

Decent

Work:

A Common Goal of Youth and Trade Unions



International Labour Office
Geneva

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A Common Goal of Youth and Trade Unions

Productive and rewarding work is the most deeply felt aspiration of everybody. That is, work which meets people's basic aspirations, not only for income, but for security for themselves and their families, without discrimination, and providing equal treatment for women and men. For young people, it is the very symbol of coming of age. With work, young women and men become independent and free to make choices about their lives.

But for millions of young women and men, decent work – as well as its symbolic and real benefits – remains the stuff of dreams. Unable to find that coveted “first job”, they remain dependent on their families or forced into survival-type activities.

In many labour markets worldwide, increased insecurity, inequality and exclusion are the reality. The benefits of the global market, the knowledge economy and the network society have not reached everyone. Especially in the developing world, many nations, comprising millions of villages and households, are cut off from the “New Economy”. Increasingly, unemployment, underemployment and informal work are the plight of young workers.



TRADE UNIONS CAN HELP

Today, trade unions represent hundreds of million people. Based on democratic principles, they are powerful organizations fighting for inclusion, equality and social justice. As a result, trade unions have a key role to play in shaping the present and future of our global economy. In particular, they can influence education and training policies and the creation of quality jobs for young people entering the labour market. But trade unions also face challenges, among them the need to adopt new strategies and practices to recruit young people employed in the growing knowledge economy and the expanding informal economy.

PROVIDING EDUCATION FOR ALL

Poor education is often the most important reason for youth unemployment. Equipping youth with literacy and numeracy is the foundation for developing their employability. Education is a fundamental right for all children and young people. And education is an indispensable condition if young women and men are to break the vicious circle of poverty and exclusion. As such, it

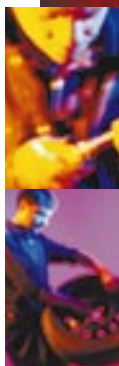
is also the key to reducing the “decent work deficit”. For all these reasons, trade unions insist that:

- Access to quality and relevant basic education should be expanded.
- Trade unions support increased investment in education and teacher-training, paying particular attention to the needs of rural and isolated areas.
- Children should be in school, not at work. The effective abolition of child labour is a priority for the international trade union movement. To achieve this goal, trade unions encourage employers to recruit young adults rather than children and support such government measures as providing poor families with financial aid to help cover education costs.
- Discrimination in respect of education should be eliminated. Trade unions promote positive actions that ensure equal access to education for girls and young women.

IMPROVING THE TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK

Basic education is crucial for the employability of young people but it does not, by itself, guarantee a speedy and successful transition to work. Skills as well as relevant labour market information and career guidance are also important. Trade unions promote action on several fronts:

- Adjust school curricula to the needs of the labour market. In many countries, trade unions are working closely with educational institutions and employers' organizations to update school curricula and skill profiles.
- Develop national qualifications frameworks. Young people should be recognised for their skills and qualifications, whether learned at school or on the job. A national qualifications framework provides a structure for evaluating and recognising these skills and qualifications.
- Introduce measures to reduce the number of school dropouts and incentives to encourage them to return. Trade unions also call for special counselling services and training programmes designed for school dropouts and young unemployed.



- Combine technical education with training in “employability skills”, such as oral communication, problem-solving, team-working, self-learning, business awareness, creativity and innovation.
- Provide training in entrepreneurship and business support services.
- Make relevant labour market information and career guidance accessible to all young people, with special attention for young women where needed.
- Build strategic alliances with other stakeholders including governments, employers' organizations, educational and training institutions and non-governmental organizations.

Spanish trade unions help young people to find decent work

In Spain, the youth committee of Comisiones Obreras has published a guide, distributed free of charge to vocational training centres. This guide outlines different techniques for searching and finding a job and also provides an overview of workers' rights and the various services offered by trade unions.

PROMOTING MORE AND BETTER JOBS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Trade unions support governments' and employers' initiatives to create quality jobs under good working conditions for the young. Trade unions are playing an active role in several areas:

- ✿ By supporting job creation programmes that focus on expanding sectors (including services and new technologies), the public sector (particularly areas of social utility such as education, training, health and local services) and which feature accessibility for all (i.e., these new jobs must be accessible to the most vulnerable groups in society including young women).
- ✿ By advocating the reduction of overtime and working hours to increase the number of jobs for young recruits.
- ✿ By negotiating better working conditions, fighting wage discrimination against young workers and promoting the principle of equal pay for work of equal value.
- ✿ By promoting social protection for all, including young people. Young people need a level of basic security to enable them

Lithuanian and Canadian

trade unions

join forces to support their youth

In Lithuania, the youth section of the national centre LPSS has led initiatives to request foreign companies to respect collective agreements and to translate the terms of contracts into the national language. They are also joining forces with other unions, e.g., the Canadian Auto Workers, out of such common interests as the increasingly precarious working conditions facing young people.

Source: Youth and the trade unions, Common interests, ICFTU

to develop their skills and creativity, and to take advantage of labour market opportunities.

- ✿ By supporting employment protection laws and the strengthening of legislation governing the employment of young people.
- ✿ By promoting the abolition of "last hired, first fired" practices which heavily penalize young people.

The information and communication technology (ICT) sector offers great potential for job creation and should, therefore, be accessible to all young people, especially the most vulnerable. However, in terms of access to new technologies, the "digital divide" separates the rich



from the poor, the most educated from less educated, young men from young women, reinforcing already existing inequalities. Trade unions support measures to bridge this digital divide. Trade unions ask for a strategy at both the international and national levels, particularly in less developed countries, to:

- Increase investment in telecommunications infrastructures as well as in the ICT-training of teachers and, where feasible, connect schools to the Internet. Particular attention should be paid to the needs of those in rural and isolated areas and of those outside the formal educational system.
- Bridge the ICT gender divide by eradicating discrimination related factors that restrict equal access to ICT.
- Adopt measures to ensure that social protection systems and legal and regulatory instruments cover young workers engaged in new working patterns and practices.



FIGHTING HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is a major concern for trade unions. Over 36 million people are currently living with HIV/AIDS, two thirds of them in Africa. HIV/AIDS particularly affects people in the 15-49 age group – that is, the working age population. Thousands of workers, including the young, suffer discrimination at the workplace because they are HIV-positive. Unfair dismissals, mandatory pre-employment tests, harassment, lack of confidentiality and denial of promotion or vocational training are among the abuses suffered by HIV-positive workers worldwide.

Trade unions are well placed to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic using the work place as a major “entry point” for information, prevention and rights campaigns. Unions are taking action on several fronts:

- By proposing prevention and protective clauses in collective agreements and partnership with employers;
- By demanding “zero tolerance” of discrimination at the workplace and in society; and
- By advocating lower prices and greater availability of medications, especially in developing countries.



ORGANIZING YOUNG PEOPLE

YOUNG WOMEN

Shop attendants, domestic helpers, home or contract workers, factory workers in export processing zones... all over the world, more and more women are entering the job market. Being both young and a woman increases vulnerability, especially where no tradition of trade unionism exists. Women have illiteracy rates twice as high as their male counterparts. More women hold part-time jobs than men and more women work in the informal economy.

Fighting discrimination is a fundamental priority for trade unions. It requires trade unions to re-examine themselves and overcome the same obstacles to equality that are found in companies and the job market. Positive action is needed to change the status quo through offering training, maternity leave and support for women with family responsibilities.



Young women and trade unions

In Benin, trade unions have developed strategies to unionise women by offering them services that meet their needs. These include: co-operatives offering basic household products at discount prices; laundries; childcare for female street vendors; and education, in the form of play acting, to teach illiterate women about trade unions, health, education and the rights of women in general.

YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

In many developing countries, the chances of young people finding good jobs are minimal and unemployment benefit schemes are practically nonexistent. In order to survive, young people turn to the informal economy as their last resort. Young street vendors in Bombay, taxi-motorcycle drivers in Cotonou, seamstresses working from home in Montreal, day farm-workers in Rwanda or apprentice coachbuilders in Mexico are all part of the informal economy worldwide. It is imperative that young people in the informal sector become organized.

Spurred on by economic necessity, the young workers of the informal economy organize themselves for various reasons, for example, to facilitate access to credit, create mutual insurance funds, reduce production costs or fight against eviction threats from local authorities. Co-operatives, NGOs or union-style organizations... the forms young workers choose vary according to national legislation.

Trade unions contribute to the organization of young people by:

- Encouraging the informal economy workers to join trade unions. When informal economy workers join a union, they pay token membership fees or, at any rate, fees lower than those paid by salaried workers. Given their unsteady incomes, they also have the possibility to pay on an irregular basis.
- Helping create and reinforce organizations specifically dedicated to the informal economy (for instance, by offering institutional support to workers in their dealings with financial institutions or by offering management or workers' rights training).



YOUNG DISPLACED PEOPLE

Solitude, guilt, loss of self-confidence... Losing one's job often means being cut off from social and work relations. It also means becoming "invisible" in society.

For young people who lose their jobs, trade unions:

- Provide responses to their "re-socialisation" needs;
- Encourage collective action;
- Maintain a link with the world of work. With or without a job, young people retain their trade union membership status.



ICFTU's campaign to help young people organize

In April 1998, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) launched a worldwide awareness campaign under the slogan "The Future Starts Now, Join a Union". Its aim is to inform young people about trade unions and to help them join the movement. The campaign seeks to renew dialogue between two divergent worlds. Because many young people are arriving later and later on the labour market, because they are finding jobs in sectors where trade unions are poorly represented, and because trade unions have not always given them the space they deserve, young people often have a rather poor image of the movement. The ICFTU turned to its "own" young people to find the right language. Meeting within the framework of the ICFTU's Youth Committee, they have drawn up a programme of action at the grassroots level.

Source: Youth and the trade unions, Common interests, ICFTU.

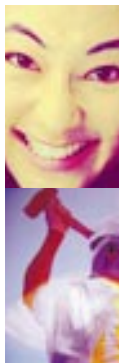
REJUVENATING TRADE UNIONS

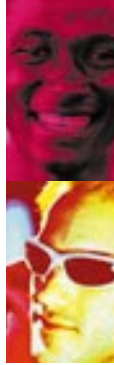
In the past, trade unions were characterised by strong male domination of the large factories, offices, mines and plantations that made up the mass-production economy. Now, the future of trade unions is in the booming knowledge networks and the sprawling informal economy. That is where the work is going and where many young women and men need representation.

To better defend the interests of young workers, unions must first convince them to join the trade union ranks.

Trade unions must:

- Listen attentively to young people to better understand their particular needs, diversity and interests.
- Adapt language and communication codes as well as use media that reaches out specifically to young people.
- Be where young people are (schools, universities, education centres, discotheques, beaches, sports clubs, concerts, stadiums...) and get involved in new fields of activity with a predominant number of young people. In most cases, these fields are atypical forms of labour that are either poorly protected or lack protection altogether.





- ✿ Meet their needs using an approach that young people find appealing (for example, through music).
- ✿ Offer incentives to join the unions by, for instance, offering special membership conditions to students and young people without jobs.

However, unionizing young people is not enough. In order to ensure the long-term success of organization campaigns, trade unions need to integrate young people at all levels of responsibility within trade union structures, including management positions. The fight for equality is one of the most powerful organizing motors for trade unions. Equal opportunity in the workplace will never be a reality until young women occupy top leadership posts within the unions.

Força Sindical recruiting young people

Recruiting young people is one of the tasks of the Brazilian national confederation Força Sindical. Thanks to an agreement with a major radio station, Força Sindical organizes, for example, meetings with students to try and sensitize them to the dangers of drugs and violence – two scourges, which strike particularly at the young – by offering, after a speech, a live concert on the campus.





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