

Seven Theses on the Gen Z Uprisings in the Global South: The Forty-Third Newsletter (2025)



Guillermo Grebe (Chile), *Muro sagrado de la dignidad* (Sacred Wall of Dignity), 2021.

Dear friends,

Greetings from the desk of **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

The walls of Santiago, Chile – the city where I live – are marked with faded graffiti from the *estallido social* (social uprising) of 2019. Years later, these slogans continue to spill onto the sidewalks, from *Nos quitaron*

tanto que nos quitaron hasta el miedo (they took so much from us that they even took away our fear) to *No son 30 pesos, son 30 años* (it's not 30 pesos; it's 30 years). Both slogans refer to the 30 years of neoliberal austerity imposed on the Chilean people, including a 30-peso hike on the price of metro tickets and deep cuts to the country's social wage system. The uprising was led by high school students born between 2001 (age 18) and 2005 (age 14), who are part of Generation Z or 'Gen Z'. However, this term, forced on the world by mainstream media, often erases the social complexity and national specificity of such uprisings. Nonetheless, this term, and the concept of a 'generation', are worth exploring.

The protests in Chile – which eventually drew in all age groups and delegitimised the right-wing government of Sebastián Piñera – were not singular. Young people born in this era led protests across the world, including mass mobilisations against a gang rape in Delhi, India (2012); the March for Our Lives campaign against gun violence in the United States (2018); and the Fridays for Future campaign against the climate crisis (2018), which was initiated by the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg (born in 2003 and recently tortured by the Israeli government). The Chilean uprising was followed by the national strike in Colombia in 2021, the *Aragalaya* (struggle) in Sri Lanka in 2022, and the upsurge in Nepal earlier this year that resulted in the resignation of the centre-right government. In each of these cases, what began as moral outrage over a singular issue snowballed into a critique of a system that has proven incapable of reproducing life for young people.



Joseph Mbatia Bertiers (Kenya), *A Week before the Elections*, 2007.

The concept of the generation was developed a century ago by the German scholar Karl Mannheim in his essay 'The Sociological Problem of Generations' (1928). For Mannheim, a generation was not defined by the era in which a cohort was born but by their 'social location' (*soziale Lagerung*). In political terms, a generation is produced when it experiences rapid and disruptive changes that make it re-encounter tradition through new 'cultural carriers' (*Kulturträger*) – individuals and institutions that transmit culture – and becomes an active

force for social change, a far cry from the way in which generations became a marketing typology after World War II (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, etc.). Mannheim saw generations as forces for social change, while neoliberal culture turned them into 'segments' in their brand strategies.

The term Gen Z has been used in descriptions of protests taking place from the Andes to South Asia, where young people – frustrated with limited possibilities for social advancement – took to the streets to reject a failing system. Some elements of Mannheim's **theory** are at work here. It is true that imperialist forces often intervene to instigate and shape these protests, but it would be inaccurate to view these protests as merely the product of outside intervention. There are important internal sociological factors that require analysis in order to understand these 'Gen Z protests'. Many of them are driven by a range of overlapping processes that emerge from the national context while being conditioned by the international conjuncture. In this newsletter, we propose seven theses to begin to understand these developments and perhaps channel them in a progressive direction.



Muvindu Binoy (Sri Lanka), *Protest in Colour IV*, 2022.

Thesis one. There is a youth bulge across the Global South, where the median age is 25 years, and people in these young societies find themselves victims of harsh debt-austerity policies, climate catastrophes, and permanent wars. In Africa, the median age is 19 – lower than any other continent. In Niger, the median age is 15.3; in Mali, 15.5; in both Uganda and Angola, 16.5, and in Zambia, 17.5.

Thesis two. Youth in the Global South are frustrated with unemployment. Neoliberalism has weakened state capacity, leaving very few tools to address this issue (leading to demands such as opening up state employment

opportunities, in the case of the Quota Reform **movement** in Bangladesh). Educated youth with middle-class aspirations are unable to find suitable work, leading to structural unemployment or a skills mismatch. There are various colloquialisms for the kinds of precarious jobs on offer: in Algeria, there is a term for the unemployed that borrows from Arabic and French: those who ‘lean against the wall’ to hold it up (*hittiste* from the Arabic *hayt*, meaning wall). In the 1990s, the university system was expanded and **privatised**, meaning that doors were opened – for a fee – to large sections of what would become Gen Z. These are children of the middle and lower-middle classes, but also of the working class and smallholder farmers who were able to climb their way up the social ladder. Gen Z is the most **educated** generation in history, yet it is also the most **indebted** and underemployed. This contradiction between aspiration and precarity produces great resentment.

Thesis three. Young people do not want to have to migrate to have a dignified life. In Nepal, young protestors chanted against the compulsion towards economic migration: *We want jobs in Nepal. We don’t want to have to migrate for work.* This compulsion to migrate elicits shame about one’s own culture and a disconnection from the history of struggles that has shaped one’s society. There are **almost** 168 million migrant workers in the world – if they were a country, they would be the ninth largest in the world, after Bangladesh (169 million) and ahead of Russia (144 million). Among them are Nepali construction workers in the Gulf states and Andean and Moroccan agricultural workers in Spain. They send remittances that sustain household consumption in their countries; in many cases, total remittances (which **amounted** to \$857 billion in 2023) are greater than foreign direct investment (as with Mexico). Social dislocation, the international colour line of labour, and the mistreatment of migrants – including disregard for their educational credentials – make the allure of migration near zero.



Sabita Dangol (Nepal), *Protective Shelter*, 2020.

Thesis four. Large agribusinesses and mining companies have sharpened their assault on smallholder farmers and agricultural workers (the spur for the **farmers' revolt** in India). Youth from these classes, fed up with the rural distress and radicalised by the often-failed protests of their parents, move to the cities and then abroad for jobs. They bring their experience from the countryside to cities and are often the main phalanx of these protest movements.

Thesis five. For Gen Z, the issue of **climate change** and environmental distress is not an abstraction but an impending cause of proletarianisation through displacement and price shocks. People in rural areas see that melting glaciers, droughts, and floods strike precisely where imperialist 'green' supply chains seek resources

like lithium, cobalt, and hydropower. They understand that the climate catastrophe is directly linked to their inability to build a present, let alone a future.

Thesis six. Establishment politics are unable to address Gen Z's frustrations. Constitutions do not reflect reality, and unaccountable judiciaries seem to live on another planet. This generation's main interactions with the state are through tone-deaf bureaucrats and militarised police. Political parties are paralysed by Washington's debt-austerity consensus, and non-governmental organisations narrowly fixate on individual issues rather than the entire system. The old national liberation parties have largely exhausted their agenda or had it destroyed by austerity and debt, leaving a political vacuum in the Global South. To 'get rid of them all' is a politics that ends with a turn to social media influencers (such as Kathmandu's mayor, Balen Shah) who have not participated in party politics but who often use their platforms to preach a gospel of anti-politics and middle-class resentment.

Thesis seven. The rise of informal work has created a disorganised society, with no hope of fellowship among workers or membership in mass organisations like trade unions. The uberisation of working conditions has created an informality of life itself, where the worker is alienated from all forms of connection. The significance of social media rises with the increase in informality as the internet becomes the main medium for the transmission of ideas, supplanting the older modes of political organisation. It is tempting but inaccurate to suggest that social media itself is a driving force behind this wave of protests. Social media is a communication *tool* which has enabled a diffusion of sentiments and tactics, but it is not the *condition* for these sentiments. It is also important to note that the internet is a tool for surplus extraction – platform workers, or gig workers, are disciplined by algorithms that drive them to work harder and harder for less and less pay.



Camilo Egas (Ecuador), *Fiesta indígena* (Indigenous Festival), 1926.

The seven theses above attempt to outline the conditions that have produced the Gen Z uprisings in the Global South. These uprisings have been largely urban, with little indication that they have drawn in the peasantry and rural workers. Moreover, the agendas of these protests rarely address the long-term structural crises in underdeveloped countries. To be blunt, the typical politics of the Gen Z uprisings lead into the abyss of middle-class resentment. These protests are often – as in Bangladesh and Nepal – coopted by entrenched social forces that ventriloquise the voices on the streets and develop an agenda that benefits Western financiers. Nonetheless, these uprisings cannot be discounted: their frequency will only increase due to the factors we have outlined. The challenge for socialist forces is to articulate Gen Z's genuine grievances into a programme that demands a higher share of the social surplus and uses that surplus to enhance net-fixed **investment** and transform social relations.

Warmly,

Vijay