CHAPTER 1

FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT DREAMS

Raising an Educated Audience for a Permanent American National Theatre

One of the Federal Theatre Project’s most successful ventures was its Children’s Theatre. Representing an entirely new approach to presenting live drama to young audiences, the children’s units operated on the two-fold assumption that children needed a theatre, and that the theatre needed the children. Hallie Flanagan . . . recognized that this largely neglected audience was, in fact, the potential audience of the future and needed to be “educated to appreciate the theatre as an artistic form.”

—Federal One, a publication of the Research Center for the Federal Theatre Project, George Mason University, October 1976

In a 1936 article for Federal Theatre, Children’s Unit director Jack Rennick quotes an educator to clarify his units’ goal. “If America is ever to have a great theatre, she cannot begin too soon to train and establish an audience that will appreciate, demand, and support the best.” It is “with this objective in mind” that the children’s theatre of the FTP came into being."1

During her Guggenheim-funded travels, Hallie Flanagan had seen European theatre directed toward children, and as FTP director she emphasized the need for a vibrant children’s theatre. Children’s theatre units, separate from the adult units, were formed in New York City, Los Angeles, and Cleveland, Ohio.2 Adult units performed children’s plays regularly in Chicago, Boston, Newark, New Haven, Hartford, Norwalk, Denver, Tampa, Miami and Jacksonville, San Francisco, San Diego, and Portland. In addition, FTP marionette companies and amateur groups performed extensively for children. The FTP also funded and took over an already established theatre by and
for children in Gary, Indiana, the only unit in which child actors performed plays for federal theatre. Otherwise, performances in all cities were acted by adults.³

Casting this way was practical, since all but 10 percent of the FTP employees had to be on relief (and 90 percent of the budget had to be spent on salaries). Not only were casts large in order to employ as many people as possible, but also they were adult in order to employ the people who had to be providers. Casts were often huge, particularly in such cities as Los Angeles and Seattle, where former vaudeville performers could provide comic relief and perform circus interludes (such as would be seen in Seattle’s Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby and Los Angeles’s Pinocchio).

The New York City children’s theatre was designed as a model for the nation, and as such undertook a number of administrative tasks designed to undergird a system of national productions for children. It spent an enormous amount of bureaucratic energy setting up playlists and productions. Administrators sent out surveys to educators at public and parochial schools and settlement houses to determine children’s story preferences and theatre knowledge. They formed a consultant group “comprised of professors from New York University and Columbia, the educational director of the Boy Scouts of America, the Superintendent of Schools for New York City, and such well-known leaders in the world of children’s entertainment as Dorothy McFadden of Junior Programs, Inc., and Paul Wing of the National Broadcasting Company.”⁴ Unit personnel requested research information from the Moscow State Central Theatre for Juvenile Audiences, where, after watching children, observers had determined standards based on age for performance length, the duration of each act, and intermissions. Soviets also sent materials for suggested book reading by the children and for test questions to be answered by attending children.

Although the FTP never classified the plays according to suggested age groups for audiences, Rennick explains the corresponding age and theatre-type divisions in his Federal Theatre report. He describes three groups: ages 5 to 8, 9 to 12, and 13 and older. For the youngest viewers, he writes: “The young child is quickly bored and becomes restless with too much exposition. The play must have a great deal of color and action to hold their attention. The play can be as fantastic and as imaginative as you wish, but the imagery must not be obscured.” For the middle group, he adds, “in this case we can begin to evolve plot structure.” He describes the oldest as the most difficult group. “The majority of them refuse to have anything to do with subject matter that they claim is ‘for the kids.’ Here we must begin to do plays with a definite social awareness; we should begin to develop the faculties of dis-
crimination, criticism and thought.” He closes, “In the selection of plays for all age groups, entertainment value must be taken into consideration, but each script must contain some educational value.”

Regular audience surveys were also taken at a number of performances. (Both the plan of devising theatre for specific ages and the practice of audience surveys would come into play during the controversy that arose surrounding the New York Children’s Unit production of *The Revolt of the Beavers.*) And in a report titled “The Children’s Theatre,” Rennick noted that the New York Unit also surveyed “the financial condition of children in 220 centers with a total attendance of 200,000 children.” The survey found that 10 percent of the children were unable to pay any admission, 15 percent were able to pay five cents or less, 43 percent were able to pay 10 cents or less, and 32 percent were able to pay 15 cents or less. In this context, Rennick’s report presents the children’s theatre goals:

The Children’s Theatre aims to present two general types of plays. The first includes plays which are imaginative, humorous or fantastical in nature. The second and more important type (neglected by children’s theatres in the past) is the play with a heightened sense of realism which will help the child to an awareness of himself and his place in the world about him. In all plays there must be an educational and cultural value, and above everything else, the play must be presented to attract and retain the interest of the child.

Partly in response to budget cuts, the New York Unit produced a “Children’s Autumn Festival” at the end of October 1937, for which some of its more popular plays were restaged. The festival was the culmination of months of planning; FTP officials solicited support from a number of community leaders who would sponsor the festival. Following eight days of performances, the festival concluded with a conference for the sponsors. Minutes from a meeting on September 29, 1937, show that planning committee members included dance troupe leader Tamaris, J. Augustus Smith, director of the Negro Unit, and marionette unit director Remo Bufano. More than 7,500 people attended the festival, which was sold out for ten performances while hundreds of parents and children were turned away. The festival featured puppet shows, restagings of *Horse Play* (by the Negro Unit), *Pierre Patelin, The Emperor’s New Clothes*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk*, music by the Federal Music Project, and a vaudeville show for children that included “the ‘All-American Minstrels,’ complete with interlocutor and end men.”
The FTP Children’s Units were committed in philosophy and in practice to reaching the children of America; they took plays to settlement houses, hospitals, and schools; their repertory included fairy- and folktales, biographies, educational plays about such subjects as hygiene and nutrition, and new plays written for the FTP. If an administrative separation between children and adult productions served to oppose two types of theatre, audiences never recognized such an opposition, for these plays so carefully researched and so explicitly directed at children were always attended by children and adults alike, with the latter composing 75 percent of *Pinocchio*’s overall audience.¹¹

Flanagan never quite gave up on the dream for a national children’s theatre. Records show that on October 3, 1938, scarcely six months before the FTP would be closed, Los Angeles children’s unit director Yasha Frank submitted a survey of the schedule for the “Theatre for Youth which we discussed several weeks ago.” Frank writes:

> It incorporates a program which indicates the national characteristics of Federal Theatre Project. It plans to co-operate with the various related governmental agencies; with the other cultural projects; with National Youth Administration. It follows the fundamental trend which your policy more and more clarifies—to identify our work with the life of the community—to infiltrate into the cultural and educational and practical way of life of our fellow Americans.

The document lists nine major program categories: Shakespeare, motion pictures, safety campaign, patriotic programs, concerts, circus, marionettes, summer conference, and youth theatre bureau. It basically outlines a way to provide the theatrical opportunities in the main cities to audiences throughout the country and lists possible cooperative ventures. Stating that the production of children’s plays in small projects is impractical, Frank proposes that motion pictures be enlisted:

> I propose a series of motion pictures on 16 mm sound supplemented and enhanced by living material in which living actors perform the expository and key situations in the play. I have completed a shooting script of my play *Pinocchio* with just such a treatment in mind. Small traveling units of five or six people could road-show these productions effectively.¹²

Frank’s proposal imagines an artistic and technological marriage for a national theatre committed to all of its citizens.

Federal children’s theatre was a significant development in an endeavor that had expanded throughout the early twentieth century. Beginning mostly
with settlement house activities, theatre for children was considered by most educators to be important for the development of children. However, exactly how to create plays for children and what children actually wanted out of theatre remained untheorized in the early thirties and only slowly popularized throughout the decade. “It is well documented that children, when left to their own devices, will turn to things mimetic,” write Roger L. Bedard and C. John Tolch in their introduction to Spotlight on the Child: Studies in the History of American Children’s Theatre. “Yet for children to go to the theatre, or even to participate in formal drama or theatre activities, adults must not only sanction the activity, they must also design and implement such programs.”13 In the first two decades of the twentieth century, theatre for children was primarily an educational tool in the hands of teachers and social workers rather than of the theatrical community, and not a particularly important tool at that.

The first significant theatre for children was the Children’s Educational Theatre, which was started in 1903 (and continued to 1909) by the Educational Alliance, which “operated for the purpose of teaching better communication in a new language and American ways to the Russian and Polish immigrants who inhabited that section of the (New York) City.”14 Settlement houses, in fact, led the way in organizing children’s theatre as a means to teach immigrant children how to be “American,” keeping children away from vaudeville and providing socialization as much as education. Alice Minnie Herts, who started the children’s theatre for the Educational Alliance, said she “saw the great opportunity not to impose upon people from without, but to help people create an ideal from within.”15

Professional theatre companies mostly ignored child audiences; even when they experimented with productions for children, these were accessible only to children in large cities and at a cost that precluded much of the population from attending. At the turn of the century these productions were mostly variety shows and vaudeville-influenced comedies.

The Junior League for the Promotion of the Settlement Movements, formed in 1901 to provide socially meaningful activities for wealthy women, began organizing children’s theatre productions as early as 1912; by 1924 the Chicago League had voted to make theatre for children their focus. “Children's theatre in one form or another was the pet project of nearly every 1920s Junior League,” write Janet Gordon and Diana Reische.16 Organized theatre for children, in its inception and early development, was primarily something provided to children of disadvantaged backgrounds. By the 1930s, however, the renamed Association of Junior Leagues of America not only produced plays but also held national conferences on children's theatre, cooperated with local school districts, and sponsored some professional productions.17
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The King-Coit School and Children’s Theatre in New York taught children literature, history, painting, dancing, drawing, and acting after school and on the weekends and produced critically acclaimed children’s theatre that was an acknowledged part of the New York theatre scene from 1923 to 1958. Well-known actors who sent their children there supported it, and first-rate critics reviewed its productions.18

In 1930, one of the most influential people working in children’s theatre published her first book, *Creative Dramatics: For the Upper Grades and Junior High School*. Winifred Ward, working in the Evanston, Illinois, public school system, would shape the direction of children’s theatre. *Creative Dramatics* was used by FTP play bureau workers as a guide for choosing plays to be included in a list for distribution to schools, institutions, and children’s groups. Ward’s “creative dramatics” was a theory of how drama could be used to stimulate children’s interest in learning. Highly influenced by pragmatist John Dewey’s educational theories, her creative dramatics stressed the experiential nature of learning and how the process of creating plays and oral presentations would benefit the whole child. She believed that education should not focus on the teaching of information, but rather should be designed to instill democratic values, develop children’s self-confidence, and provide meaningful information useful to them; drama was a means to secure these ends.19

The Changing Social Value of the Child

If children’s theatre grew out of early-twentieth-century progressive educational efforts in settlement houses, a progressive emphasis on the child similarly changed the social value, and thus public perception, of children. Labor and labor reform leaders drew upon a cultural move toward increasing protection for the middle-class child to claim a similar protection for the working-class child. The victimized child—who was in material practices denied the right of “childhood”—was used to subsume the markings of class and ethnicity. My book demonstrates how its FTP children’s plays draw on such conceptualizations of childhood and children to evoke a particularly powerful nexus of innocence and victimization—as well as the symbolic fluidity of the working-class and laboring child to mediate class and ethnicity—and bring it to their productions.

In her seminal *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, sociologist Viviana Zelizer charted the shift in social value of the child from economically useful to “economically useless but emotionally
priceless” during the early twentieth century. Drawing on methodologies used in earlier studies of historical shifts in attitudes regarding children and childhood such as Philippe Aries’s *Centuries of Childhood*, Zelizer examined what she termed the increasing “sacralization” of children by analyzing such institutional practices as legal definitions of the child, child labor and insurance practices regarding children. Her study argues that shifts in social attitudes precede shifts in institutional attitudes. She explicitly argues that studies examining shifts in children’s economic valuation that posit causal relations determined by pricing and market forces ignore the process by which “values shape price, investing it with social, religious, or sentimental meaning.”

Zelizer’s chart of the child’s progression from useful to economically useless but emotionally priceless undergirds current understandings of historical shifts in child valuation and in studies of children’s literature and representations of children in art of the Industrial Revolution. She notes that labor and child labor reform rhetoric adopted, and by its adoption expanded, the idea of a universalized, protected childhood. Representations of the laboring and working-class child within labor and labor reform movements inflect the early-twentieth-century discourse of childhood with class concerns. This inflection mediates dominant fears about the working class, comments on the socially constructed nature of constraints to full democratic participation, and critiques an American Dream that promises equal opportunity to all. Labor’s claim to a right to childhood and reformers’ efforts to expose the dearth of a working-class childhood inserted class and ethnicity into a universalized model of the protected middle-class child that, as a symbolic figure, performed such necessary cultural work that it could—without erasing—carry the inflection. Ethnicity and class were subsumed by the child. If a historical perspective charts shifts in the symbolic function of the laboring and working-class child, it also shows how powerfully the innocent child animates the shifts.

Denning writes that immigrants and their children composed two-thirds of the population of America’s major cities by 1930. His chart of CIO affiliations and loyalties proposes an alliance of second-generation ethnic workers in mass-production jobs and radical specialized workers whose support of the CIO and whose movement into the arts created “an iconography and rhetoric of class.” Labor rhetoric in the thirties attempted to unite under the aegis of Burke’s “the people” a complex network of ethnic loyalties and nationalisms. Denning writes:

Popular Front public culture sought to forge ethnic and racial alliances, mediating between Anglo American culture, the culture of ethnic workers,
and African American culture, in part by reclaiming the figure of “America” itself, imagining an Americanism that would provide a usable past for ethnic workers, who were thought of as foreigners, in terms of a series of ethnic slurs.

This reclamation project was an attempt to unite millions of industrial workers with the middle class in an “urban civic culture.” Its threat to an established social order was not communism, but the powerful alliance of working and middle classes united for labor causes.

Examining discursive moments in labor and labor reform history where children and childhood performed key symbolic work for labor and its causes reveal the manner in which labor reform argued for a protected status for laboring children. I take three moments from a forty-year history to broadly sketch this trajectory: the text of an 1893 speech by labor leader Samuel Gompers, selected photographs taken by Lewis Hine, and accounts of the murder of Ella May Wiggins during the Gastonia Loray Mill strike to explore the representative power of laboring children.

An 1893 speech by Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, at the International Labor Congress in Chicago, called forth the bodies of laboring children as signs of economic, social, and civic injustice and demanded for these fleshly bodies salvation:

Save our children in their infancy from being forced into the maelstrom of wage slavery. See to it that they are not dwarfed in body and mind or brought to a premature death by early drudgery. Give them sunshine of the school and playground instead of the factory, the mine and the workshop. We want more schoolhouses and less jails; more books and less arsenals; more learning and less vice; more constant work and less crime; more leisure and less greed; more justice and less revenge; in fact, more of the opportunities to cultivate our better natures; to make manhood more noble, womanhood more beautiful, and childhood more happy and bright.

The speech’s slide from childhood to manhood and womanhood and back again demonstrates how laboring children both occupy a place at the loom, the assembly line, and the mine, and figure as the disenfranchised whose working-class status excludes them from the social, civic, and juridical benefits of American democracy. The state of childhood and the bodily activity of skilled and unskilled labor become conflated as one site of oppression; thus, reform of the laboring class is figured as the salvation of the child.
The rhetorical power of Gompers’s speech lies in its conflation of civic and family responsibilities and its insistence that public duties toward children will effect change on personal and institutional levels, and will finally transform American manhood and womanhood as well. Thus, a parental, domestic control over the values children receive and the activities in which they are permitted to engage is explicitly linked to a civic responsibility to shield “our” children from early drudgery. If children are shielded from the mills, the mines, and the factories, then manhood will be become “more noble,” “womanhood more beautiful, and childhood more happy and bright.” By posing schoolyard sunshine against workplace darkness, and then creating a striking series of oppositions through which the sunshine of the school is equated with books, learning, leisure, and justice and opposed to jails, arsenals, vice, crime, greed, and revenge, Gompers explicitly links civic responsibility to children with civic responsibility of and to the adult, and finally, to the social body figured by noble manhood, his beautiful womanhood, and their happy childhood.

Gompers reconstructs a class-based, economic struggle as an assertion of labor’s right to America’s public institutions. The child figures as the developing American to whom democratic educational opportunities must be offered and also as the laboring class that might rise to a position of economic and social privilege. The emotional logic of Gompers’s speech reproduces a model of citizenship as a network of family responsibilities within the labor struggle. Its assertive communal possessive, its striking series of oppositions (encompassing moral, ethical, philosophical, and social concerns), its iconographic—noble, beautiful, and happy—American family, join to position labor itself as the communal family that creates ideal Americans and rids American society of pervasive social ills associated with the poor, the working class, and the immigrant. Change begins with the child.

This turn-of-the-century expression of labor’s “family values” countermands a contemporary middle- and upper-class sense that immigrants, the impoverished, and the laboring class were not like decent, hardworking Americans who deserved the benefits and privileges of democratic society. Gompers asserts noneconomic goals of personal fulfillment and social democracy, separating the laboring from the labor on behalf of the working-class frail, toiling like slaves. He describes a kinder, gentler Marxism, where occupation of democratic processes, as opposed to revolution in the streets, tacitly results in economic and social parity for the working class.

Similarly, the figure of the child led organized labor and the child labor reform movement to ecstatic heights of rhetorical fervor in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1908, Indiana Senator Albert J.
Beveridge wrote in his introduction to Bessie Van Vorst’s exposé *The Cry of the Children*:

> When our people know that more than a million American children are dying of overwork or being forever stunted and dwarfed in body, mind, and soul; when they know that we are pouring into the body of our citizenship two hundred and fifty thousand degenerates (at the very lowest estimate) every year who have clouded minds and a burning hatred of the society that has wronged them, and that they have ballots in their hands . . . we may hope for an end of this national disgrace.26

Two years earlier, socialist John Spargo had warned in *The Bitter Cry of the Children* of the peril to a young growing nation embodied in the stunted forms of its laboring children.27 “It is not only the interests of the children themselves,” he wrote, “that are menaced; even more important and terrible is the thought that civilization itself is imperiled when children are dwarfed physically, mentally, and morally by hunger, heavy toil, and unwholesome surroundings.”28

In visual contradiction to the rolling rhetoric of child labor reform language is Lewis Hine’s photography for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) between 1908 and 1918. The emotional language of child labor reform opposes the apocalyptic savagery to enlightened civilization, or of verdant bloom to withered blight. Contrastingly, in Hine’s factory photos, clean lines, multiple lighting sources, and classical composition and subject positioning balance aesthetically even as the photo itself displays the technologized science that enables its reproduced “truth.” Yet Hine’s factory photographs construct and circulate representations of children dependent upon the immersion of the photograph within progressive rhetoric. They oppose child and machine in order to consolidate values associated with children and childhood—innocence, naturalness, and energetic growth—and thus to critique the celebration of technologized business that enabled rapidly industrializing America to employ children. The relationship of the laboring child to the adult laborer to labor causes the child’s victimization to demand a consideration of the relationship between human subject and machine. By presuming a protected and increasingly sacralized middle-class childhood for those whose primary marking had been ethnicity and class, by presuming a universal right to childhood, the rhetoric of the child labor reform movement presumed revolutionary social change.

Former botany teacher Lewis Hine’s mission for the relatively new National Child Labor Committee was informed by the progressive idea that
the application of knowledge and science to social problems would make economic self-interest give way to community interest. Hine took thousands of photographs of children at work. He often used duplicity to gain factory entrance—pretending interest in the machinery, or to be a postcard salesman—while he surreptitiously photographed. He measured children’s heights against his suit buttons and recorded the measurements later. To document birthdates, he went to homes and looked in family Bibles. The photos, often with Hine’s accompanying observations, were published in National Child Labor Committee pamphlets and in Charities magazine (among others); they served as supplements to Hine’s written reports, and as posters for national exhibitions. Each child was placed, named, and aged; each factory was named and located. When Hine began his work, little was known about the numbers or about the conditions of working children. While the 1900 census revealed that 1,750,178 children were working, this didn’t include the number of working children under the age of ten who weren’t recorded. They worked primarily in textile mills, glass factories, mines, and canneries, on the streets and in the sun, and at home. States themselves then set standards: generally minimum ages of 10 to 12 and maximum hours of about 10 a day. And if the laws were loosely drawn and full of exemptions, enforcement was concurrently lax. In 1910 in North Carolina, where 75 percent of the spinners were children, there were no inspectors. Hine considered textile mills to be the worst offenders of child labor laws; textile mill owners and operators considered children prime laborers. While in Northern factories the population of working children in mills had decreased to less than eight percent, in the South, where numerous mills were Northern subsidiaries, the percentage of children had shot to 25 percent of all workers, an increase of 300 percent during the 1890s. Perhaps because of this cheap and abundant labor pool, the number of mills grew from 180 to 900 between 1880 and 1904.

Hine’s photos display how the values of machine culture structure their presentation of child labor. In Shifting Gears, Cecilia Tichi argues that “gear and girder machinery,” the highly visible structures and engines of the rapidly industrializing world, not only dominated early-twentieth-century technology but also powered imaginative interpretations of the natural world and the human as well as of relationships between the organic and inorganic. Early-twentieth-century machine ideology projected a natural world of integrated component parts by presuming an analogy of structural principles that integrated systems designers and systems of labor.29

The early-twentieth-century machine was technology made visible, and recognized by its prefabricated component structures—wheels and ball bearings and pistons, girdered structures and ordered systems; it was energy
harnessed and put to work. In its mechanized harmony, it structurally imagined order and efficiency against the background of a world of flux. Yet flux is the condition of growth from child to adult. The biological progression of the human being thus figuratively opposes a stable industrial system, even as the rapid pace of early-twentieth-century industrialization suggested a powerful force whose containment was uncertain. With their miniature laboring bodies, the children in Hine’s photos for the NCLC showed the frightening counterimage of the dominant machine, and their rhetorical power was heightened by the doomsday fervor of child labor reform rhetoric.

Hine’s NCLC factory photos often centered the child, but the meaning of the child’s body is derived from its placement against the background of machinery. In numerous photos, the bodies are dwarfed by the long clean lines of a vast mechanized system; in others the small and homely devices to enable the children to perform their labor overtly emphasize small stature, unfinished bodies. The machine imagery in these photos not only threatens to overwhelm the subject and draw away the viewer’s eye, but (particularly in an era when educational theory associated learning with imaginative free play) visually connoted the deadly repetition of tasks that the photo’s momentary flash cannot capture. Work itself is thus represented by the machine whose physical dominance within the photo’s frame suggests its power.

If machine imagery opposed the child’s body and contained within its form the idea of industrialized labor, its compositional values provide many of the photos’ aesthetic pleasures. To the machine’s straight edges and clean lines, Hine added multiple lighting sources. A hand placed on the machinery or eyes looking directly into the camera draw the viewer’s eye from the balance of form and light, and it is the smallness of the request for attention that invites an emotional participation and response. Furthermore, the compositional lines take the representation of work that the machines embody outside of the photos themselves, and reproduce in the worlds of other photos. So the straight lines of a fence and the shadowed doorway of the factory entrance suggest, in their analogic compositional form, the deadening force of the machines just outside the frame, both physically and metaphorically. Against this force, the ebullient body of the child is circumscribed.

The energy and tension of Hine’s photos, and thus their overt plea for viewer participation to effect a change, comes from opposition: the opposition of darkness to light, of the straight clean line of the machine to the soft folds of a little girl’s dress. The photos directly implicate the factory machines—metonyms for a social mechanism animated by greed—in the foreclosure of possibilities evident in the exhaustion, the ragged clothing, the dwarfed bodies of these working children. Their individual bodies, often
awkwardly positioned against and dominated by the adult-sized mechanisms of work, suggest the impossibility of control, the impossibility of making one’s own fortune, the impossibility of a mobility that would render all equal.

These photos assert a humanity for the working class against the increasingly technologized and proudly “rationalized” workplace. The rhetoric of technologized business in the early twentieth century created labor in technology’s image. It classified those who worked the machines with them—cogs in the wheels designed, managed, and made efficient by the Veblen engineer and the Taylorist time manager—small, replaceable, dehumanized.

If Gompers’s speech rested on protecting—and protracting—a childhood separated from adulthood, Hine’s photos fuse adult and child in the opposition of human to machine. With the child laborer’s haunting face in the foreground of *A Carolina Spinner*, taken at Cotton Mills, South Carolina, it is understood that the laboring child will grow into the laboring adult unto generations, trapped in a narrow, constricted world. Yet if this photo raises sympathy for the exhausted girl in the foreground, surely it also calms fears about the threat implied by a united working class. The photo explicitly appeals to a culture of patrician benevolence that exists side by side with capitalism. This girl, and the women stretching out behind her, needs help. She is small. She is weak. She is isolated and alone.

In 1906 NCLC co-founder Alexander J. McKelway wrote, “the golden age of the world . . . is still in the future . . . and the central figure on that canvas is that of the little child.” What makes Hine’s photos powerful now, and perhaps most powerful to the middle and upper-class viewer at whom they were directed, is that the child embodies the dark side of the American celebration of technology—the fear that indeed its celebrants are not ubermensch engineers designing and implementing their rationalized system of control, but rather the dehumanized matter upon which these systems are imposed. Hine’s photos spoke to the need for labor reform even as they ameliorated a fear of a powerful working class, and attested to a structure of familial relations outside of work. While he was still working for the NCLC, photos of working-class children were circulated to garner support for strikers whose poverty and/or immigrant status made their cause of little interest to most Americans. The opposition of the victimized child to the alienating machine so central to Hine’s photographs became crucial to labor’s use of children to assert a humanity that management practices attempted to victimize.

The children Hine photographed in 1908 at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, NC, would have been in their late 20s in 1929 when mill workers walked out over management practices they collectively termed the “stretch out.” The term described newly conceived labor practices that made employees work
harder and faster—to the point of exhaustion—and that disrupted the schedules workers had devised to take care of family emergencies or even regular family needs. The practices included production counting machines, motors on individual machines, and the introduction of “scientific engineers” whose time and motion studies attached a minimum wage to a specified amount of production. Production levels were raised as workers were forced to increase output to maintain wage standards.

The Gastonia strikers were the only workers in a wave of Southern walkouts who were organized by the Communist Party’s dual National Textile Workers’ Union. Because they were said to be Communist union members, the impoverished workers were hysterically reviled in the Gastonia newspaper, and in most of the statewide press, as pro-Soviet, pro-racial-equality Americans working, or rather, not working, to undermine the fabric of the community, the state, and the nation.

The Gastonia strike drew international attention and support in the left-wing press. Of particular focus was the martyrdom of balladeer Ella May Wiggins, shot in the back by Loray Mill vigilantes while she was riding home from a rally in a truck bed. Wiggins wrote and performed more than twenty songs chronicling strike events. Her death orphaned her five children, the images of whom were widely circulated in the left-wing press. Journalist Margaret Larkin chronicled Wiggins’s funeral for both *The Nation* and *New Masses* and ends the *New Masses* article:

As the first clods of wet, red earth fell on the coffin, Kat Barrett sang one of Ella May’s best loved songs:

“We leave our home in the morning
We kiss our children goodbye
While we slave for the bosses
Our children scream and cry.”

Eleven year old Myrtle, who had been a “sight of help” sheperded the four littler children at the head of the grave. The tiny ones did not know what was happening at the grave side, but Myrtle knew everything. Her small shoulders dropped; her thin face was full of grief and worry.

“It is for our little children
That seem to us so dear,
But for us nor them, dear workers
The bosses do not care
Wiggins’s most popular song was “Chief Aderholt,” which describes the shooting of the town’s popular sheriff during an unauthorized raid on the union’s tent committee. But it is through “Mill Mother’s Song,” quoted above, that she is presented to America, as an anguished working mother whose wages are too low to provide a decent home for her children and whose union activities are driven by family needs.

Wiggins was described in the Daily Worker as a “fearless class fighter,” but University of North Carolina President Frank Porter Graham said, “her death was in a sense upon the heads of us all.” Castigating the politics that had inflamed and enabled the mill-employed vigilantes, he added that “Americanism . . . was not riding in cars carrying men and guns that day, barring the common highway to the citizens of the state.” Rather, “Americanism was somewhere deep in the heart of this mother who went riding in a truck toward what to her was the promise of a better day for her children.” Ella May’s motherhood, and thus her place within the sanctity of the American family, is signaled by the presence of her helpless children, innocent victims of their mother’s politics. Her daughter Myrtle’s grief and worry is a violation of her childhood, but its very newsworthiness is an assertion of her right to that childhood. Myrtle’s too-early adulthood justifies Ella May’s fight and shifts the tragedy of her death from the workplace to the home.

The death of the Gastonia striker and the plight of her motherless children made national, indeed international, news. Such interest highlights the rhetorical intensity with which the battle between the mill owners and the fledgling union and its striking workers was circulated. It was this rhetoric that allowed the strike, which as far as production was concerned was over almost before it began, to provide such a historical moment and to reverberate beyond its early events as a coherent story of labor struggle. While the Gastonia Daily Gazette and other North Carolina newspapers demonized the workers and the Communist union as synecdochical of a dread “Red menace” threatening to destroy the American way of life, the Daily Worker cast the strike as symbolic of the global struggle against capitalism. It denounced the mill owners and “their murderous vassals, the police, and private thugs and gunmen” who were “preparing one of the most monstrous blood-baths for workers in the history of the country.” Ella May Wiggins was a “Fearless
Class Fighter” murdered by the “mill owners’ gangsters . . . because of her tremendous influence on the workers.”36

Northern newspapers, sympathetic to the strikers, often characterized the events in Gastonia as emblematic of the South’s violent primitivism and inability to provide democratic governance and protection for its citizens. As Susan Duffy, a literary scholar writing on strike plays, notes, “The Gastonia textile strike of 1929 ripped open the political animosities of the region and, like the Scopes Trial of 1925, became the cause célèbre of the liberal press in the nation. The South was perceived as another country, where people spoke differently, lived differently, and thought differently.”37

Through representations of Ella May’s children, however, members of the national and international press tried to transcend difference, even as the documentary impulse of their work is itself located in recording difference. Visual representations of laboring and working-class children had arisen primarily from the social documentary photography of Jacob Riis and late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century attempts to discover the sociological environment and behavioral characteristics of the poor and working class by living among them and recording their world. Following Riis, Stephen Crane and Jack London, photographers and writers armed with class superiority and a hodgepodge of sociological and psychological theories about this distinct and separate class in so-called classless America went to live among the tenement dwellers and factory workers. Taking on the identities of their subjects as they worked and lived among them, they wrote stories that appeared in such popular periodicals as Harper’s and Scribner’s.38 Historian Mark Pittenger writes that in their excursion into the world of “the primitive poor,” the social journalists shared a common perception that the poor lived in a “domestic ‘Dark Continent’ whose denizens were effectively a primitive and ‘unknown race.’ . . . The images they produced of that country’s inhabitants tended to reinforce an overwhelming sense of otherness. Unskilled laborers, tramps, and street people looked, talked, thought, felt, and (it was more than once remarked) smelled differently than ‘we’ did.”39

Children bridged this world of difference because, in no small part due to the efforts of labor and labor reform, childhood itself become culturally recognized as an inviolate and protected space. The implications of this universalized childhood can perhaps be seen in the decreased use of race and ethnicity, as well as class, as stigmatized difference during the twentieth century. In the coming decade, the racist policies of Nazi Germany would create an ensuing backlash in America wherein democracy came to be equated with ethnic tolerance; in the wake of Nazi persecutions and assertions of Aryan superiority, American racism and ethnocentrism became increasingly
publicly stigmatized. Anthropological theories of Franz Boas and Margaret Mead, which stressed innate racial equality and difference of culture, were used to combat Nazi ideology. Labor and labor reform rhetoric focused on the child did not by themselves change the discourse of ethnic relations in America. But they worked the ground.