

Trading childhood for profit

Following nationwide trend, Iowa Senate passes bill to loosen child labor laws

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The ongoing disintegration of social protections in pursuit of profit now targets the most vulnerable section of society: the youth. In what is likely a trial run for replication across the United States, the Iowa Senate passed a bill Tuesday that would permit children to work longer hours and in occupations currently prohibited, such as serving alcohol.

Displaying its unwavering commitment to passing the bill, the Senate approved File 542 at 4:52 a.m. on Tuesday with a 32-17 vote, with every Democrat and two Republicans opposing the legislation.

The Republican-controlled Iowa House will receive the bill, where it will likely be approved it before it is sent to Governor Kim Reynolds for her signature. The bill would grant the directors of the Iowa Department of Education and Iowa Workforce Development the authority to make exceptions, permitting 14- to 17-year-olds to work in jobs currently prohibited for minors. This allowance is contingent upon the youths' participation in an approved training program, which ostensibly provides "adequate supervision" and safety precautions.

The Iowa bill marks the most open support to date by capitalist politicians for tearing down protections amid a wave of child labor violations in the US. This has long been a key policy objective of right-wing Republicans in particular, including Trump's secretary of education and billionaire heiress, Betsy DeVos.

But more is at stake for the ruling class than Republican policy objectives. The move to dismantle child labor protections comes amid a savage assault on the working class as a whole. Modest wage growth of around 5 percent in the last two years, still far below inflation, is considered by Wall Street to be an intolerable drag on profits.

The Federal Reserve, following the lead of the Biden administration, has raised interest rates substantially over the last year in order, in Fed chair Jerome Powell's words, to "soften the labor market." The Fed's unemployment target amounts to approximately 1.4 million destroyed jobs. This army of unemployed, whose ranks have already grown by tens of thousands in layoffs so far this year, is to be used to suppress

wage growth and rein in strikes and protests, which have been encouraged by a tightened labor market.

The millions of unemployed are being supplemented by a growing child labor force. In February, the US Department of Labor (DOL) fined Packers Sanitation Services Inc. (PSSI), a company headquartered in southwestern Wisconsin, a paltry \$1.5 million for unlawfully employing underage workers to clean meatpacking plants. PSSI received a slap on the wrist for hiring and placing 102 children in dangerous jobs and assigning them overnight shifts at 13 US meatpacking plants.

The WSWs wrote at the time, "The DOL said last week that investigators found 'that children were working with hazardous chemicals and cleaning meat processing equipment including back saws, brisket saws, and head splitters. Investigators learned at least three minors suffered injuries while working for PSSI.'"

Other major incidents include:

- Automaker Hyundai's suppliers employed immigrant children as young as 12 to work in auto parts plants. According to Reuters news agency, investigators have examined as many as 10 auto parts plants for potential violations.
- A franchise owner operating seven McDonald's restaurants in Erie and Warren, Pennsylvania allowed 154 underage minors to work during prohibited hours and exceed legally permitted work hours.
- The federal government imposed fines on the operators of two pizza chains in the Cincinnati area for child labor violations.

These are only some of the known child labor violations. The British newspaper *Daily Mail* reported child labor violations in the US rose by 37 percent in the last year, likely an underestimation due to the lack of staffing and funding for the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division, charged with investigating abuses.

Under the Iowa bill, children could do office and clerical work, including operating office machines, cashiering and window trimming; cleanup work, including operating vacuum cleaners

and floor waxers; and grounds maintenance. Children could also work with cars and trucks and perform tasks such as dispensing gasoline and oil, car cleaning, washing and polishing. They will also be able to clean vegetables and fruit, handle wrapping, sealing, labeling, weighing, pricing and stocking goods, and work in freezers and meat coolers.

But the “resume-building” experience doesn’t stop there. If the bill becomes law, 16- and 17-year-olds could serve alcohol at restaurants, provided employers secure the written consent from the child’s parent or guardian. The Senate amended the bill early Tuesday to exclude minors from serving alcohol in bars.

Republican Senator Adrian Dickey, the bill’s floor manager, tried to downplay the bill’s impact, stating, “It was not intended to put minors in Tom’s Tavern slinging drinks, rather allow these youth to work in Renee’s Restaurant.”

The Senate modified the bill to prohibit 16- and 17-year-olds from working in strip clubs.

Instead of enjoying sports, theater or spending time with friends and family, under this legislation, children under 16 could work up to six hours a day, an increase from the current maximum of four hours a day. Furthermore, they could work later into the evening—until 9 p.m. during the school year and until 11 p.m. during the summer. Sixteen and 17-year-olds will be subject to the same daily working hours as adults.

Additionally, the bill will create a committee to explore the possibility of allowing teens aged 14 and older to obtain a special driver’s permit for driving to work. While an earlier version of the bill outright authorized the issuance of these permits, students aged 14-and-a-half or older can already acquire a special permit for driving to school.

The bill stipulates that teens injured on the job—likely a frequent occurrence—may seek benefits under the state’s workers’ compensation program, as the initial bill did not include such basic protections for minors at risk of workplace injury.

Republicans argue the bill will “modernize” Iowa’s laws and equip children with valuable skills. “While the responsibility of having a job might be more valuable than having a paycheck, the reward of the paycheck will allow these youth who want to have a job to possibly save for a car, maybe buy a prom dress, go to a summer camp, or take a date out for the weekend,” said Senator Dickey.

Governor Reynolds, a Republican, praised the bill earlier this month. She pointed to her own work experience when she was young. “That’s good experience,” she told reporters on April 4. “You know, it teaches the kids a lot, and if they have the time to do it and they want to earn some additional money, I don’t think we should discourage that. Ultimately, parents and kids will decide if they want to work or not.”

Families, however, will have no choice when the reality of

credit card and medical debts, exacerbated by inflation, is pummeling them into poverty and compelling parents to send their children into the workforce merely to stay afloat.

Iowa Democrats argued that the bill would increase the risk of worksite accidents by exposing inexperienced children to dangerous workplaces. While no doubt true, the Democrats in Iowa have done nothing to mobilize workers to oppose the bill.

Bowing to the Republicans, Democratic Senator Nate Boulton of Des Moines said, “You don’t like it being branded as a bill about child labor, but yet your bill talks about kids getting injured in the workplace. So let’s make it about taking care of kids who are injured working in these jobs because it will happen.”

The use of child labor has become a means to surmount the labor shortage created by the handling of the pandemic by the ruling class, which placed profits above human lives. By dismantling legal protections, Iowa’s Republicans establish an alarming precedent, unveiling untapped sources of cheap labor for corporate exploitation. Youth will face the lowest wages, and poor working class families, burdened by overwhelming debt and unlivable costs, will find no alternative but to send their children to work.

As Republicans spearhead the campaign to dismantle child protections, this drive serves the interests of the capitalists who control both political parties. The ruling class, relentlessly pursuing profit, will leave no stone unturned. They cast aside the once-cherished notion of youth as a time for learning, growth and enrichment. For them, youth are untapped labor reserves for profit.

However, such attacks will not go unopposed. Amidst a growing wave of international strikes and protests, the working class will not sit idly by as the ruling class seeks to turn their children into raw material for exploitation.



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