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Unions are only as old as they feel: lessons on young worker engagement from the UK, France, Germany and the US

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Key points:

- Young workers are not ideologically opposed to unions but rather are not exposed to or aware of the role of unions and the labour movement in general.
- Young workers are particularly vulnerable to precarious work due to labour market shifts.
- To be more inclusive, trade unions should increase the age limit for being considered a 'young worker' to 35.
- Adapting and modifying traditional union structures and practices to allow young people to innovate and create their own spaces within the union structure helps empower and engage young workers.
- Traditional unions can engage young workers by supporting organisations with non-traditional structures that partake in collective action.
- Young workers see themselves as part of a broader social justice movement, so aligning and engaging with these movements is an important way to support them.

Introduction

Recruiting and organising young people into the trade union movement is a challenge in many countries. It is also a particularly urgent one because although the workforce is generally ageing throughout the European Union and in many competitor economies, the union membership base is ageing more quickly. Another issue is that the kinds of work pressures young people experience are different to those of their older counterparts, particularly because it takes them longer to find secure employment (Simms 2012). This precariousness is not unique to younger generations, but it is more widespread and a longer-lasting experience for them (Hipp *et al.* 2015). Unions offer an opportunity to challenge some of these precarious situations, but they need to make an effective case that they represent young workers.

By and large, young people are not particularly negative about unions but often do not know very much about them. In fact, they often do not know very much about work and employment in general, so their early experiences of the labour market tend to shape their understanding and expectations (Waddington and Kerr 2002; Vandaele 2018).

Those formative experiences matter because some kinds of work are much more common for young people, particularly in sectors

such as retail, care work, hospitality and catering. In all of these sectors, there is a high dependence on flexible and low-cost labour and, despite some notable successes, trade unions around the world have generally struggled to organise workers in these occupations (Hodder and Kretsos 2015).

Precarity has crept into employment contracts far beyond entry-level jobs, often having the effect of reducing employees' prospects for a stable income and career progression. Access to housing has become considerably more difficult in many (although not all) countries, also leading to extended periods of dependence on networks such as family and friends. There is also growing evidence that longer periods of precarity can lead to mental health problems. As a result, researchers and policymakers are talking about the transition period between childhood and independent

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adulthood becoming longer, more fractured and more precarious than in previous generations.

For trade unions, these developments present serious challenges. One of the areas where the precarity young people face could be reduced is in the workplace. Enforcing and extending labour rights could help ensure that even in highly flexible jobs, the income secured is sufficient to support independent adult life and the prospect of settling into some kind of employment stability is a realistic objective. But unions are rarely present in the kinds of jobs taken by young people, and the wider decline in membership means that fewer of their friends and family will encounter, support and join unions. How, then, can unions start to address these challenges, and what lessons can be learned from the cases where they have attempted to do just this?

This policy brief draws on research from four countries (the UK, France, Germany, and the US) to highlight common issues.¹ What is clear is that the kinds of precarity young workers are facing require unions to become more innovative in their organising tactics. We present some examples of creative campaigns and explore what lessons unions can learn from each other as they face these shared challenges (for an academic and full overview of our findings, please see our special issue in *Work and Occupations*, November 2018; each of the articles are cited in the list of references).

Four key themes

While there was variation across and within country case studies, our research exposed four key themes that ran through all of them (for more details, please see Tapia and Turner 2018).

First, *precarity breeds innovation*. With many young people finding themselves in precarious job situations, either enterprising young workers or established unions have devised innovative and more flexible ways to improve their working conditions (see also Simms *et al.* 2018).

Second, it is important to build *alliances between the labour movement and civil society organisations*. These alliances act as catalysts for innovation or change in unions' framing of issues, their tactics, and even their organisational structures (see also Cha *et al.* 2018).

Third, finding a *balance between gaining union support and allowing for local autonomy* also emerged as a critical theme. In other words, young worker groups are more likely to succeed when they enjoy sufficient leeway to undertake independent initiatives while also having the backing of an established union (see also, Hodder *et al.* 2018).

¹ This research was conducted between 2014 and 2017 under the guidance of Lowell Turner and Maite Tapia. It included experts from different countries. Jane Holgate, Melanie Simms, and Andy Hodder conducted research in the UK; Sophie Bérout, Camille Dupuy, Marcus Kahmann, and Karel Yon were responsible for France; Clara Behrend, Dennis Eversberg, Lena Hipp, Lisa Müller, Katrin Schmid, and Marcel Thiel studied Germany; Sally Alvarez, Joe Alvarez, Jake Barnes, J.Mijin Cha, Giovanna Fullin, Peter Ikeler, and Salil Sapre did research in the US. This three-year cross-national project was generously funded by the Hans Bockler Foundation.

Fourth, is the significance of *leadership training* for young activists. It is critical, however, to examine whether such training allows for young worker empowerment and encourages thinking outside the box or beyond the traditional union repertoires, and does not merely socialise them into reproducing existing practices of the labour movement (see also, Alvarez and Alvarez 2018).

We explore these themes in further detail in the following short country reports.

Innovative organising in a precarious sector: the Fast Food Rights Campaign in the UK

In February 2014, the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU) launched a campaign targeting fast-food giants. The concern was not just low pay but also the abundant use of zero-hour contracts (where workers are not given fixed working hours) and the abuse of unpaid labour. This initiative is significant given the lack of unionisation among fast-food workers in the UK and the fact that this sector has a notably high proportion of young workers. Like many other countries, union membership rates amongst young people are extremely low. In 2015, just 9 per cent of 16-24-year olds and 19.8 per cent of 25-34-year olds were union members, a fall from previous years.

The Bakers' Union is a small union with around 20,000 members which, like much of the UK labour movement, are comprised of older workers. However, recognising that the fast-food sector is made up of primarily young workers, the union understood that it needed to radically change if it was going to organise in this precarious sector. There was also a conscious decision to not just rely on the 'traditional union organising' approaches. The leadership wanted the campaigns to be led from the bottom up in the ways young workers wanted to organise, feeling that this was likely to create a greater sense of ownership of the campaigns and lead to more innovation and spontaneity.

The organising approach adopted by the union has been to target fast-food workplaces and look for small-scale wins that can show workers the benefits of being in a union. Fast-food 'days of action' have been lively and fun. In Glasgow, Scotland, a group of young members dressed up in 'evil Ronald McDonald costumes, complete with scary face makeup'. They sang songs and showed people their 'unhappy meal' boxes that were filled with zero-hour contracts and low pay. In addition, the union has been keen to work with other organisations outside the union movement in order to get their message across. Interested parties have been invited to the union's demonstrations and to bring like-minded people along. Some of these have been small left political parties, but campaign groups like the National Shop Stewards Network, Unite the Resistance, Youth Fight for Jobs and other trade unions also got involved and supported the campaigns. For a small union like the Bakers Union this has been helpful in raising its profile and getting the message out about events they have planned.

An important development has been the way the Bakers' Union has amended its branch structures to make them more flexible and

responsive to young workers. Traditionally, either union branches would be based in large workplaces or there would be district branches for people who had lost their jobs but wanted to remain part of the union as they searched for new employment. In the case of fast-food workers, however, they have been allowed to create their own town centre branches for all workers in the sector, irrespective of their employer. These new branches are led by the young workers themselves, and there are also training initiatives to support young members to become local leaders.

A further procedural amendment adopted by the BFAWU relates to sending delegates to the union's annual conference. Traditionally, a branch would elect someone to send to the conference and, more often than not, this would be a long-standing member. However, to ensure that young members are able to attend, the union agreed a rule change, which means that each branch can, in addition to the designated number of delegates (up to three depending on the branch size), send an additional member under the age of 27. This change has had a dramatic impact on the look and feel of the union's annual conference. At the 2016 conference, the first year after the rule change, there were between 60 and 70 young members in attendance (out of 209 delegates). Prior to this, there had only been one or two attending each year.

The Bakers' Union campaigns in the fast food sector have been innovative and its initiatives on structural change have come from the very top of the union. A double focus on both providing young workers with the space to innovate *and* supporting them within the structures of the wider union has been important in transforming this small union into a leading organisation in the campaign to improve the precarity of young people's employment.

The creation of a new, innovative union in France

If union membership is low across all ages in France (about 11 per cent in 2013), it is particularly true for young workers (3 per cent of workers under 30 in the private and non-profit sectors) and precarious workers (2.1 per cent of workers on part-time contracts). Countering this trend, in 2010 young precarious workers from non-profit organisations (NPOs) created a trade union to represent themselves. The union is called 'Action des salarié-e-s du secteur associatif' ('Non-profit sector employee action', ASSO) and provides a good case study for understanding the ways in which unionism can be renewed and rejuvenated in terms of structure, organisation, and forms of action.

NPO jobs are more precarious and lower paid than similar positions in the commercial sector, which is why this small group of young workers decided to act; but they insisted on creating a new structure instead of merging into an existing union. ASSO's originality is in the scope of its unionism: it does not represent workers according to their professional activity but according to the type of organisation that employs them. This structure is attractive for NPO workers who usually face significant barriers to union membership. Indeed, the profile of ASSO members contrasts markedly with traditional unionism: the average age is around 34 and the majority are women. Nevertheless, even though the first members were inspired by the

new approach of their union, the decision was rapidly made to link up with a more traditional union confederation, Solidaires, as ASSO members had little experience of how a union operates and were keen to get strategic and financial support. In short, while the young workers were very innovative in setting up a new structure, they needed outside help from a former trade union.

Through a process of gradual learning and development, ASSO members established their own ways of working and campaigning based on two principles. First, they established a collegial way of operating, with as little hierarchy as possible and widely shared powers. Second, they attempted to work on a basis of consensus decision-making. It is interesting to note that, while these principles have been the subject of numerous debates in other organisations, ASSO has found them to be effective mechanisms for representation. They have built their organisation by themselves, without explicit reference to other forms of organisation. While this is partly the result of a lack of broader knowledge about how the union movement and other representative organisations operate, it does give the freedom to explore structures and approaches that suit the membership base.

There have been challenges, however, in defining ASSO's action priorities, such as finding its place in formal collective negotiation and in the confederation structure. The union has chosen to give priority to defending individuals at the workplace rather than negotiating rights at national or sectoral levels. For elected union members and their representatives, the most important action is to defend workers in difficulty. To do that, they are supported by Solidaires locally and nationally, and the confederation is thus an important resource for ASSO's members despite them not being involved in the wider structures.

This case shows that young precarious workers have been successful in creating 'tailor-made' structures that allow them to collectively determine how they want to work, organise themselves and campaign. However, creating an organisation from scratch and inventing a specific union culture takes time and funding, which they do not always have. To be successful, they need both the autonomy to set up their own structure as well as external support from existing unions.

Creating more effective engagement for young workers within the union: Ver.di's 'Perspective U35' in Germany

In 2007, the Ver.di union in Stuttgart launched 'Perspective U35' as a way to empower young workers, mostly between 25 and 35 years old, within the union. Ver.di has about 2.2 million members in ten districts and 13 different sectors. However, the membership of this age group was in decline and had very few active members. Furthermore, young people in Ver.di often felt that they did not have breathing room to come up with suggestions or new ideas due to time-consuming committee work. U35 was put forward as a way to let young workers try out new ideas and strategies.

The U35 program had the following goals. The first was to educate young workers about economic and social conditions so that they could develop an understanding of what young people experience in the contemporary workplace. This consisted of courses on labour

and union history, labour legislation, racism and feminism, as well as training sessions on organising and mobilising skills, and so on. Creating knowledge and sharing interests could then reinforce the capacity of young workers to act collectively.

A second objective was to actively encourage such collective action. The U35 participants, for example, decided to give support to striking workers of a yoghurt pot manufacturing plant who were not Ver.di members. They were also involved in anti-austerity protests by the 'Blockupy' alliance, a transnational network that protests against the austerity politics of the European Commission. They gave support to refugees with campaigns such as 'Solidarity beyond Borders' and to the refugee group 'Lampedusa in Hamburg'. Involvement with these movements spurred creativity and linked the experiences of social movements with those of workers' organisations. In addition, activists from the social movement sphere started to trust the trade unions as an important partner in struggles for social and economic justice.

The third objective of U35 was to offer space for discussion, ideas and questions, and to find new ways of building solidarity and empowering young workers. It was considered an important counterpart to the oft-entrenched structures and administrative routines within the union. For example, the 'U35 salon' would take place regularly, where members would meet, cook together, and report on and discuss a prepared theme, providing an opportunity to examine labour struggles, political topics, etc., as well as to build relationships amongst each other. They would have cinema evenings dedicated to a specific issue, for example. In 2014, they also convened a conference for works councillors under the age of 35, a few months before the nationwide works council elections. This brought together young works councillors as well as young workers running for works councillor positions. There is also a yearly U35 summit to connect and exchange experiences from the individual projects.

The U35 project is spreading beyond Stuttgart and Hamburg to other cities across Germany as it is considered a successful approach for more effectively engaging young workers in the union. Through it, young workers are given the opportunity to get to know the union and to identify and actively engage with key issues. They can act as catalysts in their companies and enable more young workers to take on greater responsibility in works councils or other types of worker representation. It has also allowed them to experience solidarity and reinforced a sense of collectiveness, which can strengthen the labour movement as a whole. The support from Ver.di has been essential and without it this type of self-organisation would not be able to grow or perhaps even exist.

Diversifying union leadership in the US: the SEIU Millennials programme

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has a membership of over two million workers, of which approximately 300,000 are 'millennials' (born between 1983 and 2000, with the majority thus under 35). In 2011 and 2012, the SEIU leadership decided to embark on a union-wide discussion about equity and inclusion that focused on ensuring that the union's leadership reflected the

broad diversity of its members. These discussions also focused on how to create leadership pipelines for young members.

In parallel to the work being done within the union on increasing equity and inclusion, young members were organising and building programmes in local branches across the US. These programmes focused on mentorship and leadership development within the union and also engagement with social movements outside, such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. These two foci, inside and outside the union, were important for developing leadership within the union structure as well as understanding how millennials engage with unions and with the broader social justice movement.

'SEIU Millennials' (now called 'SEIU Rise' to include even younger generations) was launched after the 2012 convention and eventually, 14 local millennial branches were established. The branches were connected nationally but each had the autonomy to decide how to engage with outside movements. This showed a recognition that young workers see themselves as part of a larger social justice movement. For some young workers, Black Lives Matter is as important as the union's priorities because both organisations reflect their identities. To engage these workers, both identities need to be acknowledged.

Another way to engage young people has been to support their advancement into leadership positions. For example, SEIU Local 509 has a programme that is partly sponsored by the local branch and partly by the union's central office to bring millennial members into specific projects that help build their leadership skills. Local 509 also elected millennials into leadership and within a few years, the makeup of the elected board shifted from a majority being over 45 years old to half of the board being 37 or younger. Once in office, the newly elected members helped advance issues important to millennials, such as student debt and climate change.

There are, however, some growing pains associated with expanding and diversifying leadership. On the one hand, new ideas and new programmes are fundamental to the future of the organisation and need the space to grow, develop, and adopt their own characteristics and tactics. On the other hand, the organisation needs to continue its daily work and must build the power and influence necessary to meet the members' needs, through negotiating contracts, increasing membership, etc. This tension is commonly experienced by large organisations that are trying to grow and evolve. It can be defused by educating young members on the history of the union to help provide context for why the structured and institutionalised aspects are important, but also by giving these members some space to be creative and engage in more disruptive tactics that can bring new energy into campaigns.

Conclusion

Labour movements remain essential for the survival and renewal of democratic societies. However, they need young members and activists, not just to revitalise the membership base but also for their transformative potential and experimentation. Despite common complaints about the younger generations and their lack of interest in the labour movement, we found many different cases

across these five countries where young workers have brought new vitality and diversity to traditional unions and innovation to processes of collective representation. It is important that union leaders mentor young activists by bringing them in and teaching them the ropes – not just with the aim to socialise them into accepting the existing rules and procedures but also to empower them to deviate from the norms and traditions and be able to create alternative approaches from the bottom up. In short, unions need to be receptive to young workers' ideas.

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