

# The role of the youth in the fight for socialism

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*The following speech was delivered to the ICFI's May Day 2018 International Online Rally by Genevieve Leigh, a leading member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in the US.*

The first half of this year has been characterized by an upsurge of working-class struggles all over the world: against austerity in Iran; by technology workers in China; and a wave of strikes and rebellions by teachers and lecturers in Nigeria, Kenya, Tunisia, Mexico and across the US.

In all of these struggles, young workers and students have played an active role. In Iran, unemployed youth predominated in the demonstrations in rural towns. Students in the US organized demonstrations in support of their teachers. And over a million young people in the US and around the world held massive internationally coordinated demonstrations against school violence. Their march in Washington was the largest in history.

While the Democratic Party in the US fought tooth and nail to make the protests about gun control reform, much broader issues drew a million youth to the streets. There is a widespread sense among young people that the ease and frequency with which they are massacred in American schools is symptomatic of the indifference and contempt with which the country's ruling oligarchy regards their lives.

This new generation of the working class is becoming politicized, and in a time unlike any in history.

What are the conditions of young people today? Those born at the turn of the century have lived their entire lives watching the imperialist powers wage wars of aggression in every corner of the globe. The war in Afghanistan has been going on their entire lives. They have come of age as drone assassinations became institutionalized by the Obama administration. Young people in the Middle East have seen their societies ravaged by imperialist violence, while those in the US have had their friends and family members sent off to kill or be killed to advance the aims of the American ruling class for world conquest.

An 18-year-old today was eight when the global financial crash ushered in a tidal wave of social distress throughout the world, with the major capitalist powers, led by the US under the Obama administration, funneling trillions of dollars into Wall Street to bail out the banks.

US youth are entering into political life under the presidency of Donald Trump, the most right-wing administration in US history. Far right governments are on the rise throughout Europe. The first political experiences of this generation have been scenes of these governments deporting immigrants, attacking workers, slashing funding to education, all with the complicity of the Social

Democratic and Labor Parties, and the Democratic Party in the US.

This generation has been born into conditions created by 40 years of social counter-revolution against the working class and the effects have been devastating.

Almost half of all youth in the millennial generation have no money in savings. We can't afford health care, homes, or an education. Young people make up an estimated 70 million out of the 200 million people out of work around the world. Children all over the world lack basic necessities. Approximately 3.1 million children die from hunger each year. Among students, homelessness and hunger are rampant with many youth having to make a choice between paying for school or having a home.

In the US, this crisis has manifested itself most graphically in a deadly drug epidemic. In just two years, from 2014 to 2016, the rate at which 25–34 year-olds died rose by 19 percent, due overwhelmingly to opioid use.

While trillions are spent on war and handed out to corporations and the rich, working-class youth enter into schools starved of resources, with teachers who are forced to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. Teachers in Oklahoma during the strike posted photos of destroyed textbooks. In Flint, Michigan there is a public high school which has gone an entire year with dozens of classes with no teachers at all. The same school is instead flooded with security officers and metal detectors.

When these students leave high school they have few options. Attend college and become saddled with thousands of dollars of debt. Join the military and become cannon fodder for the wars of the ruling class. Enter the workforce where wages have stagnated and most young people need two or three jobs to make ends meet.

This is the future the capitalist system offers the youth in 2018.

Working-class youth are entering into struggle. There is a vast reservoir of anger and hostility to the current system, to the state of the world, to oppression, war, societal violence, and inequality. There is little need to explain to young people that there is something deeply wrong with society. They understand very well the depths of the social crisis. They are living it.

When we talk to young people at protests, at work places, and on campuses they speak about revolution. Some call themselves socialists. Indeed, in the US—the center of world imperialism—more young people now identify with socialism than with capitalism.

This generation also has more access to technology, information and knowledge than anytime in human history. The Internet, which is used by millions of youth throughout the globe, has given this generation access to an almost endless library of information. Workers all over the world can now see each other's conditions

first hand. Crimes of the state, such as police killings, can be broadcast outside of the confines of bourgeois media. And, as we have seen with the wave of teachers' rebellion, workers can use these technologies to organize outside of the framework of the corporatist media.

But what is most crucially absent from these struggles is a political perspective and a knowledge of the history of the socialist movement.

We were told by the unions in the teachers strike that "education is not a political issue." The youth in "March for Our Lives" were fed the same line. In one breath they tell us, "No politics!" and in the next they say, "but change will be made at the ballot box." But we know exactly what "no politics" means. It means the domination of the present politics. It means the domination of the politics of the ruling class.

Lenin, in his day, called them "up lifters"—those liberals and academics who he said "are believers in law-abiding progress without a political struggle." And he waged a relentless fight against them. As we can see, these methods are well worn.

Leon Trotsky delivered a speech to young people in the Soviet Union in 1924, on May Day in fact, and he addressed this question as well:

The bourgeoisie carries out a division of labor. Politics is in its charge; the workers and peasants in the army are cannon fodder, slaves to the machines of destruction. And it is exactly the same so far as the younger generation is concerned, the young workers and peasants, that is. Politics fills the air; it is not possible to live outside of politics, without politics, any more than one can live without air.

He went on:

But the bourgeoisie cannot reveal its political face to the young people. It cannot say: there you are, the twelve- or thirteen-year-old son of a worker; you have been born into the world in order that, after serving an apprenticeship to some trade, you may go into a factory and there to the end of your days create with your sweat, blood, and marrow, surplus value for the lords of life, the bourgeoisie, who, from this surplus value, will create its bourgeois culture, its luxury, art, and learning for its children. The bourgeoisie cannot openly expound such politics to the young workers. It puts over its politics by way of circumlocution and allegories, imperceptibly or half-perceptibly, through its schools, its churches, and its press. And this work of the imperceptible bourgeois education of young people, or rather, the education of young workers and peasants in the interests of the bourgeois state, is concealed behind the slogan: 'the younger generation is outside politics.'

Such slogans are used to deceive and disorient. The ruling class

of today wants to keep young people from becoming political, and above all from turning to the working class and fighting for the political mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system. And they want to cut young people off from knowledge of the history of working-class struggle, expressed consciously in the history of the Marxist movement.

They want to drown young people in the reactionary, subjective, idealist and irrational politics of race and gender identity, which permeates the schools and universities. Theoretical tendencies associated with the Frankfurt School, the varieties of post-modernism, neo-anarchism and identity politics are all rooted in their rejection of Marxism and the revolutionary role of the working class.

The fight to build a socialist movement of the working class today requires a struggle to educate a new generation of students and working-class youth in the history and principles of Marxism and the Fourth International. Through this struggle, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) will win to its banner working-class youth and the best layers of the middle class who adopt the standpoint of the working class in the struggle for socialism.

The most critical task ahead for the revolutionary youth around the world is to understand their struggles as political struggles. We must study politics. For millions of workers and young people, seeking to create a society based on peace, equality and genuine democracy, this must be made our most pressing task. We must reject bourgeois politics and fight for revolutionary politics and for an independent political strategy of the working class.

The IYSSE calls for all young people participating in this rally today to take up the fight for socialism. Join the IYSSE.



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