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*Adolescent Girl, a Spinner, in a Carolina Cotton Mill, 1908.
Lewis W. Hine. Courtesy Princeton University Art Museum.*

Paper

Focusing on “The Human Document”

Lewis Hine and the Role of Photography in Child Labor Reform in Early Twentieth-Century America

Miranda Jessop

LEWIS WICKES HINE, NOW KNOWN AS THE FATHER OF SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY photography, changed the course of the child labor reform movement of the early twentieth century. The incorporation of his potent photographs of pitiful child laborers into the literature of the private, non-profit National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) and the reactions they elicited from the public revolutionized social reform. Simply put, his photographs, personal and powerful, changed public opinion as they were publicized in investigation reports, exhibition panels, posters, and newspapers. As Hine’s work reached increasingly larger numbers of Americans, it swayed public opinion in favor of child labor reform, which led to the passage of the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act of 1916, a federal law that restricted child labor.

Child labor has its roots in the Industrial Revolution, which increased the demand for cheap labor. Agricultural production accelerated and the manufacturing of goods moved from the home into newly-built factories. Large populations followed employment opportunities to urban areas where men, women, and children found work in new centers of industry. Employers quickly recognized the economic advantages of hiring children, whose wages were less than those of their adult counterparts. America’s first factory, built by Samuel Slater in Pawtucket, Rhode Island in 1790, was filled with child laborers.¹ Not only

1. Walter I. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children: A History of the National Child Labor Committee and Child Labor Reform in America* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 26.

was child labor significantly cheaper, but “it was also believed [that children] were more tractable, reliable, and industrious . . . and as labor unions developed, less likely to strike.”² Factory managers saw children as ideal employees.

Although several states passed laws regulating or restricting child labor during the mid-nineteenth century, these laws were largely unenforced by government officials or sidestepped by employers. Following the conclusion of the Civil War, industrial growth and expansion exploded during what came to be known as the second Industrial Revolution. All of America’s major industries became increasingly mechanized, driving up the demand for cheap, unskilled labor. Consequently, the number of child laborers grew quickly. The 1870 census was the first to count the number of children that were “engaged in gainful occupations.”³ By 1880, a little over a million children fell into this census category. Within the next two decades, that number had nearly doubled. The 1900 census records that approximately 1.75 million American children were employed;⁴ however, this number only represents working children between the ages of ten and fourteen. Thousands of younger children were also employed, increasing the total estimate to approximately 2 million.⁵

Progressive social groups began to oppose child labor during the final years of the nineteenth century. However, their attention was often divided between causes, and their strategies varied. Some organizations, such as the American Academy of Political and Social Science, published reports and articles decrying the issue. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) took up the cause of child labor in the late 1890s increasing public awareness of the need for child labor legislation in Alabama through the publication of leaflets and newspaper articles. Their efforts saw some success there in 1903, due in large part to the writings of Edgar Murphy, an influential member of the Alabama Child Labor Committee.⁶

The membership of the New York Child Labor Committee, which had been founded the November prior, included Hunter and Florence Kelley and Felix Adler. Like the AFL, they saw some success in the passage of five state

2. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children*, 27.

3. Julia E. Johnsen, *Selected Articles on Child Labor* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1925), 28.

4. Hugh D. Hindman, *Child Labor: An American History* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 32.

5. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children*, 41.

6. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children*, 47–51, 55.

child labor bills;⁷ however, they recognized the need for a federal law. The two child labor committees soon joined forces, and on 15 April 1904, the National Child Labor Committee met for the first time under the direction of Felix Adler as president and Edgar Murphy as secretary. That night, Adler delivered a speech in which he emphasized the importance of gathering information about child labor "since a knowledge of the facts will be the most useful of all means of accomplishing results."⁸ In essence, the newly formed NCLC saw the collection and publication of data as its greatest asset in agitating for child labor legislation. However, they were unable to repeat Murphy's success on the national stage.

At the time of the NCLC's conception, large numbers of children were hired in coal mines, glass houses, and textile factories. Still more worked in agricultural production, while others did "homework" in the tenements. The NCLC published some thirty-five hundred pieces of literature and announcements and 45,500 pamphlets in a single year, each containing detailed statistical descriptions of child labor, or the "facts" Adler had emphasized. It also published the proceedings of its conferences in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*.⁹ Although their written material proliferated, the NCLC's publications would not have the desired effect on public opinion until they included Lewis Hine's photographs.

Lewis Wickes Hine was born in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in 1874. He began working in a furniture factory at the young age of sixteen in order to support his mother and sister following his father's suicide.¹⁰ Over the next five years, he also worked cutting wood, delivering packages, and selling door to door while attending night school. With the help of Frank Manny, an educator at the Ethical Culture School and progressive reformer, Hine enrolled at the University of Chicago in 1900 and went on to receive a master's degree in pedagogy from New York University in 1905.¹¹ During this time, he made the acquaintance of Felix Adler and Owen Lovejoy, who would succeed Adler as the president of the NCLC.

7. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children*, 57.

8. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children*, 58–59.

9. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children*, 75.

10. Mary Panzer, *Lewis Hine* (New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002), 3.

11. Kate Sampsell-Willmann, *Lewis Hine as Social Critic* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 18.

In the summer of 1908, Hine left his teaching position and became a full-time photographer for the NCLC.¹² During the next decade, he wrote detailed investigation reports, took thousands of photographs, and headed exhibitions for the NCLC, sometimes traveling as many as thirty thousand miles in a single year—all in an effort to raise public awareness and call for social change.¹³ Hine would become known as “the father of social documentary photography” because of his powerful photographs, which were a result of both his artistic style and ideology.¹⁴ His work focused on what he called “the human document;”¹⁵ his photographs emphasized people over conditions.¹⁶ In a letter likely addressed to one of Hine’s former associates at the Ethical Center School, Hine wrote, “My child labor photos have already set the authorities to work to see ‘if such things can be possible.’ They try to get around them by crying ‘fake,’ but therein lies the value of data & a witness. My ‘sociological horizon’ broadens hourly.”¹⁷ In the years that followed, the detailed data of the NCLC would authenticate Hine’s photographs, the purpose and power of which lay in transforming bystanders into witnesses.

In June 1909, Hine delivered a lecture titled “Social Photography: How the Camera May Help in the Social Uplift” at the thirty-sixth annual session of the National Conference of Charities and Correction in Buffalo, New York. While using a stereopticon, a type of slide projector, to present his photographs, Hine outlined what he believed to be the reason for photography’s pivotal role in social reform:

We might pause to ask where lies the power in a picture. Whether it be a painting or a photograph, the picture is a symbol that brings one immediately into close touch with reality. It speaks a language learned early in the race and in the individual . . . For us older children, the picture continues to tell a story packed into the most condensed and vital form. In fact, it is often more effective than the reality would have been, because, in the picture, the non-essential and conflicting interests have been eliminated. The picture is the language of all nationalities and all ages.¹⁸

12. Daile Kaplan, ed., *Photo Story: Selected Letters and Photographs of Lewis W. Hine* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 4.

13. Panzer, *Lewis Hine*, 7.

14. Sampsell-Willmann, *Lewis Hine as Social Critic*, 3.

15. Sampsell-Willmann, *Lewis Hine as Social Critic*, 21.

16. Sampsell-Willmann, *Lewis Hine as Social Critic*, 63.

17. Kaplan, ed., *Photo Story*, 7.

18. Lewis W. Hine, “Social Photography; How the Camera May Help in the Social Uplift,” *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction at the Thirty-sixth*

Each of Hine's photographs was carefully crafted. Although his subject matter was by no means fabricated, his photographs were a calculated portrayal of the truth. Rather than focus on the factory itself or the sheer number of child laborers within it, Hine presented the public with the coal-blackened face or mangled hand of a single child, or the dirty, barefoot appearance of small groups of child laborers in mines, fields, factories, and city streets. Hine held his camera level with the faces of his subjects, forcing the viewer to look directly into their eyes.

Academics have long argued that photographs are not truthful representations of reality and therefore not reliable sources; however, historian Kate Sampsell-Willmann argues that historians are able to treat photographs "as primary sources of ideas."¹⁹ As the title of her book *Lewis Hine as Social Critic* indicates, she asserts that Hine was not only a photographer, but also a critic, and thus, when studied within the larger political, intellectual, and social context of the time, each photograph represents a specific ideological statement that is Hine's alone, not the camera's. This claim is of great significance to other scholars in that it reevaluates and reshapes the way historians use photographs; namely, as "primary sources of ideas" rather than fundamentally untrustworthy representations of the past. By effectively interpreting Hine's photographs as evidence of his own specific ideology, Sampsell's book helps historians to analyze photographs in a new way and to see Hine and other reformers as *both* artists and intellectuals. Decades before Sampsell, the NCLC recognized the potential power in Hine's method and harnessed it to communicate a specific message to the observer in order to change public opinion. For this reason, Hine and the NCLC published thousands of pages of literature featuring his photographs coupled with articles and reports detailing the conditions of child labor and calling for change.

The NCLC published ninety-one folders' worth of investigation reports, which included more than four hundred documents, each anywhere from one to several hundred pages in length. The majority of these reports were written between 1908 and 1915. Most are comprised of the notes of "a single investigator studying child labor conditions in a single industry in a single state or region," but some include the notes of multiple investigators about multiple industries in multiple states.²⁰ Each investigation, systematic in its organization

Annual Session held in the City of Buffalo, New York, June 9–16, 1909, (Fort Wayne, IN: Press of Fort Wayne, 1909), 355–59.

19. Sampsell-Willmann, *Lewis Hine as Social Critic*, 3.

20. Hindman, *Child Labor*, 379.

and meticulous in its detail, provided foundational evidence on which the NCLC built their case for child labor reform. Hine himself proved to be a valuable and resourceful investigator. In the late summer of 1908, he received his first traveling assignment from the NCLC leadership: Hine was to spend five weeks working in several industrial Midwest cities, West Virginian mining towns, and North Carolinian textile mills. As part of this assignment, Hine accompanied another NCLC investigator, Edward Clopper, who later wrote that Hine “displayed both tact and resourcefulness . . . and gathered a large amount of valuable material, not only photographic.”²¹ During this first investigative assignment, Hine produced more than 230 photographs.

In time, Hine, together with six other investigators, would write sixty-five of the NCLC’s ninety-one published reports. Trained in stenography, Hine was able to take detailed shorthand notes. When denied entrance by employers, he would pose as some kind of salesman or magazine representative in order to gain access to certain factories or mills. Ever resourceful, he often measured the children’s height against the buttonholes of his coat.²² In addition to the notes he kept on small cards hidden in his pocket, Hine took special care to record a detailed caption for each of his photographs. Between the years of 1908 and 1917, Hine’s notes and photographs were included in twenty-eight investigation reports ranging from New England textiles to California agriculture to Vermont street trades.²³ Like the leaders of the NCLC, Hine valued data in that it corroborated the social injustices exposed in his photographs, rendering his argument even more impactful.

“Child Labor in the Sugar-Beet Fields of Colorado” is one of the investigation reports that included both Hine’s photographs and Clopper’s writings. The text includes descriptions of the children, their work, and their families’ living conditions, as well as tables of statistics representing both the number and ages of children working in agriculture in relation to total enrollment, absences, and “per cent of pupils retarded, normal, ahead enrolled by grades.”²⁴ Hine’s photographs show young children hoeing, “topping,” “thinning,” and pulling beets. One photograph displays a boy holding a beet on one knee seconds before

21. Panzer, *Lewis Hine*, 32.

22. Hindman, *Child Labor*, 380.

23. Hindman, *Child Labor*, 384.

24. Edward N. Clopper and Lewis W. Hine, *Child Labor in the Sugar-Beet Fields of Colorado* (New York: National Child Labor Committee, Inc., 1916), 30.

using the enormous sixteen-inch knife in his hand to cut off the top of the beet. The text accompanying the image informs the reader that "as the knee is not protected, children not infrequently hook themselves in the leg."²⁵ Unlike the NCLC's earliest reports, which were comprised of only statistical data and saw limited success in the communities in which they were published, reports such as this one, which combined detailed findings with photographs, proved to be much more effective in changing public opinion because they put faces to previously impersonal numbers.

From 1913 to 1917, Hine worked as the head of the NCLC's exhibition department. To fulfill this role, he designed posters and prepared storyboards to illustrate the objectives of the NCLC.²⁶ He also gave presentations in which he used a stereopticon to project images of his photographs while lecturing. Hine's exhibits attracted thousands of people. In 1911, Hine directed the Child Welfare Exhibit in the seventy-first Regiment Armory in Manhattan. Approximately 2,050 people, nearly 10 percent of the total population of New York County at the time, attended the exhibit during the twenty-six days that it was open to the public.²⁷ Strings of statistics alone would never have elicited such a turnout. New Yorkers came to Hine's exhibit to look into the faces of child laborers, and were impacted by what they saw and felt. The exhibits provided a venue in which observers could have a personal experience with Hine's photographs and their subjects.

Exhibition panels, or posters combining Hine's images and powerful statements condemning child labor, were also an effective way to broadcast the NCLC's message to the American people. They included such strong headlines as "Children may Escape the Cogs of the Machine but They Cannot Escape the Deadening Effect of Long Hours, Monotonous Toil, Loss of Education, Vicious Surroundings . . . Would You Care to Have Your Child Pay THIS Price?"²⁸ This particular poster features a photograph of a smiling "normal child" juxtaposed with a photograph of a deadpan "mill child." Hine's exhibitions often contrasted current work conditions with successful or ideal change, clearly illustrating the benefits of social reform.

25. Clopper and Hine, *Child Labor in the Sugar-Beet Fields of Colorado*, 12.

26. Panzer, *Lewis Hine*, 9.

27. Sampsell-Willmann, *Lewis Hine as Social Critic*, 82–83.

28. Panzer, *Lewis Hine*, 40.

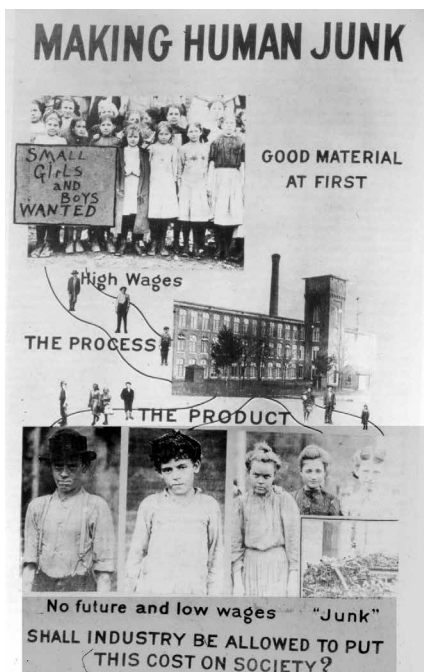


Figure 1.

At times, Hine edited his photographs in order to make his message as clear and effective as possible. For example, his poster “Making Human Junk” (figure 1), publicized in 1914 and 1915, provides a visual representation of children, “good material at first,” taken from the streets and forced to work in a textile factory—a process that turned them into “junk” with “no future and low wages.”²⁹ In order to make this message as powerful as possible, Hine cropped a smiling girl out of the photograph, leaving behind three straight-faced mill girls. By editing the photograph in this way, Hine again contrasts the images of children at work with those who attend school, visually reinforcing the NCLC’s demand for child labor legislation allowing children

to gain an education rather than toil in factories.

Similarly, another of the NCLC’s posters states, “‘Children are not equipped by experience to care for themselves in modern industry’ and so They Pay With a Maimed Life. Three times as many industrial accidents occur to children as adults.”³⁰ At the center of the poster (figure 2) are two of Hine’s photographs, both individual portraits of boys—one who lost his arm “running [a] saw in box factory,” ca. 1909, and a twelve-year-old boy who was employed in a cotton manufacturing company in North Carolina and fell into the gears of a spinning machine, which tore off two of his fingers in 1912.³¹ This poster provides a simple example of the powerful addition of Hine’s photographs to the NCLC’s emphasis on presenting the facts of child labor to the public. Rather than simply reading that “three times as many industrial accidents occur to children

29. Sampsell-Willmann, *Lewis Hine as Social Critic*, 81.

30. “1913: The Exploitation of Child Workers.” http://inquiryunlimited.org/ss_1900s/1913_child_labor/1913_child_labor.html (accessed April 1, 2017).

31. Panzer, *Lewis Hine*, 80.

as adults," the viewer is confronted with the small, mangled bodies and pitiful faces of two child laborers. This added a human element to the NCLC's publications that had been largely missing prior to the inclusion of Hine's photographs.

One of Hine's most powerful posters, published in 1913, includes a map of the United States filled with dozens of photographs of child laborers (figure 3). The images have been resized and cropped in order to completely fill the space with the faces of children at work. The map is surrounded with a chain whose links are labeled with the names of the industries that NCLC members thought were to blame for what they saw as injustice toward child laborers. Beneath this, the poster cries out, "Child Labor is a National Menace / THE CHILD LABOR CHAIN / Shall

We Let Industry Shackle the Nation."³² Although each child's portrait is compelling on its own, the placement of multiple photographs within the "chained" United States makes the NCLC's purpose clearer and more powerful, conveying in moments what would normally fill pages of an investigative report.

Although Hine's photographs were published in the thousands of pages of NCLC investigation reports, they reached an even wider audience through newspapers and other periodicals. The 8 January 1910 edition of *Harper's Weekly*, a popular illustrated news journal that had surpassed two hundred thousand copies per issue,³³ included an article by Frank Marshall White titled "The Babies Who Work." The article discusses the proposed "Children's Bureau" bill that was to be introduced in the next session of Congress. In addition to describing

32. Hindman, *Child Labor*, 82.

33. Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1956), 55.

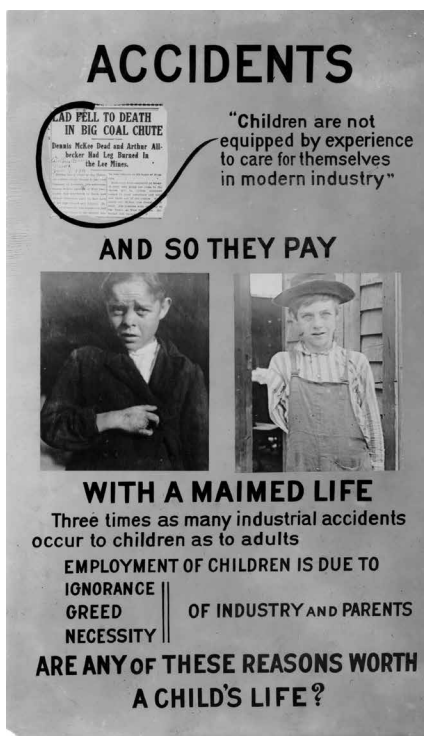


Figure 2.



Figure 3.

Hine saw the most widespread publication of his photographs in 1914 and 1915 as the NCLC used them to garner support for the Palmer-Owen bill, which was introduced in Congress during this time. Like the Beveridge bill of 1906, the Palmer-Owen bill established fourteen as the minimum age for factory work and limited the workday of employees between the ages of fourteen and sixteen to eight hours; however, it also banned products of child labor from interstate commerce.³⁴ On 15 July 1914, the *Willmar Tribune* of Minnesota published a short article titled “Dr. Adler Favors Palmer-Owen Bill: Child Labor Measure Pending Before Congress—Federal Law Badly Needed” together with Hine’s photograph of a boy “at midnight in a glass factory.” This article, like the one in *Harper’s Weekly* a few years earlier, effectively connected Hine’s photographs

the reasons necessitating the creation of the Children’s Bureau, the article also provides statistical information regarding child labor in the United States and ends by explicitly stating the aims of the NCLC. The article is illustrated with four large prints of Hine’s photographs, including a six-year-old newsboy, “a child spinner,” “a typical group of spinners,” (the youngest of which had already been working there for five years), and “a group of spinners and doffers in a South Carolina cotton-mill, where they work twelve hours daily.” These photographs heighten the effect of the article by presenting the reader with a visual representation of those who would be affected by the creation of the Children’s Bureau and introducing the reader to the work of the NCLC.

34. Hindman, *Child Labor*, 65.

with the current political question of child labor. The Palmer-Owen bill passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 237 to 45 on 13 February 1915.³⁵

The Evening Star in Washington, D.C., as well as numerous other newspapers across the nation, often published short announcements about upcoming NCLC conferences or exhibits. In this case, "Children's Labor Conference Topic: National Organization to Meet in Washington Tuesday and Wednesday," was published in the 3 January 1915 paper. Later that month, the paper printed a half-page spread titled "Child Labor Exhibit for Panama-Pacific Exposition" that included five of Hine's photographs which were labeled "New York Tenement Workers Making Artificial Flowers," "Boy Worker in a Cotton Mill," "These Little Girls Shucked Oysters in a Canning Factory," "The Children Work All Day Picking Nuts," and "Children in the Field Picking Cotton." These photographs again lend the article, which includes statistics about the widespread and exploitative nature of child labor and details about the federal child labor bill drafted by the NCLC, new weight and meaning.

Although the Palmer-Owen bill passed in the House of Representatives on in 1915, it was blocked in the Senate, and the session ended without a vote on this issue. To avoid a second dismissal of its bill, the NCLC mounted a concerted effort to disseminate their information from August to December of that same year. To accomplish this, a series of the NCLC's articles was published throughout the country. These included "No Children in the Mines: California Eliminates Children Under Sixteen From Mines and Quarries," "Forestalling Child Labor," "Special Favors to Tennessee Cannery: Amendment to Child Labor Law Passed This Year—Need for a Federal Law," and "Messenger Service a 'Crime Factory,'" among others. The articles usually included one or two of Hine's portrait photographs of boys working in coal mines. Within a few months, these articles appeared in Newberry, South Carolina's *The Herald and News*; Berea, Kentucky's *The Citizen*; *The Bismarck Daily Tribune*; *The Guthrie Daily Leader*; *The Ogden Standard*; *The Labor World*; *Golden Valley Chronicle*; *The Patriot Volume*; and other newspapers across the country. Many people who otherwise would not have viewed Hine's photographs or read the NCLC's statistics were exposed to both through these newspapers.

The Palmer-Owen proposition was successfully reintroduced in the next session of Congress as the Keating-Owen bill. Leading newspapers in at least

35. Hindman, *Child Labor*, 66.

thirty-two states published editorials in support of the Keating-Owen bill.³⁶ Some rallied support through emotional appeals. One impassioned article published in the *Chicago Tribune* declared, “[Child labor] challenges our hearts and our brains. There should be no more doubt about its abolition than about the enforcement of a statute against murder, or the appropriation of money to check a plague.”³⁷ The publication of the detailed findings of the NCLC’s investigations, coupled with Hine’s photographs, “challenged” both the mind and heart of the nation.

Despite this display of public support for the bill, it was repeatedly struck from the Senate calendar by those who opposed it. This opposition came primarily from manufacturing Southern Congressmen who claimed the bill violated states’ rights. Although the House passed the bill by a vote of 343 to 46 (a vote that transcended party lines), Senator Lee Overman of North Carolina caused the bill to be set aside again in early June 1916, just before Congress recessed for the national political conventions. During these conventions, in response to the public’s growing awareness and concern, both the Republicans and the Democrats adopted planks favoring “the prohibition of child labor”³⁸ to their platforms. In spite of this, Southern Congressmen continued to oppose the Keating-Owen bill and even threatened to filibuster the bill if it was introduced again. However, a month later, due to “public pressure for immediate enactment,”³⁹ President Woodrow Wilson announced to party leaders that he would not accept the Democratic renomination unless the Keating-Owen bill was passed during the current session.

The bill was reintroduced on the Senate floor on 3 August 1916. This time it passed by a vote of 52 to 12 with 32 Senators abstaining from the vote. On 1 September, President Wilson signed the Keating-Owen bill into law. The next day, he formally accepted the Democratic renomination and discussed some of his achievements, including “the emancipation of the children of the nation by releasing them from hurtful labor.”⁴⁰ The public had been heard in the highest levels of government; the “chain of child labor” had been broken.

The NCLC saw minimal success in affecting public opinion and the passage of child labor legislation during its first few years of operation. However,

36. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children*, 126.

37. “Child Labor,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 28, 1916.

38. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children*, 129.

39. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children*, 130.

40. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children*, 131.

the inclusion of Lewis Hine's powerful, personal photographs transformed the NCLC's literature from strings of faceless statistics into shocking, intimate confrontations with the harsh realities of child labor. Rather than simply reading the details of an investigative report, readers now looked into the young, innocent faces of child laborers. The combination of the NCLC's meticulous statistics and writings with Hine's compelling photographs in investigative reports, exhibition panels, posters, and newspapers changed public opinion as an increasingly larger percentage of the American population was exposed to Hine's "human document." In response to the rising public outcry over child labor, Congress passed the Keating-Owen bill, establishing maximum workday and minimum age parameters for child laborers. Lewis Hine set a new standard for using photography to garner support for social reform by directing the public eye to shocking images of conditions and lives he wanted to change.

Miranda Jessop is an aspiring historian who loves learning and sharing knowledge with others. She studied German for six years before serving in the Illinois Chicago West Mission, Spanish-speaking. Miranda currently studies both languages, is part of the BYU Honors Program, maintains a 4.0 GPA, and works as a closed captioner at BYU Broadcasting. She enjoys exploring the world through music and dance. For years, she danced as a soloist and member of the company class of the Utah Artists' School of Ballet and is now part of BYU Folk Dance. In her free time, she also likes to cycle and spend time with her four younger brothers, who have taught her football skills, tae kwon do moves, and how to laugh. Miranda also has a passion for service and has spent time volunteering in high school credit recovery classes and teaching free English classes to Spanish speakers. Miranda recently received the Sechin Jagchid Award in Non-Western History, is also being published in Spanish this semester, and will intern in the Volkskundemuseum (Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art) in Vienna this spring.