

THE PHYSICAL AND PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF CHILD LABOR¹

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As chairman of the local committee I desire to express our deep appreciation of the efforts of the National Child Labor Committee to secure a model child labor law for the District of Columbia. I deem it a special privilege to preside over one of the sessions of its meeting when the subject for discussion is "New Legislation, with special reference to the needs of the District of Columbia."

Child labor as a menace to industry, education, good citizenship and to the health of the children has been forcefully presented in most effective and instructive addresses, and will doubtless be again emphasized. There is one phase of the question which strongly appeals to me, and that is the effect of premature and involuntary labor upon the health and the physical welfare of the child.

Physiologists have long since demonstrated that the muscles of the average child attain only at the age of thirteen a certain amount of strength and capacity for work. Up to this time the muscular fibers contain a large per cent. of water, and in consequence are very tender and immature. As a consequence of this imperfect muscular development it is not surprising that we should find such a large percentage of children engaged in workshops, factories, or even at the writing desk or the merchant counter, develop lateral curvature of the spine and other muscular deformities, not to mention their general weakness and predisposition to rickets, tuberculosis and other pulmonary diseases; all of the bad effects are, of course, very much intensified by unsanitary environments, especially when these occupations are attended by the inhalation of dust, impure air and injurious gases.

¹Introductory address, as presiding officer at the Third Session of the Annual Meeting Washington, D. C., December 9th, 1905.

Child labor differs in degree, but never in kind. The ordinary messenger or newsboy perhaps does not sacrifice his health, but his morals and his education must inevitably suffer. And so we see different gradations until some of the most atrocious forms of child labor are encountered.

Dr. Daniels, in speaking of her personal observation in New York, tells us that a child of three can straighten out the leaves of tobacco and can stick together the material which forms the stems of artificial flowers. At four he can put the cover on paper boxes; between four and six he can sew on buttons and pull bast-ing threads. A girl between the age of eight and twelve can finish trousers as well as her mother. After she is twelve years, if of good size, she can earn more money in the work shops, because she will be accepted if her size justifies the evasion of the law. The boys practically perform the same labor as the girls, except that they leave home earlier and engage in street work as peddlers, news-boys or bootblacks. Dr. Daniels has actually seen two children under three years of age working in the tenements of New York, one a boy two and a half years of age assisting the mother, and four other children under the age of twelve, in making artificial flowers. These children earned from fifty cents to a dollar and a half a week, obviously at the expense of health and education, rights which neither the parents nor the community nor the State have a right to withhold. A feeling seems to exist in Washington that there is no special need for the enactment of a law to prevent or regulate child labor, but the same class of people told us years ago that we had no slums, and hence there was no occasion for the betterment of the housing conditions, when, as a matter of fact, investigations have shown conclusively that in many respects we are as badly, if not worse, off than the cities of New York and Chi-cago. Those who are familiar with the subject know that there is a local situation which demands immediate legislation. But whether the number is large or small it matters little, and it is clearly the duty of every community to resort to preventive measures against this hydra-headed evil.

You will say, what is the use of enacting child labor laws when such atrocious instances are possible in the city of New York, where child labor laws exist. I grant that just such evils will be wit-nessed in New York or any other American city so long as public

(286)

opinion and the conscience of the American people is not sufficiently aroused to demand the enforcement of the law.

It has been estimated that there are in this city between fifteen hundred and two thousand children under the age of fourteen engaged in wage-earning occupations. And we feel that the enactment of a suitable law would guard these children and afford them a better opportunity of becoming useful citizens, and the consumer of goods would at least have the satisfaction of knowing that they are not stained with the sweat and blood of helpless children.

How many more of the six thousand children between the ages of eight and twelve who are not now at school are engaged in wage-earning occupations we do not know. But whether they are at work because of the necessities of their parents or because of their own disinclination to study, the law should intervene and establish an effective remedy.

It has been urged, and no doubt in many instances quite correctly, that child labor is encouraged by the greed of the employers, but I am in a position to know that the business men of this city would hail with delight the enactment of a child labor law. As it is now, it is not always an easy matter to refuse to lend a helping hand in apparently deserving and pathetic cases.

It is indeed deplorable, as pointed out by Dr. Adler, that so little has been accomplished in the way of educating the public to sound and full appreciation of the evil consequences of child labor, and it is especially humiliating to know that the District of Columbia, the seat of the national government, is the only community with the exception of Georgia, Idaho, Nevada and the Indian Territory, which is at present without legislation of some kind on the subject of child labor.

The merits of the proposed bill will be pointed out to you by subsequent speakers. We know that the commissioners are deeply interested in this vitally important question, and we confidently look to Congress for relief, and to you for your hearty sympathy and support.

I have already referred to the fact that a determined effort will be made to secure the enactment of a child labor law at the present session of Congress. The reason the law was not enacted last year was on account of the shortness of the session and the lateness with which the bill was introduced. There was very lit-

tle opposition,—although there is always some opposition to movements of this character,—yet I think there is every reason to hope for the speedy enactment of this law. The bill which has been presented in Congress this session is not exactly a model child labor law, but the commissioners thought it best to introduce it in the present form, and will welcome any amendments that are deemed desirable or necessary in the light of subsequent discussion.