



# in our own backyard

THE HIDDEN PROBLEM OF  
CHILD FARMWORKERS IN AMERICA

<http://www.ourownbackyard.org>

## Part II: How Can This Happen?

### **Child Labor in U.S. History**

Background on the history of child labor in the United States and the efforts made to stop it, including pictures and a timeline.

*Source: Child Labor Education Project*

*National Center for Farmworker Health, October 2001,*

*[http://www.continuetolearn.uiowa.edu/laborctr/child\\_labor/about/us\\_history.html](http://www.continuetolearn.uiowa.edu/laborctr/child_labor/about/us_history.html)*





Breaker Boys  
Hughestown Borough Pa. Coal Co.  
Pittston, Pa.  
Photo: Lewis Hine

Forms of child labor, including indentured servitude and child slavery, have existed throughout American history. As industrialization moved workers from farms and home workshops into urban areas and factory work, children were often preferred, because factory owners viewed them as more manageable, cheaper, and less likely to strike. Growing opposition to child labor in the North caused many factories to move to the South. By 1900, states varied considerably in whether they had child labor standards and in their content and degree of enforcement. By then, American children worked in large numbers in mines, glass factories, textiles, agriculture, canneries, home industries, and as newsboys, messengers, bootblacks, and peddlers.



Spinning Room  
Cornell Mill  
Fall River, Mass.  
Photo: Lewis Hine

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the numbers of child laborers in the U.S. peaked. Child labor began to decline as the labor and reform movements grew and labor standards in general began improving, increasing the political power of working people and other social reformers to demand legislation regulating child labor. Union organizing and child labor reform were often intertwined, and common initiatives were conducted by organizations led by working women and middle class consumers, such as state Consumers' Leagues and Working Women's Societies. These organizations generated the National Consumers' League in 1899 and the National Child Labor Committee in 1904, which shared goals of challenging child labor, including through anti-sweatshop campaigns and labeling programs. The National Child Labor Committee's work to end child labor was combined with efforts to provide free, compulsory education for all children, and culminated in the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938, which set federal standards for child labor.

## Child Labor Reform and the U.S. Labor Movement

### 1832 New England unions condemn child labor

The New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics and Other Workingmen resolve that “Children should not be allowed to labor in the factories from morning till night, without any time for healthy recreation and mental culture,” for it “endangers their . . . well-being and health”



Women's Trade Union League of New York

### 1836 Early trade unions propose state minimum age laws

Union members at the National Trades' Union Convention make the first formal, public proposal recommending that states establish minimum ages for factory work

### 1836 First state child labor law

Massachusetts requires children under 15 working in factories to attend school at least 3 months/year

### 1842 States begin limiting children's work days

Massachusetts limits children's work days to 10 hours; other states soon pass similar laws—but most of these laws are not consistently enforced

### 1876 Labor movement urges minimum age law

Working Men's Party proposes banning the employment of children under the age of 14

### 1881 Newly formed AFL supports state minimum age laws

The first national convention of the American Federation of Labor passes a resolution calling on states to ban children under 14 from all gainful employment

### 1883 New York unions win state reform

Led by Samuel Gompers, the New York labor movement successfully sponsors legislation prohibiting cigar making in tenements, where thousands of young children work in the trade

### 1892 Democrats adopt union recommendations

Democratic Party adopts platform plank based on union recommendations to ban factory employment for children under 15



National Child Labor Committee

- 1904 National Child Labor Committee forms
  - Aggressive national campaign for federal child labor law reform begins
- 1916 New federal law sanctions state violators
  - First federal child labor law prohibits movement of goods across state lines if minimum age laws are violated (law in effect only until 1918, when it's declared unconstitutional, then revised, passed, and declared unconstitutional again)
- 1924 First attempt to gain federal regulation fails
  - Congress passes a constitutional amendment giving the federal government authority to regulate child labor, but too few states ratify it and it never takes effect
- 1936 Federal purchasing law passes
  - Walsh-Healey Act states U.S. government will not purchase goods made by underage children
- 1937 Second attempt to gain federal regulation fails
  - Second attempt to ratify constitutional amendment giving federal government authority to regulate child labor falls just short of getting necessary votes
- 1937 New federal law sanctions growers
  - Sugar Act makes sugar beet growers ineligible for benefit payments if they violate state minimum age and hours of work standards
- 1938 Federal regulation of child labor achieved in Fair Labor Standards Act
  - For the first time, minimum ages of employment and hours of work for children are regulated by federal law