

Ending Child Labor in North Carolina ^[1]

Almost as soon as the cotton mill industry began booming in the 1880's, critics began speaking out against child labor. Industrial unions like the Knights of Labor and the National Union of Textile Workers protested the use of child mill workers, who would work for lower wages and therefore drive down wages for adult workers. Mill owners often insisted on "equal pay for equal work", and paid their adult employees the same wages they paid the child employees.

One of the strongest objections to child labor was that it took from children their chance at an education. Before education was made compulsory ^[2], meaning all children legally had to attend school, many child mill workers had almost no schooling or completed only the third or fourth grade before beginning to work. A related objection was that child labor created a population of citizens who were uneducated and often illiterate, but who would also be participating in American democracy. "When it comes to the people's ruling us by their votes, electing our governors and presidents, initiating and vetoing legislation, taxing our incomes, we grow mightily concerned over the intelligence and independence of the electorate. We do not like to trust our interests now and the lives and fortunes of our children to a mass of voters who have been deprived of all opportunity for an education, who have been held in feudalistic bondage ^[3], who have been embittered by the robbery of their childhood," wrote child labor reformer Alexander J. McKelway in 1913.

Mill owners and even mill workers themselves didn't always welcome the efforts of reformers. Many felt that working at a young age taught children discipline, the value of money, and a sense of accomplishment. Other parents preferred that their children were working in the mill under the watchful eye of the mill supervisor rather than spending time with friends without adult supervision. They felt that working in the mills kept children out of trouble. Some families claimed that they couldn't survive without the financial contributions from their working children.

During the early 1900's, the movement for social reform was gaining momentum in many areas of society. Social reformers wanted to change conditions they felt were unjust, and abolishing child labor was one of their goals. These reformers formed the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) in 1904, a group whose purpose was to bring to light the horrors of child labor across America.

One of the founding members was Alexander J. McKelway, a pastor from North Carolina who was especially concerned about child labor in the industrial South. Along with social reform photographer Lewis Hine, McKelway investigated conditions in cotton mills throughout the South. The NCLC published their findings in a 20 page pamphlet called *Child Labor in the Carolinas: account of the Investigations Made in the Cotton Mills of North and South Carolina*, by Rev.A.E. Seddon, A.H. Ulm and Lewis Hine in 1909. This pamphlet was distributed to middle-class Americans concerned with the effects of child labor in order to raise support for its abolition. Hine also exhibited his haunting photographs of child workers and gave talks about what their lives were like to audiences throughout the country.

These efforts began to change the tide of public opinion against child labor, and in 1916 the Keating-Owen Child Labor bill was signed by President Woodrow Wilson. This bill said that the federal government could regulate child labor. Previous laws against child labor only existed at the state level and were rarely enforced. The Keating-Owen bill was overturned two years later, however, when the Supreme Court ruled that it limited state powers to regulate labor and exceeded federal authority.

Child labor began to decrease in the 1920's, due more to changes in the cotton industry than to the efforts of social reformers. New technology eliminated the need for many workers, and new fabrics and techniques made millwork more difficult. Experienced adult workers were needed for this work, and the use of child workers declined.

In 1933, North Carolina enacted laws regulating the use of child labor in industries such as cotton manufacture. The Department of Labor stated that "no girl under 14 years of age shall be employed or permitted to work in any mill, factory, cannery, workshop, manufacturing or mercantile ^[4] establishment, laundry, bakery, place of amusement, or other place of business set out in Regulation 1 above or in messenger or delivery service, or at any form of street trades" and boys between the ages of 12 and 14 had to obtain special permission to work in those industries. The laws also limited work hours, stating "no child under 16 years of age may be employed or permitted to work in the places of employment set out in Regulation 1 above for more than eight (8) hours in any one day and forty-eight (48) hours in any one week". Although child labor had begun to decline without legislation, these laws effectively ended it in the cotton mills of North Carolina.

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