

# INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE

## STUDIES AND REPORTS

Series N (Statistics) No. 25

(Revision of No. 19)

# THE INTERNATIONAL STANDARDISATION OF LABOUR STATISTICS

*A Review of the Statistical Work of the International Labour Office  
and of Various International Statistical Conferences*



MONTREAL, 1943

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## PREFACE

Good labour statistics are essential to both the framing and the administration of progressive social policy. To serve this purpose fully the statistics of employment, unemployment, wages, cost of living, family expenditures, industrial accidents and other aspects of industrial life and labour must be accurate and complete; and they must be comparable both within and between the different countries.

Progress towards this goal is necessarily gradual but it can be hastened by pooling the experience of the several countries and by formulating international standards based on the lessons of that experience. The work already accomplished in this direction through the International Labour Organisation forms the subject of the present report; and it is hoped that by presenting in convenient form the recommendations of successive international conferences of experts on labour statistics the report will serve to furnish practical assistance to statisticians and to stimulate further progress towards the international standardisation of labour statistics.

Since the publication in 1934 of the first edition of this report, summarising the work of the International Labour Office and of a series of International Conferences of Labour Statisticians in this field, a number of new developments have taken place. The most important of these is the adoption by the International Labour Conference in 1938 of a Draft Convention concerning Statistics of Wages and Hours of Work. This Convention established a set of minimum standards on these subjects to which the different Governments may adhere by appropriate action, thus converting into a definite obligation the production and publication of statistics in these fields in accordance with these standards. Besides this Convention, the present revised edition of this report adds the recommendations of the International Labour Office Committee of Statistical Experts on international comparisons of wages, food costs and rents, as well as extracts from the reports prepared by the Committee of Statistical Experts of the League of Nations, on which the Office is represented, on the statistics of the gainfully

occupied and of housing. In the revision the analysis of the work of the Office in the whole field of labour statistics is amplified and brought up to date.

As before, the report includes the resolutions and recommendations on wage statistics of the two Conferences called by the Social Science Research Council, and those on housing statistics of the Committee of Statistical Experts of the International Union of Towns, in all of which the International Labour Office collaborated.

In the revision, the resolutions are arranged by topics and chronologically under each topic, instead of chronologically according to the dates of the respective meetings, as in the original edition. It is believed that the present arrangement, by bringing together all the resolutions under each topic, will make the volume of greater service to all those interested in the international standardisation of the different branches of labour statistics. A key is given in the Appendix showing the topics considered at each of the International Conferences of Labour Statisticians. An index is added to make the materials conveniently accessible.

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## INTRODUCTION

From the outset, the International Labour Office, having as one of its duties "the collection and distribution of information on all subjects relating to the international adjustment of conditions of industrial life and labour"<sup>1</sup> undertook to compile and publish statistics in these fields. Obviously, if these labour statistics were to have significance, the first task was to study the methods of compilation in the different countries with a view to bringing to light differences in techniques employed and to appraise the importance of these differences. Such a comparative study naturally suggests ways of improving the statistics by adopting the best methods, and an immediate objective, therefore, was to obtain a consensus of opinion on which methods were the best. An objective scarcely less important was a greater degree of comparability in the statistics of the different countries. The result of comparing labour statistics in different countries was thus to emphasise the importance of international standardisation.

The work of the Office in this direction has followed a number of different techniques. In the first place, a series of International Conferences of Labour Statisticians has been called by the Office to make recommendations as to the best methods of compiling data on the various topics in the field of labour statistics. These have been supplemented by a conference on housing, called by the International Union of Towns, two conferences called by the Social Science Research Council of the United States, in all of which the Office collaborated, as well as a conference on migration statistics called by the Office. All these conferences of statisticians have adopted resolutions specifying statistics which should be gathered on labour topics. In this connection may be mentioned the work of the Committee of Statistical Experts of the League of Nations, appointed in accordance with the terms of the League's Convention concerning Economic Statistics; this Committee, on which the Office is represented, has issued a number of reports dealing with international standardisation of statistics, including two on topics of labour statistics discussed in the present report.

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<sup>1</sup> Article 9 of the Constitution of the International Labour Organisation.



A second line of development has been the appointment by the Governing Body of the International Labour Office of a Committee of Statistical Experts, to advise on international comparisons of wages and cost of living, as well as to make preparation for international conferences: the resolutions of this Committee have broken new ground in this difficult field of international comparisons. A third development in the technique of international standardisation, is the adoption by the International Labour Conference of a Convention concerning Statistics of Wages and Hours of Work. A fourth type of effort consists of direct and indirect aid to the statistical offices of the different governments including missions to different countries, and other less formal methods of consultation and collaboration, which have carried forward the work of international standardisation. A fifth group of efforts consists in collaboration with other international organisations in the standardisation of statistics. Finally, the whole series of statistical publications of the Office, culminating in the *Year Book of Labour Statistics*, tend to stimulate interest in this standardisation and record its progress. Each of these lines of development will be discussed briefly.

The first of a series of international conferences of official statisticians engaged in the compilation of statistics relating to labour was called in 1923 by the International Labour Office following a suggestion to this effect made by certain governments. This was followed by other conferences in 1925, 1926, 1931 and 1937. All the principal industrial countries sent representatives.

The decisions of these conferences in no way committed the governments, nor was it intended to prepare a code of strict and complete rules for the classification and compilation of statistical data. Their aim was merely to point out the general lines to be followed in the different branches of labour statistics and to make suggestions as to the direction in which improvements should be made when opportunity arose. These suggestions, representing the considered views of the responsible experts in the field, would, it was believed, have great weight in influencing the future development of labour statistics in the direction of better data and of greater uniformity.

At the first Conference (1923) the agenda covered statistics of wages and hours of labour, statistics of industrial accidents and the classification of industries and occupations; the agenda of the second Conference (1925) comprised, in addition to a second discussion on the classification of industries and occupations, the question of cost-of-living statistics and the statistics of employment and unemployment; the agenda of the third Conference

(1926) dealt with methods of compiling family budgets, the statistics of collective agreements and those of industrial disputes. The fourth Conference (1931) dealt with the question of international comparisons of real wages, and the fifth (1937) formulated a proposal for a Convention concerning statistics of wages and hours of work, and referred it to the International Labour Conference which, in 1938, adopted the Convention.

These conferences, together with those on migration and housing to be discussed in the next paragraphs, covered almost the whole field of what is commonly known as "labour statistics".<sup>1</sup> On each of the above-mentioned subjects the Office made and circulated to the delegates a preparatory technical study of the aims and objects of the statistics under discussion and the methods adopted in the different countries, together with suggestions for improving their value and comparability.<sup>2</sup>

Independently of the conferences of official labour statisticians, certain other conferences of similar nature, in which the Office closely collaborated, were held in 1928, 1929 and 1930. At each of these meetings the International Labour Office was invited to take part: it undertook the secretarial work and the Statistical Section of the Office supplied memoranda on the subjects of the agenda. The first of these was a meeting of a committee of statistical experts (from 10 European countries) called by the International Union of Towns at Munich in 1928, in order to lay down guiding lines for statistics of housing.<sup>3</sup> The two others were convened in 1929 and 1930 by the Social Science Research Council of the United States of America, to study the statistics of wages, and experts from six industrial countries—the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy—were invited.<sup>4</sup>

Closely related to these was a special conference of statisticians

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<sup>1</sup> See Karl PRIBRAM: "The Scope of Labour Statistics", in *International Labour Review*, Vol. XIV, No. 4, Oct. 1926, pp. 476-488.

<sup>2</sup> See below under each topic for detailed list of references, including the discussions of the conferences.

<sup>3</sup> In the case of the Committee on housing statistics, the memoranda of the experts and the resolutions adopted were published in the official organ of the International Union of Towns (*L'Administration locale*, May-June, 1928). See also below under Housing, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> In the case of these two Conferences, copies of the memoranda supplied by the representatives of each of the countries and the memoranda presented by the International Labour Office, together with a report on the existing wage and cost-of-living statistics in each of the countries represented, were published in a volume entitled *International Wage Comparisons*, issued in 1932 in Great Britain by the Manchester University Press, and in the United States by the Social Science Research Council. The resolutions of the first Conference, together with a short account of its work, were published in the *International Labour Review*, Vol. XIX, No. 4, Apr. 1929, pp. 522-539; the resolutions of the conferences are given in full in Part II of the present report.

dealing with emigration and immigration called by the International Labour Office<sup>1</sup> in October 1932.

In connection with these conferences and their resolutions, the work of the Committee of Statistical Experts of the League of Nations, in which the International Labour Office participated, should be mentioned.<sup>2</sup> This Committee was established and constituted in accordance with the provisions of Article 8 of the International Convention relating to Economic Statistics of 1928, which was adopted by the International Conference relating to Economic Statistics called by the League of Nations. The membership of the Committee, appointed by the Council of the League, included statisticians from the different countries with well developed statistics, and representatives of the International Labour Office and the International Institute of Agriculture. The practice normally adopted by the Committee was to submit preliminary recommendations concerning statistical methods to the Council of the League of Nations for comment by the Governments and to formulate definitive proposals in the light of the comment received. Two of the reports of this Committee, those on the gainfully occupied population and on housing are in the field covered by the present study; and in Part II excerpts from these reports, including definitions and classifications recommended, together with the reasons for the recommendations, are presented.

A second line of development in the work of international standardisation was the appointment by the Governing Body of the International Labour Office, in accordance with a recommendation of the Fourth International Conference of Labour Statisticians, of a Committee of Statistical Experts. This Committee was organised as a committee of technical experts to advise the Governing Body on matters particularly relating to problems of international comparisons of wages and cost of living, to prepare for International Conferences of Statisticians and to consider special problems referred to it by the Governing Body. Though its functions were thus somewhat narrowly defined, the Committee has adopted a series of recommendations which have pointed the way to fruitful lines of development in the difficult problems of international comparisons of wages, cost of living, food costs, and rents. Its

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this Conference, see "Report of the Conference on Migration Statistics", in *International Labour Review*, Vol. XXVII, No. 1, Jan. 1933, pp. 1-24.

<sup>2</sup> For a review of the work of this Committee, see Michel HUBER: "Le Comité d'experts statisticiens de la Société des Nations (1931-1939)", in *Revue de l'Institut international de Statistique*, 7th year, livraison 2/3, 1939, pp. 117 *et seq.* A brief account is given in Charles K. NICHOLS: "The Statistical Work of the League of Nations in Economic, Financial and Related Fields", in *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, Vol. 37, No. 219, Sept. 1942, pp. 336-342, esp. 339-340.

work, furthermore, in preparing for the Convention concerning Statistics of Wages and Hours of Work is of noteworthy importance. The Committee held meetings in December 1933, December 1935, and October 1937; plans for a further meeting in the spring of 1940 had to be dropped owing to war conditions. The agenda of the first meeting included international comparisons of the cost of food and rent, family living studies, and elements of remuneration other than wages; at the second meeting the agenda covered international comparisons of rents, and the proposal for an international convention concerning statistics of wages and hours of work, which was subsequently discussed by the Fifth International Conference of Labour Statisticians in 1937; and at the third meeting, the topics discussed included again international comparisons of rents, the systematisation of statistics of wages and hours of work published by the Office, and a proposal for an international enquiry on wages and hours of work in the textile industry. The last mentioned project had been referred to the Committee of Statistical Experts by the Governing Body of the Office, following a discussion of the subject by a special committee of the Tri-partite Technical Conference on the Textile Industry which was convened by the Office and which met in Washington in April 1937.<sup>1</sup>

The third line of development of the techniques for international standardisation is represented by the adoption by the International Labour Conference in 1938 of the Convention concerning statistics of wages and hours of work. This Convention incorporates a minimum programme for statistics in this special field and the States Members of the International Labour Organisation were invited to ratify it and to signify by so doing their willingness to collect the statistics on this minimum plan and submit them to the Office.<sup>2</sup>

The preparation of this Convention involved three stages: first, a consideration in detail by the Committee of Statistical Experts of a draft of the proposed articles of the Convention prepared by the Office; secondly, the approval of the Convention by an International Conference of Labour Statisticians called for the purpose and including experts from the different Member States, and

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of these three meetings, see Michel HUBER: "Le Comité d'Experts statisticiens du Bureau international du Travail (1933-1939)", in *Revue de l'Institut international de Statistique*, 9th year, livraison 3/4, 1941, pp. 104-112. For the report of the Committee on Statistics of the Tripartite Technical Conference on the Textile Industry, see *The World Textile Industry, Economic and Social Problems*, Vol. II, Studies and Reports, Series B, No. 27 (Geneva, 1937), pp. 273 *et seq.*

<sup>2</sup> See J. W. Nixon: "An International Convention on Statistics of Wages and Hours of Work", in *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Vol. CI, Part IV, 1938, pp. 730-735.

finally, its adoption by the Twenty-Fourth Session of the International Labour Conference at which the Governments, workers and employers of the Member States were represented.

A fourth phase of the activity of the International Labour Office has been the sending of experts to various countries for consultations with regard to the further development of labour statistics. In particular a series of visits to various American countries arranged during 1940, 1941 and 1942 may be cited as an illustration. In this type of effort may be included also the numerous less formal activities in the way of specific aid to the statistical offices of the different countries, supplying documents, references, or special memoranda on different topics as requested, and serving as a clearing house of information on the standardisation of labour statistics.

A fifth phase of activity has been the collaboration of the Office with other international organisations interested in international standardisation or in specific fields of labour statistics. Besides the Committee of Statistical Experts of the League of Nations, the work of which has already been mentioned, the Office has collaborated with the Health Organisation, the Permanent Committee on Road Traffic, and the Institute of Intellectual Co-operation of the League, and with other international organisations and committees, including in particular, the International Statistical Institute and the recently formed Inter-American Statistical Institute. The exact scope and influence of each of these forms of collaboration might well be made the subject of special study, but for present purposes it perhaps suffices to call attention to the variety of these activities and the importance of their influence as a whole.

Finally, the series of publications by the International Labour Office in the field of statistics and statistical methods is itself an important medium of international standardisation. These include reports on statistical methods in the various fields, as described in detail in the succeeding sections; other studies present the statistical materials available on specific topics. Many articles in the *International Labour Review* are devoted to statistical problems. The section of the *Review* devoted to statistics presents current data on cost of living, employment and unemployment, hours of work and wages. The *Year Book of Labour Statistics*, which dates formally from 1935-36<sup>1</sup>, presents in comparable form the data from as many countries as possible on each of the main fields of labour statistics. From a study of the statistics published

<sup>1</sup> See below, pp. 41, 44, for a discussion of the predecessors of the *Year Book of Labour Statistics*.

in the *Review* since 1921, and in the *Year Book of Labour Statistics* during the period since 1935, the progress made in the international standardisation of the statistics of labour can be shown. As more and more countries publish statistics on various topics the scope of the tables in the *Year Book* is extended. The *Year Book* thus serves both to measure progress, and to stimulate the development of statistics in the various countries in the form adopted in this annual volume.

This account of the work of the International Labour Office would be incomplete and give perhaps a false impression if it were to disregard the primary element in the whole picture, namely, the desire on the part of the several countries to perfect their own statistical measurement of the status, progress and problems of labour. The International Labour Office has served as an agency through which this desire could find expression and could be translated into effective action.

The demand for more and better statistics arising in different countries from the broadening recognition of their importance has been reflected in the adoption by various international meetings of experts of resolutions calling for improvements in data on the subjects with which they have been concerned. Thus the Conference of the American States Members of the International Labour Organisation held at Santiago de Chile in 1936<sup>1</sup> urged the development of statistics on the cost of living and family living studies according to plans to be developed by the Office, and a similar Conference held in Havana in 1940<sup>2</sup> called upon the Office to take steps to secure uniformity in all labour statistics and urged the Member States to ratify and give effect to the Convention concerning statistics of wages and hours of work. In a series of resolutions on various topics the International Labour Conference at several sessions has called for better and more uniform labour statistics in the different countries.<sup>3</sup> But the force of the whole movement is perhaps best exemplified in the series of International

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<sup>1</sup> See *Labour Conference of the American States which are Members of the International Labour Organisation (Santiago de Chile, January 1936), Record of Proceedings*: Resolution concerning the cost of living in American countries (No. 9), p. 293. Other resolutions affecting statistics dealt with the question of uniformity in methods of investigation into the conditions and costs of the nutrition of workers (Resolution No. 11, *ibid.*, p. 295); the establishment or extension of central bureaux of social statistics, particularly with regard to wages, cost of living, unemployment, industrial accidents, occupational diseases, and labour disputes (Resolution No. 23, *ibid.*, p. 300), and with regard to statistics of the agricultural population (Resolution No. 25, *ibid.*, p. 301).

<sup>2</sup> *Second Labour Conference of the American States which are Members of the International Labour Organisation, Havana (Cuba), 21 Nov. to 2 Dec. 1939, Record of Proceedings*, p. 267, Resolution No. XX.

<sup>3</sup> For the text of resolutions of the International Labour Conference on points dealing with statistics, see *The International Labour Code 1939*, pp. 543-4, 555-6.

Conferences of Labour Statisticians in which officials responsible for labour statistics in the various countries have met for the common purpose of unifying the course of development and advancing the international standardisation of labour statistics. The results of the movement are shown in the expansion and steady improvement during the past twenty years of the labour statistics published in the different countries.

In the following pages, each branch of labour statistics is discussed in detail, and references are given to the various statistical publications of the International Labour Office.

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## I

### CLASSIFICATION OF INDUSTRIES AND OCCUPATIONS: THE GAINFULLY OCCUPIED

This topic of classification of industries and occupations is in a sense preliminary and of general character since it relates to the way in which labour statistics in the various fields may be classified or organised. The gainfully occupied or the employed, for example, may be classified according to the industry in which they are employed or the occupation which they perform; wages may be arranged according to the industry or occupation of the wage earner; strikes according to the industry to which the establishment affected belongs. For purposes of international comparison, it is obviously desirable that the materials available in the several countries be classified or organised along similar lines.

In preparation for a discussion of the classification of industries and occupations at the First International Conference of Labour Statisticians in 1923, the Office published a report summarising the classifications in use in a number of countries and presenting the principles underlying the different uses of such a classification.<sup>1</sup>

The Conference in its resolutions emphasised the distinction between classification by industry and by personal occupation and pointed out that, for purposes of classifying the occupied population, the primary classification should be according to industries with subdivisions by occupations, suggesting, however, that to give full details by occupation a second separate classification, by occupations, may also be necessary.

The Conference drew up a list of main divisions—primary production (agriculture, mining, etc.), secondary production (manufacture and construction), and services (transport, commerce, administration, etc.).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Systems of Classification of Industries and Occupations*, Report prepared for the International Conference of Labour Statisticians, Studies and Reports, Series N, No. 1 (Geneva, 1923).

<sup>2</sup> For the discussions at this Conference, see *International Conference of Labour Statisticians: Report*, Studies and Reports, Series N, No. 4 (Geneva, 1924), pp. 8-30.



At the Second and Third Conferences in 1925 and 1926 attention was given to the list of industries; the Second Conference recommended that the Office draft a provisional list for use in labour statistics<sup>1</sup>, and the Third suggested that the details of the specific content of each industry group as used in the classifications of the different countries be compiled as a further step in the direction of a uniform list.<sup>2</sup> In response to the resolution of the Second Conference the Office prepared a provisional list of the principal branches of economic activity, for the purpose of presenting in a uniform order the data available in respect to wages, employment and unemployment. The list (latest revision) is given in Part II (pp. 51-52).

A further study of the subject has been undertaken by the Committee of Statistical Experts of the League of Nations—on which the International Labour Office is represented—to which the whole question of preparing a scheme of classification of industries was referred in accordance with the provisions of the International Convention relating to Economic Statistics.<sup>3</sup> This Committee has considered the problem of industrial classification in relation to the gainfully occupied population. On this subject its final report in 1938 recommended a uniform definition of the “gainfully occupied” and two lists of industries—a minimum list and a detailed list—for purposes of classifying the gainfully occupied in a uniform manner for international comparison. The minimum list is given in full in Part II (pp. 65-66), together with the pertinent resolutions of the Committee, and the recommended definition.

With regard to a similar list of occupations for purposes of international comparisons, the Committee decided against any attempt (for the time being) to draft such a list since it considered that an occupational classification was primarily of national rather than of international statistical interest.

In this connection, the statistical work of the Office relating to the gainfully occupied population may be discussed. A series

<sup>1</sup> For the discussions at the Second Conference, see *Report on the Proceedings of the Second International Conference of Labour Statisticians*, Studies and Reports, Series N, No. 8 (Geneva, 1925), pp. 40-70. In this connection reference may be made to R. H. COATS: “The Classification Problem in Statistics”, in *International Labour Review*, Vol. XI, No. 4, Apr. 1925, pp. 509-525.

<sup>2</sup> For the discussions at the Third Conference, see *Report on the Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Labour Statisticians*, Studies and Reports, Series N, No. 12 (Geneva, 1926), pp. 86-91.

<sup>3</sup> This Convention was adopted in 1928 by the International Conference relating to Economic Statistics called under the auspices of the League of Nations.

Manley O. HUDSON (ed.): *International Legislation: A Collection of Texts of Multipartite International Instruments of General Interest beginning with the Covenant of the League of Nations*, Vol. IV, 1928-1929, pp. 2575-2589, esp. 2582-2583 (Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1931).