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# ORGANISING INNOVATION : UNIONS, YOUNG WORKERS AND PRECARITY

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JANUARY 2018

## Authors

### **Melanie Simms**

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Melanie Simms is Professor of Work and Employment at the University of Glasgow in the UK. She has written about union organising for the past 20 years and is always keen to start a debate about how unions can learn from each other.

### **Jane Holgate**

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Jane Holgate is Professor of Work and Employment Relations at the University of Leeds. Her research has focused on trade union organising and the under representation of diverse groups in the labour market. More recently her interest is around community organising and trade unions.

### **Andy Hodder**

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Andy Hodder is Lecturer in Employment Relations at the University of Birmingham. His research examines contemporary trade unionism in a range of contexts. He has written on the relationship between young workers and trade unions and union use of social media.

### **Unions 21**

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Unions 21 exists to support unions to increase their influence, impact and effectiveness within the world of work. We will do this by working with unions, supporters and stakeholders to create an open space for research, innovation and activity to assist unions to secure a better life for working people. This paper is part of its work on Good Work.

Unions 21  
77 St John Street  
London EC1M 4NN  
[www.unions21.org.uk](http://www.unions21.org.uk)

This cross-national project was under the guidance of Lowell Turner and Maite Tapia and included experts from the different countries. Sophie Bérout, Camille Dupuy, Marcus Kahmann, and Karel Yon conducted research on France. Clara Behrend, Dennis Eversberg, Lena Hipp, Lisa Müller, Katrin Schmid, and Marcel Thiel on Germany. Sally Alvarez, Jake Barnes, J.Mijin Cha, Giovanna Fullin, Peter Ikeler, and Salil Sapre did research in the US. The authors of this pamphlet did the UK research.

# INTRODUCTION

**By and large, young people are not particularly negative about trade unions. Research in many countries rejects some of the stereotypes that young people are more individualistic than previous generations and care less about inequality, social issues and employment. Rather, young people often don't know very much about trade unions. In fact, they often don't know very much about work and employment in general. So their early experiences of the labour market tend to shape their understanding and expectations.**

Those formative experiences matter because some kinds of work are much more common for young people. The UK is fairly typical in that retail, care work, hospitality and catering are common early experiences of work for young people. 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 struggled to organise workers in these occupations.

Although some of the stereotypes about young people in general, and young workers specifically, can be over-played, there are some features of our changing society that mean that the lives of these workers are often quite different from previous generations. To some extent, young people have always had precarious and transient lives but the erosion of some of the social protections built up in many countries in the prosperity after 1945 has left this generation more exposed to risks than those before them.

Specifically, precarity has crept into employment contracts far beyond entry-level jobs, often having the effect of reducing opportunities for stable income prospects and progression. Access to housing has become considerably more difficult in many – but not all – countries, also leading to extended periods of dependence on extended networks such as family and friends. As a result, researchers and policy makers often talk about the transition periods between childhood and independent adulthood as becoming longer, more fractured and more precarious than in previous generation.

For trade unions, these developments present serious challenges. One of the areas that could reduce the precarity young people face is in the workplace. Enforcing and extending labour rights could help ensure that even if jobs were highly flexible, the income secured was sufficient to support independent adult life and the prospect of settling into some kind of stability in employment was a realistic objective. But unions are often unknown entities in the kinds of jobs taken by young people, and the wider decline of unions means that fewer of their friends and family will encounter, support and join unions. How, then, can unions start to address those challenges? And what lessons can be learned?

This pamphlet draws on research from four countries (USA, UK, France and Germany) to highlight common issues facing unions. It looks first at the national policy approaches that are being developed, and then moves on to highlight campaigns, initiatives and projects that have explicitly engaged young people in union work. Although they tell a generally positive story about some of the things that unions can do, there are some barriers and lessons to be learned. These are presented for reflection in the final section. What is clear is that the kinds of precarity these young workers face mean that unions are having to become more innovative in their organising tactics. We present some examples of innovative campaigns from the four countries and explore what lessons unions can learn from each other as they face these shared challenges.

# NATIONAL POLICY DIRECTIONS

**The four countries we studied all have very different institutional arrangements for trade union representation, so national level representation looks quite different in the different settings. Nonetheless, it is clear that the challenges facing unions in organising and representing young people are so profound that they will require high-level strategic planning if they are to be tackled effectively. We therefore wanted to know what was happening at national level in the four countries.**

The **USA** is probably the highest profile of the cases. The peak level organisation there is called the America Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO). Although there have been recent changes to the national structures in the USA, the AFL-CIO is still the major national umbrella body. Two AFL-CIO initiatives targeting young people are particularly important: Next Up and Union Summer.

Next Up is a relatively recent development since the late 2000s that seeks to engage, empower and mobilise union and non-union workers under the age of 35. It hosts national summits and direct action days, aims to develop young workers into leadership positions within their unions, and supports young workers' groups within unions. It is supported by the Young Worker Advisory Council which draws in expertise from community organisations beyond the labour movement. In essence, the objectives of the initiative are to give leadership around young workers' issues within the labour movement. Successes are relatively limited, but include taking 43 young leaders through the Young Worker Leadership Institute, and supporting young activists to attend national and international forums.

Union Summer is a much longer-running initiative run by the AFL-CIO. It is very high profile in the USA and beyond. It engages interns for 9-week Summer programmes which trains them as union organisers and encourage them to consider working in the labour movement as a career. The programme has a strong emphasis on both labour history and on effective workplace and community organising. It has been extremely successful in attracting enthusiastic young organisers despite some challenges managing the temporary influx of staff in some local unions.

The **German** trade union structure means that sectoral unions are responsible for recruiting, organising and representing workers in their specific sectors. For young people in vocational education, this will usually be at the level of their workplace. As a result, the peak-level German Trade Union Confederation (the DGB) has been especially interested in engaging students who are in university education rather than vocational training. The initiative is mainly about raising awareness of unions and the work they do, as well as providing support and information to students. It also works to give advice to students who are employed in casual work alongside their education. The initiative has had some notable success and is increasingly a priority area of activity.

In **France**, there are many national level confederations bringing together unions with particular political positions. All of them struggle to recruit young members and identify the fact that the aging leadership profile is a serious concern. In common with Germany and the UK, although some work has been put into developing policies around young members, the federalist structures mean that adoption of particular campaign priorities within individual unions is patchy and inconsistent; often depending on key individuals. Nonetheless, where young activists do take on roles, they can be 'fast-tracked' through the structures and can quickly occupy leadership positions. While this can be beneficial, it can also mean result in difficulties establishing legitimacy and problems if too much is expected of these leaders too quickly.

The **UK** Trades Union Congress (TUC) is familiar with many of these challenges and potential pitfalls. Much of its activity has focused on providing a point of co-ordination for affiliate unions and to give strategic direction emphasising the importance of recruiting, representing and engaging young workers. Importantly, it has also drawn attention to the wider issues beyond the workplace that often disproportionately affect young people such as housing and mental health which are not issues that unions campaign widely on in the UK.

In all four countries, then, we see that the peak-level representative organisations have taken the challenges of raising awareness of unions among young workers very seriously indeed. And there has certainly been evidence of innovation both around the ways these organisations target young workers, and the campaigns they prioritise. There is a recognition that the precarity faced by many young workers requires new approaches and there is clear evidence of strategic leadership around these issues even in countries like Germany, the UK and France where the peak-level organisation has little or no authority to lead specific organising activities.

# ORGANISING YOUNG WORKERS

**Looking at specific activities to organise young workers directly, it is also clear that individual unions and campaigns are having to develop innovative approaches to target these workers. One very direct approach to address the challenges of the under-representation of young people in unions is to develop and support campaigns that either directly or indirectly seek to organise the jobs where young workers disproportionately find employment. Three of our cases were particularly impressive here: a campaign by the German service sector union Ver.di to organise in the health and social care sector, a campaign by the US retail union RWDSU to target retail workers in New York City, and a campaign by the UK food retailing union BFAWU to target fast-food workers. Each of these campaigns highlight particular successes and challenges.**

The Ver.di campaign in Germany focused on improving the vocational training opportunities for young workers in the care sector. It targeted a wide range of employers from large hospitals to small care homes for older people, and initiated collective bargaining around the issue of training. When it started the campaign, the union explicitly acknowledged that it would deliberately target the high numbers of young people working in the sector. The project has been highly successful in building links between the union and the young workers' representatives and in facilitating dialogue to establish the interests of young workers. It has also had some notable success at improving both opportunities for vocational training in the target employers, and the quality of that training. However, a major challenge has been the high turnover of youth representatives which means that it can be difficult to keep these issues on the agenda at workplace level.

The Retail Action Project has been a long-running campaign-oriented worker centre by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) in New York City in the **USA**. It has supported campaigns at non-union workplaces focusing on issues such as non-payment of wages, and accreditation of skills. In doing so it has provided a space for young activists to experiment with tactics, to develop confidence and experience, and to challenge employers with some success. Although the campaign has been important in developing key activists, turnover is high and the focus is very specific, meaning that it is unlikely to develop into a wider occupational unionism for retail workers. Nonetheless, it illustrates what unions can achieve with a limited budget and a tight focus.

In the **UK**, the BFAWU campaign for fast-food workers' rights is interesting because the union has long organised workers in food production, but had not previously invested in expansionist organising activity. The campaign for a £10 per hour pay rate has attracted a great deal of attention and is explicitly influenced by the US SEIU campaign 'Fight for \$15'. Although very small scale, a planned strike in September 2017 will coincide with US Labor Day actions and attracted a high level of media attention to the calls for raised pay rates, secure contracts, and trade union recognition for collective bargaining.

These brief examples show that unions are innovating in important ways. The campaigns highlighted here show both how unions have to take their existing tactics and target new groups, as well as how they have to develop new tactics and approaches to tackling some of the specific issues of concern to these workers. It is also clear that unions learn from each other and this is very heartening. Examples of successful practices spread increasingly quickly between campaigns, between unions and even between countries. It is clear that this kind of learning will be essential if unions are to successfully tackle some of the challenges of recruiting young, precarious workers. And the precarity matters. It affects the issues these young workers want their unions to campaign around. Accredited skills development and the quality of training are essential for workers who may well need to move between employers. And, of course, the basic issue of pay, hours and work scheduling will always be important to all workers, but are especially important to these workers who often face the most brutal end of poor management practices.

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## Lessons learned

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Lessons from these cases include:

- The importance of established unions and their leaders actively supporting young workers' organising activity.
- Precarious employment brings to the fore different issues: training accreditation and quality, shift scheduling, pay progression.
- Labour and activist turnover will, inevitably be high and unions have to both plan for that and put in place support to reduce turnover where possible.
- The US and UK projects have successfully attempted to create spaces where young people can organise without imposing restrictive structures on them. In both cases, this is argued to be central to the success and energy of these campaigns.
- Moving these initiatives to a stage where formal representation of these workers can take place through structures of collective representations (works councils, recognition for collective bargaining, legal strike action etc.) is far more challenging and requires careful understanding of how these mechanisms work. At this point in a campaign it seems that the expertise of more experienced leaders can help guide tactics and action, but may also serve to constrain some of the more spontaneous actions.

# DEVELOPING YOUNG WORKERS' ACTIVISM AND LEADERSHIP

**Organising young workers is only a first step to effective representation and to integrating their interests into the demands and campaigns of trade unions. In all of the initiatives we studied, everyone was in agreement that it was important to develop young workers as activists and leaders. In some cases, such as the fast-food workers' case in the UK, this happened within the union and the specific campaign, but other unions launched specific initiatives to develop leadership capacity.**

Ver.di union in **Germany** has established a project to develop young leaders, which for them is defined as workers under the age of 35. The project was developed to help address the challenge that in the “rush hour of your life” young workers often lose contact with their union. The aim was to get young people engaged with a range of campaigns and activities in the labour movement and beyond without forcing them to take on formal roles within the structures of the union. Combined with training, support and opportunities to engage colleagues the scheme has been able to develop networks of young activists around key cities. The flexibility has been central to the success of the networks because it has allowed individuals to dip in and out of activism. It also means that networks can activate around particular campaigns as support is needed. It should also be noted that this creative energy has encouraged an approach to activism that sometimes has less central concern for the strategic objectives of the union, which can be seen as problematic by some more established leaders.

In a similar approach, the **US** union SEIU has developed the SEIU Rise programme. This explicitly encouraged young people, and especially young people from a more diverse background (women, ethnic minorities etc.) to develop leadership skills and stand for office in local unions. What quickly followed once young people were elected to formal positions was that others followed suit. Encouraged by the momentum, there are examples of local unions developing campaigns of particular interest to young workers such as around climate change and changes to pension provision. These had not previously been high-profile union issues but were quickly established to be of particular interest to younger workers. In common with the Ver.di case, as these campaigns developed, a tension emerged between these new campaigns, and more established priorities to recruit members and negotiate collective contracts.

In **France**, the CGT union was keen to establish whether these pressures and tensions were common to the experience of developing young leaders. That project traced the careers of activists who had been involved with the union's Youth Committee in the early 2000s. Although they are now no longer considered young, the interviews gave considerable insight into some of the challenges facing young activists. Key findings included:

- The union tended to reproduce the traditional model of activists and to exclude people who did not conform to that model. People with backgrounds in wider campaigns quickly fell to the wayside.
- Activists who did conform to the more traditional approach were quickly promoted and a number have had meteoric careers and now occupy positions in the sectoral and national union. In the regard, the Youth Committee worked to identify future talent, albeit in shaped in the traditional ways.
- Union leaders constrained the autonomy of the Youth Committee's actions around campaigns that were not seen to be moving in the strategic direction followed by the union more widely.

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## Lessons learned

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The lessons from the French case are not uncommon in the other cases studied. Tensions quickly emerge if initiatives aimed at engaging young workers and identifying young leaders take the union in a very different strategic direction than the wider union. It is also common that these programmes serve to educate young activists into how to 'be union'. In other words, they can encourage young workers to replicate existing practices and priorities rather than to bring new practices into the organisation.

Despite these risks, where they exist, it was widely agreed that these programmes are essential to identify and develop a cadre of future leaders. They have been successful in identifying new campaigns and activities, even where this brings them into conflict with the wider union. Importantly, these initiatives require resources and support because turnover rates are high, but where young people are successfully identified as potential leaders, they can be rapidly promoted within their organisations.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF INNOVATING

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**Many of the initiatives that we studied were quite uncomfortable for at least some existing union members and leaders because they broke away from the established patterns of doing things. This is really important. All of these unions and peak-level organisations came to the view that things needed to be done differently if they were to address the significant decline of union membership and to give young workers some sense that unions could and will represent their interests.**

In different ways in the examples discussed above, the initiatives have all had at their heart the fact that they want to respond to the specific situations within which young workers find themselves. In some cases this is by branching out to organise new workplaces and new sectors. In others it is to identify issues that are particularly important to these young workers and which haven't previously been a priority.

In all of the cases, the unions involved have had to accept a high level of turnover of members and activists because instability is an inevitable consequence of the precarity these workers face in their lives at work and beyond. In some cases, the unions have had to experience the discomfort of rethinking their strategic direction as an enthusiastic group of young members has wanted the space to move in a different direction. These are not easy things for established union leaders to accept but it is absolutely clear that the only way the union movements in these countries and beyond will survive the fundamental society shifts we are all experiencing is by responding to these challenges.

These campaigns stand as examples about how unions can learn from each other in very different settings. That organisational and campaigning learning will be essential to the future of union membership.



Unions 21  
77 St John Street  
London EC1M 4NN

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