

Exposé of Gap's use of child labor part of a broader social phenomenon

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On October 28, the British newspaper, the *Observer*, published an exposure of multibillion-dollar global clothing company Gap's use of child labor in India to produce children's clothing bound for US and European markets. Far from being an exception to the rule, the incident reveals the conditions that hundreds of millions of children around the world must endure in the service of global capital.

Children are the most easily exploited of all laborers. Worldwide, the International Labor Organization estimates that 218 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 work in developing countries, with more than 122 million in the Asia-Pacific region, another 50 million in sub-Saharan Africa, and nearly 6 million throughout the Caribbean and Latin America.

UNICEF estimates that 1 in 12 children around the world are involved in slavery, armed combat, and the sex trade, or forced into illicit factory work. These children suffer abuse and neglect, malnutrition, serious injuries, and poor physical and emotional development. The social isolation of children in the workforce precludes access to education and healthcare.

National governments turn a blind eye to these conditions while working to further loosen labor and trade regulations and drive down labor costs for investors. Both national and international laws banning child labor have been in effect for decades, but as long as the social and economic origin of child labor—the capitalist system—goes unchallenged, the practice will continue.

Freelance journalist Dan McDougall described the New Delhi factory that was subcontracting for Gap as a “derelict industrial unit” in the *Observer* piece. The children, some as young as 10, said they had been sold by their families to the subcontractor, where they were beaten, made to work long hours, and held in squalid conditions.

The area in which the children hand-embroidered clothing was “smeared in filth, the corridors flowing with excrement from a flooded toilet,” the newspaper reported. The children told McDougall they were forced to labor 16 hours a day, and those who cried or were unable to complete their

workloads were hit with a rubber hose or had oily rags stuffed into their mouths.

A 10-year-old described his ordeal, made possible only by the most extreme poverty and economic lawlessness. “I was bought from my parents’ village in [the northeastern state of] Bihar and taken to New Delhi by train,” he told McDougall. “The men came looking for us in July. They had loudspeakers in the back of a car and told my parents that, if they sent me to work in the city, they won’t have to work in the farms. My father was paid a fee for me and I was brought down with 40 other children. The journey took 30 hours and we weren’t fed. I’ve been told I have to work off the fee the owner paid for me so I can go home, but I am working for free. I am a shaagird [a pupil]. The supervisor has told me because I am learning I don’t get paid. It has been like this for four months.”

Another child McDougall estimated was around 12 told him the children had been made to work “from dawn until about one o’clock in the morning the following day” for four days in a row to fill the Gap’s order.

Gap was swift to portray the discovery as an unauthorized exception to the company’s labor policies, pointing to the fact that it has dozens of inspectors to monitor its 2,700 factories around the world. The company has 200 suppliers in India.

Spokespersons for the company said that last year Gap voluntarily withdrew contracts with 23 factories for labor violations. For subcontractors found in violation, Gap’s stated policy is to have children removed from the workplace, enroll them in school, and guarantee work once legal working age is reached. Apparently, to avoid even the threat of government enforcement, Gap said it would cancel its contract with the Delhi vender and voluntarily destroy the products made there.

However, the ubiquity of child labor in India tells a different story than one of “ethical capitalism.” The country’s privatization and divestment since the early 1990s has resulted in a rapid industrialization, but has not raised living standards among its massive poor population.

Rather, as in China, in Bangladesh, and throughout Asia, globalized production has drawn the formerly agrarian population in India into industrial work, resulting in growth in urban productive centers without a corresponding growth in wage standards or social infrastructure. Meanwhile, publicly owned industries have been privatized. As a handful of financial elites fatten their financial portfolios, the poor are forced into working longer hours just to subsist. For large-scale corporations such as Gap, Ralph Lauren, J.C. Penney, and numerous others with operations in India, the cheap cost of labor is one of the central reasons for outsourcing production there.

In the days since the *Observer* exposé, a number of other Delhi child labor operations have been raided by Indian police and human rights activists. One day after its publication, 14 boys were removed from a sweatshop only a few buildings away from the Gap operation. They had been held in a single cramped room where they both embroidered women's garments and slept, according to the Associated Press.

One 11-year-old said his parents had sent him off to work two years ago, and he had not heard from them since. He told the press he was worried they were upset with him because he never got any money to send back. The following day, Tuesday, another 28 children were found at the same factory.

On November 1, an explosion in an illegal Hyderabad fireworks factory killed 11 and injured 13 others. All but three of the victims were under the age of 13, according to the Indo-Asian News Service.

Most of the children recovered from the Delhi sweatshops had been brought into the city by train from Bihar, an impoverished agricultural state. Like much of the country, social infrastructure including schools and jobs is lacking in the region. Desperate, often landless, parents are convinced to sell their children to traffickers for a few dollars and the promise they will be well cared for in the city and send home wages. Instead, children are frequently held as slaves in hazardous conditions.

International law prohibits the use of child labor, and 155 countries have signed onto a United Nations convention banning most types of labor by minors. According to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, "Every child shall have, without any discrimination as to race, color, sex, language, religion, national or social origin, property or birth, the right to such measures of protection as are required by his status as a minor, on the part of his family, society and the State."

The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have a right "to be protected from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the

child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development."

Nevertheless, according to the rights foundation Save the Children, as many as 80 million children in India work. Indian law prohibits the hiring of children under the age of 14 for "hazardous" occupations, but even the Indian labor ministry admits that as many as 13 million children work in prohibited manufacturing operations such as glass-making, domestic work, and embroidery.

Activists participating in the raids on factories told Agence France Press November 5 that the government has no intention of implementing child labor laws, and that police frequently tip off factory owners or accept bribes during raids. Activists become targets for assassination by business owners.

Following the Gap raid, the government accused activists of inventing a crisis in order to encourage developed countries to erect trade barriers over labor standards. Responding to the *Observer* exposure, Commerce Minister Kamal Nath told reporters October 30 that child labor conditions were being exaggerated by human rights groups to "show India in bad light." Without elaborating, he added, "There will be pressure on India to take retaliatory measures."

Many children labor in the booming garment export industry, which grew by 20 percent in 2006, according to the Indian government, to \$10 billion in annual profits. Garment manufacturing is the country's largest economic sector behind agriculture in terms of employment and foreign capital generation, yet many of the factories are small subcontractors without high-tech production methods or efficient assembly lines. Instead, factory owners compete by slashing wages, subcontracting to informal operations where conditions are dire, and drawing labor from the most exploited layer of the Indian population.



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