



War on Want

CAMPAIGN AGAINST WORLD POVERTY

Fenner Brockway House
37-39 Great Guildford St.
London SE1 0ES
Tel: 020 7620 1111
Fax: 020 7261 9291
www.waronwant.org
War on Want is a registered charity

Core Labour Standards: Enforcing Fundamental Freedoms

As the world enters a new era of global interconnection and interdependence, the need for international respect for workers' rights is more essential than ever. By promoting pro-poor growth and productivity, globalisation could benefit the poor and increase equity. But when labour standards are suppressed, liberalisation can have a negative impact on development and this is why it has often been associated with growing inequality. At the same time, globalisation offers workers from all over the world better opportunities for mutual support and solidarity. War on Want believes that better labour standards are crucial to re-directing globalisation to work in the interests of the poor.

Core Labour Standards and the ILO

Eighty years ago, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) was formed primarily to guarantee international standards to address "injustice, hardship and privation" in the workplace. Unfortunately, many of the injustices that existed then continue today. In some countries, trade unions are prohibited outright. Where trade unions are allowed, many workers face the threat of dismissal, assault, arrest, exile, and even murder. In 1998, the ILO laid down the basic rights that workers are entitled to everywhere as fundamental, inalienable and indivisible human rights. They are:

- Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining
- The elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour
- The abolition of the most hazardous forms of child labour
- The elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation

To guarantee global core labour standards the ILO has, so far, relied on incentives rather than penalties. It is often criticised for not having the 'teeth' to enforce core labour standards and this has led some to look at additional ways to ensure implementation.

'Social Clause' in the WTO?

There is a powerful movement to include a 'Social Clause' - trade sanctions protecting workers' rights - into the rules of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the global body that enforces trading rules. The WTO has the power to impose sanctions and many in the international trade union movement believe that this would help to enforce core labour standards. This is a controversial idea and many in developing countries fear that a Social Clause could be used for protectionism, allowing rich countries to keep developing country goods out by claiming they are produced in sub-standard working conditions. Poor states will need time to re-adjust and put into place measures to ensure that children, for instance, are able to take up their education and are not forced into more dangerous work in the informal sector.

At the last round of talks on trade at Seattle in 1999 the EU proposed the creation of a joint ILO/WTO Working Forum on trade, globalisation and labour issues to promote a dialogue between those involved. War on Want supports this move but believes that the WTO should

continued overleaf

be subordinate to other international institutions in instances where trade issues may have wider repercussions. The WTO should also undergo significant internal reform before it could become capable of supporting workers' rights. Although the organisation appears democratic on paper, the member countries of the WTO lack the resources and skills to properly represent their interests.

Empowering the ILO

Despite its lack of powers, the ILO is widely recognised as the organisation with the competence to police workers' rights globally. There is, however, provision in its constitution to compel countries in breach of fundamental workers' rights to comply. The recent case of Burma, where it is estimated that 800,000 people still work under forced labour, has illustrated the ILO's emerging powers. In November 2000, for the first time in its history, the ILO urged its 174 members to review their relations with Burma and advocated sanctions.

For some, the ILO action against Burma is a sign that the organisation will soon be a more effective regulator and enforcer of workers' rights. At the same time, many recognise that the ILO relies on its members for effectiveness, and ultimately that may mean imposing sanctions. However, such sanctions are only likely to be enforced in the most extreme circumstances.

Codes of Conduct

A popular suggestion for implementing core labour standards has been to encourage employers to implement workers' rights. Many Transnational Corporations (TNCs) have recently adopted 'codes of conduct', promising certain social and environmental standards, which often include workers' rights. However, this approach has been problematic as TNCs have found creative ways to evade their social codes, or in some cases, to ignore them altogether.

The UN has renewed efforts for self-regulation through the 'Global Compact'. Launched in 1999, the Global Compact embodies core values of human rights, environmental protection and core labour standards, that participating businesses pledge to uphold. But there has been a largely negative response to the Global Compact due to the absence, again, of outside enforcement.

Alternatives – Fair trade

There are other ways in which core labour standards can be protected. Alternative trading systems, such as those that produce 'fair-trade' products by offering growers a fair price for their goods have proven successful. But many argue that it is not an option available to most workers. There have even been attempts to co-ordinate an international fair trade label, though again the proposed monitoring systems have been questioned because of difficulties with outsiders monitoring working conditions.

Alternatives – Regulation

Recently, the European Union has taken measures to bring TNCs, rather than countries, to task over their social and environmental impact. If effective this could point the way to developing a new system of bringing corporations, rather than countries, under direct international accountability. There have also been moves to lobby public bodies to take account of workers' rights when procuring goods or services. Public procurement regulations in recent years have forced public bodies to examine 'best value' and 'market access' when procuring services, but have largely ignored the effects on workers around the world.

War on Want and Core Labour Standards

War on Want believes that workers should be allowed to organise to protect their own interests. This is why we support workers around the world by helping them to secure legal, political and other avenues towards implementing core labour standards. We can also help by campaigning to ensure companies realise their responsibilities and that governments hold them to account. Consumer pressure, trade union solidarity and political action can all help to implement workers' rights globally.

For further information contact Nick Dearden at War on Want on: 020 7620 1111 or ndearden@waronwant.org