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International Labor Organization: A Fact Sheet

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Summary

This paper provides basic information on the International Labor Organization (ILO) and issues of interest to Congress. It is updated periodically. CRS Report 97-942, *The International Labor Organization and International Labor Issues in the 105th Congress*, contains more detailed information on ILO issues of congressional interest.

Background. The ILO was founded in 1919 under the Treaty of Versailles and associated with the League of Nations. The United States did not join the ILO until 1934, due to Congress' refusal to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, U.S. refusal to join the League of Nations, and Senate fears of a free trade "plot" to reduce U.S. protective tariffs. After World War II, the ILO became a U.N. Specialized Agency. It has 174 member countries and the fourth largest budget of the U.N. system. Its purpose is to assist governments in raising labor standards and improving working conditions. It provides technical assistance through training programs, advisory missions, and surveys. It helps governments write labor legislation, conducts research and studies on workplace problems, and offers solutions.

Organization. The ILO structure is unique. In addition to government representatives from each member country, two additional delegates represent each member country's employer and employee organizations, theoretically speaking and voting independently of the government delegates. The International Labor Conference, comprised of all members, meets in June and is the legislative and policy making body. The Governing Body sets the agenda for the annual Conference, appoints the Director General, examines and approves the budget for adoption by the Conference, and directs the activities of the Conference. It has 56 members; 28 government representatives (including the United States and nine other permanent members of "chief industrial importance") and 14 seats each for labor and business representatives. The new ILO Director General, Juan Somavia of Chile, will take office in March 1999. The International Labor Office is the permanent staff of the ILO. ILO headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland. The ILO has a Washington Liaison Office.

U.S. Participation in the ILO. The United States is represented in the ILO by the Department of State and the Department of Labor sharing responsibilities as the

government representative. The labor representative is the AFL/CIO and the business representative is the U.S. Council for International Business.

Congressional Interests.

Labor Standards. The ILO, as the U.N. agency concerned with setting labor standards to protect workers’ rights, has adopted 180 multilateral labor standards as conventions or treaties which are binding when ratified. Seven of these are considered “core” human rights labor standards, which address basic human rights of workers. (The United States has adopted only one of the “core” conventions, No. 105 on forced labor. In May, 1998, the President transmitted no. 111 to the Senate, the core convention on discrimination in employment.) Although the ILO has no enforcement powers, it has a well regarded system to supervise how the conventions are applied in member countries, using independent experts to investigate, evaluate compliance and publish the findings. Countries often work to comply with the ILO when adverse publicity is imminent. The June 1998 International Labor Conference adopted a Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. This declaration states that all ILO members agree to adhere to the principles of the seven core labor standards, regardless of their level of development and whether they have ratified them. The ILO members also agreed to establish procedures for annual reports by all members on compliance with the core standards, but are still debating how this will be done.

Child Labor Convention. The ILO has always been interested in curbing work by children. ILO Convention 138 on minimum age for employment is one of the “core” human rights conventions. Currently, the ILO is developing a new core child labor convention to focus on the worst forms of child labor, bonded or slave labor, hazardous working conditions, and employment of very young workers. It is expected to be adopted at the June 1999 International Labor Conference and be opened for ratification.

ILO Budget. Under the ILO Constitution, members agree to pay a set share of the budget, which is adopted by a 2/3 majority vote of all members. The 1998-99 budget is \$481 million, or \$240.5 million per year. The United States pays 25% of the calendar year budget, but owes (is in arrears to) the ILO nearly \$28 million for previous years, according to the State Department.

U.S. Contributions to the ILO (in millions of dollars)	
FY 1991	\$62.0
FY 1992	54.6
FY 1993	57.3
FY 1994	53.3
FY1995	62.2
FY1996	64.5
FY1997	54.0
FY1998	60.4
FY1999 (req)	59.8

International Program for the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC). The ILO has a highly successful technical assistance program to help countries eliminate the worst forms of child labor by providing sustainable alternatives for communities. IPEC is currently operating in 30 countries with 23 countries on the waiting list. The United States has contributed \$8.1 million to IPEC since FY1992. The U.S. contribution is included

in the Labor, Health and Human Services appropriation. For further information on child labor, see CRS Issue Brief 97052, *Child Labor and Public Policy in a Global Setting*.

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