

16-year-old worker killed in Wisconsin sawmill amid growing erosion of child labor laws

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The death of 16-year-old Michael Schuls at a northern Wisconsin sawmill is a horrific example of an economic system obsessed with minimizing labor costs in the name of profit, regardless of the consequences. Under capitalism, young people are becoming no more than commodities to be employed, injured and even killed for financial gain.

Schuls, a sophomore at Florence High School, played football, basketball, baseball and soccer. He lived in the small town of Florence, near the border between Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Florence had a population of just 641 as of the 2020 census.

Only two weeks before his death, Schuls celebrated his 16th birthday. In a June 15 Facebook post to commemorate his son's birth, Schuls' father posted, "If anyone sees this kid today wish him a Happy 16th Michael Schuls Love you bud more than words can say proud of the young man you have become. One of the kindest hearts I know Hope you have a great day #justadadandhisboy."

According to the Florence County Sheriff's Office, on June 29, Schuls, while working at Florence Hardwoods sawmill, tried to unjam a wood-stacking machine. Schuls climbed onto a conveyor belt to clear the blockage. The police stated the boy did not activate the machine's safety stop switch before getting onto the conveyor belt, a mistake of inexperience that would cost him his life.

Roughly 17 minutes later, a coworker found him trapped in the machine. At the time, Schuls was working solo in the facility while a supervisor was handling a forklift outside, as the sheriff's deputies reported.

After receiving a 911 call, first responders arrived,

administered a defibrillator, and carried out CPR before transporting Schuls to a local hospital. The Children's Wisconsin hospital in Milwaukee later received him. Two days after sustaining his injuries, he died there.

Florence County Coroner Jeff Rickaby said the post-mortem examination determined the cause of death as traumatic asphyxiation. "That's caused by entanglement in a machine," Rickaby said.

An outpouring of grief has erupted from family, friends and strangers who find the tragedy outrageous and unnecessary. Commenting on Facebook, a person wrote, "Wow I would of thought you would of had to have been at least 18 to even work at a sawmill because that just sounds dangerous all around...." Another person commented, "Wtf no one at 16 should be working in a sawmill or an industrial job."

A comment on the GoFundMe page to support the Schuls family read, "Labor laws and companies should be protecting workers and kids, things like this should never happen and it is truly sad." The family members have chosen not to make any comments. Schuls' funeral will take place on July 15 in Florence.

A life cut so short raises multiple questions. Why was a minor permitted to operate heavy machinery? Although authorities were quick to point out Schuls' failure to use the safety switch—a precaution that could have saved his life—this only shifts the blame onto the shoulders of the victim, a child of 16.

At the time of this report, there are conflicting accounts as to whether Schuls was employed legally or not. The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development actively prohibits children under 18 from entering sawmill buildings, engaging in logging activities, handling machinery or explosives, working

on trestles, operating within portable sawmills, lumberyards or using chainsaws.

The practice of illegally employing minors is growing. According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), the number of minors involved in child labor law violations exploded by nearly 400 percent between 2015 and 2022, from 1,012 to 3,876. These violations include the employment of dozens of children as young as 12 in an Alabama auto parts plant and more than one hundred children in dangerous jobs at a Wisconsin meatpacking plant.

Meanwhile, various media outlets have noted that while Wisconsin law bars children from working in sawmills and logging in Wisconsin, it allows youths aged 16 and up to work in planing mills. Schuls was stacking lumber in this type of facility when the deadly accident occurred.

According to his Facebook profile, Schuls' father also worked at the sawmill and was an equipment operator. The personal motivations underlying the decision of the 16-year-old Schuls to work at the mill remain unclear. Nonetheless, one could assume that his father helped him land a summer job at the facility.

Ultimately, the blame does not fall on the father but on the companies and lawmakers, who enacted legislation permitting minors, who lack the necessary experience and judgment, to work with hazardous machinery.

The elimination of child labor protections is increasingly becoming the norm. Over the past two years, the EPI reports, proposals to relax child labor laws have surfaced in 10 US states, Wisconsin included. Just this year alone, legislators have proposed at least eight such bills, one of which, in Minnesota, would allow minors to work on construction sites.

According to Wisconsin state officials, there has been a more than fourfold increase in child labor complaints from 2018 to 2022. In March, Jennifer Sereno, Communications Director for the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development's Equal Rights Division, told Wisconsin Public Radio that minor employment complaints rose from 18 in 2018 to 86 last year.

On the same day 16-year-old Schuls sustained his fatal injuries, an Iowa bill took effect that erodes many child labor restrictions in that state. That legislation expands the list of jobs that minors can legally work in,

increases the maximum hours they can work in shifts and allows businesses to work minors late into the night.

At the time of the bill's enactment, the WSWS wrote, "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."



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