

The Political Situation of Youth in Europe

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The central role of youth in the class struggle during the last decade:

Since the last world congress we have seen a countless numbers of class struggles and social and political rebel movements in the European continent and on an international level. As in the classic historical examples of large mobilisations against the existing system, young people have also in this decade been in the lead of these struggles.

As mentioned in the document for the world congress: “Social upheavals, fightbacks and alternatives”, young people played a key role in the Arabic Spring, 15M Movement, Occupy, and at the latest in the movement around Corbyn in England - and a lot of other examples may be mentioned. During the last decade all European countries have experienced different kinds of mobilisation, not all of them with the same degree of political impact, but common to these movements has been the fact that young people have been overrepresented in the mobilisations and in the leading role of these movements.

This factor of course makes it important to place focus on youth as a key point for our political strategy, something that we of course already tried to do in the past, and thus it is important to have an independent analysis of the changing focus of the youth, and of the changing material conditions, in order to improve our intervention within the youth.

For that reason we try to present some of the elements that we find appropriate to be better analysed in a future discussion, knowing that this topic is far too complex to try to come up with a final proposal to sum up the development since the economic crisis.

The material conditions:

Even though of course important differences in terms of material conditions of youth in Europe occur, depending on gender, race, geographical zone (North-South but also East-West), sexuality, age in itself, displacement from home-country, etc., there are some general characteristics that we can trace.

The last decade has led to an increase in the education level in Europe; this has been ongoing since the beginning of the century, but has accelerated in the last decade since the economic crisis began (for instance statistics indicate a general growth of university enrolments, with the exception of Italy). The north western countries have lost a lot of older industrial jobs, and this has led to a need for a new market, based on knowledge and higher academic background, while in the east and southeast countries the new production methods have resulted in the need for more skilled workers.

This means in general that young people all over Europe are spending more years inside the education system, even though neoliberalism has continuously tried to speed up the time it takes to get an education (which means that students feel more pressure to finish their career, and so they tend to spend much time in studying, and are likely to dedicate less time to other activities); together with the future of more working years afterwards, this results in the fact that coming generations will have way more years related to the labour market.

Despite a growing number of young people are investing in higher education in order to increase the possibility of employment and to improve their conditions, a hope that has been supported by the neoliberal ideology which proposes a solution through a sort of society of knowledge and technology, they very often end up clashing with a hard situation in the labour market.

We first saw young people as one of the main victims of the economic crisis, with lost jobs and unemployment. The figures of youth unemployment rate across the crisis speak quite clearly (Eurostat): on the EU-28 scale, it passed from 16% (2007) to 22% (2014). But these numbers get even more scary if we consider that youth unemployment rate doubled (or more) in the same period (2007-2014) in some countries (EE, GR, I, IRE, CYP, LAT, LIT), and, despite a slightly positive trend, it is still above 40% in EE, IT, KR and GR (>50%) (Eurostat 2016). And for students who just completed a university (tertiary education) career, we have a general drop of employment rate from 87% (2007) to 82% (2014) (1-3 years after graduation, Eurostat), with huge drops of the percentages in the countries most affected by the crisis (more than 15% for IT and Gr, more than 9% for EE, P and IRE). In addition, figures are worse for women, with a gender gap of 5% of these latter statistics. In summary, many young people pursue higher education careers with the hope to get a good job, but their hopes are often frustrated by the reality once they try to enter the labour market.

On the labour market we have seen that a lot of the rights and improvements in working conditions, which young people gained in the years before the economic crisis, were lost immediately after.

This is of course directly linked to the fact that young people have a weaker connection to the labour market, and are often seen as secondary workforce, with lack of experience.

In many countries we saw how neoliberal governments used reform after reform to target directly the living conditions of young people, at first cutting social benefits, then unemployment payment, opportunities and grants for students etc.

This lack of social security cleared the way to a new explosion of jobs with deteriorating working conditions. We have seen within the last five years reforms in order to normalize precarity as working condition, and policies that introduce and promote new forms of precarious contracts in order to make labour cheaper and young (and later all) labour force blackmailable and flexible. In this regard see for instance the Loi Travail in France, the Jobs Act in Italy, the Youth Guarantee EU policy, the explosion of mini-jobs (20% of contracts in Germany in 2010, 2/3 women), and the spread of unpaid apprenticeships and stages (often as a part of the education itself).

These changes, often introduced with youth as the main target, are then used as a wall bracket to attack the conditions on the whole labour force.

The weakened social security also raised the question of the healthcare system, and even in a very young age there is a strengthened awareness on a safe work environment, and the need to be physical fit to work until a very high age.

The political conditions:

The situation today is that many young people are working under precarious conditions, have more than one job, are working and studying at the same time, or are working outside their home country, both because of cheap labour in other countries and because of urbanization. Many young people have moved far away from their social roots, and so ripped apart from their family, and without the same connection to the exact geographic place they are working. All these elements, together with the different forms of contract in the jungle of precarity, are challenging our traditional way of organizing these people politically and in trade unions, in a common struggle for better conditions.

When the economic crisis also developed into a social crisis, we saw that at the same time there was more pressure on young people to be available for the labour market, or education system, and make themselves necessary for a boss to secure their own future - also because of the lack of social security; this makes the freetime more expensive for young people, and we see that young people don't have the same possibility as earlier to

take out time for political work, taking part, for instance, in a 3 weeks political school or other activities.

Another element to be considered is that the lack of victories by students/youth movements during the last decade (for instance on school and university reforms, application of Bologna process, on labour reforms, or on precarisation) has a negative effect in terms of the perception of the usefulness of struggles. In other words, in many cases young people perceive participating in political activities or struggles as a *useless loss of time*, the few available hours that precarious life under neoliberal conditions leaves to be spent.

A war between generations?

There is nothing new in the fact that younger people have a weakened legal position when it comes to social benefits etc, or when we talk about working conditions on the labour market. But this general acceptance that younger people should suffer worse conditions, has now started a domino effect where the question of age is in focus. We have seen how liberal governments all over Europe has increased the age range for the inferior conditions, the lowered social benefits, legal rights etc.

On the other hand we have seen a well-grounded machine of liberal propaganda starting to spread out the problem of the larger amount of the older generation who lives longer. This dependency ratio is also in the lead of the bourgeoisies attack on social security, welfare and working hours/years, and they are almost trying to use it as a starting conflict between generations (like we see how the migrants etc. is also used as excuse for cut downs).

A swift political focus:

In the beginning of the century the major political focus of young people was on the anti-war movement, the fight against US-imperialism, and after that, the anti-globalization movement. Even though there have been US-imperialism attacks and aggressions, also from European countries, this hasn't attracted the same political focus and mobilisation as earlier. We may say the same about the earlier struggles against, for example, the Bologna-process on privatisation of the education system, which also used to attract a broader interest by the youth.

The crisis starting in 2008, affecting the youth harder, gave rise to radicalization processes in several EU-countries. We have seen since 2008 several mobilizations related to the economic, political, social and environmental effects of the crisis. Even if these mobilizations showed different characteristics and intensity from country to

country, we can still find some common elements of mobilization on a broader scale, around some new topics.

From a social and cultural perspective, people under 25 has matured in a postmodern context. They are quite more receptive than previous generations to identity politics and identity demands, not only on feminist aspects but also on queer and antiracist issues.

Apart from struggles against austerity, worsening of life and working conditions (for instance in Greece), reforms of labour market in terms of casualization (as the youth movement against Loi Travail in France), cut downs on education system (for instance Italy in the student's movement cycle 2008-2010), etc., on a general level some new questions had a quite big impact on the radicalisation and mobilisation of young people:

- The question of equality and the right to self-determination over own body: before the explosion of a new feminist movement, which really influenced and mobilized a lot of young people, we saw the “Slut walk” demonstrations, the fight for LGBTQI+ rights, abortion rights etc. Nowadays we are going into a period where the feminist movement appears as one of the largest social struggle, being able to organize and politicize a big sector of youth and to elaborate its own theoretical reflections and political agenda. In general terms, it is possible to speak about a “feminization of avant-gardes”.
- The climate disaster: in the last period the issue of climate change has been one of the main topics to raise consciousness about the need of a system change, both in the general public, but also on a mobilisation level with demonstrations against the big COP-meetings, G8/G20-meetings, civil disobedience against coal mines around Europe, and an international/European coordination of activities.
- Refugees: a movement that accelerated extremely fast in Europe in the last period was the refugee's movement, also because of how fast the need of a movement was created. This led to some of the greatest mobilisations seen in the last decade, not in a traditional sense of large demonstrations, but in the mobilisations of people, again in which the youth has been overrepresented, who actively took part in solidarity work of housing and helping refugees. After a small amount of time it was possible to connect some of these movement on a European coordinating level, thanks also to comrades from the FI.
- The fight against “over-non-democratic-structures”: Related to the ongoing struggle in all European countries against austerity, there has been a growing focus against the non-democratic structures who is

behind these attacks. The fight against the troika, central banks, the EU system etc. has taken more and more focus in different countries, but without ever really being connected on a broader European scale with common mobilisations (we could mention some minor coordination and common action with Blockupy, but it never really reached a relevant scale). But this has still been a radicalising factor on a national level, and questioned the “democratic structures” in our societies.

- Some of the protests against the cuts, austerity and worsening life conditions imposed by the crisis, in which the youth sector was protagonist, had a strong accent on the topic of democracy itself. We have seen experiments of radical democracy (with massive assemblies, organization into commissions and never-ending meetings), often taking place in occupied squares, in opposition to the political establishment (sometimes defined as *casta*) and even to liberal democracies (for instance 15M, Nuit Debout).

The fact that that young people are playing a key role in the political development and the fight for political change is not new, but in the last decade we have also witnessed that the right wing is trying to catch the young people for their political project; the uprise of new far right parties and movement has a high representation of young people, many of them fighting for better living conditions, and in a belief that is due to the migrants and refugees that we have economic problems in society. Some ultra-liberal parties also catch the youth campaigning for a fight for freedom against overregulation from state, for the right to self-determination etc.

New social media:

When mentioning the movements and political topics which have radicalized in the last decade, it's important to mention that even though the anti-globalization movement disappeared and the European Social Forum no longer exists to gather activists from all over Europe, and from different struggles, the upcoming of social media and new platforms has led to a situation where young people are rapidly radicalised from news in other countries (countries they already relate to); this might of course come from other European countries, but another good example is the Black Lives Matters movement in the US, which very fastly spread to new movements on the European continent, or the movement around Bernie Sanders, which had a hype that also spread to Europe, or the Occupy movement before that. We have also seen this element in the case of those anti-war movements that we have experienced.

This connection of information cross-borders has opened some new great possibilities, which we already saw under the Arabic spring, but the lack of a common place (and a physical place) to gather the information and develop the strategy and theory, represents another challenge.

Points for the WC to adopt:

First of all we must accept that FI can't fill in all the tasks which are needed to be done around these questions, about strengthening the possibilities of young people in the class struggle. But we still think that there are some points we need to work on inside the FI:

1. The need for young activists to meet physical cross-borders.
1. The youth camp has played a vital role in collectivising the information, and connecting activists around Europe; it is vital that this work continues and gets the needed attention from the leadership of the FI, since this is our biggest yearly event, but also that we seek to gather more young anticapitalistic people to participate, who may not be at the point where they are directly linked to the FI. It's also important that we try to use the collectivized discussions and political developments from these camps, and make them available outside the camps.
2. The need for a continued education of young leading cadres on an international level, and the need of keeping these people in contact. This means a larger focus for the national sections on the participation of the schools and seminars at the IIRE (both the youth school, but also the Ecosocialist School, seminars etc.), and also the care of sending young comrades to the different seminars. Specially with focus on young female comrades.
3. Besides that, we should explore the possibility to make continuous network among young people working with the same political topic, at the beginning on a European scale.
4. The need to strengthen our self-organization of young people, both on a FI-level, where we should try to use the base around the youth sectors - gathered at the youth camp - to develop an ongoing political collaboration, which goes beyond than just the youth camp itself. And also try to work to establish a working international organisation of youth organizations broader than the FI.
5. The need of a digital revolution in the FI: we need to start focusing a lot more energy on spreading and collecting the information that we have available in the FI. The institute is already doing a great job in collecting material from seminars and schools, and the FI is directly linked to a series of writing homepages, but we need to focus more energy on gathering these in a single and easy-to-access place, available and closely linked to the social media.

6. A European convention on the political situation of young people. In the upcoming period the FI should arrange minimum one European convention for young people to develop this topic further, of course with visitors from other continents, before the next world congress. It should serve to analyse the changing conditions for young people since the economic crisis, the current conditions of youth, and how does this change of living conditions impact the political struggle.