

International Cooperation of Young Trade Union Members – Can it Help to Increase the Level of Unionization Among Young Workers?

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Abstract

Youth structures of trade unions are increasingly collaborating internationally. This is one of the union leaders' response to two fundamental problems: the falling union density in EU countries and the gap between the generations which is related to the low participation of young people in trade unions. This article attempts to analyze the international cooperation of young members of European trade unions. There are different forms of cooperation more or less formalized. International projects are also helpful. The aim of these initiatives is to create network and cooperation between young unionists and to increase their knowledge and skills in trade union activity, both at national and international level. For the purposes of this article, representatives of the various bodies were asked in the interviews about issues related to the international cooperation of young trade union members, including the themes of the various activities, types of projects being implemented, their effectiveness, and barriers which exist in the international cooperation of young union members. Experts were also asked about potential of such cooperation to tackle the problem of low density among young workers.

Keywords: trade unions, internationalization, youth trade union participation, trade union membership

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Introduction

Trade unions face the problem of falling density (Visser 2002; Ebbinghaus 2002). Over the last decades, this level has fallen in most countries. The reasons are given, among others: globalization, structural change, new channels of communication and information, demographic change and more (Lesch 2004). The level of unionization varies greatly between European countries. In Estonia it is 5.7%, while in Finland it is 69%¹.

An especially important issue for trade unions is the declining level of unionization among young people. It is not easy to provide precise data on the level of unionization among young workers. First, there is a difference in the meaning of the word 'young' (organizations differently define age limits), and secondly, organizations rarely manage databases of the age structure of their organizations. This makes it difficult to compare data from individual countries (Kahmann 2002). Regardless, there are a number of studies which indicate that the level of unionization among young people is significantly lower than older workers (Serrano Pascual and Waddington 2000; Blanchflower 2007; Pedersini 2010). The difference is twofold, and in Anglo-Saxon countries it may be even two and a half times (Bryson et al. 2001; Gomez et al. 2002). Importantly, the level of unionization among young people is falling faster than among the general population (Serrano Pascual and Waddington 2000; Kahmann 2002, Vandaele 2012). The only exceptions in Europe are Belgium and Germany, where the level of unionization of young workers over the past 10–15 years has improved (Keune 2015; Pulignano and Doerflinger 2014).

Not only is the level of unionization of young people a threat for the future of unions, but also the current age structure of trade unions. Most often, by observing the age structure of workers' organizations, it can be seen that unionization is low among young workers and is increasing with age and decreases again before retirement, so the union pattern takes the form of a reversed U-letter (Ebbinghaus et al. 2011; Pulignano and Doerflinger 2014). At present, the trade union is dominated by middle-aged and older workers. Young workers are underrepresented. This causes a generation gap. One study has shown that the age gap between 1975 and 2001 among trade union members has increased significantly. Moreover, age has become a more

¹ OECD data for year 2013.

significant determinant of whether a person joins a trade union than it was before (Machin 2004).

The age structure of many trade unions makes it possible that in the near future many of their members will retire. In Italy even half of the union members are already pensioners (Chiarini 1999; Bernaciak et al. 2014). Similar trends are noted in Germany (Schnabel and Wagner 2008) and in the Netherlands (Huiskamp and Smulders 2010). Gumbrell-McCormick (2011) states that union members and activists go into retirement, and are not replaced by the same number of people. The lack of sufficient number of middle-aged leaders has a significant impact on the lack of sufficient experience and knowledge of union work, and on the size of the generation gap between young and older members. Differences in attitudes and experiences between generations of workers, and hence lack of understanding, can lead to tensions within structures. Also, Waddington and Kerr (2002) point out that the average age of trade unionists is growing. As a result, differences in the perception of reality, culture and the identification of workers in different age groups, are becoming more important (Morris 1986).

It is also related to the fact that the trade unions reflected the structure of the labour force few decades ago, concentrated among male laborers and public employment, with weak representation in the expanding private sector services (Bernaciak, Gumbrell-McCormick, Hyman 2014: 17). Older workers are usually employed in the manufacturing and public sectors where the unionization level is much lower for young workers. This is confirmed by research in the UK, where it is noted that the age of employees is important in explaining the low rate of entry into trade unions. Generally, young workers are less likely to join a workers' organization. In addition, not only the age of the employee is important, but also the age of the workplace. In newer workplaces, the level of unionization is lower than in the older ones (Charlwood 2002).

It should also be noted that the youth unemployment rate is higher than that of the general population, which affects the level of unionization in this age group (Serrano Pascual, Waddington et al 2000; Kahmann 2002).

In the discussion about youth unionization there is another important topic. It is about demographic change. The 'cohort effect', according to researchers, could be a significant threat to the future of trade unions. Older workers who have been and are still highly unionized are replaced by younger workers who are poorly organized. This obviously reduces the level of unionization. In this situation, the acquisition of young people appears to be crucial to ensure the continuity of the trade union movement, especially in an aging Europe (Schnabel 2012).

Trade unions as one of the methods to combat the negative trend have adopted the development of international cooperation, which is supposed to contribute to dissemination of good organization practices. This also applies to young unionists. This article aims to assess whether increasing collaboration between young people at the international level (mainly in Europe) can contribute to a change in youth unionization trends. The research question of the observations suggest that such cooperation does not deliver the desired effects despite relatively high costs. To verify this hypothesis, a study was conducted with people who are deeply involved in the international networks of young people. It covered 10 experts. The scope of the study, however, is broader. Experts were also asked about projects, cooperation issues, barriers, evaluation of the involvement of trade union leaders in the cooperation of young people and the future of cooperation of young trade unionists. In this way, a broader picture of the achievements and challenges related to the cooperation of young trade unionists from different countries, has been drawn up.

The first part of the article will show the most important reasons for the low level of unionization among young people based on current research. Next, the way in which the trade unions respond to the above-mentioned causes of low youth representation in unions will be presented. Further, organizations and networks that are the platforms for international cooperation of young trade unionists will be presented and results of the research will be discussed. The article summarizes the conclusions and recommendations resulting from the research conducted.

Causes of the Current Situation

There are many attempts to explain the decline of unionization among young people. In this section individual theories complementing each other are presented. It shows that the problem of low unionization of young workers is multidimensional.

One of the basic factors explaining the low level of unionization of young people is change in the structure of economy, followed by employment differentiation and atypical forms of employment, which are commonplace among the younger generation. There have been changes in the structure of economy and labour market. Industry workers have been replaced by other groups, collectively referred to as 'white collars'. These include, for example, office workers, administrators, officials, etc. This group of workers is, in principle, characterized by a higher level of education. They expect a different kind of support than low-skilled workers, who are still the

foundation of the trade union movement. This applies to services offered by union, ways of communication, training and activities (Serrano Pascual and Waddington 2000). Literature emphasizes that this type of employee is more difficult to organize for trade unions. Since there are many young people in this group, it is a bigger challenge to recruit them (Kahmann 2002).

In addition to the fact that young people are often found among white collar workers, many are employed in less regulated services and smaller businesses. In addition, they are often employed on the basis of atypical contracts (Haynes et al. 2005; Sanchez 2007; Pollert, Tailby 2009; Kretsos 2010; Bernaciak et al. 2014; Just Go for It 2016). It all hinders effective organization (Pollert and Tailby 2009) and raises its cost (Kretsos 2010; Bernaciak et al. 2014). This is well described by Gumbrell-McCormick (2014: 299). *In both cases, it is more difficult for unions to rely on traditional industrial or occupational basis for organization and identity, especially as the rise of new technologies and industries has blurred the distinction between traditionally well demarcated industries and occupations. It is more difficult to recruit and organize temporary workers, and at the same time less useful for the union as the growth in membership is often short-lived. This is a particular problem for the recruitment and organization of the most precarious workers, often undocumented workers in agriculture, catering and other largely seasonal jobs where there is a frequent change in location.* It is not only atypical employment which is important. It is worth to mention about common phenomenon, that is the increase of traineeships and apprenticeship. Apprentices and trainees are groups whose status on the labour market is uncertain, which makes it difficult to organize (EC 2014).

In addition to the above considerations there is the rotation of employees. Young people are more likely to move jobs than older workers, so even when they join a union, there is high probability that they will leave because they move to a job where there is no union presence (Castiglioni 2012). Some researches prove that young workers are often leaving the workplace instead of making the effort to improve their situation by joining the workers' organizations and collectively defending their interests (Serrano Pascual and Waddington 2000; Fontes and Margolies 2010). This corresponds to the findings of research by Australian students who are both studying and working. They prefer to leave and change jobs when the employer infringes workers' rights rather than take action with other employees and openly express their concerns (Allan et al. 2006). It is also noted that the career cycle of a young person today is often not linear (Castiglioni 2012). Fontes and Margolies (2010) highlight one more important aspect. Young people often do not perceive their first professional experiences as 'career' builders. They see it as one of many

steps to permanent employment. This also affects the ineffectiveness of trade unions in attracting young workers because, as already mentioned, they associate workers who have not encountered so much labour market dynamics and dominate in sectors that are stable.

In addition to structural change, one of the key explanations for the low participation of young people in trade union organizations is the lack of contact between young people and trade unions, through their workplace activities or through friends and family networks. This is confirmed by numerous studies. For example Ebbinghaus et al. (2011) has shown that access to trade unions (and, therefore, increased availability for potential members) significantly increases the likelihood that a person will become a member of the union. Similar results were obtained by Schnabel and Wagner (2007).

Social and family networks are very important. Active family members and other work colleagues influence the decision of a person to join the organization (Gomez et al. 2002; Blanden and Machin 2003). Gomez et al. (2002) points out that the falling union density level creates the effect of a snowball, which makes each generation less aware of the existence of trade unions.

Charlwood (2002) argues that workers in highly unionized areas (the UK study) are more willing to join unions. He also points out that membership in a union is the so-called 'experience good', what means that employees appreciate them even if they do not receive ad hoc benefits. This is due to the fact that family or friends and co-workers most often encourage membership. In another study, it was pointed out (Van de Vall 1970: 136) that *many workers join the union in order to occupy a psychologically safe position among the members of the group, i.e. in order not to be isolated or despised as a 'parasite'*. Such a social custom may allow trade union to exist even in a voluntary open-shop system and even if the employer expressly opposes it and if there is a risk of a free-riding (Naylor 1989).

Fontes and Margolies (2010) also raise another important topic. It is about the lack of teaching about trade unions in schools. They point out that only historical books in Anglo-Saxon countries refers to the trade union movement and its role. Despite their efforts, trade unions are unable to ensure that education about trade union movement is possible in schools. It can be assumed that in other countries it is similar.

The problem of weak contact of young people with trade unions is also linked to the issue of unattractive forms of communication between trade unions and young people. Labour unions fail in proper communication with young people. As has already been pointed out, young people often do not know what unions are and are

not effectively encouraged to join. It is worth mentioning here the opinion expressed in the Just Go For It report (2016: 4). *Young unionists and workers feel that TUs are struggling with communication. Young people do not know what the TU is and if and when they hear about it, they are influenced by the traditional media and public opinion. TUs do not invest enough, either in activities in the workplaces or schools, or in trying to change the public opinion. And further: They use old fashioned ways of communicating, using an obsolete vocabulary. Young workers see TUs as bureaucratic monsters, with a patriarchal and pyramidal structure, which have not changed in years and have no interest to modernize. They are perceived as static and difficult to access, with a top down approach impermeable to any request or proposal coming from outside its walls. Their leaders are often assimilated to politicians both in the way they act and live.*

It is argued that trade unions should adapt to the forms of communication used by young people. They should start using social media and other online tools (Bailey et al. 2009). Communication with young people is crucial, because as mentioned above, the employee most often joins in the first years of his or her career. If unions do not succeed in communicating with potential member at this time and do not convince them to join, it is highly possible that the person will no longer join the union (Visser 2002; EC 2014). Trade unions still ‘learn’ new media. Studies and interviews show that trade unions see the need to follow changes in communication methods but still cannot be effective (Bailey et al. 2009).

This seems to confirm the study conducted in Australia, where one of the respondents stated that *I still don't think [unions] have got it. I still don't think that the union movement is running in the same circles as Generation Y. I don't think that they take advantage of the technology as much as they should* (Bailey et al. 2009: 7). The same authors emphasize the fact that one of today's basic forms of contact with potential members, a website, is often unattractive and rarely updated. This fact is also highlighted by one of the respondents for this article. At the time of the interview, she said that when she surveyed the trade unions' websites for the project, one of the organizations had not updated its website for two years.

The language of trade unions is one more cause of the limited potential of organizations to reach young people effectively. Many opinions suggest that the language of the unions is hermetic and difficult to understand for potential audiences (Fontes and Margolies 2010). Attention is also drawn to the fact that communication methods are not selected for recipients. For example, if an organization prepares an event, it should evaluate what kind of venue to choose, what kind of music should

accompany it, how to prepare it, etc. But that does not happen (Fontes and Margolies 2010).

Despite the need for modern forms of communication, direct contact remains most important, and new forms only complement it. Pulignano et al. (2014) states that a personal contact is the best and most appropriate way to convince young people about the need for trade unions and the importance of being a member of a union. For young workers it is important that the person who talks to them is of a similar age. Quite often, however, there is a lack of young organizers within the union (Fontes, Margolies 2010).

Difficulties in effective communication face an additional barrier, namely the bad image and stereotypes that are attributed to trade unions. Young workers often connect trade unions with the manufacturing industry, in which there are high levels of accidents and strikes. Young workers also see trade unions as organizations dominated by middle-aged men who do not understand their interests (Serrano Pascual, Waddington 2000). Union activity and culture are seen as reserved for older people, and union meetings are seen as incomprehensible, boring and bureaucratic (Our Time is Now 2013). There are also a number of economic stereotypes that reach young people. Pascual et al. (2000) states that union legitimacy was challenged in the 1980s and 1990s by defining them as 'part of the problem' and not as a 'part of the solution' that came to young people who believed the employer would care for them. It is worth mention here the opinion expressed by Gardawski (2011: 40). *Student of economics is aware that the only result of union activity is the overpayment of labour costs by trade unions and the reduction of demand for it, which results in the emergence of unemployment or increasing its level. ... The writer of these words carries out economics studies and knows how strong, unilateral negative stereotypes of trade unions remain after such lectures in economics in the heads of future managers.*

The prevailing opinion on the perception of trade unions by young people is that young people are fairly critical of the labour movement and do not identify themselves with it. A number of studies, however, show that young people despite appearances, are even more favorable to trade unions than older workers (Serrano Pascual and Waddington 2000; Kerr and Waddington 1997; Gomez et al. 2002; Haynes et al. 2005; Vandaele 2012). Positive ratings of trade unions have, in principle, persisted and even improved during the financial crisis, which was linked to the belief of young people that trade unions are able to defend them from the effects of the crisis (Keune 2015). At the same time, it is emphasized that young people are aware of what benefits they can get from the trade unions. Especially in terms of working conditions (Just Go for

It 2016). Following Kretsos (2010) it can be said that the hypothesis about the negative attitude of young people towards unions was basically rejected.

Not only are external factors affecting the level of unionization of young workers. Issues related to the organizations themselves are also significant. This should include some kind of conflict between the core of the union, that is, older workers from the public and industrial sectors, working on more stable conditions, and between young people who work in the private sector and experience unstable employment in the private sector. This is pointed out by Visser (2012), who refers to the ‘median voter’ theory, which means that the structure of unions determines decisions made by the organization. It was observed in recent years when union debates were dominated by topics like: defense of lower pension age, protection of older workers, etc. (Vandaele 2012). The concept of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ refers to it. The theory of insider-outsider assumes that there are two groups of workers on the labour market: insiders in highly protected jobs, sufficiently protected and outsiders who can be unemployed or hold jobs characterized by low salaries and low levels of protection, employment rights, benefits, and social security privileges. Interests of these two groups are different (Rueda 2005). Trade unions are seen as defending the so-called ‘insiders’, most often employed on contracts of indefinite duration (Friedman and Friedman, 1980). According to Kretsos (2010) this may adversely affect the perception of trade unions by young workers. Keune (2015) writes that the high and growing age of the average unionist means that unions first focus on representing its members; it is not therefore a surprise that young issues are not a priority. However, as indicated, this is a short-term strategy. In the long term, young people are needed to strengthen the position of trade unions.

In the Mediterranean countries, there are cases where trade unions have agreed to orse employment and pay conditions for new and young workers to protect older workers (two-tier systems). At the same time reforms for flexibility of the labour market do not violate the rights of those who have long been on the labour market (Kretsos 2010). In another analysis, it was pointed out that many trade unions expressed opposition to precarious employment by excluding precarious workers from their structures. Alternatively, they silently accepted the worsening of the conditions of weaker groups to protect the conditions of their core members. This led to a conflict between ‘protected’ employees and precarious workers (Bernaciak et al. 2014).

While noting that trade unions protect ‘insiders’ it is generally indicated that workers’ organizations make efforts for precarious workers. This is because their fundamental value is the struggle for social justice. Unions represent the whole

workforce, not just its members. In addition, expansion of atypical contracts also threatens their members, not just young workers (Keune 2013).

Additionally, it is worth to mention progressive socio-cultural change resulting in the individualization of attitudes. Individualization can be defined as a process in which attitudes are increasingly based on individual rather than group references (Peetz 2010). It is assumed that the weakening of the collective reference framework is one of the main reasons for the weakening of young people's participation in various policy initiatives and lower identification of young workers with trade unions (Vandaele 2012). Gomez et al. (2002: 521) states that *unions are 'outmoded institutions unable to reach a new generation of workers imbued with individualistic values – that are at odds with the collective ethos of underpinning unionism*. Also, Allvin and Sverke (2000), based on the Swedish example, show that individualization of attitudes among young workers is widespread.

Hyman (1997) argues that there is no conflict between the individual and collective action. On the contrary, collectivism serves as a basis for the realization of individual interests. It is also claimed that young workers who experience problems at work try to solve them through collective actions, such as talking with colleagues, organizing meetings with managers and others (Tailby, Pollert 2011; Our Time is Now 2013). This undermines the hypothesis of the individual attitudes of the young. Following Oliver (2005), it is possible to judge this view as a stereotype.

One of the often cited arguments for explaining the difficulties in effective organizing young workers is the instrumental approach of younger generations to trade unions. This is because a young person – a union member, in exchange for a paid contribution, expects a particular service. One of the most obvious answers to the question of why employees join a trade union is that they want something they cannot afford: better pay and employment conditions, insurance in the event of a conflict with the employer who makes arbitrary decisions, job security, social protection and respect for oneself (Visser 2002). This is related to the fact that when this service is not received or is of poor quality, young people choose to leave the union.

Such behaviour is highlighted by Allvin and Sverke (2000). In their study, which included members of the Swedish blue-collars organization, they found that younger workers exhibited an instrumental approach (defined as identification with the union in exchange for benefits associated with membership). Other studies also support this hypothesis (Waddington, Whitston 1997; Gomez et al. 2002; Visser 2002; Pulignano, Doerflinger 2014; Keune 2015).

This is argued by Kahmann (2002: 33). He stated on the basis of the British experience that *Providing discounted insurance schemes, discounted mortgages, and access to cheaper motoring. introduced by many unions in the 1980s to develop a consumer-based appeal to some extent but have proved to be marginal for youth's interest in union.*

Interestingly, and in some way mixing mentioned opinions, the problem was presented by Waddington (2014). He noted that instrumentalization among young workers is important, but it is crucial in this case that the expectation of a particular service in return for membership entails only membership but does not reflect in the union activity. This definitely distinguishes junior members from their older colleagues. As the researcher puts it, young people show '*willingness to pay*' without an accompanying '*willingness to act*' (Waddington 2014; similarly Pulignano and Doerflinger 2014). This is due to the fact that young workers, in contrast to older workers, are less sensitive to ideology (Pulignano and Doerflinger 2014). This also represents a new challenge for trade unions, as it means that the traditional model of trade union debate is exhausted (Kahmann 2002).

Moreover, the problem is not the negative attitude of young workers to trade unions, but low knowledge about them (Serrano Pascual and Waddington 2000; Vandaele 2012). This opinion is expressed not only in research but also in journalism. Bristow writes: "*Despite these achievements, many young people do not even know what trade unions are. And when they have heard of them, they are most likely to think of the 1980s, and 'people who wear brown shirts and go on caravan holidays'*".

Trade unions make a mistake. Quite often it happens that young people are not asked if they want to belong to a trade union (Waddington and Kerr 2002; Kahmann 2002; Charlwood 2002; Diamond and Freeman 2003; Tailby and Pollert 2011; Just Go For It 2016). This is also pointed out by Kretsos (2010), who writes that not only the growing segmentation of the labour market is hampering the unionization of young people but also the organizational failure of the union itself. He stresses lack of unions in the workplace, choice of improper support methods, sometimes the limited effectiveness of local union representatives, lack of daily contact with young union members. In a similar vein, Kahmann (2002) states that trade unions do not adequately work out strategies for informing young people about unions. In his opinion, the problem is the lack of an active approach.

The attitude of young employees is also influenced by the attitudes of employers (Dundon 2002). Quite often they display reluctant attitudes toward the functioning of trade unions. Serrano Pascual and Waddington (2000) and Waddington and Kerr

(2002) argue that employers' unwillingness to trade union activity can be considered as a key factor explaining the current situation in the trade union movement.

Young people are more likely to work in small workplaces. In this situation young people may experience difficulties in relation to superiors when they become members of a trade union. This becomes particularly acute when a young employee is working in an unstable form of employment. Interestingly, young people recall that it is easier to solve problems in a small workplace by talking directly to the supervisors rather than through a trade union (Serrano Pascual, Waddington 2000). Research also shows that the resistance of employers to recognize a union and to cooperate with it significantly hinders union membership. This is related to the fact that if an unions experiences difficulties in functioning, its accessibility to potential members decreases and it is harder to attract new members (Waddington, Whitston 1997).

The last possible explanation is passivity of young people. The Eurobarometer survey, where young people have been surveyed for social and political life, has provided proof of the low social activity of young people. These data clearly show a negative trend in this regard. In 1987, in the age group 15–24, 45% of the respondents belonged to any organization. 5% of respondents indicated that they belonged to trade unions. In 1990, 50% belonged to any organization in the same age group; 8% indicated trade unions or another professional organization. The fact that it was the last edition where researchers asked directly about trade union participation was a sign of the times. In a 1997 study, a survey showed that 52.4% of young people belonged to any organization. 4.4% of the respondents reported that they belonged to a trade union or political party. In another study, in 2001 results did not change significantly. 50% belonged to any organization and 4% belonged to a trade union or political party. In 2007, data showed a significant decline in the participation of young people (this time in the 15–30 age group) in various types of organizations. Only 22% said they belonged to an organization. 7% of people indicated a trade union. In a series of studies on young Europeans, the question of union membership has disappeared. In this situation, it is only possible to assess the overall activity of the young. In 2011 52% of people aged 15–30 belonged to any organization. In 2013 it was 56%, and in 2015 it was 49% of people.

This means that in various years about half of young Europeans were passive. They did not undertake any social activity. In addition, a significant proportion of respondents are members of sports clubs (29% in the 2015 survey). It can be concluded from this that young people are a group that is not very active and difficult to engage in any kind of activities. This is evidenced by the literature that describe the declining

number of young people who take part in the elections and life of political parties. That means that political apathy and disappointment is growing and reflects in falling unionism (Waddington and Kerr 2002).

Trade Union Response – International Cooperation

Trade unions see the problem of falling young membership and take a number of initiatives to attract young people to trade unions. Following Serrano Pascual and Waddington (2000) these initiatives can be divided into three categories: changing the image of trade unions, reforming organizations to encourage young people to join unions and developing an agenda tailored to the needs of young people.

Promotion of trade unions is a response to problems related to low knowledge about the labour movement, weak communication and negative image. In principle, it focuses on raising awareness about the effects of union work and on the potential benefits that come from participating in a labour union. Unions use various tools, from direct contact, through billboard campaigns, mass media and the Internet (Puignano and Doerflinger 2014).

Campaigns are effective if they contain appealing content for young people. As mentioned earlier, unions are dominated by older workers which makes the interest of the union more focused on the problems of these groups. Trade unions are aware of this and are also trying to raise topics related to the younger generation. This was particularly significant after the outbreak of the last economic crisis (Keune 2015). Waddington and Whitston (1997) found that the ‘bread and butter’ problems were rated the highest among young workers among the reasons to get unionized. ‘Support if I had a problem at work’ received overwhelming support (it is the prime reason for UK workers to join a union), followed by ‘improved pay and conditions’. This is in line with findings by the UNISON UK public sector union (Kerr and Waddington 1997).

Reform of unions to attract the young and increase their activity takes several forms. Most often, there are separate structures for young members or networks to improve communication between young people in the organization and potential members (Pedersini 2010). In addition, young people quite often have a place in the executive bodies of the union (Vandaele 2012). Unions also support the creation of partnerships between youth structures and student organizations (Vandaele 2013). In addition to organizational changes, unions also take other initiatives, such as

reducing membership dues for young people (Le Queux 2000) and creating union cards that provide access to union services regardless of where they work. Workers' organizations also cooperate with schools and colleges (Kahmann 2002).

In addition to creating different types of platforms and networks for young people in different organizations taking many other activities to promote trade unions, which decided to create an international network of young trade unionists (look at this sentence again – it doesn't make sense). They allow better sharing of good practices and jointly address problems related to young workers (Just Go For It 2016). To assess their effectiveness, 10 interviews were conducted with people who have a leading role in international networks involving young workers. These are:

- European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) Youth Committee
- European Centre for Workers' Questions (EZA) Platform for Young Workers
- International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) Youth Committee
- Pan-European Regional Council (PERC) Youth Committee
- Central European Youth Trade Unionist Network (CEYTUN)
- Mediterranean Youth Trade Union Network (MEYTUN)
- European Trade Union Institute (ETUI)
- International Labour Organization Bureau for Workers' Activities (ILO-ACTRAV).

The above networks and organizations carry out a number of initiatives aimed at promoting trade unions among young people and the fight for the rights of young workers in the European or regional forum. The network of young trade union members has been established relatively recently. The oldest was founded in 1999 (Youth Committee of the ETUC), and the last initiative was launched in 2016 (MEYTUN). In this section they will be briefly described together with the selected projects that are being implemented and then detailed research results will be presented.

The Youth Committee of the European Confederation of Trade Unions was established in 1999. It consists of representatives of individual member organizations of the ETUC. Members should be no older than 35 years. Election of the Committee is held every two years. Members shall then elect members of the Committee's Bureau, taking into account geographic distribution. The Office coordinates the work of the Committee and represents it outside.

The aim of the Committee is to represent the interests of young European workers and the unemployed within the ETUC as well as ‘outside’, in front of institutions, politicians, employers, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders².

The committee carries out many projects. One of them is ETUC Youth Think Tank, which aims to exchange and improve knowledge on current issues related to trade union work in Europe, the Youth Friendliness Indicator, which aims to provide a tool for comparing European labour markets with regard to the situation of young workers, training for Committee members organized each year with ETUI, project implemented with Turkish trade unions: *The Dialogue between Trade Union Organizations in Turkey and a Focus on Young Workers* aims to initiate dialogue, communication and cooperation between Turkish and European trade unions, with a special focus on young people. It is also worth mentioning the ILO’s ‘Academy for Young Leaders of the Union’ project, which will be presented in the next section. These are just some examples of initiatives. The Committee is certainly the largest, most formalized and most active network of young trade unionists in Europe. For this reason, young people are trying to debate the current issues. An example would be the position of the ETUC Executive Committee on the European Solidarity Corps, initiated by the ETUC Youth Committee. In this and other matters, the Committee is trying to react, which strengthens its role. The fact that the position is adopted means that older leaders count on the opinion of young people.

The second network is the ITUC Youth Committee. The ITUC Organizing Academy plays a special role in the work of the Committee. The Academy seeks out the best solutions for organizing young people. The purpose of the Academy is also to broaden the knowledge of the practice of gaining membership in trade unions. The academy consists of very interactive workshops. Academies have different dimensions, eg. national or regional. The focus of the course is to build an organizational campaign, which in this case is understood broadly, not only as a gathering of members, but also as the preparation of an agenda for young workers and a change in the image of trade unions.

On the ITUC website we find information that justifies the organization of such events and is the guiding principle of work for young people: *Young people are critical to the future of trade unionism and to the strength, effectiveness and legitimacy of trade union organization. Youth does not reject trade unionism and often identifies strongly with its principles and values. However, they too frequently face difficulty in finding*

² More information on the Committee’s work can be found on the website <https://www.etuc.org/issue/youth-committee> [access: 15.09.2017]

*their place in trade union structures and activities. It is crucial that unions respond better in their policies and activities to the needs and expectations of young workers, make them feel welcome and remove the obstacles that prevent their full participation*³.

The Platform for Young Workers of the European Center for Workers' Questions is the next example of international cooperation. It consists of representatives of individual EZA member organizations, who are no more than 36 years old. The Core Group is comprised of 8 people. Every two years there is a Platform Conference, which discusses issues that are close to young people. At present, the Platform's work program includes the implementation of the Youth Guarantee in individual EU Member States, job precarization, workplace happiness, mobbing (do you mean harassment? 'Mobbing' doesn't translate directly from Polish to English), workplace stress and health at work. During the conference, Core Group members are elected for a 4-year term. The platform started work in 2007, although it was formally set up in 2011. So far 5 conferences have been held. Aside from organization of the Conference and initiating debates on important issues from the perspective of young people, the platform also aims to present young people's views at numerous seminars and conferences organized by EZA⁴.

The ITUC structure is PERC, which encompasses European countries and parts of Asian countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan. As in the ITUC, the Young Committee was also set up in PERC. The Committee consists of 9 members, elected every two years during the conference. Conferences are also a time of debate on topics relevant for young PERC members. Conferences are held each year. As in the case of the ITUC Young Committee, the PERC Young Committee also organizes organizing academies.

An example of a regional network is CEYTUN, which covers Central and Eastern Europe. The network currently consists of over 50 young trade unionists from six countries: Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria and Germany. The idea for establishing such a network was made in 2012, although officially the network has been operating since 2013. Initially concentrated in the countries of the Visegrad Group, after some time it was extended to Germany and Austria. It was about acquiring good trade union practices in these countries. During the conferences, which take place twice a year, issues related to young people are discussed. These

³ <https://www.ituc-csi.org/youth> [access: 15.09.2017]

⁴ More information on the Platform's work can be found on the website <http://eza-young-workers.org/> [access: 19.09.2017]

include PR in trade unions, digitization of work, migration, populism, etc. In particular workshop work is used.

The second regional network – MEYTUN covers in particular countries of the Mediterranean Sea. It is divided into two subgroups, Latin and South-Eastern. It was launched in Rome in 2016. MEYTUN allows participants to discuss important issues from the perspective of the network countries and submit them jointly to the ETUC Youth Committee.

Finally, it is important to note and emphasize the role of institutions supporting the work of young trade union members, namely ETUI and ILO ACTRAV. Both institutions organize training sessions, in which informal groups of young trade unionists are formed. In this case, two particularly important initiatives should be identified, namely ETUI European training for young trade union leaders and the ILO Academy for Young Trade Union Leaders.

The first one is ETUI's oldest training. It is targeted to people up to 40 years of age. 25 people participate in it and it is divided into three 1-week stages. The aim of the training is to develop the capacity to integrate the European and national dimension into trade union work, to develop the capacity to work in a multicultural environment and contribute to the development of the European trade union identity. It is worth to emphasize the fact that one of the requirements for participants is to help establish networks with other participants in the training. And indeed there is a network of graduates of this training. Many of them also become members of the ETUC Youth Committee.

The second initiative was jointly organized by the Youth Committee of the ETUC and ILO ACTRAV (Bureau for Workers' Activities). ACTRAV assists trade unions in their training activities in order to increase their membership and activity, to increase their capacity for representing members, to improve their negotiating skills, and to empower them to participate in various decision-making processes within unions. Involvement of the ILO ACTRAV results from the fact that for United Nations investing in young people is a priority and it is therefore important to support young people in member organizations and to create space for young people in union structures.

The training was directed to young trade union leaders and young union experts working in national trade union organizations affiliated to the ETUC. Participants must be no more than 35 years of age. The purpose of the Academy was to enhance the skills and knowledge of young trade unionists in order to develop their capacities to contribute in a more effective way to social dialogue and socio-economic

policy-making. The academy consisted of five parts, including the following topics: youth employment and youth rights, labour and social rights, union learning for new skills and competences, social dialogue and collective bargaining and organizing and communication strategies. In addition, the European Youth Conference was held at the end of the project. In total 50 young unionists took part in the Academy.

Apart from the above mentioned, there are also many other examples of various types of union youth structures. These include industry structures, such as the European Transport Federation Youth Committee, which was established in 2013, the UNI Global Youth Union Committee with its regional committees, the Youth Working Group, which was established in 2016, the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions Youth Committee set up in 2012, the European Federation of Public Service youth network which was created in 2010 and Working Group of the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers which was established in 2011 (Information from the Just Go for It report 2016) .

Survey Results

This section will discuss results of the study, which involved 10 interviews with people directly involved in the cooperation of young trade unionists at European and global level (mainly European ones). The number of interviews conducted is not large, but given the importance of the above structures and the position of the persons with whom the interviews are conducted, this study may be considered rather representative. The scope of the study included questions on projects implemented, issues of cooperation, barriers, assessment of the involvement of trade union leaders in the cooperation of young people and the future of cooperation of young trade unionists. One of the parts of the study was also a discussion on how transnational cooperation would affect the level of unionization of young workers.

In the first place respondents were asked about overall satisfaction with how the network works and whether the results of the work are satisfactory. All of the people responded positively. It was also mentioned that it is worthwhile to invest further in this cooperation and in the projects. Cooperation should be further developed and deepened. Experts stressed the importance of training and seminars, which they believe are conducive to building a European awareness and important in the fight for labour rights at European level. ETUI and EZA play the main role in their delivery.

It is worth adding that participation in projects, trainings and seminars allows the creation of local trade union representatives in transnational organizations. The ETUC project with Turkey and the ILO Young Trade Union Leaders Academy allowed the creation of two new ETUC Youth Committee members from Turkey and Romania.

Subsequently experts were asked what issues and problems were or should be the subject of debate and initiatives. The list of topics is long and covers a wide spectrum of issues. From typically worker issues, through topics related to European policy, to issues directly related to trade unionism. They can be divided into two groups.

The first group includes specific topics, resulting from the current socio-economic debate. New initiatives related to employee rights and employment conditions, work-life balance, work precarization, occupational mobility, labour market and education, the European pillar of social rights, and two-gear Europe. The second group of issues is more general. It covers topics such as discrimination against young people in the labour market, technological changes and their impact on the labour market, organization and training of workers, trade unions and populism, investments, climate change, international trade and the rise of international corporations. This set of topics shows that young trade union members, on the one hand, are aware of the changes in the world of work, and that there is a need for action to increase unionization rates and knowledge among their members and, on the other hand, that they are not locked into the outside world and are aware of political, social and economic processes. What was emphasized here was the willingness to influence the decision-making process in the EU. From this it can be concluded that the agenda will primarily be dictated by the central authorities of the European Union. In addition experts noted that cooperation at the supra-national level enables the creation of common strategies and actions to achieve specific goals.

One example of cooperation on a specific issue using the network is the project of the Maltese Union Forum youth section about *Right to Disconnect*, which thanks to cooperation with the French unions, has managed to prepare a legislative proposal in this regard. It was presented to the local authorities as well as to the parliamentary opposition. An online campaign was launched⁵.

⁵ Information comes from an interview with a representative of the MEYTUN network. More information can be found for example here <https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20170115/local/should-workers-have-the-right-to-disconnect-from-work-e-mails-after.636531> [access: 20.09.2017]

In the next part of the interviews, experts commented on barriers to international cooperation of young trade unionists. The problem identified by some people is that people who are taking part in various events are randomly selected. It is important that, as has been pointed out, it is very important that the information obtained at various events must be delivered into national work. The role of the participants is to 'duplicate' the acquired knowledge and skills at the national level. Experts said also that union leaders should ask and be interested in the work of their representatives in the networks so that they feel they are committed for responsible participation in the network.

It turns out that the potential of organizations sending representatives to participate in the work of a given network is of importance. Some of the organizations do not have enough resources and staff, which hampers effective work. Sometimes some of the organizations do not provide transportation and financial means for traveling abroad. The most common organizational difficulties are encountered by organizations from Eastern and Southern Europe. The different potential of individual organizations may reward network participants from countries with strong trade union movement and adequate resources and human resources to work at international level. Also some of the networks are not provided with fixed funding (eg MEYTUN), which limits the possibility of their development. On the other hand, thanks to new technologies, this barrier is overcome. Young unionists organize videoconferences and use social media. In addition they meet on other occasions. However, it is stressed that personal contact is difficult to completely replace over the Internet and telephone.

Rotation of network participants was also indicated. The reason is on the one hand, the age barrier which is set at 35 and on the other hand, it is related to the fact that young people are more likely to change their jobs, places of residence, etc. This makes the network not stable. One expert commented on this problem as follows: *there is a lot of fluctuation. Young people, their lives, they change quite quickly so it's hard to engage them. They also have a lot of concerns on their mind. Sometimes they do not have decent jobs or they are changing jobs. They are having a young family or try to have a young family, which makes that they cannot say 'I will commit to the platform for the next 4 years'*. Moreover, many people have noticed that they see need for fresh blood flow to the network. This promotes new ideas and adds energy to the whole structure. This justifies maintaining the age barrier. However, a lower age barrier could cause lack of candidates for work within the networks. Sometimes there are people older than 35 years old because of the lack of other candidates.

Experts were asked about the knowledge of foreign languages, especially English, which is the most commonly chosen as a working language. As it turns out, this is not indicated as an important barrier. There are problems but they are much smaller than a few years ago. This is particularly true of the steering bodies of individual networks, where the language barrier is no longer present. As one of the positive effects of international cooperation it is indicated that active participation in the work of the network contributes to the improvement of language skills.

The experts spoke about the interest of trade union leaders in work at transnational level. At the same time they were asked what leaders could do to strengthen the network. All respondents agreed that current trade union leaders are interested in young international co-operation, but this is often not reflected in reality. It was emphasized that the intention was expressed but at the implementation stage there was no openness and willingness to support. In addition many organizations are struggling with current issues, so the topic of young collaboration goes to the back. What is pointed out is that when talking about support experts do not mention financial resources. The most frequently answer was that there was no recognition of transnational cooperation as an important element of union work. Leaders, according to experts, do not show sufficient openness and willingness to work with young network members. They are expected to feel encouraged, motivated, appreciated for their work. One of the experts said: *The national leadership, they should also be supportive and they need to encourage young people to be part of this movement.* Leaders are expected to be open to criticism and to draw conclusions from it.

The attitude of leadership is linked to another issue – the lack of involvement of young people in the decision-making process. Young unionists who acquire knowledge and develop their international network are not involved in union work at national level. This means, in practice, that people with great knowledge and skills do not use them in their daily work. It is stated that the commitment requirement cannot be unilateral. Just as leaders are expected to worth to trust them. One of the experts said: *They must deliver. They must be able to show some results for the trade union organization, but even beyond for the young people who are out there and who haven't yet joined the union for variety of reasons. Maybe because they don't know that the union can help them, maybe the union does not talk to them, etc.* They must also, as already mentioned, transfer knowledge to the structures.

It was also asked whether the political situation in Europe and especially relations between the various countries had influenced work in the network. It turns out that, in principle, it has not. Most people emphasized that trade unions do not undergo political divisions within the EU and remain in solidarity. What sets them together

are universal values. Even if there are political divisions, they do not affect the daily work. One opinion pointed out that political differences can be perceived as a value because it connects different points of view. It is worth noting here that this contradicts the analysis presented by Dribbusch (2015) who thinks that the differences in the perception of European affairs by trade unions hampers their ability to act in solidarity. The signal, however, is that, according to one of the experts, anti-European tendencies are gaining strength, which may have a negative impact on further work by individual networks. Attention was also paid to the emerging division into the so-called 'Two-speed Europe'. It is worth to mention for example, that there is a different perception of migration across different parts of Europe. For its eastern part it is a 'brain drain', and for western 'social dumping'.

What is conducive to international trade union cooperation is the implementation of projects using European funds. In order to implement them various types of international partnerships are created between different organizations, which makes networking easier. In this context experts were asked how the future of cooperation could be affected by the current situation in the European Union, taking into account scenarios that have been presented for the future of the European Community. Some of them stated that possible weakening of European integration could have a negative impact on cooperation especially in the context of joint projects (eg Erasmus plus). At the same time, some argued that the political situation in the EU cannot and will not influence the situation in the trade union movement.

In the later part of the interview, the question was asked whether international cooperation could prevent a decrease in the level of unionization and whether it could fill the emerging and deepening generational gap within trade unions. Experts remain optimistic. It is argued that the exchange of experience between participants in the network plays a special role. Proper adaptation of acquired knowledge at the national level should foster the level of unionization.

Summary and Recommendations

Interviews have highlighted several frailties of cooperation. Without eliminating them it will be difficult to expect that the functioning youth forums will be able to be considered as valuable and worth spending significant money even if the respondents

were positive about the potential of international cooperation in the fight against the falling unionization rate of young people.

First and foremost what is causing the problem is the union leaders' approach to the international cooperation of young trade unionists. Although they speak positively about transnational work they appear to be uninterested in the functioning of the networks and the issues that are discussed in them. Interviews have confirmed findings in some of the studies: young people want to be taken seriously and want to occupy an important place in the union structure. However, older leaders are distrustful of them, looking from above, effectively discouraging young people to work in the union (Fontes and Margolies 2010). Without this change work at international level can be wasted. Not only because there will not be 'a spill over' effect of acquired knowledge and experience but also because, as one expert pointed out: *young people who are not involved and who are not supported can burnout. For this reason, they leave the organization and enter the normal labour market.* It may deepen the gap in the union structure and the gap in the leadership.

In this situation, it would be advisable to include people who are active in the international arena in the decision-making process within the union structures. These people should have a chance to speak on issues that are important to the organization. They should also have a chance to participate in the decision-making process. This would allow for changes in the trade union movement and the inclusion of young workers in the work of trade unions. It would be expected that this would have a positive impact on the perception of trade unions among the younger generation. Unfortunately, it does not happen. This is shown not only by the results of this study. Vandaele (2012) showed that in only 26 of the 44 European confederations young person was guaranteed a place in the executive body of the union. Only in 13 cases did the person have the right to vote, in 9 cases to vote and in 3 to have observer status. According to the author of the study 'despite administrative reforms undertaken by confederations, there are only limited opportunities for youth to have a voice at the level of the umbrella organization' (pp. 211). Failure to involve young people in decision-making will also result in lack of knowledge about the functioning of trade unions among the younger generation which may reduce the effectiveness of future actions (Payne 1989). This, however, should be combined with greater requirements and decision-making responsibilities. If young people were given space to act, they would have to be responsible for running campaigns, meetings, etc. As one of the people interviewed said, this is a 'right and duty' principle.

In this context dialogue between the generations as reported by Castiglioni (2012) is of particular importance. Interactions between the generations of the unions, their debates and exchange of experiences would enable the revival of union movements and to some extent reduce the gap in leadership by eliminating the effects of the existing generation gap. This is especially important given the differences in the level of education of the different cohorts and their perception of reality. It is worth mentioning that 90% of the participants of the ILO Young Trade Union Leaders Academy had a higher education. Real dialogue in the long run may improve the level of unionization. But if the change of perception of young trade unionists does not take place there will be a lack of mutual knowledge between different generations, and if older leaders will be afraid of young leaders it can be said that international work will be ineffective and wasteful.

In addition to changing the attitudes of the trade union leaders, it is essential that the selection of network participants is transparent and that they can then join the union inner work. Some experts have confirmed cases of unidentified members, sometimes family members of union leaders, who were not interested in acquiring knowledge and passing it to the national level. In addition, it is necessary to constantly seek new representatives of unions in networks. The study has highlighted the problem of the lack of young people who could take part in work at the supranational level.

In addition, equalization of the potential of individual organizations is significant. The research shows that there are differences in the ability of organizations to actively participate in the work of networks and organizations. This applies especially to Eastern and Southern Europe. In particular, the European Commission and the European Trade Union Confederation which initiate projects and support them financially have a role to play here.

Another issue that was not widely discussed in this article is the regionalization of trade unionism; this may pose a threat to young people's cooperation and the future of the trade union movement. On the one hand, regional structures (CEYTUN, MEYTUN, as well as others that have not been analyzed in this text, such as the Nordic Groups) may foster closer cooperation on issues common to the region. On the other hand, as has already been highlighted, some problems may be differently understood by different regions. There is therefore a danger to cohesion and solidarity within the trade union movement at European level. While one of the experts draws attention to this and points out that it is important to avoid opposing each of the regional groups it can be difficult.

Also the manner in which trade unions work and communicate needs to change. Experts said that union structures are hierarchical and bureaucratic, which discourages young people from joining. The solution, according to the respondents, is not to adapt young people to how the trade unions work, but to allow them to work differently using other communication tools and other approaches to their tasks. Increasing the space for young people could improve the image of trade unions. In addition, according to the surveyed, young people today are not interested in structures, but rather loose movements. This shows political choices. The narrative should change so that it is more positive and not contesting. It is important to show a positive story to young people. This corresponds to Kahman's (2002) claim that transforming trade unions into social movements can attract young people and thus contribute to the political and organizational revitalization of the trade union movement.

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