

Poverty Upsurge

ONE AND A HALF BILLION PEOPLE will be living in poverty by the end of the year, according to the World Bank's new Poverty Update.

This estimate appears, if anything, to be low: the Bank defines poverty as those living on less than a dollar a day.

In 1987, 1.2 billion people lived on less than a dollar a day, according to the Bank. By 1993, the number was close to 1.3 billion. The Bank estimates 1.5 billion will be in abject poverty at the start of the new millennium.

These numbers represent a constant proportion of the global population living in poverty from 1993 to 1999, but it is clear the situation has worsened in the last two years.

"The financial turmoil of the last two years has dealt a blow to the expectations we had for reducing poverty," says World Bank President James Wolfensohn. "Just a short time ago, we had confidence that the international development goal of halving poverty would be met in the next 20 years in most areas of the world. Today, countries that until recently believed they were turning the tide in the fight against poverty are witnessing its re-emergence."

The Asian financial crisis has substantially increased the number of people in poverty, with Indonesia alone raising the number meeting the Bank's definition of poverty by approximately 20 million.

In its global survey, the Bank found worsening poverty around the world. In India and South Asia, steady growth appears to have excluded the rural sector, where poverty is constant or increasing. In Africa, per capita incomes dropped in 1998. Hurricane Mitch severely damaged the economies of Central American countries. Poverty is rising sharply in Russia, the Ukraine and Romania. And poverty increases are expected in the Middle East and North Africa.

Mexico's New Labor Rules

MEXICO'S LABOR LANDSCAPE was fundamentally altered on May 11, when the nation's Supreme Court ruled that workers have a right to form independent unions, outside of the control of the official Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM).

The decision overturns a 50-year regime of state control over public employees unions, reports Dan La Botz of Mexican Labor News. What exactly will come in its place remains unclear. The court held that as few as 20 workers could join together to form a labor union, and suggested that more than one union can function in an individual workplace.

The decision appears to be a boost to fledgling independent unions in Mexico, including the recently formed National Union of Workers. Following the ruling, 25,000 workers in the nation's health department left their official union and created a new independent union; through

their new union, they plan to organize health workers throughout the country. Unions in the departments of agriculture and environment were also expected to break off from official structures, La Botz reports.

The official unions denounced the decision, with Jose Ayala Almedi, head of the Federation of Unions of Workers at the Service of the States (FSTSE, the main government workers union), saying the decision represented a "grave problem" and that it "would open the possibility of the pulverization of the labor unions."

Some progressive union figures are also skeptical of the decision, according to La Botz. "We see this as an attack," Rosendo Flores Flores, top officer of the Mexican Union of Electrical Workers, said. "This will make it easier for the government and the employers to strike at unions." The electrical workers have fought ardently against privatization and recently allied themselves with the independent National Union of Workers.

Progressives like Flores fear the decision may facilitate the formation of company unions and undermine labor solidarity, according to La Botz, but most independent labor activists seem to be cautiously optimistic about the decision.

Academic Freedom Chilled

THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (AAUP) is joining the chorus of those warning about corporate restraints on academic freedom.

"When corporate sponsors seek to prevent medical faculty from sharing their findings, it sends shock waves far beyond the nation's campuses and hospitals," says Mary Bergan, general secretary of the AAUP. "Colleagues throughout the entire field feel the chill. Students may lose out on valuable lessons. And the American people may be kept in the dark about information vital to their safety and health."

At a May conference called "Academic Values in the Transformation of American Medicine," the AAUP highlighted the case of David Kern, an associate professor of medicine at Brown University. His full-time position was eliminated from one of Brown's affiliated hospitals allegedly following protests from a textile producer which funded Kern's investigation of an outbreak of a new occupational disease among the company's employees. Kern had discovered respiratory disorders in several company employees.

Dr. Nancy Olivieri, a professor of medicine at the University of Toronto, says, "My experience may be an opening shot in a struggle that transcends disciplines and borders."

She says that in 1996 she saw her research funding slashed and faced the threat of a lawsuit if she informed patients that her studies of a drug to treat blood diseases had detected dangerous side effects.

— Robert Weissman