The School's Out: The hidden history of Britain's school student strikes

Stephen Cunningham

Michael Lavalette

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**Introduction**

**Working class childhood, politics and school strikes**

On the 11 September 2014 thousands of young people from across Scotland got onto school-buses and travelled to the SSE Hydro centre in Glasgow to take part in The Big, Big Debate. The event was organised by the BBC and brought 16 and 17 years olds together to discuss Scottish independence. The students were preparing to take part in the referendum and were about to become the youngest ever voters in British electoral history.

The debate was remarkable for a number of reasons.

First, the interest it generated. Between 7,000 and 8,000 young people took part in the event directly;[[1]](#footnote-2) an indicator of a quite remarkable political engagement. In England this would be equivalent to 16 and 17 year olds packing Wembley football stadium to take part in Question Time, for example. Further, as the event went on, the hash tag #bigbigdebate trended number 1 in the UK for 4 hours.

Second, the 'mismatch' in the sides. The Yes Alliance sent the SNP's Deputy Leader (now Scotland's First Minister) Nicola Sturgeon and Green MSP Patrick Harvey. These were two of the Yes side's big hitters from the two year referendum campaign. Both were identified with the left and, during the campaign, both had repeatedly spoken out about issues of social justice, inequality, climate change and war. Both argued that the referendum offered people Hope; that an alternative to Westminster driven neo-liberalism was possible; that a different Scotland could be won.

Representing the No side were Scottish Tory leader Ruth Davidson and Respect MP George Galloway. There is no doubt this was a strange combination! Over the campaign Davidson had been kept in the background because the Labour leadership of *Better Together* argued any association with the Tories would push people into the Yes camp. So why was she rolled out here? There is no doubt that Galloway is a very able debater. Yet the Better Together leadership had kept their distance from him during the campaign. He had been marginalised to such an extent that he had to organise his own speaking tour to defend the union called 'Just say naw'.

The speakers for the union, whatever individual merits they may have, seemed to indicate that, for the leadership of the No side, this debate, unlike the other televised ones, was less significant. Maybe the audience were 'just kids'?

If this was the attitude of the leadership of *Better Together* the debate emphasised how completely out of touch the Westminster Labour machine had become.

The debate was remarkable for a third reason. We are constantly told that people are no longer interested in politics - and young people in particular are totally disengaged from political debate and the political process. James Sloam, Co-Director of Centre for European Politics at Royal Holloway, University of London has argued that:

One of the prominent features of recent general elections has been decreasing rates of turnout amongst young voters. Turnout among young people (here, 18-24 year olds) has fallen from over 60% in the early 1990s to an average of 40% over the previous three general elections (2001, 2005 and 2010). … [T]he youth turnout rate in the UK is the lowest of all the 15 members of the old European Union. Voters aged 18 to 24 in Sweden turn out to vote at double the rate of their peers in the UK. … This disillusionment extends to public policy. [[2]](#footnote-3)

The whole premise of this argument was dealt a deadly blow during the run up to the Indy vote. Public engagement in politics was remarkable. People registered to vote, attended public meetings in large numbers and many joined marches, flash mob gatherings and took part in canvassing. But the engagement of young people in the campaign was particularly marked and indicated their willingness to get involved when the debate - and the vote - could make a real difference.

The suggestion that young people are not interested in politics is based on their lack of engagement with the bland Westminster political game. It is certainly the case that the main Westminster parties hold little attraction for young people. The various 'youth organisations' of the Westminster 3 have collapsed. The Labour Party Young Socialists no longer exists and their student organisation is a rump - populated by young career politicians looking for a safe seat. But to extrapolate from this to suggest that young people are not interested in politics is to ignore the diversity of young people's involvement in a range of social movement activities.

Over the last two decades - as the main parties official youth organisations have gone into terminal decline - young people have continued to take part in, and organise, a range of movement and protest campaigns. These have ranged from movements against climate change and fracking, global poverty and global justice campaigns, anti-war movements, campaigns against racism and fascism and a range of other national and local activities.

The campaign to elect Jeremy Corbyn to the Labour Party leadership also brought significant numbers of young people onto Labour’s radar, with many joining, either as supporters or members, because Corbyn seemed to offer a different politics to the mainstream.

The suggestion that young people are now apolitical was always overstated. Any claim that young people were not interested in, or knew little about, the issues surrounding the referendum was completely dispelled by the debate. The young people in the audience asked a range of challenging questions. They wanted to know about currency union and/or replacement. How an enhanced welfare system would be paid for. At what level any new tax rates would be set and how we could ensure that those in ordinary jobs would not see their tax rates go up. They asked about student fees, funding the NHS, their own job prospects and apprenticeships. They asked how it was possible that one of the richest countries in the world, Scotland (and by extension Britain), could harbour some of the highest child poverty rates in the European Union? And they wanted to know why Trident submarines were housed on the Clyde and, in the post Cold War era, why the Government was even considering replacing them.

The level of debate from the audience was incredibly high. And if they didn't like the response the politicians gave, they were not slow to let them know about it. On a number of occasions George Galloway's answers were roundly, and noisily, booed. The boos reached a crescendo when he, bizarrely, tried to draw an analogy between the SNP and German Nazis (though, when the programme was broadcast in England and Wales a day after the debate took place, the audience reactions had all been replaced with polite 'canned clapping'!)

The debate was an indication of what was to come. One week later young people - like the population of Scotland as a whole - turned out in their hundreds of thousands to take part in the vote. And young people were amongst the most enthusiastic Yes voters. An estimated 75 per cent of 16 and 17 year olds voted to break up the British state!

This book is not about the Independence referendum. But it is about young people and politics and, in particular, their involvement in one form of youthful collective action: the school student strike.

The school student strike has been in existence for as long as we have had compulsory education. In England the education system can be dated from the Elementary Education Acts of 1870 and 1880. Initially children were required to go to school between the ages of 5 and 10. The school leaving age then gradually increased to 11 (1893), 12 (1899), 14 (1918), 15 (1944) and 16 (1972). Up until 1918 there were exceptions allowed in areas where child labour was deemed 'economically significant' (such as agriculture and textiles) and children could get out of schooling with an appropriate exemption certificate.[[3]](#footnote-4)

This also means that, at times, school student strikers were playing and mixing with other children, of the same age, who were working and engaged in more traditional forms of strike activity. Thus, in earlier periods young people, who would today be school students, were active in some important strikes and conflicts. Let's consider some examples.

In the earliest phase of capitalist development, the pre-industrial crowd would protest against a range of grievances, from the price of bread to political corruption, by gathering in urban centres to confront local sources of power and authority. Crowds would gather, often 'riot' and, in the process, confront the yeomanry, army or police. The crowds were made up skilled and unskilled workers, of men and women, and of old and young.[[4]](#footnote-5) For example, in June 1792 in Edinburgh a crowd gathered outside the home of the hated Henry Dundas. Dundas was:

Home Secretary, president of the Board of Control for India, treasurer of the navy, and political manager for the nobles of Scotland and most of their forty-five subservient members of parliament at Westminster.***[[5]](#footnote-6)***

Dundas lived in George Square, in the New Town area of the city. The Square included the homes of many of his extended family, who had gained their wealth and positions of influence through their powerful patriarch. Robert McQueen (Lord Braxfield) the chief judge in Scotland also lived on the Square. As the crowd grew the garrison was turned out and opened fire on the protestors. One of those who was killed was Robert Ritchie, described as 'no more than a boy', when he joined the affray.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Louise Raw's excellent history of the Bryant and May matchwomen's strike of 1888[[7]](#footnote-8) provides an important corrective to accounts which portray the workforce as being led into strike action by 'outside agitators' like Annie Beasant. Beasant was an active socialist and great supporter of the matchwomen but she did not lead the strike. As Raw's shows the strike-leadership came from within the workforce itself. As John Charlton notes: there were 1,400 workers at Bryant and May "predominantly under the age of 15".[[8]](#footnote-9)

The employers identified five 'ring leaders' of the strike. One of those identified was Mary Driscoll. Mary was 14 at the time and took on a leading role as a striker. She subsequently became a committee member of the Union of Women Match-makers formed out of the strike. Her sister Mog (Margaret) was two years older and also active in the strike. Both Mary and Mog were well versed in politics, came from a strong Irish republican household and held strong political opinions.[[9]](#footnote-10) Raw also discusses the life of striker Martha Robertson. Martha worked as a box maker inside the factory; she was six when she joined the strike.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Paul Ryan[[11]](#footnote-12) has produced interesting and important material on the history of apprentice strikes in Britain. Young workers launched nine unofficial strike movements in engineering and shipbuilding between 1910 and 1970. On average the disputes lasted more than five weeks and involved over 15000 young workers at a time. Many of those on strike would, today, be 14 and 15 year olds stuck in the class room.

Dave Lyddon[[12]](#footnote-13) has recently added to the literature about the Great Unrest in Britain and has argued that "one feature of the period of the labour unrest that stands out, but has not been generally commented upon, is the involvement of young people in strikes and strike movements."[[13]](#footnote-14)

As well as the school student strikes of the period, which we discuss in chapter 3, there were, Lyddon argues, significant apprentice strikes in the summer and autumn of 1912, especially in shipbuilding. There were also significant strikes throughout the early twentieth century by 'pit boys'. Lyddon quotes data suggesting that there were, on average, two strikes a year by pit boys in the north-east coalfield alone between 1889 and 1907. But it wasn't just in the pits that 'lads' went on strike, young boys and girls in the tin and iron industries were regular strikers. And during the Great Unrest 'non-traditional' workers like newspaper boys, golf caddies and young boys employed in the banking industry all came out.[[14]](#footnote-15)

And, of course, it's not just children in Britain who engage in politics and rebellion.

Detlev Peukert[[15]](#footnote-16) in his social history of life in the Third Reich includes discussion of young people's resistance to the Nazi regime. He argues there were two significant groups of young people engaged in acts of resistance.

First there were groups of 'Edelweiss Pirates' who started to appear in the late 1930s. There were a numbers of groups across Germany, the 'Travelling Dudes' from Essen, the 'Kittelbach Pirates' from Oberhausen and Düsseldorf and the 'Navajos' from Cologne. All of them considered themselves Edelweiss Pirates.

The Pirate groups were made up of people aged between 14 and 18. They had clearly identifiable dress codes, wore identifying badges and used the weekends to drink, mix with the opposite sex, travel and confront the Hitler Youth. As Peukert notes

For the Edelweiss Pirates ... Dissociating themselves and emphasising differences [between themselves and the Hitler Youth] involved, in addition, taking positive action of their own in order to provoke their Nazi opponents ... Reports of brawls with members of the Hitler Youth, ... Of assaults on uniformed personnel, and of jeers and insults directed at Nazi dignitaries, are legion.***[[16]](#footnote-17)***

In addition to the Pirates were the 'Meuten' a significant gang of working class youth based in Leipzig. According to Peukert the Meuten were much more politically self-conscious than the Pirates. They drew on deeper Communist and Social Democratic traditions of organising and resisting in Leipzig and were matched by similar groups in Dresden, Halle, Erfurt, Hamburg and Munich.[[17]](#footnote-18)

The Meuten and the Pirates were subject to all manner of repression. They were rounded up, imprisoned and some of their leaders were executed. Yet they continued to resist and fight up until the end of the war.

As the Second World War battles on the Eastern Front came to their conclusion the people of Warsaw rose up against the German occupation. The Warsaw Uprising started on the 1 August 1944 and lasted 63 days. Under immense pressure, with few arms and little support from the Soviet and Allied Forces, the people of Warsaw launched their magnificent, defiant rebellion. Many children were involved in the campaign. The boy scouts delivered mail and instructions to fighters across the city. They helped put out fires and were involved in various forms of civil resistance. Young girls got involved with nursing and emergency services. But many young boys and girls also got directly involved in fighting. Warsaw's most poignant memorial to the uprising commemorates the hundreds of children who were killed. The memorial statue, called 'The Little Insurgent', depicts Antek Rozpylacz ('Antek the flamethrower') a thirteen year old boy-soldier dressed in oversized army fatigues and holding a machine gun. Antek was killed near the Old City at the height of the fighting (see photograph 1).[[18]](#footnote-19)

Perhaps the most inspiring example of school students throwing themselves into battle for their rights took place in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. The civil rights movement faced a monumental struggle to break segregation in the city. The city leaders were determined to face down the challenge and police chief Eugine 'Bull' Connor was vicious in responding to any civil rights protests. Martin Luther King called for his supporters to challenge city prohibition orders banning demonstrations by marching, getting arrested, filling the prisons and bringing the system to a grinding halt. But the trickle of volunteers threatened the strategy. King himself was arrested and wrote his famous 'letter from Birmingham jail' decrying the meek support for the struggle given by white establishment liberals. Something needed to change - and it did on what was called D-Day, Thursday 2 May.

Despite a ban on marching, D-Day was a march by High School students against segregation. At 1 pm on 2 May 50 teenagers walked out if the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church singing 'We shall overcome'. As the police started to make arrests another group of students joined the march, and then another and another. And they weren't only High School students, elementary students joined as well: "Asked her age as she climbed into a paddy wagon, a tiny girl called out that she was six"[[19]](#footnote-20)

The cops started to run out of paddy wagons, so they brought up school buses to ship the students to jail. Over 600 students were arrested that first day and now, as one of the movement leaders Fred Shuttlesworth said "The whole world [was] watching Birmingham"[[20]](#footnote-21)

The following day even more students arrived to support the struggle. The cops' intention was to stop any march, but not to make arrests because the jails were full. As the students came out of the churches Bull Connor responded by turning high powered water canon on the children. The water pressure was so great that children were knocked off their feet and sent tumbling down the street. Still the children kept coming. Now the cops began arresting them again and school buses were brought up to cart them of to prisons that were already overcrowded.

Connor responded by bringing in his 'K9 teams'. Officers with German Shepherd dogs were let loose on the children. The images of dogs attacking and biting children were beamed across the states and more generally across the globe.

Striking photographs of the snarling dogs and the high-pressure hoses appeared everywhere ... News reports stated that three people had been treated at hospital for dog bites, that five black children had been injured by the fire hoses or police clubs.***[[21]](#footnote-22)***

That evening King announced the marches would continue over the weekend and that Saturday 4 May would be 'Double D-Day'.

On the Saturday the movement resorted to guerrilla tactics. The cops expected the marchers to start, as usual, at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church but the children started marching out of churches across the city. And so it continued. On the Monday the first 19 children arrested danced their way into the wagon singing: "I ain't scared of your jail/ 'cause I want my freedom/ want my freedom/ want my freedom' [[22]](#footnote-23)

On the Tuesday groups of children managed to avoid the cops and invaded the shopping and commercial district - without any arrests. Now the economic pressure on the city elites grew steadily. A group representing the city and business interests met with representatives of the movement and, after two days a negotiated settlement was reached. On Friday an historic agreement was announced that effectively broke segregation in the city: the catalyst for change had been the thousands of young people – school students – determined to fight for their rights, no matter the personal cost.

These magnificent examples should immediately lead us to reject the notion that young people are not able to engage in politics or grasp the complexities of contested and contentious political action. But these examples are all of young people involved in general political and social movements.

The school student strike is specific to children and presents evidence of young people, in difficult and restricted circumstances, engaging in political action to improve their conditions within the education system or to raise political issues within the school setting. The school strike represents an example of a significant, consciously political, action. It is a frontal challenge to school authority, to the position of students in the education system and within society as a whole.

What 'jars' about the school strike is that it confronts and confounds the dominant ideological conception of children and childhood.

Dominant understandings of childhood often treat it as a fixed 'life stage' that has been recognised by all societies across time and place. This is a period in life, so we are led to believe, where children are recognised as having particular developmental needs. They are recognised as not being 'fully adult', as being dependent and in need of protection. And thus, childhood is also portrayed as a period that is free from worries, devoted to play and learning.

Of course humans do have a relatively long period of dependence and, compared to most animals, a much longer period of psychological and biological maturation. But these developmental facts do not determine young people's social experiences, their 'childhood'.

The notion of childhood has changed significantly though history. Historically, the further back we go the more 'unrecognisable' childhood becomes.

In pre-capitalist societies there was not such a rigid divide between young people and older members of their communities. Unlike today, people would wear the same types of clothes, eat the same foods, and engage in the same range of activities, regardless of age. Things like storytelling and play, which we tend to associate with childhood, were communal activities for all.

In agricultural based societies young people mixed play with a gradual introduction to work within the family economy. Sometimes things like hunting rabbits straddled both fun, play and leisure activity, whilst also providing food for the family.[[23]](#footnote-24)

In his journal documenting his tour through Britain in the 1740s, author and novelist Daniel Defoe[[24]](#footnote-25) made frequent comments about children working alongside their families in a range of cottage industries. Defoe's account is shaped by the ruling ideas of his epoch. To our eyes his report reveals the horror of child labour exploitation, but he quoted positively examples of children 'as young as four' at work and being 'independent' and 'self-reliant'.

At the same time as these young 'independent' working children were labouring in cottage industries - or slightly later, being exploited in mills and factories - their 'betters' were leading a rather different life.

In the nineteenth century:

The children of the well-to-do were better housed, clothed and fed. But the difference was ideological as well as economic... It was assumed by adults of the middle and upper classes that children were dependent on adults and subservient to them. They did not work; they played and learned ...Whether at home or school, children were segregated from the adult world.***[[25]](#footnote-26)***

The male offspring of the wealthy had their life plotted out for them. Soon after birth they were deposited with a wet nurse. They spent long days in the nursery away from their parents before being sent away to preparatory school. This was followed by Boarding School, University and then, for many, a career in the army, clergy or city.

Young girls were also handed over to a wet nurse. They would spend a much longer time in the nursery before coming under the tutelage of a Governess. They would be taught reading, embroidery, house management skills, painting and the arts. At the age of 21 they would 'come out' to attend Debutantes Balls. The aim of these events was to find a husband. Meaning the young women would leave the confines of their father's home and replace it with that of their husband.

Whilst these cosseted children were leading long 'childhoods' - though one that was often brutal and brutalising - their working class counterparts were climbing chimneys to clean the flues and put out fires, working in mines, mills and factories or struggling to survive because they had no paid employment. Outside of work, working class young people lived on the streets, watched out for their younger siblings and actively engaged in the life of their community.

The industrial urban working-class household, like its rural predecessor, was one where children lived huggermugger***[[26]](#footnote-27)*** with adults; segregation was neither possible nor expected. In the 1850s, and often still in the 1900s, it was also an economic unit in which all members but the very youngest played a part, contributing unpaid labour and any earnings. ... They were prepared for the adult life through participation, and their experiences equipped them for responsibility and independence at an age when their 'betters' were still in school.***[[27]](#footnote-28)***

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries working class young people did not have a 'childhood' as we would understand it today. They were young working members of their families, with 'responsibilities' and a degree of independence that was significantly different from that of their so-called betters.

But during the last two decades of the nineteenth century a more recognisable working class childhood was carved out. Working class childhood is a social construct that was formed in a particular historical context.

There were several elements involved in this process.

First, there was working class agitation against the exploitation of child labour. Children have always worked and played a role within the family productive unit. In the pre-capitalist world work could be hard and taxing. But the rhythms of work were fixed by the seasons and children worked and were guided under parental supervision. Parents often pushed children to work hard. But there is no evidence of general parental brutality.[[28]](#footnote-29) Within the family economy:

Different work would be expected of different individuals: children's work was more auxiliary and recognised as having a learning component. ... How far children were divided by gender depended on their age and availability. Between children and adult status there was a continuum.***[[29]](#footnote-30)***

This started to change with the development of capitalism. In the cottage industries in the early phase of capitalist development the imposition of the market onto productive life meant that the rate and level of exploitation of the family's labour resources intensified - including that of children.[[30]](#footnote-31) With the development of industrial capitalism, the expansion of factories and mills during the latter part of the eighteenth century, life for the child labourer became much more extreme. The child worker was no longer under the direct authority of their parents but was subject to the whims of the overseer and foreman. The intensity of work was not controlled by parents but was set by the relentless pace of the machines.

Although factory children sometimes worked under other relatives, including parents, the work rhythm and discipline were set from above, by overlookers determined to keep up pace and production. Parents had effectively lost control over how their children were trained, and on the demands made on their health and strength.***[[31]](#footnote-32)***

During the nineteenth century there were increasing demands from working class organisations to regulate and control children's labour and to protect children from long hours of arduous factory employment. Often these demands were taken up by landed Tory philanthropists (famously like Lord Shaftesbury) who were motivated by a mixture of hostility to Whig manufacturers, commitment to religious notions of child innocence and bourgeois ideals of family life. During the nineteenth century legislation slowly brought more areas of child work under some degree of regulation.[[32]](#footnote-33) A process was unlocked which started to treat working class children as children, rather than workers, and opened up a space for working class childhood to develop.

A second element leading to a focus on working class young people arose from changes to the employment structure. In contrast to the above, as the nineteenth century progressed changes to the labour market meant there was a growing problem of child unemployment and underemployment.[[33]](#footnote-34)

The new industries that started to establish themselves at the end of the nineteenth century had fewer spaces for child workers. This led to increasing numbers of unemployed working class young people hanging around on the streets during the day. In contemporary debates these 'Street Arabs', as they were known, drifted around the city and were viewed as a potential threat to the established order. Journalist, social commentators and politicians increasingly raised their voices against the problem of unruly youth - and openly debated what measures were needed to control them.[[34]](#footnote-35)

The problem of controlling unemployed and unruly working class youth took place against a more generalised period of crisis for the ruling class.

Economically, Britain remained the foremost global economic powerhouse but growth rates were sluggish and newly industrialising countries, like the USA and Germany, were catching up and starting to challenge the dominance of British capital.[[35]](#footnote-36)

Politically, the gradual expansion of the vote and the birth of a number of working class political parties, alongside the rise of new unionism and unemployed agitation, further fuelled the growing sense of disorder and potential challenge to the existing order.[[36]](#footnote-37)

Socially, there was growing concern about the living conditions in which the 'outcast' population of the inner cities lived.[[37]](#footnote-38)

A range of voluntary organisations committed to 'child saving' emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. Organisations such as Barnardos (1867), the Girls Friendly Society (1874), the Church of England Waifs and Strays Society (1881), the Children's Society (1881), the Church of England Purity Society (1883), the White Cross Army (1883) and the NSPCC (1889) were committed to saving children from a life of vice, misery, crime and danger.

In part these organisations were shaped by a set of ideas that argued that if poor working class children were not saved from danger, they would themselves become dangerous.

There was anxiety that the conditions of urban living were fuelling opposition to Government and state. Such fears prompted a number of investigations into working class living conditions. Perhaps most famously were the poverty studies of Booth and Rowntree.

Booth was a Liverpool industrialist and arch Conservative. He wanted to study poverty to disprove the 'outrageous claims' made by the Marxist organisation the Social Democratic Federation, that poverty was rife in the inner cities. A study by the SDF had suggested that 25% of the population of London was living in poverty.[[38]](#footnote-39) Booth set out to attack the SDF for: "Putting such erroneous ... 'Incendiary' statements [about the extent of poverty], before the people".[[39]](#footnote-40)

Rowntree was a Quaker and impressed by Booth's study of poverty in London he decided to something similar in York. At the start of his study he thought the poor were poor because they drank too much.

Both Booth and Rowntree undertook their studies with a set of assumptions about poverty based on very traditional notions of what was termed 'less eligibility'[[40]](#footnote-41) and the personal failings of the poor themselves. But the results of their studies emphasised that there was a deeper structural problem: poor wages and employment conditions were the root cause of poverty.[[41]](#footnote-42)

These findings seemed to point to an even greater problem. Poverty, ill health and nutritional deficiencies seemed to lie behind the recruitment problems experienced by the British army during the Boer Wars. In 1900 56.5% of the men who were measured at army recruitment offices were under 5 foot 6 inches; in 1845 only 10.5% of potential recruits had been under this height.[[42]](#footnote-43) During the Boer War between 40-60% of potential recruits were deemed unfit to serve.[[43]](#footnote-44)

As worrying for the defenders of Empire was the decline in the birth rate from 35.5 per 1,000 in 1871-75 to 29.3 per 1,000 in 1896-1900 alongside the increase in infant mortality from 146 per 1,000 live births in 1876 to 156 per 1,000 live births in 1897.[[44]](#footnote-45)

In 1903 the Government set up an Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration which made a number of recommendations including demands for improvement to the standard of food and drink, regulation of overcrowding, control of air pollution, training of young girls in cookery and 'home economics', provision of school meals for underfed children and school medical inspections.

This coincided with the formation of a National Efficiency movement which focussed on working class children and aimed to improve their education, health and morality. It also led to the growth of organisations like the Boys Brigade, Boy (and then Girl) Scouts, Lads Clubs and a range of sporting clubs shaped by notions of 'muscular Christianity', all of whom promoted 'healthy living' for working class young people.

The message was clear. British capitalism and the British Empire needed a fit and healthy workforce and army if it was to fend off competition from its economic and military rivals. But this meant focussing on working class children, 'Children of the Nation'***[[45]](#footnote-46)***- and women as 'mothers of Empire'.***[[46]](#footnote-47)***

The consequence was an increase in state legislation and activity in the area of child 'protection' and 'regulation'. State activity was shaped by a relationship of both 'care' and 'control' and both these drivers were embedded within the growing state welfare activity unleashed from the end of the nineteenth century. According to Hendricks what we witnessed was

a consciously designed pursuit of the national interest, which included all-round efficiency, public health, education, racial hygiene, responsible parenthood and social purity.***[[47]](#footnote-48)***

There was substantial legislation passed relating to child welfare and protection at the turn of the twentieth century. The Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act (1889), the Poor Law Adoption Act (1889), the Custody of Children Act (1891) and the Children Acts (1872, 1897, 1908) laid ground for the removal of children from parents on the grounds of 'unreasonable' treatment.

Through such legislation state welfare professional started to carve out their roles. Midwives, doctors, and social workers started to gain a role as regulators of children's lives, of appropriate family relationships and of what was acceptable within the home.

As part of these processes the school, and the education system, became established as central features in children's lives. Education seemed to address a number of the problems that contemporary commentators identified.

For those concerned about the growing economic competition from the U.S. and Germany education would allow the basic numeracy and literacy skills required in the new industries. This was 'education for work' - and remains a central driver for some aspects of the education system today.

Interestingly whilst some sections of capital wanted a more educated workforce to keep up with global competitors others, like textile manufacturers, were opposed to the schooling system because it would deprive them of a source of cheap labour. On this issue an initial compromise was reached where 'half time working' was allowed up until 1918.[[48]](#footnote-49)

For those concerned about unruly 'Street Arabs' the school system offered a solution by establishing an institutional location for young people which would require them to spend the main part of the day 'locked in the classroom'.

The schooling system was based on hierarchy, complete subservience to the teacher, rote learning and obedience. These were thought to be the ideal values that would train young minds to be obedient workers in the factories in later life. This was viewed as a positive counter to the trade unionism, socialism and all forms of anti-capitalist values that were seemingly growing amongst the working population.

Gender roles and the importance of the family could be taught via 'Home Economics', commitment to the Empire instilled via the annual Empire Day celebrations (where pupils were encouraged to dress as 'natives' of conquered lands) and health and nutritional issues addressed via school medical inspections and even free school meals (both established after legislation was passed in 1906, enabling school meal provision, and 1908, establishing compulsory medical inspections).

Education was also supported by significant sections of the working class. Education was valued as a way of lifting people out of poverty and ignorance. Of course support for the idea of education was not the same as support for the kind of education that was established. Conflict over the form and content of education has always been a feature of educational debates. Free school meals may have been driven by a mix of eugenicist and national efficiency concerns - but they also brought a very real material benefit for working class children and their families, and were supported for this very reason.

The education system as it developed, therefore, contained a number of contradictory elements and drivers. But this leaves one aspect out of the discussion: the attitudes of young people now required to attend school.

Stephen Humphries[[49]](#footnote-50) argues that the response of working class young people to the 'regulatory invasion' of their lives was a rebellious anti-authoritarianism which brought them into conflict with teachers, schools, park keepers, police and a range of 'authority figures'.

As the editorial in the Educational News in 1889 argued in the face of that year's school strikes:

Schoolboy strikers ... are simply rebels. Obedience is the first rule of school life. ... School strikes are therefore not merely acts of disobedience but a reversal of the primary purpose of schools. They are on a par with strikes in the army or navy.***[[50]](#footnote-51)***

Working class childhood, then, was forged in a particular socio-economic context, out of the conflicts between state institutions, policy makers, welfare agencies and professionals and the responses of working class young people to these processes.

In the school setting young people are subject to a range of rules that dictate everything from the clothes they wear to how they should conduct themselves in the classroom. The school regime regulates their activities, their interactions with teachers and those in authority and delineates their learning schedule. In all these aspects of schooling students are denied a significant voice. Schooling has, in part, also been about teaching us to accept authority and know our place: today the authority of the teacher, tomorrow that of the foreman or office manager.[[51]](#footnote-52)

The school strike challenges all of this.

School strikes have been far from uncommon in Britain, indeed we will argue that hardly a year goes by without a school strike somewhere in the country, though generally the strikes are not reported and remain hidden from history. As Robert Adams notes,

Collective protests by pupils have received scant attention from researchers ... Pupil protest has been largely ignored by commentators over the years, despite the fact that schools ... have a long history of pupil protest.***[[52]](#footnote-53)***

In the second decade of the twenty first century in Britain school students have taken strike action against a range of issues: changes to school hours and holidays, petty rules about dress codes, school privatisation, and, perhaps most memorably, against changes to student fees, funding and Maintenance support in 2010.

In November and December2010 young students left their schools and sixth form colleges to join mass demonstrations against cuts and student fees.[[53]](#footnote-54)

The student Day X protests were a response to the Tory-Liberal Democrat Government's austerity measures. The focus was the implications of draconian cuts to education and their impact on students. The government were rushing ahead to implement changes to student funding which would see students paying full fees for their Higher Education. This would mean that students would have to pay up to £9000 per annum to attend university; the most expensive fees in Europe.

As the student movement developed more grievances were raised. In particular the Government's intention to scrap means-tested Educational Maintenance Assistance from some of the poorest students in post-16 education became a central mobiliser. Almost 600,000 young people qualified for EMA, which offered payments of up to £30 a week to students from poorer backgrounds to enable them to attend post-compulsory education.

The movement of 2010 was led by university students. They occupied universities, colleges, politicians' offices, banks, shops and offices owned by tax avoiding firms and demonstrated at a number of local and national demonstrations. The demonstration on the 10 November, organised by the National Union of Students and the lecturers union the UCU, saw over 50,000 students lay siege to Tory party HQ in Milbank.

The Millbank siege galvanised opposition to austerity. It also gave confidence to others to join the battle.

On three massive days of protest Day X (24 November), Day X2 (30 November) and Day X3 (9 December), university students were joined by significant numbers of school and sixth form students.

It was precisely the youngest school and college students who were to become the cutting edge of the movement. ... Most major cities saw several thousand school and college students walk out on Day X, with hundreds in even some of the smallest towns. Pupils went from classroom to classroom chanting "Strike, strike" and pulled out whole schools. Town halls and Lib Dem offices were occupied. In Brighton protesters took over four buildings.***[[54]](#footnote-55)***

The 24 November day of action saw considerable numbers of school students take action across the country. There were school strikes recorded across London, Liverpool, Newcastle, Manchester, Nottingham, Oxford, Cambridge, Leeds, Sheffield, Birmingham, Barnsley, Bristol, Brighton, Milton Keynes, Cardiff, Bury, Blackburn and Winchester.***[[55]](#footnote-56)*** The school students were involved in a range of actions. According to the BBC:

Up to 3,000 students paraded through Brighton city centre as eggs and fireworks were thrown.

In Manchester around 3,000 protesters gathered outside the town hall, disrupting city centre traffic.

In Oxford, hundreds of students and school pupils protested in the town centre.

In Cambridge, more than 200 students scaled scaffolding to erect banners at the Senate House and protested in the grounds of King's College.

In Liverpool, more than 2,000 students marched, with about 300 of them blocking three major city centre roads to traffic.

In Sheffield, 2,000 students and secondary school pupils marched to the town hall.***[[56]](#footnote-57)***

The centre of the protest was London. Laurie Penny writing from the demonstration for The Guardian's rolling coverage of the events captured the excitement and dynamism of what was happening.

There are no leaders here: the thousands of schoolchildren and young people who streamed into Whitehall three hours ago in protest at the government's attacks on further and higher education were working completely off script.

A wordless cry went up somewhere in the crowd and they were off, moving as one, with no instructions, towards parliament.

But just because there are no leaders here doesn't mean there is no purpose. These kids – and most of them are just kids, with no experience of direct action, who walked simultaneously out of lessons across the country just before morning break – want to be heard. "Our votes don't count," says one nice young man in a school tie.***[[57]](#footnote-58)***

The BBC reported

there were a disproportionate number of younger pupils who had bunked off school for the day. Some were as young as 13 - although that particular pupil insisted his mother knew where he was. ... Three teenage boys from a St John's Wood school - none of them older than 17 - told me why they had turned up. "I want to study medicine," said the first one who was in his first year of A Levels. "What the [expletive] am I supposed to do to pay the fees I'm now going to face?"

Another 16-year-old, describing himself as "Kieran from Camden", had been reading up on Marx. He gave every journalist who would listen a passable essay on the theory of class.***[[58]](#footnote-59)***

Similar stories were heard across the country:

Jamil Keating led a walkout of over 400 students from Xaverian Catholic Sixth Form college in Manchester. “We feel like the rich have been completely let off the hook. It’s the poor that are being made to pay. We have to fight, we have no choice"

Samir Hinks from Bury College echoed this: “We’re the ones who will have all our rights taken away. The Lib Dems have lied. The first demo on 10 November was a spark, now it’s turned into a roaring inferno. There is a huge sense of unfairness at the system—it’s two-tier. We have to fight tooth and nail for everything while the rich get it handed to them on a plate. This isn’t just about the cuts to education—it’s about being young and working class and not having a future."

Arnie was one of 1,100 who walked out of Chiswick Community School, in west London. He said, “I was expecting a handful of people but suddenly there were hundreds, then a thousand.”

“Our school wouldn’t let us hold a sit-in,” said Shona, a year 11 student at Chorlton High School [Manchester]. “They said we had to do it in break time. We didn’t feel like this would make the point strongly enough so we organised a walkout.”***[[59]](#footnote-60)***

On Day X2 (30 November) there was, again, significant school and college student involvement across the country with school and college walk outs in London, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Colchester, Cardiff, Belfast, Newcastle, Bath and Liverpool.***[[60]](#footnote-61)***

In Twickenham school students from Orleans Park school demonstrated outside Lib Dem Cabinet Minister Vince Cable's office. Many were as young as 14. Joe Rogers (aged 15) said

I want to go to university so does everyone here but we can’t afford it. We just want to be heard.

Charlie Pellow (14), added,

I want to get a job but I’m worried I won’t be able to afford university.

Whilst Sophie Mann (15) said she feared the cost of higher education would rise even more in the coming years.

We’re worried that when we go to university it’s going to be even worse.***[[61]](#footnote-62)***

In Wiltshire, school and sixth form students from Hardenhuish and Sheldon schools met up in Chippenham town centre. Chris King, aged 17, said:

The [fee] rises are totally unjust and unfair when you consider that most of the people in the cabinet either went to Uni for free or are millionaires. ... The government are continuing our involvement with Afghanistan and Iraq, but they are unwilling to put money behind the education of young people in this country.***[[62]](#footnote-63)***

On DayX3 (9 December) the protests culminated in a blockade of Parliament as MPs voted on the issue inside. Once again there were protests across the country, but the focus was on Westminster and the vote.

The day was notable for three things.

First, the resilience of the young protestors who had been protesting for a month and created a massive political problem for the Coalition, especially the 'junior partners' the Liberal Democrats who had stood in the election in May 2010 on a platform of 'no fees'.***[[63]](#footnote-64)***

Second, the brutality of the police. Mounted police with truncheons and on foot snatch squads picked off small groups of students. Others were kettled for hours in freezing cold conditions. Many were beaten. Many were arrested.

Finally, on the evening of 9 December some demonstrators got close to Prince Charles - an action that caused apoplexy in the popular press the following day.***[[64]](#footnote-65)*** That the royal family should actually be confronted by young working class people demanding their rights was unheard of. It made the establishment froth at the mouth.

Over the month long protest movement the school students were dismissed, and slightly ridiculed, in the press as 'copy cat' strikers. This suggests they were unthinking and easily led; out for a bit of fun and a bit of disruption - but not serious about the issues. They were, after all, kids. And as kids they were, apparently, vulnerable to the influence of outside agitators, mischievous university students and assorted radicals.

For example, in Liverpool Head Teacher, Sister Brigid Halligan of Sefton Park secondary said schools across the city would be “anxious” that students walking out of lessons would affect attendance rates and exam preparation for 14 to 18 year-olds.

I don’t think compulsory school age students should be encouraged to join such a protest. We have a responsibility for them. Even for sixth form students I would prefer them to be in school, their exams are coming up ... The danger is some very young children will think this is a really good idea without really understanding what they are doing it for.”***[[65]](#footnote-66)***

Other Head Teachers noted their general support for the issues, but not the form of protest:

Litherland High’s headteacher Jim Donnelly said: “I share their concerns over the cuts” but as all his pupils were 16 or under he was forced to mark them truant for skipping class.

Dr David Dennison, headmaster at Aigburth’s St Margaret’s CE Technology and Language College said while students should register their concerns over the “bitter blow” of a rise in tuition fees it should be “done in a manner that would not be detrimental to their present courses"***[[66]](#footnote-67)***

This led to those in authority trying to treat the strikes as examples of truancy, not political action. In Sheffield Police Supt Martin Scothern was reported as saying:

I am disappointed that large numbers of schoolchildren joined the demonstrations. We are working with local education authorities to deal with truancy issues.***[[67]](#footnote-68)***

As we will see in the chapters that follow, dismissing the political meaning of strikes is far from uncommon. But the quotes from school strikers given above indicated quite a clear political understanding of what was happening. But as the following examples show, it also completely misunderstands the rapid political learning that can take place during strike waves.

In Sheffield, on 7 December 2010, 250 students from King Edwards school marched on the town hall.

The school students tried to get into the town hall but were stopped by police, so they marched off down the main road. They then went into Topshop—run by tax avoider Sir Phillip Green.

About 50 students got inside Topshop which closed down. (They) then went on to Boots—which moved its HQ to a Swiss post office box to avoid paying some £86 million a year in UK taxes.***[[68]](#footnote-69)***

The young students were drawing political conclusions and linked education cuts to tax avoidance. In practice their actions were posing a serious alternative to the Government's austerity agenda - they were asserting that cuts and austerity were not inevitable, the deficit could be funded by making the tax avoiders pay their due.

Similar views were expressed by young students who occupied their school in Camden. The students from Camden School for Girls occupied their school for 24 hours. They spoke to journalist Sadie Robinson and explained why they were occupying:

“It came about after two of us went to visit the student occupation at University College London (UCL),” said Jen. “It was very inspiring. We were glad that university students were doing things, but we thought that sixth form students should take action too – because we’ll be the ones paying higher fees. ... The younger kids all support us too. They all walked out last time – and they will again tomorrow.”

Cathryn explained that the students had three goals. “We want the school to agree not to penalise students for taking part and to issue a press statement against fee rises,” she said. “We also want the school to confirm that it supports the right to protest.”

[The] Students [were] against plans to raise fees but also with many other Tory proposals. “The Tories say that they want ex-soldiers to be able to train up quickly to become teachers,” said Cathryn. “But our teachers have years of training and are committed to teaching. The Tories just want to discipline the working class.”

Jen added, “We’re against Michael Gove’s white paper. I’m fine with discipline from trained teachers – but not from a bloody military commander!”

They also question other aspects of the coalition government. “The government says there are too many people on benefits,” said Nikki. “But if they stop people being able to get degrees, how are they supposed to get jobs? I want to go to university – but I won’t be able to afford it if they raise fees. Then what?”

Students reject the idea that cuts are inevitable and necessary. “A lot of people used to think that there’s not much else the government can do but make cuts,” said Jen. “But after we had a couple of UCL students and a South Bank student came to talk to us, people think differently. It was a mind-opening meeting.***[[69]](#footnote-70)***

The protests of 2010 came close to defeating the Government's plans for education. They opened up fissures in a weak Government and damned the Liberal Democrats who plunged in the opinion polls as a result.

The student radicalisation didn't simply end with the passing of the legislation introducing increased fees. Indeed many of the young activists returned to the streets a year later to join trade unionists fighting to defend public sector pensions.***[[70]](#footnote-71)***

Through their actions the young students dismissed notions of student apathy and provided an example of the energy, drive and huge potential young people have to challenge the political status quo when they act together to assert their rights.

As we explore in the chapters that follow, this energy and enthusiasm for change is common to all school student strikes, it is what makes them vibrant and exciting - and a challenge to the dominant order.

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| **Tom** **Kay (Sheffield 2010)**  **"The strike was very mixed ... It emphasised that EMA was a class issue"**  In 2010 I was 17 in the second year of Langley Park sixth form college on Sheffield. The college is in the north of the city, in one of the poorest wards in the country.  The atmosphere in the college had been quite political since the election. A lot of students relied on EMA and others were nervous about what the Coalition's plans for higher education funding would mean.  The college itself had made a submission to the Government against cuts to EMA and the impact it would have on students from our part of the city. But though they spoke out against the cuts in this way, in the days before the 24 November strike the senior management tried to stop us talking about any walk out.  For a few days before the planned strike I leafletted the college. I also had a stall outside. I was arguing people should come out at 2pm and join the protest in the city centre.  The college authorities said I couldn't have a stall. The Principal and Vice Principal came outside and said "If we let you have a stall, what happens if the BNP turn up tomorrow? We wouldn't be able to stop them".  I told them this was a stupid argument and if the BNP turned up there would be loads of students out to stop them. Langley Park is the most multicultural sixth form in the city, there is no danger of the BNP turning up!  I refused to take the stall down. When I went back into the school they took me to the administration section. Normally students weren't allowed in here, but I was kept for 2 hours. I was told I had an "inherent problem with authority" and my actions were a "danger to other students"!  The day before the strike I was called out of class again. This time there were 2 cops waiting for me. They questioned me and demanded to know if I knew of any plans for violence at the demo!  On the day of the strike 63 students came out. That was pretty good. We are miles from the city centre - about an hour and a half walk.  We commandeered a bus - all 63 of us piled on. We were chanting and singing. One of he students had brought a Palestinian flag - which is interesting because it emphasises, I think, that it was political and the politics were quite generalised.  Then the bus got stopped by the cops. A copper asked me what we were doing, told us to stop chanting and when I asked him about this he told me to "fuck off"!  When we got to the city centre we joined the demo. There were about 2000 school students there. The crowd was very mixed. There were a lot of Somali kids there and poor white working class students as well. The EMA issue was really significant and the demo showed, I think, that this was a class issue.  When we got back to school the following day there were loads of debates about the strike. One of the senior managers tried to stop me talking to other students in the canteen and we had a stand up row about this. In the school I was known to be quite political and people were coming and asking me about what was happening next and I think the school wanted to isolate me.  There were two significant outcomes. First, when I told mum and dad about being taken out school to talk to the cops, they went ballistic. They demanded to see the Principal. The outcome was that we got a formal apology from them and a guarantee it wouldn't happen again!  Second, the UCU branch in the college put a statement saying there should be no victimisation of students. This was important and meant the college backed off from that. Instead they moved to be much more open in their criticism of what the Government were doing.  Our school didn't join the remaining Day X events. It had started snowing and the college actually shut down for a fortnight! But that meant I was free to join the university occupation - and that's what I did.  I had been planning to take a gap year after college. But after my experiences I decided to go straight to uni. I wanted to keep up my political activity - and that's what I did. This was a great learning experience for me. It was an exciting time and it helped convince me that we can fight for and achieve a better world. |

1. Jamie Ross What 7,000 teenagers talked about during The Big, Big Debate

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25. A. Davin (1990)"When is a child not a child?" In H. Corr and L. Jameson (eds) Politics if Everyday Life (Basingstoke, Macmillan) pp37,38 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Huggermugger - in this sense Davin means 'socially hidden' or concealed ie not recognised as children with distinct needs [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Davin (1990) Op. Cit pp38,39 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. There is considerable debate on the social causes of child labour exploitation in the early phase of capitalist development. People like Ivy Pinchbeck (1930/1981) *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution* (London, Virago) argue that in the cottage industries children worked long hours doing repetitive and mundane tasks. These continued, she argues, during the early phase of industrial production - but now the exploitation was more open and visible. As a result it motivated philanthropists and politicians to enact legislation to control the worst forms of child labour exploitation. In contrast EP Thompson (1963) *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, Penguin) argues the exploitation of child labour during industrialisation was one of the most brutal episodes of the industrial revolution. These debates are explored in M. Lavalette (1994) Child Employment in the Capitalist Labour Market (Aldershot, Ashgate) where it is argued that the debate misses the key turning point, the intensification of child labour exploitation which came about with the growing hold of the market from the seventeenth century onwards. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
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38. See F. D. Hyndman (1911/2013) Record of an Adventurous Life (London, Nabu Press) pp330-332 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Ibid p331 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. 'Less eligibility' was a concept established in the New Poor Law (1834). It is the notion that the 'idle poor' are always looking at ways of getting 'something for nothing'. It is therefore essential to stop benefits becoming attractive to the idle poor - or more attractive than work - so they must always be paid at a rate lower than the lowest paying job on the labour market. Work must always be more attractive, more eligible than benefits. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
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44. D. Dwork (1987) "War is good for babies and other young children: A history of the Infant and Child Welfare Movement in England 1898-1918 (London, Tavistock) [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
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