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NGOs to retrieve child workers

The Jakarta Post , Jakarta | Fri, 08/12/2005 9:30 AM | Jakarta

The Jakarta Post, Jakarta

A full color poster bearing pictures of workplace safety for children employed in the informal footwear sector and a bundle of comics depicting a child who decides to continue schooling instead of taking up work are among the tools that activists use to deal with the issue.

Other approaches in retrieving child workers, particularly those employed in high-risk workplaces, are more complicated since social and financial aspects come into play.

""We have to work with all the stakeholders, from parents and workshop owners to the authorities,"" Anton Waspo, an activist working with child workers in footwear home industries in Ciomas, Bogor, said on Wednesday.

Trying to provide a better option for some 575 identified child workers -- out of an estimated 1,500 child workers -- in Ciomas, non-governmental organization ELSPPAT set up an activity center for both the children and their parents with the support of the International Labor Organization (ILO).

Saung Sararea, the center, which was opened in June, offers child workers a range of activities from reading books to training programs.

""We are currently in the very early stages of retrieving these children, trying to familiarize them with activities in the center,"" said Anton.

He added that his priority was seeking better child labor laws, however, in the short run providing working children with other things to do and preventing more children from entering the workforce were more feasible objectives.

Since some of the parents were forcing the children into jobs, Anton said that they were also the target of the program.

""We are giving educational information on the negative impacts of the work on their children and how to avoid them,"" he said.

Workshop owners are also receiving information on how to make the workplace better in terms of health, he added.

So far, the activity has not come up against resistance from either parents or workshop owners. ""But this is only the first step,"" Anton said.

ELSPPAT is also working with the local health agency to gage the extent to which the hazardous chemicals in the glue used in the factories has affected the children's health. ""A local doctor is currently carrying out physical examinations on the workers to monitor their health,"" he said.

A previous approach used to retrieve child laborers in Cibaduyut, West Java, succeeded in reducing the number from 1,046 in 1999 to 256 in 2003.

""The previous program succeeded in so much as it has been able to raise the awareness of locals to monitor by themselves the number of child workers as well as the workplace condition,"" said Anton. ""We hope that we can reach that level of success in Ciomas.""

Meanwhile, in Tasikmalaya, another activity center *Griya Karya Mandiri* (GKM) is hoping to provide 281 child worker in the area with alternative activities.

""Since we started in February, we have seen 25 children move from their jobs to take up other activities,"" said GKM coordinator Gumilar Mulya. (003)

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