

Young People and Trade Unions: New Challenges for a Generational Change

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Abstract: *The relationship between young people and trade unions is fundamental for labour organisations because it is increasingly necessary to re-think their generational change. The article aims to deepen understanding of the new challenges concerning youth and trade unions by reflecting on the labour organisations' renewal and analysing how they could involve young generations. Trade unions need to establish networks among young people both inside and outside the labour organisations and, at the same time, deal with young workers in contexts external to the workplace, reaching out to youth generations through innovative experiences and new models of aggregative participation. Ultimately, the new tasks that will be important to the future of labour organisations include investing in new generations and also accompanying providing them assistance in particular moments of insecurity, such as the transition from school to work or during unemployment; and helping them to develop their job skills. The analysis of the essay focuses on how trade unions can apply strategies and policies to support initiatives and social proposals that could facilitate young workers' participation in trade unions.*

Key words: *young people, trade unions, generational change, organising.*

1. Introduction

In the face of the changes concerning the ethics and culture of work, safety, health and worker protection is necessary deepening what is today the role of the trade unions in the society and in particular how the labour organisations are closed to the young people.

If, in the past, unions have succeeded in moving beyond the limitations of individuals to organise collective bargaining power, today, the situation has changed (Bauman, 2001). The unions have difficulty in their relations with the growing complexity of the labour market; there also is less stability and a decrease of stable jobs. Youth generations enter the labour market gradually, often while still in school. Their career progression is not always linear; thus they often collect random experiences they cannot use to their advantage to ensure themselves a stable employment position.

Reflecting on this set of circumstances, the role of trade unions is increasingly crucial to provide opportunities and strategic interventions that can help younger generations develop their job skills; offer support to develop youth entrepreneurship and independent living, as well as by proposing active work policies.

2. Young people and trade unions: a mismatch?

Youth generations have less interests in and propensity to unionization; however, union membership itself has a lower component of identity than in the past. This is the effect not only of young people's anti-union attitude, but also the difficulty for unions in communicating with youth generations regarding union representation (Carrieri, 2006).

Further, young people have decreasing confidence in the social image of trade unions. On the one hand, there also is a reduction of total workforce and on the other hand, the "attractiveness component" of trade unions is decreasing for younger generations, particularly for precarious workers (De Luca, 2008).

The decline in trade union membership is particularly significant among young workers, and this is a worldwide trend. Thus, recruiting, organising and representing young people is the most difficult task currently faced by trade unions (Kahmann, 2002).

This negative trend is, in part, a consequence of structural factors. Principally, these stem from changes in the labour market, including the growth of labour flexibility, deregulation, and a shift from manufacturing to service-based work. Union memberships are stagnant or declining, and new workers have more difficulties joining unions (Fairbrother, Yates, 2003). It is more arduous for workers with atypical employment contracts to join unions; with such workers, unions typically emphasise the discontinuous or temporary nature of employment relationships.

«A key factor which determines union membership is the rate of labour market turnover. Young people are more likely to move jobs than older workers, so even where they join a union, there is high probability that they will leave because they move to a job where there is no union presence» (TUC, 2004, p. 40).

Concerning these difficulties, trade unions should aim to show more interest in attracting young workers and helping them resolve problems in everyday life. Labour organisations have to focus more on the needs of young people, particularly those who are in their last years of high school.

Young people have little knowledge of trade unions; these consequences also are connected to the fact that the unions are considered as an obsolete and older organisation by young generations (Ferrari, 2011). This distorted and incorrect perception can lead to negative images of the union by young people who do not understand the role of labour organisations.

Trade unions need to achieve goals related to the “youth question” by aggressively engaging younger generations, proposing new youth-focused ideas and projects, and also representing young people in the workplace, particularly those who have atypical contracts.

One of the consequences of the contemporary youth perception of trade unions is that they can be perceived as “disposable.” The result is a discontinuous relation between young people and trade unions also in terms of youth protection and rights, thus creating a “fragmented union membership” (Carrieri, 2006). There is a decrease in the meaning of values – defined as the sharing of behaviours, norms and significance – associated with unions. Contemporary social life tends to be located around the interaction of intense and fleeting relationships, often dictated by the emotional components of social actors (Magatti, 2009).

Trade union organisations – especially for a young person – can represent actually an opportunity to respond to a logic of individualism in the society; they also have a significant task in employment rights and duties of workers, employment contracts and labour relations to young employees representing «an attempt by individual workers to escape from insecurity» (Tannenbaum, 1951, p. 176).

3. Responses to unions' crisis

3.1 Key questions for unions' renewal

In order to address generational change, trade unions should dedicate time, energies and strategies to thinking about ways in which labour organisations can engage young people and how to better communicate with them. One initial question is the following: In which places (outside of the formal work context) can unions engage young people?

There are other questions concerning union representation: How are young people protected, in particular, in the transition between school and work? What about young people that have atypical contracts? Once young people start working – without union support – how can labour organisations attract them?

These questions are fundamental to the question of increasing youth participation in union membership, but there are also other considerations:

- Which specific strategies can be developed to recruit young people?
- In which ways do unions establish their identity inside and outside labour organisations?

Notably, there are some slogans that have been popular with the media. A whole generation is called “lost generation”, referring to the NEET¹ phenomenon: how can trade unions engage young people who are looking for a job as well as all the other youths unemployed and not in school? (Castiglioni, 2011).

3.2 Strategies and innovations

One of the issues that Simms (2011) was able to identify in relation to trade union responses to assisting young people during the financial crisis concerns “campaigning to recruit more young workers”. Almost all European countries have specific projects to engage young workers; however, the new challenges concern innovative ways to engage the youth.

The proliferation of social network websites represents an opportunity for trade unions to circulate information on their initiatives via creating new relations with young people: this could represent an early step in innovation of the new union’s image. Labour organisations can also support young workers using an on-line consulting forum wherein the youth can write their question and directly contact trade unionists and activists and also receive information about topics related to their study, work and internships.

By concerning the other tasks that trade unions have to fulfil, labour organisations have to stand by (young) workers in helping them develop their job skills, particularly during delicate periods of their lives such as school-to-work transition or unemployment. Strategic interventions on youth’s transition from education to the workplace represent an opportunity for trade unions to engage with young people during their studies, or when they are looking for a job.

Trade unions also can enter directly high schools and universities organising with students networking, events, activities that should include issues such as health and safety, the law at work, the minimum wage, trade union representation, the role of unions in the society. Via specific programmes in collaboration with schools, trade unionists can assist in creating an efficient learning experience in which they have the possibility to deepen students’ understanding of how labour organisation can provide information and advice to individuals and members if they have problems at work.

Labour organisation should involve students in services that orient them to work by providing and supporting internship programs and accompanying young people in their passage from the school to the workplace. Thus, students and young workers can be aware of the role of the labour organisations via increased understanding of the activities and initiatives offered by unions.

4. Conclusions

Labour organisations require a “cultural change” in terms of their issues, approaches and actions; at the same time, they have to maintain their contribution to the economy, social relations, and development of democracy.

The major priority for trade unions necessities they focus on the organisation and involvement of young people (Barber, 2004); the difficult task trade unions have to undertake is how. In all European countries, there are generally lower levels of trade unions membership among young workers than other groups (Simms, Eurofound 2011); the strategies that unions can carry out involve recruiting and engaging young people and attracting new (and future) members by intercepting them when they are students or young workers.

Therefore, some solutions that trade unions can consider are related mainly to generational change.

¹ The acronym NEET stands for Not in Employment, Education or Training and describes young people who are disengaged from both work and education and are at a higher risk of labour market and social exclusion.

The first is to enter the schools and universities through special meetings and projects; this represents an opportunity to intercept young people during their studies because when they start working, it is more difficult for them to join a union.

Second, it is necessary to organise programs specifically tailored to students, by supporting them as they adjust to new work and accompanying them in their school-to-work transition. It is necessary for labour organisations to offer young people support, training programs and job-search assistance, both in high schools and universities.

Third, a labour organisation must employ innovative ways to communicate with youths – such as via social networking interfaces and Web sites more broadly – which will facilitate the development of greater recruitment opportunities.

Fourth, labour organisations can actually represent a place in which young people have the possibility to participate and where they can express themselves professionally.

In conclusion, the dialogue between generations may be an opportunity to raise new ideas and strategies for generational change by offering opportunities for interaction between young and old members within the unions.

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