

Interview:

Fighting forced labour: ILO launches new programme

Roger Plant, who heads the ILO Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour (SAP-FL), has worked in the human rights area for many years and has served as an advisor on human rights to UN, government and non-governmental organizations, as well as the private sector. He is the author of *Sugar and Modern Slavery*, a study on the plight of Haitian migrant workers in the Dominican sugar industry. He spoke to the *World of Work* about the new ILO programme

What exactly is forced labour?

The most widely used definition is, in essence, labour which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily. Traditionally, people have thought about this with the penalty being physical harm or constraint B which it often is B but in recent decades there's also been a much better appreciation of some of the other types of penalties that can coerce people; for example, being in debt with your employer, confiscating identity documents, or threatening various reprisals if you don't work for him.

Are things getting better or worse?

There is a wide range of practices, some of which are getting worse. The trafficking of women and children B mainly for prostitution and domestic service, but also sweatshop work B has increased dramatically throughout the world in the last ten years. Millions of people live and work in conditions of debt bondage in many countries throughout south Asia and Central and South America. Forced labour in the form of coercive recruitment is present in many countries of Latin America and in parts of the Caribbean, as well as elsewhere.

So is this purely linked to poverty?

No. For a start, forced labour is a truly global phenomenon; very few states are fully exempt. It's certainly not just a problem involving developing countries as people often assume. In the wealthier countries you find vulnerable migrant workers, often women and even children, who are subject to coercive treatment at the hands of intermediaries or employment agents in the shadow economy. In Europe, for example, there has been an explosion of trafficking since the breakup of the former Soviet Union. And the problem of trafficking links networks of countries B most countries in the world are sending, transit or receiving countries, or a combination of all these.

And who's to blame B governments?

Sometimes, but not usually. Unlike the mass forced labour of the past century, exacted first for economic purposes by colonial powers, then for political purposes by totalitarian regimes, most modern forced labour is not exactly directed by states. There are some exceptions to this. But most modern forced labour is exacted largely by individuals and enterprises acting outside

national law by feudal landlords or criminal elements who trap people in coercive labour conditions. However, governments do have a clear responsibility to stamp out forced labour and punish those responsible.

Is there enough public awareness of this problem?

No, not nearly enough. Neither the general public, nor most specialists in human rights and development organizations, have a real grasp of the dimensions and gravity of forced labour in the modern world. That is why in its first year our new programme is giving high priority to awareness raising, to sensitize public opinion as to the reality of modern forced labour and trafficking for labour exploitation, and how to combat them.

How has the ILO previously dealt with forced labour?

For a long time the ILO has addressed problems of forced labour through its regular supervisory machinery; the two forced labour Conventions after all are among the most ratified Conventions. It's also undertaken major Commissions of Enquiry, the most prominent example being Myanmar. Yet, in June of last year, we issued the first global report on forced labour, a report which had some key but disturbing messages, and which highlights the need for a special programme. A wide range of activities are now taking place: to identify the problem, develop the national consensus to tackle it, and develop the specific programmes to eliminate it.

Can you give some specific examples?

In Nepal and Pakistan, for example, with ILO support, sample studies and surveys are under-way to identify the true extent of the problem and the most effective strategies to tackle it. In West Africa, several member States have agreed to a comprehensive research programme, focusing in particular on the forced labour practices associated with traditional and chiefly systems. We've also got a project in Brazil assisting the Government's Mobile Inspection Units to secure the release of workers trapped in forced labour situations, and generally to improve law enforcement.

What about in some of the destination areas, such as Europe?

There's a lot to do. We have to alert public opinion to the very real danger of a rising incidence of forced labour affecting both irregular migrant workers in the shadow economy, and young women and children in the sex sector. We also need to have appropriate sanctions imposed on labour traffickers and smugglers, and to provide alternative forms of livelihood.

There is potential to get things moving at the moment; both irregular migration and trafficking are currently high on the European political agenda, and while the main focus has been on trafficking for sexual exploitation, there is a growing realization that trafficking for labour exploitation can be a serious problem.

Why have a special programme to tackle forced labour?

The experience of the ILO and UNICEF with child labour over the past decade has already demonstrated the effectiveness of strategies which combine data gathering and analysis with practical assistance to the governments ready to address the problems. I believe that the world

is now ready for a similar approach on forced labour.

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