**Introduction**

NIPSA Youth are a group of young activists within NIPSA aged between 16-35 who campaign on youth issues. In 2014 NIPSA Youth launched its charter - the basis of all youth strategies and actions. It outlined a series of campaign aims for young people, in the Union, in the workplace and in the global community. In the workplace the Charter demanded that: young people are paid a living wage and treated with respect; are offered genuine and sustainable employment/proper training and are offered real apprenticeships in all sectors. NIPSA Youth are opposed to the use of zero-hour contracts.

Following on from this emphasis and in response to motions passed at the 2014 NIPSA General Conference we decided to examine the economic outlook for young people and challenge how they are currently being treated within the labour market. On Youth Unemployment in particular the reason this issue matters is that in Northern Ireland from November 2014 to January 2015, 19.5% of 18-25 year olds were unemployed. This contrasts with the figure of 14% in the UK. From October to December 2014, 17.1% of 16-24 year olds in Northern Ireland were not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). Again this is higher than the UK figure of 13% for the same period.

The following booklet therefore provides a brief overview of: the scale of the problem; a critique of existing provision; our alternatives and the way forward in terms of campaigning.
Links with Youth Unemployment and Mental Illness

Since 2010, the UK has seen a 57% increase in youth unemployment while, in Northern Ireland, unemployment is at its highest level in 15 years, with a record high among 18 to 24-year-olds. Equally shocking are the facts that:

- Around 1,000,000 young people in the UK are without any work, education or training.³

- The Office of National Statistics report that 115,000 18-24 year olds have been unemployed for longer than 2 years.⁴

NIPSA Youth is concerned about the detrimental effect on society in general and today’s youth in particular of this social neglect. For example, in many cases, young people are becoming increasingly detached from society and, in particular, can suffer from mental ill health, relationship problems and can struggle to obtain qualifications.

In addition, NIPSA Youth believes that the youth unemployment figures are underestimated especially in areas where there is a significant student population. In this way, with students not eligible for Jobseeker’s Allowance, the overall proportion of unemployed young people can appear to be lower. In Northern Ireland:

- more than one in five young people are deemed to be “NEET” — not in education, employment or training.

- More than one in 30 school-leavers has no formal qualifications.

- More than half of graduates are forced to compromise their chosen career path just to find employment.

A recent Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI)⁵ study showed that youth unemployment costs the Northern Ireland economy around
£300 million a year. Studies by the Prince’s Trust on mental ill health in Northern Ireland show that, if you compare young people between 16 and 25 who are in employment with those who are long-term unemployed, the latter group is:

- Over 50% more likely to have been prescribed antidepressants.
- Over 50% more likely to believe that they have nothing to live for.6

**Current youth schemes**

In Northern Ireland the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) is responsible for preparing people for work and in the last number of years, DEL has introduced a number of initiatives aimed at helping unemployed people. These included the Collaboration and Innovation Fund, which was aimed at exploring new approaches to tackling barriers to employability. There was also the Local Employment Intermediary Service, which focuses on helping those who are not in employment, education or training through additional funding.

Another initiative is the Youth Employment Scheme (YES). The intention was to offer work placements to help 18 to 24-year-olds gain the skills and experience needed to improve their prospects in competing for jobs on a more equal basis with more experienced workers. DEL launched the Youth Employment Scheme in September 2012 to combat the upward trend in youth unemployment. This scheme will end due to a cut in funding for such time-bound schemes and without a viable alternative funded scheme in place.

**Failings within current youth schemes**

NIPSA Youth believe that the YES scheme’s introduction was hasty and appeared to be a response to political pressure (the DEL Minister had faced several Assembly questions on youth unemployment for
example). In this way, the Minister announced the launch of the scheme on 2 July 2012 and it commenced in September 2012 with fundamental details of the scheme not formalised and the programme guidance nowhere near completion. Despite NIPSA’s objections the scheme was launched without consultation. This resulted both in staff being highly stressed over a lack of delivery training and the young people on the pilot programme also highlighting areas of difficulty. For example, some young people reported experiences with employers who stated clearly they had no intention of retaining any staff. This suggests some employers use the scheme to gain temporary staff and financial subsidies. Other young people reported feeling forced to take a place on the scheme even though it was deemed to be voluntary. In our view the real purpose of the scheme is to massage youth unemployment statistics. In addition the model used facilitates public money being used to generate corporate profit for the work programme providers. This represents both an ethical failure and a strategic one in that real job opportunities are not being created.

DEL intends to launch new programmes, including a “Youth Training System”. It is claimed that the proposed system will ensure a seamless progression to further education, training or employment for those leaving school at 16. This is to be done through an employed or non-employed route, and, in order to participate in the scheme, a curriculum of learning equivalent to five GCSEs will be required.

There are ongoing issues with the current Steps 2 Success programme. These are the same issues that existed with the launch of YES – issues that management had promised would not recur. Again despite guidance not being finalised and staff receiving no training, staff were put under pressure to start people on the programme.

This is all against the backdrop of what has been happening in Britain. The Tory-led Government’s Help to Work scheme sends the unemployed
to do 760 hours of unpaid labour over six months. It is worth noting that the maximum allowable community sentence for convicted criminals is 300 hours of unpaid labour over 12 months (the average being 110). It appears the Government view is that punishment for being unemployed should be greater than that handed down for illegal activity.

NIPSA Youth notes that one of the problems with such programmes is that they create a further difference between the haves and the have-nots. They also contribute to the outsourcing of public jobs and do not offer real opportunities to young people. It means the Government continuing to ignore research on viable alternatives such as youth guarantee schemes, supporting a living wage or decent training opportunities. All this is at a time when, as discussed above, in terms of corporate welfare, the Government continues to waste public money.

NIPSA Youth fully endorses the principles that should underscore a just society outlined in NIPSA’s “An Economy we own, a Society we shape” policy document. While this document looks at the necessary public service “spine” of society to protect people of all ages and discusses the need for fully inclusive lifelong learning, given our remit, we wish to emphasise how the attacks on the public service are severely detrimental to the health of and employment opportunities for young people. We believe that the public service should be enriched through areas that tackle the issues affecting young people in Northern Ireland.

NIPSA Youth call on the Government to:

- Increase the recognised skills of young people through engagement with voluntary initiatives, which would result in accredited qualifications, thereby creating more paid opportunities for them.
- Particularly focus on supporting and enabling young women to enter occupations in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) where they are currently under-represented.
Economic Plan to Create Jobs

On 18th March 2015, the Office for National Statistics released the claimant count figures for Northern Ireland. At the time it stood at 46,200, with the youth unemployment rate at 19.5%. This is unacceptable.

On the same day, UK Chancellor George Osborne delivered his last budget of the parliamentary term. The budget speech was full of all the usual Tory rhetoric and carefully constructed sound bites but it certainly did nothing for our struggling young people, those who, unlike the political class who set the Budgets, have to exist on a National Minimum Wage (from October 2015) of £6.70; £5.30 for 18 - 20 year-olds; and a shockingly low £3.87 for 16 to 17-year-olds. NIPSA Youth therefore call on the Government to increase the minimum wage to more accurately reflect the cost of living.

Our own local political “leaders” are offering nothing better. Their answer to the current 46,200 unemployed people is to advocate making another 20-30,000 public-sector workers redundant, with the knock-on effect of a further 6,000 private-sector jobs likely to be lost. Added to this are the thousands of jobs to go in the community sector due to budget cuts – all this on top of the jobs already lost from the last five years of austerity policies that included recruitment freezes. This is all in the vain hope that giving multinational corporations a tax break will somehow magically create the 72,200-plus jobs that are needed.

NIPSA Youth believe this is completely the wrong approach. We believe in our young people and reject the disastrous, self-defeating austerity policies of the Tory/Stormont Governments. We propose a new economic plan to create jobs, invest in our future and give people back the dignity of full-time, secure and well-paid work. This is the least a state can do for its people, and requires full investment in public services and public servants. In addition the focus should be on four key sectors: Construction, Energy, ICT and Manufacturing.
**Construction:** This has been among the worst hit sectors from the latest (2007/8 onwards) collapse of capitalism. Numerous skilled professions - bricklayers, plumbers, electricians, architects, surveyors etc. were depleted by this man-made crisis. Through a mass building programme of social housing, we can put these skilled workers back to work while also creating apprenticeships and solving our national affordable housing shortage.

**Energy:** We all depend heavily on a constant and plentiful supply of energy in our day-to-day lives. Whether it is petrol or diesel for the car or home heating fuel, we must have it. But, at what cost? We are at the mercy of the world markets, with prices fluctuating on a daily basis, often driven by financial speculators or geopolitical events in far-off shores making prices at the pump unaffordable. This is not counting the cost to the environment of burning the last of our fossil fuels and creating an ecological disaster.

Developing and marketing renewable green energy is our only alternative. Great strides have been made towards developing new technologies and new methods of working to bring renewables to market for mass consumption. We simply must be part of this. Other countries such as Denmark have already captured the world market in developing market-leading wind turbines, while our shipyards lie empty.

**ICT:** Barely a week goes by without a representative from the business sector being on our airwaves talking about a shortage of skills in this sector. Quite simply, the sector is now so big and changing at such a rapid pace that we have not been able to keep up with demand. This rapid pace is certainly not going to change. Major funding of ICT further and higher education qualifications is required therefore to match skills with jobs.
**Manufacturing**: This industry was abandoned by the Thatcher and successor Governments in the 1980/90s. Manufacturing should be the bedrock of an economy. In other words to earn ourselves a collective living, we need to “make stuff”. The alternative is the belief that the bubbles based around “money always making money” will not burst. Have we learnt nothing from the crash of 2008? It’s not complicated; it’s simply a case of using all our talents to make things society needs and that people want to buy. Think of all the people such an approach would employ along the way. High-end manufacturing can really flourish if there is the necessary and strategic investment in skills and finance. Certain high-value products have found their niche in UK manufacturing and are being successfully exported to China and across the globe. We need to see much more of this type of innovation and less public money being thrown at building a mini-City of London on the Lagan in the form of the Titanic quarter.

In these four key sectors, we should use public borrowing facilities constructively - to invest; not to make redundancy payments. While £700,000,000 has been set aside for public-sector job cuts, we should invest in our future with these funds. We can also look at making this money go further by teaming up with education providers and socially responsible employers to match funding, which would create even more opportunities for our young people. We can also look at allowing public-sector organisations such as the Housing Executive to borrow in order to build rather than the current proposal to further privatise our housing stock and its administration. We should explore all options. This could also include setting up worker co-operatives with state assistance. Through these and other measures, we believe we can grow our collective wealth and opportunities. This is in stark contrast to the current neo-liberal approach of slash and burn. Our goal is not to cut 20-30,000 plus jobs but to create 20,000-plus jobs, thereby working to
build a more equal society – of full employment and greater fulfilment for citizens.

**Youth Guarantee Scheme**

Another necessary measure is a Youth Guarantee Scheme. Northern Ireland must tackle youth unemployment by providing a guarantee that every young person is offered a job, further education or work-focused training as soon as they leave education or become unemployed. NIPSA Youth calls on the Government to create new and decent jobs and to provide vocational and professional training with access to independent careers advice.

The Government must implement a Youth Guarantee Scheme that guarantees paid employment at the end of training. This should include free participation, with young people receiving a living wage for time in employment. There should also be education or on-the-job training that is appropriate to the skills of each young person. Young people must not be forced off benefits if they do not accept a job offer or training place.

A precondition for making a Youth Guarantee Scheme work is the creation of decent private and public-sector jobs. The Government should support companies to create new jobs by providing direct financial support to those employing young people. This could be done through tax exemptions or paying part of the young person’s wages. NIPSA Youth believes that companies should be obliged to employ more young people and to provide apprenticeship training positions with a requirement on the company to employ the trainee at the end of the training.

Northern Ireland should support its young people getting into the labour market through available training prior to commencing employment and accessible training whilst in employment.
NIPSA Youth demands that all training and work placements are waged with a guarantee of employment. We value our young people, and this should be demonstrated in the workplace. Through proper training, support and opportunities, we can successfully tackle our growing youth unemployment problem. We can only meaningfully invest in our future if we invest properly in our young people.

The approach must be based on the premise of shared responsibility of the stakeholders - a “tripartite” agreement involving trade unions, employers and the state. Trade unions must therefore be involved as a key strategic partner in the development, delivery and monitoring of the youth training system.

**Apprenticeships**

NIPSA Youth embraces high quality apprenticeships as a way to train young people for the workplace. We believe that not everyone needs to go into further education to secure a decent skilled job however apprenticeships should be designed to enable individuals to progress into higher education or technical training as well as developing a highly skilled workforce.

Apprenticeships must provide high quality training leading to qualifications that are valued by both young people and employers. Young people must be provided with opportunities to develop skills and gain relevant experience. Apprenticeships should be available to all age groups. Anyone who wishes to return to education through an apprenticeship or those who wish to change their career should be encouraged to do so. Apprenticeships should involve a breadth of training beyond that required for a specific job.

An apprenticeship strategy in Northern Ireland must have the full support of all Government Departments and include the Trade Unions as a key strategic partner. A new system of Apprenticeships must be linked
to an industrial strategy for Northern Ireland focusing on productive employment, manufacturing and export. Northern Ireland must move to legislating on Apprenticeships in order to ensure that all parties are clear about their respective roles and responsibilities.

Everyone benefits from high quality apprenticeships with employers enjoying monetary and non-monetary benefits, apprentices gaining substantial employment and the Government delivering more efficient skills training that matches the needs of the economy and addresses the issue of youth unemployment.

**Social Clauses**

The scale and importance of public contracts, that any national, regional or local government awards are significant. In addition it is possible that the award can be accompanied by specific requirements being made of the contractor via social clauses within any awarded contract. NIPSA Youth believe that, as a starting point and best practice, in order to address youth unemployment in Northern Ireland and in securing the opportunity for young people to obtain high-quality skills, the creative use of social clauses in public procurement is essential.

The UK Government has piloted this idea with some success in contracts managed by the Department for Work and Pensions, creating an additional 20,000 apprenticeships. They have also been successfully introduced in many other EU member states.

The inclusion of social clauses in public procurement to encourage policies to promote youth employment founded on employment rights of International Labour Organisation standard is key and ultimately should be enshrined in legislation.
The role of the Trade Unions

The majority of work within the trade union movement is dealt with by the services of lay representatives in particular sectors. This offers us a key role in maintaining/enhancing links to young people and, as the life/work experience of young activists on a range of areas will more closely reflect the concerns of young people, NIPSA Youth can play a key role in this.

For example, one of the most obvious ways for us to address the issue of youth unemployment, in addition to our own Charter and campaigns, is to build links that enable us to work collaboratively with third-party organisations campaigning on the issue; intensify the lobbying of elected representatives and outline a viable economic alternative to the flawed and limited systems currently in place.

However, while we must acknowledge the issues that youth unemployment poses from a societal point of view, we must also look at the issue organisationally. Simply put, if young people aren’t working, they aren’t joining unions. Although some unions are making moves to rectify this issue by offering community and student membership packages, we can never expect the membership rate to be as high as it is in a properly organised workplace with permanent employment.

In addition it is unfortunately the case that in our society today, even when young people enter work, they may not necessarily consider or have the option of joining a trade union. This reflects the restructuring of our society from the Thatcher era and throughout the new Labour years that deliberately waged war on the Unions, a war underwritten by a raft of anti-union legislation. This has created the atomised world of work within which zero-hour contracts flourish and the balance of power has been tilted in favour of the employer.

The ideological and organising challenge this creates is considerable.
One option as a means to increase awareness of what Unions have and can bring to society would be to introduce a “unions in schools” project and roll this out across all schools as part of the careers curriculum. In this way, by instilling in young people the benefits and importance of trade union membership prior to entering work they can become involved in the movement when they want to, not when they need to.

**Conclusion**

This booklet can merely provide a snapshot of an issue as long-standing and multi-faceted as youth unemployment. It is clear the neo-liberal model - and its politics of government by and for the 1% has failed young people as it has failed the rest of society. NIPSA Youth do not accept that it has to be this way. We know that all that we have that is best in our society was fought for and we too accept the challenge and responsibility of taking that struggle forward. We fight to educate, agitate and organise our membership. We fight to win!

**Endnotes**

Young people are a vital part of the local and global community who share common interests and ambitions. Join NIPSA Youth and sign up to our Charter, today!