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*Major Human Rights Abuses Complicate U.S. Trade Relations with Central Asian Republic*

## Teachers, Students, Labor Rights Watchdogs, Religious Leaders, Call on Uzbekistan to End Forced Child Labor in Cotton Fields

*Demonstration at Embassy of Uzbekistan Delivers Petitions Demanding That Millions of Children be Sent Out of the Fields and Back to School this Fall*

Calling for an end to forced child labor in the cotton fields of Uzbekistan, and carrying a quilt to which they pinned photos of children picking cotton, over fifty demonstrators, representing American teachers, students, religious and human rights organizations, and labor unions, dumped petitions with thousands of signatures at the front door of the embassy of that central Asian republic in Washington, DC today.

The demonstration comes at a critical moment in U.S.-Uzbekistan trade relations:

The U.S. government has just begun new talks with Uzbekistan this week for a trade and investment agreement while a formal complaint filed by the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) with the U.S. Trade Representative is pending.

Last month, the US Department of Labor included cotton from Uzbekistan on the List of Goods Produced by Child or Forced Labor that was required by the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2005. US DOL also recommended that cotton from Uzbekistan be included on an updated List of Products Produced by Forced or Indentured Child Labor as part of Executive Order 13126 of 1999.

Today, the government of Uzbekistan opens the Fifth International Uzbek Cotton Fair to attract U.S. and other cotton importers to buy Uzbek cotton.

International brands and retailers including Wal-Mart, Target, Levi Strauss, GAP, Limited Brands, Disney and Nike, among many others, have agreed to ban Uzbek cotton from their supply chains until forced child labor is ended.

Uzbekistan is the world's second largest exporter of cotton and up to one third of the country's workforce

labors on cotton farms. While the cotton industry is very profitable for a few large landowners and political elites, the vast majority of cotton farmers live in dire poverty. Independent union representation is almost nonexistent for workers. Thousands of children as young as seven are forced, by government decree, to work in the cotton fields instead of attending school in order to meet government-imposed cotton production quotas. Even children who are enrolled in rural schools are often dispatched to work in the fields when their schools are closed down during harvest time by government officials. Some children are conscripted to work in remote areas where they are forced to stay in dormitories while they pick cotton.

Speakers, representing some of the demonstration's sponsoring organizations included:

- Arlene Holt-Baker, Executive Vice President, AFL-CIO
- Antonia Cortese, Secretary-Treasurer, American Federation of Teachers
- Amanda Formica, United Students for Fair Trade at George Washington University
- Bama Athreya, Executive Director, International Labor Rights Forum
- James E. Winkler, General Secretary, United Methodist Church, Board of Church and Society
- Sally Greenberg, Executive Director, National Consumers League

Additional sponsors included the Child Labor Coalition, Communications Workers of America, Not for Sale Campaign, Service Employees International Union, United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers, and Workers United.

Credible reports indicate that up to a quarter of a million children and youths become forced laborers in Uzbekistan's cotton fields each year. This is one of the most widespread and shocking examples of forced labor in the world today, it has been going on for decades, and all of this cotton enters the global garment industry. We are wearing the labor of these kids on our backs, and it is time once and for all for the Government of Uzbekistan to stop this terrible human rights abuse." – **Bama Athreya, Executive Director, International Labor Rights Forum.**

For more than 2 million Uzbek students, going 'back to school' also means going 'back to the fields,' as they and their teachers are forced to leave school to perform long, hard and dangerous work in the country's cotton fields. While the government and bosses reap the profits, the children lose valuable learning time while toiling in the fields for little more than meager meals. This state-sanctioned practice must be denounced. All children belong in the classroom, and teachers must be free to practice their craft." – **Randi Weingarten, President, American Federation of Teachers.**

"Uzbekistan continues to violate with impunity international labor conventions prohibiting forced labor and the worst forms of child labor with its official state policy forcing millions of school children into the cotton fields. The futures of these children, as well as that of the Uzbek nation, are being destroyed by this flagrant and intentional non-compliance with international law. The AFL-CIO stands in full solidarity with the struggle of the people, workers and children of Uzbekistan to end this scourge." – **Stanley Gacek, Associate Director, International Department, AFL-CIO.**

"The key to Uzbekistan's future is not in the growth of its cotton, but in the growth of its children's minds, which cannot happen if they are forced to work. As a student and youth, I stand in solidarity with young people in Uzbekistan in demanding that the government stop these abusive policies." – **Amanda Formica, George Washington University member, United Students for Fair Trade.**

The Uzbek government's use of forced child labor is immoral and must be stopped. People of all faiths in the U.S. and around the world want to be sure that the clothing they buy is made by workers who enjoy ethical working conditions. We add our voices to those who are calling for an end to abuses in the cotton fields of Uzbekistan." – **Jim Winkler, General Secretary, General Board of Church & Society, The United Methodist Church.**

Today, we are here to remind consumers that the cotton that goes into the clothes they wear may have

been harvested by school children in Uzbekistan, where the government has replaced mechanical harvesters with the sometimes bloody fingers of small children and teenagers, who are forced to leave school and pick cotton. On behalf of American consumers, the National Consumers League and the Child Labor Coalition demand that the government of Uzbekistan do the right thing and stop forcing its school children to harvest cotton and instead allow them to remain in school.” – **Sally Greenberg, Executive Director, National Consumers League.**

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*This rally is sponsored by: AFL-CIO, American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Child Labor Coalition, Communication Workers of America (CWA), International Labor Rights Forum, Not for Sale Campaign, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), Workers United*

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