

YTS is not about training for jobs. It is about something quite different. The objective is to redefine the cultural outlook of new generations.

Dan Finn

# Britain's Misspent Youth

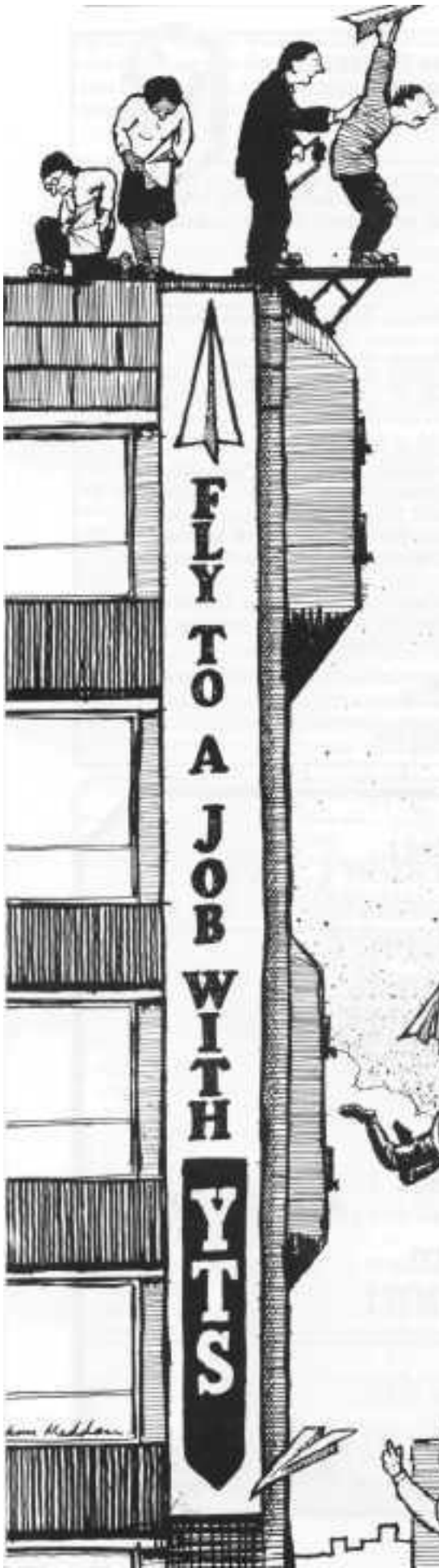
AS UNEMPLOYMENT HAS returned to levels which many thought had been left behind in the 1930s, we have seen the creation of government programmes which have attempted to ameliorate its worst effects. Perhaps the most significant of these interventions have been organised by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC); a tripartite body with a growth rate matched only by the increase in unemployment.

In place of a strategy of job creation, and apart from attempts to manipulate the unemployment statistics, MSC programmes represent the most *active* policies of the state for responding to the crisis of mass unemployment. Since 1974 its activities have affected millions of people, kept thousands away from the dole queues, and structured the experiences of the vast majority of school leavers making the hazardous transition to work.

In recent years these programmes, especially those for young people, have gone through various transformations to retain political support *and* accommodate the unemployed. From an initial response aimed at the most 'disadvantaged' (the Job Creation Programme), which defined unemployment as a cyclical and temporary problem, we have arrived at the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) which in many areas of the country became the only source of work for school leavers.

Last September, however, YOP was replaced by the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), which will provide 460,000 places for about £1 billion. This guarantees a year's training, including 13 weeks off-the-job, to all minimum age school leavers. 300,000 trainees will be placed directly with employers and a further 160,000 in a different, more expensive variety of local authority, voluntary and state schemes. The YTS is intended to be the mechanism through which future generations of the working class make their first acquaintance with wage labour.

Over the period of its existence, MSC finance has also been used to change the activities of many institutions. The work of colleges, of voluntary organisations, and now of schools, is being transformed. The job security and employment conditions of thousands of workers has been undermined, especially in further education; and the MSC currently dominates our perceptions of unemployment.



Remarkably the MSC has been able to cultivate extensive support for each phase of expansion. Despite reservations, a tripartite consensus between government, unions and employers has been carefully constructed around each new programme.

### From YOP to the YTS

YOP was originally promoted as an avenue into full time work, but this 'promise' soured as young trainees found it more difficult to obtain work. In its first year one in eight school leavers were affected by YOP; by 1982 it was covering one in two; and in 1983 there were more school leavers on YOP courses than in normal jobs. In five years YOP provided temporary placements for nearly 1.9 million youngsters.

The most contentious element of YOP concerned the large number of trainees placed with private employers, usually for six months. In 1981, Youthisaid pointed out that they were 'concentrated in small, low-paying, non-unionised workplaces'. Rather than philanthropic employers 'helping' the young unemployed, it became evident that many were using YOP to subsidise their recruitment procedures, if not directly exploiting young trainees as cheap labour.

As the programme expanded it became impossible to monitor and 'police' the scheme; vetting was perfunctory, and fewer on-site inspections were carried out. A growing proportion of youngsters were returned to the dole at the end of their placements. Evidence accumulated that employers were substituting trainees for workers; the MSC admitted to a job substitution rate of at least 30%. The Government refused to increase the trainee allowance and its purchasing power was steadily eroded. Few trainees received off-the-job education or training; they were excluded from many aspects of employment legislation. Between 1980 and 1983 there were seventeen deaths and over 9,000 injuries to trainees. There were many complaints about the arbitrary discipline procedures being imposed by employers.<sup>1</sup>

In place of a scheme intended to improve the employment prospects of the young, and get them into work, a pool of vulnerable cheap labour was created. At best YOP was redistributing unemployment, it was doing nothing to reduce it. By 1981, there was a groundswell of opposition and the first indications that young people were refusing to take up places. Unions became disenchanted: Tower Hamlets Trades Council argued that 'every major promise that was given by the MSC to the

trade union movement has been broken, ignored or manipulated'. Motions were submitted to the annual TUC Congress calling for a withdrawal of union cooperation. Congress accepted many of the arguments, but the particular resolutions were eclipsed in a new debate initiated by the MSC, which appeared to secure both the long-standing TUC policy of day-release education for young workers and a new right of access to 'quality' training for unemployed school leavers. The abuses of YOP were admitted, but the focus of attention shifted; after a consultative process, the MSC, voluntary organisations, employers and many trade union officials launched a concerted campaign to win support for a new training programme — the YTS.

### The TUC and the MSC

To explain how the TUC and many individual unions, endorsed these new proposals, we should understand how they had initially become enmeshed with the MSC. Since the last war, the trade union movement has called for government intervention to impose coherence on the chaotic training arrangements that characterise many sectors of employment. At the same time, the TUC has become involved

more heavily involved in supporting the recession-hit apprenticeship system and developed special programmes for the unemployed.

The first Thatcher government was, however, determined to reverse state involvement in these areas, and the budget of the MSC was slashed. The Tories proposed to return training to market forces. In opposing these policy changes, the TUC became more committed, arguing for the MSC's expansion in response to accelerating unemployment.

In the wake of the inner-city riots of 1981, which were partly blamed on unemployment, the Tories were converted; they did a 'U-turn', and expanded provision for the young. Paradoxically, this took place at the same time that individual trade unions were being ousted from other MSC bodies. In particular, 17 Industrial Training Boards, which had imposed some coherence on patterns of training, were abolished. In these shifts, the role of trade unions was redefined as their influence and power were eroded.

### The power of the MSC

The MSC was also concerned to create new forms of local involvement in dealing with the unemployed. It established a

## Composition of YOP: 1979-83

	1978/79	1979/80	1980/81	1981/82	1982/83
Work Experience (WEEP)	128,200	182,100	304,500	461,500	393,400
(% with Private Employers)	(84.5%)	(76.2%)	(79.5%)	(80.4%)	(78.6%)
Work Preparation	34,000	34,300	55,500	91,500	67,800
Pilot YTS Places (12 months long)					81,900
TOTAL — ALL YOP	162,200	216,400	360,000	553,000	543,000

in a range of corporate organisations which have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to modernise the British economy.

The high point of this process was the period of the 'social contract', initiated by the 1974/79 Labour government. In return for wage restraint and a curb on militancy, the TUC and its affiliates were offered legislative concessions and a more direct involvement in the management of the economy. It was in this context that, in 1974, the MSC came into existence.

The MSC's constitution guaranteed union representation and in contrast to earlier arrangements was empowered to pursue more vigorous policies for the reform of industrial training. The trade union movement saw within this a major advance, which seemed to be confirmed when the Labour government expanded the direct training services of the MSC, became

structure of area boards to approve schemes, made up of nominees from the TUC, employers and the voluntary sector. These boards enabled the MSC to present itself as open and democratic, when it actually bypassed established democratic and collective bargaining procedures. Local authorities, for example, had little formal involvement, and could only compete for MSC resources on the same grounds as other sponsors. Many trade union officials and lay members approved schemes without reference to criteria (around rates of pay, job security,

<sup>1</sup> For detailed evidence on these points see the report from Sheffield Trades Council, *A Trade Union Response to YOPs and NTL* (1982), or the report produced by D Carter and I Stewart (TGWU officers in Manchester), *YOP, Youth Training and the MSC: the need for a new Trade Union Response* (1982).

discipline, and so on) which they would normally apply in collective bargaining.

Though area boards had formal authority over the scheme, the reality was more complex. In effect, they obscure the way in which operational power remains firmly entrenched in the hands of the civil service, which controls the collection and presentation of data, the monitoring of schemes, the allocation of resources and the construction of policy. As the MSC developed, it became a tightly structured bureaucracy with massive administrative power.

Colin Ball, one of the civil servants involved in the creation of YOP, has described another way in which the MSC exercises this control. He points to a key element in MSC practice, the protection of their central authority by the division of operational responsibility amongst a host of sponsors.<sup>2</sup> Ideologically, because this involves community groups, employers, local authorities, colleges and voluntary organisations, the MSC is able to present itself as involving the whole of the community. In reality, he witnessed a process of divide and rule, where few sponsors could challenge the entrenched power of the bureaucracy.

The MSC has not, therefore, been a simple palliative. It represents a bureaucratic response to the political problems posed by unemployment. It focuses attention, not on the crisis of production and investment, but on the qualities and capacities of the workforce. It takes for granted the demands of employers and seeks to adjust the supply of labour accordingly. The MSC is not engaged in combatting class, sexual and racial privilege: its activities have simply reproduced and reinforced these basic distinctions. Only by grasping these broader points can we appreciate why the MSC has been given such massive resources.

Although initially hostile to special programmes for the unemployed, the Thatcher government soon came to appreciate their strategic importance. In their battles over rates and public expenditure, the MSC offered a route for bypassing the political control of local authorities, who might have put those resources to other uses, such as extending educational opportunities. The MSC was also successful in implementing low-wage, Conservative proposals which under other circumstances would have been vigorously opposed. More importantly, perhaps, the MSC has transformed the experiences of most school leavers and has profoundly affected the ways in which we can think about youth unemployment.

### **Training without jobs**

From its inception the MSC evolved the mythology that youth unemployment was caused by a 'mismatch' between young workers' capacities and the characteristics required by employers. It firmly located the problem within the unemployed

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themselves. The almost total focus on job-finding and job-keeping reinforced the myth that there were jobs available to anyone who had the 'social skills' and persistence to find and secure them.

Though they formally acknowledged the importance of economic factors, it was the ideology of mismatch which informed the development of their programmes, both obscuring the structural causes of youth unemployment and easing the achievement of other objectives. Smothered in a rhetoric of concern, it enabled young people to be taken off the streets into workplaces and colleges, into a 'safe' environment, demonstrating that the state was tackling unemployment.

In terms of the experiences and expectations of young people, it developed new kinds of work induction which were not merely concerned with giving them particular skills. As part of its deeper objectives, the MSC was attempting to structure and define their response to the experience of cheap labour and unemployment. The expectations of school leavers were manipulated and systematically reduced, as they were given their first lessons in the realities of Thatcherite Britain.

The period between 1978 and 1983 was marked by a working out of new definitions of the rights and opportunities of those young people who, despite mass unemployment, leave school at the earliest moment. The young working class, it was alleged, needed a year of 'training' before they could even enter the labour market: young school leavers were effectively separated from the political question of full employment.

### **The Youth Training Scheme**

The YTS had been endorsed by the trade union movement largely because of the claimed removal of the abuses of YOP and the offer of 'quality' training to unemployed school leavers. However, in view of the history of YOP, and more recent developments, such claims should

be regarded with considerable scepticism.

Throughout 1983 the YTS was publicised as an employer-led scheme. This did not merely reflect the need to secure places, but indicated an important change in emphasis, signalling a series of concessions to employers: together they question whether it is possible for the YTS to meet the interests of trainees.

Employers have retained complete control over hiring and firing, and have been granted special discounts on the charges for off-the-job educational provision (resulting in larger classes, and so on). Trainees are excluded from Employment Protection, from most of the Race and Sex Discrimination Acts, and Health and Safety provision is inadequate.

Schemes negotiated nationally by the Large Companies Unit (a division of the MSC), which account for a third of the places offered by employers, are not subject to the approval of local boards. In Coventry, the result has been that hairdressing employers, who had been excluded from YOP for abuse of the programme, can now take on trainees through a national agreement. In general, sponsors need only declare that there is no appropriate or recognised trade union for approval, and the scheme can proceed.

More disturbingly, many of the local employer-based places are organised by private training agencies. These are profit-making organisations, which the MSC will largely entrust to monitor themselves. In Birmingham, where over half the places are controlled by agencies, the local NATFHE branch has already established that many of them have questionable credentials. There is evidence of direct abuse: an outer London agency was charging employers £10 a week for the trainees it placed with them.

The Thatcher government maintains that the young have priced themselves out of jobs. Tory policy, in the shape of the YTS, involves reconstructing youth as cheap labour. Despite an earlier commitment, they have refused to increase the £25 a week allowance in line with inflation. The £25 should be compared with average earnings of £47 which 16 year old employees received in 1981.

With respect to quality, it should be stressed that the on-the-job training will not be assessed and it is important to question the MSC's capacity to enforce standards in a scheme which has no effective monitoring or skill testing. Unlike our European competitors, the YTS will simply provide trainees with a certificate which without testing of standards must be of questionable value.

The broader, educational pretensions of the MSC were punctured when they issued guidelines for the content of the off-the-job provision which specifically excluded considering matters 'related to the organisation and functioning of society in general'. Young people, it seemed, could learn how to fill in application forms, but could not discuss why they were unemployed! Although those guidelines were withdrawn, the Employment Minister in question — Peter Morrison — further revealed his conception of the scheme in a Commons debate in July 1983:

'The scheme is not a social service. Its purpose is to teach youngsters what the real world of work is all about. That means arriving on time, giving of their best during the working day, and perhaps staying on a little longer to complete an unfinished task'.

In view of these developments, it is reasonable to suggest that this 'new deal' has more to do with providing employers with a pool of cheap and vulnerable labour, from which they can pick and choose their recruits, than it has to do with meeting the training and educational needs of the young unemployed.

### A permanent bridge to work?

As school leavers have few, if any options, they will undoubtedly enrol in their thousands on the YTS. However, we should be wary of accepting such behaviour and the numerous other public successes that the MSC will parade over the next year, at face value. There is evidence that many young people are unwilling to become involved (only 55% of expected trainees had enrolled by the beginning of November), and Job Centres have resorted to sending threatening letters to reluctant trainees. In less than six months, a voluntary 'quality' scheme was looking like a compulsory dose of work education.

This lack of enthusiasm should not surprise us. Despite the blandishments of MSC publicity, it should be obvious that there will be enormous variations within the YTS. Some employers will offer good training, with a chance of a job at the end; but many sponsors clearly offer what most school leavers see as an extension of YOP. Many young people will not enrol until convinced they will not obtain work; and, where parental resources will allow it, others have chosen to extend their education.

The persistence of youth unemployment will clearly undermine the YTS. All school leavers may be offered places but, inevitably, many will be displaced at the end of their training. From the summer of

1984, there will be thousands of YTS graduates entering a depressed labour market where their job prospects will be diminished by competition from experienced adults and a new batch of subsidised school leavers.

After those aged over 50, under 24 year olds are more vulnerable to prolonged unemployment than any other group. In October, Youthaid estimated that half of the country's under-19s and one in four of the under-25s were out of work. Many of this generation are being consigned to the margins of the economy, to alternate between insecure badly paid jobs and long spells of unemployment. These realities will have serious implications for the credibility of the scheme and for the reactions of young people to it. The YTS is more likely to be seen as a 'gangplank to the dole' than a 'bridge to work'.

In response to this dilemma the state has introduced a number of other cheap labour schemes, ranging from the Young Workers Subsidy (100,000 places) which encourages



*YOPS scheme, BR station, the Wirral. Pay £23.50 per week, 1981*

employers to undercut rates of pay established by collective bargaining; to the Community Programme for the long-term unemployed (130,000 places), which on any project can only pay an average wage of £60 or less. In addition, the MSC has recently launched a debate on what it calls its Adult Training Strategy.

Whatever the outcome of that consultative process, the political message is clear. The programmes of the MSC will be in the

forefront of policy changes, as the state intervenes in the processes whereby unemployment as a problem is defined. Orchestrated by the Thatcher government, the MSC will be attempting to restore the credibility of the YTS, as well as compel the participation of reluctant trainees. It will take new initiatives to create a consensus about how we respond to those trainees who fail to get work and to the growing numbers of the long-term unemployed. These policies, which could result in up to a million people on MSC schemes, carry all kinds of implications for the trade union movement.

### Trade union responses

There has been opposition to the MSC. Some trade unions, and many workplaces, have negotiated improvements or alternatively will have nothing to do with it; and thousands of the unemployed have refused places on its various schemes. This resistance, however, has been fragmented and localised. This has partly been the result of the TUC's unwillingness to question its commitment to the MSC, but more realistically has reflected the success of Thatcherism in exploiting the plight of the unemployed.

On a number of occasions the TUC has blocked proposals which were blatantly provocative — that the YTS should be compulsory and pay £15 a week; that adults should do 'voluntary' work for their unemployment benefit. But on each occasion, within the bowels of the MSC, a compromise was established which gave concessions, but at the same time delivered programmes which offered little of real value to the unemployed.

The MSC has formally kept its commitments about paying the rate for the job, no job substitution, and so on; but these guarantees have in fact been eroded, redefined and manipulated, so that in a number of areas the MSC and employers have been able to proceed as they see fit.

Unfortunately, the debate about trade union involvement has been polarised between those advocating a boycott of MSC programmes and those who claim that existing guarantees are sufficient. In place of the pragmatism which has guided official attitudes, many trade unionists argue that participation in the MSC has been largely ineffectual, has given a trade union seal of approval to cheap labour schemes, and has made it difficult to create a strategy of opposition.

The call for a boycott though has created

<sup>2</sup> C Ball, Here Comes Super YOP, *New Society*, 20 August 1981.

a gulf between those working within and those working outside the MSC, and amongst many active trade unionists. The argument creates divisions because it fails to recognise that MSC programmes, however inadequately, do respond to the needs of many of the unemployed. A boycott could easily be understood as an attempt to defend what already exists — a racist and sexist apprenticeship system and an elitist structure of education. It would offer little to the workers and activists involved in MSC schemes, or to young people who have no other options.

TUC policy calls on trade unionists to

report abuses to area boards; to negotiate improvements; to recruit trainees and to monitor the impact of the YTS. These are important activities which, without more resources and a broader campaign, are unlikely to be translated into reality, even in organised workplaces. More fundamentally, these proposals are barely adequate for creating an active relationship between young people and the trade union movement.

If the TUC continues to participate in the MSC, its role must be transformed from one of consensual partner to that of an advocate of the interests of trainees. On one

level, that means establishing the right of trainees to organise and be represented at all levels within the MSC, as well as exposing abuses and campaigning for real

a gangplank to the dole rather than a bridge to work

improvements in their conditions. At an ideological level, it means drawing attention to the duplicity of the Thatcher government which is pursuing an economic policy which destroys jobs — and a training policy which presupposes their existence.

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