

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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INDIA

A quarter of the world's child-labour force is said to be in India, where poverty and the lack of compulsory education make it an especially serious problem. An Indian labour ministry survey says that one out of four Indian children between the ages of five and 15 is working. The total could be between 7.5 million (a government estimate in 1985) to 44 million (an unofficial estimate). Legislation in 1986 banned the employment of children under the age of 14 in hazardous work such as glass-making, fireworks, match factories and carpet-weaving. But some employers have openly defied the labour ministry and resisted attempts at enforcement. The government complains that jurisdiction is divided between it and state governments, and its budget for child welfare in 1992 was only \$2.2 million.

The field study

This was carried out in the notorious town of Sivakasi in Tamilnadu state, where about 45,000-50,000 children are believed to be working in the fireworks and match industries. There is no obvious trade-union presence. The investigators were presented to owners or managers at the factories as relatives or friends from outside Tamilnadu who were on holiday and interested in seeing how matches and fireworks were made. Their guides asked them not to mention in their reports the names of the factories they had visited. Why? "If the employers came to know that they had helped us, concealing our identity," the investigators reported, "they feared they might be in serious trouble and their lives might be in danger." In half a dozen cases, that fear was unfounded because these factories bore no name board identifying the owners.

In Sivakasi, the match-making industry was the first one to be set up. The techniques were brought there from Calcutta, and eventually the chemicals were made at Sivakasi. Several firms diversified into fireworks after imports were banned. Both industries gave birth to a printing industry to produce the needed labels. For the employers the business became a highly profitable one.

Jobs are protected

Matches can be made automatically. But there is only one mechanised match company in India: WIMCO, which has units in several states including Tamilnadu. Its capacity is restricted in order to leave room for the more labour-intensive semi-mechanised plants, which produce about 83% of the output.

Sivakasi and neighbouring Sattur produce about 55% of India's matches. About 60,000 workers are employed by the industry. About half of the employees are below the age of 14, and some children begin their working life at a match factory at the age of five.

Frequently child labour is employed at small unlicensed factories which are subcontracted by licensed ones.

Fireworks: About 90% of India's production of fireworks is at Sivakasi in both licensed and several hundred unlicensed factories. Most of the output is used on one day a year: Diwali, - the Festival of Lights. In the industry they say: "We produce for 300 days a year, we sell for 30 days, we sell in a rush for three days and the whole thing goes up in flames in three hours!" Diwali is a holiday for the child-workers. But they are not given a single firework by their employers; they must buy them like everybody else - and usually cannot afford to do so.

Where's the licence?

As with matches, child labour is concentrated in unlicensed fireworks factories working under sub-contracts. About 30,000 people work in fireworks factories, roughly 20% of whom are children, who begin working at the age of ten. The children are used to dye outer paper, make small firecrackers, roll the powder and pack the final product.

Most of the children working in the Sivakasi-Sattur belt come from villages

in Kamaraj district but some, from the so-called "backward castes", come from villages 40-50 kms (25-30 miles) away and survive in slums. Many of their families have land and have benefited from a rural-development scheme which gives them a loan to buy a bullock and cart, a cow or poultry.

But the area is drought-prone and irrigation is inadequate; poverty and ignorance persist.

Who will feed me?

The wages are appalling. Children earn about 15-18 rupees (48-57 US cents) a day on piece-rates. In exceptional circumstances they can pick up 20 rupees. In the mini-factories, wages are much lower: 8-15 rupees a day.

Some of the families which depend on child labour to support them fail to provide two square meals a day. One 12-year-old girl told an interviewer that she was given only two dishes of gruel a day.

Factories work a 10-12 hour day, seven days a week, and longer during the peak pre-Diwali period. The children are brought in from Kamaraj in the morning, after being woken up as early as 3 am. They get home as late as 10 pm. Their buses are crammed and many children stand for the journey of two or three hours.

The village agent is paid by the factory to go from door to door, banging with his bamboo stick, until the children (mostly &ls) get up and are ready for the bus. When asked if the long hours derived her of the pleasures of childhood, 12-year-old Kavitha gave a resigned look. When asked if she would like to go to school like other girls, she shot back: "Who will feed me, then?" Did she know any games? "Running," she replies. Any other games? Kavitha is silent.

Sub-contractors not only pay their child-workers less than the main licensed companies but also disregard safety laws more freely. At one sub-contractor's plant ICFTU investigators found that chemicals were stored in houses or huts, contrary to safety laws. As they are not registered factories, their sub-contractor owners cannot be prosecuted under the Factories Act. It is also claimed that children working

for such sub-contractors are beyond the reach of the Child Labour Act.

No gratuity for you

Adult workers who have completed five years' service at a match or fireworks factory are entitled to a gratuity from the company. However, on the eve of their completion of the five years, employers dismiss the workers, or ask them to resign "voluntarily". The next day they are taken back as gratuity-less "new employees".

What of burns caused by accidents? Sivakasi has a hospital, and the workers have an insurance scheme, but the hospital has no proper clinic for burns despite frequent requests and protests and broken government promises. Accident victims have to be taken 70 kms (44 miles) to the hospital at Madurai.

There are many fatal accidents at Sivakasi. This is because unregistered match and fireworks factories are not covered by the safety laws. Match factories are supposed to have rubber floors, but the investigators found none. At one mini-factory, little more than a large shed, they found highly inflammable chemicals dispersed around the working area with little thought for fire protection; the entire shed looked as if it would be gutted in seconds if it caught fire.

Trust us!

Even when inspections take place, they are often inadequate. Inspectors are usually engineers who have little knowledge of dangerous chemicals, who often accept the assurances of the foreman that everything is in order. But there were three serious accidents in the past 13 years: 37 dead (including children) in September 1981, 39 dead in September of the same year and 16 dead in 1992. Scores of minor accidents, some of them causing burns, have gone unreported.

While our team was visiting one small plant, fire broke out twice as children were working. They put the fires out nonchalantly and resumed their jobs. The foreman laughed at the visitors worried looks.

Ignorance about health care and employers' negligence is overwhelming

at small plants. There are few toilets or supplies of drinkable water. Children complain of headaches and back pain. In part of the match-making process girls rapidly pound match sticks on their chests, which some people claim causes tuberculosis. Another extraordinary practice, that of the children using their thighs to apply chemicals on match-sticks, is said to cause skin diseases.

Growing up quickly

In the absence of proper documentation, how do you decide whether an employee is a legal child worker or a legitimate adult one? The method used is an analysis of the formation of teeth; growth of limbs; changes in tissue; growth of bones; and hair. All of these factors depend, of course, on the individual's diet. Canny employers "promote" girls from childhood to adolescence over the age of 14 by telling them to wear half-sans and to put a dot on their foreheads like grown-ups.

Managers employing children either register their age as being above 14 or do not register them at all. When honest inspectors report child-labour at a factory, the prosecution often fails. This is because the Child Labour Act stipulates that a worker's age may be assessed only by a registered and approved doctor - not an inspector.

The Inspectorate of Factories has an office in Sivakasi along with a Deputy Chief Inspector and a ten-man staff. The inspectors have to cover 3,000 factories, which means that factories are visited, on average, twice a year. There is a widespread view in Sivakasi that some of the inspection staff collude with the employers. The Joint Chief Inspector says such allegations are wild and ill-founded. He describes what happens. It is not encouraging.

Hide in the store-room

When an inspector visits a factory, child-workers are bundled into store-rooms and sheds and told to stay there until he goes. The inspector will catch one or two of them only if he is quick or lucky. If he catches workers who look under-age, the onus of proving this is on him.

Until now, mini-plants have not been covered by child-labour laws but they will

be - but this will stretch the Inspectorate's inadequate resources even more. In addition to carrying out inspections, inspectors have other jobs such as collecting workers' savings and contributions to welfare and insurance funds.

If a case goes to court, the litigation drags on for months. At the end of it, instead of receiving the maximum punishment of three months in jail or a fine of 10,000 rupees, a guilty employer may get away with a small fine that is easily covered by the handsome profits he has been making while the case is heard. In recent years there have been 49 cases presented by the Inspectorate in Sivakasi and only one conviction.

What next?

It is imperative that the government specifies, under Section 18 of the Child Labour Act, who is competent to issue birth certificates which are acceptable in a court, and to oblige employers to keep lists of employees containing their dates of birth based on approved birth certificates and their dates of employment.

The employers are unrepentant. A spokesman for the Match Manufacturers' Association admits there may be child labour in the mini-plants run by sub-contractors but asserts that stories of child labour in Sivakasi are mostly myths propagated by the media, people "outside" and the automated company, WIMCO, which wants a larger share of the market and is allegedly blackening the name of the semi-mechanised firms.

The employers contend that their industry has made a major contribution to the economy of a chronically drought-prone and backward corner of Tamilnadu. Maybe. But they are taking out more than they are contributing.

BANGLADESH

Sanctioned by tradition and encouraged by dire economic necessity, child labour is a serious problem in Bangladesh. Employment of children under the age of 14 has been banned for decades but enforcement remains lax. The Bangladesh Department of Labour Statistics reckons the number of child labourers at about 3 million. Informed observers think the true number is much higher. Children work on the land, pedal rickshaws, and work as domestic servants and in textile mills and garment factories. Efforts to control child labour have been ineffective in large part because «child labour still constitutes a major income source for many families»

The field study - garment manufacture

This took place at a garment manufacturer in Dhaka, the capital, in collaboration with the Bangladesh Garment Workers' Federation. The factory employs 375 people. About 20% of them (i.e. 75) are child workers. Most of them are girls between the ages of ten and 14. They work from 8 am to 4.45 pm. Their days and hours worked are recorded on an attendance card. A skilled worker earns about 1,800 taka (\$40) a month; unskilled workers can expect 800-900 taka (\$20 - \$22) a month. Payments to child workers, however, are kept secret - it is up to the supervisor.

Legally prescribed workers' benefits are not provided after two years' service. Management says workers prefer to leave after two years so the question of benefits does not arise. Working conditions are sub-normal. Work-spaces are cramped. Ventilation and lighting are bad.

Child workers are resigned to their fate. They re-do their work at the request of the supervisor without protest. They were unwilling to talk to the investigators. When pressed, they complained of eye strain and threats from their supervisors that they might lose their jobs. Except for first aid, no medical service is provided; people seriously injured in accidents at work are given modest pay offs.

Like mother, like daughter

The child-workers' parents usually come from the working class: artisans, tailors, factory and farm workers and hawkers. Some parents, mostly mothers, work in garment factories. About 12-15% of the workforce visited by the investigators were of the same family. Parents are often obliged by their poverty to get their

children to work in the same factory so that they contribute to the family's slender income while being under some parental supervision.

Workers often live close to their factory, often 20-300 metres away; if they lived far away they could not afford the cost of public transport. They often live in roughly made sheds with tin or thatched roofs. In many cases up to six people live in a one-room shed. Sanitary conditions are appalling.

Many homes are subject to the disastrous floods which regularly afflict Bangladesh. The floods destroy homes and spread malaria and diarrhoea. Children are given meagre meals, diminishing their chances of full mental and physical development.

No time for growth

Adult workers are aware that the children need education and access to social services, but reality blocks them. They are tied to their jobs from day to night. They have to concentrate upon making ends meet. However, some people think it is in their interest not to encourage those children who have been to elementary school to seek further education. That would deprive them of a source of income.

This also suits the employers. They get access to child-workers (mostly girls) who are docile and quick with their fingers. They work uninterruptedly without complaint. But the company which allowed a visit by an investigator guiltily insisted on anonymity.

The unions see no way out. They think child labour in the textile industry will remain inevitable in Bangladesh as long

as the country is as poor as it is.

The field study - Exploitation by building firms

Children are also exploited in Bangladesh's construction industry. They are employed especially in stone-breaking in the quarries on the outskirts of Dhaka. No serious statistics are available but about 30% of construction workers are reckoned to be children. Large numbers of construction workers are employed by sub-contractors, whose wages are much lower than those of the contractors.

The field study was conducted at building sites in the Narayanganj district, 12 kms (seven miles) from Dhaka. Children from the ages of seven to 16, of both sexes, were found working there. In one case the investigators found a five-year-old at work.

The child-workers are placed around heaps of stones, where they have to break 80-100 sq feet of stones per week, or ten sq feet a day. Sub-contracts last a week as a minimum, and workers earn about 40 taka a day. With that money they have to buy essential equipment: a hammer (costing about 80-85 taka); an umbrella (as a shield from the sun); a water-can (for drinking water); and rubber gloves (to protect their hands).

Eleven-hour working day

The working day starts at 7 am and can continue, says the sub-contractor, until 10 pm if the stone-breakers (working on piece rates) have the energy to continue. Eye injuries, from flying stone chips, are frequent. No treatment apart from first aid is available. Asked why he did not demand it, a worker replied with resignation: "Allah will save us."

The sub-contractors do supply workers with one-room shacks. However these have no running water, electricity or ventilation. Unmarried people can live in separate huts. Latrines are rudimentary.

The employers say they are helping the workers by giving jobs to them and their children. Their approach, they say, is an "act of charity". "If the workers are, they say, grateful. How else, ask the employers, would some of these men with their large families eke out a living?"

The workers seem to be ignorant of family planning and are convinced that they should have large families - their "real assets" - in order to assure themselves of care and protection in old age. However, too many children too often creates an unbearable family burden.

The field study concludes that "the potential for trade union action in the building sector is bleak, due to the ignorance of the workers, the attitude of the employers (who often do not allow organisers to visit their sites) and the dismal conditions of life."

The Field study - Exploitation in commerce

The field study covered the Dhaka Azimpur Government New Market, where the workforce of 1,398 includes 466 child workers, almost all of them boys. Disregarding the law which states that shops may open only for eight hours a day, many of the markets' 460 shops remain open for 12 hours.

Children are paid monthly. The lowest wage is 200 taka a month and the highest 400 taka. There is no medical insurance or social security. Employment is temporary; workers may be fired by employers whenever they like.

The field study concluded: "According to the Azimpur Government New Market Employees' Union, child labour is a reality that is hard to eradicate. Laws cannot do much in view of the grinding poverty that compels parents to send children to work." >>>

NEPAL

The legally defined minimum age for the employment of minors in Nepal is 16 in industry and 14 in agriculture. The constitution stipulates that children shall not be employed in factories, mines or similar hazardous work. But there is no child protection act, the labour department administers the minimum-wage law only in larger enterprises of the formal sector, and child workers are found in all sectors of the rural and urban economies.

The field study

Nepal is known for the beauty and craftsmanship of its carpets. It is less well known that these carpets are partly made by children who work from 6 am to 10 pm, seven days a week, in atrocious working conditions for a pittance.

The field study of Nepal's carpet factories found that roughly 20% of the workforce were children below 14 years.

Other estimates have been about 50%, ie. 200,000 children, many of whom have been sold into slavery at the factories by their parents.

As with child textile-workers and street-vendors in other parts of the developing world, which are described in other sections of this report, the company which completes the carpet and exports it does not soil its hands with child labour.

It conveniently sub-contracts work to the locals, some of whom sub-contract it further.

At this low level, anything goes.

Ruthless exploitation is the name of the game.

Child-labour laws are flouted.

In Nepal, there are three levels of work in the carpet industry: the manufacturer/exporter, who is at the top, and who contracts work out to a master-weaver or loom-holder.

The sub-contractor who employs weavers to make the carpets. Finally, the weavers, and it is among them that children are found.

The weavers say that children are employed because small hands tie intricate knots more easily. Maybe. But the principal reason for employing children is that they are easy to exploit.

Less than a dollar a day

After three to six months of unpaid "training", during which the children live 15 to a room and are fed rice and lentils, they go on the payroll and are paid for piece-work.

They usually receive less than \$1 a day, but in some factories, they only receive \$10-\$15 a month.

In one study more than 75% of the child carpet-workers had migrated to towns such as Kathmandu and Lalitpur from homes in the countryside. Some 80% of these are from Mongol ethnic minorities, mostly from the Taming community, a friendly people who are mostly illiterate.

Some of the children have run away from home because family life was difficult. Others are brought to the factory by their parents because they could not afford to support them or pay for their education. Some are brought to the factory by friends or relations who are already working there. Others are recruited in distant villages by middlemen who collect a percentage of the child's tiny wage.

One young Mongol boy, Shyam, said he earned 500-600 rupees a month for working a 16-hour day - and out of that he had to pay 300 rupees a month in rent.

He had come to the factory because at home "however hard my father and my brothers worked there was never enough to eat".

"I would cry for my mother"

At work the children sit on hard benches in unventilated rooms, breathing in the woollen fluff that fills the air.

The hammer they use in the weaving process often skins their knuckles, making them bleed.

Girl workers are often sexually harassed.

Sometimes the child-workers stay in a hunched position for hours.

Some factories are so badly lit that the children's vision becomes impaired.

Work on tight looms causes their knuckles to swell, causing early arthritis.

At one factory a child-worker said her hands were frequently injured by a cutter. "I would cry for my mother but then the master would beat me," she said.

The boss provided his own unusually crude brand of medical treatment for deep cuts. He would fill the girl's cut with matchstick-powder and set light to it with another match. «My skin and blood would burn together,» she said.

The sub-contractors give no days off or holidays and provide no conventional medical care or education for the children. There is no job security.

The workers are not allowed to have visitors who, in any case, are not welcome. Security at the main gates is tight.

The employers do not want outside world to know what they are up to.

Some of the most unscrupulous of the factory-owners encourage young Tamang girls to go to Bombay where they are promised work in Indian films - and end

up in prostitution. The girls naively jump at the idea of stardom.

No prospects

If they lose their job, the child-worker's chance of finding another are slim.

This is because they have missed out on their education and are mostly untrained and illiterate.

Their lost opportunity to live a decent life has been described as a devastation of human resources".

There is no excuse for the businessmen's behaviour, which is mainly motivated by greed. The carpet industry is booming in Nepal. In 1991-92, carpets accounted for 57% of all exports.

A study of earnings indicates that if only adults were employed in the factories, these would still be profitable. Total costs would increase only by 8%.

According to a study by UNICEF, the most effective and best solution to the child-labour problem is to provide children with free and easily accessible primary education. When given the choice, the poorest parents send their children to school and not to work.

THE PHILIPPINES

The constitution of the Philippines forbids the employment of children below the age of 15 except under the responsibility of parents or guardians, and then only if the work does not interfere with schooling. It allows employment of children aged from 15 to 18 under conditions established by the government. Nobody under the age of 18 is allowed to take part in hazardous work but serious violations of child-labour laws occur in the piecework or contracting out of embroidery and other work related to textiles.

The field study

In the Philippines the field study looked at a German textiles multinational with 48 branches around the world, including one in the Philippines, which produces women's clothing such as bras, girdles, panties and bikinis. 98% of its output is marketed in Europe; the remainder is sold in the Philippines. This company produces clothes in the Philippines because of the low wages which it has to pay, and like many other businesses in the Philippines it benefits from using child labour. It does not do so directly, but contracts work to local firms and asks no questions; these firms employ child labour themselves or sub-contract the work again.

Some children start working at the age of four.

When local operators receive an order from a multinational for a certain quantity of underwear, either they produce it in their own factory or they farm it out to sub-contractors in community-level «factories» that are nothing more than small huts. Most of the community-level workers are children. The child-workers, mostly girls, are chosen for their extreme poverty, their docility and their dexterity with their fingers. The sub-contractor pays the children considerably less than the contractor pays him for each item.

There is always a delay in paying for the work which is contracted out, which means that the child-workers have to wait for their meagre pay-packets. Contractors also compete fiercely to win the limited number of contracts that are on offer. They offer the very lowest possible price, and this ensures that the child-workers' wages stay low. The beneficiary of this process is the German multinational.

The underwear that reaches its main factory is in an advanced state of manufacture, thanks to the young, delicate and

obedient hands which have done jobs such as sewing, embroidering, making button-holes and attaching separate pieces of the product.

Working class

The parents of the child-workers are from the low-paid working class: mechanics, drivers, farm-workers, electricians and vendors. Their mothers may be garment-workers working in the same hut. Families can have as many as 23 members, and they live in dilapidated two-room houses often with dirt floors and with ceilings so low that adults have to stoop. These homes are sometimes close to the factory but many can be found on river banks and on the edge of swamps. There is no adequate ventilation. Prize possessions are a television set, a sewing machine and a fan. Sadly, frequently these «prizes» have broken down and the family cannot afford to have them repaired.

Latrines are often primitive, and stink; gastro-intestinal ailments are rampant. Children often have to make do with one or two meals a day, which inhibits their mental and physical development.

The field study found that from four to six years of age child-workers have their earnings appropriated by their mothers. From seven to 12, children alternate school with garments production, and many of the children in this age group said they sent their wages on school needs.

From 12 to 17 some children try to get a secondary education but those who cannot afford to do so go to work.

Girls are under more pressure to give up school than boys. This is because, in addition to their jobs, they are expected to carry out household chores such as

cleaning, washing, ironing and baby-sitting. Many younger girls placed a high premium on education, as they said that their textile jobs were a stepping stone to better education. Some girls said they were working so that they could send their younger brothers and sisters to school - in a spirit of self-sacrifice they had given up their own ambitions.

Their ideal, often expressed, was to become a nurse or doctor working overseas-a dream not for them but for their younger brothers and sisters.

Four-year-old workers

Wages are paid by piece-rate. Children aged between four and six, who do simple jobs, earn roughly five pesos a day, while an 11-year-old may earn up to 10 pesos a day. In factories, children work for eight to 11 hours a day, Monday to Friday.

In the peak pre-Christmas season they work on Saturdays and Sundays as well, and for a rush job they can work for as many as 24 hours before taking a break. In the many months they are encouraged to come late and leave earlier which is in the interests of the sub-contractor who pays by piece-rate. Take-home pay from factories varies between 15 and 150 pesos a week.

If the work is not considered up to standard, the children have to re-do the rejects a very unfair system which upsets the children, as they have to pay for the cost of the thread and are not paid for the extra work involved. They complain of back strain and hand cramps after long hours of stitching, and of allergies to factory dust and eye strain. Accidents are frequent - there have been several cases in which children's fingers have been cut off.

Children are under such pressure to meet quotas that they repress the desire to use the toilet. Sometimes they are sent on unpaid errands while at work; they are shouted at, cursed and otherwise humiliated by their bosses.

Adult workers are given the best work positions and access to fans.

The position of children who carry out the same work at home is marginally better than those who work in factories.

They are given more time to rest and are not exposed to such a strict, menacing boss, as they are in the charge of parents or

relations.

The multinational makes the money

These child-workers produce the women's underwear that the German multinational sells on the world market, particularly in Europe. A piece for which a child in tattered clothes is paid 80 centavos can be sold by the company for the equivalent of 150 pesos, a difference of more than 1,000% even considering the cost of the raw materials.

The field study found that in factories run by the contractors the workforce ranged from 30 to 100 people, and at home work-sites from five to 30 people. In both, the age of the workers ranges from ten to 45. Almost all the workers are girls or women. At home work-sites the ratio of adults to children can be two to one.

No Job security

In the factories the conditions of work are what is known as "casual", while for those at home work-sites, there is no job security at all. In the factories, the working day is from 7 am to 7 pm with an hour off for lunch. At home work-sites there are no schedules, and payment is by piece-work. For example, a seamstress in a community work-site gets five centavos to attach lace to a bra. She usually sews 500 pieces of lace a day and earns 25 pesos. At the factories a folder/packer can earn 30 pesos a week for packing 1,200 half-slips or bras.

In the factories workers are given snacks during overnight work and a free excursion to a resort every year. In the community work-places, on the other hand, there are no benefits except access to a television and cold water.

One factory visited during the field study was a crowded, two-storey building crammed with machines, bundles of cloth, thread, plastic bags and cartons. It was well-lit and the toilet was adequate. But the place was poorly ventilated, and the smell of the textile was nauseating. Chemicals irritated the eyes and the sound of the machines was deafening.

More relaxed at home

The house visited in the field study was one of the better ones. Some other work-

places are dilapidated and poorly lit and ventilated. This is particularly the case in the poorest communities, and it is here that the children are under particular pressure to accept employment at extremely low wage rates.

In the home work-sites, houses turned into factories provided a more relaxed atmosphere. Children watched television, drank cold water or relaxed in the living room during breaks.

Their main concern was when the sub-contractor, who owns the house, demanded more work - especially during the peak pre-Christmas season.

These children do not realise that they are being exploited. They have no idea of the multinational's profits. On the contrary, they regard themselves as lucky to have the job so that they can afford to go to school as well.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the field survey did not come across any case of children organising themselves to protest against their low wages or appalling working conditions.

Children keep quiet, as they dare not risk losing their jobs, and they usually voice satisfaction.

MEXICO

Child labour in Mexico under the age of 14 is banned by law. From 15 to 16 children may work for up to six hours a day, provided that they do not do overtime or night work. Enforcement of this law seems to be reasonably adequate for large and medium-sized companies but less certain for small ones, and the worst enforcement is with the many very small companies, especially those with five or fewer employees. In the informal economy, there are significant numbers of under-age street vendors.

The field study

The industrialisation which started in the 1950s attracted many country-people to Mexico City in search of a better life. **Some found it; others did not.** Marginalisation and destitution in some areas of the capital are on the increase.

One of the products of this mass movement of people was - and is - thousands of street-children. UNICEF divides them into two categories:

Children of the street. These are children who have broken their family links and survive from their own resources in the informal market. They spend the night on the streets and are generally perceived to be anti-social.

Children in the street. These are children who live with their family but spend much of their life on the streets earning money for themselves and their family or simply for recreation.

The field study concentrated on the children in the street: vendors of chewing-gum, sweets and newspapers, porters and mechanic's assistants.

It focused on several areas where the children worked, such as metro stations, the famous Plaza Garibaldi, the La Luna and La Comercial supermarkets and sports centres.

Forty child-workers were interviewed and many more were observed. Children could be seen going out to work at night, (which is illegal), to paid less than the minimum wage, working in markets, carrying merchandise on their backs or in trolleys, singing in the streets, shining shoes, selling gum and many other products in the streets, cleaning windscreens and working as domestic servants.

A vital contribution

The investigation showed that 85% of the children questioned joined the informal economy because of their parents' lack of sufficient income to support the family. Their contribution helped the family but hampered their personal development: they neglected their education and health; long working hours in some cases deformed their bones; and under-nourishment coupled with tiring work made them more vulnerable than normal to illness.

The newspaper vendors live in the State of Mexico, which surrounds Mexico City (the Federal District). They have to leave very early in the morning to travel to the Federal district to pick up the newspapers and sell them. They then go to school and return to selling newspapers before going home. They receive no pay as their earnings go into the family budget.

The porters have families living in poor parts of the countryside (in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Puebla) and live with family members or with fellow-migrants in a rented room. In both cases the children contribute to the household budget. They also try to send money home.

Like the newspaper vendors, they have to get up very early in the morning to rent the trolleys in the market. Once they have achieved this, the children are threatened, insulted and occasionally hit by adult porters who have official work permits. The children, who are working illegally, have to hide from market officials while working, as well as refraining from retaliating against the adult workers. Of the children interviewed, almost all can read and write. But none is attending

school now, and five per cent have never been to school at all.

A retail network

Vendors of sweets and foreign foods.

There is a paradox surrounding their employment - while firms are banned by law from employing minors to work in the factories, they may freely sell their products at wholesale prices to minors who they can assume will re-sell them on the streets at a profit. The manufacturers also sell to intermediaries who will re-sell the products to child-retailers and to the child-vendors' parents. The manufacturers thus profit from child labour without employing children directly, but, nonetheless, the children serve as an informal retail distribution network. Among the companies mentioned to our investigators were Adams, Nestle, Ricolino and Gamesa, and sweets such as Snickers, Twix, Hall's, Three Musketeers, Life Savers and Clorets.

The girls selling chewing-gum said they went to school as well as street selling, although how they manage it beggars the imagination. They work through the night at Plaza Garibaldi and go home on the first Metro at 7 am. The investigators were concerned that the girls are not accompanied by their mothers during the night and are vulnerable, particularly as they work in very rough areas.

The mechanic's assistants are children who work with mechanics in permanent premises, passing them tools or spare parts, carrying and cleaning. They earn about half as much as an adult mechanic. Those interviewed could read and write but were educated only up to primary grades, and did not attend school. They do not live with their parents and their money is their own.

The investigators came across a 15-year-old boy who said he had obtained a work permit at the age of 12 (he did not say how) and had subsequently worked as a bag-packer, shop assistant and - for the past five months - as a packer at the Coca Cola factory in San Juan Aragon where he was treated as an adult. He had given up school because he had to work but he

hoped, since his current job stopped at 6 pm, to study computers in the evenings.

A helping hand

Voluntary supermarket bag-packers

aged between 14 and 16 are in an entirely different category. The field study found that they have homes with two parents and they go to secondary school. They do not have a fixed income because they are by law too young to have a job contract, and so the only income they receive is the tips the supermarket clients give them. But they are legal: the Federal District has authorised work of this kind in agreements with the supermarkets.

The Federal District overnment is helping these **privilege poor children**, encouraging them to stay at school. Those with good marks are given school materials and uniforms. Medical care is guaranteed for any accidents at the supermarket.

Recommendations

National

Education

Provision for proper primary education, particularly where coupled with the provision of free school meals is probably the most important component in any programme to tackle the problem of child labour.

Replacement

Where possible child labourers should be replaced by an unemployed adult worker of the same family, which ensures that at least one breadwinner remains in the family.

National Legislation on trade

Countries should bring in national legislation prohibiting the use of child labour, and the inspectorates should be strengthened, and given more resources to carry out their work. In addition, countries should be encouraged to bring in legislation *which* prevents the import of products produced by child labour.

Community Awareness and trade union action

Trade unions could include clauses prohibiting child labour in collective agreements and publicly campaign naming companies using child labour.

International

Ratification of International Conventions

All countries should ratify the ILO Conventions which prohibit child labour. In particular, Convention no 138 on Minimum Age, which has only been ratified by 46 countries.

The Social Clause

Clauses prohibiting child labour should be included in international trading agreements, particularly the GATT.

Boycotts and Labelling

Campaigns to support the boycott of handmade carpets made with child labour in India, Pakistan and Nepal are under way. In tandem with this a labelling system is being introduced which guarantees carpets which are not made by child labour.

Multinationals

Pressure should be put on multinationals to undertake investigations where there is a possibility that child labour has been used in the production of their products.

ILO Complaints