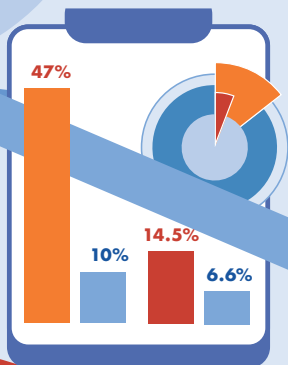




REVERSING THE DECLINE



**How to get young workers
involved in industrial unions**



YOUNG PEOPLE: HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT, LOW TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP

Recruiting and engaging young workers is an existential question for industrial unions in Europe. Unionising younger workers is the only way to ensure the long-term viability of our organisations whilst tackling the crisis of youth unemployment, poverty, precarity and low pay.

Over a decade on from the financial crisis, youth unemployment remains stubbornly high at 14.5% across Europe, compared to an overall rate of 6.6%. The countries which continue to top the list are still the ones which were hardest hit by the Troika: Greece (29.7%), Spain 29.3%), Italy (22.4%), Romania (22.2%).

For those young people that do find a job, insecure employment is the norm: 47% of young workers have a temporary contract, compared to 10% of the general workforce.

A whole generation of workers has been scarred by low-quality and low-paid jobs, meaning lower future earnings, smaller pensions and lifelong financial insecurity. This is not only bad for individuals: national economies suffer too, particularly in Southern and Central and Eastern Europe. Countries with the lowest graduate employment rates experience the highest levels of emigration, leading to brain drain.

Meanwhile, trade union density continues its long-term decline. There exists a real possibility that unions as we know them will disappear in many European countries over the next generation. The share of young members in unions is still, on average, smaller than the share of members over 54. Young members are not being recruited in sufficient numbers to replace the natural cycle of members retiring. The median age of union members has increased in almost all European countries. If this is not reversed, many unions will simply fizzle into non-existence.







YOUNG WORKERS IN INDUSTRIALL EUROPE ARE TAKING ACTION TO REVERSE THE DECLINE

Engaging with young workers has been at the heart of the work undertaken by industriAll Europe's Youth Working Group. In May 2022, the Working Group secured the adoption of its **Youth Action Plan** by industriAll Europe's Executive Committee. The Plan commits industriAll Europe and its affiliates to take concrete steps to improve the involvement of young workers in the labour movement. Since then, the Youth Working Group has been working on elaborating and rolling out national action plans.

In conjunction with this push at national level, industriAll Europe has undertaken a major study to understand the level of youth engagement in its affiliates, the steps being taken to encourage participation by young workers and, most importantly, which measures are most effective in growing youth membership and engagement. The study provides a solid base of evidence so unions can take those steps which are proven to engage their existing young members. This is a prerequisite to recruiting more young workers, who need to see unions taking them and their issues seriously before agreeing to join up. Studies show that workers who do not join a union before the age of 35 are unlikely to ever join one. This is why young workers need to be actively engaged in the work of the union in order for them and their peers to see the worth in joining. Once they have, they are more likely to maintain membership throughout their working lives. If they don't, the labour movement could lose an entire generation, and with it any realistic chance of meeting the challenges of the next decades.



WHICH MEASURES ARE MOST EFFECTIVE IN GROWING YOUTH MEMBERSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT?





FINDINGS: A STARK SNAPSHOT OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE'S INDUSTRIAL UNIONS

IndustriAll Europe's full report¹, of which the following is a summary, took a detailed look at the challenges of organising young people, the steps being taken to attract young people to the union and then to involve them in union activism once members. The aim was to uncover whether the strength of a union's youth structure, and its influence on decision making, feeds through to more youth activism, organising activities and recruitment of young members. The author conducted a survey of members of IndustriAll Europe's Youth Working Group and Executive Committee in order to glean detailed information about affiliates' youth structures and strategies for organising young workers. The key findings make for mixed reading in terms of how industrial unions are meeting the challenges of engaging young workers. However, there are several clear lessons on what works – and what does not – when it comes to attracting, and keeping, young people.

- 1. Young members make up only 15.3% of membership.** In about a third of unions, this proportion is growing, while it is declining in a third, with the final third remaining stable. The share of young members is, however, smaller than the share of members older than 54 in almost all unions.
- 2. Reduced or free membership for young workers is an effective tool but will not reverse decline overnight.** The survey did not find a higher rate of young members among unions that have reduced rates, but they did have more stability in youth membership. This indicates that special rates for young workers likely encourage prolonged membership. There is strong evidence that if a member joins when young,

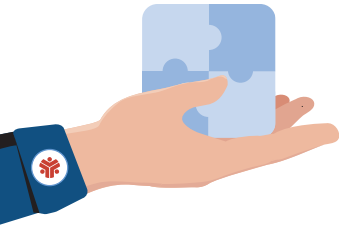


SEVERAL CLEAR LESSONS ON WHAT WORKS



¹ *Representing and recruiting young workers in trade unions. A report based on the views of the members of the Youth Network and Executive Committee of IndustriAll Europe, by Kurt Vandaele, senior researcher at the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), Brussels.*





then they are likely to remain a union member throughout their career. As such, any cost in reducing membership fees for young workers should be weighed against the financial and industrial benefits of retaining them as a member over their working life.

3. Formal youth structures are key, and they are most effective when they have financial resources and staff.

Most of the unions surveyed had some formal youth structure. Those which respondents identified as having weak capacity, in terms of staff and financial support, were also described as the least effective. Structures with more resources were more likely to be viewed as effective. Respondents were asked to describe the type of youth structures in their union and evaluate their effectiveness. Youth committees at national level and formal networks are very common, but are only judged to be relatively effective. In contrast, a separate department or section for young members and specialist full-time youth officer(s) were the most effective type of structure.

4. Youth structures on their own are not enough; they need a real voice in union decisions.

The survey found that youth structures could generally influence union decision making on day-to-day youth issues. However, respondents were much less convinced that youth structures were able to influence decision making in general, and even less able to shape the union's strategic orientation or be involved in collective bargaining or social dialogue. Where youth structures were judged to have the strongest capacity, they were also perceived to have most influence over decision making. Excluding younger voices from these discussions risks overlooking those issues of specific concern to young workers. If these are not being addressed by the union, other young workers are less likely to perceive trade unions as effective and so will be less likely to join. This is why it is key that representatives of young workers are involved in all aspects of union decision making.





- 5. Involving young workers at all levels means giving them a seat at the highest table.** 37% of respondents report that young workers have no formal voice at all on the union's executive and a further 29% had representation but without voting and/or speaking rights. Less than half the respondents (39%) report reserved seats for young people with voting rights on the executive. Those unions that grant voting rights to youth representatives, and have youth structures with moderate or high internal capacity, were judged to have the most influence over union decision making.
- 6. Youth structures with more capacity are more active in training other young members and promoting the union to non-members.** The survey found a correlation between the resources afforded to youth structures, and the strength of their representation on executive committees, on the one hand, and the frequency of internal training activities and external campaigning on issues, on the other. When young workers are given the resources and space to talk to other young workers about the issues affecting them at work, it leads to more union activity orientated to young workers. Furthermore, when youth structures have a voice in decision making, this sense of being taken seriously demonstrably feeds through to greater activism by young members.
- 7. Strong and resourced youth structures are key to organising and recruiting young workers.** Unions are clearly aware of the challenges and are taking action to address the problem: most unions have dedicated strategies to increase membership and 90% of those that have such plans have undertaken youth recruitment campaigns in the last five years. The most significant finding of this study in this area is the strong association between having a well-resourced youth structure and undertaking youth recruitment campaigns. It shows that giving young workers a voice in the union and resourcing them to conduct trade union activities pays off with more activism and new membership.





RECOMMENDATIONS – HOW DO WE TURN THE TIDE?

The findings lead to a clear set of recommendations. They echo those proposed by industriAll Europe's Youth Working Group and adopted by the Executive Committee.

- 1. Unions should offer reduced or free membership to young workers,** but it must be coupled with a plan to involve young members and turn them into activists.
- 2. Youth structures are necessary to involve young workers, but they need to be properly resourced to be effective.** The most successful youth structures are those with dedicated full-time staff, their own financial resources and even a separate youth department.
- 3. Young workers should have reserved seats, with full voting rights, on decision-making bodies, including executive committees.** As trade unionists, we know that if you're not in the room, and you don't have a vote, you don't have a real voice. If young workers' concerns are not heard at all levels of the union, then they will be overlooked and unions will not appear attractive to young people.
- 4. Give young workers time and resources to train other young members and build up new activists.** Young people coming into the union must be viewed as the future of the labour movement with their own experiences to contribute, not pupils to be inducted into 'our way of doing things'. They should be listened to, supported and given resources to develop campaigns and materials that will attract other young workers.
- 5. All unions should have strategies for recruiting young workers and involving them fully in the life of the union.** These strategies should be developed principally by young people themselves and receive the necessary support from the entire union. Recruiting young members must be a priority for the union, as if the future depends on it, because, in a very real sense, it does.



