

I Want To Work.

Denniz Johnston

(A review of Mick Young, I Want to Work, Cassell, Australia, 1979.)

This is a good, readable book. Having been stuck on the dole for a while now, I found its sensitivity to the problems of being unemployed surprising. It is a clear and direct book which unequivocally counters the 'dole bludger' myth, and other similar arguments which are used to attack unemployed people, with comprehensive (but not longwinded) criticism, argument and facts. The section entitled 'Understanding the Figures' is a clear and straightforward discussion which demystifies a lot of the statistics which have been used to confuse the unemployment issue.

The analysis of the causes of unemployment and the proposals for overcoming unemployment, however, are not strong.

The main problem is contained in the submerged contradiction that exists between the reasons for the major budgetary cutback initiated by Labor in 1975, when even the Regional Employment Development scheme (the RED scheme) was cut, and the positive proposals advocated by Mick Young for '...job creation on a scale not previously contemplated,...' (p. 99). If ever there was a need for job creation, and not cutbacks, it was in 1975 when unemployment had shot up by almost 100% on the year before! (Figure from Appendix 4 of the book.)

Mick Young claims that 'A Labor government can't share the delight of the conservatives [in high unemployment] or the indifference of those who have the luxury of waiting for Utopia' (p. 83). In the light of Labor's cutbacks on 1975 in the face of dramatically rising unemployment, Mick Young's main proposal for large-scale job creation through government action, becomes just as irrelevant and impractical ('pie in the sky dreaming') as any 'Utopian' proposals he may have had in mind. Labor was unable to deal with the serious unemployment it experienced whilst in office, and no amount of affirmative assertion and repetition by Mick Young of those expansionary proposals which were rejected by Labor when in office, will change that. In the context in which they are advanced, i.e. in the context of an inflation-ridden capitalist recession, they have proved impractical and irrelevant even to the A.L.P.'s needs in office.

Mick Young does not go into the reasons for the cutbacks in 1975, he simply asserts, 'In any case, 1975 was a year when we had to cut back in the budget, so RED was scaled down' (p. 104).

While criticising Fraser's singleminded concentration on 'fighting inflation first', his alternatives fail to address the problems of inflation and capital accumulation. He often writes as if unemployment exists independently of the capitalist economy. He analyses the fundamental causes of our present unemployment situation as follows: 'Despite all the factors — collapse of a boom, wage overhang, technology, structural problems — the Prime Minister's fanatical belief that the only legitimate role for governments is to beat inflation first, at whatever social and human cost, is the real cause'. In the context of the current recession (and with the latest OECD forecasts for G.D.P. to 'grow' at slightly more than 0%, and

inflation to be over 10% in 1980), this is an amazing diagnosis. Unemployment, and especially youth unemployment, is exceptionally high throughout the Western capitalist world, not just in Australia. To focus on Fraser's fanaticism as being a fundamental cause is to ignore the *international* generality and depth of the current world economic recession. It also confuses the *political* role of the Fraser government with the *economic* conditions of crisis and recession that 'gave rise' to the Fraser government in the first place.

A more plausible explanation of unemployment would focus on the causes of the capitalist recession itself, and on the reasons capitalists have for introducing labour-displacing technology as a part of the process of temporary recovery from the recession; and, finally, on the political role of the Fraser government in helping capitalism to survive the recession. I would argue that high unemployment is a symptom of the inability of capitalism and the profit motive to meet many people's basic needs, and a 'solution' to unemployment would involve the transformation of capitalism into a system of social ownership with democratic planning of the economy. This view is not new, but it challenges Mick Young's basic assumptions that full employment can be maintained under capitalism, and that this can be done solely through parliamentary means.

As far as practically relevant proposals are concerned, this view directs attention towards building support for social ownership and democratic planning of the economy. Democratic planning would encompass Mick Young's proposals for training, retraining, and labour power planning, etc. These objectives can be pursued through such practical activities as developing rank-and-file workers' understanding of the causes of unemployment through practical struggles and intervention in their industries, fighting layoffs and technological redundancies, etc. The task of building rank-and-file understanding can also be pursued through the development of a democratic, mass circulation workers' press, as well as developing greater democracy in the A.L.P.

Many people have been pursuing these activities for a long time. The insensitivity, and sometimes outright opposition to these initiatives by those holding high positions in the labour movement has been a major factor holding back their development.



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