

Record levels of unemployment for Europe's youth

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According to the latest figures from the German Statistical Office and Eurostat, youth unemployment across Europe has increased by a staggering 25 percent in the course of the past two and a half years. The current levels of youth unemployment are the highest in Europe since the regular collection of statistics began.

In the spring of 2008, prior to the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the financial crash of that year, the official unemployment rate for youth in Europe averaged 15 percent. The latest figures from the German Statistical Office reveal that this figure has now risen to over 20 percent.

In total, 20.5 percent of young people between 15 and 24 are seeking work in the 27 states of the European Union. At the same time, these numbers conceal large differences in unemployment levels for individual European nations.

In Spain, where the social-democratic government led by Jose Luis Zapatero has introduced a series of punitive austerity programmes at the behest of the banks and the IMF, youth unemployment has doubled since 2008 and now stands at 46 percent. In second place in the European rankings is Greece, the first country to be bailed out by the European Union and to install austerity measures, with a rate of 40 percent. In third place is Italy (28 percent), followed by Portugal and Ireland (27 percent) and France (23 percent).

In Britain, where youth have taken to the streets in a wave of riots and protests in a number of the country's main cities, unemployment hovers around 20 percent. A recent report from Britain's Office of National Statistics reported that joblessness among people between the ages of 16 and 24 has been rising steadily, from 14.0 percent in the first quarter of 2008 to 20 percent in the first quarter of 2011—an enormous 40 percent spike in just three years.

According to the latest statistics, Europe's biggest economy, Germany, has one of the lowest official rates of youth unemployment (9.1 percent), but these figures are deceptive. Due primarily to the policies introduced by the former Social Democratic Party-Green Party coalition government (1998-2003), Germany has one of the most broadly developed low-wage job sectors in Europe.

In 2010, no fewer than 7.84 million German workers were employed in precarious so-called “atypical types of employment”—i.e., agency work, temporary work and part-time jobs involving less than 20 hours of work per week. Many of these workers earned €400 or less per month. Recent figures show that the wage levels of such workers have actually declined in recent years, thereby compounding the pool of so-called “working poor” in Germany.

The German Statistical Office notes that nearly 40 percent of young Germans able to find work are invariably employed in such forms of precarious work, which pay badly and are strictly temporary. Exact figures on underemployment in Germany are difficult to obtain, but the extreme situation for youth in the country is reflected across Europe—i.e., the official statistics for youth unemployment would swell enormously if they included the millions who are underemployed.

The growth of long-term unemployment for a broad layer of European youth, including very many highly educated young people with academic qualifications who are unable to find work, has led a number of commentators to refer to a “lost generation”.

The social problems encountered by the young unemployed are compounded by the social cuts and austerity packages being introduced across Europe. All of these measures aimed at restocking the vaults of the

banks and swelling the portfolios of the European capitalist elite hit youth the hardest.

It is no coincidence that the suburb of London where protests and riots began last weekend—Tottenham—has the highest level of joblessness in London and the 10th highest in Britain as a whole. Just to the south of Tottenham, the London borough of Haringey has already slashed its youth services budget by 75 percent this year. These cuts are part of a package of measures aimed at driving down the borough's budget deficit along the lines advocated by the Conservative government headed by David Cameron.

The closure of youth facilities, including libraries and sports clubs, together with the slashing of welfare payments, such as youth allowances and housing subsidies, means that unemployed youth are condemned to poverty and denied any opportunity of using their leisure time creatively. Such conditions are not exclusive to London and Britain. They prevail across Europe and have been engineered by governments of all political colours—conservative, social-democratic and Green.

In Britain, leading politicians and both the gutter press and so-called “quality” press immediately sought to deflect attention from their own criminal activities by demonising protesting youth as “yobs” and vandals. For significant sections of the European press, however, the link between what took place in Britain this week and the complete lack of a perspective for millions of young people in modern Europe is evident.

Two commentaries in the German language press make clear that some sections of the media are concerned that the systematic wiping out of jobs and social protection for youth could have not merely explosive, but also revolutionary social implications.

On Thursday, the German *Der Spiegel* wrote that August 12 is International Youth Day, and posed the question: “This should be a day of celebration and joy.... But is there something to celebrate? Hardly.”

The article continues: “The numbers are so alarming, because they give a face to the European debt crisis. They show that the crisis in the euro countries is not just a problem for the treasuries of bankrupt countries, but has fatal consequences for the population. And, as is so often the case, it hits youth first.”

The article then draws attention to the hundreds of thousands of youth who took to the streets of Athens

and Madrid to protest against austerity programmes and makes a parallel with the most recent protests in Britain, concluding, “In London it seems there is no holding back this hopeless generation.”

In Vienna, the Austrian *Der Standard* writes: “Governments are showering billions into the markets with one hand to keep our resident devil, the Dow Jones, happy. With the other, they're slashing social benefits. That policies of this sort are received as pure cynicism in countries like Spain, Greece and Britain, where youth employment is around 44, 38 and 20 percent respectively, is a puzzle for the minuscule elite, who discuss the difference between frustrated protesters and criminals over tea while worrying only about the state of the money markets.”

The article continues that the solution is not “extra police and empty phrases, but action. And quickly”. The article concludes, however, by warning: “But who knows whether the generation demonstrating in the streets will see that day come?”



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