

# The real world of work – no place for the faint-hearted



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Around the world, two hundred and fifty million children work outside the family home. Most are at serious risk of injury or abuse. As globalisation gathers pace, more than eighty million migrants and refugees are exploited in precarious work across scores of countries. Some die, like the Chinese who drowned off England's north coast earlier this year while picking cockles. Almost all work in awful conditions. In many parts of the world, people are killed or imprisoned when they organise collectively to seek or defend basic rights at work. All of this employment is hidden from scrutiny and labour regulation. It is exempt from what most of us regard as basic safeguards for civilized employment.

The International Labour Organisation [ILO] is focusing on four main areas in its quest for decent work as a global goal. First and foremost, it calls for an urgent rethink on the way globalisation is governed. It wants far more recognition of current imbalances in the international system and greater emphasis on social issues, rather than the present dominance of economic factors. A detailed policy position is set out in its report *A fair globalisation: creating opportunities for all*.

Second, the ILO urges greater recognition of collective bargaining and freedom of association. Its report *Organising for social justice* paints a cautiously optimistic picture, balancing acknowledgement of progress with concern that some countries still have much to do. There is strong emphasis on collective bargaining's economic benefits with transparent wage determination creating the stability and certainty necessary for effective investment decisions. The ILO identifies genuine progress since its 2000 collective bargaining report, with more widespread acceptance of the benefits of bargaining and freedom of association. But far too many people still do not enjoy these rights.

Third, exploitation of migrants and refugees remains a major problem. In the past decade their numbers have grown by an average of six million each year. They now total one hundred and seventy million. More than half are engaged in some form of paid work. If international migrants were seen as one population, they would make up the world's fifth most populous country. Their number will continue to grow rapidly as more and more people are displaced by globalisation's failure to provide jobs and economic opportunities for millions in developing countries. Many more will be forced to cross borders in search of jobs and security. While some skilled migrants do find quality jobs in hi-tech industries, most must settle for low status work with little legal protection against exploitation.

The next ILO conference will discuss options for a more-integrated approach to employment of migrant workers. International labour migration is a highly-complex problem that presents real difficulties for policymakers. For all that, the ILO's analysis [*Towards a fair deal for migrant workers in the global economy*] confirms many positive effects of migrant employment. It provides large capital inflows to the country of origin. At close to \$US100 billion annually, this is the second-largest source of external funding for developing countries, according to the World Bank. And the overall economic effect of immigration on receiving countries is clearly positive too. Migrants rejuvenate populations and stimulate growth without inflation. There are, however, major brain-drain difficulties for some countries. More of Jamaica and Ghana's trained doctors, for example, are working outside their countries than in them.

Fourth, child labour remains a huge blot on the world's employment landscape. It is a widespread and growing global phenomenon. It traps millions of children in hidden forms of exploitation, often involving abuse, health risks and violence. But the recent ILO report *Helping hands or shackled lives [understanding child domestic labour and responses to it]* also shows that some progress is being made. By ratifying ILO Convention N° 182, more countries are committing to prohibit and eliminate the worst forms of child labour. This Convention is enjoying the fastest ratification rate in the ILO's ninety-year history. More than 150 countries have already committed to it. In parallel, ILO Convention N° 138, which sets out a minimum age framework for eventual abolition of child labour, has also been receiving a surge in ratifications. Shamefully, Australia is the only developed country that has ratified neither Convention on child labour.

This is the daunting reality confronting the International Labour Organisation as it seeks to develop its Decent Work Project. It puts into perspective our own grumbling about problems at work. But it should also give pause to those in Australia who loudly and routinely equate all 'regulation' with inefficiency. And it should make everyone stop and think about how globalisation can be harnessed so that more of the world's people gain the benefits. As a speaker at the recent ILO Conference in Geneva said: 'There is no point to a globalisation that reduces the price of a child's shoes, but costs her father his job'.

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