

Trade Union Responses to the rise of precarious employment among young people in Southern Europe

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Abstract

Labour markets across Southern Europe are characterized by the offer of either limited or low-quality job opportunities for young people. The current paper examines the trade union responses to the emergence of the young precarious generation of 1,000 euros (or even less) in Southern Europe. It is concluded that while recent research evidence suggests that there is an unsatisfied demand for unions by young people and that there are not attitudinal shifts to unionism across generations, unionism is still based on and identified with the 'core' permanent workforce, excluding young-aged 'outsiders' and non-standard workers. This development is partly related to insufficient strategies of organizing young precarious workers at the workplace/ establishment level, as well as peculiar regulatory anomalies and complex/ contradictory union strategies.

1. Introduction

Trade unions have an obvious interest to deal with the issue of the problematic position of young workers in the labour market, as union membership in western industrial nations is ageing and tends to be concentrated in declining or slow-growth sectors. According to a recent Pedersini (2010) study young workers seem to be almost invariably the most problematic group of workers to unionise. Younger workers' much lower levels of unionization are evident in almost all countries, especially in the Anglo-American world (Bryson et al., 2005; Haynes et al., 2005; Lowe and Rastin, 2000; Visser, 2006; Waddington and Kerr, 2002). Not surprisingly international and national trade union organizations and industrial relations academics have repeatedly urged that the issue of low union density among young workers is one of the most significant challenges and a top level priority for organised labour (ILO, 1997 and 1993; Lowe and Rastin, 2000; Pascual and Waddington, 2000; Waddington and Kerr, 2002). The acknowledgement of this need has in turn resulted to a variety of trade union initiatives that aim to organize and to provide a wide range of specialized services to young workers.

At the same time many scholars have tried to explain how and why young people compose one of the most hard-to-unionise and under-represented groups of the workforce. In any case both the academic research and union initiative have shown that when certain preconditions are met organizing young and other vulnerable groups of workers is possible (Howley, 1990; Milkman, 1993; Tate, 1994; Milkman, 2000; Milkman and Voss, 2004; Fantasia and Voss, 2004; Holgate, 2005; Nees, 2005). Nevertheless the success of organizing young

workers is mediated by many variables and factors that are context-dependent and idiosyncratic in nature.

In essence, a one-size-fits-all approach to organizing and representing young workers does not suit the modern reality of labour markets, which are characterized by growing diversity and constant restructuring. Different socio-economic and regulatory contexts, variable union identity characteristics and diverse groups of young workers in terms of education, ideological orientation and employment history affect dramatically the outcomes of union organizing and the effectiveness of representation strategies at local and national level. The current paper examines the trade union responses to the rise of precarious employment among young people in Southern Europe (Greece, Italy and Spain).

Precarious employment could be defined as employment characterised by the absence of security elements associated with the typical full-time, permanent employment. Precarious employment is also closely associated with the absence of other features of good work and is associated with similar concepts such as “insecure work” (Heery and Salmon, 2000) and “vulnerability at work” (Pollert and Charlwood, 2008). Young people (defined here as those between the ages of 16 and 30) often have little choice other than to accept these forms of work as they are typically in a comparatively weak labour market position. Their transition into the labour market is often difficult; illustrated by the fact that the European average youth unemployment rate is more than double the overall unemployment rate (Biletta and Eisner, 2007).

Further when they do secure employment, young people are more likely to be engaged in positions that are associated with precariousness and the risk of social exclusion. Even the EU admitted recently that fractured transitions between education and employment – with periods of paid work interspersed by unemployment, or withdrawal from the labour market, have been common for young workers, or at least substantial numbers among them. This situation is likely to be exacerbated as the consequences of the financial and economic shock of 2008-9 works its way through economies and labour markets.

In general the broader economic transformations have generated new social fractures and inequalities posing at the same time significant challenges for many workers, households and communities in all industrialized countries (Vosko, MacDonald and Campbell, 2010). Irrespective of age differences trade unions have by definition an obvious obligation to protect vulnerable people at work as agents of social interests of those workers to the lower end of the labour market. Further, the deepening of labour market and social inequalities put in action downward pressures on wages and working conditions and set in motion multiple dangers to displace standard employment and standard workers.

For this reason unions are supposed to be actively engaged in policies and strategies that aim to protect and diminish the risk of precarious and insecure employment among the workforce. Nevertheless each national setting offers unique path-dependent constraints and opportunities for union advance and action shaped by the institutional legacies, structures and mobilization traditions. The Mediterranean setting is ideal

for exploring the impact of labour market segmentation on union renewal strategies, including organizing strategies to increase youth density, as these countries share common cultural roots and political history traditions that result in turn in more or less common challenges in the way societal and economic modernization and transformation process took place in the last decades.

Furthermore they share common characteristics in the distribution of welfare and possess similar modes of social reproduction: pronounced labour market segmentation and familialism (Karamessini, 2008). Further all these countries are subject to EU employment policy interventions and are committed to greater investment in co-ordinating and benchmarking in the area. Finally one structural characteristic of the labour markets in the examined countries is that a growing and significant part of the young workforce is trapped into low paid and insecure jobs (Kretsos, 2010). This situation has resulted in the emergence of a new underclass composed of young people usually covered in the press as the 'Precarious Generation' or the 'Generation of 1,000 (and even less on certain cases) euros' despite the existence of high collective bargaining coverage rates and the adoption of a more employee protective legislation in the recent years.

My departure point of analysis is that the emergence of young precarious generation in Southern Europe represents a powerful external challenge to the unions and should be seen as an opportunity for unions to rethink the effectiveness of traditional representation strategies and to devise new forms of action appropriate to the changed social and economic context. From the analysis followed here it is also argued that such forms of actions and strategies are currently either absent (Greece) or incomplete (Italy and to a lesser extent Spain) in Southern Europe.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section summarises the explanations that have been advanced in the international literature to justify the existence of low youth union density rates; namely attitudinal explanations and structural constraints of organising young contingent workers. The next part maps the variety of union responses to the rise of precarious youth employment and examines union specific issues for the existence of low youth density. This section presents the preliminary findings from in-depth interviews with top level union officers and an exploratory desktop research on the strategies and the tactics big trade unions use in order to increase youth density rate in Southern Europe. The conclusions consider implications for the inefficiencies in union approaches to organising and representing young precarious workers.

2. Explaining Low Youth Density

A three-fold set of explanations has been proposed for the low youth density rates observed; first, the attitudes of young workers towards unionism are usually negative. Such a rationale argues the existence of an inter-generational shift in attitudes with young people being more antipathetic to trade unions and more

individualistic than previous generations. For example Polavieja (1999:4; 2001a; 2001b) has argued that outsiders in Spain show significant lower levels of pro-union attitudes in comparison to insiders.

The second type of explanation for the low youth density young workers gives emphasis to the structural characteristics of youth employment and focuses on the actual opportunities of young people to unionise (Charlwood, 2002; Haynes et al. 2005; Waddington and Kerr, 2002; Serrano Pascual and Waddington, 2000; Waddington and Whitston, 1997). Young people are usually employed in the less-regulated private services sector and they are more commonly to be found in smaller workplaces with no union representation. As such it is by definition difficult for young workers to join unionism, especially when a lot of young workers are employed under flexible and insecure contracts or move from one job to another (Llorente Sanchez, 2007).

Finally, a third set of explanations for the low density levels of young workers focuses on union specific reasons. This approach highlights the crucial role of union strategies in organising and attracting young workers. According to this perspective, union inefficiencies in terms of recruitment strategies, deficits in internal union democracy, gerontocracy on leadership and the decision making process are responsible for the low levels of youth membership.

The interesting development here is related to the observed dynamics in the respective debates, even if a serious limitation on these debates is that the literature is dominated by scholars from Anglo-Saxon speaking countries. In any case it seems that there is a gradual abandonment of the idea that the rejection of unions by young people is caused by hostile attitudes to unionism. There is considerable evidence anymore that structural labour market factors and conditions in the labour market are much influential regarding the unionization levels of young workers (Tailby and Pollert, 2009). Typical examples of such evidence include the research of Haynes et al. (2005) for New Zealand, as well as the research of Madland and Logan (2008), Bearfield (2003), Freeman and Diamond (2003) and Gomez et al. (2002) for USA, Australia, Britain and Canada respectively.

The focus on a number of structural factors and conditions that prevail in the labour markets as main determinants of the low youth trade union density rates had already been recognized by the earlier studies of Serrano Pascual and Waddington (2000) and Waddington and Kerr (2002). In both cases the authors concluded that there is no wide-ranging shift in young people's attitudes, either because young people are more likely to exhibit a greater individualism than in the past, or because younger generations of workers are characterized by political apathy. In essence, the low trade union membership level should be seen as the outcome of the employers' resistance and hostility to unionisation, as well as the concentration of employment of young people in private-sector services and small workplaces. There is no doubt that apart from an attitudinal shift, greater labour market segmentation can increase the costs of union organizing efforts and

make a union presence in individual workplaces less likely. Besides the statistics on union density show dramatic differences observed among standard and non-standard workers (Fernandez Macias, 2003; Visser, 2006).

As Ramon Alos et al. (2009: 101) indicate in their analysis many institutionalist and insider-outsider theorists have concluded that trade union membership is concentrated among workers in the core of the labour market (Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Edwards et al. 1975; Friedman and Friedman, 1980; Gordon et al. 1982; Osterman, 1984; Sollow, 1990; Rubery and Wilkinson 1994). According to this perspective the polarisation of union representation and support can also be explained in the sense that trade unions are considered to protect mainly the interests of labour market “insiders” and particularly those with open-ended contracts (Friedman and Friedman, 1980; Rubery, 1988). From this angle, it is reasonable to anticipate that the attitudes of the labour market “outsiders”, such as young precarious workers may not be positive towards unionism.

Nevertheless, as the recent evidence from the European Social Survey showed, there is an unsatisfied demand for unions by young people in Southern Europe and a large potential for unions' growth and renewal (D'Art and Turner, 2008). Moreover the need for unions is observed to be higher in the countries where this article is focused, as all EU Mediterranean countries hold the first five positions with Greece (89%) being first in the league and Portugal (85%), France (80%), Spain (79%) and Italy (77%) to follow. In a similar vein, the analysis of Fernandez Macias (2003) about Spain demonstrated that insecure workers had more positive attitudes towards unionism than those of stable employees. In a similar vein Altieri and Carrieri (2000) found a high demand for unionization among atypical workers in Italy.

Such evidence contradicts with the fact that youth union density rates still remain low and urge the need for unions to organize young precarious workers. Does labour market segmentation represent a really insurmountable structural constraint on union growth? If so, then how can we explain some successful stories of organizing and increasing youth unionization rates across certain professions and services highlighted in several studies (Brofenbrenner and Hickey, 2003). According to Sanchez (2007) issues of union unavailability and lack of employee representation at the workplace in accordance with positive performance of local representatives and social and political capital have a significant effect on trade union density levels.

The lack of union availability has been highlighted in many studies as a main driver for the unions' failure to fill the 'representation gap' (Bryson *et al.* 2005:18; Charlwood, 2002; Freeman and Rogers, 1999; Lipset and Meltz, 1997; Waddington and Whitston, 1997). In a similar vein Fernandez Macias (2003: 215) has found that in Spain only one in three temporary workers are in workplaces where a union representative can be found, in contrast to permanent ones, where more than 60% have such representatives at their organizations. In general, the incapacity of unions to recruit more young workers should be linked not only with the growing trends of labour market segmentation but also with several internal union organizational inefficiencies: lack of

union availability at the workplace, adoption of inappropriate ways by unions to support and value their members, sometimes limited performance of local union representatives, unions' inability to establish daily contact with young contingent workers. These inefficiencies reduce the propensity and the available opportunities of young people to unionize and they are the main object of analysis in the next sections of the paper.

3. Union Inefficiencies in Organizing/ Representing Young Precarious Workers

3.1 The Ambivalent Character of National/ Sectoral Level Collective Bargaining

The problem of precariousness at work for many young people is growing over the years across the examined countries. An effort was made to explore unions' reactions to young peoples' vulnerability at work following a desktop research and implementing a number of in-depth interviews with top-level union officers from the big trade unions. The research was focused on aspects of organizing young precarious workers at the workplace. From the analysis followed it was revealed that not all big national trade unions in Southern Europe have followed the same paths on tackling the issue of low youth density and high youth vulnerability at work.

Nevertheless trade unions in all examined countries have not managed so far to block labour market reforms that have resulted in the deepening of social inequalities. According to Ochel and Rohwer (2009) governments in all Mediterranean EU member states, were successful in realizing such reforms because they reduced the resistance of the incumbent workers by providing greater reemployment chances to the unemployed through active employment policies. In that sense the existing regulatory framework and the collective bargaining outcomes do not seem to provide a great sense of hope for many young workers, even if in recent years more protective clauses about atypical workers were introduced in the national labour law and in many national/ sectoral collective agreements.

On certain cases unions themselves have agreed on worsening the conditions of employment and pay for the new recruits and the young workforce in order to protect the jobs and the benefits of the older staff. As a result the access of new employees to the improvements in terms and conditions laid down in collective agreements (mainly at company level) is often being hampered or restricted. At the same time a lot of reform initiatives taken by the State to promote labour market flexibility did not affect the rights of those already in employment for years, as this would produce a high level of social conflict and unrest. Instead of this it was chosen to make the employment situation of young entrants in the labour market who are less union organised extremely insecure and difficult.

A good example to name is the controversial agreement concluded between the management and the

unions in late May 2005 in Greece with the OTE telecommunications group. The agreement brought about a significant change in industrial relations on public utilities and services in Greece, as similar provisions for the young entrants were established afterwards on other semi-public organisations and the public sector. The agreement resulted in the creation of a two-tier workforce, as the permanent employment status was abolished for the newly hired employees. New workers will be subject to a probationary period of up to seven months, the completion of which will be followed by a performance evaluation and specific recommendations by the human resource department and line managers. At the same time the agreement provided an extremely generous package of early retirement for employees aged 49 and over.

Other indicative examples of transferring the regulatory machinery to more decentralized bargaining levels are the consecutive since 1998 productivity and flexibility agreements at Nissan and Seat in Spain. Such agreements which established a dual wage scale (*dobla escala salarial*) with the newly recruited workers receiving less pay than those already employed in the same department/ occupation (on average 17% and 30% less pay in Nissan and Seat respectively). The introduction of a two-tier wage system through the conclusion of a company-level agreement is a common trend in Spain in the last decades. According to Miguelez (2003), new recruits earn 10% to 30% less than the rest of the workers who are already in the company. The difference is higher if seniority bonuses or other items related to seniority are counted.

In general major issues of inequality at the expense of younger workers have been emerged with greater intensity over time in the countries of European South, as more and more regulations and collective agreements of such character have been introduced in the national employment and collective bargaining systems. For example, certain collective agreements in Spain have allowed employers to recruit workers at lower wages than workers in the same job grade who are already employed by the firm. Many collective agreements, especially at company level, have opened the way for employing workers on lower pay than that of established employees in the same grade doing the same job. Even agreements at sectoral level (for example in the construction sector in Spain) have removed the length-of-service bonus from new employment contracts.

As Caprile (1997) has mentioned for the case of Spain: *...The pressure for jobs has thus had a great impact on companies, widening the gap between young people and adults, which is basically a gap between temporary and permanent staff: on occasions these differences have been even expressed formally, as was the case of those agreements in which a double pay scale was agreed in exchange for new employment (that is, newly recruited workers were employed on a lower pay scale than established workers)...* In essence, the driving force behind all these initiatives is the serious problem of unemployment that historically has strong roots in Southern Europe (Mac Innes, 2009). Unemployment is functioning as a disciplinary device for both many workers and trade unions in accepting employers' and governments' proposals that may diverge from

their traditional standpoint, but they could also be considered as temporary solutions to the current employment crisis situation.

Nevertheless future prospects for youth unemployment are gloomy, particularly as public-sector jobs are likely to be cut in Southern EU member states to help reduce government debt levels. In this context of economic asphyxia for the countries of the South organized labour faces serious dilemmas and has to defend in many fronts (reorganization of public sector services, pension systems, liberalization of domestic markets, migration etc.). The issue of the rise of precarious employment among young workers seems not to be a top level priority as trade unions in contrast to other reforms in the public sector and the pensions system did not manage to block or even challenge seriously the gradual establishment of a two-tier reforms of employment protection. The statistics provided in the annex show how dramatic the expansion of atypical forms of employment was in the last decades and how dramatic this is reflected on the youth labour markets.

It should be pointed out that serious differences exist amongst the big trade unions regarding such reforms. This divergence is reflected better in the companies, the sectors or the regions that dual pay scale agreements have been concluded. Some unions opposed the very idea of a dual pay scale, while others followed a much more consensual approach to the issue. For example trade unions were strongly divided in Nissan Spain with the Trade Union Confederation of Workers' Commission (Comisiones Obreras, CC.OO) and the General Confederation of Labour (Confederación General del Trabajo, CGT) to refuse to sign the 2002-03 agreement and to address a legal action against it.

To summarize big trade unions in Southern Europe followed collective bargaining strategies especially at company level that in many cases resulted in reforms that transferred the burden and risk of change in the shoulders of younger groups of the workforce and the new entrants in the labour market. As Boeri and Garibaldi (2005) have argued the establishment of two-tier employment systems in the examined countries was caused by considerable asymmetric labour market reforms in the area of EPL. In essence the increase of labor market flexibility in EU Mediterranean countries took place mainly through a series of marginal reforms that liberalised the use of fixed-term contracts leaving largely untouched the legislation applying to the stock of workers employed under open-ended contracts. In political terms this orientation of trade unions to sign consensual in nature collective agreements that differentiate the employment terms and conditions of young workers could be explained as a mechanism to defend the benefits of the insider workers and for governments to win the political opposition of them.

It should be also important to take into account that the decentralization of collective bargaining functioned as a very helpful condition on this development. In essence at establishment/ workplace level bargaining was governed and driven to some extent by the employers' ad hoc needs complying to unfavourable for the worker's side power dynamics. The broader restructuring exercises implemented by

employers and sometimes by the State on the back of young precarious workers and the easiness by which management can manoeuvre legislative restrictions to changing work rules demonstrate the need for unions to organise themselves well at the workplace/ local level.

Therefore any critical assessment of unions' reactions to the problem of young peoples' vulnerability at work and the labour market should pay a lot of attention not only on the national and sectoral level collective bargaining outcomes, but much more on the tactics, strategies and activities unions follow daily on the 'inside the workplace terrain'. At the same time it makes urgent for unions to eliminate gaps and potential deficits of articulation between the higher national and sectoral levels and the lower provincial and company levels. It seems that most national level collective agreements and bargaining initiatives are inconsistent or practically impossible to be implemented at lower levels of collective bargaining.

3.2 Inefficiencies in Organizing/ Recruitment Strategies

Greece

The main union confederations in Greece (GSEE/ ADEDY) do not keep data about their number of young-aged members. In essence they do not know how many young people are members of the unions in the country. This practically reduces unions' organizational capacity to formulate the appropriate strategies to deal with the problems young people face at work. At the same time there are not specific union structures and organisations for certain groups of young workers, such as semi-independent workers and temporary agency workers who often face great risk of labour law violations by their employers. In addition to this, the recruitment of young workers organizers and campaigners is not the priority. Unions have established instead youth committees that they organize specific events and activities (information campaigns, summer camps, lobbying etc.) at national and international level. Such structures do not seem to be enough to tackle the problem of young precarious workers under-representation at the workplace, as they act at national level without targeting specifically on certain types of employers and on the specific problems and the working conditions of non-standard workers.

Examples of organising campaigns of similar magnitude to Justice for Janitors, Wal-Mart or the London Living Wage Campaign are totally absent in the country. Relevant initiatives to protect real wages and to improve the employment situation of young people are usually taken by political parties and other social organisations mainly NGOs. To a certain extent such initiatives substitute the above mentioned lack of continuous and well coordinated campaigns for workplace justice organised by the unions.

This is partly related to the fact that union movement in Greece is for historical reasons extremely politicized in a peculiar way. Unions interact heavily with political parties and the government to obtain results

at legislative/ collective bargaining level or to mobilise groups of the workforce inside and outside their constituency. This interaction raises sometimes concerns of independence of the union movement from the political ploy and the existence of an authentic representation of workers' voice remains an issue (Kouzis, 2008). This explains the fact that the gap of young precarious workers representation by the big trade unions in Greece is to a certain extent covered by the emergence of social movement unionism mainly in the big urban areas.

According to Hurd et al. (2000), social movement unionism refers to an increased resource commitment to organising the unorganised, a focus on the rank and file participation in collective action, the practice of coalition building with other social movement organisations and internal restructuring toward greater union democracy. According to another ongoing research project, more than 25 new unions (not affiliated to the big umbrella union confederations in public and private sector) have been established in the last 8 months in the big urban areas of Greece. Further the vast majority of them bear all the characteristics of social movement unionism. As Moody (1997) has defined them; militant in collective bargaining, deeply democratic, rank-and-file activism. These characteristics seem to address better, comparing to the strategies adopted by the bigger trade unions, the needs and the demands for unions of a growing part of the young workforce.

Definitely such a reaction is caused not only by insufficient organising strategies by the big trade unions, but also by the fact that the process of economic modernization in both countries since 1990s have deepen work precariousness and income inequalities which in turn has resulted on certain cases in anomie and the detachment of young people from the prevailing value system. At the same time Pedersini (2010) argues that in Greece the increase on union membership, focusing on recruiting new groups of workers, such as youth employment, women, technical staff, migrants and self-employed workers is in essence inexistent.

Italy

In Italy each big trade union confederation has since 1998 organized specific associations and federations representing atypical workers (*lavoratori atipici*). As Leonardi, (2008: 211) defines them: *...a socially and juridical heterogeneous universe, composed by agency temporary workers and "semi-subordinate" workers...* Workers on fixed-term and part-time contracts are instead affiliated to the traditional industry-wide federations. Such a schema of organising young atypical workers represents an innovation for the current accounts of international unionism and its emergence can be considered as a very fast union reaction to the new legislation introduced in 1997 regarding Temporary Agency Workers. The respective organisations of young atypical workers in Italy are NIdiL (*the New Labour Identities/ Nuove Identita di Lavoro*) for Cgil, Alai (*the Association of Atypical and Temporary Agency Workers/ Associazione Lavoratori Atipici e Interinali*) for Cisl and the Cpo-Uil (*Committee for Employment/ Comitato per l' Occupazione*) for Uil. NIdiL is by far the biggest

organization.

According to Leonardi (2008:215) and the latest (14/07/09) figures about membership published by CGIL, the number of members in the case of NIdiL has more than doubled in 11 years from 15,000 in 1998 to 36,026 in 2008. Furthermore, the membership of NIdiL was increased by 9.84% between 2007-08, which is definitely an encouraging development. NIdiL is focusing on local level based actions and one of its strategic ambitions is to create strong links with these groups of workers not only inside but also outside the workplace given their high job shift rate and the temporary character of their jobs.

NIdiL officers also pay a lot of attention to the education and the training in the sense that the potential members (young atypical workers) are not always attracted by a background of typical political and ideological socialization process, but by a high awareness and consciousness of their current working difficulties and problems. However, according to Cgil officials, there is still long way in order to make the voice of young atypical workers louder in every workplace that there is an issue of injustice.

In a recent analysis Galetto (2010) describes examples of organizing strategies targeted on specific hard-to-organize groups of the workforce by each of the large three trade union confederations of the country. As she mentions the main target group of organizing strategies is almost always non-standard workers, such as include freelancers, temporary agency workers, fixed-term or part-time workers of various kinds, and seasonal workers which in most of the cases are young, women and immigrants. Nevertheless no joint campaigns have been mounted by the various trade unions so far, despite the fact that they have signed joint documents to examine and monitor the problems of atypical workers.

Nevertheless impressive mobilization action is to be observed in Italy by other social actors and youth movements that are not affiliated to the big trade union confederations of the country. Typical examples of such social actors include the May Day Parade, the Intelligence Precaria, Chain Workers, Serpica Naro that in essence represent protest and political resistance initiatives based on strong informal networks. The innovation here lies on the way such networks activate their members by providing a wide range of services and support, such as advice on legal and trade union matters, assistance on job searching process, political support and legal representation in industrial relations disputes.

Spain

According to Pedersini (2010) Spain has recently recorded an increase in trade union membership along with a decline in union density. Such a development indicates possible problems in organizing new entrants in the labour market and in the economic sectors that new jobs were created, while maintaining the capacity to extend membership. Nevertheless the low density levels observed in Spain are not equivalent or representative to the political power of trade unions. Of significance importance issue is also the regulatory

framework governing trade unions. Trade unions' influence is mainly channelled through the election results of employee representatives and generally applicable collective agreements which cover all workers, regardless of whether they are union members. These aspects are considered to be the main reason for low union membership and density promoting instead the free-riders problem.

Low union membership rates are also heavily influenced by the high rates of unemployment and temporary employment observed across the workforce and especially among young people with Spain having the highest relevant rates across EU-15 area. Such a development has forced trade unions to demand for a broader redefinition of the employment policies in order to make higher employment security a new dogma of policy and regulatory change under social concertation terms. Information and awareness-raising campaigns targeted at specific hard-to-organize groups of workers have been used many times by the big Spanish trade unions. Nevertheless as Arasanz Diaz (2010) has argued initiatives to increase membership among new groups of workers have taken second place in comparison to political action. Trade unions remain important political institutions, but as in Greece and in Italy, many innovative organizing strategies are deployed by more militant local trade unions or broader political activist groups outside the entities of the big trade union confederations.

Malo (2006) tried to explore the ability of direct voting system for worker's representation in Spain as a instrument for temporary workers to exert more influence on unions. Given that in Spain works councils can participate in collective bargaining at the firm level it is reasonable to consider that the institutional framework provides enough space for temporary workers to influence worker's representatives. Nevertheless the election system that in a first glance provides such opportunities with serious implications for the collective bargaining outcomes exclude temporary workers (many of them young-aged), because such workers are mainly found in small companies where union elections are not called. Beyond these institutional framework obstacles to make precarious workers members of the electoral census, union organizing strategies in Spain are mainly related to immigrants. In general, Spain seems to confirm the hypothesis of Kelly and Frege (2003). According to them unions that adopt the organizing strategy are characterized by poor institutional embeddedness and weak influence on policy-making. The Spanish unions still enjoy a strong institutional position and a more open political opportunity and this has resulted according to the belief of Baccaro (2003) to focus more on social partnership approaches.

4. Conclusions

Current trends on work regulation (or deregulation) in Southern Europe make unions more relevant and significant to young peoples' living and working conditions than ever. In recent years a lot of provisions that aim to provide greater protection of young atypical workers have been introduced into the national labour law

frameworks and the national/ sectoral collective bargaining agreements. Nevertheless this seems not to be enough for reversing the declining trends of youth density rate and both the statistical evidence and a number of studies indicate that young people with atypical contracts still enjoy greater vulnerability at work in comparison to workers employed on a permanent basis.

Recent evidence has showed, there is an unsatisfied demand for unions by young people in Southern Europe and a large potential for union growth. This demand is satisfied to some extent, in Greece by a growing trend of social movement unionism that seems to address better the needs of certain groups of the young workforce. However such unionism can not simple be transplanted as a recipe for success, as it addresses the needs of a minority, though rapidly growing one, part of the young working population.

The organisation of atypical workers in the unions in Italy seems to be a quite novel and promising project with significant achievements so far. Such a development makes less urgent the emergence of alternative voice outside the big trade unions, as in Greece. Nevertheless its effectiveness remains to be seriously tested in the future, as several government policies and employer strategies have already resulted in the resurgence of certain forms of non-standard employment that are characterised by sub-standard rights and benefits. Furthermore they have also resulted in the spread of precariousness within sections of what has usually been regarded as the core workforce which is supposed to have full protection by the labour law and to enjoy traditionally more opportunities for union organisation, especially in the public sector.

In a similar vein, the Spanish experience is characterized by a plethora of company-level agreements that have resulted in the creation of a two-tier workforce with new recruits being more vulnerable to mass dismissals, lower pay and limited job benefits. On certain cases unions have defended their primary constituency (stable workers) through strategies of social closure and sectarianism. The only possibly way that general unions in Southern Europe can possibly meet the expectations of the young precarious generation in Southern Europe is to redefine their structures and strategies in order to transform themselves as a new powerful mobilizing device which can promote and ensure fairness at the individual workplace level. In essence, unions need first to enlarge the playing field to capture the needs of the new underpaid young, educated and more diverse underclass.

In this framework, unions must be available and perform effectively in every workplace, including small, leaner organizations in the private services sector. The emphasis on workplace level union availability and performance on a daily basis stems from the fact that workplace is probably the most crucial terrain of exercising industrial relations power politics beyond the regulatory strata of the labour law and collective bargaining. This is especially true for more insecure and unorganised groups of the workforce, such as young atypical workers, as the individual workplace is the appropriate level for addressing their multiple vulnerabilities at work.

The emphasis on workplace level union strategies is also more prominent on the countries the paper is focused on; first, despite the strict employment regulatory framework informal/ atypical rules are widespread in the labour market and all these countries are characterised by a high level of undeclared work and labour law violation; second, the collective bargaining coverage rate remains extremely high on international accounts and the power of union movement is to a great extent based on the regulations included in the national and sectoral level collective agreements. In any case a two-tier labour market on the back of an underclass of atypical young workers represents a structural, exogenous shock to unions that seriously challenges not only their current influence and bargaining position, but even their future existence. As history has shown, though, trade unionism was created and expanded in periods that work precariousness and instability was the norm and not the exemption (Thompson, 1967). A new type of unionism that can facilitate the collective articulation of all types of workers and especially the young precarious ones is an urgent priority though that can not be further delayed by fire-fighting fragmented and desperate union reactions. It remains a very difficult task though as unions have first to turn against themselves.

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