

World governments exploit pandemic depression to recruit youth into their militaries

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As mass unemployment from the COVID-19 pandemic ravages countries around the world, young people are turning to military conscription as a last resort. Economic crises are notoriously fertile grounds for militaries to recruit applicants who would otherwise be going to college or entering the workforce. Without other opportunities available, sections of youth are joining the military at great personal risk, in hopes of a better future.

According to a new report released by the *Wall Street Journal*, countries across the world have seen upticks in military recruitment in the last year, particularly in the last months of 2020 and the first months of 2021.

Around the world, 60 countries have some form of mandatory conscription. While military service is an unavoidable part of life in these countries, trends of enlistment and military service extension are revealing. South Korea has a draft for men, and 195,000 applications were submitted for the first four months of 2021, a rise of 44 percent for the first four months of 2020.

In Israel, where all citizens including teenagers living abroad have to enlist for between two and two-and-a-half years beginning at the age of 18, a noticeable trend during the past year has been to request extensions on their military service to continue earning an income while jobs and working conditions in Israel to decrease.

The Australian armed forces saw a 23 percent rise in recruitment applications from January 2020 to the beginning of September, and a 9.9 percent rise during the full 2020 year. The highest rates of increase were from Victoria, New South Wales, and the Australian Capital Territory, the most urbanized regions. In these regions working class youth have faced immense

unemployment and underemployment.

The United Kingdom, where the pandemic has taken a staggering toll on jobs and wages, is set to surpass its target for military recruits for the 2020-2021 recruitment cycle. To meet these recruitment goals, the UK was forced to lower the physical fitness standards and other requirements for recruitment in 2019. This move followed a 7 year stretch of low recruitment numbers.

The US Army was an exception, meeting a recruitment goal for 2020 that had been previously lowered twice. Over 62,000 people joined the US Army last year, far from the initial goal of 80,000 at the beginning of 2020. However, its rate of re-enlistment was higher than expected at 92 percent compared to 83 percent the previous year.

The recruitment efforts in the centers of imperialism, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Australia and Canada are bound up with the growing threat of a third world war. President Joe Biden, for example, has spent much of his first month in office making clear that his administration will escalate, not step back from, the aggressive and dangerous confrontation with China initiated by the Obama administration and intensified under Trump.

The escalating drive to world war has been openly acknowledged for years by the heads of major capitalist powers. Former US President Donald Trump reoriented the Pentagon's central focus from wars against terrorism to "great power conflicts" in 2018. French President Macron and German Chancellor Merkel have both floated proposals for a European Army. Macron has also pushed to bring back the draft in France, while Germany is spending billions of euros to build up its

military for foreign interventions.

There are countless military hotspots throughout the world that could quickly become the center of a major conflict. Regional wars have broken out in the Caucasus states in September 2020 between the borders of Russia, Iran and Turkey and proxy war has continued between all major global powers in Syria, nearing 7 years of open intervention. In recent months, provocative military maneuvers have continued against Iran and China overseen by Trump and Biden.

It is quite likely that the young people joining the military service around the world will see combat and suffer immense loss during their service. Moreover, this increase in recruitment comes at a time when young people are overwhelmingly opposed to war and militarism. After last January's assassination of Iranian general Sulemani, over 61 percent of Americans said they opposed a war with Iran. Even larger numbers supported withdrawal of troops or an all-out end to the decades-long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In August 2020, army soldier Daniel Robuck stationed in Honolulu, Hawaii posted a Tiktok video in which he asked his fellow soldiers why they had joined the military. They overwhelmingly answered that they "did not know." Other responses included "to beat drugs" and cycles of crime, to earn US citizenship, to make a living and provide for their families. Some stated they were lied to by recruiters. The viral video and two similar ones amassed over 4 million views and hundreds of thousands of "likes." Answering this question, "why did you join the army" has become a common theme on social media ever since.

The fact that there is an increase in military recruitment despite the risk involved and the opposition to its purpose, is a testament to the dire economic situation that workers face.

The COVID-19 pandemic is estimated to push an additional 119 to 124 million people into extreme poverty, defined as living on less than \$1.90 a day, according to the January 2021 forecasts from the World Bank. Eight out of 10 of the "new poor" will be in middle-income countries.

A January 2021 report issued by the UK-based charity Oxfam International notes that for the first time since 1870 per capita incomes are expected to decline in all regions of the world.

The report explains: "This means it is likely that

COVID-19 will drive up inequality in virtually every country on earth simultaneously. This will be the first time that this has happened since records of inequality began, over a century ago." Oxfam estimates that globally 56 percent of the population lives on between \$2 and \$10 a day.

Amid the on-going pandemic and its catastrophic impact on workers, world governments are offering to today's struggling youth the "opportunity" to risk it all in imperialist wars in order to receive the most basic stability. Most disturbing about this offer is that it is enticing enough for many youth to take it. The fact that so many young people are willing to risk their lives in order to secure a livable wage, escape poverty, or to qualify for reduced tuition is a thorough indictment of capitalism, which has nothing else better to offer them.



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