



## Further Growth in Uzbek Child Labour

Русский

Schoolchildren are spending their holidays doing backbreaking and potential dangerous manual labour, for no pay.

By IWPR staff in Central Asia (RCA No. 294, 18-Jun-04)

The sight of children picking cotton by hand is commonplace during Uzbekistan's autumn harvest, but IWPR has discovered an alarming new trend where school-age kids are being sent out to work earlier in the season. In some cases they are having to spray potentially harmful pesticides by hand.

Local authorities in the east and centre of the country are beginning to press-gang children into working over the summer holidays – unpaid.

At the beginning of June, schoolchildren in the Rishtan district of the Fergana valley were set to work spraying the cotton crop with pesticides.

They were excused from end-of-year exams to work in the fields, and anyone who refused was threatened with being kept back a year in school.

██████████, one of those taken out of school, described how she and her friends are issued plastic mineral-water bottles filled with chemicals. The bottles have holes drilled in the caps so that the children can go up and down the rows spraying the plants.

“I don't like the work,” complained ██████████. “It's so hot in the fields, and the chemicals burn your skin if they touch it.”

██████████, a 14-year-old schoolboy in Rishtan, said, “The town kids have it better since they don't have to work on the land. Instead of relaxing in the holidays we are working in the fields.”

██████████, who has worked in education in the Fergana region for over 45 years, is certain that cost-cutting is behind the growing use of child labour. Cotton is a rich source of export revenue for Uzbekistan, the world's fifth largest producer, but instead of investing that money back into the industry, the authorities keep pressing to keep production costs down.

While children are usually forced to work at harvest time, ██████ says this is the first year that they have been made to work with chemicals.

In Soviet times, crop-spraying machines and aircraft were used. But as with other kinds of agricultural equipment, local officials are increasingly using free labour instead of paying fuel and maintenance costs and buying new machinery.

“Working with chemical pesticides can poison a child,” said ██████. “Even adults should drink milk or kefir [yoghurt drink] after working with chemicals, but the authorities don’t think about that, and where would the children’s parents get the money to pay for these?”

██████████, a resident of Rishtan district, was deeply concerned when he saw children holding bottles of chemicals and sought an explanation from the provincial administration in Fergana region (which forms only part of the larger Fergana valley).

“I spoke to the deputy governor in charge of agriculture, ██████████, but I didn’t get a meaningful reply,” said ██████████.

Questioned about the practice, ██████████, head of the Rishtan district administration, flatly denied that child labour was being used in the cotton fields, saying only adults were drafted in when extra labour was needed on the farms.

██████████, an agricultural scientist at a cooperative farm in the Rishtan district, admitted the practice but insisted that the chemicals used were harmless because they were diluted.

“I don’t think the chemicals are harmful for children,” he said. “Anyway, we’ve been given our orders.”

Child labour has also appeared in other parts of Uzbekistan. ██████████, another region where cotton is farmed intensively, children from the seventh grade upwards were issued with hoes and sent out to the fields after school broke up. In this region it seems they were instructed to weed the plants rather than spray pesticides.

“We were each allocated two 500-metre rows of cotton plants and told that we wouldn’t be able to go home until we had finished,” said ██████████ conscripted for the job together with 200 schoolmates. “I only finished mine because my friends helped, and they didn’t even give us any lunch, we just ate what we’d brought with us.”

The local branch of the human rights organization ██████████ reports that ██████████ regional administration ordered a mass mobilisation of all schoolchildren. But ██████████, deputy head of education for ██████████, denied that the use of organised child labour was official policy, and suggested that the head teachers of the schools under his department’s control might have thought up the idea by themselves.

An official in the regional administration, speaking on condition of anonymity, admitted in private that child labour was widespread, but argued that the cotton industry would not survive without it.

“Self-respecting adults want well-paid jobs, and they go and find them in other countries,” said the official. “The labour shortage forces us to use children on the cotton plantations. They are always unpaid, and that’s easier with children.”

██████████, head of the ██████████, a local human rights group, says the Uzbek government is ignoring its obligations to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prohibits the use of child labour, all the more so when it is forced and unpaid.

“The scale of child labour in Uzbekistan shows that the government is both financially and morally bankrupt,” says ██████████.

The names of minors have been changed in this story.

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