

September 13, 2017

Guy Ryder
Director-General
International Labour Organization
4 route des Morillons, CH-1211
Genève 22, Switzerland

Dear Director-General Ryder:

On behalf of the U.S. garment, footwear, and travel goods industry, we would like to express our concerns with the ILO's monitoring mission in Uzbekistan on behalf of the World Bank.

Representing more than 1,000 world famous name brands, the American Apparel & Footwear Association (AAFA) is the trusted public policy and political voice of the U.S. apparel and footwear industry, its management and shareholders, its nearly four million U.S. workers, and its contribution of \$384 billion in annual U.S. retail sales.

We believe the ILO plays a key role in the international community's efforts to stop the use of state-sponsored and state-orchestrated forced labor in the Uzbek cotton harvest, and have strongly supported the deployment of ILO monitors to Uzbekistan. However, the ILO's reporting on behalf of the World Bank raises serious concerns about the mission's accuracy, methodology, and approach. Further, we fear it could have broader implications for the ILO's legitimacy.

First, ILO monitors are accompanied by an official from the Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan (FTUU), an organization controlled by the Uzbek government and known to be deeply involved in the forced mobilization of Uzbek citizens during the annual cotton harvest. We understand that the monitoring mission occurs in the context of a broader Decent Work program that the ILO must execute with the cooperation of its social partners. However, the presence of an FTUU official calls into question the independence of the ILO's third-party monitoring program.

Second, critical issues were not addressed in the most recent ILO monitoring report, issued January 2017. For example, the report fails to take into account and/or reference:

- A protocol issued by the Uzbek Cabinet that ordered the FTUU, referenced above, to direct the deployment of public workers to pick cotton. The protocol clearly demonstrates the direct and active role that the Uzbek government plays in the forced mobilization of workers to pick cotton;
- The Uzbek government's persecution of independent monitors – journalists, civil society monitors, and human rights activists – who were attempting to monitor the cotton harvest; and
- Evidence of forced labor gathered during the cotton harvest by internationally-respected independent monitors like the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights.

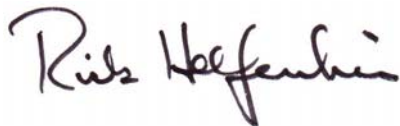
Most troubling is the introduction of a new category, “reluctant workers,” to characterize labor that does not appear to be voluntary. These are defined as workers who go to harvest cotton because of “social pressure” from their peers, as opposed to coercion. This term, introduced by the ILO in a report for the World Bank, has never been used previously by the ILO, nor does it appear in either of the core conventions on forced labor, the reports of the relevant ILO supervisory mechanisms, or other ILO publications on forced labor.

The introduction of such a tenuous term as “reluctant workers” into the global lexicon on forced labor by the ILO – the organization responsible for setting the standard of decent work worldwide – is very worrisome. The term, as defined in these reports, could provide a justification for virtually any type of forced labor, and could seriously undermine the work done by your organization to eradicate forced labor around the world.

Many of our members have pledged to avoid the use of Uzbek cotton until the government ends the practice of state-sponsored forced labor in the harvest. We rely on organizations like the ILO to provide credible, objective information about working conditions we need to make informed sourcing choices. We are concerned that the current ILO monitoring program for the World Bank undermines the ILO’s independence and credibility and, finally, the ILO’s authority in fighting forced labor around the world. Therefore, we urge the ILO to consider these serious concerns before continuing this mission.

AAFA stands ready to work with the ILO to address forced labor in Uzbekistan and around the world. We would be happy to meet with the ILO to discuss further. Please contact Nate Herman of my staff at 202-853-9351 or nherman@aafaglobal.org if you have any questions, set up a meeting, or would like additional information.

Sincerely,



Rick Helfenbein
President and CEO, AAFA