

States Move to Weaken Protections for Child Workers

July 2023 - On July 16, 2023, [a 16-year-old Guatemalan youth died while working at a poultry plant in Mississippi](#). Even though minors are not permitted to work at such facilities in that state, violations of child labor law in the U.S. are common and [have increased by 283 percent since 2015](#). Fines imposed for child labor violations are considered part of the cost of doing business. Given this reality, it is troubling that a number of states are enacting laws to weaken protections for child workers.

“The problem is that companies would like to make more profits, pay workers less, and they are able to do that if they exploit migrant children or other children who don't have alternatives.” *Professor Kate Andria, Columbia Law School*

In May, [Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds signed a bill](#) that will increase the number of hours young people can work and expand the types of work they can do to include dangerous or inappropriate occupations such as construction, roofing, work in meatpacking plants and serving alcohol. The bill also protects employers from liability if young workers are injured or killed on the job.

The business community supports these laws, especially at a time where there is a shortage of workers. Young workers are especially vulnerable to wage exploitation and violations of their basic human rights. Young immigrant workers are at even greater risk.

[In a recent article for Tom Dispatch](#), historian Steve Fraser provides an overview of the long struggle to protect children from labor exploitation. He notes that it was not until 1938 that the Fair Labor Standards Act ended child labor. However, this legislation exempted agriculture so children could still work legally in that sector. He also observes that the Covid pandemic “created a brief labor shortage, which became a pretext for putting kids back to work (even if the return of child labor actually predated the disease). Consider such child workers in the twenty-first century as a distinct sign of social pathology.”