

Report: 452 child workers died in the US from 2003 to 2016

By Jessica Goldstein
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About 452 child workers died in the United States from 2003 to 2016, according to a December 20 analysis by the *Washington Post*. Over 16 percent of those, or a total of 73, were children aged 12 years and younger. The age groups with the next highest number of deaths were 16- and 17-year-olds, with 110 and 145 deaths during those years, respectively.

A child worker is recognized by the US government as any worker under 18 years of age. According to the Fair Labor Standards Act—a set of federal laws which set age, hours worked, wage and safety requirements for minors in the US—14 is the minimum age for most non-agricultural work.

However, there are many exemptions to the law. In the US, children are legally allowed to deliver newspapers, perform in radio, television, movies or theatrical productions at any age. They are also allowed to work in businesses owned by their parents (except in mining, manufacturing or what are deemed to be “hazardous jobs”), perform babysitting or minor chores around a private home, and work as homeworkers to gather evergreens and make evergreen wreaths.

The majority of child deaths from 2003 to 2016—52 percent, or a total of 235—occurred in agriculture, although agricultural workers account for less than one-fifth of the total number of child laborers in the US. The disproportionate number can be attributed to the fact that the agricultural, forestry, fishing and hunting sector, which accounted for over 11 percent of total workplace deaths in 2017, is one of the most dangerous occupations in the US.

Another cause is that small family farms are exempt from most government regulations of child labor in the US. The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the federal organization that regulates workplace safety, states that “youths of any

age may work at any time in any job on a farm owned or operated by their parent or person standing in place of their parent.”

Children younger than 14 are allowed to work on a farm with their parents’ permission. Children younger than 12 can work only on farms so small that they’re not required to pay the minimum wage. Children are prohibited from working during school hours, which means they must work either in the early morning or evening hours. In some seasons, these are the hours with the least amount of sunlight, meaning that they make working conditions more dangerous.

Farmworkers 15 and younger are prohibited from operating a combine harvester or most larger tractors, using dynamite or other explosives, or performing other hazardous tasks. But there are exceptions for children who have been trained on certain tasks and machinery in a program such as 4-H. Children younger than 15 may and regularly do operate smaller vehicles, like tractors and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), on family farms.

According to a 2018 report by the National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, the number of youth worker fatalities in agriculture has been higher than in all other industries combined since 2009. In 2015, child workers were 44.8 times more likely to be fatally injured in agriculture when compared to all other industries combined.

Transportation incidents were the most common fatal event, with tractors and ATVs being the primary vehicles involved. Transportation incidents also cause the most workplace fatalities in the entire US labor force, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data for 2017.

The high number of child deaths in agriculture can be traced to the reactionary policies of the Obama

administration enacted after the 2008 financial crisis, in order to serve the profit interests of the major corporations and big banks and to suppress the class struggle.

In addition to stripping back health and safety regulations during his two presidential terms, Obama's Labor Department in 2012 refused to enact proposed regulations that would have forbidden children younger than 16 years of age from completing "agricultural work with animals and in pesticide handling, timber operations, manure pits and storage bins." The regulations also would have forbidden farm workers under the age of 16 from handling most "power-driven equipment" and from contributing to the "cultivation, harvesting and curing of tobacco."

Outside of agricultural work, the *Washington Post* report shows that children died working in construction (56), administrative and support and waste management (28), restaurants, hotels and retail (39 total) and several other occupations.

There is no way to know exactly how many children work in the US at any given time, as no official data is available for the total number in agriculture, family businesses and household work, including babysitting and housekeeping work for pay.

Data for employment of 15- to 17-year-olds show that 2.5 million children in this age group were working during the summer of 2017, and the number fell to less than 2 million for the rest of the year, when school is in session in the US. Both statistics are the highest level of employment recorded for this age group in the post-2008 period.

According to the report, "The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Childhood Agricultural Injury Survey separately found about 524,000 children worked on farms in 2014. The survey found about 375,000 'working household children' that same year. Two-thirds of them were 14 or younger, according to the [Government Accountability Office's] analysis."

The number of children working and killed at work in the United States exposes the stark reality of the capitalist system: Even in one of the most advanced capitalist economies in the world, child labor is not eradicated, nor will it be unless the profit system is replaced with a planned economy based on fulfilling social need.

That so many children are working points to the fact

that living standards for the working class have fallen so low that children are going to work at younger ages out of economic necessity, evoking images of children in the Victorian era who risked their lives in dangerous factory and mine work in order to support their families.

Small farmers are especially susceptible to pressure to use child labor, with a general lack of capital making production costs exceedingly high when compared to the economic gain.

Unless the working class intervenes with its own strategy to take control of the means of production, not only will child labor continue to exist in the US, but conditions for child laborers in the US will begin to fall closer to those faced by children on the continents of Asia and Africa, where it is much more common.

Betsy DeVos, current education secretary in the Trump Administration and one of the few cabinet members who has not been fired or resigned, has been a member of the board of the Action Institute. This right-wing think tank advocates the abolition of mandatory schooling and the loosening of child labor restrictions, as illustrated by one of its blog posts from early November 2016, titled "Bring back child labor."

None of the trade unions in the United States, including the United Farm Workers of America, have lifted a finger to fight against the exploitation of children in dangerous work in the US.

The working class needs its own strategy, independent of the two capitalist parties and their allies in the trade unions, putting forward a socialist program and linking up with workers around the world in the fight for a safe workplace for all workers and to put an end to child labor worldwide.

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