

EDITORIAL

WHO'S TO BLAME?

By DANIEL DE LEON

DURING the past few weeks there has arisen, principally in New York State, an agitation in favor of child labor laws that possesses some noteworthy features. Foremost among them is the attempt to fasten the responsibility for the existence of child labor on the intemperance and inhumanity of parents, who, it is claimed, swear falsely to their children's age, in order that they may thereby secure the miserable pittance child labor receives.

This feature is in direct contradistinction to the foremost feature of the child labor agitations in the South, in New Jersey, and in other States last year. In those agitations, the cause of child labor and child labor violations was plainly traced to the workings of the capitalist system, the capitalist upholders of which fought proposed enactments and defied prosecution on the ground that child labor was essential to the profitable development of their States and industries. This stand earned for the capitalists in question popular condemnation and execration. That these men could sacrifice tender and innocent childhood so brutally to the pursuit of profit, evoked general, though ineffectual, wrath and indignation.

From the foregoing facts it appears that this foremost feature of the most recent child labor agitation is but an attempt to shield the real criminals. It is an attempt to raise the cry of "stop thief" in order to fill the cells that wait in vain for the real culprits with prisoners captured among its victims.

This view gains credence when some of the arguments against child labor, advanced in this agitation, are considered. It is rightly claimed that child labor is one of the most important causes of unemployment among adults. It is also asserted that the lower wages at which children must be hired is the greatest inducement for their employment. Clearly these two facts work to the great advantage of the capitalist class and the

detriment of the working class. The first will accordingly favor child labor, while the latter opposes it.

A large reserve army of unemployed is essential to capitalist profit. With it the capitalist overcomes discontent and reduces wages. It naturally follows that he will protect and stimulate the development of anything tending to increase that reserve army. Child labor will accordingly be fostered and promoted by him in factory and legislature.

Machinery also adds to the army of unemployed. Now, it is a peculiarity of machinery under capitalism, that it decreases exchange value, while dispensing with the muscular strength and skill of men, thereby permitting of the employment of the more supple women and children. Competition is increased; and the hiring of child labor at low wages becomes not only necessary, but possible. Without machinery the employment of child labor would become unprofitable.

Here, then, is further evidence supporting the view that the attempt to shift the responsibility for child labor is but an attempt to hide the real culprit; the capitalist class. Capitalist conditions, created and maintained by the capitalist class, cause and promote child labor.

In the above facts, we also have the evidence to enforce the oft-made Socialist contention that child labor will not be advanced so long as capitalism prevails. On the contrary, as the present day reaction in some circles against it proves, it increases as capitalism increases. And its growth will be greater as the growth of easily-guided machinery grows.

Socialism alone is the remedy for child labor.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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