Precarious solidarities: unions, young workers and representative claims

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Abstract:

Young workers are often characterised in public debate as being highly individualistic and seeking different outcomes from their early employment than previous generations. This is an inaccurate and unhelpful characterisation that limits our understanding of how young people experience work, how they resist precarious employment practices and how they participate in and build collective responses to the challenges they face in their working lives and, in particular, the higher levels of precarity they face in comparison with previous generations. Joining a trade union and articulating concerns collectively is one way for young people to express their interests, but unions have been criticised for being slow to respond to the challenges of organising precarious young workers (O'Grady 2018).

The chapter further develops previously published arguments (Grady and Simms, OnlineFirst) which argue that financialisation creates new divisions between workers in workplaces, companies, sectors and economies, but that there are opportunities for trade unions and young workers to imagine and build new solidarities. The empirical material, taken from three research projects over a number of years supplemented with examples explained in existing literature, explores the solidarities built by unions as they seek to represent and engage young workers and challenge the precarious employment they face. A central finding is that when unions can respond with appropriate structures and approaches, young workers have been responsive to their messages. However, the tendency of unions to build solidarities relying on their claims to be expert representatives constrains the effectiveness of many activities. The chapter therefore concludes with some notes of caution about the opportunities to extend such innovations.

Keywords: trade union, solidarities, young workers, representative claims, financialisation

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Introduction

In most countries of the Global North, trade unions have the function of representing workers' interests in institutions of labour regulation. The exact form and function of those institutions vary considerably between national and sectoral settings (Bechter et al 2012), but the principle that trade unions can speak on behalf of labour is deeply embedded. Nevertheless, that function has faced increasing pressure in recent years. While the exact nature and source of the decline in union membership and influence vary in national settings, a central driving force behind this decline has been what is known as *financialisation* (Grady and Simms OnlineFirst). As will be discussed, financialisation acts in complex ways to increase divisions between groups of workers, and to make it harder for workers to build solidarities necessary to defend and extend their interests. Young people socialised into a world of work – and beyond – which is dominated by the consequences of financialisation are experiencing a moment in contemporary capitalism that reinforces individualism and creates divisions between groups of workers and citizens. In turn, this makes it harder to engage in collective institutions such as trade unions. It is, therefore, important to examine how unions are seeking to recruit and organise young workers and the solidarities emerging in this collective engagement.

Recruiting and organising young people is widely understood to be a major challenge facing trade unions in many countries of the Global North. The challenge rests on two interrelated issues; an ageing union membership (Vandaele 2012) and the structure of many labour markets in these countries (Simms et al. 2018). To expand, the workforce in most EU and North American countries is ageing, so we would expect some uptick in the average age among union members, and additionally there is widespread evidence that unions are not recruiting enough younger workers to replace members leaving the workforce because of retirement, ill health and other commitments (Vandaele 2018). At the same time, the structure of the labour market means that unions have increasingly found themselves with areas of

membership strength in sectors and occupations, such as the public sector, which have an older workforce. Sectors such as retail, hospitality, care work, catering and construction are all more 'youth dominated' than others, and they present different challenges to union organising and representation. Specifically, they often comprise smaller workplaces (or none as in the case of mobile home care work) and typically involve flexible and precarious patterns of employment (Simms et al 2018). Of course, separating the cause and the effect is challenging here, and there is almost certainly a dynamic relationship between the two: a strong tendency to recruit young, migrant and minority ethnic workers in these sectors allows employers to embed patterns of precarious employment. The overall result of small workplaces, fragmented experiences of work, and little effective impact of unions is that unions often struggle to organise and represent workers in these sectors. Grady and Simms (OnlineFirst) argue that these challenges are not simply a product of young people's preferences for particular occupations, but that there have been important changes to the nature of capitalism and, by extension, the world of work. These changes mean that young people's experiences of work are more precarious than those of previous generations (Oliveira et al. 2011; Vandaele, 2012). Specifically, the concept of *financialisation* is important and is used to describe the way that increasing emphasis on thinking about extensive areas of life in financial terms deepens divisions between (groups of) workers. Financialisation in Grady and Simms's terms, to be clear, refers to a particular phase of capitalism whereby profits are derived, not through production, but rather through financial activities. It is not simply the financial sector's spread in size and influence, but also the wider application of financially-driven decision making across a range of areas in employment and beyond. At work, one of the main consequences is ever greater attention to labour cost reduction in a broad sense and encompassing areas such as sweating labour, reducing pension provision, and reducing non-core payments and benefits such as holiday pay, sick leave etc. In

this respect, financialisation poses challenges for all workers, though the challenges are greatest for the most precarious; including young workers.

Thinking specifically about the inter-generational challenges presented by financialisation, Grady and Simms (OnlineFirst) argue that financialisation of the private realm of household decision making also leads to particular disadvantages for young workers. Although Grady and Simms's study took the example of the UK and how those pressures play out differently in different national contexts, the argument is valid more widely; financialisation of decisions about pensions, investments, housing, and employment have systematically advantaged previous generations above people now in the early stages of their working lives (Grady and Simms OnlineFirst). Inter-generational transfers of wealth and income do take place – and in some countries more than others – and are typically used to fund education, training, work experiences such as low-paid or unpaid internships, early experiences of precarious work, and housing needs. However, the extent to which any family unit can make those transfers largely depends on older generations' access to wealth and income. In the public realm (most specifically the workplace), particular forms of financialised competition encourage managers to set individual-level incentives, to pitch workplaces against each other for continued investment, and reinforce divisions between core and peripheral labour markets (Thompson 2003; 2011). In the private realm, young people in households without access to wealth and income transfers are further marginalised and unable to escape multiple forms of precarity in their working lives and beyond.

What this does is both *create* new divisions and *reinforce* existing divisions. For example, it *creates* new divisions by limiting access of young workers to 'core' jobs within the labour market, or limiting their access to property ownership. It *reinforces* divisions, for example, by deepening differences between families with access to pension and investment savings and housing wealth and those without who cannot support young people through

periods of precarious employment. In this context, it is even more essential that unions attend to the challenge of building new solidarities within and between generations. Inter-generational solidarity around, for example, pension provision cannot be assumed if large parts of the workforce (i.e. young workers) cannot reasonably expect ever to access those pensions.

The title of this chapter, 'precarious solidarities', alludes to two related dynamics. First, the solidarity building that unions undertake when they seek to organise and represent young workers. Unions understand that young workers are more likely than older workers to find themselves in precarious employment and exposed to the vicissitudes of a financialised world. They seek to build solidarities between young workers in particular workplaces, occupations, sectors, etc., as well as between young workers and older groups. Those solidarities need to recognise the specific experiences of precarity to which young workers are exposed. Second, these solidarities are themselves precarious. The material conditions of young people's employment mean that they are more likely than other groups to move to other jobs, as well as in and out of the labour market (Bradley and Devadason 2008). That is a precarious base on which to build effective solidarity and representation of these workers in wider institutions of labour market regulation. Despite this, many unions recognise the centrality of seeking to speak with and for young and precarious workers, and this chapter explores some of the ways they seek to do that.

The chapter first reviews evidence about young worker's representation in trade unions. Around the world, young workers are less likely than their older counterparts to be members of and engaged in unions, which is problematic because unions are the formally recognised institutions representing workers' interests to employers and in society more widely. If some groups are systematically less likely to be members, there is a real risk that unions will sideline their interests and voices. This is especially important because the chapter goes on to argue that young workers face particular experiences of employment that older generations did not;

specifically, forms of precarity driven by a deep and intensified spread of the increasing dominance of financial imperatives. Financial imperatives operate in the workplace and beyond. In short, youth and precarity intersect in ways that unions cannot ignore if they wish to address contemporary problems in work and labour markets.

Unions are aware of this risk and have sought to extend their representation to include young and precarious workers. The chapter frames analysis of these efforts using two key concepts. First, the idea of representative claims derived from the work of Saward (2010). Second, the concept of solidarity building developed from the work of Hyman (1999). After introducing these two concepts, the evidence is presented briefly from union campaigns in different national settings. These examples are presented as an overview to illustrate particular dynamics and tensions in the approaches taken by different unions to expand their representation to embrace young people and the challenges of precarious employment they face.

The central argument is that unions rely heavily on claims that they are the expert representatives (Saward 2010) of young workers' interests. While this indicates a real willingness from unions to build solidarities with young, precarious workers, it is often undertaken in a highly mechanistic manner (Hyman 1999). Those solidarities lack a strong base of membership among young and precarious workers, which mean that they are inevitably relatively weak. By contrast, there is sometimes evidence of groups of young workers coming together to build more organic solidarities (Hyman 1999) around issues of precarious employment. However, these alternative representation claims (Saward 2010) often result in highly ambiguous relationships with formal union structures and, therefore, fail to embed themselves in the wider institutions of interest representation. The result is a precariousness of both approaches and the associated risk that young workers' interests are excluded from any long-term revival of institutions of worker voice.

Representation of young workers in trade unions

The Webbs, British Socialist economists, and authors of many seminal works on industrial relations in the later part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, famously defined trade unions as "continuous association[s] of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives" (1894: 1). Several important aspects of this definition are relevant here. First, the focus is on wage earners; in other words, people in paid employment. While there are very important questions to be asked about how young people build solidarities beyond the workplace, and how unions reach out to campaign on broader societal issues, they are not the focus of the discussion here. The second important point is that the objectives of the union are open-ended. In other words, unions are not formed around a single issue which, once resolved or addressed, will result in the end of the campaign and organisation. Central to the focus of trade unionism is that employment relationships are ongoing, even if technically constrained by, for example, the ending of a temporary contract of an individual worker. Unless the employer closes the workplace, work will continue even if a different set of workers does it. Finally, the Webbs' definition explicitly acknowledges the view that there are elements of *defending* existing rights and *extending* new rights and issues. That has the effect of recognising that new groups of workers can bring fresh perspectives, experiences and issues, and that there is always a risk that once obtained any gains can be eroded, over time, under pressure from employers.

Representing young workers

What the Webbs' definition does not explore – although it is well addressed in other aspects of the Webbs' writing (1894) – is *how* working conditions are defended and improved. That requires ongoing negotiation and over time has developed into complex systems of workplace, sectoral and national representation. These institutional mechanisms of collective bargaining

between workers and employers are deeply embedded in national systems of economic and industrial democracy. These institutions assume that unions can represent the collective interests of workers to negotiate forms of industrial peace that will spread the benefits of work between the parties.

The challenge of youth representation is therefore profound. If these institutional mechanisms do not represent key groups of workers, and especially if those workers are experiencing changes in the ways that work and employment happen, this highlights a serious weakness of these representative systems. The claim to be the legitimate representatives of workers is weakened if unions are not able to recruit and represent young workers. Here, the work of political theorists is important. In particular, the work of Saward (2010) draws our attention to how representative claims are made by parties. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the focus of political theorists on political parties, the dominant assumption in that field is that certain mechanisms – typically elections – give legitimacy to the representative claims that are made. However, Saward helpfully draws our attention to more dynamic forms of claim-making which rest on a dialectic between the represented and the representatives. This allows us to understand better representation claims made in the absence of a formal election process. This is helpful when we think about how unions seek to make claims about representing constituencies (e.g. young, precarious workers) where they have little membership and elections are rarely held.

Saward (2010) differentiates between *expert representation claims* which rest on the role of the representative organisation (here: unions) to make claims on behalf of particular groups. It does not matter much whether there are large numbers of members of those organisations from that group, nor whether there are mechanisms to seek out their particular views and interests. What matters is the legitimacy of representative organisations in making claims and inferring the interests of those groups. By contrast, *alternative representation*

claims can be made which emerge as a response to a view that the expert claims are somehow limited, or to challenge the dominance of the expert claims. These rest on processes of self-organisation and require a challenge to a dominant position. Saward's ideas (2010) lead us to the question of the audience for the representative claims being made; whether the claims are being made to those being represented or the institutions within which the union is seeking to extend the rights of workers. In doing so, he rightly highlights that it is possible to make different claims to different audiences, so representative claims can be plural and contested. As we shall see, this is helpful when reflecting on what unions do when they make claims to represent young workers' interests.

Building solidarities with young workers

Saward therefore urges us to look at representative claims and we can apply that as a lens through which to explore the claims made by unions. From a different starting-point, looking at the challenges facing the union movement as the labour market changes and workers are more explicit about their divergent positions and interests, Hyman (1997) urges us to think about solidarity. Hyman poses three related questions with regard to trade unions and their representative claims: *whose* interests do unions represent? *What* issues have they embraced as the focus of representative demands? *How* do they seek to represent those groups? At the time Hyman was developing these ideas, he argued that previously dominant answers to these questions were being challenged as a result of the changes to capitalism and labour markets, whereby society was moving into the post-industrial age. Twenty years on from Hyman's work, capitalism and labour markets continue to change, and as we stress financialisation is one driver of that change. The question of how to build collective interests between workers who have different relations to the labour market is therefore ever more pressing for unions.

The answer for Hyman lies in the solidarities on which unions draw to make their representative claims, and in his work he outlines two ideal types – mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. While these are acknowledged by Hyman to be 'ideal types' for the purpose of conceptualising the challenges ahead, they are nonetheless helpful. Hyman's attention to solidarities has been a major contribution to our thinking about the challenges facing trade unions in recent decades and he makes a number of contributions that inform our understanding of what is happening when unions seek to organise and represent young workers. The first, central point of Hyman's analysis is to remind us that the working class is not, and never has been, a homogeneous unity. Sectionalism is therefore always a risk and unions must attend carefully to creating narratives that overcome sectionalism and present a united and solidaristic position. One key challenge in the current economic and political context is that solidarities that have historically been the basis of creating unity have less power than they probably once had; even the basic notion used above of a 'working class' is a contested concept (Hyman 1999).

In part, this is because of a broadening of the groups within what has historically been considered 'the working class'. Low-paid jobs such as care work, retail and hospitality are roles that unions have generally struggled to organise, and trade union membership has increasingly become a feature of better paid and better regulated occupations such as in transport and public services. Of course, there is a reinforcing dynamic to this; part of the reason why those occupations and labour markets offer better terms and conditions of employment is *because* they have union representation. But the general direction of travel has been clear in many EU countries. Unions still struggle to organise the lowest paid roles within the labour market, and this is often where disadvantaged groups such as young workers find themselves.

Hyman (1999) develops this point about the increasing diversity of experience and background within the labour market by pointing out that unions have typically, historically relied on *mechanistic* expressions of solidarity to unite workers around a common position.

Hyman, by his own admission, borrows his language of mechanical and organic solidarity from Durkheim, yet although the language is the same, Hyman uses the concepts 'flexibly'. In other words, the language is helpful, though for those familiar with Durkheim's work, the context is perhaps less so.

Accounts characterising union attempts to build solidarity along mechanistic lines may be problematical in that they have tended to assume that there actually *is* a single position around which a united working class can coalesce. Central to Hyman's argument about solidarity building is that this assumption becomes an increasingly difficult position to defend, both intellectually and practically, as the experiences and identities of working people diversify. As Hyman points out 'boundaries of union inclusion are also frontiers of exclusion' (1999: 96), and therefore narrowly defined interests are likely to exclude more workers when experiences and identities are more diverse. He proposes that to represent a much more diverse working class, with associated breadth of identities and interests, unions must take a more *organic* approach to building those solidarities. Hyman advances our thinking from considering solidarity to solidarities; they are plural and potentially overlapping or in conflict with one another. By arguing that solidarities are constructed, Hyman opens the possibility that if they have been imagined in one form, then they can be re-imagined in another.

What Hyman does not discuss in detail is how unions may achieve this. He presents the case that there needs to be space for the identities and interests of new groups of workers to be integrated into union solidarity building but does not explore the mechanisms by which that might take place. Ignoring the specificities of young workers' experiences is not a feasible option for unions. Financialisation has created new divisions and unions cannot assume that today's young workers will simply progress into jobs that will facilitate unionisation. First, because those jobs may not exist, and second, because even if they do, we know that people's early experiences of work (and, by extension, unions) shape their views and expectations.

Recent research by the UK Trades Union Congress (TUC) (2018) has shown that young people often expect employment to be a negative experience, and so are unsurprised when they hit particular challenges or inequalities, meaning that they largely do not seek support from unions to improve the situation.

Taking the literature on representative claims and solidarities together is helpful because it develops an understanding of union solidarities which encourages us to look at the claims that unions make when they attempt to organise young workers. Unions making expert claims suggests that solidarity will most likely be constructed mechanically, and this might be enough to engage and represent young workers effectively if their interests are largely aligned to the interests of the rest of the membership. On the other hand, claims made around alternative representation suggest a more organic construction of solidarities and this might be more effective in engaging and representing younger workers if their interests are sufficiently different from those of the wider membership.

Research

This chapter does not aim to present detailed empirical findings, but rather to 'step back' and reflect on a body of evidence that has been collated over time. The empirical research that underpins this chapter comes from three main research projects that have taken place from 2011 to now. Each project builds on the other.

The first was a survey commissioned by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) in 2011. That was a comparative report from the EU27 countries (plus Norway) asking country-level expert correspondents what social partners and public authorities had done since 2008 to help young people during the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis. The country-level responses and the comparative report are all available on the Eurofound website (Simms 2011) and the reports give a detailed insight into

how trade unions (as well as employers and public agencies) were responding to the increased challenges facing young people in the labour market.

The second two projects ran simultaneously. One was a British Academy small grant that ran from 2014-16 which again asked expert correspondents in the UK, Italy and Germany what trade unions were doing to represent 'losers of the crisis.' Headed by Professor Guglielmo Meardi, the objective of that project was to collate information about the extent to which unions had responded to the changes in the labour market brought about by the crisis. Each country developed different definitions of which groups had been disadvantaged by the crisis (i.e. 'losers') but young workers were specifically identified in all three national settings. This project therefore yielded additional information about how unions had responded and how the crisis had forced a degree of innovation in response and representation (Meardi et al, forthcoming).

The final project was funded by the Hans-Böckler Stiftung (HBS) research institute in Germany which funded a large international research project from 2014-2018 looking specifically at union representation of young workers. That project considered the USA, UK, France and Germany in detail, with additional input from Dutch and Belgian colleagues. Researchers in each national setting identified 5-6 case studies of innovative projects and actions undertaken by unions and similar representative organisations to represent the interests of young workers. Each case was written up and circulated among the research teams. They formed the basis of four comparative articles and an overview article published as a special issue of the *Work and Occupations* journal in 2018 (Tapia and Turner 2018, Simms et al 2018, Cha et al 2018, Hodder et al 2018, and Alvarez and Alvarez 2018).

Of the three projects, the final one in particular explores some of the experiences of young workers in their engagement with trade unions and highlights some of the challenges

and opportunities they face. We turn first to these experiences, before going on to consider representative claims and new solidarities which have emerged.

Young workers engagement with, and experiences of, trade unions

Existing research on young workers' experiences of trade union membership has identified two key challenges for unions to address. The first challenge for unions is the low overall level of membership among young workers which poses questions about the legitimacy of unions to speak for younger workers, from the perspective of both the young workers themselves and also from the perspective of the institutions of labour regulation. The second challenge faced by unions is translating young members into young trade union activists. Research has highlighted different strategies by unions and responses by young workers. We briefly consider some of those issues below.

While the figures on levels of unionisation among young people are indisputable, evidence suggests no ideological difference between younger workers and their older counterparts. In other words, young people are not ideologically opposed to trade unions (Boris, 2015; Tailby and Pollert, 2011), and, further, International Social Study Program data for 2015 suggest young workers are more likely to agree that unions are good for workers, compared with the workforce as a whole (Givan and Hipp, 2012; Hipp and Givan, 2015). Rather the low levels of unionisation are better explained by the structural factors mentioned above and the mismatch between the needs of young people and the priorities of the established unions (Cha et al, 2018). When young workers do actually choose to join a trade union they may experience the challenge of how best to get their voice heard, and there is the question of whether the traditional historical structures of the trade union help or hinder that voice function. At their worst, policies and structures of trade unions could be ineffective at engaging young workers

and decision-making processes might be unattractive or institutionally prejudiced against young worker participation (Vandaele, 2018).

Representative claims and new solidarities

Taken as a whole, the three studies give considerable insight into how trade unions seek to organise and represent young workers. This chapter therefore uses examples taken from each of those studies, supplemented with cases reported in the wider literature, to reflect on the broader claims being made by unions as they seek to speak with and on behalf of young workers. As we shall see, expert representative claims are common and often emerge from a (perceived) need to speak on behalf of and in solidarity with this very important group of workers. Here, unions draw on their expert, institutionally embedded positions to speak for young workers. What is often missing in relation to those claims, however, is a large representational base of members. In other words, union legitimacy in speaking for young workers is typically derived from their institutional and solidaristic position, rather than membership density and activism.

By contrast, where young workers organise bottom-up to form a strong base, they are often pushing what Saward (2010) calls *alternative claims*. In other words, formal union structures may be seen by young activists to, in some way, limit the legitimacy and capacity of unions. This bottom-up activism can lead to a rejection of more structured forms of institutional union representation by young workers who may in some cases actively reject the idea that unions are the legitimate structures to represent their interests. This may happen because a group actively rejects the positions of unions, or because unions establish some kind of barrier to their entry. The chapter presents examples of both.

Expanding the representational terrain

A central challenge facing unions as they seek to organise young workers is that there are not very many young workers who are currently represented by unions. Although it is difficult to get consistent and reliable data across national settings, the best estimates sourced for the HBS project indicate that while a decline in unionisation can be observed in all industrialised countries, including the ones in this study, it has been particularly notable among young workers. Across Europe, with the exception of the UK in recent years, the greatest decline in unionisation has been among young workers (Simms et al. 2018). In 2015, around 13% of workers aged between 18 and 35 years in Germany were union members (ISSP, 2015: calculations quoted in Simms et al 2018). In the UK, this rate was at around 18%, in France around 8%, and in the US around 7%. Unionisation rates of young workers were therefore below the average unionisation rate in all these countries.

This shows that organising and representing young workers requires unions to expand the terrain of representation when they seek to organise young workers. The nature of financialisation means that the central challenge is to understand and respond to how precarious employment affects young workers. Central to why union membership and union density tend to be lower among young workers are structural labour market changes: in particular, the prevalence of precarious employment among labour market entrants and the emergence of new jobs in low-skill service occupations (Oliveira et al 2011; Vandaele, 2012). As a result, the number of open-ended full-time positions declined in all labour market groups, while precarious employment in various forms has continued to expand (Allmendinger et al., 2013). Forms and consequences of precarious employment vary across national, sectoral and occupational settings (Armano et al 2017; Hipp et al 2015), but the effects are clear; young workers are more likely to experience precarious employment, and unions are finding it harder to regulate those forms of precarity. As unions seek to broaden their representative terrain, questions about solidarity building therefore come to the fore.

Mechanistic solidarities: institutionally derived expert representative claims

One approach has been to rely on the historically important mechanistic forms of solidarity (Hyman 1997). This relies on unions building on their existing representational legitimacy and extending that to make new representational claims. Three good examples stand out: in Germany, IG Metall's claims to speak for agency workers (many of whom are young or disadvantaged in other ways), the UK's TUC Commission on Vulnerable Workers (CoVE), and the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) in France, which has been actively involved in working with young, migrant workers around their employment and citizenship rights. Each is considered in turn.

IG Metall's campaign to represent agency workers is a good example of a union using its institutional legitimacy to extend representation to a new group of – often young – workers. The rationale for doing so is twofold; it seeks both to improve the terms and conditions of agency workers, and hopes to avoid any potential for agency workers with lower terms and conditions than core workers to undermine the position of the core workers that the union represents. While this can seem an obviously solidaristic position for a union to take when challenged by employers seeking to divide the workforce, it can take a great deal of internal debate and discussion to achieve in practice and many unions never reach this position.

The contested nature of this approach can be seen in the leadership demonstrated by the UK's TUC in 2008 with the publication of its report of the Commission on Vulnerable Employment (TUC 2008). The commission was established largely in response to the growing numbers of vulnerable workers – broadly defined as those at risk of exploitation as a result of some form of job insecurity – and an explicit recognition that very few of those jobs and occupations are unionised. As well as drawing wider attention to the numbers of vulnerable workers, and the fact that they are more likely to come from groups who are disadvantaged in

some way within the labour market (including but not limited to young workers), the commission also laid out a challenge to unions to seek more effective mechanisms to represent these workers. The timing of the report was somewhat unfortunate as it coincided with the financial crisis and was quickly overtaken by urgent imperatives to maintain economic and financial stability. But the intention was clear; it was an effort to demonstrate leadership in extending union representation to new groups, including young workers, using the institutional legitimacy of being the main umbrella trade union organisation rather than because unions organise and represent any significant numbers of these workers.

A third example illustrates an even more controversial positioning. This example is not taken from the research projects outlined above, but is well documented in existing literature and, in particular, in the work of Barron and his colleagues (2016). The French union CGT has in recent years lent support and solidarity to the *sans-papiers* movement. Detailed dynamics of this campaign and how it has gathered momentum, profile and support is presented in an excellent paper (Barron et al 2016), which shows in detail how contested support for this campaign was. *Sans papiers* are undocumented migrant workers – often young – working in France with few rights because of their ambiguous legal status. Campaigns supporting them to gain citizenship rights have long existed in civil society organisations, but with little support from the formal union movement who have typically seen these workers either as not-workers (i.e. not legally falling within the definition of worker or employee) or as workers with the potential to undermine terms and conditions of legally-established workers.

Barron et al (2016) outline how the CGT union in Paris came to lend its support and solidarity to these groups. Importantly for this discussion, the nature of the solidaristic claims is important. Recent CGT logo banners associated with the campaign list occupations undertaken (cleaners, security guards, carers and so on): *travailleurs sans papiers* (workers without papers). Slogans emphasising that "*they* work here, *they* live here, *they* should have

regular status" have developed into "*we* work here, *we* live here, *we* should have regular status" [italics added for emphasis] suggesting a move from a simply solidaristic position to one in which these young people are understood to be equal workers legitimately represented by the CGT.

These examples all led to a debate within the respective unions and union movements about whether this expansion of the representative terrain underpinned by solidaristic and expert positioning (as opposed to widespread union membership among these groups) was a legitimate exercise. Typically, discussions focused on why unions and confederations such as the TUC should speak for and in solidarity with groups that are not core membership groups. In all cases, leaders were clear about the solidaristic positioning and the potential benefits to core members if workers with weak terms and conditions of work are regulated more effectively. In a recent interview, Frances O'Grady, leader of the UK TUC put it very succinctly: "Conventional trade unionism still works very effectively in some areas but what's clear is that business models have radically changed…. Unions have to change too – change or die." (O'Grady 2018, quoted in Topping 2018).

Organic solidarities: alternative representational claims

In stark contrast with these claims by expert institutions to expand their solidaristic claims to include young workers is an emergent and more organic approach to organising and representing young workers. There are also clear examples of this more organic solidarity building by unions and these tend to result in what Saward (2010) calls 'alternative representational claims.' Examples include the San Precario movement in Italy, ASSO in France, and the Retail Action Project in the USA. These are examples of young workers organising outside the formal representational structures of the union movement, and where

the resulting groups have subsequently sought integration of some kind into those structures – with differing outcomes.

The San Precario movement has been well-researched and extensively written about by other researchers (Van der Linden 2014). San Precario can be translated as the Patron Saint of Precarious Workers and is a rhetorical device that focuses attention on precarious employment. With its roots in the anarcho-syndicalist tradition of northern Italian trade unionism, outside Italy the term San Precario has become a shorthand for various forms of self-organisation by atypical workers and the self-employed, who are – as highlighted above – disproportionately young (Armano and Murgia 2014). What is perhaps most relevant here are the responses of formal trade unions, which have varied from various forms of integration, to rivalry and even indifference.

ASSO in France is a further important example of self-organisation. The organisation's title in French is Action des salarié(e)s du secteur associative, which can be translated as Action for Workers in the Third Sector. Emerging as a self-organising campaign of young, precarious workers in the not-for-profit sector, the organisation has been an effort to establish something close to a formal trade union in the sector (Simms et al 2018). Illustrating again the fundamental importance of precarious employment in the lived experiences of young workers, the organisation seeks to negotiate with employers to change practices and improve the working conditions of employees. It emerged in 2010 from a small group of initiators with prior experience of union representation. Importantly for the discussion at hand, two options quickly emerged as the organisation was set up; either to be a loosely structured 'worker collective' or to seek to gain status as a formal trade union. Lack of knowledge and experience of trade unions, combined with a view that working for a third sector organisation brings ambiguities to the traditional employment relationship, led to considerable reticence towards the idea of organising as a formal union. However, the three founding members quickly realised this would

limit the scope for action of the organisation and opted after much discussion to form a local trade union branch and to affiliate to the confederation Solidaires.

This decision has, however, brought considerable tension between the local branch and the wider union structures. Branch activists are extremely critical of wider union structures and positions which they see as being stuck in a rhetoric of 'class war' and as being too radical (Dupuy 2017). Involvement with the wider confederation also highlights different ways of working, with the ASSO branch being much more inclusive and discursive, and confederation meetings being more hurried and based on the principle that decisions will be passed unless there are objections. These differences of culture and process are challenging to young representatives and have led to a focus on workplace organising and representation; with some success. The branch has been successful in winning some elections for workplace delegates leaving it in the unusual position of avoiding collective negotiation on some issues (typically beyond the workplace) while having legitimacy in workplace negotiations.

Similar tensions can be seen in the US-based Retail Action Project (RAP) in New York City which was also explored as part of the HBS project (Ikeler and Fullin 2018). The specificities of US labour law mean that unions are usually workplace focused and linked into a wider structure. Organising in the retail sector brings many familiar challenges of organising young workers in precarious employment and working in multiple sites often with relatively small workforces. To build wider solidarity, the campaign has founded a worker centre (Fine 2006) in New York City to mobilise and campaign against the widespread problems with terms and conditions of employment in the sector. Issues such as wage theft, working time violations, erratic scheduling and discrimination are common throughout the sector and form a basis for solidarity building between workplaces, which is particularly important given that the workers' job tenure is relatively short and labour turnover is high, especially among young workers. The single, geographically fixed worker centre provides a consistent point of contact for workers if

they want to retain their union involvement as they move within the sector. However, its resources are limited and cannot provide support for a geographically mobile young workforce more generally.

RAP undertakes research on employers and the local labour market, builds skills of activism and union representation among activists, and runs campaigns targeted at specific employers with some success at winning back-pay and creating a network of young activists around the city. While the position of workers' centres outside the formal structures of the trade union movement can be understood to be a response to the strict constraints placed on workplace unions in the US (see Fine 2006 for a more extensive discussion), it does limit the impact that these workers can have. There are no mechanisms to engage in formal representative collective bargaining with the employer and any improvements in terms and conditions of employment must therefore come as a result of campaigns and 'naming and shaming' employers. The position as a workers' centre also limits the extent to which these workers can be represented within the broader union structures.

Discussion

The examples above draw on extensive data collection carried out since 2011. They are deliberately chosen to highlight similar experiences and challenges facing unions in many countries of the Global North as they seek to expand their representative territory and claims to include young workers. The chapter has argued that the ways the financialisation of contemporary capitalism have played out in both public (workplace) and private realms present new challenges to unions in general, and to organising and representing young workers in particular. Of course, the category *young worker* intersects with other identities – migrant, ethnic minority, particular occupational groups etc. – and solely exploring the ways in which unions seek to organise and represent young workers on a general level blurs some of those

identities. However, rather than dismissing those multiple identities, this chapter has highlighted the commonality of experience underscored by attention to precarious employment and wider experiences of precariousness in life.

In that context, unions have relied either on building the more historically important mechanistic solidarities identified by Hyman (1999) or on a more organic approach. This chapter has highlighted the challenges to both. *Mechanistic* approaches rely on the institutional legitimacy of unions and relate to the ways they *speak for* these groups even though they may not be sufficiently well organised to be represented in the structures of trade unions. Mechanistic approaches always risk the possibility that interests may be misrepresented, or that negotiated responses may not appropriately reflect group interests. Generally, they have also not sought to organise these workers in any significant numbers.

It is important that we do not dismiss these efforts. As unions seek to use their institutional and expert position to expand to represent the interests of young, precarious workers, they are making very public statements of intent. Unions are, after all, the recognised institutions for representing workers in social, political and economic society and it is important that they are seen to say something about the interests of young workers and others who experience the precarity enforced by contemporary financialisation. But these solidarities are, inevitably, themselves precarious and limited if there is not a mass membership of young workers themselves.

By contrast, there are relatively few examples of unions attracting young workers in any significant number, and where they do, they have tended to rely on a more *organic* approach to solidarity building (Hyman 1999). These approaches have the advantage of engaging young people and bringing them into membership and activism around employment issues. But, as we have seen, they often face serious challenges embedding structures of interest representation within more traditional formal union structures. This inevitably limits the

possibility for effective improvements in terms and conditions of work in sectors where young workers dominate. It also means that much of the work that unions do to represent young workers is likely to fall back on more mechanistic forms of solidarity building. Unions are the institutionally established mechanism to represent workers so the lower levels of young and precarious workers in membership matters a very great deal. If unions are either ignoring young people or relying on mechanistic solidarities and expert representation claims to represent young people, but *de facto* lack backing and support from the young, the result is likely to be a fundamental deficit in institutions of industrial democracy. Young people in precarious employment therefore risk being excluded from the very institutions that should seek to improve work and workers' rights.

Conclusion

Too often in discussions about trade unions and young workers, there is a tone which suggests that young workers can somehow 'save' traditional trade unions if enough of them choose to join. There is far less reflection on what unions can do to improve the working conditions of young workers, many of whom experience precarity far more profoundly than previous generations. This debate needs to change to reflect the multiple and complex solidarities within and between generations that need to be built if unions are to effectively represent the interests of working people in the widest sense.

Trade unions in all the countries discussed here have struggled to recruit young workers and engage with their experiences of precarious employment. Serious questions are therefore raised about the extent to which labour movements can build sustainable representative claims for the emerging workforce and make representative claims for the interests of young workers. Solidarity building that rests on mechanistic processes, expert claims, and the institutional legitimacy of unions as the representative organisations of working people are important but

not sufficient to renew unions, ensure that they engage young workers and can regulate precarious employment. Sustainable representation rests on developing representative claims built on deep and ongoing solidarities. That is difficult to do when relying on expert claims and without a solid membership base among the group being represented. Alternative claims based around more organic forms of solidarity building are also precarious and may lack wider support because they can, necessarily, be disruptive and challenge existing structures.

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