

THE PASSING OF THE BREAKER BOY*

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"Give us enough jigs and we wouldn't have any boys—jigs do the work much better," said the foreman of a Pennsylvania coal breaker recently. (A "jig" is a mechanical slate picker which can do the work of ten breaker boys.) As fast as they can afford to do so, the coal companies are installing "jigs" or other mechanical pickers so that they need no longer be dependent on young boys to pick slate from coal.

The interesting fact about this situation is the part the new child labor law has played in convincing the coal companies that mechanical pickers are more economical than boy labor. Mechanical pickers are not recent inventions. Jigs were in use when the National Child Labor Committee first investigated the coal breakers in 1904. They were experiments then but have since been perfected. It took the child labor law of 1915, however, to supply the impetus necessary to bring about the general installation of the pickers. The clause in the law which requires children between 14 and 16 to attend continuation schools eight hours a week is not popular with the coal companies. When the law went into effect some of the companies discharged all breaker boys under 16. One breaker which used to employ 50 boys is now employing 20 because all under 16 were discharged when the new law went into effect. Most of the companies, however, kept what boys under 16 they had on their payroll, and are sending them to continuation school in accordance with the law, but are not taking on any more boys of 14 and 15. Since few boys of 16 and over are willing to do the disagreeable work of the breaker boy at the breaker boy's wage, which averages about \$1.10 a day, the inevitable result is the installation of mechanical pickers. One breaker, which formerly employed 120 boys, was employing 45 last spring after the law had gone into effect and the foreman said that the company was going to put in more jigs this summer so that in the fall only 12 boys would be employed in the breaker for odd jobs. Another foreman who used to employ

* Based on an investigation of Pennsylvania coal-breakers, April, 1916.

110 boys now employs only 23 and expects to eliminate all of them by putting in more jigs. In fact *every* foreman interviewed stated that it was the intention of the company to install mechanical pickers as rapidly as possible so as to eliminate most, if not all, of the boys. Most of the foremen consider the jig the most satisfactory of the mechanical pickers. With the Emery picker, which picks the coal dry, it is necessary to employ boys on the "tailings" as the mechanical picker cannot be relied upon to reduce the slate to as low a per cent as is required. Only one foreman was satisfied with the work of the Emery picker and he intends to install more of them in order to reduce the number of boys.

No feeling of bitterness toward the law was expressed by any of the foremen, and there was apparently no effort to evade it. There was some doubt expressed as to the value the school work would be to the boys but there was no feeling that the coal companies had been harmed by it. Two foremen expressed themselves as positively in favor of the law, saying that they considered it a good thing. It was hard to get older labor, one said, but he did not blame anybody for not wanting to work in the dust of the chutes. (The dust in this breaker was the worst seen anywhere but the foreman said it was not bad on that day compared with other days when it was not so damp.) The other foreman was running a small breaker on the top of a mountain about two miles from the nearest town, where it seemed as if he might easily evade the law if he chose to do so. But instead of that he was heartily in sympathy with it and cooperating in its enforcement. Another foreman produced a card which he said he had received from the superintendent of the continuation school that morning informing him that one of his boys had been absent from the school. "Its up to me to get that boy 'out on the carpet,' " remarked the foreman. Practically all of the companies showed the same desire to live up to the law as long as they had boys of 14 and 15 in their employ but they were even more anxious to get enough mechanical pickers so that they would not need these boys any longer. A jig costs \$500 and since it does the work of 10 boys at \$1.10 a day, in 48 days it has paid for itself and begins to make money for the company. It is the best example up to the present of the economy of automatic substitutes for child labor—economy which the employer is frequently slow to perceive without the help of a stringent child labor law.