

Who Wants Child Labor?

TWICE Congress has created acts to outlaw child labor. Twice the Supreme Court, presented by the opposition with test cases, has declared the acts unconstitutional. So we have over a million children at work, under a sort of negative national consent.

The subject is again before the country. A Constitutional Amendment has passed both Houses of Congress and now goes to the state legislatures for ratification. At this moment it is particularly pertinent to inquire: Who is it that fights measures which protect children from premature labor? And with what cause?

It is not, as may be imagined, an organization of widowed mothers. True, many widows resent laws which deprive them of the pittance their children can earn. Yet the protesting widows are far fewer than the opposition represents them. Some one is exploiting the plight of these women, whose misfortune a humane state could meet in some saner way than by topping the loss of their husbands with the using up of their children.

No, the real protester is the industry which is making a present profit out of child labor.

Such industry is variously represented; sometimes by a leading citizen who believes himself when he rationalizes, "Children are better off in the factory than on the street," whose imagination is too skimpy to entertain that axiomatic American ideal—a place in school for every child; who is abstractly sorry for the widow, and to whom a widow's pension from the state seems worse than working the widow's children. Sometimes he is different, and says bluntly, "Adult wages are too dear. Abolish child labor and you ruin my business."

The almost magic potency of this minority attitude suggests an inquiry into the actual economic importance of child labor to American industry. In pursuit of this we turn to the United States Department of Commerce and ask Secretary Hoover: *Can American industry afford to let the Child Labor Amendment be ratified?*

Mr. Hoover replies "Certainly," and gives illuminating statistics and comment. "The question of child labor is not the opposition of industry to the control of child labor, but that it should be equally controlled in every branch of a particular industry, so as not to set up unfair competition. I believe that industry in the large would welcome the Amendment. There were 30,661,000 persons gainfully employed in non-agricultural pursuits in 1920. Of these 1.7 percent were under sixteen years of age. In 1900 there were 18,622,000 so employed, of whom 3.7 percent were under sixteen years of age. Industry has prospered greatly in that twenty years. It has increased its product per

person employed; it has accomplished this with a decrease in the number of children employed. Obviously this minute percent of children has no important relation to the productivity of American industry as a whole. And while the number of employed children in non-agricultural industry is about 1.7 percent of the whole, obviously children are not responsible for anything like even this percentage of production. It would seem probable that if all the children were taken out of employment tomorrow, it would not affect the productivity of the country by one-fourth of one percent."

An analysis of specific industries was in point: The coal mines in 1910 had 613,924 operatives, of whom 15,212, or 2.5 percent, were from ten to fifteen years old. By 1920 the children had decreased to 5,850, or 0.8 percent only of the 733,936 workers employed in 1920. The clothing industries in 1910 had 397,018 workers, of whom 19,157, or 4.8 percent, were children. By 1920 the children had decreased to 11,757, or only 2.8 percent of the 422,137 workers employed in 1920. The iron and steel industries in 1910 had 851,981 workers, of whom 14,372, or 1.7 percent, were children. By 1920 the children had decreased to 12,904, or 0.9 percent of 1,419,593 workers then employed. The lumber and furniture industries in 1910 had 485,515 workers, of whom 18,806, or 3.9 percent, were children. By 1920 the children had decreased to 10,585, or only 2.2 percent of the 489,332 workers then employed. The shoe factories in 1910 had 191,287 workers, of whom 8,393, or 4.4 percent, were children. By 1920 the children had decreased to 7,545, or 3.3 percent of the 225,435 workers then employed. The cotton mills in 1910 had 317,953 workers, of whom 40,572, or 12.8 percent, were children. By 1920 the children had decreased to 21,875, or only 5.8 percent of the 378,769 workers then employed. The silk mills in 1910 had 83,177 workers, of whom 8,851, or 10.6 percent, were children. By 1920 the number of children had increased to 10,023, but the percentage of children to the whole had decreased to 8 percent of the 125,801 workers employed in 1920. The woolen or worsted mills in 1910 had 117,476 workers, of whom 7,800, or 6.6 percent, were children. By 1920 the children had decreased to 7,077, or 4.8 percent of the 148,645 workers then employed.

Taking these industries all together, in 1910, of the 3,058,331 total workers, the 133,163 child workers formed 4.4 percent; whereas by 1920 the children had decreased to 87,616, and were only 2.2 percent of the 3,943,648 workers employed in 1920 in these eight industries. They formed just half the proportion of workers that they had formed in 1910.

Interpreting the figures for these selected industries, the Secretary of Commerce points out that the output of these industries increased steadily per person employed during the period parallel with a decrease in child employment; and that their prosperity is unchallenged.

American industry can afford the Child Labor Amendment. Indeed, a dispassionate consideration suggests the additional question, "Can American industry afford not to do away with child labor?"

There are certain economies which cannot be made without a minimum of prosperity. A poor man must often buy his coal extravagantly by the bushel for want of enough cash to purchase a ton. Is America too poor to afford the apparent economy of substituting adult workers for children? The million children at work seem a confession of terrible poverty. Yet an examination of America's prosperity shows that this is a poverty not of purse but of heart. Apparently we do not look upon child labor as a last resource, to be tapped only on the brink of prosperity. For we are rich enough to get along without the work of children. Indeed, increased production automatically offers more opportunity for work for children, along with the increased employment of adults; although in times of unemployment the hundreds of thousands of working children and the hundreds of thousands of unwillingly idle adults are parallel lines which never meet in our industrial imagination. The United States Children's Bureau has made an analysis of working certificates issued to children. The figures, which do not count in children who applied for vacation employment only, show an astonishing increase in such certificates since 1921, during which time our prosperity as a nation grew and increased:

Compare 1922 with 1921: Of thirty-five cities reporting to the Children's Bureau, twenty-one record an increase in first work permits issued, the increase ranging from 9 percent to 177.5 percent, in five instances over 100 percent.

First half of 1922 compared with first half of 1921: For twenty-eight cities furnishing monthly figures, the increase was 8 percent.

Last half of 1922 compared with last half of 1921: For twenty-eight cities furnishing monthly figures, the increase was 46 percent.

First half of 1923 compared with first half of 1922: Of thirty cities reporting, all but two reveal an increase in permits granted, the increase varying from 4.1 percent to 674.3 percent. In the two cases of decrease, the percentages were 31.7 and 5.1.

As has been suggested, it must not be thought that industry's interests are ranged solidly on one side, hostile against the children's interests. Many employers feel the need for a federal law to equalize competition between states. Some want such a law on the basis that manufacturers in states which give less protection to children than their own can

sell their products more cheaply. Others believe that there is nothing immediately or remotely cheap about child labor, believe that the maturity and greater efficiency of adults, and their lesser liability to accidents make them more profitable than children; believe that the abolition of child labor will tend to increase the invention of labor-saving devices; and many maintain that manufacturers in states with higher standards for children have an actual ultimate advantage; for a state which assures its children a normal, healthy childhood and the advantage of mental training of an education is turning out a more competent adult labor supply, which will prove far more advantageous to that state's industries than the immediate cheapness with which the children's young fingers might present them. A state with poor child labor laws really suffers in competition with one more generous to children, although this is not generally recognized.

Indeed, the use of child labor in industry implies a strange indifference to gain; for, surely, it is a short-sighted carelessness which starts out a million citizens with the handicap of a stunted education if not actual illiteracy, which begins to manufacture on so wholesale a scale the incompetent adult labor supply which a million depleted worked-out childhoods must create.

Yet the real reason for passing the Child Labor Amendment is, of course, not economic. The consequent economic gain is only incidental. We cannot continue to let one out of every twelve of our ten to fifteen-year-old youngsters stagger into industry out of an amputated childhood. Child labor must be abolished because it is inhuman.

VIOLA PARADISE.

Slow Death

You need no other death than this
Slow death that wears your heart away;
It is enough, the death that is
Your every night, your every day.

It is enough, the sun that slants
Across your breast, heavy as steel,
Leaving the rust of radiance
To shape a wound that will not heal.

Enough, the crystal at your lips,
Wasting you even as it lies—
Vibrant there before it slips
Away, torn from your mouth like cries.

There will be now, as fumes from wood,
A passing, yet no new death's care.
You will know only the frustrate mood
Of breath tarnished to color of air.

HAZEL HALL.