"Old Dusty Men"? Young People and Trade Unions In The UK
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Chapter 10: **'Old dusty men'? Young people and trade unions in the UK**

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Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide an insight into the relationship between young workers and trade unions in the UK. As noted by Hodder and Kretsos (introduction, this volume), it is largely accepted that young workers are less likely to be union members when compared to older workers, and there have been a number of academic studies into the reasons behind this. Existing literature groups these reasons into three categories – the changing nature of labour markets and increasing employer resistance to trade unionism, inefficiencies of unions to reform themselves and engage with more young people, and attitudinal problems of young workers themselves (Waddington and Kerr, 2002). The way in which UK unions have tried to reverse this is discussed, whilst the rest of the chapter provides an insight into the Young Members' Network (YMN) of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS). The methods used involved analysis of internal PCS documents and discussions with twenty (full-time and lay) officials from across the union at the union's Annual Delegate Conference in May 2014 and the National Young Members Seminar in June 2014. Widely acknowledged as the most successful youth structure in contemporary UK unionism, the YMN has been subject to previous academic enquiry (Hodder, 2014) and the insights provided in this chapter complement this existing research.

The UK context

Following a substantial period of trade union decline in many advanced industrial economies, in the mid-1990s unions began to recognise the need to reassess their policies and agenda (Waddington and Whitston, 1997: 515). Specifically in a UK context, unions struggled for many years to develop clear strategies for survival and growth in the face of successive neoliberal governments and changes to the socio-economic make-up of the country. Numerous accounts provide competing reasons for the changes to the industrial relations landscape and subsequent decline in trade union membership from approximately 13 million in 1979 to 6 million by the mid-1990s (Brown et al, 1997; Willman and Kelly, 2004). In 2013, union membership in the UK stood at around 6.5 million, with a density level of 25.6 per cent (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). Only 3.9 per cent of workers aged 16-24 were union members although this figure rose to 19 per cent for those aged 25-34 (ibid). The average age of a trade unionist has been increasing for some time and data from the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Survey notes the average age to be 48 (Van Wanrooy et al, 2013: 16).

In the 1990s, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) began advocating two strategies of union renewal – organising and partnership (Heery, 2002). However, due to the many criticisms of partnership in both academic and practitioner circles (see for example Kelly, 2004; Samuel, 2005), organising soon became the dominant approach to renewal taken by British unions 'because of the lack of other credible strategies for renewal and revitalisation' (Gall, 2009a: 2). Trade union organising has remained central to union revitalization since the launch of the TUC New Unionism project in 1997, and the TUC Organising Academy the following year (Heery, 2002), with the

shift to organising being about encouraging and achieving changes across all aspects of individual unions, and the wider union movement (O'Grady and Nowak, 2004: 154). Organising cannot be seen to be the saviour of the labour movement in the UK and numerous studies have identified problems with the way in which organising has been adopted by different unions, to varying degrees (Simms et al, 2013), with Gall putting forward the notion of the 'proverbial "Heinz 57 varieties" of union organising' (2009b: 2). Nevertheless, it is difficult to say how well unionism would have fared without the turn to union organising. Organising is something trade unions have always done, and without it, the future of trade unions would be under threat. Therefore the need for unions to 'rethink and restructure traditional ways of working to facilitate the participation and representation of previously excluded groups' (Terry, 2003: 270) has been key in the organising campaigns of many unions.

Unions have long had a strained relationship with under-represented groups of workers (Heery and Abbott, 2000) and union focus on young workers has historically been less than straightforward. Support for youth structures at the confederate level took some time to establish and whilst early attempts at increasing the number of young trade unionists were proposed in 1927, 1928, 1948 and 1956, it was not until the 1970s that young unionists were given a place in the TUC's structures (Hodder, 2012). At an individual union level, early attempts at youth specific structures occurred in unions such as the Amalgamated Engineering Union and the Civil Service Clerical Association (CSCA). Whilst it is not possible to analyse the success of such early organisations, (Wray, 1957), the CSCA stopped their Youth Advisory Committee from operating as it was considered too militant by the leadership of the union

(Hodder, 2012: 5). Limited academic attention was paid to young trade unionists between the 1950s and 1980s, with Spilsbury et al (1987) and Payne (1989) providing notable exceptions but this work focused on the views of young people towards unions rather than the actions of unions to engage with young people.

Heery (1998) and Simms (1999a; 1999b) have charted the impact of the first few years of the Organising Academy in relation to young workers and their work outlines the increasing priority placed by unions on recruiting young people. The majority of British unions now place an emphasis on organising, as noted above, and this has had an impact on the way in which they focus on young workers. There is some disagreement about what constitutes a young worker amongst the academic literature and the trade unions themselves. Hodder (2012: 6) noted that young workers ranged from 26 and under (for Equity and UNISON) to 35 and under (for the British Dental Association and the University and College Union) and calculated the average upper age limit of a young trade unionist to be 29.7, which, at the time of writing was higher than the TUC Young Workers Forum limit of 27 but lower than the ETUC Youth Committee of 35. However, at the 2014 Young Workers Conference, the TUC policy was changed to be more inclusive and as such, the upper age limit for the TUC Young Workers Forum is now determined by the union from which the delegate is a member.

The TUC Young Workers Forum is an advisory committee to the TUC General Council and meets every two months in different locations across the UK. The name of the Forum changed from 'Young Members' to 'Young Workers' in 2013 to 'reflect a

broader concern about young workers in general' (TUC, 2013: 2) and now holds open forums for young workers across the country which are themed on issues such as pay and skills, and jobs and employment. The TUC has increased the emphasis placed on young workers and in March 2014 held the first National Young Workers month. This period of campaigning activity saw a number of initiatives being launched by the TUC including the first ever TUC Youth Campaign Award (won by a GMB activist), with many union affiliates involved in events around the country. These included the GMB's first ever National Young Members' Network, Equity's Young Creatives event, joint events between Unite and Young Labour, young worker weeks by the Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU), and video and online campaigning by other unions including the National Union of Journalists and UNISON. To mark the launch of Young Workers Month, the TUC published 'My Union, My Voice' which includes the stories of eight young trade unionists from a range of different unions. At the time of writing, the TUC is also coordinating a Young Trade Unionist Leaders course to coincide with the second Young Workers Month in November 2014.

The TUC also coordinates the 'Unions into Schools' project, which has been considered as one way to improve education about trade unionism amongst young people since it became TUC policy in 2006. The TUC has a dedicated website designed to promote the 'Unions into Schools' programme, developed with the support of Unionlearn, the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), the National Union of Teachers (NUT), UNISON, Unite and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL). At the centre of the programme, the

website is 'designed to help schools incorporate education about trade unions into a range of curriculum-linked work at a secondary level' (Unions into Schools, 2014). Information is broadly grouped into five main areas: a general introduction into the role of unions in the workplace; the history of British unions; understanding working lives; informing students of their rights and responsibilities at work; how unions are involved in the fight for global justice. In addition to these pages, the website includes a 'Library' section, with links to various useful websites relating to unionism and workplace rights, as well as a number of links to short videos, including winning entries to the TUC's 60 Second Ad Contests.

The Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) runs a similar programme and has held events such as the Unions into Schools Song Festival (in both 2012 and 2013), at which school students were encouraged to write and perform songs relating to themes of equality and justice. Although there have been long been concerns about the practicalities of introducing trade unionism into schools from a curriculum perspective (Sultana, 1989), it is hoped that the involvement of the teaching unions may help circumvent this issue. Perhaps the biggest concern that remains is the lack of facilities time for trade unionists to undertake such activities (Hodder, 2014: 164). As shown by the Unions into Schools project, the role of the internet and social media in engaging with young trade unionists is increasingly being advocated by the TUC and affiliated unions.

The internet is considered to be an important way of engaging with young workers as it offers a wide array of opportunities for people to engage in political activities

due to its multidimensional character (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011). From a wider political perspective, the internet (and more specifically social media) has been shown to be successful in engaging and politicising people generally (Tolbert and McNeal, 2003) and young people specifically in campaigns such as the 2008 American Presidential Election campaign (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011). Furthermore, it has been argued that 'the Internet represents the future for a growing segment of workers who spend more time online than anywhere else' (Bryson et al., 2010: 42). Much has been written about unions and the internet (Greene et al, 2003; Martinez Lucio, 2003) and many have noted the need for unions to engage in social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (Bailey et al., 2010; Bryson et al., 2010).

Indeed, it has been suggested that new technologies are 'changing the face of community engagement because of their ability to recruit people to causes, organize collective action, raise awareness, influence attitudes, raise funds, and communicate with decision-makers' (McAllister, 2013: 93). Young people in particular have high levels of engagement with social media and the use of such technology has been shown to have a positive impact on improving political participation. In a number of studies, social media has increasingly been shown to be effective in campaigning (Castells, 2012; Hill, 2013) and studies by Panagiotopoulos (2012) and Panagiotopoulos and Barnett (2014) provide useful insights into how social media is perceived by trade unionists. However what is lacking from the research is a discussion of how and for what unions use social media. This has been argued to be

of particular importance to young workers as unions 'need to adopt the communication technologies used by young people' (Bailey et al, 2010: 57).

As with all social media, the extent to which it is used by unions obviously depends on the amount of resources dedicated to that side of communication. Additionally, it is important not only to analyse the content of the communication, but also the consumers, as without analysing who these people are, it is difficult to say how effective union use of such media is. Indeed, as stated by McAllister (2013: 97) it should be noted that 'social media and new technologies are not the universal antidote to the lack of youth engagement' in trade unionism. The remainder of the chapter will outline the ways in which the Public and Commercial Services union engage with young workers through their Young Members' Network.

The PCS Young Members' Network (YMN): A case study

The YMN of PCS has been chosen as a case study having been highlighted as a successful union initiative for engaging young people in trade unions, winning the TUC Award for Youth five years in a row. PCS represents lower and middle grade workers in the civil service and those working in the private sector on Government contracts. As noted above, the union has a membership of approximately 260,000 (TUC, 2014) with union density in the civil service being just over 50 per cent (PCS, 2014). Formed in 2004 as part of the union's shift towards organising, the YMN exists with the aim of democratically representing the interests of PCS members aged 27 and under and to provide an opportunity for young trade unionists to become active and learn about how the union works. The union's YMN has been

celebrated across the trade union movement as being one of the more successful youth initiatives.

Since the formation of the network, the union, according to one full-time official, has systematically attempted to ensure that 'young people are at the forefront of our union, are at the forefront of the trade union movement and are entirely at the forefront of the fight against austerity'. Indeed, the same official went on to note that 'The NEC [National Executive Committee] have been very very supportive of the Network... they take it very seriously and everybody sees it as an integral part of the union'. The network provides information such as ten point guides for young members on: how to organise a meeting; how to write a leaflet; how to organise a picket line. Such information is provided by the network in such a way as to 'actually give people the necessary skills and information that they need to go ahead and organise for themselves', according to one full-time official. Avoiding jargon and having clear communication is also of importance to the network and as such, one full-time official explained 'there's no fluff or waffle about it, we tell it how it is'.

The YMN is both an equality network and part of the National Organising Department but in order to be part of the network, a member has to self-identify as being young. Despite this, it was noted by a full-time official that 'we find that we don't have problems recruiting young members to the union so long as we are recruiting them to something relevant and something viable'. Central to this was the importance of the like-recruits-like concept, 'a belief that organizing new groups of workers requires organizers with matching characteristics' (Heery et al, 2002: 5), and

central to the organising agenda. This was said to be effective by both lay and full-time officials, with the views best summarised by the following quote from a young lay activist who noted 'people naturally go to people that are like them and if you've got nobody that is really like you, then you're not going to feel any connection to it'.

The importance of training across the union is also seen as vitally important for the promotion of young members for a number of reasons. Regular training courses are provided both nationally and regionally and the union holds an annual Young Members' Forum, providing the young trade unionists with the opportunity to meet and discuss issues and strategies for campaigning. As noted by a full-time official:

> 'We've always prided ourselves in running good quality training seminars and events for young people because I think it gives, particularly young members, an opportunity to sit with other like-minded people in a relaxed environment. Everybody treats everyone with respect, and we all work together and we're all looking towards the same agenda and I think our education and training programmes have been key, not only to explain what the union is and talking about practical issues in terms of how do you organise if you're a new branch, how do you overcome some of the obstacles that you may be encountering as a young trade union rep. But I think we don't just want young members to get involved in the union just so the union looks quite good, we also want young members to be driving that work and to be making

the union relevant to other young members so I think that the

training that we provide, and the seminars, are key to developing

that confidence'.

Such views were confirmed by another full-time official who noted 'we are looking

to do more young members training… it's about looking to see what the young

members actually want training on', and, as stated by a number of young members,

'making the trade union movement relevant to young workers'. Training is also seen

as important for challenging the mind-set of other members about the role young

members can play within the union. As noted in the literature, some young trade

unionists often experience difficulties in getting their views across and being taken

seriously (Bielski et al, 2013; Payne, 1989), and although the success and visibility of

the network is improving within PCS, it still remains a problem. As stated by one full-

time official, 'It's alarming sometimes, I did a training course… last week, and it was

an organising training course and it was predominantly older people that were on

it… and every one of them held a view that young people weren't interested in

pensions, or the union because they weren't brought up in that era, that they were

Thatcher's children, and you know, that was kinda the view, and it's completely

contrary to what's actually out there', thus supporting the earlier work of Freeman

and Diamond (2003) who argued that young people are more like 'blank slates'.

Young members also expressed frustration with this, with one recalling their

experiences at a union training course: 'I did the new reps training recently and I had

to keep speaking up 'cos people were just constantly slagging off young members,

saying "young people aren't interested, they don't care", and I had to keep being

like, "look, out of the 20 people here, 5 of us are young members, we're all here as new reps and you're like 40 odd, stop saying that we're not interested and that we don't care and that we're not bothered". It really annoyed me, and that was at training for reps'. As Graham (2001: 4) pointed out that 'you cannot assume that young workers will all have the same issues or that they will necessarily be different to that of their older colleagues' and this view was supported by a number of young members interviewed, with the prevailing view amongst them being 'we're not that different!'. Such experiences were also encountered at a branch level by a young branch official who explained 'whenever I'm trying to do something to get the young members interested, a couple of them have said, you know, why bother, they're never interested in doing anything…[but] maybe if we start doing something for them, they'll get interested and they'll get active'.

However this is not always the case and the success of young members within the union is also viewed positively. As noted by another full time official, 'I think over the years, it's been noticed, particularly by older colleagues in the union about the calibre of young members that come through every year at conference and I think that we've always maintained a visible presence, our stalls are popular, as well as our fringe events and I think that it's really encouraging that to still attract numbers, despite the facilities time attacks'. As noted by another full-time official, 'we've always favoured having young members in with organising because we recognise the value of getting somebody young into the union and nurturing that interest and finding out the talent that goes with that'. However, the downsides of this were also pointed out by the same official who stated 'I think conversely, sometimes in PCS we

do sort of latch onto young members and make them celebrities before their time…'. Of course, such over exposure is a concern as it is important not to put too much pressure on younger representatives with one full-time official noting 'we're kind of a victim of our own success in some ways, because we develop reps very quickly in a very supportive environment, they're a lot more keen to take other work on that perhaps they wouldn't have before, so because they've got different job roles on the go at the same time, and the lack of facilities time means that sometimes the young members work takes a bit of a back foot'. Nevertheless, it does highlight the importance of the YMN and its ability to act as a progression route for younger members to progress up through the union.

Despite these successes, a number of issues still remain for young people within the PCS. The ability of the union to recruit and engage young people has been somewhat hampered in recent years by government policy in the public sector. Recent recruitment freezes have contributed to the age of an average civil servant increasing from 41 in 2002 to 45 in 2011 and consequently, the union has seen the average age of the membership increase accordingly (Hodder, 2014: 160). Over the years, there have been numerous discussions at the union's national conference about the possibilities of raising the upper age limit for the young members' network although a number of officials interviewed were against this idea. As noted by one lay official, 'raising the age limit doesn't actually help us organise new young members, it doesn't actually get new people involved, it doesn't help recruit, it doesn't help organise, it is just an arbitrary way of just kind of, expanding the network, and the point of the network is to get new young people involved in the

union and kind of build around that and just by upping the age limit, all you're doing is moving the goalposts, it's not building on anything or does anything to change it so that's why we've resisted those things'.

The network is also actively aware of the importance of changing the image of trade unionism amongst both potential members and the wider public. Changing the public perception of unions is something that has long been a concern for the union movement (Cupper, 1980; Walsh, 1988). As noted by one young member, 'part of it is about throwing off all these stereotypes of trade unionists being old dusty men that just like shouting on picket lines, we are the trade union, we need to show people'. Additionally, PCS have long been a supporter of the Unions into Schools project and officials commented on regional initiatives external to PCS, such as the production of 'a little comic book all about introducing the idea of unions to young people... for school kids, to get the message out to kids when they're younger so they're aware of it when they do join the workforce'. This was considered to be extremely important by almost all of those interviewed, with one young official noting:

> 'you grow up, you go to school, you get taught history in which
> they normally slam the trade union movement or kind of side-line
> it on massive issues, the media obviously paints a very distinct
> picture of a trade union, as do politicians and everyone else and
> so I think that can build a very negative image amongst young
> people's minds and so when you're talking to them about a union,

you have to go almost right back to the very beginning and that is

one of the bigger things'.

Table 10.1 shows the extent to which PCS uses social media, compared with the TUC. PCS have been using both Facebook and Twitter longer than the TUC and are more active in terms of posts and tweets per month. Over 2,000 more people 'Like' the TUC on Facebook but PCS has over 400 more followers than the TUC on Twitter. However, such data is problematic as it is impossible to say whether the people who 'Like' unions on Facebook are even members or potential members and with Twitter, it is difficult for the unions to know if they are being followed by members or potential members.

Table 10.1 – union use of social media as at 31st July 2014

Union/federation	Type of Facebook page	Dated Joined Facebook	People (members/likes)	Posts	Posts Per Month
TUC	Page	Aug-10	6,802	598	12.46
TUC Young Workers	Page	Mar-13	185	114	6.71
PCS	Page	Nov-12	4,330	404	19.24
PCS Young Members	Group	Sep-07	413	875	10.54
Union/federation	Date	Followers	Following	Tweets	Tweets

	Joined Twitter				per month
TUC @TUCnews	Jun-09	15,613	475		3,593	57.95
TUC Young Workers @TUCYoungWorkers	N/A	1,113	225		1,301	N/A
PCS @pcs_union	Apr-09	16,585	879		12,566	196.34
PCS Young Members @PCSYMN	Jan-11	1,124	455		1,154	26.84

Source: author

Despite being more proactive on Facebook and Twitter than the TUC, some young members expressed the view that they 'don't think social media is used enough within PCS'. However, it was pointed out by a full-time official that the union 'have had some criticism from some of the young members that they haven't found out about events becomes we've used social media too much... in the past, we've relied a lot on social media and just thought "oh they're young, they must use social media" but it is a presumption sometimes... [even if they do] it's about getting them to like our page'. This highlights some of the problems of relying on social media to get the message of the union out there. As one young member noted, the union has a presence on social media, stating 'most of the groups and the areas, there will be like a Facebook page for young members... but if you're necessarily liking that page, you might not be getting all the updates, so it's a breakdown, the information may be going out but if you don't know where to look, you feel like the technology isn't

being used to its advantage'. This view was confirmed by another young member who believed 'A lot of people wouldn't go and look out PCS union or PCS young members' network on Facebook'.

There was also widespread acknowledgement from officials and members that social media cannot replace face to face contact with members, thus supporting the views of McAllister (2013: 97). As noted by one young official, 'I don't think there is any substitute for going up to a person in a workplace and talking to them', before going on to note 'to find us on social media I think you have to go out and look for us and I think the only people who do see what we put are normally other branches and other reps'. Specifically in relation to Twitter, the same official went on to explain:

> 'we have all the branch reps and activists and they're following on
>
> the Twitter feed but how do you go from that to wider outreach,
>
> to ordinary lay members in the civil service? I don't know how to
>
> promote it or how to get in touch with them, cos I assume some
>
> people use Twitter, I imagine that the majority of them don't, but
>
> then again, how would you go to them and go, "here's a Twitter
>
> feed, follow that"? Unless I go up to them and speak to them in a
>
> workplace in the first place and put it in front of them and get
>
> them to join that way, but again, that kind of defeats the point of
>
> using social media to recruit people if you have to go and speak
>
> and recruit them in the first place to get them to follow the
>
> Twitter feed'.

However it was also noted as something the union 'should be using...in this day and age to communicate'.

Conclusions

This chapter has provided an overview of the relationship between trade unions and young people in the UK. As noted earlier, historically, the relationship has not been straightforward as unions often neglected the importance young members to trade unionism (Cole, 1955: 79; Wray, 1957). With the advent of union organising in the mid-1990s, British unions have begun to understand the importance of recruiting and engaging young people. Many unions have now established youth sections and the TUC is continually expanding its work on youth issues. However the union movement in the UK is experiencing declining membership levels amongst young people despite the best efforts of the TUC and its affiliates. The way in which social media is utilised by unions remains under-researched despite the insightful work of Panagiotopoulos (2012), Panagiotopoulos and Barnett (2014) and Geelan (this volume). This chapter contributes in part to understanding the extent to which unions engage with social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and shows that usage varies substantially between different unions, most likely due to resourcing issues.

The PCS Young Members' Network was used as a case study to highlight some of the issues facing young trade unionists today and aimed to complement existing research from the UK on this area (Freeman and Diamond, 2003). The findings

illustrate the importance in the network of developing new activists and introducing them to trade union activity. The network is designed to promote trade unionism amongst young people within the civil service and beyond, and it is seen as an integral part of the future of PCS from both an equality and organising perspective. Whilst this is encouraging, the findings show the battles that still need to be fought both within the union, in terms of providing more encouragement and opportunities for younger members, and externally, in terms of dealing with an ageing workforce and a hostile industrial relations climate. The activities of the PCS have been well documented in relation to youth engagement and more research is needed into the approaches of other unions in the UK.

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