

Youth Action Plan

Trade unions' future at risk? Building a future for trade unions through youth inclusion

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The world of work is going through unprecedented changes. Globalisation, digitalisation, decarbonisation and demographic change are all shaping the functioning of the economy, the industry and employment as a whole. The COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated these already existing transforming forces. In Europe, industry is a major contributor of wealth and job creation and it has proven to be resilient and innovative when facing the present disruptions. Workers and their trade unions are at the forefront of these multiple challenges. Trade unions need to innovate in order to be able to revitalise and renew, and ensure that they not only survive, but remain central in the future of work.

One of the most pressing challenges faced by trade unions in this context is the decline in union membership, particularly among young people. In the past four decades, the labour force has been characterised by less unionised young workers replacing older cohorts of unionised workers. Trade unions must reverse the decline and regain vitality as soon as possible, answering successfully to the transformations of the world of work. Action is urgently needed to prevent a worst-case scenario of many trade unions losing a majority of their active members due to retirement in the next 5-10 years.

The reasons why young people tend not to join unions compared to one or two generations ago are debatable. What must certainly be rejected is the claim that young people do not care about collective issues. Over the past years, young people have shown a great sense of social justice and willingness to contribute to the improvement of society. Their involvement in social movements, like *Fridays for Future*, *Black Lives Matter*, or *#MeToo*, has been remarkable. It is the trade unions' job to show that they continue to be the structure for young people and that young people do have a place in the movement.

With this Action Plan, industriAll Europe's Youth Working Group is ringing the alarm bell to trade union leaders. The message is clear: The future of unions depends on their capacity and willingness to revitalise. This means that unions need to innovate in order to become more in tune with current developments and more attractive to younger generations. Only in this way can trade unions ensure that they continue to represent a majority of workers across all age cohorts.

The Youth Action Plan includes two parts. The first part presents initial data which proves that unions can no longer ignore the problem of declining youth membership, as they will be at risk of either dying out or being replaced by other structures. The second part sets out recommendations on how to improve the situation. Different strategies must be urgently adopted to ensure renewal and revitalisation, such as: better youth inclusion, improving unions' image in society, strengthening legitimacy as the voice of all workers, innovating membership, empowerment and mobilising strategies of workers, and increasing cooperation with other social movements.

In her [2021 State of the Union address](#), European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, announced that the year 2022 will be dedicated to youth. This comes as a reaction to the worsening situation of young people on the labour market. IndustriAll Europe has already warned against the risk of losing the next generation of industrial workers (resolution in: [EN](#), [DE](#), [FR](#)). Our youth meeting before the 2021 Congress also highlighted that the difficulties of young people did not start with the COVID-19 crisis, but that they were aggravated by the economic and social consequences of the pandemic (access the report [here](#)).

2022 as the European Year of Youth is the right moment to tackle the problems that young workers and apprentices have been struggling against for the past years. IndustriAll Europe's Youth Working Group urges trade union leaders to join the efforts of many other actors that will make youth a priority in 2022. The Youth Working Group demands action and not just nice words. We expect our leaders to follow up on the recommendations in this Action Plan. The group's activity over the coming months will focus on implementing the Plan.

Ringling the alarm bells: Trade unions' future at risk?

In 2019, the ILO published "[Trade Unions in the balance](#)", which highlights alarming trends that warn in many cases against unions' extinction or replacement, unless urgent action is taken now. The figures below show the decline in young peoples' union membership in nearly all advanced industrial countries. The COVID-19 crisis has probably only accelerated these worrying trends.

Figure 5: Union density rates, 16-25 years

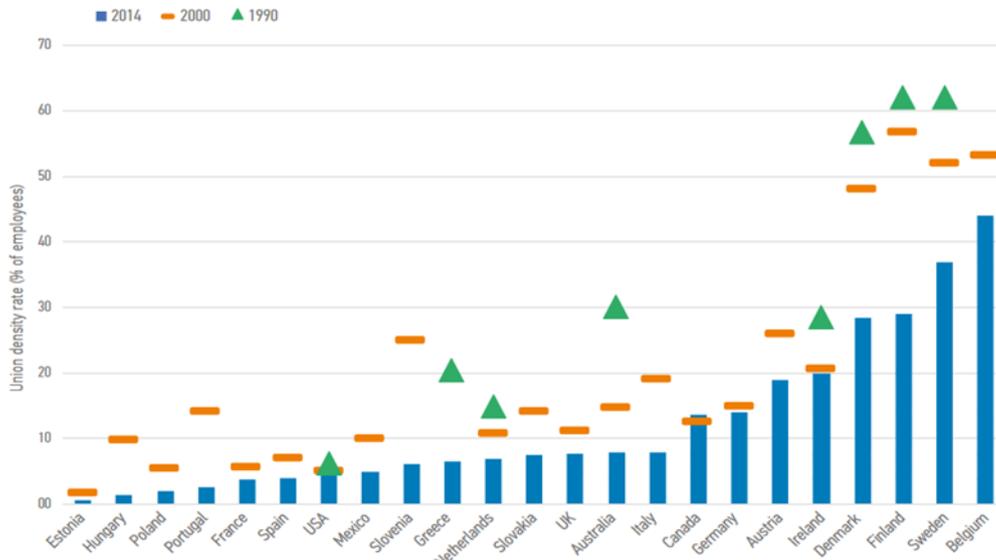


Figure 1. Union density rates of people aged between 16-25 years old. Density rates are calculated as the proportion of union members in employment – basically those who have found jobs. Hence, these percentages do not consider the large number of full-time students or the unemployed in this age group. In two-thirds of the countries shown in this figure, less than 8 per cent of young workers have joined a union.

Even more alarming is the gap in unionisation between young workers entering the labour market and older workers close to retirement. This gap is larger than ever.

Figure 6: Union density rates of workers entering and leaving the labour market, 2014

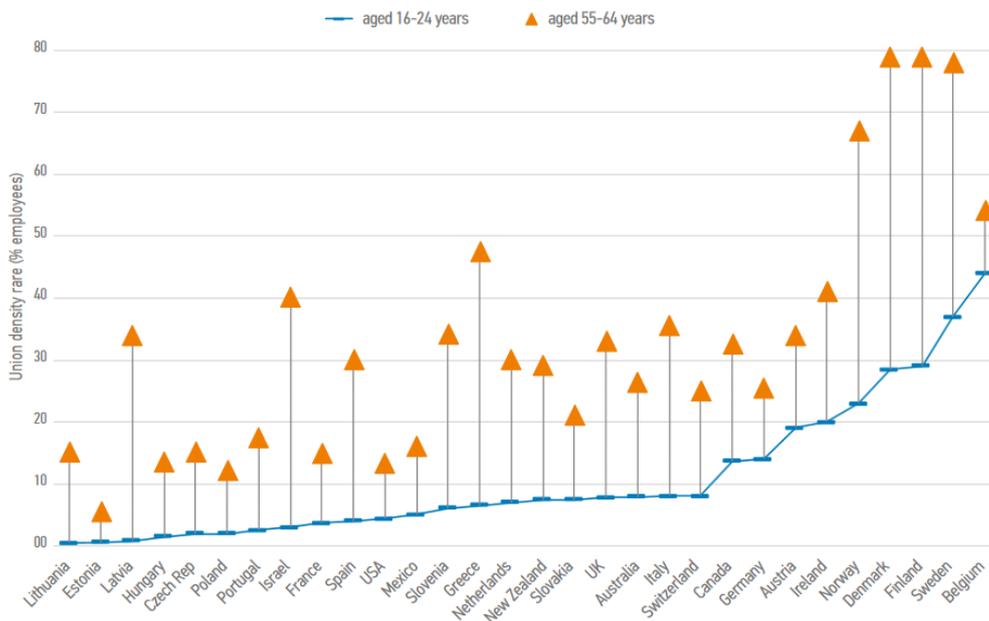


Figure 2. Gap in the unionisation rates of workers in the two age groups (16–24 and 55–64) in which the average worker enters or leaves the labour market.

The average age of union members in European countries has risen to 45 years (calculated from the European Social Survey). Union density rates tend to increase with age in almost all countries. The issue here is that the differences between young and old have increased. Studies¹ show that workers tend to join unions when they are young, most often when they get their first stable job and begin establishing a family (Visser, 2002). The probability of leaving the union is also highest in the first years of membership and then sharply decreases (Van Rij and Saris, 1993). **Workers who do not join a union before the age of 30 or 35 will most probably never join one. This means that together with the decline of union membership among young people over the last thirty or forty years, the proportion of workers who never join a union has increased.**

Furthermore, new workers are increasingly less exposed to trade unions through social networks at an early enough stage in their lives and careers. Contact with colleagues, friends and parents who are themselves union members is very important. British and Dutch research has shown that if parents are union members, this increases the likelihood that their children will also join a union (Bryson and Davies, 2018; Visser, 2002). There is also ample evidence that 'members make members' (Waddington and Kerr, 2002). To encourage and endorse union membership and maintain a 'good' reputation of taking part and contributing to the collective effort, contact with colleagues who themselves are visible union members is crucial (Ibsen, Toubøl and Jensen, 2017; Visser, 2002).

But the likelihood that young people will find employment in companies and workplaces where there are many union members, or where the union is highly visible, has dramatically decreased. With declining unionisation rates, there are fewer parents in each generation who can transmit the benefit and values of belonging to a union to their children. Lower unionisation rates among young people mean that in each cohort, the share of workers who will never have first-hand experience with a trade union increases. The data for the United Kingdom show that never-membership has increased from 23 per cent in the mid-1980s to over 50 per cent in 2005-2006 (Bryson et al., 2017). Bryson and Gomez (2005) have shown that it is this reduced likelihood of ever becoming a member, and not the loss of existing members, which accounts for the United Kingdom's decline in overall union membership since the 1980s.

In Central and Eastern Europe, unemployment, low wages and emigration have drained the unions of young people. In some countries, like Estonia, Latvia or Hungary, there are hardly any young people left in the unions. Korkut et al. (2017) point out that instead of increasing union bargaining power by limiting the supply of labour force, the departure of young people has stalled union renewal and threatens the continuation of union activity in many sectors.

Towards renewal and revitalisation: initial recommendations

Trade unions must urgently gain new members and especially young members until the age of 35 years. There are various ways to achieve this. However, in many cases, this means being open to innovative ways of approaching young workers. Some of the means need to change and modernise, for example by using all available means of communication, especially the internet and social media. The objectives of

¹ The paragraphs and sources in this part are based on ILO's ["Trade Unions in the balance"](#) and can be found in the reference chapter of the report.

organising and expressing solidarity among workers remain the same, but some of the means need to adapt to the current reality of employment relations and up-to-date technologies. More ideas are highlighted on industriAll Europe's [blog](#).

IndustriAll Europe's Youth Working Group sets out a series of initial recommendations to ensure our leaders' commitment to move towards renewal and revitalisation. Action must begin now, as tomorrow might be too late.

IndustriAll Europe's Youth Working Group recommendations for better youth inclusion:

- **Set clear quantitative annual targets of gaining young members.** This is key to any strategy of union renewal. The ILO [calculates](#) that in order to maintain current membership levels, unions must replace an estimated 3 to 4 percent of their members each year. This would still mean that unionisation rates, set against an expanding working population, decrease. Membership growth would require that unions somehow replicate the unionisation rates among young people of the 1970s. However, **it is important to acknowledge that young people today are different and that unions need to adapt the way in which they approach them.** Across Europe, the group of higher-educated and highly skilled workers has been growing and there has been a considerable shift from blue-collar to white-collar workers. Trade unions must adapt their strategies and methodologies to attract all workers.
- **Develop strategies of youth recruitment and empowerment.** This can start from an early stage, in vocational schools and at universities, and during the transition from school to work. **Introduce special membership programmes**, with reduced dues and targeted benefits that help young people at this stage of their lives. A part of membership might be more fragile and temporary and less based on a permanent and 'open-ended' commitment, much like the changes in today's employment relationships. New thinking and experimenting are required in order to reach more young workers. Stimulating young workers also requires training, mentoring and political education. Unions need to invest in this.
- **Consider a 'developmental' perspective on union participation for young workers**, meaning a step-by-step approach that over time builds mutual support between union representatives and young members who are willing to offer their services to the union.
- **Create resources, benefits and policies for younger workers.** Temporary agency work and temporary employment have become the reality for many, if not most young people. This is a strong reason why unions have to adapt their policies to also include these workers. Given the ageing of union membership, especially in industry, unions urgently need to recruit more young people by paying attention to all employment patterns. Newcomers who are potentially interested in activism need to receive a stronger recognition and systematic promotion within the trade union hierarchies.
- **Create a youth structure with voting rights and a budget to carry out their activities and campaigns.** Provide the space and resources for young people to carry out their ideas which are most likely to reflect the issues faced by their generation. A different type of engagement is needed for workers who are currently entering the labour market and who

are most likely on more fragile and temporary contracts (and less on permanent ones). Young members need to have a space to debate how to best reach and represent their peers and receive the means to carry out their initiatives.

- **Set a youth quota (under the age of 35) for seats in all committees, bodies and structures of the union.** The ETUC has already made a start, at its mid-term conference in November 2021, with the adoption of a quota for congress delegations (every fourth delegate per delegation must be younger or aged 35; violation of this criteria leads to a proportional reduction of voting rights). At federation level, EFFAT has 6 seats with voting rights dedicated to youth representatives in its Executive Committee. At national level, CGIL has set a quota of 20 percent for workers under the age of 30 years for elected union officials. Similarly, but also using a much higher quota in the case of women, this has worked to bring more women into union leadership positions and it is plausible that together with a change in policies, this has made unions more attractive to women.
- **Modernise communication and use all available means, including internet and social media.** In 2022, many trade unions continue to neglect the importance of having an online representation with a functional and up-to-date website, where workers can get informed about their rights and can press a simple button to join. To young people (and not only), this raises questions about the unions' professionalism. This also prevents people from getting properly informed regarding membership and hinders people from joining. Furthermore, **social media** channels have become a must in today's society to reach people of all age categories, and especially young workers. Regardless of personal opinions about social media, its success in influencing people and creating communities has been proven multiple times. Trade unions must start using these instruments to their benefit.

Roadmap for the implementation of the Youth Action Plan:

IndustriAll Europe's Youth Working Group is committed to the implementation of the Youth Action Plan and urges trade union leaders to support and join its efforts also at national level. The following initiatives and activities are foreseen for this purpose (this is a non-exhaustive list, which might be adapted):

- **Spring 2022: Start of the joint industriAll Europe - ETUI study to assess the situation of youth membership and youth inclusion among our national affiliates.** The current Action Plan reflects a worrying overall reality of decreasing youth membership in trade unions. We aim to assess the situation in our sectors among our members. **As part of the study, we will conduct a survey, which we expect our affiliates to fill in. The results of the study will be presented at the industriAll Europe Executive Committee meeting on 30 November - 1 December 2022.**
- **Spring - Summer 2022: Joint activities with CEEMET on youth employment.** We welcome the fact that the employers are keen to collaborate with us on the issue of improving youth employment. However, for the moment, they are only willing to approach the issue from the aspect of training and skills. **A potential joint event is planned in the European Parliament.** IndustriAll Europe stresses the urgent need for quality jobs and quality apprenticeships in order to improve the situation of young people on the labour market.

- **Autumn 2022: Meeting of the Youth Working Group** and other interested young members focusing on **the implementation of the Youth Action Plan at both national and European levels.**
- **Follow-up of the adoption of a youth quota** at the ETUC mid-term conference in November 2021 and exploring how this commitment can be brought forward in industriAll Europe.
- Supporting the ETUC campaign on improving the situation of young people on the labour market through quality jobs and training, organised as part of the 2022 European Year of Youth.
- **Autumn 2022:** Potential exchange meeting of the the **BTUP Task Force** and the **Youth Working Group** to create synergies for a deeper implementation of youth organising and recruitment strategies into national recruitment plans on demand, as well as an **exchange on best practices of youth organising.** Development of follow-up activities and recommendations for organising and recruitment.