

Tobacco companies profit from child labour in Malawi

Barry Mason
3 June 2010

Britain's Channel 4 programme "Unreported World" has highlighted the ongoing use of child labour in tobacco harvesting in Malawi. Presenter Jenny Kleeman went to tobacco growing areas of the country to see for herself the use of child labour.

Filmed in an area of the country near the Zambia border, Kleeman spoke to a group of women and children, some just toddlers, sorting tobacco leaves at the side of the road. One woman with three children helping her said that she would earn around 80 pence for the day's work.

A group of tenant farmers harvesting tobacco in the fields lived in pitiable conditions. One woman with several children explained how the farm's owner would insist on a quota of one and half carts of tobacco leaves being harvested each day. The only way she could meet the quota was by having her children help in the harvest. She told Kleeman that as a tenant farmer her income was about £18 a year. Such low wages mean many tenant farmers have to borrow money from the farm owners and end up in debt, becoming bonded labourers.

A common problem of those harvesting and sorting the tobacco leaves was green tobacco sickness. This is brought about by nicotine absorption through the skin and results in severe headaches and racking coughs, leading to chest problems. In developed countries such as the United States, workers on tobacco farms are provided with protective clothing.

Kleeman interviewed one farmer asking why he paid such low wages and provided no protective clothing. He said that it was because he was paid such low prices for his tobacco at the leaf auctions. The prices paid at such auctions were being pushed down and the government gave them no price protection, he said.

Half of the child labourers in Malawi are under nine

years old. Kleeman spoke to the head teacher of one primary school, who said that around a third of his pupils were absent as they were helping with the tobacco harvest. The absences would mean the children would fail their exams and not be able to go on to secondary school, giving them no chance of breaking out of the circle of poverty associated with tobacco farming.

Kleeman examined claims of child trafficking associated with tobacco harvesting, visiting one charity that had been able to rescue such children from tobacco farms. The children told of being recruited by farm owners touring villages. The dire levels of poverty suffered by their families left them open to such practices.

Child labour is illegal in Malawi, but is tolerated by the authorities. The programme heard of one case of a farmer who was also a politician, who employs children. Although he was reported to the authorities by a charity, he was let off with a caution. There is a penalty of five years jail and fines, but no one had been prosecuted.

The programme filmed the auction of the harvested tobacco in the city of Lilongwe. Last year at such auctions 232 million kilograms of tobacco were sold throughout Malawi. At the Lilongwe auctions leaf buying companies will spend US\$2.5 million a day buying up the tobacco brought in by the farmers. The Malawi anti-corruption bureau has accused the companies of colluding to keep prices low. A government minimum price level is ignored. Last year Malawi deported four executives from leaf buying companies for offering low prices.

The leaf buying companies sell on the tobacco to the big companies such as British American Tobacco and Phillip Morris. The tobacco picked and sorted by child

labour ends up being sold on to these big companies.

After pointing this out to the big tobacco companies, Kleeman explained that the local fixer the programme had employed was detained for 10 hours by the Ministry of Labour, who questioned him about where they had filmed, etc. The tobacco companies told the programme they were opposed to the use of child labour and had supported projects to help sanitation and education within Malawi. The companies had in fact spent around US\$6.5 million over eight years and in only two out of the 28 districts that make up Malawi.

Commercial tobacco was first grown in Malawi in 1889, when US settlers from the State of Virginia introduced the crop. From the 1960s onward the growing of tobacco began to be switched from the Americas to Africa and Asia. Malawi today is amongst the top 10 tobacco producing countries and earns 70 percent of its foreign exchange from tobacco.

Tobacco production used to be highly controlled by the government, but following IMF structural adjustment directives brought in at the end of the 1980s production by small-scale farmers on rented land has increased rapidly.

This process has locked these small farmers and their families into a circle of poverty. A February 25, 2008 *Corp Watch* article, "Playing with Children's Lives: Big Tobacco in Malawi", explained:

"The Malawi Tobacco Control Commission (TCC), a local government watchdog for the tobacco market, estimates that it takes \$1 for farm workers to produce a kilogram of tobacco, which they usually sell at \$0.70 for a loss of \$0.30 per kilo. Hard working farmers who cannot make a living turn to child labour."

Around a fifth of Malawians rely on tobacco production for their income. The vast majority of these are extremely poor.

The use of child labour in Malawi is entrenched. A report by the Norwegian base Institute for Applied Social Science, FAFO, published in October 2000 explained:

"While accurate systematic data is lacking, some work has been done indicating that child labour in Malawi is widespread and increasing... Studies indicate that child labour is much higher on the tobacco estates. Malawi is generally regarded as one of the countries in the region with the highest incidence of child labour."

Like other impoverished countries, Malawi has

suffered terribly from the global economic crisis. While some mineral exporting countries have experienced continuing demand for their commodities, most of the former colonial countries have seen a decline in exports, falling commodity prices, disinvestment and reduced aid. The result is that their debt levels are increasing once again. Poverty is worsening as a result, with children suffering most.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact