CHILDREN FOR HIRE - CHEAP

Throughout the land, child labor is making a comeback as already inadequate laws buckle under pressure of fraudulent appeals to patriotism. Here is what greed and indifference are doing to America's greatest asset—its children

CHILD labor is here again. It is countrywide and increasing. This time it is not a slum problem. Employers eager for cheaper labor are reaching down into schools for full- and part-time workers; and children, drawn by the lure of paid "war service" and backed by shortsighted parents, are responding by hundreds of thousands.

As a result of this situation, overdriven, understaffed state labor departments are reporting a startling increase in violations of state child-labor laws. As for federal violations—the Children's Bureau states that in the fiscal year 1942, there was an increase of 132 per cent in the number of minors found illegally employed. Of these children, 75 per cent were under 16; 37 per cent were under 14; and 12 per cent were under 12. Many were 10, 9, 8, and even younger.

Most of the new employers of child labor, except farmers and canners, are in nonessential industries. Most of them know that there are untapped sources of adult labor still available. But they prefer children—the child worker is cheaper, more agile and willing, has less bargaining power. So the cry goes out for more and more children, "to help win the war."

Just how it helps win the war for an Alabama girl of 11 to work in the fields till she collapses and is taken to a hospital with heart trouble has not been made clear. Or for a 13-year-old New Jersey boy to work on farm machinery he does not understand, and have his arm torn from his body. Both are documented cases. Then there was Bernard, 15, illegally employed by a food-products company in the state of Washington, who died recently of burns from live steam while trying to clean a vat. And Joseph, the Connecticut high-school youth illegally employed to run a freight elevator, who climbed on the cab to clean the hoistway and was crushed to death between the elevator and the top of the shaft.

OldMagazineArticles.com

Children for Hire

There is today a steady exodus from high schools to unskilled, temporary jobs in bowling alleys, diners, stores, on freight elevators, on trucks, in quick-lunch spots and honky-tonks—jobs that have no bearing whatever on the war and offer no future. Some of this employment is illegal, some of it is extremely hazardous, much of it is injurious to health or morals, and all of it is at a wage that no adult would consider.

This 11-year-old works 10 hours a day and more on a huge bean farm. Yet legislation to relax child-labor regulations has been introduced in 13 states

The younger children, aged 10 to 14, are being swept by the same craze for earning. At three every afternoon, hundreds of thousands of these youngsters hurry to so-called part-time jobs, to work sometimes until midnight and beyond, earning a few dollars at the risk of ruining their education, their health, their future.

The young victims of the accidents described above were obviously sacrificed not to "help win the war," but to line employers' pockets. They bring to mind other recent instances of boys illegally employed: Frank, 13, of New Jersey, who worked for a meat market until he was impaled on a meat hook; Cedric, 16, of Ohio, whose arm was snapped off by the centrifugal drier he was trying to operate in a laundry; Irving, of New Jersey, who fell from the elevator he was too inexperienced to run.

Incidents too ugly to report here are daily coming to life—stories not only of bodily and moral injury to individual child workers, but of whole towns and sections where the wholesale, unsupervised employment of school children (legally and illegally) is resulting in brazen truancy, defiance of all home authority, running away, breakdown of school discipline, and widespread juvenile delinquency.

In all states, the chiselers are hard at work, trying to break down child-labor laws it has taken this country 125 years to build up. Not that any state in the Union has model child-labor laws. Far from it! The child-labor provisions in most states are still pitifully inadequate.

Recently in Houston, Texas, Howard, a boy of 15, who was trying to operate a laundry mangle, died after having had his right arm torn off above the elbow. A sheet had jammed the machine, which was powered by a 7½ horsepower motor. Howard shut off the power, thought he had untangled the machine, and switched the power on again; his hand caught in the sheet and he was pulled into the mangle.

A fellow employee ran to the machine—but could see no one. Then he observed that the motor was smeared with blood. He heard a thumping sound. Shutting off the power, he found Howard and lifted him out. The boy's clothing was all torn off; and besides losing the arm, he had a fractured leg, deep cuts and bruises.

Howard was legally employed, according to the state laws of Texas! Texas permits a child of 15 to operate a mangle.

OldMagazineArticles.com

Children for Hire

Eighty per cent more work permits were granted to minors under the age of 16 in 1941 than in 1940, and the figures so far compiled for 1942 show an additional increase of 58 per cent.

Betty, all of seven years, picks cotton on a "crop vacation." In some states, schools are closed for several weeks so that children can be exploited

Danger: Children at Work

"The situation is alarming," Miss Beatrice McConnell told the writer, who had gone to Washington to find out for Collier's how federal officials viewed the problem. Miss McConnell is Director of the Industrial Division of the Children's Bureau. "In some neighborhoods," she went on, "we have been told there is scarcely a child fourteen or over not working; and many children, some under fourteen, are working long hours after school."

"What is the answer, Miss McConnell?" the writer asked.

"Action by the parents, schools and public-spirited citizens of each community," she returned quickly. "Let them ban all after-school work that is unsupervised and harmful. Let them insist that no children be excused from school work to take jobs unless all other labor sources have been exhausted." (These groups should also persuade the local chamber of commerce to agree to a fixed closing hour at night for all employed children, and to a provision limiting the amount of work a school child may carry, in addition to school.)

"Do you regard seriously the attempts now being made by pressure groups to break down the child-labor and school-attendance laws?" inquired the writer.

"Yes. Very seriously! There were many such attempts last year, even though only a few legislatures were in session. Federal legislation was struck at. For instance, a bill to 'suspend for the duration' the child-labor provisions of the Sugar Act was introduced in the House and passed, then fortunately tabled by the Senate Finance Committee. The step would have meant a return to deplorable conditions in the sugar fields, when little children worked ten and twelve hours a day."

"Will that attempt be made again this year?"

"It may. And numbers of bills to break down child-labor standards are now being introduced in the state legislatures as well. This year the real test will come."

Miss McConnell urged that a clear distinction be made between (1) children under 16 and older boys and girls; (2) between summer-vacation work and full-time employment during the school year; and (3) between part-time work of school students carried on as an educational, supervised project, and indiscriminate employment after school hours without safeguards.

"Our chief anxiety now," she said, "is over the increase in employment of younger children. The child under sixteen belongs in school, not in industry. And

OldMagazineArticles.com

the amounts and kinds of work he can undertake in addition to his school program, without grave injury to himself, are very limited."

Pitiful instances of the exploitation of child workers from 14 to 8 years old and even younger are being reported not only by labor inspectors but by ever-increasing numbers of citizens who demand that something be done.

Hundreds of thousands of children, like this strawberry picker, risk their education, their health and their future for a little money

Here is a letter about a 14-year-old boy employed illegally in a cotton gin last year:

"At noon on April 1, 1942, while helping a man operate a delinting machine, he was struck on his left leg by a part of the machine known as the breast. This piece knocked him over into the machine where the saws caught his left arm and mangled it. . . . The saws also cut about eight strokes into his left side. Finally, they got him out and took him to the hospital. The doctor amputated his arm, but he died at 4:15 P. M., April 3, 1942."

Tragic Squandering of Youth

And here is more damaging evidence, all of it taken from the files of the Children's Bureau and the National Child Labor Committee: A Pennsylvania boy, 13, employed last year at 20 cents an hour to help in threshing, was caught between tractor and threshing machine and severely injured in back and abdomen. A New York boy of 14 engaged by a butcher as delivery boy only was instead put to work on an electrical meat grinder; his hand was caught in the grinder and severely injured. At Akron, an inexperienced boy of 15 was killed and another injured when they poured water into a steel drum which had held rubber latex and put a lighted match to the opening.

What a tragic squandering of precious youth! Boys killed and maimed—for what? Because we adults are too blind, or too absorbed in making quick money, to organize our children's patriotism and find safe channels for it?

And here is part of a report received recently by the Children's Bureau from its inspectors of fruit and vegetable packing sheds:

"In one cold storage plant, 24 children from 10 to 15 years of age went to work at 3 A. M. and capped berries until 7 A. M., when they stopped to eat breakfast and go to school. Some stayed out of school during the strawberry season and worked from 3 A. M. till 3 P. M. or even longer."

In Illinois, Mrs. Jewell Organ Coleman, Superintendent of the Women's and Children's Division of the Labor Department, has opened a determined fight on violations of the Child Labor Act, especially by owners of bowling alleys, retail stores, and factories and restaurants.

OldMagazineArticles.com

In Iowa, Charles W. Harness, State Labor Commissioner, warned that "the number

> of minor children working now for pay in Iowa is about five times that of a year ago, and many of them are girls."

All over the United States, the story is the same. Cheap restaurants, bars, taverns and honky-tonks (some with informal houses of prostitution attached) are hiring boys and girls to serve meals, wash dishes, dance or eat with late customers; or even, as in the case of one Louisiana girl, to solicit soldier customers for a photographer by offering to pose seated on their laps. Much of the above happens in crowded defense areas. Here is a state report on this situation, made to the Children's Bureau:

"Problems of delinquency and vice have increased in the areas near military camps and construction centers. Much of the delinquency of young girls has resulted from the many opportunities for jobs in disreputable places."

Under proper conditions, children can be of real help. Some farm communities proved last year that even urban children can safely help get in crops—(1) if properly selected; (2) if told clearly what is ahead; (3) if supervised as to housing, health, food, morals, recreation, hours and conditions of work.

In one county in Virginia, for instance, last summer, the schools worked out a rotating-group plan with the farm committee and county agent, to provide enough boys for two weeks to harvest the crop. No boy worked more than 5 days, or was selected unless standing well in his studies. Each group went out under leadership; furthermore, each city boy was matched with an experienced farm boy to avoid accidents. The hours were short: from 9:30 to 5. The boys cut corn, filled silos, picked apples. The farmers were amazed at how much the children did.

This is very different from the usual casual announcement by a school principal that a certain number of boys and girls are wanted for emergency farm work; that those who wish to go are to meet at 5:30 A. M. on such and such a street. The casualties occur among these unsupervised workers. Proof that supervision pays is the fact that farmers who again are eager for child helpers are chiefly those who last year employed carefully selected, supervised groups such as those sponsored by youth organizations.

A Child-Labor Black Market

The bright spots in the current child-labor situation are few. Everywhere the black market prevails. In the Connecticut defense-plant area, child-labor abuses attained appalling proportions last fall—but the State Labor Commissioner did something about it.

Virtually all state labor departments urgently need more inspectors, and the Connecticut labor department, headed by Commissioner Cornelius J. Danaher, needed them too. Yet it found a way to uncover conditions.

Miss Edna M. Purtell, the department's crack industrial investigator, suggested a plan which other states might well copy. "We knew the violations were mounting and had to be uncovered," she told the writer. "But we hadn't enough inspectors. So we drafted an informal, casual little questionnaire, asking school children if they were working, and if so, to give details.

"We picked the crowded defense cities of Hartford, Bridgeport, New Britain and New Haven, and asked the school superintendents to circulate our questionnaire in junior and senior high schools. The questionnaire was not to be taken home, but answered then and there by each child.

"The questionnaires were all given out on the same day," she went on. "It was

OldMagazineArticles.com

done very casually. That way we got the real truth. Every child in those schools that day answered in his own handwriting. Here is the information, tabulated."

She pushed a paper over to me. The table breakdown showed that, out of 17,000 high-school boys and girls in those four cities, over 4,700 were employed (exclusive of domestic service and street trades); and of this number, over 1,000, more than one fifth, were under 16—illegally employed.

Of 4,689 high-school students of Bridgeport, New Haven and New Britain who were working after school, 2,726 worked 6 days a week; 627 worked till 10 P. M., and 306 worked till midnight and after.

Sixty-Hour Week for Pin Boys

"We found children twelve, thirteen, fourteen and fifteen years old working up to sixty hours a week," Miss Purtell told the writer. "The bowling alleys were the greatest offenders of all, employing the youngest children the longest hours under the worst conditions. In a Hartford alley, we found a boy of twelve working sixty hours a week, seven days a week, quitting at 4 A. M. every morning. Some of the bowling alleys had back rooms filled with cots where local pin boys and some runaways could sleep and play crap games. Last year, one twelve-year-old boy, stupefied by drowsiness, lost two fingers of his left hand when a bowling ball struck him. In one alley, both girls and boys were found to be employed."

"What good has the survey accomplished?" the writer asked.

"Great good! First, it led us to the violators. Second, it has stirred public indignation to such a pitch that we have obtained a large number of convictions."

Connecticut's experiences seem to show that child labor is a problem Americans cannot look to Washington to solve; it's a problem for the community, in close cooperation with the War Manpower Commission, the Children's Bureau, and the labor department in each state, for parents, teachers, school boards, public-spirited citizens. The greatest present need is for a quick survey of genuine labor needs in the community and a listing of untapped sources of man- and womanpower to supply local needs, so that school children—except when recruited as a part of some carefully planned project—will remain in their schools.

In 13 states (California, Connecticut, Delaware, Indiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Utah and Wisconsin), bills relaxing child-labor or school-attendance regulations for the duration have been introduced. A New York bill would permit children 12 years and over to be absent from school for 60 school days (i.e., 12 school weeks) to work in agriculture or "suitable" work in offices or plants.

A Massachusetts proposal would permit minors under 18 years to operate motor vehicles during the war. Also in Massachusetts is a bill to permit 15-year-old boys to work in amusement parks and at beach resorts until midnight. In five states, there are proposals to let down the laws, so that young boys can work at night in bowling alleys.

The pressure for relaxation of child-labor laws in these and other states will increase steadily.

Our boys and girls are the nation's most precious resource. Shall we permit them to be systematically exploited, to be weakened physically, mentally and morally?

On the answer will depend all that our Armed Forces are fighting to preserve.

Collier's
APRIL 24, 1943
OldMagazineArticles.com