

ON THE NEED FOR CHILD LABOR LAWS

1905

----- *Florence Kelley* -----

Florence Kelley (1859–1932) was at the forefront of many Progressive-era reforms. She campaigned tirelessly for laws to protect working women and children, and she helped ensure the passage of the first act to designate federal funds for health care. This excerpt, focusing on her investigation into the use of child labor in the glass bottle industry, demonstrates her strategy (“investigate, educate, legislate, and enforce”) as a social reformer.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Hypothesizing

What do you think Kelley hoped to accomplish by writing and publishing this essay?

The Glass-Bottle Industry.—The urgent need for the present stringent law of Illinois can, perhaps, best be made clear by a somewhat detailed description of the children in one trade as it was found to exist ten years ago.

When the first factory law of Illinois was enacted, in 1893, it prohibited the employment of children under the age of fourteen years in factories and workshops. For children employed in the glass-bottle works, this provision, until the present year, when the new law made this method more difficult, was successfully evaded by dissolute men and women who gathered in orphan and deserted children from the poorhouses of five counties adjacent to that in which stands the city of Alton, and from the orphan asylums in St. Louis, and made affidavits as “guardians” of the children that the lads were fourteen years of age when they were really from seven to ten. The “guardians” then proceeded to live upon the earnings of the children which were, in 1893, forty cents a day for small boys and sixty cents for larger ones. One “guardian” controlled the wages of several boys. In some cases the “guardians” and their wards lived in shanty-boats along the Mississippi river, drawing their floating habitations well up into the mud of the river bank for the winter, and floating away for the summer, when the glassworks closed. During this enforced holiday the “guardians” and the children lived precariously by fishing and berry-picking, the children profiting by the fact that the glass-blowers could not endure the heat of the ovens during July and August.

The earnings of the glass-bottle blowers depend somewhat upon the speed of the boys who fetch and carry for them. These lads are, therefore, kept trotting at the highest speed which a child can maintain for several hours. In making

inspections of the glass-bottle works, the writer found it impossible to get from a boy a consecutive statement as to his name, address or parentage. A boy would say, "My name is Jimmie"; and then trot to the cooling oven with his load of bottles and returning say, in answer to a fresh question, "I live in a shanty-boat"; then trot to the moulder for another set of bottles and returning say, "I'm going to be eight next summer," and so on. Among twenty-four lads questioned during one night-inspection, not one ventured to pause long enough to put together two of the foregoing statements. And the eye of the boy interrupted in his work was always fastened anxiously upon the blower for whom he was working. The blower did not pay the boy, who was carried on the payrolls of the company; but when a boy was detained for the purpose of questioning, a shrill whistle sounded and the boy would say to the inspector, "Don't year hear him doggin' me?"

The load of bottles which a boy carries at any one time is not heavy and there is no lifting to be done. Hence such work is commonly described by employers as "light and easy." But the circumstances attending the work, the surroundings amid which it is done, fill the words with grim sarcasm. The sustained speed required of the children and the heated atmosphere render continuous trotting most exhausting. An hour's steady trotting in pure air tires a healthy schoolboy, of seven to fourteen years; but these little lads trotted hour after hour, day after day, month after month, in the heat and dust.

There was no restriction upon night work. Any boy who was eligible for work at all, was used indifferently by night or by day; and pitifully little children were found at work at two o'clock in the morning. Often a sleepy child, stumbling among fragments of white-hot glass, received serious burns; and bandages were more common than among any workers that the writer has seen in the course of many hundreds of inspections. Indeed, loss of time while recovering from burns received during their work constituted one of the grievances of the "blowers' dogs," of whom several were found in their homes convalescent from burns and other illnesses incident to their occupation. Mothers complained bitterly, too, of the loss of coats and shoes by burning when the boys collided with each other in the course of their work, the burden of each being glass heated just below the melting-point.

At the close of the day's work or the night's work, the children went from the heat and glare of the glass-ovens into the cold and dark of the morning or evening. They went, with the men with whom they worked, to the nearest saloons to buy the cheap drinks which were freely sold just across the street from the works. All the boys used tobacco, usually chewing it, those of seven and eight years of age doing exactly what the men did by whose side they spent their working hours. As seen and heard at their work, and at the closing hour, when they left the works, these children were stunted, illiterate, profane, obscene, ruined in body and mind before they entered the long adolescence known to happier children.

The sharp contrast between the heat of the glass-ovens and the frost of the winter mornings, produces in the children, wearied by hard work, rheumatism and affections of the throat and lungs, from which many of them die before reaching the age of apprenticeship. Of those who survive, virtually none succeed in attaining the position and wages of a skilled glass-blower. Their health would be inadequate to the strain, even if the career were open to them. But it is not open; for an old rule of the union limits closely the number of apprentices to each hundred glass-blowers and fixes the age of apprenticeship at seventeen years. The coveted privilege of apprenticeship is commonly reserved by the blowers for their own sons, whom they do not employ as “dogs” but keep to the age of seventeen years, either attending school or working in some less destructive occupation than glass-bottle making.

Source: *Some Ethical Gains Through Legislation* by Florence Kelley (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905), pp. 43–46.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that Kelley hoped to publicize the ways child laborers were mistreated as a way to arouse public indignation. Stories such as this might prompt the public to put pressure on legislators to pass laws regulating the conditions under which children were allowed to perform industrial work. Students may note Kelley's strategy of describing both the harsh physical treatment and the moral corruption of the boys, who drink, smoke, and swear like the older men with whom they work; by emphasizing both, she hoped to provoke widespread public outrage.