
Child Labor

by Eugene V. Debs

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The command to “multiply and replenish the earth,”¹ is one that bears about even date with the introduction of the fig leaf costume improvised by Adam and his beautiful spouse. And it may be said, we think, without fear of successful contradiction, that poor men and their wives are exceptionally loyal in their obedience to the heavenly mandate, for in all lands they multiply with astonishing rapidity, and we doubt if many of them will be shut out of Paradise because of disobedience of the command. But dismissing all speculative views upon the subject, what are the facts? Poor men will marry. They usually marry healthy women. The result is a numerous progeny. It so happens that in many cases, in the rural districts, where food is abundant and cheap, no special embarrassment is experienced by the parents in rearing their flock. Food is plentiful, and though common, is healthy. The expense of clothing is reduced to the minimum, and as a consequence, the work of multiplying and replenishing the earth goes bravely on. Children are not overworked, they live much of their time in the open air and physically develop into splendid specimens of men and women.

But, an entirely different state of affairs exists in towns and cities — except in the matter of multiplying. It does not seem to matter particularly, where poor people live, or how they live. The multiplying business is always kept up. Under certain conditions, the fact would be one of the most agreeable that political economists and statisticians could comment upon, for where children are numerous, well clothed, fed and sheltered, the three great essentials of prosperity and happiness are supposed to exist, and ordinarily do exist. But where child labor exists as a necessity of living, then the whole aspect of af-

¹ From *Genesis*, chapter 1, verse 28, which reads: “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

fairs is changed. Under such circumstances it will be found difficult to exaggerate the deplorable surroundings and conditions.

Mr. Arthur T. Hadley, of the Connecticut Bureau of Labor Statistics, says

That the prevalence of child labor indicates a bad state of things, hardly needs proof. If a man sends his children to the mills at an early age, it means either that he cannot support his family himself, or that he cares more for a slight increase in his present earnings than for the future welfare of his family. It means that these children are growing up without the advantages of regular education. It means that there is great danger of physical deterioration, and little chance of intellectual improvement. It means an addition to the ranks of unskilled labor at present, at the expense of the higher development of those laborers in the future. It means that the community is more anxious to increase the quantity of its products than the quality of its citizens.²

Such a picture. Turn it in any direction, view it from any point, presents to the minds of thoughtful people, a state of affairs, essentially repulsive. There is not one redeeming feature in it. It is fraught with danger to society and to the state. It must be remembered that it is an American picture, not an English nor a continental European picture. Children of tender years compelled to work to keep themselves in food, to supply clothing and shelter, to keep gaunt hunger from their miserable homes. What are the causes which underlie such terrible effects? Who is responsible for the situation? What is the remedy? The cause is readily found. It is that the father cannot support his family at current wages. He cannot earn, or, more properly, cannot obtain enough for his work, to supply his family with food, clothing and shelter. But, Mr. Hadley says:

If a man sends his children to the mills at an early age, it means either that he cannot support his family himself, or that he cares more for a slight increase in his present earnings than for the future welfare of his family.³

² Arthur T. Hadley, *Second Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the State of Connecticut for the Year Ending November 30, 1886*. Hartford, CT: Case, Lockwood, and Barnard, 1886; pg. xvi.

³ *Ibid.*

We think it quite probable there are human monsters who would, for mercenary considerations, compel their children to work when able to support them and send them to school, but we hold that such creatures are exceptions, and yet, were it otherwise, the wretched proceeding might be traced to the experience of the father, which had taught him that no enemy is so relentless as hunger and no friend so good as money, and to secure the friend and circumvent the enemy the sacrifice of the welfare of his children is defensible. After all, the cause of child labor, with all its deplorable consequences, is traceable directly to the fact that the father's wages are below the supporting point, and down to the starvation level. To gloss over the facts, to remove in some measure its hideous aspects, or to shift the responsibility from where it properly belongs, statistics are furnished demonstrating that in Europe, people live on less wages than are paid in the United States, and this is done, presumably, upon the principle that "misery loves company," and that A, because he is starving, will be reconciled to his situation if he knows that others are in like condition.

Legislatures are endeavoring to remedy the evil of child labor, by enacting laws with severe penalties attached, forbidding the employment of children under a certain age. Such laws are believed to be philanthropic, and in strict accord with the best interests of society. Nor is this all, but laws are enacted requiring parents to send their children to school. Who is there to question the wisdom of such legislation? But the question arises, if a father cannot support his children by his wages how can he send them to school, or what benefit is a law which forbids their employment, whereby they are able to live outside of a poorhouse? Manifestly, under such conditions, legislation only aggravates the evils it seeks to remove. It might have the effect of sending the mother to the mill and thus with the responsibilities of maternity and physical labor send her to the graveyard some years sooner than would otherwise be the case. Such things may be remedies, but if seriously analyzed they will be found little, if indeed any, better than the disease they are expected to cure.

The wrong, the curse is, that labor is not honestly rewarded. Capital, capitalists, and the pets of capitalists receive more than their just portion of the wealth which labor creates. Labor ought to receive so much as will decently clothe and shelter it. Labor should be able to keep the children out of factories and shops and at school. Children should be so situated as to have full mental and physical develop-

ment, and this they would have if simple justice was meted out to working men.

But the skies are brightening. The night of wrong is disappearing. The sun of justice is rising. The full orb moon is to come. A baptism of joy is in store for the children of working men. The school is doing its work. The newspaper and the magazine, the pulpit and the rostrum are coming to the rescue, and more than all, the ballot will inaugurate a peaceful revolution, and the Truth and the Right are to prevail.

The work of multiplying and replenishing the earth is to proceed, and the children are to have an abundance of food and clothing in this free and heaven-favored land.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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