

Take Steps Against Child Labor
By AILEEN SMEDY
Los Angeles correspondent

It's estimated that 250 million children around the world are forced to work in factories, mines, prostitution, domestic work and agriculture every day. Some are sold by their families while others are abducted and forced into servitude. Some are as young as 5.

In June, representatives from almost every country in the world will convene in Geneva for the International Labor Organization's Summit on Child Labor.

The intent of the ILO's conference is to write and adopt new international laws to eliminate the most extreme forms of child labor. To attract attention to this issue, the Global March Against Child Labor began in the Philippines on Jan. 17. A core group of marchers, including children, human rights activists, celebrities and several former child workers, are simultaneously making their way across four continents — Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas — before meeting in Geneva.

What began as a group of 27 people from 17 countries in February last year has grown to a coalition of more than 800 major human rights and social organizations, trade unions and NGOs in 99 countries representing well over 200 million people. Many heads of state and government officials have welcomed the march, and local residents have turned out to join marchers along the way.

"The response has been overwhelming," said Pharis Harvey of the International Labor Rights Fund, one of the founding organizations. "Once you talk with people, you find that they are desperate to find something better for their children."

Most people are against child labor, and most countries have laws protecting children. The problem, however, exists in the enforcement of these laws. "In Indonesia, for example," said Harvey, "it's illegal for children under age 15 to work, except if they come from poor families. That's the loophole, the rich don't send their children to work."

The marchers have been speaking to local groups, addressing the media, rallying, and even running as they did last month in Beaufort West, South Africa. Said one reporter, "The energy and vitality of the children was visible and seemed to be infectious as the elders joined in the run as well." In the town of Mendoza, Argentina, marchers were honored with the title Illustrious Visitors upon their arrival. Communities along the route have welcomed the marchers with concerts, plays and traditional dances.

The march will enter the United States on May 2 in Los Angeles, then continue across the country to Washington, D.C., before leaving for Geneva on May 28. For those too young or unable to march, but who want to support, the Kids Campaign To Build A School for Iqbal and the Robert F. Kennedy Center are hosting a Young People's Online March Against Child Labor. They hope to get 3,000 online messages against child labor collected to represent a symbolic 3,000-mile march across the United States. Already they have received more than 2,000 messages.

The address to walk a virtual mile against child labor is <http://www.globalmarch-us.org>. The international Web site with updates and locations is located at <http://www.globalmarch.org>.

WT