

15 Questions About Child Labour

1. What is child labour?

The definition of child labour usually means work done by children under the age of 15 that is full-time, and therefore interferes with their education. Also, work that is exploitative, and work which damages their physical, mental, social or psychological development. It does not mean work done by children after school, on weekends or during holidays to help their family. Some of the worst child labour abuses - incredibly - involve 4 and 5 year olds working full-time.

2. How many children work?

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that 250 million children work in factories, plantations and fields and down mines. This does not include children working as domestic servants - a type of work very difficult to count or estimate. Getting exact figures is difficult in countries like Burma or China, where it is next to impossible to get reliable figures even though child labour is rampant.

3. Why do children work?

There are many reasons why children have to work. An increase in the supply of child labour is caused by poverty. We can't look at child labour just at the level of the individual family - we need to look at the economic structures which create poverty for the vast majority of people in the world, and so force children into work.

The increase in the demand for child labour is caused by the intense pressure on many companies to become more competitive and win a greater market share. Children are seen as a cheap source of labour, which may be enough to give a company a slight edge over competitors or provide an opportunity to increase profits. Companies are now freer to maximise profits by either moving offshore or using overseas sub-contractors, and so availing of cheaper labor costs - and the cheapest possible wages are that of a child.

4. Is child labour caused by poverty?

Yes, poverty is one cause of child labour, but child labour is also a cause of poverty. "Child labour is not only a by-product of poverty, it also generates poverty..... The argument that child labour can't be eliminated until poverty is eliminated reverses cause and effect and provides an excuse for tolerating child labour. Ending child labour is a way out of poverty." (Pharis J. Harvey).

Child labour causes poverty because when a child is employed, it displaces an adult from that job, and also drives down adult wages in that industry or region. When children work, they are denied an education and so have no chance of escaping from poverty. Illiterate child labourers usually become poverty-stricken, illiterate adults who in turn have to send their children out to work, and so perpetuate this cycle of poverty.

5. Won't high economic growth through globalisation solve the problem?

Child labour has increased due to globalisation. Globalisation has created the potential for immense economic growth. But when combined with economic rationalist policies favouring labour deregulation, ruthless competition, the banning of trade unions and a disregard for the human and environmental consequences, it becomes a potent mix for driving down workers wages, conditions and safety standards both in developing and industrialised countries. This laissez-faire ideology has resulted in a "race to the bottom" which has increased the incidence of slave labour, prison labour and especially child labour.

6. Why is this an issue for the trade union movement?

Employers use children because kids are cheap to hire. Children are not likely to organise trade unions and have little power to demand better health and safety conditions or fair wages.

Child labour weakens the power of all adult workers, as we are forced to compete with children for jobs. Parents can't get work because companies prefer to hire their children. Employers are using the most vulnerable in society to undermine our battle for safe, fair and democratic workplaces.

7. Won't children be worse off if they don't work?

Some claim that if children are displaced from work they will be forced into begging or prostitution. It is better, they say, to just leave them in work.

Trade unions, however, believe that when a total package is implemented which includes adequately-resourced education as an alternative for the child, and the child's job is given to an adult relative, then both the child and their family are better off. The local community would also benefit from the higher adult wages being earned - and spent.

8. If children don't work, won't these families starve?

Children rarely earn a living wage, in fact, they are hired because they can be paid so little. The parents of child labourers are frequently unemployed or underemployed. There is often a direct co-relation between child labour and adult unemployment. It's true that families will need financial support to make the transition from child to adult employment. This should come in the form of income generation programs for adults, job creation, access to community micro-credit and savings, and even cash subsidies to families whose children leave work.

9. Will child labour decrease as poor countries develop?

Not necessarily. Even when economic growth was high in the early and mid 1990s in some countries such as Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, child labour continued to increase. Real development can only occur when adults are at work and children are at school. Until then, a small minority of people will profit from child labour, but whole communities will be condemned to a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment and waste their most valuable resource for the future - a healthy and educated workforce.

10. Why is child labour getting worse in some countries?

Poverty, the race to the bottom, structural adjustment programs, contracting out, technology, free trade zones and a growing informal economy - all these fundamentals of the new "global economy" have caused the increase in child labour. Anything that causes or sustains poverty encourages child labour.

When a country has financial problems, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) moves in and usually demands the economy becomes "export oriented". This means enticing foreign investment through cheap labour, no unions and weak labour laws. It also requires cuts to government social spending such as health and education. But adequately resourced primary education is one of the most effective solutions to the problem of child labour. The poorest and most vulnerable children have paid the debt of the Third World at the expense of their normal development, their health and their opportunity for education.

Contracting out is also increasing child labour as local firms compete fiercely for contracts and look for the cheapest labour in order to win them.

New manufacturing techniques also increase the demand for child labour. Young people, women and children conform best to the profile of the flexible worker.

Free trade zones have also led to an increase in demand for child workers. Between 80-90% of employees in free trade zones are young women and girls.

The informal economy has grown in recent decades as more and more work has gone underground. The growth in small workshops, temporary work, and home-based work has made it easier for employers to use children.

11. Does child labour really affect me?

It does. Products made by child labour are sold in your corner store - matches, fireworks, toys, clothes, sporting goods, plastic gadgets ... you name it. Oranges picked by Brazilian children makes its way into your breakfast juice. Surgical instruments used in our hospitals are made by children. We benefit from their cheap wages. And since child labourers are usually paid about half the adult wage, that drives down the value of adult labour, both overseas and here. It makes it tougher for adults to hang on to wages, to jobs.... and to unions.

12. Shouldn't we boycott?

If only it were that easy. Child labour is so widespread it's difficult to promote one company's record over another. There are lots of reasons to boycott Nike, but Reebok isn't much of an alternative. Unions generally support company boycotts where the workers themselves have called for one.

Consumer boycotts or government sanctions are most effective when they are part of a wider package which includes adequate education as an alternative for the child and the child's job being given to an adult relative.

However, boycotts and sanctions are only successful if each individual country takes a similar stand. It is much more effective to have a global solution where all countries have to observe as agreed standard, such as Core Labour Standards, which could be included in the rules of world trade.

13. Is there child labour in Australia?

Yes. In most industrialised countries, including Australia, child labour has become a relatively marginal phenomenon, but it has never disappeared entirely. We are now witnessing an increase with the growth of outwork production in some industries such as the clothing industry where many workers are irregularly employed, work from home and are paid per piece sewn rather than receive a fixed wage.

Organisers from the Textile, Clothing & Footwear Union have found children working on industrial sewing machines after school, until late at night and during school holidays. "One disturbing fact about outwork in Australia is the incidence of children working. While it is rare to find children directly employed by contractors, we have found children working long hours alongside their parents or other siblings. We have witnessed one child about 8 years old, sewing because his mother was suffering severe stress and overuse syndrome from working 18 hours". (The Hidden Cost of Fashion - Report on the National Outwork Information Campaign - TCFUA, March 1995)

14. When we oppose child labour, aren't we trying to protect our own jobs?

We join a union to win justice for each other. Unions seek a world where children have access to decent education, health care, and are free from exploitation. Yet there is something wrong with a global economy which has 250 million children working and 800 million adults unemployed. Unions want a world which has safe, fair employment for all adults, but we can't help improve standards for workers around the world if we're caught in the same downward spiral.

15. What should I tell my kids about child labour?

Be frank with your children about child labour. Show them this pamphlet. If kids their age or younger are making their toys and their clothes, they should hear about it. The environmental movement has shown that children and young people can be agents for great social change.