

The US government's multi-pronged push to coerce young people into the military

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Efforts are underway to expand all branches of the US armed forces. These include lowering recruitment standards, loosening age restrictions and expanding the pipeline from middle and high schools through the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC). Most significantly, there are advanced preparations to reinstate the military draft.

These measures are in line with the January 2026 National Defense Strategy, which calls for “nothing short of a national mobilization,” likening it to the buildup for World Wars I and II.

Current deployments are already stretching US forces to their limits. As Donald Trump contemplated a US ground invasion of Iran last February, military sources noted they were straining under the largest Middle East buildup since 2003, alongside continued operations in Latin America and the Caribbean.

This crisis was addressed in a 2025 report, “Drafting a Solution: Overcoming the Existential Crisis of the Selective Service System,” by John Markel of the West Virginia University College of Law. The report cites war-gaming by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), a Democratic Party-aligned national security think tank, to simulate a mass mobilization needed for a “large-scale combat operation against a near-peer adversary” such as China. Based on the Selective Service’s own planning figure that 500,000 induction notices would be required to yield 100,000 conscripts within 193 days, CNAS found that even under “best-case” assumptions, the current system would fail to provide the necessary manpower.

Emphasizing that “multiple high-ranking personnel in the United States military fear World War III is on the horizon,” the CNAS suggests addressing the Selective Service System’s “existential crisis” by “replacing the national draft lottery with artificial intelligence” and “deepening the registration process to produce more data.”

Pointing to the central strategic question as whether China could out-mobilize the United States, the American Enterprise Institute recently reminded policymakers that “Policy—not biology—determines how wide the recruiting aperture can open in wartime.”

For these reasons, the \$901 billion 2026 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the largest in history, includes a provision that will automatically register every American male between 18 and 26 for the Selective Service starting in December 2026. Using Social Security records, the provision makes registration fully automatic and compulsory, a major step toward the reimposition of conscription.

The recruitment crisis

Three years ago, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported on a sharp military recruitment shortfall and the role of school authorities in forcing tens of thousands of students into the Junior Reserve Officers' Training

Corps (JROTC) through mandatory, and often illegal, enrollment.

That crisis has officially “turned around.” Every service met its 2025 quotas, but the ruling class has responded not by relaxing the pressure, but by intensifying it. For fiscal 2026, Congress raised end-strength targets by some 26,000 troops, pushing the active force past 1.3 million—its highest level since 2023—even as recruiters were ordered to find still more.

What Trump officials are now crediting to a “resurgence of pride” in a Hegseth-run military is, in fact, the product of economic coercion: the lowering of standards, a pay raise pegged to the wages of the working poor and, above all, the deepening of the “economic draft.”

The mechanism the Army credits most is the Future Soldier Preparatory Course, launched at Fort Jackson in 2022 and dubbed “Army Fat Camp.” The program offers recruits who fail academic or fitness standards up to 90 days of remediation.

Having insisted for years it would not lower standards, the military simply moved the threshold. In December 2025, the Pentagon’s own inspector general found that the Army and Navy had enlisted more low-scoring recruits than the law permits, with the Navy using “off-the-books academic and physical fitness development programs” to lift scores past the legal cap.

As of April 2026, the Army also raised its maximum enlistment age from 35 to 42 and eliminated a prohibition against applicants with a marijuana or drug-paraphernalia conviction.

The second lever was money. The FY2025 NDAA raised junior enlisted base pay 14.5 percent—designed to make service “financially competitive” with big-box retailers. The military is outbidding Walmart for the labor of young workers.

The intensifying “economic draft”

The collapse of options under capitalism, riven by economic crisis, debt and social inequality, is at the heart of the matter. Youth today face stagnant wages amid rapidly rising housing, education and living costs.

Recent data show that unemployment among 16–24-year-olds in the US is around 9–10 percent—roughly twice the overall rate—with even higher rates for minority youth. Housing surveys find that majorities of people in their 20s and early 30s spend more than 30 percent of their income on rent. Many are convinced they will never be able to buy a home or afford children.

Over the past decade and a half, living standards for broad sections of the working class have been eroded as union leaderships accepted tiered labor systems, permanent “temporary” status, frozen or reduced wages and sweeping cuts to pensions and healthcare to preserve corporate profits and their own institutional position.

Nowhere was this clearer than in the Obama-engineered auto bailout, in

which newly hired autoworkers—disproportionately young—were brought in on a second tier with wages roughly half those of older workers, locking an entire generation into far lower pay and worse conditions than their parents had enjoyed.

Meanwhile, manufacturing employment has fallen by more than 90,000 jobs in 2025, marking the third straight year of decline; white-collar jobs are being wiped out by AI, and tech layoffs are expected to reach 100,000 by year's end. Recent college graduates now face higher unemployment than the workforce overall. Estimates of underemployment—which include those working part time involuntarily or stuck in jobs below their skill level—indicate that more than one in 10 young workers in the US are unable to secure the hours or type of work they want at any given time.

In this landscape, the military's offer of a guaranteed paycheck, housing allowances and education benefits operates as a mechanism of economic conscription, drawing heavily on working class youth who see few comparable routes to stability in civilian life.

Expanding the JROTC pipeline

The expansion of JROTC is one of the clearest mechanisms of this economic and political conscription, tying K-12 schools into the recruitment system. The program, which already encompasses half a million students in some 3,475 units, with the Army alone running about 1,700 units and 275,000 cadets, is being aggressively expanded. These programs are immensely important to the military, as an estimated one in four cadets enlists or commissions.

The FY2025 NDAA authorized JROTC units at Job Corps centers for at-risk youth ages 16 to 24 and lowered the minimum required to establish a unit. The bipartisan SERVE Act would go further, providing recruiters with students' names, birth dates, phone numbers, email addresses and student-aid filer lists, designating "military-friendly schools" and proclaiming a "National Week of Military Recruitment."

The Trump administration's fascist blueprint, Project 2025, demands mandatory Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) military-entrance testing for every student in a federally funded school.

It should also be noted that ROTC, operating at colleges and universities, has about 20,000 Army cadets and is its largest source of officers. Campus reports consistently note that "many" or a "vast majority" of cadets are also coerced economically, dependent on ROTC "scholarships" to avoid student loan debt.

A bipartisan and international policy

The offensive against youth is not just a Pentagon initiative, but a bipartisan policy and an international trend among the imperialist powers.

The \$901 billion military budget, with its automatic conscription registration, passed with the votes of House Democratic Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, Minority Whip Katherine Clark and Caucus Chair Pete Aguilar. Jeffries called the NDAA "a must-pass investment in our men and women in uniform."

The Senate's senior Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, Jack Reed, praised the bill for "recognizing the urgent challenge China poses." Automatic registration itself was sponsored by Democrat Chrissy Houlahan. Trump, who signed it, justified gutting Medicaid and Medicare on the grounds that "we're fighting wars."

This is part of the escalating war fever among all the imperialist powers.

As the WSWS reported, the German Bundeswehr made 2,013 school visits in early 2026, sending "youth officers" into classrooms and running war-simulation games for students nearing conscription age. The German parliament passed a military service law in December 2025, with Defense Minister Boris Pistorius threatening "partial conscription."

France's defense chief said the country must be ready to "lose its children" in a war with Russia. Canada's recruitment has hit a 30-year high amid youth unemployment near 14 percent, while Britain openly urges jobless youth into uniform.

Young people across the world face the same struggle against world imperialism.

The way forward

A generation is awakening to the reality that it is being prepared as cannon fodder in the ruling class's expanding world war. This requires a clear political program and organization. There is no fight against war without a fight against capitalism and for socialism. The struggle against war must be based on the working class, the great revolutionary force in society.

Anti-war sentiment among young people has erupted into mass protests during the last two years on a scale not seen in decades. In Germany, a sustained school strike movement against the reintroduction of conscription has seen tens of thousands of students walk out in over 90 cities. In the United States, the "No Kings" protests against the Trump administration drew at least eight million into the streets—with solidarity actions in Canada, Mexico, Germany and Italy.

At every demonstration, alongside signs opposing ICE raids and dictatorship, the slogan "No ICE, No wars" rivaled "No Kings" in frequency, reflecting a deepening consciousness that war abroad and repression at home are two sides of the same class policy.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) urges young people to join our ranks and take up the following demands:

- The immediate repeal of automatic Selective Service registration, and the rejection of any conscription for the war against Iran or any other imperialist conflict.
 - The immediate withdrawal of US forces from the Middle East and an end to the war against Iran—and to the bipartisan drive for global domination, the arming of Israel and the escalation against Russia and China.
 - The abolition of the standing army and the dismantling of the military-intelligence apparatus—the Pentagon, the spy agencies, the global network of bases and the machinery of surveillance—built to wage war abroad and repression at home.
 - An end to the "economic draft," under which the young are driven into the military by poverty, debt and the impossibility of affording an education. Every young person must have the right to a decent job, free education, healthcare and housing.
 - Redirect the resources squandered on war to urgent social needs: universal healthcare, free public education, affordable housing and secure, well-paid jobs for all.
- Join the IYSSE and the struggle against war.



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