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Young Workers: A Lost Decade (One Year Later)

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Young Workers: A Lost Decade (One Year Later)

Abstract

[Excerpt] In 2010, the AFL-CIO conducted a follow-up to a major national survey commissioned in 2009 and conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates to find out how young workers were faring in the economic crisis. The AFL-CIO wanted to know how much had changed in the year since that landmark survey.

Keywords

young workers, employment, benefits, income, workforce

Comments

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Young Workers A LOST DECADE

One Year Later

In 2010, the AFL-CIO conducted a follow-up to a major national survey commissioned in 2009 and conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates to find out how young workers were faring in the economic crisis. The AFL-CIO wanted to know how much had changed in the year since that landmark survey.

The 2009 survey compared what was happening in young people's lives with the results of the AFL-CIO's first national survey of young workers in 1999. Young workers were identified as those younger than 35.

In 2009, young people told the story of a crisis. The news was so bad that we called the report, "A Lost Decade."

Nearly one in three young workers reported they had no health insurance, compared with 24 percent of young workers in 1999. Almost one out of every three workers still lived at home with parents, and more than half couldn't afford to save money out of their monthly paychecks. For the first time in generations, young workers faced the very real possibility of being financially worse off than their parents.

The 2009 survey found that young people were delaying the traditional milestones associated with adulthood—settling into a career, getting married,

buying a home, having kids. Because of the lack of good, stable, entry-level jobs, young people were finding the road to adulthood increasingly difficult to navigate.

In 2009, 12.9 percent of young workers between the ages of 16 and 34 were unemployed, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' (BLS) Current Population Survey. That is several percentage points higher than the national average. One of every five young workers lucky enough to have a job was overqualified for it, while another one in five was working outside his or her chosen field. Young workers also reported being discouraged from accessing or advancing in their chosen careers because they couldn't afford further schooling—this was true for two of five young workers and nearly half of all young people of color.

So what has changed in the year since the 2009 survey was conducted? Not much.

The economy still isn't working for young workers, and their prospects for the future are worrisome. The unemployment rate among workers ages 16 through 34 has remained nearly steady at a painful 13.1 percent, according to BLS data, but many young workers who are out of work have even fewer resources to fall back on. According to a 2010 survey by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 52 percent of young workers had savings that

would cover their living expenses for two months or more, compared with nearly 60 percent in 2009.

Young workers continue to suffer from a scarcity of good jobs. They are much more likely to be unemployed than their older counterparts, particularly if they're younger than 20: Nearly one in four young workers between the ages of 16 and 19 can't find a job, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' most recent employment report.¹ And three in 10 young workers report being overqualified for their current jobs or working outside their chosen field, a sign that workers are having even more trouble finding jobs within their career paths.

Young workers often have to settle for what's left in our economy. The 2010 Hart Research study found that almost a third of employed young workers interviewed were working part time, compared with 20 percent of adult workers.

And young workers' trademark optimism has taken a hit. This generation of workers is pragmatic, resilient and team-oriented, but the strain of coping with the recession is starting to show. Significantly,

young workers surveyed report being more worried about the economic outlook now than in 2009, and nearly 80 percent are concerned about the economy at large and the prospects for the next generation.

It's obvious the economic crisis has long-term implications for all working families and could get worse if we don't take action. That's why the AFL-CIO is working with partners within and outside the labor movement to develop leadership and activism opportunities for young workers within and outside the union movement.

The AFL-CIO hosted regional futures forums with young workers across the country this spring, followed by a Next Up summit of more than 400 workers younger than 35—the generation “next up.” Participants at the regional forums and the summit began a conversation about what's necessary to engage young people in the labor movement and give them the tools needed to rebuild the economy. In three days of conversations, summit participants, led by AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler, drew up a game plan for growing and developing the next generation of labor leaders.

YOUNG WORKERS ARE FACING TOUGH OBSTACLES			
	1999	2009	2010
% of young workers who are unemployed ²	6.2%	12.9%	13.1% ³
% of young workers who work part time ⁴	22.8%	26.3%	29% ⁵
% making less than they need to pay bills ⁶	10%	24%	26% ⁷
% somewhat or very worried for the future ⁸	20%	41%	60% ⁹

¹Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 2010.

²Bureau of Labor Statistics, annual averages 1976–2009.

³Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 2010.

⁴Bureau of Labor Statistics, annual averages 1976–2009.

⁵Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 2010.

⁶Hart Research Associates, “AFL-CIO New Understanding of Unions,” July 2010.

⁷Hart Research Associates, July 2009.

⁸Hart Research Associates, July 2009.

⁹Hart Research Associates, July 2010.

The findings of the Next Up summit were presented in August to the AFL-CIO Executive Council, which adopted 10 next steps for the AFL-CIO's work with young workers:

- 1** Host an annual Next Up young workers meeting for education, skills building and networking;
- 2** Establish a National Young Worker Advisory Committee that will develop and oversee the implementation of the short-term and long-term goals of the AFL-CIO young worker outreach program;
- 3** Work with the AFL-CIO Organizing Department to identify best practices for new models of representation of workers in nontraditional employment that can be shared with affiliates;
- 4** Provide a toolkit for creating young worker groups at the state and local levels that can be used at organizations with varying degrees of resources;
- 5** Review existing mentoring programs and develop a template based on best practices that can be used by young and seasoned leaders;
- 6** Sponsor a video contest to demonstrate the strength and diversity of our union membership;

- 7** Establish a text messaging program targeting young workers to carry out strategic campaign actions;
- 8** Co-host monthly webinars at the regional, state and local levels with young leaders in the field to maintain open lines of communication;
- 9** Mobilize young workers and provide leadership opportunities for them in the AFL-CIO 2010 political program; and
- 10** Coordinate the young worker outreach programs of organizations within and outside the labor movement to ensure wise use of resources and avoid duplication.

The freedom of young workers to join unions is a critical component to rebuilding the economy for young people and all working families. Our nation's young workers have the potential to rebuild this country. But unless we take deliberate and creative steps to create good jobs for the future, they may never get that chance. The cost of investing in jobs can't compare with the long-term costs of an entire generation of workers who will contribute less in taxes to our economy, not to mention the cost of wasting human potential.

It's easy now to look back at our current problems and get discouraged. But we can't throw up our hands and hope the economy drives itself—there's too much at stake. If we want to ensure prosperity in America in the long term, we must continue to take decisive action to address the jobs crisis. Our young workers—and future generations of Americans—deserve nothing less.

The AFL-CIO represents 12 million union members nationwide.
For more information on the AFL-CIO's Next Up program for young people, go to
www.aflcio.org/aboutus/youthsummit/
or check us out on Facebook at www.facebook.com/aflcionextup.