

Australian youth pushed into unpaid “work experience”

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A recent report has shown that amid the slowdown of the Australian economy and the growth of unemployment, thousands of young people are being compelled to perform unpaid work, in the hopes of securing permanent employment.

The government-sponsored report, entitled *Unpaid Work Experience in Australia: Prevalence, nature and impact*, was carried out by several universities. While the report tried to put a positive spin on the phenomenon, its contents give a glimpse into the lives of a generation facing perpetual job insecurity.

The report was based on a survey of 3,800 young people around the country. It found that a staggering 58 percent of respondents aged 18–29 had participated in at least some unpaid work experience (UWE) in the previous five years. The figure was estimated at 26 percent for those aged 30–64 and 34 percent across all ages.

The length of UWE varied widely. Over a third of the young people surveyed had worked unpaid for over a month. For 10 percent, it lasted six months or longer. Much of this was accrued on a part-time basis.

Only 27 percent of respondents were offered paid employment by the host company or organisation. Half of those surveyed participated in unpaid work as part of a university or tertiary course. But significantly, 47 percent signed up for UWE as individuals, in an attempt to break into the labour market.

The workers faced precarious conditions, with virtually no rights or legal protections. Over 30 percent of those who chose to comment, said their experience was negative. They cited dangers to health and safety, injuries, insufficient amenities, including toilets, and confusion over whether they would be covered in the event of an injury or accident. Others said they had been forced into menial tasks that gave them no

experience in the relevant field.

Some reported they had been “exploited” and simply used as “free labour.” Examples in the report included, “a musician asked to work for ‘exposure’ rather than payment” and “a pastry maker used for 160 hours of work experience, told he was a great worker, but then let go at the end as the patisseries knew they would get another free worker.”

Respondents said they faced financial hardship, including struggling with the cost of living, childcare costs and relying on support from family and friends. The report mentions similar studies in the UK, which have revealed that professions such in journalism, law and finance are dominated by those from “privileged backgrounds” not merely because they have access to social networks, but because their families are able to bear the financial costs, particularly in expensive cities such as London.

Following the report’s publication, a number of young people commented on their experience. Michael Hogan, quoted in *news.com.au*, spoke about the pressures of UWE placements for teaching students: “Imagine this day. You’re at work at 7.30 am ready to make another impact and show how good you are, then you don’t leave until 4.30 pm because you’re getting assessed and unpacking what you did that day and then you get home and you’re evaluating and looking back at feedback and what you did wrong. It’s very stressful, you almost get to the point where you break. Sometimes you don’t put the pen down until 8 pm.”

Sophia, who worked for nine months as an intern in the media industry, was sometimes required to work 12-hour days without any pay. “You felt like you couldn’t say no because there were a million other people who would happily take your spot if you refused to do something or left on time,” she explained.

Commenting on the prospects facing young people, Sophia said: “I think it’s so competitive now, everyone has a tertiary education, so the only way to differentiate yourself is to have first-hand experience or a post-grad degree. When we hire at my current job I instantly dismiss anyone who hasn’t had past industry experience—internships have been normalised and are expected rather than being a bonus.”

The prevalence of unpaid work is a product of a decades-long assault on the jobs, wages and conditions of the working class, presided over by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments, in collaboration with the thoroughly corporatised unions.

The Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating deregulated the economy, beginning in the 1980s, creating the conditions for the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs. The unions have enforced the shutdown of large sections of manufacturing and the erosion of longstanding working conditions, leading to an unprecedented growth in various forms of insecure employment. According to various reports, up to 50 percent of the entire workforce is employed in casual and part-time positions.

Australia’s youth face an historic reversal in social conditions, with rising housing costs, student debt, and chronic under-employment. Apprenticeships, TAFE courses and other forms of vocational education have been gutted.

Today, government measures are aimed at using young people, ever more directly, as an ultra-cheap labour force, to drive down the conditions of the working class as a whole.

The federal Liberal-National government is rolling out a ‘Prepare, Trial, Hire’ (PaTH) policy. Coming into effect in April, it will push youth who have been unemployed for six months or more into 30–50 hours of work a fortnight. They will receive an additional payment of just \$200, on top of their meagre unemployment benefit, effectively a wage of \$4 per hour. The government will also reimburse employers with \$1,000 for taking on an “intern.”

The policy is aimed at creating an “intern army” of 120,000 young people over a period of four years. They will take up virtually unpaid positions in fields such as motor trades, hospitality and retail. The Labor Party welcomed PaTH, having previously supported moves to force all long-term unemployed people under the age

of 50 into “work for the dole” programs.



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