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# Women and the Anti-Child Labor Movement in Illinois, 1890–1920

Lynn Gordon

*Chicago, Illinois*

Industrialization, urbanization, and immigration brought problems as well as benefits to Americans living around the turn of the century. People were especially alarmed by the pressures on family life, and what they saw as its disintegration. Yet profound mistrust existed between labor and business, rich and poor, upper and working classes, so that attempts to help families never led anywhere. A very special group of women, college educated and seeking meaningful work, drew together other women from all levels of society, formed child welfare organizations, proposed legislation, and lobbied for its passage. Regulation of child labor became their most important project. Between 1890 and 1903, three major laws were passed to limit the kinds of work children could do, and a State Department of Factory Inspection was set up to watch over young employees.

Passed between 1893 and 1903, Illinois's major child-labor laws were largely due to the pressure and skill of women reformers. As early as the 1870s, organized labor, business leaders, and the press worried publicly about child labor, but they failed to form an effective coalition or develop concrete proposals to deal with the problem. Two decades later, led by Hull House, the women succeeded in both respects.

Hull House residents Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, and others skillfully circumvented class conflicts, persuading working-, middle-, and upper-class women to join organizations that formed a child welfare movement. Working together in the National Woman's Trade Union League, the Chicago Women's Club, the National Congress of Mothers, the Illinois Child Labor Committee, and the Consumers' League, women publicized the problems of children, and enlisted support from male legislators, school officials, and judges for the regulation of child labor.

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Reformers proposed a whole battery of laws to get children out of factories and into schools, provide them with recreational areas, and set up vocational education programs. They also saw workmen's compensation and mothers' pensions as ways of benefiting children. Making the future of America the basis of their appeal, they said the United States needed healthy, well-educated citizens prepared to take their places in the urban, industrial order. Thus the proper socialization of all children, and especially immigrants, was an urgent national priority.

## 1870–90: Recognition of a Problem

In 1873, Chicago's largest daily, the *Tribune*, lamented: "We are getting to be a community of strangers. No one expects to know . . . half the audience at the church or theatre, and as to knowing one's neighbors, that has become a lost art."<sup>1</sup> Certainly the years 1870–90 saw rapid changes in the city. The population increased 268 percent, with 77.9 percent of foreign parentage. Before the 1870s immigrants came from western and northern Europe; the new arrivals were southern Italians, Poles, Bohemians, Croatians, Slovaks, Lithuanians, and Greeks. The black population doubled. All groups faced overcrowding and housing shortages.<sup>2</sup> These physical changes plus rapid industrialization and periodic depressions led to social tensions, strikes, and violence culminating in the 1886 Haymarket Riot and the 1894 Pullman strike. The middle and upper classes identified all workers with strikers, calling them dangerous radicals and anarchists. In turn, native and foreign-born laboring people developed a profound mistrust of the "establishment." Thus when Chicago's trade unionists called for the regulation of child labor, other groups acknowledged the problem but refused to support their call for legislation.

In 1879 Thomas Morgan of the Chicago Trades and Labor Assembly (later the Chicago Federation of Labor) appeared with other union leaders before the Illinois House of Representatives Special Committee on Labor to ask for compulsory education laws and prohibition of wage labor by children under fourteen. They argued that child labor depressed wages, took jobs away from adults, deprived young people of educational opportunities, menaced their health, and fostered juvenile delinquency.<sup>3</sup>

Morgan and his wife Elizabeth, both officers of the Trades and Labor Assembly, were British socialists who had come to America in the 1870s. They led the labor unions' fight against child labor. The *Chicago Evening Post* said of Elizabeth Morgan: "The child labor and

sweating system have been the study of her life, and when a Congressional Committee came to Chicago to investigate sweaters, she was the only representative of labor who appeared before it."<sup>4</sup> The Morgans found, however, that they could not solve the problem of child labor solely with union support.

Middle- and upper-class attitudes toward female child labor may be found in a series of articles in the *Chicago Times*. Published in the summer of 1888, they were advertised as: "Life among the Slave Girls of Chicago. Let Romance Rest—Give Truth a Hearing. No need to draw upon the imagination nor to indulge in fiction. A dreadful, damnable reality is presented to this community. European methods introduced developing and expanding here, whereby the marrow is ground out of the bones, the virtue out of the souls and the souls out of the bodies of the miserable, ill-fed, half-starved, underpaid, insulted, roughly-treated and unprotected working girls."<sup>5</sup>

The girls' lot was pictured graphically if too dramatically by reporter "Nell Nelson" who worked for a time in Chicago's sweatshops. The *Times* concluded that female child labor menaced the American family: "but worse than broken shoes, ragged clothes, filthy closets, poor light, etc, was the cruel treatment . . . robberies of a gentle life . . . murder forever the sweet faith that belongs to woman's nature."<sup>6</sup>

Prominent businessmen quoted by the newspaper agreed. One executive said that factory girls only worked for "pin money" and that their parents could well afford to keep them in school. What would become of the working class if the women labored in factories instead of learning to make leftovers of a veal roast and to darn socks?<sup>7</sup>

The articles, and the many "Letters to the Editor" inspired by the series, showed no awareness that financial necessity caused young girls to work. Readers' solutions to the child labor problem called for domestic science courses to make school more meaningful, and placement of the girls as maids in wealthy families. They admitted that servants had little free time, low social status, and small wages, but still felt service was more educative and respectable for a future homemaker than factory work.<sup>8</sup>

The only letter writer recommending legislation to improve working conditions and limit child labor was John Peter Altgeld, reformer and future Illinois governor. His comments prefigured the ideas of Progressive reformers in the mid-1890s: "While legislation not backed by public sentiment may be a dead letter, public sentiment produces definite and lasting results only through legislation. Moral suasion and the benign influence of religion are beautiful, but unfortunately in all ages there have been men who went straight from the sanctuary into the world, and plundered and trampled on the weak, and, what is more, they lost neither their seats nor their influence in the temple. So that after all it is legislation that protects the lowly."<sup>9</sup>

The new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe had a bad image for encouraging child labor, yet the foreign language press consistently opposed it. *L'Italia* condemned the "inhuman practice indulged in by some of our compatriots" of sending ten-year-old boys onto the streets to shine shoes. The youths often picked their clients' pockets to make enough money to satisfy their employers. The latter, said *L'Italia*, were "brutal, ignorant, uneducated Beasts."<sup>10</sup> Other newspapers complained that child labor harmed the immigrants' image with native Americans.<sup>11</sup>

A public consensus existed, then, that child labor harmed not only young people but the larger society. Only trade unionists, however, wanted corrective legislation, and they lacked broad-based support and skilled lobbying techniques to get it.<sup>12</sup> The middle and upper classes approached the problem with condescension, lack of understanding, and fears about any social legislation proposed by workers. Only the efforts of the remarkable Hull House women brought these groups together for successful social action.

## The Women of Hull House<sup>13</sup>

Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr inaugurated an era of social action in Illinois with the 1889 founding of Hull House. Leading residents at the social settlement included Florence Kelley, Julia Lathrop, Sophonisba Breckinridge, Grace and Edith Abbott, and Dr. Alice Hamilton. Through their efforts, and with the patronage of wealthy society, Hull House became a neighborhood cultural center and an international gathering place for planning social reform.

Each resident worked on projects to benefit children and family life. Florence Kelley was most prominent in the drive to regulate child labor. Julia Lathrop, instrumental in setting up the juvenile court system in Illinois, became the first chief of the U.S. Children's Bureau. Grace Abbott supported birth registration to facilitate the carrying out of compulsory education laws and administered enforcement of the first federal child labor statute (1916) for the Children's Bureau. Sophonisba Breckinridge and Edith Abbott collaborated on social science studies of women, the family, and employment. Jane Addams did everything and inspired everyone.

The Hull House residents fit Richard Hofstadter's profile of early twentieth-century reformers: native Protestants from locally prominent families who feared erosion of their status by new groups in American life.<sup>14</sup> We must add to this picture, however, if we hope to understand the Hull House women. They came from small towns and

families with a reform tradition. All had unusually close relationships with fathers who inspired them to care for worlds beyond the household. They had attended college and faced serious conflicts choosing careers upon graduation. These additional data provide insights into their interest in a child welfare movement.

Florence Kelley grew up in Philadelphia, but the others were not raised in large, urban areas. The Abbott sisters were brought up in Grand Island, Nebraska; Sophonisba Breckinridge lived in Lexington, Kentucky, and the Lathrop and Addams families were from Rockford and Cedarville, Illinois. The lure of the big city drew them all to Chicago, but they brought with them the celebrated rural values of neighborliness and visiting, so important in the social settlement movement. Significantly, Kelley spent much less time going to meetings and acting as a local organizer than the rest. Primarily she conducted social investigations for the state and federal governments, and served as an officer in national welfare organizations.

The fathers of these women were active in public life, often for reformist causes. Many had Quaker ancestors. Othman Abbott was a lawyer, politician, and Civil War veteran. William Lathrop, also a lawyer, helped to start the Republican party in Illinois and served in both the state legislature and the United States Congress. The Breckinridges were a nationally distinguished family. Sophonisba was the great-granddaughter of John Breckinridge, Kentucky senator and attorney-general of the United States under Thomas Jefferson. A cousin, John C. Breckinridge, ran against Lincoln for the presidency in 1860. Her father, a Confederate colonel, was also a prominent local lawyer. Florence Kelley's father, nicknamed "Pig Iron" Kelley, fought in Congress for a protective tariff on metals, believing that it would guarantee high wages for workers and security for their families. His daughter absorbed his concern for the working class.<sup>15</sup>

In *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Jane Addams spoke of her father with the greatest respect, affection, and devotion. John Addams had been a friend of Abraham Lincoln, an Illinois legislator, and an important man in his town. He had opportunities to become senator or governor but, to his wife's disgust, declined. His daughter paid warm tribute to him in the following passage:

Of the many things written of my father in that sad August in 1881, when he died, the one I cared for most was written by an old political friend of his who was then editor of a great Chicago daily. He wrote that while there were doubtless many members of the Illinois legislature who during the great contracts of the wartime and the demoralizing reconstruction days that followed, had never accepted a bribe, he wished to bear testimony that he personally had known but this one man who had never been offered a bribe because bad men were instinctively afraid of him.<sup>16</sup>

In some cases the family's activist tradition extended to the female

members. Kelley's Quaker Aunt Sarah Pugh, an abolitionist, refused to use the products of slave labor, sugar and cotton, in her home. Julia Lathrop's mother Adeline, class valedictorian at Rockford Female Seminary, was a suffragist and local cultural leader, as was Elizabeth Abbott, mother of Grace and Edith. The Hull House women had close, inspirational relationships with their parents, especially their fathers, who encouraged them to study, discuss issues, and take an active interest in the world.

All the residents had been part of the first generation of American women to attend college in significant numbers. Florence Kelley went to Cornell University; Sophonisba Breckinridge to Wellesley; Julia Lathrop to Vassar; Jane Addams to Rockford Seminary; Edith Abbott to the University of Nebraska; and Grace Abbott to Grand Island College. The college experience was inspirational, intellectual, and communal. Jane Addams said that Rockford students were very conscious of their obligation to carry on the traditions of the pioneer missionaries who founded the seminary. The missionary fervor pervaded, although for many, like Addams, it was a secularized spirit.<sup>17</sup> She mentioned that one of the students' favorite quotations came from Thomas Carlyle: "'Tis not to taste sweet things but to do noble and true things that the poorest son of Adam dimly longs."<sup>18</sup>

Most of the future reformers spent their immediate postcollege years drifting, dissatisfied and frustrated, confronted with the classic dilemma of the educated woman. In the nineteenth century women chose between family and career; few combined the two. The traditional Victorian view of woman credited her with enormous moral and spiritual influence, but for the most part restricted this influence to her home. By inspiring her husband and children to be noble, patriotic, pure, religious, thrifty, and responsible in their contacts outside the home, she uplifted the social order. She was "the better half"—a bulwark against the crass materialism created by industrial and commercial opportunity. Most women accepted these ideas; even today some feminists think women are innately more sensitive, compassionate, and better suited to deal with people than are men.

Bryn Mawr's president Martha Carey Thomas rejected the "homebody's" role for women; she directed her students into academic and professional careers; many did not marry. Statistics from Wellesley, Smith, and Vassar for the late nineteenth century show that many of their graduates too did not become wives and mothers.<sup>19</sup>

For the Hull House group the choice was particularly difficult. Their families, including those previously supportive and encouraging fathers, expected them to use their education only in the home. The women themselves believed that mothers exercised the essential influence over their children and should not work. Florence Kelley argued that female teachers made poor models for young girls be-

cause they never performed little homely chores like making toast and cocoa in front of their students. She wanted required domestic science courses in the schools. Otherwise women would be tempted to work in factories instead of taking proper care of their families.<sup>20</sup>

Yet the pull of the outer "man world" was strong. Only Kelley of the Hull House group actually did marry and have children, and she was divorced when she began her social reform activities. Her three children lived with friends and relatives most of the time before they entered college. Kelley, Addams, Lathrop, and Breckinridge all studied law or medicine, attempting to become professionals. Jane Addams, however, developed an illness leading to collapse while attending medical school. Kelley was denied admission to the University of Pennsylvania law school because of her sex. Colonel Breckinridge wanted his daughter to uphold the family honor, but he didn't want her to be a lawyer. Only when she wept did he permit her to take the Kentucky bar exam. Not surprisingly, she never practiced law.

This period of doubt and despair following college demoralized all. Jane Addams, traveling in Europe and very unhappy, talked of seeing other young women from her social class caught endlessly in "the snare of preparation,"<sup>21</sup> and never accomplishing anything useful. Julia Lathrop worked as her father's secretary. By 1895 Sophonisba Breckinridge's family feared for her mental health.

By looking beyond the Hofstadter profile, then, it becomes clear how the social settlement movement grew from the needs of these women, as well as in response to social conditions. Settlement work for child welfare allowed them to use their knowledge, develop special professional skills, and yet be "feminine" because they worked on behalf of children and families. They could remain happily within their "sphere" because they extended it. Settlement life also satisfied desires for an intellectual, communal environment like college.<sup>22</sup>

Jane Addams felt and often said that settlement work benefited reformers far more than the people they tried to help.<sup>23</sup> Yet their services to society went far beyond self-serving individual acts of good will. By persuading disparate groups to work together to carry out a child welfare program they reassured Americans that social problems could be attacked and that the social order was reformable without revolution.

## Formation of a Reform Coalition

Reformers appreciated the benefits of industrialization but worried about the pressures of modern urban life on families, particularly

among the working classes and immigrant groups. The city offered children constant temptations to steal and to indulge in "adult" pleasures. Technological change made skills obsolete, putting people out of work perhaps permanently. The breadwinner had no financial protection against accident, and his family received little if he died. Lack of income often forced women and children into factories. When children worked, they often developed health problems, and their lack of education meant trouble for future generations of Americans. Immigrant children frequently lacked respect for parental authority because their mothers and fathers weren't "American" enough. Jane Addams concluded: "The family has been called the 'fountain of morality,' the source of law, the necessary prelude to the state itself; but while it is continuous historically, this dual bond must be made anew a myriad times in each generation, and the forces upon which its formation depend must be powerful and unerring. It would be too great a risk to leave it to a force whose manifestations are intermittent and uncertain. The desired result is too grave and fundamental."<sup>24</sup>

Reformers who wished to strengthen the family focused on the child, key to the future. To allow him to be abused or neglected was not merely a personal injustice but endangered the future of the country. The Republic needed self-governing, enlightened, healthy citizens. If the family cannot raise children properly, the state and the schools must step in. Advocates of social legislation carefully pointed out that the dollar cost of social action was not large compared to what could eventually become a dreadful burden on society.

The human product of our industry is an army of toiling children under-sized, rachitic, deformed, predisposed to consumption if not already tuberculous. Permanently enfeebled by the labor imposed upon them during the critical years of development, these children will inevitably fail in the early years of manhood and womanhood. They are now a long way on the road to become suffering burdens upon society, lifelong victims of the poverty of their childhood and the greed which denies to children the sacred right of school life and healthful leisure.<sup>25</sup>

How much better it would be, said child welfare proponents, to spend the money now to enforce compulsory education and child labor laws, give scholarships to children so they could attend school, provide parks and playgrounds for innocent amusements, set up vocational education courses in the schools, and compensate injured workers so that mothers could stay home and properly raise their children.

The Hull House residents believed that "the people" should work together against "the bad guys." Jane Addams disliked organized philanthropy because it did not promote social change but represented only the vague good wishes of the upper classes. She praised

social reform plans by trade unionists as moral because they represented united class action, and she urged the middle and upper classes to join in.

An exaggerated personal morality is often mistaken for a social morality. . . . A man who takes the betterment of humanity for his aim and end must also take the daily experiences of humanity for the constant correction of his process. He must not only test and guide his achievement by human experience but he must succeed or fail in proportion as he has incorporated that experience with his own. . . . It is necessary to know of the lives of our contemporaries, not only in order to believe in their integrity, which is after all but the first beginnings of social morality, but in order to attain to any mental or moral integrity for ourselves or any such hope for society.<sup>26</sup>

Nothing pleased Addams more than the use of social settlements as neighborhood centers. *Twenty Years at Hull House* contains many descriptions of people working together. Italian-Americans entertained Irish-Americans at a successful party.<sup>27</sup> Business and working men held conferences, which Addams said might have prevented Haymarket had they been undertaken earlier. She complained that people did not realize that the settlement house stood neither for capital nor for labor, but for cooperation.<sup>28</sup>

Florence Kelley became a socialist in Europe in the 1880s and worked with the Socialist party in New York City. In *Modern Industry* she stated that the only real solution to industrial problems was cooperative ownership of the means of production.<sup>29</sup> Yet her activities spoke far more of the conciliatory reformer than the doctrinaire radical. She said that Europeans never understood her brand of "American" socialism,<sup>30</sup> though she herself did not explain it. Her socialist comrades kicked her out of the New York party, and she never worked with them again. Perhaps Kelley failed as a radical because she tried to reconcile class differences instead of seeing them as inevitable.

The Hull House residents, then, believing that coalition was a moral imperative, as well as a practical necessity for passing legislation, became the links between upper-class high society women and female labor leaders. Reformers joined the most exclusive Chicago women's clubs and labor organizations as well. Upper- and working-class women, following their example, became members of each other's groups and formed new ones together, like the National Woman's Trade Union League (NWTUL). Some of the women drawn together and into social action by the settlement workers became outstanding figures in their own right.

Agnes Nestor, a leader in the female gloveworkers' union, described a Hull House meeting in support of striking stockyard workers in her autobiography. She joined the NWTUL, noting that it was an organization "begun at the top." Yet she praised the "social justice,

unselfishness, great vision, and high courage" of reformers Jane Addams and Mary Eliza McDowell.<sup>31</sup> Nestor worked with Ellen Henrotin, Sophonisba Breckinridge, and Edith Abbott on legislative proposals for compulsory education, an eight-hour day for women, and regulation of child labor. She also served on a committee to advise the federal government on the administration of the Smith-Hughes Act promoting vocational education.

Margaret Dreier Robins came from a wealthy New York family. She and her husband Raymond, both social workers, moved to Chicago and lived for a time at Hull House. As the frequent president of the NWTUL, she joined working-class women in social action programs.<sup>32</sup>

Margaret Angela Haley grew up on a farm in Joliet, Illinois. She taught in rural schools and studied for one semester with Francis Parker at the Cook County Normal School before becoming a Chicago public school teacher. In 1901 Haley began a thirty-year career as the business agent and president of the Chicago Teachers' Federation. Her organization belonged to the Chicago Federation of Labor from 1902 to 1917, and she herself joined the NWTUL. Haley supported child labor legislation, laws to improve women's working conditions, direct primaries, and women's suffrage and fought against sexist policies of the National Education Association.

Ellen Martin Henrotin was president of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, wife of a Chicago bank president, and author of *The Social Status of European and American Women* (1887). Women's clubs had been founded as middle- and upper-class cultural organizations, but leaders like Henrotin pushed them into reform programs by persuading the membership that working women and children needed their help. By the turn of the century most women's clubs had "Industrial Committees" to draft and lobby for social legislation. When the Chicago Woman's Club sent delegates to NWTUL meetings, Agnes Nestor commented: "Only now can we appreciate the distance we have come."<sup>33</sup>

Alzina Stevens, a printer and typesetter, became active in women's labor groups in the 1880s. She organized for the Knights of Labor in Ohio and attended the 1892 Populist party convention. Stevens came to Chicago in 1892 and moved into Hull House. Critical of those with a sentimental attachment to labor, she nevertheless worked very well and closely with the reformers. Florence Kelley appointed her assistant factory inspector in 1893. She lobbied for a stronger child labor law and for compulsory education. In 1899, just before her death, she became the first probation officer of the Cook County Juvenile Court.

Wealthy and socially prominent Louise DeKoven Bowen turned down Jane Addams's request in 1891 that she serve as president of the Hull House Women's Club. Pleading pregnancy, she sent Addams

a check instead, saying that she feared "Miss Addams would think her a useless member of society."<sup>34</sup> Later Bowen became Hull House's most devoted supporter, contributing her time and money generously until her death in 1954. Bowen was also vice-president of United Charities and a leader in the woman's suffrage movement. Most important, she formed and presided over the Juvenile Protective Association, an umbrella organization for many child welfare projects.

Led by these women, and staffed by lesser-known volunteers, reform groups mounted effective campaigns to get legislation benefiting children. The story of the movement to regulate child labor in Illinois shows the successful operation of the coalition.

## The Coalition in Operation: 1893–1903

The Hull House reformers, led by Florence Kelley and Jane Addams, used this women's coalition to push for child labor legislation. In 1892 Kelley suggested an investigation of the sweating system and child labor in Chicago to the Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics. She and Elizabeth Morgan undertook this job, along with a study of Chicago's slums, for the federal government. Their reports showed a preponderance of women and children in the garment trade; only 25 percent of the workers were male adults.<sup>35</sup>

After hearing the evidence, the 1893 Illinois legislature appointed its own committee to make a personal investigation. Fearful that this was intended as a gesture to pacify labor and provide legislators with a junket to the big city, Kelley and Morgan took charge of the committee and led the men on a tour of the sweatshops. A Chicago newspaper reported that a senator actually refused to enter one workplace, lest he take germs home to his children.<sup>36</sup>

As a result of the committee's report, the Illinois Senate proposed a bill to regulate child labor. Jane Addams described the lobbying efforts of reformers on behalf of the bill: "Before the passage of the law could be secured, it was necessary to appeal to all elements of the community, and a little group of us addressed the open meetings of trade unions and benefit societies, church organizations, and social clubs nearly every evening for three months. Of course the most energetic help as well as intelligent understanding came from the trades-unions."<sup>37</sup> She also asked Ellen Henrotin and the General Federation of Women's Clubs for assistance: "We insisted that well-known Chicago women should accompany this first little group of Settlement folk who with trades-unionists moved upon the state capitol in support of factory legislation."<sup>38</sup>

Thus the skills of reformers in gathering information and people together, the power of labor, the prestige of prominent Chicago women, and the support of Governor Altgeld secured practically unanimous passage of the State Factory Inspection Bill of 1893 (108 to six in the House, forty to zero in the Senate).<sup>39</sup>

The law stated that: (1) no child under fourteen could work in any factory, workshop, or manufacturing establishment; (2) children fourteen–sixteen seeking employment needed an affidavit of age from a parent or guardian; (3) employers were required to keep a file of affidavits and a posted list of all employees aged fourteen–sixteen (called a wall register); (4) state factory inspectors could demand a physical fitness certificate from any working child who appeared unwell; (5) females and children could not work more than eight hours a day, or forty-eight hours a week; (6) a state department of factory inspection consisting of a chief, a deputy, and ten assistant inspectors would enforce the new law.

There was no organized, sustained, articulate opposition to the 1893 law, or to the two that followed in 1897 and 1903. Businessmen founded the Illinois Manufacturers' Association (IMA) in 1894 to oppose the eight-hour day for women, not the regulation of sweatshop conditions and child labor. Examination of extant IMA records shows that its officers often urged the membership to block proposed labor legislation, but never when it concerned child workers.<sup>40</sup> Florence Kelley said that the IMA wrote secret letters to individual businessmen saying that the law was unconstitutional and offering support to those who broke it, but no evidence exists to substantiate her claim.<sup>41</sup> Many businessmen actively supported child welfare laws, and those who did not would probably not have argued against them publicly. During the Progressive Era, child welfare legislation became so popular that opposition was almost unpatriotic. Then too, many industries no longer employed children, and their use continued to decline.<sup>42</sup>

Two groups of manufacturers resisted enforcement, if not passage, of the new statute. The garment sweaters, who employed the largest numbers of children, consistently broke the law. Inspectors complained that the fly-by-night nature of sweatshop operations made it impossible to police them. Shut down in one location for repeated violations of the law, they opened next day in another.<sup>43</sup> They never formed a block against reforms, but counted on quietly evading the law. The small size of the inspection staff helped sweaters get away with this. The glass manufacturers broke the law and openly opposed further legislation. They used child labor extensively and were powerful enough to effect Florence Kelley's dismissal as chief factory inspector in 1896.<sup>44</sup>

Parents, especially immigrant parents, often resisted enforcement of the child labor laws. They were the despair of reformers who never

understood that resistance to schooling came from a desire to keep children close to “old country” values and from a lack of understanding about the value of education in America. Often immigrant parents did not realize that the work in an American factory differed from the work children performed in Europe, such as picking oranges in the family grove.<sup>45</sup> Settlement workers often denied that children’s wages were an important source of family income and insisted that parents kept them out of school only from stubbornness, laziness, and stupidity.<sup>46</sup>

At the suggestion of Henry Demarest Lloyd, Governor Altgeld asked Florence Kelley to head the inspection department. She selected Alzina Stevens for her deputy, and ten others for assistant inspectors. They issued annual inspection reports for 1893–96 that have become classics in social welfare literature. The reports listed all inspections, violations, and results of court cases. Graphs, tables, and charts showed the extent of child labor in Illinois. The department was also responsible for health and safety inspections, but Kelley’s famous commentaries on the statistics always dealt with child labor.

She said that the affidavit system worked well: “Although some affidavits are undoubtedly false, hundreds of parents have withdrawn their children from work, rather than forswear themselves.”<sup>47</sup> She complained, however, that doctors issued fitness certificates with only cursory examinations of the children.<sup>48</sup> Kelley cited cases showing the bad effects of child labor on health and morals, and proving that child workers lacked education and preparation for adult life. Many working children, illiterate in English, drifted from one job to another without learning vocational skills. Teachers and principals failed to enforce compulsory education laws, expelled unruly students, and did not update their curriculum.<sup>49</sup>

Florence Kelley thought that fourteen–sixteen year olds should not work at all. Since employers continued to hire children in this age bracket despite the difficulties of the affidavit, health certificate, and wall register procedure, she recommended tougher legislation. Sixteen should be the minimum age for employment, English literacy required for any job, and night work for minors prohibited. All mercantile establishments, not just factories, should be under the law. She asked for more inspectors and for staff physicians to eliminate the department’s dependence on unethical doctors.<sup>50</sup> Kelley also wanted parents who swore to false affidavits punished for perjury, saying that the behavior of immigrant parents greedy for their children’s wages was “sordid.”<sup>51</sup>

The 1893–96 reports documented the battle of the State Department of Factory Inspection with the Illinois Glass Company. Glass manufacturers said they needed child labor. Inspectors told them either to use older children or make technological changes. Most fell

in line, but Illinois Glass, the largest firm, held out until Governor Altgeld ordered a special investigation of the Alton, Illinois, firm in 1895. Inspectors found no wall register, no affidavits, and a “defiant disposition” at Alton.<sup>52</sup> Adult workers at Illinois Glass said it was easier and safer to work with children over fourteen, but the company preferred younger boys because it could pay them less. Kelley said that town officials forced poor families to send their children to work in the glass factory, rather than giving them relief. Schools already too crowded to accommodate factory children had no plans for enlargement.<sup>53</sup> By 1896 the annual factory inspection report said that the Illinois Glass Company no longer employed children illegally, but the staff continued to watch the firm closely.

Bills incorporating Kelley’s recommendations were proposed but not passed by the legislature. In 1895, however, a Child Labor Commission was appointed, which asked the Chicago Civic Federation, part of the unofficial child welfare coalition, to write a new law. The Federation’s Industrial Committee, chaired by Deputy Inspector Stevens, investigated child labor in mercantile establishments. The report said that children who worked in department stores faced constant temptations to steal. A long working day meant that they returned home at hours when the streets were unsafe. Poverty, not greedy parents, was the cause of most child labor, but children’s wages were so low that they rarely contributed significantly to the family’s support. Children under fourteen should be removed by law from department stores and required to attend school. Such a law would also help adults by making more jobs available for them.<sup>54</sup>

A new child labor bill passed the 1897 General Assembly forty to one in the Senate, 120 to zero in the House.<sup>55</sup> This law put department stores, offices, and laundries under the provisions of the 1893 act. Hours for all working children were restricted to ten a day, sixty a week. Dangerous and “immoral” occupations (unspecified in the law) were prohibited to those under sixteen.

Florence Kelley was not able to enforce the new law. When John Tanner became governor in 1896, he assured the public that Kelley would retain her post. Yet to the indignation of the Chicago press, he replaced her with Louis Arrington, a resident of Alton and former employee of the Illinois Glass Company.<sup>56</sup> That ended Kelley’s active influence in Illinois. She moved to the Henry Street Settlement in New York City and continued to work against child labor as the secretary of the National Consumers’ League. The Illinois reform coalition, however, continued to press for further legislation.

Arrington’s factory inspection reports, 1897–1901, contained mostly statistics and little commentary. He did recommend taking the power to issue affidavits away from parents, requiring working places to improve sanitary conditions, requiring English literacy of working

children, regulating "street trades," and adding doctors to the inspection staff.<sup>57</sup> No legislation, however, passed during this period.

In 1901–2 Chief Inspector and reformer Edgar T. Davies investigated and condemned the affidavit system, saying that it encouraged parents to lie about their children's ages.<sup>58</sup> His report interested a number of child welfare organizations which set up the Cook County Child Saving League and proposed to regulate child labor further and send young workers to school. Members of the league included Edwin G. Cooley, superintendent of Chicago schools; Hastings H. Hart, president of the Child's Home and Aid Society; E. P. Bicknell, general superintendent of the Chicago Bureau of Charities; Jane Addams; Harriett Van der Vaart, head of Neighborhood House Settlement and member of the Industrial Committee of the State Federation of Women's Clubs; Judge R. S. Tuttle, Juvenile Court of Cook County; George Thompson, legislative committee of the Illinois Federation of Labor; T. D. Hurley, president of the Visitation and Aid Society; W. L. Bodine, ex-officio superintendent of compulsory education; and Davies as chairman.<sup>59</sup>

The league's bill eliminated the old affidavit system. Instead, children wishing to work needed a statement of age and classroom attendance from school authorities. Working hours were again reduced to eight a day, forty-eight a week, and night hours (during which work by children was prohibited) were extended. Reformer Charles Chute said that if the proposed law passed the legislature, Illinois would have "one of the best bodies of protective legislation for children to be found at that time in any State."<sup>60</sup> The bill disappointed Davies, though, who had wanted English literacy required for a work permit.<sup>61</sup>

The determined opposition of the glass manufacturers made a great deal of lobbying necessary for the 1903 bill to pass. Representatives from charitable organizations, settlement houses, the Illinois State Federation of Labor, and juvenile reform groups went to Springfield to debate the glass industry before the House Committee on Labor and Industrial Affairs. No record of the debates has survived, but Margaret Haley commented on them in her unpublished autobiography. She reported her argument with Mr. Levis of Illinois Glass. Levis said that boys in school learned nothing that would help them in the working world, whereas factory work trained them for jobs. Agreeing that the schools' curriculum needed revision, Haley maintained that child workers changed jobs so often they failed to learn skills. Also, they did such menial work that when technological change eliminated their jobs, children were left with no training to earn their living.<sup>62</sup>

The bill passed eighty-five to one in the House and thirty-eight to zero in the Senate.<sup>63</sup> Davies called Jane Addams the "moral force"

behind the new law, and praised her assistance in setting up the revised affidavit procedures in the schools.<sup>64</sup>

## The Decline of Reform: 1904–17

Although the separate elements of the reform coalition increased their influence after 1903, the 1903 law was the last major child labor statute of the Progressive Era in Illinois. Yet not only the influence but the visibility of the coalition had widened.

The Chicago and Illinois Federations of Labor consistently supported child labor reform and became more powerful and effective between 1903 and 1917. The State Federation in particular benefited from the swift, nationwide expansion of the American labor movement, the purging from its ranks of “undesirable radicals,” successful legislative efforts, and the affiliation of Illinois coal miners.<sup>65</sup> In 1906 the State Federation and the NWTUL unofficially joined forces. Agnes Nestor, Mary Eliza McDowell, Jane Addams, and Ellen Henrotin pushed the ISFL to support bills aiding women and child workers.<sup>66</sup> Labor’s lobbying techniques also improved. In 1913 unions set up a permanent Joint Labor Legislation Board in Springfield. Reformers looked to the board for assistance. In 1916, Barney Cohen, former ISFL president, became chief state factory inspector.

Reformers also received help from newly formed national organizations—the Consumers’ League (1899) and the National Child Labor Committee (1903). Both groups lent their names, resources, and journals to state efforts. Harriett Van der Vaart, Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, and Edgar Davies wrote about child labor in Illinois for these national periodicals. In 1908 the National Child Labor Committee held its annual meeting in Illinois, providing the coalition with much publicity.<sup>67</sup>

The Chicago Industrial Exhibit of 1907 was a showcase for child welfare groups. Exhibitors represented women’s clubs, labor unions, and government departments. Among the sponsors were the Illinois Woman’s Trade Union League, Illinois Consumers’ League, Chicago Tuberculosis Institute, Chicago Woman’s Club, Chicago Geographical Society, State Department of Factory Inspection, Chicago Federation of Labor, University of Chicago Settlement, Northwestern University Settlement, Hull House, Chicago Commons, Neighborhood House, Department of Health of Chicago, Visiting Nurses’ Association, and the Industrial Committee of the City Club. Charles Henderson and other University of Chicago faculty spoke, national organiza-

tions lent support, and Chicago businessmen donated supplies and money. Displays included charts, posters, pictures, and graphs on industrial conditions. Papers presented there were later published.<sup>68</sup> A similar exhibit was held in 1911.<sup>69</sup>

In 1916 the Greek newspaper *Saloniki*, encouraged by the owner of a shoeshine parlor, campaigned to help bootblacks working for Greek employers. *Saloniki* said that bootblacks should have reasonable working hours so they could attend school, thereby causing native Americans to think well of the Greek community. Grace Abbott addressed Greek businessmen and bootblacks at a Hull House meeting, and many of the employers present agreed to close their shops on Sundays and holidays so the boys could rest and study. Two or three times a week young bootblacks would be allowed to go to night school.<sup>70</sup>

Yet with all its publicity and support, the coalition could only block attempts to destroy existing legislation; proposals for new laws failed. In 1911 the National Alliance for the Protection of Stage Children tried to get special, more liberal work permits for child actors. Jane Addams, the Mothers' Congress of Illinois, the Illinois State Federation of Labor, and the Illinois Child Labor Committee lobbied vigorously, and the bill was defeated. The reformers' own bill, however, for stricter regulation of children working in street trades, also failed to pass. In 1915 the Illinois Committee on Social Legislation, representing many organizations of the reform coalition, asked the legislature to raise the minimum age for certain kinds of work. For the first time, violent opposition to a child labor bill led to its defeat.<sup>71</sup>

Oscar Nelson, chief state factory inspector in 1915, assumed that manufacturers engineered the defeats. Yet when his office surveyed businessmen, an overwhelming majority favored further regulation, even prohibiting work for those under fourteen.<sup>72</sup> Why, then, the sudden reluctance of the legislature to regulate child labor? In the absence of legislative debates from that time, no definitive answer exists, but there are some probabilities.

In a recent essay, Selwyn Troen has suggested that technological advances between 1900 and 1920 put many children out of work. The adoption, for example, of the pneumatic tube, cash register, and conveyor belts in department stores eliminated the need for cash boys and girls. Typewriters and dictating machines required more skilled office workers. Child labor regulation and inspection systems may also have promoted technological change, as in the Illinois glass factories. In any case, more and more of the employable young stayed in school and went on to high school.<sup>73</sup> Progressive social reformers wanted more laws and tougher school attendance requirements, but the sense of crisis had passed, and with it went much of their political support.

Furthermore, the reformers' basic tenet that the state should step in because parents had failed offended many, especially immigrants, who saw American society and schools drawing their children away from community values. Some said that further legislation would infringe too much upon proper parental authority and personal liberties. In the 1920s those opposed to the federal child labor amendment used the parental rights argument.<sup>74</sup>

The professionalization of the elements of the coalition, described by Robert Wiebe in *The Search for Order*, also led to a decline in effectiveness. Lawrence Cremin has said that the progressive education movement, a coalition of professional educators and reformers, lost its vitality and lay support as teachers became more organized.<sup>75</sup> As each group in the child welfare movement developed and concentrated on its own specific interest, it lost support from the general public for common causes.

In the 1920s labor, for example, organized, unionized, and negotiated for wages rather than social reform legislation. Middle- and upper-class women joined suffrage organizations. None of the women's rights groups was very broadly based; some had a strong nativist element, excluding working-class and immigrant women. The Woman's Party, pushing for full equality, threatened protective legislation for working women, widening the distance between social classes. The Hull House women continued to work for the old organizations and support the familiar causes, but with many of their earlier goals already achieved, and the coalition breaking up, they could accomplish little in the way of more social legislation. The public had lost not only its sense of crisis but its interest in continuing reform.

## Conclusion

Apart from the actual effects of social legislation, the coalition's achievement lay in promoting the idea that children's rights may transcend parental authority. How far the state should go to define and protect those rights continues to be controversial.

Most importantly, the coalition helped prevent further polarization in a tense and troubled time by showing that groups need not have profound empathy to cooperate. Women in particular formed functional bonds that temporarily ignored class, and learned to work together outside their homes.

Aside from their contributions to society, the personal growth and fulfillment of the Hull House reformers was great. They began their

adult lives confused and purposeless. By the first decade of the twentieth century their confidence, energy, compassion, and determination had made them a generation of heroines.

## Notes

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