The issue of child labour has received renewed and increased attention from activists, researchers and policy makers in recent years. There is even an initiative to make a new ILO treaty against child labour. This resurgence of international interest in an age old phenomenon has triggered considerable debate as to the appropriate role for children and whether children have a legitimate role to play in the workplace. Should children be permitted to work in protected environments, or can protection only be guaranteed by the complete removal of children from the workforce? Do children have a right to work? Are the empowerment and protection of child workers achievable, or even desirable, goals? These questions and many more have, in recent years, been increasingly pondered and debated by adults concerned with the plight, protection or empowerment of the world’s many millions of working children. The monograph under review, *Children, Work and “Child Labour”: Changing Responses to the Employment of Children*, adopts a rather unique approach, comparing a developed country, the Netherlands, with a developing one, Indonesia. Through these case studies, Ben White illustrates some of the complexities of children’s work and offers a stimulating perspective for the generalist with an interest in child labour. Placed within the broader literature, this monograph contributes to our understanding of the global picture of children’s work; a picture that reveals clear differences between countries, regions and types of work, and highlights the need for appropriate and flexible responses.

The monograph will be particularly useful for those interested in child labour in Indonesia, where the issue has received very little attention, despite the large numbers of children involved. Recent international developments have prompted an increase in interest, action and research on this subject, but accurate information remains sparse. In this context, the work of White has made a significant contribution to the existing literature on child labour in Indonesia. White, both individually and with Indonesian researchers – most notably Indrasari Tjandraningsih, has previously investigated the economic value of children, the nature of children’s work in rural industry, and the effects of capitalist development, globalisation and increased consumerism on children’s work.

*Children, Work and “Child Labour”,* one of White’s most recent contributions, is a fairly brief (p. 55) overview of regulatory and legislative responses to the employment of children in the Netherlands and Indonesia (or more particularly Java) between 1850 and 1990. White’s underlying contention is that the objective of those concerned with child labour should not be the elimination of all forms of work from the lives of children and young people. Instead, the aim should be the identification of abuse and exploitation, and the implementation and enforcement of mechanisms to improve the conditions of children’s lives and work.

Most importantly for White is the need to support the efforts of working children themselves to secure improved conditions. White is a strong advocate of children’s rights and empowerment. In essence, White sees empowerment and protection as linked and mutually-reinforcing: through empowerment, child workers are able to
claim their rights, including their right to protection. Through self-organisation, the demands, interests and concerns of working children may be reflected in measures designed to ensure their protection. A recurrent theme of White's work is the need to listen to, and include, the views of children when designing policies, programmes and campaigns that impact on their lives. Here, White's point is salient and welcome: few other contemporary discourses or debates aimed at protecting the rights and improving the lot of a target group have excluded the subjects in the way debates regarding child labour have excluded children.

*Children, Work and “Child Labour”* makes reference to the international developments that have taken place in discourses on child labour and children's work in recent years, and is highly critical of some approaches. While it is not necessary, it is useful for the reader to be aware of these developments and to understand the context in which White is writing. A range of possible approaches and solutions have been put forward as responses to what has been perceived as “the child labour problem”. Historically such responses have been primarily through the introduction of international conventions and national legislation which set minimum ages for entry to various kinds of work. Since the early 1990s, other approaches have gained considerable support, most notably from unions, some non-government organisations, and policy makers in the United States and some European countries. For these groups, past approaches are considered insufficient and the focus has shifted to import restrictions and consumer boycotts of goods made by children.

Like White, I have serious reservations about such responses. Not only are they dubious in both their motivation and effect, they have also resulted in the issue becoming highly sensitive and politicised to unprecedented levels. Studies in Bangladesh have indicated that when children are forced out of the export sector under threat of sanctions, it is extremely unlikely that they will return to school but will seek work in other sectors.¹

Boycott and sanction campaigns have drawn attention to appalling cases of abuse and exploitation, such as the carpet industries of South Asia and various forms of child bondage, which should be given priority with the aim of immediate and effective elimination. Indeed these most odious forms of labour are inappropriate not only for children, but also for adults. Generally speaking, however, supporters of boycotts and trade restrictions have not identified the vital differences between various forms of employment in which children are engaged, seeking instead to impose across the board sanctions. Again to draw on the Bangladeshi case, it seems that children were removed from the very sector where it may have been possible to offer them some protection and forced into situations that are virtually impossible to regulate.² Efforts to eliminate child labour appear to have been counter-productive where attempts to improve conditions and provide a degree of protection may have had a more positive effect.

The school of thought that supports boycotts and trade sanctions may be described as the “abolish-it-now” school. This school of thought consists of a heterogenous group which, for a variety of reasons that are not always based on a concern for the


²Some Bangladeshi organisations, such as Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, have made this point.