

European Community

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EUROPEAN COMMUNITY SEEKS TO LINK LABOR STANDARDS TO TRADE PRIVILEGES

The European Community, the nine-nation trading bloc that was the first to offer generalized trade preferences to developing countries, now seeks to link four fundamental labor standards to the advantages it offers its trading partners.

The Community's aim is to help countries benefitting from its cooperation to base their economic growth on conditions that are compatible with social progress. The four standards, chosen by the Commission from among a vast body of standards covered by the 151 conventions of the International Labor Organization (ILO), are considered minimal. Certain business and labor circles in the Community would like to go further, including, for example, provisions on minimum wages and rights of unions.

The Commission believes these four standards, if adopted, would further the movement for human rights, and allow experience to be gained for future application of more complex standards. The Commission has asked the Council of Ministers to agree to a policy of preference for those countries that uphold these minimum standards over those that try to justify inhuman working conditions by invoking under-development.

Standards that the Commission wants to require of all states with whom the Community trades are:

- 1) Equal opportunity and treatment in employment, regardless of race, color, religion or sex;
- 2) A work week in industry limited to 48 hours maximum;
- 3) A minimum age of 14 for children working in industry;
- 4) Protection of the health and safety of working children and adolescents.

The Commission made its proposal for international labor standards to the Council last month. The principle of requiring certain work standards had already been contained in a Commission statement on the renewal of the Lome Convention, the Community's trade-aid program involving 56 African, Caribbean and Pacific nations that is currently being renegotiated.

In a press conference in Brussels announcing the proposal, Development Aid Commissioner Claude Cheysson pointed out that the Community scheme differs from a plan under discussion in the United States. U.S. Labor Secretary Ray Marshall has said he would prefer to use provisions under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to restrict imports from those industries that profit from abnormal working conditions. The Commission, said Cheysson, seeks to avoid any hint of protectionism; it would prefer to suspend trading preferences and aid to those countries that do not meet the work standards requirement.

Suspension of aid would follow inquiry by the ILO into alleged violations of the four standards. Consultations would then be held between the Community and the countries concerned to work out a solution. Only if violations persisted would the Community withdraw the commercial advantages it gives through exemptions on customs duties and similar charges. That withdrawal could be limited to the products or the areas of industry where the standards were not complied with. Financial and technical aid provided by the Commission and the European Investment Bank for particular projects and programs would also depend on compliance.

The Commission proposal makes allowance for some flexibility in applying the standards. Special circumstances in the least developed countries may sometimes mean delay. The flexibility accepted by the ILO in its agreements will be respected. Children under 14, for instance, can be employed in craft work and agriculture as well as in family or other small-scale undertakings for the local market.