Document-Based Question

Industrialization and Child Labor in New York

Directions: The following questions are designed to test your ability to work with historical documents. As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of the document and the author’s point of view.

Historical Context:

Children in America worked long before the Industrial Revolution. While industrialization did not create child labor, it did change the nature and places in which children worked, especially after the Civil War. More children began working outside the family home or farm, under circumstances that were harmful to their development, if not downright hazardous to their health and safety. Beginning in the 1890s, progressive reformers and labor leaders began drawing attention to the circumstances under which children worked and pressing for laws to eliminate child labor.

Following the disastrous Triangle shirtwaist factory fire in 1911, the New York State Legislature created the Factory Investigating Commission to study the conditions under which workers of all ages labored. Investigators discovered families, including children as young as five, engaged in manufacturing tasks under horrific conditions in their own tenement apartments. The commission sponsored changes in state law to prohibit children under fourteen from being employed at factory work in any location, including tenement houses. Yet, as their progressive forebears had learned and their New Deal successors would soon discover, support for regulation of child labor was far from unanimous. State and federal child labor laws were struck down as unconstitutional and a federal Child Labor Amendment failed to gain adequate support among the states. For some parents, regulation infringed upon their right to run their own households and decide what was best for their own children.

Still, great progress was made in reducing child labor through state laws and under the short-lived National Recovery Act of 1933. Federal regulation of child labor became permanent in 1941 when the United States Supreme Court upheld the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act. Nevertheless, child labor endures even today in certain economic sectors and within specific cultural groups.

Task:

Using the information from the following documents, and your own knowledge of history, answer the questions in Part A that follow each document. Your answers to these questions will help you complete the writing assignment given in Part B.
PART A: SHORT-ANSWER QUESTIONS

Read and analyze each document and answer each of the questions in the space provided.

Document 1

Series 12979, Union label registration application files, 1889-1943, New York State Department of State.

1. Why do you think the cigar makers’ union put this label on its products?

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2. The label uses the terms “coolie,” “prison,” and “filthy tenement-house workmanship.” Discuss why you think the union used these terms. Do we still have these biases today?

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3. In the late 19th century, the term “coolie” was often used as a derogatory word to refer to low-wage workers of Asian descent. Are there any immigrant groups that are discriminated against in the labor force today?

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Excerpt 1

The Commission's investigation showed that work was carried on in tenement houses for factories under the most unsanitary conditions, and that the system of licensing tenements for manufacturing purposes in no way insured the work being carried on under proper conditions. Investigators found work carried on in rooms in which there were persons suffering from contagious and infectious diseases—scarlet fever, diphtheria, measles, typhoid, and tuberculosis.

Our investigators found among home working families, many cases of impetigo, a loathsome skin trouble, which is contagious. Children suffering with this disease were found playing with manufactured products. In one case a girl suffering from the disease was found picking nuts for a factory.

Excerpt 2

Another great evil of tenement house manufacturing was the fact that it made legally possible the work of little children in manufacturing pursuits at home, when the law rigidly excludes them from such occupations in the factories. Children as young as five, six, and seven years of age were found doing this work. One little girl, aged 7, testified that she worked until eight o'clock in the evening.
Excerpt 3

BILL RECOMMENDED BY THE COMMISSION.

In view of these findings the recommendations of the Commission were most conservative in character. They were embraced under the following heads:

1. Prohibition of the employment of children under fourteen years of age in tenement house work. (It was felt, however, that no system of inspection to which the State could resort, would effectually prevent such employment.)

2. Immediate prohibition of work in tenement houses on all articles likely to become contaminated, and therefore injurious to public health; or on articles from which it is clear that disease may be communicated.

Series A3024, Proofs of brief supporting the conviction of Jacob Balofsky, 1914, New York State Factory Investigating Commission.

1. In what year was this document written?

___________________________________________________________________________

2. Whose investigation and findings does this document describe?

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3. Name two ways in which you think child labor might have been harmful to children.

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4. The Commission’s recommendation #1 states, “(It was felt, however, that no system of inspection to which the State could resort, would effectually prevent such employment.)” Why do you think the Commission thought there was no way for the State to prevent the employment of children in tenement houses?

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§ 70. Employment of minors. No child under the age of fourteen years shall be employed, permitted or suffered to work in or in connection with any factory in this state, or for any factory at any place in this state. No child between the ages of fourteen and sixteen years shall be so employed, permitted or suffered to work unless an employment certificate, issued as provided in this article, shall have been theretofore filed in the office of the employer at the place of employment of such child. Nothing herein contained shall prevent a person engaged in farming from permitting his children to do farm work for him upon his farm. Boys over the age of twelve years may be employed in gathering produce, for not more than six hours in any one day, subject to the requirements of chapter twenty-one of the laws of nineteen hundred and nine, entitled “An act relating to education, constituting chapter sixteen of the consolidated laws,” and all acts amendatory thereof.

§ 3. This act shall take effect immediately.
Questions for Document 2b

1. Why do you think the 1913 law prohibited children under the age of 14 from working in tenement houses, but allowed them to work on their families’ farms?

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2. Why do you think the 1909 law that addresses the employment of minors was called “An act relating to education?” How are child labor and education related?

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Letter from WPA Teachers Union to Governor Lehman expressing the union members' position on child labor.

In the midst of a concerted drive to defeat the passage of the Child Labor Amendment, the action of the New York State Senate is highly commendable. We believe that your activity played a very important part in this campaign.

The passage of the Child Labor Amendment is of vital significance to the trade union movement. Unscrupulous employers have not hesitated to use child labor to lower the wage standards of organized labor. They have not hesitated to stum the growth and educational development of millions of children for the sake of profits.

We therefore wholeheartedly endorse this amendment and urge that you use your good offices in securing the passage of this amendment by the Senate.

Respectfully yours,

Morris Levine,
Secretary
Questions for Document 3

1. When was this letter written?

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2. To whom was the letter written?

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3. What group was responsible for sending the letter?

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4. What national issue triggered the union to write to the Governor?

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5. Is the WPA Teachers Union for or against the passage of the Child Labor Amendment? Why are they for or against it? Give two reasons.

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6. Why do you think some children had to work at such a young age?

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Document 4
Telegram from the Mrs. of Nassau County to Governor Lehman protesting the Child Labor Amendment on the grounds of government encroachment on family decisions.

Series 13682-53, Central subject and correspondence files, 1933-1942, New York State Governor Herbert H. Lehman.

1. To whom was this telegram sent?

2. What group’s views does the telegram represent?

3. Are “the Mrs. of Nassau County” for or against the passage of the Child Labor Amendment? Why are they for or against it?
PART B: ESSAYS

Essay 1

Using information and evidence from all of the documents to support your thinking, and using your own knowledge of history, write an essay that describes how industrialization impacted children. Your essay should be well organized and should include an introduction, at least three paragraphs, and a conclusion.
PART B

Essay 2

Using information and evidence from all of the documents to support your thinking, and using your own knowledge of history, write an essay that presents your opinion on whether the government should be allowed to restrict child labor or whether parents should be allowed to make decisions regarding their children’s employment. Your essay should be well organized and should include an introduction, at least three paragraphs, and a conclusion.