

Student resistance grows, but real alternatives still needed for the Covid Generation

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Winter has closed in on the 'Covid Generation'. Youth unemployment continues to creep up, with over 10 per cent of 18-24 year-olds not in full-time education officially out of work in the period August to October 2020, and another 15 per cent categorised as 'economically inactive'. Young people make up 40 per cent of those who have become unemployed because of the pandemic - but constitute only 20 per cent of the workforce. According to Institute of Employment Studies analysis, benefit claims among under 25s have risen by 125 per cent, with one in seven young people now claiming.

With furlough now being extended till at least the end of March, monthly employment figures will not reflect the real crisis in the labour market and are still to hit levels experienced after the financial crash - the fallout from which was intensified by the Tories' 'austerity' programme. Yet Britain is on course to reach its highest level of youth unemployment since the 1970s and 80s. Young workers, particularly those with lower-level qualifications, but also students working part-time, are massively over-represented in sectors like hospitality, leisure and retail - areas that have suffered most from the Covid restrictions. It is estimated that up to two fifths of the workforce in these industries are under 30 years old.

As employers stop hiring new staff, the million or more young people trying to enter the labour market face mounting barriers. The 'kick-start' initiative, a £2bn plan to finance 300,000 six-month work placements for the under-25s, is reported to have attracted just 4,000 employers and created 20,000 jobs. Without an injection of funds and a leading role for the public sector, the future of the scheme can only be in doubt. Meanwhile, apprenticeship opportunities (still being promoted by government as

the main alternative to university study) continue to dwindle, with only a third as many starts this year for those under 19 (just 5,000), and less than half for those aged 19 to 24. Over the summer, 1,000 young people in England were withdrawn from apprenticeship programmes because of being made redundant.

At the other end of the labour market, annual graduate recruitment has been culled (two thirds of university leavers have seen applications paused or withdrawn) as firms concentrate on trying to protect existing staff. More internships have become 'virtual' - in many cases making them rather pointless. Resolution Foundation data show that, even three years after having left full-time education, the employment prospects for today's graduates are projected to be 13 per cent worse. Of course, those leaving university are still much more likely to find employment compared to those with lower qualifications, but this only intensifies 'bumping down' - where graduates move into 'non graduate' work at the expense of those who previously entered these jobs, worsening their situations still further.

A calamitous year for education

Despite initial fears that after this year's A-level debacle many might defer their places, young people have flocked to university - increased participation was also a feature of the years after the financial crash - creating a situation of 'education without jobs'. Further down the age group, school students, up to half of whom planned to proceed to HE, effectively sat out the summer as exams were cancelled. Since then, as government has insisted that there is no alternative to schools being open all of the time for all students, hundreds of thousands have been subject to 'stop-go' education: sent home

when Covid cases emerge in their school (a million being forced to self-isolate in just one week at the end of November). Evidence shows this has affected socially disadvantaged students the most, widening inequalities still further.

Government, focusing almost entirely on schools (no doubt hoping that this would allow parents to get back to work), gave little thought to the consequences for infection rates of thousands of students moving across the country to the confined spaces of campus residences. Universities, either locked into contracts with private sector providers or, as businesses, reliant on 'customers' bringing in money after weeks of closure, did little to prevent this. As a consequence, rather than experiencing the excitement of 'freshers' week', hundreds were confined to rooms and without proper facilities.

Partying students rounded on by the tabloids were condemned, and organisers threatened with expulsion by university leaders, but, with public opinion clearly behind a 'stranded generation', authorities quickly changed their tune. As a result, emergency ration boxes were replaced with proper food! Lectures, and in many cases also tutorials, have been put online - something supported by the University and College Union, with good reason, but further disappointing - though probably not surprising - students.

Student resistance grows

There has been a growing students' resistance. '9k 4?' posters decorate windows, and grassroots activist groups have sprung up across the UK, with rent strikes starting on several campuses. In Manchester students promptly pulled down fences that had been erected overnight and patrolled by security guards. (The university has now refunded the equivalent of four weeks' rent.) Yet, at the time of writing, as with the protests about bungled A-level grades, levels of opposition have continued to be both localised and relatively modest; in addition, large numbers, particularly those new to campus and trying to make social contacts, have been fined by universities for breaking social distancing requirements. Having been sent home early, students now face a staggered return through January.

It is ironic that, as 'mass' higher education has replaced the selective participation of the post-war years, the National Union of Students has been little more than an onlooker rather than the main organiser. This says as much about the changing

aspirations and potential vulnerabilities - but also the atomisation and fragmentation - of current students, compared to their privileged predecessors, as about the organisation itself - now facing 'disaffiliation' threats. Education unions, though naturally sympathetic to students, have concentrated primarily on the workplace safety of their own members.

Real alternatives needed

Likewise, those young people most in danger of losing their jobs are in poorly organised sectors, or face situations where unions, not able to confront the growing precarity of work, devote most of their resources to looking after their 'core' membership, allowing new younger workers, often outside of existing agreements, to slip through the safety net.

We need to support students in their demands for tuition fee and rent refunds and the calls for this year's GCSE and A-level exams to be cancelled and replaced by properly moderated teacher assessment. But actions by young people must be part of a nationally coordinated and longer-term response. Despite the Labour Party attracting youth support in the last two elections on the basis of promising to end tuition fees, there has, for example, been no serious attempt within the Party or the wider labour movement to put forward an alternative economic programme for young people.

With the economy predicted to be suffering the effects of the pandemic by the time of the next election, the scarring effect on the Covid generation both economically and emotionally could last years. Rather than desperately trying to find short-term work placements in declining ('zombie') sectors of the economy, now is the time to start organising and planning such a programme, promoting skills training, but also employment guarantees, in a Green New Deal, a revamped health and care system and other new industries.