

**NATIONAL CHILD LABOR
COMMITTEE; CHILD LABOR AND
SOCIAL PROGRESS: PROCEEDINGS
OF THE FOURTH ANNUAL MEETING,
ATLANTA, GEORGIA, APRIL 2-5, 1908**

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National Child Labor Committee

105 EAST 22D STREET
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Committee.

THE BASIS OF THE ANTI-CHILD LABOR MOVEMENT IN THE IDEA OF AMERICAN CIVILIZATION

BY FELIX ADLER, PH. D.,
Chairman of the National Child Labor Committee.

The National Committee holds at this time its first public conference in the Southern States. Let me, therefore, as its chairman, succinctly indicate its scope and purpose. The first point to bear in mind is, that the committee does not propose to supplant, but to supplement, the state and local committees; it does not intrude on the province of these committees. It stands ready to give aid and advice, when invited to do so. It has, as a matter of fact, stimulated the establishment of state and local organizations, where previously such organizations had not existed. Again, it is conducting important investigations, which would be beyond the power of the local committees.

The National Committee is a kind of steering committee. It keeps steadily in view the fact that our country is passing more and more from agricultural into industrial conditions; and it seeks to prevent the recurrence of the evils incidental to incipient industrialism.

I have said that the Child Labor Committee is national, not only in name but in scope and purpose. I make this assertion because all sections of our country are represented in it, because it deals with a problem common to almost all the states, but chiefly because this Committee is attempting to eradicate from among our people a practice which is uncongenial to American civilization. My object, in the brief time at my disposal, will be to indicate the deeper foundations on which the attempt to abolish child labor rests. That foundation is, in a word, the inconsistency of child labor with Americanism, with the ideas by which American civilization is characterized. American civilization is characterized by the spirit of fair play. It is not fair for the strong to take advantage of the weak. It is not fair for the adult to put the heavy burdens which he ought to bear on the weak shoulders of a child.

American civilization is characterized by compassionateness to-

ward human suffering. Nowhere in the world, when that chord is touched, is the response so prompt. It does not comport with American civilization to behold without indignant pity the spectacle of the sufferings of little children. I mean the sufferings caused by forced and unnatural extension of the hours of wakefulness; the sufferings caused by deprivation of time and opportunity for play; the sufferings caused by the physical, mental, and moral deterioration which is the well-nigh inevitable consequence of premature toil.

But American civilization is characterized at bottom by a still more distinctive trait, and upon this I wish to dwell with all the emphasis at my command. Every civilization has, so to speak, its keynote, its *leit motif*, its dominant principle. Practices which are tolerable, even justifiable, in one civilization, are intolerable and unjustifiable in another, because in the one case the dominant principle permits and agrees with such practices, and in the other case the dominant principle does not. Thus, for instance, polygamy is perfectly tolerable in Mohammedan countries, because polygamy is in harmony with the dominant principle of Mohammedanism. The type of civilization worked out under the Koran is founded on the worship of power, God himself being regarded primarily as the omnipotent, and hence it has been natural for the follower of Islam to assert the rightful preeminence of the more powerful of the two sexes, and to maintain a form of the marriage relation altogether based on the supposed superiority of man and inferiority of woman. But polygamy in Utah is intolerable and unjustifiable; not for abstract reasons, but because it is uncongenial to American civilization, for American civilization has for its dominant principle the moral equality of all human beings, both of men as compared with men, and of woman as compared with man.

And on precisely the same grounds we assert that child labor is intolerable and unjustifiable, namely, because it is contradictory to the dominant principle, the fundamental idea of the civilization which is being developed on this continent. That dominant principle is the moral equality of all human beings, the right of each human being to freely develop and even when necessary to be assisted in developing whatever gifts of mind, whatever talent, whatever potentialities Nature has given him. To cut off development, therefore, from the American point of view, is the

great sin. To impose heavy weights which are bound to check physical growth, and by preventing education in the years when the intellect and the character are formative, to stunt mental and moral growth, that is the unpardonable offense.

Lincoln said in an address which he delivered in 1859: "There are more mines above the earth's surface than below it." What he meant was, that the mental and moral nature of the mass of men is a precious mine. We shall find plenty of gold in it if only we look for it. To bring this gold to the surface, is to contribute in the truest sense to the national welfare and well being.

I think that those who commit the offense against the child are hypnotized by greed; I think that it is the duty of the community to deliver them from such obsession, and to bring home to them the sense of their responsibility. No one should lay profane hands upon a sacred thing, and what is more sacred than the life of a child, and the hope for humanity that lies in every child? In spoiling the child, we spoil the generation that is to come after us. In laying the burden of premature labor upon the young, we deprive the Republic of the citizenship to which it is entitled.

Before the jury of the American people we plead for the child, and before you as a part of that jury. Need we have any apprehension as to the verdict you will return? Those of you who are strong men will side with us against taking advantage of the weak. Those of you who are parents, imagining for a moment your own children as taking the place of those who are at work in the mills, will cry out with horror and indignation at the practice, and will join us in the effort to save the little ones. Those of you who continue to believe in the great principles to which this country is dedicated, the equality of men and the progress of mankind, will join us in condemning a system that is fraught with inequality and incompatible with progress. All of you, I make bold to believe, will unite with us in saying that the shield of the state must be held over the child to protect it, and that the iniquity of child labor must cease, wherever in this broad land it now exists. The genius of American civilization condemns it. Americans, mindful of their heritage, will unite to abolish it.