

General Convention of The Episcopal Church 2024 Archives' Research Report

Resolution No.: 2024-D021
Title: Support for Child Labor Protections
Proposer: Lawton, Ms. Sarah
Topic: Labor

Directly Related: (Attached)

None

Indirectly Related: (Available in the [Acts of Convention](#) database, searchable by resolution number)

2012-A012 Urge Governments to Follow Principles in Adopting Trade Polices
2006-B018 Endorse the NCC Policy on the Rights of Children

In preparing this report, the Archives researched the resolutions in the Acts of Convention database for the period 1973 through 2022, selecting “direct” resolutions that have a substantive bearing on the proposed legislation. The “direct” resolutions are attached and “indirect” resolutions are available in the Acts of Convention database. Committee members who require other research assistance should contact the Archives through the [Research Request Form](#).

D021 - Support for Child Labor Protections

Final Status: Not Yet Finalized

Proposed by: Lawton, Ms. Sarah

Endorsed by: Russell, Ms. Laura, Metoyer, The Rev. Eric M. M.

Has Budget Implications: No

Cost:

Amends C&C or Rules of Order: No

Requests New Interim Body: No

Changes Mandate Of Existing lb: No

Directs Dfms Staff: Yes

Directs Dioceses: No

Directs Executive Council: No

HiA: HD

Legislative Committee Currently Assigned: 07 - Social Justice & United States Policy

Completion Status: Incomplete

Latest House Action: N/A

Supporting Documents: No

Resolution Text

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring,

That the Episcopal Church remember with the gratitude the work of faithful Christian and Episcopalian Frances Perkins, who is called the architect of the New Deal and the conscience of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and as the first woman cabinet member and Secretary of Labor oversaw the enactment of the of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 which for the first time banned oppressive child labor in United States federal law, and who is remembered each year in Lesser Feasts and Fasts on May 13th; and be it further,

Resolved, That the Episcopal Church oppose current attempts to weaken child labor laws at the state and federal levels, such as: repealing age verification and parental permission requirements; granting employers immunity from civil liability for workplace injuries, illness, or death; lowering minimum ages for working in hazardous industries, including meatpacking and industrial laundries; creating sub-minimum wages for teenagers; and extending the number of hours children are permitted to work; and be it further

Resolved, That the Episcopal Church recognize that the primary targets of these attempts to weaken child labor laws are our most vulnerable children, including very low-income and migrant children, who are often living apart from their parents; and be it further

Resolved, That the Episcopal Church's Office of Government Relations and Episcopal Public Policy Network support domestic and foreign policies to strengthen and enforce child labor laws in the United States of America and globally and throughout the labor supply chain, including supporting policies to:

- eliminate separate treatment of agricultural workers under federal employment law;
- fully fund enforcement of child labor standards at federal, state, and local levels, and enhance company penalties for violating these rules;
- eliminate sub-minimum wages for youth;
- eliminate or prohibit two-tiered systems, often labeled as training programs, which fail to protect children from hazardous work, especially in the agricultural sector;
- strengthen wage theft laws and provide resources to enforce them, especially for children;
- provide adequate protection and oversight for unaccompanied minor and refugee children after they are released to their sponsors;
- improve government oversight and transparency regarding the use of child labor in the global supply chain, and the use of diplomatic pressure on foreign governments and regulation of global corporations and their imported products to eliminate the use of oppressive child labor in factories and products;

and be it further

Resolved, That the Committee on Corporate Social Responsibility of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church take this resolution into account in the implementation of its corporate human rights screen and in corporate advocacy via the Church's investment portfolio, with attention to the use of child labor in the global supply chain of companies in which the church is invested.

Explanation

Although most of us grew up with an assumption that oppressive child labor is an artifact of the past, at least in the United States, in recent years there has been a coordinated campaign to weaken state-level child labor laws in the United States, taking advantage of the fact that the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 provides certain exemptions to the ban on child labor, especially for agricultural work, and that many of these exemptions are regulated at the state level. Since 2021, twenty-eight states have introduced bills to weaken state laws regulating child labor, and twelve states have enacted them as of February 2024. It is understood that the campaign is also aimed at eventually diluting federal law regulating child labor.^[1]

The passage of these laws are often justified as attempts to offer job opportunities to teenagers. The fact is that most U.S. teenagers are increasingly investing hours in school and extracurricular activities, reflecting the greater importance of education in career opportunities. Even young people who want to go into the higher-paying trades can seek that pathway via community college and paid apprenticeships after high school; very few are seeking on-the-job training for future careers via their paid work during their school years. The agricultural carveouts to the Fair Labor Standards Act reflect a different time,

when family farms were still a significant part of the American landscape, and they also reflect the political coalition that passed the New Deal in the 1930s.

According to researchers Jennifer Sherer and Nina Mast, “the primary proponents of these laws are business groups and their state affiliates, particularly the National Federation of Independent Business, the Chamber of Commerce, and the National Restaurant Association. Hotel, lodging, and tourism associations, grocery industry associations, home builders, and Americans for Prosperity—a billionaire-funded right-wing dark money group—have also supported bills in various states.”^[iii]

The New York Times has been publishing a searing series of articles on the realities of migrant child labor in America today, “Alone and Exploited: An investigation into America’s hidden migrant child workforce,”^[iiii] led by investigative reporter Hannah Dreier; it is well worth the time to read the series in full. She introduces readers to children who have serious injuries, including mangled limbs, and children who are working the night shift while trying to go to school by day. They are producing goods that many of us use every day that are marketed by big-name companies.

Happily, there are efforts to push back on these efforts to weaken child labor laws. For example, U.S. Senator Ben Ray Lujan of New Mexico recently introduced the Children’s Act for Responsible Employment in Agriculture (CARE) Act^[iv] to strengthen protections for children in an industry that allows children as young as twelve to work in hazardous conditions with long hours.

The global supply chain is also deeply implicated in the exploitation of child labor. According to Human Rights Watch, 160 million children worldwide, almost 1 in 10, are engaged in child labor, half of them in hazardous conditions.^[v] Agriculture, mining, and manufacturing are top industries for child workers, and many of the products consumed in the United States are made at some point in the supply chain by children, including very young kids. Companies often rely on corporate-funded certification groups for labor and environmental practices that in practice are flawed.

Governments, including ours, can pass more robust regulations requiring better due diligence for supply chain human rights and environmental practices, which are enforced by competent government agencies, and we as a church can raise our moral voice in support of such laws. As an institutional investor The Episcopal Church can also engage in corporate advocacy and screening to push companies to improve and actually follow through on their child labor policies.

As Christians we have a responsibility to care for the most vulnerable among us. Children, especially migrant children, many of whom are not living with parents or even family, are among the most vulnerable people in our society. We must raise our voices against their exploitation and harm.

Frances Perkins, who is remembered on our church calendar each year on May 13, happened to be a bystander witness to the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of March 25, 1911 in New York City; she watched 47 young, immigrant women and girls die as they jumped to their deaths from the locked top floor of their factory to escape the flames (in all, 146

people died that day). She said later that that day was “the day the New Deal was born.”^[vi] As a deeply observant Christian and adult confirmand in the Episcopal Church, she once said, “I came to Washington to work for God, FDR, and the millions of forgotten, plain common workingmen.” We can honor Frances, and our own baptismal vows, by renewing our commitments to protecting children and all workers.

Loving God, we bless your Name for Frances Perkins, who in faithfulness to her baptism envisioned a society in which all might live in health and decency: Help us, following her example and in union with her prayers, to contend tirelessly for justice and for the protection of all, that we may be faithful followers of Jesus Christ; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.^[vii]

Endnotes:

^[i] “Child labor remains a key state legislative issue in 2024,” by Nina Mast. Economic Policy Institute, Blog Post, February 7, 2024. <https://www.epi.org/blog/child-labor-remains-a-key-state-legislative-issue-in-2024-state-lawmakers-must-seize-opportunities-to-strengthen-standards-resist-ongoing-attacks-on-child-labor-laws/>.

^[ii] “Child labor laws are under attack in states across the country,” by Jennifer Sherer and Nina Mast. Economic Policy Institute, March 14, 2023, updated December 21, 2023. <https://www.epi.org/publication/child-labor-laws-under-attack/>.

^[iii] “Alone and Exploited: An investigation into America’s hidden migrant child workforce,” New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/series/alone-and-exploited>.

^[iv] “During Ag Week, Luján Introduces Legislation to Improve Child Protections and Safety Standards for Agriculture Industry.” Press Release. <https://www.lujan.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/during-ag-week-lujan-introduces-legislation-to-improve-child-protections-and-safety-standards-for-agriculture-industry/>.

^[v] Human Rights Watch website, Child Labor section. <https://www.hrw.org/topic/childrens-rights/child-labor>.

^[vi] Frances Perkins Center, “Learn Her Life.” <https://francesperkinscenter.org/learn/her-life/>.

^[vii] The collect appointed for us of the Feast of Frances Perkins, Social Reformer, 1965, on May 13, Lesser Feasts and Fasts.

Note: this resolution and/or its explanation contains external references, such as URLs of websites, that may not be in the required languages of General Convention. Because of copyright restrictions, the General Convention cannot provide translations. However, your web browser may be able to provide a machine translation into another language. If you need assistance with this, please contact gc.support@episcopalchurch.org.