
A Crime Against Humanity

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There are a few, a precious few, as compared with the millions, who have a correct conception of the ills which flow from child labor. If the most thoughtful in the land were required to designate a social and industrial wrong more than any other prolific of mental, physical and moral degeneracy, we doubt not that "child labor" would be named.

Turn it which way you will, examine it as you may, the question of child labor has no bright side, nor can its contemplation afford satisfaction to anyone unless their being is shockingly debased.

It is worth while in the discussion of the subject to descend to particulars, to analyze with unhesitating candor and severity.

Starting out with the proposition that child labor is a crime against humanity, the question arises, Who is to blame? or, Where does the blame rest? Quite likely the reply will be "Society is to be blamed," therefore, as in criminal proceedings, since a whole community or a state can not be indicted, the crime escapes punishment.

"Oh," says one, "our civilization is to blame, the body politic, social, industrial, religious," all are involved, and hence the verdict, "Nobody is to blame."

The discussion of the evil effects of child labor is not of recent date, it began in England more than a century ago, where employers regarded children as material to be worked up, and it was worked up to an extent that horrified civilization, and finally brought Sir Robert Peel to the front to devise ways and means by which the poor children might be redeemed from conditions compared with which savagery would have been a supreme blessing.

It is held in some quarters that our civilization is peculiarly English; admit it, and then read the reports that have been submitted to parliament upon the condition of the industrial classes, and there will be little difficulty in arriving at the conclusion that American ideas of "child labor" are eminently English.

It has been held that in the United States of America in all things pertaining to the well being of the people, we were in advance of all other nations. In the form of government we boast that we did not borrow European ideas, but on the contrary, constructed a government especially designed to establish the sovereignty of the people; a government in which the poor have rights as sacred as the rich; and that the laws would protect the rights of all alike, and yet it is true, humiliatingly true, that even now, with all our boasting, the rights of workingmen are cloven down by decisions of English courts, made when the employer was master and the workingman a slave.

But cutting adrift from such reflections, the question arises, What is the American view of child labor? Can it be said that there is any well defined sentiment upon the subject such as exists in England?

It is possible, but by no means certain, if an appeal were made to the whole people, as in the case of a presidential election, the national judgment would be recorded against child labor, and this uncertainty indicates to what a deplorable extent the national conscience has been warped and deformed regarding a matter which the profoundest thinkers of the period regard as of supreme importance.

Why is child labor permitted? What are the incentives which underlie this crime against humanity?

Child labor is permitted by society because society is soulless, heartless, because it is dominated by ideas which regard with apparent contempt questions which relate to labor, to the employment of children, notwithstanding the age is distinguished for the discussion of all sorts of moral questions.

As a general proposition only poor people have large families. In the homes of the rich it is no longer fashionable to be prolific. One child is the real aristocratic idea, and beyond three is plebeian and vulgar. This being true, questions relating to the prerogatives of poor men of the future are already mooted, the idea being to relieve them of the ballot. In England, while the elective fran-

chise is being extended, in free America the codfish aristocratic class discuss the propriety of abridging it. The argument is that the masses are degenerating and that, therefore, the institutions of the country are in peril.

It is held that the life of a generation is 33 years, hence the male infants of today in 33 years will be the men who will control the destinies of the republic. It is readily seen that with such facts in full view the child labor question becomes one of commanding gravity.

It is held by men who have investigated the subject in its moral and physical aspects, that child labor is of all outers, which now confronts the nation, the one that should create the most active solicitude.

Who are those who favor child labor? and why are they opposed to any movement looking to the emancipation of children from toil?

There are several classes of people who favor child labor: First, indigent families whose poverty is the result of circumstances over which they have no control. Widows whose orphan children must work to keep themselves and their mothers out of the poor house. Second, parents degraded by multiplied vices, who have less regard for the welfare of their children than bears have for their cubs: whose children are required and compelled to work that their degenerate parents may be idle and gratify their beastly inclinations. Third, parents whose greed of gain totally obscures all consideration of the moral, physical and intellectual welfare of their children, who are willing to coin their young lives into dollars and cents to gratify mercenary instincts and force upon society moral and physical deformities to propagate in due time a still more degenerate generation. Fourth, there is still another class, known as employers, whose natures are so deplorably depraved that the employment of children is one of the means devised to augment their wealth.

Such employers are the monsters of the age. They are without conscience. In all the fens, swamps, jungles, and stagnant waters of the world, no animated thing is found more repulsive than the creature, having the form of man, who counts his gains, secured by child labor. His palatial home, his purple and fine linen, the luxuries which surround him, the food upon which he subsists, the downy bed upon which he reposes, all, everything, is damned,

irrevocably cursed by the crime of child labor, by which the “human form divine” is distorted, the immortal soul shriveled, the intellect shackled, and the child slave, at last grown to manhood or womanhood, sent forth to multiply a degenerate species of humanity, to describe which, the language supplies no adequate terms.

Does the pulpit take cognizance of the deplorable drift of events? Does it sound the alarm? Does it mass its anathemas and hurl them at society and seek to arouse universal hostility to conditions which the devil and his imps have foisted upon humanity? How gladly would we now and here reproduce the declarations of the pulpit against the degrading crime of child labor but, unfortunately the pulpit is silent.

Our readings enable us to say that lecture bureaus are numerous, and the intellect of the country is summoned to lecture upon “temperance, righteousness, and a judgment to come,” but whoever heard of a strolling lecturer, high or low, who chose for his theme the crime of child labor?

We have great institutions of learning and educators of renown, and millions are annually expended for education, but who of all the professional educators the country boasts, has sought to arouse the national conscience to the blighting curse of child labor?

The discussion of tariffs and currency, double standards and single standards, commerce and transportation, food and famine, etc., like Tennyson's brook, goes on forever but who discusses the crime of child labor?¹ Does echo answer who? It does more. It declares chiefly, we might say exclusively the crime of child labor is discussed in the ranks of labor.

If there is in the United States a growing sentiment against the crime of child labor, it is chiefly due to the influence exerted by organized workingmen.

Labor bureaus are taking up the subject and compiling facts.

We have before us, as we write, the report of the Minnesota Bureau of Labor Statistics, a book of nearly 400 pages, devoted exclusively to child labor and education. From this report we make the following extract:

¹ Reference to “The Brook” (1855) by **Alfred Tennyson** (1809-1892).

If there is one proposition of government more universally accepted by our people than any other it is that the safety and permanence of republican institutions depends upon the virtue and intelligence of the people. But, children having nothing worthy of the name of education, forced into factories at an early age to toil for ten hours each day, can not, save in very exceptional cases, develop into intelligent men and women. Yet they are to become an integral part of our people, and the men, at least, who grow from such children are to be, by our theory and practice of government, entrusted with all the important rights and duties of citizenship equally with the most intelligent persons in the land. We have based our government and public institutions upon the intelligence and virtue of the people. Everything which tends to build up that intelligence and virtue tends to strengthen and perpetuate republican institutions. Everything which tends to destroy that intelligence and virtue tends to break down our institutions. If certain tendencies of our industrial development are found to be at war with the development of the people, is there an argument needed to convince any thoughtful man that such tendencies should be checked.

To illustrate: If it be found that great factories can best be developed, goods cheapened to the public, and the production of certain classes of commodities facilitated and multiplied by applying child labor to improved machinery, does it follow that, in the long run, the people are benefited thereby? We will admit that goods are made cheaper and more plentiful, but what is the effect upon children? Are they maimed, crippled, dwarfed, distorted, withered? Will they grow up human manikins, intellectually and physically, or full rounded men and women? Are they fitted in any degree to take part in the direction of affairs, or must their lifelong lot be meek obedience? Or can they be trusted with power only at the expense of disaster?

Some philosopher has said that "dirt is only matter out of place," and, so, the multiplication of machinery is not in itself an evil; it is simply, in many cases, a perverted good. We cannot afford to destroy our men and women in their childhood for the sake of cheapening commodities. We cannot afford to undermine republican institutions, nor profit in any way by tendencies and influences which have their issue in lowering the standard of humanity. It is well that factories should prosper, it is better than men and women should be developed. Our institutions are more valuable and sacred than the material prosperity of a few individuals.

The foregoing indicates what labor bureaus are doing to point out the essential iniquities of child labor. The appeal is made to the patriot and philanthropist, to the statesman and the political economist — and above all, to the conscience of the nation. The employment of children of tender years in factories and shops should be declared a felony. It is a crime against humanity and the state. It contemplates generations of dwarfs, physical and mental.

In this connection it is worth while to state that “Dr. Snow, of Fall River, Massachusetts, testified that the laboring people of that city were largely made up of foreigners, induced to come here by the manufacturers; that they were, as a class, dwarfed physically, and that after a careful examination of their antecedents he had come to the conclusion that the character of the labor they had been performing from childhood was responsible for their inferior development.” Besides, he said that these dwarfed people were lacking in vitality. Parents thus dwarfed mentally and physically, have no higher conception of childhood than to harness it to a machine at the earliest possible day, and the factory lords of Fall River, still more debased, employ children to increase their wealth.

It is doubtless true that there is a growing hostility to child labor in the United States, but the sentiment is not sufficiently pronounced to bring about a sweeping reform. Laws are often dead letters, because there are few sufficiently courageous to note their violation and fly to the protection of the infant toilers, in which regard the working children of the United States are in a more forlorn condition than dumb animals, for whose protection there is a powerful association of philanthropic men.

We have said that the champions of the children subjected to toil are found in the ranks of organized labor, and if a public sentiment is to be created that shall emancipate those children from degradation, and make their lives something better than a curse, labor organizations will have a large share of the responsibility. Said President Gompers, of the American Federation of Labor, at Detroit:

Of all the ills that mankind suffers from, the unjust and cruel tendencies of modern methods of wealth producing, the one that seems to me to rise to horrible proportions is that of child labor. Our centers of industry, with their mills, factories, and workshops,

are teeming with young and innocent children, bending their weary forms with long hours of dally drudgery, with pinched and wan cheeks and emaciated forms, dwarfed both physically and mentally and frequently driving them to premature decay and death. The innocent smile of youthful happiness is soon transformed into wrinkles and other evidences of early decay. The life's blood of the youth of our land is too frequently sapped at the foundation. The hope of a perpetuity of free institutions is endangered when the rising generation is robbed of the opportunity to enjoy the healthful recreation of the playgrounds or the mental improvements of the schoolhouse. The children of the workers have none to raise a voice in their defense, other than the organized wage workers, and I appeal to you to take such action as will protect them from the contemptible avarice of unscrupulous corporations and employers.

These are brave words; words opportune and fitly spoken, and should be heeded by every workingman in the land, who would emancipate childhood from the debasing influences of labor. T.V. Powderly, General Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, is on record as saying, "The question of child labor and education is the most important that can come before us now or at any other time."

But, after all, labor organizations are not half aroused upon the enormity of the crime of child labor. In many factories children are practically buried alive, and in others, according to the New York report of factory inspectors, "children are crippled for life by machinery, which they should not be permitted to approach, much less control. The tale is one well calculated to horrify all people not dead to sympathy.

What of it all? This. Labor organizations can, if they will, score a triumph for God and humanity, by making child labor a burning question, and if they fail, generations of children, born deformed in body and in mind, will bear testimony to their incapacity to grasp a question fruitful of untold ills to humanity.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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