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Young and unionised in the UK? Insights from the public sector:

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Abstract:

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to analyse the relationship between trade unions and young workers in the UK using the Young Members' Network of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union as a case study.

Design/methodology/approach – Findings are based on semi-structured interviews with 20 full-time officials and 39 lay officials of all ages, the collection and analysis of primary documents and observations at a range of union meetings.

Findings – It is argued that PCS has developed a strong network of young activists and is leading the way in terms of engaging with and representing young workers. However, its success in the future may be limited due to changes to the external environment in which the union is trying to organise.

Research limitations/implications – The research highlights the role of an under researched area of trade union membership. To provide additional insights, further research is needed into the practice of other unions.

Originality/value – This paper provides significant qualitative analysis into this issue which complements the existing quantitative research in this area.

Keywords: Industrial relations, Public sector, Trade unionism, Union responses, Young workers, Trade union membership

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1. Introduction

This paper analyses the initiatives of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union in its attempts to engage with young people in the British Civil Service. Whilst existing academic work on the unionisation of young people focuses on the young people themselves, this is limited in the sense that it does not allow for the consideration of more experienced union representatives and their views towards the unionisation of young people. The paper contributes to the existing literature by looking at how the PCS Young Members' Network (YMN) operates and fits within the structures of the union. It draws on a qualitative sample of both young and experienced members in order to provide a balanced account from across the union.

The transition of young people into employment has been well documented (Bradley and Devadason, 2008) and it is clear that they experience "more difficulties in finding stable and well-paid employment" than older workers (Kretsos, 2010, p. 7). Indeed, it is acknowledged that young workers are particularly affected by the wider changes in global economic conditions which have led to the development of "flexible capitalism" (Sennett, 1998). Such changes have seen an increase in employee insecurity and instability as well as a loss of occupational identity (Beck, 2000; Sennett, 1998). As such, "young workers are concentrated in low-waged, poorly organised industries [...] [and] are among the most vulnerable to economic downturn" (Tailby and Pollert, 2011, p. 499). This increasingly low-paid, low-status and insecure work is predominantly carried out by young workers, who are described as being part of "the precariat" – a "disparate group in non-regular statuses, including casual workers, outworkers and agency workers" (Standing, 2009, p. 110).

As the position of young workers in the labour market is increasingly precarious, one may expect them to join unions for protection, as “workers who band together in trade unions are far less vulnerable than isolated individuals” (Hyman, 1975, p. 23). However, it has been shown that membership of trade unions is actually lower amongst young people compared to older people (Visser, 2006, p. 47). In addition to this, Blanchflower (2007, p. 1) found that the “probability of being unionized follows an inverted U-shaped pattern in age, maximizing in the mid-to late 40s” and more recent data shows that union density amongst young workers substantially declined in the last decade, with levels being 4.6 per cent for those aged 16-19 in 2011 (Brownlie, 2012, p. 29).

The paper is split into sections. The next briefly discusses the existing literature which considers the levels of unionisation amongst young people. The following section examines the methods and provides some background to the PCS. The discussion examines concerns with the past, present and future of young trade unionists and provides an insight into the problems of engaging young civil servants with unions. It is argued in the final section that the PCS has developed a strong network of young activists and is attempting to increase the engagement and representation of young workers. However, the attempts of the union may be limited due to circumstances beyond their immediate control.

2. Young workers and trade unions

Research examining the relationship between British unions and young workers is not extensive, although notable exceptions include Blanden and Machin (2003); Freeman and Diamond (2003); and Waddington and Kerr (2002). Many reasons for the low rate of union membership amongst young people have been proposed over time and these can be split into three separate but not mutually exclusive categories: changing labour markets and employer resistance to unions; union inefficiencies; attitudinal problems. These will each be considered in turn.

2.1. Changing labour markets and employer resistance to unions: the case of the civil service

The increase in flexible, temporary and part-time work, particularly amongst young people in sectors where union organisation is weak or non-existent, is widespread and effectively excludes such workers from the opportunity to be union members (Tailby and Pollert, 2011). Levels of union membership have also suffered as successive governments sought to decollectivize the employment relationship (Brown et al., 1997). Such moves towards individualising the employment relationship were assisted by the promotion of anti-unionism amongst employers (McCabe, 2007; Gall and Dundon, 2013). The changing nature of the British civil service will now be considered.

As noted by Standing (2011, p. 53), civil service reforms have seen governments “acting more like commercial firms in their treatment of civil servants, pursuing functional and employment flexibility”. Traditionally, employment relations in the civil service were defined

by a co-operative system through the development of Whitley councils. The aim of the Whitley system was to “secure the greatest co-operation between the state in its capacity as employer, and the general body of civil servants [...] with a view to increasing efficiency in the public service, combined with the well-being of those employed; to provide machinery for dealing with grievances, and generally to bring together the experience and different points of view of representatives of the administrative clerical [...] civil service” (Dunnill, 1956, pp. 56-57). This worked well for some time and although major reforms began as a result of the Fulton Report of 1968, the introduction of the Efficiency Unit in 1979 increased the scale of decline of the much heralded Whitley system, alongside successive government attempts to undermine it.

Following a report produced by the Efficiency Unit of the Cabinet Office in 1988, more radical changes were proposed and the civil service was broken up into more controllable sections, through the creation of Next Steps Agencies. This was fundamental to the wider strategy of privatisation, contracting out, and market testing through the adoption of managerial practices from the private sector and the extent of devolution to agency status “resulted in significant divergence in industrial relations practice across government bodies” (Martin, 2010, p. 219).

Government reviews into the operation of the civil service continued and 2004 saw the Lyons and Gershon reviews both reporting the need for the relocation of civil servants away from London and the south-east and vast job cuts across the service. Further cuts were

proposed as part of the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review and the Government as an employer had become increasingly hostile towards public sector unions, with the change in Government in 2010 reflecting “a hardening of both political and economic attitudes towards trade unions” (Hodder and French, 2010, p. 7). In addition to this, there were changes in the nature of work organisation, achieved through increased levels of casualisation and flexibility (Fairbrother, 1991; Carter et al., 2012), the contracting out and privatisation of (non-core) services into anti-union environments (Smith and Morton, 1994), the Taylorisation of work through call centres (Fisher, 2004) and crucially, the dismantling of central grading and the introduction of individual performance management to eliminate job demarcations and facilitate work extensification and intensification (Fisher, 2007).

Overall, it can be argued that these changes “challenged the civil service model of full-time, lifetime career service, and significantly recommended the institutionalization of a core-periphery model for the civil service” (Fairbrother, 1991, p. 73). Work in the civil service has become more precarious and Standing (2011, p. 53) has suggested that the changes described above are part of a wider plan “to turn more of the public sector into the zone of the precariat through privatisation, outsourcing and casualization”. The impact upon the size of the civil service is evident. In 1977 there were 746,000 staff but by the end of 2011, this had decreased to approximately 444,000, the lowest since the end of the Second World War. In 2012, there were 8,431 temporary workers in the civil service, which equated to 1.6 per cent of the total civil service employment (McGuinness and Coleman, 2013).

This may be a small number when compared to the 5 per cent of workers in the wider economy considered temporary but the 1.6 per cent does not include the number of agency staff in the civil service (Working Lives Research Institute, 2010). Unions have suggested that within the Home Office alone, the number of agency workers is as high as 10 per cent and that “expenditure on agency workers increased from £3.9 million to £6.5 million” in 2010 (Working Lives Research Institute, 2010, p. 3). In terms of age, the number of civil servants aged between 16 and 19 years declined by 58 per cent in 2011 from 2,270 in 2010 to 970 in 2011. In contrast, the number of civil servants aged 65 years and over increased by 22 per cent to 5,230 in 2011, with both figures reflecting the impact of civil service restructuring on the age profile of civil servants (Office for National Statistics, 2011, p. 7).

The concept of a job for life long associated with a career in the civil service began to disappear in the 1990s (Corby, 1998). As noted by Standing (2009, p. 13), a “career suggests progression in terms of technique, status, income and security. It suggests entering and remaining in a single occupation, existing only to retirement, surrounded by the trappings and rewards of the occupation”. This has dramatically declined within the civil service and it has been suggested that “staff attributed this change to the world outside the civil service, and accepted this insecurity as a part of modern life” (Harrington et al., 1998, p. 46). More recently, since 2010, the civil service has been subject to a recruitment freeze and civil servants have faced changes to their pensions and redundancy schemes (Hodder and French, 2010). In summary, the state as employer is now said to be “following rather than leading, private sector personnel and employment policies” (Duncan, 2001, p. 29, original

emphasis) and this is replicated in an increasingly hard-line attitude towards civil service trade unionism (Hodder and French, 2010, p. 7).

2.2. Union inefficiencies

The second reason for low union membership amongst young people is attributed to the inability of the trade unions themselves actively to increase the number of young trade unionists. A recent review of the literature has noted “union inefficiencies in terms of recruitment strategies, deficits in internal union democracy, gerontocracy in union leadership and the exclusion of young workers from the unions’ decision-making process” (Kretsos, 2011, p. 454). Historically, this has long been considered a problem for the trade union movement both in the UK (Wray, 1957) and beyond (Seidman et al., 1958, pp. 267-268) as there have been few specific union initiatives aimed at young people. Furthermore, Ryan (1987, p. 128) suggested that those that did exist played only “a fitful role in representing youth interests”.

The overall attitude of the union movement towards young members appeared not to have changed by the 1980s as Payne (1989, p. 128) suggested that “young unionists are tomorrow’s union leaders, but they may not be getting the experience in unionism which they need to prepare them for this role”. This attitude seems to have changed in recent years. The neo-liberal stance of successive governments, together with continuing membership decline, meant that unions needed to reassess their agenda in order to survive (Waddington and Whitston, 1997, p. 515). As such, organising became a dominant approach

to union revitalisation following the formal re-launch of the TUC in 1994 through the New Unionism project (Heery, 1998a, p. 339) and the move towards organising saw a change in focus and an increase in resources being put towards increasing the number of young trade unionists (Simms, 1999a).

Organising as a concept is difficult to define despite being subject to numerous debates (de Turberville, 2004; Fiorito, 2004; Carter, 2006; de Turberville, 2007; Simms et al., 2013). Central to these debates around organising is the concept of the “organising model”. Different unions have different perceptions of what organising entails and within the existing literature, there is debate around the importance of the rank and file membership to organising (Fairbrother, 2000) compared to the importance of union leadership in the development of a form of managerial unionism (Heery and Kelly, 1994). However, for the purposes of this paper, the organising approach constitutes a hybrid form of “managed activism” (Heery et al., 2000; Simms, 2007). This leadership-led approach aims for increases in the number of both members and activists and has meant that many unions have acknowledged the need to “rethink and restructure traditional ways of working to facilitate the participation and representation of previously excluded groups” (Terry, 2003, p. 270).

A survey of 64 of the 96 British unions conducted in 1998 found that 77 per cent placed a high or moderately high priority on recruiting young workers, the third highest group targeted behind part-time and female workers (Heery, 1998b, p. 5). A further survey linked specifically to the TUC Organising Academy, conducted in 1999, found that 85 per cent of

the unions involved with the initiative placed a high or moderately high priority on targeting young workers for recruitment, the second highest group behind female workers (Simms, 1999a, p. 11). A third survey was conducted of 81 organising projects linked to the Organising Academy and found that 67 per cent of the projects had the objective of increasing young members, with 53 per cent aimed at increasing the number of young activists (both 3rd behind attempts to increase women and ethnic minority members and activists) (Simms, 1999b, p. 5). The success of these projects was measured in the survey, which revealed that 814 out of a total of 5,797 new members recruited (14 per cent) and 29 out of a total of 355 new activists (8 per cent) were young (Simms, 1999b, p. 14). This suggests that getting young workers to join unions may be one thing, but getting them to become active is much more difficult (Healey and O'Grady, 1997, p. 175).

2.3. Attitudes

The third reason suggests that young people possess negative attitudes towards trade unionism and are more individually orientated in their outlook on working life. It has been suggested that young people today are ideologically opposed to trade unionism. The deindustrialization of the UK and the decline of traditional unionised industries in the 1980s coincided with rising unemployment and Cregan (1999, p. 182) has suggested that "persistent levels of high unemployment did make some youth look askance at union membership if they feared employer victimization". Shister's (1953) claim that trade unionism was the norm for young people (pp. 421-422) was arguably still the case up to the 1970s but workers' exposure to unionism is rapidly "becoming a less reliable means of increasing union membership among the young" (Lowe and Rastin, 2000, p. 205). As a result

of this, young people in the UK have been termed “Thatcher’s children”. This decline in union values is unlikely to be reversed due to the decline in the “‘passing down’ of union tradition through social and family networks” (Waddington and Kerr, 2002, p. 299). However, other research has found the ideological concept not to have any significant impact on young people’s views on trade unionism, with young people instead being referred to as “malleable” (Lowe and Rastin, 2000, p. 203) and “blank slates” when it comes to trade unionism, actually expressing more favourable views towards unions than older workers (Freeman and Diamond, 2003, pp. 36 and 39).

3. Background and methods

The PCS union is the largest civil service union in the UK and primarily represents lower and middle grade civil servants and those now working in the private sector on Government contracts. The union has a membership of 267,965 and PCS density in the civil service is 52.6 per cent with the total trade union density in the civil service being 68.9 per cent (PCS, 2013, p. 20). Total union density was 26 per cent in 2011 in the UK (Brownlie, 2012, p. 24). As a result of civil service industrial relations, civil service trade unionism developed in a specific manner “typically committed to lobbying, consultation and reasoned argument, rather than militant mobilization, as the primary means by which to represent the interests of their members to managers and ministers” (Fisher, 2004, p. 165). The lack of strong workplace trade unionism in the civil service can be attributed to the historical reliance on national Whitley structures but civil service unions recognised the need to change as the “challenge of the last three decades also taught PCS to behave rather more like a trade union” (Fairbrother et al., 2012, p. 162).

Although PCS has a history of factionalism amongst the union leadership (McIlroy and Daniels, 2009; Funnell, 2010), the election of a left-wing General Secretary and National Executive Committee in 2001 following a period of moderate leadership led to “both an increased emphasis on a militant bargaining agenda, with ‘ambitious’ bargaining goals; and a willingness to use collective mobilisations, such as strikes, to achieve the union’s bargaining aims” (McCarthy, 2010, pp. 186-187). The union’s move towards organising occurred partly as a result of this change in leadership and partly due to the influence of structural issues and external factors within the civil service.

The data form part of a wider research project on union organising within the PCS undertaken between 2010 and 2011. Interview respondents comprised a mixture of full-time officials and lay-representatives from three different groups of the union as it is acknowledged that “unions are using a wide range of organising methods and techniques and they could differ” (Vandaele, 2010, p. 2) even within one union. As such, the wider research project analyses the organising approach of the union, focusing on whether the PCS approach to organising is uniform across different civil service departments. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 20 full-time officials and 39 lay officials of all ages, and were supplemented by the collection and analysis of primary documents. Documentary analysis of the rich and comprehensive archival resources which exist within the PCS was undertaken and the union’s National Recruitment and Organising Strategies were an invaluable source of information relating to the development of organising young workers.

Observations were also undertaken at a range of union meetings, including specific YMN events, including the PCS Young Members' Fringe meeting at the 2011 and 2012 Annual Delegate Conferences and the 2012 PCS Young Members' Forum. The observations informed the author's background knowledge and contributed to the design of the interview questions, as well as providing additional data. Hand written notes were made, following the example set by Collinson (1992, p. 233), who developed his own form of shorthand, in an attempt to generate accurate data, without overtly disrupting the field. All data were analysed following King's (1998) thematic coding. Initial codes were developed and modified as the researcher analysed and interpreted the fieldwork data. As both the documentary analysis and observations were undertaken, a number of additional codes were developed. The data present the views of a limited number of union officials in one British union and therefore cannot claim to be representative of the PCS or the wider union movement. Despite these limitations, the data are useful, providing detailed insight into the PCS strategy on organising young workers. The following discussion will be framed around the themes identified earlier in the paper to consider the ways in which the PCS has been able to encourage more young workers to join the union.

4. Discussion

4.1. The changing civil service

This section considers the implications of the changing nature of the civil service on young workers. As noted above, the civil service has undergone radical changes and at the time the

data were collected, the policies of the Coalition government were at the forefront of people's minds. The programme of civil service reform was considered to have an adverse impact on young members and one full-time official noted "undoubtedly they [young members] have an inferior pension scheme, they're most vulnerable when it comes to job cuts and we need to protect them". This was confirmed by the views of a lay activist, who noted changes in the civil service over time, stating "I think one concern they may have is a lack of career prospects [...] there's no real clear career path, which there was then [when I came into the department] and I think it must be quite disheartening for people who are coming here who are very bright people".

The decline of career options has long been identified in the literature (Corby, 1998; Harrington et al., 1998) but the implications for young civil servants have not always been considered. As noted by one lay official, "when I joined the department, you could actually look at the civil service as being a career – people that are coming in now, it is usually a stepping stone to something else". Another lay official confirmed this by noting that "many young members come in on fixed-term contracts, certainly in my experience, where there has been a permanent recruitment ban [...] for a while now, you'll get people joining who are on those contracts [...] their employment conditions are fragile". These employment conditions were thought to have implications for union membership, best summarised by the following lay official who stated "they think it's not worthwhile joining while they're casual or temporary". However, another lay official noted, "the work's generally horrid, it's the modern equivalent of sending kids up chimneys, so I would argue that they're actually

strongly motivated to see the benefits of an effective trade union if those benefits can be demonstrated to them”.

The ageing nature of the workforce was another common feature across interviews. According to one full-time official, “we have an ageing workforce [...] I’m getting a number of branches coming back to me and saying [that] because there’s a hold on recruitment, because they’re cutting back, because they’re losing staff, young people are the cheapest to get rid of really [...] so there seems to be a shortage of new young members coming through at the moment so that’s going to be a problem”. This is partly due to a recruitment freeze imposed upon the civil service in May 2010 and the union has seen the average age of its membership increase from 41 in 2002 (Serwotka, 2002) to 45 in 2011 (internal union data). However, such problems appear commonplace within the union movement in the UK and the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Survey found the average age of a union representative in the UK to be 48 (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013, p. 16).

To summarise this section on the implications of the changing nature of the civil service, the following quote encapsulates the majority of views in relation to young workers: “I think it is precarious for young people, but at the end of the day, it’s a job and they’ll take it and they don’t have to worry so much for six months, a year, two years if they’re lucky [...] and I think it does stop them joining unions [...] they’re worried that if they get involved, they’ll feel the backlash ‘cos they’re not educated in unions”. The next section therefore considers what the union has done to encourage young civil servants to join the union and become active.

4.2. What has the union done?

The development of the YMN within the PCS union was directly aimed at embedding young workers' issues into the fabric of the union. The PCS YMN is open to workers aged 27 and under and PCS has approximately 17,000 members young enough to join the network. Writing in 2002, PCS General Secretary, Mark Serwotka (2002, p. 22) noted that "if trade unions are to survive and thrive, we need to recruit young people". With the creation of a full-time Youth Organiser post within the National Organising Department, the YMN was formed in 2004 as part of the union's first National Organising Strategy (PCS, 2004). This first strategy stressed the desire to "become an organising union where members understand the importance of collectivism and the importance of winning together, rather than expecting the union to do things for them" (PCS, 2004, p. 7).

Since 2004, the YMN has featured consistently in National Organising Strategies and 2006 saw the launch of the PCS Young Members' Charter (YMC) at the inaugural Young Members' Forum. The Forum acts as the Annual General Meeting of the YMN, enabling members to meet and discuss a wide range of issues relating to the union. The priorities of the network are set out in the charter, which states the need for "a young members' contact in every branch to work with the young members' network" (PCS, 2006, p. 15). However, the development of this has been problematic due to the recruitment freeze and the lack of young people in civil service positions, as noted previously. The Young Members' Charter was followed by a Young Members' Constitution in 2007 and the first Young Members'

Organising Strategy in 2010. The strategy was specifically aimed at increasing the number of young activists within the union. Various officials commented on the difficulties of explaining the benefits of membership to young people, with one lay activist noting “very often they will need somebody to explain that it’s not about a group of men who go out with placards and shout at people that are trying to get into work, that it’s about more than that – that happens occasionally, but that’s not just what we’re about”.

Across the union, there were conflicting views on the difficulties of recruiting younger members, with one full-time official commenting “the feeling I get from some of the older members is ‘oh that’s a young person, we’ll get another young person to talk to them’ whereas just talk to them normally”. This was sometimes used as an excuse for not recruiting young people into the union but was viewed negatively by another full-time official who noted “it’s an excuse; it’s not even a reason”. Relying on young workers to recruit other young workers reflects the organising mantra of like recruits like – “a belief that organizing new groups of workers requires organizers with matching characteristics” (Heery et al., 2002, p. 5) and whilst it is designed to encourage an increase in membership, it may not always work in practice if there is a limited number of young representatives in the first place. This was further supported by the views of a lay official who noted “everyone was young but not everybody is young and things change and attitudes change”, which suggests a belief that those who are no longer young are unable to identify and therefore recruit younger workers. Yet a young lay activist believed the issues of young members were the same as other members, stating “when I first started off, that’s exactly what people

used to say, 'what are the young members' issues?' but they're exactly the same – they are exactly the same issues”.

Furthermore, it was suggested that it can be difficult for young trade unionists “to ascertain the authority in their branches and their groups to get what they want to achieve and to get young members' issues on the agendas”. When asked why, one full-time official suggested that “maybe they see them as a threat because they're young, bubbly, in your face, they may have new ideas, god forbid new ideas, you know!”. Those young members who are active in the YMN may experience difficulties in getting advice and mentoring on union issues from older representatives. On this point, it was noted by a full-time official that “they might be active and high profile amongst other young members, but they've haven't gone back to their branches and embedded that young members' work in the work of their branches”. This may be due to a lack of mentoring within the union, a point emphasised in a number of interviews and best encapsulated by the following quote from a full-time official who commented “if that [mentoring] doesn't happen, then you've got young members who haven't been given any responsibility, they've not been mentored, and there's a danger they'll fall away”. All of these issues may contribute to the low level of young people involved with the union and the National Young Members' Organiser has been quoted as saying “I hate it when people describe them as the trade unionists of the future. They are the trade unionists of now – with serious issues to contend with” (PCS, 2011a, p. 15).

Whilst the National Organising Department conducts branch and group “health-checks” to monitor the number of young activists and members, some respondents argued that more could be done to ensure that young people become involved in trade unionism. Currently, when members join the union, they have to “opt in” to join the YMN. However, there has been debate within the union as to whether young members should automatically be part of the network with a lay activist suggesting that such a move may “have a knock on effect on the number of people [active]”. A full-time official confirmed this view, stating “we wouldn’t have this problem if when they joined they were automatically part of the network so why don’t we just do that?”. This builds upon “the notion of unions as experience goods” (Bryson and Gomez, 2003, p. 74), which suggests “the willingness to join a union rises after sampling membership at work or after an employee has experienced unionism by proxy through social interaction at home or with friends who have experienced unionism” (Bryson and Gomez, 2003, p. 81). However, one full-time official noted “I can understand why you want more people in the network but at the end of the day, they are still members of the union so what do you want us to focus on? Getting people into the network or getting people into the union?”.

4.3. Influencing attitudes

It has been suggested by Kochan (2003, p. 171) that “unions would do well to become a more central part of young workers’ consciousness by engaging them and their peers in activities that are both of interest to young people and demonstrate the value of membership and representation at an early age”. One way the YMN has done this has been through making links with organisations such as Youth Fight for Jobs and the Workers Beer

Company. Such initiatives have been shown to help in the promotion of the union message as noted by one full-time official who stated “I always feel more enthused [and] much more excited if there’s some younger people”. The same official also went on to say “I think the idea that I think some people have that anyone born since Thatcher is anti-union is not true, not in my experience”, thus supporting the earlier work of Freeman and Diamond (2003).

However, unions in the UK have long had to deal with a negative portrayal in the media (Seaton, 1982; Manning, 1998) and more recently, it has been noted that “The labor movement, particularly in a time of historic weakness, can hardly organize itself sufficiently to combat inaccurate and biased media representations, given that it lacks the material resources to do so” (Thomas, 2012, p. 91). This was confirmed by a number of officials and their views are best represented by the following quote from a young lay activist who noted that many young people “don’t know what a union is [...]. the education has been [...] unions are bad, unions are on strike, you know people are moaning about the unions all the time [...] once you see or hear that when you’re younger, it has an effect on you later on in life”. As a result of negative portrayal in the media, unions are becoming more aware of the importance of the internet and have invested a considerable amount of effort into online resources and social media (Greene et al., 2003; Bryson et al., 2010; Panagiotopoulos and Barnett, 2014).

Unions are able to use the internet as a potentially “radicalising and mobilising force, extending participation and eroding barriers to activism” (Saundry et al., 2007, p. 181) and

PCS has acknowledged (PCS, 2011b, c) that union presence online is particularly relevant to younger workers as “the Internet represents the future for a growing segment of workers who spend more time online than anywhere else” (Bryson et al., 2010, p. 42). This was confirmed by one full-time official who noted “you only open your post once [...] but some people are on it [the internet] a few times a day, they’re more likely to see something on there”. Thus, PCS is using internet sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to lobby and promote the wider union message and regularly provides guidance for members and activists on how to make the most out of such media.

However, some officials advised caution with social media, specifically with regards to Facebook. Indeed, as one full-time official noted, “Facebook is a great thing to move forward but you’ve got to be careful with it, be wary about promoting it too much, ‘cos whilst the young members’ network doesn’t have any specific bargaining power or anything like that, it is a campaigning, organising body, and if you’re campaigning for something and the managers see that a couple of people are on it, there’s a potential backlash there” and possible disciplinary action. Twitter was considered to be less problematic by another full-time official who commented “because of the short nature of it, you can only say so much, so it is more a good way of announcing things rather than passing on detailed information”. However, despite the increasing importance placed on such activities over the last ten years, it still remains “too early to tell if IT will revolutionize unions” (Fiorito et al., 2002, p. 627) and evidence from Australia suggests that unions still “need to adopt the communication technologies used by young people” (Bailey et al., 2010, p. 57).

PCS has also attempted to demonstrate the value of unions to young people at an early age by going into schools to promote the union message (PCS, 2007, p. 11). However, this was considered problematic by a full-time official who confirmed that “we went into some schools to do that [...] [but] the training course that the TUC uses is a week-long”. Indeed, a common complaint from union officials was that initiatives aimed at encouraging unionism amongst young people were hampered by constraints on facilities time. This was confirmed by a lay official who noted that branches have “got no time for the members to go, they’ve only got time for the reps [...] it’s really hard for members to get involved” and further emphasised by a full-time official who complained about “the lack of the facilities time [for activists] to do young member work”. This problem has only been accentuated by the recent reforms to facilities time in the civil service (Hodder et al., 2013).

5. Conclusions

Due to the lack of extensive research into the relationship between young workers and trade union structures, this study has been exploratory. It has been noted by Kretsos (2010, p. 3) that “current socio-economic forces have made work more insecure, unpredictable, and risky” (original emphasis). The British civil service is no exception and is becoming more precarious as the changes described illustrate. In summary, the changing nature of the civil service has led to Standing (2009, p. 161) claiming that it has been “professionalized, then unionized, then atomized”. Young civil servants have been deeply affected, being subject to low pay and worsening fringe benefits as a result of the changes to the pension scheme (Hodder and French, 2010).

The PCS has attempted to deal with the main reasons cited for low union membership amongst young people and it has been clear through the development of the PCS NOSs, that the YMN has been a priority of the union, featuring heavily in National Organising Strategies since 2004. Through attempting to improve the image of the union movement externally and embracing an agenda that young people can relate with internally, PCS have built a YMN aimed at increasing the number of young members and activists and have begun to embed this into existing union structures. Such attempts are useful if the union movement is to transform the “blank slates” described by Freeman and Diamond (2003, p. 36) into young and active trade unionists. The structures developed by the union are crucial to the success of the network in the future. As stated in the first NOS, successful organising takes time and organising has always been viewed as the long term objective of the union (PCS, 2004, p. 7).

However, the structural changes to the civil service have made work increasingly precarious, and along with the imposed civil service recruitment freeze and other changes in the external environment, these are perhaps of greatest concern to PCS. At the time of writing, the recruitment freeze is set to continue until 2015 and with the average age of both the PCS member and activist rising, there may soon be very few young workers to organise, despite the best efforts of the union. As one participant noted, “you’ve got your time bomb ticking – when they’re 28, they’re no longer young”.

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