

Name:

Hard at Work

By Ritu Upadhyay. Reported by Lucien Chauvin/Ecuador

Ten-year-old Wilbur Carreno is less than four feet tall and weighs only 50 pounds. He is small for his age. That's exactly what makes him good at his job.

Wilbur spends his afternoons climbing banana trees four times his height. He expertly ties the heavy stalks of bananas so the trees won't droop from the weight of the fruit. "I've been working since I was 8," he told TFK. "I finish school at noon and then go to the field."

In Wilbur's poor country of Ecuador, one in every four children is working. An estimated 69,000 kids toil away on the vast banana plantations along the country's coast. Ecuador is the world's largest banana exporter. Kids working in the industry are exposed to harmful chemicals, pull loads twice their weight, and use sharp, heavy knives.

Do Kids Belong on the Job?

Child labor is certainly not limited to Ecuador. The United Nations estimates that 250 million kids around the world are forced to work. Many countries don't have laws limiting kids' work.

A concerned group called Human Rights Watch conducted a study of Ecuador's banana plantations last April. They found that most children begin working on plantations around age 10. Their average workday lasts 12 hours! By age 14, 6 out of 10 no longer attend school. Many families face the difficult choice of either putting food on their tables or sending their kids to school.

The family of Alejandro, 12, struggles with that choice. Alejandro has had to work beside his father, Eduardo Sinchi, on a plantation. "I don't want my kids to work," says Sinchi. "I want them in school, but we have few options." Sinchi has nine children and earns as little as \$27 a week. "It isn't even enough for food, let alone school, clothes, transportation."

Hard Work for Little Pay

Sinchi's pay is typical in Ecuador. The average banana worker earns just \$6 a day. One reason pay is so low is that Ecuadorians are not allowed to form work groups called unions. In countries like Costa Rica, where laws allow unions, some banana workers earn \$11 a day. Such countries have fewer child workers because better pay means parents can afford to keep their kids in school.

Ecuador's big banana companies have begun to do something about child labor. Last year, they signed an agreement not to hire kids younger than 15 and to protect young workers from chemicals. "We need to eliminate child labor," says Jorge Illingworth, of Ecuador's Banana Exporters Association. But small plantations did not sign the agreement, and, he says, they employ 70% of the kids.

Banning child labor is a start, but it doesn't really help families like the Sinchis. Now that Alejandro can't work, his family suffers more. The answer, most believe, is better pay for Ecuador's adult workers. For that to happen, U.S. shoppers would have to put up with higher banana prices or stop buying Ecuador's bananas to make their point. Guillermo Touma fights to help Ecuador's workers. "If we could raise awareness," he says, "we could raise wages and invest in education for our children."

From *TIME for Kids* January 24, 2003 Vol. 8 No. 14

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From the pages of

TIME
FOR KIDS