

Child labor returns to the United States: A society moving in reverse

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This past week, the Iowa Senate advanced a bill which would dismantle many child labor restrictions in that state, expand the types of jobs that minors can legally work, extend the maximum length of shifts and allow businesses to employ them late at night.

The bill was introduced in the Republican-controlled legislature on the grounds of “modernizing” Iowa’s child labor laws. In fact, it is the thin end of a wedge of a massive social regression. The United States, the world’s wealthiest country, never tires of lecturing others about “democracy” and “human rights.” But here, the barbaric practice of child labor, once thought to be consigned to the dustbin of history, at least in the advanced industrialized countries, is back.

In the 1800s, the capitalists justified the exploitation of child labor on the grounds that it would “prevent the habitual idleness and degeneracy” and teach “habits of industry,” as one study said. Today, virtually identical arguments are being made to justify the rollback of child labor laws. “That’s good experience,” Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds said earlier this month. “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.”

According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), 10 states have considered bills to loosen child labor restrictions in the United States in the last two years. Eight bills have been introduced so far this year, including one bill in Minnesota which would allow children to work at construction sites. Another bill was recently signed into law in Arkansas.

The number of minors involved in child labor law violations skyrocketed nearly 400 percent between 2015 and 2022, according to the same EPI study, from 1,012 to 3,876. This includes a number of high-profile scandals, including the employment of dozens of children as young as 12 in an Alabama auto parts plant and more than a hundred children in dangerous jobs at a Wisconsin meatpacking plant. In both incidents, these children were overwhelmingly immigrants, who comprise one of the most super-exploited and

oppressed layers of the American working class.

As a matter of fact, child labor was never fully abolished in the United States and remains widespread in rural areas. Approximately 500,000 children between the ages of 12 and 17 work in agriculture, and exemptions for farm work exist that allow children as young as 10 to work with their parent’s permission. Agriculture is also exempt from the federal minimum wage and, again, employs mostly immigrant workers.

And of course, US corporations make profits exploiting child laborers in sweatshops all over the world. In 2020 there were 160 million children worldwide—nearly one in 10—in child labor, nearly half of whom were employed in hazardous work, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO). The percentage of children in the workforce, which had been on the decline, has stagnated since 2016, and the total number of child laborers increased by 8 million.

The EPI’s report notes that the main consideration behind the drive to abolish child labor laws is the reversal of the sharp decline in the labor force participation rate for 16 to 24 year olds, which fell by more than 10 percentage points since the start of the century. This is “awful low,” one grocery industry lobbyist argued during an Iowa Senate hearing, adding that the bill would help to reverse the trend.

More young people choosing to finish school and go on to earn a college degree, rather than continuing to work in dead-end jobs with no prospects, is intolerable for the ruling class. More youth must be driven into low-wage jobs to counteract a tightening job market, which has led to modest pay increases. More troubling, it has encouraged a greater mood of defiance among workers, who are pushing for strike action in one industry after another. While the campaign to abolish child labor laws is being spearheaded by Republicans, it is of a piece with the economic policy of the Biden administration and the Federal Reserve, who are using interest rate hikes to trigger mass unemployment and drive down wages.

No small consideration in the dismantling of protections

for youth is the war policy of American imperialism. The trillion-dollar military budget and the tens of billions made routinely available for the US proxy war in Ukraine, as well as increasingly open preparations for war with China over Taiwan, require the development of a super-exploited war economy. Plans are being drawn up to send hundreds of thousands of young people, either drafted or induced by economic hardship to enlist, to fight and die for American imperialism in faraway battlefields against nuclear powers.

A basic litmus test for whether a society is moving forward or backward is its treatment of the most vulnerable, including the youth. What emerges in the US, therefore, is a picture of a country moving rapidly in reverse, driven by a deep and intractable economic, political and social crisis.

As a matter of fact, the ruling class has been systematically attacking the living standards of workers for nearly a half-century. But one gets a sense that particularly in the last few years, conditioned by the massive crisis unleashed by the pandemic, a certain inflection point has been reached.

The right of children to a childhood, a social achievement won only through bitter struggle, along with every social gain made over the course of more than a century, is now being junked. The conditions of life of the working class increasingly are coming to resemble those of the 19th century.

These include:

- **The eight hour day and five day workweek.** In factories across the US, it is not uncommon for workers to be kept on the job for weeks at a time without a single day off or work 12- or even 16-hour shifts. Railroad crews are on “on-call” status 24/7, leaving them without the ability to spend time with their families.

- **Workplace safety regulations.** These have been gutted and regulatory agencies left underfunded, leading to a series of horrifying industrial accidents, such as workers falling into molten metal, crushed to death by machinery, incinerated by gas explosions and poisoned by massive chemical leaks.

- **The right to an education.** The public school system is being hived off into the private sector in the form of charter schools, an estimated trillion-dollar growth sector. In the cities of Detroit and New Orleans, the majority of schools are now charter. Meanwhile, school districts around the country are cutting programs and shutting down schools.

- **Public health.** The abandonment of the official response to the pandemic has led to more than 1 million deaths in the United States alone. Advances in medical science, which could have been used to contain the spread of disease and even methods known for centuries, such as contact tracing and quarantining, have been brushed off on the grounds that they are “too costly” to “the economy.”

One figure gives an indication of the cumulative results. A young American worker entering a factory earning a starting wage of \$16 per hour, as is typical in the auto industry, makes less in real terms than the average production worker did in the United States in 1944. In other words, the entire postwar boom has been reversed for the younger generation.

Key assistance in this social counter-revolution has been provided by the union bureaucracy, which has become totally integrated with management and the government. They have bargained away all of the achievements of the past in order to secure their own positions and six-figure salaries drawn from workers’ dues money. In fact, wages are growing even more slowly among unionized workers than among nonunion workers.

Meanwhile, corporate profits are their highest on record, and trillions of dollars are made instantly available to the banks whenever their speculative ventures threaten to collapse on them. The hikes in interest rates, in addition to driving up unemployment, have also produced record profits for large banks like JPMorgan Chase, which made over \$50 billion in its last fiscal quarter.

Youth have no future under capitalism. The continued existence of this form of society is predicated upon the cannibalizing of all the social and cultural achievements of the past. In the sense of technical and scientific developments, humanity long ago created the means to eliminate poverty, war, pandemics, environmental destruction and every other social problem. That all of these are reemerging today with a vengeance is for one reason only: the capitalist profit system.

The solution for youth is to take up the fight for the socialist reorganization of our planet and the abolition of capitalist exploitation, in order to clear a path for the resumption of human progress. The International Committee of the Fourth International is holding its annual May Day rally in order to build such an international movement. We urge our young readers: take up the fight for socialism! Attend the May Day rally, and join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party !



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