

Don't get young in third millennium!

**Capitalism and the demonising of the young working class
Sean Vernell**

Dedicated to all the students I have taught at City and Islington
College.

Sean Vernell is a teacher at City and Islington College in north London and is a member of the University and College Union National Committee.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those who gave advice and support in writing this pamphlet: Sally Campbell, Ian Ferguson, Charlie Kimber, Rachel Kendal, Richard McEwan, Ed Mynott, Judith Orr, Andy Strouthous, Jenny Sutton, Paul Vernell, Terry Wrigley, Alex Woodman and special thanks to Suzanne Jeffery.

Don't Get Young in the Third Millennium!
Capitalism and the demonisation of young people
Sean Vernell

Published February 2010 by Bookmarks Publications
c/o 1 Bloomsbury Street, London WC1B 3QE
© Bookmarks Publications

Bricks image © Mayang Murni Adnin
Cover design by Adam di Chiara
Typeset by Bookmarks Publications
Printed by Mixam Press
ISBN: 978 1905 192632

■ Contents

Foreword by Michael Rosen	4
Introduction	7
How did being young become a crime?	9
Conditions of the young working class	12
Young people are not the problem— they are part of the solution	26
Saying what we are for	34
Notes	39

■ Foreword Michael Rosen

ONE way in which adults can worry about the future is to complain about young people, because, like it or not, one day we adults aren't going to be here and the young people will be! Now sometimes this can be expressed as a bit of mild griping: 'In my day, we used to...,' but there's something else going on when it's those in power talking. The system they run spins out of control, they can't guarantee the things they say they can do when they ask us to vote for them: to make sure everyone has a job, everyone has a home, everyone has a health service, and everyone has an education to the level they want. They could, if they wanted to, do something about that: at one stroke, they could start to solve the housing crisis—change the law that sells the houses and flats that used to belong to all of us, set up a national emergency house-and-flat building programme to build dwellings that will stay owned by all of us. That way, the almost impossible job for young people to find places they can afford and won't be thrown out of, when the system tells them

they've lost their job, would be solved. That's just one example.

But governments, Labour or Tory, don't do this. So instead, they figure out ways to make it seem as if other people—not them, not the system—are to blame for our problems. And who do they light on? Young people. How convenient! The one group of people who couldn't possibly have caused any part of the system to go out of control, the one group who couldn't possibly have stacked up all our problems about housing, lack of jobs, a health service struggling to survive, terrible, bloody wars, is of course the people with no power, in charge of nothing!

One of the tricks governments have always used to maintain power is to try to turn the public's worry and anger on any group who seem as if they're 'outside' the system—what's been called 'the other'—immigrants, people who worship a god different from the official religion's god, travelling people and young people.

Sean Vernell has done us all a great service by breaking this all down and analysing just how it all works and I urge everyone to read this, especially any young people wondering how and why all this stuff goes on. I'd ask anyone who reads it to look back over the way in which society has brought you up over these last few years. Look closely at how the government forced schools to work. When you were very young, why did you have to have that stupid stuff about earning smiley faces or being on red, amber and green for behaviour? All that did was make sure that most of the class were seen as not good enough. Were you split up into 'fast' and 'slow' groups? Why? All that did was turn you against each other. Who decided that this was the way your life should be run? Why didn't you have any control over that? How did they make you feel as if being tested and given numbers and ranked in order was 'normal'? We don't do that when we get together with our friends and family.

I think that all this is about teaching most of us to not want power, to not want to have control over our lives, to think of ourselves as 'not good enough'—so we had better leave it to those who do know. But they don't! They've screwed up. They've been screwing up for hundreds of years, killing millions and millions of us in wars, prisons and camps. They've been screwing up pretending that they can keep everyone in work, everyone fed, everyone in decent housing, everyone healthy, everyone learning what they have the

potential to learn. But they can't and don't. And it all starts when we're young, when they teach us that we're not good enough to control our lives, we're not good enough to create a system in which we control all of our lives, all the industries and institutions of our life: buses, trains, housing, health, building cars, TVs—anything.

So this is a pamphlet that is in a way about un-learning all that stuff about being not good enough. And I'm dead glad it's come out.

■ Introduction

NEIL Kinnock made a famous speech in the early 1980s, on the eve of the election of Margaret Thatcher's Tory government for a second term:

If Margaret Thatcher is re-elected as prime minister on Thursday, I warn you...that you will have pain—when healing and pain depends on payment. I warn you that you will have ignorance—when talents are untended and wits are wasted, when learning is a privilege and not a right. I warn you that you will have poverty—when pensions slip and benefits are whittled away by the government that won't pay in an economy that can't pay... If Margaret Thatcher wins on Thursday, I warn you not to be ordinary, I warn you not to be young. I warn you not to fall ill. I warn you not to get old.¹

Sadly, the same warnings could apply to being young in the new millennium. After 12 years of New Labour, the condition of

young people's lives has got worse. Young people in Britain are some of the unhappiest in the world, according to a recent Unicef report. Paul Foot, the great socialist orator and investigative journalist, made the point that the most recent generations of children will be the first since the Second World War to be poorer than their parents, despite Britain being the fourth richest country in the world.

In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s parents could expect their children to be better off than they had been, with a house, better education, better healthcare. But no longer. In all these areas prospects for young people today are worse.

In 1997, when New Labour came to office to the tune of 'Things Can Only Get Better', millions celebrated, looking forward to the end of the 'greed is good' society. Millions were to be betrayed. There have been many disappointments, among them the terrible wars still being fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the rabid extension of the market into public services. When the banks so spectacularly collapsed in 2008 the New Labour government spent trillions of pounds of taxpayers' money bailing them out.

One of the worst aspects of New Labour in government has been the pushing of a socially right wing agenda, which has identified young people as a source of society's problems.

This pamphlet is an attempt to address the reasons why so many of our young working class are so unhappy, and why they are regarded with such fear and loathing by the media and politicians. It will look at the alienation and demonisation of young people and how this is bound up with the booms and slumps of the economy over the past 30 years. It examines how the concept of 'youth' has been constructed, and assesses the damage done to young people's lives by the relentless obsession with the market.

The central message of this pamphlet is that if society is to progress young working class people have to be active participants, with greater freedom to shape their own lives. It attempts to put forward some campaigning ideas around which the young working class can reassert its own agenda. It is aimed at all those, young and old, who see it as their business to change the world.

■ How did being young become a crime?

YOUTH as a discernible social category was developed during the period of industrialisation throughout the 19th century. There were no laws to protect children and it was common for them to work in the factories of Manchester and the East End of London in the most barbaric conditions.

The concept of juvenile delinquency was constructed by the state in response to the rise of the industrial working class, and its resistance to the anarchy of the market.³

As the struggles of the early 19th century developed into the revolutionary Chartist movement demanding universal suffrage, employers and their governments created a raft of new laws to control social unrest and to reimpose their values on society. Young workers were increasingly seen as a threat to the establishment.

Fear of revolutionary change was expressed as fear of 'crime' and thus the criminalisation of the young came about. The characters in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* reflect the anxieties of Victorian society: Oliver the middle class boy who needs to be protected from the threat of the working class Artful Dodger, the amoral pickpocket. This fear led liberal reformers like Lord Ashley to campaign for compulsory education to teach moral codes to the 'dangerous classes', the 'fearful multitude of untutored savages'. Borstal was introduced in 1900 and separate juvenile courts in 1908.

Young people's identities have been demonised in every decade, from the Glasgow razor gangs of the 1950s and the mods and rockers of the 1960s to the near hysteria that greeted punk rockers in the mid 1970s. Each phase has also had its own racism: from the Mediterranean garrotters of mid-Victorian England, the Irish in 1900, 'street Arabs', the labelling of Afro-Caribbean youth as muggers in the 1970s⁴ to the ferocious attack on Muslims as a part of the 'war on terror' today.

The 20th century was a constant battle between the state's attempts to restrict working class young people's freedoms and the fight against these constraints. The anti-war, civil rights and sexual liberation struggles of the 1960s won greater freedoms: the 1964 Education Act that brought in comprehensive education; the liberalisation of abortion laws and the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967.

From the mid 1970s onwards deep economic crisis and the failure of Keynesian policies to solve the crisis allowed a newly confident right wing to pose an alternative to 'liberal Britain'. Restructuring British capitalism along neoliberal lines meant breaking up every vestige of the post Second World War welfare consensus. By the end of the 1970s those within the ruling elite who had fought to break the consensus had won—and still today the *Daily Mail* rails against the 'permissive' and 'decadent' 1960s.

It was under the Labour government in the mid 1970s that the assault on working class living standards began. However, it was the election of Margaret Thatcher that signalled a wholesale offensive on the working class and its welfare provision. The attacks on education throughout the 1980s, and attacks on young people's lifestyles such as the Criminal Justice Act of the late 1980s, shifted the

debate over the way we should treat and understand young people and their problems. Instead of locating social problems within society, the individual was to blame.

Ten years of New Labour have embedded this attitude. Newspapers veer from stories about the need to protect our children from psychotic paedophiles lurking on the internet to headlines demonising young people as ‘savages’ and ‘feral’.

‘Youth’ is an elastic category. It is a transitory state to adulthood, but when this transition begins and ends is not simply biological; it is socially determined—and it varies in different people, places and eras. Yet billions of pounds are spent constructing a single image of youth through films, advertising and other cultural institutions, in order to ensure an easily targetable market for capitalists.

Absurd laws govern what people can and cannot do at specific ages: under the age of 16 you cannot legally ‘be used by another to beg’—but you can at 16! You can legally marry, bear children and pay taxes at 16, but you can’t vote till 18. Perhaps most disturbing is the setting of the age of criminal responsibility at just ten years old (eight in Scotland)—by far the lowest in the EU.

The attacks on welfare over the past 30 years have changed the age of transition to adulthood and independence. In 1979 the unemployed could claim full housing benefit at 18. Today they have to wait until they are 26. This combined with the dearth of council houses available means that many young people cannot afford to leave home, and prospective students will apply to the university that is nearest to their parents’ home. The children of the wealthy do not have such considerations.

Every young person should have a basic right to grow physically and mentally without fear of persecution or destitution.

■ Conditions of the young working class

IN a recent Unicef report into children's health in the 21 OECD nations, Britain was 20th on every count.⁵ The US was bottom. It is no coincidence that these are the two countries which have most pushed the competitive values of the free market.

Young people are big business: under-16s spend £3 billion a year of their own money on clothes, music, sweets and magazines. Their parents spend £6 billion a year on clothing for them. Money spent on advertising directed at children in the US has soared to \$15 billion, compared with virtually nothing 20 years ago.⁶

Despite this pressure, the 'get rich or die trying' attitude of the rich and powerful has not fully penetrated the hearts and minds of the very young. A recent survey by the Children's Society revealed that very young children are more tolerant of human diversity in all forms and they are more concerned about the environment

than ever before. They are also more likely to work collectively to solve problems. However, as they get older and enter their teens the impact of living in a market-dominated society takes its toll.

Mental health

In 2004, 10% of five to 16 year olds living in private households in Britain had a clinically recognised mental disorder.⁷ The number of 15 and 16 year olds experiencing some 'significant' emotional difficulties nearly doubled between 1974 and 2006—boys from 7% to 13% and girls from 12% to 21%. In 2007, 8.9% of young people aged 16 to 24 said they had self-harmed, compared to 5.3% in 2000. The rise was particularly marked among young women, from 6.5% in 2000 to 11.7% in 2007.⁸

Among 11 to 25 year olds, one in 15 has self-harmed and some 142,000 young people attend accident and emergency departments each year as a result of self-harm.⁹

Anorexia among young women has risen dramatically. In 2006/7 there was an 80% increase on the previous ten years in admissions to hospital as a consequence of anorexia among girls of 16 and under.¹⁰

Many of the gains won by the women's movement have been eroded, and old stereotypes of male and female behaviour and appearance have been restored. Even young children are expected to assume an identity of sexual attractiveness and live up to impossible physical ideals. This is driven by the multinational fashion industry, the advertising industry and the mass media, which need young people to become consumers, at the cost of deep personal anxiety and feelings of inadequacy.

Suicide rates of young men between the ages of 15 and 24 rose from 9.8% in 1976 to 15.8% in 1996. The rate marginally dropped to 13.3% in 2002.¹¹ This is the second highest cause of death among this age group, the biggest cause being road-related accidents (30%). It is higher than the 7% killed by crime.¹² There are many reasons why young people decide to take their own lives, but it is difficult to deny that this rise coincides with a period of history in which there has been an aggressive penetration of competitive values into every aspect of our lives.

There is an important debate about what constitutes mental

illness, but these figures suggest that there is something fundamentally wrong with our society. Why are a significant proportion of our young so unhappy? Many of the explanations we read in our newspapers move from blaming the young themselves to blaming their parents or their teachers. It is true that young people are very much affected by what happens in their homes and schools. However, we need to delve much deeper than these partial explanations.

Family

Family break-ups are cited by the Children's Society survey as one of the key reasons for our children's unhappiness. Seven out of ten children said that 'parents getting on' is one of the key factors in creating a happy home.¹³ Some argue that the decline of the traditional family unit is the source of the problem. This approach fails to recognise that the central issue is not the type of family unit that a child grows up in but the level of poverty and stress faced by the adult or adults in a home.

Working parents in Britain work some of the longest hours in Europe. Night shifts are common for many working class families. When one of the parents walks in from a shift, the other walks out to work. Yet not working can be even more damaging, leaving families in poverty. In London, which has some of the poorest boroughs in England, 30% of working age residents were not in employment in 2007—before the economic crisis.¹⁴ With unemployment rising to the 3 million mark the levels of poverty will rise enormously and hit communities that have still not recovered from the recession of the 1980s.

The impact of this on family life can be devastating. Relationships are severely tested as people attempt to survive the humiliation of unemployment. Only resolving these issues will begin to tackle one of the areas cited by young people as a major cause of their unhappiness.

Education

It is damning of our education system that so many young people leave school never wanting to pick up a book ever again. How does a society manage to wrench from young people something as integral to being human as learning? Once again, if we listen to successive

governments and newspaper columnists we would believe it is to do with 'dumbing down', 'politically correct' teachers and the lack of discipline.

The last quarter of the 20th century up until today has seen an enormous expansion of education. However, this expansion has not achieved the stated government aim of a more skilled workforce. The number of young people in meaningful paid employment has fallen and will continue to fall as a consequence of the recession.

As school curriculums have become less and less relevant to young people's lives, so the levels of boredom, cynicism and bullying have increased. Truancy rates have soared: one estimate puts it at around 500,000 young people on unauthorised absence from school each week.¹⁵ Many young people are voting with their feet.

Education is an ideologically important part of our society over which recent governments have wrestled for control. Between 1945 and 1979 four education acts were passed. Between 1979 and 2006 there were 35.¹⁶ Each one of these acts rolled out the market further and wider.

The rush to meet targets, to outdo competitor schools and to be top of the league tables has led school managements to prioritise winning funding rather than focusing on strategies to develop students' enjoyment of learning. They ignore the increasing teacher workload, and deal with the predictable resulting bad behaviour from pupils by developing more punitive disciplinary measures.

The level of permanent exclusions from school rose from 3,000 in 1990 to almost 13,000 in 1997. During the same period fixed-term exclusions (mainly boys) rose to 100,000. The figure for permanent exclusions has since run at between 8,000 and 10,000 per year, while the number of fixed-term exclusions in 2007/8 was 324,180. This is overwhelmingly among working class boys.

The institutionalised racism of the British education system is revealed by the fact that among African-Caribbean boys the figure is between five and eight times higher than for white boys.¹⁷

The introduction of the market into the education sector has done untold damage to young people's lives. The narrowing of the curriculum has left the young less able to deal with the complex and difficult problems that life throws up. Despite all the talk of a 'meritocracy', the link between young people's educational achievement

and family background is stronger now than in the 1960s. The very poorest tend to fall further behind at every stage. A recent study showed that, of pupils on free meals who, against all the odds, were in the most successful 20% of 11 year olds, only one in seven reached university.¹⁸

The government's announcement, as part of their cuts in public spending, that they will cut over £600 million from the further, adult and higher education budgets with an estimated 20,000 job losses will not only have a devastating effect on those who work in these sectors but also on young people's educational opportunities. Over 300,000 students' places will go, further reducing the chances of young people from the poorest backgrounds reaching university. Class divisions are alive and well in 21st century Britain.

Work and unemployment

English manufacture must have, at all times save the brief periods of highest prosperity, an unemployed reserve army of labour, in order to produce the masses of goods required by the market in the liveliest months.¹⁹

For the third time in 30 years working class people now face a period of mass unemployment. The young will, as in past recessions, bear the brunt of the jobs cull. One in five 16 to 24 year olds are without work—946,000. This figure is expected to go over the 1 million mark very soon. The unemployment rate for 16 and 17 year olds stands at 33%.²⁰ A report by the Institute for Public Policy Research shows that just under 50% of young black people between the ages of 16 and 24 are without work, which is well over twice the 20% rate of unemployment among white people.

This has not always been the case. The period after the Second World War saw full employment until the 1960s. Capitalism was going through a great expansion and consensus was reached between the main political parties on the economic approach to be taken. The young were employed in the manufacturing industries where many of their parents worked. It was accepted by this generation that the most basic human need, to work, would and could be fulfilled by society. Unemployment rates among young people

in this period were lower than those in the working population as a whole.

This does not mean that every young person was happy about the kind of work they were doing. Alan Sillitoe captures well in his 1958 novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* the alienation felt by young working class people. Arthur the anti-hero, working in a factory in Nottingham, expresses this anger:

Once a rebel, always a rebel. You can't help being one. You can't deny that. And it's best to be a rebel so as to show 'em it don't pay to try to do you down. Factories and labour exchanges and insurance offices keep us alive and kicking—so they say—but they're booby traps and will suck you under like sinking sands if you aren't careful. Factories sweat you to death, labour exchanges talk to you to death, insurance and income tax officers milk money from your wage packets and rob you to death. And if you're still left with a tiny bit of life in your guts after all this boggering about, the army calls you up and you get shot to death.²¹

The tens of thousands of young people who work in call centres today will recognise this frustration and rage. Nevertheless, they were in work. However, the onset of crisis in the early 1970s, which grew throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s, meant that full employment was no longer possible or desirable if profit levels were to be sustained. Unemployment reached the 1 million mark in the summer of 1975. Under the Tory government it rose to 2.5 million in 1981 (8.9%), and by the summer of 1986 it had reached 11.4% as swathes of manufacturing industry were closed.

So how did governments get people to accept that full employment was no longer a realistic part of life?

To achieve this they had to turn the argument on its head. Rather than the closure of factories and loss of manufacturing jobs being the cause of mass unemployment, it was argued that young people could not find work because there were 'deficiencies' in their attitudes, education and training that put them at a disadvantage within the jobs marketplace. This line of argument was first put forward by the Labour prime minister Jim Callaghan in the 'Great Debate' about the future of education in 1976. Phil Mizen argues:

Egalitarianism, claimed Callaghan, had supposedly been at the expense of nurturing individual initiative and ability, and 'progressive' teaching techniques, a curriculum infused with permissiveness and an anti-industrial bias among teachers were all held to account for producing ill-disciplined and poorly qualified school leavers.²²

It was here that the Labour prime minister signalled the direction that educational policy was going to travel over the next 30 years which we are so familiar with today: the emphasis on training and skills as opposed to education.

This was an important change to the way governments viewed and understood unemployment. An ideological offensive took place that shifted the blame and responsibility for unemployment from society to the individual. The debates today around employment and skills are about putting the emphasis on the young getting skills that make them employable rather than governments and employers creating meaningful jobs for the young. The term 'worklessness', which is used today rather than 'unemployment', symbolises this attempt to shift the blame. Even the government's own select committee now accept that there is no direct correlation between up-skilling the workforce and a successful nation:

It may well be the case that increased skills lead to an increase in national prosperity but there is a surprising lack of evidence to support the conclusion.²³

Throughout the 1980s more and more training schemes were launched: YOPS, YTS, MSC and others. The philosophy of the government then as now was that market forces would be the key to finding young people work. However, even when the economy picked up, older women returning to work after having children were preferred by employers over young workers. Young workers were seen as 'more difficult'.

Young people who did manage to find work saw their wages cut drastically. Between 1979 and 1994, young people's wages were cut from 42% to 25% of the adult rate. For 18 to 20 year olds in this period wages fell from 61% to 49% of the adult wage.²⁴ Indeed throughout the last 30 years, young people's wages have eroded

faster than those of low paid workers overall. Despite the introduction of the minimum wage many problems associated with low pay still exist, not least of which is the very low level at which the minimum wage has been set and the continued gap between the rates for 16 to 21 year olds and for older workers.

There cannot be many better examples of policies that have so spectacularly failed than the youth employment strategies pursued by governments in the last 30 years. Young people today need policies that will ensure they don't become another 'lost generation', scarred and dehumanised by life on the dole. This is one of the most urgent tasks for government. A programme of 1 million green jobs such as that proposed by some in the trade union and environmental movement would be a good place to start.²⁵ Reversing the cuts in higher, further and adult education and scrapping tuition fees for all courses would make a very positive impact on the opportunities available to young people. Moreover, for this to take place governments must abandon their 30-year commitment to neoliberal economics that has so clearly failed to provide the most basic of human needs.

Social security: squeezing the young

With the institutionalisation of youth unemployment, more young people have turned to the social security system to survive. Benefits for the young unemployed during the long boom of the 1950s and 1960s seem very generous compared to today's benefit system. Every so often MPs and celebrities appear in ridiculous documentaries living for one week on social security payments in an attempt to prove that they are not only ample but are too high and act as a disincentive to find work.

The myth of a 'culture of poverty', in which young men prefer unemployment and young women have babies in order to live off benefits, has developed. It has been popularised by think tanks and policy units. American sociologist Charles Murray articulated this idea on the strength of half-day visits to a few British council estates, and it has been echoed since by the mass media. It underlies much New Labour thinking on benefits, which are geared towards pushing people into work, even when it is clear that wage levels are insufficient to lift them out of poverty.²⁶

Behind this attempt to paint the young unemployed as ‘scroungers’ with unrealistic expectations of life is an attempt to justify cutting young people’s benefits and forcing their families to shoulder the financial burden for longer—letting the state off the hook.

A single person over 25 years old receives £64.30 per week, dropping to £50.95 for those under 25. The UK is near the bottom of the western European league table in comparative rates of unemployment benefit. The gap between benefits and earnings has widened significantly over the past 30 years because Jobseeker’s Allowance has increased at a rate below inflation. If it had increased in line with earnings, an unemployed person would receive over £110 per week.²⁷

There is evidence to show that low benefits act as a disincentive to find work. People living in abject poverty find their lives spiralling out of control as they attempt to survive. Poverty affects people mentally and physically and makes it much harder to find work.

The modern benefit system was introduced in the 1950s when all governments accepted, to some degree, the idea that society had a collective responsibility to help those who, through no fault of their own, found themselves without work. This approach has been transformed in the last 30 years into one where there is begrudging help for those who are ‘actively seeking’ employment and can prove it, on vastly reduced rates and tied to education and training.

Housing

A place to live which is warm, secure and affordable should be one of the most basic things that a society should provide. In Britain, according to a survey conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation 75,000 young people are statutorily homeless.²⁸ This is an underestimate as the figures only count the homeless who have registered.

Being homeless brings with it many other social problems. A young homeless person is more likely to be dependent on drugs or alcohol and have greater mental health problems. Employers are very reluctant to hire those who are homeless.

In 1966 *Cathy Come Home*, Ken Loach’s documentary exposing the plight of the homeless, shocked British society. It peered behind

the curtains of the 'swinging sixties' and found a different world where tens of thousands of young people could neither get on the property ladder nor afford rented accommodation. Have things got any better today?

The rate of new house-building lags far behind demand. Young people are staying on in their parental homes out of financial necessity, creating tensions within the family. Therefore the housing problem cannot merely be measured in terms of actual homelessness; overcrowding has once again become a real problem for young people in many of Britain's poorest areas. The government's own figures say:

It is estimated that some 526,000 households are overcrowded of which 216,000 are in the social sector. There are particular overcrowding problems in London where some 37% of all overcrowded households live.²⁹

Overcrowding is set to worsen with the rise in unemployment. By 2011, according to a report by the National Housing Federation, more than 2.65 million people will be forced to live in overcrowded conditions. This is an increase of 15% since the beginning of the recession.³⁰

Cramped conditions also affect physical health. Diseases such as TB that were on the decrease have been revived. All the reports into overcrowding reveal that it is one of the major causes of violence and family breakups. The government must resolve the problems of homelessness and poor housing if young people are not to be irreparably damaged.

Crime—the real victims are the young

A day doesn't go by without the media highlighting another youth-related crime incident involving knives, guns or drugs. A picture is painted of a society in which the young have lost control and are roaming the streets like packs of dogs. However, all the available evidence shows that young people, rather than being the main perpetrators of crime, are in fact much more likely to be the victims of crime. Shereene, a 19 year old student writing an essay on knife crime, reveals that the recurring emotion young people feel is not

aggression but fear:

The amount of young people who carry knives shows the consequences of a society which is allowing many young people to grow up feeling that there is no hope for them, while at the same time preaching that anybody can become rich and famous. Most youths of today find it hard to get jobs, so how they see it is the only way out for them is to turn to crime in order to get rich quick and to get what they want.³¹

Elisabeth, in an essay exploring the relationship between rap music and the rise of gun culture, provides an insight into why violence and crime have become part of some young people's lives:

I think that some people don't understand that most of the violence comes from their pain, the things that are going on in their lives. They are struggling to get by in life. Some are affected by being unloved or because of racism. Many black boys are growing up without a father figure, and even if they do, they are either in prison or not involved in their life so they end up living with a single mum who has to play both roles. Most mothers find it very hard to cope on their own and some even have to have two jobs to try and get by in life just to provide. Even then, they can't cope because it's still not enough. Drugs can become a way of dealing with their pain so that they can carry on trying to provide for their family.³²

Social class and the colour of your skin are key factors in determining what kind of life a young person is likely to have. As Goldson and Muncie argue:

Why is it that the social profiles of 'young offenders' tend to look basically the same throughout the youth justice systems in 'advanced' industrial countries? Predominately young men with an over-representation of youth drawn from minority ethnic communities, low income, low educational achievement, poorly paid and/or casualised employment (if any) and strained familial relations, are the standard defining characteristics of children and young people most frequently in juvenile detention centres and custodial institutions whether this be in Australia, England and Wales, Canada or the US.³³

The claim that the police and the youth justice system are institutionally racist is very much reinforced by the stop and search figures. The police have been given greater powers to legally stop and search people under successive anti-terror acts passed in the last eight years. There was an overall increase of 9% in stop and searches in 2007/8. Young black people were seven times more likely to be searched than white people. Asian youth were twice as likely to be stopped as white youth.

The criminalisation of young black people is nothing new. They have been targeted by the press throughout the last three decades. The infamous headline in the *Sun* newspaper in 1983 which said 'Black Crime Shock' is an example of the constant attempt to link crime and race in the public's mind. The *Sun* article made the statement that 'blacks carried out twice as many muggings as whites in London'.³⁴ This crude and simplistic attempt to link crime with race deliberately ignored issues such as police racism and urban poverty and deprivation. But it did successfully create a common sense among the media and politicians which uncritically presented the idea that black youths were public enemy number one.

In truth young black people are far more likely than other social groups to be on the receiving end of unwarranted harassment and violence by the police. The reality for many young black people is:

pervasive, ongoing targeting of black areas involving stopping and searching vehicles 'on a flimsy pretext', persistent stop and search on the streets, commonplace rude and hostile questioning accompanied by racial abuse, arbitrary arrest, violence on arrest, the arrest of witnesses and the bystander, punitive and indiscriminate attacks, victimisation on reporting crime, acting on false information, forced entry and violence, provocative and unnecessary armed raids, and repeated harassment and trawling of suspects.³³

Crime increases wherever there is desperate poverty. In Scotland, where ethnic minorities make up a very small part of the population, crime is most frequent in very poor white neighbourhoods. This is not because of immorality, stupidity or a genetic inclination towards violence, but arises from a situation where legal

opportunities for a better life are largely missing.

New Labour governments have, arguably, gone further than any other government in the last 30 years to criminalise the young. Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) are the means by which a generation of young people have been criminalised. This, more than any other piece of legislation, reveals the fear and loathing engendered within society towards working class youth. Everyday behaviour, which in another period would be simply put down as high jinks, is now seen as criminal. Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party, in a recent report described this well:

New Labour has created over 700 new offences since 1997... Children are now dealt with more harshly than adults. There appear to be numerous instances where incidents that used to be regarded as normal adolescent behaviour fifteen or twenty years ago are now being seen as low-level criminal activity. Young people are receiving ASBOs for playing football in the wrong place, loud music or loud behaviour disturbing neighbours...

October 2006 saw 3,350 children and young people locked up in England and Wales, a doubling in a decade. Yet the British Crime Survey, which asks young people themselves whether they have offended in the past twelve months...shows that levels of crime committed have been static for the past five years. There has been a disproportionate increase in the numbers of girls and boys from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds sent to prison.³⁶

If crime figures and criminality are exaggerated for young people in general, it is even more so for young girls. Increasingly we read headlines about young girls being robbers, murderers, even rapists. However, the reality is there has been a very modest rise in criminal behaviour among young girls. When compared to young boys, girls continue to commit fewer, and on the whole less serious, offences than boys and present a lower risk of reoffending, according to a recent Home Office report.

The headlines say more about the failure of the economic restructuring and competitive values of the last 30 years than they do about the nature of young people today. The moral panic whipped up by the press and politicians points to old-fashioned

sexist attitudes towards girls.

If young people are going to be free to use their abilities to transform society then the criminalisation of young people must be reversed. A prerequisite of this is that governments and law enforcement agencies stop routinely harassing and imprisoning young people.

■ Young people are not the problem—they are part of the solution

Michael Moore: If you could talk directly to the young people of Columbine what would you say?

Marilyn Manson: I would not say a single word to them; I would listen to what they had to say. That's what no one did.

(*Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore's film about the massacre of high school students in Columbine)

HOW does society go about allowing young people a more equal say? To answer this it is necessary to debunk myths surrounding young people's alleged apathy towards politics. Wherever you go you hear adults in their 40s and 50s bemoaning this generation as

not as radical as previous ones. Some within the trade union movement complain that this generation are self-interested and have lost any sense of collectivism. Politicians too moan about the lack of interest shown by young people in politics. They point to the very low turnout in general, local and European elections to prove that young people today are simply not interested in politics.

The first thing to point out is that it is not only young people who are turned off by 'official politics'—all ages are. The last general election had the lowest turnout, across age groups, since universal suffrage was introduced.

Secondly, these assertions about young people and their alleged political apathy are based on the idea that previous generations were continuously on the barricades and were steeped in a collectivist identity from the beginning of their lives. This rather rose-tinted view of the past does not match up to serious inspection. Even at the high point of the anti-war movement in 1968 in Britain there was only one demonstration of 100,000. During the last decade's anti-war movement, there was a demonstration of 2 million in 2003 and 17 demonstrations of 80,000 or over within the next four years. School students and young people played a key role in the movement.

'Official politics' is simply not seen as relevant to young people's lives. Nevertheless this generation is arguably one of the most political; it is the generation that alerted us to the dangers of global warming and has built the largest anti-war movement in British history. Combine this with the attacks on living conditions and job prospects and we can see how the state of the world has shaped this generation into one of the most radical and critical—and who are also beginning to organise at work.

Dave, a call centre worker, describes how he has started to organise his workplace:

We're engaged in a battle with management about who controls the notice boards—every day they take them down. But they can't stop us leafleting and petitioning outside the building. Already 200 people have signed the petition demanding that we are paid the London Living Wage of £7.60 an hour and our leaflets which explain workers' rights have gone down really well.³⁷

Sarah describes how she is trying to recruit to the union among call centre workers—reflecting an old tradition being developed in new circumstances:

I tell them that the call centres of today are like the factories of the Victorian era—they are the bright Satanic mills that have replaced the dark ones of the past. These factories were transformed by people who fought for better conditions and the unions were central to those battles.³⁸

This is not to say that the curriculum in our schools with its emphasis on testing and vocation has not stunted an inquisitive and critical instinct. As Zoe Pilger, a leader of the school students' strikes against the war in 2003, wrote:

We do not want to grow up in a world in which the business interests of men in Whitehall define our futures. We are now educated more than ever before, and yet, through excessive examinations and syllabus control, there is very little room for discussion. It is a paradox that in today's society young people will learn more, but think less.³⁹

The remoteness of politicians and trade union leaders from the everyday lives of young people is partly to blame for their inability to relate to and understand how young people view the world. It is also the measurements that are used to gauge political awareness that are the problem. Too often the old barometers of attendance at trade union or political meetings or even how many left wing publications are bought and sold have been used as the key measure to gauge whether young people are politically active or not.

However, there are times in history when these instruments of measurement no longer fit. In the years running up to the explosive events of May 1968, when French students joined workers in the biggest general strike in world history, we could have ploughed through newspapers and not found a hint of the key historical moment about to happen. An explanation of this contradiction was given by veteran socialist activist Tony Cliff looking back at this period:

The deep alienation of workers from traditional organisations smashed all such barometers to pieces. This explains why there was no way of detecting the imminence of the mass upheaval in May 1968. And also, more importantly, it explains the extreme nature of events. If the workers in France had been accustomed to participate in branch life of the unions and the Communist Party, these institutions would have served both as an aid and a ballast preventing the uncontrolled spread of the strike action. The concept of apathy or privatisation is not a static concept. At a certain stage of development apathy can be transformed into its opposite, swift mass action.⁴⁰

An understanding of apathy in this sense provides an important insight into the likely way a new mass movement could emerge, bringing with it new democratic values. Two examples in recent history from France and Greece point to how a new movement, with young people at its centre, came about in this way.

France: reliving the spirit of 1968

In 2006 the French conservative government launched an attack on young people. They introduced a law that would make it legal for employers to sack workers under the age of 26 without notice or compensation. This sparked a spontaneous revolt uniting university and high school students with the poor, Arab and African working class youth from the banlieues (low-income housing estates on the outskirts of cities) and with trade unionists. Oriana Garcia, a French university student, who was at one of the 67 out of 84 universities that took strike action, explained what they were campaigning about:

Our movement has the spirit of '68. If that uprising was against repression, ours is a revolt against neoliberalism and a government that wants to drive the working class conditions of young people back to the 19th century.⁴¹

The government attempted to divide the movement, saying that it was simply middle class university students attempting to defend their privileges:

The government wants to portray this as a revolt by privileged students, but we are only one element of a revolt struggle. The Lycées, the unemployed, those who exist on part or low wages, the poor of the banlieues and the workers are also part of this movement.⁴²

The government's attempts to divide the movement backfired. Tens of thousands of young people took to the streets. It was estimated that over half a million school and university students and young people from the banlieues joined the demonstrations that took place across France.

There were clearly similarities to 1968, but also differences, as Daniel Bensaid explained:

The other difference lies in the motives of the movement. In 1968, the spark was a demonstration against the war in Vietnam. The themes were very internationalist—solidarity with Vietnam... The present movement is directly based on a social question—the destruction of the workplace regulations and the generalised casualisation of employment, which is common both to youth in education and to workers. The question of the link, and not just solidarity, between the two is therefore immediate.⁴³

This movement took place in the context of the familiar disparaging comments from the media and the politicians about apathetic and depoliticised youth. This movement has gone on to shape a new, dynamic left wing electoral alliance as well as rejuvenating sections of the trade union and student organisations.

The Greek revolt

The killing by police of Alexandros Grigoropoulos, a 15 year old school student, was the spark that ignited the student revolt in Greece in December 2008. The outpouring of grief and anger that followed the killing reflected the deeper anxieties of the young in Greece. It was an explosive mix of an out of touch government, corruption among politicians over land deals and the imposition of austerity measures in response to the banking crisis. One eyewitness expressed the disappointment of a generation who had seen a dictator removed and a liberal democracy ushered in:

It was great that the politicians we have today helped to get rid of the junta in 1974. But ever since they've created their own cliques of power and sidelined those who are not with them. People have had enough of the scandals, the corruption and especially the police, who we all know are not clean.⁴⁴

The boy was killed in Exarchia, a poor working class area of Athens. Unemployment, low wages and insecure jobs among the young are rife in Greece. Graduate unemployment is also very high. This explosive mix burst onto the streets and shook the right wing government of Costas Karamanlis to its foundations. Tens of thousands demonstrated, rioted and fought back against the police. Wider layers of working people sympathetically greeted the protests. The government was pursuing a programme of cuts and privatisation, and students and workers joined in common cause to challenge it. It seemed to come as a surprise to many, not simply that young people demonstrated but the ferocity of the protests and the speed at which they spread to different parts of Greece. Greek students had previously been at the forefront of the anti-war movement, leading strikes and protests and creating new networks which were now put into action.

The French and Greek revolts point to an emerging pattern. The anger and a sense of 'we have nothing to lose' can be replicated across Europe. As the conditions of young people's lives are eroded and the TV channels they tune into show war, poverty and environmental disaster their sense of injustice and disillusionment grows deeper.

Is Britain different?

Some would claim that what took place in these two countries is a French/Greek disease. Of course, traditions do make a difference. The Greek left are better organised and more rooted in their communities and unions than the British left are. In France successive governments, in a shorter period of time, have tried to implement the kind of policies that it took the Tory governments in Britain 20 years to implement and which continued under ten years of New Labour governments. All this does make a difference.

However, in this country we might be starting further down

the field, but the underlying pattern is the same and therefore we could find ourselves propelled very quickly to the front.

Young people in Britain have on many occasions been at the forefront of fighting for change and against injustice. In Lewisham in 1977 thousands of black and white youths united to chase the Nazi National Front off the streets. In 1981 the impact of the Thatcher government's economic policies and police racism created uprisings in Toxteth, Brixton and St Pauls in Bristol. More recently, too, they have been involved in some of the biggest social movements in British history. The anti-war movement is the most significant to date. The 10,000 school students who took strike action on 5 March 2003 against the Iraq invasion formed the biggest school student strike in British history and radicalised a generation. Henna Malik, one of the school student leaders, explains the how they got started:

It was after the 2 million demo that people really started talking about it. There was a real politicisation—you even had nine year olds using the word imperialism. People underestimate the intelligence of students a lot. Just to see 2 million people on the streets made such an impact and we started to talk about going on strike... We set up a London-based School Students Against the War group and then we held a national meeting at Friends Meeting House, which was attended by hundreds from around the country... There was a broad consensus that we should go on strike.⁴⁵

Since then we have seen a number of other examples of young people in Britain on the move. In January 2009 some 50,000 mainly young people demonstrated through the streets of London against the massacre of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. This demonstration mirrored the demonstration that had taken place a few weeks earlier in Greece. Further education students from some of the poorest areas of London made up a significant proportion of those who attended the demonstration. A wave of occupations spread across Britain's universities calling for boycotting, disinvesting in and sanctions against Israel. Thirty universities were occupied, the biggest wave for 25 years.

More recently, 100 students occupied their university at the

School of Oriental and African Studies after the privatised cleaning firm ISS called in 40 immigration officers to arrest and deport 12 cleaners. The students united with the cleaners' union, Unison, and the lecturers' UCU union and won a significant victory.

The rise of the far right has also brought young people onto the streets of Britain leafleting housing estates against the Nazi British National Party (BNP) and packing out Love Music Hate Racism (LMHR) gigs in Rotherham and Stoke. In Stoke, the heartland of BNP support where they succeeded in getting 12 councillors elected, 25,000 young people turned out to the LMHR carnival. As fascist organisations take to the streets of Birmingham, Harrow and Manchester attempting to divide our communities by playing on people's fears about immigration and Islam, young people turn out to protect their communities and drive the Nazi thugs out. The demonstration at the BBC headquarters in protest over the leader of the BNP appearing on *Question Time* also revealed a new generation of young anti-fascists prepared to use militant methods to combat racism.

All these examples point to the emergence of a radicalised youth movement shaped by war, racism and poverty that is laying the foundations for a broader movement with the potential to offer real hope to millions of young people.

■ Saying what we are for

Clear majorities of the young thought they should have some say in decision-making about local facilities and the issues such as compulsory identity cards.⁴⁶

ANY movement that emerges to challenge the prevailing orthodoxies needs to have some idea of what it's advocating. We cannot predetermine in any great detail what those alternatives could be in advance of that struggle—not least because it must be the young themselves who construct their own alternatives. However, what we can do is outline some ideas that we can raise within our communities, trade unions and campaigns to help facilitate any such movement.

The starting point should be to demand the end of the economic approach which believes that basic human needs like a home, an education, healthcare and meaningful employment

should depend on the market. This is not only morally wrong; it also does not work. Social needs, not private profit, should determine what is produced. We should offer an alternative based on planning for need.

Some first steps:

- All competition between schools, universities and colleges should be abolished and replaced with a planned approach based on the communities these institutions serve.
- Scrap league tables and testing as the main forms of assessment.
- Scrap all university and college fees.
- Reverse cuts in further and adult education and give equal funding status with other sectors.
- Give young employees a statutory right to paid educational leave and to workplace training committees; trade unions must be given negotiating rights for education and training.
- Repeal stop and search laws and ASBOs.
- Start a building programme for youth clubs: 80% of young people complain about nowhere to go. Three out of four 11 to 16 year olds do not have access to a youth club.

Pay, benefits and employment

There will be a lot of pressure from governments and employers on young people to accept lower wages for a job. The 'don't price yourself out of work' argument is prevalent. However, young people and the trade union movement as a whole must resist this argument to accept lower wages for employment. The experience of every recession including this one is that when unions agree to take a reduction in wages, the jobs of the workers are cut too. Cuts in benefits then follow.

Avoiding struggle on pay also implicitly concedes the central tenet of the government's and employers' argument—that the money is not there. There was no shortage of money to bail out the banks, though workers are now being expected to pay this back through cuts in health and education and welfare benefits. Billions spent on war in Afghanistan and Iraq show that it is a question of priorities and commitment, not a lack of money.

We must fight for structures to be put in place in every school, college, university, housing estate and workplace that allow young

working class people to have a real say in determining what takes place in these institutions. Such structures would allow young people to get together with others to decide collectively what is needed in their communities.

Further steps:

- Set up town/city/borough-wide community forums with representatives from local unions, parents' groups, students' unions, youth groups and community groups; their role would be to ensure that young people's concerns surrounding issues like education and employment could be heard and acted upon.
- All young people should receive a universal basic income, which would allow them to meet their basic needs for independent survival. Every young person must be allowed equal access to education and employment. Their financial situation must not put them at a disadvantage.
- A maximum 30-hour week would allow employment to be spread around a wider number of young people. Those hours not spent in work will allow young people to spend more time pursuing their own creative desires and allow them to participate in decision-making forums as outlined above. This would go a considerable way toward relieving the sense of alienation that young workers feel.
- Raise Jobseekers Allowance to a minimum of £110 per month (see www.pcs.org.uk/en/campaigns/welfare-reform/welfare/welfare-for-all.cfm for more details).

These suggested steps are only the beginning of a wider transformation of young working class people's lives. We all need to raise these suggestions in our trade unions, community groups and political parties. They will need to be raised within any movement that comes about due to the attacks on young people's lives. Raising an alternative set of proposals for how a more inclusive, planned and therefore more equal society for young people could be obtained is not a luxury but a necessity. After all, the future of humanity lies in their hands.

■ Conclusion

The terrain on which young people are beginning to fight for a better world is far more favourable than it was the last time a wave of mass unemployment ravaged young people's lives. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher's election signalled the victory of the ideology of the free market. Thirty years later, this political and economic dogma has spectacularly failed. The collapse of the banking system mirrored the failure of a capitalist system that seeks to put profit before people's needs. Socialists are not alone in putting forward arguments for a world organised around people's needs as opposed to a minority's greed. Millions of working people feel the same.

The privateers and the disciples of the free market have not abandoned their vision. They have been wounded but they still scuttle around in our hospitals, schools, universities, colleges and social services seeking to implement their discredited policies. The fight we are engaged in now takes place within a bigger historical picture where two paths for humanity are signposted.

One, signposted 'business as usual', will lead to a worsening of young people's conditions of life, where millions will languish on the dole, further alienated from the potentially liberating experience of education, or be forced into soul-destroying and meaningless jobs, and thousands more will be economically conscripted into the army where they are told to kill and maim the poor and unemployed of another country.

The other path is one that holds out hope for the whole of humanity, where working people unite across industries and communities to fight against the attacks on their jobs and services and put forward a vision of a society based on their collective values. It is this path which lays the potential for the liberation of the young working class to unleash all their creativity and energy to build a more equal and productive society.

Notes

- 1: Speech by Neil Kinnock in Bridgend, Glamorgan, 7 June 1983. From R Harris, *The Making of Neil Kinnock* (Faber and Faber, 1984), p208.
- 2: By using the words 'working class youth' or the 'young working class', I am not referring only to young people growing up in poverty, or only to the children of manual workers. The vast majority of the population are employed by capitalism, whether in manual or white-collar jobs. Currently large numbers of bank workers and university lecturers are being made redundant. Most young people now experience low paid employment in poor conditions, and are learning what it means to be working class. Among university graduates unemployment and levels of debt are high. Life is most precarious for young people in 'poor work'—low paid jobs without secure contracts, alternating with spells of unemployment. The term 'young working class', while recognising different experiences and degrees of oppression, is intended to cover the majority of today's youth.
- 3: K Marx, *Capital*, vol 1.
- 4: G Pearson, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1992.
- 5: Unicef, 'An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries' (February 2009).
- 6: R Layard and J Dunn, *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age* (Penguin, 2009), p37.
- 7: Social Trends 38 (2008), Office for National Statistics.
- 8: 'Adult Psychiatric Morbidity in England, 2007: Results of a Household Survey', NHS, 2007.
- 9: 'Truth Hurts', Mental Health Foundation/Camelot Foundation, 2006.
- 10: As above.
- 11: Office for National Statistics.
- 12: *The Lancet*, September 2009.
- 13: Layard and Dunn, as above, p22.
- 14: 'Globalisation, Skills and Employment: The London Story', London Skills and Employment Board, 2007.
- 15: P Mizen, *The Changing State of Youth* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p44.
- 16: S Tomlinson, *Education in a Post-Welfare Society* (Open University Press, 2005), p8.
- 17: Mizen, as above, p45.
- 18: 'Is Talent Wasted? Attrition Rates of High-Achieving Pupils Between School and University', The Sutton Trust, June 2008.

- 19: F Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.
- 20: *The Guardian*, 16 October 2009.
- 21: A Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Harper Perennial, 2006), p202.
- 22: Mizen, as above, p30.
- 23: 'Re-skilling for recovery: After Leitch, implementing skills and training policies', House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, December 2008.
- 24: Mizen, as above, p65.
- 25: www.campaigncc.org
- 26: See R Levitas, 'Defining and Measuring Social Exclusion', *Radical Statistics* 71 (Summer 1999).
- 27: *Guardian*, 21 January 2009.
- 28: 'Youth homelessness in the UK', Joseph Rowntree Foundation, May 2008.
- 29: 'Tackling Overcrowding in England', Department of Communities and Local Government, July 2006.
- 30: 'Housing Overcrowding will Soar', BBC News, February 2009.
- 31: S Vernell and Walton (eds), *Writing from the City*, vol 2 (City and Islington College, 2009).
- 32: S Vernell and Walton (eds), *Writing from the City*, vol 1 (City and Islington College, 2008).
- 33: B Goldson and J Muncie, *Youth Crime and Justice* (Sage, 2006), p18.
- 34: As above.
- 35: As above.
- 36: www.plaidcymru.org/uploads/publications/319.pdf
- 37: *Socialist Worker*, 11 July 2009.
- 38: As above.
- 39: Z Pilger, 'Generation Apathy', *Independent on Sunday*, 23 March 2003.
- 40: Quoted in C Harman, *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After* (Bookmarks, 1988), p360.
- 41: *Socialist Worker*, 25 March 2006.
- 42: As above.
- 43: Interview with Marxist activist Daniel Bensaid, Socialist Worker online.
- 44: *Guardian*, 8 December 2008.
- 45: Quoted in A Murray and L German (eds), *Stop the War: The Story of Britain's Biggest Mass Movement* (Bookmarks, 2005).
- 46: British Social Attitudes Survey, National Centre for Social Research.