

UN labour body under fire over tobacco ties

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The UN's labour organisation was accused Thursday of capitulating to pressure from tobacco companies after it withdrew an announcement that it had cut financial ties with the industry.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) had initially released a statement announcing it had severed links with so-called Big Tobacco, a relationship that has dogged the Geneva-based body for months.

But the ILO later announced that it had not made a final decision and the issue would be discussed again in March.

ILO spokesman Hans Von Rohland told AFP that his office had been sent a draft resolution in which members would agree that "no new funding shall be accepted by the ILO from the [tobacco](#) industry."

"We sent out the second-to-last version (of the resolution) by mistake," he said.

'Invisible hand of tobacco lobby'

Activists argued the events pointed to the tobacco lobby's powerful influence.

"Something behind closed doors and outside the main plenary produced this decision", said Shuo Peskoe-Yang, a senior researcher at Corporate Accountability, a US-based civil society group.

The outcome is a result of "the invisible hand of the tobacco industry", he told AFP.

The ILO includes representatives from employers, labour unions and member-states.

Peskoe-Yang said he understood that there was widespread support to cut off tobacco funding from Europe, Canada, Australia and elsewhere, but that African voters in particular faced pressure to keep ties open.

"The tobacco industry was dangling these funds in front of the Africa bloc", he said, noting that the United States was also in favour of preserving the links.

The ILO had justified its ties to tobacco companies as a way of helping improve the working conditions of the some 60 million people involved in tobacco leaf growing and production worldwide, notably in Africa and Asia.

The agency has received more than \$15 million from Japan Tobacco International and groups linked to some of the world's biggest tobacco companies for "charitable partnerships" aimed at reducing child labour in tobacco fields.

But activists and civil society groups have insisted that tobacco-funded programmes had little impact in improving workers conditions.

They argued that a partnership with a major UN agency was allowing [tobacco companies](#) to portray themselves as a responsible corporate actor even as their products were killing millions of people each year.

Pressure on the ILO has mounted since United Nations Economic and Social Council passed a resolution in June calling for the UN system to

prevent "[tobacco industry](#) interference".

Corporate Accountability said that interference would now continue.

"Tobacco corporations have already admitted to using the ILO as an avenue of influence within the UN system, made all the clearer by the ILO's dubious decision," the group's deputy director for campaigns, Gigi Kellet, said in a statement.

"For now, the ILO will remain one of the industry's primary tendrils in its campaign to block, weaken and delay labour and public health protections."

The ILO said the programmes linked to tobacco funding were due to expire next year. A decision will then be made on their possible renewal.

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