

Vulnerable Workers in Times of Social Transformations

Discrimination and Participation of Young and Older Workers,
and Social Dialogue Stances

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Inclusion of Vulnerable Age Groups through Membership and Participation

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Abstract This chapter examines to what extent social partners are able to successfully identify issues concerning the vulnerable age groups of workers, to represent the interests of those groups, and to introduce those issues into the negotiation system constituting the framework of social dialogue institutions in different countries. Of particular emphasis within the chapter is the subject of the role of representatives of vulnerable groups present within social organisations, including the topic of special structures created to strengthen the position of those groups.

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1 Introduction

For many years Europe has been undergoing the expansion of the importance of social dialogue as a means of forming positive relations between social partners, and achieving various agreements on social and economic matters.

The dialogue, established and conducted on many levels – from the European, to the national level, to the regional and company level – has been meant to achieve stability and to profit all sides interested in the proper functioning of the labour market and the development of economy. The effectiveness and the importance of the dialogue were further guaranteed by the participation of appropriately-placed delegates of governments, trade unions and employers' organizations – with all sides being properly represented.

In recent years, however, most European countries have been experiencing a crisis of this public institution, which has been chastised by al-

most all of its actors. Schnabel (2012) points out that one of the key topics to have perturbed the participants is the question of the representativeness of social partners.

Research into the condition of employees from the two vulnerable age groups prompts a specific means of analysing the way in which they are being represented by trade unions. In most countries, the level of unionisation has been gradually dropping, as a result of economic changes. The changes in the sizes of most companies, with the increasing participation of small companies and the growing importance of the service sector affects the potential unionisation process adversely as well. The growing percentage of individual contracts at the expense of group agreements acts as a detriment as well. Yet the trade unions have remained - in accordance with legal regulations - the only representatives of employees during negotiations at the national, regional and company level. The coalescence of these phenomena leads to a question about the extent to which trade unions are able to represent the vulnerable age groups in the labour market, as well as the issue of whether or not the unions have worked out appropriate strategies and proposals to let them encourage employees to join unions and put their trust in them. The matter of obstacles encountered when organizing and representing the interests of vulnerable age groups by the unions is of high importance as well, particularly concerning the awareness and recognition of those hindrances. The means of recognizing the needs and expectations of the vulnerable groups, the effectiveness thereof, as well as the matter of including those wants into the negotiations is of no lesser importance, as is the question of active participation of representatives of these groups.

The aforementioned subjects - described in this introduction only in a very cursory manner - were the subject of a series of interviews with representatives of a number of trade unions, employers' organizations, and labour market institutions. Their views were confronted with the opinions of young (25 or younger) and older (55+) employees.

2 Union Membership in Vulnerable Age Groups

Pedersini (2010) states that the primary issue concerning the integration of employees in the labour market by social dialogue actors is the question about the actual share (membership and participation) of those groups in the daily activities of trade unions and employers.

In recent years, most European countries have been witnessing a constant decrease in the number of members. The phenomenon has been the subject of numerous analyses, yet, from the perspective of this research, they are not particularly relevant, though it is worth mentioning that out of the six countries where the research was conducted, four have experi-

enced a drop in the number of union members, while only two (Belgium and Italy) have experienced a slight increase.¹

Table 1. Net union membership as a proportion of wage and salary earners in employment

Country	1990	1995	2000	2005	2011
Austria	46,9%	41,1%	36,6 %	33,3%	27,8%
Belgium	53,9%	55,7%	49,5%	52,9%	50,4%
Italy	38,8%	38,1%	34,8%	33,6%	35,2%
Poland	36,5%	20,2%	17,2%	21,5%	14,1 (2010)
Spain	12,5%	16,3%	16,7%	14,7%	15,6% (2010)
United Kingdom	39,7%	34,4%	30,1%	27,1%	27,1 % (2010)

Source [online]: <http://www.uva-aias.net/208>

This general data does not reflect the processes occurring in trade unions regarding particular age groups – especially concerning their participation in trade unions. Based on the available data, as well as estimates provided by trade unions, an attempt at such analysis has been made, and even though it should not be treated as a certainty, the results have revealed considerable differences.

Table 2. Union membership in vulnerable age groups

	Austria	Belgium	Italy	Poland	Spain	UK
Young workers	no data available	45 % (< 30 years)	10 % (<25 years)	5% (<30 years)	7 % (16-24 years)	8% (16-24 years)
Older workers	no data available	43 % (> 50 years)	80 % (>55 years)	40% (>55 years)	20 % (> 55 years)	27% (> 50 years)

Sources: Belgium: van Guys 2010; Italy, Poland and UK: Estimates indicated by unionists interviewed 2012; Spain: National Institute of Statistics, 2010.

The statistics based on the interviews conducted as part of the LinkAge project allow for an additional insight as well (Table 3).

¹ Union density rate (net union membership as a proportion of wage and salary earners in employment <http://www.uva-aias.net/208>) has been taken into account.

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Table 3. Union membership among vulnerable age groups representatives interviewed during the LinkAge project

Country	Austria	Belgium	Italy	Poland	Spain	United Kingdom
	Total	TU members	Total	TU member	Total	TU members
Younger workers	8	0	9	5	10	1
Men	3	0	4	2	5	1
Women	5	0	5	3	5	0
Older workers	8	4	10	10	10	8
Men	4	2	5	5	6	4
Women	4	2	5	5	4	4

Source: LinkAge project

Although the sample available to the researchers was limited, the data - incomplete as it may be - collected during the research has matched the tendencies regarding the membership in trade unions.

In the majority of the countries - with the exception of Belgium - trade unions have a far greater percentage of older members than younger ones. The estimated number of young people who belong to trade unions is ca. 5% to 10%.² The sole exception is Belgium, with its exceptionally high unionisation level - 45% of employees younger than 30 years are members of trade unions. Furthermore, the union density rates among young workers is usually much lesser than the average for the total workforce. Only in the case of Spain do the experts on the dynamics of Spanish unionisation hold that unions not only have increased their membership figures but also its composition has become more representative of the evolution of the total workforce (ES-EXP1. See also: Beneyto 2012; Alós et al. 2011).

The union participation levels differ considerably between younger and older employees. In Spain and the United Kingdom (Table 2), union density among the older employees is three times higher than among the younger ones. Even greater differences can be observed in Poland, and, particularly, in Italy. Only in Belgium are both age groups represented more or less similarly in trade unions.

² In the case of Austria, official data of unionisation of vulnerable age groups was not available, but out of the total of 1.2 million ÖGB members, 154 000 members are younger than 30 years and 43,000 members are 19 or younger. In total about 30% of the active population is unionised (AT-TUR4).

3 Obstacles to Unionisation of Employees

The results of the research conducted during the project have made it possible to attempt to describe the key obstacles in the unionisation of employees from the vulnerable age groups.

3.1 The Trade Unions' Point of View

From the trade unions' point of view, the key obstacle is the weakening position of the employees in the labour market, the result of which is their decaying attachment to the work place, and the individualization of labour relations.

The unions admit that fewer and fewer employees at the company level ever come in touch with any trade union. The Development Department of the NSZZ Solidarność has pointed out that in Poland, only every fourth employee works for a company in which there is a trade union. The low union density rates are directly associated with the recent evolution of the labour market and the occupational segregation of young workers. Youth employment in every country covered by our investigation is concentrated in less unionised sectors, such as the wholesale sector, the retail trade, hotels, restaurants, or services. The same can be observed among workers who find employment via employment agencies. A Spanish trade union representative made the following observation on the subject:

Young workers in those Federations with greater influence in the Union were the first to be expelled from the labour market. At present moment, those few who are still working, they do so mainly in service sectors such as retail distribution. Those working in the industry were the first to be fired because they were mostly employed in outsourced companies. [...] This is the main difficulty: The thing is that young workers have been massively expelled from those economic sectors with the strongest union organization. [...] It is very difficult to be taken into consideration [refers to youth demands] in a bargaining process where you are not even present. (ES-TUR3)

Another important factor is the fact that labour relations in these sectors are characterized by a high degree of individualisation of labour relations, which have considerably affected the current labour market. On the substantive level, employment contracts have become more diverse e.g. in terms of hours worked, job descriptions and contractual status. On a procedural level, contracts are now less determined by collective bargaining and are negotiated on a more individual basis, which frequently involves the imposition of terms without prior negotiation (a phenomenon

occurring particularly often in Poland [Gliksman 2008]). In the context of the current recession, these processes have given rise to an apparent willingness of employees to accept changes in their terms and conditions of employment in order to retain their jobs. Brown & Marsden (2011) point out that, given this context, it would not be unreasonable to assume that, on the one hand, the lower levels of trade union participation among younger employees have also undermined the power of social dialogue in addressing the very significant problem of youth unemployment and the casualisation of youth employment – and, on the other, that the relatively higher levels of unionisation among older workers would render the issue of extending working lives a salient issue for social dialogue agents.

Additionally, in almost every case, the unions have admitted that the lack of employment stability – as well as the nature of the short-term contracts that are so easy to annul – discourage the employees, both those younger and older, from joining unions. In Poland, the unions find their activity considerably more difficult, as until only a very recent time, they had only been allowed to grant memberships to employees with regular contracts; the possibility to recruit workers with civil-law contracts or mandate contracts has only been given recently, while the possibility to recruit the self-employed is still being blocked due to legal loopholes. The matter should be stressed, as those three forms of employment concern the vast majority of young people in this country.

The limited success rate of the unions in recruiting young people may stem from the fact that the unions find it difficult to name the benefits of unionising. The representatives of trade unions stress the fact that, considering the current condition of the economy and social dialogue, they are unable to match the expectations that, in their opinion, young people have when it comes to trade unions – that is, ensuring the stability of employment (open-ended contracts), appropriate wages, and protection from termination.

The unionists have pointed out that – particularly in Belgium and Poland – younger workers join unions only when they have particular needs, e.g. before getting an open-ended contract or when they need protection by unions (Kubisa; Ostrowski; 2014). Once they get a long-term contract, they leave the unions. The unions are aware of the problem, and have experienced their frustration over the issue. As a Belgian union representative put it:

It is a real challenge to keep our young members. They join the union to be protected, particularly in times of crisis, but they do not stay. (BE-TUR5)

It is also due to those concerns that trade unions are less willing to create long-term strategies regarding the recruitment of new members – while the negative examples of quick abandonment of membership are a convenient excuse to ignore this particular area of union activity at the company level.

The unionists have also pointed out that younger employees more and more often are indifferent to any attempts by the unions to assist them. Another Belgian union activist has stated:

We organize free training, even paying the cost of their transport, and they do not come! They do not see the point. (BE-TUR4)

Trade unions have also pointed out that, concerning young employees, the regulations pertaining to the negotiation system are highly unfavourable to their activities as well. In Spain and Poland trade unionist underlined, that the provisions of collective agreements or other agreements are automatically applicable to all workers within the level defined by the agreement, regardless of whether they are union members. So, workers may find no reasons to join unions.

In Spain's case, the unionists have also mentioned that in some companies the trade unions (known as the 'yellow' unions) are usually set up with the employers' support, as a means of obstructing the implementation of class trade unionism. This is particularly evident in the service sector, such as the retail and hospitality industries, which employ the majority of working young people.

3.2 The Employees' Perspective

In all countries, except Belgium, the young people interviewed expressed little interest in the work of trade unions or total lack of it. Young people think that unions only represent workers on regular contracts, which, moreover, are often those with higher seniority. Besides ignoring what the unions do, many young people interviewed have said they rely more on other types of organizations, even when it comes to the defence of their working conditions.

Older workers have expressed a stronger commitment with the unions and a greater knowledge of their activity, however, they do not recognize unions as effective agents in the fight against age discrimination.

4 Supporting Factors in Unionisation of Vulnerable Age Groups

In spite of the aforementioned difficulties in unionising employees from vulnerable age groups, the research conducted as part of the project has made it possible to recognize certain factors which – the negative tendencies notwithstanding – allow for effective solutions and action in this regard.

There is no doubt that young people pay considerable attention to the social view of trade unions. This involves union traditions, which, in most

countries (with the exception of Poland), are remarkably rich. The role and position of trade unions in the workplace is of high importance as well, as is their participation in activities aimed at helping or training the unemployed (for instance in Belgium).

Regarding the young people, it is furthermore of particular importance to the unions to reach those who have not entered the labour market yet, or who have only just begun their careers. No doubt, national regulations on helping and representing employees is of high influence there. Such is the case with the Chamber of Labour (AK) in Austria, which has a compulsory membership for all employees, who automatically become union members as soon as their employment begins; the same goes for the Austrian Economic Chambers (WKÖ), for all employers.

In contrast to the unions' concerns, young people do not always treat memberships in unions as temporary tools, and are aware of the fact that the unions' capabilities are often limited. Still, it appears that reaching employees or prospective employees at an early stage is the key; young people do know that there is a great potential within the unions, which allows them to conduct training, run seminars, or engage in debates regarding the labour market, the labour law, etc. Most trade unions from most countries researched do indeed engage in such practices.

A representative of the Democratic Students' Alliance, working together with the NSZZ Solidarność on a campaign to increase the awareness of young people and to unionise them, has said:

Today's labour market is significantly different, particularly for the young people, who more and more often lack any rights. Trade unions must run information campaigns to show that young employees have rights as well, that they may join unions and profit from doing so. (PL-PO-1)

Young people have stated that they would expect assistance from trade unions should they find themselves unemployed; being helped in securing employment is a priority to the young. The young employees believe that trade unions should approach them more actively in the workplace. Even though they might prove unable to provide actual help concerning wages, the unions can still work to integrate employees from the vulnerable age groups in the workplace.

Unions can also use the fact that in spite of the increasing amount of problems to face, young people can still remain united and are willing to manifest their dissatisfaction together - including their disappointment in the current economy or labour conditions.

A representative of a British trade union has stated:

Young people join all kinds of organisations, in fact young people are by nature very collective, they like being with their own peers they like

doing things in groups, they join all kinds of like protest organisations, they're much more minded to get involved in collective organisations. (UK-TUR1)

In practice, this poses a major challenge to the unions – the question is how to convince young people that when it comes to addressing the issues related to labour conditions, they can and should join trade unions.

5 Participation of Vulnerable Age Groups within Social Dialogue Actors

5.1 Special Structures Uniting Vulnerable Age Groups

One of the activities aimed at the inclusion of vulnerable age groups in the social dialogue is the strengthening of their position within the organisation, via the creation of structures for the representatives of particular groups.

Out of the six countries researched for the project, the trade unions in five have had such structures. Interestingly, these have been created primarily for young employees.– however, most trade unions have been found to have special sections for pensioners and retirees, which actively participate in the activities of the respective union (Austria, Belgium and Poland).

The Belgian trade unions appear to pay special attention to the matter of creating structures for people from various age groups – the situation concerning the issue of union density in Belgium seems considerably better than in the other countries.

The unions in Belgium have created age-related working groups to better address the needs of all of their members, from the moment in which they enter the workforce, to the time when they leave it.

In the case of the CSC, which has developed specific structures for young people, the youth group is usually divided into three sub-groups: students, unemployed young people, and young employees. They work together on selected subjects, with the aim of establishing inter-group reflections. The FGTB has had two specific youth organisations for a number of years: the FGTB Students (students, apprentices, interns) and the FGTB Trade Union Youth (young employees and welfare recipients aged under 35). The two groups have recently merged in order to reinforce each other. Similar actions have been taken by major trade unions in the United Kingdom (UK-TUR1).

Belgium has special structures grouping pre-pensioners, pensioners and older unemployed persons.³

³ This concerns the CSC and the FGTB.

It is a very active group because it is composed of former activists and delegates who now devote themselves to union work. (BE-TUR-1)

In Poland, there are internal union structures that group primarily pensioners and retirees, that is, people who have already exited the labour market, or are about to do so. In Spain, certain changes have occurred in recent years as well. Union members over 55 years were traditionally transferred to Pensioners and Retired Union Federations, when they became unemployed, in order to receive advice on the different paths to inactivity covered by the social protection system. However, a recent agreement of the most representative union at the national level in Catalonia (CC.OO) has established that those older union members who lose their jobs will remain in their Union Federation, until their effective retirement from the labour market.

The structures formed for specific age groups often promote or implement measures and solutions deemed important by their members. For instance, the Youth organisation of the ÖGB (ÖGJ) in Austria supported the implementation of a Youth Guarantee. In addition, the sections plan and conduct special seminars and informational campaigns aimed at vulnerable age groups – particularly younger employees.

The existence of structures dedicated to specific age groups has been subject to debate in the unions themselves, as not all unionists are certain as to the necessity of forming such cells.

A specific positive example is that of the Young Workers Forum created by the TUC in the United Kingdom. Each member union names two delegates under the age of 27 as members of the Forum, which is currently involved in three priority campaigns: the matters of wages and employment, the issue of promoting unions among younger people, and the issue of housing. There is also one seat on the General Council, reserved specifically for a younger member.

In most cases such age-related structures are merely advisory and opinion-giving bodies. In the United Kingdom, the Unite West Midlands has a regional Young Members' Committee, which regularly gives recommendations to the executives on the issues of training and the educational needs of young workers; the regional branch then works on meeting those expectations. Other branches of Unite have younger representatives as well; their tasks involve identifying the issues that specifically affect the younger workers (UKTUR3).

Of particular note are the Italian trade unions, where retirees have long constituted a sizable percentage of union membership, and where the first structure created by a trade union and aimed specifically at retirees can be traced back to 1949 and the CGIL, with major union confederations following within a few years – eventually specifically referencing the need to create such structures in their statutes. Ever since then, the new structures

and newly created affiliate retiree unions have successfully managed to represent the retirees within social dialogue – particularly, at the local level – for several generations. Moreover, the Italian unions have long taken into consideration the fact that, due to their age, their retired members will often welcome assistance related to various aspects of their lives whose importance grows as they themselves age. Therefore, the unions have been actively meeting those needs, providing retirees with respective assistance in a number of matters – from medical and legal, to helping the older people find productive means of entertainment and spending free time.

In Poland, during the last five years, the largest trade unions have managed to create structures aimed at the young people (under 30 years of age) as well – the Youth Section of the NSZZ Solidarność, the Youth Forum of the FZZ, as well as the Youth Committee of the OPZZ. A representative of the NSZZ Solidarność admits, nevertheless, that the role of those structures have not yet been clearly defined, thus leading to disappointment among both the activists involved in their operations, and within the union itself:

No-one described the goals of such structures; were they e.g. supposed to take up the issues of the young and thus exert influence on legal solutions concerning their problems, or were they to participate in negotiations on various levels. There was no plan to be implemented back then, and no specific tasks. If such a structure can create this and is going to represent its members, even internally, then it will attract people. Merely spending time with them is not enough. (PL-TUR1)

Another representative of trade unions doubts the feasibility of creating such structures:

Perhaps their existence is feasible on the national level, since they allow for taking specific positions or methods to organize young workers; however, they are hardly feasible on the company level, as it is better to get young people involved in the already existing structures than it is to create brand new ones for them. (PL-TUR2)

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Table 4. Structures for younger/older workers within trade unions

	Young workers (>25)	Older workers (55<)
Austria	Youth Organisation of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGJ) with similar structures in trade unions under the umbrella of Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB)	-
Belgium	CSC: structures for young workers and young unemployed people,FGTB: group for students and structures for young workers recently merged into one structure ETUC Youth Committee	CSC: group composed of early retired, pensioners and older unemployed persons (similar structures as well in FGTB)
Italy	-	-
Poland	Youth Forum of the FZZ, the Youth Section of the NSZZ Solidarność, the Youth Committee of the OPZZ	-
Spain	Youth organisation of the Workers' Commission in Catalonia(similar youth structures in all Spanish trade unions	-
UK	Young Workers Forum, executive committees of Unite and Unison Trade Union	-

Source: the LinkAge investigation

Many trade unions have also been creating temporary groups devoted to specific subjects, e.g. ones which, at the particular moment, are subject to public debate or negotiations – however, as the unions have admitted, the membership in such groups is not necessarily synonymous with actually representing a particular age group (Austria, Poland).

The employers’ organizations have been creating youth sections in recent years as well, in order to promote entrepreneurship among young people, as well as to support the employers. As such, these organizations typically involve themselves in providing training to young people, as well as in running meetings, conferences, and business trips. Occasionally, they attempt to participate in the business matters of their supervisory unions, although – as their representatives are hesitant to admit – their influence on the decision-making process is highly limited, as is their presence in the structures of employers’ organizations. However, the act of participation in these groups is often considered a prerequisite step to eventually begin participating in the major structures.

5.2 Actual Influence of Representatives of Vulnerable Age Groups on Trade Union Activities

Even though structures that group specific age groups do exist, their members are not always convinced of their actual influence on the activities of the entire union. The representatives of Polish trade unions have pointed to the fact that their structures are of the 'problem-related' nature, rather than 'statute' – as such, they have no direct political influence on the unions' activities. Nevertheless, the situation is considerably better for the vulnerable age groups in some countries, in which their representatives directly participate in the planning and implementation phases of union activities.

Belgium, where the CSC has created an action plan to integrate younger persons in all decisions, structures, communication, etc., has been a good example of the approach. The federal youth coordinator is in charge of monitoring the implementation of the plan. Still, even Belgian unionists from the vulnerable age groups are not fully satisfied with their influence on the activities of their unions: in the CSC, for instance, the seniors are currently exploring the best strategies to secure a real role in the union. They sometimes feel that they are marginalized and that others take the important decisions – including those that directly concern them – within union structures. A Belgian union activist asks thus:

We are very well organised. We have a bureau and different committees, and we meet regularly to define our guidelines and positions. However, one places us in the category of non-active from an economic point of view but also in the organization. Do we still have a place in the unions? (BE-TUR7)

This may be due to the fact that this group includes pre-pensioners, pensioners and the older unemployed, but no older employees. As a result, decisions concerning the working conditions of older employees and pensions are taken mainly by the affiliated unions.

It has been observed as well that some Belgian trade union structures have implemented specific mandates in working groups at different levels of the organisation specifically designed for young people to promote their representation; however, some young people cannot hold the mandates because trade unions way of activity is not suitable for them (daily meetings, additional responsibilities, etc.) (BE-TUR-9).

Direct actions to get young employees involved with elections are not effective enough, either. A representative of a Belgian union has observed:

We organised a campaign for the last workplace elections in 2012 to get young people on the lists and to encourage them to vote. I had to train young people to do their job properly. (BE-TUR2)

As a result, only a few young people stood as candidates and an equally small number of young employees cast their votes. Trade unions have stated that young people are also often employed in precarious jobs and therefore fear losing their positions should they stand for election. According to a Belgian unionist (BE-TUR5), this is also because young employees do not always see the necessity of having union representatives at the company level:

They do not see the point of a union presence at the workplace. At the same time, when we ask why young activists are candidates for union elections, it is precisely because they have witnessed unpleasant events in the company. We must work with them on this paradox.

A good example of genuine inclusion of vulnerable age groups in the labour market comes from Austria, where the representation of the interests of vulnerable age groups and their inclusion in decision making process takes place at different level – e.g. at the company level, the employees elect their work council representatives. At the regional level, the employees elect the AKs (The Chamber of Labour) employees parliament. Within the organisational structure of ÖGB, the youth organisations' inclusion in the decision-making process is highly formalised. That is not the case for the older employees, as there is no specific structure.

At the national level in Austria, the Youth organisation of the ÖGB (ÖGJ) has a vote in the highest decision-making bodies of ÖGB (ATTUR4). Similar rights are reported by a youth representative within the Union of Salaried Employees of the Private Sector and of Printers, Journalists and Press Employees (GPA-djp) (ATTUR1).

At the company level, there are youth representatives⁴ (*Jugendvertrauensrat*) within the work councils which are elected by apprentices and young employees (<23 years), and which represent their interests at the company level.

The Chamber of Labour includes young people through more informal processes: The Chamber of Labour for Upper Austria (AK OÖ) includes younger employees through projects (ATTUR6). The Chamber of Labour for Burgenland (AK Burgenland) takes the opinion of student representatives gathered via specific seminars into consideration when dealing to certain subjects (ATTUR2).

Young people are barely represented in the supervisory structures of the organizations – both trade unions and employers' organizations – which stems primarily from the system of election, which rewards people with

4 About 3 000 youth representatives in Austria (aged <25), compared to 65 000 works council representatives (ATTUR4)

longer work history and greater accumulation of trust. Often, however, older employees are well-represented in the supervisory structures, typically due to their long-time memberships. Trade unions in which elections occur every 4 years have pointed out that the average age of their members has been steadily growing, and have named the lack of future replacements for current members as one of the reasons – this, in turn, causes difficulties in cases when older activists retire, often resulting in the interruption of the respective union’s activities within the company.

Interestingly, even though – as mentioned above – structures that group older employees are a rarity within trade unions, there is nevertheless a prevalent opinion that older people do indeed have real influence on the activities of the unions. The opinions expressed by union representatives from Austria confirm this:

We do not say we need in particular persons aged 55+ in decision making bodies. But they are involved if there are persons [in this age group] in works councils or within the trade union. (AT-TUR5)

Older persons are better included in decision making as they tend work in higher positions within the organisation. There is no special attention paid to the inclusion of certain age-groups in decision making. (AT-TUR6)

The words of a representative of an Italian trade union summarise these observations quite well:

Vulnerable employees occupy a very important role, but the subjects involved in the social dialogue are those who are already in the labour market. Therefore, the youth are out of the picture. Everybody talks about the youth, but nobody does anything for them in practice. We have been working with the aim of increasing apprenticeship contracts in several sectors and promote turnovers in enterprises, with the purpose of increasing youth employment. (IT-TUR2)

5.3 Participation of Representatives of Vulnerable Age Groups in Negotiations

During the research, no examples have been found of circumstances in which employees under 25 or above 55 were formally represented during negotiations or consultations. The issues of youth unemployment and of the re-collocation of employees over 55 have been faced by policy makers within the issue of labour policy plans, which has been discussed with the social partners in consultation commissions regulated by the law. However, even the policy makers have stressed the fact that labour policies

have never focused on the issue of age, but rather on issues connected to particular statuses with a standardized outline for the whole population of reference (disabilities, addictions, etc.). This characterization is derived from the presence of a homogeneous employment situation, which has only recently highlighted the greater vulnerability of employees under 25 and over 55. Social partners and policy makers are facing this unprecedented issue, which necessitates a deferred period of time for implementation that poses a danger of degrading the effectiveness of the activated actions and policies.⁵

5.4 Actions Aimed at Vulnerable Age Groups

Independently of the aforementioned activities, trade unions have attempted to conduct various actions that have targeted the vulnerable age groups.

In most cases, such actions are part of the programmes financed or co-financed by the administration. A particularly high number of such actions has been observed in Austria, where the projects ‘Youth coaching’⁶ and ‘Fit2Work’⁷ were implemented by the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection (BMASK). The platform ‘Work & Age’ (‘Arbeit und Alter’)⁸ was a common project created by social partners to provide entrepreneurs and HR managers with information on subjects related to age and work (intergenerational management). NESTORGOLD⁹ is a BMASK initiative – an award for successful age management projects – further supported by social partners (ATER2, ATER1). ‘WAGE: Winning Age, Getting Future’¹⁰ is a social partners’ project in Upper Austria, acting as an inducer of innovation, and a centre of expertise in generation management (ATFUR5, ATFUR6).

The Belgian unions have suggested the development of some new programmes concerning employment as well; for instance, in order to increase the hiring of younger employees in Brussels, the unions have proposed to better match the employers’ needs and the job offers given to younger

5 With the exception of Austria, where youth representatives may also participate in the collective bargaining processes (AT-TUR1).

6 [http://www.neba.at/jugendcoaching/warum.raw?task=callelement&item_id=264&element=f85c494b-2b32-4109-b8c1-083cca2b7db6&method=download&args\[0\]=e4cf2ab9230cfd088ee74aaaa0d5ee07](http://www.neba.at/jugendcoaching/warum.raw?task=callelement&item_id=264&element=f85c494b-2b32-4109-b8c1-083cca2b7db6&method=download&args[0]=e4cf2ab9230cfd088ee74aaaa0d5ee07)

7 <http://www.fit2work.at/home/>

8 <http://www.arbeitundalter.at/>

9 <http://www.nestorgold.at/>

10 <http://www.wage.at/>

employees at the local level, since, in some areas, the unemployment rates of younger people remain very high, even though the local companies are looking for applicants. The idea is to develop training within the company. The employers hire a young person for one year on an employment contract. They train the individual, and then decide whether or not to keep the young employee at the end of the training year, after assessing motivation and the skills acquired.

The second initiative concerns the issue of the employment of younger employees living in Brussels. The main problem is that over 50% of jobs in the city are held by people who live outside Brussels. It should therefore be possible to improve the hiring of unemployed young people who live in the poorest neighbourhoods by giving them priority when being hired. One possibility would be to require companies to establish quotas in favour of the employees who live in Brussels.

The Experience Fund is another federal initiative designed to increase the employment rate of older people in Belgium, by encouraging employers to adapt and improve employment opportunities, working conditions and work organization. Projects to improve the working conditions of employees over the age of 45 can receive a grant from the Experience Fund.

According to a Belgian public officer (BE-PO2), the objective of the funds is to give experienced employees the opportunity to stay on the job longer by adapting their working conditions, taking into account the specific initiatives that form part of careful age-related human resource management, and the direct or indirect improvements which come as a result of those. This could include, for example, physically reducing the workload by offering new working tools and equipment or improving skills through training. This initiative has been in effect for ten years. The attitude of social actors towards the fund has evolved over the years. According to an interviewee, this initiative is now better known and more welcomed by employers. Initially, employers were confused about the objectives of the Experience Fund:

At first they confused it with the labour inspectorate and were suspicious. Then confidence was built and they understood that our function is simply to improve the working conditions of older employees. (BE-PO2)

The trade unions' attitudes have evolved as well. At first, they were very hostile towards this measure:

In the beginning, we were perceived as simply trying to keep employees in employment as long as possible. Today the unions have changed their view of us and even come to see us. (BE-PO2)

The employers' associations have been getting involved in activities aimed

at assisting the vulnerable age groups as well - mostly by implementing certain training projects, or promoting the concept of active age management among the employers. For instance, the Austrian Economic Chambers WKÖ strongly focuses on the awareness rising in companies. Through cooperation with the Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS), the WKÖ also influences the development of programmes and projects for unemployed persons, the inclusion of older employees in the work life, work organisation, qualification and health promotion (AT-ER2). WKÖ also participates in the above mentioned social partners' activities.

In Spain, the employers' associations deal with the problems of specific age groups as a part of the promotion of Social Corporate Responsibility among their affiliates. As such, specific employment programs for young people and other vulnerable groups in the labour market are carried out by Foundations linked to the Employers' Associations, and partly financed by public institutions (ES-ER1, ES-ER2).

Active Labour Market Policies in Spain have been more focused on specific age groups of employees, especially the younger ones. Within this age group, the ones which have traditionally deserved more attention from the public policy are those young people who remain unemployed after dropping out of school, and who are addressed through different programmes that combine training and employment, such as Workshop Schools. However, the current supply of these types of employment programmes is said to be completely insufficient, given the size of the problem (ES-TUR4). These types of active labour market policies combining training, guidance and employment are very expensive in terms of financial resources, and have been affected by drastic budget cuts implemented in the last two years by the austerity plans. Public spending in active labour market policies (in Catalonia) has been reduced by 56% in the last two budgetary years (ES-PO2).

Other employment policies related to the matter of the inclusion of vulnerable age groups are those mentioned earlier, concerning the implementation of the dual system of vocational training. Although the regulation of the system is set by the government at the national level, its actual implementation and development is in the hands of the regional governments.¹¹ Union proposals with regard to the future development of the dual system of vocational training focus on the recruitment conditions of trainees in the companies (ES-TUR4). According to unions, a dual system alternating between practical training in the company and theoretical training should be linked to the conclusion of a labour contract. However, current attempts on the development of a dual system in some large companies are implemented through grants and non-labour practices, which offer the

11 Therefore, the following comments only apply to the situation in Catalonia.

possibility of incorporating trained people without any cost to the company. The employers' associations argue that smaller companies cannot afford the trainees' wages. On the other hand, the unions argue that companies may set up a pool of resources devoted to the recruitment of trainees on a labour contract basis. Without such investments, the efforts carried out by the companies, there is no incentive to retain the young trainee. Otherwise, companies may be using these training schemes as a way of replacing employees – the older ones – with labour contracts, and better working conditions, regulated by collective agreements.

In Poland, the NSZZ Solidarność has been conducting an informational campaign for years, targeting both the younger and the older employees. One of the attempts is the unions' participation in training young people in the matters of labour law, the Act on Trade Unions, etc., which were for example organized for students in the biggest universities in Krakow (PL-TUR-6, PL-PO-1). Solidarność was also the initiator of the large-scale social campaign «Sisyphus. I Don't Want To Start From Scratch», whose aim was to educate society about the social effects that the so-called 'junk contracts' have on employees (Stachowski 2014).

The overview of the initiatives undertaken by trade unions leads to one conclusion: the majority of the unions are well aware of the need to assist and organize the disadvantaged groups within the labour market. The relatively weak effectiveness of the initiatives (taking the increase of the representativeness of young and old workers within unions as a point of comparison) is a confirmation of the unions' limited resources, knowledge and experience regarding the means of assisting members and prospective members outside their own territories. The unions find it difficult to name specific goals of their activities concerning the organizing, as well as – and above all – the proper evaluation of the results (Simms, Holgate, Heery 2014). The unions have been unable to seize the opportunity offered as a result of their campaigns, to truly extend their influence and to attract groups of employees located outside the scope of their usual activities. Even when the attempts at organizing are successful, those successes are often short-termed, since the addressees of the unions' activities may actually join unions, yet they eventually find themselves unable to integrate and do not get involved in their activities, thereby remaining barely noticeable within the unions.

6 Conclusions

The collected information allows for a conclusion that the issue of inclusion of vulnerable age groups constitutes a major challenge for social partners, particularly for trade unions – a challenge bound to grow, considering the current economy and the tendencies within the labour market.

In spite of numerous declarations being made regarding the representation of vulnerable age groups, the data is evident. While many older employees still are members of trade unions, younger employees are overwhelmingly absent from unions. What's more, most young people not only have no contact with unions, but they lack even the basic knowledge of their role and tasks. The sectoral and occupational segregation of young people in the labour market is the main factor that reduces the contact between employees and trade unions.

While unions have attempted to reach young people, by means of various actions - from informational campaigns, to trainings, to representing vulnerable groups in various institutions of social dialogue - there is no complex interest in the subject as such. Of all the countries researched, none has provided the researchers with an example of a strategic approach to the issue whose aim should be an effective way to organize younger employees and to protect their interests together. The youth structures created by trade unions are often little more than façades, and their results are disappointing. The real representation of interests of vulnerable age-groups and the inclusion in the decision-making process takes place at a different level - the national, the regional and the company level - but its efficiency is doubtful. In the majority of investigated countries, there is no special attention paid to the inclusion of certain age groups in the decision-making process of the unions' structures.

Even though people from the vulnerable age groups are disappointed by the conditions in which they find themselves, they rarely see the unions as a means of improvement. The younger workers can hardly see any potentials or benefits in joining trade unions. In most of the countries researched, the work of the unions is very often associated with such terms as 'historical' and 'outdated', rather than with 'modern reality' - as such, it is of little interest to most young workers.

It is therefore hardly an exaggeration to state that the future of European trade unions depends on the extent to which the unions are able to locate themselves in the new conditions, and to reach more employees - primarily, the younger employees.

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