



India: economic boom masks widespread child labour

Its economy is performing well, but India is still plagued by immense hardship. Four hundred million people live below the poverty line and 90 per cent of its active population work in the informal economy. Poverty is a major cause of the widespread practice of child labour. India is still the largest child labour market in the world, exploiting as many as 60 million children in its industrial, agricultural and commercial sectors. This is the background to the international conference which will be held in November in Hyderabad under the heading "Out of work into school – children's right to education is non negotiable." The trade union movement is leading an active campaign to defend this basic right.

Agricultural workers, domestic servants, weavers, rag dealers, diamond cutters, textile workers, mechanics, stone breakers, brick makers ... Every day in India some 60 million children (1) work hard to support their families or to support themselves. India, an emerging economic power, has the largest child labour force in the world.

Child labour from the urban shanties and poverty stricken countryside is abundant and cheap and can be found in all sectors of the economy. In this still predominantly rural country, millions of children not only help their families with tasks such as harvesting or looking after animals, but are also employed as workers on the tea, rice, wheat and sugar cane plantations that are owned by wealthy landlords. In coastal areas, children work on the fishing boats or in the fish factories.



Photo: ILO

STREET WORKERS

In urban areas, child labour is rife in the informal sector and the streets are teeming with children working as rag dealers, shoe shiners and street vendors. The capital Delhi which has 12 million inhabitants is also home to some 500,000 child street workers, explains Rajib Halder, head of Prayas, an associa-

tion providing several thousand such children with meals, care and shelter for the night. He explains that most of these street workers earn no more than 30 rupees a day on average (0.50 euro). Some live with their families in the shanty towns, but many simply sleep on the streets. All suffer violence at the

hands of the police, who consider them "antisocial elements."

Street vendors are one of the largest groups employing children as tea boys, "coolies" or odd jobbers. Seven-year-old Abdul works from 9 am to 7 pm in a

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small garage on the outskirts of Delhi, where he earns 500 rupees a month (8.65 euros). Covered in oil, he cleans the spare parts of a vehicle being repaired. His boss does not feel he has anything to hide, "I don't see anything wrong with it. I also started work when I was 6 years old," he explains. Abdul is from a family of eight children living in a shanty town in Delhi. "Poor children have to help their families. That's just the way it is," adds his employer.

Mahesh, aged 10, washes dishes in a basin on the floor of a dhaba, a basic café serving tea and snacks. He knows that if he breaks a cup his boss will beat him with a stick. Mahesh was sold to his employer some months ago by a "child supplier" who captured him when he arrived in Delhi, alone, from Bihar, one of the poorest states in India.

Many children who are left to fend for themselves in Delhi fall into the hands of intermediaries and unscrupulous employers. Thousands of poor children come alone to the capital, either fleeing from violent parents or from rural areas affected by famine and drought, such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh or Rajasthan. Some come from neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh. Child traffickers look out for them at the stations, make them think they will help them and then sell them as domestic servants or workers or hand them over to prostitution rings.

Child domestics - mostly girls - are the least visible but there are several million of them. Child servitude is both a tradition and a status symbol in India, a sign of belonging to the middle classes, points out Kailash Satyarthi, founder of the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude (SACCS), based in Delhi.

Hidden behind four walls, these children are often treated like slaves. They get up at dawn, do the housework, the shopping, the cooking and look after their masters' children. They are undernourished, underpaid if paid at all, mistreated and, in some cases, sexually abused. SACCS recently quoted the case of a young domestic servant who, starving, drunk the milk left in the bottom of a glass. As punishment, his employer beat him, then branded him with a hot iron rod.

INDUSTRIAL WORK

Child labour is just as present in the formal economy, in hotels and restaurants where children work as waiters, dishwashers and porters, in transport where they work as bus drivers' assistants, in silk and cotton mills, tanneries, glassworks, printers and chemical factories which manufacture paints, colourants and fireworks.

In Aligarh, in the northern State of Uttar Pradesh, thousands of children



Photo: ILO

aged between six and 14 make locks in small metal workshops. Like the adults, they are involved in all stages of production, including the most dangerous ones like burnishing and acid baths. They earn less than 300 rupees (5 euros) a month, according to a local study. Nearly all of them left school before completing their primary education because of their families' poverty.

Another study, carried out in 2002 in the city of Sivakasi, in the southern State of Tamil Nadu, revealed that as many as 66,000 children aged between six and 14 work in the match factories, where they make up a third of the labour force. They work 12 hours in a row for 125 rupees (2 euros) a week. Some 5,000 children work in the region's fireworks factories. They work among flammable substances that are stored and processed with no regard for safety. In April 2000, four children were burnt to death in a factory in Kadalayoor when the raw materials they worked with caught light.

Match production is a typical example of an industry employing children. The sector is low tech and labour intensive. But child labour is not inevitable. Another Indian State, Kerala (south west India) houses some 800 match factories, but not a single child is employed. True: Kerala is the exception to the rule. The State has long pursued voluntaristic social policies, which have succeeded in reducing poverty and in allowing nearly every child to benefit from a proper education.

UNPAID WORK AND SLAVERY

India's child workers all come from

deprived sections of society: families living in depressed urban areas with high unemployment or underemployment, poor or landless rural communities, religious and ethnic minorities and immigrants. A number of factors specific to India also contribute. One is the caste system. The lowest castes and outcasts (untouchables) are still treated as the pariahs of society. They are excluded from decent work and are the first to have to put their children on the labour market. Widespread sexual discrimination is another factor which pushes girls into work from an early age. Boys are given preference for education. Educating girls is often seen as pointless, given that their supposed purpose in life is to become wives and mothers.

Hundreds of millions of people belong to these deprived sections of Indian society. Knowing that these people have to survive, employers take on their children as workers. They invariably use the same arguments to justify their actions. Their work helps their jobless parents to survive. It stops these children from falling into a life of crime or prostitution, and it teaches them a trade.

This idea that they are learning a trade is often used as an excuse for not paying them. Take the case of Aman, aged 14. The son of a family of homeless untouchables, he sews small pieces of synthetic fabric in a sports bag workshop in Delhi. Like so many other children, he accepts his employer's argument, "I'm not paid, but I'm learning a trade, and, later on, I hope to have my own bag shop."

Exploitation of the most vulnerable members of society is the same in rural

areas. Countless small farmers are ruined every year by drought, poor harvests and unequal land distribution. The agrarian crisis is crippling entire farming communities and low caste families, who are forced to flee from misery, drifting from one region to another in search of work. Many come to the overcrowded shanty towns. Others end up working under slave-like conditions in stone quarries, brickworks or plantations. In the northern State of Haryana, some 2,500 brickworks employ 300,000 workers of whom 40,000 are children. They fashion clay into bricks for 12 to 14 hours a day, crouched under the hot sun, hounded by their supervisors, for poverty wages that are not always paid. In June, they are back on the streets when rains make it impossible to mould the clay outdoors.

DEBT SERVITUDE

Many children are forced to work under the system of debt servitude, whether as domestic servants, stonecutters or farm workers. Indebtedness is rife among India's poor. The government has allowed basic health services to deteriorate so far that the onset of illness spells disaster for indebted families and can lead to their ruin, as can any other costly affair such as marriage or an unexpected event like job loss or natural disaster. The Indian press reports regularly on suicides among indebted farmers.

The usurers demand exorbitant rates of interest - 60 per cent or more. Since the loan sharks are also often employers, they take the children of debtors as a pledge against the loan and force them to work in brickworks, mines, stone quarries and construction sites. According to SACCs, some ten million children are estimated to be working as forced labourers in exchange for loans.

HOME WORKING

Many children are forced into servitude in small carpet workshops to pay off debts. According to SACCs, around 100,000 Indian children work in the carpet sector, mostly in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. The children work, crouched in the same position in front of high looms, for over 12 hours at a time. Children represent 40 per cent of the workforce in the Indian carpet industry, and the proportion is much the same in Nepal and Pakistan, reports SACCs. Kailash Satyarthi points out, however, that the numbers are substantially lower than ten years ago, thanks to the pressure exerted on employers through global awareness-raising campaigns.

Some carpet traders have responded to this pressure by trying to conceal the use of child labour. They have relocated their looms to the homes of poor fami-



Photo: ILO

lies in dozens of widely scattered, small and isolated villages. This practice of scattering home working operations has also been adopted by other sectors that widely use child labour, industries such as textiles (weaving, assembly, embroidery), metalwork, beedi (hand rolled cigarettes) and incense stick. Nowadays, explains SACCs activist Rajib Vidyasagar, "Ninety five percent of India's salaried children work in these small-scale production units or at home, especially in rural areas. It makes child labour more invisible."

By scattering the work, employers are also able to isolate workers from each other, pay them as they please, increase the amount of undeclared work, and avoid inspections. Since home working is considered to be a "private affair" in India, it is not covered by labour laws. As a result, poor rural populations, who accept homework to supplement their meagre farming incomes, are freely exploited without legal restraint.

Football manufacturing has followed the same trend, distributing homework around the villages of Punjab, where SACCs estimates that around 10,000 children work up to 14 hours a day

hand sewing small pieces of leather into footballs. The numbers are, however, falling because of the intense campaigns targeting Indian and Pakistani football manufacturers in the run up to the 2002 World Cup.

LAWS FLOUTED

Has the Indian Government turned its back on the problem? The answer is mixed. India is collaborating with the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) which is being implemented in five Indian States, although on a scale insufficient to deal with the problem. However, the country has not yet ratified ILO Conventions 138 and 182 on prohibiting child labour and eliminating the worst forms of exploitation.

National legislation does exist, such as the 1986 law which made education compulsory for under 14s and prohibited child labour in dangerous sectors - mines, construction sites and factories. 1994 saw the creation of a National Authority for the Elimination of Child Labour (NAECL).

In practice, however, legislation is flouted on a daily basis. Underage factory workers are told to say that they are at least 16. Labour inspectors are desperately short of resources. They do not have a vehicle to do their rounds, and, in any case, the fines they impose are far too low to act as a deterrent (100 to 200 rupees which is 1.74 to 3.50 euros). The families themselves are unlikely to denounce the illegal employment of their children, for fear of losing part of their income. What's more, employers have so much power that the authorities do not dare prosecute them. The police are often corrupt, and the public is rarely outraged by stories of poor children working.

Meanwhile, the authorities show very little evidence of intent to ensure that the law is respected. In 1998, a law was passed prohibiting government officials and civil servants from using children as domestic servants. But "even members of parliament have them," remarks Kailash Satyarthi of SACCs. In March 2004, he and his team went to a stone quarry in the State of Haryana to rescue some 500 malnourished men, women and children, supervised by armed guards, from forced labour. The owner of the quarry is ... a Member of Parliament. ●

BÉNÉDICTE MANIER (*)

(*) Author of: "Child Labour around the World", La Découverte, 2003

(1) Estimates given by SACCs, the largest NGO involved in the fight against child labour in India. The figures are drawn from sociological studies and are accepted as a reference by other Indian NGOs.

An urgent need for social policies

Following independence, India established an economic and social framework in industry, agriculture, health and education, which, though never fully developed, bear witness to the political will for social development. During its eight years in office, however, the BJP-led coalition broke with this tradition pursuing highly liberal policies which, whilst benefiting the middle classes, led to the dismantling of public services and the creation of even greater social inequality.

In education, the BJP promoted new private schools and neglected state schools which have greatly deteriorated, particularly in rural areas. The 2002 law on compulsory and free education has remained ineffective, "It has not been followed up by any concrete measures. Education and healthcare have received the lowest share of the government budget," explains Ram Mital, National Secretary of the Indian union HMS. He went on to say that in the villages, "when there is a school, there's no blackboard. And when there is a blackboard, there's no teacher." The lack of adequate and accessible opportunities for the poorest members of society means that millions of children do not go to school and therefore constitute an abundant supply of child labour. "When you take 50 children out of work, there are a 100 more to take their place. It's like trying to fill a bottomless barrel," remarks Rajib Vidyasagar of SACCs. Many start work at age five or six, without ever having set foot in a school.

Public expenditure on health declined from 1.4 per cent of GDP in



1991-1992 to 0.9 per cent in 2001-2002. Clinics providing primary care do not have the resources needed to meet demand, forcing Indians to turn to more expensive private clinics. Poor families often have to take their children out of school and send them to work to pay for medical expenses.

Farming communities have also become more vulnerable. Millions of indebted farmers no longer benefit from state aid. The government has taken measures to promote the export of cereals, whilst a quarter of the Indian population suffers from malnutrition. Nine Indian states are currently classified as "food insecure." Whilst a wealthy minority in urban areas enjoy fast food, the rural masses have had to cut their consumption of basic cereals. The poorest will even sell their organs (kidneys and eyes) to feed their families.

In the industrial sector, the government has encouraged privatisation and restructuring. The Haryana Electricity Board halved its workforce from 52,000 in 1991 to 27,000 following privatisation. The ageing textile sector, now facing tough competition from China, employed 250,000 people in Mumbai in 1981. It now employs only 20,000. Urban unemployment has grown. Tens of thousands of redundant workers have had to take their children out of school and put them in work.

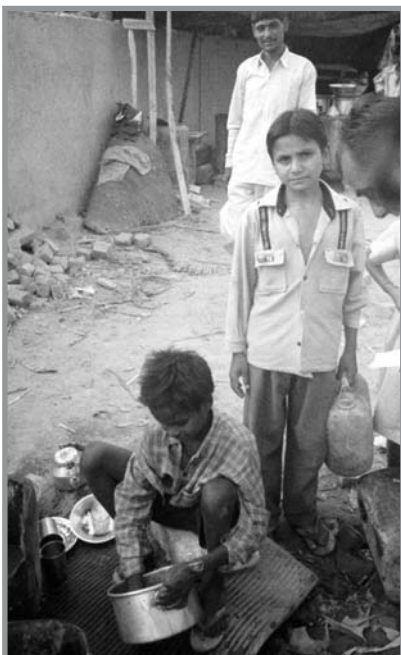
"INDIA SHINING"

Thousands of new jobs have, however, been created in the services and information technology sectors. India has managed to attract foreign investors to its technology parks by offering generous tax incentives. The parks have proved popular among big British companies such as British Airways, Tesco

(supermarkets) HSBC (banks), Aviva and Prudential (insurance), which have relocated thousands of back office operations such as ticketing, call centres, customer care, financial transactions and accounting. IT companies from the United States, such as Intel, Microsoft, Hewlett Packard, Dell, Google and IBM, have followed suit. According to forecasts made in early 2004, it is estimated that some six million jobs will be transferred from the United States to India over the next ten years. This new supply of jobs, which partly explains the record economic growth rate of eight per cent in 2003-2004, has benefited those graduating from India's universities and technology schools - qualified workers whose social costs are low.

But, booming India or "India shining" as it was called by the BJP, with its emerging middle class, shopping centres, new cars and mobile phones, is benefiting only a tiny minority of the population. Only ten per cent of the active population has regular work (nearly half of that is provided by the public sector). For the vast majority work is precarious: 60 per cent live off little pieces of self-employment and 30 per cent rely on casual work.

Overall, 400 million people out of a total population of one billion live in absolute poverty - that is on less than a dollar a day. The same numbers are illiterate. Some 25 million are homeless. Half of the population in Mumbai and a third in Delhi live in overcrowded shanties. It was this excluded majority that finally penalised the BJP in the May 2004 elections. The new government, the Congress Party, has promised social justice, better basic education, and the fight against poverty and malnutrition. The need is urgent. ●



Trade unions in India fight job insecurity

In 1976, in the southern State of Tamil Nadu, a commission of inquiry into child labour in the match factories made the following statement: putting an end to the employment of children would “create more problems than it would solve”, because they earn ten to 20 per cent of their families’ income. Nearly three decades later and nothing has changed. Child labour continues to be fuelled by the immense poverty affecting Indian workers, points out Ram Mital, National Secretary of trade union Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). “In rural areas, for example, the average wage is 35 rupees a day (0.62 euro), or 18 to 24 rupees for women,” he explains. “And, on top of that, people don’t find work every day. The income is so low that without involving the whole family, children included, you cannot make ends meet.”

India’s employment structure contributes to the country’s massive poverty. Ninety per cent of the active population works in the informal economy. They live on poverty wages, without social security, the protection of unions, a minimum wage or other labour laws. Millions of poor workers cannot send their children to school, and need them

to work to contribute to the family’s survival. To the great satisfaction of employers, “A child will work 14 hours a day for five rupees, and an adult will ask 35 or 40 rupees for eight hours,” says Ram Mital.

Urgent measures should be taken to improve family income by “raising adults’ wages,” he adds. To achieve this, the HMS believes it is essential to step up pressure on employers. The trade union has recently intensified its efforts to organise workers in the informal economy, “to bring as many workers as possible into trade unions, to get reasonable wages, so they are not forced to make their children work.”

But within India as a whole, only radical and sweeping change will rescue millions of poor workers from low castes, rural areas and shanty towns from their desperate plight. “We need new policies to alleviate poverty and to raise the quality of employment,” emphasises Ram Mital.

A change of attitude is also needed, especially among the emerging middle classes who are largely insensitive to the issue of child labour. Although still a small minority, “The middle classes employ more children (as domestics) than

industrial plants,” adds Ram Mital. To this end the HMS has launched several campaigns using posters, stickers and brochures to raise public awareness. The campaigns are run in partnership with INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress, also an ICFTU affiliate), and the ILO, whose International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) is being implemented in five Indian States. The campaigns emphasise the inhumane conditions under which children are exploited and the importance of education in the nation’s development.

Another major challenge is to end the legal impunity enjoyed by those employing children. Since 1996, a Supreme Court ruling obliges employers to finance the education of children found to be working illegally for them. But this ruling has never been applied. “Employers are not prosecuted. They are powerful, and the legal system is bad. The case comes to court after two years; the children have grown up by then and it’s too late,” explains Ram Mital. Nonetheless, he believes that, “If this ruling were respected, even if the employers only financed half-time education, we could eliminate child labour in 20 or 30 years.” ●

Child labour worldwide

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) 1, 245.5 million children aged between five and 17 – one in six of the world’s children – are involved in forms of labour that should be abolished. 8.4 million of these children suffer the most appalling forms of exploitation - forced labour, domestic service, armed conflicts and sexual exploitation.

In the five to 14 age group alone, there are 127 million working children in Asia, 48 million in Africa, 17.4 million in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 13.4 million in North Africa and the Middle East. This situation can be largely explained by widespread poverty and the absence of a global policy

on education. In today’s world, one in two people lives on less than two dollars a day, and a third of the active adult population is deprived of a decent living. 186 million people are unemployed and 700 million people are underemployed.

In both developing and industrialised nations, many children have to work to help their families make ends meet. In Argentina, for example, the economic crisis that hit the country in 2000 plunged half the population into poverty. As a result, the number of children in work saw a sharp increase, reaching one million in the year 2002. In Great Britain, Italy and Eastern Europe, thousands of children also work to alleviate their families’ poor economic situation. There are some 2.5 million children aged between five

and 14 working in industrialised countries and 2.4 million in the transition countries, according to the ILO.

Child labour plays an important role in the economy, whether it is in the informal or the organised sector. It contributes to the production of mass consumer goods, such as tea, sugar, tobacco, cocoa or textiles. According to the ILO, 760 billion would be enough to eliminate child labour and ensure universal education between now and the year 2020, and the socio-economic benefits of this investment - health, skilled labour, eradication of poverty, improved agricultural and industrial production - would be seven times greater (5,100 billion).

Children in the precious stone industry

India is the world's largest precious stone-cutting centre. Seventy per cent of global diamond production was handled in India in 1995. The diamond industry is concentrated in Mumbai and Surat (Gujarat), and the orders are subcontracted out to numerous small workshops. The industry employs some 800,000 workers, only one per cent of whom are children.

India also cuts precious stones such as emeralds, rubies and sapphires, semi-precious stones (lapis lazuli and turquoise) and synthetic stones. This sector is the speciality of the cities of Jaipur (Rajasthan) and Trichy (Tamil Nadu). In this sector, unlike the diamond industry, children aged six to 14 represent as much as "40 per cent of the labour force," estimates Yamina de Laet of the International Chemical, Energy and Mine Workers' Federation (ICEM).

The children are taken on at the age of five or six and are not paid until they reach the end of their two-year apprenticeship. According to a survey carried out in India in 1997 by the Universal Alliance of Diamond Workers (UADW), the children's wages are three times lower than the adults'. They earn only 150 to 200 rupees (2.70 to 3.60 euros) compared to the 500 to 600 rupees (9 to 10 euros) paid to adults. Although low, this salary may make up as much as 40 per cent of their family's income.

The children work in small workshops, crouched in the same position for ten to 12 hours a day, piercing, cutting and polishing stones. They suffer from back problems. Their sight is affected by the poor lighting, and their fingers are damaged by the splinters of stone and the polishing discs. Any at-



tempts to organise are severely repressed, and work is increasingly subcontracted out to home workers in order to circumvent labour laws.

AN INTERNATIONAL ETHICAL LABEL

The ICFTU launched a public campaign in 1997, following a survey of child labour in the stone-cutting industry. It led to two diamond multinationals, De Beers and Rio Tinto, adopting internal codes of conduct intended to guarantee the absence of child labour. But child labour remains present both in the extraction of diamonds (in African diamond mines, such as in Sier-

ra Leone or Congo) and in the processing of diamonds (in India and Thailand).

In response, ICEM, in partnership with the NGO Global Witness and the Belgian Federation of Diamond Bourses, will launch an ethical label in 2005, which will require the diamond industry to commit to five criteria: Corruption-free, Clean (no money laundering), Child labour-free, Conflict-free and Compliance with social standard SA 8000. The initiative has been dubbed "The Fifth C", as it adds an ethical criterion to the industry's four professional criteria, which all begin with "C" (Cut, Clarity, Carat and Colour). ●

SACCS: rescue operations save children

Since it was founded in the early eighties, the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude (SACCS www.globalmarch.org) has contributed to the liberation of over 60,000 children in India, most of whom had been sold or were in servitude. Its "rescue operations" are carried out by stealth, usually at dawn, in carpet workshops, garages, brickworks and stone quarries. They are dangerous as the employers are often armed. SACCS forewarns the police every time, to avoid prosecution for trespassing or stealing labour. "We take the police with us, but it's a calculated risk, because they can be bribed. Every second is a threat," recalls Kailash Satyarthi, the coalition's founder.

SACCS has managed to turn the situation of these children around through the three ashrams it has opened on the outskirts of Delhi, which are havens of peace and education for these young former slaves. The NGO is also campaigning for free education throughout India. It tours the villages to help improve the quality of schools and to convince the local population to reject the exploitation of children. Within three years, 75 villages in several States including Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra have thus been declared "child friendly zones."

SACCS works with hundreds of associations involved in protecting children and promoting human rights, including

consumer groups and trade unions in India and worldwide. In 1998, it coordinated the Global March Against Child Labour, which travelled through Asia, Europe and the Americas, and culminated at the ILO headquarters in Geneva.

Today, Kailash Satyarthi says he is "optimistic." Child labour can be eradicated thanks to "the emergence of a globalised civil society. Intensive awareness raising has already seriously hit industries working in carpet, glass, firecracker and football manufacturing," he says. "We are fighting a centuries-old socio-economic and cultural problem. But we can see the difference in one or two decades. It is very important."

BEHAVING LIKE A MAFIA

His work has also won him quite a few enemies. Kailash Satyarthi has been physically threatened on many occasions. In 1985, SACCS freed around 20 children aged between seven and 12 who were working as bonded labour in a carpet workshop in Bihar. It created bad publicity for the employer, who lost an important contract and decided to take revenge. "Five or six people came and threatened my office with guns.

One day, police in uniforms came to the door. A warrant was issued against me and the Haryana police had come to arrest me." He explained that the carpet trader had bribed the police: "The plot was to arrest me officially, bring me out of Delhi, pretend I tried to escape on the road and shoot me." He went on to explain that he was saved because of the intervention of the Delhi police. Following strong international pressure, he was subsequently placed under police protection for three years.

Another rescue operation in June 2004 almost went wrong. Kailash Satyarthi was trying to save several Nepalese children, younger than 14, who were forced to perform in a circus and who were regularly raped and beaten. He was attacked by armed circus owners and hospitalised with serious injuries. He now believes that child labour is so advantageous to employers and traffickers that they "behave like a mafia." ●

Unions for children: the wrong solution

In India, several associations help child workers defend their rights in the workplace. Butterflies, a Delhi-based NGO, provides street children with meals and literacy classes. They work with rag dealers, shoe shiners, porters and market workers and bring them together once a month to discuss their problems. In 1991, it decided to go further, and set up the Bal Mazdoor Union (BMU), literally the "child workers" union, to help children defend themselves against the abuse and violence of their employers. BMU now covers 300 children who are helped by social workers to negotiate better pay and working conditions and to recover unpaid wages. They also mediate with the police, who treat street children as if they were "antisocial elements." In the southern city of Bangalore, another movement, Bhima Sangha, covers 13,000 children who work in the hotel

and restaurant trade and protects them from their employers' abuses. Membership entitles the children to free hospital care.

Children's trade unions emerged during the eighties in several countries in Latin America (Manthoc and NATs for example) and Africa (EJT - Children and Young Workers' Union). All condemn child exploitation but they defend children's right to be respected and to earn their living with dignity as "actors in the economy."

All these organisations raise a genuine concern: the quality of life of children, forced to work in the absence of a global alternative – free schools, an alternative income and decent work for their parents. There is no doubt that their activities (union representation, protection of workers' rights, solidarity funds, evening classes and health care)

help make the children's working conditions less miserable. But these are only short-term solutions. Unless these children are withdrawn from work and given a normal education they will be condemned to poverty for the rest of their lives. Although the unions mean well, their actions support the presence of children on the labour market. "Child labour trade unions don't make sense. They don't need representative structures. Children should not be at work," states Guy Ryder.

Most of these organisations want to be officially recognised as trade unions. In 1992, the Bal Mazdoor Union submitted an affiliation request to the National Register of Indian Trade Unions. The request was rejected. As Ram Mital of the Indian union HMS protested, "To recognise their union would indirectly mean encouraging child labour. The question is its elimination." ●

"School is the best workplace for children"

Established in 1981 in Andhra Pradesh, the Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation (MVF) has only one slogan, "School is the best workplace for children." Backed by several hundred volunteer workers, the foundation carries out painstaking in-depth grassroots work, travelling from one Indian village to the next to convince families of the benefits of education. They often find that although most parents send their children to work out of necessity, they would prefer them to study. The MVF helps these families take their children out of work or forced labour and put them into school.

The younger children – aged five to eight – are placed directly into state schools. MVF tries to involve the whole village in education and has set up motivational parent-teacher associations, which mobilise resources to improve village schools and finance additional teaching staff and classes.

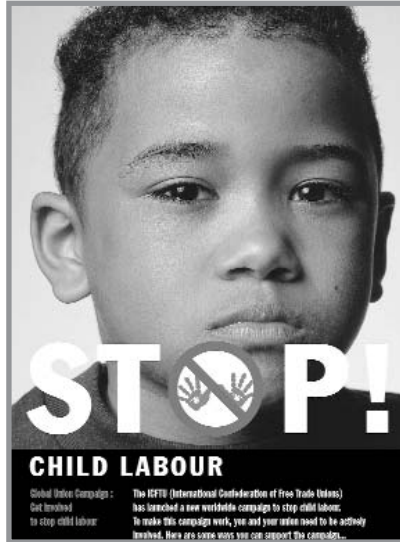
The older children - aged nine to 14 - are initially placed in the informal education centres set up by the foundation, where they are gradually prepared for the mainstream education system. This preparation takes place in either the foundation's bridge schools or camps where the children take part in educational and leisure activities for three to four months. Some 150,000 former child workers have

already benefited from these stepping stones to formal schooling. The work does not stop there. MVF volunteers throughout the country ensure the progress of some 550,000 children through an intensive follow-up programme specially designed to keep them in school. Backed by funding from the World Bank, ILO, UNDP, Dutch NGO Hivos, and the Indian government, the MVF is already active in over 4,300 villages in Andhra Pradesh. At a local level, volunteers address sensitive issues such as early marriage, encouraging families to marry girls at a later age so that their education is not cut short. Their work also extends to improving the parents' incomes through the creation of work cooperatives.

World Congress in Florence: consensus on universal education

During the World Congress on Child Labour, organised by SACCs in Florence, Italy, in May 2004, some 150 children from Asia and Latin America, all freed from the world of work, presented their ideas and experiences. They spoke to representatives of the ILO, UNESCO, the European Union, the World Bank, governments (USA, Brazil, Costa Rica), international trade union organisation (Education International, NGOs (Rugmark, Mani Tese), trade unions from around the world and European children. They spoke of their lives as newspaper sellers, refuse collectors, domestic servants and slaves in the carpet industry.

The Congress emphasised the need for socio-economic mobilisation and international policies to guarantee education for all and reduce poverty and global inequalities. The children raised important issues on these subjects. "If children don't work, how will their poor parents



survive?" asked Rajiv, a young Indian, evoking the need to raise family incomes in developing countries. The situation in

Africa was also discussed, particularly the worrying increase in the number of AIDS orphans who become the heads of households and have to support their families.

The children pointed a finger at the officials at the event. "Previous promises have not been fulfilled," stated a young Nepalese boy. The representative of the US Labour Ministry was asked why the United States "has not yet ratified the International Convention on the Rights of the Child", and why they prefer "war" to "the development of poor countries."

The children also pin-pointed international financial institutions. "If you have a heart, think of us and the children of poor countries," Fatima from Nicaragua appealed to a World Bank representative, before going on to ask him. "What percentage does the Bank invest in children?" Another young delegate suggested that poor countries should be able to re-fund their debt in the form of educational projects rather than in monetary form.

ICFTU General Secretary denounces child labour

"People are making money out of child exploitation and this has to be stopped," asserted Guy Ryder, ICFTU General Secretary, during the World Congress on Child Labour held in Florence (Italy) from 10 to 13 May, in his presentation on the ICFTU's position. "Should we accept child labour as an inevitable part of our world of work even if we get rid of the worst forms?" he asked. "Trade Unions do not believe so. It is within our grasp to put an end to it. We have a set of international instruments, like the ILO Conventions and the Millennium Goals set by the UN, with very clear objectives."

Child labour elimination makes economic sense. Every dollar spent on the elimination of child labour brings seven dollars in benefits," as shown in the ILO study published this year.

Up until now, the reasons for failure have been "hypocrisy: we are not really interested in doing what we say we should do; incompetence: it is beyond our capacity to actually carry out what is identified; and, finally, the absence of a genuine will to stop exploiting children for profit."

Political will has "progressed to some extent but not enough," he considered. "The formal political will is there. ILO

Convention 182 has been the fastest ratified convention and other conventions are being ratified. But it is not enough."

As for employers' organisations, "There is a growing commitment. Some multinationals fear that their good reputation might be endangered. But we have to keep up the pressure."

The international community and governments are still tolerant towards child labour. They have got to translate their commitments into concrete measures. They still have public opinion to mobilise," Guy Ryder added. Eliminating the worst forms is not enough, "We have to eliminate the 'non abusive' forms of child labour as well; we reject the idea that child labour could not be abusive."

The priority is to foster "global public goods" like education. "The issue of child labour has been divorced from education and it tends to be seen as a charity issue. But it is only part of a broader challenge," he stated.

The exploitation of children is one example among many that, "We need a governance of globalisation. Access to markets must be counterbalanced by respect for social rights. We have had concrete propositions for a decade now on the respect of fundamental rights, and precise propositions on what could be done." ●

The final declaration of the Congress called on governments to "criminalise child labour, but never criminalise the children," to fight against trafficking and to provide quality compulsory education, free of charge. It also called on governments to put development aid to good use, to work with civil society and the trade union movement, and to promote the labelling of products not produced by children. Finally, it appealed for social rights to be protected and for adults to be given decent work so that they can send their children to school.

The Congress had an opportunity to hear about the development of an encouraging project in Brazil. The Bolsa Escola gives financial support to the families of children who go to school. When first launched in 1995, it applied to 20,000 families in a single Brazilian State but was extended to all the federal States in 2001, and 8.3 million families benefited from it in 2003. Proof that - whatever the economic context - where there's political will there's action. ●

Publisher responsible at law: Guy Ryder, General secretary

ICFTU

5 Bld du Roi Albert II, Bte 1,
1210-Brussels, Belgium
Tel: ...+32 2 2240211, Fax: ...+32 2 2015815
E-Mail: press@icftu.org
Web Site: <http://www.icftu.org>

Report and photos: Bénédicte Manier

Editor in Chief: Natacha David