

# Representing and organizing young workers

The case of the French trade union confederation CGT

**Marcus KAHMANN**

Institut de Recherches Economiques et Sociales (IRES)

F-93192 Noisy-le-Grand

[marcus.kahmann@ires.fr](mailto:marcus.kahmann@ires.fr)

# The research: international context

- Present findings of a comparative study on French union approaches to organizing and representing young workers (Bérout, Dupuis, Kahmann, Yon, 2016);
- Focus on a single confederation, CGT;
- Research part of ongoing 5-country research project on youth engagement in trade unions (US, UK, NL, FRG, F);
- Study the processes of inclusion of young workers in interest representation with the aim of fostering strategy development and mutual learning (Turner, Tapia 2013);
- Qualitative methodology, based on the identification of a number of significant cases in each country.

# The national research context

- The **academic literature**: There is a rich body of work on youth engagement (*associations*, student unions, social movements), but very little on unions and youth engagement;
- Existing literature is often preoccupied with finding causes for non-engagement, but much less with analyzing processes of (dis)engagement;
- **Labour market situation** is heterogenous : 80% of young people have A-levels; unemployment distributed very unequally depending on the level of educational certificates; job stability has been continually decreasing since the 1980s;
- **Youth attitudes to work and trade unions**: Evidence is somewhat contradictory and calls for qualifying the impact of age on attitudes;
- **IR context**: organizational and institutional stability.

# CGT: An outline

- CGT (*Confédération Générale du Travail*) is the oldest French union (1895); long time hegemonic confederation but debating its place with CFDT;
- Organizes across all industries and is structured along industrial and geographical lines;
- Historically marked by anarcho-syndicalism; distance taken from Communist Party from the 1990s onwards;
- Membership: 690.000 members in 2015, 50 % of which are older than 50; 15% are under 35; bias towards male (white) lower-qualified manual workers;

# Questions, methodology

- Aim: Explore the place and the role of youth issues in CGT (and to compare it to other French confederations);
- A bottom-up, hypothesis generating research strategy;
- Empirical basis: Interviews with 4 CGT officers working at national and regional level; participant observation at CGT young workers congress; analysis of official and internal documents.

# The place of youth policies

- The question of legitimacy of youth policies has two dimensions:
  - ✓ What are « young people »? Does it make sense to develop specific youth policies?
  - ✓ What resources and degree of autonomy do youth structures have?

# Debates questioning the usefulness of the category of young people

- There is a range of attitudes towards the category of « young people » within French trade unions (refusal -> embracement);
- CGT debates have questioned the homogeneity of young people, pointing to the diversification of labour market positions and identities;
- CGT does not negate the utility to speak to and organize them as young workers, but calls for a target-specific approach;
- However: tension between target-specific policy approach and the everyday CGT discourse of young people as precarious workers.

# Ressources & autonomy of national youth structures

- Historically institutionalized youth structures; regional youth commissions from the 1950s onwards; after May 1968, a national youth committee was set up;
- Structure: a national youth officer reporting to one executive board officer; regular assemblies of the decentralized youth committees (regional & industrial);
- Limited financial autonomy: Funding of campaigns requires approval of executive board; deliberative voice in the national union assembly (CCN);
- Decentralized youth committees are operationally free to determine their own priorities. Result: Low degree of visibility at head-office about number and activities of youth committees;
- Not only little autonomy but also regularly debates about their existence



# The role of youth policies : External and internal aspects

- With regard to the role of youth policies, we can distinguish between two aspects:
  - Young people as targets of organizing, campaigning, public policy etc (*external dimension*); which are the dominant modes of reaching out to young people?
  - Young people as members of the organization and potential leaders (*internal dimension*) ; how does the organization deal with young union activists?

# External dimension: Organizing, mobilizing and politics

- At the 2009 CGT congress, **organizing** young people became a union priority (transversal task), but there is little sign of coordinated efforts, let alone results; idea of double membership UNEF-CGT came to nothing;
- The youth committees' **political claims** (CGT, 2011) focus on training, job creation & employment rights. They are guided by the principle of equal treatment; no reference to or institutional implication in youth-specific public (employment) policies;
- Significantly, worker **mobilizations** (both in & outside the workplace) are absent from official youth communications.

# Informing about labour rights as the dominant repertoire of actions

- Campaigns & initiatives informing young people about (individual) labour rights to help defend themselves are the dominant repertoire of the national youth committee. They target specific employment situations:
  - Publishing guides on labour rights (general guide; internship; temporary agency work; seasonal work);
  - Seasonal workers' campaign during summer and winter;
  - Student worker advice offices on several university campuses;
- The rights-centred approach goes along with the suppression of references to collective dimensions of workers' lives (meta-narrative on social conditions and remedies; workplace representation; collective action; worker sociability);

# Internal dimension: Transforming young militants into future leaders

- CGT youth committees have always been a socializing agency for young unionists - and been contested on these grounds;
- Since 2006, CGT has strengthened its links with the two major left-wing student unions (UNEF, UNL); this opens up perspectives for new members and leadership profiles. Example: Ex-UNEF leader became head officer for youth and equal equalities;
- Young activists are a rare resource: They may be kept jealously by local unions and can « climb the ladder » very quickly, even to the national level.

# Conclusions

- CGT's youth policies have remained internally contested and weakly developed, both in terms of authoritative & financial resources. This strikes a contrast with more established « special interest groups » such as pensioners and women. Its main register of action has been providing information to young people about their labour rights through a variety of campaigns and initiatives, at the expense of promoting collective action out- and inside the workplace;
- The lack of focus on organizing young workers – through youth structures and otherwise - is surprising when we consider a) the official priority given to young workers and b) the fact that within a decade CGT will have lost half of its economically active membership;
- In the absence of such efforts, what we will probably see in the near future is the breakdown a well-known pattern: Instead of the old generation blocking the ascension of younger cohorts, the latter will get into leading positions very quickly. The transmission of knowledge and values are becoming an urgent question.
- This points to the significance of longterm demographic drivers to union change (vs financial, political or institutional factors ).