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## Opposition to child labour

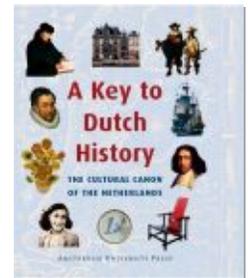
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A Key to Dutch History: The Cultural Canon of the Netherlands.

Amsterdam University Press, 2007.

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## Nineteenth century

# Opposition to child labour

### Out of the workplace and back to school

Child labour was a normal and usual occurrence in the nineteenth century. Children worked on the land and in shops or workshops. This was considered very sensible – they could learn a trade in this way – but often it was necessary for children to work to supplement the family income. When, during the Industrial Revolution, children were put to work in factories as well, more and more objections were raised against child labour – at least in factories.

Working conditions in factories were usually very poor. A well-known story is that of Petrus Regout's glass factory in Maastricht, where the kilns burned day and night. The factory had two shifts of workers, each working twelve hours at a stretch. Half-asleep, children aged between eight and ten years old would have to walk to work at about midnight to start their shift. Regout saw no problem in this. He believed that children could do with less sleep.

In about 1860, criticism of child labour became more intense. Doctors and teachers explained that working was unhealthy and that the proper place for children was at school. Factory operators began to realise that children would be better off starting work once they had completed their primary education. Moreover, children aged twelve years and older who could read and write could be put to better use in the factories. At the same time, the need for child labour decreased as increasingly more work was done by machines. The attitude of parents also began to change with the times. As their wages began to rise and the need to supplement their income with their children's wages became less pressing, parents started to send their children to school more often and for longer periods of time.

Two Acts contributed to this development. The *Kinderwet van Van Houten* (the Child Labour Act of 1874) prohibited

children under the age of twelve from working in workshops and factories. This did not mean, however, that child labour in factories was fully abolished with immediate effect. Furthermore, children were not prohibited from doing farm work. The *Leerplichtwet* (Compulsory Education Act of 1900) put an end to

child labour once and for all. From that time onwards, parents were obliged to send children aged between seven and twelve years old to school. In practice, most parents were already doing so. By about 1900, ninety percent of all children were attending school.



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## Sub-topics

### Primary education sector

Children as factory workers (only one hundred years ago)  
The way of life at the bottom of society in the nineteenth century  
Improvements in primary education in the nineteenth century

### Secondary education sector

The novel (condemnation) *Fabriekskinderen* by J.J. Cremer  
Industrialisation in the Netherlands compared to countries like Belgium and England  
Charles Dickens  
School-funding controversy, relating primarily to the equal treatment in financial terms of private and state schools  
Social legislation in the Netherlands in the long term

### Past and Present

Child labour today in Third-World countries

### In the Treasure Chest

Nineteenth-century primer or writing materials that were used in primary schools

## References

### Places to Go

Leiden: the Lakenhal Museum  
Losser: Grenshistorisch Smokkel- en Textielmuseum [historical smuggling and textile museum in a border region]  
Rotterdam: National Museum of Education  
Arnhem: Open-air Museum

### Books for young people

Catherine Chambers, *Kinderarbeid* (10+ info)  
Martine Letterie, *Opa Sigaar* (8+)  
Martine Letterie, *Broer in de fabriek* (8+)

### Background literature

Willemien Schenkeveld, *Het kinderwetje van Van Houten*. (Verloren verleden 22), Hilversum 2003  
Willemien Schenkeveld, "Maastricht: de fabrieken van Petrus Regout: Kinderarbeid en de wet-Van Houten" in Jan Bank and Marita Mathijsen, *Plaatsen van herinnering: Nederland in de negentiende eeuw*, Amsterdam 2006

### Websites

[www.schooltv.nl/vroegerenzo](http://www.schooltv.nl/vroegerenzo) [child labour]  
[www.kennisnet.nl/po/leerkracht/perdagwijzer/kinderarbeid](http://www.kennisnet.nl/po/leerkracht/perdagwijzer/kinderarbeid)  
[www.onderwijsmuseum.nl](http://www.onderwijsmuseum.nl)