

The social conditions behind the rise in teen labor

## US newspapers hail the rise in teen labor and poverty wages as a “rite of passage”

Andy Thompson  
6 July 2021

In recent weeks several major US newspapers, including the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, have run articles praising the increase in employment of teenagers. The articles appeared shortly after the publication of the latest jobs report from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, which showed that the percentage of youth aged 16–19 years old holding jobs increased to 33.2 percent, the highest since 2008.

A theme running through the articles is a sense of jubilation. “Teens are saving the summer,” writes the *Journal*, with the *Post* declaring that the higher number of teenage workers is “good news, for the economy and the nation’s soul.” The *Tribune* ran an op-ed from Charles L. Evans, the president of the Federal Reserve Bank in Chicago, which argued that increasing the number of teen workers would curb violent crime and youth poverty.

While the capitalist press celebrates that restaurants and bars will reopen now being staffed by high school students, they ignore the social conditions behind the increase in teen employment, principally the COVID-19 pandemic which has caused millions of layoffs and widespread unemployment. Despite the continuing danger of the pandemic and particularly the spread of the Delta variant, businesses that were forced to shut down or cut staff in the last year are now reopening.

However, adult workers have not returned in large numbers to service and retail jobs, which pay poverty wages and generally have working conditions that would facilitate the transmission of the virus. Faced with a labor shortage and unwilling to increase wages, businesses have turned to hiring teenagers who can be

more heavily exploited for their labor.

Many states maintain laws that allow businesses to pay workers under 18 far less than the minimum wage. In Illinois, employers can get away with paying young workers \$8.50 per hour when the minimum is \$11 per hour. In New York, the under-18 minimum wage is just \$7.25. In California, where the minimum wage is \$14 per hour, laws exist that allow full-time college and high school students to be paid \$11.05 per hour. In Georgia and Wyoming, the states with the lowest possible minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, students can be paid just \$6.19 per hour.

In addition, a federal law exists for all states that allows employers hiring a worker under 20 years old to be paid a “training wage” as low as \$4.25 per hour for the first 90 days of employment. Conveniently, those 90 days would be around the length of time a student would hold a job during the summer while on break from school.

Reading the major papers, one gets a sense that teenagers are taking up jobs simply to pass the time in what would otherwise be a boring summer break. Petula Dvorak, a columnist for the *Post*, writes a romanticized tale of her 16-year-old son’s experience getting a part-time job at a coffee shop.

After explaining that her son, who became “lonely and depressed” during the shutdowns of the pandemic, is now joyful. All it took to cure his depression, apparently, was pouring coffee for \$10 an hour. She writes, “He comes home on fire after a shift, marveling at the technology of each drink machine he learns to use, the intricate coffee recipes he has to learn.”

Anyone who has visited a major coffee or fast-food chain, let alone having worked in one, will be

immediately struck by the absurdity of the thought of the young staff staring starry-eyed at the wonders of a coffee machine. If the story can be believed, the young Dvorak will quickly learn not to spend too much time pondering the awesome power of the ice machine, at least not when the manager is watching.

The shallowness of the *Post*'s column does not end there.

Dvorak argues, "Everyone should experience work in the service industry. Nothing builds character, empathy, money literacy and people skills like a low-paying job." She quotes a manager of an Uncle Julio's restaurant who believes that "it should be mandatory" for teenagers to have to work for a period as a low-wage worker.

The phrase "rite of passage" appears throughout the various press reports on teen jobs, implying that spending your teenage years working to make money for businesses is simply a part of the American Dream. In Dvorak's column she goes as far to say programs like sports camps, extra tutoring, or traveling and socializing with peers are all wastes of time that could be better spent working.

The reality is that teenagers and other young workers have not been exempt from the social devastation brought on by the pandemic. Despite the lie pushed by both the Trump and Biden administrations, that young people are essentially immune from the virus, over 2,700 people under 30 have died from COVID-19 in the US, with 326 of them being aged 0–17. Large numbers have delayed their college programs or dropped out altogether.

Moreover, young people have seen their parents lose jobs and struggle to provide necessities over the past year. These conditions of desperation and need to support their families with additional income are what is driving teenagers to take on jobs, not a self-imposed character-building exercise or a fascination with refrigerators.

In a report from the *Times*, Chase Christensen, a principal at a small high school in Wyoming, shares that several students have dropped out with no plans to return to school having taken on full-time jobs to do what they can to earn an income. And the jobs are not the typical retail or restaurant work that are common summer work for high schoolers. Christensen says that his students have taken jobs working night shifts at a

nursing home and digging in a gravel pit.

The conditions of life for young people under capitalism have become increasingly bleak and especially so over the course of 2020. A recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that approximately 19 percent more Americans died in 2020 than in 2019 and that the death rate for young adults 25 to 34 has dramatically jumped to the levels of 1953.

It is no surprise that a recent poll from Axios and Momentive found that among adults aged 18–24, 54 percent hold a negative view of capitalism. At the same time, support for socialism is growing. An earlier poll in October of 2020 found that support for socialism among people aged 16–23 increased from 40 to 49 percent from 2019 to 2020.

Faced with unprecedented levels of social inequality young people increasingly find themselves in a position where they have no serious future under capitalism. With a collective \$1.57 trillion in student debt, low-wage jobs and seemingly no way out, young people are increasingly looking for a serious political alternative.

Students and young workers must take up the fight for socialism, study the history of the Marxist movement, and turn to the working class to build a movement that can end capitalism and put global resources under democratic control. We urge all young workers and students to take up this fight themselves and join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality today.



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