

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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### Spotlight on Ignace Bla (Dignité-Côte d'Ivoire)

"We often come across the worst forms of child labour"

Brussels, 7 August 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): According to a 2003 ILO study covering 1,500 cocoa producers in Côte d'Ivoire, there are over 5,000 children working in the country's cocoa plantations. These children may or may not be paid and are not receiving any form of education. Most come from the neighbouring countries and are victims of the child trafficking rackets organised with Burkina Faso, Benin and Mali.

Ignace Bla, Deputy General Secretary of the free trade union "Dignité", explains the main reasons behind this situation and the work that is being done in Abidjan and the cocoa-producing regions on combating child labour.

What is the child labour situation like in Côte d'Ivoire?

Child labour certainly exists and there is a cultural aspect that needs to be borne in mind. In fact children have always been involved in family farming activities, especially during holiday periods. In order to normalise the situation and prevent certain misunderstandings, a law was introduced one year ago that stipulates types of work that are regarded as dangerous for children. More specifically, the authorities have drawn up a list of jobs that are prohibited for people under 18 years of age.

There is another growing problem, however, which is much harder to control. That is the trafficking of children, mainly from the neighbouring countries of Burkina Faso, Mali and Benin. These children are working in the cocoa industry. Dignité is tackling this problem, by trying to identify the children concerned and to escort them home to their countries of origin. This is a type of forced labour, in fact, and is hard to control since there is connivance from our government.

Do you manage to find these children's families?

In some cases, yes we do. The children themselves provide valuable information and we supplement that with information from the authorities. Very often the children are staying in camps near the plantations and unfortunately some of these farms manage to escape the notice of the labour inspectorate.

What action has Dignité been taking to tackle this problem?

Dignité has organised several awareness-raising initiatives, since we think this is a cultural problem and linked to attitudes. The people affected by child labour, and particularly the parents, do not necessarily know that it is illegal. So we need to take measures to inform them about the illegal nature of the work. We also hold seminars in order to inform other social groups. We held a March with more than 1,000 young people and its main slogan was "Stop child labour in all its forms!" Our aim is clear: to get the country to respect the national and international conventions it has signed on employment law.

What are the children's working conditions like?

We often come across the worst forms of child labour. When children work in plantations they are forced to walk long distances with huge loads on their heads. They also work with very sharp tools. Many other economic sectors exploit children too, such as the building trade or the food industry. The starting point of this forced labour is the sale of children on the black market. The buyers can make huge profits.

How much does a child cost?

Quite frankly a child can be bought for something between 120,000 and 220,000 CFA francs (185-340 euros). For that price the child will work for the owner for 1 to 3 years. The length of time to be worked can be negotiated.

How much does the child earn?

Virtually nothing or nothing at all. The owner allows the child to eat, but that's all. Occasionally, a child will be given a small bonus at the end of a year.

Where do the children come from?

The initial trading is done in the neighbouring countries. It is hard to estimate the number of children who are victims of this trafficking or to be sure about the identity or nationality of the sellers. But in our exploratory missions we have met children from Burkina Faso, Benin and Mali.

We try to find out who these children are before picking them up, wherever possible. We have to act quickly so that they are not moved to other workplaces.

When they arrive at the reception centre we hold a debriefing and then arrange their repatriation. Sometimes, we manage to get them into schools.

Given the magnitude of the problem what is the official reaction of the authorities in Côte d'Ivoire?

As you know black markets are, by definition, invisible. The markets move from one part of a town to another and it is very hard to keep a track on developments. That said, we keep the government informed about any such dealings we notice. In Oumé, for instance, the government and the local authorities are supporting a programme aimed at eradicating this problem. A list of illegal activities has been drawn up and legal measures are in place for punishing the criminals.

The trafficking involves different countries in the sub-region, so what is the cooperation like between unions in the various countries?

We are permanently in contact. In January 2006, we held an international seminar on immigration issues in Yamoussoukro, the administrative capital. With support from the World Confederation of Labour we were able to invite unions from Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso and Mali to the seminar.

One observation from the workshop was that when families emigrate they automatically expose their children to the danger of trafficking. We need to promote exchange of information between the countries and pool our efforts better, but we lack the resources we need.

Does Dignité support children working in the informal economy?

Yes, organising the informal economy is one of our basic policies. Our local unions belong to sectoral organisations, which facilitates the circulation of information. But saying that, the informal economy has many sectors that are not organised and in which many children are working. I'm particularly thinking of the agricultural and food production industries. By organising in local unions we have managed to identify some children. We would like to organise the grass roots better, so as to become even more effective and to free children from this exploitation. If we can manage that more jobs will become available and older people will be able to get work.

Apart from poverty, what do you see as the reasons behind child labour?

Poverty is not the only cause but it is one of the main ones. There is no getting away from the fact that Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Burkina Faso are very poor countries. What is more, these countries need a lot of labour for producing certain raw materials. That cannot be a justification for child labour, however. The problem needs to be tackled at the roots, by using international levers to help the producers get a decent income. Then children will quickly leave the system and go back to school.

Child labour is also a cultural phenomenon. Can you change something that is so deeply rooted?

Yes, of course we can, by using awareness-raising policies. We have noticed that attitudes are changing. In remote villages in Côte d'Ivoire some parents would like their children to go to school. In the unions, we explain the benefits of having children, villages, regions and indeed a country with proper schooling. Where children are exploited, the opposite is the case, since the country regresses and poverty takes hold.

Is access to education equal for boys and girls?

Yes, 15 years ago some of our parents could only imagine keeping their daughters at home. But now the politicians want to have women in decision-making bodies. If we want women to become members of parliament, ministers or even the President (why not?!), we have to start at the grass roots with determined, gender neutral policies.

Interview by Pierre Martinot

- link to interview with Mahjda Fahchouch of SNE/AOB-Morocco (« School, the best workplace for children ... »):

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991224576&Language=EN>

- link to interview with Mohamed Mdaghr of AOB-Netherlands

( « La communauté marocaine en Europe est une alliée essentielle dans la lutte contre le travail des enfants au Maroc ») : <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991224574&Language=EN>

-link to interview with Stavri Liko of FSASH-Albania (Child labour - "attitudes" are a problem")

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991224681&Language=EN>

-link to interview with Shantha Sinha, (The MV Foundation, India) "Poverty is no excuse for child labour":

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991224859&Language=EN>

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