

Youth structures in six European trade union federations: a short overview

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Introduction: a renewed élan

This short contribution focuses on the structures for organizing and representing young workers in six European trade union federations (ETUFs); the Youth Committee of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) is not included here.¹ The reason for this is that recently – in other words, since the Great Recession – trade union youth structures have stepped up their efforts, internally and externally, to promote the interests and needs of young workers. Although some of the predecessors of those ETUFs, like the European Metal Federation, had youth structures in place (Platzer and Müller, 2011), at least two motives in particular underlie the reinforcement of existing structures or the establishment of new ones. First of all, the increased prominence of those youth structures should be seen in light of the widespread growth in youth unemployment in Europe and European Commission initiatives, such as the Youth Guarantee, to tackle this problem. Secondly, there seems to be a rising awareness within the ETUFs about the need to increase union membership, particularly among young workers, who are frequently employed on non-standard, often precarious employment contracts.

Based on union documents this short article analyses and discusses in detail these underlying reasons for reinforcing and establishing youth structures within the ETUFs by focusing on their different organizational outcomes and statutory positions; their membership composition and size; and their goals and current activities. Regarding their financial resources, it is sufficient to mention here that youth structures are dependent mainly on external (project-)based funding by the European Union, particularly with regard to membership-related activities.

Differences in organizational structure and statutory positions

The youth structures in the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers/Fédération Européenne des Travailleurs du Bâtiment et du Bois (EFBWW/FETBB), the European Federation of Public Service Union (EPSU) and UNI Europa are marked by their fairly informal character or ad-hoc character in the case of IndustriAll. With the exception of UNI Europa, they currently do not have a recognized position in the Federations' decision-making structures nor do they have a fully dedicated budget. In terms of staff, a policy officer, besides other responsibilities, is responsible as liaison person for the coordination of youth activities within union structures and between ETUFs; this is also the case for the ETUFs with formal youth structures. Thus, within the EFBWW/FETBB, the ad hoc 'working group youth', established in 2011, still looks fairly

1 To our knowledge, the European Arts and Entertainment Alliance, the European Confederation of Police, the European Federation of Journalists and the European Trade Union Committee for Education have so far not established any (formal) youth structures.

embryonic, as this youth body has no official name. The same accounts for the informal network. Nevertheless, those undeveloped youth structures do not hold EFBWW/FETBB back from being involved in research projects or events organized for young trade unionists. The EFBWW/FETBB plans to strengthen its youth structures at its general assembly in November 2015. As for EPSU, this federation, after its eighth congress in 2009, set up an informal network in 2011 and a virtual network by means of a 'secret' closed Facebook Group in 2012. At its recent congress, in 2014, EPSU decided to allocate a specific budget for young workers' activities and to establish a special structure for them, which would imply a formalization of its youth structures.²

In the case of IndustriAll and UNI Europa, the affiliated trade unions nominate the members and substitutes of the respective youth bodies of those Federations. In IndustriAll, participants in the first conference on young workers in industry in 2012 and a similar seminar the following year, co-organized by the Education Department of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), laid the ground for establishing an informal and virtual network coordinated by a Work Group – the latter via a closed Facebook Group. The Work Group has an ad-hoc character as it has been established since 2012 until the next IndustriAll congress in 2016. It is expected that a formal youth committee will replace this Work Group then. Similarly, in UNI Europa, a Steering Group, elected every two years, has been responsible for assisting an informal network since 2008. The Steering Group and the network have a virtual component by means of a closed Facebook Group and Facebook Like Page called 'UNI Europa Youth', respectively. UNI Europa Youth is also active on Twitter and has distributed a newsletter via a mailing list since 2014. Both are used to distribute information and announce activities to network members. The youth structures of UNI Europa are rather hybrid in terms of their status within the decision-making structures. On the one hand, the president of the Steering Group is a full-member of the Executive Committee and Management Committee of UNI Europa with the right to vote. On the other hand, although the Steering Group meets regularly, it does so only in a rather informal way. Also, the Group is still striving to bring forward more representation of young people in all decision-making structures of UNI Europa. Those are all reasons, together with the informal character of the network, to classify the UNI Europa youth structures as informal.

Whereas some of the youth structures in the above-mentioned ETUFs look, at least on paper, fairly weak, two other ETUFs have recently reinforced their youth structures (see Table 1 for an overview). The European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) and the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT) both officially established a statutory Youth Committee in 2013. Within EFFAT, the Youth Committee is the result of a gradual process started in 2011 with a working group on trade union youth work. The Committee is now one of the Federation's constitutional committees; its members represent the Committee with the right to vote at meetings of the EFFAT Management Committee and Executive Committee. Also, EFFAT has established a virtual network by means of a Facebook Like Page.

Finally, in the case of the ETF, the Youth Committee is the result of a gradual process which started in 2010 with the two-year 'Transunion' project, a project co-funded by the European Commission that involved acquiring knowledge and developing the capacity-building of young workers in the transport sector, as one of the three pillars of the project.³ The 'Transunion' project,

2 The fact that this formalization takes a while could be attributed to different views among the network members; some of them perceived a youth network as being less rigid and more flexible than a formal structure such as a youth committee.

3 The other pillars concerned women in the transport sector and the trade unions' contribution to making this sector more ecologically sustainable.

Table 1. The presence of youth structures in six ETUFs.

	Youth network		Youth body	
	Virtual	(In)formal	Ad-hoc or informal	Formal
EFBWW/FETBB		<i>'working group youth'</i>	<i>'working group youth'</i>	
EFFAT	EFFAT Youth Committee ^a			EFFAT Youth Committee
EPSU	<i>Unknown (secret)</i>	EPSU Youth Network		
ETF	ETF Social Network ^b	ETF Youth Network		ETF Youth Committee
IndustriAll	IndustriAll Youth FB Group	Youth Network	Work Group	
UNI Europa	UNI Europa Youth ^c ; Youth Steering Group	UNI Europa Youth	Steering Group	

^a See <https://www.facebook.com/pages/EFFAT-Youth-Committee/497762323671097>

^b See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/etfyouth/>

^c See <https://www.facebook.com/unieuropayouth>

Source: Author's own classification.

involving a survey distributed among ETF affiliates to identify the key challenges for trade unions in relation to young workers in the different transport subsectors, led to the first ETF Young Transport Workers conference in 2012. The conference outcomes comprised an action plan and specific targets for ETF affiliates to give more voice to young workers as well as the formation of an ETF Young Workers Steering Committee and of an informal network consisting (mainly) of young unionists who participated in the two preparatory seminars and the conference. The ETF also initiated a virtual network via a closed Facebook Group in 2011. The follow-up project 'Transunion Youth', in 2013, paved the way for the establishment of a formal ETF Youth Committee. Four ETF Youth Committee members have seats on the Executive Committee, with the right to put forward proposals and resolutions, and members also have one seat on the Management Committee and, interestingly, also the longer-established Women's Committee.

Variation in membership composition and size

The membership composition of ETUF youth structures can vary. This also illustrates a functional differentiation within youth structures: whereas youth networks are intended to build and sustain network density by making young trade unionists active and connecting them by offering regular opportunities for exchanging information, good practices or (innovative) ideas and experiences across sectors and countries, youth committees in principal have a representative function vis-à-vis the ETUF (Vandaele, 2015). Thus the formal Youth Committees of the EFFAT⁴ and ETF⁵ have 22 and 19 members, respectively, and both take regional balances into account in their membership composition; the ETF also considers industrial and gender balances. Similar to the formal youth

4 Members should not be older than 34 years; actively participating in youth work in their trade union; and have sufficient English language skills.

5 Members should be aged below 35 years.

committees, the informal youth bodies of EFBWW/FETBB, IndustriAll and UNI Europa also consist of a small group of young unionists, reflecting regional balances and seeking gender balances. The (in)formal youth networks generally have a less regionally balanced composition. This reflects their organic development: they consist mainly of young unionists who have attended (recent) meetings, seminars or workshops focusing on youth issues in cities across Europe. The virtual networks overlap to a certain extent with informal youth networks.

Goals and current activities

Whereas three youth structures⁶ have agreed on a formal work programme or action plan, a number of common goals could nevertheless be identified across all youth structures within the six ETUFs, based on their activities or on other union documents. Thus, in this section the main youth structures' aims and activities will be analysed within a goal typology framework, although without assessing the youth structures' impact in terms of goal advancement. Similar to women's groups in trade unions (Parker, 2006), youth structure objectives are manifold and sometimes overlap: they may have a procedural, institutional or substantive character.

First, concerning procedural aims, although this is not always explicitly articulated, the reinforcement of youth structures within ETUFs could be identified, aimed at amplifying young workers' voices at European level. For instance, it is no coincidence that the very first meeting of the EFFAT Youth Committee in 2013 was held under the banner 'Watch out, we're coming'. Accordingly, at the fourth EFFAT Congress in 2014 one of the sessions, dedicated to youth employment issues, was prepared and led by its Youth Committee members, showing its relevance for the ETUF. Also, UNI Europa initiated a Twitter-campaign under the hashtag '#includingyouth14' at the UNI Global Congress in 2014, promoting an increase in the number of young delegates at (international) trade union congresses.

Similarly, apart from those procedural aims *within* ETUFs, youth structures are also active in advancing the presence of young trade unionists and the status of youth structures in the trade unions affiliated to ETUFs. Basically, mutual knowledge of youth structures in trade unions is stimulated via education and training in various events, seminars, summer or winter schools and conferences, often in collaboration with the Education Department of the ETUI. Recently, the youth structures of the six ETUFs concerned also set up a joint EU-funded two-year project entitled 'Empowering the integration of younger workers in European Metal, Transport, Food, Services, Construction and Wood' to support the efforts of national trade unions to recruit young workers, integrate them into their structures and involve them in their decision-making processes. A joint conference on these topics, involving 150 young trade unionists, was held in May 2015, to be followed by four regional seminars in 2016 and the publication of a practical guide. While activities involving transnational learning have a voluntary character, the EFFAT Youth Committee went a step further by asking for a signed pledge in which all EFFAT members commit themselves to better integrating young people in day-to-day trade union work, rather than youth-specific work alone, and to launching at least one initiative to attract more young members. The EFFAT Youth Committee will monitor the practical implementation of this pledge via its representation in the Executive Committee.

Secondly, in terms of institutional goals, one of the main priorities of youth structures is to make trade unions more attractive and better known among young workers and to organize those

⁶ Those are EFFAT and ETF, not coincidentally the two ETUFs with a formal Youth Committee, and UNI Europa.

workers. This is also a key objective of the recent campaign entitled ‘Enough of their crisis – back to our future’, set up by the six ETUFs since March 2014 and run by their respective youth structures. Again, as with procedural goals, the youth structures’ role here is mainly confined to exchanging experiences, best practices or ideas and capacity-building for engaging the affiliated trade unions to step up their recruiting drives, particularly in relation to young workers. In addition, the ETF Youth Committee also intends to set up its own young workers campaign with the aim of attracting more young workers to both the trade unions and the transport sector. Indeed, one of the main obstacles identified by the youth structures is the ‘traditional image and perception’ of trade unions that non-unionized young workers hold.

Finally, regarding substantive goals, youth unemployment is by far the number-one work priority for all youth structures of the six ETUFs; they have joined forces around this goal via the aforementioned ‘Enough of their crisis – back to our future’ campaign. At a UNI Europa Youth seminar in March 2014 they kicked off this campaign with a flash-mob in the run-up to the European elections. Besides a brochure, the campaign is also virtually present via its own website,⁷ campaign videos, a Facebook Like Page and a Twitter account. However, based on the fairly limited number of views, likes and followers, it seems that young trade unionists across Europe have scarcely been reached. Even so, the campaign is aimed principally at European decision-making bodies to put young people and their precarious position in the labour market and especially youth unemployment high on their agenda. So far, this has resulted in presentations of the campaign at various events: a public hearing in the European Parliament to debate youth issues with (young) MEPs; a joint letter of the ETUC and the six ETUFs sent to European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs Marianne Thyssen asking for the prioritizing of an effective youth employment policy in Europe; and public support for the campaign from one MEP. As the issue of youth unemployment is of cross-sectorial nature, it is worth mentioning here that the campaign has also initiated a rising coordination and dynamic, entailing trust-building, with the long-established Youth Committee of the ETUC. Since 2014, the youth structures of the ETUFs have one representative within the ETUC Youth Committee Bureau.

Furthermore, a number of other substantive goals could be discerned that are either specifically concerned with young workers or are of a more general nature. The youth structures’ aims focus on young workers’ specific problems across Europe, for instance, with a view to abolishing zero-hour contracts, ending unpaid internship schemes and pushing for equal access to vocational (ongoing) training for young workers. In other words, the youth structures also aim to promote the quality of jobs for young workers. Other aims are related more to general sector-specific issues, such as promoting gender equality in the traditionally male-dominated transport sector, ensuring a social transition towards a more environmentally friendly and sustainable transport sector or increasing the construction sector’s attractiveness to young workers. Thus, the latter, more general, substantive goals, together with fostering cross-border and inter-generational solidarity, contribute to the pursuit of a broader trade union agenda; this is not directed solely towards workplace issues.

Conclusion: increased horizontal coordination

From historical accounts about national trade unions, intensifying youth unemployment seems to be a recurrent reason for taking (new) initiatives towards young workers. Similarly, the rise in youth unemployment in most European countries has meant not only a heightened engagement

7 See <http://www.back2ourfuture.org/>

with young people on the part of the six ETUFs – at least in terms of substantive goals – but also more coordination between them on issues facing young workers, as most of these issues transcend not only national but also sectoral borders. Their youth structures are involved positively in this increased horizontal coordination, particularly via the ‘Enough of their crisis – back to our future’ campaign. The substantive objective of this campaign – to put youth unemployment higher on the European agenda – fits into the traditional function of transnational trade unions, namely lobbying the European decision-making institutions. However, whether this campaign will also satisfy its institutional aim – better organization of young workers – remains to be seen. The same applies to the main youth structure procedural goal, to strengthen trade unions’ deliberative vitality with regard to young workers (Vandaele, 2015), which depends on the effective commitment of the affiliated national trade unions. Here, however, the ETUFs could set an example themselves as there is still (significant) room for improving this deliberative vitality in relation to young workers within most of them.

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