

# Labour savers

Teachers around the world are being mobilised in the fight against child labour. **Steve Packer** reports.

**E**ducation International general secretary Fred van Leeuwen speaks for the hopes and survival of hundreds of millions of children when he says: “Where education is up, child labour is down. Where education is down, child labour is up.”

Van Leeuwen and his EI colleagues have been making a lot of dramatic statements like that all over the world in recent months. The Brussels-based organisation—of which the AEU is one of 400 affiliated unions in more than 170 countries—has been campaigning for the rights of children for a long time. It has an especially central role this year because the power of education was made the theme of the International Labour Organisation’s World Day Against Child Labour on 12 June, with the slogan “Education is the right response to child labour”.

EI has put the emphasis on mobilising the 30 million teachers it represents by making them more aware of how they can help. It is stressing that, after the parents, teachers are in the best position to know when and why a child drops out of school and to ensure practical measures are taken to get them back into the classroom.

“It has taken the world a long

time to recognise children as people, with rights, articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child,” EI deputy general secretary Jan Eastman told a conference in Geneva in June. “This is still not the case for 218 million children under the age of 18 involved in child labour, and 72 million not in school at all—the majority of whom are girls.

“Poverty, education and child labour are inextricably linked. While a root cause is poverty, the way out is through education.”

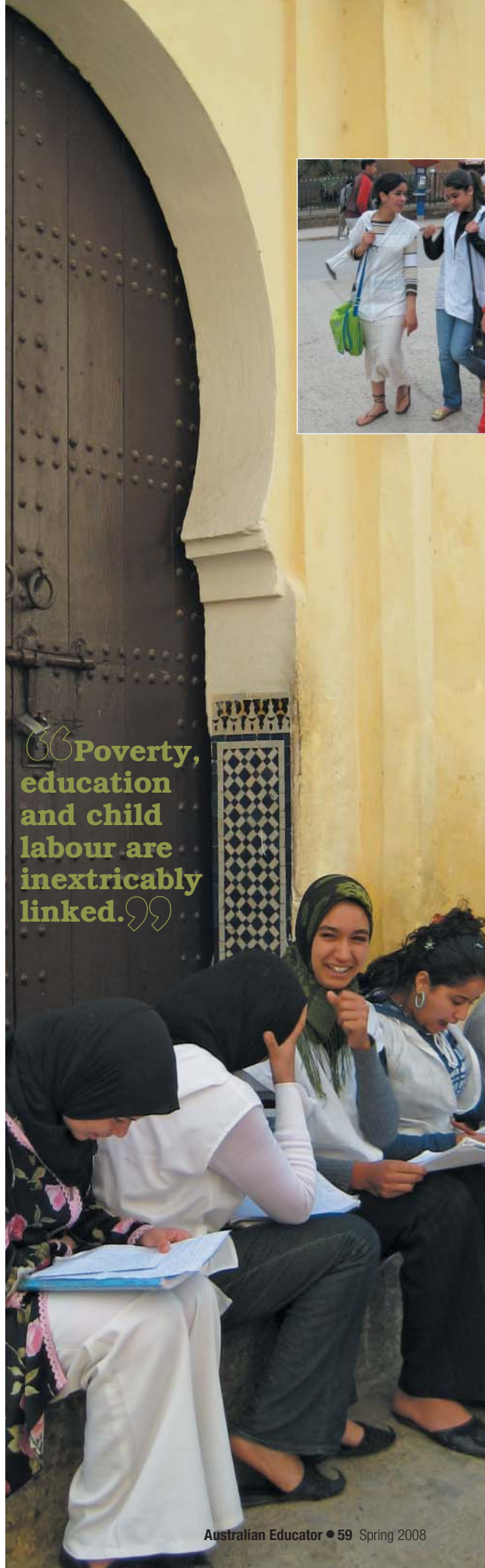
EI’s message is that quality public education which is free, compulsory, accessible and child-friendly is an effective strategy for preventing child labour and rehabilitating children who have already been subjected to it.

“Girls face double or even triple jeopardy, especially in rural settings,” says Eastman. “They often labour in the family home long after the day’s work. Societal attitudes and traditional practices still serve to exclude girls from education.”

## Death sentence

In many countries, from Albania to Morocco to Zaire, children are being put to work in agriculture and industry, and as domestic servants, trash collectors and street hawkers. In some cases, leaving

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a great deal by talking about the issue and mobilising to lobby governments for monitoring and good quality education for all."

### Dropped out at 12

EI's 10-minute documentary *No to Child Labour! Yes to Education!* tells the story of Sara, a 14-year-old Moroccan girl, who dropped out of school at 12 to become a live-in domestic servant for a wealthy family. Her own family could barely afford to feed her, let alone buy textbooks.

The situation is common in Morocco where most child domestics work 14-18 hours a day, seven days a week, for wages of less than US12 cents an hour. Officially, education is compulsory until age 16 and the minimum age for work is 15. But each year up to 320,000 Moroccan children quit school to work in domestic service, agriculture, handicraft industries and worse forms of labour.

Poverty is the main problem, but it is compounded by illiteracy, says EI communications officer Nancy Knickerbocker. More than 80 per cent of Moroccan women in the countryside and 60 per cent in the

met with her mother, Sara returned to school with the assurance that her clothes, books and other educational materials would be paid for under the Dutch program. She is now a conscientious student who earns high marks and dreams of becoming a paediatrician.

### Escaping poverty

Fred van Leeuwen has been telling another story: "Some time ago I had a dinner conversation with the chief executive officer of a Dutch brewery with plants all over south Asia. He talked about their booming business in Vietnam and Cambodia, casually mentioning his company's employment of children. I was startled. I protested. 'But we are saving these children,' he said. 'We employ them and provide basic schooling at the same time. We give them the education you people are unable to provide. Without us, they would be working in the fields with no future.'

"We were both wrong," says van Leeuwen. "I was wrong because these young children were indeed given a real opportunity to escape poverty. He was wrong because children's education should not depend on them being employed by his company.

"Few would disagree today that children should be learning, not working. No longer can we accept that the coffee we drink, the carpets we walk on or the shoes we wear should be produced at some point in the supply chain by child labour." ●

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school can be like a death sentence. When children are left to a life on the streets they can be easily influenced by drugs or criminals, or trafficked in prostitution. In war zones they are forced to bear arms and fight, with the prospects of being killed or injured or suffering psychological damage from the horrors they are made to commit and witness.

Even in Australia and other developed countries, child labour is an issue. "The problem is very widespread and it's not possible to say it doesn't exist in any country," says Donatella Montaldo, EI's child rights co-ordinator. "Some children can be victims of the trafficking phenomenon and forced into prostitution, crime or to work as domestic servants. A lot of child labour is hidden in developed countries."

In terms of sheer numbers, the biggest problem is in Asia. Proportionally, it's Africa.

According to the ILO, the most progress in reducing child labour has been made in Latin America.

"Teacher unions worldwide have been very active and successful in this year's campaign," says Montaldo, "with more than 30 countries involved and plenty of activity, including awareness-raising through street marches, meetings with education ministers, press releases and prepared documents.

"We're receiving more and more information from all over the world. We're coming to better understand the nature and magnitude of the problem. As teacher unionists, we can do

Every year, instead of continuing their education, 320,000 Moroccan children quit school to work.

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cities are illiterate. For men, the illiteracy rates are 50 and 40 per cent respectively. "Parents often can't comprehend the value of education for their children's life chances, and how vital it is to breaking the cycle of poverty," says Knickerbocker.

Three Dutch organisations, including the teachers' union AOb, are funding a program to tackle the issue by targeting Moroccan teachers, schools, families and politicians.

Sara's school principal knew about her plight because she used to visit his house to do homework with his daughter. After the principal and Sara's teachers

### Resources

- Education International reports: [www.ei-ie.org](http://www.ei-ie.org)
- No to Child Labour! Yes to Education!: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q\\_b3RFRBrLw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_b3RFRBrLw)