

Report reveals millions living under modern day slavery

Usman Khan
18 June 2016

A recent report by the Global Slavery Index estimates that some 45.8 million people today, across 167 countries, are living under some form of modern day slavery.

The figures reviewed in the report lay bare the conditions within which some of the most oppressed sections of the working class are living in. The plight of modern day slaves is the most extreme manifestation of the essential logic of capitalism; these are human beings that enjoy no rights beyond those of the commodity: to be bought, sold, and used.

Unlike historical definitions of slavery in which people were held as legal property—a practice that has been universally outlawed—modern slavery is generally defined as human trafficking, forced labor, bondage from indebtedness, forced or servile marriage or commercial sexual exploitation.

The countries with highest number of slaves, collectively making up 58 percent of the total number, are India, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Uzbekistan. In India alone there are an estimated 18.35 million people living as slaves, 3.39 million in China, 1.53 million in Pakistan, 1.53 million in Bangladesh and 1.23 million in Uzbekistan.

The two countries with the highest percentage of their population living under conditions of modern slavery are North Korea with 4.373 percent and Uzbekistan with 3.973 percent.

The Asia Pacific has 66 percent of the total number of slaves documented by the report. The tremendous explosion of slavery in the region has been fueled by its transformation into the main cheap labor platform of global capitalism.

As the report notes, “the high prevalence of modern slavery in the region reflects the reality that many countries in Asia provide low-skilled labour for the production stage of global supply chains for various industries including food production, garments and

technology.”

Beyond the Asia Pacific there are large numbers of slaves living in virtually every region of the world. The report notes 2.1 million slaves living in the Americas, 2.9 million in the Middle East and North Africa, 6.2 million in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2.8 million in Russia and Eurasia, and 1.2 million in Europe.

Poverty acts as a motivating factor in many of the countries listed in the report causing large numbers of people to migrate in search of work. Workers are often taken advantage of in the course of their search for work or upon arrival at their destination.

The report notes that “Young women and children migrate from rural areas to cities, or to wealthier nations, or in some instances mining sites, with the promise of employment, but upon arrival they are subjected to forced labour, debt bondage and sexual exploitation by their recruiter.”

In India, the country with the largest number of slaves by a wide margin, 300,000 children roam the streets as slave-beggars under the control of criminal cartels within the country. Millions more Indians are forced to work in a number of industries including domestic work, construction, agriculture, manufacturing, the sex trade, fishing and manual labor.

In western Europe most of the slaves are individuals originating from Eastern Europe, including Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Slovakia. Non-EU trafficked victims are predominantly from Nigeria, China and Brazil.

The massive refugee crisis produced by US and European imperialisms’ criminal interventions throughout the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia is expected to further fuel the slave trade in Europe.

A recent International Organization for Migration survey indicates that “people moving out of conflict zones and through Europe are both at high risk of exploitation,

and are already being targeted”.

In Eastern Europe and Russia an important driving factor in the growth of slavery has been the collapse of the USSR, the reintroduction of capitalism into the former buffer states, and the violent imperialist breakup of Yugoslavia.

In all of the countries of this region the breakup of Soviet Union has led to a significant fall in the living standards and quality of life for the population. Accompanying the fall in living standards and quality of life has been an explosive growth of slavery and human trafficking in Eastern Europe, and throughout the post-Soviet sphere.

Between 1987 and 1998, during the decade following Mikhail Gorbachev’s announcement of perestroika, the number of Eastern Europeans living on less than \$2 per day rose at a staggering pace, from 1 million in 1987 to 24 million by 1998.

Though the report does not specifically identify those countries as such, it is noteworthy that some of the wealthy countries on the list with high levels of slave trade are leading allies of the US. These countries include Qatar, Singapore, Kuwait, Brunei, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Japan and South Korea.

Within the Middle East the growth of slavery is directly tied to the ongoing imperialist wars. Yemen, the target of Saudi Arabian bombardment with the backing of the American military, has seen a fivefold increase in the recruitment of Yemeni children as child soldiers since last year. The report notes that this means that “a third of the combatants are children.”

In areas of Iraq and Syria which have been occupied by ISIS and other extremist forces, which developed out of the US led efforts to overthrow President Bashar al Assad, sexual slavery is now flourishing.

Saudi Arabia, along with a number of other Gulf States, has played a prominent role in the American military’s interventions in the Middle East. It has been the principle source of funding, arming, and training of Islamist militants in the wars to topple the Libyan and Syrian governments and is playing the leading role in the war in Yemen.

Japan and South Korea have, in recent years and with the encouragement of the American government, aggressively pursued claims against China to parts of the South China Sea and to small islands and rocky outcrops in contested waters. This is being done as a part of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia.”

The Global Slavery Index is published by the Walk Free

Foundation. The group’s founder, billionaire mining magnate Andrew Forrest, has stated that in order to combat the growth of modern slavery businesses need to be pressured to revise their practices to refuse to make use of slave labor. He has also said that consumers should boycott businesses which use slave labor.

Forrest stated that: “We need to make it unacceptable for people to buy something without asking the company where it was made and who made it and if they can’t answer that question clearly then the next question must be ‘how do you know it wasn’t made with slave labour?’”

This fundamentally pro-capitalist perspective of the report comes through the clearest in one of the passages on North Korea, which suggests that opening up North Korea to the capitalist market could improve income opportunities for ordinary Koreans. The absurdity of this perspective is demonstrated by virtually the entirety of the rest of the report which demonstrates that the continued thriving of slavery arises inevitably out of the operations of the global capitalist system.

The relentless pressures generated by the capitalist market, above all the drive of the major imperialist finance houses to extract ever greater profits from the world economy, form the objective basis for the growth of modern slavery.

Calling on workers of other countries to boycott the products of companies exploiting slave labor only serves to line up workers behind the interests of other, more “humane” capitalists. While the conditions of life for the 45.8 million people who are enslaved are particularly brutal, the majority of the rest of the working class works under hardly less brutal conditions. Freedom, under the prevailing conditions, would only mean entry into a different kind of slavery.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact