**Challenges for young workers**

Let us think about the realities facing our younger generation. We’ve recently seen a big leap in the number of young people out of work for six months or more. And those who are lucky enough to find work are often working far below their skill level – often in minimum wage jobs.

With graduates chasing non-graduate jobs in their hundreds of thousands, the labour market situation really is profoundly difficult. One of the most worrying trends we’ve seen over the past five years or so has been the explosion in the number of unpaid internships. While internships can be a good thing – offering young people a positive experience and a route into a career – all too often the reality is very different: exploitation, staff being undercut, employers benefitting from a huge pool of very cheap, very willing labour.

We believe these kind of internships are entrenching inequality, not many young people, especially those from working-class backgrounds, can afford to work for free.

Only the privileged few can afford to work for nothing or a pittance – meaning far too many internships are little more than work experience for the wealthy. A finishing school for the upper middle class with exclusive access to key contacts, networks and opportunities in the top professions. Self-evidently, that’s bad for social mobility.

At the time when young people are unable to find suitable work, many of them are also effectively being priced out of the education system. The abolition of EMA and university top-up fees rocketing under the coalition has seriously undermined participation in both further and higher education. Given the growth of unpaid internships, many people from this generation face an unfortunate double whammy. Paying for education, then working for free!

We’re stepping up our campaigning and lobbying work on the issues that matter most too young people.

First, making the case for proper schemes to help young people find work. The Future Jobs Fund – a scheme scrapped by the coalition – was far more effective in getting people back to work, and we want ministers to reinstate it, or something similar, as a matter of urgency.

We’re making the case for a living wage. We need to move from a minimum wage, with all of its unfair age differentials, to a living wage. We want central government to take the lead and hard-wire the living wage into the public procurement process so we really begin to change things in the private sector too.

We’re making the case for high-quality apprenticeships. We want apprenticeships to be at the heart of a world-class vocational education system in the UK. Giving young people a pathway not just to a decent job, but to a good career.

As a movement, we need to redouble our efforts to reach out to the millions of young workers who need the protection that only a union card can give.

A quick run around of what I understand are the issues facing our young workers today and what we need to do to reach out to the next generation of trade union members.

**Beth Farhat**

**Northern TUC Regional Secretary**