

Death of 14-year-old on the job highlights growth of child labor in Canada

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A 14-year-old boy lost his life June 15 in a workplace accident at Atelier PJB in Saint-Martin, a village 125 km south of Quebec City. The young worker was crushed by his forklift truck when it overturned. The minimum legal age to drive such a machine in Quebec is 16. Terrible as it was, this event—which highlighted the growth of child labor in Quebec and across Canada—is not an isolated case.

In fact, the accident was only the latest in a series in which very young workers have been seriously injured or killed. Last year, a 13-year-old was dragged by a conveyor belt at Bardobec, a cedar wood manufacturing company in Saint-Just-de-Bretenières, a city in southeastern Quebec. The young boy escaped with his life, but suffered a punctured lung, broken ribs and third-degree burns. In another 2019 case, a 17-year-old from Alma, Quebec died after being crushed by a 3,000 kg concrete panel just two weeks after starting work at Béton Préfabriqué du Lac.

These tragic events underscore that young people who work are not just doing “odd jobs” like mowing their neighbour’s lawn. Often, they are performing “adult jobs” with all the responsibilities and risks that come with them. This finds expression in the large numbers of injuries suffered by young people in various industries. Just in 2017, 2,656 young people under the age of 19 were involved in a workplace accident in Quebec.

The situation is particularly serious in the agricultural sector. Children are often involved in farm work at a very young age, even as young as 7 or 8 years old, and they are quickly tasked with driving large and powerful machinery, leading to injuries and deaths.

As evidenced by the employment statistics for high school youth, the ruling class is increasingly using teenage labor. According to data from the *Centre d’*

étude des conditions de vie et des besoins de la population (Center for the Study of the Living Conditions and Needs of the Population), one out of every two high school students (aged 12 to 17) in Quebec works during their studies, an increase of 10 percent in just 6 years. Even among those in junior high aged 12 to 13, 46 percent have a paid job during the school year.

While the proportion of employed high school students is around 36 percent in the Montreal metropolitan area, this figure skyrockets outside of Quebec’s major urban centers. In Abitibi-Témiscamingue, two-thirds of young people have to balance work with high school study, while in five other Quebec regions the number of youth who are working while studying is close to or exceeds 70 percent.

There is no minimum age for working under Quebec law, but parental authorization is required until the age of 14. While some restrictions prohibit working at night, during school hours, or activity that is harmful to a young person’s health before the age of 16, these standards remain largely on paper.

Quebec is the province with the highest student employment rates, and one of the most legally flexible. But the rest of Canada is not far behind. In fact, more than half of Canada’s ten provinces do not have a minimum working age. Even in those that do, a waiver can be obtained if parental permission is provided. While some provinces have formal restrictions (on allowable hours in Quebec or types of employment in Nova Scotia), others such as British Columbia and Alberta allow the exploitation of youth in dangerous environments as young as 12 years of age.

As part of a gamut of anti-worker measures, Alberta’s United Conservative Party introduced

legislation (Bill 32) earlier this month that will make it legal to employ 13- and 14-year-olds without their parent's permission.

Across Canada, many businesses rely on a minimum-wage workforce largely made up of young people to remain "competitive" and rack up large profits. For some large companies, such as McDonald's or Tim Hortons, teenagers and young adults represent more than 50 percent of their workforce.

Child labor, which is far from being a thing of the past, has historically been condemned and opposed by the working class for several reasons.

Child labour can exact long-term physical and psychological consequences on an immature human body. Also, young people are particularly vulnerable to occupational accidents. Generally they are employed to do "regular" work, with little to no supervision and preventive measures. This puts them at greater risk than adults, since they lack experience and training, and tend to be ignorant of potential dangers.

Employers also pressure teenagers to work more hours, which can have long-term consequences on their learning. Employers take advantage of young people's fear of losing their jobs to put more and more demands on them. Since the government monitoring system operates on the basis of complaints rather than inspections, such abuses are only detected where there is an industrial accident or when they are just too blatant.

Working at a young age also hinders the ability to access higher education, in particular limited-enrollment programs. It is recognized that when youth work more than 15 hours per week, their school performance drops markedly. In addition to causing burnout in children and teenagers, work accentuates the school drop-out rate. Sometimes employers who want their young workers to work full-time encourage them to abandon their studies.

Child labor only underscores the extent of the social crisis across Canada. Children do not work for fun but to meet basic needs, such as helping to cover family expenses. According to Campaign 2000, 1.35 million children live in poverty, or nearly 19 percent of the country's children. The use of food banks has increased in recent decades. In Beauce, the region where St. Martin is located and the June 15 tragedy

occurred, foodbank use increased by 500 percent between 2006 and 2018. This crisis has been further exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

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