

Death of 15-year-old exposes growing use of child labour by Canadian employers

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The death of a fifteen-year-old boy at an Alberta gravel-crushing site has exposed the lie that child labour is a problem only in the developing world.

Chris Lawrence was working for Arjun Construction, a Calgary-based gravel-crushing and washing company, near Drumheller, Alberta this past July when he became entangled in a conveyor belt and suffered fatal injuries.

Lawrence's 17-year-old girlfriend Kristina Kinder told CTV that he had taken the job a month-and-a-half before out of desperation. "We had nothing," she said. "We were living in my car. We didn't really know what we were going to do. He took (the job) knowing that it was the only thing that would help us at the time."

Alberta, which has been governed by right-wing Conservative governments since 1971, has some of the weakest labour regulations and most blatantly anti-worker laws in Canada, thereby fostering conditions in which tragic accidents like Lawrence's death can happen with little or no consequences for employers.

In Alberta, children can legally work as early as the day they turn twelve years old. Children between the ages of 12 and 14 are allowed to work in offices and restaurants, including kitchens, as long as they are not working in a bar or operating hazardous equipment. Those 15 to 17 are legally permitted to perform almost all jobs, except those demanding special certification or licenses, including in such hazardous industries as construction, agriculture and manufacturing. The one proviso is that they are not allowed to work graveyard shifts, running from midnight to 6 AM.

Last spring, Alberta's government launched a review of the province's labour standards, the results of which were published at the beginning of this month. Despite Lawrence's death, no significant changes are planned

to the rules governing the employment of youth 17 and younger.

Under a section titled "restrictions on employment of children," the review says younger teenagers should not work during school hours unless they are enrolled in an off-site education program, and children under 15 should only be employed with the consent of a parent or guardian.

That the problem of child labour is not restricted to Alberta was underscored only a few weeks after Lawrence's death, when government inspectors in the neighbouring province of Saskatchewan discovered two children aged eight and ten working at a chicken-processing plant on a family farm.

Across Canada, labour on farms goes virtually unregulated due to both the absence of regulations and the dearth of inspections. According to research by Professor Bob Barnettson of Alberta's Athabasca University, children as young as nine and ten regularly work illegally on farms.

The trade unions have been fully involved in Alberta's consultations on revising its employment standards. In its submission to the review, the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) advocated a few minor reforms to child labour regulations, including a programme of targeted inspections for company's employing child labour and a training programme for businesses.

In a statement released shortly after Lawrence's death, the AFL did not even call for banning children from all hazardous work or for a serious investigation into what took place at Arjun Construction. Instead, it politely recommended that a "review" should be conducted to determine if there were certain jobs for which children and young people should not be hired.

Despite an initial public outcry to improve workplace

safety standards following Lawrence's death, Alberta's updated employment standards continue to allow children as young as 15 years old, and even younger with parental consent, to be legally employed. Furthermore, the ambiguity and omission of specific details on the conditions of children's wage labour, including the type of work allowed and the responsibilities of employers to ensure safety, security and supervision of young workers, leaves much room for businesses to use habitually low-paid child labourers to perform a vast number of jobs, including many that are dangerous.

In addition to lax labour standards, Alberta has little independent oversight of the workplace to enforce them and to ensure occupational health and safety. The province relies on a complaint-based system to bring dangers to light. However, the workers who find themselves in vulnerable working conditions, especially children, are generally those who have the greatest fear of losing their jobs, and are therefore the least likely to file a complaint exposing any abuse or danger they confront in the workplace.

Even the government's employment standards review found that employers frequently abuse their child labourers, violating even the minimal standards to which they must currently legally adhere. Violations include paying less than the minimum wage, making illegal deductions, forcing youth to work excessively long hours (including on school days), and inadequate health and safety training.

The brutal exploitation of child labour in Alberta is particularly revealing given that the province, the center of Canada's oil industry, has far and away the country's highest per capita GDP and is routinely touted as a major success story. According to the "Alberta Career and Industry Outlook" report, between 2012 and 2014 Alberta averaged economic growth of 3.2 percent. With the economy experiencing high growth due to massive investment in Alberta's oil sands, companies—including in construction and manufacturing—seek to keep labour costs down by employing child workers.

As long ago as 2005 the Alberta government, at the behest of the employers, changed the rules surrounding child labour so as to allow children between 12 and 14 to work in restaurants and offices. This is part of a national trend. In 2003, British Columbia's Liberal

government passed legislation allowing children as young as 12 years old to be employed if their parent or guardian provided a note of consent. Bill 37 also replaced regular inspections of workplaces where child workers are employed with a complaints-based system. In 2009, Saskatchewan reduced the minimum working age to 14 years old from 15.



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