

OPINION

Child labor: What to do?

BY STEVE CHARNOVITZ

Recent exposes about the use of child labor in factories overseas have raised anew the question of what should be done to address this egregious problem. Democratic congressional leaders are advocating a ban on imports made with child labor in violation of foreign laws. The European Commission and the U.S. government are pressing the World Trade Organization to consider labor rights at a ministerial meeting this December. Responding to consumer pressure, many employers are taking steps to stop using child labor in foreign plants.

More than 100 million children work in developing countries. Sometimes these children are under 10 years of age. The worst abusers are Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Thailand. Child labor is regularly used to make carpets, apparel, coffee, tea and toys for export.

The first efforts to stop factories from employing children occurred in Austria in 1786. By the early 20th

century, policy-makers recognized the benefits of creating international standards. At its first conference in 1919, the International Labour Organization approved treaties setting a minimum age in industry and regulating night work by children. The following year, the ILO persuaded Persia to prevent child labor in carpet factories.

To draw a line between reasonable and unreasonable work, the most recent ILO convention (of 1973) provides that children over 13 may engage in light work when this is not harmful to their health and does not prevent their attendance at school. Similar principles are included in the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (of 1989), which declares that children should be protected from hazardous work or employment that will interfere with education or social development.

International standards are

one thing: current practices are another. Human rights groups have documented the existence of bonded labor, whipping, dangerous workplaces and other instances of child abuse. Some economists defend child labor on the grounds that this may be the best option available to impoverished families. Yet this begs the question of the proper regulatory role for government. Of all individuals, it is children who most require paternalism.

Producers should be responsible for the ramifications of their actions. Some American companies using foreign plants, such as The Gap and Levi Strauss, have taken commendable steps to scrutinize garment

not accepted by the House.

An import ban would also address only half of the problem. Last year, a special government commission in Australia issued a report finding that "in the context of extreme poverty, simply removing children from factories does not guarantee that they will not end up destitute or forced into worse employment."

International aid and technical assistance will only work if developing-country governments want to ameliorate their current practices. Yet in many countries, the plight of child workers (particularly girls) is of little concern to government and business elites.

Despite the push by the

Clinton administration, it seems unlikely that the December WTO conference in Singapore will address worker rights. Many Asian countries object to such a discussion on the grounds that worker rights should not be linked to trade policy. Yet the most vociferous objectors are of-

ten governments that routinely violate ILO standards in their quest for greater exports.

Labor unions would like the WTO to incorporate rules for worker rights in the same way that the WTO has incorporated rules for intellectual property rights. That's not going to happen.

But even without new rules, there is a beneficial role for the WTO. It should cooperate with the ILO on issues like social labeling and child labor in export processing zones. Action by trade ministers would also be useful in building bridges to human rights, labor, religious and consumer groups, which typically feel alienated from the WTO. The more public support for free trade, the better.



"It would make me very happy if you would stop whistling!"

suppliers and their labor practices. But there is a limit to how much individual companies can do in a highly competitive market.

Consumers may also feel a responsibility for the harm brought about by their purchasing decisions. Social labels on goods can help consumers make informed choices. For example, the Rugmark program in India certifies that no children under 14 wove the carpet. While voluntary labels would seem to be consistent with international trade rules, government programs to require social or eco-labels might run afoul of them.

Any law to ban imports of products made with child labor would definitely be viewed as a violation of trade rules. No nation has ever enacted such a law. In 1913, the U.S. Senate approved an import ban on child-made goods as part of the Underwood Tariff, but it was