

Australian youth speak on their experiences during COVID-19

Our reporters

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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality spoke to numbers of young workers across Australia recently about their experiences amid the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic has fundamentally altered class and social relations, young people confront an enormous social crisis, a future of growing social inequality, impoverishment, casual and insecure work, and a life of instability.

While Australia has not seen the same shocking levels of death and infection as in Europe or the United States, there is nonetheless an immense social and economic crisis unfolding. According to the recent December 2020 Brotherhood of St Laurence report, youth unemployment among people aged 15 to 24 reached a 23-year high of 16.4 percent and youth underemployment sits at 17.9 percent on top of that. Combining both unemployment and underemployment, approximately 33 percent of youth are unable to get enough work to make ends meet.

One indication of the level of social distress experienced by youth, the Victorian Agency for Health Information reported a 72 percent increase in serious self-harm and suicidal-ideation cases in emergency departments for those below the age of 18 in the last weeks of Melbourne's lockdown in September and October.

Tristan Deeg, 18, a student at the University of Newcastle who works at a Coles supermarket said, "I had a few weeks off during the first wave of coronavirus cases. At work we were provided with absolutely zero PPE, there were no health guidelines at work, I had to leave because of my young sister's compromised health."

During the initial lockdown in March, April and May, Tristan explained: "I was just living off student payments. I was fortunate that I was living at home with my parents; if I wasn't, it would have been a completely different situation. I wasn't able to access JobKeeper payments and I was only receiving \$300 a fortnight... [it's not enough] to pay off my car, phone bills, food, etc."

Speaking of his work and the retail sector, he said: "The pandemic has just made the situation worst, there is next to

no part-time and permanent work, there are no positions going at my workplace. I would say around 80 percent of the workforce is casual, the only part-time let alone full-time positions are the department managers and store managers."

Asked about other people his age, Tristan added: "I get around \$21 an hour, which is fairly good compared to other casual jobs. I've worked here at Coles for over two and a half years. A lot of my friends have worked at Maccas [McDonald's], Subway, pubs, where conditions are much worse, often they get between \$11–\$17 an hour.

"A mate of mine has a butcher's apprenticeship, where he makes just \$9 an hour. He is 16 years old. It is going to be tough for a lot of my friends to find work, I certainly don't see the job situation getting any better under capitalism. The class consciousness of my generation is growing by the minute, a revolution does seem to me as inevitable at this point, whether it's soon or five years."

Kobra Sayyadi from Sydney, a part-time tutor, told the IYSSE: "The pandemic has impacted me in so many ways. It has affected my academic students, my part-time work and my relationships with my family and friends. It's probably a similar experience for everyone.

"I found it a lot harder to switch off. Because I was in the same environment, it made it hard for my body and brain to know when I was supposed to be working, or studying, or resting. Especially in the first semester, it was really anxiety-inducing. Even when I had to commute to university, I could listen to some podcasts and did some reading.

"During COVID, none of that was there. I don't think I stepped outside for a few weeks, or longer. The days blurred into weeks, and the weeks blurred into months, I couldn't tell if it had been a few weeks, or a few months. It was definitely difficult."

Speaking about her work, she said: "Like many other businesses we had to temporarily close for a few months when the pandemic started. For a few weeks, we couldn't do anything. Parents started cancelling classes and delaying them. Once we were in the midst of it all, and COVID was everywhere, was when the business shut down for a few

weeks. We didn't have any classes and it took a few weeks for us to work out a new system."

A woman who wishes to remain anonymous spoke about her situation in Melbourne. Currently she resides in a house with up to eight other people. "I've been here the longest since July, six have come through since. [There was] no contract when I first arrived, I didn't sign anything initially, no proper templated contract, it was just 'here's the bond, here's the rules.' Some ledgers have been sent with an incorrect date claiming my rent is overdue."

On the situation more broadly, she said: "I feel like the pandemic has been dealt with horribly, especially in the US. The ruling class like saying 'yay good job healthcare workers!' but they are responsible for how severe this pandemic is. They are acting like we can stop worrying about the coronavirus, that this is all over."

Aditya, 24, a Masters of Neuroscience student in Melbourne reported that he is currently unemployed and is trying to find more research assistant work and has been trying to land a job in teaching. "I'm fortunate that I have been able to be supported by my parents in Pakistan which has given me more room to concentrate on my studies. The pandemic has made things very hard; it's been a struggle trying to get a sense of direction. You feel tired and hopeless, I have heard plenty of stories of people struggling, even cases of suicide. There hasn't been enough help for everyone.

"When I came to Australia, I was surprised at the number of students who work while studying here, but people need to survive.

"I am upset with the whole transition to online learning, we had to go into lockdown for the sake of the pandemic [and] transitioning to online learning had to be done. The quality of the classes naturally dropped with [this] transition it's almost impossible to say we can have the same quality of practical classes. Despite this, the classes stayed the same cost and students were not given a lot of help and teachers weren't either.

"The issue is that bosses and the universities used the pandemic as an excuse to carry through these cuts. There haven't just been problems for students, there have been problems for the casual teachers as well who are being seriously underpaid, for example, some staff are being paid one-hour wages for the equivalent of three hours of work.

"When lockdowns began easing, I was eager to go to out again, to spend some time with friends, to go to restaurants, but there has been a completely different mood. You are torn by the fact that you are either endangering lives or not helping local businesses."

Michael, a young worker from Queensland Performing Arts Centre commented on the world situation, "I see the

social divide has been getting worse, this includes more calculated and streamlined ways of exploiting workers all around the world. There has been a decline in working rights, increasing casualisation and expansion of the gig economy, the destruction of penalty rates, etc.

"It's insane that there were no preparations put in place before the pandemic. The poor response, negligence, and lack of support for workers everywhere. There needs to be more funding for the WHO, vaccine research, and the health sector in general. Warnings about such a pandemic were ignored, even when scientific evidence was presented.

"I think Australia has dodged a bullet when it comes to keeping COVID-19 cases low. However, I do believe there is still potential for a spike in infections."

Lachlan R, 18, a Social Science student at the University of Newcastle, criticised the government's response to the pandemic, in particular the rollout of JobKeeper.

"I have a few friends who all started apprenticeships, nearly all, like 75 percent got laid off [during the lockdown]... they had to get JobKeeper. However, for a lot of people, the JobKeeper went to the company, a lot of the businesses are taking the JobKeeper money and not giving it to the employees... "I have friends who are earning \$500 a week, the JobKeeper was meant to be giving them \$750 before September but they were still receiving only \$500.

"I obviously think that the growth in social inequality is the real issue here, it makes sense to keep some businesses afloat through government handouts. I think the workers should have been prioritised, however. JobKeeper should have just been directly deposited into the bank accounts of workers but instead, it goes straight into the accounts of the business.

"The other issue was that casual employees weren't able to get JobKeeper, if someone had gotten the virus, they wouldn't be able to get money, because JobKeeper doesn't provide for casual workers, they wouldn't have had any other choice but to go back to work to survive."



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