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German Unions and Young Workers: Three case studies of innovative representation practices and organizing activities

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Overview

1. Pluralization of Pathways and Polarization of Risks
2. Institutional Peculiarities: The German System of Dual Interest Representation
3. Union Representation: Diversification of Approaches
 - Pathway I: Vocational Training
 - Pathway II: Higher Education
 - Pathway III: Precarious Employment
4. Conclusions



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(1) The Labour Market Position of Youth in Germany

- Relatively Low Unemployment but growing non-standard employment
- Since the 1980s: *Pluralization of Pathways* between Educational System (ES) and Labour Market (LM)
 - Decreasing number of apprentices in the dual system
 - Three dominant pathways: Vocational Training, Higher education, Precarious Employment
- Along these Pathways: Polarization of Risks (unemployment, Low-Wage)



(2) The Institutional Framework of Interest Representation

- Interest Representation in the Dual System
 - Collective bargaining by trade unions (wages, working-time)
 - Firm-level representation by works councils (work organization, implementation of collective agreements)
- Within workplace codetermination
 - Youth and Apprentice Committee (Jugend- und Auszubildendenvertretung)
- German unions traditionally support these committees (network of union youth representatives)



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(3) Union Approach to Youth

- Traditional Youth Approach: Focus on Apprentices in the Dual System
 - Firm-Level: Exclusive Domain of Youth and Apprentice Committee
 - Union-Level: Youth Branch in practice an “Apprentice Branch”
- Pluralization of Pathways changes Workforce Composition (Up- and downskilling)
- Unions are extending their Youth approach



(3) Pathway I: Vocational Training

Case Study

Metalworking firm, traditional production site in the car industry, 5.500 employees, 100 apprentices per year, no students

- Institutional resources for the representation of young workers
- Youth Apprentice Committee as an extension of works council (resources, training for future works councils)
- Success: Union culture among youth, high union density (>80%), large network of union activists
- Limits (narrow definition of youth, transition into regular employment as a 'critical juncture' for representativeness)



(3) Pathway II: Students

Case Study

Organizing Project by the national union organization, IGM enters the university system, nation-wide University Information Offices

- Union uses resources for organizing students through the establishment of representation structures at universities
- Central topics: future work life (student organizing as preparatory work to increase density among highly-qualified employees)
- Success: Improved Image of unions, some members, some activists
- Problems of entering a new arena: (need of staying power, tensions between preparatory work and organizing)
- *More recruitment success on Firm-Level (Dual Students)*



(3) Pathway III: Precarious Employment

Case Study

Production site of a car supplier, 330 people, 40% temporary agency workers, successful negotiations and collective bargaining

- Union resources into strike action and collective bargaining
- no apprentices = no Youth and Apprentice Committee = no extra-resources for organizing youth
- Success: wage increases and some temp-to-permanent transitions, increasing union density among temps
- Limits
 - Growing density rests on bargaining success (effort!)
 - Young workers are addressed through their status not as “young workers”



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(4) Conclusions

- The ,Extension‘ of the Youth Category reflects the pluralization of pathways between ES and LM
- Basic Interests between the different groups (apprentices, students, precarious workers) differ remarkably little: wage, time, security
- However, the ,discovery‘ of new groups results in challenges as well (new language, new arena, divergent time horizons)
- Diversification of representation an ongoing, incomplete process: precarious employment