

One million young people in UK not in education, employment or training

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One million young people in the UK aged 16 to 24, one in eight, are not in education, employment or training (NEETs). The figure is on track to reach 1.25 million, one in six young people, within five years. This is the “lost generation” identified by Alan Milburn’s “Young people and work” interim report.

Roughly 400,000 are unemployed, actively looking for work, and 600,000 are “economically inactive”, either unable to or seeing no hope of finding any. Six in 10 NEETs have never had a job—up from four in ten in 2005. This is despite 84 percent reporting having sought employment at some point and wanting a job or training.

Rejecting the right-wing characterisation of this generation as “work-shy, snowflakes, soft,” Milburn said, “The problem is that for too many young people, opportunities are not growing, they’re shrinking.” The fact that a veteran of Tony Blair’s right-wing government—as health secretary Milburn was responsible for driving forward the Private Finance Initiative, which opened the NHS to the private sector—has authored such a report points to the extraordinary severity of the crisis and how much further to the right Labour has travelled since.

Every aspect of life is blighted for young NEETs. Milburn’s report estimates lifetime earnings losses of up to £300,000, even in cases where they return to work; 40 percent of 22 to 29 year-olds are already at risk of pension poverty.

Without access to a stable income, young NEETs are effectively denied decent accommodation, with most finding themselves in temporary or sheltered homeless accommodation or stuck in a relative’s spare room. Sofa surfing is endemic. Roughly 124,000 young people have been forced into homelessness in the UK, rising by 6 percent in 2024-25.

Capitalism has robbed these young people of a fulfilling life and a future. Their suffering is the direct result of a parasitic economy designed to produce nauseating levels of wealth for a tiny few. The same processes driving down living standards for the working class and creating NEETs

are driving up historic profits for the ruling class. While a million young people are deprived of even a job, 157 people in Britain enjoy a net worth of at least a billion pounds.

Those NEETs born in 2008 during the financial crash will have turned 18 this year. Their entire childhood has been characterised by social inequality, austerity, attacks on education, mental health support, health care and housing. They entered their teens as a pandemic and the government’s brutal herd immunity policy savaged society. Now, as they go into adulthood, they must contend with AI-led job cuts, a stuttering economy and plans for yet more cuts to social support.

When young people attempt to find work at a suitable level for their skills or education, they find almost nothing. The number of mid or lower skilled jobs in Britain has fallen by 1.6 million over the past twenty years. ONS data also shows that hospitality jobs, one of the dominant sectors of youth employment in the UK, has halved in the last four years alone.

Class and regional divides are stark. In the UK’s lowest income households, young people are three and a half times more likely to be NEET than those from the highest income households. The *Guardian* reported, “Of the 10 English local authorities with the highest proportion of young people not in work or education, eight are in the north or Midlands.” These areas, which never recovered from deindustrialisation, frequently face NEET rates more than double the national average.

Young people bearing the heaviest burdens of the social crisis are hit the hardest. Care leavers are over five times more likely to be NEET at 17, hitting 40 percent by age 20. Half of young informal carers receive poor GCSEs and nearly a quarter have been NEET for over 18 months. Young mothers face double the NEET risk.

The combined impact of throttled funding and the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has added an absentee crisis to the problems facing British schools. Rates of persistent absence have close to doubled. Those who miss school regularly are four times more likely to become

NEET. Cuts to public transport funding have a similar effect, preventing young people from accessing opportunities.

This is compounding a mental health crisis for which there is almost no support. Since 2007 there has been a 47 percent increase in the proportion of young adults suffering from common mental health conditions, and over a third of them are NEET. NHS Digital Mental Health Services Monthly Statistics show areas of the highest deprivation are twice as likely to contact mental health services than in areas of the lowest deprivation.

Staffing levels are too low to cope with demand. According to the British Medical Association, “since 2016 the number of children and young people in contact with these services has expanded at over 4 times the pace of the psychiatry workforce.”

The welfare system offers no serious support. For every £25 spent on benefits for young people, the state spends only £1 on helping them into work. In practice, only the healthiest NEETs have a chance of getting any training or assistance—those with the fewest barriers. Disabled and chronically ill youths are written off. This suits the government, who do not have to invest the resources necessary to make work accessible to everyone and can scapegoat those left unemployed as lazy.

Labour is preparing to do that to justify attacks on welfare, aimed at forcing some NEETs into super-exploitative, precarious low-wage work, and others into destitution. Its pitiful £2.5 billion Youth Guarantee—just £2,500 per NEET—is aimed at creating a pretext.

A “Jobs Guarantee” programme is, in reality, a subsidy for low-wage employers. Fewer than 100,000 young people over three years will be offered 6 months’ employment of 25 hours a week at the minimum wage, entirely paid for by the taxpayer. This furnishes employers with a steady stream of low-cost labour while compelling young people to accept insecure and poorly paid work—KFC and JD Sports have been raised as possible hirers—either trapping them there or leading them back into unemployment.

A £3,000 per hire scheme for a few hundred thousand more will not deliver even the inadequate number of jobs the government claims it will, and hundreds of thousands of “work experience” placements are yet another way of gifting employers free labour.

Behind this fig leaf, Business Secretary Peter Kyle has insisted that “Now is not the time to give 18- to 20-year-olds the full minimum wage”. Treasury Minister Torsten Bell and other Cabinet members have signalled plans to “slow down the pace” of abolishing lower youth minimum wage rates.

The *Guardian* reports that Labour is “poised for fresh welfare changes”, restarting the offensive of last year, when the government proposed tightening eligibility criteria for

disability benefits and cutting off support for hundreds of thousands—a cut of £7 billion. Widespread opposition forced Labour into a retreat. Now the “Youth Guarantee” can be used as justification for penalising the vast majority of NEETs it does nothing to help.

Young workers are bearing the brunt of the abandonment of the entire working class by the trade union bureaucracy and its collaboration with the employers and the government. This is reflected in the fact that just 3.1 percent of workers aged 16-19 and 10.7 percent of workers aged 19-24 are in unions—roughly half the 1995 figures. 16–24-year-olds represent just 4.4 percent of union members in 2025, versus 7.4 percent in 1995. The overall unionisation rate fell from 32 to 22 percent in this time.

Responding to Milburn’s report the Trades Union Congress (TUC) have published an article, “Why more than one million young people are out of work, education or training”, authored by Anjum Klair.

Klair politely writes that Milburn’s report “should be a watershed moment, that galvanises the Government to create the quality, paid work and apprenticeship opportunities, alongside sustained investment in skills, education, health and social security that we know will give young people with so much potential the chance to succeed.”

What a fraud! The government the TUC is appealing to bares responsibility, along with every other capitalist party and the TUC itself, for the hellscape young people face under British capitalism.

The TUC and Labour can offer young people nothing because the capitalist system they defend can offer them nothing. Young people must reject attempts to limit their opposition to polite appeals to the Labour government. They must help to build the new organs of class struggle, and above all the mass socialist party that the working class urgently needs as the only possible means of fighting for its future.



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