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1. Introduction

Trade unions around the world have struggled to motivate young people to join their organisations. In a way, there is a paradox, since trade unions are in need of new members to stabilize their position regarding social dialogue and collective bargaining in the long-run. On the other hand young people who often have difficulty to enter the labour market and who are more likely to find themselves trapped in temporary jobs are thus vulnerable and in need of protection. However, the influx of young members into trade unions is limited although they could be the right actors to defend and strengthen the individual and collective rights of the youth, and to give the youth more voice. Even though trade unions and the youth might need each other in a way, they seem to have difficulty to get together.

Compared to most other European countries, trade union membership in Belgium has not declined, but remained stable with a density of about 50% in the past years (Visser, 2013). Although membership figures for young people are lower compared to their older counterparts, the gap is by far smaller than in many other countries. Yet, there is inconclusive empirical evidence about the relationship between age and trade union membership in Belgium. Specifically, some studies like the one of Schnabel and Wagner (2007) did not find a significant effect, while others (e.g. De Witte, 2000) conclude that the likelihood to join a union increases with age in the Belgian context. Still, the unions have strived to both achieve higher membership among the youth and to advance the young people's situation in the labour market. Thereby, the youth is considered a heterogeneous group comprising young people in education (future employees), young workers and jobseekers aged between 15 and 35 years. Unions focus on a variety of topics of particular interest for the youth, such as school-to-work transitions, entry in the labour market or temporary contracts. Yet, unions perceive attracting young people as difficult even though they have sought to counteract in recent years, particularly by strengthening their youth structures and reinforcing the rejuvenation of their organisations. Belgian trade unions have had a solid youth membership base – what seems to be more challenging for them is mobilization and encouraging trade union activism among the youth. Generally, this report sheds light on the relationship between the Belgian trade unions and the youth and examines related challenges.

The report is based on a mixture of primary and secondary empirical data. In the first phase of the project, documentary analyses were carried out in order to get a first impression about the Belgian unions' youth working, the related structures and history. Furthermore, the Belgian youth's position in the labour market was sketched. The project's second phase built upon the already collected materials and expanded them based on 12 semi-structured interviews of 60-90 minutes duration, conducted between mid-March and mid-May 2014. Those interviews were carried out at different levels, i.e. with national (8 interviews), sectoral (2 interviews) and regional (youth) representatives (2 interviews) of the different trade union federations. Furthermore, an event where all unions collaborated to tackle the challenge of school-to-work transitions was attended (TRANSIT school-leaving days, Antwerp April 30th, 2014) and followed by various short talks with the organizers, teachers and participants to better understand the practices developed by unions to reach the youth.

Table 1 – Overview of the collected primary data

	Data collection
ACV-CSC	4 interviews
ABVV-FTGB	5 interviews
ACLVB-CGSLB	3 interviews
Participation in an event of the TRANSIT-project	Informal talks with organizers, teachers, and participants; participant observation

Source: Own illustration

The report is structured as follows. After a brief introduction into the labour market position of young people in Belgium, it focuses on trade unions and the youth. A first chapter sheds light on the unions in general, gives a brief historical overview on youth work as well as the structures nowadays and is concluded by exploring membership patterns and reasons for the lower youth membership. The next chapter takes a closer look at the trade unions' actions and initiatives focusing on the youth and is arranged around the different levels of action, namely from macro-level to micro-level activities. At the same time, the unions' social media use as a method to get in touch with the youth is examined. After a discussion about the main challenges the unions face nowadays regarding the youth, the report is concluded.

2. The labour market position of young people

The Belgian youth faces three specific problems: relatively high structural youth unemployment, difficult school-to-work transitions and a high probability of being offered temporary employment.

In Belgium, school attendance is compulsory until the age of 18. There are four different tracks the youth can choose:

- *Professional secondary education (Beroepssecundair onderwijs or BSO)*: BSO represents a practical specialisation. This means that school is attended full-time until the age of 16, and then part-time in combination with internships and practical trainings. BSO attendants can specialize in certain crafts like carpenter, roofer or baker, but also in service jobs like hairdresser, kindergarten teacher or carer for the elderly. Most BSO graduates directly start working after having finished school at the age of 18.
- *Arts secondary education (Kunstsecundair onderwijs or KSO)*: KSO combines general subjects with a specialization in arts (fine arts, performing arts and ballet). School needs to be attended full-time until the age of 18. Mostly, KSO graduates continue their education at a *hogeschool* (university of applied sciences) to earn a professional bachelor.
- *Technical secondary education (Technisch secundair onderwijs or TSO)*: TSO combines general subjects with a specialization in practical technical subjects. TSO students also need to do an internship to apply their practical skills in a company. Full-time school attendance is compulsory until the age of 18. After graduation, most former TSO attendants go to *hogeschool* (university of applied sciences) to study for a professional bachelor.
- *General secondary education (Algemeen secundair onderwijs or ASO)*: ASO represents the most general educational track in Belgium. Having completed full-time education until the age of 18, most graduates go to university to earn a bachelor and master degree.

In principle, everyone with a secondary school diploma can join higher education, but in practice, this is principally done by ASO-graduates. Especially BSO-graduates mostly start working directly after leaving school. However, in 2012, the share of the young people (18-24) without a secondary school diploma amounted to 12% (20.1% in Brussels, 8.7% in Flanders and 14.8% in Wallonia)

(Smets, 2013). Belgium also reports growing numbers of so-called NEETs (Not in Employment, Education or Training) among its youth, as illustrated in table 2.

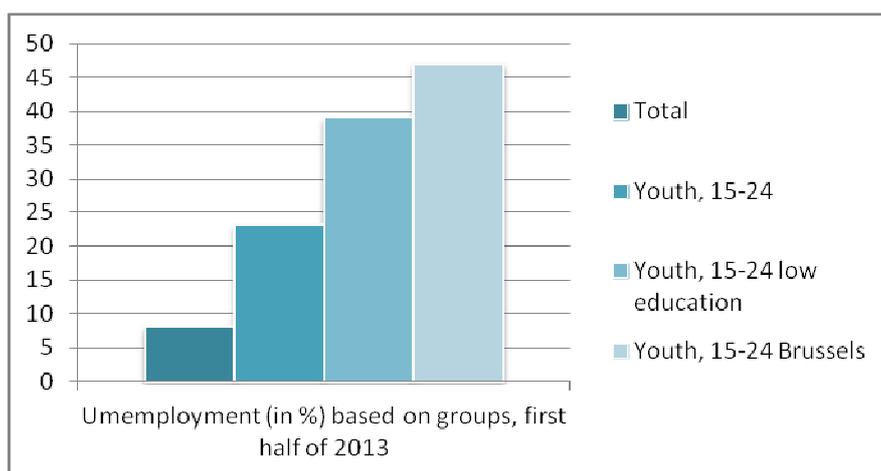
Table 2 – Number of NEETs in Belgium and by region among the age group 15-24

	Number of youth (n)	Total number of NEET (n)	Total number of NEET (%)	Unemployed NEET (%)	Inactive NEET (%)
Belgium	1 326 134	163 711	12.3	5.2	7.2
Brussels	137 457	26 441	19.2	8.4	10.8
Wallonia	448 573	68 912	15.4	7.3	8.0
Flanders	740 103	68 358	9.2	3.2	6.0

Source: ADSEI (*Enquête naar de arbeidskrachten EAK*) in Jacobs, 2013

Especially the share of inactive NEET is problematic, as this figure mostly incorporates those young people leaving school without a diploma who could not find work. As a consequence, they are likely to become inactive. This background information is important to be pointed out as unemployment among the youth is highly contingent upon education in Belgium. The higher the level of education, the lower the probability to be unemployed (Van Hauwermeiren and Marin, 2013; Lamote et al., 2013; Vroman and Djait, 2013; Hoge Raad van de Werkgelegenheid, 2013) as illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1 – Unemployment (in %) by different groups, first half of 2013 (number of people looking for a job relative to a certain group)



Source: ADSEI (*Enquête naar de arbeidskrachten EAK*) in Smets (2013)

Sourbron and Herremans (2013) report a dual labour market for the Belgian youth due to the fact that chances in the labour market are largely determined by

the level of education. The average youth unemployment rate of the last ten years as well as regional differentiations can be found in table 3.

Table 3 – Average unemployment rates from 2003-2012, with regional differentiation, compared to other European countries

	Unemployment rate of youth (younger than 25 years)	Unemployment rate of adults in the most active group of labour market parti cipants (25-54 years)
Belgium	19.8%	6.8%
Brussels	35.0 %	15.8 %
Wallonia	29.6 %	9.6 %
Flanders	13.5 %	4.0 %
Greece	30.7 %	11.1 %
Spain	30.4 %	13.2 %
France	20.9 %	7.7 %
Germany	11.4 %	7.9 %
Denmark	10.4 %	4.8 %
Austria	9.0 %	4.0 %
The Netherlands	7.3 %	3.4 %

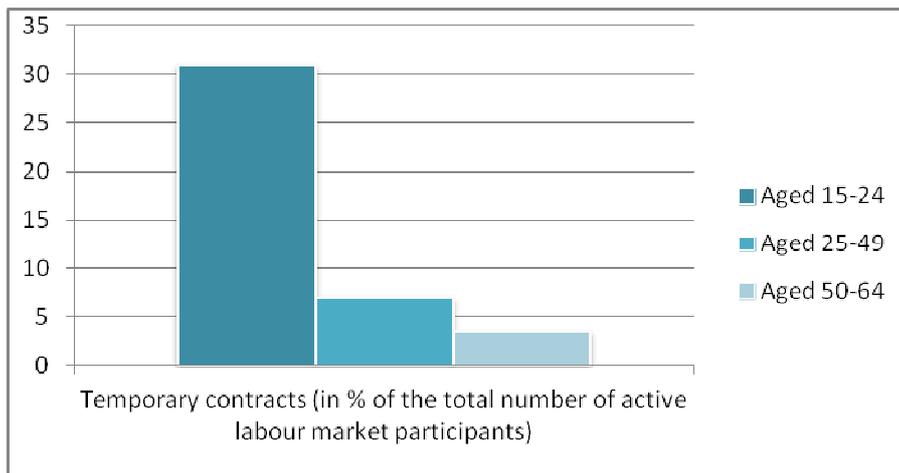
Source: Eurostat in Cockx (2013)

Two aspects are striking, especially when comparing Belgium to other European countries: Firstly, the unemployment rate among the youth is about three times higher compared to the most active group of labour market participants. Secondly, there are huge differences between Belgium's three regions. While youth unemployment is particularly high in Brussels and Wallonia, it is at a much lower level in Flanders. This becomes evident when comparing the numbers of the different regions with the ones of other European countries. While Flanders features a relatively low youth unemployment rate, the data of Wallonia and Brussels are among the highest rates in Europe. Additionally, young women, youth with a migration background and lowly educated are particularly exposed to youth unemployment (Liagre and Van Gyes, 2012).

Following Sourbron and Herremans (2013) school-to-work transitions strongly depend on the education level. While they are relatively easy and fast for the highly-educated youth, they prove to be drawn-out and difficult for those with low levels of education. According to the Flemish public employment agency VDAB, the shrinking number of jobs for lowly educated young people due to relocation and automation makes it difficult for them to gain ground in the labour market (Van Hauwermeiren and Marin, 2013).

A final problem the Belgian youth faces is the high incidence of temporary employment, especially for the low-skilled youth. Young people are more likely to be offered temporary contracts, as indicated in figure 2.

Figure 2 – Temporary employment among different age groups in 2012 (in %)



Source: *Enquête naar de arbeidskrachten (EAK) in Smets (2013)*

Thus, the youth is particularly exposed to temporary jobs since about 1/3 holds a temporary contract. The fact that many young people enter the labour market via jobs in the service sector (especially hotels and restaurants, sports companies as well as temporary agency work) could partially explain the overrepresentation of temporary employment, as it is relatively widespread in these kinds of jobs (Liagre and Van Gyes, 2012). According to the Hoge Raad van Werkgelegenheid (2013), especially those young people who were unemployed or inactive are more likely to be offered temporary employment. Overall, four out of five young people accepted a temporary contract due to the unavailability of permanent work (Hoge Raad van Werkgelegenheid, 2013). Even though the incidence of temporary employment among the Belgian youth compared to their older counterparts seems to be high, the numbers are by far lower compared to the EU-27 average of 42.1% in 2012 (Eurofound, 2014). Besides, the number of temporary contracts rose in 20 of the 27 EU-countries between 2009 and 2012. Yet, the Belgian figure slightly decreased from 33.2% in 2009 to 31.4% in 2012.

Overall, this paragraph emphasizes the vulnerable position of the youth in the Belgian labour market. Specifically, young people are more exposed to temporary contracts and unemployment than other age groups. Skills seem to be an essential explanatory variable in this respect, as the highly skilled youth is less vulnerable

than lowly skilled young people. While school-to-work transitions seem to run smoothly for the former, the latter struggle to gain ground in the labour market. Trade unions face a particular challenge in approaching the youth because many young people are characterized by features that make them difficult to organise. In particular, the youth is often employed on temporary contracts in hard-to reach sectors and small companies, where unions are not necessarily present. Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that the youth itself is a rather heterogeneous group, for example consisting of those with migration background or the lowly-educated who could be even more difficult to represent, organise and mobilize. The following sections explore if and to what extent trade unions are aware of and engage in supporting the youth to face the aforementioned challenges.

3. Trade unions and the youth: history, structures and membership patterns

3.1. Trade unions: an overview

There are three trade union confederations in Belgium, each reflecting a socio-political stream in the country. The two largest are ACV-CSC (*Algemeen Vakverbond/ Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens*) and ABVV-FGTB (*Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond/ Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique*), belonging to the Christian and the socialist movement respectively; while the smaller ACLVB-CGSLB (*Algemene Centrale der Liberale Vakbonden van België/Centrale Générale des Syndicats Libéraux de Belgique*) is rooted in liberalism. Trade union membership in Belgium is among the highest in Europe with a density of about 50% in 2011 (Visser, 2013). An important explanatory factor is the so-called ‘Ghent system’, which rules that unions are partially responsible for administering unemployment benefits (Vandaele, 2006; Van Rie et al., 2011). Thus, their strong institutional embeddedness contributes to shaping their position as social actors and reinforces their presence in debates on social issues. A remarkable feature of Belgian industrial relations emanates from the divide between the French- and the Dutch-speaking regions, which affects all aspects in society and the ways trade unions are organised. The three trade union federations cover the public and private sector. To do this, ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB set up sectoral divisions, for example for manual workers in the metal and food industry or retail, but also for non-manual workers and public services.¹ In addition, some of the sectoral divisions (especially in ACV-CSC) belong to one language group.

The three trade union confederations are recognized as ‘representative unions’ because of their broad support which enables them to conclude collective agreements and to be consulted by public authorities at the inter-professional level. Belgium has an elaborated system of social dialogue at all levels (inter-professional, sectoral and company). The topic under investigation determines the way in which the representative unions are consulted. For matters concerning

¹ Please note that this organisational structure is likely to change soon because of the reunification of the status of workers and employees (*eenheidsstatuut/status unique*) in Belgium.

labour law social partners are asked for advice in the National Labour Council (NAR/CNT) in which they can also conclude collective agreements. For health and safety issues the social partners are consulted through the High Council for Prevention at Work (*Hoge raad voor bescherming en preventie op het werk/ Conseil supérieure pour la prevention et la protection au travail*). In matters of social and economic importance the Central Economic Council (CBR/CCE) composed of equal numbers of representatives from the worker's and the employer's side is consulted by the government. Alongside these three formal institutions, the so-called 'Group of Ten' (*Groep van tien/ Groupe des dix*) exists for politically sensitive issues, in which the national leaders of the most representative employers' and workers' organisations get together. Every two years they conclude an inter-professional agreement (IPA/AIP) for the entire private sector with measures for 'social progress' (wages, employment, and training).

3.2. Unions' youth engagement: history and structures

Belgium's two major trade union confederations ACV-CSC and ABVV-FTGB have a longstanding, structured tradition of working with youth issues since the 1940s in comparison with the liberal ACLVB-CGSLB, which has set up its formal youth work about five years ago.

ACV-CSC has started a close collaboration with the Christian Youth Movement KAJ-JOC (*Katholieke arbeidersjongeren/Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne*) around the end of WWII (Gerard, 1991). Thereby, ACV-CSC granted considerable financial support to the youth movement. This collaboration proved successful as the union could quickly discern a rise in young members. In 1959, ACV-CSC announced its first five-year youth programme. It principally demanded the possibility of taking cultural leave for young employees (ACV, 2011) and the establishment of separate youth election committees, for example on health and safety. In the 1970s, ACV-CSC finally set up its own proper youth department, stating that organising the youth – no matter if still in education or already working – was the primary aim because of the importance for the union's future (ACV, 1977:32). In order to achieve this goal, the Flemish ACV and the Christian Youth Movement signed another collaboration agreement to create awareness for trade union work and recruit members (Den Hert, 1971). Furthermore, ACV started to create youth committees in its regional branches. Those committees were set up to raise awareness and encourage participation especially by providing union-related education and training (Den Hert, 1971).

The growing importance of the youth within ACV-CSC was further reinforced at the national union congress in April 1985, where attracting the youth and thereby, the rejuvenation of the union, was agreed upon as a strategic goal (Kelber, 1986). From 1999 onwards, ACV-CSC has offered free union membership (called Enter) for young people, students and recent graduates until the age of 25. In 2010, ACV-CSC again strengthened its commitment towards the youth and the rejuvenation of the union in its Resolution 100. Specifically, the resolution envisages various actions and campaigns targeting young people of all educational levels and it encourages works councils to create better company-level regulation for new workers and those on temporary contracts (many young people fall in this category). Additionally, it asks for an improvement of the campaigns and services for job students, a specific programme for highly-educated young people, new actions that should be developed by young activists, the development of training programmes for young union activists to encourage participation in social elections as well as a mentor programme for young activists and a specific communication approach targeted at the youth. Finally, ACV-CSC envisages developing a kind of youth action programme together with the other trade unions and the government, aiming at specific policies pointing towards job starters and therefore, tackling problems like temporary contracts.

ABVV-FTGB started its formal youth work in 1946. Their 'Union charter for the young worker' acknowledged the youth to be a group with specific needs and demands (ABVV, 1946). Particularly, compulsory education until the age of 16, limitation of working hours for those below 18, equal pay for equal work independent of age, limited exposure of young workers to harmful working conditions and representation of young workers in all organisations was demanded. In 1948, the union set up its first youth departments and those quickly joined forces with socialist youth movements in order to broadly reach young people (ABVV, 1951: 123). Furthermore, youth conventions were organised by the union's 'national youth service department', tackling potentially interesting topics for young people, such as the protection of young employees in labour law, apprenticeship systems or youth representation in works councils (ABVV, 1951: 125). In the 1960s, the union attempted to provide better representation for the young workers via the creation of inter-professional youth councils in all provinces in order to raise union awareness and to encourage members to become activists (ABVV, 1965). In the 1970s, the union's youth work was reorganised into two departments separated by language, namely 'ABBV Jongeren' (Flemish) and 'Jeunes FTGB' (French) (ABVV, 1972: 259). When the Belgian government decided to appoint separate ministers of national education and culture for Flanders and Wallonia, the union's youth departments increasingly drifted apart.

This structure has persisted until today. Since about a decade, ABVV-FTGB has offered free membership for young people in education aged between 15 and 25 years called 'Magik'.

In contrast to ACV-CSC and ABVV-FTGB, ACLVB-CGSLB does not have a long tradition in formally working with youth issues. A separate youth department was set up only in 2010, with three employees covering Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia. Similar to the two other trade union confederations, the liberal union has also offered free membership for young people in education aged between 16 and 25. This membership formula is called 'FreeZbe'.

Nowadays, ACV-CSC, ABVV-FTGB and ACLVB-CGSLB use the following youth structures. Each confederation has a specific department or section for the youth, with union officers solely working on such issues. In the case of ACV-CSC and ABVV-FTGB, there are two national representatives, one for the country's Dutch- and one for the French-speaking part. Furthermore, there is at least one regional youth representative in every province, working rather independently from the national level. The national and regional representatives of each language zone meet regularly to coordinate the youth work. This is different in the liberal trade union, which employs three national representatives, one for Brussels (part-time), one for Flanders (full-time) and one for Wallonia (part-time). Youth representatives at the regional level, in contrast, are mostly volunteers taking up this role on top of their normal function. Thus, all unions divide their youth work by following the language-related divisions in Belgium. There is also an additional reason for this division, since Wallonia grants subsidies for youth work. As *CSC Jeunes* and *Jeunes FTGB* are recognized as youth organisations, they are equally financed by internal union funds and subsidies provided by Wallonia. In contrast, the unions' Flemish youth sections are entirely funded internally. In general, the representatives of the Christian and socialist trade union confederations are satisfied with their internal youth structures.

"I cannot ask for more – we have the best youth structures in the world." (ACV-CSC representative)

On the contrary, because of a shorter history of relationship with the youth, the liberal union had less time to establish well-functioning national and regional youth structures internally. In recent years, they have set up their formal youth work by creating information material based on a corporate design, or by establishing a facebook page. Moreover, the union still works on advancing the

position of the youth work internally by stressing its relevance since this is not yet acknowledged by everyone.

“Internally, we could still do more for the youth. When we started our work, we had to struggle to be taken seriously, but our voice has become more important internally. Although we can make ourselves heard, we still need to convince people and be patient.” (ACLVB-CGSLB representative)

Thus, the different Belgian unions are at different stages regarding their youth work. While the Christian and socialist union confederations have well-established structures, the liberal trade union is still building up its youth work. Generally, the unions are highly aware of the youth problematic and its potential consequences. The youth is in need of protection because it is particularly exposed to unemployment, difficult school-to-work transitions and temporary contracts. Therefore, enhancing the position of young people in the labour market can be viewed as an important objective trade unions strive to realize. Furthermore, engaging in youth topics and youth work is also important regarding the future of unions, as young people are needed as potential new members. At the same time, the unions need to organise those young people in order to effectively represent their interests, as membership is an essential precondition for interest representation.

“Who has the youth, has the future.” (ACV-CSC representative)

Without a continuous influx of new members, the future of trade unions could potentially be endangered. Thus, the logic consequence is that unions have a great interest in increasing membership among the young generation.

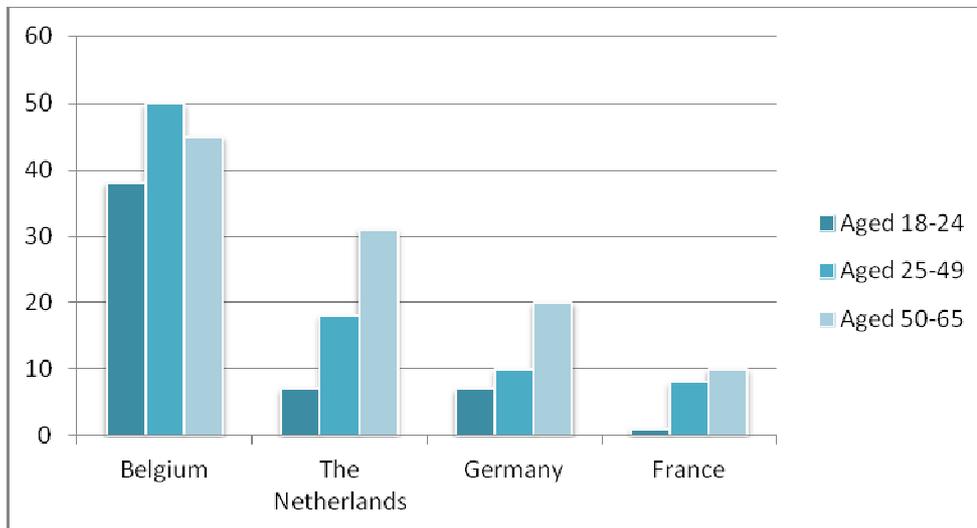
3.3. Trade union membership patterns

Trade union membership has been relatively stable in Belgium with about 50% of density in 2012 (Visser, 2013; see Eurofound, 2010 for more information). In contrast to most other European countries, trade union membership is hardly fragmented, meaning that there are no remarkable differences between sectors and age groups (Eurofound, 2010). A crucial reason contributing to the unions’ strength could be their institutional embeddedness. It is important to emphasise that the Belgian unions are involved in social security management by handling unemployment benefits as typical part of the ‘Ghent system’ (Vandaele, 2006). This system provides the unions with more resources and organisational interest in defending unemployment insurance as a key channel

for maintaining high unionisation. This certainly contributes to maintaining the relatively high union density. Additionally, Belgian unions are strongly present in the workplaces, especially in large firms, via union-dominated works councils.

A wide range of international studies (i.e. Visser, 2002; Visser, 2006 or Ebbinghaus, 2002) point out the low unionisation levels of the youth. Following these accounts, it seems that unions fail to get access to young people, i.e. due to their presence in hard-to-reach sectors and small companies. Since the chance to become a trade union member is at its highest when starting to work, it is crucial to attract young people at the beginning of their career (Daalder and Van Rij, 1996; Huiskamp and Smulders, 2010; Visser, 1996). However, membership patterns are generally described to be U-shaped, meaning that the incidence of union membership is lower among the youth, rises with age and declines when approaching the end of the career (Liagre & Van Gyes, 2012). Although the U-shape is most prominently the case for the Scandinavian countries, it also occurs in Belgium. Regardless of the reasons for not reaching the youth, the implications for trade unions are problematic, as a lack of young members could threaten their existence in the long run. Based on the European Social Survey figure 3 reports union membership data by age group.

Figure 3 – Trade union membership by age group (in %)



Source: *European Social Survey (2012)*, in *Liagre and Guys (2012)*

Although figure 3 indicates Belgium’s decent position in comparison to its neighbouring countries, it still emphasizes the lower affiliation levels of young

people. Based on such data and empirical studies (i.e. Blanchflower, 2007), it can be assumed that age has an impact on trade union membership. As illustrated in table 4, we could identify some relevant numerical differences among the Belgian unions regarding youth membership.

Table 4 – Trade union membership in total and for the youth over time

	ACV-CSC in total (below 25)	ACV-CSC youth	ABVV-FTGB total	ABVV-FTGB youth (below 30)	ACLVB- CGSLB total	ACLVB- CGSLB youth (below 25)
2002	1 536 723	-	1 286 968	8 741	232 823	3492
2003	1 563 935	-	1 311 446	10 429	233 654	3 505
2004	1 587 825	-	1 347 704	13 733	237 444	3 562
2005	1 601 279	174 166	1 368 821	15 452	251 512	3 773
2006	1 616 146	-	1 415 403	20 678	258 756	3 881
2007	1 635 579	-	1 434 527	24 989	265 309	3 980
2008	1 645 068	174 278	1 455 454	26 760	266 200	3 993
2009	1 658 188	168 758	1 481 614	28 434	268 455	4 027
2010	1 665 217	167 136	1 503 748	28 285	274 308	4 115
2011	-	-	1 517 538	29 889	-	-
2012	-	-	1 536 306	29 707	-	-
<i>Source</i>	<i>Faniel and Vandaele, 2012</i>	<i>ACV yearbooks of 2006, 2009, 2010, 2012</i>	<i>ABVV (2013)</i>	<i>ABVV (2013)</i>	<i>Faniel and Vandaele (2012)</i>	<i>Faniel and Vandaele (2012)</i>

Source: Own illustration

Membership in general in ACV-CSC and ABVV-FTGB has been quite stable with about 1.5 million members each. The liberal union ACLVB-CGSLB has increased its membership from about 230,000 to 275,000 in the past decade. However, there are interesting patterns to report with regard to youth membership (below 25 years). While it has been pretty stable in ACV-CSC with about 170,000 and ACLVB-CGSLB with about 4,000 members, the socialist union ABVV-FTGB could remarkably increase its share of young members. Starting from 8,741 members younger than 25 years in 2002, it could triple its youth membership within 10 years, leading to 29,707 members in 2012. How could this rise in members be explained?

Increasing the unions' attractiveness for the youth is considered pivotal to encourage membership. As illustrated in figure 3, youth membership figures are lower compared to older workers although the gap in Belgium is by far smaller than in its neighbouring countries. Still, the unions consider encouraging young people to join a trade union as a challenge.

“The recruitment of new young members is challenging, retaining them is a bigger challenge. Certainly, encouraging young members to become activists is very difficult.” (ACV-CSC representative)

Thus, in addition to the numerous events organised for young people (see next chapter), trade unions have started to offer free membership for those still in education until the age of 25 in the late 1990s. The free membership formulas *Enter* (ACV-CSC), *Magik* (ABVV-FTGB) and *FreeZbe* (ACLVB-CGSLB) entitle all young people who are affiliated to the same rights as paying members. Those membership formulas should create more awareness among the youth for the unions' work, make membership more attractive and create a possibility to easily make contact with the union. All members get access to information, for example on student work (i.e. taxation), internships and student subsidies. Furthermore, the unions provide support in terms of school-to-work transitions and for those who recently started to work, advice in terms of employment contracts, youth vacation and other youth-specific regulations. Finally, members can enjoy free legal protection, for example in case of problems in their student job. Thus, the first and foremost aim of these initiatives is creating awareness among the youth before actually starting to work, in order to accompany them on their way from school to work and from free to paid union membership. Even though the interviewees agree on the necessity of offering free membership, they are not entirely satisfied with its outcomes. On the one hand, the influx of new members is still limited and on the other hand, the transition from free to paid membership does not go smoothly in many cases.

“At the moment, we are not satisfied with the transition rates from free to paid membership. That's why we currently evaluate Enter.” (ACV-CSC representative)

While all three unions work around attracting new members (see chapter 4), it is remarkable that structured initiatives to retain new members are absent. However, it might be worth investing more into keeping those members in order to stabilize membership figures in the long-run. At the same time, it might be easier to keep someone who is already affiliated compared to attracting a new member.

The lower incidence of trade union membership among the youth may also lead to a lower presence in company-level representation structures. However, according to Belgian legislation (article 25 in the law on social elections) the youth (aged between 18 and 25 years at the day of the social elections) is entitled to specific company-level representation mandates (*jongeren mandaat/mandat jeunes*). The number of mandates depends on both company size and the number of young people within the workforce. The related regulation is displayed in table 5. Generally, youth representatives are voted for in the social elections based on a separate list (if the conditions outlined in table 5 are fulfilled), taking place every four years. If elected, the youth representatives get a seat in the works council and the health and safety committee.

Table 5 – Youth mandates in Belgian companies

Number of employees in the company	Number of young employees (aged below 25) in the company	Number of mandates for the youth
Less than 101	25-50	1
	More than 50	2
101-500	25-100	1
	More than 100	2
More than 500	25-150	1
	150-300	2
	More than 300	3

Source: Vanachter (2007)

The Belgian legislation has created structures for youth representation at the company level, and unions arguably have an interest in encouraging activism among their members. Activism in general can take various shapes, but in case of the social elections, unions search for members who are willing to run as candidates. The existence of youth mandates is positively evaluated by trade unions. In detail, ACV-CSC points out that without specific mandates, young people would face difficulty to become candidate and get elected in the social elections. This is due to the fact that the previous union delegations would probably favour older and more experienced candidates at the expense of the youth. The youth mandates counteract such tendencies and this contributes to the rejuvenation of company-level representation and union structures. However, trade unions face a particular challenge to motivate young people to engage in activism. The unions agree that there is no standard procedure to find and motivate suitable candidates, but that interesting topics on the agenda, a good

atmosphere, motivated delegates and communicating successful results can be helpful.

“Well, how do we get people engaged? We need to create a good identity and a good dynamic ... it’s like having fun with friends. And we attract them with issues that are not necessarily linked to unions, such as trainings about social media, festival tickets and so on. This works like a door opener.” (ACV-CSC representative)

“The first contact is mostly made by older delegates in the companies. If the young people show interest, they are invited to take part in information evenings and so on. Everything depends on the guidance of older delegates, so their role is crucial.” (ACLVB- CGSLB representative)

“Young people only become active when they see results. Hence, you have to show that their commitment can make a difference and that their actions can have an impact on their lives. It is very important but often forgotten to present results, to show what could be achieved.” (ACV-CSC representative)

Until now, the Belgian trade unions have not set up specific and structured programmes to encourage trade union activism. There could be two reasons for this: On the one hand, the interviewees agree that there is no ‘standard’ way to find and encourage potential activists to run for the social elections. Thus, a ‘standard programme’ for potential activists might not create the desired results. On the other hand, the unions’ priority on visibility and attracting young members might have led to the fact that they neglected the topic of activism. To date, interested potential activists follow various trainings, but a formal kind of long-term encouragement and training strategy does not exist.

“Training and education of young activists is crucial. We need to bring them together, form a real group, and create companionship. Young activists also need to feel supported and not lonely.” (ABVV-FTGB representative)

ABVV-FTGB has attempted to give its activist working more structure and therefore, set up the so-called ‘Working Class Heroes’ initiative. It represents a network of young activists (aged until 35) that gives information and regularly arranges or encourages actions (e.g. making a movie together). Social media are used as primary communication tools. Furthermore, information can be easily exchanged between young activists in the established network. Bringing together young union activists in an own loose network is likely to add value to their work. However, this cannot solve the problem of recruiting new activists, as the network has been established for actual and not potential activists.

The most important period for encouraging activism is certainly prior to the social elections, which take place every four years. However, if trade union actions to encourage activism are limited to the period of the social elections, this could explain the relatively low number of young people running as candidate. Young people could get the impression that they fulfil the function of ‘fill-ins’ to complete the youth list or closing the gaps on this list if activism is only encouraged once every four years. Unions, however, could increase their credibility in this respect by actively promoting activism regularly and not only in four-year terms.

“Certainly, the period of the social elections is the most important time to gain attention. But social elections only take place every four years, and what we would need is a constant effort.” (ABVV-FTGB representative)

This quote exemplifies that the unions are aware of the necessity of constant efforts to encourage youth activism. However, this idea has not yet been translated into actions in practice. Yet, if the unions want to retain their strong position in society, they should think beyond membership and find ways to promote activism, as this is at least equally important. Furthermore, the ‘constant effort’ that is required does not only relate to encouraging, but also to retaining activism. This is particularly the case for candidates who were not elected and are therefore potentially discouraged in retaining their activism. However, it could be crucial for the unions to not lose these people.

“We give specific training also to those union activists that were not elected. We try to strengthen their commitment by giving them a role; they get an antenna function to be prepared for later – we cannot afford losing them.” (ACV-CSC representative)

The quote suggests that unions have realized the need of motivating non-elected activists to go further. Therefore, they offer various trainings and attempt to ‘give them a role’, like becoming a leader of a regional youth group. Yet, such initiatives still lack a structured character and it remains uncertain if they cover all non-elected activists and if they are generally enough to overcome an election defeat and to remain active.

Even though unions struggle to encourage activism at the workplace-level, there has been a positive development regarding internal structures and the acceptance of young candidates. This is important since the general acceptance of young people as ‘equal’ members in trade unions and among trade union activists could be strengthened.

“Ten years ago, there was quite some resistance against the youth, as older employees might lose their seat in the social elections to a young activist. Fortunately, this has changed and seen the fact that many young people stayed in our organisation, they nowadays facilitate openings to other young people since they have not forgotten how hard it was for them to get in.” (ABVV-FTGB representative)

3.4. Why is union membership lower among the youth?

The lower union membership among the youth could stem from various reasons. In this respect, empirical data generally points to the public image of unions and the lack of knowledge about them as obstacles to membership.

“Unions are not sexy.” (ACV-CSC representative)

This quote and the collected empirical data highlight the negative image of Belgian unions nowadays. Respondents pointed out that this image is particularly created by the media in two ways: On the one hand, the media mainly cover strike activities of the unions, but successful negotiations and new collective agreements are hardly in their focus. Furthermore, news on strikes hardly explain the underlying reasons, but rather report on the consequences for the public, such as traffic congestions. This is likely to let the public perceive union activity as principally going on strike, even though strike numbers are at a historical low in Belgium (Vandaele, 2012).

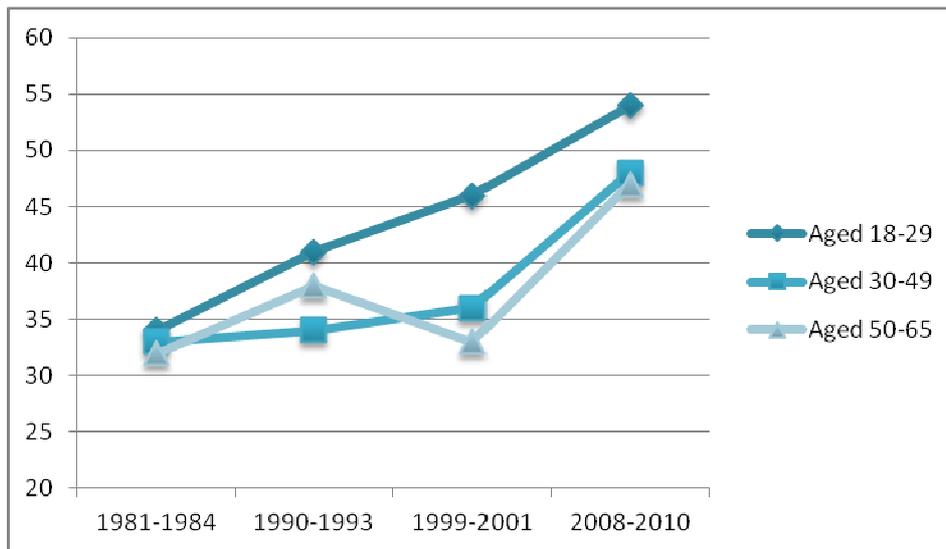
“Those young people who know what a trade union is will think about strikes in the first place. Anyway, many school leavers do not even know what a trade union is.” (ACV-CSC representative)

On the other hand, the image of unions created by the media is one of “old men in coloured jackets” (ACV-CSC representative). Young unionists are only rarely in the media focus, and that creates a view on unions where older members prevail. This has implications for the youth and their perception of trade unions. If unions are dominated by older members, they will especially represent them. So why would young people join a union?

Apart from the interviews, various international studies (i.e. Alivin and Sverke, 2000; Beck and Fitzenberger, 2003; D’Art and Turner, 2008, 2012) claim that the rather negative attitude of the youth towards trade unions can be used to explain their hesitation to become a member. However, Belgian data does not support this hypothesis, as shown in figure 4. Hence, the data rather confirms the

argument put forward by Freeman and Diamond (2003), claiming that the youth has a positive attitude towards trade unions. Belgian data indicates that the confidence in unions has even increased over time, thereby emphasizing the particularly positive view of young people. Keeping this finding in mind, one key question remains: Why is membership among the youth lower although young people seem to have confidence in unions? A range of international studies (such as Waddington and Kerr, 2002 or Haynes et al., 2005) points out that unions simply do not reach the youth and therefore, cannot effectively encourage them to participate. Even though several interviewees highlighted that the unions' public appearances might not be particularly appealing for the youth, it is hardly plausible that this will prevent them from becoming members.

Figure 4 – Share of the working population (in %) having confidence in trade unions in Belgium over time



Source: *European Value Survey 1981-1984, 1990-1993, 1999-2001, 2008-2010 in Liagre and Gyes (2012)*

Thus, it makes sense to have a look at specific motives for joining a trade union in order to explain the lower youth membership figures. Specifically, De Witte and Cossey (1987a, 1987b) and De Witte (1988) highlight three principle motives in this respect:

- a) *Instrumental motive*: Individuals join a union since it provides services and support; moreover, unions protect them in case of conflicts at work. Hence, membership is based on rational choice (Kahmann, 2002).

- b) *Social motive*: Individuals join a union due to belonging to certain groups and networks. The decision to become a union member can especially be influenced by family, friends and colleagues. Being asked to join a union by such peers is likely to have a positive effect on membership decisions.
- c) *Ideological motive*: Individuals join a union due to being convinced of a certain ideology, i.e. the belief in collectivism and social justice. Individuals who see such values realized by trade unions and their work are likely to become members.

According to several studies (i.e. Van de Vall, 1963; De Witte, 1988, 1995; Butaye, 1986), particularly instrumental and social motives are essential when explaining membership decisions, whereas ideological motives rather inspire the choice for a specific union (Kahmann, 2002). Furthermore, ideological motives are supposed to be more widespread among older workers (de Bie et al., 1966). Various international studies (Bryson et al., 2005; Gomez et al., 2002) point out that instrumental motives prevail for the youth, as joining a trade union is mostly a rational choice based on cost-benefit considerations. Our empirical data widely confirm those research results. Instrumental motives seem to prevail in the Belgian context, and membership is widely perceived as a kind of insurance.

“Membership is seen as an insurance against what can go wrong; it could be described as the ‘cheapest lawyer’.” (ACV-CSC representative)

Instrumental motives for union membership can also be associated with the Ghent-system. The linkage between unemployment insurance and trade unions provides a strong incentive to join a union. Although unemployment benefits can actually be received without being a member (via de *hulpkas/caisse auxiliaire*) the services provided by unions can be seen as beneficial (i.e. less paper work, faster receipt of benefits), especially for those young people who are unemployed or with lacking job stability. Furthermore, the price of membership is an aspect to be considered when deciding to join a union. While research on the Netherlands (Huiskamp and Smulders, 2010) shows that the cost of membership could be an obstacle, it can be assumed to be less hindering in Belgium. On the one hand, trade unions only charge about 15 Euro a month, and on the other hand, there are membership subsidies in many sectors which pay back parts of the paid fees at the end of the year (*syndicale premie/prime syndicale*).

Additionally, social motives can determine membership decisions as well. Empirical data point out that affiliation is more likely for those young people whose parents are trade union members.

“Unless their parents are union members, young people do not know anymore what a trade union is and what a trade union does.” (ABVV-FTGB representative)

Since trade unions are aware of the fact that the family can encourage membership decisions, they have attempted to make use of it. On the one hand, ‘family days’ are annually organized for union members’ families. In this context, affiliation of their children is promoted. On the other hand, trade unions directly target members with children aged 16 and older in order to promote their free membership initiatives. Ideological motives, however, hardly seem to play a role in young people’s membership decisions. In fact, trade unions fear that presenting themselves as too ideology-driven might even have adverse effects.

“Young people view trade unions differently than older members. Therefore, we try to keep ideology at a minimum. For instance, in trainings, we don’t extensively study Marx and Lenin anymore.” (ABVV-FTGB representative)

International research also sought to explain why young people join or do not join trade unions. Specifically, a study of Waddington and Whitston (1997) in the UK on the reasons for becoming a trade union member among newly-recruited and the methods used for recruitment is worth mentioning. The main reasons for membership are problems at work; this is even more important than for example better pay levels and working conditions. This corresponds to the importance of instrumental motives when explaining why people join unions. Furthermore, the results also demonstrate that young people are more interested in industrial benefits, professional service and training, compared to the older age groups. Conversely, there is an adverse effect when looking at ideology, as this motive is particularly important for older workers. Considering the methods of recruitment, one issue needs to be emphasized: Instead of taking initiative and making contact themselves, the youth mostly relies on contact made by the union or on recommendations, e.g. of friends, managers or in the context of training classes, which highlights the importance of social motives. Older employees are more likely to directly get in touch with the union and actively seek support.

4. Trade unions and the youth: challenges and actions

4.1. Representation, youth aspects and collective bargaining

Employment-related youth issues are a topic on Belgium's political agenda and therefore, trade unions have an interest in strengthening the position of young people in the labour market by promoting action at this level. In order to achieve their objectives, the three trade unions mostly join forces to incorporate their ideas in the political discourse.

“When it comes to the national level, we work together with the other unions to lobby behind the scenes.” (ACV-CSC representative)

In recent years, an important topic on the political agenda has been the reform of the unemployment benefits system. In Belgium, young people who cannot find a job after leaving school can ask for specific financial assistance (*inschakelingsuitkering/allocation d'insertion*) after a certain waiting period (*beroepsinschakelingstijd/stage d'insertion professionnelle*). When the recent economic and financial crisis hit Belgium, this system was put under enormous pressure. Some politicians demanded a reform while others opted for its abolition. The unions, however, wanted to keep the system at any price in order to not risk the impoverishment of the youth and to give perspectives, but they knew that due to the difficult situation caused by the crisis, a reform was inevitable. In the end, the system was kept but with two wide-reaching changes. On the one hand, the waiting time to be entitled to the assistance was prolonged from nine to twelve months and on the other hand, the duration of the entitlement was limited to three years. This regulation is still being discussed at the national level and further changes are likely. A little change came into effect in spring 2014, ruling that the particularly vulnerable groups among the youth (i.e. those with medical or mental problems) are entitled to get financial assistance for five instead of three years. Such lobbying activities at the top-level are not only crucial for the youth, but also for the unions, as they can be seen as a way to demonstrate that the youth matters and that unions are able to effectively represent the interests of young people. However, such activities mainly take place in the background and are not easily visible for the (young) public.

“When we discussed the law on unemployment benefits, we wanted young people to know about that. So we send a delegation of them to the minister and put the corresponding video on youtube. We need to show what we do, and that there are not only old men with grey beards in suits talking to the minister.” (ABVV-FTGB representative)

The debate about the reform of the unemployment benefit systems can also be linked to the unions’ role as service provider in the Ghent system. The unions certainly had an interest in keeping the specific benefits for the youth, as they are allowed to pay them out as well. Hence, losing this system would have meant a loss of attractiveness towards the youth. In other words, the unions would have lost young ‘customers’ in need of help regarding unemployment benefits, and therefore, probably also young members. Thus, the unions’ lobbying initiatives did not only ensure that the system was reformed instead of abolished, but also stabilized the unions’ role as service providers in Belgium.

Youth aspects are almost absent in collective labour agreements in Belgium. Only two specific issues are regulated via such agreements: youth wages and specific training policies for young people at risk.

Firstly, the regulation regarding youth wages is currently changing, and the cause for these changes exemplifies the unions’ role and position in the Group of Ten. Unions have attempted to incorporate youth issues in this committee comprising top-representatives of the social partners, concluding inter-professional agreements every two years. In the 2007-negotiations, the unions demanded for the first time the abolition of the comparatively lower youth minimum wages until the age of 21. In these days, the National Labour Council’s collective labour agreements 43 and 50 ruled that minimum wages were 6% lower for those aged 20, 12% for those aged 19 and 18% for those aged 18 compared to older workers. Hence, there was a 6%-change per year until the age of 22, when the wages of young people eventually reached an equal level compared to older workers. The unions, however, could not convince the other parties at the bargaining table of their position towards youth wages back in 2007. The crisis arguably changed priorities of the social partners, but youth wages were again put on the agenda in 2013. By then, the unions could persuade the other parties at the bargaining table. As a result, several agreements were concluded that will step-by-step abolish youth wages for those being aged 18 and older. Specifically and starting from a 6% yearly change rate, this percentage was reduced to 4% by April 2013, to 2% by January 2014 and will reach 0% by January 2015. Hence, this illustrates that trade unions also attempt to integrate youth aspects into the

discussions of the Group of Ten and subsequently, into inter-professional agreements.

Secondly, the youth is frequently considered as risk group in sector-level collective agreements. This is due to the inter-professional agreement of November 18th, 1988, regulating that the employers need to pay 0.18% of all gross wages to be spent on employing and training groups at risk. Thereby, the Joint Committees themselves give a definition of their sector-specific risk groups. Many sectors consider sub-groups of the youth to be at risk. To cite an example, the food industry defines ‘unemployed and particularly unemployed aged below 30 years’ as group at risk.

4.2. Trade union activism at the micro level: actions and campaigns

4.2.1. Reaching the youth

At the micro-level, activities mostly focus on raising the youth’s awareness about trade union work in order to encourage membership. Various studies revealed that the most important reason for young people for not joining a union is that they were never asked about it (Gallagher, 1999; Waddington and Kerr, 2002; Kahmann, 2002). Thus, trade unions face a situation where they have to raise awareness about their own organisation before they can go a step further and promote the potential benefits of membership. Therefore, unions regularly organize campaigns through the media, in companies, and via the internet to not only promote certain topics, but to also increase their own organisations’ visibility. Especially poster campaigns should reach as many people as possible, and therefore, such posters are for example spread in public transport where they can be seen by a relatively high number of persons. Such campaigns aim for confronting the audience with up-to-date issues that are particularly relevant, also for the youth. To cite an example, ABVV-FTGB Metal annually (every October) campaigns around temporary agency work in the metal sector, as many young people who start working in this sector are employed via agencies. However, such campaigns can hardly guarantee grabbing the attention of young people, because they do not establish personal contact or dialogue between young people and the union. Thus, what could be crucial in this respect is proximity.

“We have to go to the young people instead of the other way around.” (ACV-CSC representative)

Hence, this proximity practically means that unions ‘need to go’ to young people in education, to those searching for a job and to the ones already working or go to places where young people generally gather to make personal contact. This is important, as only dialogue ensures that unions understand the needs of young people, and that the youth gets more aware about union work and the potential benefits of membership. As mentioned in the second chapter, the youth itself is a heterogeneous group, and unions need to find ways to deal with that in their youth work.

“We need to adjust our strategy to the various target groups within the youth. Every audience has its specific challenges.” (ACV-CSC representative)

Various means and actions are used by the Belgian unions in the attempt to reach all target groups within the youth. An overview of selected actions is given in the next section.

4.2.2. Youth-related trade union actions in detail

In general, there are several regular trade union initiatives (e.g. school-leaving lessons, festival work) and numerous ad-hoc actions (e.g. about the European elections 2014 or the European youth guarantee). An overview about selected activities of the past years can be found in table 6.

Table 6 – Overview of selected trade union youth actions

Initiative (date, ad-hoc versus regular)	Brief description	Reasons	Strengths	Problems
<i>Examples for regular initiatives</i>				
School-leaver-lessons (all unions)	Trade unions come to school to teach last year students about the labour market and social security system	Facilitate school-to-work transitions, present the services that unions provide (free membership)	Reaches a high number of people, good way to make a first contact	Labour- and time-intensive
University campus groups (ABVV-FTGB)	Jeunes FTGB install university campus groups with the ultimate aim to fight against inequality in higher	Strong interest representation for students in higher education desired	Good way to make contact with students, different actions and initiatives (also focusing on higher	High importance of ideology could decrease the groups’ attractiveness

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	education		education are arranged)	
Job and study fairs, e.g. SID-in (all unions)	Study information days: Fairs in different cities presenting higher education institutions and job opportunities to last year students	Unions are present in order to spread information about student rights and the labour market in general.	Possibility to contact teachers to promote future school-leaver-lessons, reaches a lot of people in short time	Young people come to the fair to learn more about higher education, the union presence could be irrelevant for them
Festival working (all unions)	Booths at various festivals all over the country; games and quizzes with attractive prizes are frequently organised	Reaching young people in an informal leisure environment, encouraging interactivity by games and quizzes	Reaches a high number of people in short time, good way to present the unions as 'young' and 'fun' organisation	Time- and labour intensive, new members might not be permanent, little actual debate possible
TRANSIT (collaboration of all unions)	Information sessions and a stage play about finding a job based on a collaboration of various actors	Facilitate school-to-work transitions by giving relevant information to young people	Reaches a fair amount of young people due to cooperation with schools	Limited to Antwerp (since 2008), Boom and Mechelen (both since 2014).
FreeZbe Award (ACLVB)	Once a year, a young militant at the company-level is given the FreeZbe award for special engagement, initiatives or actions	Encouragement of activism among young people in companies, reward for good work	Reward for activism could encourage others to follow, short videos of the winners are uploaded on youtube and the FreeZbe homepage	Limited visibility even within the trade union
Examples for ad-hoc actions				
"The voice of Europe", living-room discussions (ACV)	A unionist opens his/her living room to about ten interested people; a (foreign) speaker will give a talk about a European topic which is discussed afterwards	Stimulate (youth-related) discussions about relevant European topics	In-depth discussion of potentially interesting topics to provide a new perspective, personal atmosphere due to being in a living-room	Limited number of participants, difficultly to find unionists to open their living-room for an evening
Smartphone application launch event	Students were encouraged to gather at a public	The application gives access to information about	Reached about 500 users, way of the union to	Same information provided as in the paper brochures,

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(ABVV)	square by offering free French fries; all students who downloaded the new app took part in a contest with an iPad as main prize	student work, labour market issues and youth-related legislation	demonstrate that they open up for new forms of technology and media	relatively expensive event
Black book temporary agency work (ACV)	A book with testimonies and experiences of young temporary agency workers	Making the public aware of the situation of young agency workers	Easily understandable publication with a lot of quotes (emotionalizing), high media attention	Difficult to ensure that the book is actually read
European demonstration, Brussels 04.04.14 (all unions)	Manifestation arranged by ETUC for a strong social Europe	Protest against social dumping and inequality, call for more means to fight youth unemployment	Highly visible, many participants due to collaboration of all unions	A few violent participants negatively influenced the action and its media coverage
'Dig a hole and win a keg beer' (<i>Graaf een gat, win een vat</i>) (ACV)	'Treasure hunt' – hints are given for answering questions about student work correctly, leading to one of 50 kegs of beer	Reaching higher educated young people and at the same time motivating them to learn about student work.	Possibility of involving youth movements, good first contact point, entertaining initiative	Participation only possible in groups, alcohol as mode of encouragement could be questionable
Action 'Gala de Catch : Studentator contre Super chômeur' (CSC)	Young militants displayed a 'wrestling' match at three public places in Brussels to illustrate competition among different personalities from different groups of workers, with the 'big boss' winning in the end	Illustrate the competition between student workers and regular workers that lose their job due to modification of the student work law in 2012	Creative way of demonstrating and making a point, high public visibility	Reached only a limited amount of participants, relatively high amount of work to organize the event

Some of the union activities focus on specific target groups within the heterogeneous youth. Those still attending school are primarily targeted by so-called school-leaver-lessons. Details are given in table 7.

Table 7 – School-leaver lessons

School-leaver-lessons (offered by all unions)
<p><i>Description:</i> The three trade unions offer such lessons for all school types to introduce and explain important aspects about the Belgian labour market and social security system to young people. The Flemish ACV reaches about 15,000 students with this action every year, and the Flemish ABVV about 1,500. This numeric difference is due to the fact that schools invite trade unions to give those classes and therefore choose only one union.</p> <p><i>Objectives:</i> Those lessons aim at giving neutral information, and it is not the objective to convince young people about the relevance of a particular trade union and the importance of membership. Still, the material used in such presentations and the information brochures distributed in the context of school-leaver-lessons clearly belong to the union giving the lesson.</p> <p><i>Participants:</i> Last year students of all types of schools.</p> <p><i>Strengths and weaknesses:</i> School-leaver lessons contribute to increasing the unions' visibility vis-à-vis the youth, raise awareness about union-related topics and shape the young attendees' first impression. Even though a relatively high number of school-leavers can be reached, those lessons are time- and labour-intensive for the unions.</p>

Additionally, trade unions are present at study- and job-fairs, and there are regular ad-hoc events to target school leavers. A very successful example in this respect is the so-called TRANSIT-project in Antwerp which has existed since 2008 to facilitate school-to-work transitions. The three unions and other organisations have joint forces to realize the event. Further information is provided in table 8.

Table 8 – TRANSIT school-leaving days

TRANSIT school-leaving days (Antwerp, annually since 2008)
<p><i>Description:</i> The TRANSIT project is a prime example of a successful collaboration among various organisations around the topic of school-to-work transitions. The event has been initiated by RESOC Antwerp (the regional socio-economic council) and joined by VDAB (Flemish employment service), RVA (national employment office), PWA Antwerp (employment service for low-skilled persons), UNIZO (employer association) and the regional organisations of the three trade union federations. Those organisations collaborate in two ways to successfully run the project. On the one hand, they jointly finance TRANSIT and on the other hand, they put together</p>

their employment-related knowledge to create an interesting half-a-day programme for young people which is structured as follows: After a 20 minutes kick-off presentation of the VDAB about the administrative aspects of the labour market entry, the programme continues with a 60 minutes stage play in which two professional actors present various job interview situations in a funny but informative way, leading to recommendations about do's and don'ts when applying for jobs. Furthermore, they attempt to raise the participants' awareness for the services provided by VDAB. Afterwards, the participants are split into small groups to attend workshops of about 80 minutes about social security in Belgium, given by representatives of RVA or one of the unions.

Objectives:

The main goal is facilitating school-to-work transitions by giving relevant information, raising awareness and sensitizing young people about various work-related subjects, for example employment contracts, youth-related labour regulation or social security. At the same time, TRANSIT enables school-leavers to get in touch with key labour market actors.

Participants:

Last-year students and their teachers in schools in Antwerp and the surroundings are invited. While the project initially focused on BSO- and TSO-graduates, the 2014-edition was also open for ASO-graduates. The 2013-edition of TRANSIT reached about 3,000 school leavers.

Strengths and weaknesses:

The use of different methods (interactive workshops, presentations and a stage play) is evaluated positively by the organizers, teachers and the majority of school leavers. Several teachers mentioned that they use their classes to prepare the students for their participation in TRANSIT, and continue discussing the contents afterwards. Hence, TRANSIT has encouraged teachers to incorporate a focus on school-to-work transitions in their curricula. Yet, TRANSIT faces a very heterogeneous target group, as it is open to school leavers of all educational levels. Even if some sub-groups appreciate the contents, some others might not feel attracted. Especially for ASO-graduates, the information provided could be too basic.

Remarks:

Although TRANSIT has been highly successful in Antwerp, realizing the project in other cities and communities is difficult, as the organisations involved are not necessarily interested in this kind of 'neutral' collaboration, according to the project managers in Antwerp. Regarding the unions, they need to overcome their sense of competition for new members to make such a project a success. In Antwerp, the unions decide beforehand which topics are covered by brochures from which union in order to be equally represented. In 2014, two more Flemish cities (Boom and Mechelen) initiated their own TRANSIT projects based on the Antwerp-example. Further information are provided here: <http://www.transitweb.be/wp/>

For those young people who are already working, the trade unionists and works councillors in the companies are the first contact points. For those attending higher education, there are trade union campus groups at some Belgian universities. Those are particularly widespread in the French-speaking part of the country, where predominantly Jeunes FTGB established them. Their members

arrange various events about subjects linked to higher education or more general, to raise awareness for youth-related topics in the Belgian society. Further information is displayed in table 9.

Table 9 – Trade union student groups at university

Les étudiants FGTB (campus groups at university)
<p><i>Description</i></p> <p>FTGB's student movement has established groups at the country's French-speaking universities since 1966. They are particularly strong at the Free University of Brussels (ULB) and the Catholic University Louvain (UCL). 'Les étudiants FGTB' is a sub-group within Jeunes FTGB. The topics they deal with are twofold: On the one hand, it could be greater societal topics of interest for the youth (e.g. youth unemployment); on the other hand, they could be linked to the specific situation of the students. An example would be the actions at ULB in 2012, when the members organised protests against the planned privatization of student housing.</p> <p><i>Objectives:</i></p> <p>By mainly dealing with topics relevant for the youth and arranging actions about them, the activists attempt to raise awareness among their fellow students and encourage membership. Ideologically, those student groups aim at fighting social inequality (i.e. regarding university access and the cost of education) in order to achieve the intellectual emancipation of all individuals in society.</p> <p><i>Participants:</i></p> <p>University students</p> <p><i>Strengths and weaknesses:</i></p> <p>Student groups at university can arrange highly-specific actions fitting to their specific target group. This specificity could make it relatively easy to reach fellow students. Yet, many of their actions are ideologically-driven. As mentioned before, using ideology to attract potential members mainly works for older persons, but could be difficult regarding young people.</p> <p><i>Remarks:</i></p> <p>Further information can be found at http://unionsyndicaleetudiante.be/</p>

Furthermore, there are various trade union activities in places where young people gather. A prime example in the Belgian context is the so called 'festival working' of all trade union confederations, as illustrated in table 10.

"Being present at a festival has a low return in terms of membership, but it can be interesting for image building." (ACV-CSC representative)

The rationale behind the unions' festival working is not only membership, but increasing visibility and creating a 'young' image.

Table 10 – Festival working of all trade union confederations

Festival working (all unions)
<p><i>Description:</i> Trade unions are present at all major Belgian music festivals (e.g. Rock Werchter, Pukkelpop or Dour Festival) with an own booth. Mostly, young militants are sent to these festivals lasting several days and are required to work in shifts at the union’s booth and in return, they often get a free ticket for the festival.</p> <p><i>Objectives:</i> Trade unions attempt to increase awareness about their organisations, distribute information materials and promote (free) membership.</p> <p><i>Participants:</i> Young people visiting music festivals.</p> <p><i>Strengths and weaknesses:</i> The unions’ festival work reaches a high number of young people in short time. Furthermore, participation in quizzes and games organized there is encouraged by the possibility of winning attractive prizes (i.e. smartphone, tablet). Those activities are mostly linked to the unions’ facebook pages, where pictures are posted by the unions and additional prizes can be won if participants share those pictures on their personal facebook pages. However, people tend to be tipsy at those festivals and therefore, affiliation might happen in a non-sober condition. This leads to the fact that after the festival, people may tend to directly cancel their union membership again.</p>

4.2.3. Which problems do trade unions face nowadays regarding the youth?

Although the unions have developed a wide range of different initiatives and actions for various target groups to encourage young people to join their organisations, empirical data shows that they face various problems. Three challenges are worth mentioning: firstly, encouraging participation in actions in general; secondly, reaching those young people employed in small companies and hard-to-reach sectors and thirdly, the high incidence of temporary contracts among the youth.

Firstly, empirical data demonstrates that it has become more difficult to motivate young people to take part in actions and initiatives organised by trade unions.

“Previously, it was easy to attract 400, 500 people to attend our ad-hoc events. Nowadays, we are happy if 150 people are there.” (ACV-CSC representative)

Hence, unions have started to not only evaluate the success of their actions based on the number of participants anymore. Other factors such as media presence and impact, feedback given by participants or the general feeling of the unionists being present are taken into consideration as well. What could explain the lower numbers of participants nowadays is the shift from ideological to instrumental motives when thinking about membership. Especially in the period after the Second World War, ideology was the core motive to join a trade union, and this ideology also kept the movement together. Nowadays, young people predominantly join trade unions due to instrumental motives, and this has a consequence: the youth is mostly interested in trade unions as service providers, and less interested in the movement and mobilization. If young people cannot be attracted by the idea of a movement anymore, it could work via interesting topics. Unions could focus on something young people suffer from like temporary contracts or youth unemployment, but also on more general topics of societal interest, such as the environment, pollution or climate change. Drawing from our interviews, young people are easier to attract to participate in union initiatives if they deal with such subjects. Although climate change, for instance, is not necessarily a traditional union matter, trade unions can demonstrate their openness towards those more general societal topics, sharpen their profile and position themselves better by focusing on such issues.

“We need to acknowledge that young people have different values than older members. They identify themselves with post-materialistic values such as happiness or equality. They only participate if the values they are interested in are present in a movement ... society does not adapt to us, we need to adapt to society.” (ABVV-FTGB representative)

The Belgian unions have started to react to this by increasing the diversity of topics they focus upon. For example, ABVV-FTGB and ACV-CSC have begun to engage in ‘green’ subjects. Furthermore, the unions nowadays try *“to keep ideology at a minimum”* (ABVV-FTGB representative). Finally, quite a number of the aforementioned actions and initiatives emphasize the unions’ role as service provider, and this could especially address the instrumental motives which seem to prevail for the membership decisions of young people nowadays. Hence, unions have arguably tried to make themselves more interesting for the youth by addressing their rather instrumental motives and by focusing on greater societal topics. However, employment remains the unions’ core subject and area of expertise and to date, the linkage between traditional and rather new subjects remains vague.

Secondly, unions have struggled to reach the relatively high number of young people who are employed in small companies and hard-to-reach sectors. Following a study of van der Zee and Vaessen (2002), young people appreciate a strong union presence at both workplace- and sector-level and this poses a particular challenge to trade unions. One reason for this is the Belgian legislation, ruling that works councils are only compulsory in companies with more than 100 employees (please note that sectoral collective agreements could lower this threshold). In practice, this means that young people are over-represented in workplaces without interest representation structures. Furthermore, current developments reinforce this problem, as pointed out by a respondent:

“Large companies become smaller through restructuring, but the threshold for setting up employee representation structures stays the same. Since employment currently mainly grows in small companies, young people are very likely to not be represented by a union delegate at the shop floor. Thus, it is our challenge to find new ways to reach those young people” (ABVV-FTGB representative)

Tackling this challenge might be possible in two ways. Firstly, unions could engage in lobbying at the sector-level for lower employments thresholds for setting up company-level representation structures. If companies downsize, unions may then advocate for amending the thresholds as well. Secondly, unions could try to reach young people employed in such companies and sectors with specific and targeted actions. Even though they are potentially labour-intensive and take time, they could be worth it in order to make contact with those young people working in small companies and hard-to-reach sectors. For example, the liberal union just started setting up a campaign to target young people working in small shops. The reasons for this initiative are twofold. On the one hand, many of those shop assistants are hired via temporary work agencies and on the other hand, the shops are too small to feature compulsory employee representation structures. Therefore, unionists have started to go from door to door to establish contact, distribute information packages, and to make FreeZbe and trade union work in general more known. Thus, there are ways to overcome the problem of small companies and hard-to-reach sectors with a relatively high concentration of young staff. As employment in those hard-to-reach sectors is growing, trade unions should seek ways to promote the importance of representation and membership among the predominantly young people working there.

Thirdly, the high number of young people employed on temporary agency work contracts is evaluated as problematic. Especially newcomers on the Belgian labour market making the transition from school to work are vulnerable for this kind of flexible contractual arrangement. Since such temporary agency jobs

mostly include regularly changing workplaces, union representatives in one workplace encounter difficulties to reach these young people. Empirical data emphasizes another potential problem:

“At the company-level, some of our delegates pay more attention to the permanent staff since they have the social elections in their minds. What happens at the company-level strongly depends on the delegates there.” (ABVV-FTGB representative)

This stresses the importance of the delegates’ attitudes towards agency workers in general. Since they change workplaces rather often, they are not automatically potential voters in the social elections. This could decrease the delegates’ motivation to also effectively represent the young agency workers’ interests. To date, trade unions have not offered specific training to their delegates on these issues. On higher levels, unions have been actively engaged in campaigns around temporary agency work and successfully negotiated sector- and company-level agreements increasing the protection of those workers. Although temporary agency work can be seen as a stepping stone into permanent employment in Belgium, unions are still interested in limiting the use of this form of work to a minimum in order to avoid large numbers of young people entering the labour market via work agencies. For example, the Flemish ACV published the so-called “Black book on temporary agency work” (*Zwartboek Interimactie*) in collaboration with the Catholic Youth Movement KAJ. The book sheds light on the problems and societal consequences linked to temporary agency work performed by young people. The initiative was widely perceived as successful, since it gained quite some media attention and raised awareness for this topic in the Belgian society. Yet, the publication of the black book did not provoke immediate political action to improve the young agency workers’ situations.

4.3. The use of social media as a method to reach the youth

The young people’s extensive use of social media may be seen as a good point of contact by trade unions. As indicated by an ABVV-FTGB representative, the importance of social media is met by employing young people in the union’s communication department who are responsible for the general social media use and appearance. Since they are close to the life reality of the youth as the union’s target group, ABVV-FTGB strives to ensure an appropriate, interesting and attractive appearance in the various social media.

“There are a lot of young people working in our communication department in order to approach the youth in a suitable way.” (ABVV-FTGB representative)

The three Belgian union confederations make use of various social media. All trade unions’ youth sections have an own facebook page. These pages are predominantly used to encourage participation in actions and initiatives as well as to post pictures of them afterwards. If youth-related regulation changes (e.g. regarding the unemployment benefits), unions tend to post that as well, mostly with a link to the relevant information brochures on their homepages. Sometimes, the unions also put links to potentially interesting articles, but this does not encourage discussions among the facebook community. Generally, looking at the number of followers of the unions’ facebook pages reveals mixed success. The pages have between 290 (ACV Jongeren) and 930 (FreeZbe) followers (February 2014). Seen the fact that for example ACV-CSC has about 170,000 young members, 290 followers on facebook seems to be a rather low number. In contrast, the liberal union has 930 followers based on about 4,000 Flemish members. Empirical data scrutinizing the opinions on the unions’ facebook pages indicate that it is generally not considered a suitable method to recruit new members, but rather used as a tool to increase visibility.

“In a way, facebook works. But it is certainly not a way to really mobilize the youth. It always needs to be combined with a personal approach.” (ABVV-FTGB representative)

“We always try to combine offline with online communication. Brochures in paper coupled with our facebook page.” (ACLVB- CGSLB representative)

Thus, unions predominantly use facebook as a tool to increase visibility and provide information. Furthermore, if young people ask questions on facebook, those will be answered by a union officer. However, encouraging active discussions about topics of societal interest via facebook is difficult – all trade unions have tried, but the number of comments and likes are very limited. Yet, interactivity may be encouraged via quizzes and contests which are sporadically initiated via facebook, and those who participate can win prizes.

The unions also make use of youtube (all trade unions and/or youth sections have an own channel) to upload videos ad-hoc, for example of actions. Yet, youtube is only rarely used, since the number of available videos per channel does not exceed 30. Therefore, the youtube channels are by far less developed than the unions’ facebook pages. However, twitter is the least developed social medium the unions make use of. Trade unions seem to be hesitant to use it and there are no regular, but only sporadic tweets. The main reasons for this hesitation are particularities of twitter itself: tweets are always public, they provoke immediate

reactions and can be ‘retweeted’, that means shared with other users. Unions fear that the dynamics that develop on twitter could be negative for their organisations and therefore, they hesitate to use it.

Besides the use of facebook, youtube and twitter, ABVV-FTGB has adapted to the youth’s extensive smartphone use. The French-speaking Jeunes FTGB developed a mobile phone-friendly version for its website, and the Dutch-speaking ABVV Jongeren has recently launched its own free smartphone application available for iPhone and Android. It includes a quiz and information on the Belgian labour market and the social security system. The rationale behind developing the application was the fact that nearly all young people use a smartphone nowadays, and check the internet or applications for urgent questions instead of consulting paper brochures. Since ABVV-FTGB “*wants to be the leader and not a follower*” (ABVV-FTGB representative), they invested in programming the application. Another less obvious reason for its development was competition between the different unions. Being the first to develop a smartphone application can increase the union’s visibility and be a way to distinguish the organisation from others.

“Competition between the youth sections of the three Belgian unions is important – we challenge each other and that motivates us to further develop.” (ABVV-FTGB representative)

However, the French-speaking section Jeunes FTGB is sceptic with regard to the use of smartphone applications in the union’s youth work.

“Applications are focused on fast and convenient service delivery, but they cannot give attention to the potential complexity of a question, especially if this question deals with the legal system. So I doubt the usefulness of applications in our work as a social movement.” (ABVV-FTGB representative)

Those differences in opinion between the Dutch- and the French-speaking part of ABVV-FTGB do not only show the controversies about the use of social media, but also stress the limited collaboration between the two youth sections that are separated by language.

Hence, all unions make use of social media and facebook is arguably the platform they utilize most. Regarding youtube and twitter, they seem to be more hesitant and thus use it less. Empirical data also shows that another aspect leading to the hesitation to make more use of social media can be found within the trade unions themselves. The attitudes of higher level unionists towards social media

are a determining factor in explaining their use. Even though changes have happened in the past decade in this respect, some unionists still struggle.

“How can I develop a great youtube channel if only have 30 minutes access to youtube per day? How can I develop a smartphone app if the phone given to me by the union is not a smartphone?” (ACV-CSC representative)

“It took us 1.5 years to develop the facebook page. Initially, facebook was blocked, then there were the concerns about privacy. It took too much time – by the time we were ready to launch our facebook page, the other unions had one as well, so we were already too late.” (ACLVB-CGSLB representative)

Thus, some unionists still struggle internally to promote the use of social media, especially in the unions’ youth work. They find themselves not only confronted with technological obstacles, but also with hesitation or even resistance within their own union.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This report sheds light on the relationship of Belgian trade unions and the youth. International literature has widely discussed the paradox that both groups potentially need each other, but that they struggle to get together. The youth as a particularly vulnerable group in the labour market is in need of protection that could be given by trade unions, and unions need to gain new members in order to keep their role as social actors in the long-run. The present report investigates the ‘youth challenge’ that trade unions have faced in recent years.

Youth structures in Belgium’s major trade union confederations ACV-CSC and ABVV-FTGB have existed since the Second World War, which emphasizes the importance the unions have given to young people. The liberal trade union ACLVB-CGSLB has just recently started its formal youth work. Looking at trade union membership figures reveals lower levels of affiliation of young people compared to their older counterparts. Even though this difference is relatively small in Belgium compared to other European countries, it leads to a subsequent problem, namely the lack of young union activists. Therefore, trade unions have sought to tackle the youth challenge in various ways and at different levels. At the national and inter-professional levels, unions have actively engaged in protecting the rights of young people, for example regarding the previously lower wage levels for young people. At the micro level, trade unions have organised a variety of actions, initiatives and events to promote union work and encourage membership. Yet, unions face three particular problems in this respect: motivating participation in such actions, reaching young people working in small companies and hard-to-reach sectors and dealing with the relatively high incidence of temporary contracts among the youth. The unions also adapted their methods of reaching the youth. In response to the young people’s extensive use of social media, unions have started to be present on facebook, youtube and twitter.

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from this study with a view on Belgian trade unions and the youth. Based on the empirical data presented in the previous sections of this report, it is possible to identify some best practices regarding those initiatives.

- What seems to be most important to encourage membership is personal contact. A direct, personal approach with an open dialogue is considered the best and most

suitable way to persuade the youth of the need of trade unions and therefore, also membership.

- What is essential as well is the way trade unions present themselves. Unions are widely seen as organisations of ‘old men with grey beards’. If they arrange events for the youth, they could attempt to reverse this image by letting young members and activists represent the union. This shows to the participants that trade unions are not only organisations of ‘old men’, but that young people are affiliated as well and that the representation of youth interest matters.
- Linked to that, ‘creative’ events seem to attract a higher number of participants than ‘simple’ information presentation evenings, for instance. Events like the ‘treasure hunt’ (explained in table 6, p. 21-23) which combine an entertaining activity with information on student work are more popular than attending information sessions where presentations on the labour market and the social security system are given. At the same time, such ‘creative’ events might also contribute to attributing a ‘younger’ image to trade unions.
- Finally, events where the three unions collaborate tend to attract a high number of participants (see table 6, i.e. European demonstration in Brussels, TRANSIT Antwerp). Although those events may be beneficial for the image of unions in general, it might be difficult to distinguish the three unions from each other.

Attracting new members, however, is not the Belgian unions’ major problem nowadays. The unions can be considered as strong social actors, and they are highly embedded in society. They are visible since they contribute to shaping public discourses about employment-related subjects in Belgium. On the other hand, trade unions operate in a strong institutional context. The fact that they act as service providers in the Ghent system by paying out unemployment benefits gives an extra incentive to affiliate. It is also important to mention that the price of union membership is rather low, with about 15 Euro per month. Many sectoral collective agreements rule that a substantial part of the yearly membership fees is paid back (*syndicale premie/prime syndicale*). Furthermore, there are free membership formulas offered by all unions for those in education until the age of 25. Hence, the Ghent system and the low price of membership especially address instrumental motives to join a union, since membership can be seen as an affordable “*insurance against unemployment*” (ABVV-FTGB representative). While instrumental motives can arguably encourage membership, it can be doubted if they are sufficient to also motivate trade union activism. In other words, if people join trade unions solely because of the services those organisations offer, why would they go a step further and become union activists? Membership is arguably a precondition for activism, but if young people join unions because of the services they provide, it might be difficult to convince them of becoming an activist. The Belgian unions perceive encouraging activism among young people as a problem, but they have not yet found possible solutions.

Formalized programmes or a structured approach towards motivating activism are missing, and there is no staff specifically dedicated to address this challenge. Unions arguably need to increase their efforts in this respect in the coming years, since young activists are essential for trade unions in various regards. They are undoubtedly required to ensure the future of the unions. Furthermore, their presence among older union activists reinforces the importance of youth issues and contributes to assuring effective youth representation. As most activists are older than 40 years, they might be too far away from the specific life reality of young people to effectively represent them. Therefore, more diverse teams of activists in terms of age might better represent the different target groups among the Belgian workforce. Finally, if young activists are visible, this could create a 'younger' image of unions and encourage both membership and activism among the youth. In sum, trade unions arguably need to maintain their efforts regarding youth membership, but what they certainly should do as well is developing a structured approach towards promoting union activism among the youth.

Overall, all Belgian unions have increased their efforts regarding the youth in the past years, but it remains a challenge to reach, organize and mobilize them. This challenge will probably accompany trade unions in the coming years as well and demand creative answers in order to bring them together with the youth.

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