

Child Labor in Agriculture (June 10, 1927)

Abstract

The author of this article, Elli Radtke-Warmuth, was a journalist who was active in the women's labor movement. She wrote for various Social Democratic newspapers, such as the *Volksblatt* published by the SPD, from which this 1927 article is taken. Referring to the book *Landwirtschaftliche Kinderarbeit* [*Agricultural Child Labor*] by sociologist Helene Simon, which had been published in 1925 and was based on surveys, Radtke-Warmuth reports on the persistent use of child labor in German agriculture, which remained widespread and largely accepted. She points out the health, social and political consequences of this practice and calls for better legal protection of children. While the Child Protection Law at the time prohibited the employment of children under the age of 13 in factories and other businesses, this did not apply to agriculture. During the Weimar Republic, legislation tended to focus more on the "moral protection" of minors than on preventing their exploitation in the workplace.

Source

Where Youth Protection Is Needed.

During the deliberations on the two so-called Laws for the Protection of Youth, the Filth and Obscenity Law [*Schmutz- und Schundgesetz*] and the Law for the Protection of Young People at Amusements [*Gesetz zum Schutze der Jugend bei Lustbarkeiten*], we repeatedly and emphatically pointed out that the protection of young people emphasized in these laws must remain illusory as long as the housing shortage, the capitalist exploitation of underage people and the general impoverishment of the broad proletarian classes represent sources of danger of the worst kind for young people. Especially for children working in agriculture, legal protection against exploitation and physical and moral danger would have been much more necessary than a ban on visiting amusement parks or cinemas. The Child Protection Act [*Kinderschutzgesetz*] of 1903 only covers children working in commercial enterprises, while children working in agriculture and domestic service are still completely unprotected today. We have excellent material on the extent of child labor in Germany – and also in other countries – and on the attitude of interested parties to the legal regulation of agricultural child labor in the book "*Landwirtschaftliche Kinderarbeit*" [*Agricultural Child Labor*] by comrade Dr. Helene Simon (published by F. A. Herbig, Berlin), which is based on two extensive surveys compiled in Germany in 1904 and 1922. In 1904, around 1,770,000 schoolchildren were identified as wage laborers in agriculture, of whom 1 million were under the age of 12 and almost half a million under the age of 10. The survey conducted by the German Child Protection Association in 1922 covered a total of only 500,000 children, but it must be concluded from other reports that the total number of children working in agriculture has increased considerably since 1904. In this survey, the age of the working children is most frequently given as 10 years, but children as young as five to six are also employed, mainly tending domestic animals. Both surveys consistently report long and unfavorable working hours for the children. Working hours of 6, 7, 8 and more hours, even late into the night, are not uncommon. Many children in paid employment report "working the same hours as adults," i.e. 8, 9 and more hours in the summer. Particularly serious is the fact that farm work begins very early in the morning and the children have already worked several hours by the time they get to school. In some areas, children herding cattle remain out on the pasture all night. It is a well-known complaint of rural teachers that children sleep soundly during lessons. During the busy work season, children are often excused from school altogether or reported sick. The children of the poorer rural population are thus deprived of schooling and consequently lag behind in their general mental development; in other words, the children's unregulated farm labor raises people who are

inadequately equipped for the struggle to secure their existence. This also applies to the physical damage caused by this work. It is deliberately misleading if the rural circles benefitting from child labor only ever present this work as recreation and educational play. In the vast majority of cases, the children suffer permanent damage to their health due to overexertion, lack of sleep and the often very unsuitable type of work. Bent and crippled limbs as a result of a permanently stooped position, as well as injuries from machines etc. are not uncommon. Children work both in rooms where there is a lot of dust (from threshing) and outdoors in unfavorable weather conditions. The assertion that rural child labor is educational and valuable for the development of the child's mind is only partially true. In most cases, the constant company of adult farm workers and the handling of animals in livestock farming is anything but educational. Teachers and clergymen complain vividly about the brutalization and neglect of these children when answering the surveys. The children were often given cider, beer or even schnapps with their meals at work, just like the adults. In many cases, the children slept in the same room as the farmhands and maids. Nevertheless, with the exception of teachers and a few reasonable people, landowners and farmers and the people who depend on them are most resolutely opposed to the legal regulation of child labor. "Prohibiting child labor would mean making sugar beet cultivation impossible, letting the fields be taken over by weeds or letting the potatoes rot." "We prefer children to adult workers." There were numerous responses of this kind. The actual physical and moral dangers for working children are only denied by German agriculture because these children represent cheap and convenient labor material for them. If it is a question of diminishing one's own profits, then protection of the young is neither necessary nor desirable, for then it is not a question of endangering but of improving the young. But even among the ranks of the proletarian rural population itself, much is still being sinned against. Certainly, parents will not send their children to work for pleasure. The smallest earnings are urgently needed. But it must never be forgotten that unprotected, unrestrictedly exploited child labor means wage dumping for adult workers. The situation of the working rural population should not be improved by exploiting their young children, but by uniting the rural workforce itself. However, workers who have been used up in their early youth and who have received inadequate schooling cannot successfully fight to improve their situation. What has long been needed is a legal restriction on child labor in the countryside and in domestic service, i.e. a complete ban on child labor at too early an age, before, during and shortly after daily school lessons and at night, and a ban on all harmful and accident-prone work, even for older children. It is high time that this important issue was resolved by legislation in our favor.

Elli Radtke-Warmuth

Source of original German text: *Volksblatt: Lippische Zeitung*, Detmold, June 10, 1927, p. 8.

<https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/newspaper/item/ECI6FKOPUTRX2EGD7A35TS22GTTI MPNC?issuepage=8>

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