

Protect our Children*

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Among the many serious crimes of capitalism about which history will one day sit in judgment, none is more brutal, horrible, disastrous, insane, in one word—outrageous—than the exploitation of proletarian children. Exploitation of proletarian children by capitalism means the deprivation of health, vitality, childhood and education as well as the destruction of the body and the soul of future generations. It is deprivation and destruction committed against the weakest, most defenseless and most helpless of all the members of society. Capitalism pounces upon the proletarian child that is already threatened and damaged prenatally by the ruthless exploitation of its father and mother. Capitalism, aided by the poverty or ignorance of the parents, drives the child into the factory, the workshop, the brick kiln, street peddling, beet planting, animal care, pinsetting in bowling alleys, deliveries and the murderous cottage industry. Wherever the child goes, capitalism puts it through the profit mill to squeeze out every ounce of muscular and mental strength, which is converted into gold. What remains is a deplorable creature that has been physically and mentally ground up. The exodus of the rural population to the industrial centers and the opening of underdeveloped regions and countries by the modern means of transportation relieve the capitalistic entrepreneurs of the necessity to spare today's proletarian child in order to obtain the indispensable adult worker of tomorrow. Thus, the capitalistic exploitation of child labor has condemned, crippled and mowed down generation upon

future generation. Thus way beyond the present time period, it has committed unscrupulous crimes which will affect the future, and far beyond the proletariat, will prove to be detrimental to the entire nation.

How it smashes and withers the body, spirit and morality of proletarian children is amply illustrated by a plethora of facts. It is shown by the frighteningly large numbers of weak, sickly, senescent children in the elementary schools. It is proven by the teachers' well-founded complaints about the lack of attention, mental alertness, power of comprehension and inferior performance of pupils who, having to work early in the morning and late at night, sit tired, weak and apathetic over their schoolbooks both in school and at home. It takes on horrible forms in the shape of increasing gangs of youthful degenerates and criminals. It must even frighten the "loyal" admirers and beneficiaries of militarism because every new levy of recruits demonstrates a large, and in some cases alarming, increase of unfit men who cannot be trained [for use] against both the external and the internal enemy.

The path of capitalism and its proper realm are littered with the innumerable corpses of children who were slaughtered because of their tender fingers, as is written in *Das Kapital*. The path of capitalism is covered with spiritual and moral powers that have been destroyed and ground into the dust. It was not "propagandistic exaggeration," but scientific research into the horrors of the capitalistic exploitation of children which made Engels exclaim in protest in his 1845 *Conditions of the Working Class in England*: I accuse the bourgeoisie "literally of social murder"! And verily, just as "all the scents of Araby" could not clean the bloodstained hand of Lady Macbeth, the miraculous works of capitalism will be unable to make up for the horrible capital crime of its "Bethlehemite infanticide." It constitutes an indestructible monument of shame on the capitalistic system, its brutalizing influence which drowns human feelings and thoughts "in the ice-cold waters" of lust for profit and narrow-minded egoism, so that until this very day society is impelled to issue only ridiculously inconsequential measures for the protection of the proletarian child against the strangling exploitation of its labor power.

* Zetkin C. Protect our Children. In: Foner PS, ed. Clara Zetkin: Selected Writings. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015. pp. 84-85. Reprinted with permission of International Publishers.