How inviting it looks, the fruit laid out for us in grocery stores and supermarkets in a profusion of bright color. Red, green, yellow, orange, purple. Cherries, grapes, berries. Apples and oranges, bananas, peaches—oh, especially the peaches. Or maybe you prefer apricots, maybe melons, or something else from nature's overflowing cornucopia.

And the vegetables, their color subdued, but their variety and quantity as great as the fruit—yellow corn, green peas, carrots, potatoes, squash. And lettuce, of course, and cauliflower, and so much more.

It's a daily show of the great abundance of food that springs from the fertile soil of many, many farms and is rushed to stores and markets for our choosing.

But what of the people who clamber up and down ladders, reaching high in trees to pluck fruit for us? Who pluck it from bushes or vines? Reaching, stretching and picking. Reach, stretch, pick. Reach, stretch, pick . . . Their dirty, sweaty work seems endless.

And what of those who wield short-handled hoes as they scurry over dirt fields like spiders, bent double, rhythmically bending and straightening. Bending and straightening as they move swiftly along dirt rows to deftly free vegetables from the earth's grasp.

Much of that work is done by child labor. An estimated 400,000 workers 18 or younger—some as young as six—are among those who do the vital, difficult and dangerous work in our fields, orchards and vineyards, for poverty-level pay and few, if any, benefits or protections from some of the country's most exploitive employers.

Virtually all farm workers need our help, for virtually all are treated badly. But help is particularly needed by the younger farm workers, many of them migrants, who have virtually no say in how they're treated.

Twelve-year-old children often work in the fields 8 to 12 hours a day, sometimes more, six days a week when school's not in session, risking injury and poisoning from the pesticides that are regularly sprayed in areas where they work. They risk exhaustion and dehydration caused by working in the hot sun. And like most farm workers, the young often work in fields that lack such simple amenities as fresh drinking water and field toilets.
The young workers suffer fatalities at five times the rate of children doing other work, and far more disabling injuries. Although federal law prohibits children under 18 from doing hazardous work in other industries, it allows 16 and 17-year-olds to do hazardous work in agriculture, which the National Safety Council calls our most hazardous industry.

Even when school is in session, the youngsters are allowed to put in up to 18 hours of work per week, the main cause for their generally poor school attendance. They're too busy earning money for their poor families and just too tired anyway to attend. Many end up dropping out. Barely half manage to graduate from high school.

Some of the pre-school children of workers also are affected by the poor conditions and dangers. Their parents have no choice but to bring them along to the fields, many of them sprayed with pesticides. Many play around the dangerous heavy machinery used in harvesting, and some end up working along with their parents, who need whatever money their children can earn to help support their families.

U.S. agriculture is in many ways quite advanced, but its labor practices are strictly 19th century. We've come a long way since child labor was a common practice, and it's way past time that agriculture caught up.

That could happen with passage of a bill that's been pending in Congress for several years – the Children's Act for Responsible Employment, or CARE, that was introduced by Democratic Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard of Los Angeles.

The bill would generally bring the regulations setting limits on the working hours of young farm workers in line with those covering young workers in other industries. That would mean, for example, that workers would have to be at least 16 to work in agriculture and 18 or older to work in hazardous agricultural situations. Fines for violations by grower employers would increase to $15,000 per instance, and growers would face prison terms for repeated violations that lead to death or serious injury.

The bill, strongly supported by labor and civil rights groups, also would tighten restrictions on pesticide use, require full and regular reports and investigations of serious work-related injuries to younger workers and otherwise tighten and broaden enforcement.
The United States is under pressure from labor advocates in other nations to enact such legislation. As one advocate group says, "It's a matter of urgency" that the United States take a leadership role and update its laws and regulations on child labor.

The CARE bill would do just that and, if fully enforced, provide seriously needed help to some of our most vulnerable and most valuable workers.