

Living and Working Conditions: Child Labour in the Coal Mines of Columbia

Sastre, Beatriz S. Cespedes, and Maria-Isabel Zarama V. Meyer (2000) Living and Working Conditions: Child Labour in the Coal Mines of Columbia. Ed. Bernard Schlemmer. *The exploited Child*: 83-92.

According to the authors, Beatriz S. Cespedes Sastre and Maria-Isabel Zarama V. Meyer, the use of children as laborers will create poverty and slow economic development. They address this issue in their article *Living and Working Conditions: Child Labour in the Coal Mines of Columbia*.

In Columbia, there are different sizes of mines. The sizes range between large-scale mines to small-scale mines. Large-scale mines are safer because they use high-tech equipment and are operated legally, by the laws of the country. On the other hand, small-sale mines are rustic and un-safe. The use of manual labor in place of equipment makes it dangerous for the workers. These small scale-mines often illegally use children for workers.

Many of the small collieries (coal mines) are owned and operated by families. Children are used to work within these mines; because of their small size they can fit into smaller tunnels (in contrast to adult workers, where the tunnels need to be significantly larger). Nevertheless, how does this the slow economy? These small collieries are dangerous, poor ventilation creates toxic air that the children constantly breathe. This toxic air leaves many children with life-long sicknesses. Due to a weakened immune system, the children contract “parasites, calorie and protein deficiencies, anemia, avitaminosis, and rooting teeth.” Other common illnesses are influenza, and tonsillitis.

As well as the internal medical problems of the children, they have visible deformities. Skin diseases and rashes are common. Along with these skin diseases are hostile work environments and work accidents. In work related accidents, the children may lose fingers, hands, eyes, ears, or in the worst-case scenario their lives.

Although the children experience this danger in the mines, they are more willing to work than go to school. From their perspective, school is seen as a waste of time. Why go to school when they can start earning money at the age of six? Children will not receive money to go to school. With their limited time, many children try to fit in schooling, mining, and working in the fields, but they always wish for more time in the mine.

As with every country, its future rests on the shoulders of their children. If their shoulders are bent and deformed, how are they to become a developed country? If all they ever learn is how to mine, how will they improve their economical situation?

The authors conclude this paper with steps that the Columbian government has taken to get children back into school. The results have been successful. Already the economy has improved. As long as the children keep making progress, the country will progress as well.

(This summary was taken from a paper written by Sarah Wright a student at USU)

