Published on *Adam Smith Institute* (http://www.adamsmith.org)

Common Error No. 37 [1]

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37. "We should all boycott multinationals which have children and women working long shifts for low pay in sweatshops."

It is true that conditions in developing world manufacture include those which would not be tolerated in advanced economies. People work long hours in conditions we would not accept, and the labour force sometimes includes children. However, the conditions should not really be compared with those which took a couple of centuries or more to achieve in the developed world, but with the alternatives available in their own countries.

In poor countries children work as a matter of economic necessity. They work mostly in agriculture, or sometimes as scavengers on rubbish dumps. They work long hours for little pay in unsanitary conditions. Some work as child prostitutes. Those who have jobs with multinationals are in many ways the lucky ones, even if the conditions could be described as sweatshops. They get much higher pay than the average in their countries, and have jobs where most of their peer group do not. There are long waiting lists for such jobs, and those already employed there try to gain similar jobs for other members of the family.

The pay is very low by Western standards, but very high compared with what they might make elsewhere in their own countries. For them it is a chance to advance themselves and their families. It is that cheap labour which makes them attractive to multinationals. Without it, they would have no reason to establish factories and create jobs there. If we forced them to have the same pay and conditions we are used to, it would take that opportunity from them.

It took us decades into our industrial development before we could afford to improve pay and conditions. Our aim now should be not to deny opportunities to developing countries, but to shorten the time in which wealth can lead to improved pay and conditions.

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