

Statement of Antonia Cortese, Secretary-Treasurer of the American Federation of Teachers

Before the Consultative Group to Eliminate the Use of Child Labor and Forced Labor in Imported Agricultural Products

Foreign Agricultural Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Public Meeting

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Good Morning, members of the Consultative Group.

I am Antonia Cortese, secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of Teachers. The AFT—which is the second-largest union in the AFL-CIO—represents more than 1.4 million pre-K through 12th-grade teachers; paraprofessionals and other school-related personnel; higher education faculty and professional staff; federal, state and local government employees; nurses and healthcare workers; and early childhood educators. Our members work with children and youth every day in classrooms and many other settings, and we are very concerned about their well-being here and around the world.

I am also co-chair of the Child Labor Coalition, and a member of the board of trustees of Freedom House, a nonpartisan advocate for freedom and democracy in the world.

I am pleased to be with you today to discuss your important and essential mandate to develop a program aimed at eliminating child labor in our agricultural imports and to implement a monitoring system that will provide American consumers with assurance that they are not unwittingly supporting the exploitation of children when they go grocery shopping or through other everyday purchases. The focus of my remarks today will be on child labor – because that is an issue with which I have been personally involved and because of the AFT’s focus on the interests of children.

Around the world, 70 percent of all child labor is in agriculture, according to information collected by the World Bank. Partly this is because fewer agricultural workers are organized into unions or other representative associations that can help monitor labor practices. It is also because the large number of workplaces (every individual farm) makes working conditions more difficult to monitor than in a factory. Adding to the difficulty is the fact that many agricultural workers are exempt from coverage by their

nation's labor laws because they work on a temporary, contract or seasonal basis. We have experience with this situation in the United States.

Section 3205 of the Food and Energy Security Act – the Farm Bill – has assigned this body the task of addressing those difficulties and establishing a voluntary, independent, third-party monitoring and verification system that will make it possible to certify whether an agricultural product imported and sold in the United States is produced with the use of forced labor or child labor. To accomplish this, you have undertaken a process that seeks to give voice to all stakeholders in the complex international agricultural production and supply chain. Those who will appear before you today reflect your success in engaging a wide array of interests and advocates. They include: human rights and faith organizations; labor unions and other worker representatives; consumer advocates; and agricultural businesses.

You may ask why the American Federation of Teachers is here today. Why are we involved with this issue? First, as I have said, by the very nature of their work, our members have a strong commitment to the well-being of children. That includes supporting action that will protect children from abusive and unsafe working conditions. Just as important, it includes our advocacy for educational opportunities for all children around the globe. These child workers should be in schools – not being used as cheap labor.

Second, our members and their families comprise millions of American consumers who want to be able to make informed purchasing decisions. We believe – and numerous surveys have confirmed – that most U.S. consumers do not want cheap goods if they come at the cost of forcing children to work or other abuses. The idea behind the monitoring system we support is to place information about agricultural products and their involvement with child labor before consumers and allow the market to work.

I can assure you that the AFT will be aggressive about informing our members. Once consumers have ready access to reliable information about the use of child labor, most of them will avoid products brought to market with such practices. We are confident that consumer choice will drive the effort to end child labor, and those free market decisions will also drive changes in business practices that allow child labor to continue.

We are not asking for a ban on any product or commodity—we simply asking for the consumer to be informed. For the market to work properly and efficiently, consumers need information. This is the tool that keeps the market functioning.

In addition, the AFT has a long record of active opposition to child labor. As the members of this body are no doubt aware, in February AFT President Randi Weingarten called on Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to take immediate steps to close the U.S. market to chocolate made with cocoa that is produced with child labor. The AFT also has been a sponsor of the Fair Trade movement, which helps farming families across Latin America, Africa and Asia to improve the quality of life in their communities through a program that certifies that commodities are produced under fair labor conditions and that producers receive a fair price, among other things.

I know a little bit about Fair Trade because as an officer of the New York State United Teachers, before being elected to the AFT's national leadership, I advocated for NYSUT support for the Fair Trade movement. The New York teachers developed classroom curriculum materials that address Fair Trade principles.

I want to briefly address what a workable monitoring system might look like. To accomplish the mission of significantly reducing the use of child labor in agricultural products imported into the United States, the system you develop should, at a minimum, include these features:

- It should establish a reliable certification program for agricultural products.
- All stages of the supply chain should be subject to traceability and inspection requirements.
- There should be annual on-site inspections of each farm and handling operation by a certification body or agent.
- It should allow for multi-stakeholder participation.
- There should be a comprehensive conflict of interest policy for certification bodies and agents. To be credible, the monitoring and certification system must be independent.
- It should include an anonymous grievance procedure that is open to third-parties. This would allow for new or continuing violations to be identified, and it would provide protections for whistle-blowers.

The Department of Agriculture has decades of experience and expertise with such monitoring and certification programs. One of the most analogous is the National Organic Program developed to reliably identify organically produced agricultural products in the marketplace. The USDA inspection

programs for meat, eggs and other commodities provide other examples of existing systems that may inform this body's work.

As you move ahead with this effort, you will hear from others about why the goal of ending child labor abuses is unachievable, or how the work is too difficult or impractical. Some will say that they are just innocent purchasers of products and have only limited or no means of knowing whether child labor was involved somewhere in the supply chain. I would suggest to you that there are no innocent bystanders in a chain of commerce that is linked to the abuse of children.

And the system we advocate will provide the information that responsible businesses and ethical consumers need. You will hear that such a monitoring system is impractical and cannot work because of the sheer number of producers and the millions of farms that make up the supply chain. I would suggest to you that we must make a start. And once a monitoring system is implemented, we are likely to learn that it is not as impractical as predicted. And all the stakeholders in this process have a responsibility to take steps that will reduce the likelihood that products made with child labor ever make it into the stream of American commerce.

I want to leave you today with someone else's words on the scourge of child labor. They are from a speech last year by Senator Tom Harkin, a longtime leader in the effort to end this abusive practice around the world.

Senator Harkin—the former chairman of the Senate's Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee—and I were in Geneva, Switzerland last June to speak to the International Labor Organization. On that occasion, he noted that the ILO had declared that "abusive and exploitative child labor is one of those uniquely offensive practices—like slavery—that is never acceptable, never excusable." He went on to describe the plight of many child workers: "These children endure long hours of hard labor, with little or no pay. They are denied an education, and deprived of normal growth and development. They are children stripped of their childhood."

Once again, I commend you for taking on this important task. And as the process moves forward, I hope we can all resolve together that we will do what is necessary to allow children to be children—which includes going to schools where they can receive the education that will boost the economic growth and development of their nations.

Thank you.