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**IMPLEMENTATION OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 60/251
OF 15 MARCH 2006 ENTITLED “HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL”**

**Written statement* submitted by Europe – Third World Centre, a non-governmental
organization in general consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is
circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[26 February 2007]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the
submitting non-governmental organization(s).

In favour of the total prohibition of child labour and redistribution of wealth in the world¹

1. Child labour has probably existed from the beginning of history. But 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). Many testimonies exist about its massive use in England in the nineteenth century. Karl 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 reproduction of the conditions of exploitation by preventing the destruction of human productive forces and an excessive transformation “*of the blood of children into capital*”². 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 world capitalist 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, illegally, in significant proportions in the United States (where 5.5 million children work on a regular basis)³, 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 majority from ethnic minorities and/or from immigration, are often cut off from educational and social protection systems⁴. 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 towards the North increase the exploitation of workers of the periphery. This manifests itself in extreme forms of overexploitation, of which child labour is the most repugnant.

Figures on child labour in the world are shocking

2. Assessment of the real extent of the phenomenon is complicated by problems of definition. 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 language⁵). It is also difficult to integrate and to classify the various institutional forms of child labour according to 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 work 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. “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 formalization of economic facts are further complicated by the unreliability of statistical data in many countries of the South, on the exact number of children, for example (due notably to the

¹ This statement has been written in collaboration with Rémy HERRERA, a researcher at the CNRS-Centre d’Economie de la Sorbonne (France).

² See chapters on the production of absolute surplus in Book 1 of *Capital* by Karl Marx.

³ See: Monestier, M. (1998), *Les Enfants esclaves*, Le Cherche Midi, Paris.

⁴ According to the *United Farmworkers Union*, 800.000 children are at work in the U.S. agricultural sector, especially in Florida and California.

⁵ In English, the words *labour* and *work* are not equally linked to the concept of exploitation.

frequent absence of birth registers). 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 abolished because it confronts the very logic of really existing capitalism. 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.

3. 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 variation, most estimates range between 200 and over 400 million children in work. According to the International Labour Office –considered as the reference on this subject-, 352 million children, 5-17 years old (ie one quarter of this age group), were economically active in the world in 2000, carrying out activities described as “*unacceptable*”, - to use official terminology⁶. 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), work. 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, ie 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.

Extreme kinds of labour: different, but converging realities

4. The actual living conditions of working children differ according to economic activity, the institutions in which they are involved, and region... The agricultural sector predominates in most countries of the South. 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 5000 homeless children, almost as many as in Guatemala City or Bucharest.

5. 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/metalworkers in Nigeria or 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 sex work in Thailand and 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 or cooks 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 when children are involved in work such as prostitution or the production of pornographic

⁶ ILO (2002), *L'Avenir sans travail des enfants*, Geneva.

materials, traffic of bodies, organs or drugs, modern slavery (for debt in particular), or as soldiers in armed conflicts.

6. Child labour is, first and foremost, a consequence of poverty. According to the World Bank, more than 1.3 billion people, ie 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 “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 neoliberal project is ended, through unified resistance, mobilization and struggle of peoples of the South and the North in defence of their rights and a universal civilization, respectful of cultural differences.

Recommendations

7. 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, 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), redistribution of wealth in favour of the poorest... The realization of these inalienable rights of people, may require land reform and nationalization of those natural resources and means of production which are considered strategic. The aim is democratic participation of people in decision-making processes and control of their collective future, in full respect of the right to development.

8. If these reforms are not undertaken by the state, one solution might be the payment of a universal income 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 grants for families and scholarships, 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 the necessary funds to the country. 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. 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.

9. The only acceptable type of child labour, 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 education, if it is proven that these activities do no harm to children and contribute to their optimal development.

10. It is urgent to obtain respect for the prohibition of child labour - the age limit, which could be 16 or 17 years, to be decided internationally-, and to enforce compulsory education, at the same time as establishing a system of wealth redistribution worldwide.
