

# ITUC BRIEFING

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## Canada:

Youth in the face of crisis,  
trade union renewal



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# Introduction

Almost three years after the onset of the economic and financial crisis that sent shock waves through the world, the situation is ever more difficult for young Canadians. Faced with soaring unemployment rates, increasingly insecure jobs and growing flexibility, they are particularly vulnerable to mass layoffs. From Vancouver to Montreal, in some cases faced with very different realities, trade union organisations are taking on the huge challenge of protecting workers' rights and extending their organising campaigns to colleges and universities.

## **Young people have not been spared by the crisis**

Young people, along with women, were among the first to experience the effects of the economic and financial crises. They are usually the first to be laid off by companies, in accordance with the infamous “last in, first out” rule, as they are the workers with the least seniority. Figures from 2009 (see box), one year into the crisis, show that unemployment rates for workers aged under 24 in Canada rose sharply to 16.4% from only 10% before the crisis. The same trend can be observed with women. At present, in 2011, despite the Canadian federal government's assurances that the crisis is well behind us, the latest figures seem to be pointing to the contrary. In its 2010 report “Youth Employment in Crisis”, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) draws attention to the sharp rise in youth unemployment in the wake of the crisis, noting that in countries that are currently in the process of economic recovery, job creation is not sufficient to prevent further unemployment growth among relatively inexperienced workers, such as young graduates. According to the ILO, unless appropriate steps are taken soon, the youth will be faced with an untenable situation that will represent a threat to social cohesion.

“The CLC (Canadian Labour Congress) decided to take action,” explains Erin Harrison-Taylor, chair of the ITUC Youth Committee and former national representative for young workers in Canada. With the help of its affiliates, the CLC has been running a vast action plan for a number of years, aimed at reforming the unemployment insurance system and improving the state pension scheme in Canada. A number of other campaigns are also underway, such as that on the minimum working age, aimed at abolishing child labour in Canada.

<b>Geography: Canada</b>	<b>Gender: Both sexes</b>	<b>Year: 2009</b>	
	<b>15 years and over</b>	<b>15-24 years</b>	<b>25 years and over</b>
Population	27.309.200	4.394.100	2.291.500
Labour force	18.368.700	2.867.900	15.500.800
Employment	16.848.900	2.430.100	14.418.800
Full-time employment	13.628.300	1.291.500	12.336.900
Part-time employment	3.220.500	1.138.600	2.081.900
Unemployment	1.519.800	437.800	108.200
Not in labour force	8.940.500	1.526.200	7.414.200
Unemployment rate	8.3%	15.3%	7%
Participation rate	67.3%	65.3%	67.6%
Employment rate	61.7%	55.3%	62.9%

Sources: Statistics Canada, LFS Microdata and Historical Review

## Changes in the union organising system

Union membership rates within the CLC have increased steadily over recent years. It currently stands at 20% of the labour force nationally, with peaks of over 35% in certain provinces like Manitoba. According to Erin Harrison-Taylor, this increase is thanks to a change in strategy. Trade unions were faced with an unprecedented industrial crisis and many factories with high levels of union membership were relocated to the southern hemisphere. Rising to this challenge, the CLC is now organising in other sectors such as services, which mainly employ young workers. Public services are another leading sector for union activity. Dialogue plays a central role in recruitment. Young members discuss with other young people in the workplace, explaining the benefits of union membership, the union struggle for higher minimum wages and improved health and safety laws. Erin Harrison-Taylor insists: *“Unions do not only work for their members; all workers benefit from trade union campaigns and the gains they secure.”*

In North America, there are substantial advantages to working in a unionised workplace. The first major difference is the wage level: wages are generally higher in unionised workplaces. Pension access is also facilitated, as well as other non-wage benefits. In spite of all these advantages, unions still receive a lot of bad press in Canada. Most of the leading press corporations belong to North-American multinationals that readily publish articles discrediting unions. Moreover, college or university students are seldom well informed about the realities of trade unions. For this reason, unions are also running awareness raising actions in universities.

## One major goal for young workers: improving the Canada Pension Plan

One of the main campaigns carried out by the CLC is aimed at improving the Canada Pension Plan (CPP). The union proposal is clear: to gradually double the future benefits of the CPP. A slight increase in the contributions made today would result in thousands of dollars in added benefits each year for the workers of tomorrow. This campaign is fiercely criticised by a number of special interest groups, some of whom claim that the CPP will no longer exist when the young workers of today retire. The CLC is totally opposed to this view and maintains that the CPP is reliable. It guarantees the payment of benefits over the next 75 years at least. According to the union, the real danger lies in the fact that a third of workers aged between 24 and 64 have no pension savings and are likely to face serious hardship. It is therefore essential that they be helped to raise sufficient savings. According to the union plan, doubling the future benefits of the CPP would considerably increase the likelihood of receiving higher benefits on retirement. For example: a 28-year-old working full-time until his or her retirement, in other words 37 years of contributions at the full rate, would be entitled to a CPP pension of approximately 1,772 Canadian dollars per month. Without the plan proposed by the union movement, this same worker would only be entitled to 886 Canadian dollars a month.



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## Minimum age campaign

Unlikely though it may seem, Canada is among the 26 countries that still haven't ratified ILO Convention 138 concerning the minimum age for admission to employment, alongside Iran, India or Burma, thus opening the door to child labour. This being intolerable for the trade union movement, the CLC launched a campaign on the minimum age. Even as we speak, millions of Canadians are unaware of this reality. The campaign aims at identifying the weaknesses in Canada's existing minimum age legislation and urging the Canadian authorities to ratify Convention 138. The "Canadians Opposed to Child Labour" campaign is led by young trade union members in co-operation with social partners, student and civil society organisations. Its key aim is to ensure that each and every provincial and territorial government agrees to amend its labour laws in order to reflect the principles enshrined in ILO Convention 138 relating to the minimum age for employment. Once this aim is achieved, it will be up to the provincial and territorial authorities to outline the relevant course of action allowing the federal government to ratify the Convention and, above all, to take all the appropriate steps required for its implementation.

The current laws on minimum age, whether federal, provincial or territorial, are contrary to Convention 138 and were further weakened in British Columbia and Alberta, where the minimum age for admission to employment was brought down to twelve. The Convention states that the employment age should be no less than the compulsory school attendance age and that it should not, in any case, be under age 15. Attention is also drawn to the rising incidence of workplace injuries among young workers and lack of awareness about their rights at work. This



campaign is aimed not only at eradicating child labour but also at putting this issue at the heart of the public debate, both at federal and international levels.

## The transition from school to the world of work

Among the most urgent challenges unions currently face in Canada is the lack of information or misinformation among young college or university students regarding unions. *“Most of the time, people think that unions protect lazy workers and that it costs them money, especially in the public sector,”* explains Georgianna Bates, member of Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union (COPE 378) based in Vancouver, in British Columbia. *“Thanks to the work carried out by unions, they are enjoying a number of benefits such as the five-day working week, whether or not they are union members. To overcome this problem, we are organising information sessions on the world of work in schools, colleges and universities.”* More often than not, students are already involved in the world of work. Many of them work to pay for part of their studies or simply to earn some pocket money. *“The cost of studying is constantly on the rise,”* adds Georgianna Bates, *“These students are unaware of their rights, including those on the minimum wage, for example. It is vital that we inform them. Not only for the jobs they do as students but also so that they are better prepared when they enter the world of work after their studies.”* Other obstacles come in the way of trade unions: the federal and provincial

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governments, right-wing in the main, are increasingly privatising public services. Georgianna Bates works for Transit, a once public firm that has now gone private. Although this company still receives public subsidies, its primary aim is to maximise profit. This approach has a direct impact on the workforce, in particular on young workers, and their salaries.

According to Stephen Von Sychowski, also a member of COPE 378, unions not only open up interesting opportunities in the workplace but also help promote exchanges with young workers in other countries. *"I am a union member because the company I work for is unionised,"* he explains. *"Once your workplace is organised, you are automatically called on to join a union. I didn't choose this company by chance. I knew that by being a union member I would have increased protection as well as a higher wage. That clearly influenced my choice."* Furthermore, Georgianna and Stephen both had the opportunity to attend the World Festival of Youth and Students in South Africa, which allowed them to share their experiences with young trade unionists from 16 different countries. *"We feel connected with workers from other countries. For us, this international dimension is essential. Our union is, for example, closely involved in an international solidarity campaign with the Mexican miners. In many countries, independent trade unions are subjected to intimidation and violations, which is something we become increasingly aware of thanks to our international exchanges."*

### **The "Alive after Five" programme**

The BC Federation of Labour has embarked on an awareness raising programme on health and safety aimed at young workers. Since its launch in 2003, over 66,000 secondary school students and young workers in more than 75 communities across the various regions of British Columbia have taken part in this programme, which focuses on four main points:

- ▶ Knowing your rights and responsibilities in the workplace
- ▶ Recognizing hazards and dangers
- ▶ How best to report on injuries
- ▶ What protections are guaranteed by law
- ▶ The "Alive after Five" course facilitators are young workers aged between 21 and 30 on average.

Further information: <http://www.healthandsafetybc.ca/young-workers>

## Harnessing social networks for recruitment purposes

While many young workers are ready to fight for their ideals, they still need certain anchors. *“They support social and environmental causes, are willing to fight against inequalities, but they don’t always know who to turn to,”* explains Trevor Davies of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the country’s largest union in terms of membership. *“Unions can bring them certain answers. Not just in terms of improved working conditions but also regarding other issues that are important to them.”* The importance of social networking in the lives of young workers nowadays is a fact unions are well aware of. It allows them to communicate with them, be it for campaigns, information or recruitment purposes. It is not unusual for unions to organise so-called “social” events via Facebook or Twitter, to name but the most popular social networks, and it works. *“Through Facebook, you can stumble upon long-lost friends,”* Trevor Davies adds. *“You can talk to them about your actions and so on, and send an incredible amount of messages to a whole lot of people in no time.”* As for young trade unionists, it is paramount that people understand that unions are an essential part of democracy, that joining them provides us with a voice and that they undoubtedly offer an “incredible opportunity for changing the world”.

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## Young workers in the food industry, “from the field to the table”

The UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers Canada) is a trade union involved in every branch of the food industry, from agricultural workers to those employed in food processing, warehousing and distribution, in short “from the field to the table”. *“In this industry, work can begin at a very young age, as early as 15 or 16,”* says Enver Harbans, UFCW national representative and member of the CLC’s Working Group on Young Workers. *“That is why young workers make up almost 40% of our membership. It is a dangerous sector and working to protect the occupational health and safety of all is one of our missions.”* For Harbans, the strength of the trade union movement in this sector lies in the diversity and the young age of its members. Difficulty, on the other hand, sometimes arises from the exchanges between very young grassroots members and an older leadership. Another problem trade unions are facing are the anti-union campaigns led by certain aggressive political parties with the backing of unscrupulous multinationals. The crisis has also had disastrous consequences for the food industry. Rising oil prices have had a direct impact on the cost of goods as a result of increased transportation costs. *“The food industry is based on consumption patterns,”* adds Enver Harbans. *“If people buy less because the goods cost more, the employer tends to cut these costs, which will inevitably result in job cuts. And as usual, young workers will be the first out.”*



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A new phenomenon is emerging in Canada with regard to migrant workers. Rather than hiring migrants who have obtained Canadian citizenship, immigration policies are encouraging companies to hire migrant workers from abroad. In 2010, in excess of 250,000 “temporary” migrants came to work in Canada, an all-time record in the country’s history. Most of them work in the fields, on seasonal contracts. *“The contracts under which these migrants are hired allow the government and employers to exploit them much more easily than if they were protected by*

*Canadian citizenship,” explains UFCW national representative and migrant labour expert Pablo Godoy. The contracts of these seasonal workers generally state they have to work 60 hours a week. Yet it is not unusual for their working week to reach 90 hours, without overtime pay. “They rarely have access to medical insurance schemes and are unaware of their rights owing to the language barrier,” adds Pablo Godoy. Over 35% of these workers are under 30 and come mainly from Latin America and the Caribbean (Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, ...). Migrants are among the most vulnerable category of workers and are racked with the fear of losing their jobs. In most cases, they have to cover the cost of their return journey themselves and raising the necessary funds can take several months. Those who lose their jobs are blacklisted and barred from applying with another company. “We run help centres for migrants. Last year, we processed close to 39,000 complaints regarding a whole range of abuses, applications for medical cover, etc.” The UFCW sees access to these centres as a first step, although much remains to be done. “We have managed to organise close to 10,000 migrant workers,” Pablo proudly points out. “Thanks to this work, we have been able to renegotiate their contracts with their employers and they now have legal protection in the workplace.”*

## Quebec

### Precariousness in Quebec

Relations between young workers and trade unions can at times be complex, especially in Quebec. Here too, the age difference between the leadership and young workers can lead to a disconnect that is not always easy to bridge. The generation at the helm of the trade union organisations grew up with the baby-boom that characterised Quebec. This is no longer the case. Back then, it was not unusual to spend one’s entire career working for the same company, which seems inconceivable for young people in 2011. Precariousness has crept in little by little. *“When we talk of precariousness, we are not necessarily talking of a lack of jobs but rather of impoverished workers. And not always necessarily in terms of wages,”* says Atim León, trade union adviser at the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ). Nowadays, many young workers take for granted that they will have to change jobs 15 times during the course of their working lives. What is the point then in standing up for better working conditions? They are characterised by an increasingly individualistic discourse, far removed from the sense of solidarity. *“Montreal is the capital of videogames,”* says Atim León. *“Scores of start-ups are created around this industry. It draws in an army of young people who are prepared to drop their studies to join these SMEs. They are lured in by gleaming new offices and gadgets, but reality catches up with them a few months later when the company goes bust.”* Precariousness is the rule in the videogames sector, where the onus is on a flexible workforce and where stability is far from the norm. Of course it is not the only sector that is affected by the crisis. In Quebec as elsewhere, young people are the first to suffer the consequences. The emergence of temporary jobs puts their future at risk since, in most cases, their temporary contracts do not include a retirement plan. *“Within our ranks at the FTQ, we have about 30% of young workers under 35.*





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*We don't really have a recruitment campaign as the union here is linked to the company. The work is carried out from the inside. When we talk to them, when we take our time to explain things to them, it becomes clear that young workers would rather be in a unionised workplace with better working conditions,"* says 28-year-old Jean-Thomas Courchesne who works as an English language teacher and is a member of the Youth Committee of the CSN (Confédération des syndicats nationaux). *"Atypical employment – precarious, part-time, temporary, freelance or multiple employment arrangements without career opportunities – has doubled over the last ten years. Currently, more than 30% of all jobs in Quebec are atypical. Bosses claim that young workers want more flexibility whereas in actual fact we are moving away from job security. More and more young people are becoming fatalistic. Trade unions should be the link between young workers and society,"* he adds. According to Jean-Thomas, things are evolving positively within the trade unions. At the CSN, where more than 25% of the membership is under 30, young workers feel they are better understood by the leadership.

## **A day of reflection**

In November 2010, the CSN joined with a number of other trade union organisations, including the FTQ, to hold a day of reflection on young people and trade unionism. For the CSN Youth

Committee, this event, the first of its kind, has managed to raise various points and courses of action that matter to the young people of Quebec. Young activists have the will to stand as committed players within their trade union organisations, even though they do not hesitate to point the finger at certain problems and to demand changes. The young workers taking part in this day of reflection emphasized their wish to see more young people involved at the different levels of the trade union organisations. Strategies will have to be developed to enable such involvement. Discussions also took place on the need to improve communications as a way of improving union outreach into society but also within the trade union movement itself. Finally, ensuring access to information for all union members implies ongoing investment in new expression forums such as social networks that are extremely popular among today's young people, while also ensuring direct human contact and awareness raising aimed at young people.

## Formation Soleil

For over 20 years, the CSN and its Youth Committee have been running an annual summer school called Formation Soleil. This programme allows young union activists to attend a training course on trade unionism within the context of an outdoor vacation. This training course is open to all CSN members under 30 with little or no trade union experience. The course is aimed at raising awareness on the importance of activism and trade union action. *"All the CSN Youth Committee members take part in facilitating sessions during Formation Soleil,"* explains Marisol Durand of the health and social services employees' union of Saint-Jérôme and member of the Youth Committee. *"It is essential that we listen to our members and this summer school allows us to do it. In the healthcare sector where I work, a lot of young people are employed part time. Thanks to the trade unions, they gain a better knowledge of their rights."*

This view that is echoed by Alexander Roy, the young president of the workers' union at Papier Couché d'Atlantic, affiliated to the Fédération de l'industrie manufacturière: *"The Youth Committee acts as a real driving belt. Who better than young people to engage with young people? We are their ambassadors. Year after year, we have the feeling we're reaching more people."*

In Canada as elsewhere, precarious work has become a reality for large numbers of people and especially for young workers. New forms of exploitation are the everyday reality of these young workers who ultimately experience nothing but that: part-time work, home-working, temporary work, .... Many of them are disillusioned and fatalistic. Conscious of this reality, trade unions are reviewing their practices and opening up more places for young people within their structures. It is only with a strong and united trade union movement capable of ensuring trade union continuity that workers will be better protected in an increasingly aggressive world of work.



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