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No school fun for child laborers

Tony Magliano | Aug. 20, 2012 Making a Difference

It's that special time of the year again -- at least for parents -- when kids start heading back to school. And for those who have discovered the joy of learning, school is an adventure.

But sadly, millions of children worldwide do not attend school. They will never learn to read or write. They will not acquire computer skills. They will not experience singing in chorus, going on field trips or playing at recess. Their classrooms will be sweatshops, farm fields and battlefields. Their days will be filled with long, dirty and dangerous work. And the lesson they will learn is that life is cruel and unfair.

According to the U.N.'s International Labour Organization, there are approximately 215 million child laborers ages 5 to 17 in the world. The organization defines child labor as "work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development."

Among all child laborers, approximately 115 million of them work in the worst forms of child labor, including slavery -- the sale and trafficking of children -- debt bondage, child prostitution and the production of child pornography, making and selling of drugs, forced armed conflict, and hazardous work that jeopardizes their physical, mental or moral well-being.

For example, a report from the labor organization, "The end of child labour: Millions of voices, one common hope," states that almost 1 million children work in small-scale mines and quarries.

"Children dig and haul ore out of underground mines, dive into rivers and flooded tunnels, and transport heavy materials," the report states. "They grind rock and mix it with mercury to extract gold. They pound rocks into gravel. They live in areas where soil, water and air may be contaminated with heavy metals. On a daily basis, they risk serious injury, chronic illness and even death."

Child labor exists largely because so many families are desperately poor. Countless parents throughout the world have no sustainable employment and no land to even grow food. They strive to scratch out some kind of an existence for their family. But their heroic efforts are not enough. Sadly, children must work, and often in terrible conditions at that, in order for the family to survive.

Some of the reasons millions of parents in the developing world cannot support their families, making child labor an unjust necessity, include: local governments unable or unwilling to provide assistance; wealthy nations selfishly giving less than 0.9 percent of their annual budget for international poverty-focused assistance; trade policies that often favor rich nations over poor countries; and multinational corporations like Wal-Mart that take unscrupulous advantage of sweatshop workers who make many of their products.

We can't let this continue. Together, we can stop all of this selfish injustice.

We can vote for compassionate politicians and urge sitting legislators to greatly increase international poverty-focused assistance; establish fair trade policies with all poor nations; stop subsidizing corporations like grain

commodity companies that undercut small businesses in the developing world; pass loophole-free legislation severely penalizing corporations that take advantage of sweatshop workers and give tax incentives to those companies that financially help their suppliers provide a living wage and decent working conditions for their employees.

And we can patronize Fair Trade-certified companies.

Furthermore, we can visit freethechildren.com [1] to learn about kids helping kids.

Let's tirelessly work for the day when cruel and dangerous children's work gives way to schoolwork and homework.

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist.]

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