

Child labor and child slaves

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The following article was submitted to the World Socialist Web Site by Dr. Dipak Basu, Professor in Economics at Nagasaki University in Japan. It is followed by a commentary by Jerry White, on behalf of the WSWs editorial board, concerning the political conclusions drawn by Dr. Basu at the end of his article.

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The victory of the so-called developing countries in the recent World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in stopping the inclusion of labor standards in trade issues is hollow, as the problem of exploitation of labor in general and child labor and even slavery is getting worse in the developing countries.

In selected areas of India, Ghana, Indonesia and Senegal, according to the recent International Labor Organization (ILO) survey, 25 percent of the children are working. If seasonal laborers are taken into account in Senegal the percentage can reach 40. In Ghana, more than 75 percent of the working children aged 10-14 were female.

About 73 million children between the ages of 10 and 14 were working in 1995, representing 13.2 percent of all 10- to 14-year-olds around the world. There are an estimated 250 million child workers between the age of 5 and 14 in the world, without taking into account those who work with their families in mainly domestic activities.

The greatest numbers of child laborers are in Asia, 44.6 million; followed by Africa, 23.6 million; and Latin America, 5.1 million. Estimates by country showed even the developed European countries are not immune from this. Among the 10- to 14-year-old children the working rate is 41.3 percent in Kenya, 31.4 percent in Senegal, 30.1 percent in Bangladesh, 25.8 percent in Nigeria, 24 percent in Turkey, 20.5 percent in Côte d'Ivoire, 17.7 percent in Pakistan, 16.1 percent in Brazil, 14.4 percent in India, 11.6 percent in China, 11.2 percent in Egypt, 6.7 percent in Mexico, 4.5 percent in Argentina, 1.8 percent in Portugal and 0.4 percent in Italy.

But this is only a tip of the iceberg. No reliable figures for workers under 10 are available, though their numbers are significant. In central and eastern Europe, the difficulties connected with the transition from a centrally planned to a market economy has led to a substantial increase in child labor. The same is true of the United States, where the growth of the service sector, the rapid increase in the supply of part-time jobs and the search for a more flexible work force have contributed to the expansion of the child labor market.

The largest group of working children is the unpaid family workers. A high proportion of the children give their wages to their parents or other relatives with whom they live. Rural children work more than urban children with agricultural work being the main type of rural work and informal sector activity the main urban occupation. Children's work is considered essential to maintain the economic level of the household, either in the form of work for wages, of help in household enterprises or of household chores that free adult household members for economic activity elsewhere.

In India along with many other countries children work in textile,

clothing, carpet, footwear, glass industries, fireworks industries, diamond and other gem stone polishing, salt, limestone and mosaic chip quarrying industries. Many of these occupations involve the children in hazardous work.

Many of these children have no opportunity to go to school. Many of their parents, who suffer from illiteracy and ignorance, do not understand the importance of education. Moreover, the high cost of education is another obstacle for these children. With the government shying away from the education sector to be replaced by the private sector, as part of the structural adjustment program initiated by the IMF-World Bank, many children have to work to pay for their school. But many schools serving the poor are of such abysmal quality that many children drop out of school in frustration. Recently a large number of municipal schools in Calcutta's poorer northern areas were closed down due to the lack of students.

A majority of those children who work, do so nine hours per day or longer, and many work six or seven days a week, including on public holidays, especially in the rural areas. In many instances girls work longer hours than boys.

Child laborer in hazardous and other industrial work lead lives of degradation and hardship, and are deprived of their rights as children. The majority are involved in farming and are routinely exposed to harsh climate, sharpened tools, heavy loads and increasingly to toxic chemicals and motorized equipment. Because they are not matured mentally, they are less aware, even completely unaware, of the potential risks involved in their specific occupations or at the workplace itself.

A very high proportion of the children are physically injured or fall ill while working. Injuries included punctures, broken or complete loss of body parts, burns and skin disease, eye and hearing impairment, respiratory and gastrointestinal illnesses, fever, headaches from excessive heat in the fields or in factories.

Agriculture employs more than two-thirds (70 percent) of the total working children and as a result a high proportion (70 percent) of the ill or injured children are from that sector. Children are being used in commercial agriculture throughout the world and as a result are exposed to a variety of risks. In tea plantations the usual risks for children are bruises after picking tea for a long time, frequent fever due to long working hours in humidity, snake bites, subjection to harsh climate and lack of protection for both boys and particularly for girls.

In coffee and tobacco plantations there are similar risks. In Sisal plantations, the main crop in Africa, the risks are snakebites, long working hours, dusty and unhealthy working environments, lack of protective gear, thorn wounds by sisal pick. In sugar cane plantations the typical risks are back pains for bending for a prolonged time, toxic insecticides and fertilizers, choking smell, starvation for a long period due to the nature of work. Exploitation, harassment and torture are routine for children in every agricultural field.

About 13 percent of the ill or injured children work in the wholesale and retail trade, restaurants and hotels. Female children receive 25 percent of the injuries from working in this sector. Occurrences of injuries are significantly higher in the mining and construction sectors. On the average 35 percent of the female children and 26 percent of the male children are

injured while working in the construction sector. 19 percent of the children get serious injuries while working in the transport sector.

Girls working as domestic servants away from their homes, sometimes in various Middle Eastern countries, are frequent victims of physical, mental and sexual abuses which can have devastating consequences on their health. ILO reports on child labor (December 1999) detailed conditions of "forced prostitution" to which female children are subjected. "The AIDS epidemic is a contributing factor to this trend, as adults see the use of children for sexual purposes as the best means of preventing infection. The full extent of the problem is unknown, but in Thailand an estimated 250,000 to 800,000 underage children are working in the sex-trade. The laissez-faire attitude of the authorities in charge of national and international tourism is also largely responsible for the current situation."

Social costs of child labor are enormous but can not be quantified. A study by the ILO in Kenya found that 35 percent of the working children would like to go to school but cannot.

Niger, one of the poorest countries in Africa, provides a typical example of child exploitation. Uranium, gold, phosphates, tin, coal, limestone, salt and gypsum mining are prominent in Niger. In Madaoua, a major gypsum mining town in Niger, 43 percent of the mining workers are children. Of these 6.5 percent are 6 to 9 years of age and 16 percent are of 10 to 13 years of age. These children are exposed to innumerable safety hazards. During extractions they are at risk of injury from their tools and from exhaustion as they have to cover a huge area in search for gypsum. Other risks are snake and scorpion bites and foot injuries, as most of them are barefoot, from stones and wood splinters.

Liptako is a major gold mining area in Niger. Gold ores are obtained in difficult and dangerous conditions, as the method of work is primitive without any source of mechanical or electrical or any other power. Children are fully involved in most of the activities in gold production. 17 percent of the workers are children. They are also involved in related activities like transport, drug selling and prostitution. In the extraction phase, children are used as carriers of ores and waste products to the surface.

The child laborers manually carry sacks that weigh 5-10 kg. In addition to the danger of falling rocks, the children can also fall down mine shafts. They are exposed to risks such as explosions, asphyxiation, dust, dermatoid, flooding and drowning in the mines. They also face very high or very low temperatures, dangerous air and space, bilharziosis due to polluted water where they wash gold ores and dangerous materials used in mining and processing. The nearest medical facilities are 60 km away.

Millions of Russian children, victims of the country's economic breakdown after the fall of the Soviet Union, are in imminent danger of falling out of the school system and facing destitution, child labor or criminal exploitation. One of the main reason is the decline in the Russian education system. Up to 5 percent of children under 15 are working more than 20 hours per week; this figure certainly will go up in near future.

More and more children are being used by criminal syndicates, especially for the sale and distribution of illegal drugs. There is also increasing evidence of children becoming the victims of extortion rackets run by slightly older adolescents. A report of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) discusses "a new sub-culture of society" involving "children as young as five years old who live in basements and on the streets of Moscow." Some of these children work in brothels and use drugs, and suffer horrific psychological damage.

In the countryside children work in farms for up to 14 hours a day to be paid in kind. (This is not unusual in Russia where up to 50 percent of the workers do not receive regular wages). A lot of these children are infected with tuberculosis, while the number of hospital beds for children fell by 20 percent between 1994 and 1996. The education system is collapsing due to the nonpayment of salaries to teachers and nonavailability of books and other materials. As a result children are being pushed into the labor

market.

There are child slaves in both South Asia, Middle Eastern countries, sub-Saharan Africa and in Latin America. In many cases a child is sold into slavery as a result of a labor contract that his or her parents have signed into or in exchange for a sum of money that is often described as an advance on wages. Child slaves are to be found in agriculture, domestic help, sex industry, carpet and textile industries, quarrying and brick making. It predominates where there are social systems based on exploitation of poverty such as debt bondage. It is also simply a means of survival. Brick Kiln workers in Pakistan are a clear example of slave child labor.

Bricks are produced in Pakistan in manual and industrial processes. Brick Kiln owners get their supplies of labor force from Zamadars, labor supply agents whose job it is to make sure that laborers do not run away.

Laborers are bonded to the owners through a system of advanced payments (peshgis) whose interest rates are so high that workers can never repay them fully. Their children and wives are then forced to take responsibility for the debt. That creates a pool of bonded or slave child laborers who are tied to the owners of the brick making factories for life and unable to escape their "obligation." Workers and their children are traded from one owner to another. Some workers are sold more than 10 times. Wives of the workers are also bonded laborers; they are most exploited, both physically and sexually.

No education or medical facilities are available for these children. Escape is not possible due to the close associations between the owners and the local police force. About 60 percent of the children start work below the age of 13. The mortality rates among children are high and they suffer from blindness due to the presence of high degrees of lead in the mud. Blindness among older workers is around 15 to 20 percent. Owners insist that the children work unless they have to look after younger siblings. Mental torture for these children is horrific. They live in fear, witness physical violence meted out against their parents. Their reactions are different from normal children, according to Mrs. Asma Jehangir, a human rights advocate in Pakistan, "They do not surround a car or a vehicle entering the kiln premises but run away in fear."

Although women are an integral part of the labor force they do not receive any separate wages. Marriages of young girls are not encouraged. The labor-suppliers run prostitution dens and supply women to the owners. Several incidents were reported where widows and abandoned women were sold to recover outstanding debts of the workers. Illiterate workers are unable to verify their outstanding debts. As a result they, along with their children, will be slaves for the rest of their lives.

It was reported in the *Times of India*, on December 7, 1999 that a slave market operates openly in Bihar, one of the most backward parts of India. In the Sonepur cattle fair in Bihar state child laborers are sold like cattle.

"A well-organized gang of some 15 persons is reportedly involved in this racket. The gang not only sends child laborers to different states such as Punjab, Haryana and Delhi, but also 'supplies' them to various factories in some industrialized states," the newspaper said.

According to this report a shopkeeper in the fair admitted that he had purchased two child laborers, one of them a 12-year-old girl. He had to pay Rs 900 to a broker-cum-contractor who supplied the children. The slave market has been operating for over a decade with the children brought to Bihar by contractors from Raxaul, Sitamarhi, Jogbani and some other towns close to the Nepal border.

"In the beginning, some poverty-stricken children were sent here by their parents so that they could earn something. Taking advantage of their helplessness, some contractors engaged in 'supplying' laborers to factories, grabbed the opportunity to sell these child laborers," the *Times* reported.

The whereabouts of these sold children are not known. Many UNICEF-sponsored non-government organizations (NGOs) have set up their stalls

at the fair but have failed to stop child abuse.

There is no child labor in one part of India, surprising as it may be, in the state of Kerala. Nor is there is child labor in Cuba. The reason is not hard to find. Due to continuous efforts of the enlightened government of Kerala, there is almost universal literacy and extensive social services with a population fully aware of their rights. The government has implemented full-scale land reforms (only one other state in India, West Bengal, has implemented land reforms), which has absorbed landless agricultural laborers. New schools were opened everywhere, trade unions are encouraged and the minimum wage laws are implemented. Enrollment in schools is free and free school meals encourage poor families to send their children. The minimum wage, which is higher than anywhere in India, allows parents to survive without their children having to go out to work. Anyone who has not enrolled his son or daughter in school comes under pressure from other villagers. There are extensive facilities for adult education. In this way every inhabitant in Kerala gets used to reading newspapers and takes an active interest in protecting their rights. Similarly, imposition of compulsory education for children in Sri Lanka has reduced the percentage of child labor to about 5 percent of the total labor force.

The arguments of the developing countries that inclusion of labor rights and environmental issues are meant to stop their exports to the developed countries should not cut much ice. Developing countries suffer much more when they have liberated imports. The result is growing unemployment in the developing countries where industries and agriculture are unable to compete.

The acceptance of a new product-based patent system will also ruin many industries, particularly drugs and pharmaceuticals. These will make developing countries technologically dependent on the developed world. When a developing country accepts a loan from the World Bank for a project, it forfeits its rights to buy materials from domestic sources or to employ domestic contractors. Anti-dumping measures are being used against the developing countries to take away their comparative advantages.

However, most developing countries, while gladly accepting unequal treaties from the World Trade Organization, opposed the inclusion of labor rights and environmental issues which are meant to benefit poor workers and children in the developing countries. For example, all 4,000 victims of the disaster in the Union Carbide fertilizer plant in Bhopal, India were very poor slum dwellers. Legislation is there, but implementation is absent. If the developing countries would face trade sanctions through the World Trade Organization, they would be forced to implement fundamental human rights of the workers and children.

Progressive measures sometime come out of reactionary setups. Legislation implemented after the long campaigns of Lord Wilberforce against the slave trade or of Abraham Lincoln against slavery in the southern United States are some examples. The World Trade Organization is an oppressive and reactionary organization, no doubt, but inclusion of labor rights, which may help to abolish child labor and slavery, is a progressive act indeed.

Dear Dr. Basu,

Thank you for your informative article about child labor and child slavery. It paints a chilling picture of the exploitation of children, which, as you demonstrate, not only persists as we enter the twenty-first century, but is proliferating throughout the world, particularly in the most impoverished countries.

Towards the end of your article, under the heading of "Silver linings," you raise a number of political issues that we cannot agree with. In particular, you suggest that child labor and child slavery could be abolished if the World Trade Organization adopted labor standards to prohibit these practices and punished violators with trade sanctions.

The WSWS is not opposed to labor standards. There should be guidelines

to guarantee workers in every part of the world the right to a secure job and a living wage. Moreover, child labor and child slavery should be outlawed and employers who exploit children should be punished. However, the issue is: should working people place their faith in the WTO—an institution controlled by the most powerful transnational corporations and richest countries, which you correctly denounce as "oppressive and reactionary"—to abolish child labor and child slavery?

Working people have had long and bitter experiences with capitalist institutions which claim to champion the interests of the masses. Following World War II the United Nations was established ostensibly to ensure world peace and promote democracy. Instead it has chiefly functioned as an instrument of the US and other imperialist powers to justify one military intervention after another, from the Korean War, to Vietnam, to the virtual destruction of Iraq.

An agreement to ban child labor and slavery signed by the WTO or any similar institution would be a dead letter. The exploitation of children is not, as the capitalist trade ministers and mainstream media present it, simply a blemish on an otherwise healthy social order. It is the product of the profit system itself. The operations of the global capitalist market—with transnational corporations and investors crisscrossing the globe to find the cheapest sources of labor—have created an economic demand for the exploitation of the most vulnerable segments of society.

Those nations—such as India, Pakistan, the former USSR and African countries—which your article cites as the most egregious exploiters of children are all subject to IMF and World Bank "structural readjustment" programs. These US-backed measures, designed to pry open foreign markets for global corporations and investors, have led to massive cuts in social benefits, including education, the elimination of agricultural subsidies, the privatization of state-owned facilities, the shutting down of noncompetitive industries and the introduction of "flexible" labor laws. All of these measures, as you point out, have contributed to the spread of child labor and child slavery.

In your article you say "the arguments of the developing countries that inclusion of labor rights and environmental issues are meant to stop their exports to the developed countries should not cut much ice." But in fact, Clinton pushed labor standards at the WTO meeting precisely to extract further concessions from these countries with the threat of trade sanctions.

However, this does not mean we accept the arguments of the capitalist governments in India, Pakistan and other oppressed nations which defend the use of child labor in the name of protecting their "national sovereignty." The Indian bourgeoisie, for example, has often used fake anti-colonialism to justify its oppression of the working class. Indian officials have claimed that ending child labor would only further impoverish families that depend on the income of their children. These arguments reflect the concern of the national bourgeoisie that trade sanctions to curb child labor would threaten the chief commodity that makes their countries attractive to global investors, i.e., cheap labor.

In your conclusion you seem to support the idea that economic nationalism is a viable alternative to "liberalized" trade policies. But all forms of economic nationalism, from the policy of import substitution to the national autarchy of the Stalinist regime in the former USSR, have failed in the face of the increasing integration of the world economy. The issue is not reviving the outmoded nation-state system, but integrating the world economy in a rational, democratic and egalitarian fashion, i.e., through the socialist transformation of society.

Every capitalist government in the world, including those in Germany, France and Italy which are led by Social Democrats or former Communist Party officials, has carried out a systematic assault on the living standards of the working class. Those which don't face immediate reaction from the global markets. Ultimately all governments that base themselves on the defense of the capitalist market and nation-state system are obliged to adapt to demands of the most powerful transnational corporations and banks.

If the above-mentioned governments in Europe are gutting social benefits there is no reason to believe that the same will not be the case in India or any of the other less developed countries.

This brings me to the question of your characterization of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front regime in Kerala as an “enlightened government” that has protected the interests of the masses. While it may be true that conditions in Kerala are relatively better than other Indian states, the CPI (M) leads a bourgeois government that defends the interest of Indian capital and therefore is incapable of solving the basic needs of the masses. The workers and peasants in Kerala face ever-widening social inequality and capitalist exploitation that is interwoven with caste oppression.

Moreover, the Left Front government in Kerala, like its counterparts in West Bengal and Tripura, has embraced the Indian capitalists' “new economic policy” and vied with other states to lure foreign investment with tax concessions and promises to curb labor unrest.

The Left Front was a pillar of the United Front coalition which ruled India between 1996 and March 1998 and pressed forward with the privatization of public sector industries, cuts in state expenditure on social welfare programs and reductions in price subsidies for basic commodities. These policies have fostered the spread of child labor.

The same can be said of Sri Lanka, or for that matter Castro's Cuba. The more these respective governments open up their countries to the exploitation of transnational corporations and global investors, and the dictates of the IMF and World Bank, the more conditions emerge for the proliferation of child labor, and even worse forms of exploitation. In Sri Lanka, for example, there has been a growth of the sex trade involving children, particularly in relation to the tourist industry.

In your final paragraph, referring to the possibility of the WTO acting against child labor and slavery, you say, “progressive measures sometimes come out of reactionary setups,” and cite as an example Abraham Lincoln's struggle against slavery in the US. As a matter of historical record, Lincoln, far from being a reactionary figure, played a leading part while the rising industrial bourgeoisie in the US still had a progressive role to play. Lincoln led what became a revolutionary struggle—the American Civil War—to destroy the southern slavocracy and abolish slavery.

Your example actually argues against any illusions that contemporary capitalist institutions will end such horrific forms of oppression as child labor, and points instead to the need for a revolutionary movement against capitalism and its institutions, just as 140 years ago it took a movement of masses of people to forcibly end the scourge of chattel slavery. Today, of course, capitalism and wage slavery are the obstacles to human progress, and the leading social force for revolutionary change is the working class.

I hope these remarks are taken in a spirit of constructive dialogue on the political problems confronting the working class and oppressed masses. We encourage you and other readers of the WSWWS to continue to contribute your letters, essays and articles to our web site.



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