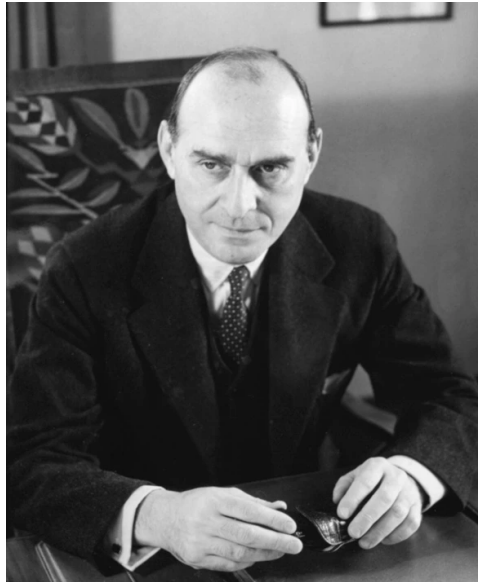




Source: Morse, n.d., ILO, Flickr

MORSE, David Abner

American attorney for the National Labor Relations Board and fifth Director-General of the International Labour Office of the International Labour Organization (ILO) 1948-1970

By **Daniel Maul** · Version 15 January 2013

Was born 31 May 1907 in New York City, United States, and passed away 1 December 1990 in New York City. He was the son of Morris Moscovitz, cabinetmaker, and Sara Werblin. On 13 May 1937 he married Mildred Edna Hockstader. They had no children.

Morse was born as David Abner Moscovitz and changed his family name to Morse in September 1937.

Biography

Morse was the son of first-generation Russian Jewish immigrants. Born as Moscovitz in the Bronx in New York City, he grew up in a family of modest background in small-town Somerville, New Jersey. He was a gifted student and, after graduating from Rutgers University in 1929, he enrolled at Harvard Law School. In 1933 he was admitted to the New Jersey Bar. One of his teachers at Harvard was the civil rights lawyer and future Supreme Court Judge, Felix Frankfurter, who was the legal brain behind much of the social reform legislation introduced by New York's Democratic Governor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. When Roosevelt became President of the United States (US) in 1933, many of Frankfurter's students began to staff the newly built New Deal agencies. Like the careers of Dean Acheson and David Lilienthal, Morse's started as a name on Frankfurter's list. Passing through several posts within the Department of the Interior under its Secretary Harold L. Ickes, he became

regional attorney for the National Labor Relations Board for the State of New York and occupied himself mainly with arbitration of industrial conflicts. He became prominently involved in the implementation of the so-called Wagner Act of 1935, which for the first time in American history put trade union activities on safe legal ground.

In 1937 Moscovitz changed his family name to Morse. The step was motivated by instances of anti-Semitic resentment he had experienced in both his private and professional life due to his name. The idea to 'Americanize' it was further pushed by his marriage that year to Mildred Hockstader, who was born into one of the richest and most distinguished Jewish families in the US. She had been supposed to marry someone from the highest strata of society. Her choice of the son of poor Eastern Jewish immigrants was greeted with great apprehension and it took years, until Morse joined the Truman administration (in 1947), for him to be accepted as part of the family. In 1937 Morse also left government service and became a partner in a private law firm specializing in labour law. The Second World War brought Morse back into government service. Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 he volunteered for the army. In early 1943, in the wake of the Allied invasion of Italy, he was deployed to North Africa as an intelligence officer. Due to his pre-war experiences, Morse was given the task of heading various departments dealing with labour affairs within the Allied occupational forces. He was responsible for drafting plans for the re-democratization of labour relations in Italy and, later, in Germany. Like many other 'liberal' New Dealers, his domestic and wartime experiences informed his later international activities. His time with the occupation forces in Europe strengthened his internationalist convictions and his belief in the necessity of the US playing an active role beyond its borders once the war was over. Determined to return to private law practice he declined a high post with the United Nations Rehabilitation and Relief Administration (UNRRA). He was acquainted with UNRRA's Director-General Herbert Lehman, former Governor of the State of New York, with whom Morse had worked in the United Jewish Appeal before the US entry into the war. Morse returned to civilian life in 1945 and took up a post once again with the National Labor Relations Board. He served as its General Counsel for one year until 1946, when President Harry S Truman nominated him to be Assistant Secretary of Labor. He was asked to build up and head a section of the department devoted to international affairs. His concept was to extend the scope of American post-war foreign policy by including the fields of social and labour policies. Later he played his part in winning the support of the American trade union movement for the implementation of the Truman Doctrine, which was the start of American foreign policy to 'contain' the Soviet Union, and the European Recovery Program, set up in 1947 by Secretary of State George Marshall to help rebuild the European economies. In 1947 Morse was named Under Secretary of Labor and represented the US government in the ILO Governing Body and as a delegate to the International Labour Conference.

Morse was 41 years old when he became Director-General of the International Labour Office on 1 September 1948, after being elected by the Governing Body in San Francisco that June. Although the ILO became a United Nations (UN) specialized agency in 1946, its position was still precarious due to the early stages of the Cold War. The Soviet Union was not a member (it had boycotted the ILO since 1937 and its membership was terminated in 1940) and kept a hostile stance towards the ILO. That, in turn, increased the ILO's reliance on the good will of the leading Western powers, in particular the US. Against the backdrop of growing anti-internationalist sentiment in American domestic policy the idea took hold among influential West European members that it would be in their own best interests if the vacant top post were, for the second time since John Winant (1939-1941), to be filled with an American. The Truman administration had its own reasons to push the candidacy of one of its nationals, as the ILO seemed to be a strategic post from which to win the support of European governments and trade unions for the Marshall Plan. Morse's record in this regard and the fact that no one else in the extended circle of the administration had comparable experience of the ILO work, which had been part of his portfolio, made him the natural candidate. After personal conversations with the President, a reluctant Morse, who initially was not overly enthusiastic about leaving the US

for an international assignment and at the time was also seen as potential Secretary of Labor as well as candidate for the US Senate, accepted the offer and stayed in office for many years.

Morse's 22 years at the helm of the ILO (he was re-elected in 1957, 1962 and 1967) left a mark on the organization in two major respects. First, the ILO under his leadership turned its attention to the problems of the developing countries. Second, based on his initiative the ILO introduced a strong human rights focus in its 'classical' field of activity, which had been in the definition and adoption of international labour standards since its foundation in 1919. Morse entered his new post against the backdrop of the looming Cold War. The Eastern Bloc initially greeted the appointment with open hostility, even more so since Morse quite explicitly used his office to promote the Marshall Plan as a measure against growing communist influence in Europe. The clear fronts that characterized his first years in office, however, soon began to vanish after Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, when the Soviet Union rejoined the ILO. Despite his liberal anti-communism, Morse welcomed this as a positive step, because the alternative was to deal with the communist world as a hostile bloc outside the organization.

While the working relationship with representatives of the Eastern Bloc proved to be relatively uncomplicated for much of Morse's time in office, the same could not always be said about his country of origin. From the very moment he took office Morse had to deal with strong anti-ILO forces in US domestic politics. In order to influence public opinion in the ILO's favour, throughout his entire time in office Morse worked at great lengths to lobby American political decision and opinion makers, making frequent trips to the US and the ILO's Liaison Office in Washington DC. As a liberal internationalist and the American head of an international organization, Morse was a prime target for anti-internationalist forces at home, in particular during the so-called McCarthy era in the early 1950s. When representatives of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) approached the ILO with a request to investigate American employees, Morse (unlike UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie) denied them access to the ILO's premises, citing the independence of the international civil service. To Morse's disappointment the support of US administrations was rarely more than lukewarm. Already in 1951, and still under Truman's Presidency, plans for the establishment of a migration authority under ILO auspices had to be buried (resulting in a separate institution, the present International Organization for Migration), mainly due to American lack of support. In addition, across all of his time in office Morse had to deal with fierce opposition headed by American employer representatives who constantly campaigned against 'socialist tendencies' in the ILO's standard-setting work. The most damaging factor was the growing estrangement between him and the American trade union movement. From the mid-1950s onwards he had faced constant allegations of being 'soft on communism' by the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and its President, George Meany. These attacks almost led to Morse's resignation in 1961. He faced repeated demands by the Soviet Union to install one of their nationals as Assistant Director-General. He publicly refused the request, also announcing that he would not be standing again in the 1962 elections for Director-General. Behind the scenes he made clear that lack of US support was the major reason. A direct intervention by President John F. Kennedy reversed his decision. However, his relationship with the AFL-CIO leadership remained tense until the end of his time in office. This was also true for his relationship with Jef Rens, the Belgian Deputy who had been designated as his successor.

When Cold War tensions began to ease, decolonization entered centre stage. During Morse's time in office, the ILO more than doubled in size: from 55 countries in 1947 to 121 in 1970. The growth was almost exclusively accounted for by former colonies becoming independent states. As a result of this shift the so-called 'developing' countries formed, from the early 1960s onwards, the bulk of the ILO's membership, raising demands for better representation in both the structure and agenda of the organization. Morse initiated and moderated a process of regionalization and decentralization of the International Labour Office, which opened up regional offices on all continents in 1965 and introduced geographically more balanced recruitment policies at the Office level. While these structural reforms

ran smoothly, decolonization conflicts in Indonesia and Algeria and the Suez Crisis of 1956 brought tensions into the ILO at other levels. In the 1960s ideas of Afro-Asian solidarity and 'non-alignment' were heard on the international scene. In Morse's perception there was a real danger that these conflicts could ultimately lead to the break-up of the UN system in as much as it seemed to threaten the delicate *status quo* it had reached during the early Cold War years. Morse sought to avoid at all costs a spillover of the 'politicized' debates that were haunting the UN in the context of the Congo Crisis since 1960.

At the 1963 International Labour Conference politicization reached the ILO with full force, when a group of African, Arab and Asian delegations, with the support of the Eastern Bloc countries, walked out of the Conference in protest against the South African government's Apartheid policies. To overcome what was perceived a life-threatening crisis for the ILO Morse used a double strategy. He insisted on adherence to constitutional principles and procedures and began to work out a set of proposals, which, in cooperation with the UN, would permit the gradual exclusion of South Africa from the ILO's proceedings. This eventually led to Pretoria's voluntary retreat from membership in 1964. For Morse the threat of 'politicization' provided yet another argument to work hard for strengthening the organization's predominantly 'technical' profile. He reinforced its character as an agency of international development aid under the heading of 'technical assistance'. He had been an early advocate of extending the policies behind the Marshall Plan to the world beyond Europe, an idea that had taken concrete shape in President Truman's 1949 Point IV Program. When Morse took office in 1948 he used existing programmes for reconstruction in Europe as a starting point for a general programme of technical assistance tailored to the needs of developing countries. While in 1948 only 20 per cent of the ILO's budget had been earmarked for activities other than standard setting, roughly 90 per cent of the funds went into technical work in 1970. The kind of assistance the ILO rendered to its clients reflected prevalent development thinking in as much as it privileged industrialization in areas such as vocational training. This emphasis on productivity issues and the recruitment of economists and social scientists for the newly founded 'technical' ILO departments mirrored Morse's handwriting. By the late 1950s technical assistance expanded significantly from its small-scale character. The ILO managed to secure its share of resources provided by new funding agencies, such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP). With these new opportunities opening up, Morse's ILO contributed to the debates of the first UN Development Decade, launched in 1961, by raising attention to the widely ignored social consequences of economic development. The ILO's new strategy refocused attention to the creation of 'productive employment' and culminated in the World Employment Programme (WEP), launched on the occasion of the ILO's fiftieth anniversary in 1969. Morse (1969: 89), who made the WEP his top priority during his last years in office, described it as 'an entirely new departure' for the ILO and a 'first attempt at truly world-wide planning'. The WEP was the first attempt to present a development strategy which, unlike previous economics-centred approaches, focused on the problem of poverty and became a model for the 'basic needs' approach of the new World Bank President, Robert McNamara, and the UN's 'human needs' campaign of the 1970s. The ILO underpinned its new emphasis on technical services by founding the International Institute for Labour Studies (IILS) in Geneva in 1960, which was intended to serve as both a think tank and a centre for advanced study in all matters of labour and social policy and the International Training Centre in Turin in 1964.

The focus on human rights in standard setting was the second great legacy of the Morse years. The ILO's 1944 Declaration of Philadelphia had already redefined standard setting as working for universal social rights of individuals. This was a departure from the early days, when the ILO's standards had been directed not to 'all people everywhere' but rather to a clearly defined group of people: the workers in industrialized countries of the West. Only after Morse had taken over office did the Philadelphia principles take a more concrete shape, connecting the redefinition of the ILO as a development aid agency and the new emphasis on human rights. Right from the start of the technical work Morse promoted an integrated approach to development in which human rights standards were seen as a 'method' of development rather than as a goal. For him the liberal values of the Declaration

of Philadelphia, in particular freedom from forced labour, freedom from discrimination and a democratically organized reconciliation of social interests through freedom of association, provided the ILO with a key to keep the process of modernization on a democratic course. The new emphasis on human rights became most evident in the fact that all but three of what the ILO in the twenty-first century regards as its 'core' labour standards were adopted during Morse's first ten years in office: Freedom of Association (number 87, 1948), the Right to Collective Bargaining (98, 1949), Equal Remuneration (100, 1951), the Abolition of Forced Labour (105, 1957) and Discrimination in Employment and Occupation (111, 1958).

By the end of the 1950s the sometimes-heated debates that accompanied the adoption and application of human rights standards against the double background of the Cold War and decolonization led to a policy shift. Morse concluded that the topic had to be taken away from the political debates of the International Labour Conference and transferred instead into the Office's practical activities, the starting point of the new 'promotional' or 'educational' approach which Morse presented in his 1958 human rights report. The need for a pragmatic approach became even more apparent in the 1960s when, in the face of growing resistance to the application of ILO human rights standards by the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa, differences of opinion regarding the question of what actual value human rights standards had in the development process were running through the ILO itself. While a 'labour standards faction' emphasized the organization's normative role, a 'development faction' wanted to couple the applicability of ILO standards to economic factors such as productivity. The underlying controversy was about the question of whether 'development dictatorships' or 'democratic governments' were better prepared to meet the challenges of the economic and social process of modernization. In all of these discussions Morse played the role of a moderator rather than taking sides and demonstrated his extraordinary skills in balancing tensions within the Office and among the membership. However, this role was the very reason why he was perceived as avoiding clear decisions of policy and at times even faced accusations of being overly opportunistic with regard to the organization's core principles.

On 31 May 1970 Morse left the ILO at one of the high points in its history and certainly on the height of his own reputation. On the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary in 1969, the ILO was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Morse regarded the ceremony, next to the Pope's visit to the ILO's premises the same year, as the climax of his professional life. When he handed over to his successor, his long-time Deputy Director-General, C. Wilfred Jenks, in 1970, he left an organization that wore his mark in more than one respect. However, his role as the conceptual head behind the organization's self-reinvention should not be overestimated. Far from being a visionary intellectual, his role was that of a moderator of change and a manager with a sharp political mind. His success rested to a large degree on his recruitment policy and a fine sense for the value of public relations work. He very actively directed an influx of new staff into the organization, which grew from 600 in 1948 to roughly 3,000 in 1970. He was a gifted diplomat and built up a tight network of contacts and friendships within the UN system, one of the closest being to UNDP's Paul Hofmann, who had administered the Marshall Plan between 1948 and 1950. He also was a skilled administrator with a high ability to create an *esprit de corps* with his closer collaborators and to command respect and even adoration by a great portion of the ILO staff. According to Robert W. Cox (1973: 102), who was a close Canadian collaborator, head of the ILS and later a political scientist, under Morse's leadership the ILO resembled a 'limited monarchy'. Despite the growing positive reputation Morse enjoyed both inside and outside the ILO, his views regarding international politics, including that of his own role as head of an international organization, turned increasingly pessimistic. Especially during his middle years Morse suffered from recurring moments of physical and mental exhaustion that bordered on depression. Morse left a somewhat difficult legacy to his successor, Jenks. From the catastrophes, which haunted the ILO during the 1970s, culminating in the temporary withdrawal of the US between 1977 and 1981, Morse cannot be completely exonerated. On some occasions, such as the nomination of a Soviet Assistant

Director-General, he had put conflicts off successfully over a long period of time, only to fall back with double force on his successors.

After his official resignation on 9 February 1970, Morse returned to the US and became a partner in international law firms, first with Surrey & Morse in Washington DC and later with Jones, Day, Reavies and Pogue in New York. In this capacity he acted as a legal advisor to both American companies (amongst others Philip Morris) and the governments of Senegal, Ivory Coast and Zaire in their dealings with international corporations. He chaired the Advisory Panel on Programme Policy of the UNDP from 1970-1972 and was active in the Council of Foreign Relations, the World Rehabilitation Fund and the United Nations Association of the USA until his death in 1990. What has also remained from his years in Geneva is a substantial art collection, mostly of nineteenth and early-twentieth century French graphics and paintings, which Morse and his wife donated to the Zimmerli Art Museum in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The Allée David Morse in Geneva, which links the Route de Ferney with Avenue Appia, touches the ILO premises.

May 2021: ILO explained in header and precise date of leaving

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