

The capitalist crisis and the conditions facing the youth

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A measure of the historical viability of a social system is the future it holds for the younger generation. From this standpoint, the conditions facing youth at the beginning of the new academic year are an indictment of the capitalist system.

More than two years after the supposed onset of the economic "recovery," mass unemployment continues unabated, particularly among youth. On an international scale, falling growth rates and rising joblessness make clear there is no real recovery. Austerity measures being imposed in the US, Europe and Japan are compounding the social disaster. Students have no reason to believe they will have a chance of finding a decent job after graduation.

In the United States, the percentage of youth with a job this summer was the lowest of any year since World War II. Overwhelmingly, the jobs that are available are low-wage positions that do not pay enough to meet the soaring costs of higher education.

Tuition and student fees in the US, already the highest in the world, have risen by 130 percent over the past 20 years. This has led to record levels of indebtedness for young people. Millions leave college burdened by the knowledge that they may be in debt for the rest of their lives.

Thirty-six states in the US have announced funding cuts to public colleges and universities this year, amounting to a total of over \$5 billion. Arizona has slashed higher education assistance by 22 percent, Colorado by 20.9 percent, and Washington by 23 percent. In California, students at public universities will find they have to pay \$1,000 more in tuition this year than last.

Public schools are being closed by the hundreds, accompanied by an unprecedented wave of teacher layoffs. In 2010, 151,000 education workers were laid off in the US. In the coming school year, a further 227,000 layoffs are planned, according to a recent survey by the American Association of School Administrators.

The terrible conditions facing youth are not unique to the United States. In Britain, university tuition is set to triple next year, from £3,000 to £9,000. This has prompted a 30 percent rise in applicants this year, as millions of students seize their last chance at a reasonably affordable education. The flood of applicants means that tens of thousands will be turned away.

Youth unemployment is soaring across Europe. In Britain, it is 20 percent, up from 14 percent just three years ago. In Greece and Spain, where brutal austerity measures have sparked mass protests over the past year, youth unemployment stands at 40 percent and 46 percent, respectively. For the entire continent, it is over 20 percent.

All over the world, youth face the same predicament: there are no jobs, schools are starved of resources, decent employment and education are increasingly confined to the privileged few. Young people see their futures being stripped away to finance wars, bank bailouts and the extravagant wealth of the financial elite.

The younger generation will fight back as part of a resurgent movement of the working class. As Leon Trotsky wrote in 1938 during another period of capitalist crisis and social upheavals: "Only the fresh enthusiasm and aggressive spirit of the youth can guarantee the preliminary successes in the struggle; only these successes can return the best elements of the older generation to the road of revolution."

As young people begin to fight back, the questions of perspective and history are posed with particular acuteness. What is the way forward? What type of struggle is required? What political program is needed?

Already the events of this year reveal the problem of political perspective. In Egypt and Tunisia, youth were a critical component of a revolutionary upsurge of the working class that ousted US-backed dictators who had held power for decades. Half a year later, however, the same military apparatuses remain in control of the state. In the absence of revolutionary leadership, the United States and other imperialist powers have

utilized the social convulsions in the region to pursue their own predatory interests, most nakedly and criminally in the neo-colonial war in Libya.

In the US, mass demonstrations in Wisconsin earlier this year involving tens of thousands of young people and students heralded a far broader movement against cuts in education, health care and pensions. But the demonstrations were shut down by the trade unions with the aid of middle-class ex-left organizations such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO), which worked to defuse the mass opposition and channel it behind an electoral campaign for the Democratic Party. This despite the fact that the unions accepted the cuts sought by the Republican governor and the Democrats openly endorsed them.

Workers and youth in the United States confront the fact that the election of Obama—who made a particular appeal to young people—has changed absolutely nothing. Obama, the candidate of “change,” is overseeing the destruction of public education and championing trillions of dollars in cuts in social programs, including basic entitlement programs that date back to the New Deal of the 1930s.

The recent riots in Britain expressed the discontent and despair of millions of young people, whose indignation at unemployment, poverty and police brutality can find no means of expression within the existing political system, and who have been completely abandoned by the trade unions and the representatives of a corrupt and affluent middle-class “left.”

The International Students for Social Equality, the student organization of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality parties, is organizing students and young workers throughout the world in a struggle against war, inequality, unemployment and poverty.

The ISSE insists that the basic issues students face are inseparable from the conditions of the working class as a whole. These conditions cannot be opposed simply within the confines of the schools and college campuses. Rather, students and youth must turn to the working class as a whole and fight for its international unity and independent political mobilization against the capitalist class and all of its political parties and representatives.

In the United States, this means a break with and implacable opposition to the Democratic Party, one of the two major parties of American big business. In Europe and internationally, it means opposition to the Social Democratic and “Labor” parties, which uniformly support right-wing, pro-corporate policies. It is not a question of pressuring the political establishment, as claimed by the ISO in the US and its counterparts internationally, but building a new party that fights

for the establishment of a workers government and socialism.

Such a movement must be international. The ISSE rejects all attempts to divide workers and young people along national, racial, religious or ethnic lines. In particular, it opposes the efforts of the ruling class to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment and insists on the right of workers and youth to live wherever they choose with full citizenship and democratic rights.

Above all, this movement must be grounded on the understanding that the basic problem is the capitalist system itself. The alternative to capitalism, with its incessant wars, economic crises, and the scourge of mass unemployment, is socialism.

The socialist program demands a massive redistribution of wealth. It calls for the factories and businesses to be taken out of the hands of the billionaires and placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the population as a whole. These political demands are essential to securing the basic social rights of the working class, including the right to a good paying job, quality education, health care, housing and a world free of war and repression.

The ISSE will carry out a determined fight in the coming months at schools and campuses as well as in working class neighborhoods and at factories and work locations, confident that the perspective of socialist internationalism will find a growing audience among young people looking for a way forward.

We urge all students and young people to take up the fight for socialism by joining the ISSE and fighting to build the Socialist Equality Party as the new, revolutionary leadership of the working class. To find out more about the ISSE and sign up to join, click here.

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