

## Organising young workers in the Public and Commercial Services union

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## **Organising young workers in the Public and Commercial Services union**

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### **Abstract**

This article analyses the relationship between unions and young workers using the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union as a case study. PCS is leading the way in terms of engaging with and representing young workers. However, its future success may be limited due to changes to the external environment.

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## **Introduction**

This article examines the initiatives of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union in relation to organising and engaging young workers. The organising debate in the UK has given considerable attention to increasing the level of involvement of particular groups such as women (Colgan and Ledwith, 2000), migrant workers (Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010), black and minority ethnic workers (Holgate, 2005) and young workers (Waddington and Kerr, 2002) in union activity, both at a membership and at activist level. Much of the existing research in these areas has focused on whether the interests of these groups should be represented separately. However, existing research specifically relating to young workers is limited, and the issue is in need of greater examination. PCS has developed a separate Young Members' Network (YMN) in order to develop activism among young people and integrate them into the work of the national union, rather than limit their representation to separate structures.

This article focuses on the views of a range of union officials and qualitatively assesses the extent to which the union has embedded an understanding of the need to engage with young people within the union's structures. This is crucial as 'The way in which central union structures support and promote organising activity (or not) are important in promoting innovation and activism' (Simms, 2013: 375). Notwithstanding the difficulties of measuring internal union initiatives against the influence of strong external pressures, the research is exploratory in nature and provides preliminary insight into the activities of a British union that has won the TUC award for Youth every year since 2009. The article utilises three concepts described by Serrano Pascual and Waddington (2000) as to how unions have attempted to engage with young workers—reforming union organisation to encourage membership and participation, highlighting an agenda appropriate for young people and changing the image of trade unions. These three categories are used as the framework for the findings.

The article is organised into five sections. The next section provides a background to the relationship between trade unions and young people in the UK and briefly examines the reasons postulated for low levels of youth membership. The third introduces the PCS union and its YMN, and explores the data and methods utilised in the research. The findings are discussed in the fourth section, which is split into three sub-sections based upon the research of Serrano Pascual and Waddington. The conclusions then highlight that while the union seems to be moderately successful in its endeavours, future success may be limited due to changes to the external environment.

### **Unions and Young People: An Overview**

The relationship between trade unions and young workers in Britain is not straightforward. Unions have long recognised the importance of young workers to the future of the movement, but the extent to which their needs have been catered for is questionable. It was not until 1970 that the first TUC Youth Award was presented, followed in 1974 by the establishment of the TUC Youth Conference. By comparison, the Scottish Trades Union Congress established its Youth Advisory Council and annual Youth Conference in 1938 and was one of the first youth-specific union structures in Britain. Furthermore, it is difficult to analyse the success of early youth sections, partly as British trade unions historically did not classify their members according to age (Wray, 1957: 304) and Cole (1955: 79) noted that union provision for young workers provided 'The weakest spot of the Trade Union movement', going on to suggest that 'Most Trade Unions are in spirit adult bodies, and do not accommodate themselves too easily to the ways of youth'. The predominantly apathetic attitude of the union movement towards young members had not appeared to change by the 1980s as Payne (1989: 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'. However, the last 20 years have seen a change in focus by many unions and an increase in resources being put towards improving the number of young trade unionists (Simms, 1999a: 11; 1999b: 5).

Getting young workers to join unions may be one thing, but getting them to become active is much more difficult, possibly due to the 'mismatch between what young people say they want and what unions think they ought to want' (Healey and O'Grady, 1997: 175). While density has declined for all age groups (total UK union density was 26.6 per cent in 2010), the level of membership among the lower age groups has consistently been significantly less than in the older age groups despite initiatives by unions and the TUC. Table 1 shows that density declined substantially with levels being just 4 per cent for those aged 16–19 in 2010. For the purposes of this article, young workers are considered to be aged 27 and under, in line with the definition used by PCS.

**\*\*Table 1 about here\*\***

Several writers have postulated many reasons as to why young people tend not to join trade unions, but few have specifically explored the relationship between organising and young workers. There has long been a concern about the apathy of young workers, with many of them believing they are well provided for (through both their jobs and state policy) and thus not having a need for trade unionism (Waddington and Kerr, 2002; Wray, 1957). This feeling 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: 299). However, other research has found young people not to have overtly negative views on trade unionism, instead being referred to as ‘blank slates’ (Freeman and Diamond, 2003: 36).

Other reasons consider the impact of changing labour markets. Previous studies have highlighted the increase in flexible, temporary and part-time work, particularly among young people in sectors where union organisation is weak or non-existent as this effectively excludes

such workers from the opportunity to be union members (Tailby and Pollert, 2011). Haynes et al. (2005: 100) went even further to suggest that young workers are employed 'in smaller, private-sector workplaces with lower unionization rates because they [young workers] are less likely to organize' but acknowledge it is more likely to be a cost-cutting strategy. This has wider implications for union membership as Bain and Elsheikh (1979: 140) suggested that older workers have had more opportunities to join unions due to having worked longer. However, a more recent research (in an American context) has suggested that if a worker does not join a union by the age of 40, he or she is not likely to join at all (Budd, 2009: 5),<sup>1</sup> and if younger workers' continued experience of employment is in the non-unionised sectors, it is likely to have a knock-on effect for future union membership, giving rise to the 'never member' (Bryson and Gomez, 2005). An additional reason cited for low union membership among young people is 'attributed to 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: 454).

While it is likely that both the attitudes of young people and changing labour markets have contributed to low union density among young workers, the failings of unions themselves to address this issue is of significant importance, following the work of Undy et al. (1981) who suggested that internal factors affecting union growth are more significant than external factors. Research examining the relationship between young people and unions is not extensive in a UK context, although there are notable exceptions (Blanden and Machin, 2003; Freeman and Diamond, 2003; Waddington and Kerr, 2002). The literature is also predominantly quantitative in nature, focusing mainly on non-unionised sectors and the young workers themselves. This presents a gap for qualitative insight into the relationship between trade unions and young workers in a unionised environment, analysing the extent to which the representation of young workers has been embedded within existing union structures. Thus, the aim of this article is to provide an insight into the way in which PCS organises young workers.

In their analysis of the relationship between trade unions and young workers, Serrano Pascual and Waddington (2000: 34) identified three main 'measures that have been specifically introduced as a means to attract and engage with young people'. Union activities were concentrated in the following areas:

- Reforming union organisation to encourage membership and participation
- Highlighting an agenda appropriate for young people
- Changing the image of trade unions.

These three broad areas, although distinct, are not mutually exclusive and have been used by unions to increase the number of young, active trade unionists (Serrano Pascual and Waddington, 2000: 34). A number of measures have been implemented by unions to reform union organisation, including increasing levels of recruitment and activism and reviewing existing internal structures to re-establish the relevance of trade unionism to the changing workforce. The authors argue that pursuing an agenda appropriate to young people could be a successful recruitment tool and may assist with developing levels of participation. The final area relates to the wider image of trade unionism and the range of methods that are being used to 'bring the perception of trade unions closer to young people' (Serrano Pascual and Waddington, 2000: 35). Following a brief introduction to PCS and the YMN, the data and methods are discussed before the development of the YMN within the PCS union is tested against the three concepts highlighted by Serrano Pascual and Waddington.

### **Background, Data and Methods**

PCS was formed in 1998 following a series of mergers between more than 40 unions and is the largest civil service union in the UK with a membership of 285,877 (31 May 2011) and primarily represents lower and middle grade civil servants and those now working in the private sector on

Government contracts. PCS density in the civil service is 51.3 per cent (total union density in the civil service is 67 per cent) (PCS, 2011a: 7). The civil service has been subject to radical changes aimed at increasing efficiency and effectiveness, resulting in the contracting out and privatisation of non-core public services. The impact upon the size of the civil service is evident. In 1977, there were 746,000 staff, but by March 2011, this had decreased to 498,433. Accordingly, following a change in union leadership in 2001, PCS has developed '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: 186–187). Despite this, research into the approach of the union is limited, aside from McCarthy (2010) and Upchurch et al. (2008).

In 2004, the union made the 'deliberate decision to change the emphasis of our work towards building proper sustainable workplace organisation' (PCS, 2004: 2), producing the first National Organising Strategy (NOS) and establishing the YMN, supported by a full-time Youth Organiser. PCS General Secretary, Mark Serwotka (2002: 22) noted that 'If trade unions are to survive and thrive, we need to recruit young people'. The YMN was developed with one of its main objectives being to 'bridge the gap between being a member and getting active in the branch' (PCS, 2005: 27). The PCS Young Members' Charter (YMC) was launched at the inaugural Young Members' Forum in 2006. The Forum was developed as the Annual General Meeting of the YMN and sets out the priorities and demands of young members in the union and called for 'the whole of the union to meet these demands and actively encourage the next generation of activists in PCS' (PCS, 2006: 14).

In order to build a successful YMN across the union, the YMC stated that 'there should be a young members' contact in every branch to work with the young members' network' (PCS, 2006: 15). If the union is serious about the YMN, the position of Branch Youth Officer should be included within the model branch constitution, similar to the existing requirement for a Branch Women's Advisory Committee, but this is not currently the case. Indeed, 'Young members should be given a fair chance to play their part in the ordinary union branches alongside their older and more experienced fellow members' (Wray, 1957: 307). The YMN produced a role description

which, over time, has been adapted to fit in with group plans to improve the coverage of their activists (PCS, 2011b). A motion was submitted to the union's Annual Delegate Conference in 2012 to amend the model branch constitution to include the role of Branch Young Members' Officer, but the motion was guillotined. While some branches have added these positions to their constitution, making it a compulsory position should, in theory, encourage more to take on the role. The PCS YMN is open to workers aged 27 and under, and PCS has approximately 17,000 members young enough to join the network.

The data were collected between September 2010 and August 2011 and formed part of a wider research project on union organising within PCS. Respondents were a mixture of full-time officials and lay representatives from across the union. A mixed methods approach was taken, encompassing semi-structured interviews with 20 full-time officials and 39 lay officials of all ages, the collection and analysis of primary documents and 14 observations at a range of union meetings, including specific YMN events (PCS Young Workers' Week 2010 North-West regional rally, the TUC Young Members' Forum Open Meeting 2010, the PCS Young Members' Fringe meeting at the 2011 Annual Delegate Conference (ADC) and the 2012 PCS Young Members' Forum).

Data were analysed following King's (1998) template analysis. Initial codes were developed a priori and modified as the researcher analysed and interpreted the fieldwork data. As documentary analysis developed further, additional codes were developed specifically in relation to the organising activities of the union in relation to young members. Through the views of interviewees and documentary analysis, the data aim to provide an understanding of how young members fit within the union's structures through discussions of encouragement and opportunities for involvement. As the project evolved, the importance of the YMN became increasingly evident, and interviews deliberately raised the issue of young members in this context. The research was undertaken against the background of attacks on terms and conditions proposed by the Coalition Government. The data present the views of a limited number of union officials in one British union and therefore cannot be claimed to be

representative of PCS or the wider union movement. However, despite these limitations, the data are useful, providing detailed insight into PCS strategy on organising young workers.

## **Representation of Young Members**

### *Reforming union organisation*

This section explores the way in which PCS has developed in order to better cater for young members. Much of the initial work in this area formed part of the move towards union organising from 2004 onwards. Nationally and regionally, the PCS YMN is an organising network, rather than an equalities network, and having such links with organising has been argued by one full-time official to be positive as ‘there are so many younger reps who have grown up with that [organising] model in mind and understand what they have to do to make it a reality’. Indeed, the fact that PCS young members have won the TUC award for youth every year since 2009 goes some way towards highlighting the successes of the YMN.

In 2007, the introduction of elected positions to the YMN and the adoption of the Young Members' Constitution at Annual Delegate Conference democratised the network, the rationale being that ‘the establishment of democratic structures within the Young Members Network will enable it to build and develop its campaigning and organising work’ (PCS, 2007b: 65). The YMN is coordinated by the National Young Members Committee. This is elected annually and made up of 10 regional convenors and 4 officers (chair, vice chair, equalities officer and secretary), with the officers being elected at the Young Members' Forum. Simms (2001: 8) noted that ‘The key to a successful youth network is that a union needs to listen to it and not instruct it. This has not always been the strongest feature of British trade unions, but we must allow a mainstream voice for young people within our union structures’. In this respect, the importance of having clear structures is evident in PCS.

In PCS, larger civil service departments and agencies are organised into groups within the union which, under PCS rules, are designed to mirror the employers' structure. Groups are made up of branches that represent members who work for the same employer. Branches are organised on a geographical basis. Each group has its own Group Executive Committee (GEC) elected annually by union members within that group, and these lay officials are elected for the purposes of negotiating pay, terms and conditions with management. This reflects the fragmentation of civil service bargaining. Indeed, while there is no longer a system of centralised, national bargaining for the civil service as a whole, bargaining for each agency or department, represented by a group, is conducted at a national level, and not at the workplace. Each group has autonomy in formulating and implementing policy and holds an annual group conference, at which a number of issues, specific to the work, terms and conditions of that employer, are discussed. These can range from pay and organisation to proposed changes to working practice.

In addition to the group structure, the union has a network of Occupational Associations. According to the union rulebook, 'Where members with common professional or occupational concerns do not all belong to the same Branch, the Branches to which such members belong may be formed by the NEC [National Executive Committee] into an Association' (PCS, 2010a: 16). Each association is managed by an Association Committee, which operates in a similar manner to GECs. Such associations provide a forum for exchange of information across employers in terms of best union practice to make the most of specific campaigns and negotiations for the benefit of the membership. Examples of some Occupational Associations include: the Public Sector Group, the Call Centres Forum, the Atypical Workers Forum, the Support and Related Grades Association, the Professional and Managers Association, the Commercial Sector Association. Despite these associations, issues of organising and negotiation are conducted through the group structures.

The views of the YMN are represented on the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the union through the NEC Youth Forum, which liaises between the NEC and YMN. At a group or branch level, young members' interests are represented by way of a Young Members' Advisory Committee (YMAC). The first YMACs were established in the two largest groups of the union, with the aim of increasing the number of these advisory committees across the union (PCS, 2007a). YMACs are only able to comment on issues debated in meetings in relation to how they will specifically impact upon young people and are not able to enter debates on wider issues. This may lead to confusion among the membership, with one participant stating that the national commitment to young members 'needs to be matched at group and branch level'. Another participant noted that some branches view the YMAC as 'a talking shop'. When asked if the YMAC was taken seriously in relation to policy development, the same participant replied by saying 'it's not that they don't take us seriously ... they just forget', whereas another commented 'I would say they feel included in a way but it's whether they get listened to ... you just feel like you're paid lip service'. The YMACs are, however, considered by officials to be key to providing opportunities for younger members as they enable them to 'develop an experience of the higher level ends of the union without necessarily having to go through the natural process'. It was also suggested that the YMACs are seen as 'a progression route and ... very effective'.

The year 2010 saw the first Young Members' Organising Strategy, a separate policy aimed at increasing the number of young activists within the union, across all groups. The focus placed on the YMN within the NOS became less prominent as the strategies evolved, possibly reflecting the advances made in embedding the network into union structures. Over time, the NOSs became dominated by a range of statistics covering issues relating to membership, density, mapping and activist levels, but unfortunately, these data are exceptionally difficult to use for purposes of comparing changes in membership/activist levels due to the number of different variables documented in each NOS. Consequently, it is only possible to analyse the number of young activists for the four-year period between 2006 and 2009 (PCS, 2010b: 13). Table 2 shows the percentage of young activists actually decreasing during that period but remaining around 5 per

cent of the total number of activists within the union. There is a lack of young people working in the sectors that PCS organises in, and this goes some way to account for the low levels of membership among young people. Indeed, the union estimates the network only contains approximately 900 members (PCS, 2013), which is unsurprising as only 0.2 per cent of the 498,433 civil servants were aged 16–19 and 11.6 per cent were aged 20–29 as of March 2011 (Office for National Statistics, 2011).

**\*\*Table 2 about here\*\***

In 2002, the average age of a PCS member was 41, and the average age of a civil servant was the same (Serwotka, 2002). Using figures provided by PCS, the average age of a PCS member in 2011 was 45, the same as the average age of a civil servant. If the age of the membership base is increasing, it is no surprise that the age of an activist is also increasing—the average age of a union representative was 46 (Kersley et al., 2006: 146)—the same as the average age of a PCS activist. Some officials also noted that the age of PCS activists has been a problem for some time with one official stating that ‘for years and years I think we neglected the development of young activists’, with another noting that ‘the problem we’ve always had within PCS ... is our activist base is not young by any stretch’. This has been exacerbated by a recruitment freeze imposed upon the civil service since May 2010. Such external factors inhibit union growth (Undy et al., 1981: 22–23). The recruitment freeze and ongoing departmental cuts have led to an ageing workforce in the civil service. As one full-time official noted, ‘Does the civil service give sufficient numbers of young people genuine and proper employment opportunities? ... I think the answer to that question is probably not’. Many interviewees stressed the problem of a lack of young people to recruit and organise, with one branch official stating ‘if we get anybody in here who looks under 27, I’m not joking, I’m in there!’

Several participants suggested that low activist levels across the union are unsurprising, given some of the difficulties faced by younger members in their attempts to become more active. One respondent noted that 'It is harder for young people in unions 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'. Confirming this view, another suggested that more experienced officials can be 'quite reluctant to sometimes give away things ... 'cos of your age and that, they're unsure'. One possible reason for this may be due to the view held that 'you really need to be involved in the union for a long time to build up the experience rather than just stepping into the role'. Another respondent echoed these thoughts, stating that they 'came from a tradition ... where you wouldn't even consider standing for a GEC [Group Executive Committee] position unless you'd done your time as a branch rep doing those sort of horrible cases and actually become reasonably proficient'.

To be clear, gaining union experience is of course important to the development of representatives, but the extent to which young members are being given the opportunities to gain experience is questionable. Several respondents still viewed young members as the trade unionists of the future, with one admitting 'it's a cliché, but it's a cliché 'cos it's true, young members are the future of our union'. This has resonance with Freeman and Diamond's (2003: 30) pessimistic analysis of youth initiatives, suggesting that unions 'cannot easily modify their operations to fit specific groups and ... the programmes ghettoize young members'. Additionally, this may contribute to the low level of young people engaged 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, 2011c: 15).

However, membership of the YMN is not automatic. If you are aged 27 and below and are a PCS member, you currently have to 'opt in' to the network. However, it has been suggested that trade

unionism is a form of experience good, 'which by its nature is physically intangible, [and] ideally must be "sampled" in some way to convey its benefits to the consumer' (Bailey et al., 2010: 43). Interview data confirm this and suggest that a number of activists and full-time officials would prefer young members to automatically be part of the network and therefore receive the targeted communications (such as emails, briefings and magazines) in the belief that it would 'have a knock on effect on the number of people [active]'. Existing research further supports this and notes that 'successful union efforts to improve network density among young workers may lead to greater union knowledge, participation and active engagement in the pursuit of union community and political goals' (Johnson and Jarley, 2005: 606–607).

The union has attempted to reduce the negative experiences of young activists by encouraging them to shadow more experienced officers in their roles, before progressing onto the roles themselves. This has been documented (PCS, 2011b), and interview evidence suggests that it works, with one respondent noting how a number of 'people that have grown up through the young members' network in the group and we've got young members actually who would still class as young members on our Group Executive Committee'. However, there is no formal mechanism in place to monitor the number of activists that progress from the YMN to take up other positions within the union, which is problematic when trying to evaluate the success of the YMN. To encourage young members to become more involved, regular emails are sent out inviting them to join the network. One way in which PCS has tried to raise awareness has been through making campaigns relevant to younger people, and these attempts will be looked at in the following section.

#### *Highlighting an agenda appropriate for young people*

Serrano Pascual and Waddington (2000: 36) note that 'an agenda appropriate for young people must address their situation within the labour market and any shift in attitudes', and it was perceived as vital to link the union campaign against cuts to pension schemes to young members

as this issue will have a large impact on them. However, 'unions should not devote their resources entirely towards specific campaigns targeted at younger workers' (Haynes et al., 2005: 111), and in support of this, PCS have stated that 'even union organisers make this mistake, trying to recruit young people with materials offering style over substance' (PCS, 2010c: 4). This is problematic as organising efforts 'need to be cognisant of younger workers' more instrumental approach to union membership and less developed understanding of how unions work' (Haynes et al., 2005: 111). At a national level, the union attempted to highlight aspects of the national campaign predominantly on pay and pensions and tailor them towards the large number of young members in the union (PCS, 2011d: 1). The guidance also made the link between young members and pensions, which is often perceived to be a difficult issue to get young members onside with, as one respondent put it, 'it's not as agitational with them as it is with other members'. Another went further to suggest that 'one problem we have with young members is the current dispute, they know their goose is cooked, so to speak'. In an attempt to deal with this problem, a feature on how young members dealt with the reality of the cuts was provided in the union magazine (PCS, 2011e), and numerous examples of young members' views have been increasingly appearing in all PCS publications.

The YMC also promoted issues for young people to organise around, such as pay, pensions, casualisation, job security, social justice and wider community initiatives. This 'back to basics' approach, focuses directly on the labour market issues affecting young members in PCS and is similar to work done by other unions (Serrano Pascual and Waddington, 2000: 36). Other activities include the annual National Young Trade Unionist Week, launched in 2006. During this week, events take place around the country, and over time, the week has gained support from other unions (including the Communication Workers Union, Unison, Unite, and The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers) and the wider public on the issues affecting young people today (PCS, 2010d: 11). The YMN has also forged links with a variety of organisations such as Youth Fight for Jobs, UK Uncut and the Workers Beer Company. These links are useful to the union, as PCS considers such organisations as appealing to young people

and providing opportunities for social activities, and the initiatives are seen as a way of potentially increasing activism and/or membership. This is consistent with existing research which has shown that 'new members who participate in formal and informal socialization activities will exhibit greater levels of union commitment' (Booth et al., 2008: 56).

Part of creating an agenda appropriate for young people is promoting the opportunities for younger workers to become involved in union activities. This requires a level of training, at both national and group level, to ease their transition into the union. Indeed, it has been suggested that the 'main barrier to participation of young members is the lack of training and awareness of PCS structures and their role' (PCS, 2011f: 1). Such training is provided through occasions such as the annual Young Members' Forum where members attend presentations and workshops on issues, including 'How the union works', 'Pensions—how it affects you', 'Economics for dummies' and 'Tackling under-representation in PCS'. This training is replicated at a group level by the YMACs and takes place over three days, covering issues such as 'the make-up of PCS, how young members fit into the trade union structure, running a campaign and how members make a difference' (PCS, 2010e: 5). There is sometimes the view that it is difficult for older union officials to campaign and organise around young workers' issues due to their age. This is problematic, as Graham (2001: 4) noted 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'.

Yet some branches are in danger of entering a vicious circle due to this line of thinking, as the recruitment and engagement of young members is never going to improve while the branch officials believe they cannot do anything to improve it. One full-time official commented that 'there's a lot of old-school people that have become entrenched'. This claim appears to be supported by the views of branch officials, one of whom stated 'it needs another 18 year old or at least somebody that remembers being 18 to know what's gonna appeal to them'. At a branch executive committee discussion around young members, several officers commented on the

differences between young and old people, making comments such as 'it's just a different generation now', and 'you've got to think like a young person'. These views were held across different groups within the union. Another branch and group officer stated 'it's very difficult to know what young people would like, what they want and how they want it'. As such, the recruitment and organising of young people is in danger of being removed from the agenda of many branches in order to focus on other issues deemed more pressing. However, with the age of trade unionists rising, one possible way to engage with young members would be to change the image of trade unions.

### *Changing the image of trade unions*

The impact of the public image of trade unions has increased in importance over time. As one participant noted 'it's a bit depressing to see the kind of, well, people like me I guess, the sort of middle-aged, white blokes' and this is widely perceived as being the standard image of trade union officials. The impact the media plays in the public perception of trade unions cannot be understated, particularly among young people (Cupper, 1980: 42–44). Comments from branch officials state that 'a lot of young people today have grown up in a period where ... the unions have got a bad rap', implying that the negative portrayal of trade unions in the media has led to a decrease in membership. Another union representative suggested that the media projection that 'unions are baddies' has further implications as 'once you see or hear that when you're younger, it has an effect on you later in life'. While the extent to which unions are negatively portrayed in the media may have declined in recent years, industrial relations issues 'are still considered worthy of national press coverage in the UK' (Logan, 2008: 19), and Walsh's (1988: 217) stark warning that 'unless trade unions acknowledge the continuing role the media are playing in determining their effectiveness, the consequences are likely to be grave' is arguably still true today as unions need to be aware of their communicative power (Geelan, 2013).

For this reason, PCS is among many UK unions attempting to stem the negative media portrayal of unions in a number of ways. For example, PCS issued detailed guidance on press releases and how to deal with media questions as part of the campaign pack for industrial action in 2011 (PCS, 2011g). The importance of social media to trade unionism is one that has not gone unnoticed by PCS. While the creation of sustainable online 'structures of union engagement that are innovative, open and creative is not easy' (Martinez Lucio et al., 2009: 128), the notion that union presence online is particularly relevant to younger workers builds upon the premise 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). The union is increasingly 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 technology (PCS, 2011h; 2011i).

In addition to the importance of the media in union image, it has been argued that 'the greatest weapon for unions might lie in education at school, so those youngsters with core characteristics become members when joining the work-force, regardless of union presence or power at any particular workplace' (Cregan and Johnson, 1990: 101). PCS has been involved with this concept for some time, and at the TUC Congress in 2006, representatives from the PCS YMN 'successfully proposed a key amendment calling for the benefits of trade unionism to be promoted amongst young people within schools, colleges and universities', with the aim of deciding 'how best to put pressure on the Government to build into the national curriculum the social benefits of trade unionism' (PCS, 2007b: 11). This work continued to be noted in the NOS (PCS, 2008: 15) which detailed the development in proposals to include trade unionism in the national curriculum. The union has been training young trade unionists to go and talk to school pupils, but this has been problematic due to lack of facilities and time available to do this kind of work. In 2010 and 2011, motions were put to the Annual Delegate Conference regarding this, and the successful 2011 motion instructed the union to 'negotiate a policy that allows trade union activists paid time off work to promote this program as part of the government's agenda for

citizenship within schools' (PCS, 2011j: 26). Progress on this is ongoing, but it is too soon to tell how successful this will be. This is in part because 'teachers generally present students with a conservative picture of the world of work which is ideologically weighted towards the needs and criteria of employers' (Sultana, 1989: 7), which is likely to have contributed to the widespread 'perception of the absence of social and collectivist values amongst young people' (Moore, 2011: 156). Many participants shared the view that people generally are not 'as union minded as they used to be'. This can be best described by the following quote, stating 'you've usually got to sell the union to young members and by sell, I don't mean marketing ... [but] actually explaining what a union is because I think that consciousness has gone'. This lack of consciousness can also be partly attributed to the decline in the likelihood of young workers having parents who are trade union members (Blanden and Machin, 2003: 410), and it is hoped that the YMN can provide 'the re-awakening of exactly this consciousness that both the trade union movement and young workers need' (PCS, 2010c: 14).

In addition to the work being developed between the union movement and schools, there have long been calls for trade unions to develop 'closer links with students and the NUS' (Healey and O'Grady, 1997: 178). In 2006, a partnership deal to jointly promote the benefits of trade unionism to working students was finally signed between the TUC and NUS (TUC, 2006), and PCS worked with NUS to organise a national demonstration (held in Manchester in January 2011) to highlight the impact of government cuts on young people. One participant suggested that the union involvement in the 'student demonstrations have had a massive impact on the attitude of young members'. Serrano Pascual and Waddington (2000: 35) noted that unions have been developing their links on university campuses for some time, the aim being to increase awareness of trade unionism. A motion was passed at the 2011 PCS Annual Delegate Conference, requesting 'regional offices to continue supporting the activity of PCS young members in cross-union/student campaigning' (PCS, 2011j: 16), and observations made at the PCS Young Members Forum 2012 saw young members calling for PCS nationally to make stronger links with the NUS.

## **Conclusions**

Using Serrano Pascual and Waddington's (2000: 34) framework, the development of the PCS YMN has been analysed, and due to the lack of extensive research into the relationship between young workers and trade union structures, this study has been exploratory. A number of reasons, both internal and external, have been given for low levels of union membership among young people, and the union has made considerable effort to change internally. Indeed, it is evident that the organising agenda adopted by PCS has changed the union from being moderate in purpose, pursuing partnership (Martin, 2010), to being more militant (McCarthy, 2010), with the ultimate purpose of 'building proper sustainable workplace organisation' (PCS, 2004: 2). It has been clear through the development of the PCS NOSs, that the YMN has been a priority of the union; however, any concrete attempt at measuring this success is problematic due to the lack of data published by the union. Through attempting to improve the image of the union movement and embracing an agenda that young people can relate with, PCS have developed a YMN aimed at increasing the number of young members and activists and have begun to successfully embed this into existing union structures. These democratic structures will be crucial to the success of the network in the future. However, as was noted in the first NOS, successful organising takes time, and organising has always been viewed as the long-term objective of the union (PCS, 2004: 7). As noted by Gomez et al. (2002: 540), 'Effective union organizing today can have multiplier effects well into the future, as it leads to more union family members and more union-friendly family and peers, both of which enhance preferences for unionization, especially among youths upon which future unionization is built'.

With only eight years since its inception, it is too early to say how successful the YMN initiatives will be in the future as they will be determined by a combination of internal and external factors. As such, three main areas have been identified for further investigation in both the short and long term and to assess the value of the framework adopted in this article. In the short-term, the

impact of the proposed changes to the model branch constitution to include the role of Branch Young Members' Officer needs to be monitored, should the membership approve the change. In the long term, the extent to which union activity in schools and the links made with the NUS and student demonstrations can reinvigorate a union consciousness among young people needs to be considered as this has implications for the wider union movement. Perhaps of greatest concern to the PCS is the current hostile environment within which the union is operating, including the extent to which the imposed civil service recruitment freeze and other changes in the external environment will impact upon the number of young workers PCS can engage with. This battle against cuts to jobs and terms and conditions may also reduce the resources available to organise young people, and as such, the union is limited in the impact it can have on these external issues. At the time of writing, the recruitment freeze is set to continue until 2015, and with the average age of both members and activists rising, there may soon be very few young workers to organise into a network, despite the best efforts of the union.

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## Tables

**Table 1: Trade union density by age groups, 2000–2010 (Achur, 2011)**

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
16–19	5.4	5.3	4.9	5.2	3.9	3.3	5.2	3.8	4.3	4.1	4.0
20–24	14.3	14.3	13.5	14.0	13.5	13.2	13.1	12.9	12.2	11.8	12.0
25–29	23.1	22.6	22.0	22.4	22.7	21.8	21.9	19.6	20.2	20.9	19.6
30–34	28.2	28.0	26.7	28.5	26.8	26.9	24.7	25.1	24.9	24.1	22.5
35–39	33.5	31.5	32.3	32.5	31.0	29.3	28.9	30.0	27.4	27.6	27.0
40–44	37.2	36.4	35.9	36.1	34.6	35.0	35.2	33.4	33.2	30.5	31.1
45–49	40.3	39.3	39.7	38.8	39.9	37.7	37.7	36.9	35.4	36.1	34.1
50–54	38.5	39.4	39.0	39.8	39.3	40.6	39.9	39.1	38.4	37.6	37.6
55–59	36.7	35.9	34.8	35.4	36.2	37.5	36.4	38.5	38.2	39.0	37.1
60–64	30.7	32.0	28.7	30.6	28.4	27.5	28.4	30.1	28.9	30.2	28.2
65–69	14.4	10.2	14.6	13.3	8.8	15.6	15.3	12.9	19.2	16.5	13.7
Over 70	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	9.3	7.9	12.6	7.3

**Table 2: Number of young PCS activists**

Date recorded	No. of young activists	Young activists as a percentage of total activists
31 December 2006	514	5.07%
31 December 2007	521	5.09%
31 December 2008	497	4.61%
31 December 2009	524	4.68%