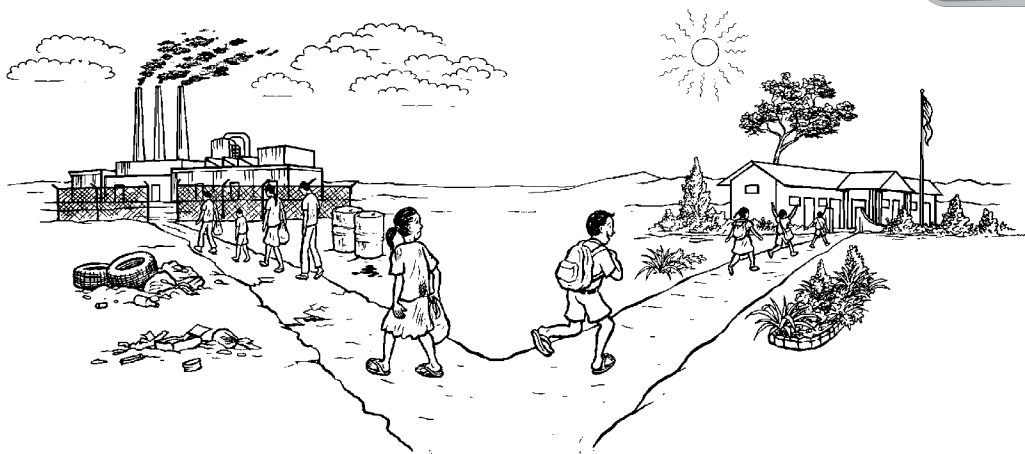


Children who work

24



Factories today are not safe places for children to work. Conditions in the factory can hurt children's growing bodies and reduce their chances of becoming healthy adults. As the ILO says, "Children belong in schools, not supply chains."

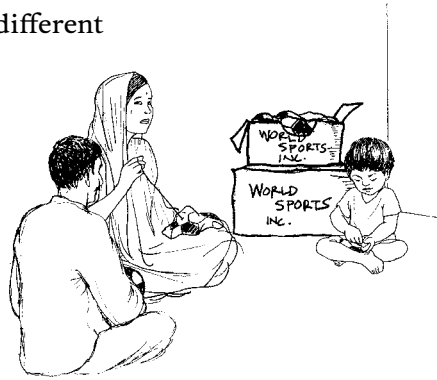
You and your union or community organization can help children stay in school and help end child labor in the factory.

- **Reach out to children who work and their families** to understand their needs and find solutions that help them, not penalize them for being poor.
- **Negotiate** with the boss to pay fair wages to children who work and to help children who work to go to school.
- **Refuse to work alongside child laborers** when the boss hires workers who are too young or gives them dangerous work.
- **Report factories who hire children illegally** to the authorities and to child welfare agencies so they can help child laborers attend school and receive income.
- **Organize to win laws** that protect children and punish those that hire children illegally.
- **Organize for a living wage** that allows families to have a decent life, keep children in school, and have access to childcare (see page 289).

Factory work harms children

Work dangers that affect children are not different from the dangers faced by adults. They include noise, dust, chemicals, fire, and repetitive motion.

But dangerous working conditions can harm children more because their bodies and minds are still developing and are more vulnerable to injury and disease. An injury or illness due to work can slow a child's development or cause a disability that will prevent the child from learning, working, or getting a better job as an adult.



Child labor can happen in a factory or at home.

Young people who work

Child labor is work done by children that harms their health, their development, or their education. Child laborers are usually younger than the age allowed for regular work in their country, and are usually working when they should be in school. Child labor is less common inside factories, but child laborers often do factory work at home or in smaller workshops.

Many countries allow **school-age children to do some work**, usually around the home or in a family business. Laws may limit the type of work school-age children can do and the hours they can work. When children are not exposed to chemicals or dangerous conditions, and have enough time to go to school, study, play and rest, the work they do usually does not harm them.

Young workers are between 15 and 18 years old, and have regular jobs in a country where the legal age for work is under 18. Young workers may no longer be “children” in the eyes of the law, but they do not yet have the skills and judgment of older workers. Their bodies and minds are continuing to grow, and exposure to chemicals and repetitive work affects them more than it does older workers. Often the need to earn money effectively ends the possibility for further education. For these reasons, factory work is more harmful for them than adults.

Children are injured more often than adults

Some factory owners hire children for certain jobs because they think they have nimble fingers. However, children are at greater risk of becoming injured because they are smaller and do not have as much control as adults over their bodies and movements. Machines, tools, and workstations are designed for adults, not children's smaller bodies.

Dangers that affect children more than adults

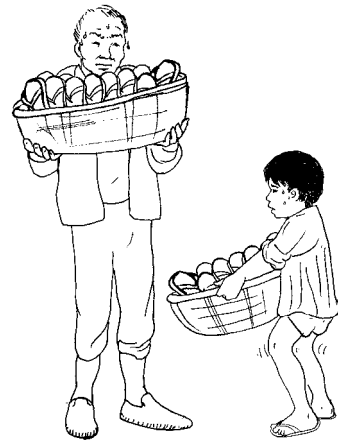
Noise: Young workers are more at risk of hearing loss than adults. Noise exposure limits set for adults are not safe for children. See chapter 13: Noise.

Heat: Young workers also have a lower heat tolerance than adults. A safe environment for an adult might not be safe for a child. (See chapter 15: Heat and cold.)

Heavy work: Heavy work may place excessive stress on growing bones and might cause bone damage or impaired growth.

Chemicals: Children are more easily and seriously harmed by chemicals because:

- Their bodies are smaller so they receive a proportionally higher dose of toxics than adults when exposed to the same amount.
- Their bodies are growing and are more vulnerable to damage caused by toxic chemicals. Toxic exposure at work can harm children's growing organs, hormonal balances, and skin, and increase their risk of cancers.
- Their bones and bodies absorb lead, other metals, and fumes faster than adult bodies do, which can cause learning and developmental problems.
- They breathe faster than adults, which makes it more likely that they will get sick from indoor and outdoor air pollution.
- They are closer to the ground and are more likely to eat, breathe, or touch chemicals that drift to the ground.



Physical development harmed

Working children suffer growth problems and slowed physical development because of:

Lack of activity: Child workers often cannot play, explore their neighborhood, or interact with other children. Neither do they rest as much as they need to for healthy physical development.



Children exposed to toxics may learn slowly, be irritable and restless, or show other signs of slow development.

Exposure to toxics: Working children exposed to toxics can have health problems such as headaches, difficulty breathing, long-term reproductive problems, cancers, or even death. Toxics can also harm a young person's ability to learn.

Lack of food: Some children work so the family can eat. Yet children working in factories often put off meals while working or to meet production targets. Malnourished children can have poorer health, loss of vision, stunted growth, learning disabilities, and less energy compared to other children.

Learning denied

Boring work: Children doing simple, boring work instead of going to school, studying, and playing will not gain the mental, social, and learning skills important to do well in their community and society.

Missed school: Child laborers usually cannot complete school and may not learn to read, write, or do math. Children who do not get an education have fewer work opportunities as adults.

Noor's story

Noor lives in Serdang Lama, a small village in Selangor state in the country of Malaysia. She has been working since the age of 7 in a small T-shirt factory.

She folds printed T-shirts to be packaged. She works 6 days a week from 8:30 in the morning until 5:30 in the evening. She does not have time to play with other children.

"I would like to go to school. But we don't have money. So I'll continue to work here."



Signs a child's work is appropriate

- The child is the legal age to do legally regulated work or is working in a family business.
- The child attends school and has time to study, play, and rest.
- The child looks cared for, healthy, and happy.
- The work is appropriate to child's age and physical and mental capabilities.
- The girls and boys have equal opportunities to work.
- The child is supervised by responsible and caring adults.
- The workplace is safe, not dangerous to the health or life of the child.
- The work pays a decent wage and provides job skills so the child can get better work in the future.
- The child is not working to pay a family debt.

Signs of harmful child labor

- The child is school age but is not going to school.
- The child's age and the type of work violate national or international laws.
- The child looks tired, dirty, underfed, ill, or unhappy.
- The child is forced to work because of family poverty, abandonment, or the illness or death of parents.
- The girls have to work because they are denied schooling.
- The child is not paid a decent wage.
- The child is forced to work for little or no pay.
- The child works unsupervised or is supervised by abusive adults.
- The child works during school hours, when she should be studying, or very late or early in the day, when she should be resting.
- The work is dangerous, unhealthy, or too difficult for the child's age and physical or mental abilities.
- The child faces emotional, verbal, physical, or sexual abuse.

Causes of child labor

Family poverty, debt, or being orphaned often force children to work instead of going to school.

Unemployment and no living wage

Working adults should be paid enough in a regular work week to support their family. However, low pay, unstable employment, and unemployment among adults keep many families in poverty. Export factory jobs usually do not pay enough for families to survive, so even children have to work.

Employers often recruit child workers because they can pay them less than adults. Yet they expect the children to work the same as adults.

The false promise of job training

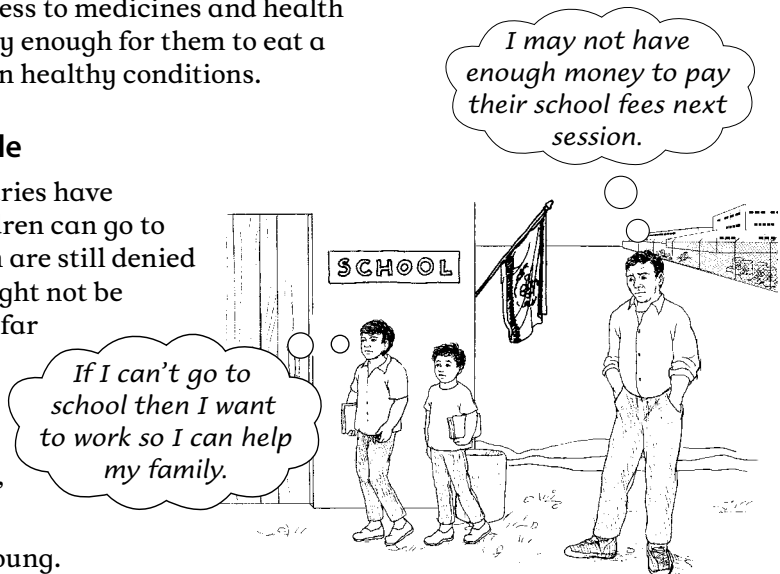
Children and young people sometimes work for little or no pay because the job promises to teach them skills for a job in the future. In many countries it is legal for the factory to offer internship wages. But then they try to get away with paying young people these lower wages for longer periods.

Illness and lack of health care

HIV, TB, malaria, and lack of health care weaken people's ability to care for their children, who are often forced to work to make up for a missing or ill parent. These diseases can be prevented and treated when people have access to medicines and health care, and jobs that pay enough for them to eat a healthy diet and live in healthy conditions.

School is not possible

Although many countries have laws that say all children can go to school, many children are still denied education. Schools might not be affordable, or may be far away and there is no transportation. Girls often leave school to work to pay for their brothers' school fees or are pressured to marry young.



Protect children and end child labor

National governments set the minimum age when a young person can begin regular paid work. This is often the same age when children finish the years of schooling required by law, and is usually between 12 and 15 years old, depending on the type of work. Wealthy industrialized countries usually require more years of school, and young people may start regular work when they are 17 or 18 years old. The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations (UN) established a general minimum age of 15.



The UN and ILO on children and work



The **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** says a child is any person under 18 years old and that children should be protected by their governments.

- Children have a right to an education.
- Children have the right to rest and leisure, and to play.
- Children cannot do work that may be dangerous, work that interferes with the child's education, or work that is harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development.
- Governments must set a minimum age for beginning regular work, regulate the hours and conditions of work, and promote the physical and psychological recovery and social integration of child laborers.

The **ILO Minimum Age Convention (No. 138)** and **Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (No. 182)** say:

- Children may do light work beginning at 12 to 13 years old, but it may not interfere with school, rest, play, or be harmful to their health.
- Minimum age to work is 15 years.
- Minimum age for dangerous work is 18 years.
- The worst forms of child labor should be banned.

The **ILO Medical Examination of Young Persons Convention (No. 77)** says:

- Medical examinations should be given to children and young persons before they begin work and each year while they are working.

The roles of the UN, ILO, and other international organizations that promote workers' rights are explained in Appendix A.

Focus on the root causes

To eliminate the root causes of child labor, we need an economy that works against poverty and supports education for every child.

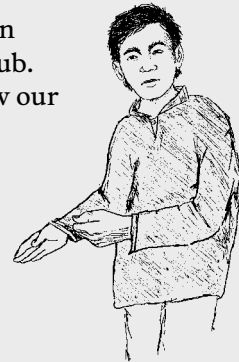
- **Organize to create better conditions and pay for all workers.** This reduces the number of children forced to work to help support their families.
- **Provide education and job training for adults** to increase their ability to earn better wages.
- **Enforce laws to ensure that workers get the pay and benefits they are due,** such as a minimum wage, overtime pay, social security, health care, and maternity benefits.

Child workers' associations

When I had been working a few years in a factory in Bangkok, a friend told me about the Child Workers Club. The Club helps child workers get organized so we know our rights. It also campaigns with employers to give child workers educational opportunities to prepare for a better future.

I started going to Club meetings, and the staff of the Club encouraged me to become a full-time, paid organizer for the Club. I visit child workers in their places of work to find out about conditions. Then we talk about child workers' rights and I encourage them to come to the Club's activities to learn more. I write for the newsletter and sometimes help with events.

In the factory, I worked the whole day without thinking about anything else, just finishing the assigned work. Here I have to think a lot. Organizing is far more difficult than anything else I have done. Sometimes I've been so worried that I've wanted to quit, but staff here have encouraged me to continue and I have gotten pretty good at this work!



Prasert is a young boy from Khon Khaen province in northeast Thailand.

Education for all children

Education needs to be available nearby, relevant to the child's needs and interests, good quality, and free (or at least affordable). If workers pressure an employer to fire child laborers, the children are often forced into other, even worse jobs to earn a living. For the child to have a real alternative to working, the family's poverty must be lessened, and there must be a school the child can attend. Your organization can:

- help child laborers find and get into free schools, sometimes offering vocational training, and make sure these school also offer free, nutritious food.
- provide economic support to the family, to replace the income the child earned.
- give orphan child workers food and shelter, so they can attend school and vocational training instead of work.
- reconnect children with their families if they are separated.

Money-for-school program helps prevent child labor

To help stop child labor, the government of Brasilia, a state in Brazil, launched a grant project to support poor families. Most children who work do so because their families depend on the money they make working. The program, called Bolsa Escola (school grant), pays poor families a monthly stipend for each child in the family (from 5 to 17 years of age) who goes to school regularly. This money replaces the children's contribution to the family income and it allows their families to afford basic needs.

The Bolsa Escola has been successful at giving children the opportunity to go to school instead of work: school attendance has doubled in some communities and children miss fewer days of school. Bolsa Escola is now a national program. It was integrated into Bolsa Familia (family grant), a program that also offers money to families for vaccinating their children. The program has also spread to other countries in Latin America and Africa.

The government should ensure children's rights

Pressure the government to do its job:

- **Enforce child rights** granted in international conventions and national, state, and local laws.
- **Set legal limits on schoolchildren's work:** Laws protecting child workers usually limit the number of hours and time of day a child can work. This is to keep work from conflicting with school time, studying, playing, and resting. The limits usually forbid children from doing work that is harmful such as using power tools, working near dangerous machines, using chemicals, working in hot areas, and carrying heavy things.
- **Create school permits for children's jobs:** In some countries, an employer must get a permit from the school for each child they hire. The permit shows the child is attending school and that the employer knows the limits on children working.
- **Create orphan programs:** Local youth centers can be established to care for orphaned or homeless children who are forced to work to support themselves.
- **Fund income support for families:** Create community-based programs, such as basic income grants, childcare, common kitchens and meals, adult literacy, education, and job training to help families keep children in school and adults earning a living.

Unions take action in Brazil

The United Workers' Confederation (CUT) organized a national campaign to stop child labor in Brazil. First they partnered with research centers and universities to study child labor and people's ideas about child labor in each area. People felt it was better for children to work in urban areas than in rural ones. They said, "At least they are working and not just living on the streets."

Then they tried to build support in communities for the struggle to end child labor. They used radio and TV programs, newspapers, booklets, posters, videos, and a photograph exhibit to raise awareness about the conditions of child workers.

They also encouraged employers to talk about child labor with the unions. The unions stopped children from working in the most dangerous jobs, and helped provide assistance to them and their families. The campaign also built support for better education, income supports, and recreational programs, all of which are a step toward preventing child labor in the future.