

Backing Trump's funding cuts, Georgia Republican says children should work instead of getting free school meals

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In an interview with CNN on Tuesday, Georgia Republican Congressman Rich McCormick suggested that instead of getting free meals under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), school-aged children should be forced to work to feed themselves.

News anchor Pamela Brown had asked the US House of Representatives member how Trump's federal funding freeze would affect programs like NSLP, which provides meals to low-income students. McCormick responded by saying child labor laws should be repealed, and that child hunger and poverty are a result of laziness on the part of children themselves.

In the interview McCormick stated, "Before I was even 13 years old, I was picking berries in the field, before child labor laws precluded that. I was a paper boy, and when I was in high school, I worked my entire way through. You're telling me that kids who stay at home instead of going to work at Burger King, McDonald's during the summer, should stay at home and get their free lunch instead of going to work? I think we need to have a top-down review."

When asked to clarify, he continued, "I mean, how many people got their start in fast-food restaurants when they were kids, versus just giving a blanket rule that gives all kids lunches in high school who are capable of going out and actually getting a job and doing something that makes them have value, thinking about their future instead of thinking about how they're going to sponge off the government when they don't need to."

McCormick's attitude is emblematic of the ruling class as a whole and its efforts to plunder all social programs that mitigate the effects of poverty to provide themselves with more tax cuts and government subsidies. Trump's return to power has immediately intensified these plans as he attempts to impose a "Milei model" in America, based on the extreme right president of Argentina, that would cut off all public spending except for that of the police, immigrant catchers and the military.

The message of McCormick and Trump to working class school children is: "Work or starve." No one, no matter how old or how young, is to be exempt from wage slavery. To the capitalist class, if you are not generating profits, you are not worth a ham sandwich.

The school lunch program is just one of many programs to be targeted by Trump and the newly created Department of

Government Efficiency (DOGE) headed by Elon Musk, the world's richest man. In the 2022-2023 school year, the most recent period where data is available, over 28 million students received benefits from the NSLP allowing them to receive meals at school for free or at a reduced cost.

Should the program be cut, these tens of millions of children would go hungry. For the most impoverished students, free school meals are their only guaranteed source of food. Due to low wages, working class families commonly account for the benefit in their budgets, buying less food at grocery stores to have more for other bills and expenses, especially as grocery prices continue to climb.

Just as reactionary is McCormick's contention that child labor laws should be abolished and the historical clock be turned backwards to the days when children labored in the coal mines and textile mills, and many were turned into cripples before becoming adults.

In fact, in recent years the employment of children in America has skyrocketed. According to a November 2024 report from the Department of Labor, there are currently more than 1,000 open investigations into child labor across various industries.

The report states:

The conditions that brought about child labor laws in the 1930s once seemed like a chapter from the history books, yet, over the last two years it has become clear even in today's modern economy, 100-year-old labor problems can still emerge. Investigations by the Department's Wage and Hour Division (WHD or the Division) have uncovered an alarming increase in the employment of children to work in dangerous conditions across industries throughout the country.

The report notes that the largest violators under investigation include food services, retail, construction, janitorial services, meat product wholesalers, furniture manufacturing and sawmills among other industries.

On January 15, 2025, the Department of Labor released a statement announcing it had reached agreements with Perdue Farms and staffing agencies, Staff Management Solutions LLC

and SMX LLC, for penalties related to child labor violation. The Labor Department had been investigating Perdue and the staffing companies for employing children “in hazardous occupations at the Accomac facility to debone and process chicken and other products using equipment such as electric knives and a heat-sealing press. The employers also permitted children to work after 7 p.m. during a regular school week.”

The agreement stipulates that Perdue pay a total restitution of \$4 million to be split between “the children, organizations advocating for child labor victims, and to support additional work to prevent child labor exploitation.” Perdue will also pay a \$150,000 civil penalty. No one is to be charged criminally. According to *Forbes*, Perdue Farms saw revenue of \$10.3 billion in 2024.

In response to the investigations into child labor and the exposure of major industries’ flagrant violations, right-wing state legislatures have moved forward with scrapping protections against employing children.

In 2023, Iowa passed legislation allowing children as young as 16 years old to work in industries, which had previously only been allowed for adults over 18. This includes manufacturing and restaurants that serve alcohol. The law also permits 16-year-olds to work longer hours and removes restrictions on the number of hours students can work during school days. The Iowa legislature is currently advancing a new law that would reduce the penalty on businesses that violate child labor laws from a maximum of \$10,000 down to just \$2,500.

At the start of the new year, changes to child labor laws in Indiana also went into effect. Now the state has no limits on how late 16- and 17-year-olds can work, and there are no regulations regarding working while school is in session. The law also grants exemptions to child labor for children as young as 14, who dropped out of school to work full-time.

The abolition of child labor laws as proposed by McCormick will lead only to the increased exploitation of impoverished children who are forced to abandon basic education so they can labor to support themselves and assist their families. It goes hand in hand with the vicious attack on immigrants, which is aimed at dividing workers and creating a climate of terror that facilitates the brutal exploitation of the entire working class.

The fight against child labor was central to the struggles of the American labor movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Laws banning the hiring of children were won in hard-fought battles and strikes by the working class, in most cases led by socialists.

As early as 1869, the Knights of Labor, one of the first workers’ organizations in the United States, adopted the abolition of child labor into its program. Such demands were also adopted by the American Socialist Party, the United Mine Workers (UMW) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Most famously Socialist Party member and labor organizer Mary Harris “Mother” Jones organized the “March of the Mill Children” from Philadelphia to New York City in 1903. The march drew thousands of child workers, who carried banners with slogans such as, “We want to go to school not the mines!”

During the 1912 textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, led by the IWW, over 30,000 mill workers went on strike against

virtually every factory in the city. The strike was nothing short of a battle with workers facing down the state militia armed with bayonets.

After several weeks, IWW leader “Big Bill” Haywood organized to send the children of the Lawrence workers, many of them workers themselves, into the care of supporters outside the city. As the hungry children poured out of trains and the abysmal treatment of workers in Lawrence became widely known, an immense amount of support from other workers came flowing into the city to help sustain the strike.

In one instance the police and militia forces attempted to prevent any additional children from boarding trains and attacked the group of women and children with clubs and made mass arrests. Some women were thrown into jail cells while carrying their babies.

Support for the Lawrence strike spread well beyond the borders of the US, with workers in Sweden and France refusing to unload mill products. In Rome, workers protested in front of the US consulate.

The Russian Revolution inspired millions throughout the world and in the United States and encouraged the semi-insurrectionary factory occupations and general strikes that established the mass industrial unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

Fearing an “American October,” the ruling class made a tactical retreat before the mass movement of workers and granted limited reforms. It was not until 1938, under Roosevelt’s New Deal-era Fair Labor Standards Act that a federal ban on child labor would be implemented. Even then, the act provided for significant exceptions, especially in agriculture work. Today, the agricultural industry remains one of the largest employers of children, much of it sanctioned by the law. Immigrant youth sent into the fields are among the most exploited workers.

Today, the ruling class thinks it can nullify the democratic and social gains won by generations through bitter class struggle. To prevent Trump and his ilk from stripping these rights away, workers must unite, regardless of race or ethnic background, and mobilize their collective strength.

This requires breaking free from the union bureaucracies, which are all offering their services to Trump’s government of oligarchs and fascists, and building rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves in every factory, school, neighborhood and workplace. The task today is to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and prepare the working class for the battles ahead.



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