

# CHILD LABOUR



**‘There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.’**

*Nelson Mandela*



Some children are taken away and taught to shoot and kill as combatants in armed conflict, as child soldiers; others are ‘sold’ into bonded labour in order to pay off a family debt, though the lenders often manage the debt in such a way that it is impossible for the family ever to clear it and the family may remain bonded through generations.

Some child labourers are forced to work in carpet sheds situated far from populated areas; others work in the basements of chemical and clothing factories; some work all day in large fields or plantations; still others work below ground in coal mines or in stone quarries. All of these children suffer on a scale that defies our understanding.



## CHILD WORKERS

Despite efforts in many countries to outlaw the practice of forced child labour, the nature of the 'employment' often makes it difficult to regulate and monitor.

A large majority of working children are unpaid family workers and those who are paid something receive well below normal rates, with girls regularly getting paid even less than boys.

Sometimes the money earned by the children forms an important part of the family income, supplementing the adult earnings.

Some children may be effectively imprisoned and forced to work as slaves or unpaid domestic servants in the homes of the rich. Child domestic work is one of the most common forms of child labour; millions of children are even now working in fulltime domestic labour, with many working up to fifteen hours a day.

According to the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), some 165 million children between the ages of five and fourteen were working in 2008 and some 218 million children under the age of eighteen are working fulltime in extremely dangerous and harmful conditions for little or no wages. Over 70 percent work in agriculture, fishing and hunting in many countries and on all continents.

*(from Facts and Figures, STOP Child Labour/school is the best place to work; ILO figures)*

## SOME REASONS WHY CHILDREN WORK



*Based on: School Works! Child Labour, with permission of the Professional Development Unit, INTO*

- Inadequate employment opportunities for adults
- Inadequate income necessitates a variety of incomes to provide for family members, especially where families are large
- Some jobs require small hands and bodies (sewing, crawling in small spaces)
- Many agricultural jobs pay by the amount of produce picked, a system that encourages families to bring more children into the fields to help collect/pick.
- For a fuller list see *School Works! Child Labour, The Right to Education & Fairtrade*, INTO, Irish Aid, CESEMA (2008)

Until relatively recently, most children around the world were expected – and often forced – to work as soon as they were 'old enough'. The following are just some of the many jobs or positions held by children in times gone by; grandparents, great-grandparents or other elderly relatives may be able to give children information about other jobs children did in the past:

**Apprentices:** these were the 'lucky' children who became apprentices in trades like stitching, carpentry or stone-masonry.

**Chimney sweeps:** small children, sometimes as young as six years old, who crawled up chimneys and cleaned out the soot. They often worked twelve-hour days.

**Newsies:** children, mostly boys, who sold newspapers on street corners.

**Office boys:** young boys who sharpened pencils, stuffed envelopes, swept floors and ran messages.

**Powder monkeys:** boys who worked on warships and at forts, carrying gunpowder to the cannons during battle.

**Waterboys:** children who brought water to farm and construction crews while they worked.

**Shoeshine boys:** boys who worked on streets shining the shoes of people passing by.

- Visit the excellent BBC site 'Children in Victorian Britain' which tells about children at work in Victorian times. There are slideshows and games and other activities, and visitors to the site can hear children describing the experiences of working in Victorian times in the words of Victorian children.  
[www.bbc.co.uk/schools/victorians/standard/work](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/victorians/standard/work)

## MODERN-DAY CHILD LABOUR



A recent media exposure of the use of child labour by some suppliers to Primark caused widespread anxiety, and the company took quick action.

### **Primark Takes Action Over Child Labour**

by Maggie Urry (16 June 2008, *The Guardian*)

*Primark has stopped buying from three suppliers it found were using child labour to embroider clothes it had sold in its stores.*

*The discount fashion retailer owned by Associated British Foods said the three factories in India were found to have subcontracted work to home workers*





# TEAM SPIRIT

who had used children. One of the factories had been supplying Primark for 12 years.

Primark has removed the clothes from sale and said it would refund customers who returned them. It has told other suppliers it 'would not tolerate this type of subcontracting'.

Primark said it would appoint a 'reputable non-governmental organisation in southern India to act as its eyes and ears on the ground'.

The company is setting up a charity to improve the lives of young people in the areas it sources products from. It will put in 'a substantial six-figure sum', George Weston, chief executive of ABF, said.

In the run-up to the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, articles appeared about child labour rings in China. The addresses below link to articles by David Barboza and tell of his investigations into the matter, with research contributed by Chen Yang. The teacher might prefer to visit the links him/herself before discussing the articles with the class, or simply discuss with the children the extract below from one of the articles.

**'Child Labor Rings Reach China's Distant Villages'**  
by David Barboza, *New York Times*, 10 May 2008 (Extract)

Liangshan is a target of child labour rings precisely because it is a place of desperation. The remote villages, which are reached by travelling for hours along winding, mountain roads, are situated along a drug-trafficking route that originates in Myanmar and heads north through Yunnan Province and up to this richly forested region.

The area is plagued by drug abuse and AIDS, and many of the Yi people are uneducated and even unable to speak Mandarin Chinese, the national language. Younger people can often just get by in Mandarin, while most speak the Yi language.

Luo Gu A He, 69, said his 14-year-old granddaughter left Keqie Village for Beijing in March, after her father died following a drug addiction. He said she earned about \$4 a day working seven days a week at a construction site.

'She is too young; I worry about her being alone in Beijing,' he said. 'But if she stays with me she couldn't live either; she'd starve to death. She made the decision to go outside. And on the day she left I cried.'

[www.ihf.com/articles/2008/05/10/asia/10china.php](http://www.ihf.com/articles/2008/05/10/asia/10china.php)  
[www.nytimes.com/2008/05/10/world/asia/10CHINA.html?pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/10/world/asia/10CHINA.html?pagewanted=print)

[www.nytimes.com/2008/05/10/world/asia/10CHINA.html?pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/10/world/asia/10CHINA.html?pagewanted=print)

'Behind Chinese labor scandal, dirt-poor children', by David Barboza, *International Herald Tribune*, 10 May 2008 [accessed 8 August 2008] [www.ihf.com/articles/2008/05/10/asia/10china.php](http://www.ihf.com/articles/2008/05/10/asia/10china.php)

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?



Concern's 'Stop Child Labour – School is the Best Place to Work' campaign seeks to eliminate child labour through the provision of fulltime formal education. The inspiration for the campaign comes from the MV Foundation based in Andhra Pradesh in India. This foundation enrolled almost half a million child labourers into fulltime schooling and effectively ended their experience of child labour.

### Raising Awareness in School

12 June is World Day against Child Labour. Education International, the federation of organisations representing over 29 million teachers and other education workers through over 300 member organisations in over 150 countries and territories, organises annual awareness-raising activities around the day to highlight the right of every child to a free quality public education.

### Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

In April 2000 in Dakar, Senegal, 164 governments, including the Irish government, agreed to Education for All to provide education for all the world's citizens. That same year, the UN adopted Education for All as the second Millennium Development Goal to be achieved by the year 2015.

Find out about the eight Millennium Goals and about the six Education for All goals. [www.campaignforeducation.ie](http://www.campaignforeducation.ie); [www.campaignforeducation.org](http://www.campaignforeducation.org)

## ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITY

### Interview with an 'agent' or with 'child labourer'

Materials: *Sums, Not Sticks* (see below) or poem 'Sad' by Larry O'Loughlin from *Something Beginning with P*; toy (or old) microphone, scarf/jacket/battered case or piece of clothing to indicate child worker or agent.





# TEAM SPIRIT

## CHILD LABOUR AND CHILDREN WORKING

Read story from *Sums, Not Sticks* or the poem 'Sad' with the class. Allow time for children to discuss their reactions to these depictions of child labourers.

- Tell the class or groups that they are going to be reporters who will have the opportunity to interview those children who make toys or who work making carpets or in other bonded labour situations. They might also interview an agent, those (usually) men who visit families in the developing world and persuade them to 'sell' their children into bonded labour – remind the class that the families are usually convinced their children will receive an education from these men or at their factories. Remind them also that some families in the developing world are so poor they simply have no real choice but to 'sell' their children in return for a cash payment and the promise of more money to come once the children have completed a certain term of bondage.
- Ask the class or groups to **write down at least ten questions** they would like to ask the child labourers or agents – they can work in pairs to do this, if they wish. Appoint a child as MC – she/he will take charge of the microphone and will pass it round when each 'reporter' wants to ask questions.
- If the reporters interview an agent, that child must endeavour to be as slippery as possible in attempting to dodge questions or to justify child labour.
- When each pair has asked three or four questions and recorded the answers, the agent can call a halt to the interview and 'leave'.
- Ask the children to talk about what they thought of the agent – if they thought he was telling the truth/ if they thought they'd have been fooled if they were the impoverished family forced to 'sell' their child. Did they agree with anything he said, and if so, what? How did it feel talking to someone like the agent? How did they feel about the child labourer? Could they imagine themselves being in that position? How did they think the child labourer felt towards them as journalists or interviewers?
- Ask the children to **write a report on their interview(s)** – they can write in pairs or individually. The children might read their reports to the class and put them together for display in the English/drama area; or they might write a poem or verse about the experience and how it felt to consider the lives of those less fortunate.

Children from fifth class in St Brendan's BNS, Birr, Co Offaly produced a book of thought-provoking and imaginative short stories that give an insight into the lives of child bonded labourers during one of the Development Education through Literature residencies. The paperback book, *Sums, Not Sticks*, ed Enda O'Connor, was published by Blackwater Press (ISBN 1841312843). Though now out of print, copies may be available to borrow from some libraries.

### POETRY IRELAND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP PROJECT

Authors, author-illustrators and poets work with class teachers and children to explore, through the use of creative writing, the human and political effects of child bonded labour, child poverty and lack of education. The children gradually learn the facts through guided discussion with class teacher and visiting writer, and begin to understand life as it is for children in bonded labour, with a final realisation that some solutions to the problem are possible.

The project enables exploration of issues relating to the MDGs, particularly the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, and achieving universal primary education.

Children from over eighty schools have worked on the project since its inception, and the scheme will run with twenty-five schools in 2009.

**Contact Moira Cardiff in Poetry Ireland, at +353-1- 4758605 for further information.**

