

Child labour: A global scourge

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Children being forced by extreme poverty into wage (as well as slave) labour remains in the second decade of the Twenty-First Century a chilling, global phenomenon.

In its latest report on the issue, “Marking Progress Against Child Labour: Global Estimates and Trends,” the International Labour Organization (ILO) said that in 2012 at least 168 million children were working in conditions that fell under its definition of “unacceptable” or exploitative child labour.

Almost half of the child-labourers—73 million—were between the ages of 5 and 11. A further 47.4 million were children 12 to 14 years old. (According to the ILO’s definition, only 12- to 14-year-olds who work at least 14 hours per week or are involved in hazardous work are counted as child-labourers). And in 2012 there were 47.5 million documented cases of 15- to 17-year-olds working in hazardous conditions, or for more than 43 hours per week, as bonded labourers, or in some other form of coerced labour.

The ILO report indicated a gender discrepancy in child labour cases. There were 99 million boys between 5 and 17 years old who fit the ILO’s definition of unacceptable child labourers versus 68 million girls. However, the ILO cautions that its statistics frequently do not include less visible forms of child labour, such as work done in homes—work that is often, and in the case of domestic labour generally, performed by girls.

According to the ILO, there were 78 million fewer child labourers in 2012 than in 2000. While the ILO and others have been quick to laud this “progress,” the decline may have more to do with the world economic crisis that erupted in 2008 than the efforts to enact and enforce laws banning “unacceptable” child labour.

As the ILO report itself concedes, in the period immediately after the 2008 economic meltdown, employers of child labourers cut back, particularly amongst the cohort of early teenagers.

Of those the ILO considers child labourers, about 68 million work in the agricultural sector, 54 million in the service sector (including domestic work), and 12 million

in manufacturing. 85 million children (approximately half of the reported number) are engaged in hazardous work, where they are regularly threatened with and fall victim to serious workplace-related injuries and illnesses. In some cases these prove fatal.

While hazardous working conditions—such as working barefoot and without a helmet on a construction site—threaten all workers, children are especially vulnerable. Such conditions compromise their still developing physical and psychological well-being and youth are more vulnerable to accidents because their bodies and minds are not yet fully mature.

The ILO figures on child labour are revealing, but they are far from definitive. Given the moral odour surrounding the practice and its often outright illicit character, employers frequently hide and cover up their use of child labour. Moreover, in many countries bribery of the few officials tasked with auditing workplaces for labour-code breaches is rampant, further diminishing the veracity of official reporting of child labour.

In October 2013, at the third Global Conference on Child Labour, the ILO conceded that its target to eliminate the worst forms of child labour by 2016 would not be met. This is hardly the first time that the UN agency has had to backtrack on its targets and rosy projections.

International law prohibits the use of child labour and 155 countries have signed a United Nations convention banning most types of labour by minors. Nevertheless, this global scourge persists amidst unprecedented wealth and technological progress, because employers and governments find it profitable and because capitalism is continuously driving workers and peasants into dire poverty, making them unable to support and educate their children.

According to the charity Save the Children, to take just one example, 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 labour ministry admits that as many as 13 million

children work in prohibited manufacturing operations such as glassmaking, domestic work, and embroidery.

Child-rights activists commonly state that the Indian government has no intention of implementing child labour laws and that police frequently tip off factory owners or accept bribes during raids. Moreover, activists have been targeted for assassination by business owners.

In relative terms, the highest incidence of child labour is found in Sub-Saharan Africa, where more than one in five children (21 per cent) between the ages of 5 and 17 are said to be engaged in child labour. In Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean, the numbers are at 9 per cent, followed by 8 per cent in the Middle East and North Africa.

Many of the more than one thousand workers killed in the April 2013 Rana Plaza garment factory collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh were children.

In the aftermath of the collapse, Western retailers and governments announced various measures, including “social audits” and inspections, to ensure that garment manufacturers adhere to elementary safety standards. But these measures had much more to do with protecting corporate brand names and profits than improving the lives of garment workers.

Giant Western retailers continue to relentlessly press the garment contractors and subcontractors to lower costs and speed up production, thereby ensuring the unsafe working practices that contributed to the Rana Plaza disaster persist in Bangladesh’s \$22-billion-a-year garment industry. Young girls still work for as long as 11 hours a day and are subjected to physical and verbal abuse when they aren’t considered to be working fast enough.

In Peru, where producing gold is a \$3 billion industry, children work in mines, often having to wait prolonged periods before getting even meagre wages. While working in these mines children are also exposed to mercury poisoning, life-threatening diseases like malaria, and industrial accidents.

Even in developed countries like the United States , child labour can be found. In California , children are cultivating fruits and vegetables and in North Carolina they are working on tobacco farms. While some of these workers are migrant children, others are US citizens. However, none of this is illegal. According to the US ’s Fair Labor Standards Act, children are allowed to work in agriculture as long as they have parental consent. (See: “Child labor widespread on American tobacco farms”.)

Corporations, anxious to market their products including amongst liberal-minded middle-class elements,

tout slogans of “corporate social responsibility” as a means of sweeping their predatory practices under the rug. Despite occasional corporate campaigns, often in alliance with governments, trade unions and humanitarian organizations, child labour and other brutal forms of exploitation stubbornly persist precisely because all these entities have a vested interest in maintaining the root cause of the very problem they shed their crocodile tears over—capitalism.

Despite signing an agreement to end the use of child labour in its cocoa farms, Nestlé, the world’s biggest food company, still employs child labour in its West African cocoa supply chain. Harvesting cocoa is hard, dangerous work. There are frequent cases of children being injured from machetes slicing into their legs as they harvest the cocoa pods.

A recent addition to the corporate social responsibility bandwagon is cosmetic chain *Lush* . It has vowed to remove the mineral mica from its cosmetic products in response to news reports that its supply chain contains mica produced by forced labour. However, its “social audit” program to monitor mica production did not manage to reliably document incidences of child labour. This was at least because some of the sites where the mica was being extracted were deemed too dangerous for the auditors to visit!

The continuing prevalence of child labour underscores the failure of all efforts to reform and “humanize” capitalist exploitation. This scourge will not be ended through protest campaigns directed at governments and corporations but only through the independent political mobilization of the working class against the profit system.



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