



**Gerónimo Venegas, President IUF's agricultural trade group
– Opening remarks - Global March Against Child Labour;
International Conference on child labour in agriculture, July
28-30, 2012, Washington DC.**

Senator Harkin, Ministers, ladies and gentleman, brothers and sisters from the trade union movement. It's a great honour and pleasure to be here and to bring to this important conference greetings from the IUF, in particular from our general secretary **Bro Ron Oswald** who cannot be here today, but who sends his good wishes for a successful conference.

For those of you who do not know the IUF, it is a global trade union federation made up of 370 affiliated trade unions in 120 countries. Those trade unions represent workers throughout the food chain - in agriculture, in food processing, in hotels and restaurants. As trade unions, they represent mainly workers in some sort of employment relationship – there's an employer there somewhere – often precarious, day labourers, contract works, self-employed. Most IUF affiliates do NOT represent small farmers, a notable few do in particular CONTAG and GAWU who both have representatives here in the conference. I must stress this point about the majority of IUF members not representing small farmers as it is important to for you to understand that this does limit our ability to intervene and to act directly with small farmers, the main users of child labour in agriculture.

As you will have read in the background document and as I am sure you will hear repeated on many occasions over the next few days - agriculture is the biggest employer of child labour with 60% of all child labour taking place in agriculture. Yet often it is not addressed by policy makers or even worse it is regarded as somehow normal, an unchangeable reality of rural life that children toil in our fields and plantations. In the Brazil 2013 conference and the global conference in 2016 there must be clear commitments to target child labour in agriculture – frankly without this the goal of elimination of worst forms of child labour by 20106 will not be achieved.

Most child labour is an outcome of poverty, children work because their parents are poor but child labour undermines our ability as trade unionists to negotiate living wages in agriculture. It is a vicious circle – IUF is committed to breaking this circle of poverty and we think our main contribution as a trade union organisation is by working for decent work for adults in particular for living wages and safe and healthy workplaces

Regrettably, child labour is not the only problem facing us – there are many decent work deficits for agricultural workers.

Agricultural workers are often denied access to even the basic of rights covered in the ILO's core conventions in particular to freedom of association and the right to bargain collectively.

This is not just my view as a trade unionist – a report from the ILO for the 2008 International Labour Conference Committee on **Promotion of rural employment for poverty reduction** stated.

“Globally, rural workers still form the largest workforce. While improvements have been made in the protection of agricultural workers in some countries, in many others, they are not covered by labour legislation and other regulations protecting workers.

Furthermore, where laws do exist, lack of resources and political will to enforce the provisions as well as isolation, poor literacy, poverty and lack of organization, often prevent workers from fully asserting their rights. The labour protection gap for these workers remains huge.....”

Agriculture is also one of the most dangerous industries to work in with the highest rate of fatal accidents and many millions of workers injured or made ill through workplace accidents and exposure to pesticides.

Put together the poor health and safety conditions and the widespread use of child labour and the extent of the challenge we face becomes clearer. Millions of children at risk of workplaces injuries or even worse, workplace fatalities.

I know from my own experience these realities --- I worked as a child labour in Argentina.

My own experience drives my commitment to end child labour in agriculture and my union, UATRE, has several programmes on child labour elimination and literacy training.

I think it is also appropriate to mention that as we are meeting here 1 billion people are malnourished and under-fed and it is clear that the problem of world hunger will increase. The vast majority of the hungry are in rural areas – agricultural workers, the landless, subsistence farmers. It is a terrible and cruel irony that those who feed the world often have the least resources to feed themselves and their families.

For my union UATRE and IUF the message to this conference is clear. Decent work in agriculture should be at the heart of plans and strategies to eliminate child labour and also to ensure global food security.

For me the way to address the decent work deficits in agriculture has to start with government ensuring that agricultural workers can really exercise their right to belong to a trade union and to be represented by a trade union and for employers to recognise that mature systems of industrial relations bring benefits and productivity.

However, the children toiling in the fields cannot wait for these improvement, they need action now.

Globally we need:

- innovative ideas to reach out to small farmers and to bring them in to the debate;
- companies to do more to eliminate child labour in their supply chains
- governments must invest in rural development and in particular rural educations