

Speech: PM speech at ILO centenary conference: 11 June 2019

Presidents, Prime Ministers, Director General, ladies and gentlemen.

This year, we mark the centenary of the International Labour Organisation.

An agency born of the bloodshed of the First World War, dedicated to building a better tomorrow, and inspired by a simple yet vital goal: to end “injustice, hardship and privation” in the workplaces of the world.

Today, the ILO can look back with pride at what it has achieved through a century of tireless work with employers, trade unions and governments.

Safer workplaces.

Fairer conditions.

Better pay.

It has been a hundred years of steady progress.

A hundred years that have built the foundation on which we stand today as we gather in Geneva to look to the future of work – and to ensure that future works for us all.

Because advances in technology and culture are already revolutionising the workplace.

But how we respond, and how we prepare for and anticipate advances that have yet to happen, is crucial.

For it will determine the extent to which that revolution brings benefits rather than just change – and whether those benefits are felt by just a handful of individuals, or each and every one of us.

After all, we have already seen how the rise of globalisation brought increased prosperity to many – but that a failure to ensure the benefits were shared by all meant whole communities found themselves feeling left behind.

Today, we live in a world where what it means to be an employer or employee has changed, is changing.

And that can be a good thing.

It can mean better working conditions, greater flexibility, more independence and higher wages – but only if regulations keep pace with the rapidly evolving workplace.

That is why one of my first acts as Prime Minister was to commission an independent review of employment practices in the modern economy.

In response to its findings, we are delivering the biggest improvement in UK workers' rights for 20 years – including making sure that agency workers are not paid less than permanent staff, improving enforcement of holiday and sick pay, and quadrupling the maximum fines for employers who break the rules.

Government also has a duty to ensure that the workplace is truly open to everyone – including people with disabilities, and those with children or other caring responsibilities.

Only by doing that can we ensure that all employees can fulfil their potential and all employers can draw on the widest possible talent pool.

And that is why I was proud to help change British law so that all employees can request flexible working, and why I introduced shared parental leave and pay to the UK.

But more still needs to be done, including making it possible for both parents to spend time at home with a new baby, so that sharing the responsibility for raising a family is a norm established from the outset – and I want to see that happen.

Finally, shaping the future of work means investing today in the skills that our people will need to do the jobs of tomorrow.

So in England we have created millions of new, high-quality apprenticeships for school leavers, and are launching new advanced technical qualifications for young people.

When I look at the opportunities on offer, the opportunities we can harness through better training and changes in regulation and culture, I see a future of work that has rarely been more exciting.

And I want to see a world in which everyone can enjoy the benefits it promises.

But for that to happen, it's not enough to focus on above-board employment, on the companies that play by the rules and do the right thing.

We must also address a relic from the past that plays an all-too-significant part in the present – and which must be banished from its future: modern slavery.

Well over 100 years ago, in nations across the world, governments condemned slavery to the history books. It should not exist anywhere today.

Yet around the world it remains a daily reality for more than 40 million men, women and children.

People like Ajoba, who was lured to Britain with the promise of decent work, but ended up spending nine years as an unpaid domestic servant, banned from leaving the house or meeting other people.

Or Olive, from China, who was told that she could pay back her husband's

gambling debts by taking a job in a London restaurant, only to be forced into prostitution.

Raped seven days a week for several years she considered killing herself – but was told that if she did so, her parents would be murdered.

Or Harry – British born and bred, always proud to have a job.

Becoming homeless after struggling with mental health problems he was targeted by a gang who offered him work, food and accommodation.

He ended up living in a damp, overcrowded caravan, doing hard physical labour for 16 hours a day.

Weak and malnourished, when he asked for his pay he was beaten.

And his suffering continued when he was sold to another gang – yes, “sold”, in modern Britain, for £3,000. These are just three stories among many millions.

Indeed, the sheer scale of modern slavery is frightening to behold.

The UK is an advanced liberal democracy at the forefront of the fight against such exploitation.

But if tonight we were to free everyone in Britain who is trapped in some form of slavery and bring them to the ILO so we might hear their testimony, they would not merely take every seat in this hall – they would fill it seven times over.

To find room for every victim in the world, we would need a city 200 times larger than Geneva.

Modern slavery truly is a global epidemic.

It hides in plain sight in our towns and cities, our fields and factories.

It reaches into every corner of our lives – in the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the services we pay for.

Yet for many years it seldom captured the world’s attention or outrage – allowing those who trade in human misery to quietly continue their work, and allowing all of us to look the other way as we benefitted from the forced labour of this growing underclass.

Throughout my time in government – first as my country’s Home Secretary, more recently as its Prime Minister – I have fought to change that.

To put the issue of modern slavery firmly on the domestic and international agenda.

To prevent men, women and children becoming trapped in modern slavery and free those who are.

And to relentlessly pursue, apprehend and bring to justice the barbaric individuals responsible.

Over the past nine years we have made much progress, and the tide of international opinion is with us – almost 90 governments have now endorsed the Call to Action on Modern Slavery that I launched in 2017.

But there is still much work for all of us to do.

So as I prepare to step down as Prime Minister, I believe it is more important than ever that we not only continue the fight against modern slavery, but that we accelerate it.

That we recommit ourselves to the task.

That we match our words with actions.

And do all that we can to meet the UN's goal of ending this abhorrent crime by 2030.

Because modern slavery is simply immoral.

No leader worthy of the name can look the other way while men, women and children are held against their will, forced to work for a pittance or no pay at all, routinely beaten, raped and tortured.

Those of us who can speak out, who have a platform from which to be heard, have a duty, a moral duty, to raise our voices on their behalf.

But those trapped in slavery are not its only victims.

The gangs, the people smugglers, the child abusers who prey on the poor, the desperate and the vulnerable in this way are criminals – and the money they make from forced labour is used to fuel and finance further criminality.

Organised crime, the drug trade, even terrorism.

Around the world, the proceeds of modern slavery are destroying lives and communities with every bit as much callous indifference as the slave trade itself.

It is a major cause of dangerous illegal immigration – with all the risks that brings for the migrants, and the challenges it brings for nation states.

And, while it may seem cold to speak in such terms when dealing with a global human tragedy, there is a high economic cost.

As the founding treaty of the ILO says: “the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labour is an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries”.

The same is true of businesses.

How can an honest, ethical entrepreneur possibly compete and succeed when

they are undercut by those who cut corners, exploit the vulnerable and ignore the regulations that keep us all safe?

The ILO estimates that \$150 billion of illegal profit is generated from forced labour each year – a quarter of a million dollars every minute of every day.

Every penny of that is being diverted from the pockets of responsible businessmen and women.

And with criminal gangs almost inevitably evading taxes, that also means less money for the state, less money for public services, less money for our schools and hospitals.

So, in one way or another, modern slavery harms each and every one of us.

And each of us has a role to play in helping to defeat it – something that must involve tackling not just the symptoms, but also the underlying causes.

Because, while ultimate responsibility for modern slavery lies with the criminals involved, it does not exist in a vacuum.

Indeed it can only exist if certain conditions are met.

To begin with, poverty and lack of opportunity create the vulnerability and desperation that is exploited by criminals.

In the UK we are committed to building a strong economy, ensuring that the benefits of it are felt by everyone, and tackling the burning injustices that still hold back too many people.

And overseas we remain committed, in law, to spending 0.7 per cent of gross national income on official development assistance.

Because aid works.

And it has a crucial role to play in tackling the causes of modern slavery – by helping children go to and stay in school, promoting safe employment, and fighting the diseases that cause poverty and desperation.

But we must not attack modern slavery solely from the supply end.

Demand is just as important – and modern slavery will remain a stain on our conscience as long as enough of us are willing to plead ignorance in return for higher profits or cheaper goods and services.

Businesses of all kinds must do more to ensure they are not relying, even inadvertently, on forced labour in their workforce or supply chains.

I want to help them do this – which is why, on the eve of World Day Against Child Labour, I can announce that the UK will be funding a £10 million programme to reduce the exploitation of boys and girls in Africa's rapidly expanding agricultural industries.

By building an evidence base and developing new intervention policies, we can prevent children from being drawn into dangerous work in the first place – protecting young people and keeping sources and supply chains ethical.

But businesses must also take responsibility themselves – and if they fail to act, politicians should not be afraid to make them.

In the UK, our ground-breaking Modern Slavery Act already puts a duty on large businesses to be open about what they are doing to stamp out abuses in their supply chains.

I want us to go further still: strengthening and improving the transparency statements required of big businesses, and expanding the law to cover the public sector and its vast purchasing power.

Last year, the UK, United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia agreed to use the collective purchasing power of our public sectors – worth more than \$600 billion annually – to demand higher ethical standards in our supply chains and crack down on modern slavery.

I want to see other nations joining us in this.

The UK is already turning promises into action – for example, we are piloting an innovative new programme that will improve responsible recruitment in parts of our public sector supply chains that pass through Asia.

And the more nations and organisations subscribe to this approach, the more effective it will be – the combined purchasing power of every government and organisation represented here today would represent an unprecedented lever with which to improve standards.

However, the most powerful voice of all belongs not to business or government, but to the consumer.

It is customers who ultimately decide whether a business succeeds or fails – and if enough of us turn our backs on companies that exploit forced labour, modern slavery will cease to be commercially viable.

It sounds optimistic, but it can be done.

After all, a decade ago single use-plastics were barely controversial.

Today, retailers around the world are falling over themselves to remove them from their shelves.

Buying something from a company that uses slave labour should not be any less socially unacceptable than using a disposable coffee cup.

So as well as talking to governments, multilaterals and NGOs, today I want to call on ordinary shoppers the world over to vote with their wallets.

To shun those companies that do not make the ethical grade.

And instead support their rivals who take an active role in fighting modern slavery.

That's why we plan to launch a new central registry of modern slavery transparency statements – so that we can all see exactly which companies are serious about stamping out abuses, and which should be avoided by consumers with a conscience.

And it is why we are already running a £1 million campaign to raise awareness of the issue in the UK.

So we can and must attack modern slavery from both ends, working together internationally to reduce supply and demand.

But none of this should distract from the central piece of the puzzle: pursuing the criminals at the heart of it all. Governments around the world are increasingly recognising the scale of the problem and legislating to deal with it.

I am immensely proud of the lead the UK has shown here, with 2015's Modern Slavery Act being used to successfully prosecute a steadily growing number of individuals – 81 in 2016, 153 in 2017.

The most recent figures show more than 1,300 active police investigations, up from 188 in 2016.

And last year we saw the full reach of the law, when a British court jailed a British citizen for her part in trafficking five women from Nigeria to Germany – even though none of her crimes took place in the UK.

While the UK has led the way in this regard we are far from the only nation taking such steps.

President Buhari of Nigeria demonstrated great leadership when he personally committed to champion the fight against modern slavery across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Australia has recently adopted stringent transparency legislation.

And, just last month, the Dutch senate voted to adopt the Child Labour Due Diligence Bill.

So right around the world, on every continent, governments are stepping forward to join the fight.

But if we are to make a real impact, our actions must also involve a greater level of international co-operation – not just in terms of law enforcement operations, such as the joint UK/Latvian operation that broke up an organised crime gang late last year – but across the board.

Because, at present, too much of the global effort is uncoordinated, and, as a result, less effective than it could be.

Alliance 8.7 has been established to bring a greater focus to much of this work, increasing collaboration and providing a platform for dialogue and knowledge-sharing.

We in the UK fully support the work of the Alliance – and the work the African Union is doing to co-ordinate the continent's approach to ending child labour.

But it is clear that, around the world, there is still much work being duplicated, and insufficient sharing of experience and insight.

That has to change – and it is the responsibility of governments, multilaterals and NGOs to make sure this happens.

That is why we will be putting £140,000 into the UN's anti-trafficking co-ordination mechanism, ICAT.

And I am proud to announce today that I am creating a new International Modern Slavery and Migration Envoy for the UK – an advocate for tackling modern slavery globally, helping us co-ordinate our efforts with his or her counterparts in other nations.

In Lagos last year I met some remarkable young women who, having escaped from people traffickers, were rebuilding their lives with the help of the Salvation Army, funded by the UK government.

Throughout my career I have met with victims of truly horrendous crimes.

Yet, even judged against that standard, what I heard that day was deeply disturbing – it will stay with me for many years to come.

But the women also told me how the support they were now receiving meant they could move from the darkness into the light.

That, for all they had suffered, they could now face the future with renewed hope and confidence.

It was a tangible reminder of the human cost of modern slavery – but also of the very real difference we can make to individual lives if we match our warm words with real actions.

So this week, as we look to the future of work, let us say once and for all that modern slavery has no place in the modern world.

And let us commit ourselves to a future in which all the people of the world can be employed in dignity, safety and freedom.

A future in which men are not trapped in debt bondage.

A future in which children are not forced into backbreaking labour.

A future in which women are not shipped around the world and sold into prostitution.

A future in which modern slavery becomes a thing of the past.

That is the future of work I want to see.

And that is the future of work that we can and must deliver.

Thank you.