

## History of Child Labor

In the late 1700's and early 1800's, power-driven machines replaced hand labor for the making of most manufactured items. Factories began to spring up everywhere, first in England and then in the United States. The owners of these factories found a new source of labor to run their machines – children. Operating the power-driven machines did not require adult strength, and children could be hired more cheaply than adults. By the mid-1800's, child labor was a major problem.

Children had always worked, especially in farming. But factory work was hard. A child with a factory job might work 12 to 18 hours a day, six days a week, to earn a dollar. Many children began working before the age of 7, tending machines in spinning mills or hauling heavy loads. The factories were often damp, dark, and dirty. Some children worked underground, in coal mines. The working children had no time to play or go to school, and little time to rest. They often became ill.

By 1810, about 2,000,000 school-age children were working 50- to 70-hour weeks. Most of them came from poor families. When parents could not support their children, they sometimes turned them over to a mill or factory owner. One glass factory in Massachusetts was fenced with barbed wire “to keep the young imps inside.” The “young imps” were boys under 12 who carried loads of hot glass all night for a wage of 40 cents to \$1.10 per night.

Church and labor groups, teachers, and many other people were outraged by such cruelty. They began to press for reforms. The English writer Charles Dickens helped publicize the evils of child labor with his novel *Oliver Twist*. Britain was the first to pass laws regulating child labor. From 1802 to 1878, a series of laws gradually shortened the working hours, improved the conditions, and raised the age at which children could work. Other European countries adopted similar laws.

In the United States it took many years to outlaw child labor. Connecticut passed a law in 1813 saying that working children must have some schooling. By 1899 a total of 28 states had passed laws regulating child labor.

Many efforts were made to pass a national child labor law. The U.S. Congress passed two laws, in 1918 and 1922, but the Supreme Court declared both unconstitutional. In 1924, Congress proposed a constitutional amendment prohibiting child labor, but the states did not ratify it. Then, in 1938, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act. It fixed minimum ages of 16 for work during school hours, 14 for certain jobs after school, and 18 for dangerous work.

Today all the states and the U.S. Government have laws regulating child labor. These laws have cured the worst evils of children's working in factories. But some kinds of work are not regulated. Children of migrant workers, for example, have no legal protection. Farmers may legally employ them outside of school hours. The children pick crop in the fields and move from place to place, so they get little schooling.

Child labor has been less of a problem in Canada because industry there did not develop until the 1900's. The Canadian provinces today have child labor laws similar to those in the United States. Most other countries have laws regulating child labor, too. But the laws are not always enforced, and child labor remains a problem.