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Emergent cultures of activism: young people and the building of alliances between unions and other social movements

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Abstract

This paper considers emergent cultures of activism among young people in the labor movement. We question whether unions should reconsider creating different forms of organization to make themselves relevant to new generations of workers. Our comparative case study research from the United States, France, Germany, and the UK—where young people are engaged in ‘alter-activism’ and unions have successfully recruited and included young workers—shows that there is potential for building alliances between trade unions and other social movements. We suggest that emerging cultures of activism provide unions with a way of appealing to wider and more diverse constituencies.

Key words

Young workers, labor unions, alter-activism, social movements, community alliances

Union membership statistics show that young people have low rates of joining trade unions and, in many countries, union density of workers under 25 is less than ten per cent. Yet we have seen young people engage in Occupy-style mobilizations that began in 2011, and spread around the world. Even when traditional labor rights are key issues in the social movements led by young people, this activity mainly takes place outside of traditional trade union channels. Scholars in the field of social movement studies have developed the notion of ‘alter-activism’ to highlight the contrast between emerging cultures of activism and traditional forms of collective action, such as that commonly found in the labor movement. Many of these new activists, whether they are employed in precarious positions with no union representation or are students or unemployed, are, in the main, either unaware of unions or do not come across them in the sectors in which they work. In some cases, they are simply distrustful of traditional labor unions.

Our article asks whether the gap between emerging and traditional forms of collective action can be filled. We look to the academic literature in the fields of social movement and labor and industrial relations studies to address this question. Our comparative case study research from the United States, France, Germany, and the UK suggests that the situation is more complex than simple opposition between ‘alter-activists’ and ‘traditional unionists’. We show how young people can be vehicles for connecting trade unions to other social movements and can contribute to labor revitalization. The first section of this paper expands on the idea of ‘alter-activism’ and addresses its relationship with traditional labor activism. The second section summarizes our research methods based on qualitative comparative case study analysis and is then followed by the findings. One finding is that rather than disdaining trade unions, young people can act as intermediaries between labor and other social movements and contribute to hybridizing the trade union repertoire of collective action.

Another finding is that young people can bring fresh perspectives into the labor movement, but this depends on the openness of unions to young activists and their concerns. Further, removing the barriers between young people and unions may allow for re-consideration of the very essence of the meaning of trade unionism. For example, the expansion of tactics and engagement with coalitions could extend the jurisdiction of organized labor to include wider concerns beyond traditional concerns of terms and conditions of employment.

‘Alter-activism’ and its relevance to labor movements

Consideration of the relationship between young activists and labor unions is of interest for a number of reasons. Firstly, most young people will become workers at some point and, as such, they are potential union members—new recruits that the labor movement badly needs if it is to stem the last few decades of drastic decline (Connolly, 2012; Hodder & Kretsos eds., 2015; Simms, Holgate, & Heery, 2013; Turner, Katz, & Hurd, 2001; Upchurch, Taylor, & Mathers, 2009; Vandaele, 2012, 2013, 2015). Secondly, paying attention to emergent cultures of activism helps understand how new forms of collective action can help reframe traditional labor issues and allow for a rethinking of the way unions organize (Frege, Heery, & Turner, 2004; Hodder & Kretsos eds., 2015). Yet these trends are often not a priority for labor unions where the concern is mainly with defending the current terms and conditions of existing members—few of whom are young workers. Young people can also be seen as ‘lost’ for the labor movement because of the perception that they favor other causes and different forms of collective action.

However, far from being apathetic, young people have, in recent years, engaged in various mobilizations from solidarity with refugees all over Europe to struggles against racial injustice and for environmental justice. They have also organized around issues related to their material conditions, such as precarity at work and poor housing, showing that, ‘the traditional distinction between the new social movements, focusing on post-material issues, and the old ones, linked to class politics . . . seems more and more misleading’ (D della Porta & Reiter, 2012: 350). Following the economic and financial crisis of the late 2000s, the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa, mobilizations of ‘Indignados’ in Europe, and the Occupy movement in the United States, a new global cycle of contention has developed in which labor and social issues have regained centrality (D della Porta, 2015; Estanque, Costa, & Soeiro, 2013). Young people have played a key role in these ‘anti-austerity and pro-democracy protests’ (Flesher Fominaya, 2017). Research shows, for instance, that the student struggles against the neoliberal reforms of the university system shaped the anti-austerity mobilizations in Southern Europe (Zamponi & González, 2017). While these ‘Indignados’

and Occupy-style movements have been more or less diverse in terms of generations and social origins of their participants, there has been a common feature of young people struggling against indebtedness, precariousness, and the risk of social downgrading (Ancelovici et al., 2016).

In a study analyzing the protagonists of these movements (Juris & Pleyers, 2009), the authors posit that there is a shared set of political-cultural practices that young, largely urban, and middle-class activists adhere to that represents an emerging form of citizenship among young people. These young people—identified by Juris and Pleyers (2009) as ‘alter-activists’—are creating new forms of activism ‘based on lived experience and process; a commitment to horizontal, networked organization; creative direct action; the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs); and the organization of physical spaces and action camps as laboratories for developing alternative values and practices’ (2009: 58). The authors argue that young people are not, as previous research has found, disengaged from civic organizations, but rather that their *form* of civic activism has changed. Juris and Pleyers’ research shows that young people are less likely than previous generations to vote, unlikely to be a part of mainstream parties and unions, and less inclined to participate in conventional politics. Yet, the forms of ‘alter-activism’ described by Juris and Pleyers suggests that young people are not, on the whole, rejecting politics, but are, instead, engaging in different modes of political activity and citizenship that reflect diverse forms of participation. Though they are not rejecting politics *per se*, young activists are critical of formal political and civil society associations, including trade unions, ‘which they view as hierarchical, bureaucratic, and distant from their grass-roots base’ (Juris & Pleyers, 2009: 61).

In the same vein, French sociologist, Vakaloulis (2013), describes how young professionals prefer to create *ad hoc* organizations rather than join unions, which not only tackle the issues affecting their work, but also include wider issues such as combating precariousness or poor housing. In Southern European countries like Italy, Spain, and Portugal, facing the upsurge of mobilization by young, precarious workers outside traditional union organizations, several scholars have been following the hypothesis of the ‘precariat’ (D della Porta, Hänninen, Siisiäinen, & Silvasti, 2015; Standing, 2011) as a new historical collective actor. Studies have also focused on the relocation of protest from the workplace to the urban space (Greenberg, Lewis, 2017), and on the tensions between the labor movement and new generations of contingent workers (Diaz-Salazar, 2003; Lopez Calle, 2008). Similarly, studies on the emergence of ‘alt-labor’—a term coined in the United States to designate structures such as worker centers, which are distinct from traditional union organizations but also aim to defend workers’ rights—have highlighted a difficult relationship with American unions (Fine,

2005; Tait, 2005). This literature shows that leaders of ‘paraunion’ movements are often young graduates who want to act in solidarity with the least-protected workers (immigrant workers, undocumented and precarious workers, etc.) whom they consider abandoned by unions. Consequently, apart from what might be considered some idiosyncratic configurations of labor organizing, such as in Los Angeles (Milkman, Bloom, & Narro, 2010), traditional unions and alt-labor movements have not frequently collaborated, even though there are overlapping interests.

Whereas many studies show that young people are often engaging outside the world of work and away from the traditional labor movement, other scholars explain how young people perceive or join trade unions (see for example Bailey, Price, Esders, & McDonald, 2010; Dufour-Poirier & Laroche, 2015; Freeman & Diamond, 2003; Hodder & Kretsos eds., 2015; Juris & Pleyers, 2009; Keune, 2015; Pascual & Waddington, 2000; Payne, 1989; Vandaele, 2012, 2015). Contrary to literature in the area of social movement studies that tends to ratify the idea that young people disregard organized labor, scholars in the field of labor and industrial relations have shown that the low youth union membership, which is frequently taken as evidence of a generational distrust towards unionism, is more the result of two factors: firstly, structural factors, such as the labor market status of young workers and the absence or weakness of trade unions in sectors where most young people work, and secondly, political factors, namely a mismatch between union strategies and young people’s needs. So if there are structural, as opposed to ideological, impediments to unionizing young workers, a thorough consideration of relevant organizing strategies can perhaps overcome these barriers.

Crossing these two lines of research suggests that emergent cultures of activism outside of the traditional labor movement are not unilaterally interpreted as a sign that unions are outdated, but that they present an opportunity for trade union revitalization. For example, recent studies on paraunion movements in the United States show that relationships between trade unions and alt-labor organizations have changed, as ‘many worker center leaders developed a more positive view of traditional unions as they struggled to build durable organizations’ and ‘organized labor began to reach out to other social movements’ (Milkman & Ott, 2014: 3 & 9). Likewise, in Portugal, ‘new’ movements of young and precarious workers emerged in the wake of union-driven protests and went on to increasingly rely on ‘old’ actors in order to sustain mobilization (Accornero & Ramos Pinto, 2014). This illustrates the idea that the attitudes of new generations towards the labor movement are not bound to remain defiant and outside of organized labor and that new generations of activists can influence trade unions, as well as be influenced by them.

From the reflections of these authors we find that it may be advantageous for the labor movement to go beyond the traditional world of work and change trade union structures to engage with emergent cultures of activism, such as those involved in global justice, place-based, anti-austerity, environmental, or racial equality movements, if they wish to organize young people. Current mobilizations, whether they be by young workers, students, or precarious individuals, standing astride those two worlds are crucial in that they inform how young workers and workers-to-be will perceive trade unions and organizations now and perhaps in the future. The next section will briefly outline our methods and methodological approach before comparing and contrasting how young workers are starting to bring new forms of activism into the labor movement.

Undertaking the case study analysis

Data for this paper derives from a four-country study in France, Germany, the USA, and the UK¹ where case study research looked at innovative ways that young people were engaging with union campaigns and, conversely, what unions were doing to become more relevant to the concerns of young workers. In total, 25 case studies were initially undertaken, and seven were chosen in order to focus more deeply on what we could learn in a cross-country comparison. The seven were chosen for the ways in which they directly addressed overcoming barriers to building closer relationships between traditional labor unions and young workers, but also where young activists had utilized spaces beyond the workplace as sites of alt-activism. In short, the case studies are the Bakers Food and Alliance Workers Union and the TUC's Young Workers Strategy in the UK; the SEIU Millennials, the Futures Committee, and the Retail Action Project in the USA; Lampedusa in Hamburg, Germany; and ReAct in France. The methods adopted were similar in that we wanted to give voice to young activists, and to do this, the researchers undertook case studies, including in-depth interviews with people involved in running the campaigns, as well as union staffers supporting the organizing drives. Participant observation was utilized to get close to the action taking place and to witness first-hand the tactics and methods being adopted by young people to highlight what they perceived to be unjust labor practices. Internal documents were analyzed to provide additional policy context to the alt-activism, and a coding system was used on data in order to identify themes that would assist with the comparison across countries. Finally, and in line with a commitment to openness, the findings have been discussed with participants and debated in a number of workshops

¹ We want to acknowledge the Hans Böckler Foundation for funding this comparative research and thank them for their support throughout, especially in facilitating workshops for the research to meet and discuss the findings. A full list of the research team can be found at XXXX

with young people and labor activists so as to allow feedback on, and a corrective to, our interpretation of the data.

Young people connecting labor with other social movements

Rather than opposing emergent cultures and traditional forms of activism, our case studies provide examples of how young people can play a key role in connecting labor with other social movements. Young people see themselves as part of a larger social justice project that includes racial justice, immigration, and broader issues of economic inequality beyond ‘traditional’ labor issues. As such, young people’s organizing includes close alliances and engagement with other social justice organizations.

For example, in the USA, within the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), SEIU Millennials, now renamed SEIU RISE, has successfully worked with other social justice and civil society movements. SEIU is one of the most diverse unions in the USA with approximately 300,000 millennial members (Cha, 2016). The idea for what became SEIU Millennials was sparked by an inquiry into why people were interested in Occupy Wall Street, but seemingly not interested in the labor movement. Occupy Wall Street brought income inequality into mainstream focus yet labor unions were not at the forefront of Occupy, and were not seen as integral in reversing income inequality by people engaged in the Occupy movements. Once this reality was brought to the attention of SEIU leadership, resources were devoted to developing a plan to address both engaging young workers and working with other civil society movements.

One of the first projects under SEIU Millennials was a summer training program called the Freedom Summer Fellowship to commemorate the upcoming 50th anniversary of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project, a project during the Civil Rights movement that brought over a thousand volunteers to Mississippi to register voters and work to integrate the state’s segregated political system (Levy, 2015) The goal of the program was to train millennial SEIU leaders and then place them within social justice and civil society organizations around the USA. The inaugural fellows, who were all millennial leaders within SEIU, went through an intensive training on the history of the civil rights movement, the history of other social justice movements, and organizing practice. After completing the training, fellows were placed in different social justice movements around the country. Some fellows took part in the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina, which was focused on fighting back against an extremely conservative legislative agenda focused on increasing hardship for working families, communities of color, and rolling back democratic reforms that had made voting more accessible. Other fellows took part in fighting against anti-immigration measures

in Georgia and Alabama, and others worked with civil rights advocacy organizations, such as the Dream Defenders. The work of SEIU Millennials during this time took young leaders out of the ranks of the union, helped them form local millennial committees, and then gave them support to be in social justice movement spaces.

While SEIU RISE shows that young labor activists *within* labor can engage in other social movements, conversely, the case of the French group ReAct is a good illustration of ‘alter-activists’ learning to mobilize *alongside* traditional labor organizations (Yon, 2016). ReAct is short for ‘Réseau pour l’Action collective transnationale’ (a network for transnational collective action). Created in 2010 by a dozen young graduates to combat the power of multi-national corporations (MNC), it is currently made up of about thirty active members. The founding members were in their mid-twenties when they conceived the project and most of the later recruits were of a similar age when they joined ReAct. Whether they work for the movement full-time or as volunteers in parallel with their studies or a professional career, their investment in ReAct comes across as an original way to extend the militant activism they began during their school years in environmental, student, and global justice movements into the labor movement.

A common feature of ReAct activists is that they have spent time living in countries other than France or have grown up in a cosmopolitan environment. This outward-looking experience contributes to the discovery of ‘new’ forms of collective action. For example, a ReAct activist had previously taken part to the Arab spring protests in Morocco and another one campaigned in Scottish alternative ecological movements, such as Reclaim the Streets and Guerilla Gardening. Spending time in English-speaking countries was also decisive for learning about the Alinsky methods of community organizing (Fink, 1983), which focuses on helping communities express their own sense of injustice and promotes disobedient practices and non-violent direct action to attract media attention and impact public opinion.

This international socialization of activists shaped ReAct’s ambition to ‘unlock the power of people affected by abuse from multinational corporations and to act as ‘network forgers’ to link people together in order to improve their working *and* living conditions’ (ReAct, 2018). It is a dissatisfaction with existing trade unions that has pushed ReAct members to set up their own *ad hoc* structures. As one of the founding members explained:

We looked at quite a few organizations, NGOs, unions, and that kind of thing, but we didn’t find what we wanted so we decided to set it [ReAct]up. We met up with French unions...who thought international

meant going to a meeting in Geneva from time-to-time, and NGOs who acted internationally, but were more concerned with denunciation, and so there you go, we started to take a deeper look and to think that something [different] had to be tested out.

However, from 2014, ReAct's main objective became to construct 'contractual relationships' with French unions. This change was not an easy one, as ReAct members initially viewed them with some distrust. As one interviewee said:

I found it really difficult negotiating with the union leaders...because of their ultra-bureaucratic way of thinking...political positions and ideologies...and you realize that in fact, too many people have a personal interest in it, and don't want things to change...And so because of that...I turned my nose up at the unions all the time... For me, they weren't reliable partners at all, we needed to create our own union, we couldn't work with them. I've moved on a bit since then, though...but there are some things that I still find mega complex.

The concern of durability of ReAct's action justified the group's 'cultural shift', as one of the members interviewed put it, involving a systematic search for formalized partnerships with the unions. The project's viability relies on unions recognizing its utility, because they are the only stakeholders that have both a direct interest in a stronger power relationship with MNCs, and possess sufficient resources to devote to that objective. While the founders of ReAct were mostly unfamiliar with classic forms of activism, the later arrival of members from the student union *Union Nationale des Étudiants de France* (UNEF), which developed long-lasting relationships with the labor movement, helped ReAct connect more closely with trade union networks. Experience in the field also gave them an opportunity to discover the difficulties of union work, in particular when they face repression by employers, both in France and abroad. This discovery helped to dissipate their initial 'romanticized' vision of direct action against MNCs and placed ReAct activists in a position to learn from unionists.

In the UK, the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU) is a traditional labor organization. Yet, refocusing itself to organize in chain coffee shops, bars and fast food restaurants, where many young workers are to be found in this notoriously un-unionised sector, BFAWU developed tactics inspired from other social movements. The fast food industry employs a high percentage of young workers with McDonald's, for example, reporting that 42 per cent of its workers are under 21 and the average age of an hourly paid employee is 20 years old (McDonalds, 2018). The union launched a 'Fast Foods Rights' campaign in 2014 and the focus has been around direct action in stores and a

media campaign that highlighted how large multi-national companies like Google, Amazon, Apple and Starbucks have either not been paying tax on their profits in the UK, or have been paying minimal amounts. The outcry at this, and the resultant ‘tax-shaming’ campaigns, has drawn huge attention to the behavior of these and other companies, and part of the outrage relates to the companies’ exploitative employment practices, particularly the use of zero-hour contracts that do not guarantee any fixed hours per week.

The fast food sector (and coffee chains) are highly visible on most UK high streets, and are therefore an attractive public facing target for highlighting the concerns of workers and their lack of employment rights and levels of exploitation. A young organizer recruited by the union spent his time talking to young workers in these stores encouraging them to think about how they can get involved in fighting for their rights. There was a conscious decision to not just rely on the ‘traditional union organizing’ approaches, as the campaigns wanted to be led from the bottom up in the ways young workers wanted to organize. The union’s leadership felt like this approach was likely to create greater ownership of the campaigns and be more innovative and spontaneous:

This idea that young people aren’t interested in politics and are happy to go along with what’s going on is just nonsense. Every one of them that I’ve met, and they’re so, so clever, so bright...Communication methods for younger people are different – older people might want a leaflet, but for these [young people] it’s Facebook, Twitter, mobile phones, etc. It’s also about meeting them in places where young people meet rather than some grotty pub with lots of old people in there – so looking to make it more like a social event [rather than a meeting]. Also, they have created a choir where they write protest songs and they go to festivals, they sing outside McDonalds – they are great. --BAWFU official

The fact that these places are non-unionized meant young workers had to think about alternative forms of action to strikes or other industrial action. For example, in Glasgow, Scotland, a group of activists employed street theatre as a way to get noticed. They dressed up in evil Ronald McDonald costumes, complete with scary face makeup. They sang songs and showed people their ‘un-happy meal’ boxes that were filled with zero-hour contracts and low pay. In other places, groups of young people working in this sector have come together to ‘hit and run’ occupations of fast food premises where they have sung about their woes to customers, moving across town as quickly as possible to avoid detection. The tactics adopted have had an impact with McDonalds, one of the key targets, announcing in September 2017 it would offer guaranteed-hour contracts to all employees who wanted them (Wilkinson, 2017). These tactics made of non-violent direct action were similar to those employed by ReAct activists in France: taking advantage of the social protests against the ‘*loi Travail*’

reforming Labor law in the spring of 2016, ReAct activists, jointly with young trade unionists, students, and ‘*Nuit debout*’ protesters occupying the *place de la République* in Paris, organized similar occupations of McDonald’s restaurants.

In Germany, the case of the group known as ‘Lampedusa in Hamburg’ (LIH) provides another example of young activists connecting labor with other social movements (Schmid, 2016). In 2013, around 300 refugees from West African countries decided to declare that they were undocumented immigrants, demanding to be recognized as citizens and workers. Their struggle for the right to work was taken up by young union activists from several unions including ver.di, the two million member German union. One of their youth groups saw it not only as a matter of defending basic human rights but also defending the rights of worker, as illegal employment leads to heightened exploitation. Three and a half thousand students from various Hamburg schools boycotted classes and marched downtown in support of LIH claims. The dedication of young union activists engaged the local labor movement in a wider social movement for equal rights in the city of Hamburg and beyond. As a result, activists from other social and political movements have formed coalitions with ver.di and come to trust the union as a reliable partner in the fight for the rights of marginalized groups on the job market. This effort gave rise to direct contact, exchanging experiences of activities and campaigns, and the attempt to link union organizing with local movements to create the sense of a social movement unionism.

A condition for success: the openness of trade unions to young activists and civil society groups

Our case studies show that young people adopt tactics and modes of action inspired from their counterparts in other social movements or from previous experiences. They do so, both in a logic of mimesis and because traditional union repertoires can be ineffective in the non unionized or anti-union environments where young and precarious workers are concentrated. The circulation of tactics and modes of actions contribute to reinforcing the resonance and ‘family resemblance’ between labor and other social movements, changing the mutual representations of unionists and activists outside the labor movement. However, such cross-breeding also depends on the openness of traditional labor leaders.

The Retail Action Project (RAP) in New York City provides a good example of such openness. RAP is a project of a traditional labor union (Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union) supporting a non-union entity that together aims to assist with the transition from informal worker collectivism

to formal worker organizing via collective bargaining (Fullin & Ikeler, 2016). Together, RAP and RWDSU have been working to transform a sector that is notorious for providing abusive working conditions and poor wages with little to no protections for workers. The two organizations work together to combat rising inequality, increase worker power, and support other broader social justice issues that are rooted in traditional labor concerns. The retail sector has long employed mainly part-time workers and, in the USA, employers provide few fringe benefits to part-time workers, such that many employees find themselves working in precarious economic conditions. It is also a sector with a high percentage of young workers.

The Retail Action Project began in 2005 as a campaign-based initiative of RWDSU. RAP focused on workers' rights at non-union fashion retailers and has won major back-wage settlements, improved conditions, and successfully formally unionized several stores (Fullin & Ikeler, 2016). In addition to winning workplace rights, RAP has made a conscious effort to build capacity among retail workers and, as a result, succeeded in building a creative, youthful identity among its members. In doing so, RAP introduced traditional unions to a new generation of young workers who may be unfamiliar or wary of traditional unions. In contrast to the traditional union model of organizing in the USA (e.g. build membership, win a contract, negotiate on behalf of all the workers in the workplace), RAP has continued to address worker grievances even when unionization was clearly unattainable. RAP used legal tactics and direct-action methods spearheaded by young and immigrant workers to pressure employers into providing better pay, security, and better treatment on the sales floor. RAP organized one-day boycotts and store-front rallies in front of the *Young Rat Bastard* clothing chain, which had violated wage and hour protections (Fullin & Ikeler, 2016: 9). Leading the actions against the company were young immigrant and LGBT workers, who were treated particularly poorly. RAP also provides young people with a space to congregate and build community, provides skill training, job placement assistance, and other services that build personal and worker capacity. Here, even though there may not be workplace organization, there is incentive for RWDSU to support RAP because engagement between young workers and the union is facilitated by RAP. RAP builds trust among young workers and, in turn, young workers may be more open to RWDSU and traditional unions because of this trust.

In the UK, the Bakers union has also used its position to develop alliances between young people, civil society groups, and trade union organizations. The Bakers union linked up with the SEIU in the USA, Unite in New Zealand, and a number of other trade unions across Europe and Central America so that members would feel they were part of a global movement fighting low pay and

precarious work. The closest link the Bakers union has is with the SEIU, who helped fund an organizing post in the BFAWU. The Bakers union has been keen to work with other organizations outside the union movement in order to get its message across. As such, young workers have invited interested parties to join actions and to bring like-minded people along. Some of these organizations have been small left political parties, but more general campaign groups, like the National Shop Stewards Network, Unite the Resistance, Youth Fight for Jobs, and other trade unions, have also been involved and supported the union's fast food campaigns. None of these organizations have any formal connection with the Bakers union, but they are made up of members and supporters who share the injustice of what is perceived to be large companies unconcerned about precarious working conditions of vulnerable young employees. Further, there has been vocal support from the UK trade union federation, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), and active support from Unite the union via its branches that are made up of community activists. For a small union, like the Bakers, these partnerships have been helpful in raising its profile and getting the message out about events they had planned.

As in the UK, McDonald's presents itself as the leading recruiter of young workers in France and ReAct's interest in McDonald's was also triggered by the Fight for \$15 campaign in the USA. When SEIU set out to intensify the Fight for \$15 campaign's global dimension by targeting McDonald's internationally, ReAct suggested including France, which is the company's number one market in Europe. The aim was to carry out a campaign attacking McDonald's image with support from the main French trade union, the Confédération générale du travail (CGT). SEIU was keen on funding an organizer for a young ReAct activist, but the CGT officials in charge of the fast-food industry vetoed the project. They were suspicious of ReAct activists whom they perceived as 'youngsters' with no labor experience, and they were afraid of losing control of the campaign. In contrast to this failure at the national level, collaboration was made possible at the local level between ReAct activists and CGT workplace unionists in several McDonald's restaurants in the Paris region. They were roughly the same age, many of the CGT workplace unionists working part-time as student-employees. These young CGT unionists would share with ReAct members the same culture of activism that differentiates them from their elders at CGT's top leadership. The CGT activists in McDonald's restaurants in the Paris area had already taken advantage of the SEIU campaign to develop their own actions based on similar slogans for union freedom and a 13-euro wage. They were open to non-conventional forms of action, and initiated a legal complaint against McDonald's, filed with the help of Eva Joly, a personality known for her fight against corruption and for having stood as a green candidate at the 2012 French presidential elections. While being involved in CGT

set-ups (such as its youth commissions), the young CGT leaders in McDonald's restaurants are less concerned about organizational borderlines than their elders and CGT officials at the national level, and do not hesitate to coordinate their action via social networks (for example, the Facebook page, 'les indignés de McDonald's' or, the McDonald's outraged), bringing together unionized and non-unionized employees, and members of CGT and other trade unions.

The fact that the activists are within the same age group has resulted in similar forms of action and openness to new technology, making it easier to build a relationship of trust between ReAct and the young CGT local leaders in McDonald's restaurants in the Paris region. Together, they devised a corporate campaign, and an activist was recruited to set up a network of diverse stakeholders to work on a threefold condemnation of the social, fiscal and environmental wrongdoings committed by McDonald's, (e.g. low salaries, dissatisfactory working conditions and obstruction of union rights, tax evasion practices and the quality of products and the relationship with farmer suppliers). The campaign, launched in fall 2016, was particularly attractive to former and current members of the student union, UNEF, because the organization had a long record of combating low student wages and 'McJobs' was one of its key causes. It also attracted the global justice movement *Association pour la taxation des transactions financières et pour l'action citoyenne* (ATTAC) that had recently been redeploying around a campaign against tax evasion. Finally, the left-leaning farmer movement '*Confédération paysanne*' and green activists also played an important part around the environmental part of the project.

In Germany, the case of Lampedusa in Hamburg also shed light on divisions within the labor movement. While the youth groups in unions were in favor of supporting the demands of LIH, defending a model of 'social movement unionism' and following examples of similar mobilizations in other countries, such as the 'sans-papiers' strikes in France, there were strong divisions in the top leadership of German unions, some of them held the view that trade unions should only represent legal employees: 'the struggle for Lampedusa in Hamburg has shown that the lines of conflicts are drawn not so much between refugees and union members, but between the younger generation of union activists and the representatives of an understanding of unions that still defends only the interests of core personnel and a kind of lobbying in union policy as central and decisive for union policies in general' (Schmid, 2016).

Reframing traditional labor issues and extending labor's jurisdiction beyond the institutional framework of industrial relations

A third theme found among the analysis of our case studies is that the presence of young activists, within or alongside trade unions, can contribute to redefining a trade union's agenda. Trade unions not only reframed traditional labor issues, such as precarious working conditions or poor wages, but also broadened the scope of issues to include structural economic inequality. They also took into account the specific concerns of young people, such as unaffordable housing.

In Boston, Massachusetts, the Futures Committee is an initiative of the Greater Boston Labor Council (GBLC) to engage and empower young union workers. The Futures Committee surveyed young workers throughout the greater Boston area and found that economic stability and finding a reliable job resonated the strongest with young workers (Barnes, 2016). In response to the survey results, the Futures Committee joined the 'Good Jobs, Strong Communities' campaign, a coalition of youth and community organizations, which focused on economic inequality issues, including fighting against wage theft. In their work with the coalition in May 2014, the Futures Committee partnered with a local advocacy organization, Chelsea Collaborative, to fight for back wages owed to custodial workers of a movie theater in downtown Boston. These two organizations rallied the support of community organizations and affiliates involved with the Good Jobs, Strong Communities campaign to fill the movie theatre lobby in protest of stolen wages (Barnes, 2017: 6). The event led to workers receiving back wages owed and, subsequently, Boston and the neighboring cities of Cambridge and Chelsea have all enacted legislation to combat wage theft. In this example, the alignment between the survey results of the priorities of young workers and the goals of the Good Jobs, Strong Communities campaign provided a natural way for young workers within the union to engage with a civil society movement outside of the union.

In the case of the Bakers union in the UK, it was realized that while low pay was a serious labor issue for young workers, housing and high rent costs were of equal concern, so the framing of issues needed to be much wider than the traditional concerns of pay and conditions. This expansion of framing has provided opportunities to engage young people in conversations about these issues and broadened the scope of what they understand unions to be about. Similarly, the UK trade union federation, the Trades Union Congress, established a Young Workers' Forum (YWF), which is an advisory body intended to facilitate relationships between young trade unionists and the General Council, which is the primary decision-making body of the TUC Committee (Simms, Holgate, & Hodder, 2016). Via the Young Worker Committee (YWC), which is made up of delegates from

unions affiliated to the TUC, the YWF sets key priorities for the year and campaign priorities can be both workplace issues and wider concerns. Reflecting this broad remit, recent years have seen priorities around pay, mental health, and housing. One advantage of the youth structures is that they have enabled the TUC to re-frame issues beyond the traditional workplace concerns of pay, terms, and conditions. In 2015, a focus on mental health and young workers, for example, highlighted concern about stress, depression and mental health problems that may result from wider life challenges, as well as issues at work (TUC, 2015a). The cost and poor quality of rented accommodation is an issue that particularly affects young people and has been promoted by the TUC as a campaign to engage young people. This effort led to the publication of a TUC Charter For Young People In Private Rented Accommodation (TUC, 2015b). As part of these campaigns, the TUC produces materials such as negotiating handbooks, advice webpages and other campaign materials to support activists, and also to reach out to new members through, for example, social media campaigns.

The case of ReAct is quite different, as young ReAct activists engage in an ‘altruistic’ way and do not expect unions to represent these type of interests. But ReAct contributed in another way to modify the agenda of trade unions. The fact that ReAct activists are both young and external to the trade union world helps them reframe and suggest new ways of addressing key issues for the labor movement. As a unionist interviewed put it: ‘It helps bring in a few fresh ideas. You know how to do it on your own, but sometimes having someone who forces you to think differently... that’s the advantage of outside cooperation.’

As mentioned before, one purpose of ReAct is to combat the power of mult-national corporations. Traditionally, trade unions consider action at the international level through the institutionalized channels of industrial relations—such as European Work Councils and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD. ReAct members took advantage of their situation to develop direct links of solidarity between employees, trade unionists, and communities across the world from the grass roots level. As one respondent put it:

So, we said to ourselves: well, they’re [MNCs] mobile, so we need to be mobile too... And our generation probably faces a specific challenge and has a specific responsibility—because we have quite a few advantages, like multilingualism and mobility—to build these networks.

One of ReAct’s first campaigns was the building of an international alliance of trade unions in France and Morocco in a call-center company. It was actually thanks to the study abroad experience of a

ReAct member in Morocco that first contacts were made with Moroccan employees. Likewise, another project of building an international union alliance at the level of a microelectronics multinational company was made possible by the PhD project in social geography of a ReAct member. ReAct's engagement in global unionism, i.e. promoting an upscaling of union action through transnational solidarity, eventually led to the successful organization, in November 2017, of the first French-speaking edition of the Global Labour Institute. During three days, a hundred unionists from French trade unions CGT and Solidaires, as well as from other unions in Belgium, Switzerland, and French-speaking countries in Africa, met together with civil society activists and alt-labor groups from France and abroad to discuss perspectives of transnational labor action. ReAct organizers did not actually invent anything new; the construction of transnational union alliances follows on from experiments carried out by unionists. However, in devoting 100 per cent of their activist time to this action, they embodied an issue that is strategically central for the labor movement, but in reality is often neglected due to the frequently hectic schedules of unionists in juggling representation tasks and professional duties. Young ReAct members have much greater international mobility. As students, several of them have taken advantage of academic experiences abroad and as young people with no family ties or regular employment, they can easily travel abroad.

Conclusion

These studies of young workers in France, USA, UK and Germany help to dispel stereotypes that suggests that young people have little appetite for political engagement. As the research finds, young people are not necessarily politically inactive or less engaged compared with older generations, rather the ways in which they engage with social movements and politics takes a different form than traditional union activity. In doing so, they act directly as cultural creators contributing to renewed forms of collective action. Young workers are using new technology, such as social media to recruit and organize social actions and are more innovative and comfortable in doing so than older generations of union activists. Young workers have also adopted non-violent, disruptive actions to draw attention to issues they face as precarious workers.

Our case studies show that 'alter-activism' and traditional labor activism can cross-breed in wider social mobilizations or specific campaigns. While they may use different methods of activism, the concerns of young people are often the same as traditional union concerns, such as working conditions, precarity of employment, and wages. Similarly, the context may be different, for example, young people's employment is more transient than previous recent generations, but young people are more likely to be employed in low-wage jobs, have zero-hours contracts, unpredictable

schedules, and an ‘employer’ who is difficult to identify. In addition, young people’s interests in terms of what they would like unions to focus on extends to other issues outside of the workplace to cover issues such as housing, tax avoidance by large companies, immigration, racial and environmental justice. Traditional labor unions, by having a greater focus on these issues, can perhaps find an entry point into engaging with young people so as to bring them into the union movement. By lifting the structural and ideological barriers in unions and supporting organizing initiatives for better working conditions *and* broader social justice issues— even if the workers are not ultimately brought into the union—young people become more familiar with the labor movement and begin to build trust and a feeling of solidarity. In the example of ReAct, the campaign against McDonald’s went beyond wage and economic issues to include environmental wrongdoings. Young union members in the USA actively participate in social justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street and would like these to be more clearly identified as union issues as well. In Germany, young trade union activists were at the forefront of the solidarity with migrants, and in the UK, the Bakers union worked with organizations outside the union movement to support the union’s fast food campaign.

However, some examples show that there are still barriers preventing young people’s engagement within unions. The cases of ReAct in France and LIH in Germany illustrate that external or sideway initiatives raise political issues and can sometimes produce distrust from traditional union leaders fearing a dilution or destabilization of labor’s core identity. Therefore, how union leaders view young workers is as important as how young workers view unions: disregard and distance can be mutual. The encouragement and development of younger leaders in the trade union movement is important to help facilitate collaborations with young activists outside unions and lift existing barriers.

All the evidence suggests that young workers are crucial to the long-term survival of unions and there is a need for labor unions to change if they are to be of relevance to the changed labor market and labor practices of the twenty-first century. Unions can help protect young workers against increasingly precarious and poorly paid employment, but only if they rethink their policies and practices. Our research shows that young people are not opposed to joining unions and do see the value in unionization, but they want to be able to organize in the ways that make sense to their lived experiences. The case studies presented in this paper provide examples of how unions can engage with a wider and more diverse constituency if they so choose. By adapting to new tactics, aligning with other civil society movements, and reframing traditional union priorities, unions can appeal to and engage with young workers in a way that is not only attracting young workers to unions but that

also shows there is a value in being part of a much larger labor family that is able to harness greater power and generate solidarity to effect change.

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