

Press Release

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International Labour Organization forced to address conflict of interest

Responding to mounting pressure, UN agency to consider severing ties with the tobacco industry

Lilongwe, Malawi- In the latest in a series of high-profile disaffiliations, the International Labour Organization (ILO) will decide whether it, too, will finally sever ties with Big Tobacco. The decision, set to come at its governing body meeting this month, could shutter one of the tobacco industry's last-remaining avenues of influence to the United Nations.

The decision comes as a global call by public health and labour leaders around the globe who delivered a letter this week to government representatives of the ILO Governing Body calling on them end the ILO's public-private partnerships with the tobacco industry. Global public health leaders from the [Secretariat of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control \(WHO FCTC\)](#) to [global tobacco control organizations](#) have long called for the ILO to shut its doors to Big Tobacco.

“For over ten years, we have seen the ILO on the wrong side of rural people's history with its policy to take money from global cigarette makers,” said Lucky Mfungwe, Lilongwe-based Centre for Social Concern. “This month, the ILO has the opportunity to stand on the right side of history and protect agricultural workers over corporate profits.”

In the past 15 years, the ILO has received more than \$15 million USD from tobacco corporations for joint programs, including more than \$10 million from Japan Tobacco International for its [Achieving Reduction of Child Labour in Supporting of Education \(ARISE\) program](#). The industry promotes these programs to [boost](#) its public relations, but they do little to curb child labor in tobacco fields because they do not shift the tobacco industry-driven cycle of poverty for tobacco farmers that forces children into the fields. The ILO's coziness with the tobacco industry violates Article 5.3, a [core tenet of the FCTC](#), which establishes a firewall between the tobacco industry and public health policymaking.

“Captains of the tobacco industry insufficiently support genuine workers' rights and dignity in tobacco fields. Corporate groups like UN Global Compact have severed its ties because of industry malfeasance,” said Marty Otañez, Associate Professor in Anthropology at the University of Colorado Denver and board member of the Human Rights and Tobacco Control Network. “For the ILO to remain relevant in areas of labor rights and community engagement, it needs to end its collaboration with the tobacco industry.”

As more and more countries and institutions firewall themselves from the tobacco industry in line with the FCTC, the tobacco industry has struggled to maintain its influence. In an attempt to regain a lost foothold, Philip Morris International recently launched the [Foundation for a Smoke-Free World](#), to which it will give nearly \$1 billion over the next decade.

Members of the Tobacco and Allied Workers Union of Malawi (TOAWUM) as well as researchers with the Centre for Social Concern, have seen little or no benefit from ILO-funded social responsibility projects administered by the Eliminate Child in Tobacco Growing Foundation (ECLT). ECLT is the primary body that receives money from Japan Tobacco and other tobacco companies and implements child labour schemes in Malawi's tobacco sector. According to Rafael Sandramu, TOAWUM's Secretary General, "The intent of much of ECLT's programming is not bad. These initiatives, however, insufficiently address root causes of tobacco-related child labour, which is endemic poverty among tobacco farmers. That poverty is exacerbated by contracting schemes developed by the very companies funding some projects for ECLT."

Tobacco companies continue to purchase leaf produced by child laborers in Malawi while simultaneously trying to appear as friends of workers through ILO-funded social responsibility schemes. "Now is a good time for the ILO to end its charity program focusing on the issues the industry has on its agenda. Instead, the ILO and Big Tobacco need to focus on local farmers and their desire for fair earnings and enforceable collective bargaining agreements," noted TOAWUM's Sandramu.

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The Centre For Social Concern (CfSC; www.cfscmalawi.org) is a project of the Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers). CfSC promotes and raises awareness about human rights and economic justice by training church and community leaders to document and advise on cases of human rights abuses and violence. The Centre was started in 2002. It works on the plight of the tobacco tenants and the promotion of the passing of a bill regulating tobacco tenancy labour, a monthly review of the cost of living through the Basic Needs Basket survey, and a number of other social justice issues. CfSC as well as the Tobacco and Allied Workers Union of Malawi lead a task force on tobacco tenancy issues, engaging officials in government and industry to raise awareness among stakeholders about unacceptable conditions of work, including both forced and child labor. CfSC is like a voice for the voiceless that hopes to enable them to find their own voice. Lucky Mfungwe is the Economic Governance Programmes Officer with CfSC.

The Human Rights and Tobacco Control Network (HRTCEN; www.hrtcen.net) works to advance a human rights-based approach to tobacco control- utilizing the legal remedies and reporting requirements of current treaties and conventions, including the recent Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. HRTCEN will educate on and utilize measures that are currently accessible and will encourage adoption of new measures in order to decrease the morbidity and mortality of the people with the least agency to claim their rights. Marty Otañez is a HRTCEN board member and an Associate Professor in the Anthropology Department, University of Colorado Denver.