

Bush to Press Free Trade in a Place Where Young Children Still Cut the Cane

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CHIMALTENANGO, [Guatemala](#), March 11 — Work starts early for the people of the Guatemalan countryside, sometimes as early as 5 or 6. Not the time, the age.



Guatemalan children shine shoes and make bricks. They cut cane and mop floors. At some factories exporting to the United States, they sew and sort and chop, often in conditions so onerous they violate even Guatemala's very loose labor laws.

"They like us young people because we don't say anything when they yell at us," said Alma de los Ángeles Zambrano, 15, who recently quit after 18 months at a food processing plant to work part time for an organization trying to improve conditions for young workers.

President Bush is likely to miss this side of Guatemala's labor market when he comes to this rural area on Monday to visit a thriving agricultural cooperative that sells products to Wal-Mart's stores in Central America. The president will meet with Mariano Canú, the leader of a United States-backed co-op that hopes to take advantage of the Central American Free Trade Agreement. Mr. Canú is doing well enough that his children are in school preparing for Guatemala's new economy.

Opening up trade, Mr. Bush argues, will ultimately raise wages and improve working conditions in Central America. “My message to those *trabajadores y campesinos*,” Mr. Bush said last week, using the Spanish words for workers and peasants, “is you have a friend in the United States of America. We care about your plight.”

But this country’s young workers, most of them poor indigenous people, say they often feel that nobody cares about them: not their parents, who send them off to the work force; not their stern bosses, who treat them like adults; not the dysfunctional government off in Guatemala City.

“It’s a major concern,” said Manuel Manrique, [Unicef’s](#) representative in Guatemala. “Child labor keeps children out of school. The numbers are very high and there’s a social acceptance in this country that child labor is O.K.”

None of the child workers interviewed around here said they had yet felt any benefits of Cafta, as the trade pact is known, which Guatemala signed nearly two years ago and which slipped through the United States Congress by a hair. One provision in Cafta, which is intended to increase trade by eliminating tariff and nontariff barriers, requires companies to adhere to local labor laws and commits the United States to helping improve inspections.

But that is easier said than done. Guatemala’s labor code sets the minimum age for employment at 14. In some cases, though, the government can provide work permits to even younger children. Children under 14, who require parental permission to work, are supposed to work in apprenticeships appropriate for their age. Economic necessity in the family must be shown, which is not a problem in this country where 80 percent of the population lives in poverty and two-thirds of that number, or 7.6 million people, live in extreme poverty.

But with little enforcement of labor laws, those conditions are routinely violated. Guatemalan workplaces can resemble grade schools, with adult supervisors standing over little laborers like the strictest of teachers.

The State Department acknowledged in its latest human rights report for Guatemala released this month that “child labor was a widespread and serious problem” and that “laws governing the employment of minors were not enforced effectively.”

A few hours before leaving for Guatemala on Saturday, Gordon D. Johndroe, the [National Security Council](#) spokesman traveling with Mr. Bush, said: “Cafta, in its nine-month existence, is beginning to bring economic benefits to the people of Central America, but it will clearly take some time before all those benefits are fully realized. We’ll continue to work with the Guatemalan government to make sure all obligations to their people are met.”

An independent study of the issue estimated that about a million Guatemalan children under age 18 are working. Another review by the [United Nations](#) found 16 percent of children between the ages of 5 and 14 in the labor force in 2000, more of them boys than girls.

The child workers are people like María, 16, who lamented her four years in the labor force but at the same time insisted that she not be fully identified so as not to endanger a job that is helping to support her parents and four brothers and sisters.

“My father hits me and tells me I can’t study,” she said, tears running down her cheeks. “He stays home and drinks and I have to go to the factory.”

She studies on the sly. On Sundays, her only day off, she goes to special classes for young laborers offered by the Center for Study and Support for Local Development, a small group known by its Spanish initials, Ceadel. Despite having worked at a factory since she was 12 and at home for years before that, María has now completed the equivalent of third grade.

“I can be so tired, so exhausted, but I feel so good when I come home and read,” she said, her tears stopping and her face lighting up. “It can be any book. I just like to see the words.”

Critics of Cafta see Guatemala’s child labor problem as evidence of the flaws in so-called free trade.

Senator Sherrod Brown, Democrat of Ohio, was one of the principle opponents of Cafta while he was in the House of Representatives. “These trade agreements were written for investors in large American corporations,” he said in a telephone interview. “They weren’t written for American workers and they weren’t written to protect Central American children.”

Cafta’s backers, however, say it will take time to lift countries like Guatemala out of poverty and to improve longstanding social problems like child labor. The United States government is paying for efforts to improve the Ministry of Labor, which is now so dysfunctional that some inspectors say that since they work during the day they cannot possibly investigate reports that children are working night shifts.

Mr. Bush, in his speech in Washington before leaving on his Latin American trip, said American government aid had helped lift Guatemala’s percentage of children who complete first grade to 71 percent from 51 percent, a significant increase but one that illustrates the dire state of education in the country.

“Children have more energy and they don’t complain or know anything about unions,” said Carlos Toledo, whose Asociación Nuestros Derechos aids child laborers. “For a company, they are perfect.”

To draw attention to the issue of child labor in advance of Mr. Bush’s visit to Chimaltenango, the National Labor Committee, a New York-based group that has investigated gross labor violations worldwide, interviewed child workers in the area.

The group focused on Legumex, a factory that exports broccoli, melons and other fruits and vegetables to the United States, and in a report to be issued on Monday accuses it of violating a host of labor laws, including employing children, some as young as 13, for shifts longer than permitted.

Charles Kernaghan, director of the labor group, traced the food exports to American food service marketers that distributes to schools, hospitals, restaurants and the military. “It is very possible

that children in the U.S. may be eating broccoli harvested and processed by other children in Guatemala,” Mr. Kernaghan said in a statement.

But at Legumex, executives interviewed about child labor in general insisted that they were complying with labor laws. They said they did not employ children under 18 without parental permission. They said they paid low wages — which they said were the legal minimum of about a dollar an hour but that Mr. Kernaghan said were well below it — because of the low prices paid for their products in the United States.

“We’re a developing country,” said Hermann Peterson, the company’s auditor. “We can’t have the same conditions as factories in the United States.”