1,600 children maimed every year in Australia

Child labour--a growth industry of the 1990s

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Child labour, a worldwide scourge, has become a growth industry in Australia over the past 15 years. Children as young as 7 have become an indispensable component of major industries, particularly retail and clothing.

In the clothing industry, the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union estimates that 82,500 children under-16 are now working, usually at home alongside their parents, out of a total workforce of 329 000. The sweatshop conditions in which they and other children often work--including long hours, unsafe facilities and token wages--expose the myth that child labour is confined to the 'Third World'.

Reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Melbourne *Age* newspapers last month gave a glimpse into the situation. These reports primarily focused on the industrial injuries suffered by youth.

Nationally on average 1,600 children aged between 12 and 16 are seriously injured, maimed or killed each year in industry. In the most populous state of New South Wales alone, eight children under 16 were killed, 232 suffered permanent disability and 2,013 received serious injuries between 1991 and 1997.

In Victoria, the WorkCover agency only provided figures for 15-16 year olds, showing that 3,579 had been seriously injured since 1985. Queensland had 467 serious injuries in 1997-98 and 491 in 1996-97.

South Australia had claims from children as young as 11, with 314 reports of serious injury in 1997-98. Western Australia recorded 61 serious injuries to 13 to 14 years olds from 1993 to 1997 and 226 for under 16s in 1996-97. Of these, 114 suffered fractures, 83 serious burns and 11 traumatic amputations.

These figures provide only a partial picture, covering those accidents that were officially reported or led to compensation claims.

Some of the horrendous deaths and injuries included the death of a 14-year-old boy after falling from milk truck; a 16-year-old boy suffocated by fumes inside an empty petrol tanker; a 13-year-old boy crushed to death under an orchard sprayer; a 13-year-old boy killed after his larynx was crushed by a strap pulling shopping trolleys; a 13-year-old girl sucked into wheat silo; a 15-year-old boy poisoned by gas in an abattoir; and the maiming of a 15-year-old girl who fell waist deep into a vat of boiling oil.

In one case, Rick went to work at a local butcher shop at the age of 13 in order to save money for a surfboard. Concerned for the safety of their son, his parents obtained assurances from the butcher that he would not go near knives or machinery but only wash trays and sweep up.

Soon, however, the shop changed ownership and the new owner began using the boy to clean machinery, unbeknown to his parents. The original industrial mincer with safety guards was replaced with an older model without guards.

On June 29, 1996, Rick and another 14-year-old proceeded to wash the mincer, unsupervised. Rick's hand became entangled in the machine, pulling his arm in up to the elbow before his fellow worker could turn it off.

At first doctors informed his family that amputation was necessary but after 10 hours of microsurgery his thumb was saved. Following further grafts, doctors reconstructed his forearm and re-created a stump of a hand.

Yet at a recent federal Senate inquiry the Howard government claimed Australia had 'no child labour problems'. It opposes the establishment of a minimum employment age.

The re-emergence of child labour marks a reversion

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to the conditions that existed in the early years of capitalism. Child labour grew and was institutionalised in Britain from 1780 to 1840. It was not until 1842 that Parliament prohibited women, and children under-10, working in mines. In 1847 children's work was limited to 10 hours a day in textile factories.

Child labour was not outlawed in Britain and the US until the 1930s. Nominally similar laws have existed in Australia since the turn of the century, although it is still legal to send young children up chimneys in NSW and in Victoria it is legal to put children as young as 7 to work for eight hours between 6am and 11pm, as long as a permit has been obtained.

Last year 1,796 such permits were granted, primarily in the entertainment and advertising industries. The reality is far different. Some 36,000 children are toiling in the backyard garment industry in Victoria.

And as if to ensure that even the most extreme cases of exploitation go uninvestigated, last year the Victorian government disbanded the Youth Industrial Unit, cutting the staff enforcing child labour laws from seven to one.

In Cabramatta, the centre of the Vietnamese community in Sydney, the use of children as clothing outworkers is so widespread and specialised that one retail store is reputed to measure and fit children for industrial sewing machines.

Another major child labour business is the retail industry. Apart from small family businesses, where tens of thousands of children are required to assist their parents, some 57,000 15-year-olds and 78, 000 16-year-olds are legally employed nationally. Most are school students working part-time, often at night, to help pay for their studies or sustain themselves and their families.

A recent Australian Retailers Association survey found that 46 percent of retailers employed junior workers because of low wages, with an adult worker earning 150 percent more than a 15-year-old. It also calculated that if employers were forced to pay full wages, 60,000 young workers would be sacked immediately and a further 55,000 laid off over time.

The return to nineteenth century practices is driven by the features of modern capitalism--the global drive for cheaper labour, the rise of permanent mass unemployment, the spread of poverty to wider layers of working people and the cutting of welfare, unemployment and student benefits.

Anti-immigrant policies have worsened the problem, particularly by denying all social security payments to new arrivals for their first two years and by slashing English language programs. For many newly-arrived families unable to find work, the only alternative is to enter the backyard industries, putting their children to work in order to survive.

As usual, the trade union leaders have responded to the latest reports with cynicism and hypocrisy. Australian Council of Trade Unions president Jennie George said she was 'shocked' and 'outraged'. Yet the unions, working arm-in-arm with federal Labor governments under the ACTU-Labor Accords from 1983 to 1996, presided over these conditions.

In the textile industry for instance, the unions opposed any unified struggle against the closure of factories in the mid-eighties, which saw the loss of over 90,000 jobs nationally. Instead in 1987 the unions effectively campaigned for the legalisation of the outworker industry by gaining recognition of outworkers as contractors. This was supposed to guarantee wages of $9.30 an hour and was claimed as a 'victory'. In practice, major clothing companies, including some of the best-known brands, employed contractors who in turn sub-contracted the work for rates as low as $1 an hour.

This made it possible for sections of the industry to stay onshore, having made their wage costs competitive with those in Southeast Asia.

Child labour is today a global pestilence--estimated to exploit over 120 million children worldwide. Even in the so-called advanced countries such as Australia, it has become a central means of maintaining profit rates. Not only its expansion but its very existence denotes a society in deep crisis, one that must not just consume labour but also childhood.

See Also:
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