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## CHILD LABOR A MENACE TO CIVILIZATION

BY DR. FELIX ADLER,  
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I wish to emphasize, in the remarks I am about to offer, the importance of this movement, as being not only in the interest of the child, but of civilization.

There is a Greek legend, according to which an ancient city was built to the sound of music. A great musician struck the lyre, and as the strains he wooed from it rose into the air, so rose the walls of the favored city. The meaning of the legend is transparent. Music was to the Greeks the incarnation of measure. They believed that the whole life of nations, as well as of individuals, should be musical—that is, subject to due restraints. They would have condemned as grotesque a civilization based on the exaggerated appreciation of a single end, such as material prosperity, and characterized by the absence of self-containment in the pursuit of this and by lack of consideration for other, higher social interests.

I could not help thinking of this ancient story on visiting, as I have now done for the first time, your beautiful and wonderful city, situated, as it is, between its lovely hills: a city extemporized, as it were, at the bidding of energy and genius; a city destined, it would seem, to become the centre of an ever-increasing population. And I could not but wish that your Birmingham, too, may, like that city of old, be built to the sound of music—that is, with due regard to the nobler human purposes involved in the future civilization of your community as well as of the whole country.

The child labor movement is making headway in every part of the United States, though with unequal acceleration. There have been notable gains, both in legislation and also, though not equally so, in enforcement. The former, without the latter, needless to say, is inadequate. And yet, what even mere legislation can accomplish may be seen in the fact that the greatest number of young persons who enter the field of industry are of the minimum age permitted by the law. From this it is evident that by raising the

minimum age the influx of young persons into industry may, to a certain extent, be controlled.

Everywhere, then, there has been a distinct forward movement; and yet the goal is still very distant and we need the earnest support and co-operation of all who appreciate "the holy war" in which we are engaged; a war having for its object the stability of civilization as well as the welfare of the child.

Permit me, with particular emphasis, to call attention to the following point. All students of sociology are practically agreed that it was the prolonged infancy of the human child that made civilization possible. The long period during which the child is non-productive has been the condition *sine qua non* of the evolution of human beings; and this for two reasons—first, the prolonged state of dependence has elicited the tenderer traits, the capacity for self-sacrifice, in the parents. Without the children pulling at our heart-strings we should still be savages to-day. Without the qualities of generosity and self-sacrifice, no civilization is worth having.

In the next place, the prolonged exemption of the child from productive industry has been the means of securing to it the opportunity of physical growth and of mental preparation for the later work of life.

The thinkers of the world, those who have given the greatest attention to the problems of human development, unite to impress upon us the truth that mankind has slowly grown out of the state of primitive barbarity, has slowly climbed to the level upon which we stand to-day, thanks to the leisure and respite granted to the young offspring of human beings. And yet, at this very moment we find that wherever mechanical industry is introduced the temptation proves almost irresistible for those who have in mind only immediate and quick material aggrandizement, to rob the child of that leisure and respite so necessary for its own sake and for the sake of progress in general, and to employ the cheap labor of little children in order to multiply profits.

In the first volume of the report on the Condition of Woman and Child Workers in the United States, we find the following figures: In five Southern states, 143 establishments were selected, and in these establishments, and in nine or ten others, in the State of Mississippi, there were found well-nigh a thousand children, eleven years and under, at work. Think of it!—children of eleven years

old and under at work. To one not acquainted with the facts, such a statement seems hardly credible; yet the statistical data have not been impugned. We find that of children seven years old, there were in these establishments seventeen; of children eight years old, twenty-eight; of children nine years old, 107; of children ten years old, 283; of children eleven years old, 494.

Many of us have children of the same ages—eleven and ten and nine and eight and seven. I ask you, in imagination, to put your own children into the places of these little wage-workers. Can you imagine yourselves, for an instant satisfied that any child of yours, of such tender years, should be compelled to toil at monotonous, wearying, uninspiring, uneducating labor, as are these children?

Is there not something contrary to the nature and spirit of the American people in these conditions? Is it, I ask, congenial to our character, to our institutions, to permit that the weak shall bear the burdens of the strong? Is it in harmony with American principles that 949 children eleven years and under shall do work that ought to be done by adults?

But, if we ask for the reasons that have made this state of things possible, I think we shall find that the principal reason is ignorance and lack of enlightenment on the part of parents, employers, and the general public alike, rather than any desire to inflict harm. And if we consider the operating motives, I think they may perhaps be classified briefly as follows:

#### *Child Labor Maintained by Fallacy*

In the first place, the fallacy of reasoning from exceptional to average cases. An employer who began to work as a child, who never had any special educational advantages, who forced his way upward by sheer pluck, intelligence, shrewdness and will-power—such a man is disposed to ask: Why cannot others achieve what I have accomplished? He forgets that he is the exception that is very far from proving the rule. He has had exceptional gifts, exceptional tenacity, exceptional opportunities!

A second reason—especially in the Southern States—is the marked individualism that resents the interference of the state, and would limit such interference within the narrowest bounds. This narrow attitude is giving way, and is bound to give way, more and

more, under the imperative pressure of social necessities, and a more enlightened individualism will take its place—an individualism which realizes that collective action within its proper field is not only not prejudicial to the highest development and enrichment of individual life, but is rather its indispensable prerequisite.

A third motive is false sympathy. The wages of the little children, it is said, are necessary to complete the income required by the family. And from this point of view it seems unfeeling to deprive the parents of that increment to their revenue which can be furnished by the little hands. This argument, however, is based upon a failure to see that if the earnings of the children were withdrawn, in the long run the adult-wage would rise. It is true that in the period of transition before this appreciation could take place, there would be suffering. But is it not the duty of society in general to come to the rescue at this point and to minimize the evils that are always involved in any passage from a lower to a higher stage?

The appeal to sympathy, I contend, is fallacious. Admit that the present condition is evil, admit that a better condition can be reached; then it is a profound error to limit the appeal of sentiment to the sufferings to be endured in the interval, instead of directing it to the continuous and multifold evils that will ensue if the present condition remain unaltered.

And there is one point more to be noted. One of the reasons why the movement for the abolition of child labor is retarded, why it meets with such persistent opposition, is sectional patriotism. I think we shall find in any new community, combined with the individual desire to get wealth quickly, an ambition that the community of which one is a member may compare favorably with others in respect to rapid material progress. This is especially likely to be the case in a section like this wonderful Southern country, the immense resources of which have been lying dormant so long, and which is now opening up prospects of vast extension of power and wealth to those whose imagination is capable of conceiving of them.

We may allow for the unselfishness, or, to speak more truthfully, the collective selfishness, implied in this motive. But none the less we must insist upon the peril and the folly of striving for economic power at the expense of those permanent social assets and interests of which I spoke at the beginning.

*Robbing Society of Childhood*

Let me give you a concrete example of what I have here in mind. In the same government report to which allusion has been made, several cases are mentioned that have occurred in North Carolina mills. They are not typical in any sense; but they do indicate the dangers incurred, the havoc wrought, whenever the materialistic incentive is allowed to operate unchecked.

In one of the mills the children of a single family—one thirteen years old, one eleven years old, and one ten years old—have worked for a considerable part of the eight months preceding the investigation, on an average seventeen hours a day. Consulting the pay-rolls, the investigator found that they were paid off at the rate of seventy-eight to eighty-four hours a week. These children would work from six a. m.—remember, children thirteen, eleven and ten years of age—until six p. m., with thirty-five minutes intermission for dinner, and then, after supper, would frequently return to work for half the night until midnight, or would remain at home until midnight and then turn in to work the second shift of the night—children, I repeat, ten, eleven and thirteen years of age. Imprint these facts upon your memory. Such concrete cases are more cogent than a world of abstract argument. Such conditions are still possible in the United States. And why are these children so mercilessly overtaxed? In some cases, it is true that the father, being a ne'er-do-well, simply lives on the earnings of his children. But in the case mentioned it was not so; the father of the family was himself a hard-working man. He did not spare himself—he worked hard day by day. He was merciless to himself, and he was merciless to his offspring. Often, indeed, we find that those who are willing themselves to endure the greatest hardships are the most ruthless and pitiless toward others. This man did not spare himself, and he did not spare his own flesh. He worked, and his children worked. And, of course, we are not surprised to hear that not one of them had any education, that neither the parents nor the children could read or write.

Then there is another family mentioned where there were five wage-earners, several of them children. Together they had accumulated in one year the sum of \$400, but neither the adults nor the children of that family could read or write. And the youngest, it is said, was an exceptionally bright child—a child of ten years.

Surely it is pitiful to think of an exceptionally bright child who has not the opportunity to acquire even the rudiments of an education.

In this government report we learn also that not fifty per cent of the children who are at work at fourteen have ever had as much as twelve months' schooling.

And so I repeat, that not merely considerations of sentiment, but concern for American civilization should enlist us in this movement for the protection of the children. For how shall we ever work democracy with men who, when they were fourteen years of age, had not even had twelve months' schooling? Or with unusually bright children who had not seen the interior of a school-room? Or with children who are in the mills—I will not say seventeen hours a day, but during the normal factory day? Children as young as these, of whom there are so many in the South, and so many more in other sections of our land.

#### *Menace to Efficiency*

And there is yet one other reason which I wish to mention. A general discussion is at present going on, on the subject of efficiency, and whatever doubts may be expressed as to certain means of producing efficiency, it is unquestionable that efficiency itself, of the right kind, is the condition, not only of progress, but of maintaining the standards at which we have already arrived. Efficiency means physical vigor unimpaired, for without a sound body there cannot be a forward-reaching, vigorous intelligence. Efficiency means mental training of such a kind that the worker shall understand the principles underlying the processes. The efficient worker—the skilled worker, as we call him—is he who, instead of merely repeating a process, understands the reasons for it, and therefore is intelligent about it; and because he is in daily touch with the details of the work, can suggest improvements of it. Efficiency, then, depends on physical strength and mental and moral development, and the movement for the abolition of child labor, regarded from this point of view, is nothing else than a movement having for its purpose to provide, for those young children who are to be the workers in America, the possibility of becoming efficient. Without this supreme quality they will not be able to compete with the workers of other countries. Without it they will not be able to maintain and to further elevate the standard of living among the

working class. Efficiency in all lines of activity is to-day, more than ever, the supreme desideratum. But how can the thousands of young children who are employed to-day become efficient, if we waste their possibilities by premature exploitation? How can they become efficient if not fifty per cent of them have twelve months' schooling? How can we ever hope to make them efficient unless we preserve for them intact and sacred the prolonged childhood, on the basis of which humanity has risen to the level of civilization it occupies to-day?