Union responses to young workers since the Great Recession in Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden: are youth structures re-orienting the union agenda?

Kurt Vandaele
Union responses to young workers since the Great Recession in Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden: are youth structures reorienting the union agenda?¹

Kurt Vandaele
ETUI

Summary
This article analyses how youth structures at the confederal level of trade unions are influencing the union agenda in the face of the growing problem of youth unemployment in Europe. Five youth structures from union confederations in Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden have been studied. Although youth structures were already able to influence the union agenda in certain confederations before the crisis, the evidence demonstrates that youth issues have gained prominence today. A particular pattern discernible across countries is coalition-building between youth structures and student organizations for guiding the transition of the next generation of young workers from school to the labour market. More generally, youth structures’ possibilities for action can be explained not only by the confederations’ age composition and changing systems of union governance, but also by the specific national socio-economic context and political opportunity structures.

Résumé
Cet article analyse comment, au niveau des confédérations syndicales, les instances représentant les jeunes influencent l’agenda syndical face au problème grandissant du chômage des jeunes en Europe. Cinq de ces structures, actives au sein de confédérations syndicales en Irlande, aux Pays-Bas et en Suède, ont été étudiées. Même si les instances représentant les jeunes avaient déjà pu, avant la crise, influencer l’agenda syndical dans certaines confédérations, les conclusions de l’analyse démontrent que les problèmes de la jeunesse ont aujourd’hui pris davantage d’importance. L’étude montre également, dans différents pays, un phénomène spécifique de constitution de coalitions entre instances des jeunes au niveau syndical et organisations étudiantes, afin d’agir

¹ I am very grateful to Juliane Bir for initially helping to arrange the interviews; to Margherita Bussi for her remarks on youth unemployment regimes; to Anders Kjellberg for providing information on the Swedish unions and labour market arrangements; and to Sjaak van der Velden for the literature tip on the Dutch pro-unemployed organizations.

Corresponding author:
Kurt Vandaele, European Trade Union Institute, Bd du Roi Albert II, 5, 1210 Brussels, Belgium.
Email: KVandaele@etui.org

Zusammenfassung

Keywords
Youth structures, youth committee, young workers, trade union revitalization, youth unemployment, Ireland, Netherlands, Sweden

Introduction
This article analyses youth structures in five trade union confederations in Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden since the pronounced increase in youth unemployment in the European Union (EU). Whereas young people (aged between 15 and 24) are generally more vulnerable to unemployment than older age groups, the number of young unemployed has climbed dramatically in almost every EU Member State since 2009, although there continues to be cross-national, regional and sectoral variation. Young workers are the age group by far the most affected by precarious employment, with about 42.1 per cent of employed young people in the EU working – frequently involuntarily – in temporary jobs and 31.1 per cent of them working part-time in 2012 (Eurostat). Given these youth labour market challenges, as an external challenge to unions, it is interesting to analyse how and to what extent unions are adapting their internal policies and strategies for tackling youth unemployment, supporting young people once they have a job and engaging this new generation of workers in unions. If unions largely fail to do all this, it will eventually impede their generational renewal, worsen their already biased representation of the workforce and reinforce the nearly universal de-unionization trend in advanced capitalist societies.

The ‘revitalization turn’ in the union literature since the late 1990s has shifted the focus from the outside environment to the strategic choices of unions themselves. Inspired by this more voluntaristic approach, this explanatory article focuses on the under-researched youth structures at the confederal union level. Drawing an analogy with women’s structures, youth structures are specialist structures for representing and empowering young workers in unions. They are based on age,
frequently up to the age of 35 years. Using secondary literature and expert interviews, this article analyses the influence of youth structures in Dutch, Irish and Swedish confederations on reorienting the union agenda towards young workers’ interests and needs. We investigate whether the current youth labour market challenges offer opportunities for youth structures to pursue innovative union youth policies more effectively. We develop the argument that the confederations’ age composition and systems of union governance only partly explain youth structures’ influence since it also depends on the specific national socio-economic context and political opportunity structures, which may either constrain or facilitate youth structures’ room to manoeuvre.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses theoretical approaches and empirical findings for better understanding relations between young workers and unions and the possible influence of youth structures on revitalization strategies. Section 3 provides information on the case selection and research method, while Section 4 documents similarities and differences in the presence, types and status of youth structures in the confederations considered. Section 5 maps contextual information on recent quantitative developments in the youth unemployment regimes in Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden. Section 6 analyses youth structures and diverse union responses to engaging young workers in unions, supporting them and tackling youth unemployment in particular. Section 7 draws conclusions.

**Youth unionization, specialist structures and alliance-building**

For its analysis of the influence of youth structures on unions adopting youth policies, this article draws on three broad strands of approaches and empirical studies. For identifying causes of the low youth unionization, the youth-focused union literature is first discussed briefly. Since youth structures have rarely been addressed to date, the literature on gender democracy in unions can also shed light on underrepresented groups in unions and special structural arrangements to overcome this. Finally, the ‘revitalization turn’ in the study of unions suggests supplementary union strategies for engaging with young workers and other organizations. In summary, the literature discussed here provides a better understanding of the opportunities and possible limitations of youth structures, as well as feasible revitalization strategies they can pursue.

Looking at the research on young workers and unions, three broad reasons have been put forward to explain low youth unionization. First, young people’s individualistic orientations have been considered to be at odds with the traditional collectivist working-class values underpinning unions, making it less likely that young workers will join a union. However, surveys on attitudes towards unions across cohorts find, again and again, little evidence for this claim (Vandaele, 2012). To explain the incongruity between young workers’ fairly positive predisposition towards unions and their low union membership, reference is usually made to their position in the labour market. Indeed, young workers tend to be employed in small businesses and the low-waged private services sector, often with non-standard contract arrangements, which are frequently associated with labour market vulnerability, since union presence at the workplace and collective bargaining are often weak or inadequate (Tailby and Pollert, 2011). In other words, structural changes and barriers in the labour market and the lack of visibility of union activity in the workplace, a second broad reason for the low youth unionization, are arguably more relevant than the assumed intergenerational attitudinal shift.

Nevertheless, the individualistic orientations of the next generation of workers are a widespread stereotype in public opinion but also, apparently, among union officials and representatives. Union officials in Australia, for example, most frequently frame the reasons for youth membership decline in terms of “the individualistic nature of youth and their high levels of self belief and ‘independence’” (Esders et al., 2011: 121). This obstinate perception is likely to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy
affecting union efforts with regard to youth recruitment and representation. Thus, union representatives in the United Kingdom seem less responsive to the concerns of young workers (Freeman and Diamond, 2003). A recent study of a Belgian union also found that older union activists are often perceived by their young counterparts as ‘paternalistic’ and not willing to alter old routines and ideas (Cultiaux and Vendramin, 2011). The examples illustrate not only that factors external to unions can explain the low youth unionization, but also that the internal structures, policies and practices of unions have a role to play. For assessing young workers’ under-engagement in unions, the manner in which union representatives and officials frame the issue of low youth unionization and, more broadly, the dominant, possibly paternalistic union culture should also be taken into account.

Echoing the consensus in the gender literature on unions (Ledwith, 2012), a change in culture, customs and communications will also be required to improve young people’s engagement with unions. Given that union members are commonly older than the general population and ageing, such a change and transformation could not be achieved immediately; nevertheless, a more profound development of youth structures may contribute to it (Bielski Boris et al., 2003). However, a survey of youth structures at the confederal level across Europe revealed that youth representatives considered their resources insufficient, although most of them had a dedicated budget and some administrative support (Vandaele, 2012). Nonetheless, similar to women’s structures, youth structures enable unions to represent young workers as a ‘disadvantaged social group’ alongside the mainstream union structures (Cockburn, 1996). Although young people make up a heterogeneous group, it can be assumed that they have some fairly distinct interests and concerns on the labour market and beyond (such as illegal underpayment or age discrimination). Comparable to women’s structures in unions (Parker, 2006; Kirton and Healy, 1999), one would expect that youth structures can at least partially change the internal power arrangements within unions, widen the unions’ interests and reshape their agenda, goals and strategies. Finally, like women’s structures (Parker and Douglas, 2010; Parker and Foley, 2010), youth structures might also contribute to or supplement union revitalization strategies.

Indeed, the ‘revitalization turn’ hints at alternative strategies for building power among workers, of which alliance-building between unions and social movements in the wider civil society is among the more promising revitalization strategies. In the field of youth employment, concerns about young workers may also be a subject of interest to, for instance, pro-unemployed and student organizations. With regard to the former, the unemployed in Europe have showed in the past that they have been able to mobilize, often driven by government reforms aimed at restricting their rights (Chabanet and Faniel, 2011). However, their mobilization tends to be spontaneous and marginal geographically and, at least equally important, the unemployed-union relationship is generally considered ambiguous and complex since, historically, ‘unions assure above all the defence of the most active segments of the waged workforce’ (Chabanet and Faniel, 2011: 401). Therefore, turning to the second potential partner, it looks more favorable for unions to build alliances with student organizations to facilitate engagement with future workers. The school-to-work transition process is of particular interest here since early labour market experiences tend to have long-lasting effects on later attitudes towards unions and their perceived effectiveness (Lowe and Rastin, 2000).

To begin with, evidence within cohorts confirms that workers are exposed to unionism at a relatively young age and that unionization is becoming very unlikely for workers reaching middle-age (Budd, 2010). Therefore, since young workers are quite receptive to unionization, it would appear to be crucial for unions to be visible during young people’s student phase and to engage with them at

---

2 In order to limit the empirical analysis other organizations are preliminarily excluded.
this stage, particularly because workers with previous positive experience of unionism are more likely to become union members when they enter the full-time workforce as compared to workers without prior union membership (Oliver, 2010). However, early socialization appears to have a stronger influence on shaping attitudes towards unionism than experiences in student employment as such. This makes it important for unions to connect with schools to inform secondary schoolchildren about their relevance and activities. Still, in the later study phase, there is also some scope for unions to develop strategies for engaging with students. Students in certain disciplines (such as arts and social sciences) seem to be particularly receptive to unionism, which would imply that unions would better focus on their school-to-work transition processes, such as apprenticeships and traineeships, than on their experiences in student employment outside the field of study (Oliver, 2011).

**Case selection and method**

The analysis covers the youth structures of five confederations from three countries: the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), covering both the Republic and Northern Ireland; the Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV, Dutch Trade Union Federation), by far the main confederation in the Netherlands; and, enabling intra-country comparison, all Swedish confederations: Landsorganisationen i Sverige (LO, Swedish Trade Union Confederation), Sveriges Akademikers Centralorganisation (Saco, Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations) and Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation (TCO, Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees), each largely organizing different groups of workers on the labour market (manual, professional and white-collar employees). For pragmatic reasons, the main focus is on the confederal level but, certainly, the confederations’ authority over their affiliates depends on policy issues and differs significantly between and within countries.

All the countries selected here represent a different welfare regime, although the specific school-to-work transition regime (Walther et al., 2009) or youth unemployment regime (Cinalli and Giugni, 2013) will possibly be more directly relevant for analysing unions’ constraints and opportunities for engaging young workers and their responses to youth unemployment. Each country also embodies a different type of industrial relations system, with union identities reflecting those national types, although (increasingly) subject to (transnational) transformation (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013): ICTU reflects the liberal pluralism of Anglophone countries; FNV the employer-dominated social partnership of the centre-west countries in Europe; and, finally, the Swedish confederations the Nordic type of organized corporatism. Furthermore, the union identities vary not only cross-nationally but also within countries. Interestingly, Figure 1 demonstrates that the confederations are partially also diversified by age. According to the ‘median voter’ theorem the specific age distribution might influence union policies since they will be oriented towards the ‘average union member’. With a rising share of students and young workers and more than 10 per cent of the membership young – that is, up to the age of 24 years – Saco’s age profile differs significantly from the other confederations.

Apart from secondary literature, this article draws additionally on semi-structured expert interviews with 12 national (ex-)union officials and personal communication via email. Initially, five union experts were identified with the help of the secretariat of the youth committee of the European Trade Union Confederation. Further interviews were conducted with other union officials to provide additional insider knowledge on youth structures. Whereas only four interviewees had or currently have a leading position in a confederal youth committee, all others are responsible

---

3 The more state-centred or polarized type of southern Europe is lacking in this country selection.
for either labour market policies or for youth issues at the confederal level; naturally, the union officials’ position in the union structure will influence their experiences, views and insights. All interviews, carried out and analysed during early 2013, were conducted in English except for those in the Netherlands which were in Dutch.

Youth structures: presence, types and status

Three confederations in the country sample have incorporated youth committees as part of their youth structures: the Dutch FNV and Swedish TCO are the exceptions. In Ireland, young union members up to the age of 35 are represented by two youth committees in both the Republic and Northern Ireland. The ICTU confederal youth committees are made up of young worker representatives, elected or selected, from all affiliates, although not all of them have established youth committees. The reasons for their absence relate mostly to the small membership size and inadequate resources. At present, there are no reserved seats for youth committee delegates in the ICTU Executive Committee. However, as the confederation has been carrying out a strategic review of its operations, as approved at the 2011 Biennial Delegate Conference, the structures for engaging young

Figure 1. Total union membership and membership by age, 2007–2012.

Note: * Data include all Irish unions but ICTU affiliates account for over 95%; ** Full-time students working part-time and pensioners are excluded. The data overestimate the share of young workers but largely overlap with the LO age profile; *** The last age bound is ≥66 years for SACO; **** <29 years instead of <25 years; TCO membership is equally distributed among the 25–44 and 46–65 years categories; no information was available for those categories.

Source: Statistics offices; Sweden: Anders Kjellberg, SACO and TCO.
members are subject to examination aimed at reinvigorating the youth committees. Yet, their reconstituted form is not known at time of writing. In May 2013 the confederal youth committees set themselves a new aim and a new set of objectives and a strategic plan. Finally, youth conferences, courses and seminars and (virtual) networks are also part of the youth structures in the ICTU.

Similar but more dramatically compared to the Irish case, internal restructuring has also affected youth structures in the Netherlands. FNV Jong (Young), an internal grouping representing all FNV members up to the age of 35, was re-established in 2006 as a direct response to the Alternatief voor Vakbond (AVV, Alternative to the Union) established the year before, in itself a reaction to the largest union demonstration in Dutch history against the government’s pension reforms in 2004.\(^4\) Seven years later, in 2012, Jong became a separate union organization entailing direct membership and implying that young workers have the choice to become a member of either Jong or a sector-based union, or (theoretically) both. The different statutory status forms the subject of the replacement of the old FNV with the newly structured and tentatively named De Nieuwe Vakbeweging (The New Union Movement). The immediate cause for its reorganization was strong internal discord about the FNV’s agreement with a new governmental pension reform plan in 2010. However, an additional explanation, although not contradictory as such, are the deeper-lying frictions between unions increasingly embracing the organizing approach in recent years and unions traditionally embedded in social partnership arrangements (de Beer, 2013).\(^5\) The autonomous position of Jong entails that young workers are no longer represented primarily as a disadvantaged social group within the confederal decision-making structures, as was previously the case.\(^6\) Instead, like the other Members of Parliament representing their unions, youth representation, with the right to vote, is based on member proportionality within the Member Parliament, which is the new primary decision-making body of the reformed FNV. It is too early to assess whether youth structures have been reinforced. On the one hand, Jong’s new autonomous position signifies more legitimacy for its standpoints and more room to manoeuvre vis-à-vis the leadership of FNV and its affiliates. Since June 2013 the board of Jong has also been strengthened by three extra union officials. On the other hand, unless Jong manages to increase its membership significantly, it remains uncertain to what degree it will influence decision-making within the Member Parliament, although its composition is expected to be characterized by ‘diversity and pluralism’ according to the new statutes. Youth representation could also be reinforced if Jong is complemented with a large network. According to the new union structure’s statutes a seat with the right to speak is reserved for such networks on condition that they are permanent and organize at least 1 500 members (FNV, 2012). However, a large horizontal young members’ network across the sector-based affiliates is currently still in its infancy.

The Swedish confederations differ in terms of their youth structures. Most of the LO affiliates have installed youth committees, although sometimes with substantial resource differences. Regional youth structures also exist. Ung (Young), composed of youth representatives who are either elected or appointed by the affiliates, principally represents the young members until the age of 30 at the confederal level. Young workers have no reserved seats in the executive committee, although its composition is expected to be characterized by ‘diversity and pluralism’ according to the new statutes. Youth representation could also be reinforced if Jong is complemented with a large network. According to the new union structure’s statutes a seat with the right to speak is reserved for such networks on condition that they are permanent and organize at least 1 500 members (FNV, 2012). However, a large horizontal young members’ network across the sector-based affiliates is currently still in its infancy.

4 Accusing the ‘traditional’ unions of inadequately defending the workers’ interests in non-standard forms of employment, particularly young workers, AVV provoked considerable media attention but quickly fizzled out.

5 Interestingly, the Algemene Nederlandse Bond voor Ouderen (General Dutch League for the Elderly), affiliated in 2009 to represent the elderly, left FNV in 2013.

6 The ‘old’ Jong had a seat in the FNV executive body with the right to speak.
confederal level. The Saco Studentråd (Student Council) differs from ‘traditional’ youth committees. The long-established Studentråd, founded in 1943, is an umbrella organization indirectly representing almost 100,000 students, irrespective of their age, in higher education via (currently) 19 student associations. The students are organized by their future profession since the associations were set up by Saco’s affiliates, whose member domains are demarcated by professions; out of the 22 affiliates three do not have such an association. The Studentråd represents students’ rights vis-à-vis higher education governing boards and public authorities and, at the same time, defends their future interests and needs on the labour market by assisting in the school-to-work transition. The Studentråd is run by an elected board of students and its full-time president is a member of the executive council of the confederation with the right to speak.

Finally, in TCO youth structures seem underdeveloped at the confederal level: there is no youth committee and there are no reserved seats for young people in the executive committee. Moreover, despite the fact that youth structures are present in most affiliates (with the notable exception of Unionen, the largest union), no statutory rules on reserved seats within the unions’ executive committees are pursued. However, to give a voice to young workers, a ‘transformational approach’ (Kirton and Healy, 1999) has nevertheless been encouraged since 2007. Its (paradoxical) focus lies upon the future proportional strength of young workers in senior positions by setting a non-binding quota of 30 per cent of young members, i.e. under the age of 35 years, for all executive bodies of the affiliates and TCO itself. This new approach is driven by several union officials at the confederal level for developing union awareness campaigns, maintaining a recruitment network and transferring best practices across the affiliates. Their predominant foci are engaging young workers and stimulating new informal workplace clubs.

**Recent developments in youth unemployment regimes**

Besides the country-specific regulations in youth unemployment regimes, rapid changes in youth unemployment will probably influence youth structures’ priorities and shape union responses towards the young unemployed and young workers in general. Therefore, before turning to the empirical analysis, we briefly outline recent quantitative developments in youth (un)employment.

---

7 A youth unemployment regime is ‘a set of coherent measures and policies aimed at providing a state response to the problem of unemployment and, more specifically, youth unemployment’ (Cinalli and Giugni, 2013: 1).

8 Although unemployment is a multi-faceted problem, this section is restricted to quantitative developments.
Table 1 demonstrates that young people’s activity rate has fallen considerably in Ireland, probably indicating that young people either stay longer in education or return to it. In the Netherlands the rate has only been slightly declining since 2007 and is still at an exceptionally high level; a fairly similar picture can be drawn for Sweden.

In order to explain differences between youth employment rates, apart from demographic changes and the business cycle, the institutional framework for facilitating the school-to-work transition is also relevant. Particularly in countries where public youth policies stimulate a ‘culture of autonomy’ (Oliveira et al., 2011: 173) students need to supplement their studies by doing part-time work, implying that those young people already have labour market experience before finishing their studies. In all countries considered here, although to different degrees and with a lack of state support for Irish young people when accessing the labour market, reconciling student life with a job has been common. However, since the global crisis of the financially dominated regime of capital accumulation, part-time and temporary employment has become increasingly associated with difficulties finding a full-time job in Ireland. This involuntary pattern, often associated with precariousness, is less common in the Dutch case. In contrast, involuntary employment stands above the EU-15 average in Sweden and has marginally increased since the crisis.

Figure 2 shows that the Irish and Dutch pre-crisis youth unemployment levels stood clearly below the EU-15 average. Yet developments have diverged since the crisis set in. The Irish youth unemployment rate worsened in 2008 and skyrocketed the next year, although mitigated by emigration, jumping to a rate above the EU-15 average. The Dutch rate grew only slightly and is still below the EU-15 average.9 The unemployment level in Sweden has been above the EU-15 average since 2003 and its rate has deteriorated only slightly since the crisis. However, as stressed by all Swedish interviewees, the high rate partly reflects a statistical artefact because students following school-based or preparatory vocational training programmes are no longer considered employed or part of the labour force since 2005. Hence, since the denominator for calculating the unemployment rate has been reduced, the rate is artificially augmented. Also, in case of redundancies, Swedish workers are mostly fired according to the last-in-first-out principle, thus often young people are among the first to go.

Table 2 illustrates that Irish long-term youth unemployment has soared since the crisis, particularly among young males, which is largely the result of the collapse of the housing bubble and the subsequent crisis in construction, which has disproportionally affected them. Also, young workers with lower-level qualifications have been hit hard. The Dutch long-term youth unemployment rate is fairly stable and relatively low. Increases for the different categories of young unemployed people are rather moderate; still, youth unemployment is high among workers with a migrant background in the large cities. Despite its relatively high youth unemployment level, Swedish long-term youth unemployment is the lowest among the three countries, although its increase has been considerable since 2007. Sweden suffers from high male youth unemployment and especially unemployment among the low-qualified group of young workers, but their increase is below the EU-15 average. Supply-side policies towards youth-specific goals might be relevant to explaining differences between the long-term and general youth unemployment rates, although effectiveness is essentially contingent upon the type of activation programme (Kluve, 2010). In any case, in Ireland, the collapse of social partnership in late 2009, in existence since 1987, meant that the social partners’ engagement became uncertain, so that the state alone became responsible for the (uncoordinated) activation policies aimed at, among others, young people (Dobbins, 2011). However, today they lack substantial funding due to budgetary constraints.

---

9 The Dutch rate might be higher due to hidden unemployment among young workers in (bogus) self-employment.
Youth structures, the union agenda and engaging young people: main findings

This section analyses the policy priorities of youth structures and their influence on the union agenda. The confederations’ responses to youth issues over recent years are reported briefly, bearing in mind that the confederations shape interest representation to different degrees than their affiliates.

Figure 2. Youth unemployment rate in IE, NL and SE and EU-15-average, 1998–2012 (%).
Source: Eurostat.

Table 2. Selected labour market indicators on youth unemployment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>IE</th>
<th>NL</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>EU-15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term youth unemployment*</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth unemployment with lower-level qualifications**</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female youth unemployment</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male youth unemployment</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average change 2007–2012</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term youth unemployment*</td>
<td>+21%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
<td>+15%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth unemployment with lower-level qualifications**</td>
<td>+26%</td>
<td>+11%</td>
<td>+3%</td>
<td>+9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female youth unemployment</td>
<td>+26%</td>
<td>+7%</td>
<td>+3%</td>
<td>+7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male youth unemployment</td>
<td>+34%</td>
<td>+8%</td>
<td>+7%</td>
<td>+10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * EU-15: 2011 data; ** Pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education.
Source: Eurostat.
Ireland: youth structures catching up with tackling youth unemployment?

The debate about the young unemployed and their often precarious situation is new to Ireland; it has been problematized by the social partners and the government only recently. Before Ireland entered into a deep recession in 2008, the first country to do so in the euro area, there was almost full employment. Moreover, even after the economic boom, youth unemployment did not assume immediate prominence, despite its rapid upsurge. Initially, the ICTU was preoccupied with lobbying the government for an alternative economic recovery plan to tackle the crisis and responding to the austerity measures, such as various cuts in the jobseeker’s allowance since 2009 and a €1 per hour cut in the minimum wage in 2011. Government initiatives for helping young workers – among them, social insurance exemptions for employers taking on workers who had been unemployed for six months or more – have been ‘small-scale and, sometimes, not specifically confined to young workers per se’ (Dobbins, 2011: 176). Accordingly, doubts have been expressed, for instance, as to whether the national internship scheme ‘JobBridge’, initiated in July 2011, providing work experience placements of up to nine months for social welfare recipients, while keeping their welfare payments plus a weekly top-up, will generate long-term employment.

The 2009 breakdown of the national social partnership implied that formal engagement is lacking between the social partners for a joint comprehensive approach to tackling youth unemployment. Despite its association with neoliberal policies and failure to stem union marginalization in its heyday (D’Art and Turner, 2011), many in the union world stress that the government should attempt to revive social partnership. Likewise, indicating a consensus-based discourse on the youth unemployment problem, bilateral contacts between the social partners are still maintained. Although initiatives especially targeted at young workers are limited, the return to company-level collective bargaining did not prevent some companies – for instance in the banking and finance sector – from adopting alternative measures to staff cuts, such as short-time working, sabbaticals or career breaks and apprenticeships (Dobbins, 2011). In order to establish career paths for young workers, unions also try to promote training and to improve and extend the apprentice system – which was largely associated with the construction sector – to other sectors, such as hotels and catering.

Last but not least, the protracted modernization of the ICTU’s organization and structures has led to a certain degree of inaction on the part of youth structures. Also, opportunities for alliance-building with (unemployed) young workers or non-unionized students have appeared to be fairly limited. The fact that young (unemployed) workers so far have not come onto the streets en masse, has been explained by emigration, in particular of construction workers. However, not only the specific nature of Irish political culture, with historically less polarization in terms of class divisions, but also the fact that the unemployed are largely subjected to the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed’s (INOu) strategic choices and its uneasy relationship with the ICTU might further account for their lack of mobilization and alliance-building (Royall, 2012). Indeed, in the past, the mobilization of the unemployed has been largely impeded by the INOu, established in 1987, which favours representing the unemployed by campaigning, (state-sponsored) service-orientated activities and lobbying the relevant decision-making authorities. Particularly because of the INOu’s inclusion in the centralized social partnership process since 1997, the political opportunity structures have not been conducive to protest-oriented methods.

Nevertheless, although the ICTU has essentially been organizing the anti-austerity protests, other protests have emerged. Occupy camps have been set up in major Irish cities – the first started in summer 2011 but all had been dismantled by June 2012 – but unions did not take any coordinated action to connect with the camps as a coherent message was lacking; Occupy Dublin was clearly characterized
by hostility towards the unions (Sheehan, 2012). Furthermore, students have been involved in anti-
austerity demonstrations since 2010, but their protests have been limited to specific education issues
such as funding. Moreover, the Union of Students in Ireland was initially not inclined to coalesce with
the union movement due to perceived opposing interests, but relationships have been improving
recently and common campaigning platforms are envisaged. Also, since 2008 the ICTU has developed
the ‘YouthConnect’ programme drawing parallels between democracy in the workplace and in schools
through the activity of their student council. In agreement with the Irish Second-Level Student’s Union
and in close cooperation with the teaching unions, the ICTU offers introductory classes to second-level
schools by young graduate teachers who are unemployed. Although successful for building intelligence,
in terms of what students are doing and the conditions they face in the workplace, and for raising aware-
ness among the school population about their rights, teachers are reluctant to give full access to the stu-
dent councils. In addition, since 2012, a more collaborative approach has been taken with the students’
union in the Dublin Institute of Technology – a type of further education college – to set up an informa-
tion campaign on rights for students working part-time to support themselves whilst in college.

Finally, only recently have the unions tried to put the youth dimension in a more prominent light
in various ongoing campaigns aimed at curbing the ‘excesses’ of austerity politics and by strongly
supporting the European ‘Youth Guarantee’ . However, it is feared that implementation of the guar-
antee might reinforce tendencies towards a two-tier labour market, with (young) ‘outsiders’ and
(older) ‘insiders’ as employers have taken the opportunity to introduce worse terms and conditions
for new entrants to the labour market since the crisis. Indeed, the European youth unemployment
strategies look more like old neoliberal wine in new fancy bottles (Lahusen et al., 2013). With
regard to union recruitment, Irish unions have only lately embraced the ‘organizing model’. In
2007, the ICTU launched the still ongoing ‘Outreach’ campaign, jointly funded by five affiliates,
aiming to stem union decline and particularly addressing younger workers, providing them with an
information service and advisory support with the help of new technologies (Dobbins, 2010). Spec-
cific campaigns have been targeted at low-paid sectors with predominantly young workers, but
limited resources and competing demands within the unions make this challenging.

Netherlands: youth structures punching above their weight?
As a relatively new organization, Jong’s priorities have been centred mainly on increasing its
visibility and influence. Internally, the ‘old’ Jong initiated an informal (virtual) network approach
for sharing information and experiences on youth issues and strengthening young members’ union
involvement. This approach has been followed by some unions but their youth networks are still
weakly developed. However, since Jong’s new autonomous position, understanding is increasing
and various attempts are being made actively to recruit young members, which was hardly the case
in the past. In fact, most young workers seem to have positive attitudes towards unions, although
they have ‘never thought about it in a serious way’ (Huiskamp and Smulders, 2010). Externally,
Jong has been campaigning with regard to summer jobs to stimulate union participation, being
present at job fairs and organizing school visits to inform young people about their rights on the
labour market. Jong has developed various plans concerning youth unemployment and has been
able to influence the confederation to lobby the government. Likewise, Jong has attempted to grab
the (social) media’s attention on specific youth issues, such as youth unemployment.

Despite fairly unsettled youth structures, youth issues seem to feature high on the trade union
agenda. Explanations of this hint at Jong’s discursive power and coalition-building capacity, as
demonstrated by the media campaign on youth unemployment tactically commenced before the
parliamentary elections of 2010. Jong has been building issues-based alliances with student
organizations and making use of (social) media to influence the FNV’s agenda and its lobbying on specific youth issues. Since its establishment, Jong has also been institutionally embedded via the national tripartite Sociaal-Economische Raad (Social and Economic Council), the government advisory council on economic issues. The effectiveness of these strategies should be understood specifically in the Dutch context, which is defined by recurring government plans for pension reforms, causing (divided) union opposition and – occasionally – worker mobilization and, often linked to this, the questioning of union representativeness in the mainstream media. This context is favourable for Jong since by being responsive towards youth issues, the FNV and its affiliates, despite their low representativeness, can demonstrate that they are defending the interests and needs not only of older workers but also of the young.

Whether the unions’ strategies are effective will also depend on the employers’ organizations and the government: both seem concerned about youth unemployment today. As in the past, with the taskforce Jeugdwerkloosheid during 2003–2007, the government and social partners have paid attention to certain youth labour market issues since the crisis. In 2009 the partners agreed to stimulate sectoral collective agreements with a provision for a continuation of employment after the traineeship. Based on the agreements the partners look responsive to youth issues since they frequently include labour market provisions aimed at the long-term unemployed and young unemployed (Schaapman, 2011). In 2009, the government introduced a youth unemployment action plan, with a kind of youth guarantee, but its implementation has been difficult, largely for budgetary reasons. The relatively low youth unemployment rate but also the consensus-based poldermodel might explain why there has ‘not really been a debate’ (Schaapman, 2011) on youth unemployment. But this has recently changed since youth unemployment is still increasing in 2013. A new government plan is aimed mainly at facilitating the school-to-work transition: in the new social agreement on labour market reforms, the social partners and government agreed, among other things, to strengthen the position of young people on the local labour market (with a newly developed youth guarantee) and to support initiatives to tackle youth unemployment.

**Sweden: increasingly dynamic youth structures?**

All the Swedish interviewees framed young-older issues in a non-confrontational manner, but this does not exclude tensions, particularly within LO and TCO, with a more skewed age profile towards older workers compared to Saco. In accordance with the more centralized tradition of LO, it is stressed that the youth structures of the affiliates could profit from more internal coordination, in other words, better strengthening their organizational structures and harmonizing priorities. Regarding the youth structures’ priorities, the Saco Studentråd focuses on the school-to-work transition with regard to matching young people’s education and employment; recruiting young members and youth unemployment as such are secondary issues. However, besides the school-to-work transition, the latter are undoubtedly priorities for the LO’s and TCO’s youth structures: they had already gained prominence on the union agenda before the crisis. In 2007, the centre-right government more closely linked contributions to state-supported unemployment funds to the unemployment risk. The contributions to the funds and unions’ fees, which are traditionally closely linked, rose for workers with a high unemployment risk, causing a substantial drop in membership, especially of LO but also of TCO, particularly since the often part-time working young people left or refrained from joining a union (Kjellberg, 2011).

 provisionally in 2015, a parliamentary commission on social insurance will evaluate the amendments made to unemployment insurance and besides LO and TCO, Saco is also actively campaigning and lobbying to improve students’ rights (particularly since students with a university degree
but without work experience since 2007 are no longer entitled to receive an unemployment ben-

efit). To lobby the government more effectively, expertise on youth unemployment has been
pooled by an informal working group, including the youth union officer, in LO since 2012. LO
and TCO are actively lobbying the government for additional measures linked to (vocational) edu-
cation, work experience and more funding for the public employment service. They consider the
government employment package, activated since 2010, for reducing long-term (youth) unemploy-
ment insufficient.\(^{10}\) Equally, the interviewees stressed that the young unemployed should get help
earlier within the youth employment guarantee – a 15-month programme aimed at unemployed
people aged 16–24 – with activation policies, usually starting three months or more after registra-
tion with the public employment service. Another government initiative, the tripartite job pact,
failed in March 2013. The job pact, aimed principally at encouraging education and on-the-job
training for inexperienced workers, was partly inspired by the ‘vocational introduction’ scheme
(Johansson and Ringqvist, 2013). Such a scheme has gained importance since 2010 when it was
introduced in the metal sector and similar framework agreements have spread to other sectors; the
scheme pays at least 75 per cent of the minimum wage to young workers under 25 years of age and
tutors and trains them to improve their skills.

The youth structures of all confederations are stimulating coalition-building with student orga-
nizations; providing various courses; trying to improve knowledge about unions via campaigns at
summer jobs and through school visits; and offering reduced subscription arrangements for stu-
dents. Particularly, the LO campaign for improving the experiences of students with a summer
or extra job is perceived as very successful in terms of building visibility and a better reputation
for trade unions; increasing membership is not the main aim. Furthermore, since school visits are
planned mainly according to the unions’ organizing domain, the vast number of non-academically-
oriented secondary schools is an organizational challenge for LO, whereas the higher education
institutions and universities are so far the main focus for TCO and certainly Saco. Since late
2007, TCO has instigated a rather top-down revitalization process, involving all affiliates, aimed
at students and young workers, both often in temporary employment, to build a more ‘youth-
friendly’ union image. Therefore, TCO partially reallocated financial resources and launched the
FacketFörändras.nu project (Transform the Union Now), including an advertisement campaign,
events and a dedicated website, to accentuate the achievements and importance of collective
bargaining and representation and to interact with the general public about the future of unionism. The
project is trying to change the trade unions’ image – as dominated by LO in Sweden – through a value-
driven marketing campaign, but instrumental reasons for unionization are also included. Although her-
aleding a potentially transformative change, more analysis is needed of how the project is effectively
articulated between the confederal level and all affiliated unions since TCO’s decision-making struc-
ture is traditionally bottom-up. The TCO youth membership share is increasing again, however.
Finally, the prominent like-by-like recruitment in the Saco unions, which employ students for recruit-
ing members at higher education institutions or universities, is considered particularly effective,
despite the turnover. Besides being members of a Saco student association, students in higher educa-
tion are also often members of a local union of the Sveriges Förenade Studentkårer (SFS, Swedish
National Union of Students). The relationship between them is considered complementary, with the
Saco student associations being more attentive to issues related to students’ future professions.

\(^{10}\) Earlier measures related to the labour market reforms of 2006 that generalized fixed-term employment
and introduced a new youth guarantee scheme and a reduction in employers’ payroll taxes.
Conclusion

Youth unemployment is high on the international, European and national political agenda. Youth structures are regarded by the interviewees as somehow taking advantage of this to influence more significantly the union agenda towards young workers, although this is not quantifiable in the chosen research design. However, a greater sensitivity to young people’s interests and concerns had already gained importance in the Dutch and Swedish confederations (except for Saco) before the Great Recession. In contrast, the Irish case is marked by a policy lag: despite the rapid rise in youth unemployment since the crisis, the ICTU’s progression towards young workers’ interests and needs has been delayed. The composition and young workers’ declining share in total membership might be an explanatory factor here – the relatively young age profile of the Swedish Saco certainly contributes to the relative prominence of youth issues on the union agenda. However, the Dutch youth structures provide evidence that numerical strength alone is not enough to explain the degree of youth structures’ influence. Likewise, since both Dutch and Irish youth structures have been involved in a process of reforming union governance systems, the ICTU restructuring of union structures can only clarify to a certain extent why its youth structures have been perceived as less influential on union actions prioritizing youth unemployment.

Differences in union responsiveness towards youth unemployment and youth issues generally should also be understood within their specific national-economic context and the political opportunity structure. In Ireland, the rapidly deteriorating economic situation and unilateral government austerity measures urgently required a union response, while at the same time the social partnership broke down, leaving little room for social dialogue. To mitigate the effects of the crisis, Irish unions have focused rather on the company level, but also on lobbying the government to revive the national social partnership. In contrast, apart from their institutional embeddedness in national policy-making structures, the Dutch youth structures were actually reborn out of the government pension reforms, making the unions particularly vulnerable towards ‘accusations’ within the mass media of favouring their older members and thus providing opportunities for the youth structures’ discursive power.

In the Swedish case, Saco’s membership has hardly been affected by the profound changes in voluntary unemployment insurance, but LO in particular, but also TCO have seen a significant membership decline, particularly among the young. The youth structures’ priorities within Saco remained fairly oriented towards the school-to-work transition, although in itself also affected by the crisis, while youth structures in the other two Swedish confederations have been able to put youth unemployment and youth union recruitment higher on the union agenda. Specifically in TCO a more innovative approach has been taken to transform union culture by rethinking how unions should adopt their language, visuals and messages. Finally, Swedish unions are not only lobbying the government, but Sweden’s collective bargaining system, marked by decentralized coordination, makes it possible for the social partners at sectoral and company level also to tackle youth unemployment.

Despite all these differences, some broad similarities can also be discerned. Apart from lobbying the government, the confederations and their affiliates are encouraging specific collective bargaining arrangements in the workplace and, beyond it, pursuing alliance-building to respond to youth unemployment and support young workers; their implementation has not been considered here. Coalition-building with pro-unemployed organizations is virtually absent in all cases, however. In the Dutch case the mobilization of the unemployed is traditionally marginal and union support has been hesitant (van den Oord, 1990), whereas the national social partnership shapes relations between the INOU and ICTU in Ireland. Primarily unions but also the non-union funds and job security councils are defending the rights of the unemployed in Sweden (Diedrich and Bergström, 2006). Undoubtedly,
coalition-building between youth structures and student organizations is an emerging pattern across the countries and aimed primarily at organizing school visits to raise awareness about unions and lobbying to improve the school-to-work transition. In this sense, youth structures’ significance for growth in union membership is crucial. However, additional progress can be made here and in other dimensions of union revitalization since all too often youth structures have no more than advisory status: they have been heard but are they really being listened to in union decision-making bodies? This article has demonstrated that the involvement of youth structures and their transformational capacity is still largely dependent on external pressures and in particular the context of increasing youth unemployment and the political attention paid to it.

**Funding**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**References**


FNV (2012) Vernieuw de vakbeweging! *Overeenkomst ‘de nieuwe vakbeweging in oprichting’*. Amsterdam: FNV.


Johansson E and Ringqvist L (2013) Halt in social partner talks to tackle unemployment. EIROnline. Available at: http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2013/02/articles/se1302019i.htm


