

Surveys reveal

Child labour in Britain: A quarter of school children working

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One in four children under the age of 16 are working in low-wage jobs paying as little as 33 pence an hour (US\$.53), according to two recent surveys. While previous research suggested that up to 2 million school-age children in the UK had some form of employment, new figures indicate that the numbers are even higher.

Child labour has become a vital part of the low-wage economy in Britain. Legislation drafted in the 1930s prohibits children under the age of 13 from working, but a survey commissioned by the Trades Union Congress, called "Working Classes," found that nearly one-quarter of all 11 and 12 year olds were working illegally.

More than a quarter of the children who work during the school year said they were often too tired to do homework. Teachers report many children falling asleep in class. Additionally, many of those surveyed work before the legal start time of 7 a.m. and over half had worked after the legal cut-off time of 7 p.m.

Some of the young children surveyed reported working seven days a week, and some as many as three hours a day. During the holidays a small number worked the equivalent of a full-time job (31 to 40 hours a week), with a further 3 per cent working in excess of 40 hours.

According to the government's Low Pay Unit, the exploitation of children as cheap labour is increasing in the northeast of England. Its survey, "Fair Play for Working Children," reveals the staggering extent of child labour and the appalling conditions under which children work.

Again, of those school children surveyed, a quarter were found to be working. However, conditions are worse than even this figure suggests. While 10 per cent

of 10 year olds were employed, the figure for 15 year olds was 35 per cent. Of those working, 25 per cent were under the legal working age of 13, and some children worked up to 29 hours a week. The majority were likely to be doing adult work in the service sector, not traditional children's jobs like newspaper rounds. While it is illegal for children to work in factories, 2 per cent reported having done so during the school year and 3 per cent during the summer holidays.

Fully 44 per cent of working children suffer job-related injuries as result of their work. One in ten of the injuries were serious enough to require treatment. The 1997-98 Health and Safety Executive figures show that 46 school-age children suffered serious injuries at work, but this is under-reported because such child labour and casual work is illegal.

The previous Tory government actively promoted the growth of child labour. National legislation relating to children's work has never been updated since the Children and Young Persons Act of 1933. The Employment of Children Act of 1973 was introduced but never implemented. The Tory government withdrew legislation relating to children's health and safety in the 1989 Employment Act. There is no legislation controlling work on Saturday or during school holidays.

Department of Health guidelines limit work to a maximum of five hours per day for 13 and 14 year olds, and 8 hours per day for 15 to 16 year olds. In 1994, the Tories negotiated an exception to European Union legislation limiting the working week for school children to 12 hours, so that 13-15 year olds in Britain could be exploited for up to 17 hours. There is no restriction on the hours of work for 15-18 year olds,

which can include night shifts.

The Labour government and the trade unions are attempting to make political capital by denouncing the growth of child labour under the Tories. But instead of ending the practice they are seeking to build on the Tories' legacy.

The Low Pay Unit survey was timed to coincide with the second reading of MP Chris Pond's private members bill on February 13. His Employment of Children Bill is supported by 160 MPs, but is not an official government initiative. Even this bill is not designed to end child labour but merely to bring Britain's legislation into line with the rest of Europe.

The June 1992 European Directive on the Protection of Young People at Work should have been implemented in the UK in 1996, but has not been. On the whole, it allows more exploitation of children rather than less. It limits work during school time to 12 hours a week, as opposed to 17 in Britain. However, it increases the number of hours children under 15 can work during school holidays to 35, against 25 under current UK legislation. Those over 15 can work a full 40-hour week, as opposed to 35 hours in the UK. The European Directive also enables children to be employed between 6 a.m. and 8 p.m., an increase of one hour at each end of the day when compared with 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. in the UK.

The European Directive will thus not only increase the exploitation of children, but also make it acceptable and legal. Yet the TUC unions are giving it full backing as "an ideal opportunity to simplify and standardise legislation in this area."



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