



MARYLAND STATE & D.C. AFL-CIO

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HJ 7 - Ratifying the Federal Child Labor Amendment House Rules & Executive Nominations Committee March 11, 2024

SUPPORT

Donna S. Edwards

President

Maryland State and DC AFL-CIO

Madame Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of HJ 7. My name is Donna S. Edwards, and I am the President of the Maryland State and District of Columbia AFL-CIO. On behalf of Maryland's 300,000 union members, I offer the following comments.

HJ 7 adopts the 1924 proposed Federal constitutional amendment which stated that Congress has the power to limit, regulate, and prohibit the labor of persons under eighteen years of age. Unfortunately, Maryland rejected the resolution in 1927.

One of the crowning achievements of the American labor movement was the push to protect and exclude children from the workforce, so their time could be better spent in education and enjoying childhood. Businesses fought hard to keep children in factories, fields, and mines, arguing that parents had the ultimate right to decide what their kids did with their time. Reformers kept organizing until laws and Supreme Court interpretations granted that the state had a right and an interest in regulating child labor. This victory was never complete as young workers in the agricultural industry were excluded from the National Labor Relations Act and fight to this day for the same protections that other children have.¹

Nearly a century later, states are chipping away at their child labor protections in the name of addressing workforce shortages rather than increase pay and benefits.² Iowa, Minnesota, New Jersey, Arkansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Tennessee, New Hampshire and more have all pushed these loosening of basic child labor protections. Additional states, Florida, Indiana, and West Virginia, have introduced bills to weaken prohibitions against children performing hazardous work, under the guise of expanding access to "career education." Minnesota is considering allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to work on construction sites. Some of these proposals have been called, "Irresponsible and dystopian."³

¹ Josh Christenson, "'Alarming' rise in migrant child labor under Biden, up 88% since 2019: GOP senator." New York Post. March 5, 2024.

² Jacob Bogage, "In a tight labor market, some states look to another type of worker: Children." Washington Post. February 11, 2023.

³ Mark Peterson, "'Irresponsible and dystopian': Indiana Senate discusses child labor bill." WNDU. March 5, 2024.

The recent push to rollback child labor protections are not part of some effort to teach future workers about the value of a dollar and learn valuable skills for their future.⁴ This is about exploitable cheap labor, with few rights and protections. The children of millionaires will not be the ones working night shifts on the slaughterhouse floors.

Federal action is necessary and must step up where the states have failed. With the future of certain rights under question before the Supreme Court, it is necessary to ensure that clear language in the constitution prevents any ambiguity. Child labor must be stopped.

We urge a favorable report on HJ 7.

⁴ Hannah Dreier, "Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across the U.S." New York Times. February 28, 2023.