



Protesters celebrate Szafter Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation after countrywide protests as part of the Cockroach Janta Party's protest movement in Mumbai, India, on Sunday. RAFIQ MAQBOOL/AP

Few jobs. Rising costs. Are you surprised youth are rebelling?

Global student-led movements share a cause: the growing precarity of young university graduates

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OPINION

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Last weekend, student protesters in India did the hitherto unthinkable. They pierced the supposedly impregnable armour of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and forced him to sack his Education Minister. Although the “Cockroach” movement targeted a local cause, namely an exam scandal that had set back the lives of millions of students, it followed the plot of a wave of recent protests around the world.

Student-led demonstrations have now risen in such widespread places as Peru, Indonesia, Serbia and Madagascar. They’ve toppled governments in Nepal and Bangladesh and brought fierce fighting onto the streets of Kenya and Tanzania. And they’ve found echoes in the “lie-flat” movement of young Chinese exiting the formal economy and the rise in Western democracies of anti-establishment politicians on both the left and the right.

These various rebellions seem to flow from a common stream. While highly localized in the issues they target, they are thoroughly globalized in their use of social media to organize organically, recycling the same memes and iconography, such as the Straw Hat pirates flag from the *One Piece* Japanese manga series.

They eschew formal political structures and ideologies and shape-shift from left to right, aligning with whoever currently opposes the establishment. The fact so many of the Indian protesters had started out as Modi voters is mirrored in the many young Americans who rallied behind Donald Trump in 2024 but have since abandoned him to turn to socialists like Zohran Mamdani.

Above all, the protests target corruption and abuses by established politicians, and concern themselves with the challenges of daily life, from finding jobs to the cost of living. That shared motivation would seem to reveal their common cause: the growing precarity of young university graduates in much of the world.

These aren’t working-class rebellions but revolts by highly educated people who feel the promises they were made – that if they studied hard, they’d rise the social ladder – are not being met.

TikTok and YouTube are filled with vlogs by young people in different countries recording chronicles of life as unemployed, broke professionals. A recurring theme in all of them is that university graduates are struggling to find work in their fields or are entering the work force on temporary contracts with little security or upward mobility. As is the case in Canada and the U.S., youth unemployment rates in many countries have risen above those for the overall population – in India it has reached nearly 30 per cent.

While university graduates generally still have better job prospects than young people without degrees, their futures are less assured than was the case in the era when degrees were scarce commodities. It’s become harder to find work, and the benefits available to new employees have often been curtailed.

That the phenomenon of graduate marginalization is so widespread owes to the intersection of two long-term global trends. Since the Second World War, there’s been a huge, worldwide expansion of higher education. Over the last two decades alone, total university enrolment on the planet has doubled as families everywhere chase the dream of upward mobility.

Unfortunately, there’s also been a widespread decline in upward mobility owing to changes in the job market. Since the 1980s, and especially since the liberalization of the Chinese and Indian economies in the 1990s, globalization has forced businesses to compete with companies internationally to keep or expand their market share. That entailed keeping labour costs low by reducing wages, employment and job security, such that employers could shed

workers quickly during down times. Those businesses that could cut their wage bill were then able to capture more market share and make more profits.

The result is that globally, the labour share of GDP has fallen while the profit share has risen, a trend that has taken hold in most countries (Canada included). In few places has the decline been sharper than in India, though, where the share of GDP devoted to wages fell from 75 per cent of GDP in the 1970s to just more than half today.

Couple a growing population of graduates with high hopes and heavy debts to a job market that offers them fewer opportunities and the sense that a social contract has been broken takes hold.

Yet while you might think such conditions would make a country ripe for revolution, few of these protests seek to burn down the system. In fact, recent research has found that non-violent political campaigns are more likely to succeed if youth are involved. Canada’s youth are no different: While people under 30 want major change, polling reveals that they still would prefer it to happen within the system.

The global Gen Z revolt thus offers governments everywhere an opportunity to engage with disaffected youth. But if they neglect to do so, burning down the system could become the next option.



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