

Foreword

In his authoritative book *International Labour Standards* (1979), Nicolas Valticos¹ asserted that labour laws and regulations would be ineffective in the absence of efficient labour administration and inspection bodies and systems. Indeed, weak and badly managed ministries of labour, understaffed labour inspectorates and poorly resourced public employment services still represent substantial obstacles to the implementation of labour policies in many countries, and not only in developing ones. Perhaps surprisingly, while labour policies (and especially their financial aspects) have been the subject of many studies and ideologically heated debates during the past decades, very little has been written about institutional obstacles and challenges. When the current financial and economic crisis started in 2008, labour administration bodies were entrusted with essential roles in mitigating the social consequences of the crisis. Ministries of labour were given more influence and achieved higher visibility as governments strengthened employment services and extended protective measures. However, the enhancement of labour administration was relatively short-lived. The implementation of austerity measures in many countries, and especially in Europe and the United States of America (USA), has had a substantial impact on national labour administration systems. Labour ministries, which typically administer large and expensive social programmes, were among the first victims of budgetary cuts, limiting their capacity to provide services.

In many developing countries, labour ministries have been facing an additional challenge associated with a long-term tendency towards a marginalization of their role. The extremely low proportion of the state budget allocated to labour ministries in some countries demonstrates the simple and worrying fact that labour policies are often treated as a relatively low priority when national budgets are established. As demonstrated by many recent International Labour Organization (ILO) institutional audits of labour administration, labour ministries in many developing countries simply do not have the necessary financial and human resources to implement their own mandates. In other cases, scarce resources are wasted by inadequate management. For the ILO, it is a very worrying situation, as the role of national labour administrations is not

only to implement the provisions of most international labour standards, but – and above all – to adopt and implement national labour policies, guarantee compliance with national labour laws, provide protection to vulnerable segments of the labour force and supply services to stakeholders, particularly employers' and workers' organizations.

Within the structural reforms initiated recently by the new ILO Director-General Guy Ryder, the creation of a new Department for Governance and Tripartism is a significant step towards enhancing the importance of the agenda of labour administration within the ILO's programmes of technical cooperation and research. I believe that this book on labour administration in times of change will represent one of the steps towards better knowledge and understanding of the challenges that governments are facing in the labour field. It is collective work of a team composed of both academics and practitioners, all of whom have long-term experience and extensive records of publications. I particularly appreciate the efforts of the co-editors of the book, Jason Heyes from the University of Sheffield and Ludek Rychly, my colleague from the ILO and former Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs in Prague.

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NOTE

1. Nicolas Valticos was Assistant Director-General and Director of the ILO's International Standards Department.