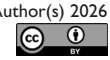
The Sociological Review

Article

Student workers as proto-workers: 'Experience', quitting and the production of consent

The Sociological Review
1–18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Abstract

Work undertaken by students is widespread, but largely overlooked, with this employment dismissed as a precursor to 'real work'. The designation of student work as not real, 'proto-work', is central to the production of consent. Drawing on original analysis of focus group interviews with 83 students undertaking paid work and Burawoy's text, *Manufacturing Consent*, the article identifies two ways in which hegemonic legitimation of and consent to extremely poor-quality work is produced: (1) the role of 'experience' and (2) labour mobility as resistance. The article points to how student workers' discussions of 'experience' echoes government and education policy on employability and demonstrates that the widespread reframing of work as experience facilitates employers' ability to exploit these workers and treat them disposably – paying them less than 'real workers' and entrenching poor working conditions. Additionally, this article demonstrates that 'experience' primarily serves to signal student workers' work-discipline and exploitability. The article finds that student worker resistance primarily takes the form of quitting, or 'labour mobility power'. Contrary to existing conceptualisations and drawing on Burawoy's analysis of 'the game', the article shows that quitting reproduces the hegemonic framing of these workers as disposable, retrenching the overarching rules of the game which position workers as a hyper-exploitable proto-workforce.

Keywords

Burawoy, consent, gender, proto-work, quitting, student work, students, youth

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Introduction

The 'dull economic compulsion' (Marx, 1867) to sell one's labour-power in order to socially reproduce oneself is fundamental to theorisations of why workers work under capitalism. Yet, for many in education who engage in paid work alongside their studies social reproduction is already guaranteed – to differing degrees – by parents or carers (and supplemented by loans for those in higher education). The degree of compulsion experienced by students is therefore typically less than other workers. Student employment is typically marked by extremely low wages and poor conditions (Hodder & Kretsos, 2015). Nonetheless, most students engage in paid work before completing their education (Hobbs et al., 2007; Hordósy et al., 2018). As such, existing concepts are inadequate for understanding why students consent to work. In order to understand this question, we propose a distinctive framework, building on Burawoy, subsequent labour process theory (Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024) and scholarship on youth labour (Besen-Cassino, 2008; Farrugia et al., 2025; Lucas & Lammont, 1998).

We argue that consent in student work is achieved by reproducing the hegemonic framing of this work as a precursor to 'real work', a framing which we conceptualise as 'proto-work'. We note Marx's (1867) distinction between labour and work and argue that the discursive framing of 'proto-work' is an attempt to exceptionalise what is quite simply commodified labour. The dominant proto-work framing obscures this underlying truth in two ways. First, through the language of 'experience' and second by the extensive use of labour mobility – namely 'quitting' – as a mode of resistance. The term 'experience' is, however, vague, lacking a clear endpoint, or moment when enough experience is gained. As an empty signifier, 'experience' therefore signals student workers' availability as abstract labour-power, rather than the possession of specific skills employed in concrete labour (Marx, 1867). Work experiences accrued by student workers primarily signify to future employers their exploitability, rather than proficiency in specific activities. Despite this emphasis by student workers on 'experience', student workers are acutely aware of their exploitation. Yet when they exercise resistance against poor conditions this primarily takes the form of 'quitting' or 'labour mobility power' (Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024; Smith, 2017). Contra to existing theorisations which see labour mobility power as an effective source of contestation for workers, we argue that the ubiquity of quitting contributes to the hegemonic framing of these workers as disposable, thereby reproducing the overarching rules of 'the game' which retrench young student workers as hyper-exploitable 'proto-workers'.

In what follows, we ask: How is student consent to poor-quality, low-paid work produced? We modify and expand Burawoy's (1979) contribution in *Manufacturing Consent*, beginning by critically considering 'the game', as well as subsequent academic work which expanded on this contribution. We then outline insights from studies of youth labour, arguing that the 'studentness' of young workers – and how this shapes the labour process – has been insufficiently examined. We then turn to our original data to, first, flesh out the conditions of student work and, second, identify two ways in which consent is achieved. The conclusion outlines our key findings and wider contributions, arguing that working lives should be understood and theorised as beginning from the earliest engagement with paid labour.

The production of consent, young workers and student workers

Classic sociological theory has tended to focus on education and training as the sites through which young people are socialised into consenting to positions within employment hierarchies (Skeggs, 1988; Willis, 1977). Similarly, political economy of youth approaches have understood 'the manufacture of consent with respect to the social relations of capitalism' as accomplished primarily through the educational system, with complicity by other institutions such as the media (Côte, 2013). In contrast, Burawoy (1979) in *Manufacturing Consent* (p. 135) asserted that consent 'is generated at the point of production rather than imported into the workplace from outside'. Although he later nuanced this claim, recognising broader sites of socialisation and how political and economic regimes shape production (Burawoy, 1985), the workplace remained primary in his theorisation.

Burawoy argued that industrial sociologists – who had long studied why workers were not working harder – had addressed the wrong question. He believed the primary question should be: why do workers consent to work as hard as they do under conditions of systemic exploitation? Drawing on Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony, Burawoy argued that under monopoly capitalism the production of consent occurred in the workplace, with 'games' central to this. The point of 'the game' – which in Burawoy's (1979) factory involved the restriction of output – is that it creates scope for worker resistance, but this is channelled through mutually understood parameters, with management 'actively participat[ing] not only in the organisation of the game, but in the enforcement of its rules' (p. 80). For Burawoy (1979), the most critical aspect of the game is that 'the very activity of playing a game *generates consent* with respect to the rules' (p. 81). Specifically, that by actively engaging in a game in which workers seek to effect small quantitative changes to their workload, they simultaneously accede to the overarching structures of exploitation. Put simply: 'workers become complicit in their own subordination' (Salzinger, 2001, p. 451).

Since Burawoy, scholars have continued to explore workers' consent and its limits. Labour Process theorists (LPT) have argued that there is always a double indeterminacy at the workplace: an ongoing struggle to keep workers turning up to work and exerting effort (Thompson & Smith, 2009). LPT focuses both on innovations in the exercise of managerial control and worker resistance (Ackroyd & Thompson, 2022). The latter includes absenteeism, pilferage, sabotage and other forms of effort limitation (Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024; Mulholland, 2004; Richards, 2008) but also 'quitting', or 'labour mobility power' which undermines managers' ability to keep workers turning up (Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024; Smith, 2017). Quitting was historically understood as 'individualistic, opportunistic behaviour taken autonomously by workers' (Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024, p. 1), but has also been seen as 'a form of protest' (Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024, p. 10) and Van der Linden (2008) emphasises fluidity between exiting and struggling to improve conditions. We draw on this conceptualisation of quitting as resistance, but – echoing Burawoy – show that some forms of resistance may serve to reinforce the rules of the game, including the extant conditions of work.

Just as Burawoy attempted to understand the subjective attitudes of workers in relation to the ways in which their consent was produced, youth labour studies has been attentive to young people's subjectivities as workers and the ways in which youth operates to valorise or de-valorise young people's labour. This scholarship has explored the types of work young people engage in, such as hospitality and retail (Besen-Cassino, 2008; Farrugia et al., 2025), identifying how the embodied youthfulness of work in these sectors denotes it as 'unserious', 'unskilled', and temporally different to 'adult' labour. Another focus has been on the conditions in which young people work, namely 'precarity' or 'gig work' (Trappmann et al., 2024), where insecurity is argued to limit worker agency. However, while young people are more likely to have insecure contracts than older workers (Mrozowicki & Trappmann, 2021), not all young people are in insecure forms of work. Moreover, while this scholarship is useful for understanding why young people may accept poorly paid and/or non-standard work, it tends not to distinguish different groups of young workers, including students. Therefore assumptions made about overlaps between 'youth' and 'studentness' are insufficiently interrogated and the particularity of how 'studentness' operates in the labour process not elucidated.

Inattention to the distinctiveness of student status for experiences and attitudes towards work is surprising given that 'working and studying become habitual and normative for most young people' (Lucas & Lamont, 1998, p. 44). For Lucas and Lammont, student work is devalued because of the overlapping nature of earning and leaning, which lends itself to understanding these as 'stop-gap' jobs, rather than 'real (adult) work'. Holdsworth (2017, p. 298) meanwhile includes paid work alongside a range of extra-curricula activities in which students are expected to engage (travel, volunteering and internships) to boost *future* employability. Convincingly, she posits this as the 'fetishising of experience', arguing that 'the point is to have done things, to record them and to accumulate these experiences' (p. 298). In what follows, we build on this work to argue that the dismissal of student work as 'not real', along with the expectation that young people accumulate 'experience' (thereby enhancing future employability) not only produces a ready supply of cheap, disposable labour to employers, but also facilitates the production of consent.

Methodology

This article emerges from a national UKRI-funded, mixed-methods study examining young women's earliest experiences of work, including that undertaken while in education, and how this may prefigure later labour market outcomes (Allen et al., 2025). First, we analysed national survey data from the UK (Zhong et al., 2025), followed by focus groups with 83 young women (aged 14–23) still in education, and one-to-one interviews with 76 young women (aged 23–29) working in feminised occupations following education. This article draws on focus group data with student worker participants.

Burawoy's work (1979; Burawoy et al., 1991) highlights ethnography's ability to explore the mundanities of working life and the labour process. The spatial and temporal features of student work make such an approach challenging, however, since it often occurs in establishments employing few workers (e.g. cafes, shops), and may last a short time span or involve irregular hours. Moreover, our focus is on a group of age-based

workers, spanning sectors rather than co-located in a single workplace. In place of first-hand observations of the labour process we used focus groups and visual elicitation to elicit concrete and detailed accounts of work. Epistemologically, we were guided by feminist methodology which foregrounds the perspectives of young women as experts (Collins, 1997; Harding, 1991). Moreover, focus groups allow participants to co-construct meaning (Wilkinson, 1998), providing a rich understanding of how student workers interpret and make sense of their working lives.

During 2024, 16 focus groups were held across England in schools, colleges and universities with 83 young women. Groups ranged between two and seven participants and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Participants were recruited using posters, social media and via gatekeepers, such as teachers and lecturers. Participants had to: be in full-time education; be currently undertaking or with experience of paid work; identify as a woman; and be aged between 16 and 23. Work was defined broadly, as activity for which young women were paid by a third party and was inclusive of informal or familial forms of income generation. Most participants were either currently working or had worked in retail and hospitality, as well as education and care work. We sought sample diversity with respect to geographic location (including rural, coastal, suburban and urban settings) and ethnicity (using gatekeepers, institutional selection and post-screening selection). In terms of social class, we sought diversity through sampling a range of more and less selective institutions, however we did not sample private educational establishments and will not have captured the most privileged young people. Highest level of parental education is often a useful proxy for social class: just over half the sample had parents who attended university (57%). Similarly, in the UK, eligibility for free school meals (FSM) is used as a class indicator; around a quarter of the sample ($n = 20$) said that they had received FSM. Although our sample was intentionally gendered (focusing on women and inclusive of all women), the sample was ethnically diverse; just over half identified as White/White British (55%) and a third (32%) stated that languages other than English were spoken at home. Ten students considered themselves to be disabled and three grew up in households in which neither parent was in paid employment.

The focus groups followed a semi-structured format with visual elicitation. Topics included: reasons for working; job roles and sectors; pay and working conditions; and their thoughts and feelings about work. We used a novel ‘emoji elicitation’ method as a fast, accessible and creative tool that draws on a familiar digital vernacular to elicit talk about work (Kill et al., forthcoming). We began by asking participants to: ‘Think about the last time you were at work or were earning and pick three emojis that reflect this’ and then explain their selections. The task generated rich data capturing the everydayness of participants’ working lives and their diverse experiences of and feelings about work. The emoji selections were recorded and analysed for general patterns in the types of emoji selected, including quantification of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ emojis. Emojis are, however, fluid in meaning, often ambivalent and open to different interpretation and (re-)signification among different genders, age groups and communities (Herring & Dainas, 2020; Sobande, 2019). As such, our analysis focussed mainly on the qualitative data produced by participants’ narratives of their emoji selections.

Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Collectively, we generated a coding frame inductively based on our knowledge of the data and the project

research questions. The coding frame was tested by systematically comparing coding of two transcripts by two researchers and was subsequently amended to add codes, collapse other codes and clarify code-meanings. Data were coded using Qualitative Data Analysis software by three researchers. Following the initial coding, a group of four researchers collectively (re)immersed ourselves in the data face-to-face, bringing to bear Burawoy's conceptual framework and theoretical insights to shape our coding approach. Pseudonyms for participants and institutions are used throughout.

Findings

Reasons for working and conditions of student work

The role of paid work in the lives of young people in education is important, socially and economically (Zhong et al., 2025). Like engagement in other types of paid activity, participants frequently cited money as a key motivator: 'I just do it to get money' (Esme, Southern coastal town sixth form). Money, of course, has a social meaning (Zelizer, 1994) and the purposes to which money was put varied. For Ava (School) and others, access to consumer goods was a key driver for working: 'I just love money [. . .] [I spend it on] nails, eyelashes.' For others, work provided a general sense of independence and freedom, or relieved parents of financial burdens. Rosy and Lyra (School) argued that it was important not to 'rely on your parents'. Many emphasised that working provided a sense of 'stability' (Taylor, School) and security: 'I just feel better when you have money. I feel like you're just like secure' (Ava).

Some participants cited more acute financial necessity. This was particularly the case for university students in the South-East where living costs, including accommodation, were high. As Azibo (University) stated: 'right now I'm just working to live'. Claire stated that she 'needed money to live off and everything [. . .] I'm on the max loan, [it all] goes on accommodation'. This was exacerbated where families' ability to contribute was limited. Maisie (University), who described herself as 'financially supporting herself through the degree', noted that her 'parents are like financially worse off' than she was.

As stated earlier, participants were concentrated in customer-facing roles in retail and hospitality, as well as in care and education. Although these are often labelled as 'low-skilled' (McBride & Martinez Lucio, 2019), many of our participants reported relatively high levels of responsibility, including management of other staff, opening and cashing-up of venues and managing interactions with customers, managers and colleagues. The emotional labour this entailed was intense and many spoke of having to navigate hostile, rude and sometimes abusive customers, including sexual harassment.

Working conditions and concrete labour were commonly characterised by participants as boring, hard, tiring and stressful. Participants frequently described being emotionally and physically exhausted following shifts. Analysing the emojis participants selected to describe their most recent experiences at work, 50 of 83 participants selected at least one emoji typically representative of a 'negative' emotion (anger, sadness or tiredness). Bushra (University) 'picked the tired emoji' to reflect her most recent time at work, 'because I was so exhausted by the end of it'. Similarly, Lyra (School) explained,

'I put the stressed emoji [. . .] and then I put the tired emoji [. . .] and then I put the cold emoji.' Such responses were typical across all age groups, signalling that poor working conditions were commonplace. Indeed, working hours were often long and late, and many reported getting home at 11 pm or midnight before school, college or work in the morning. Many juggled multiple jobs concurrently. Claire (University) said she usually had two jobs at once, 'partially [for] the money, but also like [. . .] just a bit of variety as well'.

Where participants picked emojis that indicated exasperation, overwhelm or anger, it was often related to customers. Ana (North-West Suburban FE College) used 'the angry one, because we had a really angry customer yesterday who swore at me'. Violet (School Sixth Form) had a similar take, 'some of the customers are so rude. . . They forget that I'm an actual person, not just a till op.' Given this level of emotional stress it is not surprising that a number spoke of declining mental health resulting from their experiences at work. Carrie (University) worked in a series of 'terrible' hospitality jobs where she recalls being 'shouted at' by both chefs and customers:

> It completely ruined my mental health. I would literally cry before every shift and I would cry after every shift. It was terrible. We didn't get breaks and we were paid like £6 an hour.

Overall, while some participants spoke about the rewards and pleasures of work – such as socialising with other young people – this was not a key legitimator of poor conditions and they expressed widespread negativity about their own jobs and work in general. At its bleakest, Matilda (University) said she had never 'met someone that's doing a job they enjoy', with Maisie concurring that 'we're all kind of stuck doing jobs we don't really want to do. . . we kind of all hate our jobs'.

Receipt of low pay or not being paid at all was commonplace (Allen et al., 2025). In a few cases workers received the full adult minimum wage, but for the most part they received slightly above minimum wage for their age group and in some cases undertook unpaid work, either informal work for relatives (such as babysitting) or trial shifts. Norah (University), like many others, described being paid less than minimum wage: 'I had an issue. . . where. . . my boss didn't tell me that minimum wage had gone up. . . I got underpaid massively. . . I think it was like £70 odd quid that I was not paid because he didn't tell me.' Lyra (School) reported that she 'went three months without being paid'.

Participants expressed a high level of consciousness about the exploitation and poor conditions they faced at work. They often directly attributed this to their status as young workers. For instance, Ariana stated that 'when you're younger people exploit you more' (Sixth Form) but went on to minimise and normalise this, stating '16-year-olds don't really get paid that well in general'. Despite awareness of exploitation, Laura (University) did not see a way to change this: 'it's really difficult because [in] a lot of jobs you're getting quite exploited, it's difficult to try and get change or. . . say anything about it really, because employers don't really care'. None of our participants reported trade union membership or seemed knowledgeable about trade union activity in their workplaces. This is unsurprising, reflecting historically very low union membership among young workers (Hodder & Kretsos, 2015).

'Experience' as consent

Central to understanding why and how student workers consent to work in such poor conditions is the pervasiveness of legitimating narratives of 'experience'. As explained earlier, young women stated varied motivations for engaging in paid work – not least financial. When asked to discuss why this work was important to them, however, they commonly framed it as offering less tangible benefits that can be summarised as work experience. Resonating with Holdsworth's (2017) observations about the fetishising of experience, work experience and work-based learning are dominantly framed within government policy as the practical means to develop young people's skills and capacities for future employment. Students are imagined in these policy approaches as workers of the future. Educational settings are consequently the levers, encouraging 'work-experience' through closer ties with employers 'driven by an expectation that [this] will enhance young people's labour market prospects' (Jones et al., 2016, p. 835). For example, in 2018, the Department for Education proposed every school facilitate seven encounters with employers between year 7 to year 13 (DfE, 2018, p. 9, cited in Chadderton, 2020).

The state also reproduces this positioning of students as *future* workers through other mechanisms. Most critically, the National Minimum Wage (NMW) legislation mandating lower (or no) minimum rates of pay for younger age brackets is argued by the government to enhance the employment prospects of young people, but does this by devaluing their contributions at work in the present. For instance, from April 2025, the minimum wage for 16- to 17-year-olds (a majority of whom are students due to a compulsory leaving age of 18) is just 61% of an adult wage and that of 18- to 20-year-olds, 82%, while there is no minimum for workers under 16 ('below school leaving age').[1] As England's Low Pay Commission (2015, p. 24) states: 'Youth rates exist to protect youth employment. They enable more young people to acquire essential skills and experience.' Specifically, rates are set lower to encourage firms to employ young people and prevent students leaving education early. Thus, NMW legislation primarily understands students as future, rather than current workers, and prioritises workplace 'experience' over pay.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this framing of students as future workers was reproduced by participants, using the language of experience. Two versions of 'experience' were conflated by participants. First, 'experience' was constituted as a future-orientated resource, with paid work framed as the means of building towards something more meaningful and stable in the future. Yashmita (School) describes her work as a CV-enriching 'experience':

> Best things [about work] would be like getting the experience, putting it on my CV and then like getting good references. And like if I go somewhere else I've already had the experience, so then they'd be more likely to hire me.

Second, 'experience' was narrated as fundamentally about consenting to work-discipline. This was powerfully captured in a discussion between university students Sarah and Thomasina:

Thomasina: Yes, I think you need the experience.
Sarah: Yes, even if it's not in what you want to do, to have never gone and worked and done something where you can't leave until it gets to the end of the day and you can clock out, but that's a weird feeling in itself.

In outlining why it is important to have worked, Sarah emphasises not the accrual of skills or meaningful work connected to future working aspirations and pathways, but simply being able to tolerate and endure work 'even if it's not in what you want to do' and 'where you can't leave until it gets to the end of the day'. Similarly, Elira (Sixth form) said:

> I got the job in the first place to get a bit of experience, because I didn't want to go into uni without having been in that position where you have to be in that environment and have someone basically manage you.

Despite widespread reference to the need for 'experience', very few provided concrete examples of skill acquisition. When prompted, the most common 'skills' cited were time management, independence and self-confidence. For example, Ariana (Sixth Form) discusses the skills she gained through her experiences of paid work, while conceding that the flipside of 'experience' was disproportionate exploitation:

> I would say I think it's good because you learn some important skills. . . You get kind of a bit of independence, control over your finances for the first time, especially if you're young, so that is good. But I think when you're younger people exploit you more.

Rather than signalling the accrual of specific knowledges, competencies and skills, 'experience' is instead the way in which young workers demonstrate that they are compliant and competent in the workplace:

Facilitator: What does that experience skills get you into, other jobs or other courses?
Grace: I think it just shows that you can work in-
Jada: It's like you're competent.
Grace: Yes, that you can work in like whatever environments and what not. (FE College)

Consenting to especially unpleasant work was particularly valuable in signalling tolerance of difficult conditions and therefore workers' exploitability and employability. Violet (School) argued that including Primark (a global fast fashion retailer) on her CV is useful for this reason:

> If someone was looking at my CV – it sounds bad, but everyone that talks to you on tills is like 'I don't know how you do it'. So, if you can do Primark, you can do a lot of them. And I've got more experience because I train people on tills now and stuff, so. . .

Only secondarily does Violet reflect on the actual skills she has developed, including responsibility for training other staff. 'Experience', then, primarily operates as an empty, catch-all term. One reason 'experience' is an especially effective way of ensuring consent is that, unlike the accrual of credentials or skills, experience does not have a fixed or finite endpoint. Many participants from an FE college saw sufficient 'experience' as an always out of reach goal:

Mamadou: I think it's more like because nowadays people are always like 'experience, experience, experience'. [. . .] In order for you to have that job you need, they want you to have the certain experiences to do that job. . .

Chin: It's more like they want you to have experience for you to say it, and [it's] on your CV instead of [you] actually knowing what to do.

Mamadou: Exactly.

Grace: But even with experience, more often they want someone who's been working for 10 years. Come on, behave yourself, be realistic.

Paid work undertaken for experience often became sticky. For example, Emily (University) began her job with the hope of getting 'experience' but then continued, experiencing the same conditions of work, for several years:

> I've only ever had one job, still the job I am at, Specsavers. . . I did it originally to get like experience, but then it kind of stuck and they were like, 'oh you can come in for like one day a week when you are at uni'. So that's what I'm doing now.

Participants conveyed a strong awareness that 'experience' is primarily a signifier; something that they can 'say' on their CVs, but the accumulation of sufficient experience to satisfy employers' demands might be a chimera. As Holdsworth (2017, p. 296) explains, the imperative of experience and employability placed on young people means that they are 'expected to run faster to stand still'.

Experience of work operated as signifier of a willingness to consent to general capitalist work-discipline and specific managerial discipline – something participants saw as essential to future 'employability'. Young women justified this generalised accrual of 'experience' in poor conditions by framing it as 'proto-work', something that occurred before their 'real' jobs and outside the main course of their lives. Echoing Lucas and Lammont's (1998) notion of students' 'stop gap' jobs, university student Bushra explained: 'this is like a starter *before our life.* And it's good to get experience from a young age, because then you can build it up and then do, like get bigger jobs maybe.' As such, 'experience' and 'proto-work' are mutually interdependent. By framing labour as 'experience' students accept working conditions and treatment that would not otherwise be tolerated.

Valuing 'experience' in this way is unsurprising and was reinforced by other institutions. As discussed earlier, these young workers occupy educational settings and family contexts where job readiness and the accrual of 'experience' for employability are defining and institutionalised directives – something which simultaneously reproduces the framing of student employment as 'proto-work'. Several participants spoke of parents

instilling the 'value' of paid work and encouraging them to gain – and keep – jobs even when the work was difficult, customers rude, or conditions poor. Amy (University) explained: 'I used to go home from my job crying every single day for the first two months and my Mum and Dad saying, "let's just stick it out for another week"'.

Quitting: Labour mobility, resistance and consent

In the previous section we argued that young people are both aware of and unhappy about their bad working conditions, but that they reframe this 'bad work' as 'experience' and themselves as 'proto-workers', which creates conditions of consent. That does not mean, however, that they accept these conditions passively. In this section, we show that student workers highlighted various modes of resistance. However, the primary form resistance takes is quitting. We argue that the construction of students' work as 'proto-work', alongside low unionisation rates, makes it especially difficult for student workers to engage in collective action or otherwise assert their rights as 'real' workers. Second, we argue that while quitting has previously been understood as a form of 'labour mobility power', in this context, reliance on quitting as resistance reproduces the 'rules of the game', that is the framing of young students as disposable 'proto-workers'.

A small handful of participants talked about restricting effort as a response to poor conditions at work. India (FE College) stated that as she is paid minimum wage and not respected, she is disinclined to maximise her productivity:

> I think just don't do too much for a job you don't like. I could never do more than I need to for a minimum wage job, never, I'd never do it. [. . .] why should I do all this stuff when you probably don't even respect me and my wages aren't that great?

Other respondents made similar points about restricting effort or finding other ways to 'get by' or even 'get back' at poor employers or customers (Lucas, 1997, pp. 608–609), such as hiding in stock rooms or doing homework while on shift. A far more frequently mentioned form of resistance was, however, quitting. Histories of quitting were commonplace in participants' work histories resulting from problems with managers, harassment, or because their educational timetables were not accommodated:

Carrie: My manager treated us really poorly. . . He had beef with me for some reason and I felt very singled out and I quit because of that in the end. (University)

Willow: My first job was working in my local chip shop. [Until] the end of second year of college, when I quit because they wouldn't let me have time off for my A-levels. (University)

Typically, participants described quitting as 'not a big deal' (Imene, FE College). When asked how she might handle problems at work or seek advice on these, Dina replied: 'I would just quit' (FE College). For Dina and others, quitting was the first and only solution to workplace problems. Their reliance on quitting speaks to the absence of alternative ways of addressing problems, an absence we argue is rooted in the framing of this as

'proto-work' and an 'experience' to which students must adjust themselves to benefit. In the absence of perceived avenues for changing conditions, jobs were framed binarily – either tolerable or 'so bad you had to quit within like three months' (Matilda, University).

Even student workers with a high consciousness about employment rights rarely sought other forms of redress. Elira (Sixth Form) was knowledgeable and discussed at length managerial law-breaking, and employers contravening both age-specific and general employment legislation on pay, working hours and worker treatment. When, however, she was asked what she would suggest someone do to respond to this kind of labour violation, Elira immediately recalled that she has 'just advised [friends] to quit'. She goes on to list other possible responses, including:

> going to a more higher-up person in the business. . . talk to them about it or raise an issue. If you're in a bigger company, contacting them online and then they deal with it, but apart from that, I don't know.

It is notable, however, that these forms of redress were secondary, hypothetical and contrary to her own previous action and advice to friends: to quit. Other participants, when asked what they might do differently if a similar (bad) experience happened again, responded 'just. . . leave faster' (Imene).

If student workers were constantly poised to quit, this can also be understood to stem from their awareness of their disposability. Maisie and Azibo (University) described being 'replaceable' whilst Mya (School) described how easily she could lose her job as a barista. 'If they don't need us, they would just fire us.' Similarly, India (FE College) suggests that 'when it's a big company no one cares about you. Because they can just replace you as quick as they got you.' Jada, in the same focus groups reiterated this: 'literally click of a finger type of thing'.

The ability to simply quit – and be fired – was facilitated by the typically weak contractual terms and conditions of their employment that meant that even relatively long-term jobs were easily shed. Dani (University) held a series of short-term contracts and explained how she navigated unreasonable demands from her manager through 'just leaving' at her contract's end:

> I was like, 'I'm not coming in on Christmas day' and [my manager] was like, 'No it's your contract, you have to come in'. I was like, 'Well I'm not going to be there, so you have a nice day with that'. . . So then when my contract ended for Christmas, I ended up just leaving.

Student workers' consent was therefore typically provisional and undergirded by constant readiness to quit. The result of using 'quitting' rather than other mechanisms of redress, whether union-organised collective action, informal resistance or functioning HR systems, however, is that student work continues to operate in an environment in which problems are unresolved. For instance, Laura (University), now in her twenties, discusses the catering company for which she worked when she was 14 and for whom her younger brother is now planning to work, highlighting the chaos of dealing with drunk customers, injured staff, and a lack of basic training among managers: 'It's terrible because it hasn't really changed at all, like high turnover rates. Especially because if the

[catering] job's in the diary they'll take any young person.' Here the disposability (linked to the ready supply) of 'proto-workers' enables managers to perpetuate unsafe working conditions for school-aged workers.

If the disposability of labour enabled poor conditions to persist, it also meant that some forms of management were harder to implement. India (FE College) talked about an incident where a manager attempted to discipline her, noting flippantly that they 'didn't end up sacking me, so [I] can't be that shit then'. This reveals that, where the termination of employment (by either side) is the natural conclusion of conflict between managers and workers, 'proto-workers' may have little power to change conditions, but managers' own disciplinary control of the labour process is also limited. In labour process theory workers' ability to quit has been conceptualised as 'mobility power' (Smith, 2017) and as complementary to other forms of power workers' enact within the labour process. In our study, the knowledge that they could and did quit gave participants a way to exercise resistance. However, we argue that their willingness to 'just quit' also comprised concrete reinforcement and symbolic support for the hegemonic framing of student work as temporary, unserious and not 'real': 'proto-work'. Such a framing reproduces the poor working conditions that these workers seek to contest *by* quitting. As such, although quitting might appear to contradict the value of work as 'experience', the amorphous nature of experience means that all forms of work (and therefore experience) are substitutable and the core objective is the boundless accumulation of employment 'experiences'. Ultimately quitting therefore is part of a mechanism of dual disposability: students are treated disposably as ('proto')workers and, in turn, they treat their jobs as disposable.

Conclusion

Young people's early interactions with the labour market have been a central policy concern across Europe for decades, largely as a reaction to the 'problem' of youth unemployment since the late 1980s onward. Fears that young people risk becoming 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training) have driven a range of programmes and interventions, framed as preventing early disadvantage and disengagement from the labour market (Holmes et al., 2021). Such interventions proceed from the notion that young people are at risk of 'worklessness' because they lack the skills, values and behaviours necessary to fulfil the obligation of work. Consequently, the state has repeatedly sought to facilitate uninterrupted 'transitions' between education and employment, with young people's early exposure to the workplace constructed as undisputedly positive, providing essential preparation for working life as adults.

As a result, the pay and conditions of student workers have largely been overlooked in society and - to some degree – within academic literature. Educational settings are increasingly tasked with shaping young people into employable subjects for the future, with the implicit assumption that the work they embark on post-studies is their real 'entry point' to the labour market. Contra to this positioning of students as 'workers in waiting', we argue that students are not 'proto-workers'. Rather their working lives should be understood and theorised as beginning from their earliest engagement with paid labour.

By bringing Burawoy's theoretical lens to bear on the experiences and labour processes of student workers, we advance his ideas in several ways. Whereas Burawoy focuses on relatively undifferentiated workers, we reveal the empirical context and distinctive mechanisms for the production of consent for a relatively under-studied part of the labour force: student workers. We demonstrate that student workers experience paid work as hard, tiring and boring and face widespread low pay, as well as harassment and abuse. They also display high levels of awareness about their exploitation and poor working conditions and engage in strategies of resistance.

In answer to the question, 'how is student consent to poor quality, low paid work produced?' we make three key theoretical contributions. First, we demonstrate how consent is produced through interlocking institutions that constitute student work: the state (via national minimum wage legislation and youth employment policies), education (via employability agendas and the valuing of work experience), the family (via encouragement to maintain effort and overcome adversity) and the workplace (via the conditions of student workers). Bringing together Burawoy's identification of key actors in industrial relations (the state; workplaces) with sites of socialisation identified in traditional sociological theory of youth (education; the family), we propose a new conceptual framework for understanding the mechanisms which constitute student work as a distinctive type of labour. As such, much like the ways in which migrant labour is 'fashioned' (Anderson, 2010) as precarious by institutional narratives and regimes, we argue that student workers are constructed as 'proto-workers'.

Second, we propose the novel concept of 'proto-work' for understanding the ways in which student engagement with the labour market is framed by the state and other institutions, as well as by student workers themselves, and show how this operates to secure consent. For students, a 'proto-work' framing via the language of 'experience' legitimates the poor conditions they encounter and their positioning as 'unserious' workers. This concept differs from both 'work for labour' (Standing, 2014) and 'hope labour', which typically involve unremunerated future-oriented work performed in the specific field in which young people seek stable employment. We argue that 'proto-work', while future oriented, involves actual labour, performed for pay – albeit exceptionally poor pay – and non-specific 'experience' (Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021). We argue that student workers desire this 'experience' to signal their exploitability to employers, notwithstanding critical awareness of their current treatment. If experience legitimates poor quality work, we also show that it typically operates as an empty, catch-all term, rather than relating to any concrete learning or skill acquisition. Specifically, 'experience' is the signification that these workers are compliant, willing to be disciplined and can tolerate hard, low-paid and insecure work. We argue that 'experience' is especially effective for securing consent because it is neither fixed nor finite. Student workers are acutely aware that 'there is one condition that is even worse than being an exploited worker, and that is, to be an unexploitable worker' (Bonefeld, 2023, p. 1).

Third, we further update Burawoy's (1979) concept of 'the game' – wherein workers respond to their own exploitation by using tactics of resistance which ultimately reproduce consent to the overarching rules of the game. Whilst we found a few cases of women restricting their effort at work, the dominant tactic of resistance was 'quitting'. We concur with theorisations of labour mobility as resistance (Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024) but believe

that the reliance on quitting limits the repertoire of resistance of these workers. It remains an open question what the consequences of this are for these women's working lives once they are no longer students. We also highlight the ways that, in the case of student workers, quitting is both a product of and reproduces the 'rules of the game': labour disposability, lack of voice within the labour process and workers' exploitability. Specifically, processes of high turnover and quitting, alongside poor contractual arrangements and variable NMW levels, reinforce the hegemonic framing of student work as unserious and temporary 'proto-work'. This framing is at the heart of the reproduction and normalisation of poor student working conditions and insecure working patterns.

The analysis presented is based on focus groups with young women student workers. Our analysis (Zhong et al., 2025) shows that student men are less likely to be working than women but when working work in many of the same environments. They are also subject to the same educational and policy entreaties to gain 'experience' and boost their employability – their similarly low wages rates reflecting a sardonic form of equality. Of course, some of the experiences women student workers report, namely high levels of sexual harassment, are less likely to be experienced by men. Ultimately, however, whether there are gendered differences in how student workers consent to poor conditions is a question for future research.

Our study shows the ways that youth subjectivities as workers are 'formed through the dynamics of labour and value in contemporary capitalism' (Farrugia, 2021, p. 384). What remains less clear, however, is the longer-term impact of the ways that student workers' consent is produced. We have argued that the work undertaken by students is empirically important and a meaningful site for advancing theorisations of workplace consent, not least because student work is typically workers' first experience of work. The question of how students' experiences of – and consent to – poor conditions of work normalise acceptance of exploitation or delimit their repertoires of resistance across the working life course is an important, but open question which requires further interrogation.

Acknowledgements

The first four authors of this article made an equally substantial academic contribution to its production. Earlier versions of the paper were presented at City and St George's University and the University of Melbourne. We are grateful to attendees and Charles Umney for constructive feedback on the paper.

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Funding

This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council: ES/W009870/1.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. National Minimum Wage rates (https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates) are age differentiated up to 21. Until 2023 21- and 22-year-olds were also on reduced minimum wages and before 2021 everyone under 25 was.

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