


IUF Young Worker engagement



Trade unionists hear that young workers are difficult to organize because they are not interested in unions. But studies have shown that young workers have a more favourable impression of unions than any other age group. If unions want to engage young workers and also involve them in union decision making, they need to listen to them, hear their issues and work jointly to address them – not tell them what they need.

These are the issues most frequently identified by young workers internationally:

- Poor jobs including high levels of precarious work

- Youth unemployment and underemployment

- Difficulty matching skills to the job market: Young workers do not have the skills employers are looking for OR they are overly qualified for the position they are working in

- Sexual harassment and gender based violence



The following are some suggested ways for engaging young workers to address these issues.

Recruiting and Organizing

- **Meet young workers where they are:** Meeting young workers where they are refers to both their interests and their physical presence. IUF affiliates have organized festivals, art collectives, sports activities, competitions and cafés to engage young workers while educating them on the benefits of being a union member.
- **Starting early:** Educating young people on the benefits of being a union member before they are “workers” can help instill a positive impression of trade unions in young workers’ minds. Visiting schools, university and the classroom is a good way to do this.
- **Reduced dues/fee for young, students and precarious workers:** A reduced fees structure for young workers (and also students and/or precarious workers) can make union membership more attractive.
- **Providing services to organizing workers model:** Providing union-led trainings on skills (e.g. CV/resume writing, job interviewing) of interest to young workers is a good way to bring young (and other) workers physically to the union office. These types of training are also of value as many young workers are unemployed/underemployed.

Some IUF union affiliates have apprenticeship programs that have also been instrumental in recruiting and mobilizing young worker leaders. Skills trainings can then include a union educational or organizing component.

- **Formal young worker representation and voting power in union decision making bodies:** For young workers to believe that their voices are heard within their unions, young workers must be integrated into decision making bodies and have full voting rights. Having a dedicated union officer who can work directly with young workers is also important; this person can serve to support and encourage workers pursuing union leadership positions.
- **Addressing young worker needs through collective bargaining:** For young workers to want to join and remain part of a union, the collective bargaining agreement covering them should contain language relevant to their issues. Examples include predictable scheduling language, prohibiting forced overtime, language to convert precarious jobs to permanent ones, company paid skills training and reimbursement or leave for other schooling. While these types of clauses/approaches are applicable to all workers, they are particularly relevant to young workers.
- **Associational union membership:** Various IUF union affiliates have tested associational union membership when young or other workers do not have to formally be members of the union to be a part of young worker or other activities.



With associational membership, young “workers can network with each other on a range of workplace/community issues and organize common activities and actions¹” even if they are not yet formally union members. Young workers and others can work together on social issues broader than traditional trade union issues. Unite the Union, for example, has community branches that do just this. This approach can also help empower young workers so that they may take on future fights and organize in their workplaces.

- **Training and capacity building:** Trade union rights and organizing education is important to engaging all workers. However, because young workers are more likely to be unaware of their rights, many are afraid to speak up. Management often uses this fear as an opportunity to exploit, divide and manipulate young and also other types of workers.

Organizing does not cease once a worker becomes a member of the union. Organizing those who are already members is equally as important as bringing new members into the union. Leadership skills, organizing, health & safety, research and communications trainings are all of value to young workers. Training on preventing and responding to gender based violence (GBV) is also crucial.



Communications

- **Use of language:** The type of language one uses with young workers is important as it relates to recruitment, organizing and mobilization – though, these examples can be applied to all workers. Communication and organizing trainings should be conducted with union leadership and staff. Examples of language include:
 - Asking workers what they like about their company; then explain how having a union can protect those things
 - Asking workers what could be better; then explain how having a union can help and this is how
 - Having a union levels the playing field between managers (supervisors) and employees

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- The company handbook can be changed at any time by the company. Anything in a union collective bargaining agreement cannot be changed except through collective bargaining.
- **Forms of communication:** Young workers today communicate very differently from their predecessors 5 years ago. Facebook (FB), Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube and Instagram are widely used by young workers aged 18 – 35. Among certain young worker populations, Facebook is becoming less used even though closed and open FB groups can be effective ways to communicate information within a group. Closed FB groups are better for communicating internally, while open groups are better for communicating with the broader public. Young workers also communicate increasingly via text message using applications such as WhatsApp or Viber. Some unions have also developed mobile applications (apps) to engage young and other workers for the purpose of facilitating union sign up and/or education about being a union member.
- **Establishing young worker committees:** Establishing a young worker subcommittee on the shop level is useful for young worker recruitment even if union coverage already exists. Young workers are more likely to relate to other young workers who share similar experiences.
- **Flash mobs and innovative marketing techniques:** Creativity can be important when engaging young workers. For example, a fake labour agency was created online by CGIL, publishing phony provocative job offers. “Clothing chain seeks attractive interns prepared to strip

off their rights” and “Financial Group seeks MBA graduated for coffee making and walking the CEO’s dogs” job advertisements appeared on the Internet and posters were spread all over Rome. The phenomenon went viral on the Internet and young people wrote to the fake agency telling their stories and reacting to the indecent job announcements while a big mobilization took place spontaneously. “To make the entire campaign ‘real’ and known ‘offline’, a flash mob outside the parliament followed the online campaign and a press conference revealed that CGIL was behind the entire operation.”² This is an example of how on and offline techniques can be mixed for an effective campaign. It is also important to note that there is no replacement for bottom up or “grassroots” organizing; this needs to accompany any communications strategy.

- **Face of the union:** For young workers to be interested in joining a union, they need to see that the union takes young workers and their needs seriously. Unions need to show that young workers have a real presence in the union and that the union supports their development as activists and leaders. Once developed, young workers should serve as a face of the union.

International Approaches

- **Sharing positive experiences:** While the issues young workers confront vary somewhat by region, there is much to be learned by young workers sharing experiences with one another. International trade union federations, such as the IUF, are instrumental in providing the opportunity for this to occur.
- **Common issue campaign demands:** Internationally many young workers experience the same problems (e.g. precarious work, poor job quality, un/underemployment, etc.). This provides opportunity for young workers to organize around a common issue on a single day, or better yet over a period of time.

¹ http://www.effat.org/sites/default/files/events/14134/4-just_do_it_final.pdf

² http://www.effat.org/sites/default/files/events/14134/4-just_do_it_final.pdf

Young workers are in all IUF sectors with higher concentrations in hotel, restaurants, catering and tourism (HRCT), agriculture, and food/beverage processing. They are an important part of our unions now and making them stronger going forward. The ideas in this document can be utilized across all IUF sectors. We encourage you to provide feedback and any additional ideas you might have to the IUF Secretariat.

For further information, please contact the IUF Secretariat at iuf@iuf.org

