

# #1563 Putting Our Kids to Work for Corporate Profits

[00:00:00]

## Intro 6-3-23

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** Welcome to this episode of the award-winning Best of the Left podcast, in which we shall take a look at the dynamics at play between our immigration and labor policies that lead to the exploitation of children in dangerous and deadly jobs. Please do note that there will be descriptions of the type of work exploited children are being made to do.

Clips today are from Robert Reich, More Perfect Union, Fresh Air, The Majority Report, Amanpour and Company, Citations Needed, and Democracy Now, with additional members-only clips from More Perfect Union and Citations Needed.

## Why Child Labor in America is Skyrocketing Part 1 - Robert Reich - Air Date 5-16-23

**ROBERT REICH - HOST, ROBERT REICH:** Corporations are bringing back child labor in America, and some Republicans want to make it easier for them to get away with it. Since 2015, child labor violations have risen nearly 300%, and those are just the violations government investigators have managed to uncover and document. The Department of Labor says it's currently investigating over 600 cases of illegal child labor in America.

Major [00:01:00] American companies like General Mills, Walmart and Ford have all been implicated.

Why on earth is this happening? The answer is frighteningly simple: Greed. Employers have been having difficulty finding the workers they need at the wages they're willing to pay, and rather than reduce their profits by paying adult workers more, employers are exploiting children.

The sad fact of the matter is that many of the children who are being exploited are considered to be "them" rather than "us" because they're disproportionately poor, an immigrant. So the moral shame of subjecting our children to inhumane working conditions when they ought to be in school is quietly avoided.

And since some of these children or the parents are undocumented, they dare not speak out or risk detention and deportation. They need the money. This makes them easily exploitable. It's a perfect storm that's resulting in vulnerable children taking on some of the most brutal jobs in America.

[00:02:00] Folks, we've seen this before. Reformers fought to establish the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 for a reason: to curb the grotesque child labor seen during America's first gilded age. The US banned most child labor. But now pro business trade groups and the Republican lackeys are trying to reverse nearly a century of progress, and they're using the so-called labor shortage as their excuse.

Arkansas will no longer require 14- and 15-year-olds to get a work permit before taking a job -- a process that verified their age and required permission from a parent or guardian. A bill in Ohio would let children work later on school nights. Minnesota Republicans are pushing to let 16-year-olds work in construction. And in Iowa, 14-year-olds may soon be allowed to take certain jobs in meat packing plants and operate dangerous machinery.

It's all a coordinated campaign to erode national standards, making it even [00:03:00] easier for companies to profit off children. Across America, we're witnessing a resurgence of cruel capitalism in which business lobbyists and lawmakers justify their actions by arguing that they're not exploiting the weak and vulnerable, but rather providing jobs for those who need them and would otherwise go hungry or homeless. Conveniently, these same business lobbyists and lawmakers are often among the first to claim we can't afford stronger safety nets that would provide these children with safe housing and adequate nutrition.

## **We Uncovered the Corporations Bringing Back Child Labor in America - More Perfect Union - Air Date 4-3-23**

**ANDREW RIVERA - HOST, MORE PERFECT UNION:** Do you have a quick minute to do --

**JASON SCHULTZ:** What is it on?

**ANDREW RIVERA - HOST, MORE PERFECT UNION:** Youth employment.

**JASON SCHULTZ:** Oh, I'm gonna pass on that.

**ANDREW RIVERA - HOST, MORE PERFECT UNION:** That's Iowa State Senator Jason Schultz. He's the sponsor of the most dramatic rollback of child labor protections in the nation, even if he doesn't want to talk about it.

**JASON SCHULTZ:** No. I'm gonna pass on that. I'm just kind of stepping back on that one. I'm gonna not get into any conversations. I'm gonna stay away from that, although you might find out later why.

**ANDREW RIVERA - HOST, MORE PERFECT UNION:** There you go. There's your tease. Senator Schultz is clearly proud of his [00:04:00] work, but as our investigation will show you, he's just one part of a shadowy national effort, funded by big corporations and PACs to roll back child labor laws that have been in place since the 1930s.

**JOURNALIST:** More states are considering changes to child labor laws as they try to fill jobs. Maine and Michigan lowered the required age to serve alcohol. New Jersey raised the limit on the number of hours teens can work over the summer.

Minnesota, a new bill would allow 16- and 17-year-olds to work construction jobs. In Iowa, proposed law would let 14- and 15-year-olds work certain jobs in meat packing plants.

**ANDREW RIVERA - HOST, MORE PERFECT UNION:** The Iowa bill takes child labor law rollbacks to the next level. Think kids in ultra dangerous meat packing facilities, high-volume Pepsi bottling plants, and working for cheap on the searing hot ovens of fast food chains like McDonald's for 30 plus hours a week.

No, for real. Iowa Republicans want to allow kids between the ages of 14 to 17 to work in incredibly dangerous, often deadly workplaces. Places like construction sites where more than [00:05:00] 5,000 workers died last year. As it's set up now, there would be virtually no restrictions. The job would just have to be part of an "education program", something that the company could invent itself.

It's true that more than a third of teenagers across the US worked summer jobs in 2021. But serving ice cream isn't exactly the same as working in building demolition.

So why would lawmakers put kids who are just finishing middle school into such dangerous situations? Here's what Rep Deyoe, the House sponsor of the bill, says:

**REP DEYOE:** Right now kids can be out till 10 o'clock if they're out for a sport or a school activity. And so why are they not able to be able to work until, say for example, nine o'clock?

**ANDREW RIVERA - HOST, MORE PERFECT UNION:** An actual expert we spoke to firmly disagreed.

**REID MAKI:** It's a bizarre argument to argue that playing team sports is akin to working in a factory or some other dangerous environment. We, we like kids not to work more than 20 hours a week because that's kind of a cutoff for damage that's done to them educationally.

**ANDREW RIVERA - HOST, MORE PERFECT UNION:** Okay, so why are lawmakers actually doing this?

**BRAD EPPERLY:** The bill was really spearheaded by the Restaurant [00:06:00] Association. We sort of came along, we were asked to be -- we were invited to come along.

**ANDREW RIVERA - HOST, MORE PERFECT UNION:** That's Brad Epperly, a lobbyist who works for big corporate clients like the Iowa Grocery Industry Association.

He's outright admitting to us that the Iowa Restaurant Association was the driving force behind this bill. They're an affiliate of the National Restaurant Association, a trade group that represents some of the biggest names in fast food, like Burger King and Taco Bell. They also lobby for big corporations like PepsiCo and Cisco. And from one look at their newsletter from this time last year, you can tell they've been hard at work spreading the gospel about the benefits of young labor.

The hands-on internship at the slaughterhouse is their big priority this year. But we can't give them all the credit. This child labor law rollback originated at a meeting of the Iowa Workforce Development Board, which is overseen by

Governor Kim Reynolds. Most of its members are corporate CEOs and lobbyists, and they meet up several times a year to come up with new policies. This bill was a product of a meeting in November. [00:07:00] The WDB is chaired by Jay Iverson, Executive Officer of the Association of Iowa Builders. Hence the emphasis on kids using bandsaws on work sites.

Lobbyists from the Iowa Association of Business and Industry are well represented on the board, which gives member corporations like John Deere and Google seats at the table. And of course, no race to the bottom would be complete without the Koch-funded Americans for Prosperity and Opportunity Solutions Network, also lobbying on the bill.

Given their obvious enthusiasm, we tried to get some of these lobbyists to talk to us about the many benefits of child labor, but they were a bit shy to take credit for their work.

The next part of the bill was clearly written for the Iowa Restaurant Association, Hotel and Lodging Association, and National Bureau of Independent Businesses, the state leaders in low-wage jobs. It would allow 14-year-olds to work in giant freezing meat lockers and raise their mandatory clockout time from 7:00 p.m. To 9:00 p.m., and then 11:00 p.m. in the summer.

**REID MAKI:** The research that has been done has found pretty clearly that [00:08:00] 20 hours is kind of a cutoff, and when kids work more than that during the school week, their grades start to plummet, and their school completion rate starts to plummet.

**ANDREW RIVERA - HOST, MORE PERFECT UNION:** Many businesses, like retail, restaurants and fast food joints love to hire kids, because they'll take a lower paycheck.

If they can stay at work even longer, places like McDonald's, which loves hiring kids, don't even need to worry about hiring adults who can fill those jobs, let alone paying them living wages.

**REID MAKI:** Children's brains are not fully developed, especially that part of the brain that exercises caution, that tells a person that, oh, this is dangerous, I might get hurt. That part of the brain is just not quite there yet. And it doesn't really fully develop until the early or mid twenties.

**ANDREW RIVERA - HOST, MORE PERFECT UNION:** The bill would also let 16- and 17-year-olds handle alcohol on the job, which effectively puts them in pubs and bars with intoxicated adults.

Consider these all big wins for BlackRock, Vanguard, Wellington, JP Morgan, Fidelity.

## The Child Labor Crisis In America Part 1 - Fresh Air - Air Date 5-4-23

**TANYA MOSLEY - CO-HOST, FRESH AIR:** There seems to be this rapid movement, just across the country.

You mentioned some of the other [00:09:00] states, Minnesota and Ohio, allowing teens to work more hours in more dangerous occupations like construction. There's this bill in Georgia that would prohibit the state — a government from requiring a minor to obtain a work permit. How are these state efforts complicating crackdowns on the federal level?

**JACOB BOGAGE:** That's a great question. Frankly, a lot of this is spurred on by reporting that your other guest, Hannah Dreyer, is doing at the New York Times. One of my colleagues, Lauren Garley, is doing here at The Post exposing chronic child labor abuses across the country. I think when we talk about this issue, it's important to understand how a child labor violation is investigated.

The paperwork here, believe it or not, is actually very important. If I'm a federal child labor investigator and I go down to Arkansas because I wanna investigate reports of minors working at [00:10:00] chicken processing plants — which by the way, multiple chicken processing plants in Arkansas have been cited for illegally employing minors — the first thing I do is I show up at the state employment office and I say, "Give me all of the working papers, all of the permits for the minors that are employed in your state, because I wanna look at those to see if they're accurate." I want to know where I should be devoting my resources, where I should start my investigation.

The Arkansas legislation, and legislation in Missouri, and Georgia, and Iowa would eliminate that paper trail. The other part of it is there's federal law, the Fair Labor Standards Act, which was passed in 1938. This bill is nearly a hundred years old. That codifies a basic floor of protections for children in the workplace.

It says how many [00:11:00] hours children can work, and says what environments they can work, what jobs they can do. What we end up seeing is federal law and state law in direct conflict, but the results of these state proposals that would make it harder for federal officials to do their jobs.

**TANYA MOSLEY - CO-HOST, FRESH AIR:** You mentioned that the Foundation for Government Accountability has hundreds of lobbyists around the country.

How do they go about doing the job of getting these laws passed?

**JACOB BOGAGE:** FGA is part of this group called the State Policy Network, which is a confederation of think tanks and lobbying groups, just like them all over the country. They practice what they call the IKEA model. Which I love the name for this because think about going into IKEA; you go in the showroom and you see the wonderful bookcase that you like, and then you go downstairs into the little warehouse section and you pull the [00:12:00] bookcase off the shelf and throw it in your cart. You get home and it has the cute little instruction manual, and you can put together your bookcase with an Allen wrench.

That's what FGA does, except to do it with state laws. They say, you wanna roll back child labor protections? Cool, here is a cute little instruction manual so you can pass that law with an Allen wrench. We'll provide the research, we'll provide the lobbying support, we'll drum up public support. We'll talk about it on Fox News, we'll do whatever — we can be all of the little components for you. All you have to do is tighten a few screws. That's really effective, and it's not just with child labor.

FGA is a successful group in terms of rolling back anti-poverty programs, tightening restrictions around who gets food stamps, tightening Medicaid expansion. They're a very successful group, and this is a very well worn and well proven technique to [00:13:00] get policy done at the state level.

**TANYA MOSLEY - CO-HOST, FRESH AIR:** You actually spoke with lawmakers who were not necessarily parroting back, but repeating language that you had read, that they had written as like a blueprint to talk about these potential laws.

**JACOB BOGAGE:** I think the best illustration of that is; FGA writes this white paper on their website saying teams are a crucial source of labor, and parents should have the right to get the government out of the way, they should



decide where their teams are gonna work, and work builds character, and all these talking points.

Within a few months, they have sent a senior legislator in Missouri bill text and said, here's bill text please introduce this bill. The lawmaker does, and then the Missouri Senate holds a hearing on the bill, and the FGA's lobbyist shows up and says—literally tells the Senator, "I have nothing to add to your opening statement other than you're right."

The [00:14:00] opening statement is nearly word for word what the white paper says on the FGA website. That is how soup to nuts we get here, which is, here's a policy idea, here's a bill. You're gonna hold a hearing on the bill, we're gonna show up and lobby at the hearing.

I don't want that to come off as this idea of it being — of that being a bad thing because, if you agree with these policies, that is so incredibly effective. In this case that bill is making it easier for children to work dangerous jobs for long hours. We'll continue to report on the way corporate America influences this policy at a state level, but in the very near term, I don't think you need to look very far to see who the corporate beneficiaries are of this kind of legislation.

## **HORRIFIC Child Labor Practices In Dangerous Meatpacking Facility - The Majority Report - Air Date 2-23-23**

**EMMA VIGELAND - CO-HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT:** This was a really well-done report by NBC News. Children [00:15:00] have been employed by this company called Packer Sanitation Services Incorporated, PSSI for short. And it is a cleaning company, and also this is the slaughterhouse one as well, right here involved in the cleanup for slaughterhouses?

**MACH LEECH - PRODUCER, THE MAJORITY REPORT:** Yes. Yeah. PSSI is a sanitation company for meat packing plants and other industrial --

**EMMA VIGELAND - CO-HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT:** Quite a dangerous workplace. And it's also owned by Blackstone, a, one of the biggest private equity firms in the country, but it's been passed around, PSSI, from different private equity firms over the past few years. And what essentially private equity does there is they gut these kinds of companies, and Blackstone in particular has been operating with this company using a profit model and



transactions called "dividend recapitalizations", where they essentially indebted the company and then extract money and collect dividends for [00:16:00] themselves.

**MACH LEECH - PRODUCER, THE MAJORITY REPORT:** Ooh, we gotta tighten our belts.

**EMMA VIGELAND - CO-HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT:** It's a very aggressive approach for people at the top, and private equity does this kind of stuff all the time. They then have to cut labor costs, cut safety costs in this kind of instance because they've indebted the company, and they cut costs on labor because they need to build back up the profitability of the company after they've enriched themselves.

And now they're cutting corners on labor and on regulations in the form of child safety, child labor in these instances. They're trying to get away with it, but luckily there have been some whistleblowers. Here's the report from NBC News.

**JULIA AINSLEY - NBC NEWS:** Tonight, alarming accusations about what happened inside this Nebraska meat packing plant. Migrant children like this boy, who federal investigators say was put to work in a job that can be incredibly dangerous.

Could anybody mistake these children for adults? [00:17:00]

**AUDREY LUTZ:** I don't think there's any mistaking these children for adults.

**JULIA AINSLEY - NBC NEWS:** Investigators say that child workers arrived for their shift at night, many of them from Central America.

They were employed by cleaning company Packer Sanitation Services, Inc. to sanitize equipment inside the plant. PSSI has 17,000 workers. Of those, investigators say the company employed more than 100 children, aged 13 to 17 in 13 plants across eight states. Last October, labor investigators say they found nearly two dozen children, some as young as 13, working here inside this massive slaughterhouse, cleaning up blood and animal parts in the overnight shift.

Nebraska immigrant advocate, Audrey Lutz, has been helping some of the child workers from Guatemala, who she says are scared to talk to us.

**AUDREY LUTZ:** I think these youth are afraid because they don't know the systems in this country that were meant to protect them because those systems failed.

**JULIA AINSLEY - NBC NEWS:** We spoke to a former [00:18:00] PSSI manager who asked that we conceal their identity.

Did you ever see kids, people who looked like kids working inside these plants?

**ANONYMOUS:** Yeah.

**JULIA AINSLEY - NBC NEWS:** How young do you think they were?

**ANONYMOUS:** Probably as young as 12.

**JULIA AINSLEY - NBC NEWS:** How did that strike you when you saw someone that young working a job like this?

**ANONYMOUS:** It kind of makes you sick. When you walk through the plant, you can't walk through it without getting animal parts on you or blood all over for you.

**JULIA AINSLEY - NBC NEWS:** The company disciplined an employee in 2021, according to an internal PSSI report reviewed by NBC News. The employee who handled hiring for multiple plants was found to have hired the same known minor two separate times in the span of six months under two different names. The punishment, according to the document? A demotion and a hiring policy review.

Were managers ever worried that they'd be disciplined for hiring children?

**ANONYMOUS:** No.

**JULIA AINSLEY - NBC NEWS:** The former manager says the more common outcome was to hold the frontline [00:19:00] worker accountable.

**ANONYMOUS:** You would just terminate the child, terminate the undocumented worker.

**JULIA AINSLEY - NBC NEWS:** In December, the company signed a consent decree saying they would abide by child labor laws. PSSI telling NBC News, "Our company has a strong corporate commitment to our zero-tolerance policy against employing anyone under the age of 18, and fully shares the [Labor Department's] objective of ensuring full compliance at all locations," and says they are "taking steps to prevent individuals at the local level from circumventing our wide ranging procedures."

Shannon Rebolledo was the lead investigator for the Labor Department.

How is this investigation different from what you've seen before?

**SHANNON REBOLLEDO:** I've never seen child labor violations to this extent. Just the sheer number of kids that were working. I've never had an employer or their representative impede my investigation like this. Just so brazenly.

**JULIA AINSLEY - NBC NEWS:** PSSI says it was fully cooperative in the Labor Department's investigation.

**EMMA VIGELAND - CO-HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT:** Sure. Well, they got fined \$1.5 [00:20:00] million.

**MACH LEECH - PRODUCER, THE MAJORITY REPORT:** Sorry, I just did the math on that. For 102 kids, that is under \$15,000 per kid. So if this was so outrageous and "haven't seen anything like this before", why aren't people going to jail? Like there should be massive jail time for all these people, and more broadly, anytime that somebody is exploited for labor because they're undocumented in this country, that should be immediate jail time for the capitalist that is exploiting their labor, and immediate citizenship for them and their family. Simple.

**EMMA VIGELAND - CO-HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT:** Well, good thing that the Biden administration, after the expiration of Title 42, has decided that they're going to implement a more permanent policy that says if you enter the country illegally, you're ineligible for asylum. Indistinguishable, by the way, from the way that the Trump administration has approached migrants crossing the border and, Joe, they're still gonna call you an open border president. So, good luck with that.

# Inside the Conservative Campaign to Relax Child Labor Laws - Amanpour and Company - Air Date 4-27-23

**HARI SREENIVASAN - REPORTER, AMANPOUR & CO:** When we think of child labor laws — and I'm going back into my sort of middle school history here— I remember reading Upton Sinclair and I remember reading *Jungle*. There were [00:21:00] these horrible accidents, and that's what we got these protections for — that children wouldn't have to work in factories.

That was what, the 1930s? Here we are almost a hundred years later, and you're saying that there's a concerted effort to enable children to work in factories. I understand that factories are safer today than they were a hundred years ago. I'm not saying that they're the same, but it just seems like a a giant step in the opposite direction for sure.

**JACOB BOGAGE:** Let's paint a large economic picture here in which we can identify child labor. The Fair Labor Standards Act— which among other things — codifies bare minimum protections for child labor, is passed in 1938. The reason for it is because during and in the immediate aftermath of the Great Depression, employers need to cut costs.

They do not want to work with unionized workforces. So [00:22:00] who doesn't unionize? Children. Who can you pay less? Children. Who doesn't complain? Children. Who won't question authority if they have to do a dangerous job that maybe an adult would identify as dangerous? Children. So that was driven — that legislation was driven in a reaction to corporate America seeing opportunities to cut costs through their workforce if their workforce was significantly younger.

What are we seeing today? We're seeing a historically low unemployment, historic inflation, though that was starting to cool a little bit. We're seeing another environment where businesses across the country need to cut costs.

**HARI SREENIVASAN - REPORTER, AMANPOUR & CO:** Besides the economic reality of a tight labor force, what else is playing into this movement? Is there any residual effect from the pandemic?

**JACOB BOGAGE:** [00:23:00] Yes, absolutely. That's a great question and I think we see that directly in the foundation for government accountability. This

think tank and lobbying group that we wrote about, that's pushing a lot of this legislation, directly ties government regulation around the public health emergency and the backlash — the conservative backlash to those regulations.

Two, wanting to roll back other regulations, especially around children. I think you can place this in the same universe — not necessarily from FGA a's perspective, but from the perspective of state legislators who in hearing speak out about this, to other activists who speak out about this.

You can place this in the same universe as bans on books, and library funding, and whether children can be around folks who dress in drag. This is all part of that same [00:24:00] universe. School openings and school closures during the pandemic, race conscious curricula in primary school, and even in secondary schools.

This is all part of that same ecosystem of arguments that I think is in direct response to the government regulation that, we now know, likely saved untold number of lives during the pandemic.

**HARI SREENIVASAN - REPORTER, AMANPOUR & CO:** Jacob, how are these pieces of legislation marketed or wrapped? Because when you mentioned — I could call it book bans, and somebody would call it parental rights.

**JACOB BOGAGE:** They're entirely packaged as parental rights. Down from the FGA's white papers that say this is a parent's rights issue, to the way state legislators talk [00:25:00] about it. The talking points around this are; the government should not be in the middle of the decision about whether your child is allowed to take a job, what job that is, and how long they can work.

I think it is important to point out that is a disingenuous argument. That's not a matter of interpretation, that's looking at the bills that are passed. In Missouri, the bill that the FGA submitted to the bill sponsor— who is the chair of the Education and Workforce Committee in the Missouri Senate— did not include language that required parental permission for a child to take a job.

That bill went in front of a hearing in the committee. Lawmakers talked about it and heard testimony and they said, "What's missing here? A parental rights provision." So they added a section. Arkansas totally [00:26:00] stripped it out, and then added an optional provision. Iowa, same thing.

The idea that these were originally intended to be parents' rights issues is disingenuous.

**HARI SREENIVASAN - REPORTER, AMANPOUR & CO:** What are our regulatory muscle, in terms of maybe the Department of Labor having an inspector who can go out and look at a plant and say, "Look, you clearly have children here. I don't know what their ID says, but this is a 12 year old, not an 18 year old?"

**JACOB BOGAGE:** The Department of Labor is severely outgunned here. Between state labor inspectors and federal labor inspectors, there are about 1800 of them across the country. There are tens of millions of businesses across the country. It would take about a decade to inspect every single business across this country for all sorts of labor violations— not just child labor violations, which are extremely difficult to police because you're dealing with children. Who don't necessarily know what their rights are, who maybe don't realize they're being [00:27:00] exploited.

Many of them, even in those circumstances, want the job cuz they need the wages. The labor department, and the regulatory framework is just severely outgunned and under-resourced. How often are these incidences happening? Too often.

Between 2018 and 2022, the Department of Labor is now has reported a 69% increase in child labor violations. There was something like 3,800 children employed in violation of federal child labor law in 2022. That is almost certainly an undercount.

## **News Brief: Media's Credulous Labor Shortage Reporting Helps Lay Groundwork For Repealing Child Labor Laws - Citations Needed - Air Date 4-12-23**

**NIMA SHIRAZI - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Part of this is also so plainly about not wanting better jobs to exist, right? There is this given Econ 101 state of [00:28:00] nature where there need to be jobs that pay shit, that treat people like shit, because they are imagined by some, who are pushing these policies, to be merely kind of transitory positions between being a kid — then you work in McDonald's for a few years and you learn what it's like to have a job, and then you go on to get your real job. This entire premise exists to

bolster this idea that these "low wage", "unskilled", these like patronizing terms, these kinds of jobs are merely transitory.

They don't need protections. They don't need better pay. People don't have them for that long. If you do, then there's something wrong with you, not the job. It's like laundering all of this ideology through the basic given premise, which is [00:29:00] obviously not a given, that there is a just natural labor shortage because of all these fucking handouts.

People have it too good. They're being too picky, and we need to change that, and there are different ways that this can be solved. The current right-wing American way is to loosen or gut or get rid of child labor laws. The more liberal way— as you pointed out in your piece, that we can turn back to Eric Levitz from New York Magazine's *Intelligencer*, there is a different way, and that is about immigration, right?

It combines economics and labor and immigration into this thing. This is the supposedly liberal position. Let me now quote again from Eric Levitz's piece from New York Magazine;

"On paper this does not look like a difficult policy problem to solve. A precocious grade schooler wouldn't need much time to ascertain the basic answer.

If the US expands immigration opportunities for international workers, our labor shortage, and Central Americans [00:30:00] economic woes should ease simultaneously. After all, there is no skills mismatched between economically desperate Central Americans and open US positions. The US' labor shortage is concentrated in fields that do not require an extensive education.

The US needs more kitchen staff, construction workers and delivery drivers. Central America is home to a large number of people with the interest in, and capacity to perform these roles. Opportunities for win-win policy making are rarely clear cut."

**ADAM JOHNSON - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** So the solution is of course not to pay more. It's to have more exploited immigrant labor.

**NIMA SHIRAZI - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Exactly. Expanded immigration is just a labor exploitation program now.



**ADAM JOHNSON - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Which is better than letting 'em die in a desert, but why don't we welcome more immigrants and also pay them more? That would be the actual solution for a humane society. Rather than being like, "Oh, we have this cheap exploitable labor. Why don't we have the immigrants do instead of our white babies?" — I don't know, why don't we just pay people more? That seems like a better solution.

**NIMA SHIRAZI - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Also, to [00:31:00] be fair, Levitz does something else, and he's our punching bag for this news brief. Let me read a different excerpt from his piece from New York Magazine.

This kind of brings into the domestic economic fold, the stumbling, bumbling empire trope that we have talked about before. So here's Eric Levitz writing about why child labor laws are perhaps being rolled back.

"The first prong of this policy is open and intentional. The Federal Reserve has made no secret of its belief that beating inflation will require killing jobs and lowering wages.

The second prong is a different story. US officials have stumbled into what is in essence a child labor trafficking policy, the cruelty and irrationality of which derive from negligence rather than intention."

**ADAM JOHNSON - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Rather than intention. So this is peak liberal pathologizing. Nobody really wanted us to have a child labor [00:32:00] regime again, as exposed by the New York Times and the tens of thousands...

Nevermind that we literally almost never enforce laws against child exploitation and child labor. Nevermind the fact that everybody knows what's going on. These large corporations, Whole Foods, Target, all the companies mentioned in the New York Times expose—they all knew they were using third party contractors that used child labor, everybody knew it.

Regulators knew it, but everyone looked the other way, or did a little slap on the wrist here and there. Because, again as the first segment of that paragraph makes very clear, which is; political elites in Washington needed to come up with ways of driving down wages. One way you drive down wages is to lighten the touch on the enforcement of child labor laws, because that weakens labor more broadly.

Now, again, I think it's fair to say that if Trump did this, we wouldn't do the bum "they stumbled into a child labor trafficking policy."

**NIMA SHIRAZI - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Stumbling and bubbling. It would be very intentional, clearly this was the point.

**ADAM JOHNSON - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Of course they knew it was going on. Of course, everyone knows that this is a fact of corporate America.

Corporate America certainly knows what's going on. They know they get fines here and there, that are tokens. They're aware that it exists, [00:33:00] but I guess as long as it's not intentional. Right? We didn't really mean it.

If I'm the subject of the cruelty, whether or not the cruelty is the point, as the buzzword has been since 2016, doesn't really seem to matter to me.

Your intentions are secondary to the fact that I'm still being trafficked into low-paying child labor. So again, this sort of stumbling child labor trafficking section was somewhat telling, cuz again, I think it speaks to this kind of broader wonkish— it's basically just a Matt Yglesias knockoff routine where it's like;

There's these things that happen. There's nothing that can really be done about it, but we should have more liberal immigration policies. No one really does politics anymore, we just tinker around the edges. Oh, and by the way, child labor has no real author, no one needs to go to prison. No one needs to get arrested. It's just this thing that happens.

There's this 6,500 word expose in the New York Times, but there's no bad guy except for some maybe low level brokers, like no corporations, no CEOs, nobody really needs to go to jail. We need to — and you know what the Biden White House [00:34:00] did the day after that story broke? They said they were gonna ask Congress to increase fines.

Oh, increase fines, whoa, watch out. Again, nevermind the fact we've had a two year full blown meltdown over fucking shoplifting in San Francisco. Other metropolitan areas, people screaming at the top of their lungs for longer prison and jail sentences. I also wrote about people do shoplift, but it's not as overblown, right?

No such demand for anyone to go to prison or jail from David Leonard, their daily explainer. No mention from the White House they were gonna seek

prisons or jails. Instead of adding two and two together and being like; "Oh, really what these state legislators are trying to do is they're trying to, not legalize entirely, but legalize a great deal of shit corporations are already doing."

If they're already doing it, if we know they're already doing it right. It's not just some 15 year old doing a paper route or whatever, right? This is these are like, a lot of these are real jobs. These are hard jobs. These are 11:00 PM jobs. These are operating a meat locker jobs.

They just wanna weaken the [00:35:00] labor pool. They wanna make it more precarious. They wanna make it younger. They're easier to exploit. They're easier to bully, they're easier to boss around. To a great extent, again not entirely, there are — the New York Times reported children as young as 12, and we're not talking about 12, but trust me, if they could, they would.

A great extent, 60-70% of the shit that they're just trying to legalize what they're already doing. So these business groups, and these various state legislators, and the Republican allies, and to some extent occasionally Democrats here and there, but it's mostly Republican driven by Republicans on a state level.

Again, the federal authorities have totally looked the other way because they want to get down inflation, right?

**NIMA SHIRAZI - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Without actually talking about why there is inflation.

## **The Child Labor Crisis In America Part 2 - Fresh Air - Air Date 5-4-23**

**TANYA MOSLEY - CO-HOST, FRESH AIR:** You found out about this problem after doing some reporting on a series of Trump administration raids involving undocumented teenagers.

What were the first indications of child labor violations that you found?

**HANNAH DREIER:** I noticed that a lot of the kids who I was talking to were working overnight in cookie factories, and it wasn't until [00:36:00] about a year ago that I came back to this topic and decided to really dig into what might be going on. What I found was really a child labor crisis in America.

We've seen record numbers of kids coming across the border in the last two years. We're talking about 250,000 children crossing without their parents, and the majority of them are ending up in full-time jobs. These are jobs working for household brands like Cheerios, Cheetos, Ford, and all of this is of course, completely against child labor laws.

**TANYA MOSLEY - CO-HOST, FRESH AIR:** I wanna get into how this is even possible, but first, you and your colleagues actually spoke with a hundred migrant child workers in 20 states, and you shared this story of a 15 year old named Carolina packaging Cheerios. What were some of the stories that she shared with you?

**HANNAH DREIER:** So Carolina [00:37:00] came on her own from Guatemala last year when she was 14.

Like a lot of the kids I talked to, she told me that after the pandemic, food was scarce in her village. Even drinking water was scarce. There weren't jobs, and so she decided to leave and come to this country where she thought life might be easier. She weighed 84 pounds when she got to the border, and she had an aunt here who she had never met.

The aunt took her in, but explained that she was already supporting her own children. She didn't have a lot of extra money, and so Carolina went to work at a factory packaging Cheerios. She would go to ninth grade during the day, and then work eight hour shifts right after school until midnight. Then get up again at 6:00 AM the next day.

When I talked to her, she was getting sick a lot, her stomach was hurting. It's very intensive work. You can't take your eyes off the assembly line. [00:38:00] It's work where people have gotten their fingers amputated. It can be really dangerous, and she was skipping school more and more, because she was just struggling to get through the days without any sleep.

**TANYA MOSLEY - CO-HOST, FRESH AIR:** Working overnights and then going to school during the day. You actually also spoke with teachers who have large populations of migrant children in their classes. What did you hear from them?

**HANNAH DREIER:** The teachers were struck by how this has developed in just the past several years. What I heard again and again from teachers is that, all my eighth graders at this point are working, or all my ninth graders have to pay rent. This is something that even teachers in English Language learner

programs, who've been dealing with migrant children for years and years, had never seen before. They tell me that it's really a shift just in the last couple years where kids are coming over and they have no support.

So they have to pay rent, they have to support themselves. Often they also are paying off a debt and they see these kids falling [00:39:00] asleep in class, or skipping school, slowly dropping out of school or coming in with injuries. They tell me that they are really shocked.

**TANYA MOSLEY - CO-HOST, FRESH AIR:** Do they have a duty to report this or how do they handle a situation where they have children who they know are working overnight shifts?

**HANNAH DREIER:** I think the teachers feel really torn. They see that children are being put in situations that a child should never be put in, and yet there's no support for these kids. So what the teachers are telling me is that yes, they know that this is not right, and they worry for some of the people that these kids are living with.

Sometimes kids are living with uncles, but thousands of these children are living with strangers. One of the real problems here is that there is not a support system for these children. So it's not like the foster care system, where there's a social worker who's gonna be checking up on these kids, or sort of some support in place if things go wrong.

With these migrant children, [00:40:00] they get released from a shelter to a sponsor, and then there's sort of nothing else. There's no follow up. There's not a simple solution for them. So for teachers seeing all of this, the question is, what's the alternative? What would be better? It's not clear.

**TANYA MOSLEY - CO-HOST, FRESH AIR:** Carolina shared with you the realities of her village, the lack of food, scarcity overall.

Do you have a sense of the realities in Central America where most of these children have fled from?

**HANNAH DREIER:** The pandemic has made life a lot harder in a lot of these small villages. Hard to the point where children are going to bed hungry and families don't have enough food. There's not enough work, and so parents are sending their children north.

Really what we're seeing here is the collision of a labor shortage in this country, but then also a historic influx of migrant children who are coming here alone, because life is so hard in their countries of origin right now.

**TANYA MOSLEY - CO-HOST, FRESH AIR:** So you shared the [00:41:00] story with us of Carolina, who is packaging Cheerios.

What is the latest with her?

**HANNAH DREIER:** Carolina is actually doing a lot better. She is on the road now to getting a work permit, which will allow her to work a safer job, and she also has gotten a lot of outreach from people in her community. She lives in Grand Rapids. She's very connected now to different resources there.

Health and Human Services also reached out and offered her additional support, so she is doing better. A lot of the other kids who are working alongside her packaging Cheerios, these kids were let go from their job packaging Cheerios after our story ran, but many of them have already found other jobs at other factories.

**TANYA MOSLEY - CO-HOST, FRESH AIR:** Did the outrage for Carolina happen because of your reporting?

**HANNAH DREIER:** My understanding is yes, and Health and Human Services can't discuss [00:42:00] individual cases, but what they've said generally is they don't always know when a child like Carolina has ended up in an exploitive situation. That makes sense to me because they don't have people going and checking on these kids.

So how would they know?

## **New York Times: Biden Admin Ignored Warnings About Migrant Child Labor, Punished Whistleblowers - Democracy Now! - Air Date 4-19-23**

**AMY GOODMAN - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** We had you on for your first blockbuster exposé showing children as young as 12 working across the United States. Now you're reporting that the Biden administration knew about

this — not only knew about this and didn't do anything, they actually did do something: They pushed out those within the administration who were raising alarms. Can you talk about what you found?

**HANNAH DREIER:** It's great to be with you Amy.

Just as you say, people were punished for bringing this to the attention of their supervisors. People say that they were fired, they were demoted. I spent a year talking to [00:43:00] children who came to this country and are working in the most exploitative conditions in factories, in slaughterhouses. I found these children in every single state in this country. After that story came out, I began asking, "How could it have been that the Biden administration didn't know about this?"

What I found was that, actually, they were given evidence. They were given warnings. There was sign after sign that this was happening for two years, and the administration really didn't spring into action until just last month.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ- CO-HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** Hannah, I was particularly struck by the information about Susan Rice, the White House head of domestic policy, and her reaction to the reports that there were problems in terms of how these children were being treated. Could you talk about that? Because Susan Rice has been a person who has been in every Democratic administration over the last 30 years — Bill Clinton, Barack [00:44:00] Obama and now Joe Biden.

**HANNAH DREIER:** Susan Rice is a hugely important figure, and she is Biden's top point person on immigration. It's not some junior staffer at the White House, who maybe got a warning one time and it didn't get channeled in the appropriate way. What I found was that Susan Rice's team was told about this again and again. The kind of evidence we're talking about are clusters of children found to be working in different parts of the country, repeatedly, in these very industrial jobs. These are children making car parts. These are children using caustic chemicals and acids to scrub a chicken plant. Those messages got to Susan Rice's level. Memos airing concerns about these issues got to Susan Rice's level. Her team was told, going back to the [00:45:00] summer of 2021, that people were very worried about this.

What the White House has basically said is; maybe we saw these signs, but we didn't put it all together. What their response has been is a lack of curiosity, or a lack of conscientious thinking to realize that if we're seeing kids in all these



different places who are doing these jobs, maybe there is a larger trend here; maybe there's thousands of these kids out there.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ- CO-HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** They did put it together sufficiently to force out five Health and Human Services staff members. Could you talk about those — some of those staff members and the alarms that they raised?

**HANNAH DREIER:** These are the people who were running the unaccompanied minor program for Health and Human Services. One of the women who I spoke with, Jallyn Sualog, she helped build this program. She started working for the government in 2010, right when we first started to see these waves of children [00:46:00] coming over, and she was in charge of this program for years and years. She was the highest official running the program when Biden took over.

What she says is she raised alarms. We've seen her emails where she's saying something catastrophic is going to happen, and pleading with somebody to pay attention. When her emails went unanswered, she went to Congress, and she talked to Congress staffers and said again, "I'm really worried about what's happening here. These children are in danger."

She was pushed out. She was one of five people who I spoke to who filed complaints, who showed me their emails where they were saying something really wrong is happening here. They say that instead of being listened to, they were demoted, and people just did not want to hear these warnings.

**AMY GOODMAN - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** I wanted to turn to the White House press secretary, Karine Jean-Pierre, who was speaking on Tuesday.

**PRESS SECRETARY KARINE JEANPIERRE:** This administration moved swiftly to crack down on violators and are more rigorously vet — more vigorously vet sponsors [00:47:00] of unaccompanied minors. DOL and HHS launched a new task force to heighten cooperation and better share information. We also called on Congress to provide the resources this administration has long requested to help us crack down on companies that exploit children for labor. The actions we've taken since February make clear that we will continue to investigate and hold companies accountable, but we also need Congress to provide the resources we need to enforce. We've been very clear. Again, DOL, HHS have taken actions, but we need Congress to also — to also give the —

give DOL and HHS the resources that they need to broaden these actions that they've put forward.

**AMY GOODMAN - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** That's the White House response. If you could respond to that. Particularly talk about who is responsible for what. We saw this dramatic confrontation between Senator Hawley and Alejandro [00:48:00] Mayorkas, who's head of Homeland Security. Talk about what Homeland Security is responsible for — he was particularly angry that Mayorkas was blaming the Trump administration for separating children — what Homeland Security is responsible for, what HHS is responsible for. Tell us more about these whistleblowers who made clear, time and again, what was happening, and were not just not listened to, as was just pointed out, but were pushed out, one after another.

**HANNAH DREIER:** In fairness to the Biden administration, they have taken rapid action after our first story came out a month ago. The Department of Labor is really ramping up the way that they're going to try to go after these companies that exploit migrant children. Health and Human Services has also taken some steps. What's been just so shocking to me is that these steps were not taken earlier.

One dynamic that people often point out [00:49:00] is that a lot of this came in response to the crisis at the border. Where children were coming in record numbers right when Biden took office, and a lot of them were languishing in Customs and Border Protection jails because there wasn't enough room in the shelter system to take them in. There was wall-to-wall coverage of children sleeping on the floor, children under those tin blankets, and the Biden administration was really getting slammed on: "Why are these kids languishing in jails? I thought you were going to take care of them." So there was all this pressure in the administration to move those kids out quickly, because it was so visible when they were ending up sleeping on the floors, sleeping in these terrible conditions.

What happened after that, with all these kids working, was much less visible. Nobody is going to go and have a big newsreel about children who are working in the poultry plant, because you can't get in there. It was sort-of a trade-off, as it's been explained to me; between this [00:50:00] very visible crisis, where kids weren't moving out of the shelters quickly enough, and this hidden crisis, where kids are now working these terrible jobs and often languishing in debt bondage. That's just part of this dynamic that sort of comes up again and again.

The agencies that are responsible here are really Department of Labor and Health and Human Services. I know Mayorkas has been getting questioned about this, I think as a proxy for the Biden administration. The agency that is in charge of migrant children is Health and Human Services. It's not like the regular immigration system. Children go to this different agency that's supposed to be a child welfare agency. It's Health and Human Services that's then responsible for releasing them to sponsors and protecting them from trafficking and exploitation.

## **NYT Exposé Shows Migrants Kids in U.S. Are Forced into Brutal Jobs for Major Brands - Democracy Now! - Air Date 2-28-23**

**AMY GOODMAN - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** Hannah, I'd like to ask about the children. If you could tell us some of their stories? That's really the heart of your [00:51:00] story, as you talk about Cristian, who works in a construction job instead of going to school, 14 years old. Carolina, who packages Cheerios at night in a factory. Talk about each of them and also how you found them. How difficult was it for you to find them?

**HANNAH DREIER:** These kids were not hard to find, and I think that's part of what you're seeing with these Department of Labor reforms. Inspectors just have not been looking for them in a proactive way. I came to — I went to different cities and towns, and usually the next day I already was speaking to children who are working these illegal, exploitive jobs.

I talked to Cristian in southern Florida. He was living in a house full of other unaccompanied minors, other kids who had come across the border without their parents. All of them were working full time. None of them had gone to school. Cristian had come when he was 12, two years ago, and immediately, the next day, started working full time in construction. He told me that he doesn't know how to [00:52:00] read, and he would like to learn English. He would like to learn how to read, but he can't go to school because he has a debt to pay off. He has to pay rent. I went to a construction site and talked to him as he was putting the roof on a building, and he told me he had already fallen twice that year.

He was working with power tools. He was just balancing precariously on the edge as he was trying to bend some rebar. He's a child, it's not what he wants to

be doing. He was released to this situation, and there's just no support there for him to get out of it.

In Michigan, I talked to a lot of children who are working in a factory packaging Cheerios. They also package Lucky Charms and Cheetos. These are kids who were in school, I met them at school. Some of the kids I met at school told me, "Oh yeah, we have to leave early now because we have to go to our factory job." I was just shocked, but I went to this factory, and sure enough, there [00:53:00] they were walking out after the shift. This is a place where you're working with really industrial machinery. The machines have sliced off people's fingers. One woman who was doing this kind of work was pulled in by a hairnet, and her scalp was ripped open. It's a serious, adult kind of place to work. These kids are balancing it with seven days of school as well, so they're exhausted.

**AMY GOODMAN - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** Tell us about Nery Cutzal from Guatemala, how they met their sponsor. Again, these children are here legally, and then talk about the children who have died.

**HANNAH DREIER:** I think that's such an important point. These are not undocumented children. They're not children who snuck in, and nobody ever found out about them, and now they're living a subterranean life. These are children who had turned themselves in at the border, usually asked for asylum, and were released to live with somebody who the government thought would protect them. The government can't release them [00:54:00] unless they're sure that it's a trustworthy adult who is taking these kids on. In some cases, they're being released to complete strangers.

In Nery's case, he met a man on Facebook when he was 13. The man said that if he wanted to come to the U.S., he would help him. He would let him go to school, and instead Nery shows up; the man picks him up from the airport and immediately hands him a list of debts that this kid now has. So he's charging him thousands of dollars for his journey to this country. He charged him for filling out the paperwork that he had to send to the government in order to get him released. He charged him \$45 for the dinner of tacos that they had that night. Then he told Nery that he had to go find his own place to live, find a job, and start paying back this debt. Nery doesn't speak any English. He has never worked. He was in school when he was in Central America. We've seen the text messages between him and this man. The man starts threatening him and saying, "You don't [00:55:00] matter to me. I'm going to mess you up." He threatened Nery's family. These kids are just on their own in these situations, with very little resources and very few ways out.

# Why Child Labor in America is Skyrocketing Part 2 - Robert Reich - Air Date 5-16-23

**ROBERT REICH - HOST, ROBERT REICH:** So what can stop this madness?

First, fund the Department of Labor so it can crack down on child labor violations. When I was Secretary of Labor, the department was chronically underfunded and understaffed. It still is, because lawmakers and their corporate backers want it that way.

Second, increase fines on companies that break child labor laws. Current fines are too low and are treated as costs of doing business by hugely profitable companies that violate the law.

Third, hold major corporations accountable for their supply chains. Many big corporations contract with smaller companies that employ children, which allows the big corporations to play dumb and often avoid liability. It's time to [00:56:00] demand that large corporations take responsibility for their contractors.

Fourth, reform immigration laws so undocumented children aren't exploited.

And lastly, organize. Fight against state laws that are attempting to bring back child labor. Are corporate profits really more important than the safety of children?

# We Uncovered the Corporations Bringing Back Child Labor in America Part 2 - More Perfect Union - Air Date 4-3-23

**ANDREW RIVERA - HOST, MORE PERFECT UNION:** There's one company that benefits more over any other.

**GOV KIM REYNOLDS:** Hy-Vee, where there's a helpful smile in every aisle.

**ANDREW RIVERA - HOST, MORE PERFECT UNION:** Hyvee is one of the biggest employers in Iowa, and one of its most prolific violators of child labor law. Every few years, a new report seems to come out about all the minors unlawfully working for them. Since 2000, Hy-Vee has been fined over \$700,000 for more than 30 labor law violations, including a big fine last year for safety violation.

As much as they forked over to OSHA, Hyvee has been even more generous to Kim Reynolds [00:57:00] and Iowa Republicans. Shelling out over \$815,000 over the last decade alone. Reynolds even kicked off her 2018 campaign for governor at a Hyvee and appeared on their bespoke talk show.

**GOV KIM REYNOLDS:** Hyvee is a great example of a phenomenal employer.

They one of our largest employers in the state of Iowa. They're in small communities all across this great state, and one of the major employers in these small communities. I'm very, very grateful to that helpful smile in every aisle.

**ANDREW RIVERA - HOST, MORE PERFECT UNION:** It's unclear how many kids were working there at the time, but Hyvee is just one of many corporations that are now regularly being caught violating child labor law.

For a bill pitched as a cure for so-called worker shortages in Iowa, where the minimum wage is still \$7.25 and so many other states, the reality is damning. You've seen the headlines, including the huge recent expose in the New York Times about the proliferation of child labor. Since the pandemic began, violations have exploded and were up by 37% last year.

Packer Sanitation Services, [00:58:00] Hyundai Kia in Alabama, Blackstone owned PSSI, a sanitation company with systemic violations. Instead of cracking down, states are lining up to legalize the practices. 10 over the past two years alone. It's much the same story in Arkansas, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Big donations by big corporations are leading to laws that put kids at risk in order to save a few bucks.

The intention is written in plain English. The original version of the Iowa bill called for total corporate immunity if a kid got injured at a dangerous workplace. Lawmakers were forced to scrub that last part, but employers will still avoid liability if a kid gets into an accident while driving home after working late into the night.



Exploit a kid's cheap labor, then send them packing and no responsibility when there are consequences. It should go without saying, but such a textbook example of corporate greed and corruption shouldn't qualify as educational experience.

## **News Brief: Media's Credulous Labor Shortage Reporting Helps Lay Groundwork For Repealing Child Labor Laws - Citations Needed - Air Date 4-12-23**

They're just trying to legalize to a greater extent what they're already doing or what they want to do. And so this raises a question of, well then shouldn't we interrogate the [00:59:00] pretext of a labor shortage and what that even means, labor shortage. It's become a total zombie phrase. It's become a total, in the words of Orwell, a thought terminating cliché. It's just this thing you say, oh, labor shortage. Well, we got, we gotta do what we can for the labor shortage. You know, the boys are off fighting in World War I and we got a labor shortage, so we... and women gotta pitch... it's like, What? No! Like, we went from 0.8 to 0.6. This is not a catastrophic change.

**NIMA SHIRAZI - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Yeah. Roll up your sleeves, people. Well, yeah, and I mean, as you write in your piece, I'm gonna quote you back to you. I think you put it really well, Adam. " With rare exception, there is no employer who cannot hire enough people at the right wage. What employers call a labor shortage is, really, the pool of applicants is too small and thus I have less leverage to drive down wages problem". You also quote Peter Greene writing in Forbes in 2019. He was writing really about, as you note, the related myth of a teacher shortage, another thing we've talked about on the show before, but it is applicable here of course as well, broader kind of labor shortage trope. Greene wrote this: "It's a [01:00:00] severe lack of incentives - wages, unions, benefits - needed to entice workers to take on the difficult work. You can't solve a problem starting with the wrong diagnosis. If I can't buy a Porsche for a \$1.98, that doesn't mean there's an automobile shortage. If I can't get a fine dining meal for a buck, that doesn't mean there's a food shortage, and if appropriately skilled humans don't want to work for me under the conditions I've set, that doesn't mean there's a human shortage".

**ADAM JOHNSON - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Yeah. If I throw a party and four people show up, uh, that's not a friend shortage. That's an I have a problem shortage.



**NIMA SHIRAZI - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** You need a better party, man.

**ADAM JOHNSON - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Yeah. You smell or people don't like you, you're hostile or you go on weird political rants and you alienate your friends. Um...

**NIMA SHIRAZI - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** I mean, for example...  
[laughing]

**ADAM JOHNSON - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Someone named John Adamson, theoretically speaking, I think that that's why we keep doing the labor shortage, just like. You know, okay. Like there are certain stresses in the economy as we know, you know, half a million people, uh, according to one study out of the workforce cuz of covid, there are legitimate kind of a strains on the labor [01:01:00] force. But again, going from 0.8 to 0.6 doesn't seem like a catastrophic situation, doesn't seem like now is the time to take off the child labor laws of 1937 and dust them off, you know, go to the back of the room in the State House and be like, Oh, I gotta go back to the, uh, [imitates early 20th Century accent] to the Child Labor Act of 1904, that doesn't seem like it's that urgent, and so when Levitt says this fatuous like window dressing about, oh, there's, you know, there's a 'help wanted' sign in every restaurant. It's like, yeah, okay, but the *Wall Street Journal* just had a report about ghost jobs. That one third of all job postings are phantom. They're posted by employers to make their employees think they're looking for jobs to help them, but really they're fake.

People have incentive to constantly look for applicants. There's a ton of anecdotal evidence that this so-called job shortage is dubious, and if we're gonna use it as a pretext or a justification or front load an article about the urgent need for child labor with this labor shortage, like, I beg reporters, to just interrogate the concept even a little bit, like challenge it, problematize it, question it, because it's the entire basis for why they're doing it.

Rather than saying, Oh, they're just greedy [01:02:00] corporations, like, this isn't, you know, their job is to get legislative victories where they can, to weaken labor, where they can to weaken child labor and safety standards, and anything that cuts into their aggregate profits, they're gonna find any opportunity to exploit that. So maybe, just maybe, they're using this specter of labor shortage to do that.

**NIMA SHIRAZI - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** No way, man. That doesn't fit in a headline though. So that's like, that's annoying to talk about. If

you accept the premise, then you get to move on to, you know, scolding the lawmakers who are trying to push these policies without ever having to investigate or interrogate the premise on which this entire thing is built.

**ADAM JOHNSON - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Yeah. Cause a lot of ideological work is done when you just accept the reason for something, right?

**NIMA SHIRAZI - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Like, everyone knows that no one can fill jobs. And then you're like, Oh, so what are the different solutions? Right? Like, what does the Fed think? What do economists think?

**ADAM JOHNSON - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** So we get to, what?, the solution is we get to exploit more Central American immigrants?

**NIMA SHIRAZI - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Right.

**ADAM JOHNSON - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Like, I don't know, we should be wanting these Central American immigrants to come and join unions [01:03:00] and to engage politically with worker power and to uplift their working standards. Not just saying, Well, let's plug it in for the kiddos.

**NIMA SHIRAZI - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Yeah, exactly. And so it's all just kind of sparring over already horrific narratives and trying to come up with, you know, who's gonna be the least cruel in a kind of admittedly given cruel system. Do you know what I mean? Without ever trying to make the system less cruel.

**ADAM JOHNSON - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** Yeah. Nothing we can do about it. It's just the way it is.

**NIMA SHIRAZI - HOST, CITATIONS NEEDED:** That's just the way things are. And let's talk around the edges there and politicians and their spokespeople in media really do help reinforce each other on this.

## Final comments on what child labor shows us about the ongoing debate within the GOP

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** We've just heard clips today starting with Robert Reich laying out the dynamics between immigration

and child labor. *More Perfect Union* explained how companies legitimize child labor through so-called education programs. *Fresh Air* discussed the relationship between state and federal authorities. *The Majority Report* highlighted an NBC report about child labor infractions. *Amanpour and Company* [01:04:00] looked at the coordinated campaign to roll back child labor laws. *Citations Needed* highlighted the baselessness of the argument about a labor shortage. *Fresh Air* got into some individual stories. *Democracy Now!* highlighted the fact that the Biden administration was aware of the exploitation of children, and *Democracy Now!* also looked into some individual stories and the explanation for why kids are being processed by the government and ending up in the hands of those who would exploit them. And finally, Robert Reich gave a succinct list of ways to make sure these policies do not continue.

That's what everybody heard. But members also heard bonus clips from *More Perfect Union* highlighting the case of the Hy-Vee company. And *Citations Needed* dove deeper into the media failure to combat the talking points about labor shortages, and even the liberal framing of accepting immigrant labor as exploitable.

To hear that and have all of our bonus content delivered seamlessly to the new members-only podcast feed that you'll receive, sign up to support the show at [01:05:00] [BestoftheLeft.com/support](https://BestoftheLeft.com/support), or shoot me an email requesting a financial hardship membership, because we don't let a lack of funds stand in the way of hearing more information.

And now as we wrap up today, I just wanted to bring everyone's attention to what I think is the most interesting dynamic that has been very slowly unfolding for several years now. And this topic really brings it into sharp focus.

So for decades and decades, the Republican Party has been the party of corporatism. They do the bidding of big corporations. Whatever will be good for corporations, particularly tax cuts, comes straight to mind. But in today's case, child labor. Do you need child labor? Great! We will happily make some children available to you to work in your factories. Low taxes, low minimum wage, all of those things that help corporations, the Republicans are on that side, right?

And for decades, the Democrats [01:06:00] had been ostensibly on the other side. They've been more the party of the working people, the party of unions and all of that. And then the neoliberal era came along in the late seventies, definitely into the eighties, and then was solidified as part of the Democratic Party with the Clinton era.

So at the beginning of this neoliberal era, thought of as being ushered in by Ronald Reagan, right? And so Reagan came in, he had two terms, and then his vice president, George H.W. Bush also won. So Republicans had three election cycles in a row that they won the presidency. And so Bill Clinton and his coalition came along and thought, okay, we need to do something different. We need to change our tactics in order to make ourselves electable in this new era. And it may have been that he and his team and the people around him were very much in favor of those policies. But regardless, the ethos of the [01:07:00] country had changed. And so the Clintonesque style of politics became fashionable and made electing a Democrat possible again. At least this is sort of the argument.

So what was ushered in with the Clinton era was a major pivot for the Democratic Party. They pivoted away from being the party of the downtrodden, being the party of working people, steadfastly supporting unions and all of that. We had a bunch of reforms during that era: welfare reform, telecommunications reform comes to mind also. But they got more friendly with corporations and less friendly with people, trying to triangulate this new position that the Democratic party could sit themselves in. They needed campaign finance dollars from corporations. They still wanted to be seen as "for the people" as they always had been at least for a hundred years or so. But that [01:08:00] was when things started to take a turn. And we've been basically on that path ever since. The Democrats have been trying to triangulate between being seen as supporting unions, working people. But they also are very friendly with corporations, particularly Wall Street, Silicon Valley, the tech companies and all of that. So they're trying to have it both ways. And that is leaving an opening in their defense, right? That triangulation has left the door open a bit for there to be a shift. And that is what we saw with the beginning of the Trump era.

Trump came in and said a lot of things that sounded like great economic populism. He was basically -- to whatever degree you think he was doing it on purpose and knew exactly what he was doing, or if you think he's a total idiot, and he stumbled into it -- he said a lot of things that sounded really good to working people that they hadn't [01:09:00] heard for a long time, and he was sneaking in that open door that the Democrats had left open. And he coupled it, as we all know, with massive amounts of racism, anti-immigration policies and ideas, general jingoism -- America Firstism and all of that.

So what this episode today highlights is the ongoing conflict between the wings of the Republican party. The struggle that we are seeing play out is exactly that: between the pro-corporate wing of the party that will happily shovel children into the waiting exploitative arms of corporations, and the economic populist

wing, which in their framing is also tied inextricably to anti-immigration. And so you have those Republicans like Josh Hawley, who decry child labor and use it as [01:10:00] leverage to try to shut down immigration.

**SEN. JOSH HAWLEY:** You're not going to take any responsibility for the indentured servitude and exploitation of children that is happening on your watch. A moment ago, you were crowing about the fact that you treated children so well, and yet we find tens of thousands of children who are forced to work as slaves because of your policies, and you turn around and blame a prior administration.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** But that needs to be seen through the lens of this ongoing conflict. Are the Republicans going to continue as they have been, for a hundred years or more, as the party of big business? Or are they going to manage to make this pivot and make themselves out to be the party of working people? And what I would argue is that if they ever manage to complete that turn, we are all in a lot of trouble.

And it would be shocking -- well, it would be simultaneously [01:11:00] shocking and not at all shocking -- if the Democrats did nothing to counter that pivot. Because it's happening in slow motion. We can see it with our own eyes. We can see the Republican party trying to make the argument that they are the party of working people, they are the party of economic populism. And if the Democrats just let them do it, they are opening the door to the most toxic form of politics known to humans: economic populism plus racism and nationalism equals fascism. And we can see that coming as well. Not to mention, not that Sinclair Lewis is a fortune teller or anything, but that is the exact premise of his 1930s book, *It Can't Happen Here* -- a politician espousing economic populism, racism, and nationalism rises to be America's first fascist president. And the parallels -- I mean, I read it in either the 2016 campaign or soon [01:12:00] after Trump was elected -- and the parallels are stark and obvious.

So it's clear that the stakes are high and it's clear that we are in a moment of transition. But the battle going on is not just the one that we've been hearing about: will the more moderate Mitt Romney wing of the Republican party or the Trump wing of the Republican Party win out? It's not just a debate between the more extremists and the more moderates within the conservative party. Those of us on the left, all the way from the super moderate conservative Democrats all the way to the far left, we are not bystanders. We are not simply bystanders in this competition that's going on, because the role of the Democratic party, to try to encompass the general sense of the left in America, has to react to this as well. They have to stop the path that they have been on since at least the

nineties, and recognize that they are leaving that [01:13:00] door of economic populism open. They are leaving that door open and giving the Republicans the opportunity to try to usurp that position in people's minds, make people think, wow, the Republican Party is the party of working people. And if they succeed, it'll take more decades to undo that damage.

And in the meantime, the economic populism that the left generally believes in, but not just the left -- nearly all working people believe in economic populism -- but those policies, those ideals will be inextricably linked with racism and nationalism for the coming decades. And that is what we are fighting to avoid.

So for those of us on the left, we feel like we have nothing to say about the path the Republican party will take. We are not part of the Republican party. We don't get to vote on that. We don't get to have our voices heard. But we do have sway over the Democratic party, and we [01:14:00] need to be doing everything in our power to pull that party back to the side of economic populism, back to the roots of FDR-style, New Deal-style politics that puts working people front and center without the toxic racism and nationalism tied to it.

As always, keep the comments coming in. You can leave us a voicemail or send me a text message to the number 202-999-3991 or send me an email to [Jay@BestoftheLeft.com](mailto:Jay@BestoftheLeft.com).

Thanks to everyone for listening. Thanks to Deon Clark and Erin Clayton for their research work for the show, and participation in our bonus episodes. Thanks to our Transcriptionist Trio, Ken, Brian and LaWendy for their volunteer work helping put our transcripts together. Thanks to Amanda Hoffman for all of her work on our social media outlets, activism segments, graphic designing, web mastering, and bonus show co-hosting. And thanks to those who support the show by becoming a member or purchasing gift memberships at [01:15:00] [BestoftheLeft.com/support](https://BestoftheLeft.com/support), through our Patreon page, or from right inside the Apple Podcast app. Membership is how you get instant access to our incredibly good and often funny bonus episodes, in addition to there being extra content, no ads and chapter markers in all of our regular episodes, all through your regular podcast player. And if you want to continue the discussion, you can join our Discord community; there's a link to join in the show notes.

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