Although much has been done by the ILO to protect and promote the human rights of people with disabilities and to fight with them for equal opportunity and equal treatment in society and at the workplace, much more needs to be done. The International Labour Office has, since its very inception in 1919, considered that disabled people have equal rights to decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity, and has worked to promote these rights through its international labour standards, its research and publications, and its advocacy and technical cooperation activities. Trade unions have also been strong advocates of the integration of those people with “different capacities” at the workplace and in society.

Many disabled people who can work and wish to work are unable to do so, for reasons linked to the physical and social environment, and the mistaken assumptions made about their work capacity. Both the ILO and its constituents should and could do better. And it would be wrong to take improvements achieved so far for granted. Fierce competition in global markets may have a negative impact on the performance of companies in integrating workers with disabilities. That should not be the case, and will require special efforts at the workplace. Governments’ and societies’ legitimate concerns over the sustainability of social protection systems, including long-fought-for provisions to support people with disabilities, may also lead to wrong solutions for real problems. That should not be the case either. Vision, sensitivity and knowledge are required if real progress is to be made.

In fact, the fight for integration, dignity and equal treatment for the disabled will have to be waged on many fronts in the future. There will be no place for complacency. As ILO expert Barbara Murray put it in her contribution to this issue of Labour Education (see page 1), “Most disabled people continue to occupy marginalized positions in their societies, deprived of the rights to education, training and employment enjoyed by their non-disabled fellow-citizens and frequently living in poverty.”

Studies quoted in several articles do away with myths and false concepts that have for too long been obstacles to real integration.

○ Myth 1: Disabled people are incapacitated. As Ian Graham notes (see page 23), “A blind man is not deaf. A dyslexic woman may be highly skilled” and, says the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), “nobody is perfect”. In fact, as stressed by Luc Demaret (page 11) “out of the 610 million persons with disabilities, half belong to the working-age population. Many of them want a job”. In Europe alone, the number of disabled persons actively looking for a job is estimated at 3.5 million. The number of jobseekers with disabilities is increasing faster than that of jobseekers in the rest of the working population. The truth is that discrimination makes a person with disability twice less likely to find a job for reasons that have little to do with capacities.
Myth 2: Disabled people are a burden for the social protection system. This is obviously linked to Myth 1. If only a portion of those disabled jobseekers were given employment – that is, decent work – governments will no longer have to worry and will not have to think, as some unfortunately do, about cutting legitimate entitlements to those who require special care.

Myth 3: Adapting the workplace to people with disabilities is costly. Wrong in most cases. The message from employers who have gone through the exercise is nearly unanimous: “it takes so little in terms of costs to accommodate disabled persons”. In addition, in some countries efforts by employers are supported by the State and financial incentives are provided for adapting the workplace.

Myth 4: Disabled workers are less productive. Wrong too. As one expert quoted in this publication reports, “workers with disabilities are generally conscientious and have higher job retention rates and lower absenteeism than other workers”.

Getting rid of myths, and facing true facts is important. One of those facts is that many workers with disabilities who have employment are facing poor conditions, lower wages and, all too often, abusive labour practices. By one estimate in Australia, salaries for male disabled persons are 17 per cent lower than that of other workers. For women, the difference can reach 24 per cent.

For Marc Blondel, Deputy Member of the ILO Governing Body, “the struggle of disabled workers is the struggle of all workers. It is not about being good or compassionate. It is a fight for dignity for all workers”.

This is reason enough for the labour movement to commit itself to the campaign for equal treatment and opportunities for disabled workers. There are others. Taking up the case of disabled workers strengthens the position of the trade union as a whole: when groups of people are allowed to be kept out of work, this weakens the bargaining power of unions to advance the interests of their members and weaken the protection afforded working people generally. Changing how work is done to accommodate people with disabilities has the potential for improving work for all, reducing hazards and risk of injury. All workers are vulnerable to discrimination and arbitrary treatment unless they stand together.

One of the advantages for workers organized into free and strong trade unions is that they are protected unless there is proof of incompetence or bad conduct. Other workers may have to prove that they are not guilty or fight assumptions of their limitations.

Similarly, conditions that are of importance for all workers in the general economy may have a disproportionately unfavourable or favourable effect on disabled workers. In a thriving, full employment economy, no sensible employer can afford to waste the skills of anybody. It can be the difference between success and failure. By contrast, when high levels of unemployment exist, normal efforts to ensure fair treatment for the disabled may seem to be extraordinary efforts given the fact that so many other workers are available.

Acting decisively to defend and promote the rights of disabled workers will definitely win trade unions new members – not only disabled
workers, but all those who see human rights and workers’ rights as im-
portant values in the quest for social justice.

ILO standards are key instruments enabling trade unions to lead off
the campaign. The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled
persons) Convention, 1983 (No. 159), provides a strong basis for actions
and demands. It covers four key areas: access to employment (Article 3),
equal treatment (Article 4), tripartite consultation (Article 5) and training
(Article 7). Seventy-eight countries have ratified the Convention. Encour-
agingly, 11 of these ratifications took place since 2000 and last year saw
three more countries adhering to this standard.

In addition, in 2001 the ILO adopted a code of practice on managing
disability in the workplace that provides guidelines for good practices.
While the Convention is primarily aimed at governments to ensure a
legal and policy framework for standards and activities covering disabled
persons, the code of practice is designed to help employers and trade
unions deal with the issue at the workplace level.

Indeed there is a wealth of instruments at international and national
level to address the many problems still faced by disabled persons con-
cerning access to employment, fair treatment and dignity at work and
recognition of their contribution to society.

Through its international labour standards, promotional activities,
knowledge-building and technical cooperation services, the ILO is play-
ing an important role. The ongoing discussion of a new UN Convention
on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities gives the ILO an additional
opportunity to make its voice heard and ensure that decent work for
disabled workers is put on the agenda.

At national level and at the workplace, trade unions should set the tone
for action. Employers should be brought, through bargaining and laws, to
recruit, integrate and offer decent work to disabled persons in accessible
and adequate workplaces, as well as to retain those who become disabled
while in employment. Governments should be asked to adopt and imple-
ment measures, in line with ILO standards, to fight discrimination and
ensure equal treatment and equal opportunities for disabled workers.

This publication reports on a number of initiatives taken in that direc-
tion. More will have to be done. It is our hope that this issue of Labour
Education will encourage those who have taken up the challenge to con-
tinue to promote the rights of disabled workers and will encourage others
to join this fight.

Jim Baker
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ILO Bureau for Workers’ Activities