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Child Labor and International Standards

ADULT EDUCATION WORKSHOP



Child Labor Publication Education Project

Child Labor Research Initiative
University of Iowa Labor Center
University of Iowa Human Rights



Child Labor and International Standards: Handouts

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Additional components to Child Labor and International Standards:

- Instructor's Manual
- Overheads

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Note: This module could be taught either as an independent class, or merged within the Child Labor Public Education Project (CLPEP) curriculum to create an international standards emphasis within the broader introduction to child labor. The following manual is designed with the assumption that the class will be taught independently, and incorporates variations of the introductory exercises and materials from the CLPEP curriculum to provide a framework for the health discussion.

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International Workers' Rights

Why are International Workers' Rights so Important Today?

- **We live in a global economy.** It is characterized by an unprecedented rise in global trade, global investment, global distribution of production, and global (multinational) corporations.
- **Globalization affects workers and labor standards.** Free trade advocates argue that free trade rules benefit workers by stimulating job creation and higher incomes. Labor groups charge that current trade rules encourage a “race to the bottom” in which companies cut costs by seeking the lowest possible wages and labor standards.
- **Workers in every sector are affected by globalization and international competition.** In fact, trade in services is growing even faster than trade in goods.
- **The rewards of globalization have been unevenly distributed.** A 2004 report by the International Labor Organization raises concerns that the “current process of globalization is generating unbalanced outcomes, both between and within countries. Wealth is being created, but too many countries and people are not sharing in its benefits.” *

Which Labor Standards Have Been Adopted by International Institutions?

International labor standards are embodied within a range of international organizations and institutions. However, the International Labor Organization is generally acknowledged for its central role in creating and promoting international labor standards.

Since its creation in 1919, the International Labor Organization has adopted 184 Conventions that establish standards for a wide range of workplace issues including (but not limited to):



Garbage worker.
(Photo by David Parker)

- Hours of Work**
- Child Labor**
- Workers' Compensation**
- Unemployment Benefits**
- Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining**
- Disability Insurance**
- Education and Training**
- Minimum Wage**
- Forced Labor**
- Safety and Health**
- Social Security**



Boy vendor.
(Photo by David Parker)

Discrimination
Pensions
Migrant Labor Protections
Family Responsibilities
Maternity
Rights of Rural Workers
Weekly Rest
Vacations and Holidays

The Core Labor Standards

In 1998, the International Labor Organization (ILO) adopted a “Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work” in response to growing concerns about the effects of global competition on workers. The Declaration affirms that all ILO member nations have an obligation to respect, promote, and realize the most fundamental workers’ rights:

- **Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining**
- **Elimination of all Forms of Forced or Compulsory Labor**
- **Effective Abolition of Child Labor**
- **Elimination of Discrimination in Respect of Employment and Occupation**

** World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization, A Fair Globalization: Creating Opportunity for All, (International Labour Office, Geneva: 2004).*

The Core Labor Standards: Current Challenges

Elimination of Forced Labor

Forced labor continues to persist today in many forms, including: slavery and abductions, forced labor in agricultural and domestic work, prison labor, bonded labor (forced labor as payment for debts), and trafficking in persons.

Trafficking in persons has increased dramatically in recent years. People are trafficked for prostitution, factory labor, agricultural labor, domestic servitude, and other forms of forced labor.

A recent study estimated that 18,000-20,000 men, women and children are trafficked to the United States every year.

Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The right to organize and bargain collectively has faced serious challenges in recent years.

Last year, 213 union activists were murdered because of their union activities. Nearly 1,000 union activists were attacked and beaten, 2,562 were detained, and 30,000 were fired for their union activities.

Global trends such as privatization, subcontracting, a rise in part-time, temporary, and “informal” employment, and international movement of jobs have made bargaining and organizing more difficult, and contributed to declining union membership in almost all parts of the world in the last decade.*

* ILO, *Your Voice at Work*, (Geneva, 2000) p. 9-12

Elimination of Discrimination in Employment and Occupation

The ILO reports continued workplace discrimination throughout the world, based on factors such as: race, religion, disability, HIV/AIDS, age, and gender.

At its worst, discrimination makes certain groups vulnerable to extreme abuses such as forced labor and child labor.

The global rise in temporary jobs tends to be disproportionately directed at women, and other discriminated groups, regardless of education level.

Abolition of Child Labor

An estimated 246 million children, age 5-17, are involved in child labor worldwide.

The majority of these children are working under conditions considered hazardous or extremely exploitive. In many cases, child labor denies children access to education, contributing to a cycle of poverty and exploitation.

Children can be found working at all sorts of jobs, including those in agriculture, fishing, manufacturing, mining, domestic service, and even prostitution and other illicit activities.



Girl with Beedis.
(Photo by David Parker)



Brick worker.
(Photo by David Parker)

The core labor standards are often linked

The core labor standards are often connected. Where one of the standards is violated, other violations can frequently be found.

For example, in India's silk industry, children as young as 5 years old work long hours under brutal conditions. The children are often bonded laborers, forced to work for little or no pay because of family debts owed to the employer. Many are Dalits ("untouchables" who are at the bottom of India's caste system) or Muslims, and are the victims of discrimination. In recent years, India has passed a series of laws creating obstacles to workers' rights to organize, bargain, and strike, which in turn weakens the unions' abilities to defend minimum labor standards in the country.

The International Labor Organization

"WHEREAS UNIVERSAL AND LASTING PEACE CAN ONLY BE ESTABLISHED IF IT IS BASED UPON SOCIAL JUSTICE..."

"WHEREAS CONDITIONS OF LABOR EXIST INVOLVING SUCH INJUSTICE, HARDSHIP, AND PRIVATION TO LARGE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE AS TO PRODUCE UNREST SO GREAT THAT THE PEACE AND HARMONY OF THE WORLD ARE IMPERILED; AND AN IMPROVEMENT OF THOSE CONDITIONS IS URGENTLY REQUIRED;..."

"WHEREAS THE FAILURE OF ANY NATION TO ADOPT HUMANE CONDITIONS OF LABOR IS AN OBSTACLE IN THE WAY OF OTHER NATIONS WHICH DESIRE TO IMPROVE THE CONDITIONS IN THEIR OWN COUNTRIES..."

From the Preamble to the ILO Constitution



(Photo by David Parker)

The International Labor Organization is the UN specialized agency that formulates and promotes international labor standards. The ILO was founded in 1919, as part of the Treaty of Versailles, at the end of World War I. Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, served as chairman of the commission that created the ILO and its constitution. The United States joined the ILO in 1934, under the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

How are International Labor Standards Created?

Each year, the ILO holds an International Labor Conference, where delegates establish and adopt international labor standards in the form of “Conventions” and “Recommendations.”

Each member nation sends 4 delegates to the International Labor Conference:

- Two delegates representing the government
- One delegate representing workers’ organizations
- One delegate representing employers’ organizations

How are International Labor Standards Enforced?

Once the delegates to the International Labor Conference vote to adopt a labor standard as a “Convention”, each member nation must decide whether to ratify the Convention. By ratifying a Convention, a nation agrees to apply the provisions of the Convention within its national laws and practice, and submit periodic progress reports to the ILO. “Conventions” that are not ratified by a nation are not binding on that nation. “Recommendations” adopted by the International Labor Conference are not binding.

If a nation is violating an ILO Convention, the allegation may be raised through a set of supervisory procedures within the ILO. The procedures vary slightly (depending on who is making the allegation, and the nature of the allegation), but generally include the following:

1. An allegation is submitted to the ILO (by an ILO delegate, member state, unaffiliated state, national or international worker or employer organization, or the ILO Governing Body)
2. The allegation is considered by the Governing Body. If accepted, it is referred for investigation (the investigation could be conducted by the Governing Body, the Committee on Freedom of Association, a Commission of Inquiry, or an Ad Hoc Committee).
3. The investigating committee reports to the Governing Body.
4. A recommendation may be issued (by the Governing Body, the Committee of Experts, or by the International Court of Justice as a result of an appeal).

Fundamental Conventions of the International Labor Organization: Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining

Convention 87 – Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize (1948)

“Workers and employers, without distinction whatsoever, shall have the right to establish and, subject only to the rules of the organization concerned, to join organizations of their own choosing without previous authorization.”

Workers’ and employers’ organizations have the right to:

- Draw up their constitutions and rules, elect their representatives in full freedom, and organize their administration, activities, and programs without interference from public authorities.
- Establish and join federations and confederations, and affiliate with international organizations of workers and employers.

Workers’ and employers’ organizations shall not be liable to be dissolved or suspended by administrative authority.

Workers and employers and their organizations shall respect the law of the land. The law of the land shall not impair the rights in this Convention.

Each nation will determine how these rights apply to police and armed forces.

Each member of the ILO for which this Convention is in force will take all necessary and appropriate measures to ensure that workers and employers exercise freely the right to organize.

***The United States has not ratified Convention 87.**

Convention 98 – Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining (1949)

“Workers shall enjoy adequate protection against acts of anti-union discrimination in respect of their employment.”

Such protection shall apply more particularly in respect of acts calculated to:

- make employment conditional upon not joining a union or giving up union membership
- cause dismissal or other prejudice by reason of union membership or participation in union activities outside work hours (or during work hours, with employer permission)

Workers’ and employers’ organizations are protected from interference by each other, or each others’ agents or members

- Acts designed to establish workers’ organizations under the domination of employers or employers’ organizations, or to support workers’ organizations with the object of placing them under the control of employers’ or employers’ organizations constitute acts of interference.

Machinery appropriate to national conditions shall be established, where necessary, for the purpose of ensuring respect for the right to organize.

Measures shall be taken to promote voluntary negotiation between workers’ and employers’ organizations by means of collective agreements.

National laws or regulations shall determine how these rights apply to police and armed forces.

This Convention does not deal with the position of public servants engaged in the administration of the State, nor does it prejudice their rights or status.

***The United States has not ratified Convention 98.**

Fundamental Conventions of the International Labor Organization: Abolition of Forced Labor

Convention 29 – Forced Labor Convention (1930)

“Each Member of the International Labor Organization which ratifies this Convention undertakes to suppress the use of forced or compulsory labor in all its forms within the shortest possible period.”

Forced or compulsory labor means all work or service which is exacted under the threat of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily,”except:

- Compulsory military service laws for work of a purely military character.
- Work which forms part of the normal civic obligations of citizens of a self-governing country.
- Work or service as a consequence of a conviction in a court of law, carried out under the supervision and control of a public authority, not private individuals or companies.
- Work or service exacted in cases of emergency such as war, fire, flood, ... in general, any circumstance that would endanger the existence or well-being of the population.
- Minor communal services, performed by the members of a community in their own interest, if members of the community are consulted in regard to the need for such services.

The public authority shall not impose or permit the use of forced or compulsory labor for the benefit of private individuals, companies, or associations. Where such labor exists when a Member ratifies this Convention, the Member shall completely suppress such forced labor.

Where forced labor is allowed within this Convention, or has not yet been abolished, the Convention details specific circumstances under which forced labor can occur, including (but not limited to): age of workers, exempt workers, maximum length of service, hours of work, pay, workers’ compensation for accidents or sickness, provision of food, water, sanitary housing, medical care, training, and acceptable/unacceptable categories of labor.

The illegal exaction of forced or compulsory labor shall be punishable as a penal offence, and it shall be an obligation on any Member ratifying this Convention to ensure that the penalties imposed by law are really adequate and are strictly enforced.

***The United States has not ratified Convention 29.**

Convention 105 – Abolition of Forced Labor Convention (1957)

“Each member of the ILO which ratifies this Convention undertakes to suppress and not make use of any form of forced or compulsory labor.”

- As a means of political coercion or education or as punishment for political views.
- As a method of mobilizing and using labor for purposes of economic development.
- As a means of labor discipline.
- As punishment for having participated in strikes.
- As a means of racial, social, national, or religious discrimination.

“Each member of the ILO which ratifies this Convention undertakes to take effective measures to secure the immediate and complete abolition of forced or compulsory labor as specified [in this Convention.]”

***The United States has ratified Convention 105.**

Fundamental Conventions of the International Labor Organization: Equality at Work

Convention 100 – Equal Remuneration Convention (1951)

“Each Member shall ... promote and... ensure the application to all workers of the principle of equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value.”

- “Remuneration” includes the ordinary, basic or minimum wage or salary and any additional benefits whatsoever by the employer to the worker, arising out of the workers’ employment.
- This principle may be applied by means of: national laws or regulations, legally established or recognized machinery for wage determination, and/or collective bargaining agreements.
- Measures may be taken to promote objective job appraisals on the basis of the work to be performed, using methods selected by authorities or parties involved in collective bargaining.
- Differential pay rates that correspond to objective job differences, without regard to sex, do not violate the principle of equal pay for equal work.
- Each Member shall cooperate as appropriate with the employers’ and workers’ organizations concerned in order to give effect to the provisions of this Convention.

***The United States has not ratified Convention 100.**

Convention 111 – Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) (1958)

“Each member for which this Convention is in force undertakes to declare and pursue a national policy designed to promote... equality of opportunity and treatment in respect of employment and occupation, with a view to eliminating any discrimination in respect thereof.”

For the purpose of this Convention, *discrimination* includes:

- Distinctions, preferences, or exclusions on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction, or social origin, which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation.
- Additional categories determined by the Member concerned after consultation with representative employers’ and workers’ organizations, and with other appropriate bodies.

Distinctions, exclusions, or preferences based on the inherent requirements of the job are not considered discrimination.

Each Member for which this Convention is in force undertakes to:

- Seek cooperation of employers’ and workers’ organizations and other appropriate bodies
- Enact laws and promote education to secure acceptance and observance of the policy
- Repeal statutory provisions and administrative instructions when inconsistent with the policy
- Ensure observance of the policy in national vocational training and placement services
- Indicate in annual reports the actions taken and results secured in pursuance of the policy

Measures affecting an individual who is justifiably suspected of, or engaged in, activities prejudicial to the security of the State shall not be considered discrimination, if the individual has the right to appeal to a competent body in accordance with national practice.

Measures designed to meet the needs of persons who require special protection or assistance do not constitute discrimination, when created by members in cooperation with workers’ and employers’ organizations, or provided by ILO Conventions or Recommendations

***The United States has not ratified Convention 111.**

Fundamental Conventions of the International Labor Organization: Elimination of Child Labor

Convention 138 – Convention Concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment (1973)

The minimum age shall not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and, in any case, shall not be less than 15 years. (14 may initially be allowed in developing countries.)

The minimum age for work which is likely to jeopardize the health, safety, or morals of young persons shall not be less than 18 years (16 may be allowed if the health, safety, and morals of the youth are fully protected, with adequate training.)

The government may exclude limited categories of employment from minimum age laws, when special and substantial problems arise. Hazardous work cannot be excluded.

This Convention must minimally be applied to: mining and quarrying, manufacturing, construction, electricity, gas and water, sanitary services, transport, storage and communication, plantations and commercial agriculture (excluding family and small-scale holdings producing for local consumption and not regularly employing hired workers).

The Convention does not apply to work done by young persons in schools for general, vocational, or technical education or in other training institutions.

National laws may permit 13 to 15-year-olds to do light work that is unlikely to harm their health or development, and won't prejudice school attendance or their ability to benefit from instruction. (Light work may be allowed for 12 to 14-year-olds in developing countries.)

***The United States has not ratified Convention 138.**

Convention 182 – Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (1999)

“Each Member which ratifies this Convention shall take immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor as a matter of urgency.”

“Child” shall apply to all persons under the age of 18.

“The worst forms of child labor” include:

- All forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery
- The use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography, or for pornographic performance
- The use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties
- Work which is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children.

Each Member shall take measures to:

- Prevent engagement of children in the worst forms of child labor
- Provide direct assistance for the removal of children from the worst forms of child labor and for their rehabilitation and social integration
- Ensure access to free basic education, and vocational training for all children removed from the worst forms of child labor
- Identify and reach out to children at special risk
- Take account of the special situation of girls.

***The United States has ratified Convention 182.**

Global Union Federations

National unions work together in Global Union Federations, based on their specific sector, industry, or occupation. The Global Union Federations help coordinate international solidarity in areas such as: actions or campaigns, information and research, public awareness, and representing affiliated union concerns to other international organizations.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions is the largest international umbrella organization, bringing together national union federations from 150 countries and territories, representing 158 million members. Two other smaller organizations also exist: the World Federation of Trade Unions (which historically included trade unions from Communist nations), and the World Confederation of Labor (a small organization based in Christian social principles.)

EDUCATION INTERNATIONAL (EI)

Educators, teachers, lecturers, and other employees in education

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF CHEMICAL, ENERGY, MINE, AND GENERAL WORKERS' UNION (ICEM)

Energy sector, electricity sector, chemical industries, rubber and plastics industry, diamonds, gems, ornaments and jewelry production, ceramics industry, paper and cellulose production, glass industry, cement industry, environmental protection industries, coal mining, mineral mining, and stone and sand production

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF BUILDING AND WOOD WORKERS (IFBWW)

Construction industry, timber industry, forestry, and allied services

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF JOURNALISTS (IFJ)

Print media, broadcasting, film and television, news agencies, press offices, public relations agencies, and new electronic media

INTERNATIONAL METALWORKERS' FEDERATION (IMF)

Production workers and salaried employees in the automobile industry, aviation and aerospace industry, electrical engineering and electronics, mechanical engineering, shipbuilding, iron and steel production, non-ferrous metals as well as metal processing industry

INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT WORKERS' FEDERATION (ITF)

Transport industry

INTERNATIONAL TEXTILE, GARMENT, AND LEATHER WORKERS' FEDERATION (ITGLWF)

Textile, garment, and leather sector

INTERNATIONAL UNION OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL, HOTEL, RESTAURANT, CATERING, TOBACCO, AND ALLIED WORKERS' ASSOCIATION (IUF)

Food and drink sector, hotel, restaurant, catering and tourism services, agriculture and plantation farming, and tobacco processing

PUBLIC SERVICES INTERNATIONAL (PSI)

Employees in public administrations, enterprises and institutions of regional authorities, public corporations, foundations, public institutions, in companies generating and distributing gas, electricity and water, or waste management, in the environmental, social and health sector, in public educational, cultural and leisure-time facilities as well as other public institutions, administrations and companies delivering public services; employees in international institutions which have been established by states or communities of states. Teachers and employees of nationally operated postal and railway services are explicitly excluded.

UNION NETWORK INTERNATIONAL (UNI)

Employees in the postal and telecommunications services; salaried employees in industry; business services; information technology; commerce; financial services; social insurance and private health care; property services; tourism; professional and managerial staff; newspaper sector, magazine sector, book publishing sector, advertising and PR agencies; job-printing companies, packaging and paper processing; technicians and others employed in broadcasting and television, film production, projection and other media, the advertising industry, theatres and similar artistic and entertainment industries.

Unions and the Global Struggle Against Child Labor

Unions are increasingly recognizing direct connections between worker rights and the fight against child labor. Both historically and in today's global economy:

- **strong unions are an important protection against child labor.**
- **when parents are able to improve conditions through effective unions, children are much less likely to have to work.**
- **active struggles against child labor tend to make unions and worker rights in general stronger.**

"WHEN ADULTS' TRADE UNION RIGHTS ARE REPRESSED, CHILD LABOUR IS PREVALENT"

TIM NOONAN, INTERNATIONAL

CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

BRAZIL

In Brazil, where children are regularly employed in the footwear and garment industries, on plantations, in mines, and at "informal" jobs like selling goods on the street, Brazil's largest labor federation (the CUT) is carrying out a nationwide program to educate local trade unionists on child labor issues and to organize community support for the local enforcement of child labor law. Brazil's National Confederation of Workers in Agriculture (CONTAG) trains its union leaders to bargain for contract clauses limiting child labor and/or requiring employers to provide child workers with education, and one Union of Rural Workers has started a successful "goat-to-school" program that loans goats to families who can use them for income if they remove children from work and sent them to school.

PERU

In urban areas, where a 1996 survey found 4.3 million child workers, Peru's national labor federation (the CUT) has begun funding, training, and staffing to make education programs available to children working in street markets.

BANGLADESH

Many children working in especially hazardous workplaces such as automotive and welding workshops have been removed through a program run by the Building and Woodworkers' Federation and the Metal Workers' Union. After leaving work, children are enrolled in education and assistance programs.

INDIA

In a region where many children under 12 were performing hazardous work in slate mines, India's All India Trades Union Council organized a visit to the mines and mobilized their members to organize a campaign against child labor.

UGANDA

Child labor is commonplace on tea plantations throughout the world. To control part of the problem, Uganda's National Union of Plantation and Agricultural Workers has signed an agreement with the Uganda Tea Association prohibiting child labor under the age of 18. The resulting Memorandum of Understanding

states, “UTA and NUPAW agree that employment of children under the age of 18 years is not condoned and therefore management shall not directly employ or allow employees to bring children in the Estates to work their task.”

IVORY COAST

In the Ivory Coast, where 15,000 children aged 9 to 12 are sold into a form of slavery to work on cocoa, coffee, and cotton plantations, the International Union of Food and Allied Workers (IUF) is signing agreements with employers requiring them to commit to ending child slavery.

International Solidarity: Local Action toward Global Solutions

Along with harming children directly, exploitative child labor undermines labor standards and affects workers everywhere. Internationally, widespread child labor:

- **Provides a source of cheap/exploitable labor, contributing to global poverty**
- **Contributes to the erosion of worker rights and undermines worker bargaining power**
- **Endangers the future of labor movements and civil society by interfering with education, creating generations of future adults who lack knowledge of rights and how to exercise them as workers and citizens.**

In other words: child labor affects all workers and citizens!

Many workers and unions in the U.S. and other industrialized countries are supporting efforts to end child labor by forging alliances with unions in other countries, working to achieve enforceable global labor standards, and holding transnational companies accountable for labor practices.

Examples of effective recent child labor solidarity strategies include:

Supporting workers' struggles to organize unions and reject child labor

In 2001 factory monitors confirmed illegal union-busting and other violations – including employment of 13-15 year-old children – at a Mexican factory sewing clothing with university logos for Nike and other U.S. companies. Thousands of American students, workers, and consumers wrote letters to corporate CEOs protesting worker treatment. The international solidarity campaign helped factory workers to overcome violence, intimidation, and mass firings when they tried to organize, and after months of struggle, workers won an independent union.

In 2002, as news of child labor abuses and attacks on workers in Ecuador's banana plantations spread around the world, workers, consumers, and students contacted Los Alamos plantation owner Alvaro Noboa to demand that he recognize the workers' and union and cease using illegal child labor. Presidents of the AFL-CIO, the International Union of Food and Allied Workers (IUF), the Teamsters, and many other labor leaders also issued letters in support of Los Alamos workers' struggle.



Boy Miner.
(Photo by David Parker)

Campaigning for institutions to adopt - and enforce - codes of conduct

When the 2000 Olympics were held in Sydney, Australia, Australian labor federations created and signed an agreement with the Olympic organizing committee requiring all sponsors and licensees to adhere to minimum labor standards, including international conventions on child labor.

Pressure from human rights groups, consumers, and international trade unions led the group overseeing the World Cup (FIFA – Federation Internationale de Football Association) to adopt a Code in 1998 stating it would cease using soccer balls made with child labor. This year, when reports indicated that children were still working in the soccer ball industry and that adult workers were not being paid a living wage, activists launched a new publicity and letter-writing campaign, mobilizing soccer fans, consumers, and politicians to demand FIFA improve factory monitoring and live up to the promises in its Code.

International Solidarity: Local Action toward Global Solutions

Implementing and supporting fair trade or labeling initiatives

Through programs developed by non-profit organizations, export goods like coffee or cocoa can now be certified as “Fair Trade” products if producers adhere to basic labor standards – including ILO conventions on child labor – and pay farmers fair prices, so families can meet basic living needs without having children work for wages. Groups like TransFair USA and others help to publicize Fair Trade initiatives and educate consumers about Fair Trade products.

When the use of child labor in the rug-making industries of Pakistan and India gained international publicity in the 1990s, consumer groups – building on the history of effective “union label” initiatives– worked with manufacturers to begin phasing out the use of child labor and licensing companies to use “no child labor” labels if production facilities were regularly inspected by independent monitors. The resulting “RUGMARK” label program uses licensing fees to fund monitoring programs and education and rehabilitation for children removed from carpet jobs. Consumer groups and unions play a role in educating the public about the label program and ensuring it maintains strict standards for licensed companies.



*Brick worker.
(Photo by David Parker)*

Using collective bargaining strategies

The International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions (ICEM) signed in 2000 and recently renewed a “global agreement” with the multinational Freudenberg corporation, which owns chemical and rubber manufacturing plants all over the world. Freudenberg is headquartered in Germany/Japan, but the agreement covers all Freudenberg workers in the U.S. and 40 other countries. Among other recognitions of workers’ rights, the agreement commits Freudenberg to a ban on “child labour according to the definitions included in ILO Convention 138.”

Promoting global labor standards in trade agreements

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions continues to propose adding a “social clause” covering seven core labor standards, including prohibitions on child labor, to WTO rules governing international trade; this proposal has so far been rejected by WTO leaders.

Trade agreements between the U.S. and Cambodia have successfully included incentives for garment manufacturers to improve factory working conditions. Agreements require factory owners to respect core labor standards, including eliminating child labor and respecting workers’ rights to organize unions and collectively bargain.

Filing suit against corporations for labor rights abuses abroad

The International Labor Rights Fund and other groups have begun pursuing legal action against companies for alleged labor abuses in other countries. In 1996, for example, ILRF filed a suit against Unocal for using slave labor to build pipelines in Burma; and with the support of U.S. labor unions, ILRF recently filed a suit against Coca-Cola for using paramilitary forces to suppress organizing and assassinate union leaders in Colombia (these suits are still pending). If effective, this strategy could be used in the future to hold transnational corporations accountable for child labor abuses.