
Child Exploitation in the USA: Not Just Migrant Children

By: Arnaldo Musa / Special for CubaSi

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Some North American authorities have complained that the entry into the country of more than 200,000 migrant children unaccompanied by their parents is reinforcing the problem of child exploitation, but this is only a small part of the truth.

Unscrupulous people, even within the official sphere, take advantage of this situation of vulnerability, in order to obtain a cheap, non-unionized labor force, which is an easy victim of abuse, even sexual, to survive, finding themselves without family members who protect them.

The “objective” newspaper The New York Times that a 14-year-old boy fell asleep and was nearly injured by a meat-slicing machine at the place where he worked illegally, but that another 13 suffered severe burns from the cleaning products.

CNN specified that this occurred in one of the properties looked over by Packers Sanitation Services Inc., one of the largest providers of food safety sanitation in the US. Thus, according to a known figure, it employed 31 young people between ages 13-17 to work in the meat industry such as Cargill and JBS USA throughout Minnesota and Nebraska.

It's stated that child labor is banned in the United States, but, in addition to the fact that there are states that even legislate to allow it, violations have recently been unleashed.

Some well-known companies, well-known consumer brands, were caught employing minors for exhausting work in dangerous conditions. The labor shortage leads many employers to violate laws that prohibit the hiring of minors.

They have rendered useless statements that “child labor is an issue that deeply affects who we are as a country and who we want to be,” according to Acting Labor Secretary Julie Su, who added: “Just like the President, we believe that any child working in a dangerous or risky environment is one too many.”

In many of these cases, they are children of recent immigrants who work excessively in difficult conditions, explained Jordán Abra, deputy assistant secretary of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration during the Obama administration. "Here vulnerable is piled on top of vulnerable," Abra added.

Department of Labor investigators found PSSI's use of child labor in eight states to be "systemic" and "clearly [indicated] a company-wide failure." The adults who recruited, hired, and supervised the minors, they said, "tried to derail our efforts to investigate their employment practices."

But up until now all this effort is useless in the richest country in the world, and in numerous states the laws that prohibit child labor are systematically violated, which continues to increase and already has signs that have nothing to envy, when they were publicly admitted, years ago.

THE MOST AMAZING

In 1906, an elderly Native American chief visited New York for the first time. He was curious about the city and the city was interested in him. "A magazine reporter asked the Amerindian chief what surprised him most about his trips to the city." The little children working," he replied.

Child labor might have surprised this foreigner, but it was all too common at the time in an urban, industrial United States (and on farms where it had long been common). Then law and practice almost made it disappear, so the reappearance of it, in abundance, caused shock and disbelief.

"But we better get used to it, because child labor is coming back. A staggering number of elected officials are making joined efforts (The New York Times, June 4th , 2023) to weaken or repeal laws that have long prevented (or at least seriously reduced) the ability to exploit children. "

The number of children working in the United States increased by 37% between 2015 and 2022. In the past two years, 14 states introduced or enacted laws that repeal regulations governing the number of hours children can work, reduce restrictions to dangerous work and legalize minimum wages for young people.

The state of Iowa now allows 14-year-olds to work in industrial laundries. At age 16, they can accept jobs in roofing, construction, digging, and demolition sectors and can use motorized machinery. 14-year-olds can even do it at night, and from age 15 they are admitted to assembly lines.

UNJUSTIFIABLE

Lawmakers give absurd justifications for these deviations from long-established practices. The work, they say, will keep children away from computers, video games or television. Or it will deprive the government of the power to dictate what children can or cannot do, leaving parents in control, a claim already made into a fantasy by efforts to eliminate protective social legislation and allow children up to 14 years old work without formal parental authorization.

The Cato Institute, a right-wing think tank, published "A Case Against Child Labor Bans," arguing that such laws stifle the future prospects of poor children, especially black children.

The Young Accountability Foundation, a think tank funded by a number of wealthy conservative donors, including the De Vos family [Betsy De Vos, Secretary of Education under the Trump administration], has led efforts to weaken child labor laws, and Americans for Prosperity, the Koch brothers' multibillion-dollar foundation (heavily involved in oil investments), has joined them.

These attacks are not limited to red states like Iowa or those in South California, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Hampshire, as well as Georgia and Ohio, have also been subject to these types of interventions. During the pandemic years, even New Jersey passed a law increasing the work hours allowed for 16-18-year-olds.

THE HARSH TRUTH...

...is that child labor pays off and is becoming remarkably widespread. It's an open secret that fast food chains have employed underage workers for years and only consider occasional fines as part of the cost of operation.

In Kentucky, boys and girls as young as 10 years old have worked in such catering centers and older children have exceeded the hourly limits prescribed by law. In Florida and Tennessee, roofers can now have 12. It's a topic that, unfortunately, has become inexhaustible and about which we will continue to write.

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