

Recommendations for **ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN TRADE UNIONS**



One of the main goals of the ETUC Youth Committee is to strengthen and empower youth in trade unions, to represent youth within ETUC and to empower national/federation trade union youth structures.

“Trade unions face an existential crisis. Either we recruit new, young members in considerable numbers, or within a matter of decades we will no longer exist as mass-membership organisations: if the current de-unionization trend continues, unions in Europe will lose more than 11 million members at least, i.e. 26 % of the current members, in the next 10 years.

The vast majority of European trade unions - 27 out of 31 countries - cannot stop membership decline and are experiencing a slow but almost continuous loss of trade union density.

The median age of union members has increased as well, many members are in their mid- 40s to early 50s. The percentage of people under 25 joining a union has fallen significantly. This is worrying because there is a strong association between joining young and remaining a member – people who do not join a union relatively

young are much less likely to join later. Recruitment of more young people is therefore crucial for the survival of the trade union movement.

Many unions try to recruit new members without having any overall strategic thinking on union activity and future prospects. How to recruit and retain new members must start with a shared analysis of the opportunities for and threats to trade union membership in a specific local and/or sectoral union, then identifying and making strategic choices.

Therefore, we encourage all European union’s leadership teams to start – if they haven’t already done so – making their own strategic choices including their youth structures and ask for the full backing of union federations and confederations.”

The objective of this document is to provide trade unions with recommendations to enable them to engage young workers in trade union structures.

The recommendations are based on the various inputs provided through the work of the ETUC Youth Committee, namely:

THESE RECOMMENDATIONS ARE BASED ON:

- › Experiences of our members and good practices from across Europe.
- › The results of a joint survey on youth involvement and representation in trade unions in Europe by ETUC and ITC-ILO.
- › The [report](#) “Boosting unions’ participation to guarantee quality transitions and employment to young people in Europe” published by ETUC Youth in 2018.
- › The [ILO Global Survey](#) “Review of Policies and Actions for the Integration of the Youth into Trade Unions”.

¹ “[The future of youth](#)” policy paper 2019. Extracted from the chapter “Organise, organise, organise”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRADE UNIONS

1. GET HOLD OF THE DATA

Knowing your potential members is the first step to attract them to your organisation. For this reason, data is key.

A number of trade unions do not keep membership data that is age-disaggregated. Consequently, these trade unions cannot quantify the percentage of young people in their membership. More importantly they cannot extrapolate data that would give indications as to which sectors these young people are primarily employed in and the type of employment they have.

AGE-DISAGGREGATED MEMBERSHIP DATABASE:

1.1 Ensure that your trade union organisation has an up to date database of its membership. The membership personal data should be segregated by: age, gender, labour market sector, and employment conditions. This not only provides a clear profile of the young people who are members of the trade union but also

provides trends on the youth labour market. This would prove to be essential in tailoring campaigns and trainings targeted at young people. Furthermore, with this information trade unions are better placed at identifying potential leadership material amongst the young members.

1.2 Personal data is delicate and governed by privacy regulations. It is therefore recommended that your trade union has one person who is responsible for and dedicated to collecting and managing this data about young people. This person would also be responsible for analysing the data and identifying trends.

1.3 Utilise resources such as national data and statistics to identify the involvement of young people in the labour market, by sectors and by type of working contracts. The more knowledge you have about the profile of youth in the labour market, the better you can target your message and deal with their specific needs.



2. RECRUITMENT AND OUTREACH

Actively addressing potential members is key to gain membership and involve young people. A lot of young people are not familiar with the work of trade unions. Therefore, trade unions need to invest additional effort to reach out to them.

Many young people are either facing difficulties entering the labour market, or they are unemployed, or they are working in non-standard forms of employment. All of them are potential members.

GETTING YOUNG PEOPLE INVOLVED:

2.1. Involve young people from an early stage: go to schools, vocational education and training institutes and universities to talk to young people even before they become workers. The sooner you start, the better it is. Educate and promote the values of trade unions, which will make it more likely that these values will be adopted and applied when these students enter the work force.

2.2. Explore how you can make membership fees more accessible for young members. Apply a student fee or even free membership. Alternatively, you could offer a discount or benefit cards to young members.

2.3. Offer dedicated services for young people and tailor-made support for different groups, such as unemployed young people and young workers in precarious work.

2.4. Target campaigns for young people with the specific aim of recruiting them as members of the trade union movement. This can be done by showing them the importance of trade union nowadays, informing them about their rights, their potential economic advantage and offering them a place for activism.

2.5. Create a youth friendly approach when recruiting new young members, by reaching them in events that are considered “cool” and attractive (for example, concerts, festivals, movies events etc.). Be present where young people are: festivals or events that you can join

or organise, where it is possible to combine fun with relevant topics and trade union “education” in a relaxed and friendly environment. Tackle precarious workers and unemployed people.

2.6. Peer-to-peer approach works best. Young people should talk to young people, they speak the same language; they have the same problems. Empower the young members of your trade union to campaign and reach out to other young people. These people will be your mobilisers, invest in them.

2.7. Make use of your social capital, encourage every member of the organisation to try to attract new members. To do so, various types of awards/benefits for attracting new members may be helpful. Every union member can be a trade union organiser.

2.8. Reach out to marginalised groups of workers. Young people are not a homogenic group and among them there are specific vulnerable groups with their own challenges. Identify those categories of young workers who are vulnerable and underrepresented within the labour market in order to provide them with tailor made support. Organise them by approaching them with specific awareness campaigns and different partnerships and alliances, corresponding to their unique situation.



3. YOUTH FRIENDLY APPROACH AND COMMUNICATION



For existing and potential young members, it is crucial they are informed about the work of a trade union in a language that is understandable and shared by young people.

Trade unions already have different tools and ways of communication with their members, but in most cases, these are not designed specifically for young people. Young people have well-honed digital skills and abilities, some trade union organisations do not currently relate with these communication tools. Except for the social media tools and specific awareness-raising activities in schools/universities, which are targeting young people, trade unions have not yet designed clear strategies to reach, recruit, organize and promote young people.

COMMUNICATION AND CAMPAIGNING:

- 3.1.** Investing in the image of the trade union is essential. A simple and clear message on what the movement represents is a good start to prepare young people to join.
- 3.2.** Speak the language of young people. Campaigns targeted at young people need to appeal and attract young people. Invest in targeted campaigns, where your messages are aimed at your specific target audience.
- 3.3.** Use communication tools that appeal to young people and attract their attention, such as social media, videos, podcasts or newsletters. Young people are internet savvy and are constantly present online.
- 3.4.** Offer specific and concrete help to young people, e.g. a hotline or chat which they can consult in case of job-related problems, questions concerning rights at the workplace etc.

4. ESTABLISH A STRONG YOUTH STRUCTURE IN YOUR TRADE UNION

Setting up and having a youth structure within a trade union ensures a number of positive outcomes, not only for youth but also for the trade unions, such as:

- › meaningful participation of young people in the trade union;
- › systematic work on youth topics;
- › capacity building of youth trade unions and investment in human resources.

SETTING UP A YOUTH STRUCTURE:

4.1. Establish a youth structure (YS), e.g. Youth Committee, that will be a permanent structure for young trade union activists. It should have its own statute to ensure

its autonomy from the trade union organisation. At the same time, the YS should be anchored in the statute of the trade union organisation. The YS should also have a mandate, set in its statute, which is clearly defined and known to the entire organisation. The autonomy of the YS will empower young members to discuss the topics that are relevant to them.

4.2. Set up regular meetings for the YS members. Meetings can be physical, but also digital, especially if traveling is time-consuming.

4.3. A YS that is autonomous and active is the first step to creating a network of and for young people. Such a network is an opportunity for recruitment but also for the organisation to adapt to the new trends related to communication and digitalisation.



5. INVEST IN YOUR YOUTH STRUCTURE

Invest financial, human, and material resources to ensure that the YS can function. Provide basic resources that can lead to a fully operational structure and positive results.

YSs are not normally financially independent organisations, they are limited in their own resources, and are highly dependent on the support of the trade union organisation. If investment is lacking it will not be a surprise that youth membership also lacks.

RESOURCES ALLOCATED TO THE YOUTH STRUCTURE:

5.1. Support your YS by having a paid secretariat/youth coordinator/youth officer who will be able to work on the specialised topics and follow the work regular, especially where the leadership of a youth structure is working voluntarily. Somebody, fully employed, who can work directly with young people and for young people can ensure continuity of work and permanent activities. The work of this person should be fully dedicated: they should put in place specific mechanisms and strategies to address young people, go “in the field” and be present where and when needed.

5.2. Set up a designated working area, with the appropriate equipment, for the YS. A place where they can meet and work.

5.3. Provide sufficient financial support for the implementation of a youth programme and its activities. Autonomy of the YS also means that it manages its financial resources. In this manner young people can implement their ideas and can also be accountable.

5.4. Assist the YS in getting external financial resources, if needed, such as project funding, sponsorships, support from foundations, etc., by helping them with expertise in e.g. writing project proposals.

5.5. Ensure you provide your moral and political support, and commitment to activities and initiatives for young people.



6. INVOLVEMENT OF YOUTH STRUCTURES IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

The involvement of young people in trade unions should not be aimed only at increasing the passive membership, but rather ensuring meaningful participation of young people within the trade union structures. This will not only strengthen the youth structure, but can also help the trade union invest in human resources.

Young members are still too little represented in the decision-making bodies and processes of the trade union organisations. The role of young people in the union should be made more incisive. Currently there seems to be too little space for them, not only at political level.

YOUTH INVOLVEMENT:

- 6.1. Be open to young people's suggestions on all topics, not just the youth-related issues. They may seem unimportant or unusual, but they are important to them.
- 6.2. Empower young workers in trade unions for greater participation in decision-making processes (within the trade union), involve them and listen to them, give them power to decide and the opportunity to take up responsibility.
- 6.3. Ensure youth representatives have guaranteed power at the level of trade unions to speak and vote in the highest decision-making bodies.
- 6.4. Establish youth quotas, a certain percentage of young peoples' involvement in decision-making bodies.
- 6.5. Ask for and listen to youths' voice regarding the problems and challenges they face in order to develop strategies/campaigns/action plans that provide solutions and opportunities.
- 6.6. Even in less formal decision-making processes (regular meetings, working groups, etc.) make sure youth opinion is being heard and taken into account.
- 6.7. Ensure the youth dimension is included in all trade union strategies and action plans. Youth-related topics must be incorporated in the regular work of the organisation. It is important not only to offer opportunities, but also to give appropriate support and commitment. This motivates young people to increase their skills and knowledge. It also builds an appropriate level of trust within the structure.



7. TRADE UNION POLICIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Trade union work needs to be inclusive of the challenges and needs of young people. These challenges sometimes are not mainstreamed and would be specific for young people or sectors of young people. Hence, policies should be both inclusive and specific to such issues.

POLICIES:

- 7.1. Address the challenges young people are facing within the labour market. Create specific policies and legislative initiatives to better promote their rights, to facilitate their access to the labour market and to quality and green jobs. Develop policies on topics such as apprenticeships, internships, youth unemployment, precarious work, platform work, youth wages, zero-hour contracts, discrimination (based on age and other grounds), etc.
- 7.2. Broaden the scope of topics that the trade union is addressing to get closer to young people. Identify areas that young people are interested in and how they are connected to the work of trade unions and make links. Such topics can be: environment, migration, LGBTQI+ related topics, gender equality, precarious work and non-standards forms of employment, platform work, social justice, etc.
- 7.3. Include young members in social dialogue, negotiations, and collective bargaining.
- 7.4. Invest in research on legislation (national and international, including conventions) that can be a tool to better protect them. Also, it will give you the tools to make young people and their needs more visible to the authorities and to the rest of the people.



8. CAPACITY BUILDING OF YOUNG TRADE UNIONISTS

Investing in human resources will improve the work of trade unionists and youth structures which can lead to improvement of the situation of young people in the labour market. At the same time, this helps the work of a trade union and secures expertise of trade union members.

CAPACITY BUILDING:

- 8.1.** Involve young trade unionists in educational activities and training provided by the trade union. Also, set up specific youth trainings for young members only. Ensure that these trainings correspond to the needs of young members and their interests. Bear in mind that marginalised young people have specific needs that should be met.
- 8.2.** Provide young trade unionists with opportunities to attend trade union trainings abroad and learn new practices from their peers.
- 8.3.** Invest in capacity building of young trade unionist on collective bargaining, advocacy and lobbying. They will learn the most by practice, therefore involve them in those processes.
- 8.4.** Invest in new young members through mentoring and coaching and ensure knowledge transfer.



9. ENCOURAGE COOPERATION AND NETWORKING

Making alliances with different organisations can strengthen the role of a trade union Youth Structure, their visibility and outreach, as well as increase their expertise.

CREATING ALLIANCES:

- 9.1. Map youth networks and identify organisations to build partnerships – trade unions can often find allies when it comes to youth issues. Youth councils are active in many countries, as well as at regional and local levels.
- 9.2. Make partnership on topic-specific issues. There are different local/ national/ international organisations working on topics of youth, gender, equality, environment, etc. that can contribute to the work of a trade union. At the same time this increases the visibility of trade union outreach and can even result in new members.
- 9.3. Gather and share information with good practices on youth involvement in trade unions in different countries or at the federation level. Put these examples in practice in your own organisation.
- 9.4. Support young trade unionist's involvement at regional and European level, where they can share practices, learn from their peers and get ideas they can implement also at their local/national level.





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