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Ending the Exploitation of Child Labor

“We're establishing the first-ever United States government purchasing ban on goods made by forced or indentured child labor. And we've beefed up enforcement to stop the importation of goods made by such labor.” [Clinton, Bill]The beginning of the end is in sight for child labor and we've only reached the tip of the iceberg. The national economy rests on big business for support and fluctuates when business does. The success of big business in America is based on their ability to exploit foreign child labor. At the same time, there are extreme efforts to defeat child labor coming from the United States. Under-aged and underpaid children are all around the world and are an example of the deterioration of worldwide human rights.

There are 250 million children working around the world and a large part of them are employees of American companies {O'Shaughnessy}. Most of these kids are forced into full time shifts because of their extreme poverty at a young age. This cycle of working and not receiving any education is one that keeps these families in poverty. Kids as young as four and five are involved in Nike foreign production lines [Azam], and others of the same age are making footballs for countless hours a day, six days a week. With 44% of Nike's revenue was generated by sales in the U.S. [Co. Overview], child labor plays an important part in the American economy. Nike was recently accused of having it's Michael Jordan line of shoes made in Indonesia by eleven year olds for 14 cents an hour [Working People].These companies know the situations these kids are coming from and can afford paying them less than a fiftieth of what the minimum wage in the U.S. is. Knowing that children have little organization and aren't in the position to argue with getting paid, companies can take advantage of them and exploit their poverty.

Companies are of course looking to make a profit on their product, and to do that they need to minimize all other expenses used to create that product. When they can stay in the U.S. and pay their employees minimum wage which is seven dollars an hour, or relocate to other countries [i.e. Indonesia] and pay employees 20 cents an hour; they can save a lot of money. Practically all clothing brands sold in the U.S. are manufactured in foreign countries and some feel that these companies are providing a better life for those in need of work.

“Why is it unconscionable for a poor country to allow child labor? Pakistan has a per capita income of \$1,900 per year- meaning that the typical person subsists on barely \$5 per day. Is it a revelation-or a crime- that some parents willingly send their children off to work in a factory to survive? Is it cruel for Nike to give them the chance?” [Azam]

Azam is basically destroying any idea of being able to stop child labor, only siding with the company in their exploitation of these poor kids. Companies have found a way to make this situation sound nice and agreeable to the American people who don't take the time to look past their words and into the trouble behind it. Teens are beginning to become more educated about this whole situation and are reacting to it, described in what this New York student says:

“As the future of the country, we teenagers feel it is important to make a stand against what we believe is wrong with the world. Sweatshops are one of those things. They are not improving the lives of anyone. They are propagating exploitation and poverty.” [O'Shaughnessy]

Being part of an age group that is a large target of Nike products, the revolt of teenagers would definitely bring Nike to their knees. All it takes is some organization skills and a lot of support and a decrease or end to child labor could come soon. You might be thinking to yourself “Well, what if Nike doesn't make enough money to pay American workers?” Nike reported revenues of 10.7 billion dollars in 2003 [Co. Overview] and

remember, 44% of that was generated inside of the United States. The American citizens deserve a little gratitude and some of those jobs should be located in the U.S. and given the many unemployed we have here.

So what are people doing to stop child labor? Well, you can go back to the early 1800's when children and women worked 16 hour days under harsh conditions. To solve this problem, people fought to earn better hours for both women and children, and better working conditions. [Hardy] If we fast forward to modern times and see what's happening now, you may be disappointed. One of the ideas presented is the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade [GATT] which is presently enforced by the World Trade Organization [WTO], this would prohibit the U.S. from the importation of products made by child labor. This seems like it would put pressure on another country to try and eliminate child labor, yet it wouldn't work because the company there wouldn't be under any pressure. A method I believe would work for solving this problem would be to boycott the company in that country and make them change their ways. Recently in New York, a Sweat-free Sports Equipment Law has passed and gives authority to New York's 720 school districts and 84 public colleges to consider the health and well being of the workers who make sports equipment as purchasing decisions are made. The Sweat-free Schools Coordinator for the New York State Labor-Religion Coalition says:

"The hundreds of thousands of New York State students who benefit from athletic programs in their schools and colleges must no longer do so at the expense of children and other workers employed by irresponsible manufacturers." [O'Shaughnessy]

This move by the New York school districts is important and a milestone in the fight against foreign child labor. It's good to know that such a large move is being made by an influential place and it may persuade others to do the same. This is exactly how to get these companies out of other countries and back into the U.S.

Manufacturers and big companies are located all over the world with countless foreign “employees”. The problem of stopping child labor is huge and can’t be tackled all at once, but one step at a time. With more efforts from large purchasers of sports products in the United States, the problem can be solved over time. I’ve really realized the massiveness of this situation and the truth behind the words of the companies located in those foreign countries.

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