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## Sources: Child Labor in the United States



May 1, 2017 ~ Mark R. Stoneman

On this May Day, it is interesting to read a [Progressive Era](#) speech by Florence Kelley from December 1905 entitled “[The Federal Government and the Working Children](#).”<sup>1</sup> Kelley was arguing for a federal solution to the dearth of accurate and timely data about child labor in the United States. The industrial and agricultural interests that objected to a federal role, she pointed out, were quick to band together when it came to demanding protection for their own commercial interests.

“Never again can it be a matter of merely local concern what hours the children are working. They will be the Republic when we are dead, and we cannot leave it to the local legislators, here and there, to decide unobserved what sort of citizens shall be produced in this or that State, whether they shall be strong in body, mind and character, or whether they shall grow up enfeebled by overwork in early childhood.

Of course, compiling and disseminating the data would have political consequences.



NCLC photographer's caption: “One of the small girls working in the Natick (R.I.) Mills. The girls would not stop and form a group as the boys did. Many young girls and boys work there. Location: Natick, Rhode Island.” Source: Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/nclc/item/ncl2004000800/PP1>.

Besides drawing unfavorable comparisons to other countries, Kelley bemoaned the fact that the federal government could produce timely data on the cotton crop but not on the children who picked it. Thus, it took until November 1905 for an important detail about children to emerge from the 1900 census:

“half a million of them between the ages of ten and fourteen years ... could neither read nor write—native children, not immigrants (the little black children in the cotton fields picking cotton, and the little white children in the cotton mills, spinning and helping to weave it) ...

The Departments of Education and Labor offered nothing in terms of the data Kelley sought. “What are these departments for, if they are not to furnish to the people information concerning the working children at a time when it can be used?” Linking the need for such information to the rights of future citizens and the good of the country, she returned to the theme of government interest and expertise in collecting certain kinds of information, but its willfully blind indifference to collecting other kinds.

“It is time to recognize that the children who will be the Republic have rights now. It is important that the American people should know under what conditions they are living, and working, and becoming invalids or criminals, thousands of them dying in childhood and early youth. Surely it is more important to know these things, that we may act upon the knowledge, than to be informed with furious haste by the associated press whenever another great department hopes that it has found some new variety of insect which may destroy the boll-weevil. Surely it is more important that the American people should know what is really happening to its young children in industry than that we should learn at brief intervals how the young lobsters are faring on the coast of Maine and the young trout in the remote streams of Northern Wisconsin.

Note how the information she wanted to have collected would become knowledge, something the American people knew, and therefore the basis of political reform.



NCLC photographer's caption: “9 year old boy who was smoking and playing pool in Pool Room Branch (Chouteau & Manchester) while waiting for papers. 4 P.M. May 5, 1910. Location: St. Louis, Missouri.” Source: Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004001969/PP1>.

The same concern with compiling data and producing and circulating knowledge for the sake of reform led to thousands of posed photographs of child workers taken for an organization with which Kelley was involved, the [National Child Labor Committee \(NCLC\)](#), between 1908 and 1924.<sup>2</sup> These are available digitally at the Library of Congress. Many of the accompanying captions from the time include reported information on the children's ages, working hours, schooling, and family circumstances, including whether their wages were needed at home or they were working of their own accord.

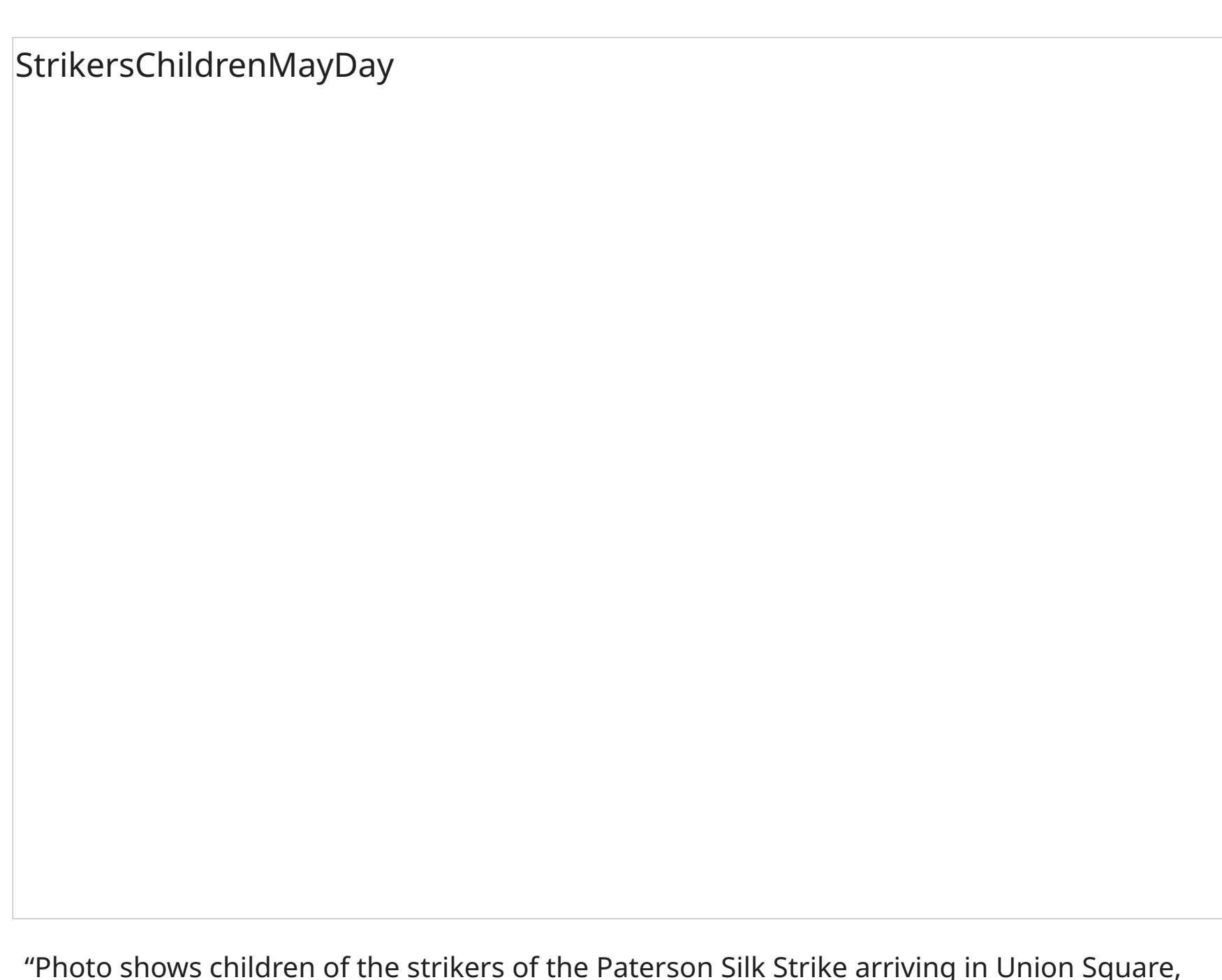
Sometimes viewers must draw their own conclusions about how old the children were, as in “[Newberry Mills \(S.C.\) Noon hour. All are working here. Witness, Sara R. Hine. Location: Newberry, South Carolina.](#)” And it was not always possible for the photographer to get the pictures he needed, a point he made in one caption thus:

“The only photo of the mill children I could get. The superintendent was too suspicious. Many young girls and boys in there on day shift. Some below 12 years old went in on night shift. Location: High Shoals Mills, North Carolina.

Living conditions and play were sometimes also captured, as were [evening classes](#) and [vocational education](#). Morality figured into the photographer's observations, too, whether to note smoking habits or paperboys entering saloons at night.

Of course, May Day was not really about reformers' efforts to acquire information and produce useable knowledge about child laborers. Instead, it was tied to workers' own emancipatory efforts, in which knowledge played a central role, a theme highlighted in the title of David Vincent's book on English workers, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, and in Semën Ivanovich Kanatchikov's autobiography.<sup>3</sup> Thus, I end with a May Day strike in New York from 1914, albeit one in which the workers appear to be using their children as a reason for earning higher wages. Without adequate pay for their fathers, the message seems to be, they would have to work too.

StrikersChildrenMayDay



“Photo shows children of the strikers of the Paterson Silk Strike arriving in Union Square, New York City during the May Day parade, May 1, 1913.” Source: Flickr Commons project, 2009, and New York Times, May 2, 1913, via the Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ggb2005012857/>.

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1. Published in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 27 (March 1906): 289–92. [↗](#)
2. In her plea for federal action, Kelley made sure to underscore this organization's inadequacy to the task at hand: “it is left to a feeble volunteer society to collect a few hundred dollars, here and there, and publish in January, every year, the new statutes which have taken effect in the twelve months next preceding.” [↗](#)
3. David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London, 1981); *A Radical Worker in Tsarist Russia: The Autobiography of Semën Ivanovich Kanatchikov*, trans. and ed. by Reginald E. Zelnik (Stanford, CA, 1986). [↗](#)

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