

# Upholding the Convention on Child Labour

by Janet Jagan June 24, 2007

Largely unnoticed, except in that excellent workers' paper *Combat* (Voice of the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union, GAWU), June 12 was not given the prominence it deserved. The day was designated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as the World Day Against Child Labour in Agriculture.

According to a full page article in *Combat* devoted to ending child labour in agriculture, 70% of all working children are in agriculture, and some at a very young age. ILO figures show that there are over 132 million children aged 5-14 working in agriculture.

The children harvest cotton, sugar cane, coffee, tea, bananas, tobacco. According to the ILO, there is clear evidence that some of these children are in the worst forms of child labour, exposed to dangerous pesticides, driving machinery designed for adults, lifting loads too heavy for their small frames and often trapped in forced labour. Many of these children work 8-10 hours per day in extreme temperatures, carrying heavy loads. And, of course, work in the fields often ends their schooling, and deprives them of much needed rest.

According to the Convention known as the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999, which our government signed in January 2001, each member shall take into account the importance of education in eliminating child labour. In so doing, each signatory to the Convention shall:

- 1) Prevent the engagement of children in the worst forms of child labour
- 2) Provide the necessary and appropriate direct assistance for the removal of the children from such types of labour and for their rehabilitation and social integration
- 3) Ensure access to free basic education and when possible, vocational training for these children
- 4) Take special account for the special situation of girls.

These requirements are of course, basic, the main intention being to end child labour, provide education and rehabilitation to children so abused.

We see so often on the television screen, sights of children condemned to work, with no opportunities for education, rest and play, which are the fundamental rights of children. Some are condemned to tasks, many quite intricate which harm the eyesight and bodies of small children and earn them a pittance while their employers grow rich out of their exploitation. Thousands of small children grow up in a form of bondage or even slavery, without a normal childhood and into utter poverty as adults.

The International Labour Organization has taken a strong stand against all child labour, regarding child labour in agriculture as the most dangerous for children. In Guyana, the government has been diligent in wiping out all forms of child labour and providing universal primary education to all children as well as very positive opportunities to children in secondary and vocational education as well as university education to thousands of young people.

If there are occasional breaches, these are generally quickly brought to the attention of the authorities and stopped. Our record of responsibility as regards the exploitation of child labour is noteworthy and we can be sure that we stand alongside other advanced nations that have pronounced a definite “No!” to child labour. As a signatory to that ILO Convention, Guyana must continue to monitor the situation and at all times prevent any acts that can be considered as contrary to the Convention.

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