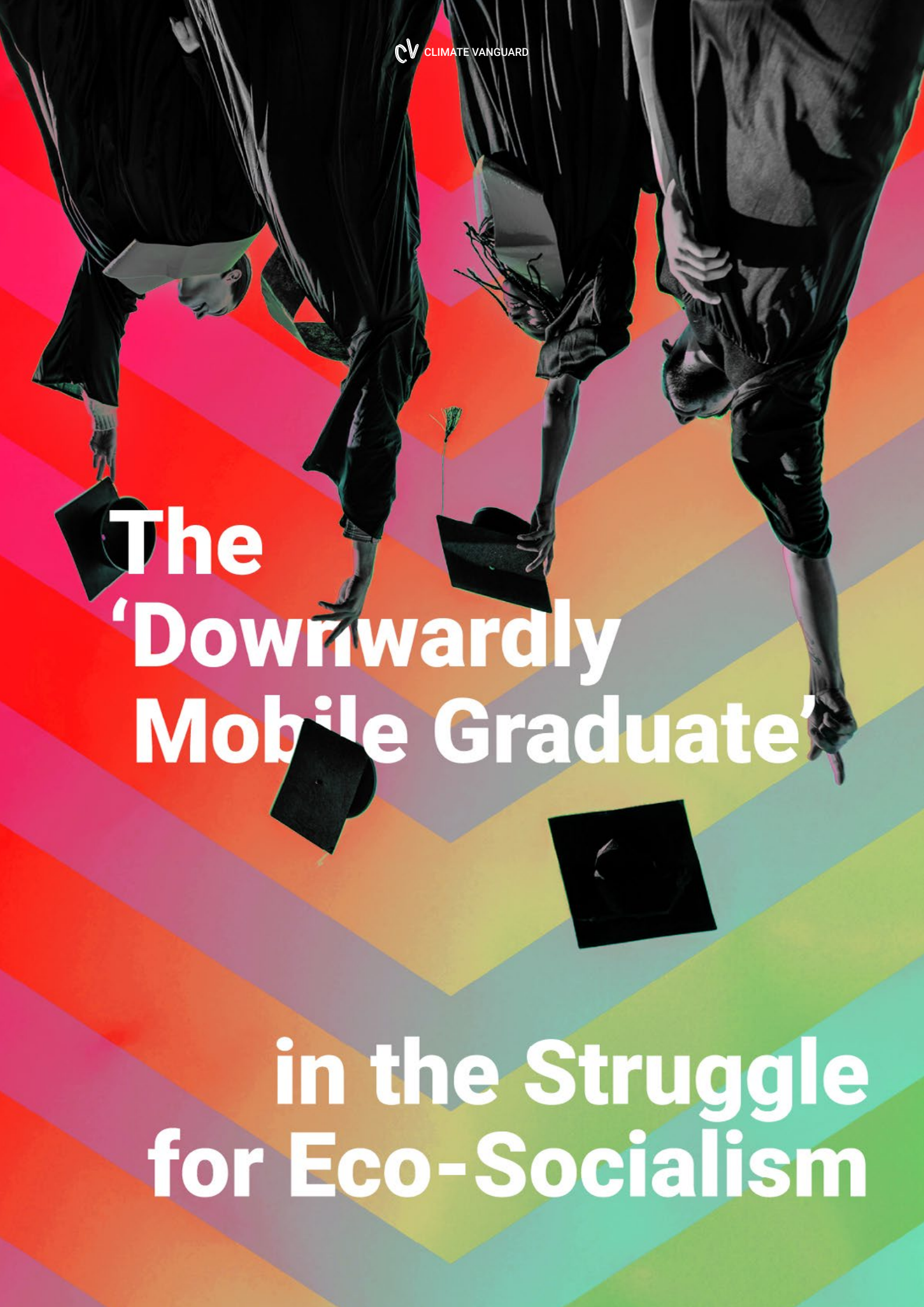


The image features three graduates in black academic regalia (gowns and mortarboards) falling upside down against a vibrant, multi-colored background of diagonal stripes in shades of red, orange, yellow, green, and blue. The graduates are positioned at the top of the frame, with their bodies and mortarboards angled downwards. The mortarboards are in various stages of falling, some still attached to the graduates and others detached and floating in the air. The overall composition is dynamic and visually striking.

# The 'Downwardly Mobile Graduate'

in the Struggle  
for Eco-Socialism

# The 'Downwardly Mobile Graduate' in the Struggle for Eco-Socialism

---

## About Climate Vanguard

Climate Vanguard is a youth-led organisation empowering youth movements through radical political education.

---

## Please cite as

Climate Vanguard (2025). *'The 'Downwardly Mobile Graduate' in the Struggle for Eco-Socialism,' Climate Vanguard: London.*

---

## Acknowledgments

This brief was primarily researched and written by Chris Saltmarsh during his internship at Climate Vanguard in Autumn 2025.

---

## Copyright

© Climate Vanguard, 2025

This publication and its contents may be reproduced as long as the reference source is cited.

# Introduction

Revolutionary organising is the process of steadily building a unified, conscious majority on the side of the working and oppressed classes, while simultaneously dividing the ruling class and those that align with their ideological prescriptions. In order to do this, it is necessary to identify the social groups that can be unified around a project for revolutionary eco-socialist transition, and those that compose the opposition. This is called social bloc analysis.

In this brief, we look at the potential of the ‘downwardly mobile graduate’ (DMG) – the section of society that attended university at significant cost, only to find themselves worse off than their parents – to be a core part of the social bloc for eco-socialist transition in Britain.<sup>a</sup> This analysis is focused on the DMG in Britain, but could be applied to other Global North countries too.

We’ve chosen to focus on this social group for several reasons. First, the educated petit-bourgeoisie has played a prominent role in the history of revolutionary struggle, including Vladimir Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Fidel Castro, Amílcar Cabral, and Che Guevara. Second, graduates today have a heightened consciousness of their own economic conditions, which has materialised in their participation and leadership in recent progressive political struggles.

From this starting point, we investigate whether the DMG could be a key constituency pushing the new left party in Britain in a revolutionary direction.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, we argue that an eco-socialist party is a necessary organisational vehicle for overcoming key weaknesses, inhibiting DMGs from fulfilling their revolutionary potential.

We begin by clarifying who exactly the DMG is as a social constituency and its key characteristics. Next, we identify the main contradictions stunting the revolutionary potential of the DMG, before arguing that the new left party can play an important role in turning the DMG into an agent for eco-socialist transition.

---

<sup>a</sup> A ‘first mover’ is a group of people who initiate the construction of a social bloc for eco-socialist transition.



Figure 1: A student protest in London in 2017 against tuition fees and student debt. Matthew Chattle/Rex/Shutterstock.

## Who is the Downwardly Mobile Graduate?

Let's take a closer look at who exactly makes up the DMG. What are the key events in recent history that have formed this section of society? How do those that belong to it experience life today? Does this produce a particular political consciousness?

Exploring these questions allows us to understand the subjectivity of the DMG – that is, how this group's shared social conditions give rise to particular ways of seeing, thinking, and acting politically.

### A Brief History

Although university graduates now make up a significant portion of British society, this wasn't always the case. University education used to be a minority pursuit dominated by the ruling class. Only 3% of British people attended in the 1950s, increasing to just 15% in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

In 1992, John Major's Conservative government passed the Further and Higher Education Act, which ended the binary divide between vocational polytechnics (where students learned a trade) and universities (which were research-based). As a result, 35 polytechnics were converted into universities (including University of Greenwich and London Metropolitan

University), increasing university participation to 33% by 1997.<sup>3</sup> This meant that a significant proportion of the population was now receiving academic higher education rather than applied professional training.

From 1997 onwards, Tony Blair's New Labour government furthered this process of massifying higher education, aiming for 50% university attendance among 18-30 year olds.<sup>4</sup> The objective of this university push was to drive social mobility and make Britain competitive in the new global economy of knowledge production.<sup>5</sup>

This was meant to deliver widespread prosperity, with graduates promised a fair share of the gains. However, the high-skill knowledge economy never delivered enough jobs to absorb the increased supply of graduate labour.<sup>6</sup> Adding insult to injury, New Labour's reforms shifted the costs of higher education from the state to students themselves.<sup>7</sup> Tuition fees were introduced and government grants became conditioned on loans with a long pay-off period.<sup>8</sup>

## **Material Conditions**

New Labour created the conditions for the emergence of a significant number of DMGs who attended university on the promise of future material prosperity, but now find themselves worse off than their parents.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, graduates tend to be materially better off than non-graduates. They earn more, are less likely to be unemployed, and are more likely to be in higher-status occupations.<sup>10</sup> However, this gap is closing, and precarity is increasing among graduates as a social group. As such, the DMG has a material interest in an alternative, more egalitarian economy.

### **1. Shortage of Graduate Roles**

Although 75% of graduates work in some kind of professional employment, they often find themselves in lower-status work than their parents.<sup>11</sup> Professional and managerial jobs are no longer expanding, but the supply of graduate labour continues to grow.<sup>12</sup>

As of 2024, most graduates studied a vocational course. Business and management (243,295), science subjects allied to medicine (e.g. nursing) (116,515), engineering and technology (65,280), computing (65,860), education and teaching (59,795), and law (54,000), all of which imply a route into a well-regarded career.<sup>13</sup>

And yet, over five million graduates are now working in ‘non-graduate roles,’ i.e. those that do not require the experience of an undergraduate degree (e.g. estate agents, construction, manufacturing, retail).<sup>14</sup> Just 60.4% of graduates living in England aged 21-30 are in “high-skilled” work and 42% of graduates employed outside London now work a job that does not require a degree.<sup>15</sup> University is no longer a guarantee of a successful professional career.

## **2. Declining Graduate Salaries**

In line with declines across the economy, graduate entry-level salaries are now lower than before the 2008 financial crisis, with education and health workers worst affected.<sup>16</sup> The so-called ‘graduate premium,’ which promised university graduates a higher income over the course of their careers, is fast-eroding.<sup>17</sup>

Graduates still earn more than non-graduates, but there is a convergence between average graduate salaries and lowest earners. In 2024, the average graduate salary was £26,500.<sup>18</sup> Graduates now typically earn just 1.6 times more than someone on a minimum wage.<sup>19</sup>

This trajectory is unevenly felt, too. The ‘premium’ for students who achieve lower grades is decreasing. For example, the premium for a lower second-class degree (2:2) – typically an overall grade of 50-60% – has fallen from 14% to 3%.<sup>20</sup> This exemplifies the failures of mass higher education. The highest achievers, who would likely have attended university regardless, remain relatively well off, while those less suited to the system see little to no economic benefit.

### 3. Graduate Insecurity

Stagnant earnings translate into a life of insecurity. The real graduate 'premium' is high debt averaging £45,150, which is paid off over an average of 29.3 years, experienced as an exorbitant marginal rate of tax.<sup>21</sup>

This relates to a general decline in graduates' savings and homeownership. Rates of the latter declined for every age bracket except for over 65s between 2004 and 2020. For example, 35-44 year olds' rate of homeownership is down to 56% from 74%, while 25-34 year olds' is down to 41% from 59%.<sup>22</sup> It is unsurprising that many graduates regret the decision and resent an economic system that is failing them.

#### **Political Consciousness**

DMGs do not represent the most immiserated portion of British society. However, they do appear to have a heightened consciousness around their relative economic decline that can radicalise them.

Graduates' political understanding of their economic conditions is closely tied to the expectations they were given. Most grew up internalising a widespread social promise that a university degree is essential to a better life.<sup>23</sup> This narrative came from authority figures of all types: school, parents, the media, and, in particular, Blair's New Labour government. But for most, prosperity through education has not materialised, leaving the DMG with a strong sense of betrayal and disillusionment over broken promises.

Additionally, attending university is not merely an economic decision but also an important source of personal and social development. When students leave home, they encounter new people from different backgrounds. They embrace new aesthetics, cultural tastes, accents, and fashion changes.

And, perhaps most importantly, they can gain a certain amount of access to critical theory and radical ideas, producing a tendency for progressive

or liberal views among graduates.<sup>24</sup> For example, studies show that graduates tend to hold more liberal values around social rights (e.g. racial justice) and are more likely to oppose Brexit.<sup>25</sup>

Because most university students have yet to acquire assets, pensions, or family responsibilities, they are also relatively insulated from the material pressures that bind others to the status quo. This means that they are much less invested in its preservation.

As such, students sometimes convert prevalent progressivism into an anti-systemic critique that disposes them more explicitly against capitalism.<sup>26</sup> These political frameworks allow graduates to relate their own economic conditions to a broader analysis of social and economic malaise.

## Political Activity

This political consciousness of declining material conditions is significant but means very little if it is not translated into political action. Over recent years, the DMG has played a big part in progressive struggles.



Figure 2: Students protesting against government cuts to education and tuition fees (2010). Save the Student.

For example, a generation of students were politicised around resistance to the 2010 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's reforms to higher education, which trebled university tuition fees to £9,000 a year.<sup>27</sup> Students mobilised with a series of militant mass demonstrations and occupations of university buildings. The movement did not defeat the government, but the uprisings trained thousands of graduates in the practicalities of political struggle. It also popularised ideas opposing marketisation and promoting social liberation.

From the 2010 student protests, DMGs went on to become key activists in Corbyn's Labour Party, translating the politics of anti-austerity on campuses into the electoral sphere. DMGs made significant contributions to what would be the largest mass electoral mobilisations in British history, and also turned out at the ballot box en masse.<sup>b</sup>

The DMG has also powered a new generation of social movement organising. It has been at the core of effective housing and community organising, including London Renters Union, ACORN, and Living Rent; driven much climate movement activity, including fossil fuel divestment campaigning and street mobilisations like Extinction Rebellion; and played an important role in the Palestine solidarity movement's mass mobilisations and direct actions.<sup>28</sup>



Figure 3: ACORN protest. ACORN.



Figure 4: Palestine encampment at Oxford University. Hollie Adams/REUTERS.

<sup>b</sup> Over 40% of graduates supported Corbyn's Labour Party at both the 2017 and 2019 general elections. (Ford, Robert et al., 2023)

# Three Contradictions

Considering this political track record, the DMG demonstrates a strong combination of material interest in eco-socialism, anti-systemic political consciousness, and propensity for radical political activity. But there are also critical contradictions within the DMG that are impeding its revolutionary potential.

## **Contradiction 1: Economic Decline vs. Opportunity**

DMGs' poor economic conditions produce widespread discontent with the status quo. However, the fact that acquiring a well-paid job and owning a home remains a possibility (albeit one that is increasingly unlikely) means the DMG is not fully disinvested from the system.

This suggests that the DMG's opposition to the system could have less to do with fundamental logics of capitalism and more about its relatively disadvantageous position within it. A capitalist political project promising ameliorative policies for graduates, but not structural improvements for all working and oppressed people in Britain and beyond, could buy off sections of the DMG.

## **Contradiction 2: Radical Sympathies vs. Liberal Education**

The DMG may develop anti-systemic intuitions arising from its experience of downward mobility. However, the DMG's mainstream education also leads to a contradictory ideological investment in the status quo.<sup>29</sup>

University education substantially informs graduates' worldviews, but does not convert disaffected young people into socialists. Although they may access critical theory at university, it usually does not coalesce around a concrete politics of revolutionary strategy, instead remaining parcelised and disjointed.

This is unsurprising given the fact that the university acts as the 'research and development arm of neoliberalism', producing and popularising capitalist ideology focused on 'employability' and 'value for money'.<sup>30</sup>

### **Contradiction 3: Urban Density vs. Social Disconnection**

In pursuit of a career, most graduates live in major cities, including 22.5% in London.<sup>31</sup> The disproportionate location of DMGs in urban areas presents both opportunities and challenges for the construction of political agency.<sup>32</sup>

On the one hand, this geographic density provides greater opportunity to disseminate eco-socialist ideas and organise politically, much like the conditions that made industrial factory workers ripe for socialist organising in the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>33</sup> The DMG may not literally work shoulder to shoulder with potential comrades, but living together in cities means they can easily attend meetings, organise actions, and build relationships.

On the other hand, the concentration of DMGs in urban areas distances them geographically, culturally, and politically from non-urban populations.<sup>34</sup> If graduates are to be key organisers in the process of eco-socialist transition, this risks excluding large portions of our potential social base.

## **From Subjectivity to Agency: Party Time**

When conducting social bloc analysis, it is important to distinguish subjectivity from political agency. While the former describes a group's shared experience and outlook, the latter refers to the conversion of that diffuse commonality into a more unified force capable of shaping the future.

Our social bloc analysis has identified a particular DMG subjectivity. However, in a society where capitalist incentives and values are so pervasive, we cannot assume that this subjectivity is fixed or reliably conducive to eco-socialism. The DMG, like any subjectivity, must be *actively* cohered into political agency.<sup>35</sup> This task requires the important work of enduring political education and organisation.

Having identified the key contradictions within the DMG subjectivity, we propose that party organisation can help overcome them. More specifically, it can facilitate an emerging revolutionary agency by supporting members to reinterpret their material conditions through a combination of political education (theory) and action (practice).

## **1. Political education**

Through political education, the party can provide eco-socialist clarity to the DMG's material conditions, pushing back against the false consciousness perpetuated by universities, capitalist media, and the far right.

This would not only pre-empt capitulation to reactionary politics, but it would actively instil collectivist values, enabling the DMG to build solidarities with oppressed social groups.

A historical example of this is the Black Panther Party, which used political education to create a shared revolutionary culture and consciousness among its members. From 1969, all party members



Figure 5: Black Panther Party's Liberation school for children. The Washington Post.

were required to attend political education classes, which were centred on revolutionary theorists like Mao Tse-Tung, Frantz Fanon, and Che Guevara.<sup>36</sup> In the same year the party also organised 'Liberation Schools' for children in response to the failings of mainstream education. The schools taught class struggle through the lens of Black history and cultivated shared revolutionary culture through song and games.<sup>37</sup>

## **2. Action**

Combating the contradiction between urban density and social disconnection, a party can promote organisational discipline in party building. Eco-socialists must develop strategies to work beyond cities and build power across diverse geographies.

The party could provide the institutional framework that supports the DMG to leave behind urban norms and assimilate into rural communities. By reaching into rural areas and other political cultures, they could build the party beyond their urban location and social milieu.<sup>38</sup>

An important example is the Communist Party of China (CPC), which has a long-standing tradition of sending young party cadre into the countryside to receive political education and gain early organising experience. A recent example is the CPC's targeted poverty alleviation efforts, which dispatched over three million party cadre to rural villages for two-year periods of intensive community work.<sup>39</sup>

Applied to party building today, this strategy would enable the movement to overcome the saturation of DMGs in urban political movements, providing the organisational infrastructure to branch out into rural areas.

## Conclusion

Graduates are far from the only social group to endure the social and economic immiseration of living in a declining Britain. However, their downward mobility is experienced particularly acutely in the context of broken social promises and heightened political understanding.

On the whole, the DMG does not have a material interest in maintaining the present state of things. They have a relatively strong political consciousness about the necessity of an alternative system. And they have a track record of struggling for progressive causes.

This does not mean that this subjectivity will definitely translate into an agent struggling for eco-socialism. The contradictions of living in capitalist society are plentiful and strong.

However, a new left party in Britain presents an opportunity. The DMG subjectivity makes it ripe to be active in the process of party building, while the party organisation can help cohere them into a unified political agent, organising in solidarity with other social groups, towards a shared vision of eco-socialist liberation.



# Endnotes

- 1 Schneider, James. (2025) "Building the Party," *Sidecar*. Accessed 12 September 2025.
- 2 (2013) "Participation rates: now we are 50", *Times Higher Education*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- 3 Ratcliffe, Mike. (2017) "The end of the binary divide: reflections on 25 years of the 1992 Act", *WONKHE*. Accessed 1 October 2025.  
  
Lunt, Ingrid. (2008) "Beyond Tuition Fees? The Legacy of Blair's Government to Higher Education", *Oxford Review of Education*, 34(6), 741-752.
- 4 Lunt, Ingrid. (2008) "Beyond Tuition Fees? The Legacy of Blair's Government to Higher Education", *Oxford Review of Education*, 34(6), 741-752.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Griffiths, Sian. (2024) "The numbers that prove graduate salaries are falling", *The Times*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- 7 Callender, Claire. "Access To Higher Education In Britain: The Impact Of Tuition Fees and Financial Assistance" in Teixeira, et al. (eds.) *Cost-sharing and Accessibility in Higher Education: A Fairer Deal?*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2008.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Schneider, James. (2025) "Building the Party," *Sidecar*. Accessed 12 September 2025.

- 10 Luzajic, Jovan and Shimma Elkomy. (2025) "Graduate outcomes: What the latest data reveals about employment, pay and job quality", *Universities UK*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
  - 11 Greaves, Laura. (2024) "What do graduates do? 2024/25", *Prospects Luminate*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
  - 12 Social Mobility Commission. (2020) "Changing Gears: Understanding downward social mobility", *Research Report*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
  - 13 HESA. (2025) "What are HE students' progression rates and qualifications?". *HESA*. Accessed 8 October 2025.
  - 14 Elias, Peter and Kate Purcell. (2013) "Classifying graduate occupations for the knowledge society", *Institute for employment research. University of Warwick. Futuretrack working paper 5*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
  - 15 Otte, Jedidajah. (2024) "'Like throwing myself at a wall': UK graduates struggle in 'insane' job market", *the Guardian*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
  - 16 Cominetti, Nye and Hannah Slaughter. (2024) "Labour Market Outlook Q4 2024", *Resolution Foundation*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- Van Essen-Fisherman, Lucy et al. (2023). "Getting Real About Graduate Earnings", *HESA*. Accessed 8 October 2025.
- 17 Banks, Joe. (2025) "How Does the British Class System Work Today? We Asked an Expert", *Vice*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- Nethwani, Tej. (2024) "The graduate wage premium in the UK: Decline and fall?", *HESA*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- 18 Gov.uk (2024). "Graduate labour market statistics", *Gov.uk*. Accessed 8 October 2025.

- 19 Cominetti, Nye and Hannah Slaughter. (2024) "Labour Market Outlook Q4 2024", *Resolution Foundation*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- 20 Boero, Gianna et al. (2023). "Graduate Earnings Premia in the UK: Decline and Fall?", *HESA*. Accessed 8 October 2025.
- 21 Gov.uk "Average loan balance on entry into repayment", *Gov.uk*. Accessed 8 October 2025.
- 22 Simpson, Lizzie and Melissa Bui. (2021) "Left behind: A decade of intergenerational unfairness", *The Intergenerational Foundation*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- 23 Banks, Joe. (2025) "How Does the British Class System Work Today? We Asked an Expert", *Vice*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- 24 Evans, Dan. *A Nation of Shopkeepers: The Unstoppable Rise of the Petite Bourgeoisie*. London: Repeater, 2023.
- 25 Scott, Peter. (2012) "It's 20 years since polytechnics became universities – and there's no going back", *the Guardian*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- Ford, Robert et al. (2023) "Degrees of separation: The education divide in British politics", *Social Market Foundation*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- 26 Milburn, Keir. *Generation Left*. London: Polity, 2019.
- Meadway, James. (2021) "Generation Left Might Not Be That Left After All", *Novara Media*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- 27 Milburn, Keir. *Generation Left*. London: Polity, 2019.
- 28 Evans, Dan. *A Nation of Shopkeepers: The Unstoppable Rise of the Petite Bourgeoisie*. London: Repeater, 2023.

- 29 Meadway, James. (2021) "Generation Left Might Not Be That Left After All", *Novara Media*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- 30 Evans, Dan. *A Nation of Shopkeepers: The Unstoppable Rise of the Petite Bourgeoisie*. London: Repeater, 2023.
- 31 Ford, Robert et al. (2023) "Degrees of separation: The education divide in British politics", *Social Market Foundation*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- 32 Greaves, Laura. (2024) "What do graduates do? 2024/25", *Prospects Luminate*. Accessed 1 October 2025.
- 33 Schneider, James. *Our Bloc: How We Win*. London: Verso Books, 2022.
- 34 Evans, Dan. *A Nation of Shopkeepers: The Unstoppable Rise of the Petite Bourgeoisie*. London: Repeater, 2023.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Kirby, Ryan. (2011). "'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised': Community Activism and the Black Panther Party, 1966–1971", *Canadian Review of American Studies/Revue canadienne d'études américaines*, 41(1), 25-62.
- 37 Perlstein, Daniel. (2003). "From Freedom to Liberation: Politics and Pedagogy in Movement Schools". Accessed 9 October 2025.
- 38 Woodrow, Archie. (2024) "There are parties and then there are parties", *Prometheus*. Accessed 2 October 2025.
- 39 Xiaoyi, Wang. (2020) "How Targeted Poverty Alleviation Has Changed the Structure of Rural Governance in China", *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*. Accessed 7 October 2025.