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**In favour of the total prohibition of child labour
and of a redistribution of wealth in the World**

Rémy HERRERA

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In Favour of the Total Prohibition of Child Labour and of a Redistribution of Wealth in the World

Rémy HERRERA*

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Child labour has probably existed from the beginning of history. Nevertheless, the establishment of the capitalist world system in the fifteenth century, and its consolidation, in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, brought with it child labour on a large scale, both in the centre (wage earners) and in the periphery (various kinds of forced labour : slavery, *encomienda*...). Many testimonies exist about its massive use in England in the nineteenth century. Marx was undoubtedly one of the very first thinkers to have understood the *systemic* character of this type of labour in capitalism, but also the key role of the state, which intervenes to maintain the general class interest of capitalists and the reproduction of the conditions of exploitation, by preventing the destruction of human productive forces and what Marx analyzed as an excessive transformation « *of the blood of children into capital* »⁶. The world has certainly changed a lot since that time, but the domination of capital has not ceased and, today, child labour remains widespread, and cannot be qualified as a marginal phenomenon of the capitalist world system. This kind of labour has re-emerged with a vengeance in the countries « in transition », after the collapse of the Soviet block. In fact, it never disappeared from the capitalist developed countries of the North, and it continues today in significant proportions, illegally of course, in the United States (where 5.5 million children work on a regular basis)⁷, and even in Europe (2 million in Great Britain, 350,000 in Italy, 200,000 in Portugal). These children, from families recently made poor (the « *new poor* »), the majority from ethnic minorities and/or from immigration, are often cut off from educational and social protection systems. However, in number and severity, child labour is of most concern in countries of the South. The latter suffer most from neo-liberal policies, in which various mechanisms of surplus transfer from the South towards the North (external debt, repatriation of profits on direct foreign investment, profits on the revaluation of bonds recorded as portfolio investments in balance of payments, unequal exchanges...) increase the rate of labour force exploitation in the periphery. This manifests itself in extreme forms of overexploitation, of which child labour is surely one of the most repugnant.

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⁶ See the chapters on the production of absolute surplus in Book 1 of *Capital* by Karl Marx.

⁷ See: Monestier, M. (1998), *Les Enfants esclaves*, Le Cherche Midi, Paris. According to the United Farmworkers Union, 800.000 children are at work in the U.S. agricultural sector, especially in Florida and California.

Figures on child labour in the world are shocking

Assessment of the real extent of the phenomenon is complicated by problems of definition. As a matter of fact, it is not easy to define what a « child » is (until what age is a human being still a child?), or even what « work » is (the concept varies according to legislation and culture, and its content changes according to language...⁸). It is also difficult to integrate and to classify the various institutional forms of child labour according to their economic function, which differs between sectors, countries and periods of time. Furthermore, it is not easy to identify the overlap of child labour with « normal » adult labour, nor the means by which the surplus drawn from child labour is re-injected into the remainder of the economy (whether or not it is legal, formal or waged), nor the means by which the surplus coming from the economy is used in sectors resorting to child labour. Labour « contracts » can only be analysed in the context of the structure of production and of ownership of the means of production, in particular land. These serious technical problems of definition and of formalization of economic facts are further complicated by the unreliability of statistical data in many countries of the South, for example on the exact number of children (due notably to the frequent absence of birth registers). As a consequence, the debate about child labour is sometimes reminiscent of the theoretical-semantic quibbles of the past, in which attempts were made to distinguish, in legal terms, between different kinds of forced labour –reflecting simply the difficulty of dealing with a morally unacceptable reality, which cannot be effectively abolished because it confronts the very logic of really existing capitalism. Nevertheless, respect for cultural diversity is not incompatible with the requirement to prioritize the welfare of children in the context of a social project to create a common civilization.

These then are some of the reasons why it is not known precisely how many children are working in the world. However, we know enough to grasp that the phenomenon is widespread. Despite substantial variations, most estimates range between 200 and over 400 million children in work⁹. According to the International Labour Office –generally considered as the reference on this subject–, 352 million 5-17 years old children (*i.e.* one quarter of this age group) were « *economically active* » in the world in 2000, carrying out activities described as « *unacceptable* » –to use here the official terminology of this institution¹⁰. Out of this total, 168 million were girls and 184 million, boys. On a worldwide scale, one in seven 5-9 year olds (or 73 million), one in four 10-14 year olds (138 million), and one in two 15-17 year olds (141 million), are working on a regular basis. In the youngest age group (5-14 years), the figure is highest in Asia (127 million), but the proportion is highest in Africa (close to one in three, that is to say 48 million). Nearly 180 million children are engaged in « *the worst forms of work* », mainly dangerous activities. If one adds, to this total of 352 million, the kinds of work considered « *acceptable* » –which, according to international experts, do not require abolition–, then the estimates exceed 400 million children over 5 years of age, in work.

⁸ In English, the terms « child labour » and « child work » are not identical, and not equally linked to the concept of exploitation. The first one concerns the realization of dangerous activities, but the second one is applied to all forms of activities, dangerous or not.

⁹ Here, read the PhD dissertation defended in the University of Paris 1 in November 2006 by M. Decrossas on the economic analysis of child work.

¹⁰ ILO (2002), *L'Avenir sans travail des enfants*, Geneva.

Extreme kinds of labour: heterogenous, but converging realities

The actual living conditions of working children differ according to the economic activities, the institutions in which they are involved, the regions concerned... The agricultural sector, which predominates in most countries of the South, is the biggest employer. There is considerable uncertainty about household labour undertaken within the family, and about the fate of street children. The latter number approximately 120 million worldwide, according to UNICEF: 45,000 in Karachi, 180,000 in Bangkok and 550,000 in Manila... The numbers are increasing in countries « in transition » from socialism to capitalism –800,000 street children in Russia according to official estimates, but 2 million according to nongovernmental organizations. The wealthiest capitalist countries are also concerned. In Chicago, for example, there are nearly 5,000 homeless children –almost as many as in Guatemala City or Bucharest.

Innumerable cases of extreme kinds of child labour reflect different situations, but all represent hell on earth: children working in cocoa plantations in Ivory Coast, pulverizing agrochemicals in Cameroon, working as smithies or metalworkers in Nigeria, or in gold mines in Burkina Faso, collecting waste from dumps in Egypt, manufacturing carpets and soccer balls in Pakistan, or shoes in Indonesia, driving bicycle-taxis in India, involved in the sex industries in Thailand and in Nepal, working as divers to catch fish in the Philippines, carrying heavy loads in coal mines in Colombia, cutting sugar cane in the Dominican Republic, working as servants for gold miners in Peru, making matches and fireworks in El Salvador, or wedding dresses for export in Honduras... Prohibition is a matter of extreme urgency in these cases, as well as when children are involved in work such as prostitution or the production of pornographic materials, traffic of bodies, organs or drugs, modern slavery (for debt in particular), or as soldiers in armed conflicts.

Child labour is, first and foremost, a consequence of poverty. According to the World Bank, more than 1.3 billion people, *i.e.* one quarter of the world's population, survive on the equivalent of US\$1 a day, while nearly 3 billion people, or approximately half the world's population, live on US\$3 a day. It is widely recognized today that miserable living conditions in the countries of the South have been further worsened by the social devastation and human drama of neo-liberalism. In addition to the fact that these policies have generally failed, they are imposed on countries in deeply undemocratic ways. Withdrawal of the state and deregulation of markets –or rather their re-regulation by the sole force of dominant world capital–, involving the dismantling of social protection for workers as well as the marketization of the entire social sphere –including human beings–, drives the increase in extreme kinds of forced labour and overexploitation of children. Such inhuman situations will only cease when the neo-liberal project is ended, through unified resistance, mobilization and struggle of the peoples of the South and the North in defence of their rights and for the building of a universal civilization, respectful of cultural differences.

Recommendations

Given the above situation, we recommend total prohibition of all kinds of child labour –with the exception of activities considered to be educational, whether institutional (in carefully considered combinations of study and manual labour or vocational training,

under the supervision of qualified teachers) or familial (inter-generational training, provided that it is not housework in disguise). It is vain to imagine that child labour will disappear without structural change and without altering the value accorded to profit and individualism, which is inherent to the capitalist world system. The only way to force a retreat, and eventually the disappearance of child labour is through profound social reforms, including universal education (public, compulsory and non-discriminatory) and of public health, but also a public system to ensure adequate provision of low cost food in stores subsidized and managed by the state, massive construction of social housing and infrastructure (water, sanitation, electricity, transport, telecommunications...), employment creation (with priority to social sectors), and a significant redistribution of wealth in favour of the poorest... The realization of these inalienable rights of people may require land reforms and nationalizations of those natural resources and means of production which are considered strategic. The aim is active, democratic participation of the people in decision-making processes and control of their collective future, in full respect of the right to development.

If these reforms are not undertaken by the state, one second-best solution might be the payment of a universal income, including to parents (or legal guardians) of children in work –if it can be established that they are acting in the children’s interests–, in order to create a « disincentive » for children to work. If such a measure is not introduced, social assistance should be guaranteed in the form of a « family scholarship », as an incentive to send children to school. If the state refuses such a scheme, it could be funded by international organizations, which would transfer directly the necessary funds to the country in question. In exchange, independent observer missions could monitor the distribution of these allowances to families. This mechanism would require strengthening of the U.N. organizations with a social vocation, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, FAO, WHO –to the detriment of the IMF and the World Bank, on the basis of constant budgets. This could be the start of a worldwide system of redistribution of wealth in which rich countries would contribute the most to financing of social policies in the poor countries. Enforcement mechanisms authorized by the international community against countries not respecting prohibition of child labour need to be worked out. Sanctions against the leaders and perpetrators of organized crime networks involved in traffic of children –as well as customers of these traffickers– will have to be reinforced. Strong publicity campaigns should be organized on the rights of children and families.

The only acceptable type of child work, which must be developed in a carefully considered and organized way, in the interests of children and society, is that carried out within the framework of educational institutions officially recognized by the state, and combined with formal education. The same applies to labour in the form of light, non-dangerous work, carried out within the framework of the family, comparable to informal education, if it is proven that these activities do no harm to children and contribute to their optimal development.

It is urgent to obtain strict respect for the prohibition of child labour –the age limit, which could be 16 or 18 years, to be decided internationally–, and to enforce compulsory education, at the same time as establishing a true system of wealth redistribution worldwide.