

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 21, 2025

The Honorable Lori M. Chavez-DeRemer  
Secretary of Labor  
U.S. Department of Labor  
200 Constitution Ave NW  
Washington, DC. 20210

Dear Secretary Chavez-DeRemer:

We write to express our serious concerns about the Department of Labor (DOL)'s decision to terminate all existing cooperative agreements at the Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB). DOL and the United States Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) Service have announced the cancellation of \$577 million in cooperative agreements. These cuts are inconsistent with bipartisan laws passed by Congress providing federal funds to combat child labor, forced labor, human trafficking, and enforce labor standards in over 40 countries. We note that the Trump Administration identifies labor practices, including failures by foreign governments to protect internationally recognized worker rights, as a foreign trade barrier in the recently issued National Trade Estimate Report on Foreign Trade Barriers.<sup>1</sup> Cancelling all existing cooperative agreements will only harm American workers, lower international labor standards, and hurt children.

ILAB was created by President Truman after World War II. Since its creation, it has served at the forefront of global efforts to eliminate child labor. Under international standards, child labor applies to work below the minimum age established under national legislation—usually 14 or 15 years old—and includes slavery, commercial sexual exploitation, illicit activities, and hazardous work that is likely to harm health or safety. Global estimates from the International Labor Organization (ILO) indicate that there are *160 million children* between 5-17 years old in child labor, roughly half of them in hazardous conditions.<sup>2</sup>

ILAB also works to combat forced labor and human trafficking – serious violations of human rights. According to the most recent figures available, there are 5.4 victims of modern slavery for every 1,000 people in the world, with women and girls disproportionately affected.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the ILO estimated that *24.9 million people* around the globe were in forced labor as of 2016.<sup>4</sup> Victims are rarely able to seek help for various reasons, due to language barriers, poverty, or unstable immigration status. Furthermore, ILAB plays a key role in addressing

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative. "2025 National Trade Estimate Report on Foreign Trade Barriers." Office of the United States Trade Representative.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Labor. "Sweat & Toil: Child Labor, Forced Labor, and Human Trafficking Around the World." U.S. Department of Labor. Last modified April 2, 2025. <https://www.dol.gov/general/apps/ilab>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection. "Human Trafficking." U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Last modified April 2, 2025. <https://www.cbp.gov/border-security/human-trafficking>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security. "What is Forced Labor?" U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Last modified April 2, 2025. <https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/forced-labor>.

China's use of slave labor as a member of the Forced Labor Enforcement Task Force to enforce the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act.<sup>5</sup>

Critically, the findings from ILAB and ILAB funds provided by Congress have led to improved adherence to international labor standards that support American workers. Since 2019, ILAB has invested in eliminating the roughly 1.56 million instances of child labor violations in the production of cocoa in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire—countries that produce cocoa for chocolate bought by American consumers, as well as nearly 60 percent of the world's cocoa each year.<sup>6</sup> Recently, DOL's November 2024 framework of action included improving access to quality education, as well as technical and vocational training, strengthening social services and social protection, and empowering women, youth and workers in cocoa-growing communities.<sup>7</sup> Uzbekistan was pushed to address forced labor and child labor in the cotton sector, which unfairly competes with American cotton growers and exporters.<sup>8</sup> Argentina's government and private sector built technical assistance programs developed by DOL in the blueberry sector, ensuring that children and teenagers had access to child care and enrichment programs.<sup>9</sup> In Honduras, one DOL cooperative agreement disbursed more than \$13 million to fight child labor and other exploitation, resulting in more than 6,000 children enrolling in educational programs, aiding more than 1,800 families, and helping train around 500 inspectors on child labor exploitation and other labor laws.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, your actions will prevent this work from continuing. A few of the contracts that have been eliminated by you and DOGE include the "Global Better Work Program (I)" and "Better Work Global (II)" in Haiti, Jordan, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Vietnam to establish strong labor enforcement and transparency; "Supporting Safe and Inclusive Work Environments in Lesotho" to stop violence against women; "Research, Innovation and Strategic Engagement Project (RISE-global)" in Brazil, Colombia, Cote D'Ivoire, Indonesia, and Guatemala to educate workers on their rights and how to protect them; and "Promoting Safe and Healthy Workplaces in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador" to improve worker safety and discourage migration to the United States.<sup>11</sup> The cancellation of these contracts is neither efficient nor puts America's interests first. Instead, we believe it will cause devastating,

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Labor. "Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act." *U.S. Department of Labor*, April 2, 2025. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/uyghur-forced-labor-prevention-act>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Labor. *Research & Project Efforts to Eliminate Child Labor and Forced Labor in the Cocoa Sector*. Accessed April 7, 2025. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/research-project-efforts-eliminate-child-labor-and-forced-labor-cocoa-sector>.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Labor. *U.S. Department of Labor Announces New Initiatives to Combat Child Labor and Forced Labor in Global Supply Chains*. News release, November 27, 2024. Accessed April 7, 2025. <https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/ilab/ilab20241127>.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Labor. "Enhancing Transparency and Accountability in Uzbekistan's Cotton Industry." *U.S. Department of Labor*, April 4, 2025. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/enhancing-transparency-and-accountability-uzbekistans-cotton-industry>.

<sup>9</sup> Tai, Katherine. "Global Working Conditions Matter for American Workers." *The American Prospect*, March 30, 2025. <https://prospect.org/labor/2025-03-30-global-working-conditions-matter-american-workers-su-tai-ilab/>.

<sup>10</sup> Gurley, Lauren Kaori. "Trump Administration Moves to Gut Programs That Fight Child Labor Abroad." *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/03/27/trump-labor-department-international-child-labor/>.

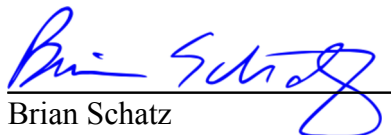
<sup>11</sup> Tai, Katherine. "Global Working Conditions Matter for American Workers." *The American Prospect*, March 30, 2025. <https://prospect.org/labor/2025-03-30-global-working-conditions-matter-american-workers-su-tai-ilab/>.

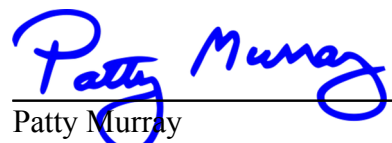
widespread harm to our most vulnerable populations, and put American workers at a disadvantage.

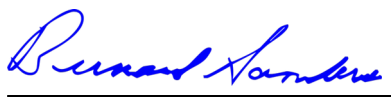
Additionally, we are concerned about the economic impacts of this decision. One of the major missions of ILAB is to enforce the labor provisions in U.S. trade agreements. ILAB grants level the playing field for American workers and ensure businesses cannot profit from labor abuses by stopping the problems at their source. Offshoring work will only drive down wages, incentivize abusive labor practices abroad, and take jobs away from hard working Americans. For example, the President and CEO of the American Apparel & Footwear Association (AAFA) has said that the cancellation of ILAB contracts will harm both their consumers and 3.5 million American workers.<sup>12</sup> The only winners here will be the multinational corporations who want cheap labor, and our adversaries that benefit from these practices.


In your confirmation hearing on February 19<sup>th</sup>, you testified to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions that we must protect children from labor exploitation. You said this in response to questions from members on both sides of the aisle.<sup>13</sup> We ask that you live up to your comments and urge you to take immediate steps to protect children, American workers, and other vulnerable populations by using funds Congress appropriated for ILAB for that purpose.

Sincerely,

  
 Brian Schatz  
 United States Senator

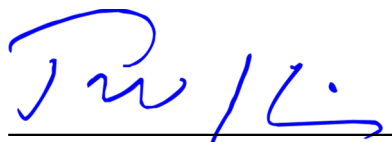
  
 Patty Murray  
 United States Senator

  
 Bernard Sanders  
 United States Senator

  
 Tammy Baldwin  
 United States Senator

<sup>12</sup> American Apparel & Footwear Association. "AAFA Reacts to U.S. Department of Labor's Action to Cancel All ILAB Contracts." *American Apparel & Footwear Association*, March 26, 2025.  
[https://www.aafaglobal.org/AAFA/AAFA\\_News/2025\\_Press\\_Releases/AAFA\\_Reacts\\_DOL\\_Action\\_Cancel\\_All\\_ILAB\\_Contracts.aspx](https://www.aafaglobal.org/AAFA/AAFA_News/2025_Press_Releases/AAFA_Reacts_DOL_Action_Cancel_All_ILAB_Contracts.aspx).

<sup>13</sup> C-SPAN. "Labor Secretary Nominee Testifies at Confirmation Hearing." *C-SPAN*, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2025.  
<https://www.c-span.org/program/public-affairs-event/labor-secretary-nominee-testifies-at-confirmation-hearing/655914>.



Tim Kaine  
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth  
United States Senator



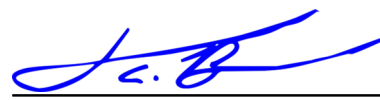
Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator



Alex Padilla  
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker  
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator



Ruben Gallego  
United States Senator