

Florida legislature working to roll back protections for young workers

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The Republican-controlled Florida House of Representatives passed legislation this week which would expand the use of child labor in that state. If the bill passed by the House becomes law, it will allow 16- and 17-year-old youth, who had been restricted to working no more than 30 hours per week by existing law, to work a full 40-hour week.

The legislature's aim is to expand the pool of cheap labor throughout Florida to create downward pressure on wages throughout the state, and to increase profitability in the exploitative construction, hospitality and food service businesses where teens are commonly employed.

Various amendments introduced to soften the law were all defeated, including a requirement that teens be provided a break every five hours. Other changes requiring employers to take measures to protect youth from heat exposure and to document claims of sexual harassment were also voted down.

The bill in question, HB 49, is one of a number of proposed laws under consideration in the state legislature and sponsored by industry groups in Florida that would weaken labor protections for minors.

Another piece of legislation sponsored by the construction industry would roll back restrictions preventing teenagers from working on rooftops or scaffolding higher than six feet and allow them to work in both residential and non-residential construction.

A report in the *Orlando Weekly* last December detailed the efforts by the Associated Builders and Contractors of Florida (ABC) and the Florida Home Builders Association lobbying groups to promote the new bill, which they authored.

An email obtained by the *Orlando Weekly* through public records requests shows that Carol Bowen, a lobbyist for ABC, sent a draft of the proposed legislation to Republican State Senator Corey Smith last October. Copied in the email containing the proposed legislation

was another lobbyist from her organization as well as one from the Florida Home Builders Association.

Senator Smith filed the legislation three weeks later.

The push to expand child labor in Florida has also been motivated by new restrictions on immigrant labor enacted by fascist Governor Ron DeSantis last year. The anti-immigrant law restricted undocumented migrants' access to public services and required businesses employing more than 25 workers to verify the citizenship status of their employees, among other measures. It was part of a series of reactionary bills supported by DeSantis and passed by the legislature last year whose purpose was to burnish the governor's reputation among the far right in the lead-up to his failed bid to defeat former president Donald Trump in the contest for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination.

The anti-immigrant legislation pushed many undocumented workers to leave the state for fear of arrest. DeSantis also secured millions of dollars in funding to sponsor deportation flights of newly arrived migrants from Texas and other southern states to northern cities governed by Democrats, after initially misappropriating federal COVID-19 relief funds for earlier flights.

Most notably, DeSantis flew approximately 50 Venezuelan migrants to Martha's Vineyard, a vacation spot favored by former president Barack Obama and other Democrats, in September of 2022. In a lawsuit later filed by attorneys for the migrants it was revealed that agents of the governor constructed an elaborate con job to lure the desperate migrants onto the flights north, including printing fake brochures outlining the supposed benefits they would receive as refugees, and claiming that they would be flown to Washington D.C. or Boston.

More recently, DeSantis has sent a contingent of the Florida National Guard to the southern border of the United States to assist Texas Governor Greg Abbott's illegal attempt to seize control of the border from federal

authorities.

A report from the US Department of Labor released last year showed that incidences of children working in violation of the law investigated by the agency had increased by 14 percent over 2022 and by 88 percent since 2019.

Florida is only the latest state to work on weakening child labor protections. Over the past several years over a dozen states have introduced similar measures. In Arkansas, the state legislature passed a bill in 2023 removing age verification requirements for children younger than 16. Both New Hampshire and New Jersey, a state which is controlled by the Democratic Party, enacted similar legislation, allowing youth to work both longer hours and later into the night.

Last year, the Iowa state legislature enacted the most expansive roll-back of child labor protections so far, much of which is in direct violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). This includes allowing 14- and 15-year-olds in that state to work in “light assembly” and industrial laundries, as well as to “momentarily” work in meat freezers. Work restrictions for older teenagers were almost entirely removed, with 16- and 17-year-old teens now permitted to perform most of the same work as adults.

The proponents of the hyper-exploitation of young workers have made various speeches in the debates and hearings preceding the passage of the regressive new laws, claiming that removing labor protections for youth will “build character” and teach young people “the value of the dollar.” The truth of the matter is quite different. Under conditions where millions of workers in the US have entered into an open struggle against capitalism in recent years, and the bipartisan assault on immigrants and refugees has diminished the available pool of cheap labor, the ruling class is seeking to find a new sector of the population that they can squeeze further profits out of.



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