

Speeches by Secretary Elaine L. Chao

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Secretary Elaine L. Chao
Remarks before the 90th Session
of the International Labor Conference
Geneva, Switzerland
June 11, 2002

I am very pleased to be here representing the United States at the 90th Session of the International Labor Conference. Let me also add my congratulations to the ambassador of Switzerland for his election as president of this conference.

This meeting gives me an opportunity to talk about an important element of a broader agenda to create a competitive twenty-first century workplace and workforce. Through the U.S. Department of Labor we are implementing a powerful new strategy to make enforcement of our labor laws more effective. This strategy is called “compliance assistance.” The goal of compliance assistance is to provide America’s employers, workers, jobseekers, youth and retirees with clear, easy-to-access information about how to comply with federal employment laws. It recognizes that even with all the resources at our disposal, there simply are not enough government inspectors to visit every workplace under our jurisdiction. Moreover, like the technical assistance, follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, our initiative is promotional. It is aimed at making the best possible use of scarce resources to achieve an objective.

The initiative is also tripartite. Employers and workers helped the government to design and implement the program. It places equal emphasis on educating workers and employers. It utilizes additional information tools as well as interactive Web-based technologies. We believe that compliance assistance is a powerful enforcement strategy that should be part of ILO-promoted best practices.

Take for example the cooperative programs developed by our Occupational Safety and Health Administration. These programs recognize that enforcement alone cannot prevent all workplace injuries and illnesses or ensure that employers maintain high standards in safety and health. Our Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP) at the state and federal level recognize and promote effective health and safety management as a cooperative effort. We involve workers, employers and government across a broad array of businesses of all sizes and the results have been striking. On average, lost workdays for VPP sites are fifty-two percent below the industry average. We anticipate a twelve percent growth in VPP sites in the coming year.

Our most recent example of compliance assistance is the [YouthRules!](#) Web site and campaign, a major new initiative launched several weeks ago. It is an aggressive outreach to employers, youth and their parents to educate them about the hours and types of work teenagers may engage in legally. We believe that it can also serve as a model for others who wish to promote both understanding and implementation of their labor laws.

Tomorrow this body will focus on the ILO's first Global Report "A Future Without Child Labor" issued to follow-up to the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. This report makes it clear that much remains to be done to eliminate the worst forms of child labor throughout the world. The instances of children forced into combat and children forced into slavery are particularly poignant and require intervention. We must all recommit ourselves to the fight against exploitative child labor. At the same time we must seek to ensure that all children, particularly young girls, are given equal access to education and training. In too many regions of the world, as our First Lady Laura Bush has so eloquently stated, girls are still deprived of education and other opportunities that would allow them to become productive, successful members of the workforce.

Another important issue I would like to touch upon today is the work of the ILO's World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization. The United States considers the commission's work both important and timely. We seek to come to grips with the paradox of the global economy. On the one hand, many benefit from its enormous opportunities, on the other hand, there are those who fail to gain access to the full benefits of expanded trade because fundamental freedoms and individual human rights have not been fully implemented.

Finally I would like to address an urgent matter on the minds of many here today. I want to thank the director-general and his staff for their report on the extremely difficult situation faced by workers and employers in the West Bank and Gaza. My government supports the director-general's proposal for enhanced technical cooperation in that region. We welcome his offer to report to the governing body in November on actions the ILO has taken on this issue.

We believe that some of the surplus remaining for the last biennium would be well spent on this critical need. The ILO has a valuable role to play in responding to what the director-general so eloquently described as the aspiration of all families in the region: "parents at work, children at school, security in the streets and peace in the community."

So in closing, let me urge all of us to renew our efforts to improve the lives of the world's workers and future workers. That is both our goal and our challenge. With determination and good will, I am confident that we can continue to extend the boundaries of opportunity and freedom worldwide.