

ITUC REPORT

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The Social Crisis Behind the Economic Crisis - the Millions of Young People Unemployed



→ETUC

“We are a precarious generation: unemployed, underpaid or working for free and invisibly, sentenced to a long dependence on our parents. Precariousness is our leitmotiv, we live our lives in the absence of any rights: the right to study, to housing, to a decent income, to health, to live our emotional relationships happily and freely.”

This is an extract from the appeal of the Italian Committee called “Our life is now. Life doesn’t wait.” created by a network of precarious workers.

Young people hardest hit by the crisis

The financial crisis that broke out in 2008 has given rise to the worst economic crisis in 30 years and the biggest overall fall in GDP since the Second World War.

The result is that Europe is not only undergoing an economic crisis but also a far-reaching social crisis. Thousands of companies, above all SMEs, are going bankrupt, giving rise to high rates of unemployment, falling wages, cuts in social security, higher taxes on consumption, high basic commodity prices, as well as rising poverty and social exclusion.

Young people are the hardest hit by this crisis. As highlighted in the "Global Unions' Statement to the G20 Summit" on 3 and 4 November 2011: "The rise in unemployment since the crisis began has hit young people particularly hard, and together with rising long-term unemployment, high youth unemployment threatens to weaken long-term growth potential." According to the figures published in the ILO report "Global Employment Trends for Youth" in 2011, youth unemployment rates have not simply seen a rise but a historical increase, going from 11.8% to 12.7% between 2008 and 2009 - the largest annual rise recorded in the last 20 years. The report adds that overall youth unemployment has overtaken adult unemployment, further confirming the fact that young people are more vulnerable to economic shocks and are the "first out" and

"last in" in times of crisis. Finally, the ILO also points out that it is the young people in developed countries that are paying the highest price for the crisis.

Margherita Bussi, a researcher at the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), adds that: "The situation of young people, especially in certain countries, was already unstable before the crisis, with very long school-to-work transition periods, the prevalence of precarious employment, poor wages, etc. But in spite of already being exposed to a degree of precariousness, young people at least had the hope of getting around it by going to work abroad or staying with their parents for longer until the right job came along. Today, they are faced with significantly fewer opportunities."

Finally, given the current context and the grim forecasts for the months ahead, the international trade union movement is recalling that with 45 million young people entering the labour market every year, the threat of youth unemployment can no longer be ignored.

Increasingly hazy future

For Tomasz Jasinski, an international advisor and member of the Youth Committee of the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ) and former president of the ETUC



→Reuters Regis Duvignau





Youth Committee¹, the repercussions of the crisis are catastrophic for young people: *"Finding a job is becoming almost impossible... and finding a good job is a stroke of luck. The quality of the contracts offered to young people provides no guarantee of a secure and stable position on the labour market, which strongly influences their personal and family lives."*

Today, many young people are no longer able to build a life plan, a vision of the future: *"Some have to stay on for longer with their parents (if that is an option), others extend their studies, but for many, their financial situation is such that they are forced to leave their studies to do jobs with poor conditions, just to survive."* Indeed, young people, especially in times of crisis, represent a totally disproportionate share of precarious workers, whose jobs are usually characterised by atypical contracts, limited if any social benefits, huge job insecurity and very low wages, etc.

Increasing numbers of young people, faced with a more uncertain future, suffer from low morale, despondency and even depression. Margherita Bussi adds: *"If the situation does not change, we are likely to see young people developing a growing lack of confidence in political, social and economic institutions, which we would do well to avoid!"*

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(Young) Europeans make their voices heard

"In 2010, very few young people took to the streets. During the summer of 2011, however, the number of young people protesting grew. I think they started to realise that they were the number one victims of the current economic crisis." This is the analysis presented by Kostas Petrou, project manager with the Greek Federation of Junior

Enterprises (JADE Hellas), regarding the surge in young Greeks taking to the streets in recent months. He adds that as of spring 2012, the protests will pick up again in response to the new government measures that threaten to affect fundamental social and labour rights in Greece.

In Spain, the "Indignant" movement and the many protests seen in recent months bear witness to the widespread discontent over the global crisis. For Ignacio Doreste, deputy secretary of the Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) youth secretariat: *"There is no doubt this movement was catalysed by the Arab Spring, a rebellion against the dictatorial regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Libya, etc., in which young trade unionists played a key role (something the Spanish press kept under wraps), and which served as an example for the CCOO."*

As regards the ideas behind the movement, Doreste believes they are rooted in the grave social consequences of the economic crisis and past policies that have heightened inequalities. *"Moreover, we have every reason to be 'indignant' given the impunity enjoyed by those responsible for the crisis, on seeing how they have inspired the policies subserviently implemented by our governments and how the privileged few continue to get rich whilst the majority face ever greater economic difficulties."*

It is this state of affairs that spurred the emergence of many protest movements across Europe and elsewhere in recent times. Greece, Spain, Portugal, France, United Kingdom, Poland, ... people across the globe, driven by momentous resolve, are rising up in increasing numbers and with increasing regularity to make their voices heard. Will governments prove capable of listening to them?

¹ His mandate came to an end in December 2011.

→ETUC



Unemployment crippling young Europeans



→ Reuters Luke Mac Gregor

Although the crisis is affecting Europe's population as a whole, young people are three times as likely to find themselves unemployed than older workers. For Goda Neverauskaite, president of the Youth Association of the confederation of Lithuanian trade unions LPSK, one of the causes is that “employers want fewer workers to do a larger amount of work. It is more profitable for them to hire someone with more experience, (...) and especially people who already have customers and a network”. According to Kostas Petrou, project manager with the Greek Federation of Junior Enterprises (JADE Hellas), it is also owed to the fact that companies would rather hire experienced professionals than young graduates, to avoid training costs.

Whatever the reasons, the figures are there to confirm this tragic reality. According to Eurostat, in November 2011, youth unemployment reached 22.3% in the European Union, affecting over 5.5 million young people. The lowest rates were in Germany (8.1%) and Austria (8.3%), whilst the highest were in Spain (46.9%), Greece (45.6% in September) and Slovakia (35.1%). One year earlier, in November 2010, the rate was 21%, i.e. 336,000 less people out of work. The situation is even worse in Eastern Europe. Tugba Balci, president of the Pan European Regional Council (PERC) Youth Committee, notes that unemployment rates in some countries are approaching

50% and the situation is likely to worsen with the measures being taken by certain governments.

The sharpest rise has been seen in Spain, where youth unemployment has almost doubled since the beginning of the crisis, going from under 20% in 2007 to 49.6% in November 2011. Youth unemployment is also hitting record highs in other European countries¹, such as Italy, where an estimated two million young Italians appear to be not to be in education, employment or training². “Public employment services are not able to provide an adequate response to these tragic figures and the recent cuts in the education system are very likely to dissuade many young people from going on to higher education or university,” underlines Salvatore Marra, head of youth policy at the Italian union confederation CGIL in the Rome and Lazio region, and an executive member of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) Youth Committee. The website of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also expresses concern at the growing number of young people disconnected from both education and the labour market.

Official unemployment figures, moreover, do not always reflect the actual situation. Paulo Pereira, a Youth





"At the Union General de Trabajadores (UGT, Spain), we are trying to show young people different ways of entering the job market, by working for a boss or becoming self employed, or by taking the competitive entrance exams for the public service, because without work, any kind of emancipation is impossible, and we have the right to build a future for ourselves 'Build your future' is one of the campaigns pursuing this goal. At the Employment Observatory, we have noted a high level of precariousness, created by the swell in temporary jobs and the difficulty in finding work, which limits young people's ability to progress and become independent. This is what makes this kind of campaign so essential. We also have a leaflet encouraging young people to try to get round the jobs crisis by creating their own activity. It covers issues such as the reasons for starting up on your own, the capacities required, the stages to follow to set up your own venture, the places to go for information ..."

Silvia Sazatornil, head of the UGT youth department



Committee representative of the Portuguese teachers' union argues that many young people who have lost all faith in the possibility of finding a job do not register with the employment services. As a result, real unemployment rates are in fact higher than the official figures. For Daniela Alexieva, human resources expert with the Bulgarian confederation of independent unions CITUB: *"Unregistered unemployment is a very serious problem. In many cases, people do not register because they think that our employment agencies can do nothing to help them. But we have human resources development programmes that offer young people opportunities, such as free training. Most young people are not aware of this, and they become inactive, depressed."*

Who are the hardest hit?

Margherita Bussi, researcher at the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) explains that since the start of the crisis *"less qualified young people have been the worst affected, as many of those losing their jobs worked in the construction sector, such as in Spain, for example"*. She adds that young men have been the hardest hit, but the impact of the austerity measures being taken and a fall in growth and purchasing power may mean that young women will soon be more affected. Young people with average qualifications (secondary school diplomas) or higher qualifications (university graduates) have also seen their unemployment rates rise, but to a lesser degree than less qualified youngsters.

Although they are not the hardest hit, the unemployment rate among young people with a medium and high level of qualifications is nonetheless very high in some countries.

Paulo Pereira explains that Portugal has never had so many qualified young people and so few opportunities to offer them. According to the national institute of statistics (INE), the Portuguese economy closed the year with 63,800 unemployed graduates. The situation is much the same in Spain. According to Ignacio Doreste, deputy secretary of the Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) youth secretariat: *"The young people of today are the generation that have reached the highest level of education in the country's history. But it is also the first generation that has, or will have, lower living standards than their parents' generation."*

Finally, in some countries, the geography further complicates matters for young people, as those living in rural areas or small towns are more affected by unemployment than others.

Drastic consequences

On outlining the consequences of unemployment seen in Italy, Salvatore Marra in fact resumes many of the problems facing young people across Europe today: *"The inability to achieve independence and build a family life of one's own, migration to other countries, social exclusion and the problems arising from this alienation, undeclared work, poverty, etc."*

Maria Kolk, president of the Students' Council of the central organisation of Swedish universities SACO, explains that Sweden has a good social security system, but being excluded from the workforce before even having a chance to enter it has drastic consequences. *"A person's first job is often the key to all the subsequent ones,"* she explains. *"Unemployment affects people's self confidence, their health and their social life."*

Quality education for quality jobs

"In Croatia, there is a problem of incompatibility between education and the labour market," explains Ivan Blazevic, president of the youth section of Croatia's union of autonomous trade unions UATUC. *"Some colleges have courses for jobs that no longer exist. Almost half of all first jobs do not correspond to young people's qualifications."* Daniela Alexieva, human resources expert with the Bulgarian confederation of independent unions CITUB, reports on a similar situation in her country: *"There is no link between education and the employment market in Bulgaria. Schools do not provide the skills that the market needs. As a result, it is difficult for young people who finish their studies to find a job that matches their skills."*

It is not just Bulgaria or Croatia that are faced with this type of problem. Many European countries would appear to have difficulties training young people in line with market needs and facilitating their entry into the world of work. In November 2011, the ETUC held a conference on "A Quality Education for a Quality Job", dedicated to this issue. During the two day event, young trade unionists from Europe tackled issues such as the abuses in the area of internships and apprenticeships, obstacles to students' mobility, barriers to quality education and the difficulties of combining a first job and studies, and ways to improve the situation.

According to Daniela Alexieva, one of the main obstacles is the lack of analysis as well as the lack of communication between the education system and companies. Her union is working to resolve this issue: *"At the moment, we are working as partners on a project being conducted by one of our employers' organisations, aimed at analysing the needs of the employment market and making it easier to integrate young people within it. The quality of education in our country, however, is not assessed. The state is not concerned with this at the moment, but we would like to see action being taken in the future because it is important to provide a quality education for a quality job."*

"In Greece, many young people are staying with or going back to live with their parents, even at the age of 27 or 28, to cut their costs," says Kostas Petrou. "In our country, as in most southern European countries, the family plays a very important role. As a result, few young people stop their studies to go to work and there is not a great deal of poverty among them. Many, however, do have to leave the formal employment market or accept jobs that have nothing to do with their training or qualifications in order to secure work." As a result of the crisis and the lack of opportunities, young unemployed people tend to take on any job going, no matter whether it is linked to their qualifications or not, whether their rights are respected or not.

In Serbia, many young people who had already entered the labour market have gone back into education. *"There are around 100,000 young people (up to age 35) who could easily return to the labour market if opportunities were to arise,"* explains Bojana Bijelovic, president of the youth section of Serbia's Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions (CATUS).

Paulo Pereira explains that in Portugal, the risk of poverty

is currently very high among young people aged between 17 and 24. Many students, moreover, have no alternative but to abandon their studies because their families can no longer cover the costs.

Be they practical or psychological, the repercussions of the crisis on young people's lives are drastic. For Silvia Sazatornil, head of the youth department of the Union General de Trabajadores (UGT): *"The worst thing about this crisis, and not only for Spain, is that it is lasting, so long-term unemployment is becoming a reality for more and more people."* As underlined at the 2nd World Congress of the International Trade Union Confederation (Vancouver, June 2010), the lack of decent job opportunities in early working life can permanently compromise future employment prospects. Governments and unions must act now! Governments, by re-creating jobs for young people, and unions, by helping them not to lose hope.

1 In the first quarter of 2011, the youth unemployment rate reached 45% in Spain, 42.9% in Greece, 33.2% in Lithuania, 32.7% in Slovakia, 30.2% in Latvia, 29.8% in Ireland, 28.7% in Portugal, 27.7% in Italy, 27% in Bulgaria and 25.1% in Hungary.

2 «NEET»: «Not in Education, Employment or Training»

Increasingly precarious employment for young people

Across Europe, an overwhelming majority of young people is, from one day to the next, being forced to accept jobs that only partially guarantee their rights and offer very little security, i.e. precarious jobs. *"In the past, when people started work with a company at the beginning of their careers they usually stayed there for the rest of their working lives,"* remarks Benoît Constant. *"Nowadays, young people are dealt the cruel hand of an uncertain future. They are no longer able to envision their future and neither do they envision their role in society."*

The website of the European Metalworkers' Federation defines precarious work by affirming that whilst each job may present different challenges, they all, indisputably, share the same disadvantages: low pay, few benefits,

no collective representation and little if any job security. Monica Bota, chief policy and lobbying advisor with the youth section of the Dutch trade union federation FNV, explains that in the Netherlands, precarious employment is characterised by repeated short-term contracts offering few working hours (around 12 hours a week), the inability to contribute towards one's pension, no training rights, and the prospect of being fired on the spot with little if any compensation. The job insecurity and workers' rights violations that come with precarious employment can take on many different forms.

Precariousness exacerbated by the crisis

Young people's job insecurity has been heightened with the crisis. For Paulo Pereira, a Youth Committee representative with the Portuguese teachers' union, explains that some employers see the crisis as an opportunity, and take advantage of the situation, demanding more from their employees at the same time as paying less, thus increasing their profit margins.

Salvatore Marra, head of youth policy at the Italian union confederation CGIL in the Rome and Lazio region, explains that in Italy the number of workers in precarious jobs rose to four million in 2011 and the average salary of a precarious worker aged under 35 did not surpass 1,068 euros, that is, 25.3% less than a worker performing the same tasks under a permanent contract.

Poland is also caught in the same kind of downward

"For young people, entering the labour market is often like tackling an assault course. Any hopes of securing a stable job (at age 27 on average) rely on first having to go through a succession of short-term contracts with poor pay conditions. The least qualified young workers very often find themselves having to do backbreaking work that may endanger their health and lead them to develop musculoskeletal disorders before they even reach the end of their young years."

Thiébaut Weber, president of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) Youth Committee and confederal secretary in charge of youth issues with the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT).

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spiral. "Precarious forms of employment are unfortunately becoming all the more common, even though the degree of precariousness varies from one contract to the next," says Joanna Szymonek, an expert with the International Department of Solidarnosc. "Employers find it very attractive in terms of labour costs. Bosses very often exploit this economic argument, especially in the context of crisis and serious financial market instability."

Silvia Sazatornil, head of the UGT youth department, explains that the percentage of precarious contracts is also very high in current day Spain. The recent labour reforms to "promote youth employment and strengthen job security" are set to make young people's employment contracts even more precarious. "This legislation places a two year suspension on the obligation to replace successive fixed-term contracts with a permanent contract, demonstrating that the government is banking on low-skilled employment and reduced workers' rights. Moreover, the new provision

"Employers do not want to take on young people without any work experience. Since getting a first job is very difficult, some work for free for a year. (...) Young people are forced to accept any kind of job and any kind of contract. The result is that most of them have atypical and provisional jobs: 85% of new contracts are in fact characterised by these conditions. Young people work part-time, some have several jobs, others do seasonal work or odd jobs, some work cash in hand or only have part of their wage declared."

Ivan Blažević, president of the youth section of the Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia (UATUC).

"In the past, temporary employment was an exception and was used when workers had to be filled in for. Today, it has become the norm. It is also a return to a form of servitude, because temporary employees never know when they are going to be working, they are called from one day to the next, they are totally at the employers' beck and call, and have no prospect whatsoever of making plans for the future. The wages are lower and there is also lack of respect for health and safety standards. Finally, it is difficult to unionise and be active in the company as this would amount to shooting yourself in the foot, given that employers have no obligation to take you back on at the end of your contract."

Benoit Constant, national youth officer of the Confédération des syndicats chrétiens de Belgique (CSC) and vice president of the ITUC Youth Committee.

regarding training and apprenticeship contracts will do nothing to improve youth employment, quite the contrary, as it increases the age limit on such contracts to 30, an age when workers should already be offered other types of contracts." She goes on to explain that "young people are more at risk of being dismissed when staff cuts are made, as they are cheaper for the bosses to fire, having been with the company for less time".

"In the Netherlands, many young flexible workers were fired at the beginning of the crisis," explains Monica Bota, chief policy and lobbying advisor with the youth section of the Dutch trade union federation FNV. "Some went back to study and others took the first job they could find. Many young people have also decided to do work placements, which amounts to working without pay, just to make sure they do not have a gap in their CV."

→ Reuters Kieran Doherty



"Operation Übernahme" IG Metall campaigns for apprentices' rights

In Germany, the youth section of IG Metall has launched a campaign "Operation Übernahme" to press companies to take on their apprentices. It has been a great success. "Our union has over 200,000 young members aged under 27," says Adrian Hermes, a volunteer for IG Metall and a member of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) Youth Committee. "It is the biggest youth organisation in Germany; it also has more members than all the political parties put together." The campaign is based on the fact that today, in Germany, when an apprenticeship comes to an end, there are a countless ways of getting rid of the apprentice or hiring the person solely for a limited period. "Operation Übernahme" is aimed at pressing employers to offer permanent contracts to the apprentices they have trained. The union is trying to mobilise as many young people as possible to help achieve this. It informs them and encourages them to fight for their future. Adrian Hermes recounts: "Our young colleagues come up with unique and very creative actions that are carried out across the country in companies that have apprentices or in areas surrounding them. On 1 October 2011, we organised a major event, 'Festival Action'. Over 20,000 young people came together in Cologne on that day to demand that apprentices be hired under permanent contracts."

This poor career profile means that young people are unable to plan a future or aspire to personal development. With a job that offers very little in terms of experience and skills development, without decent pay and no career prospects, they are in no position to build a future, to empower themselves and progress. Moreover, as Margherita Bussi, researcher at the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) explains, "discontinuous employment can have long term repercussions on young people's future social security" but also and above all, it means they are confronted, in the short term, with a very high risk of poverty, or even total destitution.

Giving visibility to precarious work

That young people today are accepting precarious work is owed to several factors, such as the lack of jobs and the need to acquire work experience, but also to the fact that many of them are not aware of their rights or do not fight to assert them for fear of losing their insecure job.

One solution would therefore be to raise their awareness, suggesting that they could join a union, for example, but there again the situation is not quite so simple. Indeed, one of the main obstacles to young people joining unions is their employment situation," explains Thiébaud Weber. "To be more precise: a young person who enters a company with a precarious contract and hopes to be taken on permanently one day does not naturally think of joining

"The number of precarious workers has risen over the last 20 years in Sweden. Today, over 50% of young people aged between 15 and 24 are in precarious employment. The current government has introduced a new system aimed at tackling youth unemployment by creating even more forms of precarious work. They are hoping to resolve the situation by combining this and reduced costs for employers hiring young people. But unemployment has not stopped rising so far and more and more young people are finding themselves in precarious work."

Maria Kolk, president of the Students' Council of the central organisation of Swedish universities SACO.

a union. Many young people are convinced that it would harm their career prospects." The casualisation of youth employment in Europe is thus contributing to distancing young people from unions ... placing them at the centre of a vicious circle.

"In my country, if you are young it is almost impossible to secure pay above the minimum wage, which is 20% lower than what is needed for a decent standard of living. Most young and inexperienced workers can therefore be classed as precarious workers."

"Most young people work to pay for their studies. They most often look to the service sector where they have flexible working hours but very low pay. There is a lot of despondency among young people because, although they are hoping for a miraculous upturn in the economy, employers do not have much interest in people who have already forgotten their studies, who have not kept up their skills... They are more likely to opt for a university graduate."

Goda Neverauskaite, president of the Youth Association of the Lithuanian trade union confederation LPSK.

To combat precarious forms of employment, we have to talk about it as much as possible. "One of our latest campaigns is entitled 'The Last Monkey' and is aimed at denouncing the precarious employment market for young people in Spain," explains Silvia Sazatornil. "The campaign features five videos disseminated online and which examine the different scenarios young people have to deal with on the job market, such as precarious jobs, temporary work, the disconnect between their qualifications and the low-skilled jobs they are offered, and the obstacles to young people's empowerment and autonomy."

In Italy, the Italian union confederation CGIL has also decided to give greater visibility to precarious or "atypical" work, launching a campaign under the title "Young People are No Longer Available to do Whatever!", to raise public consciousness about the working conditions young people



have to endure. Thanks to this initiative, young unionists and workers have now joined forces and come together in local groups. But that is not all; the CGIL has also set up the NidiL, a federation of precarious workers to fight against the abuses and offer help and information to workers.

In Bulgaria, the confederation of independent unions CITUB has also launched a campaign under the heading "My First Job", aimed at raising final year students' consciousness about their first job. Daniela Alexieva, human resources expert with the Bulgarian confederation of independent unions CITUB explains: *"We go into schools and tell students what their rights are, what they can do to find a job, where they can find help if they need it, if their rights are not respected, for example. We distribute booklets during these presentations and show them short animated films about their rights, which are funny and provocative at*

"En los Países Bajos muchos jóvenes tienen la posibilidad de cursar estudios y de encontrar un empleo. Sin embargo, para la mayoría de ellos los primeros años en el mercado laboral son una auténtica lucha, puesto que no logran obtener sino contratos a corto plazo flexibles (65% de la mano de obra flexible es menor de 35 años, 43% son menores de 26 años). Algunos empleos flexibles son en realidad empleos precarios, principalmente realizados por jóvenes trabajadores poco cualificados que combinan varios empleos."

Mónica Bota, Consejera principal en políticas y cabildeo de los Jóvenes de la Federación de Sindicatos Holandeses.

the same time. We want them to be attentive and to ask questions. This campaign is especially dedicated to young people because we see them not only as the future but also as the present!"

Tackling hiring policies

For Thiébaud Weber, unions can fight precarious employment by trying to influence companies' hiring policies: *"Our union is advocating that, for example, degressive social contributions be applied to employment contracts to create greater incentives for permanent contracts and penalise short-term contracts."*

In Belgium, the CSC has also decided to tackle the problem from this angle but strongly insists on the duration of contracts offered to young people: *"Here, various initiatives exist to give young people access to their first job. The CSC (which assesses employment schemes based on the number of long-term jobs created) has realised that when the government aid comes to an end, the young person does not stay on at the company, which goes on to hire another young person under an employment scheme for the limited period during which it benefits from reduced social security contributions. We are therefore asking for employment schemes to be assessed on the basis of the long-term jobs created rather than the jobs created for a very limited period. The Belgian union is therefore proposing a system whereby employers benefit from the reduction in contributions at the point when they sign a permanent contract, to ensure that young people have access to decent jobs and a degree of security."*

In the Netherlands, the Dutch union federation FNV is battling to ensure respect for (young) flexible workers' rights and is currently putting forward the principle of "flexible pay for flexible workers", which would force employers wanting to hire flexible workers to pay extra to compensate for the periods not worked.

→ETUC



"The abuse of work placements has rocketed with the crisis"

Work placements are a form of precarious work that almost all young people find themselves confronted with at some stage in their lives. Aside from the work experience they allow young people to acquire, they also represent a source of cheap labour for employers, who use and abuse them.

In view of this, several groups have been formed over recent years to defend trainees' rights. One of them, "Precarious Generation", emerged in 2005 out of a call for a wildcat strike circulated on the Internet, aimed at denouncing an intolerable situation. "This call led to the formation of a network of former, present or future trainees who share a common outrage against the fact that young people are now faced with the legal reality of having to do one unpaid or under-paid work placement after another, despite having highly-specialised training backed by practical experience," explains the French group's website. In the UK, Intern Aware is the group campaigning for fair and equal access to internships, by rallying support from influential political figures, among other actions.

Trade union youth committees and other youth organisations are also campaigning to secure respect for trainees. On 14 December 2011, they released a European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships, establishing standards that are non-binding but provide states with an indication of the way to go.

Thiébaut Weber, president of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) Youth Committee and confederal secretary of the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT), took part in drawing it up.

Are work placements widely abused in Europe?

Unfortunately, they are. The problem is, however, difficult to quantify, as there is very little research into work placements. The abuses are above all relayed by the many trainee groups that have been formed in Europe, which are trying to bring an end to these bad practices. Judging by the accounts given by the young European trade unionists I represent, such abuses are rife and stretch across most countries. I would even say that the abuse of work placements has rocketed with the crisis. Employers are taking advantage of the poor job climate to bring in trainees to perform tasks that are usually given to salaried employees. Work placements are all too often a golden opportunity for employers in terms of costs.

Is the issue of work placements covered by any national laws?

Slow but sure progress is being made in this area. France, for example, has introduced a number of guarantees under pressure from trainee groups and

trade union organisations. It is now compulsory to link work placements with training, and trainees are paid at least 30% of the minimum wage. In 2011, the social partners supplemented these measures, giving trainees access to the social and cultural activities of the Works Councils and establishing a waiting period between two work placements (on the same model as fixed-term contracts). There is still a long way to go, but this proves that we can make concrete progress with the cause of trainees.

What, in your view, are the main improvements that could be brought to the system?

To mention but a few, I would say that trainees should have an across-the-board assurance of performing a genuinely beneficial task in terms of skills development. They should also, in my view, benefit from remuneration for their work. If "all work deserves pay", trainees also deserve to be paid at least enough to cover their expenses (transport, accommodation, etc.).

Tell us about the "European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships"

ETUC Youth played an active role in drawing up this charter, initiated by the European Youth Forum. Other organisations also took part in this collective effort, of course, such as the French, Italian, British and German trainee groups, the Youth Councils of Belgium, Slovenia and Spain, the Young European Federalists and the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions, etc.

The charter was produced in a bid to influence national laws on work placements. It is not, in itself, binding on governments. It is not a directive. But I do believe it to be a formidable weapon that trade union organisations and youth organisations can make use of to convince leaders to establish rights and guarantees for trainees.

Does it reflect trade unions' expectations with regard to work placements?

In my view, it does. It reflects trade union organisations' expectations inasmuch as the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) held one of the pens that wrote it. This charter covers everything that has to be done to ensure that a work placement proceeds under the right conditions and is beneficial for the career paths not only of trainees but also of apprentices. It does not constitute the culmination of a process but a strong start towards a winning dynamic for trainees.



→ Thiébaut Weber, Secretario confederal de la Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT)

The world is changing, trade unionism too!



→Reuters Stephane Mahe

According to the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), nearly all trade unions have seen a considerable fall in their membership figures over the last 20 years. Other indicators also reveal a weakening of their roles and positions at economic, political and social level. At the same time, society and its concerns are undergoing radical change. In the face of these challenges, several trade unions, including many of their young members, have started to reflect on how to renew themselves, to better respond to the needs of their fellow citizens.

Nathalie Guay is an advisor on the National Youth Committee of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN) in Canada, and a member of the ITUC Youth Committee. She explains that in Canada, the issue of trade union renewal was discussed with young people for the first time in 2008, over three years ago already. Since then, thanks to various exchanges with different countries, she has realised that the views on this issue and the observations on which they are based are widely shared. "We do not always necessarily speak about it in the same terms," explains Nathalie Guay. "Some, for example, speak of the Right's offensive against trade unions, whilst others underline our limitations in the face of the financial crisis. Regardless of the country, it seems that we are all largely in much the same situation in terms of the decline in membership and the difficulties dealing with it, etc. It is this assessment of our place in society that has led us to reflect on ways of renewing ourselves, not only to ensure that we are able to properly defend workers' rights in the future, but also to influence the general course of things, in what seems to be a particularly key moment in history, an era characterised by numerous crises shaking the capitalist model."

Regardless of the terms used to speak of it, more and more trade unionists are in fact convinced of the need for

"renewal". And whilst certain aspects of the debate may differ from one organisation to the next, there does seem to be unanimity on the overall direction of the change.

Better openings for young people in trade unions

"We are struggling to integrate young people in trade union structures at the moment," says Silvia Sazatornil, head of the UGT youth department (Spain). "It is said that young people do not tend to take part. It will be said again, no doubt, but it's far from true. Young people do participate, but we have difficulty making our way into the structures..."

And yet, as Benoît Constant, national youth officer of the Confédération des syndicats chrétiens de Belgique (CSC) explains, "young people are essential to trade union renewal, hence the need to train them and to keep their trade union fervour alive". The ITUC Action Programme, established for the 2nd World Congress in June 2010, also calls on the ITUC and its regional organisations to "encourage affiliates to ensure adequate and specific youth representation in their structures and to develop formal youth structures, to include the issues that affect young people in their policy agendas, and to increase resources for youth activities".

Finally, to make their voices heard in this movement, young people have to push the issues that concern them specifically: "It is their job to refresh the themes addressed by trade unions. It is essential that they bring new issues to the table and new perspectives to the existing debates," insists Benoît Constant.

Communication in line with the times

Another aspect of trade union renewal relates to "the forms and tools of collective action, that is, information

and communication, both internally and externally", says Nathalie Guay. Given the significance of new communication media, it is crucial that trade unions modernise and adapt to them, making use of the Internet, social networks, etc. At the same time, however, they also need to run counter to this media, ensuring direct contact with young people, be it in their schools, workplaces or training course, for example.

For Antoine Thioux, a facilitator at the FGTB, *"The most important thing is being present on the ground with young activists."* For John Walsh, a member of the British union UNITE, *"If trade unions really want to establish themselves among young people, they have to be more present in the sectors where young people are concentrated: hotels, restaurants, shops, call centres, ... The places where so many young people make their debut on the job market."*

As for "indirect" contact, the Internet and the new social media are the best way to link up with young people in their day-to-day lives. Many unions now have Facebook and Twitter accounts, to quote the best known, as well as regularly updated websites featuring audiovisual materials, to give their message ever-greater appeal.

Strength in Unity

Nathalie Guay also quotes solidarity between organisations, be they trade unions or other social movements, as one of the keys to trade union renewal. The youth committees of the various European trade unions also insist on the benefits of solidarity, such as the ability to exchange experiences and good practices, or to support unions faced with difficulties in their countries. For Bojana Bijelovic, president of the youth section of Serbia's confederation of autonomous trade unions CATUS, solidarity between organisations also strengthens the impact they can have on multinational organisations. *"There is always greater strength and potential in cooperation,"* she adds.

Benoît Constant, national youth officer of the Confédération des syndicats chrétiens de Belgique (CSC) and vice president of the ITUC Youth Committee also considers this strength in unity essential in responding to the European Union: *"European directives are increasingly anti-social and undo the social gains secured in the Union's member states. Austerity, which is now the EU's response to the crisis, is taking a heavy toll*

on workers and people on benefits. This state of affairs illustrates how important strong trade union solidarity is at European level, to help even out the balance of power and strengthen our influence over the EU institutions. What's more, it is incredibly motivating to find yourself at a demonstration side by side with young trade unionists from across Europe, all united behind the same slogan: 'More and Better Jobs for Young People'."

Thiébaud Weber, president of the ETUC Youth Committee nonetheless cautions that this solidarity must be put into action, and must not be limited to statements made during trade union congresses: *"During the crisis, we have often seen the principle of solidarity extolled at international level, only to be quickly shut away in national drawers when it comes to countries defending 'their' jobs. Yet solidarity is the best way to fight the rise in protectionism and the law of the jungle."*

Trade unionism reflecting current realities

Finally, although each union may use different terms to refer to the issue, the determination to renew the movement seems clear. *"Each generation has made trade unionism evolve,"* explains Thiébaud Weber, president of the ETUC Youth Committee. *"Trade unionism post May 68 in France was not the same as trade unionism after the Second World War."* Although the crisis is challenging the validity of the system we live in more than ever before, trade unionism also has a duty to renew its vision of the world and its struggles. *"Young people will naturally model a trade unionism in the image of their experience of the world of work and their realities,"* adds Thiébaud Weber. *"They will do so above all because they represent a new generation with new codes."*

→ ETUC



Trade unions re-conquering young people

Trade unions have been suffering from a lack of popularity for some time now, especially among young people. This phenomenon, rather than being a pure rejection of trade union values, would seem to be largely owed to the lack of knowledge about their role and the many social gains they have secured over the decades. "In Belgium, at this point in time, young people still see trade unions as institutions that defend workers on an individual level, organise strikes and disrupt everyone's lives... but they do not realise the immense contribution trade unions have made to improving working conditions and living standards. The social and legislative framework they live in today did not appear out of nowhere from one day to the next," underlines Antoine Thioux of the Fédération générale des travailleurs de Belgique (FGTB), who feels that young people above all need a little reminder of their history.

Benoît Constant of the Confédération des syndicats chrétiens (CSC, Belgium), is of the view that new kinds of action are needed, that the concept of demonstrations needs to be rejuvenated, to counter young people's idea that being part of a union only means marching in tight formation under the colours of the organisation and going on strike.

Ignacio Doreste, assistant youth secretary with the CCOO (Spain), explains that Spanish unions generally have the impression that they are "too detached from young people, who associate them with the traditional image of the potbellied, male trade unionist in his fifties, standing on a soapbox haranguing his colleagues about taking action to defend workers against the boss." Unfortunately, despite Spanish trade unions' attempts to change this image, the smear campaign waged by certain elements of the media does nothing to facilitate their task. "Young people's image of trade unions is heavily influenced by the media campaigns sponsored by powerful reactionary forces, determined to discredit the role and the work of unions, especially blue collar unions," affirms Ignacio Doreste.

Spanish and Belgian unions are not the only ones that need to rejuvenate, and develop closer ties with the next generation of unionists. Most European trade unions are currently tackling the issue of re-conquering young people. "We have spoken about this issue not only within my organisation, but also during international meetings," explains Goda Neverauskaite, project coordinator with the Lithuanian trade union confederation LPSK. "It is the same everywhere, one of the reasons young people do not join unions is their image. There are few if any young people representing trade unions; we cannot identify with organisations represented by old potbellied men."

Finally, whether young people's detachment from unions is owed to a lack of historical markers or an unflattering image (regardless of where it comes from), the important thing is to reverse this trend. Because unions, under pressure from a formidable crisis and confronted with the arrival of the "retirement boom", now need more than ever before to

expand their troops and train the next generation of leaders, preparing them to tackle every challenge. That is why today, many organisations have identified the need to rejuvenate as a priority, and fully intend to do everything they can to win back the confidence of young people.

Going where young people go

When trying to raise young people's awareness, trade unions usually go into companies, schools, universities, training centres and other places of learning. In recent years, however, some have decided to widen their scope and are trying to go to all the places where young people go.

As Benoît Constant, national youth officer of the Confédération des syndicats chrétiens (CSC-Belgium), explains, young people can be successfully approached where they least expect it: "We go the Dour festival every year, to show that the youth section of the CSC goes where young people usually go, and is not only there in case of problems. We help out the festival-goers, cooking or warming up their meals at the same time as asking them questions and trying to raise consciousness about youth employment. It's an opportunity for us to promote modern trade unionism, hinged on the realities of the young people of today. This action breaks with the old-fashioned image of trade unions and is hugely successful."

Showing young people they are not alone

The campaign headed "La Resignacion No Es Una Opcion. Lucha!" (Resignation is Not an Option. Fight!), launched by the CCOO, is specifically targeted at young people. "We want the trade union movement in general to be closer to young people," explains Ignacio Doreste, "We want to show that we have a relevant role to play in tackling their problems." The main aims of the campaign are: to stimulate youth employment, to promote increased investment in occupational training, to strengthen employment in public services in order to provide better services to unemployed young people and to bring an end to the exploitation of trainees. "The campaign puts forward the idea that young people should not be resigned to their fate and should, rather, come together to work in cooperation with the trade unions to wage a collective fight aimed at safeguarding our hard-fought for rights," adds Ignacio Doreste.

Involving students in the fight

Until recently, the General Workers' Union (GWU, Malta) was only open to workers and pensioners. The union's rules, like those of many others around the world, excluded the possibility of students becoming members. The situation has now changed: the youth section in fact proposed that full-time students doing some kind of part-time work (summer jobs, weekend or evening work) and those doing apprenticeships should be allowed to join the union.

André Borg, president of the union's youth section explains: "Now that we have changed our organisation's rules, students are able to join by paying annual dues of just five euros, which is substantially less than the 40 euros paid by the other members. The goal is not, of course, to make money, as the five euros just about cover the administrative costs. We are now managing to reach a student population that used to consider unions to be aggressive, archaic and detached, etc. They have joined our family now, thanks to this affiliation, and we hope that they will stay with us once they enter the world of work."

Giving young people a voice

"We held a joint campaign with another Serbian trade union confederation on the occasion of International Youth Day on 12 August 2011, under the auspices of the United Nations International Year of Youth," explains Bojana Bijelovi, president of the youth section of the Serbian Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions (CATUS). "We prepared leaflets, CDs and USB sticks about the situation in Serbia and young people's rights at work. We played music on the day and had a board on which young people wrote their wishes in bubbles. We wanted, thanks to this little enquiry into how to improve their future, to stimulate a sense of activism and to raise their consciousness about the responsibilities of each individual and the role of trade unions in society with regards to the situation in general. We approached over a thousand young people during this event called 'Our Day - Our Voice'. The hopes the young people expressed demonstrated that they need society to show greater concern about their future." The bubbles filled in by young people from all walks of life included reflections such as 'In a country with so many problems, hiring young people should not be a dilemma'. 'Not whenever, now!', 'All governments have a duty to provide employment and opportunities for young people' or 'Why join a union? To get a better wage, of course!'

In Georgia, a similar activity is held every year in the shape of a competition open to all students. "We choose a subject that is always linked to the difficulties they face on a daily basis and ask them to write about it. It is important that the subject is linked to the reality faced by students and not just that of trade unions," explains Lasha Bliadze of the Georgian Trade Union Confederation (GTUC) youth department. He adds that the competition is a great success, as students from different universities take part, and some even go on to cooperate with the unions. The winner in 2009,

Natia Svanizde, went on to do a work placement with the GTUC and is now working for the union. Here is an extract of the piece she wrote for the competition: "I think young people should play a greater role in Georgian trade unions. It would be mutually advantageous, for the students, who would gain a better knowledge of their rights and the labours laws, and for the organisations, which would see their influence expand. Finally, I believe that ignoring the role of trade unions that are independent of the government amounts to ignoring democracy. The role of trade unions is affirmed by the European Union, the European Council, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and many other such organisations. The Georgian government would therefore do well to reflect on their proposals, if it wants to one day form part of the European Union."

Dare to play, to provoke

"We try, in our union, to come up with innovative direct actions, to modernise our image," says Mabel Espino, youth secretary of the CCOO's industrial federation. "A few months ago in Seville, for example, we carried out an action involving role play; each player was assigned a specific work placement, to which we tried to bring a touch of black humour. Several young people played the role of managers of the country's biggest companies. It attracted the attention of many passersby as well as young people from outside the union who joined in the game with us."

On a much more provocative level, Benoît Constant, youth officer of the Confédération des syndicats chrétiens de Belgique (CSC), tells of an action on the theme of solidarity held in October 2010, during which the young people brandished placards with slogans such as "Old people are all jerks", "Every man for himself", "Make the poor pay, not the rich", "Belgians first", ... all messages that are, of course, in total contradiction with trade union values, paraded with the sole aim of provoking a reaction. The result: total incomprehension and indignation at first, even a few tears, but above all, it gave rise to genuine reflection, stimulating discussions and contact with the people, which was the ultimate goal of this action.

1. The Dour Festival is a music festival attracting a public of almost 150,000 people every year. <http://www.dourfestival.be/>



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