

The Rules are Changing.

Summer is coming to an end and the kids are back at school which brings to mind about some casual reading I have been doing that I find somewhat alarming for our youth from a safety aspect. I have been reading Articles from **usatoday.com**, **npr.org** and **pbs.org** on lawmakers in at least 11 states this year have sought to loosen child labor laws to help employers fill empty jobs. These sites are on both sides of the political views but seem to share the same concern over some state legislators, most of them Republicans, that see teenagers as a partial solution to fill the gap. The unemployment rate sits at 3.5% – a level last reached in 1969 – and businesses of all types, from factories to restaurants to retail stores, are struggling to find workers.

Arkansas and Tennessee enacted changes last month. A new Arkansas law removes a requirement that **children under 16 provide proof of parental consent to work**. The Tennessee law scraps the prohibition on 16- and 17-year-olds working in restaurants that derive more than a quarter of their revenue from alcohol.

Under current law, only workers aged 18 and above can serve alcohol to customers in Wisconsin. A new bill being introduced by 3 republican law makers would broaden that to workers ages 14 to 17. They could only serve seated customers, not drinkers who were at the bar itself.

Bills introduced in January in Minnesota and Iowa would allow some teenagers to work in construction and meatpacking plants, respectively. The Iowa bill would also let some youth under 16 drive themselves to work and extend the hours teenagers could work. In 2022, efforts to expand teens' working hours passed in New Jersey but weren't signed into law in two other states. In the Iowa legislation, one of the provisions is to **exempt employers from civil liability due to the company's negligence**. "It is astounding that they would have the gall to knowingly acknowledge that more young people will be harmed, but focus on exempting businesses," said Marcy Goldstein-Gelb, co-executive director of the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health. In the past two years, even as federal officials and news investigations suggest that many minors working in manufacturing, meatpacking and construction jobs are being exploited or hurt.

But opponents say the bills, backed by business groups, are an attempt to roll back crucial child labor protections that are nearly a century old. Many adults lament the trend, perhaps because they fondly remember their teenage jobs scooping ice cream, waiting tables or working the cash register.

But in a report released last month, the Economic Policy Institute argues that the decline in teenage employment is a positive development, because it largely reflects the fact that more teenagers are staying in school. Of the 16- to 19-year-olds who said they were not working in 2021, 58.1% said it was because they were in school – up 21 percentage points compared with 2001.

“Putting off work in order to obtain more skills and education is a positive trend – for both individuals and the economy – not one that should be slowed or reversed,” the report states.

“Attempts to weaken state-level child labor standards are part of a coordinated campaign backed by industry groups intent on eventually diluting federal standards that cover the whole country,” the report says.

Debbie Berkowitz, a former federal and union worker-safety official who is now a fellow at the Kalmanovich Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor at Georgetown University, said that for decades, policymakers generally have agreed on the need to protect minors in the workplace. Recently, though, she has seen a “pretty pronounced” shift in the states. This is a push by certain industries to see if they can get away with hiring children so they can pay them less and disguise it as job training,” she said. “These entry-level jobs provide little in terms of skills.”

Berkowitz said there is a place for true apprenticeship programs and opportunities for minors to work in safe environments, but certain dangerous industries should be off-limits for children. She added that government workplace-safety regulators at the state and federal level are vastly underfunded, leaving most workplaces unchecked until a major injury or death occurs. “There are certain low-road industries that are going to cut down on labor costs where they can,” she said.

Child Labor Violations increase:

The state-level push to loosen rules comes amid an increase in the number of child labor violations tracked by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Last year, there were 835 child labor violation cases involving 3,876 children. The number of minors illegally employed in fiscal 2022 was 37%

The One major case concluded in February when Packers Sanitation

Services Inc., one of the nation's largest cleaning services for meatpacking plants, paid \$1.5 million in civil penalties after the Department of Labor found that it had employed at least 102 children in hazardous jobs in eight states, including Arkansas, Minnesota and Tennessee. Agency investigators found that the company had children ages 13 to 17 working overnight shifts performing such jobs as using caustic chemicals to clean razor-sharp saws. Last summer, Reuters revealed that children as young as 12 many of whom were migrants were hired to work in a metal shop owned by Hyundai.

A 16-year-old boy from Guatemala died as a result of an on-the-job accident at a poultry plant in Mississippi. It happened at about 8 p.m. on July 14, 2023, at the Mar-Jac Poultry plant in Hattiesburg, Forrest County deputy coroner Lisa Klem said. Workers under the age of 18 are not allowed to work in poultry plants because it's deemed to be too dangerous and therefore a violation of child labor laws. The [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#) and the Labor Department's Wage and Hour Division have launched investigations into the incident, a spokesperson said. Any company found to be in violation could face a federal fine of more than \$30,000 per incident. In 2015 the low point in the data the Wage and Hour Division found 1,012 minors employed in violation of child labor laws, with an average of 1.9 per case. In 2022, that number more than tripled to 3,876, averaging 4.6 per case.

Illinois allows children as young as 12 and 13 to work only on farms and with the parent's consent. Kids 14 and 15 can have jobs that are officially not hazardous, not manufacturing, and not mining. For kids 16 and 17, those last two restrictions are dropped. But they still can't do hazardous work. An official "employment certificate" is required to legally employ anyone under 16. It's issued by the local school superintendent, and requires an application signed by a parent or guardian. Employer and parent each get a copy of the issued certificate. Caterpillar has a program for high school students to shadow jobs and experience the job environment so when they graduate, they could choose to work at Caterpillar.

None of these labor law changes will correct the issue of high turnaround in the labor market. I have witnessed this myself in my own building.

Management has been overly aggressive about pushing all the liability and risk on the employee. Through dishonest and unethical means, new workers do not want to work under that punishment and are leaving. I hear Management say, "No one wants to work anymore". Especially not under constant hypocrisy from management. UAW members can ask for a Union steward or a Union representative if they feel that a contract violation has occurred. Or you have been put in an unsafe situation and your supervisor is not taking your request seriously, call for a UAW safety Representative. Now if your supervisor says you don't need a representative and he or she just doesn't get you one, ask him 3 times to document it and if you know who your stewards are, inform them of the issue. If you don't know who your steward is call the Union Hall 309/694-3151 ask for Bobby Koller. Please do not get on social media and complain that you asked for a representative **one time** and your representative does not care. Caterpillar management doesn't take your right to representation seriously but given the opportunity, as from my own experience as a UAW steward and Safety Representative, **WE DO CARE.**

Hope everyone had a good LABOR DAY weekend!