

The coming of the Industrial Revolution towards the close of the 18th century very materially changed the conditions under which young persons, as well as adults, were employed; children who formerly worked in their own homes or as apprentices in those of their masters, were now employed on mechanical processes in factories. In these factories, often ill-adapted for human occupation, the labour was unremitting and physically exacting, and the children's opportunities of learning a trade to provide for their future were practically non-existent.

The new conditions were met by new legislation, but not before much hardship had been endured by the child earners, many of whom were daily working long hours at an age when they are now generally considered too young even to attend school. The movement for the regulation of child labour in factories dates from the early part of the 19th century, the first Act of this kind being passed in 1802; this, however, aimed only at improving the condition of apprentices in cotton mills. It was not until seventeen years later that an Act was passed regulating the employment of children other than apprentices. The Factory Act of 1833, as well as other Acts, both before and after that year, contained further legislation correcting the worst abuses under which child earners laboured in factories, while an Act passed in 1842 was a first attempt to protect children employed in mines.

Constant improvement in working conditions for children has been effected from decade to decade in Great Britain. The latest outstanding legislation was the Fisher Education Act of 1918, which contained many important restrictions on the employment of children, as well as providing stringent school attendance laws.

Child Labour in Canada.—Industrial conditions in the earlier history of Canada did not call for child labour regulation. The children of early settlers were pressed into the hard service that life in pioneer days demanded from all hands, and it is not likely that the old idea of the sinfulness of so-called idleness was disregarded in the treatment of the young. But, as in the early days of apprenticeship in England, children were mainly employed in and about the homes and farms, where the work, though strenuous, was not attended by the wholesale evils that later inflicted so much suffering upon employees in unregulated factories.

With the gradual extension of the factory system in this country, however, the need for protective legislation developed, and a series of provincial laws and regulations has grown up to govern the employment of children. These laws, based largely upon British legislation, are constantly being extended with the spread of industry in the various provinces. It is gratifying to note that, on the whole, the Canadian standard of child labour protection is higher than is recommended in the draft conventions and recommendations of the International Labour Conference.

Most of the laws relating to child earners are contained in provincial Acts regulating labour in factories, shops, offices and mines. Besides the laws which expressly limit or regulate child labour, the provincial School Acts are an important factor in the protection of children, since regular employment is impossible for those of the ages of compulsory school attendance. The connection between school and labour laws is particularly evident in the use of employment certificates, based on educational tests, which are a condition of the employment of young persons in Quebec and Ontario.

Table 18 is a comparative statement of the laws regulating child labour in the various provinces, and is based on data compiled by the Department of Labour and the Canadian Council of Child Welfare.