24 migrant children illegally working at Ohio chicken slaughterhouse

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Twenty-four migrant children were removed from a chicken slaughterhouse in Kidron, Ohio, southwest of Akron, earlier this month. The children were being illegally employed by Gerber Poultry to work the meat processing line and in sanitation.

On October 4, FBI and Homeland Security agents surrounded the plant, shut down traffic into and out of the plant and began screening employees.

Most of the children were migrants from Guatemala who came to the United States seeking asylum. The children were trying to escape from some of the highest rates of violence in the world, and political oppression, only to find themselves working as cheap labor and in some of the most dangerous jobs.

Geronimo Ramirez, a Guatemalan who lives a half hour away and is president of Comunidad Sol en Ohio, told WKYC of Cleveland, Ohio he was called by panicking friends to come witness the raid and help if possible.

"They told me that the FBI agency, they went in there talking to them, shouting like if they were criminals. They were hitting the walls, and saying, 'They are beating me. They are hitting me, and they only speak English,'" he shared with 3News.

"They were separating the kids like they were criminals and putting them apart and it was cold. It was very scary. The kids were crying. The people were crying," Ramirez told the Cleveland station.

According to immigrant advocates, the children were working in the meat processing and sanitation sections of the plant.

A spokesperson for Gerber claimed that the company was unaware of the hiring of children at the plant and shifted blame to a contractor who did the hiring.

Many companies, especially in meat and poultry processing, have turned to contractors to do their hiring precisely so they can claim "plausible deniability" when violations are found.

Meat processing and sanitation are some of the most dangerous jobs in a slaughterhouse. Meat processing includes the killing, cleaning and carving up of the chickens. Sanitation refers to the continuous cleaning of conveyor belts and systems used to move the chickens through the plant. The cleaning is usually done while the conveyor belts are moving.

This past summer 16-year-old middle school student Duván Robert Tomás Pérez, an immigrant from Guatemala, was killed July 14 when his body became trapped on a conveyor belt he was cleaning inside a poultry plant in Mississippi.

Meat processing, involving the repeated swinging of heavy knives, leads to amputations, loss of eyes, and repetitive motion disorders that can lead to the inability to perform even easy tasks.

Overall, meat and poultry processing plants remain the most dangerous jobs in America. According to a 2017 report published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 5.4 per every 100 workers in the meat and poultry industry suffer a hospitalization, loss of an eye, or an amputation each year. Accidents in meat and poultry processing "is still higher than for all manufacturing and for all private industry," the report stated.

The discovery of a dozen immigrant children working at the Gerber Poultry plant exposes two growing and disturbing trends in America: the increased use of child labor and the abuse of migrants seeking asylum in the US.

The Department of Labor reported in February that child labor violations had increased by nearly 70 percent since 2018. While the Economic Policy Institute reports that the number of minors involved in child labor law violations skyrocketed nearly 400 percent between 2015 and 2022, from 1,012 to 3,876.

As in the Gerber case, a growing number of meat and poultry processors are using third-party contractors to provide the workers for dangerous jobs of keeping the conveyor belts clean. Child workers are also cleaning bone saws and using hazardous chemicals without proper safety equipment or training.

The Department of Labor fined one of the nation's largest meatpacking sanitation contractors, Packers Sanitation Services , a token $1.5 million in February after investigators found the company illegally employed more than 102 children between 13 and 17 years old at locations in eight states.

These fines are considered the cost of doing business.

Over the past few years, changes to labor laws are tuning back over 100 years of labor laws that have protected the health and safety of children. These changes are being introduced and pushed through by both Democratic and Republican state governments.

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Lawmakers proposed loosening child labor laws in at least 10 states over the past two years, often citing the labor shortage caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as the reason for needing more workers under the age of 18 and granting parents the "right" to send their children to work in hazardous conditions.

As a whole, these laws are generally aimed to make it easier for kids from 14 to 17 years old to work longer hours and later into the evening—and in jobs that were previously off-limits for minors.

- An Arkansas law, passed in March, eliminated age verification and governmental permission requirements for employers hiring minors. Arkansas governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed the measure into law on March 8, 2023. Among other provisions, the new law eliminates work permit requirements for children under 16, thereby also eliminating the age verification requirement for employers and parental consent before a minor can work.
- A New Jersey law increased the number of hours a child could work in one week to 50.
- In Ohio, lawmakers are seeking to extend the hour until 9 p.m. that 14- and 15-year-olds can work during the school year. Current federal law bans 14- and 15-year-olds from working past 7 p.m. during the school year. Last year, lawmakers passed a bill that extends the number of hours a minor can work to 50 hours per week.
- In Iowa, a law enacted earlier this year permits children age 14 and older to use non-power-driven tools. And a law introduced would lift restrictions on hazardous work; lower the age for alcohol service; extend work hours; grant employers immunity from civil liability for workplace injuries, illness, death; and to allow children to work in kitchens, including in freezers and meat coolers.
- A Washington state law, passed in April, permits 18-year-olds to work in certain 21-and-older establishments, such as bars.
- In Minnesota, a law lifting restrictions on hazardous work and extending work hours has been introduced.
- Nebraska lawmakers have introduced a bill that would create a sub-minimum wage for youth.
- A New Hampshire law enacted last year lowers the age to bus tables where alcohol is served and extends work hours for children.

At the same time that child labor laws are being eroded there is a growing abuse of migrant children who are coming to the United States seeking asylum.

In September, a watchdog group, the Government Accountability Project, reported at a Congressional hearing that the Health and Human Services Department (HHS) was not adequately screening and monitoring the adult sponsors whose homes migrant children were being placed in.

The Government Accountability Project represents government whistleblowers and HHS is responsible for taking care of migrant children entering the United States.

As a result, the whistleblowers reported, children were being taken and forced to work long hours and in unsafe conditions, often being forced to turn over all their wages to their "sponsor."

A June report by the Government Accountability Project noted: "Ultimately, the failures of HHS to protect children in its care and custody, manage their cases to ensure their safe placement and oversee its own operations and contractors, has served as a conduit between labor supply and demand within the U.S. food system."

As a *World Socialist Web Site* April 21, 2023 perspective, "Child labor returns to the United States: A society moving in reverse," explained:

> 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.
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> 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.

Take up this fight by joining the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party by filling out the form below.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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