



# in our own backyard

THE HIDDEN PROBLEM OF  
CHILD FARMWORKERS IN AMERICA  
<http://www.ourownbackyard.org>

## Part III: What Can Be Done?

### **Ending Child Labor**

Discussion of different strategies for ending child labor, such as organizing unions, universal education and universal minimum standards.

*Source: Child Labor Education Public Education Project,  
[http://www.continuetolearn.uiowa.edu/laborctr/child\\_labor/about/ending.html](http://www.continuetolearn.uiowa.edu/laborctr/child_labor/about/ending.html)*



Unions and grassroots groups are increasingly recognizing direct connections between worker rights and the fight against child labor. Recognizing child labor as a violation of children's and workers' rights, trade unions are joining with families and community organizations to combat child labor, to move children out of work and into school, and to support core labor standards. Historically and in today's global economy:

- strong unions are an important protection against child labor
- when parents are able to improve conditions through effective unions, children are much less likely to have to work
- active struggles against child labor tend to strengthen unions and workers' rights in general

Many workers and unions in the U.S. and other countries are supporting efforts to end child labor by forging alliances with unions in other countries. These alliances work to achieve enforceable global labor standards, such as ILO Convention 182, and hold transnational companies accountable for labor practices.

### **Supporting workers' struggles to organize unions and reject child labor**

In 2001 factory monitors confirmed illegal union-busting and other violations—including employment of 13-15 year-old children—at a Mexican factory sewing clothing with university logos for Nike and other U.S. companies. Thousands of American students, workers, and consumers wrote letters to corporate CEOs protesting worker treatment. The international solidarity campaign helped factory workers overcome violence, intimidation, and mass firings when they tried to organize, and after months of struggle, workers won an independent union.

In 2002, as news of child labor abuses and attacks on workers in Ecuador's banana plantations spread around the world, workers, consumers, and students contacted Los Alamos plantation owner Alvaro Noboa to demand that he recognize the workers' union and cease using illegal child labor. Presidents of the AFL-CIO, the International Union of Food and Allied Workers (IUF), the Teamsters, and many other labor leaders also issued letters in support of Los Alamos workers' struggle.

### **Campaigning for institutions to adopt and enforce codes of conduct**



When the 2000 Olympics were held in Sydney, Australia, Australian labor federations created and signed an agreement with the Olympic organizing committee requiring all sponsors and licensees to adhere to minimum labor standards, including international conventions on child labor.

Pressure from human rights groups, consumers, and international trade unions led the group overseeing the World Cup (FIFA—Federation Internationale de Football Association) to adopt a Code in 1998 stating it would cease using soccer balls made with child labor. This year, when reports indicated that children were still working in the soccer ball industry and that adult workers were not being paid a living wage, activists launched a new publicity and letter-writing campaign, mobilizing soccer fans, consumers, and politicians to demand FIFA improve factory monitoring and live up to the promises in its Code.

## Implementing and supporting fair trade or labeling initiatives



Through programs developed by non-profit organizations, export goods like coffee or cocoa can now be certified as “Fair Trade” products if producers adhere to basic labor standards—including ILO conventions on child labor—and pay farmers fair prices so families can meet basic living needs without having children work for wages. Groups like TransFair USA and others help to publicize Fair Trade initiatives and educate consumers about Fair Trade products.



When the use of child labor in the rug-making industries of Pakistan and India gained international publicity in the 1990s, consumer groups—building on the history of effective “union label” initiatives—worked with manufacturers to begin phasing out the use of child labor and licensing companies to use “no child labor” labels if production facilities were regularly inspected by independent monitors. The resulting “RUGMARK” label program uses licensing fees to fund monitoring programs and education and rehabilitation for children removed from carpet jobs. Consumer groups and unions play a role in educating the public about the label program and ensuring it maintains strict standards for licensed companies.

### Using collective bargaining strategies

The International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions (ICEM) signed in 2000 and recently renewed a “global agreement” with the multinational Freudenberg corporation, which owns chemical and rubber manufacturing plants all over the world. Freudenberg is headquartered in Germany/Japan, but the agreement covers all Freudenberg workers in the U.S. and 40 other countries. Among other recognitions of workers’ rights, the agreement commits Freudenberg to a ban on “child labour according to the definitions included in ILO Convention 138.”

### Promoting global labor standards in trade agreements

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions continues to propose adding a “social clause” covering seven core labor standards, including prohibitions on child labor, to WTO rules governing international trade; this proposal has so far been rejected by WTO leaders.



## Garment Workers at a Union Solidarity Center Meeting

### Cambodia

Trade agreements between the U.S. and Cambodia have successfully included incentives for garment manufacturers to improve factory working conditions. Agreements require factory owners to respect core labor standards, including eliminating child labor and respecting workers' rights to organize unions and collectively bargain.

### **Filing suit against corporations for labor rights abuses abroad**

The International Labor Rights Fund and other groups have begun pursuing legal action against companies for alleged labor abuses in other countries. In 1996, for example, ILRF filed a suit against Unocal for using slave labor to build pipelines in Burma; and with the support of U.S. labor unions, ILRF recently filed a suit against Coca-Cola for using paramilitary forces to suppress organizing and assassinate union leaders in Colombia (these suits are still pending). If effective, this strategy could be used in the future to hold transnational corporations accountable for child labor abuses.

### **Promoting access to education**

Increasing children's access to public education is a fundamental strategy for ending child labor. An example of promoting access to education is the Bangladesh Building and Woodworkers' Federation and the Metal Workers' Union that seeks to remove children from hazardous workplaces and enroll children in education and assistance programs. On a larger scale, the Global Campaign for Education is a coalition involving teachers' unions, Global March Against Child Labor, Oxfam, and Action Aid.