

HOW TO END CHILD LABOR IN US TOBACCO FIELDS

by

Baldemar Velasquez

President, Farm Labor Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO

Human Rights Watch released a report documenting child labor in US tobacco fields throughout North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia, where 90% of the country's tobacco is grown. The report documents serious health problems among the children working in the fields, some as young as 7 years old, along with dangerous working conditions, long hours and low pay. This report comes as no surprise. The issue of child labor in agriculture will not go away as long as farmworkers remain part of a shadow work force.

It is good to strengthen child labor laws as this will set the bar. However, in and of themselves stronger laws will not solve the problem of child labor. Children have to work in tobacco to help their families to survive because their parents don't earn living wages. Taking children out of this work can create problems for farm worker families. It decreases the family's needed income, it creates a day care problem for the parents, it disrupts housing and acreage assignments that many times allow a family to secure employment.

And replacing child workers with undocumented, exploited migrant workers is not the solution.

If child labor is to be eliminated, we really have to address all these issues, which leads us to the heart of the problem.

The only effective way to end child labor is to extend long denied labor rights of freedom of association and right to bargain to farm workers. Given that opportunity, the farm workers themselves will use collective bargaining to address precarious wages, job insecurity and the impact of poverty and hunger, as well as child labor. In the US, where farm workers are organized and bargain collectively, there is no child labor.

A more relevant legislative effort to end child labor is to extend labor rights to agricultural workers. Many tobacco companies and leaf merchants have "codes of conduct" and "protocols" that refer to the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights, but these have no application in reality. There is nothing that guarantees freedom of association without retaliation in the tobacco fields.

In 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law the National Labor Relations Act when we still had child labor in the mines and mills of America. Agricultural workers were excluded from that law. It is time to modernize labor relations in agriculture and give farm workers and small farmers the right to bargain with the corporations who use their labor. The federal government and Congress must take concrete steps to guarantee freedom of association to farm workers.

The tobacco companies and leaf merchants have a responsibility to put into practice the human rights protocols they espouse including the elimination of child labor and freedom of association and not waiting for government action. The Dunlop Agricultural Workers Commission provides a structure and process that allows for freedom of association to move ahead in US tobacco fields. FLOC invites the tobacco companies and leaf merchants to become part of the Dunlop Agricultural Workers Commission which establishes a National Labor Relations Board by private agreement; and through freedom of association child labor in the US tobacco fields will be eliminated once and for all.

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For more information about FLOC please visit: www.floc.com or contact FLOC President Baldemar Velasquez at 419.243.3456 x 1.