Youth suicide rate skyrockets in the US: A symptom of a rotting social order

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24 October 2019

A report released last week by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed that the suicide rate among Americans aged 10 to 24 years old increased by 56 percent between 2007 and 2017. Within the span of a decade, suicide deaths increased from 6.8 deaths per 100,000 people to 10.6 deaths. In real numbers that means in 2017 there were 2,449 more suicides than in 2007. In the same period, suicide ideation, or thoughts of suicide, and suicide attempts doubled for adolescents and young adults.

In the United States, suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth aged 12-18.

These are remarkable statistics. One could hardly imagine a more chilling indication of the extreme levels of social distress pervading society. How is such a phenomenon to be explained? Perhaps more importantly, wherein lies the solution to such daily horrors?

While certainly distressing, the figures are hardly incomprehensible. Working class youth today are facing social and economic conditions unparalleled since the 1930s.

The youngest generation of workers are entering adulthood in the wake of 40 years of social counter-revolution against the working class. Many cannot afford housing and health care, let alone embark on any of the natural milestones of life such as getting married or having kids.

Working class youth today enter adulthood on the brink of economic catastrophe, often drowning in student debt. One in five millennials are living below the poverty line, and over 60 percent of Americans say that they do not have enough money to cover a $500 emergency. Many can expect to remain in this state their whole lives.

Such conditions have profound consequences for physical and mental health.

The primary reason for this dire economic situation is not “laziness” or “moral degeneration” of young people as some of the cruder analysts suggest. This generation of workers are more highly educated than any other generation alive. Many are working two, three or four jobs to make ends meet. More than 40 percent of new college graduates, on average, are underemployed and about two-thirds of these graduates will remain in jobs that do not require a college degree years after graduation.

Jobs that once provided a decent standard of living have been systematically turned into low-paid temporary piecemeal work that is packaged and sold to youth as the “gig-economy.”

Workers employed in the “gig-economy” are considered contractors rather than employees and therefore have no health insurance, workers’ compensation protections, employer contributions to Social Security and payroll taxes, paid time-off, family leave protections, discrimination protections, or unemployment insurance benefits.

Despite vast advances in science and technology as a whole, this new generation of workers live their lives running from one job to another without any stability or social safety net. Commonplace are stories of Amazon workers, college lecturers, and students living in their cars in the parking lots outside their workplaces trying to make ends meet. Public school teachers leave the classroom at the end of the day and drive for hours a night working for Uber to afford their bills. Young auto workers are brought on as “Temporary Part-time” employees for years at a time for a fraction of the rate paid to full-time workers doing the same jobs.

Workers cannot afford to take time off and certainly cannot afford to get sick.

Nearly all of the gains made by workers over the last century have been stripped away in the “gig-economy.” And if the ruling class has their way, this will be the future of the vast majority of jobs in the future. Nearly 80 percent of major companies in the US are moving toward this contract-based work.

Marx wrote that the capitalist political economy regards the individual worker “like a horse” in that “he must receive enough to enable him to work. It does not consider him, during the time when he is not working, as a human being. It leaves this to criminal law, doctors, religion, statistical tables, politics, and the beadle.” The capitalist system degrades and dehumanizes workers, no matter the personal suffering and loss.

This process of degradation and dehumanization stretches far beyond the immediate economic conditions of any given worker. It is expressed in nearly every facet of life. Consider the social and political experiences that define life for this generation. In the past 18 years, there have been 270,000

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murders in the US, 600,000 drug overdoses (200,000 involving opioids), 650,000 suicides (130,000 by veterans), and 85,000 workplace deaths. An estimated 700,000 people have died prematurely in the US during this period due to lack of health care. This generation has witnessed, thanks to social media, countless police murders. They have watched as immigrant families were torn apart and caged within the borders of the US. Each year, they have watched on TV the bloody rampage of yet another gunman shooting up a school or public gathering.

Furthermore, what political option is presented to workers and young people to oppose these conditions? Both big business parties, the Republicans just as much as the Democrats, are committed to upholding the exploitative capitalist system upon which their power and wealth is based. During his eight years in the White House, Barack Obama, sold to youth at the time as the candidate of "hope and change," orchestrated the bailout of the banks in the wake of the financial crash, oversaw the largest transfer of wealth from poor to rich in history, deported more immigrants than any president before him, and expanded wars all around the world, including pioneering remote drone assassinations. Meanwhile, the trade unions, once vehicles for struggle in the working class, have been integrated into the corporations they claim to oppose, suppressing strikes and selling out workers in every contract for more than three decades.

Yet, in the face of these conditions the mainstream media remains puzzled. Why are young people taking their own lives in such high numbers? The immediate cause of this or that instance of suicide can be wide-ranging. But the underlying reason stems from the economic foundation upon which society is based. The thousands of people who take their lives each year are the victims of the rot and putrescence of a terminally decayed social order defined by staggering levels of inequality; efforts to divide the working class along racial, ethnic and gender lines; decades of the artificial suppression of the class struggle by the unions; 30 years of unending wars and police brutality; and the degradation of social and cultural life. The rising suicide rate is ultimately the product of the failure of the capitalist system.

It is for this reason that the ruling class becomes so uneasy when such stark figures on the social crisis emerge openly. Skyrocketing youth suicide speaks volumes about the state of society. And no faction of the ruling class has anything close to an answer for such problems, perhaps least of all those figures consciously put forward as the state-sanctioned "socialists," namely Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who promise to end all the ills of the capitalist system, without ending the capitalist system itself. Their perspective and programs are aimed at leading the mass discontent of youth and workers back into the dead-end of the Democratic Party.

The real answer, however, is emerging more openly and more forcefully every day.

Leon Trotsky once noted that, "fortunately," even under the most dire economic conditions, only a tiny percentage of the population would be driven to end their own lives. "But peoples never resort to suicide," he pointed out. "When their burdens are intolerable they seek a way out through revolution."

While this generation is coming of age under incredibly difficult circumstances, they are also living in the midst of an immense resurgence of the class struggle all over the world, and in many cases are actively participating in it.

In a continuation of the global wave of teachers' strikes over the past two years, last week 32,000 teachers and public school workers in Chicago, America's third-largest city, launched their second major strike since 2012, once again demanding adequate staffing and resources. Approximately 48,000 autoworkers at GM across the US remain on their longest strike in decades as the corrupt UAW seeks to force yet another concessions contract on them.

Train service was disrupted throughout France Friday and Saturday by strikes, as workers for the state SNCF protested understaffing and unsafe conditions. In Chile, protests that began last Monday exploded on Friday into mass demonstrations over the government's proposed 4 percent public transit fare hike. And in Lebanon, mass protests demanding the resignation of the government continued into the weekend, sparked by anger over bleak economic conditions, austerity measures and tax hikes.

Millions of workers and youth around the world are being driven into struggle by the same basic issues: stagnating wages, lack of job security, spiraling costs of living, and, above all, the malignant growth of social inequality. They are entering into the streets to win a better world for themselves and for their children, and such a world is not only possible, it is historically necessary.

It is to this social force that workers and young people in the US must turn.

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