

Summary Report of Panel 14: Youth Engagement and the Future of Work

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Some of the common themes of this panel were engagement, transparency, structural reform, and precariousness, all centered on the unionization of young workers. Trade unions need to engage young people for three reasons; in order to represent the changing workforce, in order to survive, and in order to benefit from the diversity, activism and technological knowledge that young workers can contribute. Union rates among all workers (including young workers) are declining in almost all countries. In 2013, according to the French Ministry of Work, 11% of workers were union members and only 5% of workers between the ages 15 and 35.

It can be helpful to look at who are the young people who become active members of trade unions? Why do they unionize? How do they participate and innovate? Are young activists different from previous generations of activists? They are not so different from previous generations of unionists. Young workers in public administration and industrial sectors are more likely to unionize. As well, there is a link between qualification and unionism and those with part-time or temporary work are less likely to unionize. Workers who occupy a permanent position or full time job are more likely to join. In 2000, young workers were estimated to acquire a permanent position by the age of 22. Now it is 27. This could help to explain the low unionization among young people. In the 80s, more than 75% of workers between age 15 and 44 had permanent jobs. Now it is 46%.

IG Metall has been quite successful in gaining members in recent years. How have they managed to reverse the trend? By making a strategic choice to engage in active efforts to gain young members. This includes conferences, organizing, and youth empowerment at district level. At Automax, unionization was possible among young workers because of the presence of credible young people who were rooted in the workforce and were looking for a collective solution. In this case, the precariousness of the labour market was not a barrier to unionization; it was a condition that emboldened the young workers by making them feel as though they had nothing to lose. What they were actually fighting against were other working conditions and low pay, rather than precariousness.

In Belgium, union membership is around 55%. This could be explained by the institutionalization of unions or the employment benefits. The unions have also shown an ability to identify young activists and engage them. They do this partly by offering free membership to students. The challenge is engaging passive members. Encouraging members to perform unpaid union tasks can increase commitment. Part of this is allowing them to believe that their own contribution can make a difference, which is essential.

30% of young people who are unionized in Belgium believed they could make the union stronger.

Mainly unions need to demonstrate the added value of union membership, increase the organizational capacity of unions (more horizontal less vertical), stimulate new members quickly, increase the union network, and involve union by increasing unpaid union work. Local representatives play a key role in reaching out to young workers. They are able to communicate the benefits of unionization and form a connection between young workers and the union. Less than 1% of young people are unionized when there is no local representative at work while 6% are when there is a representative. A lot of people who are not trade union members, when asked why aren't you a member; say that is it because they have never been asked! Many young workers are not aware that there is a union in their workplace or area of work.

Structural changes also need to be made to the union. Part of the situation is that young people can organize without unionizing by electing representatives informally. This is preferable to the youth who feel that unions represent an old fashioned way of organizing at work and want more flexible commitment. The formation of a youth section, which would act as a representative body and form a formal horizontal network among young activists, could be helpful. Young people favour horizontal decision making processes to vertical. They want to know who is making the decisions, how, and why, and they want to feel as though they have a voice. Overall, the main challenges in recruiting young workers are awareness/outreach, structural preference, and concern about the actions of unions.

By engaging young workers, facilitating their activism, creating a more horizontal structure and allowing them to feel as though they are strengthening the union through unpaid union work, unions can increase their membership.