

Preparing the ground for a mass movement of young people

Jarrow March for Jobs 2011

Sean Figg
Jarrow marcher

On 1 October a group of young people from every corner of the country – mostly strangers to each other – gathered in Jarrow, just south east of Newcastle. They waited anxiously to see if anyone would turn up to their launch protest. Five weeks and 330 miles later the famous Jarrow marchers arrived in London greeted by crowds of thousands and media interest.

Although the focus of attention was on the few dozen determined young marchers, thousands of people had helped make the Jarrow March the success that it was. Even on the first day a brass band and 500 trade unionists, young people and other campaigners and local well-wishers saw them off.

The 2011 Jarrow March for Jobs, organised by Youth Fight for Jobs (YFJ), has become a landmark for the new generation. Its example will become a reference point as young people are drawn into a struggle for their futures.

The 1936 'Jarrow Crusade', where 200 men, thrown from the shipyards of Jarrow into unemployment, marched to London to petition the government of the day, is well known. In the north east, its memory is part of the fabric of working class communities. To be a descendant of a Jarrow marcher is a thing to boast about – as the 2011 marchers discovered!

Britain in 2011 is no place to be young. Youth unemployment is over one million; college students' EMA payments have been scrapped; university tuition fees have been trebled; youth services are being cut and closed; the housing shortage forces young people to postpone the start of their adult lives. Young people see an out-of-touch, cruel elite preside over a system that has consigned them to the knackers yard before they've made it out of the starting gate.

Young people have made it clear that they will not take this sitting down. The student movement at the end of 2010 and early 2011 showed that where a lead is given students will respond in their thousands and with huge energy. Unfortunately the National Union of Students, having called a demo which sparked the movement, failed to provide a lead to the young people who were clearly willing to stand up and fight back against the brutal

but hated Con-Dems.

The August riots reflected the enormous anger and frustration among young people denied access to jobs, education and youth services and facing harassment by the police. Riots will not improve their conditions but without organisations and ideas about how an alternative to cuts can be won it cannot be ruled out that there will be further such events.

We hoped that recreating the Jarrow Crusade would bring the ideas and methods of YFJ to a wider audience – including young people who were keen to do something to defend their rights.

The Jarrow March adopted five simple demands. We marched to demand that the government creates decent jobs, brings back EMA, scraps university fees, saves youth services, and builds affordable housing. Of course, before even debating these questions with government spokespersons we knew the reply would be that the country is broke and that the demands were 'unrealistic' and 'unaffordable'.

But this would only strengthen our wider argument: if the current system can't afford to give us a future, then our generation can't afford this system. We put forward solutions such as wealth taxation, public ownership and democratic economic planning.

And it's not just raising the issues. To be more than a lobby group trying to persuade politicians who we know aren't listening, we need to build a mass movement that can force them to act. If no one speaks for us, then we need to get organised and create our own voice.

But we can't fight alone. The working class, particularly the organised working class in the trade unions, has the power to stop society and the power to change society. Young people have to unite their struggles with those of the working class and the trade unions.

Walking the walk

To put our ideas out in the public domain with the hook of the Jarrow Crusade would require us to walk between ten and 15 miles every day! But it was worth it. It was the walking that captured imaginations because it showed the determination and commitment of the young people doing it. People's hearts went out to us and we received huge support along the entire trip.

It was also the 'epic' nature of the un-

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photo Senan

dertaking that in part explains the huge media coverage we received. Every major national television station and national newspaper covered the march – we became the 'go-to' people for comment on youth unemployment.

The response from the trade union movement was spectacular. Since its launch in 2009, YFJ has won the backing of eight trade unions. The Jarrow March showed what that backing meant in practice. The trade unions made the march possible; food, accommodation, public meetings, rallies and social events were laid on for us everywhere we went.

The support from the PCS civil service union really stood out as an example of the united campaigning that can be built. PCS organises workers in job centres who are often low paid and at constant threat of redundancy themselves. Although required to implement and administer the government's policies that 'deal' with the unemployed, the left-led PCS and its members by no means accept these policies.

In Jarrow, Durham, Northallerton and Luton, to name just a few towns, PCS members met us and gave us their full support. For stretches of the march we even had a PCS member and job centre worker, trained by the Territorial Army, acting as our unofficial 'medic' and helping us with blisters, strains and sprains.

Support from every sector

But it wasn't just those at the public sector 'coal face' who supported us but workers from every industry and sector. On the second day we met a group of ex-workers from the AEI Cables factory in Birtley and held an impromptu rally with them.

These workers had been sacked with 30 seconds notice, even though some had worked for the company for 45 years or more. The marchers had decided to make a £50 donation to their hardship fund, but spokesman, Ian Harris, said: "No. Keep it

You need it more than we do. We want to support you."

It wasn't just organised workers who supported us either. As we walked down the pavements and verges of Britain's A and B roads, car horns were beeped and people stopped to wish us well. One woman stopped her car and pressed £100 cash into a marcher's hand, saying she completely supported what we were doing. She left so quickly we didn't even get her name or thank her properly.

When we walked through the tiny hamlet of Dalton-on-Tees, a woman rushed out of her home and insisted she make cups of tea for us. She explained that her grandmother had made tea when the original march had passed through and that the story was an enormous source of pride in the family. She had been looking out for us.

Another Jarrow descendent stopped us shortly after we crossed the river Browney in County Durham. He told us that although celebrated from the safe distance of 75 years, in 1936 the Jarrow Crusade was not welcomed by the establishment in the area.

His grandfather had been a scout for the march and went ahead to find a place for the marchers to sleep. The police had phoned ahead to the local landlord who dispatched his gamekeepers to hold up the progress of the march. When they encountered the man's grandfather they beat him so badly he had to drop out. This is the first time this story will have been put down in print.

For this older generation who supported us, the Jarrow march represented something important. We would often hear stories from those who had suffered unemployment in the 1980s and been placed on Thatcher's hated Youth Training Scheme (YTS). 'Conscription' to this slave labour scheme was defeated by a mass campaign including a 250,000-strong school student strike.

Many of the trade unionists we met had children or grandchildren and were

worried about their future. The idea that young people were organising themselves re-ignited their hope for the future.

The Jarrow March and its legacy, along with the continuing work of YFJ, could be an important bridge across which the best traditions of the labour movement – of mass struggle and solidarity – can reach the next generation.

In every area young people signed up to join YFJ and participated in the protests and demonstrations. In Sheffield 50 students from the university marched to join our protest outside a job centre and then marched through the city centre with us.

In Nuneaton, outside a college, heads snapped round when we shouted our demands on EMA, with queues forming to sign our petitions. When we marched through Coventry, students finishing college joined the march seeking out our 'Bring Back EMA' placards.

Young members of the trade unions marched with us and campaigned inside their unions. And many areas now have groups of young people organising to fight for their futures having signed up as the march passed through their town or city.

Ready and willing

The experience of the Jarrow March shows that there are young people out there who are unwilling to put up with the continued and escalating attacks on their future and want to fight back. However they are not yet a concentrated force in society. In many cases these feelings of anger were present but not yet articulated.

It was as if the ideas of the Jarrow March were a catalyst for speeding up conclusions that were already in the process of formation. Even then, once agreement was reached on what was necessary, the confidence that we could successfully change things was not automatic. But we had established a reference point for

those young people that will undoubtedly be drawn on in the future.

22% November youth unemployment figures

The enormous solidarity and desire to work with young people shown by the trade unions must be built on. Youth Fight for Jobs appeals for continued support of its campaigns and for the unions to take initiatives. Unite the Union has introduced a cheap 'community' rate and all unions should open their doors to youth – students and the unemployed – to join them and be part of the labour movement as it goes forward after the 30 November strike.



The marchers walked ten to 15 miles a day photo Oliver Fournier

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Last year's student movement was able to coalesce into a mass movement for a certain period of time more easily than a more generalised movement against all attacks on young people's futures. In part this is due to the simple fact that schools, colleges, and universities bring young people together in large numbers. This can help speed up the articulation of anger and the decision to act.

It is a more difficult feat to bring about the conscious decision to organise, when, as yet, no force acts on the unemployed pushing them in that direction. YFJ and the trade unions can provide a vehicle for this task.

Two weeks after the Jarrow march ended, youth unemployment decisively smashed through the one million mark. The Con-Dems insulting response is to steal up to £1 billion from some of the poorest in society by cutting tax credits, and giving it to the private sector.

This is the same private sector that has £75 billion in its vaults, unable to find suitably profitable outlets to invest in it. It is guaranteed that this sop will not provide enough work for the one million unemployed young people. The future is bleak now but it will become bleaker.

Launching pad for the future

But not everything is bleak. On 30 November, over three million public sector workers took strike action against the Con-Dem attack on their pensions. A BBC poll just days before the strike showed four fifths of 16-24 year olds in support, higher even than the 61% of the public who think the action to defend pensions is justified. But this generation has never seen mass action on this scale in its lifetime. The ideas of mass action and linking up with the organised working class have been placed starkly on the agenda.

In the success of the Jarrow March, we have created a crucial reference point and launching pad for the development of further struggles of young people. In the coming months, Youth Fight for Jobs groups around the country will be campaigning on our five key demands – providing young people with a way to get organised and take action and a route for the trade unions to reach the youth.

Unfortunately there is no shortage of issues that young people need to campaign about. Here are some ideas about how to get a Youth Fight for Jobs and Education group going in your area and some suggestions of what you could do.

- Start with the people you know – are your friends angry about the issues mentioned here? Get them together and have a meeting to decide what you are going to focus on and make some plans. You could just meet at a café or somewhere local where people go.
- Reach out to other young people – hand out leaflets to advertise that you want to start a group. Can you put posters on college/uni notice boards? What about leafleting young people at the job centre?
- Contact YFJ nationally and we can send you leaflets and posters and try to answer any questions you have. We can send someone to speak at a meeting if you want.
- You could start a petition in your borough calling on the council to take action. This is the text of the Waltham Forest members' petition as an example:

We the undersigned petition the council to, as a start:

1. Re-open all closed youth services and re-employ all sacked youth workers. No cuts to public services and jobs, such as fire services, health services, education and care. Expand Waltham Forest youth services including opening up clubs, sports and other facilities. Create jobs don't cut them.
2. Re-instate the EMA immediately. Use the council reserves to borrow to invest in a future for young people and our borough. Invest in training and education. No to university fees.
3. Invest in a programme of house-renovation and building to meet housing need and create jobs.

- Organise a protest, linking up with local trade unions and anti-cuts campaigners, against cuts to jobs and services.
- Contact local trade union branches to support their campaigns and ask for support for your group such as funding for meeting rooms. Ask if you can speak to a trade union meeting about YFJ.
- A good example of how to take up a local issue is given by YFJ in the East Midlands. They are demanding that Mansfield district council take over an abandoned ShoeCo housing site and finish the work. They say that the new homes should be kept in public ownership and let at affordable rents, instead of being sold to private landlords. Months of work are still needed for electricians, plumbers, joiners, plasterers and painters. This work should include proper training for young people, under trade union supervision.
- See the jarrowmarch11.com website for reports of the Jarrow march, contact details and other information.



The march receives huge support from the trade unions, including the RMT who provided a brass band for the launch demo in Jarrow photo Paul Mattsson