

**Nothing About Us, Without Us:  
Critiques of the International Labor  
Organization's Approach to Child Labor  
from the Movements of Working Children**

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# Nothing About Us, Without Us: Critiques of the International Labor Organization's Approach to Child Labor from the Movements of Working Children

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## Introduction

This booklet aims to present an alternative perspective on children's work from that offered by the International Labor Organization in its various reports and documents. It brings together several short pieces written by numerous participants in, and supporters of, working children's organizations. Overall, the documents presented here are meant to raise questions about the ILO's abolitionist approach to "child labor." From the perspective of working children's organizations, these critical questions are unfortunately otherwise likely to be absent from the upcoming Third Global Child Labor Conference in Brasilia and from much of the public debate on this issue. Such questions include: Why are working children and their organizations not actively included in the discussion and deliberation of policies and programs that will clearly impact their lives? Is this not a violation of their right to participation and of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child? Do the ILO's conceptual categories sufficiently address the complexity and multiplicity of working children's lives? Given that social scientific evidence does not suggest that work necessarily interferes with children's schooling and educational development and given that some work can instead support children's overall education and well-being,<sup>1</sup> on what grounds does the ILO continue to seek its complete abolition? How can we better respond to and prevent the exploitation of children rather than simply criminalizing children who work?

The documents included here suggest some important initial responses to these vital questions from the perspective of those who have close relationships and daily interaction with working children. They are not meant to be a full exposition of this alternative perspective, but rather a brief introduction that encourages more critical engagement with the ideas presented by the ILO. Read together, the following important themes emerge from these short essays.

- 1) Working children are experts on their experiences, yet they are not being included as legitimate contributors to the political debates about their own lives. Programs and policy that have the best interests of children at heart *must* take into account the perspectives, desires, and knowledge of those children.
- 2) The ILO's concepts and definitions of "child labor" do not and cannot capture the complexity of children's working lives. Instead, these definitions hinge upon universalizing moral and legal assertions. Children's work needs to be considered from a far more holistic and complex perspective, with greater attention to its many varieties and forms. Some work is empowering, educational, and in the best interests of children. This can be true even before the legal "minimum age."

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Bourdillon, Deborah Levison, William Myers, and Ben White. 2010. *Rights and Wrongs of Children's Work*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

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3) Exploitation of children and their labor is a significant and real problem, but one that emerges out of a particular economic and political structure (in our contemporary context, unregulated global capitalism). That structure must be interrogated. Work and working conditions for children (and adults) can and should be a positive and rewarding experience. To stop the exploitation of children, we must address the problems of this system, which is contributing to a decline in working conditions around the world (the “race to the bottom”).

Rooted primarily in the movements of working children, many of these texts are incredibly passionate, even outraged. Working children and their organizations understandably have very strong feelings about the issues being discussed at the ILO’s Global Conferences on Child Labor. The policies and claims being made at these events are not distant abstractions but matter a great deal to the lives of working children. They are frustrated with what they see as the ILO’s ongoing lack of respect for their work and for their organizations. These documents, while many are informed by academic research and scholarship, are deeply political texts that emerge from a social movement that has sought to confront common assumptions about child labor and to change the terms of political debate in support of the rights of working children.

Some of these essays and statements were originally written in response to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Global Conference on Child Labor, held in 2010 at The Hague. Unfortunately, since little has changed in the conversation on children’s work and “child labor” in the past three years, these documents remain highly relevant. The documents presented in Part I are short essays that were written and published in Spanish by a collective of authors in advance of the 2010 conference. The writings in Part II are a few critical reflections on the ILO approach to “child labor” written by individuals with connections to children’s movements in the years since the 2010 conference. Finally, the writings in Part 3 are collective public statements made by constituencies and movements that speak to the problems and pitfalls of the model of intervention and action being promoted by the ILO and their allies at the Global Conferences on Child Labor.

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## PART I

# AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

*All of the short essays presented here in Part I were originally written in Spanish by a collective of intellectuals and adult allies with close ties to the global movements of working children and were published in RevistaNATS no. 19 (2010). Taken together, these statements argue that ILO policies fail to recognize the distinction between the exploitation of working children and children's work itself. They also call for the inclusion of working children's perspective in all relevant policy discussions. It is important to realize that these are primarily political statements. For this reason, these new translations maintain the original polemical style even though they may come across as strongly worded in English. -jkt*

### **An Alternative Perspective on "Child Labor": The Need for a Critical and Complex Approach**

The stigmatization of working children has increased exponentially in recent years. Two obvious examples include 1) girls under 18 years old who work in the homes of others (domestic employees) and 2) boys and girls who work in the fields as farmers, including the children of indigenous communities. The stigmatization of these work activities is supported by a discourse that calls them forms of modern slavery, as if they are entirely the same as the colonial establishment of servants and *encomiendas*. However, despite this discourse of slavery, there is no reference to the economic and political systems that generated and that continue to maintain these kinds of exploitation. Instead, the institutions that should be protecting children's rights have created a situation of permanent attack on children who are working as street merchants or running their own businesses as they struggle to survive.

Everything seems to indicate that this situation will not change significantly. Instead of challenging exploitation, there is now an obligation at all levels (national, regional, local) to implement plans for the eradication of "child labor." Following this, the daily life of working children will be full of new conflicts, new punishments. It is in this context that we should consider the Global Conferences on Child Labor. At the upcoming conference in Brasilia, they will discuss the ongoing implementation of the "Roadmap for Achieving the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor," adopted at the Global Conference at The Hague in 2010. This "Roadmap" is a difficult and serious challenge to working children.

Our ongoing analysis and reflection in response to this "Roadmap" takes a different approach to the issues of working children. We aim to clarify and construct a discourse that recognizes and values children's work as a human right in accordance with their age, their social situation, and the development of their communities. Our analyses draw on the thirty-seven year history of the movement of working children of Peru in order to not only provide information, but to promote the study of the needs of working children, and to reach those who are interested in knowing about other ways of seeing and addressing working children's issues. We believe it is

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important to provide an alternative current of opinion that gives another political and social perspective on the realities of working children.

### **Abolition Vs. Critical Appreciation**

When people speak of child labor, they are often using it as an entelechy, a pair of words that, when put together, can be used to refer to a reality that is more or less understandable for the majority of people. Instead of this entelechy, this abstract concept, we talk about working children -- people who, while children, work.

When one puts these two words together (child and labor), preceded by the words eradication or abolition, it is as if they are a fixed set. The only way to tackle this entelechy is to show how it is an intellectual category, constructed in offices and laboratories, where its main purpose is to justify the continued existence of the institutions and people who have made child labor their primary focus from 9 to 5, Monday to Friday, ignoring -- because they don't want to lose their incomes and benefits -- the complex reality of the children, of all ages and experiences, who work.

We don't value nor celebrate "child labor." Instead, we recognize and value the humanity in each person -- in each girl, boy, and adolescent worker. These workers all are human beings who, regardless of their age and social class, because they are human, don't need assessments and measurements of their dignity, of their value, nor of their right to live. When children work, their intrinsic and evident value as human beings is augmented by their contributions to the whole society.

Working children are coming together and organizing to defend their rights and to demand the right to fair work. The movements of working children, with their actions, not only transform the lives of the children who participate, but their social and political contributions are also necessary for the realization of a more just and equitable world. Because working children value and appreciate their work and their positive contributions to society, they also completely reject abuse, exploitation, and any working conditions that violate human dignity. We cannot and do not close our eyes to the abuse and injustice created by a global economic system that is devoid of the slightest ethical principles, or, at least, is without scruples. It is inhumane to say that working children are responsible for continuing poverty and injustice. Abolitionist perspectives on child labor are hiding behind paternalistic piety and are in dangerous complicity with this brutal economic system.

Working children, and those who feel joy and suffering alongside them, reaffirm the intrinsic value of our identities and of our work. We organize against injustice and exploitation. We offer the world our ideas and proposals, without which society would be lacking a fundamental and important perspective on this subject. Without the contributions of children, we will never advance in the construction of a just and peaceful world.

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An alternative perspective on “child labor” is necessary. It is urgent that those who promote abolition and who impose their programs with the strength of their money listen to working children. They should look at the children who are in front of them, and in this way, exchange the perspective that is imposed from above for a new perspective that looks directly ahead, and begin to learn from the hopes of working children.

### **June 12<sup>th</sup>: A March Against Child Labor or Against Working Children?**

The 2010 report of the ILO in relation to “child labor” indicates very minimal change in the global statistics on working childhood. Further, there was a significant growth in the number of working children in Africa, the continent that has, in the last few years, received the most resources for the promotion of policies of eradication. Most honest people of moderate intelligence with a slight willingness for self-criticism would at least consider rethinking their dogmas and arguments at this point, as well as the ensuing proposals and recommendations for public policy. None of this has occurred. The last report expresses a shameless indifference toward the disaster of recommending abolitionist policies for so many years. Instead, it blames the global economic crisis, and a lack of energy and commitment on the part of the involved groups.

The world is facing an economic crisis created by a savage financial capitalism that produces poverty and misery for millions of adults and children. We are living under a global system that obstinately and foolishly believes that the invisible hand of the market will fix everything using its never-ending capacity for rebirth. Many of the institutions that wave the colorful flags of children’s rights become objective accomplices in hunger, exclusion, and the negation of citizenship -- they are complicit in the privilege of a few and the deprivation of many. There is absolute silence from the ILO on these structural social, economic, and political conditions.

These structures are what the ILO avoids and refuses to politically condemn. Instead of indignation and shining a light on the crimes being committed, they just dance around with euphemisms, absolution, and various proposals for the future. But each time the proposal is the same: a fight “against child labor,” which is nothing more than an abstract sociological category, without a face, without a voice, without the feel of humanity. This fight against child labor in reality means continuing regulation, repression, aggression, punishment, imprisonment, raids, suspension of parental guardianship -- in short, a fight against working children. Or, as Paolo Friere would tell us: the powerful always want to end poverty by killing the poor.

We also march on June 12<sup>th</sup>, but we don’t march against working children, we march against the exploiters of “child labor,” against the governments and international organizations who don’t act with sufficient force and aggression against the systematic and globalized abuse of the rights of all people, who avoid addressing the



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structural mechanisms of violence, and who resign themselves to a few good intentions and charitable slogans.

The issue of working children has a political undercurrent, and all those who, for reasons of naivety or criminal acuity, want to enclose it in a pious humanitarianism without political or emancipatory commitment, offend the daily sacrifice of the working children who live in a struggle to earn bread, dignity, and citizenship. This is why, on June 12<sup>th</sup>, we shout together: "Long live the working children who struggle against misery and hypocrisy, for work with dignity, for lives with dignity, for a world with dignity for everyone!"

### **The Neocolonial Spirit of the ILO**

The ILO's obvious step backward in regard to their treatment of the organizations of working children, in particular the social movements of working children in Latin America, Asia and Africa, and their policies in response to these children, both demonstrate the presence of what we could call a neocolonial perspective.

Representatives of working children's organizations, despite the fact that have been active on this issue for more that 35 years, were not invited to the conference at The Hague, nor to the upcoming conference in Brasilia. This is a step backward in ILO policies and practices from the 1990s when these organizations were invited to the ILO conferences in Amsterdam and Oslo. The ILO's Roadmap that was discussed at The Hague and that will continue to be central at the upcoming event is therefore a negation of the right of those who are most effected by an issue to have a voice in its discussion and resolution. This right could be enacted through working children's representatives in the social movements of working children (NNATs). After 20 years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the ILO appears unaware that the world has advanced significantly in terms of the children's rights to directly participate in decisions that affect them.

The ILO instead acts more like they are on a crusade, putting forth a "civilizing" mission and an assimilationist politics that seeks conversion to the creed of completely abolishing the work of children around the world. After they abolish the worst forms they will take on all the other kinds of work -- not necessarily unacceptable or intolerable. In short, they seek to abolish all of it because they see a complete incompatibility between childhood and work. Thus, abolitionism is a paradigm of colonization that continues a long history. When we think that the ILO has understood something, they return to their unwavering position. This is because their paradigm is one of simplification and one that inevitably serves a logic of domination. The ILO continues to be very distant from the suggestions of the Geneva Committee on the CRC, the respectable flexibility of UNICEF on this subject, and the positions of UNESCO in the World Declaration on Education for All (1990) and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000).



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Colonial thinking continues in the ILO despite the fact that our countries have shaken off colonial political regimes. We want facts and not arguments; welcoming words and not silences and exclusions; respect for a diversity of perspectives and not the imposition of a hegemonic approach; in short, tolerance and inclusion. The working children of our country could very easily repeat the words of their compatriot Anibal Quijano: "it is time to learn to free ourselves from the Eurocentric mirror where our image is always, necessarily, distorted. It is time, finally, to cease being what we are not."<sup>2</sup>

### **The Eradication of Child Labor: Within Whose Reach?**

An official study on child labor in Peru, financed by and with technical support from the ILO and executed by the INEI (National Institute for Statistics and Information) concluded that 3.3 million Peruvians between the ages of 5 and 17 are involved in economic activity – the equivalent of 42% of the national population in this age category (7.9 million).<sup>3</sup>

This is a result that profoundly contradicts all the statistics offered by these organizations up until now which stated that the number of working children was around 2 million. This is a finding that would require a major shift, a revision of all of the ideological assumptions and operating principles of the abolitionists. And, at the very least, raises a serious and harshly critical question mark about the efficacy of programs to abolish child labor.

IPEC (the ILO's International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor) has spent many resources and set off a great deal of fanfare celebrating their presumed achievements and results. However, there is no humility and no critical attitude in the first declarations from the regional specialist from the ILO, Guillermo Dema.<sup>4</sup> He only admits, in a vague and generic way, that "the statistics were not as positive as we had hoped." This is just burying one's head in the sand. It is evident that the whole theoretical framework of the ILO and of the abolitionist approach to child labor is based on the claim that child labor is a "scourge," a pathology, a bacteria to be combatted with coercive legal action, without considering the struggle and dignity of working children and without saying anything about the structural conditions that produce exploitation of children in the context of the workplace. We believe that it would be legitimate to apologize not just for the evident errors but also for the inconsistencies and potential manipulations in the older data that these new numbers draw to our attention.

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<sup>2</sup> Anibal Quijano. 2000. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from South* 1(3): 533-580.

<sup>3</sup> Rodriguez, José and Silvana Vargas. 2009. *El Trabajo Infantil en el Perú: Magnitud y Perfiles Vulnerables: Informe Nacional 2007-2008*. Lima: IPEC, ILO.

<sup>4</sup> *La Republica*. February 16, 2010. Lima, Peru.

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In 2006, with a great deal of publicity, the ILO released a report that announced to the world a significant reduction in the total number and percentage of working children. The region with the greatest decline was Latin America and the Caribbean. According to this report, from 2000 to 2004, the number of working children in the region dropped from 17.4 million to 5.57 million, or from 16.1 to 5.1%. It is obvious that these numbers aren't compatible with the recent survey in Peru and that they can't be considered definitive, at least not without asking for their further review. It is impossible to imagine that in all of Latin America and the Caribbean there are only 5.5 million working children if there are 3.3 million in Peru alone. These sloppy or false statistics have been presented as if they definitively prove the success of the abolitionist policies and programs of the ILO.

We await a serious and honest response from these organizations. We continue to reaffirm the need for a new approach to this issue that recognizes the economic role, agency, and protagonism of working children, that seeks to accompany them in their struggle for meaningful inclusion, that recognizes political and social responsibility for the exploitation of working children, and that helps working children who are dealing with violent and abusive conditions. The goal should not be the eradication of child labor but to help create opportunities for working children to have work that is decent, just, and that meets their various needs, especially their educational needs. This needs to be done not just with words, but also with political decisions. This, we believe, is the best way to help the 3.3 million Peruvian working children, more than 1 million of whom, up until now, had simply disappeared in the cold, cruel, and often inhuman world of official statistics. Who is going to apologize to these kids for the many years of absence, of social death, to which they had been condemned?

### **The Surprising Successes of IPEC: Statistics that hide more than they illuminate**

How many times has the ILO said "the end of child labor is within reach?"<sup>5</sup> With pride, the ILO presents their International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor, created in 1992, as "the largest technical cooperation program in the ILO, with an annual budget of some \$60 million and more than 450 staff, nearly 90% of whom are in the field. Twenty years ago, this development was unimaginable."<sup>6</sup> In their 2006 report, the ILO made the incredible announcement that child labor was soon to end because, over the previous four years, at a global level, the number of working children had declined by 11% and the number of children in dangerous work had dropped by 26%. This would mean that in order to proclaim the end of child labor, all that was left was to address the tiny 89% and 74%!

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example: *The End of Child Labor: Within Reach - ILO Global Report on Child Labor 2006*. Geneva: International Labor Organization.

<sup>6</sup> Alex Fyfe. 2007. *The Worldwide Movement Against Child Labor: Progress and Future Directions*. Geneva: International Labor Organization. Pp. v.

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Obviously, the statistics that they present don't fulfill their promises. They are also based on questionable categories that rely on insufficient sources and measurements. The most expansive definition of the ILO is that of what they call the "economic activity" of children. This explicitly excludes work done by children in their own homes or for their schools. This definition of economic activity includes only activities that are directly related to the market and excludes those that do not generate surplus value, independent of whether or not they are or are not necessary and vital work (for example, the work done in the family or for subsistence).

The ILO's use of the term "child labor" requires politicized measurements based on those activities that are prohibited according to Conventions #138 and #182. According to this, work done by children over 12 years of age who work a few hours during the week and in a permitted activity and any work done by children over 15 years of age that is not considered dangerous, is not considered "child labor." From the perspective of the ILO, child labor is only a legal category and therefore is defined on the basis of legal concepts which tacitly presume to know what is "appropriate" and "in the best interests" of children. This is also true for the children who are involved in "hazardous work." This category is also inspired by the legal standards of ILO Conventions, especially #182. Using these categories as a base, the ILO estimated that in 2004 there were 317 million "economically active" children between 5 and 17 years of age. Of these, 218 million were considered "child laborers." According to the ILO, 126 million of these were involved in hazardous work. The equivalent statistics for those from 5-14 years are: 191 million economically active children, 166 million "child laborers," and 74 million children involved in hazardous work.

A fundamental problem with the statistics presented by the ILO is that they are based on definitions of the work of children that don't permit anything other than a negative interpretation of this work. They assume that the work of children is incompatible with education and learning and that, in the first place, it constitutes an "obstacle to development," especially in regard to economic growth and the reduction of poverty. This concept of child labor not only reduces its vision to the negative aspects of children's work but it also means that the statistical data and the strategic reflections of the ILO leave out many activities that are vital and valuable for children.

We don't want to discount the possibility that in the last few years some experts in the IPEC program have begun to realize that the only way to achieve their goals is to abandon their "abolitionist" dogmas and, instead, to begin to include "civil society" in their planning. But they continue to leave out the needs, expectations, and hopes of working children and their families. They don't appear to be tired of enumerating the various dangers of work for children, and their primary interest is still the concern that child labor impoverishes and destroys the "human capital" that is needed for economic growth.

Unfortunately, we are not surprised that the flowery affirmations of children's rights and participation have not led to a concrete offer of dialogue or interaction. Instead,

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the ILO invites children to participate only under the condition that they are part of the “forces committed to ending child labor.” In none of the reports or declarations of the ILO do we find a discussion of the fact that their actions against child labor may indeed have negative consequences for working children. The differences in opinion about what strategies are most appropriate for improving the situation of working childhood are seen as a “danger of factionalism.” Instead of insistently continuing to pursue the eradication of child labor, the ILO should begin to reflect on how we can truly improve the situation by listening to what is said by working children and their organizations and by finally initiating a serious dialogue with them that is based on mutual respect.

### **The Vicious Cycle of “Child Labor”**

In the long sessions that culminated with the approval of Convention #182 there was not always consensus to include among “the worst forms of child labor” some crimes that are now ratified in the text. These practices of human trafficking, prostitution, slavery, child soldiers, child pornography, and drug trafficking would, according to many, be better described as crimes against humanity. Nevertheless, within the various texts published under the auspices of the ILO, these problems are regularly described as “child labor.” The discussion of these practices serves to overcome and overshadow the problem of the questionable approach of Convention 138 which dates from 1973 but until relatively recently had not been widely approved or ratified. This helps to explain why these practices were included in Convention 182 as a condition for approval.

The ILO documents generally lack any critique of the system of capitalist hegemony or the global economic policies that reproduce inequality and poverty. Instead, we find that the ILO and others who follow in their line of thinking have radicalized their position and now imagine a vicious cycle of poverty created instead by child labor. They construct the following step-by-step argument: child labor causes poverty, which produces and perpetuates national underdevelopment, which makes the country undesirable to international financial institutions *and* which leads to adult mental deficiencies *and* which is the root of exclusion and gender inequality, which are all the cause for not achieving the millennium development goals, which means that organized working children are a danger to society. Imagine putting this huge burden on the shoulders of working children and their organizations! States therefore present child labor as an epidemic, a scourge, an object to be removed.

The following hegemonic and simplistic claims are found in several ILO texts, including the new Brasilia base document: working children cause poverty;<sup>7</sup> working children limit national economic development;<sup>8</sup> working children will be “mentally stunted” as adults;<sup>9</sup> organizations of working children are a danger;<sup>10</sup> and working children cause

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<sup>7</sup> Brasilia Base Document, pg. 4

<sup>8</sup> ILO Handbook for Parliamentarians #3, 2002, pg. 31; Brasilia Base Document, pg. 4

<sup>9</sup> ILO Handbook for Parliamentarians #3, 2002, pg. 31.

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gender inequality.<sup>11</sup> Some academics and institutions with power on this issue are clearly opposed to respecting the rights of organized working children. Are these kinds of statements required to marginalize and exclude the voice of those who should be the primary actors at these conferences?

The 2010 Conference “Toward a World with Work in Dignity for Children and Adolescents: Steps Toward 2016,” organized by European associations in solidarity with the movements of working children in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, offered a challenge to these global conferences for eradication. This conference demonstrated that a gathering of those who experience “child labor” as direct participants is entirely capable of addressing the issues of working children. From this example, we see that it is possible to construct events that do not exclude them.

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<sup>10</sup> Vicente Iniesta Pardo, et al. 1999. *Evaluación del Programa Internacional de Erradicación de Trabajo Infantil en America Latina*. Madrid: Agro-Consulting International.

<sup>11</sup> Alec Fyfe, *The Worldwide Movement Against Child Labor*, pg. 81.

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## PART II

# NEW REFLECTIONS AND ANALYSIS

### Elimination of Child Labor or Work in Dignity for Children? Remarks on the [2010] Child Labor Report of the ILO

By Manfred Liebel and Iven Saadi<sup>12</sup>

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On the occasion of the [2010] Global Child Labor Conference, the ILO presented the latest Global Report concerning child labor.<sup>13</sup> There they had to admit that the last report's promise that the elimination of child labor would be "within reach"<sup>14</sup> could not be sustained any longer. According to new ILO estimations the number of working children globally decreased in the time period 2004-2008 from 222 million to 215 million, which is only 3 percent. Juan Somavía, ILO Director-General said on this that: "Progress is uneven: neither fast enough nor comprehensive enough to reach the goals that we have set." As reported by the ILO the number of 5 to 14-year-olds performing child labor decreased by 10 percent because of the lower employment of girls, but still in the South-Saharan Africa the number increased among 15 to 17-year-olds. Furthermore the number of children performing "worst forms of child labor" has increased by almost 20 percent, from 52 to 62 million.

This data, published by the ILO, is however not built on solid analytical and empirical foundations. The information is again based on categories and investigations that only capture a fraction of the work children are performing. Although the ILO claims wanting to include work performed by children beyond the "production boundary", namely unpaid household chores and other "non-productive" activities, the published report is based on statistical data collected between the years 2004 and 2008, a period during which this category of work was not included in the survey instruments.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore the comparability with

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<sup>12</sup> The authors of this article produced both Spanish and English versions. The version presented here is an extract of their original English-language work.

<sup>13</sup> International Labour Office, *Accelerating action against child labour. Global Report under the follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*. Geneva: ILO, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> International Labour Office, *The end of child labour: Within reach. Global Report under the follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*. Geneva: ILO, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> At its 18th session held in Geneva at the end of 2008, the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) decided on a modification of "definitions of children's work". The conference differentiated between on the one hand a broad statistical definition of children's productive activities and on the other hand a more policy-oriented, normative definition of the "negative" productive activities performed by children (in the sense of ILO's "child labour"). With this differentiation, the ICLS intended to improve the empirical consistency of statistical measurement while not interfering with the ILO's monopoly on interpretation of "child labour".



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previous data is questionable, since the prior data was based on incomplete and non-comparable enquiries made in only a few countries.<sup>16</sup> . . .

One of the fundamental mistakes of the ILO reports (nowadays as well as in the past) are that they declare the work of children as something entirely negative ignoring all other existing and possibly positive perceptions of children's work. Although many children are well able to accomplish both school and work, children's work and school life are believed to be absolutely contradictory.... In a case of circular reasoning, all types of children's work falling under the category child labor are assumed to be harmful just because they are prohibited.

A scientific reflection on the very heterogeneous working conditions and the complexity of working experience of children as well as the diversity of meanings and "effects" they have on children is completely missing from the ILO report. The ILO does not make any effort to bring up or engage with the abundantly available body of social science research relevant to the topic. As a result, the focus is not only reduced towards only looking at the harmful aspects of children's work, but many vital activities and activities explicitly approved of by children remain unconsidered in the ILO's statistical data and strategic considerations. The authors of the ILO-reports seem to be so strongly bent on illustrating the dangers and harm posed by children's work that they completely blank out the desires, needs and perceptions held by the working children themselves.

Supported by the World Bank, the ILO's "world wide movement against child labor" regards the existence of working children primarily as a waste of human capital.<sup>17</sup> Doing this, the ILO conceptualizes children solely in terms of their possible future contribution to economic growth as adults and thereby directly clashes with the idea and content of the rights of children established in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child... Adding to this, the ILO does not seem to give *rights at work*, whose defense and realization constitutes one of its core institutional responsibilities, any substantive significance regarding working children. The current report at one point briefly does mention the applicability and importance of rights at work "*regardless of the worker's age,*" and even acknowledges that minimum age-standards are among the reasons why working children and youth find their fundamental rights at work violated (Report 2010, 55). But how exactly this contradiction between the realization of fundamental rights at work for children and youth and the ILO's approach to child labor predominantly based on eradication and minimum age-standards could be resolved, remains unanswered.

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<sup>16</sup> See Manfred Liebel, The new ILO report on child labour: a success story, or the ILO still at a loss? *Childhood – A journal of global child research*, 14(2), May 2007, 279-284.

<sup>17</sup> This "human capital" oriented conceptualization of children closely resembles the "social investment state" approach to children advanced by some proponents of welfare architecture reform and criticized in the social sciences for, amongst other aspects, reducing children to their future economic role as productive workers; see Ruth Lister, Investing in the citizen-workers of the future: Transformations in citizenship and the state under New Labour. *Social Policy & Administration*, 37 (5), 2003, 427-443.



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Overall, when it comes to working children, it appears as if the ILO is willing to factually contribute to on-going violations of rights at work and to disregard the exact same values and rights that supposedly constitute the core of its *raison d'être*.

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### **Abolition or Dignity** By Juan Enrique Bazán

The Roadmap designed by the International Labor Organization (ILO) proposes to eradicate the worst forms of child labor (on the route to total abolition), an issue they make publicly visible each year on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June. At the same time, addressing the same social reality, but from the perspective of those directly affected by these issues, the movements of working children and adolescents argue that working conditions should be fair and just. They celebrate and recognize their own event each year on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December.

Both anniversaries, although there are differences between them, could perhaps agree upon a central and stable core set of ideas as long as that core included the following: 1) a struggle against all forms of capitalist exploitation; 2) a struggle against slavery and its analogous forms; 3) a struggle against all work conditions that are harmful and dangerous.

The viability of this perspective depends on legal dogmas. By this I mean not simply laws and jurisprudence, but also what these laws and sentences implicitly seek to reproduce and produce in terms of their social, cultural, and political impacts. Moving in this direction, the organizations involved in the Roadmap and the social movements of working children could possibly dialogue and find agreement about fundamental rights in regard to the work of children and adolescents. They could make a political decision that they will work to promote legal statuses and life projects that are based in the best interests of working children. What does not fit in this core should be reformulated in terms of customary laws, legal pluralism, and a new method of social-legal interpretation. Epistemologically, academic concepts and meta-languages in this field should be used and applied, and the active and direct participation of working children must be fully incorporated in a strong and clear manner.

Simultaneously, the institutions involved in the Roadmap must stop, or at least put in a strong symbolic effort to stop, presenting only pious and pitying perspectives on working childhood to the media. Simply put, working children (and other children) should not be treated as objects of pity, shame, disgrace, or suffering. In this kind of media discourse, the idea of children as rights-bearing subjects is made totally vulnerable. Such discourse cannot be justified under the pretext of transparency. The frivolous indulgence and cultural manipulation that appears in the media should not be assumed as a true picture of working childhood in public debate or in national policy. The condition of children as subjects of rights is much

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greater than this current media image. The media uses the image of the progressive eradication of child labor as a spectacle and as entertainment. In this approach, the so-called experts and leaders of opinion, who are in reality quite outside the world of childhood and are instead part of the world of entertainment, make various “urban interventions,” which are actually only advertising campaigns that have no effective results in terms of the rights of children.

We should also not lose sight of the particularity of the experiences of children who work. We should return our attention to the social realities of working children and recognize the contexts and structures that condition their ways of life. This is why it is so important, via dialogue, to observe and analyze the contexts in which working children are involved, and to re-think the political economy of children’s work in order to better understand the places and experiences in which they find themselves.

There are societies in Latin America that are experiencing dependent and deformed capitalism, a particular state of development in relation to late modernity. There are societies that have unequal and uneven development. It is in this context that the work of children, adolescents, and youth emerges and unfolds, and in this context that the rights of children must take precedence. The human activity of working should never be a humiliating experience and should instead always grant dignity. Therefore, in order to end exploitation, slavery and inhumane work conditions we must approach our task from a position that defends and promotes the rights of working children.

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## **Working Children and the Family Economy: A significant contribution to the nation -- the Peruvian case**

By Elvira Figueroa Sempértegui

*It has been many years since the Danish sociologist Jens Qvortrup identified the fact that economists do not include the contributions of children and adolescents in their national statistics.<sup>18</sup> Such a perspective makes it appear as if the millions of working children and adolescents could stop producing wealth without having any effect on global accumulation. In other words, the financial support that children and their families consider to be incredibly important has no place in macroeconomic analysis. The campaigns for the abolition of children's work, starting from the perspective of global statistics, also assume the insignificance of these economic contributions. In this view, they ignore the subjective and cultural dimension of knowing that you are useful for your community, for your family, and for yourself. Figueroa's article demonstrates, from the Peruvian case, working children's contributions to material survival, to the economy, and to the creation of their own active citizenship and dignity. -Alejandro Cussianovich*

### *Introduction:*

One area of research in which there are still very few field studies is the contribution that working children make to the family economy. The existing national literature on this subject is relatively sparse and primarily from several decades ago. More frequently, research on working children is sociological in nature, including studies of the relationship between work and school performance, children who are overage for their grade level, and school abandonment. More recently, there is greater interest in health, in general, and in the mental health of working children in particular. For this reason, IFEJANT decided on the necessity of conducting a study on the economic significance of children's work for their families of origin. This study was completed in a fairly circumscribed manner by focusing on the population of workers under the age of majority who are part of organizations of working children at the national level.

This article presents, in a fairly general form, some of the most interesting statistics and findings from this study while we are in the process of preparing a more complete discussion of the results. We have selected some graphics and data while choosing to exclude the methodological details like the survey instrument and the formulas that support our econometric model.

### *Technical Information*

To collect information, this study relied upon the participation of adult allies and working children who had been previously trained for this purpose, as well as on the information provided by heads of families in interviews. Although the survey instruments were completed by more than 750 working children in reviewing the

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<sup>18</sup> Jens Qvortrup. 1991. "Il Bambino come soggetto politico, economico e sociale." In *Politiche Sociali per l'Infanzia e l'Adolescenza*. Milan: Ed. Unicopli, p.39-55.

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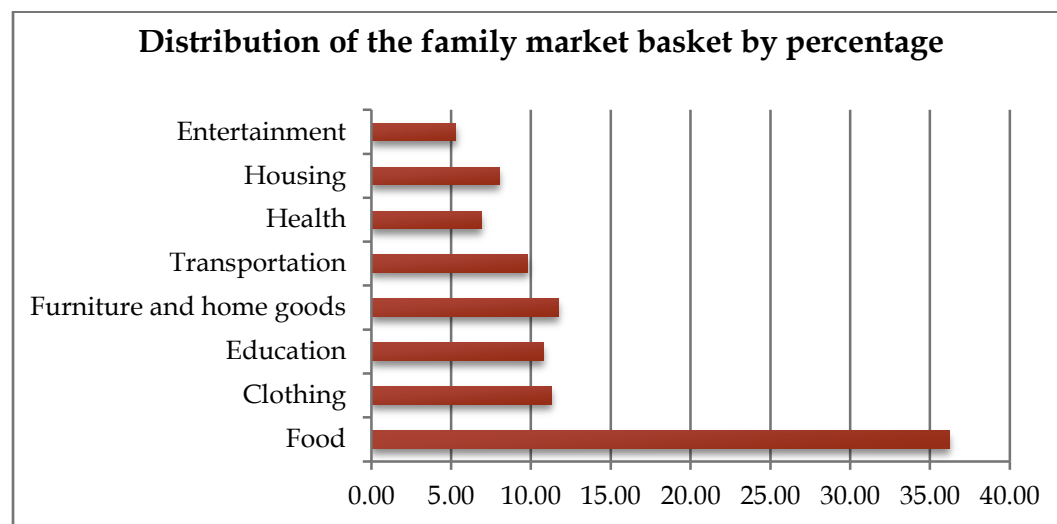
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responses we found that we had to select only some because of missing information and technical problems. With these, the number of valid surveys was reduced to 384. Technical support was provided by Milton E. Saavedra Espinoza, an economist who created the econometric model and the system for measuring the relation between a family budget and the total contribution as well as the actual contribution of a working child to the basic family market basket. The study was completed at the national level and includes ten regions of the country: Piura, La Libertad, Lima, Ica, Arequipa, Puno, Loreto, Apurimac, Ucayali and Huancavelica. The data was collected and analyzed during the second half of 2010.

We are only presenting national level data rather than specifying in detail each of the ten regions given that this is just a brief reflection. However, there are clearly important and obvious differences between the regions that will be taken into account in future analysis.

*The basic family market basket:*

In this study, we understand the basic family market basket as a concept that includes those goods and services that are necessary to cover the minimum needs of a population. This is expressed as the quantity that satisfies the minimum needs of an average individual in the reference population. In the present study, the basic family market basket of organized working children includes the following:



In this graphic, the largest cost of the families of working children is clearly the category of food. On the other hand, the smallest percentage of costs can be found in the category of entertainment.

In Peru, the minimum wage is 600 nuevo soles per month, the lowest in Latin America. This covers only 28.4% of the 2112 nuevo soles required to cover a family's standard needs in the city of Lima.<sup>19</sup>

*Some National Results:*

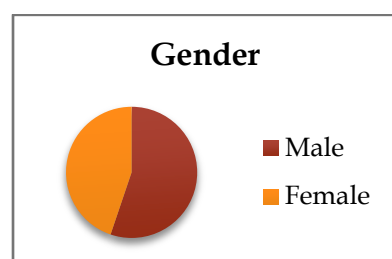
We have selected some graphs that reference some of the characteristics of the surveyed population, including gender, age, level of schooling, and the number of days and hours worked in order to obtain their contributions to their families. Finally, we present the average estimated support provided by working children.

*1. Age of Respondents*

As you can see from the table, we have a population that is majority adolescent, given that the survey was taken amongst organized working children. This is equally representative of the national situation.

Age	Frequency	%
10-12	111	28.9
13-17	273	71.1
Total	384	100

*2. Gender Distribution*



*3. Work Sector*

Sector	Frequency	%
Service	199	52.0
Commerce	149	38.9
Manufacturing	35	9.1
Total	383	100

<sup>19</sup> "Salario Minimo es Insuficiente." *Diario La Primera*. February 1, 2011.  
[http://www.diariolaprimeraperu.com/online/economia/salario-m-iacute-nimo-es-insuficiente\\_79096.html](http://www.diariolaprimeraperu.com/online/economia/salario-m-iacute-nimo-es-insuficiente_79096.html)

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#### 4. Hours of Work/Day

It is clear that the number of hours worked is relatively high for the majority of respondents. It would be useful to know if this number is the number for the entire year or during vacation periods. The following table, of reasons for working, can also help us to better understand the results regarding hours worked.

Hours Worked/Day	Frequency	%
1-3 hours	72	18.8
4-6 hours	199	51.8
6-8 hours	58	15.1
8-10 hours	31	8.1
More than 10 hours	24	6.3
Total	384	100

Reasons for Working	Frequency	%
To help my family	315	40.2
To pay for my school needs	137	17.5
To cover my necessities	115	14.7
To advance myself	85	10.9
To buy my clothing	72	9.2
To save money	43	5.5
To buy myself treats	10	1.3
To have a business	6	0.8
Total	783	100

#### 5. School

This is a significant finding that also corresponds with the results of previous studies in Lima that found that 93% of surveyed working children were enrolled in school.

Enrolled in school?	Frequency	%
Yes	372	97.4
No	10	2.6
Total	382	100

Level of Schooling	Frequency	%
Secondary	248	68.1
Primary	116	31.9
Total	364	100

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6. Working Children's Contributions to the Family Budget:

<b>Calculation of Monthly Contributions</b>	
<i>General data:</i>	
Monthly earnings of working children (average in survey)	257 n.s.
Monthly basic family market basket (average in survey)	1037 n.s.
<i>Actual support of working children to family market basket:</i>	
Monthly contribution of working children	182 n.s.
Percentage contribution of working children	<b>18%</b>

In order to understand working children's contribution to the family budget, we conducted two analyses. In the first, we consider the "Total Support of the Working Child," which is a direct comparison between the monthly earnings of working children and the monthly basic family market basket. In this analysis, we find that working children contribute 35%. The second analysis identifies the "Actual support of working children." We know that not 100% of the working child's earnings are directed to the family. The working children divide their money, putting some to personal items, school needs, treats, saving, and investing in their businesses. For this analysis, we used an econometric analysis of "adjustment factor for the net support of working children." With this analysis, we find that the support of working children to the basic family market basket is 18%.

**Discussion:**

In the 1980s in Brazil, they found that working children's contribution the family's basic needs was 30%, and in some states, even higher than 30%.

Our research affirms that working children's contribution to the family budget is not simply complementary, additional, or of little significance. It cannot be removed without there also being substantial consequences for family well-being, family relationships, and also potentially for family violence and stress levels that are often at the root of such violence.

In this sense, working children's labor is not only economically relevant to their families. It also has an impact on their quality of life. Of course, it is not a solution to structural poverty, but it is an important factor in the construction of a subjectivity marked by the dignity that comes from knowing that you are being socially useful. It can be a source of personal gratification. The organization fulfills the function of highlighting and developing the more humane elements that are at stake in the everyday work lives of children, rather than only misfortune and scarcity.

Considering these initial findings holistically, we should think about their implications for the governability of the nation and for creating a minimum level of internal peace within family life. Unfortunately, none of this is counted within assessments of the wealth of the country. The work of those who don't pay taxes isn't included in economic data and statistics. This is another way that working children are made invisible, another reason for their political and social absence,



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another way that they are made insignificant as economic subjects and participants in the reproduction of material and spiritual life.

40.2% of working children say that they work in order to help their families, support that is invisible and not valued by our society in general. Working children are instead seen as a problem, rather than as making contributions to the economic well-being of their families. The lack of knowledge about this dimension of children's work allows for a moralist discourse about the situation of working children, which hides the political significance of their labor. This is one of the consequences of working children's lack of social recognition.

We note that the significance of working children's support in the family budget has continued to rise over the last twenty years. There is an increase of 8% from Walter Alarcon's finding in 1991 that working children's contributions were 10% of the family budget. Working children's contributions of 18% of the family budget have certainly played a role in the 7% rise in the Gross Domestic Product of the country. In this context, there seems to be few reasons to not value the labor and contributions of working children and their families.

Finally, in the Peruvian case, there are examples of micro-lending programs, like that of PROMINATS (Program of Micro-financing for Working Children), organized by IFEJANT, which supports and trains working children to create their own small businesses which complement their education and work. In this process of learning, working children are creating a culture of savings and investment. The PROMINATS program, as an experience developed together with working children, is an alternative that can improve the conditions of children's work, diminish the amount of hours that they work, encourage them as producers, and motivate them to develop their capabilities and skills in various kinds of work.

The organizations of working children should continue to demonstrate their commitment to being active not just in the struggle against poverty, but also for the meaningful recognition of working children's economic contributions to the nation. The words of the economist Iguñiz apply to the working children in our study: "in each family, at any given moment, there are a variety of ways to participate in the economy.... Illegality should emerge from family values," and also, "not all small-scale activity leads to poverty."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Javier Iguñiz. 2011. "Protagonismo Economico de los Pobres." *Revista Paginas* 221: 19-27.

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## PART III

# COLLECTIVE STATEMENTS

### Statement by MOLACNATs Presented at the 2010 Global Child Labor Conference<sup>21</sup>

We raise our voices as the Latin American and Caribbean Working Children and Adolescents Movement (MOLACNATs) to protest the disrespect shown to us by the organizers of the Hague Conference by neglecting to invite us to participate, or indeed, even informing of us that it would take place. MOLACNATs, for more than 30 years, has been a place where working girls, boys and adolescents have organized themselves to implement collective action to protect and promote the rights of all girls, boys and adolescents. This activity revolves especially around our fight for social, cultural, political, and economic recognition as well as creating working and living conditions in dignity for working children, as well as for recognition of children in general as both subjects and social actors under the law.

It is unacceptable that we, the legitimate representatives of organized working girls, boys and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean, were not invited to the conference since the subjects under discussion are parts of our reality. The exclusive attendance by adults, most of whom are quite distant from the realities of our lives, once again confirms that the approach taken to working children and adolescents continues to be adult-centered and child and adolescent participation is relegated to lofty intentions and legal texts. We condemn the violation of our right to participate as children and adolescents as accorded under Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly given the observations and recommendations made by the Geneva Committee on the importance of complying with this article.

For more than 30 years, our movement has defended its firm position to fight and denounce labor exploitation of millions of children throughout the world, while at the same time fully rejecting ILO Convention 138, on minimum working age, and remaining critical of Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labor and its IPEC Program. As regards C. 138, we consider the minimum working age to be discriminatory, excluding minors younger than 14. This convention condemns thousands of girls and boys to the illegal and informal sectors, thus greatly exposing them to exploitation. As regards C. 182, which considers the use, procuring, or offering of a child for prostitution, the production of pornography or for pornographic performances, or the use of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production or trafficking of drugs as the worst forms of child labor, we believe that these are criminal offences and flagrant violations of a child's human rights. We are clearly against all of these phenomena, but calling them "labor" creates

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<sup>21</sup> Translation from the Spanish done in advance of the 2010 conference by an unknown individual.

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dangerous confusion and leads to purely repressive practices as opposed to truly liberating alternatives. Our movement already has clearly made its presence felt in the Amsterdam and Oslo C.182 preparatory conferences (1997) where it drew attention to the negative implications C.182 would have on the lives of thousands of working girls, boys and adolescents. Its ratification has given way to the development of repressive policies in some of our countries that criminalize the social, cultural, and economic reality of many of our families. Unending raids, persecution and stigmatization of child and adolescent labor in the popular classes are clear and regrettable examples of the effects of these “hardline” policies.

We identify the lack of objectivity shown by these international organizations who continue to deny our dignity with statements such as: “Child labor is a development obstacle” or “None of the main Millennium Development Goals can be achieved without eradicating the worst forms of child labor.” Statements of this kind conceal the real reasons for the economic, social, and political crises that our people have historically suffered as a consequence of the neoliberal economic model that is condemning millions of girls, boys and adolescents to poverty, marginalization and exclusion. The Hague conference will be a space where this hypothesis will be given just that much more momentum.

From our organizing spaces, as working children and adolescents who know the reality of working children in Latin America and the Caribbean, we propose the creation of work-education programs which would train us both as producers and citizens. We demand:

- To be recognized as social actors, political and economic subjects by international organizations and society in general and to be invited immediately to participate in the discussions and drafting sessions of the next conference.
- To be considered while public policy which could affect us is being drawn up.
- For our input to always be sought so that social policies can be implemented with a holistic perspective and in a way that favors development of our capacities and skills to overcome the exclusion and marginalization we face in many countries in the Global South.
- For governments to spend on education, health care, food, recreation and protecting the environment, instead of prioritizing payment on foreign debt.
- For our proposals to be listened to and considered for an economic system of solidarity where our social relationships and production take place without undermining human dignity and while protecting the environment and promoting solidarity among peoples.

We call upon labor, peasant, indigenous, Afro-descendant, student, women, and intellectual organizations as well as progressive world governments to show solidarity to our call and not submit to international organizations and their power grabs with programs and policies that, while covered with a varnish of good intentions, only propagate a system which exploits human beings. We once again demand our recognition as working children and adolescents so as to achieve the wish expressed by a working child: “We want to make it possible for children to be

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happy and walk hand in hand with adults and everyone in society to make this world a big house where we all belong.” Yes to work in dignity, no to exploitation! Yes to equality, no to discrimination! Yes to protected work, no to abuse and mistreatment!

### **An Open Letter to the Director of ILO-IPEC from Concerned Researchers<sup>22</sup>**

7 May, 2010

Dear Ms. Thomas:

We are academic and practitioner experts who have been long engaged in research into child work, and who have published widely on the topic, including in some of the ILO’s own publications. Our main interest as researchers is in how children’s work, and interventions in their work, affects the children involved. From a practical standpoint, we most want to know what is consistent with children’s well-being and development, and what undermines them. We presume that a policy or program claiming to be successful must demonstrate that its effects are good for children, and that a policy or program that harms them must be considered a failure. Policies governing child work should be justified according to whether they actually improve children’s lives.

From that children-centered point of view, we have for some time been concerned about certain contradictions between international policies intended to protect children against abuse and what social science research reveals about what benefits children. Policies and programs promoted as successful have not always been shown by research to be good for children, and some policies that field evidence suggests may harm children have not been politically recognized as failures. That will not be a surprise to you since discrepancies between what policy politics promote and what empirical evidence demonstrates have been noted and discussed in the literatures of child labor, child protection, and child rights for well over a decade.

What leads us to address you at this point in time is our observation that the ILO seems not to recognize and take seriously a marked and growing disparity between the findings of social science research and the formulation and promotion of international policy. That lack of attention comes out strongly in the plans for this month’s Hague conference on child labor and the draft program for future international action that the ILO will present there. The meeting agenda and list of invited participants denotes a primarily political event intended to promote a package of policies and actions. What it is not is a technical forum to weigh empirical evidence and debate what future directions ought to be. We think that a technical forum to discuss the big issues is needed, even if it were but a part of the

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<sup>22</sup> This letter was also originally written in English and is therefore a reproduction rather than a translation.

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conference. We are aware of the technical report to be presented in the Hague conference, but we worry that it will follow the route of ILO and UCW studies in the past, taking an unduly narrow perspective on the issues and consulting an extremely restricted number and variety of sources in analyzing them. It is a formula for never really getting into the real issues at hand. As researchers covering the field more broadly, we think the issues of “child labor” should be opened up to a more comprehensive view of “children’s work” and focused more specifically on outcomes in children’s lives. Adequate analysis should encompass the full interdisciplinary sweep of the large literature to reflect the variety of experience and research on child work, and it should ultimately focus information and attention on the question of what are the outcomes of work, and interventions in work, in the well-being and development of children. We do not anticipate that the conference report will meet so demanding a requirement or confront any of the most compelling issues that ought to be addressed by the ILO and its partners. Consequently, we do not expect it to be very useful for planning future action to effectively benefit children.

It seems to us that the way the Hague conference is shaping up represents a tragic loss of opportunity, since it would have been a timely occasion to face and discuss important practical issues increasingly raised by the extensive and accumulating evidence from anthropology, child development, economics, psychology, sociology and other fields, as well as evaluation of policy and program impacts on children. Missing this opportunity to engage the fundamental issues means that the ILO, as the international community more generally, is bound to project into the next several years not only actions able to benefit children, but also various assumptions, ideas, goals, policies and activities that the evidence suggests fail to protect children and are, in at least some circumstances, actually harmful to them. It also means that some very interesting findings about what actually does work for children are not picked up on and utilized. In the end, it is the children who end up paying the highest price when unaccountable institutions are content to merely promote what they already think and do and ignore the opportunity to avidly search out new facts and fearlessly explore the practical implications of them.

While there are many issues that would benefit from examination in the light of research and systematically evaluated experience, we would like here to mention three that are especially prominent and important in terms of their implications for the well-being of children, and that therefore merit serious discussion at an early date.

1. The continued promotion of ILO Convention 138. While we appreciate the historic centrality of the notion of a universal minimum legal age of work to the ILO and its mandate to combat child labor, and therefore the institutional pain involved in abandoning it, we must also insist that the ILO open its eyes to recognize the large and growing evidence that this approach as now conceived and implemented is sometimes (maybe often) harmful to children. We find little or no countervailing evidence that a general ban on work below a given minimum age is protective or helpful to them. There may be a valid



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debate over why the evidence looks that way and what it actually means, but if the ILO is not to be justly accused of imposing harmful policies on children just to stay in its comfort zone, it simply has to address the issue and engage in that debate. It should do so with an open mind, willingness to change, and the resources needed to revisit the issue thoroughly. To do otherwise would be irresponsible.

2. The relationship between children's work and their education. The ILO asserts that children's work threatens school attendance and achievement, by which it justifies the universal minimum age policy of C. 138. However, that globalized argument depends on a selective and incomplete reading of the available evidence. A broader view from social science research strongly suggests that this argument is fallacious. Many claimed incompatibilities between children's work and their education turn out on closer look to be illusory, situational, oversimplification, or misattributions of causality. Under a careful reading of the full evidence, it seems to us, the case for a globally generalized negative relationship between children's work and their educational development tends to disappear, and with it the case for banning children from work as a way to support their education. But that issue is open to technical debate, a debate the ILO should conduct in open forum before it continues to justify its policies with evidence and arguments that are spurious. From a cross cultural view, a stronger argument can be made for children's work as a vehicle for their education and development, a perspective that opens interesting and productive possibilities for reorienting oversight and intervention in children's work. We are slightly puzzled that the ILO so adamantly maintains its defense of an increasingly flimsy case for separating work and education in children's lives when it has the unique capacity and resources to lead the field in finding innovative ways to link the two productively for children and society. This ought to be a prime subject for discussion in the Hague conference.
3. Participation and organization of working children. While the issue of working children's participation in their own protection has in recent years been raised primarily in terms of children's rights (especially citing Article 12 of the UNCRC), and while some of us are on record with statements and publications in that line of discourse, in this letter we wish to focus on it as a means of improving policies and programs to better promote the well-being and development of children. In recent decades, social scientists have found that including the observations and views of children in their studies is essential to making accurate observations and drawing meaningful conclusions. It has become methodologically common not only to hear from children, but even to pen space for them as co-researchers. In fact, in both developing and industrialized countries, some of the most interesting and insightful research into children's life situations is today conducted by children and youth specially trained for the purpose. With knowledge gained from their research, they are empowered to make valued inputs into the formulation of more helpful and effective policies and programs. Some

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working children's organizations and programs serving working children have been doing this youth-led research and advocacy in their home areas for years. ILO policies and programs could and should benefit from such input by working children. By modern standards of practice, the resistance of the ILO to the participation of working children, as witnessed in the exclusion of representatives of working children's organizations from the Hague conference, seems a self-defeating anachronism. This may be an area in which the methods of child-centered research could be of practical use to the ILO. They certainly would suggest looking more kindly at the participation of working children's organizations in The Hague and other meetings sponsored by the ILO.

We suggest that systematic dialogue on at least the above child work issues be pursued between ILO-IPEC and pertinent researchers from the various social science disciplines. The Hague conference might have been an opportunity to start such a dialogue, had more researchers of wider background been admitted as participants. We recognize that the ILO, to its credit, tried a few years ago to establish a forum for such dialogue through the Child Labor Research Network. We readily admit that we researchers may not have responded as we should have to make that link function as hoped. But maybe that kind of mechanism was not the best way to proceed. The fact that this particular Internet-based tool may not have worked as hoped does not obviate the need for something that will, and from both sides of the policy-research divide we should keep trying. We would be happy to enter into a discussion of how that might occur.

We send our congratulations for your recent appointment to the directorship of IPEC, and our best wishes for your success in furthering the protection, well-being and development of working children.

Sincerely,

Dr. Michael F.C. Bourdillon, Professor Emeritus, Department of Sociology, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe.

Dr. Rachel Burr, Faculty of Education and English, the Open University, UK.

Dr. Karl Hanson, Associate Professor, Children's Rights Unit, University Institute Kurt Bosch, Sion, Switzerland.

Dr. Beatrice Hungerland, Professor of Childhood Studies, University of Applied Sciences, Magdeburg-Stendal, Germany.

Dr. Antonella Invernizzi, Research Consultant, France, and Honorary Research Fellow, Swansea University, UK.

Dr. Dieter Kirchofer, educationalist, independent researcher and consultant, guest professor at the University of Potsdam, Germany.

Dr. Madeleine Leonard, Professor, Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Dr. Deborah Levison, Professor, Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, USA.

Dr. Manfred Liebel, Professor, International Academy at the Free University of Berlin, and Scientific Coordinator of the European Network of Masters in Children's Rights.



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Dr. Jim McKechnie, Professor of Psychology, University of the West of Scotland, UK.  
Dr. Brian Milne, Children's Rights Research Consultant, UK and France.  
Dr. Phillip Mizen, Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, UK.  
Dr. Jeylan T. Mortimer, Professor of Sociology, University of Minnesota, USA.  
Dr. William E. Meyers, Visiting Scholar, Department of Human and Community Development, University of California, Davis, USA.  
Dr. Thomas A. Offit, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, Baylor University, USA.  
Dr. Ben White, Professor, International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands.  
Dr. Martin Woodhead, Professor of Childhood Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK.

### **MOLACNATs Statement: A Response to the Third Global Conference on Child Labor, Brasilia 2013**

We, the organized working children and adolescents of Latin America, based on our more than 30 years of experience at the local, national, and regional levels, want to express our opinion publicly in response to the new event promoted by the ILO, The Third Global Conference on Child Labor, which will occur from the 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> of October in Brasilia, Brazil. Our statement here draws on many years of lived experience, and on our own diverse realities, particularly on our experiences working in Latin America. Various cultural, social and economic factors shape and determine our work experiences and the ways that we, and our families, understand the role of work in our lives.

Our analysis and opinion presented here focuses on the preparatory documents for the event in Brazil: "Base Document of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Global Conference on Child Labor" and "Marking Progress Against Child Labor."

1. Despite the fact that they speak of open, democratic participation in the processes of preparation and consultation for these documents and for the event in Brazil, once more organized working children, who have direct experience with the topic of "child labor," have been excluded. In addition to being a violation of the principle of participation, expressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, our absence from these spaces of discussion and of the creation of policies, disallows the inclusion of alternative perspectives on what the ILO has acknowledged to be a complex and multi-faceted issue.
2. These preparatory documents claim that the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that child labor is "a violation of the human rights of the child." However, article 32 states explicitly children's right to be protected from **economic exploitation** and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous, to interfere with his or her education, or to be harmful to the

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child's health, or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. The language of the Convention clearly establishes that what needs to be combatted is economic exploitation in work, not work itself.

3. As with the event at The Hague in 2010, these documents use statistics on the quantity of working children at a global level that, from our perspective, do not correspond with reality. This is an important element to take into account when claims are being made regarding the supposed effectiveness of the policies that have been implemented under the logic of the gradual elimination of child labor. There are discrepancies amongst the various documents published from within the United Nations and the research studies conducted in individual countries, some of which have indicated that either the number of working children in the world has increased or that the decrease has been very small or non-existent. In this sense, and in response to the campaign launched in 2010 with the "Road Map" for abolishing the worst forms of child labor by 2016, we would argue that the results are not as positive as the preparatory documents suggest.
4. The ILO continues to base their reports on an assumed mechanical relationship between school desertion and children's work and/or the educational deficiencies of children who work and study at the same time. This is despite the fact that the presented statistics show that 70% of children who work also go to school, and other research has demonstrated that in many cases work is what enables us to continue to study, and that the experience of work also can be educational for us in many ways.
5. Our attention is also drawn to how the ILO addresses domestic work. On the one hand, domestic work is only included in their statistics when it is done in the homes of other people. On the other hand, when they make reference to the work that we do in our own homes, or with and for our own families, it is not included in the statistics and is often presented in a negative way. There is no consideration of how these practices are related to our cultures, or how they have positive elements like supporting our education or the construction of solidarity in our families. Furthermore, the statistics in this case are especially arbitrary and do not provide a global estimate of the labor done in our own homes, which would certainly considerably increase the number of children and adolescents who work.
6. We note that the ILO and those who are part of its international advocacy do not assume nor assign any responsibility for the crisis in the global economic system, nor for the consequences that the crisis has generated for the majority of the global population, whether they be adult, youth, and child workers. The Brasilia Base Document only states in an abstract and general way that, "the structure of the labor market... does influence the incidence of child labor in different ways. Firstly, the existence of an informal economy means that often a significant part of the economic and labor relationships escapes

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regulation and inspection by competent authorities, opening the way for the use and exploitation of the work force of children.”

7. The documents reflect a stigmatization of cultural patterns that, according to the studies, are determinants that increase the occurrence of child labor. This stigmatization and criticism of our cultures is used to explain and justify the failures of policies that not worked to eradicate child labor, such as cash transfer programs.

Finally, we would like to express to the society at large, that, as a social movement, we are committed to continuing to struggle to achieve the implementation of the rights of children and adolescents, in general, and working children and adolescents in particular, and to working together with other popular sectors for the creation of policies that can transform our world.

MOLACNATS  
September 30, 2013

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## VARIOUS PUBLICATIONS

- Some premises for reflection and social practices with working children and adolescents. Alejandro Cussianovich Villarán .
- Working Children Building an Identity  
Giangi Schibotto – Alejandro Cussianovich.

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