How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?

Kurt Vandaele

DOI:10.1093/oso/9780190864798.003.0022

Abstract and Keywords
Trade union density has almost universally declined across Europe in recent decades, although substantial cross-country variation still exists. This chapter argues that the currently low rate of youth unionization is not the outcome of a generational shift in attitudes and beliefs regarding the value of trade unions. This phenomenon is a result rather of the decline of union membership as a social custom and the diminishing exposure to unionism in the workplace. This chapter argues that unions have a huge amount of agency as they play a particularly important role in the effort to develop effective, tailor-made strategies for organizing young workers.

Keywords: young workers, trade unions, union attitudes, school-to-work transitions, organizing, comprehensive campaigning

22.1. Introduction
Trade union density has almost universally declined across Europe in recent decades (Visser 2016), although substantial cross-country variation still exists. Among the different categories of under-represented groups in unions, young workers are considered the “most problematic group” in this regard (Pedersini 2010, 13). There is ample evidence that they are generally less inclined to unionize (see Section 22.2). Three major (and not mutually exclusive) explanations for this group’s low unionization rate have been identified in the literature (Payne 1989; Serrano Pascual and Waddington 2000).
The first involves the assumption that the propensity of young workers to unionize has decreased because of intergenerational shifts in values and attitudes. The second explanation is that the opportunity to unionize has been structurally hampered by the individualization of working conditions (driven by human resource management policies), new developments in work organization (e.g., telework), and changing labor markets for young workers (Blossfeld et al. 2008). These workers are more likely to be employed in nonstandard employment arrangements and in those workplaces, occupations, and economic sectors marked by weak union representation. Finally, the sociology of unionism matters: In light of the developments outlined previously, the current policies and organizational structures of many unions are likely to be ineffective for engaging and organizing young workers, and their predominant (decision-making) culture could be considered unattractive and unfavorable for youth participation (p.661) in union democracy and action (Vandaele 2012, 2015). We need to understand that the ways in which unions perceive and prioritize (or not) young workers play a pivotal role in shaping their efforts to address this problem (Esders, Bailey, and McDonald 2011). Moreover, given that there is a significant overlap between young workers and the phenomenon of precariousness, unions’ strategies toward precarious work have, by definition, important consequences for these workers (Murphy and Simms 2017).

Based for the most part on a literature review, the aim of this chapter is to explore what kind of strategies unions in Europe could develop to reconnect with the new generation on the labor market. In developing our main argument, we refer first to the main motives for union membership because their relative presence in a sector or country will influence unions’ strategies and policies for organizing young workers (Heery and Adler 2004). The chapter broadly focuses on three areas of motivation (Ebbinghaus, Göbel, and Koos 2011): the significance of union membership as a traditional custom embedded in social networks; instrumental/rational motives that are influenced by a favorable institutional framework for unions to lower the costs of organizing and servicing (young) workers; and, finally, the principle of solidarity, the identity-forming function of union membership, and the ideological convictions promoted by unions. In the literature on youth unionization, each motive largely corresponds to a different research focus (as shown in Table 22.1), and the different sections of this chapter are accordingly built around this framework. Bearing in mind the diminishing impact of traditional motives and the pressure that employer organizations or governments exert upon “union-friendly” institutional frameworks in the labor market, the argument will be made that union agency takes on a particular importance in the effort to counteract the deunionization trend. Decisive union action in the form, for instance, of comprehensive campaigning can be instrumental in reviving or strengthening these traditional and instrumental/rational motives (Ibsen and Tapia 2017).
How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motives of union membership</th>
<th>Research focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional social customs</td>
<td>Young people themselves: Their believes and attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental/rational motives</td>
<td>Young people in the labor market: School-to-work transitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union agency</td>
<td>Young people and unions: Sociology of unionism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Author’s own typology.

If the difficulties in organizing young workers continue unabated, this situation will represent an increasingly serious challenge for existing unions. It could impede their generational and imaginative renewal, exacerbate their already biased representation of today’s more diversified workforce, and even seriously call (p.662) into question their legitimacy vis-à-vis employers and political authorities, as well as their own organizational survival. Eventually, other or new organizations or social movements might emerge or gain further prominence for representing young (vulnerable) workers (and particularly in specific segments of the labor market such as the “gig economy”). At the same time, many young workers could potentially benefit from union representation. Since the Great Recession, inequalities in the labor market between adults and young people have accelerated, with labor market flexibility tending to disproportionately affect young workers (France 2016). Therefore, the idea will also be developed that young people’s early labor market experiences should be placed center stage in any union recruitment or organizing drive toward the young. However, young people entering the labor market are not a homogeneous bloc, a fact that becomes especially clear in their transition from school to work. This crucial phase in young people’s lives is marked by differences in the timing, duration, and sequence of labor market events. Distinctive trajectories in the school-to-work transition imply different challenges and opportunities for unions in terms of recruiting and retaining young workers, as well as engaging their participation in union activities, because their exposure to unionism is not uniform.

The chapter is organized as follows. Section 22.2 explores the extent to which an individual’s age influences his or her decision to join a union, and it examines the patterns in youth unionization across Europe. Section 22.3 focuses on young people themselves in a discussion of their beliefs and attitudes toward unionization. It then explores the demise of unionization as a traditional social custom as an alternative explanation to simple cohort effects. Section 22.4
How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?

22.2. Young workers as a demographic challenge for unions

In this section, we explore the relationship between age and unionization to assess to what extent there exists an “age deficit” within unions. Based on a literature review on the determinants of unionization (of studies from the 1980s until the early 1990s), Riley (1997, 272) found “conflicting evidence,” with age only sometimes having a significant effect on union membership. Some years later, however, in the UK context, Machin (2004, 430) claimed that age is “a more important determinant of who joins trade unions now than it used to be.” A seminal study by Blanchflower (2007) concluded that union density in 34 of the 38 advanced economies investigated follows a similar pattern: An inverted U-curve in regard to age shows that workers in their mid- to late forties have the highest likelihood of being unionized, compared to lower membership rates for both younger and older workers. Controlling for existing cohort effects in the United Kingdom and the United States, Blanchflower found that the concave age effect on unionization remains. More recent research on individual countries or across countries has either confirmed the concave age/unionization pattern (Kirmanoğlu and Başlevent 2012, 695; Turner and D’Art 2012, 47) or questioned it (Scheuer 2011; Schnabel and Wagner 2012). Thus, in the latter cases, it is found that the probability of unionization increases monotonically with age.

At first glance, the typical pattern of relatively low youth unionization should not, in itself, worry unions excessively because there might be an age effect at play. As young workers grow older and settle into (if it can be assumed) stable working careers, they might naturally “mature” into unionism. However, Figure 22.1 illustrates that in most European countries considered in this study, the median age of union members increased between 2004 and 2014; the same cohort effect applies to union activists and representatives in many sectors. In fact, in some countries, the median age indicates that a great number of union members are in their mid-forties to early fifties. Because middle-aged workers currently dominate the overall union membership composition, the median voter theorem would suggest that their policy preferences are dominating union strategies (Ebbinghaus 2006). If indeed unions are primarily representing the interests and needs of “insiders” (i.e., older workers), they might appear relatively unattractive to “outsiders” (i.e., young workers). However, such a rationale, based on assumed member preferences, ignores the structural context of labor market dualization and betrays a biased reasoning regarding statistical labor market outcomes. Apart from its rather manicheistic tendencies, this framework disregards “the constraints under which unions operate and the
drivers of union strategies beyond their members’ interests” (Benassi and Vlandas 2016, 6).

Nevertheless, today’s smaller birth cohorts and young people’s later labor market entrance (due to higher tertiary education rates) might further contribute to this “graying” of unions. Figure 22.1 provides evidence that, by and large, most unions in many countries are struggling to organize young people or, at least, cannot keep membership developments in line with growing employment rates. The figure compares the unionization rates among “youth” and “adults” at the aggregated level (thus masking sectoral differences) in 2004 and 2014. Here, “youth” is defined as unionization until the age of 24 years and “adult” as unionization between 25 and 54 years. In practice, unions generally use a broader definition by setting the maximum age for “youth” at 35 years (Vandaele 2012, 208). Yet the definition of “youth” used in Figure 22.2 makes it easier to discern the possible difficulties unions have with attracting young people; it is also more in line with youth studies. Three observations can be made from the figure.

**Figure 22.1** Median age of union members in 2014 and its change compared to 2004 in Europe.

*Source:* European Social Survey.
First, country differences in adult and youth unionization are *generally* persistent over time. Looking at, for instance, the level of youth unionization, there is a strong positive relationship between the country rankings in 2004 and 2014 (p.665) ($r_s(20) = .86, p < .00$). Second, there is an equally strong positive association between youth and adult unionization in 2004, which still holds 10 years later. Although the youth/adult gap in unionization in the Nordic countries is relatively substantial because of the very high levels of adult membership, youth unionization is still higher in those countries compared to the others. Finally, there is a drop in both youth and adult unionization rates in most, but not all, countries, with a relatively stronger decline in youth unionization. In other words, during the past 10 years in most European countries considered here, less young people have joined a union, more often than not resulting in a widening of the youth/adult gap in unionization. The fall in youth unionization is especially conspicuous in Denmark, Ireland, and Sweden. Youth unionization has increased in only a small number of countries, notably Austria and Germany.

Figure 22.2 illustrates the strong self-perpetuating tendencies of early union membership and demonstrates that early unionization is key. Indeed, although a typical union member is middle-aged, the first experience with unionism is very likely to happen when a worker is still young (Booth, Budd, and Munday 2010a, 48). Evidence from, for instance, Denmark (Toubøl and Jensen 2014, 150) and the Netherlands (Visser 2002, 416) suggests that the likelihood of first-time union membership is higher when workers are young and entering the labor market than it is later on: They seem “sensitive to reputational effects even at low levels of workplace union density” (Ibsen, Toubøl, and Jensen 2017, 10). In other words, there are many “first-timers” but far fewer “late bloomers” in unions (Booth, Budd, and Munday 2010b). This essentially implies that the window of opportunity for unions to organize workers becomes decidedly smaller the older they get (Budd 2010). Moreover, the early stages of unionization are crucial because the first years of union membership are the period when the probability of member outflow seems to be at its highest (Leschke and Vandaele 2015, 3–5). However, the crucial question for many (but not all) unions is not so much why young workers are resigning from...
membership but, rather, why so many of them “do not join a union (or at least
join a union once they get a stable job)” at all (Peetz, Price, and Bailey 2015, 64).

Further contributing to this bleak picture of the continued existence of unions is
the increasing percentage of workers who have never become a union member,
a trend that has been evident in Germany (Schnabel and Wagner 2006), the
United Kingdom, and the United States (Booth et al. 2010a), as well as across
other European countries (Kirmanoğlu and Başlevent 2012, 695). The rise of
never-membership can be considered a “demographic time bomb” for unions if
organizing young workers is not prioritized. Crucially, although the employment
shift—from the traditionally highly unionized manufacturing industries to the
less unionized private service sector—has significantly contributed to the rise of
never-membership, this is not the whole story. Deunionization would have
occurred even in the absence of such a structural employment shift in the labor
market (Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999).

(p.666) 22.3. The young people themselves: Their beliefs and attitudes
toward unions
Among many other causes (see Vachon, Wallace, and Hyde 2016),
tergenerational change in beliefs and attitudes toward unions is considered an
additional explanation for deunionization. Cohort effects in attitudes and beliefs
toward collectivism are consequently a central concern in this section, which
investigates whether such effects can explain the low youth unionization rate.
Many young people do actually seem to demonstrate trade union sympathies
(although they have less knowledge about unions), but the traditional sources
for the transmission of favorable attitudes and beliefs toward unionization are
disappearing. Therefore, instead of “problematizing youth,” it is important to
understand how young people develop their behavioral attitudes toward unions
rather than simply comparing them to those of previous generations.

22.3.1. Framing young people’s attitudes and beliefs via cohort effects
Studies on youth unionization that focus on young people themselves
predominantly emphasize cohort effects. Such a social generation approach
claims that young people’s attitudes and beliefs toward collective behavior
diverge sharply from those of previous generations. There is no consensus here
as to how a young worker should be defined, in the sense that different age
boundaries are used; when these are too large, this entails the danger of
masking significant in-group variance (Tailby and Pollert 2011), which in turn
might be influenced by differences in school-to-work regimes (Booth et al.
2010b). Thus, it remains an empirical question whether the attitudes of very
young workers, with little labor market experience, are always similar to those
of older young workers with more experience.

Above all other factors contributing to the low level of youth unionization, it has
been speculated that young workers, being associated with increasingly
individualistic beliefs and values, are less motivated by the collective ethos of unionism compared to previous generations (Allvin and Sverke 2000; Kirmanoğlu and Başlevent 2012). However, there are good reasons to be cautious about this claim. First, conceptually, individualism does not necessarily exclude the belief that collective behavior is required to achieve common goals (Goerres 2010). Nevertheless, collective behavior needs backing by collective mechanisms, which are increasingly breaking down or are no longer supported by the state or employer organizations (Peetz 2010). Second, methodologically, findings on differential intergenerational attitudes toward unions are often based on small-scale sociological studies, sometimes even of an anecdotal nature, so generalizing them is problematic (Haynes, Vowles, and Boxall 2005, 96). Finally, empirically, pointing to period effects, there is little evidence that young union members are more individualistic than their older counterparts, although there may be differences between the unionized and the nonunionized (Paquet 2005). Instead, employers’ hostility to union membership and a fear of victimization among young people may play an important and dissuasive role (Mrozowicki, Krasowska, and Karolak 2015; Hodder 2016; Alonso and Fernández Rodríguez 2017).

Although a narrow interpretation of young people’s individualism often negatively associates it with “Thatcher’s children” (in the UK context; see Waddington and Kerr 2002; Bryson and Gomez 2005), recent studies referring to “millennials” cast young people in a good light in terms of political engagement (despite their individualism). Again assuming cohort effects, millennials are considered a generational group that is loosely defined as those people who reached adulthood after the onset of the new millennium. Thus, specific attitudes and beliefs have been attributed to this “tech-savvy generation,” especially concerning work, such as the minor importance of paid work in their value system. However, many of the intergenerational differences in the workplace could be explained by age and period as opposed to cohort effects (Hajdu and Sik, this volume). It has also been claimed that millennials constitute a new political generation whose differences from their predecessors have become especially apparent in the anti-austerity/pro-democracy movements that have been active since the Great Recession (Milkman 2017).

Although the participants in the anti-austerity/pro-democracy movements differ in their sociodemographic composition—being younger and more educated—and they are more likely to identify with the middle class, these youthful activists do share the same discontent and left-leaning political orientations as unionists (Peterson, Wahlstrom, and Wennerhag 2015). Still, tensions between them, if employed (and more often in vulnerable employment positions), and established union confederations rose notably in those European countries that were heavily affected by the Great Recession, such as Greece (Kretsos 2011) and Spain (Fernández Rodríguez et al. 2015; Köhler and Calleja Jiménez 2015). In these countries, the union confederations’ original strategy of political inclusion
How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?

through co-managing the crisis has contributed to a general decline in trust in them or to a perception of them being “bureaucratic dinosaurs” (Hyman 2015). But the union strategies adopted in the early stages of the recession also show that the disconnection between millennials and unions in those countries should be considered in a specific context. In fact, compared to previous generations, there is little reason to believe that most young people today are born with an “antipathetic union gene.” Studies examining their attitudes toward unions paint a less negative picture than the assumed cohort effects suggest; in fact, strong antagonistic attitudes toward unionism in principle are not at all common among young people.

(p.668) 22.3.2. Virulent anti-unionism is not the problem

Studies actually point to an underlying and unmet demand for unionization among young workers. Basing their research on European Social Survey data, D’Art and Turner (2008) report largely positive attitudes toward unions, irrespective of age, and the persistence and even strengthening of this view among workers since the early 1980s. In fact, young workers seem even more inclined to join unions compared to their older counterparts. Such findings come from studies in Australia (Pyman et al. 2009), Canada (Gomez, Gunderson, and Meltz 2002), New Zealand (Haynes et al. 2005), the United States (Booth et al. 2010a), and the United Kingdom (Payne 1989; Serrano Pascual and Waddington 2000; Waddington and Kerr 2002; Freeman and Diamond 2003; Tailby and Pollert 2011). Also, as a corollary, a comparison between Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States concludes that “workers have broadly similar preferences for unionization across age groups and borders” (Bryson et al. 2005, 166).

Significantly, this pattern of unmet demand for unionization can be confirmed for a large range of very different countries beyond the Anglophone world, including Belgium (Vendramin 2007), Denmark (Caraker et al. 2015, 97–111), France (Contrepois 2015, 94–95), Germany (Oliver 2011, 246; TNS Infratest 2015, 36–37; Nies and Tullius 2017), the Netherlands (Huiskamp and Smulders 2010), Sweden (Furåker and Berglund 2003; Bengtsson and Berglund 2011), and elsewhere across Europe (Turner and D’Art 2012); Hungary seems to be an exception (Keune 2015, 15). Furthermore, although results based on focus groups or individual interviews cannot readily be extended to young workers in general, such research methods do allow for a more enhanced differentiation between various youth segments in the labor market.⁵ Again, interview-based research in, for instance, Poland (Mrozowicki et al. 2015), Portugal (Kovács, Dias, and da Conceição Cerdeira 2017), and the United Kingdom (Hodder 2016; TUC 2017, 25–28; the latter confirming previous results) highlights the (critical) support toward unions among certain labor market youth segments.
Although young people's attitude toward unionization is generally positive, it has been found that young workers possess very limited knowledge about unions (Fernández Rodríguez et al. 2015, 147; Hodder 2016, 13). Because young people are largely unaware as to what unions actually do, the overall majority of young people seem to be largely “blank slates” (Freeman and Diamond 2003, 40) when they enter the labor market. Even if they have some understanding about unions, it tends to be a stereotyped view, especially because the press and mass media are “biased toward selecting events about actual or impending strike actions” (Gallagher 1999, 249). Unions’ negative public image might feed into the view that they are “representing a different type and culture of work and dynamics in employment to that experienced by young people” (Fernández Rodríguez et al. 2015, 157). In Australia, for example, it was found that young people think that only “victims” on the labor market need unions, being powerless to bargain effectively for themselves (Bulbeck 2008).

Young workers’ lack of knowledge about unionism is particularly evident when they experience concrete problems at work (Paquet 2005). When this is the case, at least in the Australian (McDonald et al. 2014, 321–23) and UK contexts (Tailby and Pollert 2011, 511; Hodder 2016, 66), unions are rarely considered a source of advice. For basic information and assistance on employment-related matters, popular internet search engines are common resources. Young workers also informally approach management for advice. Finally, young workers rely on parental and family support and their circle of friends as a source of information to address job-related dissatisfaction. The literature on union attitude formation has specifically identified parents, family, and friends as socialization agents who could shape young people’s union attitudes prior to their labor market entrance; it is to these pre-employment sources that we turn now.

22.3.3. Union attitude formation before labor market entrance

Two theoretical approaches are helpful for identifying sources that could influence young people’s attitudes toward unions before their first entry into the labor market. First, applying insights from marketing theory, the “experience-good” model of unionism emphasizes that workers can only truly appreciate unions if they sample membership or become a member (Gomez, Gunderson, and Meltz 2002, 2004; Gomez and Gunderson 2004; Bryson et al. 2005). Joining a union requires some degree of prior knowledge, given that most union-provided benefits are rather unclear for nonunion members; in particular, nonmembers may have difficulty discerning the nonpecuniary benefits of union membership. This problem is especially relevant for young people because most of them do not have first-hand experience with unions. Still, the importance of unionism as an “experience good” should not be overemphasized, for indirect experience through contacts and networks is also important for learning about union benefits. Second, social learning theory likewise highlights the importance of embeddedness in union-friendly social networks in which positive union attitudes are socialized (Kelloway and Newton 1996; Griffin and Brown 2011).
Social interaction with parents, relatives, and friends who support unionization increases the probability of young people having favorable union attitudes, and this might also act as a counterbalance to the predominantly negative public image of unions.

Thus, if favorable attitudes toward unionism (as a social custom) are transmitted from one generation to another, family and parental socialization can be identified as a potential source for the development of positive union attitudes among young people (Blanden and Machin 2003; Oliver 2010, 515; (p.670) 2011, 253; Ebbinghaus et al. 2011, 109). However, it can be expected that such intergenerational social learning has relatively lost its importance in most countries because, given the rise of never-membership in a union, parental union membership has itself diminished (Freeman and Diamond 2003, 33–35; Schnabel and Wagner 2006; Kirmanoğlu and Başlevent 2012, 699). Even in a high-union-density country such as Belgium, the traditional social custom of union membership has become a less important motive for unionization among the younger age categories (Swyngedouw, Abts, and Meuleman 2016, 35).

Favorable attitudes to unions can also come from young people’s union-friendly social networks (Griffin and Brown 2011, 95–96); in fact, with regard to joining a union, peers seem to be a more important source of influence on young workers compared to older people (Freeman and Diamond 2003, 45). Yet, particularly in low-union-density countries, it is again questionable whether such pro-union networks are still strong enough for sustaining the norm of union membership. Finally, social networks in the context of education could also be a source of union attitude formation. Thus, students in certain fields of study, such as the arts and social sciences, seem to be particularly receptive to unionism (Oliver 2010, 515; 2011, 253; Griffin and Brown 2011, 96). Whether this is a consequence of the self-selecting tendencies of these disciplines, which perhaps mainly attract students who already have pro-union attitudes, or whether other factors (e.g., the curriculum of certain courses) are more significant has yet to be ascertained.

One question that arises is whether the initial socializing agents continue to have an influence on young people’s union attitudes as they gain experience on the labor market. Based on the experience-good model of unionism, it is expected that the agents will lose their influence somewhat when young people have left full-time education and fully entered the labor market, for the youngsters will then gradually rely more on their own, individually accumulated “sampling history” (Gomez and Gunderson 2004, 108). This point is confirmed by a study on labor market experiences via student employment in Australia (Oliver 2010, 2011): Once young people begin to gain experience on the labor market, norms and influences at the workplace seem to gain greater importance as determinants of union membership compared to parental socialization (Cregan 1991). As Figure 22.2 indicates, the key period for unions to organize young workers is when they first enter the labor market because this gives
unions a crucial opportunity to shape young workers’ attitudes (Booth et al. 2010b, 66–68). This timing does not necessarily correspond with the completion of education or labor market entrance on a full-time basis; it could also concern student employment. Analyzing the influence of these early labor market experiences and transitions from school to work on union attitude formation is therefore vital.

(p.671) 22.4. Early labor market experiences and school-to-work transitions
Concerning the timing of labor market entry, one event in the school-to-work transition that deserves special attention is student employment. It provides unions with an opportunity to specifically target students, and it enables students to gauge the benefits of union membership for themselves first-hand (Oliver 2010, 2011). A crucial question is whether these first-time experiences with unionism in student employment serve as lasting impressions for when young people begin their careers after graduating. This exposure to unionism might be particularly different to what young people go on to experience in their future sectors of employment (Booth et al. 2010b, 61–62). Although there are few studies on young people’s attitudes toward unionism during student employment, their development does seem to be influenced by these formative experiences of work. Two conclusions can be made.

First, young people in lower quality (student) jobs or who have encountered concrete labor market difficulties (e.g., temporary or involuntary part-time employment or unemployment) seem to have a greater desire to become union members compared to their counterparts with higher quality jobs (Lowe and Rastin 2000; Vendramin 2007, 59–61; Oliver 2010, 2011). This indicates that those in lower quality (student) jobs believe that unions could improve their job quality, which is especially the case among young workers with a longer involvement in the labor market, suggesting that they realize that “exit and different jobs are not necessarily solutions to problems at work which repeat themselves” (Tailby and Pollert 2011, 514). Second, workers with previous union experience generally hold more positive views about the ability of unions to improve working conditions and job security compared to never-members (Kolins Givan and Hipp 2012). Likewise, those who were union members during their period of student employment are more likely to join a union after finishing their studies compared to those young people who have never been a union member (Oliver 2010). However, confirming the experience-good model, it is not union membership per se that seems to matter but, rather, the positive experience of that membership during student employment. Communicating with new young members in a personal way and educating them about their social rights could contribute to such a positive experience (Paquet 2005).
Of great importance, naturally, is whether unions are embedded in the workplace, because the extent of union representation influences (young) workers’ perception of the effectiveness of unions (Waddington 2014). It is no coincidence that unions’ diminishing access to the workplace (linked to the firm size via legal eligibility requirements about union representation) is clearly associated with lower youth unionization (Spilsbury et al. 1987; Payne 1989). It is therefore crucial to map what proportion of those in student employment are exposed to unionism and to analyze their experiences at work; the same principle, of course, applies for young workers in general (TUC 2016, 2017). It is certain that being in paid employment alongside studying has become widespread throughout Europe (especially for those in tertiary education) out of the need to finance costs or to improve the standard of living (Hauschildt et al. 2015, 95–102). Notable variation in student employment rates exists between countries and between study disciplines, for instance, which alludes to different patterns in school-to-work transitions. At the same time, student employment is especially concentrated in the wholesale, retail, accommodation, and food sectors in most European countries (calculations based on Grotti, Russell, and O’Reilly, this volume)—the very sectors in which union density is far below the national average. Thus, in most countries, the odds are not very high that young people have direct experience with unions at the workplace for the first time during student employment, especially in low-union-density countries. But even in unionized workplaces, one particular finding is that nonunionized students or young workers are not always actively recruited: In other words, nobody asks them to join (Cregan and Johnston 1990, 94; Pyman et al. 2009, 12–13; Oliver 2010, 511).

School-to-work transitions are marked not only by variation in young people’s labor market entry speed (via student employment or otherwise) but also by differences in the sequence and duration of employment statuses. The distinctive patterns of school-to-work transitions are associated with different degrees of job stability and security, and they have long-lasting effects on labor market outcomes (Berloffa et al., this volume). Patterns depend on differences in educational and training systems, sectoral and national labor market institutions regarding employment regulation, and changing macroeconomic conditions such as the outbreak of the Great Recession (Grotti et al., this volume). Individual characteristics such as gender and educational attainment also clearly influence young people’s early employment and career history. All of this explains why the dominance of certain patterns in school-to-work transitions varies across sectors and countries (Brzinsky-Fay 2007). Based on several institutional characteristics, five country clusters or regimes of school-to-work transitions have been identified (Pohl and Walther 2007; Pastore 2016; Hadjivassiliou et al., this volume). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore each regime in detail; rather, it is sufficient here to give an account of the degree of integration of unions into the institutional framework of these regimes and how they are
(perceived as) helpful in smoothing young people’s entrance into the labor market. Thus, in the Northern European universalistic regime, unions play a role (together with public employment services) in the management of income-support schemes and active labor market policies, which increases the probability of young workers’ union exposure. Above all, union-managed voluntary unemployment insurance schemes (the “Ghent system”) act as a selective incentive for unionization in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden (Ebbinghaus et al. 2011). However, the state-led “erosion” of this Ghent system or the promotion of new institutional alternatives or both have weakened the close relationship between unions and insurance schemes, especially for new labor market entrants (Høgedahl and Kongshøj 2017). Nonetheless, these countries, together with Norway and Belgium (the latter a quasi-Ghent system country; Vandaele 2006), record high youth unionization in both selected years (see Figure 22.2).

While belonging to the employment-centered regime, Belgium has a fairly stable youth unionization rate, explained by the relatively unchanging de facto Ghent system and the quadrennial social elections in large firms in the private sector, which offer unions an opportunity to reach out to young workers (Faniel and Vandaele 2012). In other countries belonging to the employment-centered regime, especially Austria and Germany, the dual educational system plays a central role, helping young people gain specific occupational skills while still at school by providing vocational training opportunities via apprenticeships. Historically supported by a legal framework of firm-level representation (the Jugend- und Auszubildendenvertretung), apprenticeships have been unions’ dominant and most successful channel for organizing young workers in Germany (Holst, Holzschuh, and Niehoff 2014). Since the late 1980s, however, vocational training has slowly lost its significance as an entry point into the labor market. German school-to-work transitions have become characterized by precarious employment or by tertiary education students entering the labor market directly or via dual studies, with those taking the latter route combining study with practical training or work experience in a company. These different school-to-work trajectories have prompted German unions to strategically rethink their organizing approaches; for instance, the different strategies toward organizing young workers of the IG Metall union have been identified as key to its success (Schmalz and Thiel 2017). Nevertheless, apprenticeships remain a significant recruitment channel for unions in large firms, especially in the manufacturing industry (which continues to be an important provider of employment in Germany). It has therefore been suggested that German unions would do better to focus on young people’s apprenticeships and traineeships within their field of study rather than on their possible experiences in non-study-related student employment because this is weakly clustered in particular sectors (Oliver 2011).
Finally, in the three other school-to-work transition regimes—with obvious differences between the liberal, subprotective, and post-socialist regimes—the education, training, and welfare systems generally allow less room for union involvement. In the case of the subprotective regimes, it should be noted that unions’ associational power is less oriented toward organizing union members. Their power is predominantly based on their mobilization capacity for demonstrations and strikes (as in France, although it belongs to the employment-centered regime; Sullivan 2010) or on the social election results at the company level (as in Spain; Martínez Lucio, Martino, and Connolly 2017). Although these different union identities reveal the various ways in which unions prioritize the organization of young workers (and to what extent), it is important for all unions to renew their base of union activists, candidates for social elections, or union representatives. In any case, across the five regimes, today’s school-to-work transitions are more often than not complex, unstable, and nonlinear. From a historical perspective, this level of complexity and nonlinearity is not typical for contemporary school-to-work transitions (Goodwin and O’Connor 2015). Even so, today’s employment has been increasingly plagued by precariousness and the quality of youth jobs has deteriorated, with an increase in part-time and temporary jobs since the Great Recession (Lewis and Heyes 2017; Grotti et al., this volume; Hadjivassiliou et al., this volume). In this respect, given young people’s turnover rates, it has been claimed that unions should opt for a life cycle approach to organizing instead of a job-centered approach (Budd 2010).

22.5. Union agency: Unions reaching out to young people? Historically, and highlighting their weaknesses in terms of field-enlarging organizing strategies, unions have long found their relationship with young workers to be a challenge (Williams and Quinn 2014): The “generation gap” in unionization between young workers and their older counterparts is not new. But today’s positive attitude formation regarding unionization through socializing agents and union exposure at the workplace is becoming a less effective means of reaching out to all young workers. However, the shaping of union attitudes also depends on the agency of the union—in the efforts it makes toward developing the collective consciousness, identity, and actions of the young workers (Blackwood et al. 2003). Unions across Europe have gradually (although too slowly) begun undertaking different (small-scale) actions to better engage with young people. Unions’ growing awareness of low youth unionization and the economic context of the Great Recession, with its increase in youth unemployment, have both enhanced this engagement (Vandaele 2013).

As illustrated by brochures on “good examples” from the United Kingdom’s largest union Unite (2014) and the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (Lorenzini 2016), among others (Pedersini 2010; Keune 2015), several unions are using a vast array of (not necessarily new) tactics to engage young workers. Reach-out activities include visits to vocational schools, higher
education institutions, and job-information conventions; self-promotion; and providing information about young people’s social rights and challenges in their school-to-work transitions where unions can provide specific services. Fostering alliance-building between unions and relevant youth organizations, such as student organizations, is another way to achieve a better understanding of school-to-work transitions and young people’s problems, also outside the workplace. Some unions are also present at youth events such as music festivals (p.675) or advertise in cinemas. Furthermore, although face-to-face communication and traditional forms of mass communication continue to be of importance, young people’s media consumption is heavily oriented toward the internet and social media via apps on mobile computer devices. Although unions have increased their presence and activity in this regard, there is often a lack of strategic coherence, meaning that their potential communication power is underutilized (Hodder and Houghton 2015), especially because young people’s preferences toward social media communications are based on the opportunities it offers for participation (Wells 2014).

There are also abundant examples of unions offering a reduced-price or free union membership so that students and young workers, often in low-paid or even unpaid work (e.g., in the creative industries), can sample the benefits of union membership. Meanwhile, some unions—for instance, in Italy, the Netherlands, and Slovenia—have set up separate organizations or networks for representing atypical or freelance workers, whose jobs are often characterized by precariousness (Gumbrell-McCormick 2011; Lorenzini 2016). Furthermore, regarding recent labor market developments, so-called “self-employed” workers in the “gig economy” (more likely to be younger) have been building solidarity outside of the traditional unions to deal with employment issues. They have set up their own grassroots campaigns, collective actions, (virtual) community-based self-organizations, and “labor mutuals” (Bauwens and Niaros 2017; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017). Alliance-building between these self-organizations and existing unions, as well as imaginative and diversified union strategies that make innovative use of technology to connect spatiotemporally distributed workers, is needed now more than ever to “#YouthUp”—that is, to attract the millennials and future generations. However, apart from legal arrangements, current union statutes and representation structures might often act as obstacles to union membership for those workers who frequently change employment status (including “gig workers”).

Furthermore, some unions have set up targeted campaigns demonstrating the benefits of collective representation and action in order to alter their media profile and public image among potential (young) members and the wider public (Bailey et al. 2010). Although the findings presented here are solely from the perspective of an observer, the relative success of the Dutch “Young & United” campaign illustrates the possibilities of union agency. In 2015, the Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (Dutch Federation of Trade Unions), together with a
diverse range of youth organizations, launched this campaign to reach a dispersed young workforce that is difficult to organize, given that many young people are employed in companies and sectors with a high turnover rate. Shining a spotlight on age discrimination, the well-prepared Young & United campaign was launched with the aim of abolishing the low “youth minimum wage” for young workers aged between 18 and 23 years. Intriguingly, this issue-based campaign was successful in terms of political agenda setting and the partial abolitionment (p.676) of the youth minimum wage, despite the fact that this low wage had not been a public issue in the Netherlands for several decades.

Because the sharing of media content is a social driver, and union-friendly networks are socializing agents for union attitude formation, one of the key challenges of any union youth campaign is “to tap into these networks of young people and provide information in a way that can be easily shared” (Geelan 2015, 77; see also Johnson and Jarley 2005). The Young & United campaign seemed largely effective in gaining a foothold in youth networks by using a language, visuals, and messages that appealed to young people. Inspired by methods from the “community organizing model” (Lorenzini 2016, 24–25), the campaign made heavy use of social media and escalating direct action, often with a festive dimension and led by a large and diverse group of young people who were engaged via like-by-like recruitment. However, research is needed on the extent to which the campaign succeeded in raising awareness among young people about unionism and triggered an ongoing increase in youth union activism. Furthermore, new young members might develop false expectations if they think of unions as primarily social movements, for this ignores the realities of daily, routine union work and the fact that most unions are hardly permanent mobilization machines, especially in the Dutch context. Nevertheless, the Young & United campaign turned its attention in 2017 to problematizing temporary and zero-hour contracts for young workers and putting better employment contracts on the political agenda.

The Young & United campaign demonstrates that, if it is successful, comprehensive campaigning can forge a collective identity and sense of solidarity based on salient (workplace) issues that are politicized and could be addressed by better regulation (Murphy and Turner 2016). The potential for better regulation is crucial, given that young people’s interest in unionism is based on the condition that “they feel that their contribution can make a difference” (Byford 2009, 237). From the perspective of union membership as an experience good, campaigns that make sole or predominant use of formal advertising channels are likely to be relatively unsuccessful in influencing young people’s union attitudes (Gomez and Gunderson 2004, 107). The Danish “Are you OK?” campaign, launched in 2012, illustrates this point. Although this campaign highlighted the importance of collective organization and the concrete benefits of collective agreements, its network embeddedness among young people was weak because of its top-down character; thus, young people’s union attitudes
How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?

were only marginally altered (Geelan 2015). In contrast to a simple marketing campaign, comprehensive campaigning combines a top-down approach with youth-led activism at the workplace or beyond.

Furthermore, it is doubtful whether campaigns that address young workers uniformly as an age-defined or homogeneous group will be successful. A demographic characteristic such as age might be a meager basis for identifying issues of concern because young workers do not necessarily think of themselves (p.677) as a group with shared interests (Kahmann 2002). Given the variety of school-to-work transition regimes, young workers’ different labor market experiences give rise to different interests and needs, although not necessarily different from those of older generations; still, the precariousness of young people’s working conditions might be an issue that is salient and common across the different regimes. Although union campaigns might capitalize on issue-based forms of civic and political participation and the “resurgence in youth activism,” youth engagement seems largely to mirror existing national patterns of political participation, which can be clustered into country groups that are similar to the school-to-work transition regimes (Sloam 2016; Bassoli and Monticelli 2018). This indicates that campaign strategies should be contextualized within these regimes.

Finally, if unions want to help young workers develop agency in their working lives, effective internal structures for youth representation are also a necessity, insofar as they make unions more responsive to and knowledgeable about the aspirations, interests, and needs of young people (Vandaele 2012, 2015; Bielski Boris et al. 2013). Increasing unions’ responsiveness toward young workers might help disprove the pessimistic stereotype that they are hostile to unions because of individualistic tendencies. In addition, although it could be speculated that “generational differences have perhaps been more apparent to activists than to academics” (Williams and Quinn 2014, 140), the possible misconception about young workers’ excessive individualism is certainly not without risk for unions; it could turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy if the resulting behavior of union officials and activists ends up impeding a satisfactory engagement with the new generation on the labor market (Esders et al. 2011). Similarly, certain groups of young workers, at least in the United Kingdom, have internalized the principles of today’s labor market flexibility (Bradley and Devadason 2008, 131), which indicates that “how they see the world differs from the union officials who seek to organise them” (TUC 2016, 33). A simple replication of formal union decision-making structures via parallel structures for youth entails the danger of a ghettoization based on age, weakening the articulation of young workers’ own agendas and ideas (Dufour-Poirier and Laroche 2015). Furthermore, such age-based structures, unlike gender structures or those for under-represented groups such as migrants, would face regular changes in the membership composition (because of maximum age criteria). Integrating young workers into union activities solely through forms of
How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?

Representative democracy seems insufficient for instigating a more transformative change in union strategies and practices. New forms of participatory democracy and self-expression, informal engagement around issues (e.g., precariousness), and training and education (also via mentoring and union leadership development programs) may contribute to a greater—and more politicized—involvement of young unionists in union life and activities and also empower them (Laroche and Dufour-Poirier 2017).

(p.678) 22.6. Conclusions

Demographic change is a fundamental issue for membership-based organizations, and this is equally applicable to unions. Many of them are in trouble today because union membership is not only heavily skewed toward workers in industry and the public sector but also noticeably “graying.” Although youth unionization is persistently higher in the Northern European countries and Belgium than in all other European countries considered here, a decline in youth unionization, at the aggregated level, almost represents a common trend. This representation gap in unionization between younger and older workers is not new. However, it is often explained by attributing specific attitudes and beliefs to the new generation of workers. This is a recurrent popular narrative: Public perceptions, media representations, and political discourses tend to stress intergenerational shifts, although empirical evidence of cohort effects is often lacking. Rather than a deficiency of collectivist beliefs and values, there are other, more significant reasons for unions’ difficulties in engaging and organizing young workers.

Thus, socialization via parents and social networks is a less effective means of positive attitude formation for unionism than in the past. Furthermore, young workers are predominantly employed in workplaces, occupations, and sectors in which the social norm of union membership is simply weak. If union leadership continues to hold generational stereotypes about young people, the risk is that it will not be self-reflective or self-critical enough to tackle low youth unionization. Apart from a broad strategic vision on the future of unions, a vast shift in resource allocation is needed for overcoming the widening representation gap and for turning small-scale, local initiatives into large-scale organizing efforts, especially in those growing occupations and sectors in which young workers are employed and need unions the most. In this area, early unionization and demonstration of the effectiveness of unions is crucial. The research on unions and student employment highlights that only student workers with a positive experience have a higher probability of future membership, compared to workers reporting that unions made either a negative impression or little impression at all. Rather than providing historical accounts of the achievements of the labor movement, union activities for engaging young people would do better to emphasize how unions are addressing salient issues that matter to them today.
Furthermore, the continued cross-country variation in youth unionization points to the relevance of unions’ institutional embeddedness in school-to-work transitions, inter-related with different union approaches to organizing young workers. In other words, it appears that age itself is a less important factor for explaining low youth unionization; the decision to become a union member is rather “embedded in the context of an individual’s work history” (Lowe and Rastin 2000, 217). It is young people’s early experiences on the labor market and (p.679) their (workplace) issues—either via student employment or when they begin their career after graduating—that matter, along with their direct exposure to unions at the workplace. Analyzing in detail the institutional arrangements within education, training, and welfare systems could contribute to a better understanding of how unions can strengthen their relevance for school-leavers in their transition from school to work by designing tailor-made union strategies for young people in precarious work and other nonstandard forms of employment. Youth unionization is not doomed to failure because of an intergenerational shift, and unions should therefore not resign themselves to such a fate but, rather, should recognize—it must be stressed, the sooner the better—that there is still room for maneuver.

(p.680) References

Bibliography references:


How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?


How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?


How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?


How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?


Goodwin, John, and Henrietta O’Connor. 2015. *Norbert Elias’s Lost Research: Revisiting the Young Worker Project*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.


How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?


How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?


How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?


How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?


How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?


TUC. 2016. Living for the Weekend? Understanding Britain’s Young Core Workers. London: Trades Union Congress.


How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?


Notes:

(1) This latter issue has been the result of either a lack of legal provision for such representation or a lack of deliberate managerial or state strategies of...
How can trade unions in Europe connect with young workers?

avoiding or resisting union representation in the (fissured) workplace (due to contracting out and subcontracting).

(2) I am very grateful for the constructive remarks and suggestions from Carl Roper, Mark Stuart, and the editors of this book.

(3) Retired members and other categories of passive members are included in Figure 22.1 because they can also influence union decision-making. Notably in Italy, pensioners have an incentive to become or remain union members because specialized union offices help them access welfare benefits (Frangi and Barisione 2015). Obviously, the overall median age in each country drops slightly if only active union members are included in the count; the country trends over time remain, however.

(4) Youth emigration could be another explanatory factor.

(5) Disaggregating survey data within the young age group is seldom done because the size of the survey sample usually does not allow for this.

(6) In particular, a public transport strike might disproportionately distress young people because they often make use of this means of transport (Schnake, Dumler, and Moates 2016).

(7) It remains an open question whether unions are found at the top of the search engine results page.

(8) In several countries, unions are legally prohibited from going to schools or campuses, but creative tactics can be employed to get around this restriction.

(9) See https://www.youngandunited.nl.

(10) Those problems could include issues beyond the workplace, such as affordable housing.