



FINAL REPORT

**TRADE UNIONS  
AND YOUNG WORKERS  
IN SEVEN EU COUNTRIES**

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YOUunion - Union for Youth is a project co-funded by the European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, budget heading VS/2013/0401, Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue

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February 2015



With support from the European Union.

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## 1. Introduction

This report presents a comparative overview of developments in recent years in the relationship between young people and trade unions in the past decade in seven EU countries: Spain, Belgium, the UK, The Netherlands, Germany, Hungary and Italy.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between young people and trade unions has many faces. On the one hand, this relationship has weakened in the past three decades or so. As we will discuss below, in most, though not all, countries, the percentage of young people joining a trade union has declined, leading to a very low level of organization of young workers. Many young workers have only limited knowledge about trade unions and their activities, and do not easily or automatically come into contact with trade unions. Also, trade unions in most countries have not always been dedicating much of their time and resources to establishing relationships with young people nor to make their organisations attractive for young people (Vandaele 2012), and (consequently) have been quite unsuccessful in getting them to join the unions as members. And although this is a general problem affecting membership of all age groups, it is particularly acute where young workers are concerned.

At the same time, the two are potentially of great importance to each other. Young people often have a very vulnerable position on the labour market, have been affected disproportionately by the ongoing crisis and suffer from high unemployment, precarious employment and limited career opportunities (i.e. European Commission 2013). They can potentially benefit a lot from representation by trade unions to improve their position. Such representation depends not only on youth membership of trade unions as trade unions often do address the problems of weaker groups of non-members (Keune forthcoming), but it would undoubtedly fortify such efforts. Trade unions have often become vulnerable themselves as well as a result of a declining and ageing membership. They see their legitimacy, power resources and institutional positions weaken and need new young members to strengthen and rejuvenate their ranks. Because of

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<sup>1</sup> This report is based on seven country studies prepared in 2014 by Valeria Pulignano and Nadja Doerflinger (Belgium, Oscar Molina and Ramon de Alós (Spain), Hajo Holst, Madeleine Holzschuh and Steffen Niehoff (Germany), Lefteris Kretsos (UK), Francesca Fazio, Silvia Spattini, Paolo Tomassetti (Italy), Szilvia Borbély and László Neumann (Hungary) and Maarten Keune and Frank Tros (the Netherlands). The country studies are available at <http://moodle.adaptland.it/course/view.php?id=327>.

this, in recent years, trade unions are stepping up their efforts become more visible to young people, to better represent their interests and to organize them (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013; Pedersini 2010). They are however encountering a number of problems here related to labour market structures and union policies.

Where labour market structures are concerned, it has proven to be difficult to organize young people because of their high levels of unemployment and because of the fact that the sectors in which most young people work are among the generally lesser organized sectors where the position of trade unions is weakest (e.g. hotels and restaurants, retail). Also, their often precarious labour market position, expressed among others in very short-term and flexible contracts and frequent job changes, makes it harder for unions to reach out to them and establish a relationship with them (Simms *et al.* 2013; Keune forthcoming; Tailby and Pollert 2011). Where such structural factors lead to low union membership for young people, low membership may be less age-related and more related to labour market status. Where union policies are concerned, trade union strategies, structures, communication and internal democracy are often not aligned to the needs and interests of young workers (Waddington and Kerr 2002; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013; Vandaele 2012). The same authors suggest that young workers often not a priority, the financial resources dedicated to youth representative structures are limited and young workers also face obstacles when they want to become active within unions.

Also, the attitudes of young people towards trade unions matter here. Often the low youth union membership is taken to demonstrate that an intergenerational shift in attitudes has taken place and that young people do not support trade unions anymore and find them obsolete and irrelevant, contrary to their parents. However, a number of recent articles suggest that this is not the case. They suggest that when young people start working they have no clear preferences towards trade unions, largely because of a lack of information on and experience with unions, or that they may even have a more positive view of unions than older workers (e.g. Tailby and Pollert 2011; Haynes *et al.* 2005). Others argue that the decline of trade union membership should not be mistaken for declining support for collective representation or weakening demand for the protection traditionally provided by union membership (D'Art and Turner, 2008; Turner and D'Art, 2012). Survey data show that a substantial majority across Europe believes employees need the protection of strong trade unions and that this conviction has been strengthening since the early 1980s (*ibid.*). An most importantly for the present discussion, they show that this counts for all age groups, including youth.

This point is further underlined by Vandaele (2012): “Yet there is no serious evidence that young workers have negative attitudes towards trade unionism. There is indeed good reason to believe that there is an unsatisfied demand for unionism among young workers (Vandaele 2012: 215).” This suggests that low youth membership in trade unions is more the result of structural factors, a lack of interaction between unions and young workers and a mismatch between union policies and young people’s expectations, than of negative attitudes of young workers towards trade unions.

This report aims to contribute to the knowledge on the relationship between trade unions and young people by offering the main insights of the seven country studies into the position of young workers on the labour market, their membership in and attitudes towards trade unions as well as union strategies towards representing and organizing young workers. It will first present some key statistics on the labour market position of young people (section 2). It will then discuss developments in overall and youth unions membership, as well as scrutinize the attitudes of young workers towards trade unions (section 3). In section 4 it discusses trade union strategies and activities for young workers and section 5 concludes.

## 2. Youth on the labour market

In this section, a brief review of the labour market position of young people will be presented. More detailed accounts can be found in the country studies. Here the objective is two-fold. One is to show that young people are indeed disadvantaged in the labour market as compared to the older age groups. The other is to show that within the group of young people the labour market position depends strongly on their level of education.

Table 1 shows the unemployment rate for the age groups 15-29 (a broad definition of young) and 30-64 (here called adult) for the period 2004-2013. The table shows first of all that in all seven countries as well as for the EU28, youth unemployment is consistently much higher than adult unemployment. For the EU28, youth unemployment is over the entire period just over twice as high than adult unemployment, demonstrating a clear labour market disadvantage for the young. For the individual countries there are some noticeable differences. Most strikingly, in Italy youth unemployment is over the entire period more than three times as high as adult unemployment and also in the UK this is true for most years. On the contrary, especially in Germany but also in the Netherlands, the two countries with the lowest levels of unemployment, the differences between the two rates are relatively small.

Table 1 – Unemployment rate 15-29 and 30-64 years old, 2004-2013

		2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
<b>EU28</b>	15-29	15.0	14.8	13.6	12.1	12.0	15.6	16.6	16.9	18.2	18.7
	30-64	7.5	7.2	6.6	5.8	5.6	7.1	7.8	7.8	8.5	8.9
<b>BE</b>	15-29	13.4	15.2	14.6	13.7	12.7	15.1	16.1	13.6	14.6	16.5
	30-64	5.7	6.6	6.5	5.7	5.4	6.0	6.3	5.5	5.7	6.4
<b>DE</b>	15-29	12.2	14.2	12.8	11.0	9.6	10.4	9.2	7.8	7.4	7.3
	30-64	10.5	10.5	9.7	8.1	7.1	7.2	6.6	5.5	5.1	4.9
<b>ES</b>	15-29	17.1	14.8	13.5	12.9	18.2	28.5	31.7	34.6	40.3	42.4
	30-64	8.9	7.1	6.7	6.7	9.1	14.8	16.8	18.3	21.4	22.7



<b>IT</b>	15-29	17.8	17.6	15.8	14.5	15.3	18.3	20.2	20.5	25.2	29.6
	30-64	5.3	5.3	4.7	4.3	4.9	5.7	6.2	6.2	8.0	9.2
<b>HU</b>	15-29	9.3	12.1	12.3	11.8	12.9	17.3	18.7	17.5	19.2	18.0
	30-64	4.8	5.7	6.1	6.2	6.5	8.3	9.4	9.5	9.1	8.5
<b>NL</b>	15-29	6.5	6.7	5.3	4.6	4.1	5.4	7.1	6.5	7.9	9.5
	30-64	4.0	4.0	3.4	2.7	2.2	2.7	3.6	3.7	4.3	5.7
<b>UK</b>	15-29	8.5	9.7	10.6	10.5	11.1	14.4	14.6	15.7	15.4	14.8
	30-64	3.3	3.1	3.6	3.5	3.7	5.2	5.5	5.4	5.3	5.1

Source: Eurostat

Moreover, in most countries, youth unemployment has been on the rise, especially since the start of the crisis. In Spain, this has led to an extremely high level of youth unemployment at the end of this ten year period, over 40%. Also, unemployment does not capture the entire labour market problem for young people; in many countries their participation in education has increased in recent years as they try to postpone their labour market entry because of the difficult circumstances. The exception here is Germany, where youth unemployment has declined steadily over the ten-year period to reach 7.3% in 2013. Here the young have benefitted from the overall employment growth and unemployment decline in Germany.

The young do not only experience higher levels of unemployment, they also have less stable jobs (Table 2). On average, in the EU 28, 29 percent of the young between 15 and 29 years old was working on a temporary contract, compared to seven percent of the 30-64 old. Also, for the young the percentage has been steadily increasing over time while for the adults it is more or less stable. There are again major differences between countries: in the Netherlands and Spain more than 40 percent of the young are on a temporary contract while in the UK it is 10 percent and in Hungary 17 percent.

Table 2 – Temporary employed as % total employed 15-29 and 30-64 years old, 2003-2013

		2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
<b>BE</b>	15-29	18	18	20	19	19	19	19	19	21	20	19
	30-64	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
<b>DE</b>	15-29	35	37	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	38	37

	30-64	5	5	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
<b>ES</b>	15-29	48	48	49	50	47	44	41	42	44	43	45
	30-64	19	19	20	21	20	18	16	16	17	15	15
<b>IT</b>	15-29	15	19	22	24	25	26	26	27	29	31	31
	30-64	5	6	6	7	7	7	6	7	7	7	7
<b>HU</b>	15-29	11	10	11	10	12	13	14	16	14	15	17
	30-64	5	5	5	5	5	5	6	7	6	7	8
<b>NL</b>	15-29	28	28	32	33	35	35	35	37	37	39	41
	30-64	7	7	7	8	9	9	9	8	8	9	9
<b>UK</b>	15-29	9	8	9	9	10	9	9	10	10	10	10
	30-64	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4
<b>EU28</b>	15-29	24	25	27	28	28	28	27	28	29	28	29
	30-64	6	7	7	8	8	7	7	7	8	7	7

Source: Eurostat

The extent to which temporary contracts negatively influence young people's security and careers does not only depend on their incidence but also on the extent to which they perform the function of stepping stone towards more stable jobs. Analysis by Muffels (2013) shows that in the large majority of western European countries this stepping-stone function of temporary contracts has been declining since the late 1990s, including in all countries included in the present overview (the only possible exception is Hungary which is not included in the analysis of Muffels). For example, for the Netherlands, Muffels shows that the yearly transition from temporary to permanent contracts declined from 43 percent in 1998-1999 to 28 percent in the period 2008-2011 (Muffels 2013, 87-88; see also Dekker et al. 2012). The share of temporary contracts that is converted into permanent contracts by employers is decreasing, strings of temporary contracts have become common and temporary employees are increasingly replaced by other temporary employees, increasing their insecurity in the labour market.

Obviously, young people with their high shares of temporary employment are most affected by this changing employer behaviour. Several of the country studies show that young people increasingly get trapped in sequences of temporary contracts and unemployment spells, often combined with low wages. For example, Holst *et al.* (see the German case study) argue strongly that in Germany for a large group of especially unskilled workers it is more and more common to

be on a precarious employment pathway where temporary employment is not only their entry point into the labour market but also the best they can get, even as adults. Similarly, in Spain and in the Netherlands, were the overall rates of temporary contracts are very high, young people, and especially the lower educated, increasingly run the risk to get stuck in the revolving door between temporary contracts and unemployment, also when they get older.

The importance of education for the labour market position of young people is further underlined if we compare unemployment levels for young persons from different educational background (Table 3). In 2013, for the EU28 as a whole and for all seven countries studied here, youth unemployment is highest for the lowest educational levels and lowest for the highest educational levels. This is also true for the entire 2004-2013 period, with some small exceptions (in particular in certain years in Italy).

Finally, a point of disadvantage for young people is that they much more often than other age groups have low wages (see also Maitre et al. 2012). One cause for this is the existence of youth minimum wages, where young people earn less for their work than adults. An example is the Netherlands where below the age of 23 age-related legal minimum wages are set, increasing progressively from 15 to 22 years of age and remaining well below the adult rate. As a result, an eighteen year old in the Netherlands, who is on all accounts considered to be an adult, who can vote, who can drive, and who has to pay the obligatory health insurance at an adult rate, has a minimum wage that is less than 50% of the adult minimum wage. Another cause is that collective agreements sometimes set entry wages for young persons deliberately at a very low level. This may foster their employment chances but only in low wage jobs. What is more, increasingly young workers are initially hired under intern or trainee constructions, which serve as extended trial periods with limited compensation.

More in general, in most European countries we see the overall growth of low wage employment, especially for the unskilled segment of the labour force, and young unskilled workers increasingly run the risk of entering the labour market in a low wage job but also continuing to have low wages during most of their career. Indeed, not unlike the issue of temporary contracts, also with wages a low entry wage is less and less a stepping stone towards a job with a decent wage. For example, in Germany, the reforms of the labour market in the 1990s and 2000s have led to the emergence of what the German country study calls ‘a stable pathway of precarious employment’ for a large part of the unskilled German workers, meaning that they are trapped in insecure and low wage jobs (see also Mosthaf *et al.* 2011).

Indeed, then, young people, and especially those with lower levels of education, are disadvantaged in the labour market. They face high unemployment, high levels of insecurity and low wages, and declining prospects of improvement of their position over time. In theory, this weak labour market position could be a strong motive for young people to join trade unions and to strengthen their collective representation in companies, in collective bargaining and in social dialogue. Likewise, for trade unions they may constitute fertile ground for recruitment of new members as well as a group that needs their support. In the next section we will look into the question of membership and attitudes of young people towards trade unions.

Table 3 – Unemployment rate by educational level, 15-24 years olds, 2004-2013

		2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
<b>EU28</b>	Level 0-2	21.4	21.8	21.3	20.1	21.3	26.2	27.5	28.3	30.5	31
	Level 3-4	18.1	17.5	15.7	13.5	13	17.2	18.3	18.8	20.2	20.8
	Level 5-8	12.9	14.3	13.6	11.5	11.7	15.6	16.4	16.8	18	18.8
<b>BE</b>	Level 0-2	25.8	30	30.1	29.1	28.4	30.2	35.9	31	32.8	39.8
	Level; 3-4	17.2	19.7	18	17.5	16.2	20.5	19.9	15.5	16.2	19.6
	Level 5-8	10	16	16.1	11.5	11.2	16.7	13.1	12.1	14	18.1
<b>DE</b>	Level 0-2	13.1	17.8	16.9	15.7	13.7	14.2	13.4	12	11.9	11.4
	Level 3-4	13.4	13.6	11.1	8.8	8.1	9.2	7.4	6	5.5	5.7
	Level 5-8	7.1	12.1	9	6.5	7	6	6.6	4.4	4.4	3.9
<b>ES</b>	Level 0-2	23.3	21.8	19.8	20.4	29.7	44.7	49.5	53	59.7	62.6
	Level 3-4	20.9	17	16	16.5	19.3	30.9	34.3	41.2	49.5	51.2
	Level 5-8	22.2	17	15.2	13.4	15.7	25.9	28.8	34.6	39.5	43.6
<b>IT</b>	Level 0-2	28.6	26.2	24.1	22.5	23.3	27.3	30.9	32.8	40.2	45.5
	Level 3-4	21.3	22	19.9	19	19.9	24.1	26.5	27.3	33	38
	Level 5-8	32.9	31.2	24.6	19.3	23.8	29.6	23.1	27.1	33.3	31.8
<b>HU</b>	Level 0-2	25.6	31	31.8	30.5	33.4	45.9	41.4	42	44.7	46.1
	Level 3-4	12	17.1	15.7	15.6	16.9	22.5	23.3	23	25.5	24.1
	Level 5-8	10.2	13	16.9	12.3	14.9	18.4	22.2	19.8	18.9	18.3
<b>NL</b>	Level 0-2	10.7	11.2	9.4	8.4	7.2	8.8	11.8	10.7	13.3	14.9
	Level 3-4	5.6	5.7	4.2	3.9	3.6	4.6	6.4	5.3	6.8	8.3

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	Level 5-8	3.5	4.8	2.6	2.7	2.9	4.5	5.3	4.4	5.1	6.3
<b>UK</b>	Level 0-2	19.9	22.6	25.1	26.4	28	32.7	34.1	36.2	37.2	36.1
	Level 3-4	7.7	9.5	10.7	11	11.2	15.6	16.8	18.9	18.8	18.6
	Level 5-8	4.2	7.9	9.1	7.5	9.2	13	12.1	12	12.6	13
<p>Educational levels: Less than primary, primary and lower secondary (levels 0-2); Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary (levels 3 and 4); Short-cycle tertiary, bachelor or equivalent, master or equivalent and doctoral or equivalent (levels 5-8).</p>											

*Source: Eurostat*

### **3. Youth union membership and attitudes**

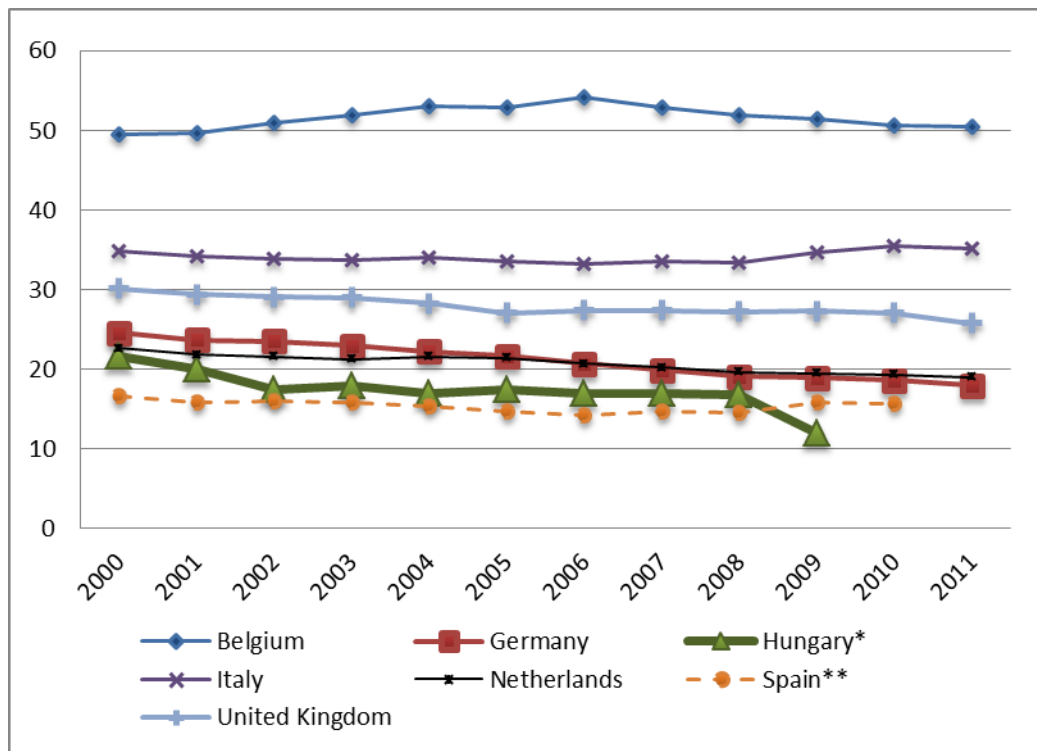
Overall trade union density for all age groups registered a significant decline in the majority of the advanced economies over the last decades. The representative status of trade unions is deteriorating in the long term in most of the European Union member states too in the period 2000-2011, including in most of the countries here under study (Figure 1). There are also some exceptions though. As the Figure shows, in Belgium membership has been quite stable over time around 50%, with some ups and downs. Trade union membership in Belgium is among the highest level in Europe, around 50,4% in 2011, only surpassed by some of the Nordic countries (ICTWSS, 2013). A major explanation for this high level is the ‘Ghent system’ that gives the Belgian trade unions an important role in the provision of unemployment benefits. There are three main trade union confederations in Belgium, each reflecting a socio-political stream in the country: the two largest are ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB, belonging to the Christian and the socialist movement respectively, while the smaller ACLVB-CGSLB is rooted in liberalism. While general membership in ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB 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.

Another exception is Italy. Trade union density is relatively high in Italy as well. In 2011 the percentage of unionized workers was at the level of 35,2%, which has been quite stable since the early 1990s (ICTWSS, 2013). Together, the three largest trade unions confederations CGIL, CISL and UIL have a total of 12.5 million members, which also include many pensioners. In contrast, in Germany, union density dropped steadily in the last 30 years. Union membership peaked at about 7.9 million people in the 1980s and has been decreasing ever since (apart from a boost in union membership due to German reunification in 1990) and in 2011 union density was around 18% (ICTWSS, 2013). Still, as discussed in more detail in the German country report, in recent years the decline in membership seems to have halted and been slightly reversed.

In the other four countries, union membership declined continuously. In 2011, trade union density in the UK was around 25,6% (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2013). Around 6.5 million employees in the UK were trade union members in 2013 and the level of overall union members was broadly

unchanged from 2012, with a reduction of only 6.000 over the year (a 0,1% decline). Meanwhile, the numbers of UK employees increased between 2012 and 2013. As a result, the membership rate fell slightly to 25.6% in 2013, from 26% in 2012. This is the lowest rate of trade union membership recorded between 1995 and 2013. In the Netherlands, in spite of the fact that 80% of employees is covered by a collective agreement, union membership is quite a bit below the UK rate, around 19%. It has been decreasing slowly but surely in the last decades, affecting all the age categories and especially young people. In Spain the overall trade union density has always been quite low since 2000 (around 16.7%), but fell even further in recent years to below 16%. The lowest trade union density is registered in Hungary. Unfortunately, there is no representative survey dealing with this issue and official data is often outdated. However, the Labour Force Survey shows that in 2009 the overall union density was 12% (Hungarian Central Statistical Office Labour Force Survey, 2010), down from almost 22% in 2001. This collapse is the strongest among the countries analyzed in this study.

Figure 1 – Union Density Rate, 2000-2011 (%)



Source: ICTWSS Database, AIAS, 2013 (\* no available data after 2009; \*\* no available data after 2010)

### *Youth membership*

Although the disadvantaged position of young people on the labour market could make trade unions especially important to them to defend and strengthen their individual and collective rights and working conditions, in most countries young membership is substantially lower than adult membership and often declining faster. Indeed, trade unions generally face serious problems in reaching out to and organizing young people, leading to an ageing membership and putting the long-term survival of unions under pressure. There are also two exceptions to this trend: Belgium and Germany.

In the Netherlands, only 61.000 people aged less than 25 years old were members of a trade union in 2011. The numbers of young people organized by trade unions declined strongly in the last decade: in 1999, there were 117.200 young trade union members. In terms of density, in the period 1995-2011, the net membership levels of workers aged 15-24 decreased from 15% to 6% and from 27% to 16% in the age group 25-44 (CBS, 2013). In the meantime, the number of over-65 years old members increased, strengthening the 'greying' of the Dutch unions.

In Italy, analyzing the relationship between young people and trade unions is hindered by the scarcity of available information and sources. However, some information is available, indicating that youth membership remains below adult membership. As an example, young people of 15-34 years old represent around 21,6% of the employed members of the CGIL, the largest Italian union (source: CGIL). These young members of the CGIL represent 9% of the total employed population of between 15 and 34 years while the total employed membership of the CGIL represents 11.6% of the total employed population.

In Hungary, union density among employees under-35 years old is very low, only around 7%, compared to an overall density of 12% (Hungarian Central Statistical Office Labour Force Survey, 2010). In the UK, where the overall union density among employees in 2013 was of 25.6%, for the age group 16-24 it was 7.7% and for the age group 25-34 it was 21%. In contrast, among the 50+ employed population union density was 32.8%, pointing to a clearly skewed distribution of age groups in union membership. Also in Spain, trade unions are facing low membership among young people. The trade union density among people aged under-35 is estimated to be around 12% (ECVT 2010). Contrary to some of the other countries, however, the difference with overall membership is

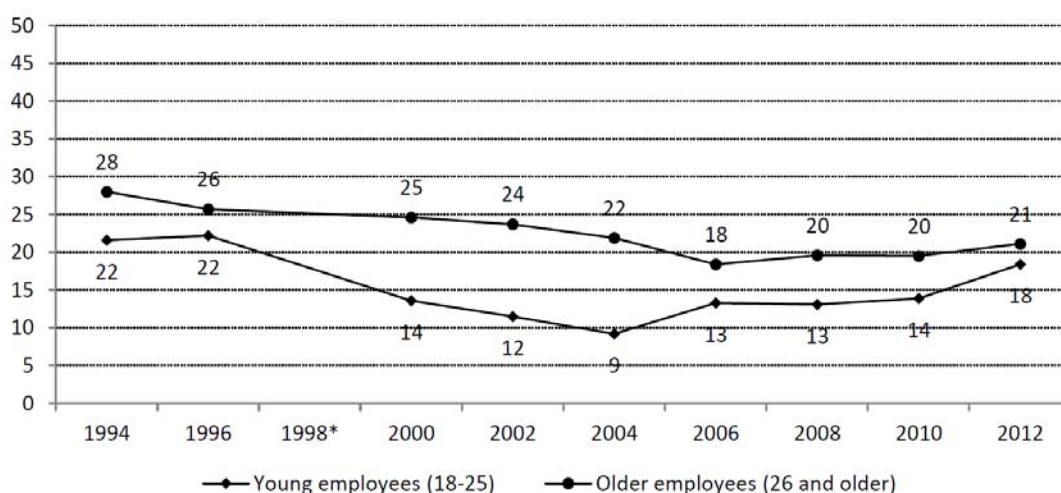


not very high, some 4 percentage points. Indeed, in Spain union membership is low for all age groups.

Then there are two exceptions to the general trend. One is Belgium, one of the high-membership countries, where there are no strong differences between sectors and age groups in union membership: youth and adult memberships are very similar. Moreover, while youth membership has been pretty stable in ACV-CSC with about 170.000 and ACLVB-CGSLB with about 4.000 members, the socialist union ABVV-FTGB has remarkably increased its share of young members. Indeed, starting from 8.741 members younger than 25 years in 2002, it more than tripled its youth membership within 10 years, leading to 29.707 members in 2012 (source: ABVV-FTGB, 2013).

In Germany, from the mid-1990s, following the short increase in unionization after reunification, union density of young workers (18-25 years) declined for more than a decade to a post-war minimum of 9% in 2004 (German General Social Survey ALLBUS, 2012). This reduction in unionization among young workers was in line with the development of union density for workers above 25 years old in the country, although it declined faster and stood at a much lower level: in 2004 density among the latter group was 22%. In the last ten years, however, the picture has changed dramatically. Since 2004, youth union density has doubled to 18% in 2012, almost equaling the density of the 26+ age group that amounted to 21% in that year (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Union membership among young and other employees, Germany, 1994-2012 (%)



Source: Hajo Holst, Madeleine Holzschuh and Steffen Niehoff (2014) *YOUnion Country report Germany*, <http://moodle.adaptland.it/course/view.php?id=327>

Table 4 shows the position and evolution of youth union membership in the seven countries under study. Although in the majority of countries youth membership is on the decline, the Belgium and German examples indicate that a decline in youth union membership is not inevitable and can indeed be reversed. The Belgian case shows that it is possible to have and maintain high membership among young workers, even if it could be argued that this is to an important extent grounded in the unions' role in the unemployment benefit system. In this respect, the German turnaround is possibly more instructive. This is especially so because the increase of youth membership has taken place in a period in which the German labour market changed profoundly, including a strong growth of flexible and marginal jobs (Eichhorst and Marx 2011). The literature suggests that these are indeed adverse conditions for the organizing of young workers, making it all the more an achievement. The two examples also put into question the often voiced view that young people are not interested in trade unions. In the next section we will look further into the issue of attitudes.

Table 4 – The evolution of youth union membership

	High Union Density (> 30%)	Low Union Density (≤ 30%)
<b>Increasing Young Membership</b>	Belgium	Germany
<b>Decreasing Young Membership</b>	Italy	UK, the Netherlands, Spain, Hungary

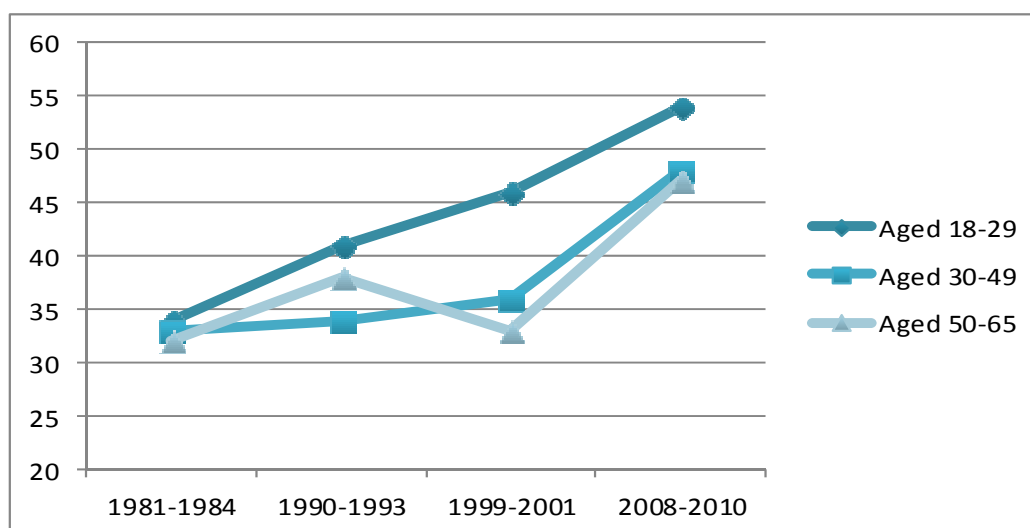
#### *Attitudes of young people towards trade unions*

What are the attitudes of young people towards trade unions? In the introduction it was argued that a number of recent studies contradict the widespread view that young people reject trade unions as being outdated or irrelevant. The interviews, studies and data collected for the seven country studies provide interesting information on this question. For example, the UK study reports on the results of a research project by the Scottish TUC: 63% of employees under 30 years old believe that trade unions are needed to protect the working conditions and wages of employees, compared with 47% of workers aged 30 and over. Also, only 9% of young people had unfavourable attitudes towards trade unions. Similarly, in a large survey in the Netherlands, on a ten-points scale (1 = very unimportant, 10 = very important) to the question “To what degree is it important that trade unions exist?” young workers (15-24 years) answered on

average 7.15 while the overall average for all age groups was 7.01. Similarly, survey data for Belgium shows that confidence in trade unions among young workers is higher than that of other age groups as well as increasing over time (Figure 3).

The Spanish report presents survey data that shows that although the view of young people about trade unions has deteriorated during the economic crisis, among all political institutions, trade unions remain the ones most positively perceived by young people. They are clearly aware of the need of institutions and/or actors like trade unions in order to defend the position of the most vulnerable groups in society. Also the Italian report shows that survey data on Italy demonstrates that the large majority of working people, including young people, find strong trade unions important. Hence, all these reports provide evidence that young people do indeed find trade unions important for the well-functioning of the labour market and society. The one exception seems to be Hungary, where the country report shows that in general the interest in political and social issues has become minimal, just as the faith in political institutions, including the trade unions.

Figure 3 – Share of the working population having confidence in trade unions in Belgium 1981-2010 (%)

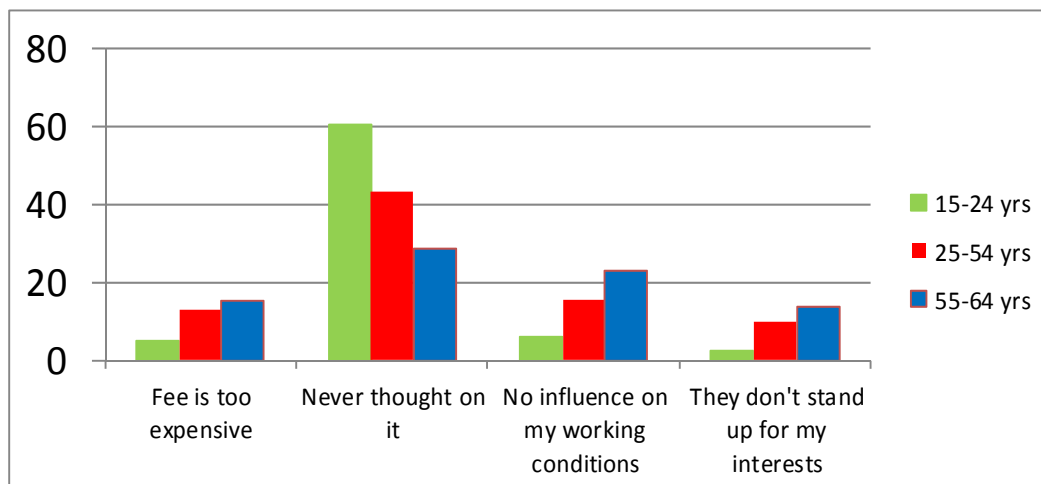


Source: *European Value Survey 1981-1984, 1990-1993, 1999-2001, 2008-2010* in Liagre and Gyes (2012), reported in Valeria Pulignano and Nadja Doerflinger (2014) *YOUnion Country Report Belgium*, <http://moodle.adaptland.it/course/view.php?id=327>.

It is important though to underline that the importance attached to trade unions in a general, more abstract sense, does not mean that young people have frequent interactions with the real-life unions in their countries or that they think these unions are necessarily doing a good job. For example, in the UK report survey data is presented that shows that 42% of young respondents said that they knew nothing at all about UK trade unions and a further 44% said they didn't know much. Hence, a staggering 86% of young people know little to nothing about trade unions. Similarly, 60% of non-union member young workers (15-24 years) in the Netherlands, when asked for the reason of their non-membership, answered they simply never considered it (Figure 4). This points towards limited awareness of and limited exposure to trade unions of young workers. Also, in the interviews it was often mentioned that young workers find it hard to identify with the unions they do know or that they are exposed to through the media, and that they are put off by a militant, old fashioned, bureaucratic and aggressive image.

And where awareness is higher like in Spain, young people who favour trade union-type organisations and activities in general are rather critical towards the unions they know and argue that they need to change in a number of ways to become more democratic and effective institutions and to be able to better represent the interests of young people. Indeed, the image of the Spanish unions has deteriorated in the eyes of much of the Spanish youth; they are not considered to be at the forefront of societal protest anymore and are often rejected by young people for being part of the old establishment and for lacking internal democracy and attention for youth issues. They are here included in the broader disaffection of young people in Spain with the traditional political institutions. At the same time, the Spanish case also shows that this does not mean that young people are not interested in politics or in social and economic issues. On the contrary, since 2010, young people have demonstrated a very strong political and civic engagement, but this has not been channeled through the unions, as was often the case in the past, but rather through newly-emerged social movements in which young people play a very important and active role. This has made it difficult for the unions to establish a closer relationship with young people; at the same time it shows that if the unions manage to reinvent themselves, disassociate themselves of the negative image they have today and establish cooperation with the new social movements, they may find fertile ground for membership and activism among the politically active youth.

Figure 4 – Reasons for non-membership of trade unions in the Netherlands, by age groups (%)



Source: Maarten Keune and Frank Tros (2014) *YOUUnion Country Report the Netherlands*, <http://moodle.adaptland.it/course/view.php?id=327>

Also, in most reports, based on survey data or on the interviews with trade union officials, it is argued that instrumental motives play a clear role in membership decisions and that young people attach great importance to the personal benefits they may or may not derive from membership. This may in part explain the high youth membership in Belgium, because of the role of the unions in the Ghent system, which makes them important service providers in cases of unemployment. In other countries young people seem to have a much less clear view of what these benefits may be. Or, as is discussed regularly in the Netherlands, they take the position of free riders who get the benefits from union activities, in particular the collective agreements unions negotiate, but can do so without becoming a member. One of the ways unions have dealt with this issue is by offering young or new members preferential membership rates. In most countries, young people can become a member of a union at a reduced rate or even for free for a certain period of time and this is expected to reduce the financial barrier to join. Also, it is supposed to offer them a real-life insight in the valuable services the unions can provide to them. Experiences with this approach are mixed. For example, campaigns offering free membership have resulted in quite some new young members signing up, but only few remained a members when they had to start to pay their contribution. Also, it is important though to underline that young workers do not only have instrumental motives to join unions and that membership fees are often not prohibitively high. As mentioned before, young persons can also be driven by political and civic engagement, which would also strengthen their ties to the unions and foster continuity.

What the country studies then demonstrate is first that young people do not have negative basic attitudes towards trade unions, second that they often know little about trade unions, third that they are critical towards the way trade unions operate, and fourth that instrumental motives play an important role in membership decisions. This all points towards union actions and strategies towards young workers and young people in general as key factors determining their view of unions and their inclinations to participate in their activities and join them as members.

#### **4. Union strategies and activities for young workers**

In this section we discuss the main views, strategies and actions of trade unions in the seven countries (see the country studies for more detailed accounts). We will highlight the main controversies, problems and lessons emerging from the country studies concerning the priorities, identities and target groups of unions; youth in union structures and youth activism; information at schools and universities and public campaigns; and workplace representation and collective bargaining.

##### *Priorities, identities and target groups*

A first question here is to what extent trade unions consider young people a priority matter. Undoubtedly, since 2000, and especially since the start of the crisis, almost all trade union confederations across Europe have given increasing attention to the youth issue. This is both linked to their need for young members to stop and reverse the declining union membership in most countries and to the rapidly deteriorating labour market position of young people since 2008. Their increasing attention is demonstrated by numerous youth-related initiatives including union statements, publicity campaigns and information programmes, initiatives to strengthen the position of young workers within trade unions, campaigns to organize young workers, more attention to youth issues in collective bargaining, etc. (some of these will be discussed in more detail below). Indeed, young people are high on the union agenda these days.

However, this does not necessarily mean that the unions put their money where their mouth is. In the interviews with union officials it was often argued that the resources dedicated to youth issues do not match the importance unions claim these issues have. Exceptions here are the Belgian unions and the German ones, in particular the IG Metall, and to some extent the Italian unions. Often the discourse is much more developed than the actual youth activities themselves and the respective resources, even though the latter seem to have been on the increase in most countries. On the one hand, this reflects the fact that a number of unions have limited resources and do not have much funds to invest in activities oriented towards the young, for example in Hungary or Spain.

At the same time, it also reflects choices, identities and the composition of membership. As Hyman (2001) argues, trade unions have different identities and some see themselves as primarily as defenders of the interests of their members, others see themselves more as defenders of society as a whole, including the weaker groups like young people, and some are more oriented towards class struggle. Following the high and increasing average age of membership, in the cases where unions act first of all as representatives of their members it is no surprise that youth issues are not a strong priority and that priority is given to the concerns of older age groups. Clearly, this can work only as a short-term strategy: in the longer term new young members are needed to cement the position of the unions. An example here would be the UK unions. Still, identities are not static and changes over time occur. For example, in 2013, the TUC General Council's advisory body on youth issues was renamed from Young Members Forum to Young Workers Forum to reflect a broader concern about young workers in general and not only members. This was further reflected in a series of youth events in the first TUC National Young Workers month in March 2014.

In the other countries an orientation beyond membership has been stronger already for a longer time and has often been institutionalized, for example in their participation in social dialogue institutions and in the conclusion of social pacts, or in a coverage of collective bargaining that extends far beyond their membership. Many union officials therefore claim that they have been doing quite a lot for young people through these channels, even if they are no union members. They also recognise that these efforts and achievements have not always been very visible and therefore do not necessarily contribute to a more positive image of their activities among today's youth. And indeed, in all countries studied here the unions are regularly criticized of representing above all the so-called insiders in the labour market, which would first of all be their members, and not the outsiders, which include young people but also, for example, precarious workers, immigrants, certain groups of women and others. From the national case studies one could conclude that both views carry some truth (see also Keune forthcoming): all trade unions are increasingly devoting attention to the outsiders but their priority is often with their members.

In addition to strategies being a reflection of identity and membership, the often quite limited resources dedicated to youth issues is also to some extent linked to an internal debate within the unions on what the possibilities to organize young workers are. A number of union officials across the countries claim that young workers are next to impossible to organize because of their structural position in the labour market or simply because of their lack of interest in unions.



They claim that this is demonstrated by numerous, not very successful, organizing campaigns in the past, and that it is largely a waste of resources to try and organize young workers. In this view, people join unions later in life, when they get more responsibilities, including children and mortgages, and hence the need for more security, and when they have acquired a clear profession or career path. Organising young people should in this view not be the aim, with the exception of those in apprenticeship-type of arrangements which already have a clear identification with their profession and sector. Rather, unions should invest in their name recognition and image as the key organisations providing support to workers and having expertise in labour market matters, to increase the likelihood that today's youngsters become union members in the future. Others within the same unions contest this view.

A further question here is to what extent unions have been oriented toward increasing membership at all and to what extent they derive their power and influence from the number of members they have. In particular in Spain membership has traditionally been low and the Spanish unions have derived their legitimacy more from their results in the works council elections, which also bring them important public resources. Hence, they have traditionally not been very active in organizing new members, let alone young members. The changing conditions in Spain following from the crisis in the economy but above all also in politics are recently pushing the unions to become more active in this sense. Also in the Netherlands it can be argued that the unions have relied mainly on their institutional positions for their influence on wages and working conditions and on government policy. They are part of national bi- and tripartite structures that give them an important voice at the national level, while they negotiate collective agreements that cover some 80 percent of employees, while their membership has been declining constantly to around 19 percent. With the decline in membership, the legitimacy of the institutional positions and the respective influence of the unions is increasingly questioned and if this decline continues the minimum threshold to be able to maintain these positions may soon be reached. This underlines the importance of strengthening efforts to organize new members, in particular young workers.

One exception here is Belgium where the argument that representing the members means not representing young people simply does not work, considering that their union density is high and has been almost the same as that for adults. Indeed, youth membership is not really a major problem for the Belgian unions compared to the other countries covered in this report. Not surprisingly, the Belgian unions seem to devote more resources to youth activities than the other

countries. Their role in the Ghent system also caters to the instrumental attitudes of young workers, while their contributions are very visible in the public debate as well.

Another exception is Germany. Here youth density is also close to the adult level, although this is a more recent development as discussed in section 3. As discussed in detail in the German study, this is the result from a clear turnaround in both the emphasis unions have been given to organizing youngsters and in the way they have been approaching them. A key factor here has been that the German unions have diversified their strategies towards young people, following the pluralization of young workers' pathways into the labour market. Traditionally, firm-level interest representation and union strategies focused on apprentices, as throughout the post-war period more than 80 percent of young Germans entered the labour market through an apprenticeship in the vocational education system. However, since the 1980s, the percentage of young workers entering the labour market through such apprenticeships has declined strongly. At the same time, two new pathways emerged. One is the rapid increase of university graduates entering the labour market directly or through so-called dual studies, in which students spend half of their time in higher education institutions and half in a firm acquiring practical, more firm-specific, knowledge. The other, is that of precarious employment. Following the deregulation of the German labour market in the last 20 years the share of precarious employment, i.e. insecure, marginal and/or low paid work, has increased rapidly, especially affecting unskilled workers. A growing share of unskilled workers does not find employment through the traditional apprentice system anymore and many of them get caught in strings of precarious jobs interrupted by unemployment spells. According to the German study, one of the key steps the German unions and works councils have made is recognizing this differentiation and adjusting their strategies to the different groups with different needs, interests and cultures. Also, US-style organising strategies are increasingly employed to offer meaningful workplace-related union activities to young workers.

#### *Youth in union structures and youth activism*

An important dimension of the relationship between young workers and trade unions concerns the institutional position of youth in the internal trade unions structures, the extent to which young workers can influence union actions and decisions, and the extent to which young people become actual union activists. In the national confederations different ways of conceiving youth structures prevails.

In some cases, they have youth departments or sections with union officers that work on youth issues. This is the case, for example, in all the three Belgian unions, the Italian CGIL, and the two main Spanish confederations. The Italian CISL also has a Department for Migrants, Women and Young People. Similarly, the TUC Young Workers Forum is an advisory committee to the TUC General Council. In these cases, young workers do not become members of the confederations or the youth departments but of the sector unions that belong to the confederations. Hence, the accent is on the sectors where membership is located, and the sector unions are the main representatives of young workers. Within the sector unions youth coordinators and departments deal with youth issues, while also regional and company youth departments or officials may exist.

In the other cases, the confederations have established youth member organisations with their own organizational structures, president, etc. and in some cases including regional and local bodies, etc.. The two largest trade unions confederation, FNV and CNV, both have created such specific youth unions within their confederal structures to organize and represent young workers. Also the German DGB has created the DGB Jugend (DGB Youth) as a separate structure. Similarly, the Italian CISL, apart from its above mentioned department, has established in 2008 their Association of Young People to represent youth within and outside the workplace, including local and regional bodies. All Hungarian confederations have their youth organization, while in Spain youth member organisations exist in some regions like Catalunya. These youth organisations differ in the way they get their membership. For example, the DGB Jugend organizes in principle all 500.000 members up to 27 years of age of the 8 sector unions constituting the DGB (like Ver.di, IG Metall, IG Bau, etc.). All CISL members below 32 can join the Association for Young People for free. In Hungary, all union members under 35 are automatically members of the youth organisations. But the FNV and CNV Youth unions largely have direct membership only (although they are developing shared membership arrangements with sector unions recently), resulting in very low membership figures (2800 and 1400 respectively in 2014).

The two models have distinct implications, emerging most importantly from the weight of the different levels and the links with the general union confederation or with the sector unions. Youth member organisations at peak level may be more functional in preventing the image in society that trade unions are just older workers' organisations and can be more effective in forwarding the views and interests of young people in discussion with trade union leadership. Similarly, they can promote youth issues beyond the unions themselves in the

public debate, pushing for example for youth friendly legislation and public policies. They may moreover play an important role in giving a place within the unions to students and young workers in instable working careers who do not yet have stable career or clear occupational or sectoral profiles.

Where the accent of youth organization is on the sector level, youth coordinators are more effective in influencing collective bargaining taking place mainly at the sector and sometimes company (UK, Hungary) level, assuring that youth views and interests are included in the collective agreements. They may also play a stronger role in improving school-to work transitions in their sectors and in providing young people in the relevant secondary education and elsewhere with information about trade unions and the benefits of (future) membership. Moreover, they may be better in linking up with or responding to specific sector and workplace cultures of young people through dedicated communication strategies and activities.

Of course, in practice both models can exist side by side. For example, in the Netherlands the two confederations have their youth organisations but at the sector level youth coordinators play their part. Also, they can share membership as indicated above and possibly be complementary to each other and strengthen each other's role, considering that to an important extent they represent young workers in different domains. At the same time, there may be tensions, for example concerning who represents who on what issues and in what arena, or conflicting views on what the interests of young workers are.

Apart from membership and representation structures, a major challenge to trade unions is to turn young people into union activists and, for example, to become candidates at works council elections. This is a problem for all unions, including the Belgian ones with their high membership. It arises because of a number of factors, including the often unstable jobs young workers have, their partially instrumental attitudes, the dominance of older members or the limited internal democracy in unions and the lack of career prospects within unions for young activists. The Belgian unions try to deal with this issue by offering training to potential young activists and try to provide them with a role like becoming leader of a regional youth group. Also, the ABVV-FTGB set up the 'Working Class Heroes' initiative, a network of young activists that exchanges information and encourages joint activities. Still, while all unions recognize the importance of fostering new activists, achievements are limited, following from a focus on membership as such but also from the simple difficulty of the task.

*Information at schools and universities and public campaigns*

To address the problem of the limited knowledge young people have on what unions are, what they do and what they stand for, as well as to improve their image, all unions in all countries studied here have developed activities to reduce this information gap. One major activity is that they provide information sessions at vocational schools, universities and other forms of secondary and tertiary education. Traditionally this was done only at vocational schools but with the increasing weight of higher education, unions are now entering the universities as well. In particular the Belgian and German unions give high importance here not only to vocational schools but also to universities, considering that the share of young workers entering the labour market from the university is high and increasing. Schools and universities are also places where it is easy to reach larger groups of young people, something which is often more complicated once they start working.

In such sessions they want to establish themselves as the core organisations with knowledge about labour market and social security issues, capable of informing and supporting working people. Also, they aim to ease school-to-work transitions, raising awareness about issues like contracts, pay, collective agreements, workplace democracy, unemployment, etc. In particular at universities they also try to provide support with issues faced by students, including limited university democracy or lack of proper housing. Such activities are first of all to increase awareness of the existence and role of trade unions and to establish their reputation of competent labour market actors. The expectation is that this will increase the likelihood of students becoming union members once they have jobs. In some cases, such activities are also used to recruit members, for example by offering temporarily free or reduced membership fees. According to the interviewees it is important that at least one of the instructors during such sessions is young him/herself to 'speak the same language' as the students and pupils and to combat the stereotype that trade unions only exist of, represent and organise older workers. Sector unions have the opportunity to provide more tailor-made lessons by providing specific information on professions, sectoral labour markets, and the respective collective agreements.

Another way to reduce the information gap and to connect with young people is through public campaigns on problems faced by young workers in general or in specific sectors. Just to give some examples, the Belgian ACV did a campaign resulting in a black book containing testimonies and experiences of young temporary agency workers, and aiming to inform the public on their often quite

precarious situation. The Belgian unions are also present at pop festivals and organize fun activities for youngsters to get into touch with them. Recently, the Spanish UGT developed the “Trabajar en Tiempos de Crisis” (work in times of crisis) campaign to provide young people with some insights and recommendations on how to find a job during the crisis.

A very interesting campaign has been the Italian CGIL’s campaign ‘NON+ disposti a tutto’, i.e. ‘NO LONGER available for anything’. As the Italian country study shows, the NON+ campaign aimed to put youth precariousness at the centre of the debate and to increase awareness of this phenomenon. The campaign was launched without showing that it was being organised by the CGIL, but rather as a form of ‘guerrilla marketing’. A fake labour agency was created online, publishing fake job announcements for indecent and provocative job offers. After a while this turned in a mass phenomenon and went viral, with young people protesting against increasing precariousness and the existence of indecent jobs. At this point, CGIL started to attach to the announcements labels saying ‘NON+’ (‘No longer’). The campaign evolved into a network called ‘il nostro tempo è adesso’ (‘our time is now’) which aimed to discuss the issue of youth precariousness and to campaign about more general areas of youth interests. The proposals included in the ‘NON+’ campaign concerned the improvement of youth conditions in the labour market and in society through a wide range of actions and reforms, including the promotion of investment in research, the renewal of public administration employing more young and highly-qualified workers, the improvement of public employment services, limiting precariousness of temporary contracts, increased rights for interns, the extension of social security to young atypical workers, new investment in education and the support for affordable accommodation for young people.

All the initiatives were organised and advertised on the internet and social media through a ‘guerrilla marketing’ communication strategy: this is a concrete example of how a trade union can be attractive to and involve non-affiliated young people in line with the US ‘organising’ model. As far as results are concerned, the campaign gave voice to many young people and mobilized them collectively, thus overcoming problems of fragmentation. However, this paid dividends in terms of image but not in terms of membership.

Indeed, public campaigns are uncertain as to their effects and returns. The challenge unions face in this respect is to effectively combine publicity campaigns with direct improvements for young people through legislation, public policy or collective agreements, and with stronger links between youth and unions,

expressed in support, activism or membership. Here a major point emerging from all country studies is that publicity campaigns can improve the conditions for the strengthening of membership and activism among young workers but that they are unlikely to achieve this by themselves. This requires a combination with organizing activities involving direct contacts between young workers and trade unions, first of all at the workplace.

### *Workplace representation and collective bargaining*

One of the key points made in all the country studies is that direct contact between unions and young workers is of essence to get them interested in unions and become members or activists. The main arena for such contact would be the workplace as it directly links unions to work experiences and allows unions to directly address work related problems that young workers experience. Direct contact in this sense trumps social media, often wrongly seen as the best types of media to approach young people. This is highlighted by a quote in the Italian country study:

«All methods of communications (traditional and modern) should be used. Today the internet and social media allow us to speak to people directly, something that was previously impossible. However, without communication at the workplace it is still difficult to get in contact with young people. In the social media arena, trade unions are users the same as others, while at the workplace they have a unique and irreplaceable function» [Gaetano Sateriale, National Coordinator of CGIL Labour Programme].

The main approach unions use to this effect is through union representatives that are present in the company or organization as members of works councils or as shop stewards. In Belgium, the union-dominated works councils are a very important instrument for the trade unions to establish and maintain contact with young workers. What is more, by law there are youth representation mandates in the social elections at the company level, with a separate list for young candidates, giving them seats on the works council and the health and safety committee and strengthening the attention for youth issues. And although getting good young candidates for these elections is not always easy, they offer young members an interesting way of becoming active for the union.

As the German report shows, also in Germany the works councils play a pivotal role. Although legally independent, works councils and trade unions are

highly interdependent. Unions dominate the works councils, which are their most prominent representatives at the firm level and have strong influence on the unions' decision making. Specifically for young people, in firms with young workers under the age of 18 or apprentices under the age of 25, works councils are entitled to establish a youth and apprentices committee whose objective is to represent the interests of young workers both towards the works councils and the management. These committees play an important part in the interest representation of young workers and have also prompted unions like IG Metall and ver.di to establish a network of local union representatives to support them and in this way to strengthen the link between unions and youth.

Also in Spain the works councils are a key channel of union influence and of linking workers and unions in general and young workers in particular. In 2003, 24 percent of works council members was below 35, giving young workers a prominent place. However, since the crisis and the rapid increase of youth unemployment this share has declined to 17 percent in 2011. To address this problem, the Spanish CCOO has issued guidelines stressing the importance of reserving spaces for young people in company-level representation structures and hence to include young candidates in the lists for works council elections.

In the Netherlands, however, works councils are not dominated by the unions and do not provide the same opportunities for unions to establish their influence in the workplace and their relationships with (young) workers. Indeed, Dutch unions are not very present at workplace level, which is one of the explanations of the fact that most young people know little about unions and have never even considered joining them or not. It also seriously affects their capacity to solve work-related problems and to engage directly with potential members and activists.

In particular where no effective workplace representation structures are in place, but also where they are, unions are increasingly developing organizing strategies to develop direct and meaningful relationships with workers. This development is apparent in the UK, Germany and the Netherlands where organizing is increasingly viewed as an indispensable way of reversing the union membership decline. With organizing strategies, unions try to mobilise workers around workplace problems related to working conditions, workplace democracy, low wages or excessive flexibility, to collectively push for solutions to such problems, and, in the process, to extend membership. Sometimes, instead of the workplace, the local community is taken as the main focus of organizing activities. In the country studies not many specifically youth-oriented examples of



organizing strategies were found. An interesting example is that in 2011, the FNV Bondgenoten (then the largest union within the FNV) and FNV Young teamed up to mobilise young supermarket workers, to promote decent work in the sector as well as the required respective adjustments to the collective agreement. In particular they argued for abolishing the youth wages in the sector and to make the adult wage applicable to all workers in the sector. And although they did not manage to achieve this completely, they did achieve a much greater wage increase for young workers of 18 years and younger (6.8 percent) than for the rest of the sector (3.8 percent), effectively reducing the gap between the collective agreement based wages of the younger and older workers.

A major strength of this initiative is the focus on one of the sectors with most young employees and with serious problems with the quality of work. Also the cooperation between Bondgenoten and FNV Young is a strength, since it aims to coordinate youth activities across the institutional borderlines within the union movement.

## **5. Conclusions**

Trade unions have given more and more emphasis to including young people in their discourses and strategies in recent years and have been trying to become more visible to young people, to better represent their interests and to organize them. They have done so out of two main motives. One, originating in the interest of trade unions to strengthen their legitimacy and power resources, is to increase their membership and to (re-)balance the age structure of membership. Membership among young people is in most cases substantially below adult rates. The other, stemming from their commitment to social justice and defending the weak in society, is to improve the position of one of the more vulnerable groups on the labour market, characterized by high unemployment, low security and low wages, and bleak future prospects, in particular for the lower skilled youth.

However, the increased emphasis on youth is not always backed up by the required resources, which often do not match the changed union discourse, reflecting limited resources but also priorities, identities and the composition of membership. The Belgian and German unions have invested most in strengthening their youth activities, followed by the Italian unions. In Spain, the UK, the Netherlands and Hungary efforts and resources have been quite limited because of a traditional dependence on institutional power resources, a focus on the representation of members and less on non-members, and/or a lack of financial resources. Also, some union officials argue that focusing on organizing young workers makes no sense since they only join union later in life when they are in need for greater security because of children and mortgages. Still, in all countries the resources and activities dedicated to youth issues are on the increase as the general sentiment is that it has become imperative for union success and survival.

Reaching and organizing young people, and even more so motivating them to become union activists, has proven a difficult task for all. The vulnerable position of youth in the labour market, as well as the fact that they often work in the least organized sectors and may not yet have a clear occupational or sectoral profiles, makes it hard to get into contact with young workers and establish a continuous relationship with them. Also, this study confirms that often young people simply know little about trade unions, what they do and what they stand for. Many have never even considered if they want to join them or not. Also, when their

awareness is higher, like for example in Spain, they are critical towards the way trade unions operate and do not necessarily relate to the image they project. Contrary to what is often assumed, however, young people do not have negative basic attitudes towards trade unions. Quite the reverse, in most countries it can be shown clearly that they actually favour the existence of strong unions, even if they do not support the actually-existing unions in their country. This apparent contradiction points to a lack of interaction between unions and youth, and a possible mismatch between the objectives, activities and images of existing unions and the ideas, identities and interests of young people.

Still, some unions have performed better than others and in particular the Belgian and German unions have achieved quite some success in terms of reaching out and organizing young workers. In Belgium, the union youth membership rate is high and close to the adult rate of approximately 50 percent. To some extent this reflects the role of the unions in the Ghent system, but it also stems from comprehensive youth strategies combining publicity campaigns and a strong presence in the media, information sessions at schools and universities, a strong effort to be in personal contact at the workplace with young workers, and a good use of workplace representation structures to represent them. In Germany, the unions achieved a strong increase in youth membership from 9 percent in 2004 to 18 percent in 2012. One element of their successful strategy has been to clearly diversify their approach towards different groups of young workers with different pathways into the labour market as well as different needs, interests and cultures: traditional apprentices, university students and precarious, often low-skilled, workers. Another has been the successful use of union-dominated works councils in general and the youth and apprentice committees in particular to strengthen contact with young workers at company level and assure their recruitment, again diversifying representation. Third, the German unions attach high importance to establishing their presence among university students through increased information and recruitment activities at universities. Fourth, they successfully address youth issues in certain cases without using the youth label but rather focusing on labour market status, for example in the case of temporary agency workers. And finally, they make increasing use of bottom-up, US-style organizing approaches.

The Belgian and German examples show that successes can indeed be achieved in reaching out and organizing young workers. They point to the need for comprehensive strategies comprising a range of approaches like publicity campaigns, information at schools and universities, making use of workplace representation structures and organizing strategies. The difference with the union

strategies in the other, less successful countries seems to lie first of all in the vast resources invested in establishing tailor-made direct personal contact with young workers. Whereas the other types of activities may improve the knowledge about and the image of unions, it is such personal contact which is most likely to indeed make young workers join the union.

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