

International Confederation
of Free Trade Unions

THE BEST KEPT SECRET

CHILD LABOUR ROUND THE WORLD

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Introduction

One of the world's best kept secrets has been that between 100 and 200 million children between the age of four and fifteen are labouring in the mines, making matches, selling gum in the streets, cooking, washing clothes, working as domestic servants, weaving carpets, making clothes, sewing underwear, and working in the fields, at the plantations and on building sites round the world.

Child labour occurs throughout the world, in both the industrialised and developing countries, although the reports in this booklet refer only to cases within the developing countries. In several countries children comprise a substantial proportion of the workforce, and in developing countries, the International Labour Office estimates that more than 18 % of children between 10 and 14 are working. At the same time, in the same countries, the number of unemployed adults exceeds the number of child labourers.

In order to carry out a campaign against child labour, the ICFTU asked its affiliates, and other trade unionists round the world to carry out research into this phenomena in their own countries. This report contains field studies from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Mexico, and the Philippines. Further reports will follow on child labour in Colombia, Brazil and Peru.

Often these field studies were carried out in the face of opposition from employers who feared that their working practices would be exposed. We would like to thank all those who helped us to gather this information.

This report is a testimony to the sad exploitation of children which takes place for economic advancement. The studies expose the terrible conditions under which these children - all from developing countries - are working. In many cases the goods they produce will eventually make their way to the industrialised countries, particularly Europe and the USA, to improve the lifestyles of those living there.

The report talks of two types of activity which the children carry out - "formal-based activity " - that is in factories or workplaces - such as the garment Factories of Bangladesh, the carpet factories of Nepal, or the machine shops of Mexico. The other type of activity is in the "informal sector", where children work on the streets, as in Mexico selling chewing p m, or in the Philippines, where a sub-contractor brings round garments to people's homes, where they are worked on by young children.

Finally the report finishes with ICFTU recommendations for ways to abolish child labour - ranging from changes in legislation, to boycott campaigns.

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