

COMMERCIAL INTERESTS STYMIE CHILD LABOR EXPLOITATION RULES ONCE AGAIN



A proposal, last month, by the US Department of Labor, to safeguard children under age 16, restricting them from working in dangerous farm jobs met with widespread opposition, especially from conservative media outlets. The Labor Department had advocated rules that would have constrained the children from handling pesticide, operating heavy machinery, chopping timber and performing other agricultural tasks that the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health had branded as hazardous to children. Conservatives were quick to oppose and criticize the move. Senator Jerry Moran, a Kansas Republican, said that “if the federal government can regulate the kind of relationship between parents and their children on their own family’s farm, there is almost nothing off-limits in which we see the federal government intruding in a way of life.” Fox News posted a story entitled, “Team Obama Wants Children Banned from Doing Farm Chores.” Sarah Palin posted, “The Obama administration is working on regulations that would prevent children from working on our own family farms” on her Facebook page. The unexpected barrage of criticism forced the Obama administration to reverse their decision, accepting that they had done so, following the “thousands of comments expressing concerns about the effect of the proposed rules on small family-owned farms.” Family farms have fiercely guarded their autonomy. In the 1920’s, a proposed Child Labor Amendment to the Constitution, was beaten back, by farm owners, who considered it a threat to the family farm. Realizing that the legislation, if allowed to go through, could regulate the workings of the underage workers at their workplaces, business interests devised a plan, forming groups with names such as Citizens’ Committee to Protect Our Homes and Children, spreading canards that the government was conspiring to ban everyday jobs on the family farm. The frightened owners unleashed protests that forced the government to rescind their decision. In another incident in 1924, the president of the Southern Textile Association, in an attempt to prevent rulings that would have instilled legal restrictions on cheap labor in cotton mills, sent around 50,000 printed pamphlets, to Southern farmers, warning them that the proposed amendment would allow the government to enter their homes and take control of their children. So powerful was the propaganda that the reformers efforts to disprove the information were incapable of stopping the amendment from being rendered ineffective and subsequently outlawed. Child labor had been described as the worst national social evil since slavery and the amendments defeat was a huge setback for the movement that was endeavouring to end child labor. The new rules for children working on farms, clearly stated that they would not affect children working on family farms or on the farms of relatives acting in parental roles, but by projecting it as the beginning of the demise of the private farm, the opposition managed, to divert attention from the existent exploitation of child labor on farms. The recent proposal by the Department of Labor was mainly targeted at protecting and safeguarding the poor, illiterate migrant child workers who do seasonal farm work for “Big Agriculture.” Without them they would not manage their work. Reports show that these children are exposed to hazardous work conditions that are extremely dangerous. According to Human Rights Watch, “child farm workers are at greater risk of pesticide poisoning, serious injury, heat illness, and death than any other youth workers in America.” Commercial forces and business interests have continually stymied efforts at reforms in child labor laws and child labor exploitation continues to thrive. It is time to reclaim our reformers legacy. Want to see which jobs are available near you? [Click here](#) to see.