
Ukraine: child labour in mining

In Ukraine, most legally-operated coal mines closed down following the break-up of the Soviet Union. Yet many families still dig for coal in illegal mines and children are expected to work, too. The International Labour Organization is working together with trade unions and the government to put an end to child labour and create new jobs.

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Dima is 15 years old and like most of his friends, his after school activity is spent digging in the abandoned mines around the Donbass mining district in Ukraine. He does it to earn money for his family.

Dima

(What do you parents do?)

My mother doesn't work. She has 2 small children. Father has left us.

Along with his grandmother's small pension, Dima's work supports 5 people.

Dima

(How much money do you bring to the family?)

All the money that I earn here.

(How much do you get in a month?)

Between 30 and 60 dollars.

Dima's family is typical in this region where half of the legally-operated mines have closed down. The loss of jobs and lowered wages has caused many families to turn to illegal small scale mines or "Kopankas" to survive. Coal is very near the surface in this region of Ukraine, so a kopanka can be started anywhere.

Myhail Volynets: Independent Union of Miners, Ukraine

There are so-called family mines. These are mines dug out of vegetable gardens, in the kitchen gardens of houses and grounds or, for example, in the cellar/basement of the house. It might be a burrow about 10-15 or more meters in depth and in such mines, husband, wife and all the family members including children, work.

There are at least 800 illegal coal mines and probably more, where children work alongside adults in what the International Labour Organization has called one of the most dangerous workplaces in the modern world. Owners of illegal mines recruit small teams of miners who work without fixed hours in unsafe working conditions using primitive hand-made instruments. Even the simplest

safety measures: emergency exits, ventilation, gas detectors and ceiling reinforcements are missing.

The new government is making a special effort to stop these illegal mines and the use of child labour by creating new kinds of jobs in the region.

Pavlo Rozenko, Government minister, Ukraine

In 2005, we hope to create 100,000 jobs, and these are not necessarily connected to mining. Only 3% of those jobs will be connected to coal mining. We want people to see that there are alternatives in other spheres of the economy.

For Dima and his friends, those alternatives may finally slam the door shut on child labour.

Tags: child labour, hazardous work

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