



Precarious Employment and the Cost of Living Crisis: The New Bastards of Young



By Adam Stowe



About me

- HE Welfare and Progression Officer
 - Student finance, hardship, budgeting, careers
- Background in grassroots activism and community work
- Graduated from Lancaster University in 2022 with a First Class degree in Politics
 - Focus on political economy, political philosophy and the life and thought of Tony Benn
- Ambitions of doing a PhD
- they/them pronouns please

Approaches to studying Politics

- Political Sciences v Politics
 - Physics envy
 - Instrumentalism
 - Use of scientific method
- Is there an objective truth?
- If it is subjective, how can there be legitimacy?
- POLITICS IS NOT JUST ABOUT POLITICAL PARTIES - I have covered:
 - Conspiracy theories, development, gender, religion, protest and social change, the ethics of communication, film and media
- It is inherently political

Aims of the project

- Provide an introduction to political economy concepts that will enable a different perspective to the current crisis
- See if there are links between precarity, crisis and coercion
- See how our students are being affected by the crisis
- Promote the wellbeing of our students

**God, what a mess, on the ladder of success
Where you take one step and miss the whole first rung
Dreams unfulfilled, graduate unskilled**

- “Bastards of Young” The Replacements (1985)

The Precariat

- A new social class derived from the words precarity and proletariat
- People existing without predictability or security
- **Undertake** extensive unremunerated activities that are essential if they are to retain access to jobs and to decent earnings
 - Constant interviews, on call for work, answering to gigs, temporary contracts, zero hours, platform economy
- **Affects the youth the most**

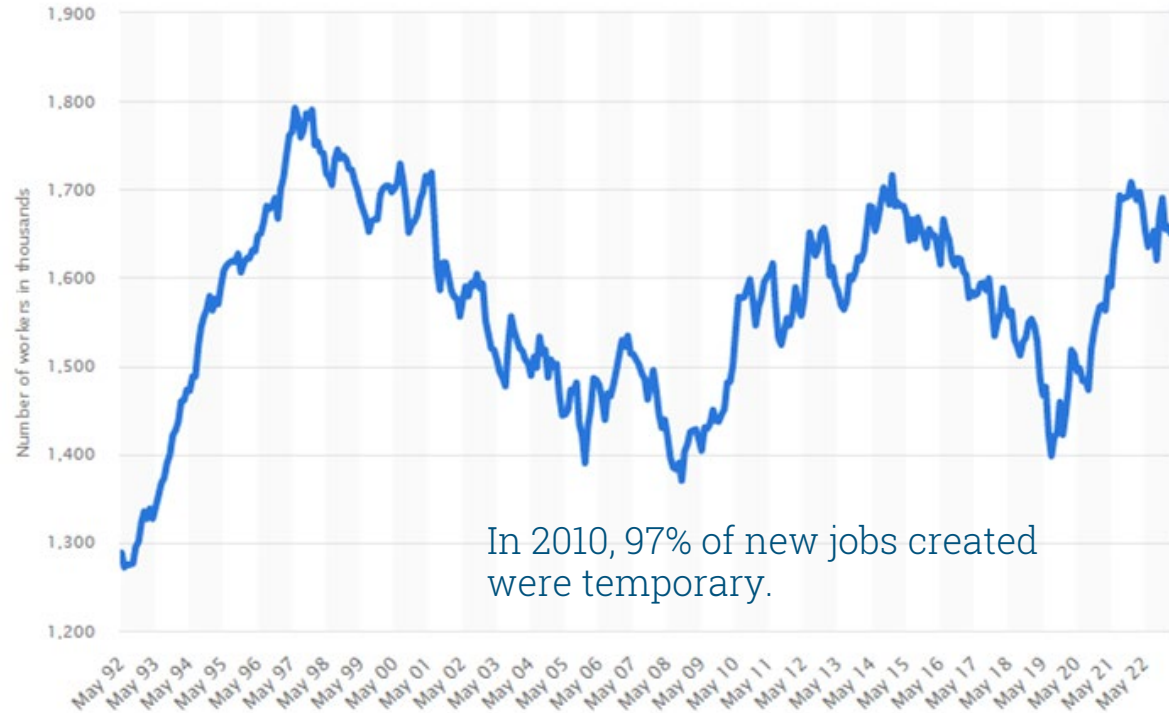
“In contemporary sociology, ‘precarious work’ describes a type of employment that leaves people suspended between poverty and prosperity, deprives them of material security, and forces them to live with a social status that is under constant threat of collapse.”

Youthful members of the full-time precariat, (2011)

Voxeurop

<https://voxeurop.eu/en/youthful-members-of-the-full-time-precariat/>

Number of temporary workers in the United Kingdom from May 1992 to February 2023



Clark (2023)

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/530216/temporary-workers-in-the-uk/>

In 2010, 97% of new jobs created were temporary.

Permanent Exceptionalism

- Leo Panitch
- The state
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Panitch, L., & Swartz, D. (1984). Towards Permanent Exceptionalism: Coercion and Consent in Canadian Industrial Relations. *Labour / Le Travail*, 13, 133–157. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25140404>

Crisis with no end

‘Instead of a moment of exception precipitating a turning point, crisis becomes a normalised, semi-permanent condition’ Alex Law

If things are going wrong, why is nothing changing?

Mark Fisher

Reflexive impotence -which describes a phenomenon where people recognize the flawed nature of capitalism, but believe there are no means of effecting change

Non-death of neoliberalism - it failed yet it lives on as a zombie

Frederic Jameson

It is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism

Bank of England is an independent body, supranational institutions such as the IMF, EU and World Bank dictate economic policy

Takes control away from the electorate - it is no longer seen as a choice but the natural order

Depoliticisation of the economy

Fukuyama - humanity has reached "not just ... the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the **end of history** as such: That is, the end-point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

Jacques Derrida -in response to Fukuyama

“For it must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: **never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity**. Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the **capitalist market** in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious, macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable, singular sites of suffering: **no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth.**”

Crisis -> unrest -> exceptionalism -> coercion -> crisis accepted as the new normal

Miners strike

Financial Crash

Cost of Living



Precarity is vital to this cycle as it is its own form of coercion. Who has the energy to fight for change when you're fighting to live?

Our economy is reliant on precarity. Our takeaways and taxis are delivered by “independent contractors” working under a platform economy, our shops are manned by young people with unreliable shift patterns, our drinks are served by people wondering if they’ll get enough tips to make rent.

So many people working under these conditions are young people and students.

Student Experience



In my role as HE Welfare and Progression and Officer, I see firsthand the effects of the current crisis.

- Budgeting
- Hardship
- Cost of living fund
- Student finance

Preliminary Study

We have had 48 application to the Hardship Fund

240 applications to the Cost of Living Fund

50 people mentioned work within their statements

10 people consented to allow their data to be used in the study, 4 of which completed an additional survey

It is clear that our students fit the criteria of the precariat

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Voxeurop

<https://voxeurop.eu/en/youthful-members-of-the-full-time-precariat/>

“I have been served a No-Fault Section 21 notice on my home and so **I am being forced out within the next 8 weeks... I am left with no wages left before half of the month is gone.** I have a limited support network around me and they are unable to help, even for housing me for a while, let alone financial help. I have been on the council list for 3 years and still no further up the priority list...**As it stands at the moment, I am facing homelessness due to something that is not anything to do with me and I'm running out of places to turn to... I am desperate.** I do not come from a wealthy family at all. We are all scraping by with the bare minimum to survive and get by from day to day.”

Survey

- 75% aged 18-24
- All in work
- 75% working over 30 hours a week while studying
- 25% not on a fixed contract
 - 25% concerned about their hours
 - 25% competing to get assigned work
- 50% have had their employers take action with the cost of living
 - Free breakfast and a one off payment
 - Some not very useful training

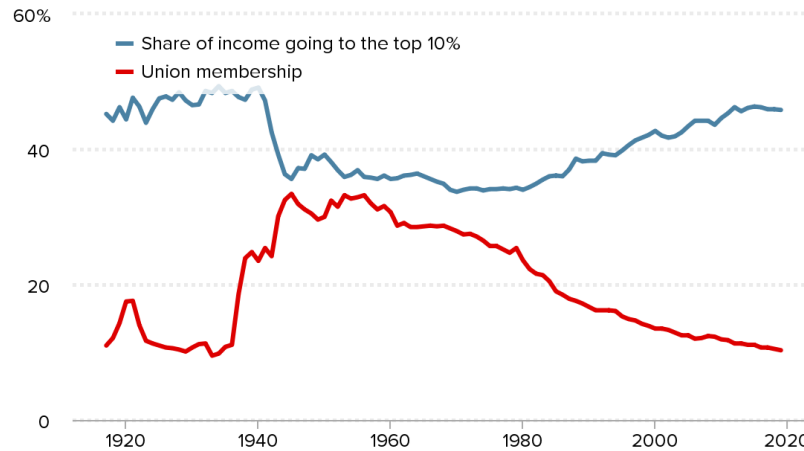
One respondent was aware of what a trade union is and was a member

Union workers
had more job
security during
the pandemic, but
unionization
remains
historically low

<https://www.epi.org/publication/union-workers-had-more-job-security-during-the-pandemic-but-unionization-remains-historically-low-data-on-union-representation-in-2020-reinforce-the-need-for-dismantling-barriers-to-union-organizing/>

As union membership declines, income inequality increases

Union membership and share of income going to the top 10%, 1917–2019



Source: Reproduced from Figure A in Heidi Shierholz, *Working People Have Been Thwarted in Their Efforts to Bargain for Better Wages by Attacks on Unions*, Economic Policy Institute, August 2019.

Economic Policy Institute

How has work changed during the cost of living crisis?

“I am working more hours now, doing more overtime.”

“I don't have certain hours of work every week. So always is a bit stress to be trying to get at least 2 shifts every week. To continue and keep my work routine.”

“I am struggling to find consistent employment, at the moment I'm on a zero hour contract with [REDACTED] but the most I get is 1 shift a week which covers my living cost for that week but just about, the problem is I haven't had a shift there for close to a month so I've had to burn through the rest of my savings and use my interest free overdraft for my rent.”

“There's not enough hours as my husband works in warehouse theres [sic] not many hours to pick up. I have been working overtime to pay my bills, and because of that its effecting [sic] my education as well.”

75% say work has negatively impacted their mental health

50% say financial difficulties have negatively impacted their mental health

75% have struggled to attend university due to financial difficulties

75% agree consistent hours and job security would improve their mental health

“Because of the prices going high, i am having to work overtime, do a lot more hours then my contracted hours so i can manage all my bills and debts. Am always tired because of work, so i didnt feel like going uni because i am getting 1 day off after few days. my hours are very long i work 14 hour shifts. I work as a support worker so my work is very mentally and physically draining.”

“I have struggled with transportation from my city to Leeds every week, also with accommodations. The accommodations was very expensive. There was times that I been required to pass all night at train station, Macdonald to attend to the Tuesday’s class. It was very difficult for me.”

Conclusions

- Students' mental health is suffering from the cost of living crisis and their working conditions
- Students have precarious living conditions and are at risk of homelessness
- Students are unaware of the role and activities of trade unions
- Students are working longer hours which is negatively affecting their studies
- Students are struggling to afford transport

Mitigations in Place at UC Leeds

- Cost of living payment and Hardship Fund
- Travel passes
- Compact timetable
- Free breakfast during exam week
- Food cupboard
- Showering facilities
- Extended opening in winter
- Guidance leaflets
- Budgeting advice

Final Thoughts

Crisis becomes normalised

Unwillingness to deviate from the economic orthodoxy

The economy is political!

Students and young people are some of the most vulnerable people in our current society

A unionised workforce leads to a more equitable society

We need to embrace alternative ways of thinking

