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The voiceless generation: The fight for progressive values within European trade unions

The study explores how Millennial union officials assess their unions' engagement with young people. The focus is on unions' image, agenda, governance, and use of social media. It builds on a qualitative research framework. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used as the principal method of inquiry. The results indicate that while there is a growing realisation of the need to broaden union agendas in order to better appeal to young people, only a few unions have actually started to pay attention to progressive causes. Opinions were also divided on whether younger unionists were given a greater say in decision-making. Likewise, while some interviewees positively assessed their unions' embrace of social media, others were more critical. The paper contributes to the literature on the relationship between unions and young workers, while at the same time also providing insights into the debate on union revitalisation.

Keywords: trade unions, youth, progressive values, Europe

JEL classification: A13, J15, J51, L31

Introduction

It is beyond significant debate that, since the 1980s, humanity has been witnessing the decline of trade unions [Beaumont, 1987]. This, in turn, has not only ignited discussions about their revitalisation [Gumbrell-McCormick, Hyman, 2013; Ibsen, Tapia, 2017; Holgate et al., 2018; Kelly, 2018; Simms et al., 2019] but has also drawn particular attention to youth unionisation [Waddington, Kerr, 2002]. This is especially relevant given that trade unions have long maintained a strained relationship with younger workers [Hodder, 2015]. As a result, both scholars and union practitioners have undertaken numerous initiatives to engage younger generations in union activities [Lorenzini, 2016; Hodder, Houghton, 2020; Smith, Duxbury, 2020].

The literature points to three primary reasons for the low unionisation rates among Generation Z and Millennials: the characteristics of the labour market, issues

related to young people's attitudes, and the inadequacy of union responses to these challenges [Waddington, Kerr, 2002]. Additionally, many service-sector firms tend to offer part-time employment and temporary or contract-based jobs, which are not conducive to unionisation [Heery et al., 2004; Tailby, Pollert, 2011; Polkowska, 2021].

Against this backdrop, the present study – based on semi-structured interviews with 16 young trade union activists from across Europe – aims to assess how they perceive their unions' engagement with young people. It contributes to the extensive body of literature on the relationship between trade unions and youth [Freeman, Diamond, 2003; Tailby, Pollert, 2011; Castiglioni, 2012; Vandaele, 2012, 2015, 2018; Lorenzini, 2016; Cha et al., 2019; Hodder, Houghton, 2020]. Given the connection between youth unionisation and ongoing efforts to reverse the decline of trade unions, this research also carries implications for the broader debate on revitalisation [Gumbrell-McCormick, Hyman, 2013; Ibsen, Tapia, 2017; Holgate et al., 2018; Kelly, 2018; Simms et al., 2019]. Considering young people's lifestyle habits and the potential of digital technologies, it places particular emphasis on unions' engagement through social media [Hodder, Houghton, 2015, 2020; Carneiro, Costa, 2020; Wood, 2020; Houghton, Hodder, 2021]. The inclusion of data from multiple European countries adds depth to this study, potentially offering crucial insights into issues that are critical for the future of the labour movement.

1. Literature overview

In response to disadvantageous changes, trade unions have sought to restore their position autonomously, notably through the implementation of revitalisation strategies [Ibsen, Tapia, 2017; Kelly, 2018]. In this context, the generational gap in unionisation between younger and older workers has once again emerged as a key focus. Indeed, although young workers have borne a significant share of the structural transformations leading to precarious employment and poor working conditions, they are less likely than their older colleagues to be union members [Hodder, 2015]. Notably, young people tend to be employed in sectors where part-time work and freelance contracts are quite common. Organizing such workers is not only particularly challenging [Polkowska, 2021; Tailby, Pollert, 2011], but also the traditional "workplace-based unionisation" model may be ill-suited for many of them [Heery et al., 2004, p. 20].

In practice, this means that when faced with adverse conditions in a non-unionised workplace, young workers are confronted with the choice of either leaving or voicing their concerns independently [Hirschman, 1970], and they often ultimately opt to leave. As a result, they develop weak attachments to their workplaces, which hinders the formation of personal bonds and, most importantly,

a sense of community with colleagues – a factor that naturally predisposes individuals to union membership [Castiglioni, 2012]. Given that Generation Z and Millennials primarily interact with non-unionised workers, they are unlikely to encounter trade unions early in their careers, making it possible that they may never become union members at all [Carter, 2006].

In this context, it has been suggested that young people exhibit low unionisation rates because they lack knowledge about what unions are – “I don’t know what a TU [trade union] is” [Lorenzini, 2016, p. 22], or because they hold stereotypes portraying unions as outdated organisations for older manual labourers uninterested in youth issues [Zientara et al., 2021].

All of this underscores the importance of education (awareness-raising) and promotion. To this end, European trade unions have, in recent years, implemented several initiatives specifically targeting young people [Lorenzini, 2016; Smith, Duxbury, 2020]. These initiatives include: (1) organizing meetings and debates in schools and universities; (2) participating in events (such as concerts and festivals) where young union members can engage with their peers and discuss union membership; (3) conducting workplace visits in sectors with a high concentration of young employees, all while promoting the idea that unions seek to protect the rights and interests of all workers; and (4) developing mobile applications and posting video content on social media platforms to introduce the fundamentals of union representation and to communicate updates, events, and campaigns.

It is argued that because Generation Z and Millennials are emotionally attached to values such as equality, participation, and resistance – qualities inherently supported by social media – the question arises as to how unions intend to attract young workers if they continue to be perceived as organisations dominated by older, male leaders committed to a centralised, top-down management style. In other words, it is difficult to envision unions increasing their appeal to young people without granting them a greater voice in decision-making and facilitating their advancement within union hierarchies. Indeed, evidence suggests that young union members are not only underrepresented at higher levels of most unions but also have little influence over youth-related policies [Lorenzini, 2016]. This aspect is crucial, as it pertains to values that are particularly important to Generation Z. Some scholars argue that beyond typical socio-economic concerns (e.g., unstable livelihoods), progressive post-material issues – such as non-discrimination, equal opportunities and environmental responsibility – serve as strong motivators for young people to engage in collective action [Gursoy et al. 2013].

It is now widely recognised that the Internet and social media “offer trade unions opportunities to expand their membership base and improve levels of activism and mobilisation” [Houghton, Hodder, 2021, p. 220]. This reflects the broader perspective that, in contemporary society, the battle for individuals’ hearts

and minds – whether as consumers, voters, employees, or organisational members – increasingly takes place online. Undoubtedly, this trend was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which personal relationship-building was virtually impossible and was replaced by online interactions.

Broadly speaking, digital technology (i.e., websites, social media platforms, and mobile applications) can aid in the revitalisation of unions in multiple ways. First, the internet and social media provide “an opportunity to significantly scale up organizing campaigns” [Simms et al., 2019, p. 338]. Second, they can enhance mobilisation and encourage worker engagement. For example, Wood [2020] demonstrates how McDonald’s employees mobilised after watching relevant content (e.g., videos) posted on Facebook and YouTube. Third, these digital tools can improve communication with the general public, as well as with current and potential union members [Carneiro, Costa, 2020; Smith, Duxbury, 2020; Houghton, Hodder, 2021; Uba, Jansson, 2021]. Fourth, the internet and social media can serve as valuable recruitment tools for attracting new members [Houghton, Hodder, 2021]. Simultaneously, they can foster a sense of collective identity and cohesion among a heterogeneous workforce by exposing and publicizing instances of injustice and exploitation, as well as providing legal and emotional support to temporary workers and self-employed contractors – an issue highly relevant to my line of argumentation. Finally, and equally importantly, these tools can help trade unions exert influence on internal policy and public debate [Uba, Jansson, 2021].

One of the challenges, however, is that relatively few Internet users visit union websites, which also “tend to present union identity in a singular image” [Hodder, Houghton, 2020, p. 42]. Notably, some research indicates that unions lean toward an outdated, “one-way” communication model [Carneiro, Costa, 2020]. In practice, this means that it can be difficult to interact and exchange opinions and experiences on some unions’ social media pages (such as Facebook), even when interactive tools are available, resulting in a unidirectional flow of communication. In this sense, Lorenzini asserts that “it is important that [...] communication is not one-sided and that users’ questions, comments, or requests are responded to” [Lorenzini, 2016, p. 21]. Consequently, it appears that interaction and dialogue between unions and the public (i.e., current and potential members) leave much to be desired, with negative implications for internal communication, marketing and recruitment [see Hodder, Houghton, 2015, 2020; Carneiro, Costa, 2020]. However, some studies suggest that “trade unions seem to use social media in an engaging way” [Houghton, Hodder, 2021, p. 236].

All of these factors have far-reaching implications, as interaction – embodying a “two-way” communication model – helps individuals familiarise themselves with and better understand union identity [Houghton, Hodder, 2021]. It is plausible that engaging with union representatives on Facebook or Twitter enhances this

understanding. Naturally, one could argue that to fully grasp union identity, which is by no means static [Hyman, 1994], it is not sufficient to rely solely on social media.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to determine how Millennial trade union representatives from across Europe evaluate their unions' engagement with young people. In doing so, it seeks to address the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do Millennial representatives perceive the way trade unions are viewed by young people?
- RQ2: How do they assess their unions' efforts to expand their agendas and make their governance systems more inclusive and participatory?
- RQ3: How do they evaluate the use of social media by trade unions for communication, promotion, and recruitment?

2. Methodology

This study is grounded in a qualitative research framework. As the primary research method, I employed semi-structured qualitative interviews [Rubin, Rubin, 1995]. This technique is recommended when a research project, as in this case, has a "fairly clear focus" [Bryman, Bell, 2007, p. 479]. The interviews included open-ended questions concerning young leaders' perspectives on their unions' engagement with youth (agendas/programs, the status of young union members, the use of social media, communication, advertising and recruitment) (Table 1).

The interviews were conducted via video link and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interview data were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed. A consistent transcription format was applied to enhance the comparability of responses, thereby facilitating both a comprehensive understanding and an in-depth analysis of the data [King, Horrocks, 2010].

Subsequently, I conducted a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, a research technique used to identify categories for analysis through a predefined coding scheme [Braun, Clarke, 2006]. This process was carried out using qualitative coding in Nvivo 12, which entails "[...] identifying segments of data as relating to or exemplifying a broader idea, instance, theme, or category" [Lewins, Silver, 2007, p. 81]. Following Hay's [2005] recommendations, the process consisted of two stages: (1) basic coding, aimed at recognizing general themes, and (2) in-depth, interpretative coding, used to identify and analyse more specific themes and emerging patterns. These were then reviewed, linked to the research questions and existing literature, and categorised into key themes [Miles, Huberman, 1994].

Table 1. Interviewee characteristics

No.	Sex	Age	Country	Position
1	F	32	Spain	Representative of the Trade Union Youth Committee
2	F	33	Bulgaria	Junior Officer
3	F	33	Slovenia	Representative of the Trade Union Youth Committee
4	M	38	Malta	Union President
5	F	31	France	Junior Officer
6	M	32	Slovakia	Union President
7	F	31	Sweden	Representative of the Trade Union Youth Committee
8	M	38	Italy	Junior Officer
9	M	34	Poland	Representative of the Trade Union Youth Committee
10	F	35	Romania	Representative of the Trade Union Youth Committee
11	F	32	Lithuania	Representative of the Trade Union Youth Committee
12	F	30	Sweden	Junior Officer
13	F	36	Poland	Representative of the Trade Union Youth Committee
14	M	35	Malta	Junior Officer
15	M	34	Finland	Representative of the Trade Union Youth Committee
16	F	31	Ukraine	Junior Officer

Source: Own contribution.

Most importantly, interviewees were recruited through personal contacts. This was made possible by an acquaintance with a high-ranking youth representative whose union is affiliated with the European Trade Union Confederation, allowing me to establish connections with Millennial union leaders.

3. Results

Most interviewees reported an observation that, after experiencing dramatic losses in influence and membership in recent years, trade unions have declined in popularity and, more concerning, face a significant image problem. In some regions, union members are perceived as “enemies” (Interviewee #1), or simply as “strikers” (Interviewee #2) and troublemakers. In certain countries (e.g., Spain), the general public views unions as corrupt and lacking transparency. However,

some dissenting voices argued that trade unions have a “positive” (Interviewees #4 and #8) or “modern” (Interviewee #6) image.

When asked specifically about the perception and attitude of young people toward trade unions, most interviewees acknowledged that Generation Z and Millennials tend to view unions in a negative light. As could have been expected a priori, many stereotypes portraying trade unions as “old-fashioned” organisations for older, blue-collar workers “with moustaches” (Interviewee #5) were echoed. These findings resonate with previous observations in the literature on youth unionisation [Hodder, 2015].

All interviewees emphasised the importance of education and raising awareness among young people (both in schools and universities), highlighting that the core issue is a lack of understanding of what trade unions actually are [Zientara et al., 2021]. In this sense, only a minority believed that Generation Z and Millennials were entirely unaware of the existence of unions per se – “I don’t know what a trade union is” (e.g., Interviewee #10). From a certain perspective, this finding aligns with the notion that young workers are “blank slates” who can be shaped into union members if the principles of the labour movement are clearly and persuasively explained to them [Freeman, Diamond, 2003]. Some representatives also pointed to the diversity of union identities (i.e., numerous organisations pursuing different goals), which could cause confusion and discourage young people from joining (Interviewee #5).

Nevertheless, all interviewees unanimously agreed that it is absolutely essential for unions to support the rights and interests of young workers. As Interviewee #8 put it: “We strive to protect and secure the rights of precarious and atypical workers.” This is particularly noteworthy given that unions have long tended to “favour the relatively privileged at the expense of the most precarious” [Hyman, 1999, p. 104]. It is also worth mentioning that a Slovenian trade union was specifically established “for young people and young workers in precarious employment” (Interviewee #3), making it stand out among its European counterparts [see Lorenzini, 2016, p. 29].

When asked about efforts to expand and modernise their agendas to better appeal to Generation Z and Millennials, many interviewees noted that their unions remained primarily focused on traditional issues (such as wages and working conditions). However, there was a growing awareness of gender equality, environmental protection, and possibly minority rights. Some representatives, however, indicated that this was not the case in their organisations. As Interviewee #4 stated, “In our trade union, we do not generally engage with other issues, such as ecology or, for example, women’s rights.” The most categorical response came from the Finnish representative (Interviewee #15): “The union’s agenda is non-negotiable.” Another interviewee rejected any modifications to the agenda

of traditional trade unions altogether (Interviewee #14). That said, it was evident that awareness was emerging among most union leaders that making workplaces more inclusive for women, LGBTQ+ individuals and environmentally conscious workers could be instrumental in attracting young employees.

When specifically asked about their unions' interactions with social media audiences [Carneiro, Costa, 2020; Houghton, Hodder, 2021], opinions were again divided. While some argued that their unions used social media in an engaging and interactive manner (Interviewees #11 and #13), others were more critical of the quality and extent of interactions (Interviewees #12 and #16). All in all, it would be difficult to use this mixed evidence as an argument for or against the claim that trade unions are not fully utilizing social media's potential [Carneiro, Costa, 2020]. However, one thing is certain: there is now no doubt that unions must leverage social media to attract younger workers. As Interviewee #4 stated, "I think young trade unionists should emphasise that social media is the way forward. And this is the new battleground."

Several interviewees also highlighted that, in formulating their messages and expressing their identity, unions should use value-laden terms, particularly "equality" and "responsibility". These were perceived as carrying positive connotations and as particularly appealing to Generation Z and Millennials. In contrast, less emphasis was placed on using words such as "partnership" and "collaboration". However, it is worth noting that the concept of partnership was not entirely dismissed, as evidenced by the following quote: "In fact, the most important thing would be to make young people understand that joining a union means they should cooperate with employers, work together and form a team to improve the quality of work and deliver better results for employers" (Interviewee #9).

Finally, most interviewees also agreed that young trade unionists should be entrusted with the responsibility of leading marketing and recruitment campaigns, based on the principle that the best strategy is one where "young people talk to young people" (Interviewee #5).

4. Discussion

A key tension emerging from the study is the divide between unions that recognise the importance of expanding their agendas to include issues such as gender equality, environmental sustainability, and minority rights, and those that remain focused solely on traditional labour concerns such as wages and working conditions. While some union representatives saw the inclusion of broader social justice issues as a necessary step toward attracting younger members, others were resistant, emphasizing that their core priorities should remain unchanged. This reflects

previous discussions on the feasibility of programmatic adaptation in unions representing more traditional labour sectors [Hyman, 1999; Lorenzini, 2016].

Moreover, the findings highlight the double-edged nature of social media as a tool for union engagement. While some respondents noted its effectiveness in communication and recruitment, others remained sceptical about its actual impact. This supports previous research suggesting that although social media is essential for modern union strategies, it must be complemented by direct engagement and traditional organizing efforts [Carneiro, Costa, 2020; Houghton, Hodder, 2021]. The notion that “young people listen to other young people” was widely acknowledged by respondents, reinforcing the idea that peer-to-peer mobilisation is one of the most effective strategies for union renewal [Freeman, Diamond, 2003]. Moving forward, unions must prioritise youth-led initiatives, ensuring that younger members play a central role in shaping and communicating the union’s mission.

5. Conclusions

These findings have significant implications for the debate on trade union revitalisation. Above all, they reinforce the view that increasing unions’ appeal to Generation Z and Millennials should be one of the labour movement’s primary priorities. Specifically, trade unions must do more to enhance their public image while simultaneously debunking myths and stereotypes associated with trade unionists. Whether the “modernisation” of union agendas and the incorporation of non-discriminatory labour rights would be feasible for certain blue-collar unions remains a contentious issue. However, there are reasons to believe that such an approach could help unions establish stronger connections with younger workers. Most importantly, it is becoming increasingly undeniable that, to achieve this goal, trade unions must ensure that gender equality – and particularly sustainable development – occupy a central place in their programs.

Given these considerations, unions should redouble their efforts in education and outreach, striving to maximise the potential of social media without necessarily abandoning traditional recruitment and organizing methods. This would involve adopting language that resonates with Generation Z and Millennials, as well as framing their messages differently by placing greater emphasis on values and the specific concerns and aspirations of young people. At the same time, intensifying efforts to involve young trade unionists in campaigns and recruitment initiatives appears essential, as they are best positioned to persuade their peers to join unions.

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