

# The ILO needs more muscle

BY STEVE CHARNOVITZ

In late March, the governing body of the International Labor Organization elected Chilean Juan Somavia as the next director-general. The election of Mr. Somavia — the first person from a developing country to head the ILO — presents an opportunity to remake the organization into a more effective international agency. A revitalized ILO can improve the global economy by helping countries make better use of their human resources.

Mr. Somavia, a lawyer by training, has served as Chile's representative to the United Nations since 1990 and held numerous leadership positions in U.N. economic and social committees. Although Mr. Somavia has not had extensive involvement with the ILO, he has a year to prepare himself before taking office in March 1999.

Over the past decade, many groups have criticized the ILO as "toothless" for not enforcing its labor conventions with trade sanctions. Others say it is removed from the economic problems of developing countries. Virtually everyone agrees there is little public awareness of the organization and its mission.

The ILO, established in 1919, is the only surviving institution of the original League of Nations. Now a specialized U.N. agency, it seeks to raise working conditions through standard-setting, technical assistance and a complaint procedure. Delegates from national worker and employer organizations directly participate in ILO decision making.

In response to criticism, the ILO is expanding efforts to protect workers. A new initiative would survey progress in every country toward achieving fundamental labor rights regardless of whether a country ratified applicable ILO conventions.

Next month, the ILO will consider a convention to combat extreme practices of child labor when the Global March

Against Child Labor — with marchers from five continents — converges on the ILO's annual conference in Geneva.

These initiatives are constructive, but deeper reforms are needed. Here are four proposals:

First, employers need to be given a greater stake in the ILO's program. Employer delegates have tended to view their role as "damage control." This follows because the ILO is not interested in situations where national labor standards are too "high."

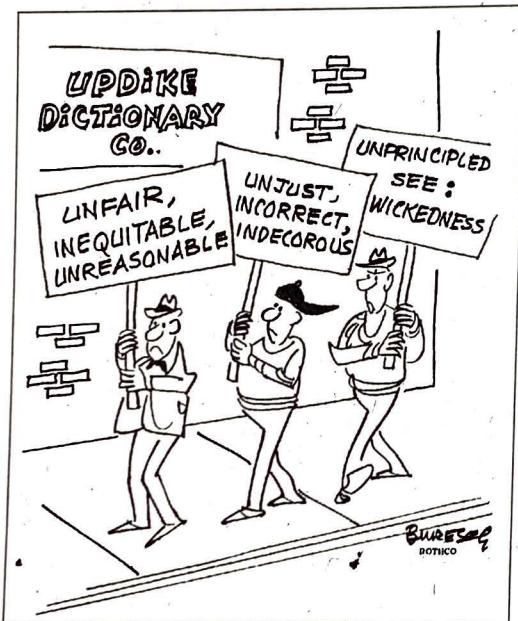
For example, laws that make it costly to restructure a firm's work force may hinder invest-

to honor basic worker rights.

Third, the ILO needs to increase involvement by civil society. This critique is ironic because the ILO is the only international organization to give full membership rights to non-governmental organizations.

But the private organizations taking part in the ILO reflect only a narrow band of the civil society spectrum. For example, chambers of commerce, sustainable development councils, consumer groups and human rights coalitions are given little opportunity to participate in the ILO.

Fourth, the ILO should devote more attention to helping shape international economic policy. Expanded trade and investment clearly benefits workers, yet these issues are rarely discussed in the ILO. It has been more than 30 years since the ILO recommended that industrial countries increase their imports from developing countries "thus promoting mutual trade and increased employment in the production of exports." Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, free trade is too important to be left to the trade ministers who oversee the World Trade Organiza-



tion. ment in a country, and thereby hurt that country's workers. Yet this common constraint receives no ILO attention. Sometimes this situation is addressed by the International Monetary Fund. But if the ILO attended to these employment problems, the IMF would not have to propose corrective action so late.

Second, the ILO should emulate successful, global environmental strategies that provide financial assistance to countries that implement key treaties.

Thanks to funding from several industrial countries, the ILO now has significant resources to sponsor experiments that help eradicate child labor. But these new projects must be managed effectively with funding allocated to governments that are making a sincere effort

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