



**KU LEUVEN**

# Main campaigns and actions promoted by trade unions in Belgium: strengths and weaknesses

Valeria Pulignano & Nadja Doerflinger  
Centre for Sociological Research, KU Leuven

# Content

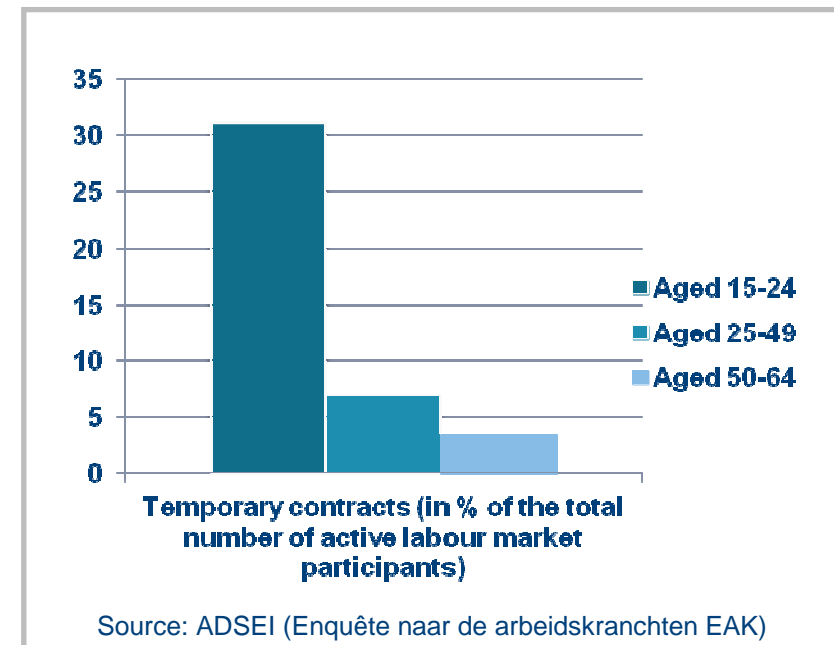
- Youth and the labour market
- Youth and the trade unions
- Trade unions and the youth
- Actions and main campaigns

# Youth within the labour market in Belgium

**1** Difficult school-to-work transitions

**2** High incidence of temporary contracts

**3** High structural youth unemployment



# Youth and trade unions in Belgium

Christian (ACV-CSC) and Socialist (ABVV-FTGB) unions have a long tradition (WWII) in working with youth issues - Liberal union (ACLVB-CGSLB) less tradition;

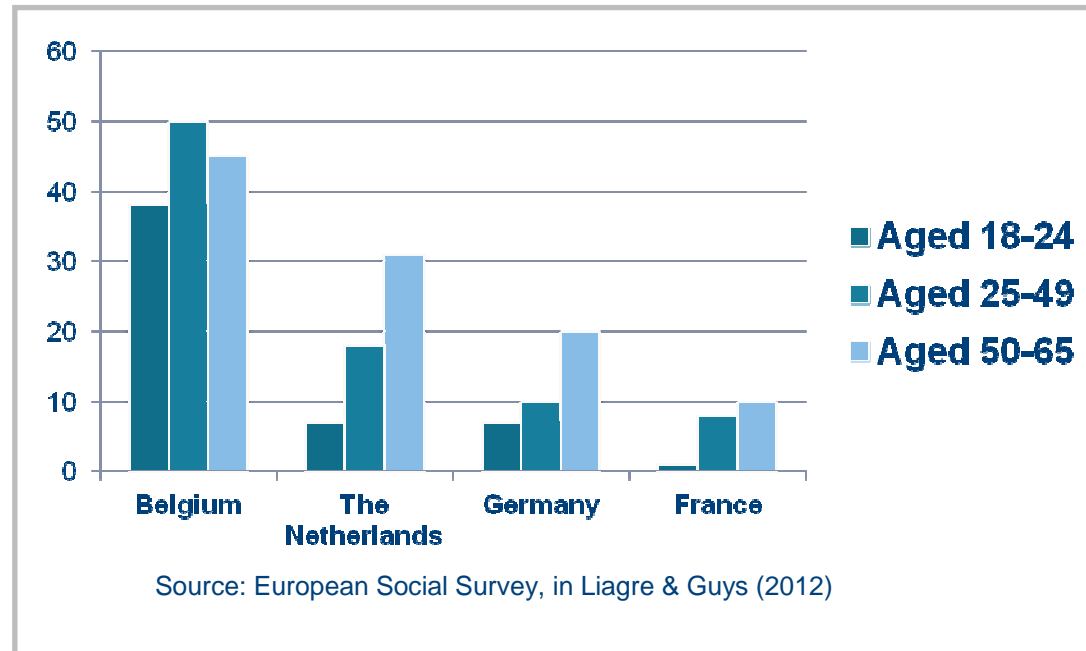
→ Well-established national and regional youth structures;



Youth work is divided according to the main languages (Dutch/French) with limited cooperation between the sections

→ Unions employ 2-3 national territorial representatives (Flanders/Wallonia/Brussels), and further local representatives for organising local events/action/initiatives for youth

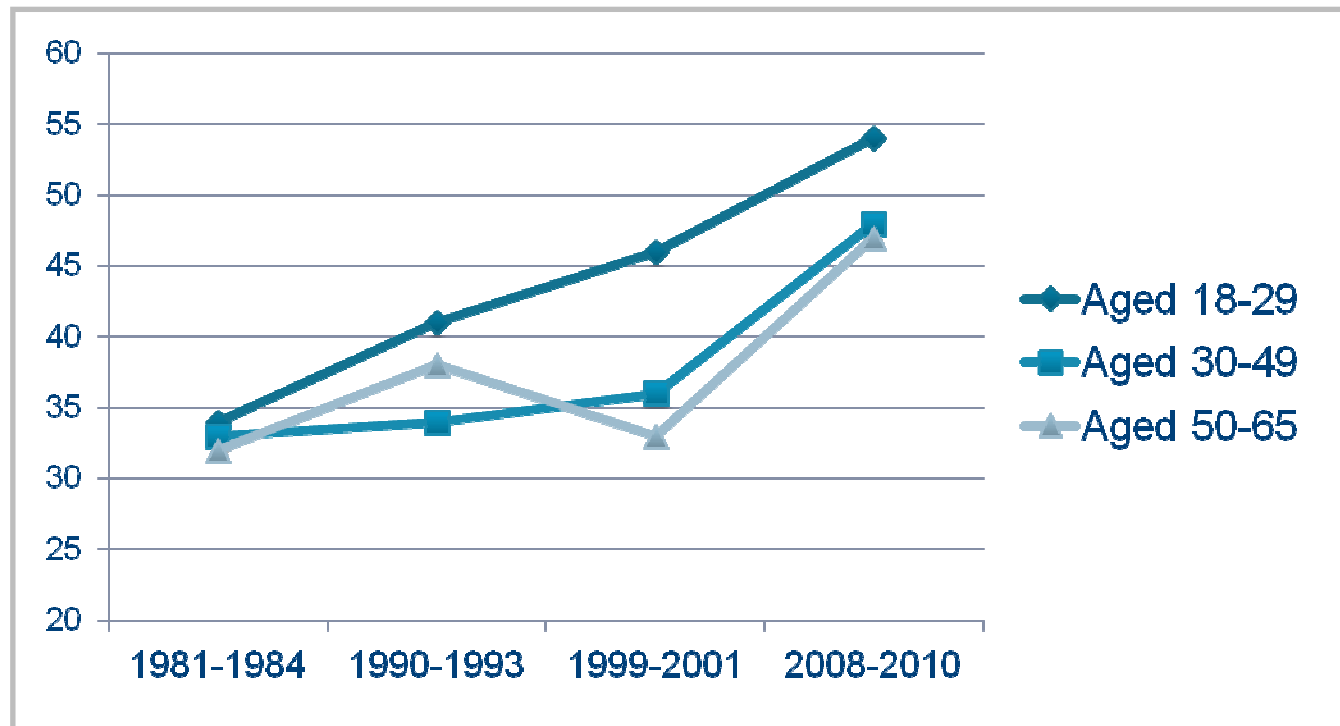
# Trade union membership by age



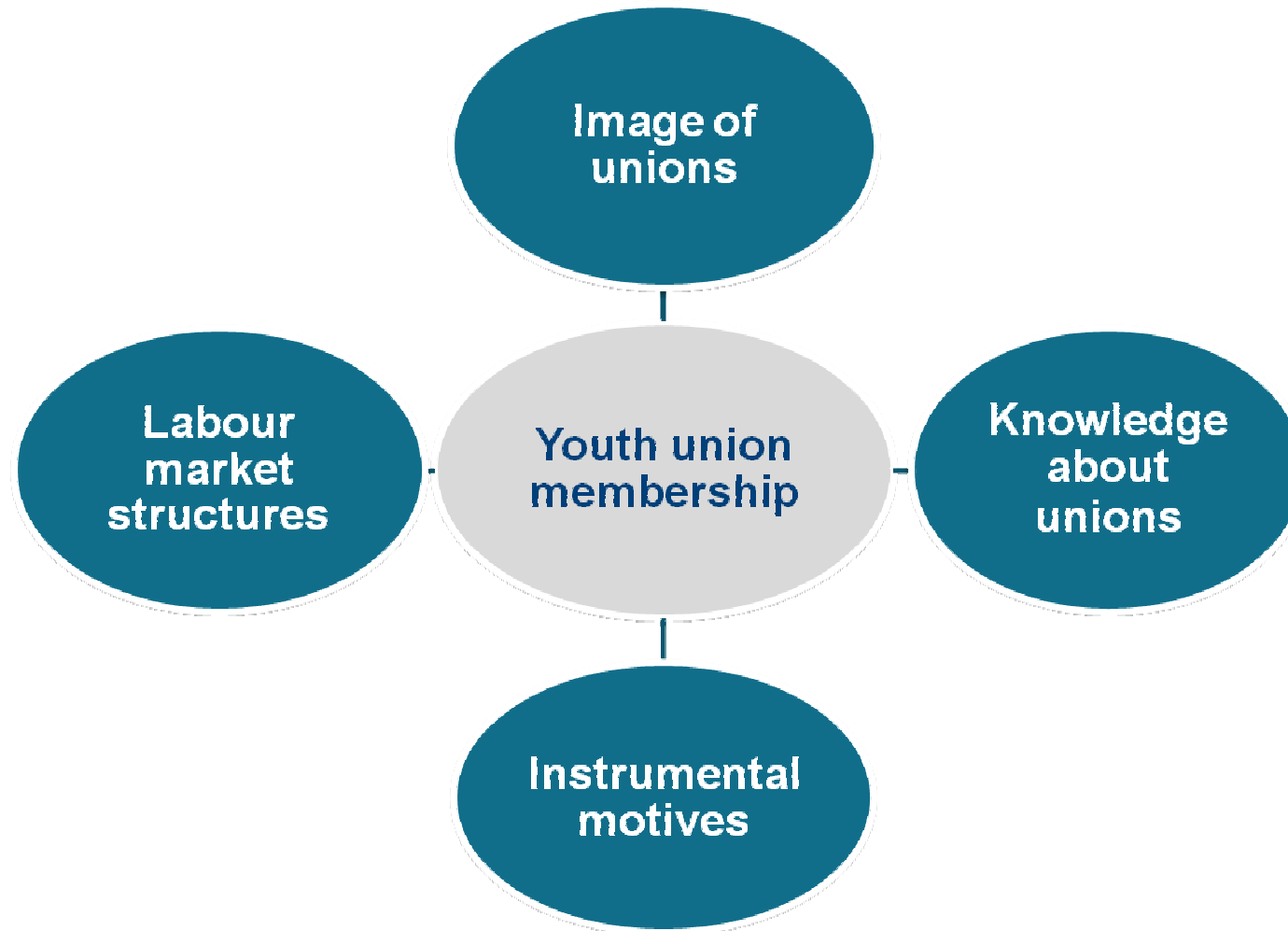
- All unions offer free membership formulas for those in education until the age of 25 to facilitate the transition from free to paid membership
- Membership subsidies reimbursing more than half of the annual membership fee exist in many sectors for all age groups

# Is it a matter of confidence in trade unions?

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



# Reasons for the lower youth membership



## Quote

*“Membership is seen as an insurance against what can go wrong; it could be described as the ‘cheapest lawyer’.”*

*(ACV-CSC representative)*



# Trade unions and the youth: Actions

## Macro-level

- Lobbying at the national level, e.g. regarding unemployment benefits for young people after having finished school;
- Activities in the *Group of Ten*, e.g. concerning the abolishment of youth wages;
- Only limited consideration of youth issues in sector-level collective agreements (youth wages, groups at risk)

## Micro-level

- Variety of initiatives for different target groups: youth in education, in employment or unemployed young people:
- Provide information; present the union; promote membership
- Combination of regular and ad-hoc actions

## Examples of trade unions actions

- **Regular initiatives:** School-leaver lessons; university campus groups; being present at jobs and study fairs; festival working; awards for young activists; TRANSIT school-leaving days; etc.
- **Ad-hoc actions:** “The voice of Europe” living-room-discussions; smartphone application launch event; “black book temporary agency work”; national demonstration for the future of Europe; etc.

# Example 1 : School-leaver lessons

## *What?*

Unionists come to schools to present characteristics of the labour market and the social security system (offered by all unions)

## *For whom?*

Secondary school students in their last year; e.g. the Flemish ACV reaches about 15,000 students every year

## *Strengths?*

Increases unions' visibility, raises awareness about union-related topics, shapes young people's first impression of the union



## Example 2 : TRANSIT project

### *What?*

Event to facilitate school-to-work transitions jointly organised by regional authorities, the public employment service and all unions in Antwerp, Mechelen and Boom

### *For whom?*

Secondary school students in their last year; the Antwerp 2013-edition reached about 3,000 graduates

### *Strengths?*

Using different methods to present information, getting in touch with different labour market actors, raising awareness and sensitizing participants about work-related subjects

# What to do to be attractive for youth?

## Personal contact

A direct, personal approach with open dialogue is most suitable to encourage membership.

## Image of unions

Unions are widely seen as organizations for 'old men with grey beards' (Image). Reversing this image could help attracting young people.

## 'Creative' events

Such events (e.g. with an entertaining or adventurous character) attract more participants than 'normal' information sessions and may give unions a 'younger' image.

## Union collaboration

Participation tends to be higher in event which are jointly organised by the three trade unions. This could be important for the unions' image, too.

# The main challenge: Encouraging activism among young people

*“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)*

- Lack of young activists leads to lower youth presence in company-level representation structures
- ‘Youth mandates’ (separate list for young people below 25) should counteract, but difficulty to find candidates
- No structured and formalized programs and initiatives to encourage activism among the youth, unions see the need to do more in that respect

# Conclusion

To what extent does membership help to find good “young” activists (?)

→ The dilemma: the “Ghent system” helps attracting members (instrumentalism), but hardly promotes becoming a young activist (political = ideology)

→ Future: actions and initiatives should also be developed to address the “missing ideology” !



YOU**n**ion  
Union for Youth

Thanks for your  
attention!

**KU LEUVEN**



# Youth unemployment in Belgium (average 2002-2012)

	Unemployment rate of youth (younger than 25 years)	Unemployment rate of adults in the most active group of labour market participants (25-54 years)
<b>Belgium</b>	<b>19.8%</b>	<b>6.8%</b>
<b>Brussels</b>	<b>35.0 %</b>	<b>15.8 %</b>
<b>Wallonia</b>	<b>29.6 %</b>	<b>9.6 %</b>
<b>Flanders</b>	<b>13.5 %</b>	<b>4.0 %</b>
Greece	30.7 %	11.1 %
Spain	30.4 %	13.2 %
Germany	11.4 %	7.9 %
The Netherlands	7.3 %	3.4 %

Source: Eurostat in Cockx (2013)




→ Strong regional differences between Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia

# Data collection

	Data collection
<b>ACV-CSC (Christian trade union)</b>	4 interviews
<b>ABVV-FTGB (Socialist trade union)</b>	5 interviews
<b>ACLVB-CGSLB (Liberal trade union)</b>	3 interviews
<b>Participation in an event of the TRANSIT-project</b>	Informal talks with organizers, teachers, and participants; participant observation

→ Interviews were carried out at different levels, i.e. with national (8 interviews), sectoral (2 interviews) and regional (youth) representatives (2 interviews)

# Social media use

	ACV-CSC	ABVV-FTGB	ACLVB-CGSLB
	Own facebook pages to promote events and post pictures afterwards, but limited number of followers		
	Own youtube channels, but number of uploaded videos does not exceed 30, limited number of clicks		
	Only very sporadically used, unions do not feel comfortable with this medium		
Others		,Mobile' webpage, smartphone application	

→ Unions do not (yet) feel comfortable with social media, preference to combine online and offline communication