

Do the young still need trade unions and do unions want them?

Introduction

The continued strength and influence of trade unions depends upon their ability to attract young workers into membership and activism. If unions are to halt a spiral of decline - where falling membership erodes union credibility and, in turn, weakens the case for joining – then this means organising today's school leavers in greater numbers than their older workmates. With very few exceptions, this is the challenge in industrialised countries worldwide and, in response to this crisis, unions have gone through an period of sustained introspection and innovation (Hodder and Kretsos, 2015).

So, whilst unions are seemingly peripheral to the lives of many young people, the young are increasingly central to union revival. The employment open to young people is disproportionately low paid and insecure: grievances that might be expected to prompt membership. This has not happened and the reasons for this are the starting point for this chapter. The question addressed here is: to what extent are trade unions capable of recruiting and representing young workers?

It now seems self-evident that unions should prioritise attracting new young members, yet just thirty years ago such a focus on young workers would have been unusual. The question becomes an urgent one at a time when prospects for decent work, decent pay and employment security seem particularly bleak for current school-leavers. Rising unemployment in many parts of the world is accompanied by the dismantling of employment protections in the name of labour market 'flexibility' and 'austerity' cuts in funding that often disproportionately affect the young. It can be argued that the inter-generational transmission of opportunity has been disrupted. In the absence of effective resistance to such growing age-related inequality, the danger is of generational warfare as young and old compete for jobs and funding: a counterproductive response, since the worsening of conditions for any age group inevitably affects the young in their turn.

After setting out the extent of the problem, this chapter will contrast competing ideas on the causes and consequences of decline and then go on discuss proposed responses. It will ask the following questions. Why are young workers less likely to be members of trade unions? Does this really matter? And what, if anything, can trade unions do about it? The discussion here will centre on the UK, but it is important first to consider the broader picture and the reasons why this debate has been more prominent in some countries than others. After all, union decline is an almost universal phenomenon and while it has been dramatic in the UK, it has been catastrophic in many other countries. The result is that the young are increasingly not represented in the workplace, nor covered by collective bargaining.

The time series of union decline in the UK conventionally takes 1979 as the starting point. This marks the point when a combination of unemployment, the dismantling of highly unionised industries and restrictive labour law halted decades of post-war growth. In a similar way, changing fortunes for unions in other countries have their watershed years when the rules of the game changed. Membership has fallen furthest and fastest in the economies of the former Soviet bloc, where the taint of party control

has had a lasting legacy in into the 21st century. Rather than providing an independent voice for workers in confronting the interests of the state as employer, the prescribed role for unions in state-socialist countries was as a ‘transmission belt’ for management - little more than an arm of workplace HR management. Post-1989, with the end of compulsory membership, union density plummeted and has not recovered. Even in Poland, where Solidarność was founded in 1980 precisely to reject this quiescent role, membership density now stands at about 10% (Eurofound, 2013) and young people’s attitudes are still coloured by this earlier history and by union implication in subsequent market reform (Czarzasty *et al.*, 2014).

In western European countries trajectories of decline differ, but they also feature a reliance on state-sponsored roles. Post war social democracy gave unions both a political and a bureaucratic role in the welfare state, particularly in what became known as the ‘Ghent’ system. Similarly, European ‘social partnership’, epitomised by the Netherlands and Denmark, involved unions gaining a degree of influence in broader labour market policy, but to a large extent relinquishing any claims to contest management prerogative at the workplace. ‘Flexicurity’ – a product of this partnership approach – trades job protection for labour market support designed to boost employment. In favourable political conditions this approach brought dividends and it was possible to argue that union influence need not be based on membership density alone (Bryson *et al.*, 2011); other forms of influence and other forms of activism are possible. But without such a critical mass, and in a more hostile climate, unions have struggled to appear credible or relevant.

In the UK, whilst the steep decline of the 1980s and 1990s has steadied, prospects of reversing it seem distant. Membership density (essentially the proportion of union members to potential members) was just 25% in 2014, compared with 32.4% in 1995 (BIS, 2014). In the case of young workers the trend has been more marked: 11% of employees in the 20-24 age group were members in 2014, compared with 19.3% in 1995. This drop is far bigger than can be attributed to the ageing of the workforce in highly unionised sectors.

Although rates of decline have changed, it is notable that the rank order of membership density between countries has remained fairly stable (Bryson *et al.*, 2011). A period of economic disruption has set the path for subsequent generations. What is less clear is how this has affected young workers themselves. Should they be seen as potential members who are waiting for unions to take them seriously? Or are today’s young more individualistic and less amenable to trade unionism?

Why do young people join (or not join) unions?

Young workers are now less likely to be trade union members, but this fact can be interpreted in two very different ways. Is this primarily a matter of ‘demand’ or ‘supply’? In other words, do young people choose not to join, perhaps because they are less sympathetic with the aims and ethos of trade unionism? Or is it simply that they tend not to be given the opportunity to join? Research has consistently supported the latter view, i.e. that there is a continuing unmet demand for union representation (Tailby and Pollert, 2011), but for many young workers there is no union to join (Bryson and Gomez, 2005). There is some evidence to suggest that young workers are more, not less, positive about unions than are older groups (Freeman and Diamond,

2003). This is significant, because if demand has fallen – if young people are now see no benefit or no point in membership – then that would suggest long-term and possibly terminal decline. On the other hand, if young workers are just as willing as ever to become members when given the option, then this suggests more scope for union intervention (Mason and Bain, 1993).

Why should we expect age to make any difference? On the one hand, young workers might be expected to be more receptive to unions and more willing to become active or militant members. This view, associated with Shister (1953), also rests on the idea that the better educated young would be less willing to accept arbitrary workplace discipline. And precisely because of the type of employment open to them, young people tend to have less to lose and more to gain from making a stand. The growth of new forms of political activism in Europe in response to ‘austerity’ cuts might be taken as evidence of this. The problem is that reasoning can work to different conclusions. Workers who have no attachment to the job may be less likely to identify with the union or their colleagues (Cregan and Johnson, 1990). Temporary, part-time or zero-hour contracts give no opportunity to put down roots and any hopes of improvement tend to focus on movement between jobs, not within them. A better-educated workforce may set greater store by their ‘employability’ and trust their own ability to bargain as individuals, rather than recognising the need for strength through collective representation (Bain and Elsheikh, 1979).

It is now normal for young people’s first experience of work to be in a non-unionised environment. While the public sector workforce is 54% unionised, the figure for the private sector is 14%. 70% of members are now in workplaces with more than fifty employees. However, aggregate figures mask the almost complete disappearance of union organisation from small private sector workplaces. Young workers are disproportionately to be found in those sectors, such as retail and hospitality, where unions have struggled for some time to maintain a presence (ONS, 2012). Within these sectors, the work available to the young tends to be in what are termed ‘elementary occupations’. In essence, the employment opportunities to the young is in areas where a number of factors – length of contract, career structure, small workplaces, as well as anti-union employers – make unionisation difficult.

On the other hand, these factors also make the benefits of membership more obvious. Typically this is insecure and poorly paid employment; even within the same category of employment, young workers are paid less than their elders (ONS, 2012). The union wage ‘premium’ (the additional pay associated with membership) although reduced over time, is now higher for the youngest workers (38% for the 16-24 group, compared with 13% for workers aged 25-34, BIS, 2014). Highly unionised economies are also those with the lowest income inequality for the workforce as a whole (Jaumotte and Buitron, 2015).

If young people need unions as much as ever, then perhaps unions themselves are the problem and therefore need to revise the way they present themselves to potential recruits. The benefits of trade unionism are not easily observed by an outsider, but are only appreciated after a workplace becomes unionised; membership is an ‘experience good’ (Bryson and Gunderson, 2004). The effective exclusion of unions from parts of the economy means that a growing number of young people have had no such experience. However, this does not rule out the possibility that young people themselves have changed. The lack of this formative influence may set attitudes for a

lifetime; Bryson and Gomez find that “‘never-membership’ had become “a common life event for the cohort of workers born after the mid-1960s, sharply distinguishing their transition to maturity from cohorts born only a decade or so earlier” (2005: 69).

A study of data from an earlier period suggests a rather more complex picture. In a re-analysis of survey data from the early 1960s, Williams and Quinn (2014) find pro-union views in the majority even among young workers in non-union workplaces. Aggregate density at this time was at least 43%, yet 41% of young respondents reported that their workplace was non-union. Most of those who had never been exposed to unions at work were nevertheless supportive and aware of the benefits. The study reveals multiple influences; information from family, or even foremen, appears to have played a bigger part than direct union communication.

On the other hand, most non-members identified in this study were employed in nominally unionised establishments and would already have been covered by collective bargaining arrangements, although many were unaware of this. Most were in favour of unions, and understood the logic of membership, but they had never been asked to join (Williams and Quinn, 2014).

The prevailing logic of unionisation in this study is an ‘instrumental’ one; ideological, or ‘principled’ non-members account for only a small minority. Unions are seen as useful organisations in so far as they are able to re-balance the relationship between employer and employee and deliver improvements in pay and working conditions. This assessment requires some knowledge of what unions do and, although this may be received second-hand, it ultimately depends on the opportunity to see unions at work. The concentration of membership (unions are present in less than a quarter of workplaces) means this is an opportunity not now available to most.

This historical snapshot helps to highlight the difference between age, cohort and ‘generation’ effects. It is clear that youth non-membership is not new, even if it did not merit discussion at a time of rapid growth. If it is part of a relatively stable pattern of transition into the labour market, then it may not warrant concern; perhaps young people ‘grow into’ unionism later in life. But if collective values have to be learned, then the neglect of younger workers may lead to a pattern of ‘never-membership’ that is more resistant to intervention, and which is echoed and amplified in successive cohorts. Although there is little evidence of an ideological individualism, we should certainly take seriously the danger of non-membership becoming the common experience – and a defining feature - of a generation.

How have unions responded?

In grappling with the problem, unions have attempted to combine two broad approaches. First, they have recognised that young members have their own specific concerns and priorities that need to be recognised. Second, they have attempted to incorporate young members into the mainstream of union life; in other words to treat them as equals, not as a separate interest group. These are complementary strategies, but there are also tensions between them.

In parallel with unions in the USA and Australia, the UK TUC and subsequently a number of its affiliates took the decision in the late 1990s to refocus activity away

from the recruitment of passive members and instead aim to develop a culture of activism. In shorthand, this was the distinction between a ‘servicing model’, where members are encouraged to rely on paid staff and to think of the union as an insurance policy, and an ‘organising model’, where members are empowered to set their own agendas and act on them (Fiorito, 2004).

One element of the organising approach is recognition of membership diversity. Unions are democratic, collective organisations, but in order to draw workers into membership, they need to appeal to their own specific needs. Potential members are best recruited, it is argued, by people with whom they can identify (‘like recruits like’); in setting the bargaining agenda, unions need to evaluate the impact on groups of members facing discrimination or disadvantage (‘equality bargaining’); and, to achieve this, these groups need to be given their own voice within the organisation (Simms *et al.*, 2012).

The focus on the process of recruitment tends to assume that problem is “not primarily with the current trade union agenda, but with the people who deliver it”. (Waddington and Kerr, 2002: 314). In this sense, it is explicitly a matter of marketing, involving a range of promotion techniques. Learning from the ‘experience good model’, unions have also offered opportunities to ‘sample’ membership at low cost (Bailey *et al.*, 2010). Some of the techniques used by UK unions to reach new members are tried and tested, such as school visits. Others are purportedly more novel, such the use of ‘social media’ (Hodder, 2015). Unions clearly need to make use of all the tools available. In some cases this sort of contact outside the workplace may be the first exposure to the unions. However, they do not substitute for face-to-face interaction at work; in fact, active engagement via social media is unlikely without this being promoted via pre-existing workplace organisation and communication (Hodder, 2015).

The recognition that young people may have distinctive priorities is relatively new; the TUC established its Youth Conference in 1974 and affiliate unions’ representative structures were adapted from the 1990s to recognise young workers as a constituency with grievances and aspirations that are not necessarily those of the wider membership (mirroring similar self-organising arrangements for other under-represented groups). The definition of ‘young’ has been negotiable, with upper age limits of between 26 and 35. This raises questions about the coherence and ‘identity’ of such groups (30 could be seen as an old person’s definition of young), but it also reflects the fact that low pay and zero-hour contracts may be more than a rite of passage for the young; problems facing yesterday’s 18 year olds now affect a substantial part of the workforce.

Self-organisation has been a controversial initiative and has faced concerns about divisiveness and sectionalism. ‘The young’ are not a group or constituency in the same way as disabled or women members are. Young members become older ones and it is therefore important to make the distinction between ‘synchronous’ equality with fairness over the course of a working life (Beck and Williams, 2015). The test for union young members organisations is how well they succeed in incorporating the demands of a specific age group into the bargaining agenda as a whole.

Conclusions

Differences in union density between younger and older workers are probably inevitable and, if stable, have no impact on the sustainability of organisation. Many other organisations struggle to attract the young, from male voice choirs to the National Trust, yet reports of their deaths has been greatly exaggerated. If workers 'grow into' unionism, then the age at which they do so may not be crucial. The current debate has been triggered by the fear that, for large groups of workers, non-membership has become the norm and that unions are poorly equipped to tackle this.

There are clear reasons why the job of recruiting and retaining members is now more difficult. In many parts of the economy, unions have no foundation to build on. A young person beginning work in the private sector, particularly in smaller establishments relying on temporary labour, may never encounter a trade union. The problem for unions is essentially a 'chicken and egg' one; winning new members requires a credible union presence, and this requires recruitment.

Even accepting that most young workers are potential members, short-term, insecure employment, fragmented workplaces and employer resistance together make membership a harder sell. 'Selling' membership is certainly one part of an effective response, but no substitute for 'traditional' workplace organisation. At a time when young people in the UK and in many other countries are at the forefront of a new political radicalism, the question is how unions can benefit from this new enthusiasm.

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