

## **The Fair Labor Standards Act** <sup>[1]</sup>

The Fair Labor Standards Act, signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 25, 1938, revolutionized the federal government's oversight of industry. Although it directly impacted only about a quarter of American workers, in affected industries, it banned oppressive child labor, limited the workweek to 44 hours, and established a minimum wage of 25 cents an hour.

While campaigning for reelection in 1936, Roosevelt had been handed a note by a young girl in a crowd. The note read,

I wish you could do something to help us girls....We have been working in a sewing factory... and up to a few months ago we were getting our minimum pay of \$11 a week... Today the 200 of us girls have been cut down to \$4 and \$5 and \$6 a week.

Asked about the note by a reporter, the President replied, "Something has to be done about the elimination of child labor and long hours and starvation wages." But the Supreme Court had ruled similar laws unconstitutional, and many members of Congress, including members of Roosevelt's own Democratic party, were opposed to federal regulation of labor and employment -- especially representatives from the South.

But millions of Americans were in the same situation as the young girl in the crowd, and public opinion was on his side. In a poll in early 1938, 67 percent of voters supported the bill. In a "fireside chat" on the radio the night before he signed the bill into law, Roosevelt told listeners to ignore the dire warnings of industrialists. "Do not let any calamity-howling executive with an income of \$1,000 a day... tell you... that a wage of \$11 a week is going to have a disastrous effect on all American industry." Today, with our wide range of laws regulating industry and labor, a minimum wage of 25 cents an hour may seem trivial. But in 1938, it was a big step.

## **Workers opposed to the law**

Not all workers appreciated the new regulations. Women who worked at home doing "piece work" for industries faced unemployment when the minimum wage went into effect. And in the oral history excerpt below, a textile worker recalls thinking the limit on the workweek was "the stupidest thing I ever heard."

[Mary Thompson describes her reaction to FDR's 8-hour workday.](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

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[industry](#) <sup>[5]</sup>

[labor](#) <sup>[6]</sup>

[North Carolina History](#) <sup>[7]</sup>

[Page](#) <sup>[8]</sup>

[reform](#) <sup>[9]</sup>

[Regulation](#) <sup>[10]</sup>

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### **Primary Sources:**

[The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, As Amended](#) <sup>[16]</sup>

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[1] <https://ncpedia.org/anchor/fair-labor-standards-act> [2] <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/the-history-of-the-americas/like-a-family-the-making-of-a-southern-cotton-mill-world/work-and-protest-interviews> [3] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/government> [4] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/history> [5] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/industry> [6] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/labor> [7] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/north-carolina-6> [8] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/page> [9] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/reform> [10] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/regulation> [11] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/students> [12] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/teachers> [13] <https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/creative-commons> [14] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/anchor-north> [15] <https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/flsa1938> [16] <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WHD/legacy/files/FairLaborStandAct.pdf>