



Cornell University
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School
DigitalCommons@ILR

Working Papers

ILR Collection

3-8-2010

Youth and Unions

Marlena Fontes

Cornell University, maf78@cornell.edu

Ken Margolies

Cornell University, kam47@cornell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/workingpapers>

Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.

Support this valuable resource today!

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ILR Collection at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Working Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact catherwood-dig@cornell.edu.

If you have a disability and are having trouble accessing information on this website or need materials in an alternate format, contact web-accessibility@cornell.edu for assistance.

Youth and Unions

Abstract

[Excerpt] Following a suggestion from the Cornell ILR Labor Advisory Counsel in early 2009 Cornell ILR began studying the relationships between young workers and unions. Marlena Fontes, a Cornell student, worked with Cornell Extension Faculty Ken Margolies and others during the summer of 2009 on the study. The study is based on a literature review, survey research, observations and focus groups. The report provides a glimpse into the issues that are facing young people and unions and how unions are seeking to organize and involve young workers and members. The table on page 9 summarizes the survey research conducted by Ms. Fontes and two other Cornell summer Fellows.

Keywords

youth, unions, labor unions, young workers

Comments

Suggested Citation

Fontes, M., & Margolies, K. (2010). *Youth and unions*. Retrieved [insert date] from Cornell University, ILR School site:
<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/workingpapers/104>

Required Publisher Statement

Copyright by the authors.

Youth and Unions

Contents

Pages 2 – 7	Executive Summary
Pages 8 – 9	Introduction to full report
Pages 10 – 12	Who are "young workers"?
Pages 12 – 16	Why Organize Young Workers?
Pages 16 – 20	Young People's Attitudes about Unions
Pages 20 – 22	Challenges of Organizing Young Workers
Pages 22 – 27	Key Issues for Young Workers
Pages 27 – 30	Making Room for Younger Members and Leaders
Pages 31 – 38	Reaching Out to Young Workers
Pages 38 – 45	New Technology
Pages 45 – 46	In Conclusion
Pages 47 – 49	References

Written by Marlena Fontes with assistance and editing by Ken Margolies,
School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University

March 8, 2010

March, 2010

Executive Summary

The study

Following a suggestion from the Cornell ILR Labor Advisory Counsel in early 2009 Cornell ILR began studying the relationships between young workers and unions. Marlena Fontes, a Cornell student, worked with Cornell Extension Faculty Ken Margolies and others during the summer of 2009 on the study. The study is based on a literature review, survey research, observations and focus groups. The report provides a glimpse into the issues that are facing young people and unions and how unions are seeking to organize and involve young workers and members. The table on page 9 summarizes the survey research conducted by Ms. Fontes and two other Cornell summer Fellows.

The need and challenges of organizing and involving young workers

For many unions, organizing young workers (between ages 18-35) and fostering young leadership has been seen as essential to increasing union membership and power. Generational differences in union density leave many union members, leaders, and supporters worried for the future and with good reason because union density among young workers is two and a half times lower than those of adult workers.

Equally important for unions are the enthusiasm, energy and ideas younger members bring to meet the many challenges facing the labor movement. As baby boomers retire from the leadership of unions and from the ranks of union members, younger leaders, activists and members are needed to carry on the work of the labor movement.

March, 2010

There are many challenges to organizing and involving young workers including:

- Young workers often do not view their current jobs as a career so when faced with objectionable working conditions they are more likely to find a new job than organize.
- Young workers tend to work in industries and jobs with high turnover rates making organizing more difficult.
- Some unions using older organizers and traditional methods of communication are not able to effectively connect with younger workers.
- Younger union members are more likely to experience union give-backs and two tier systems at the same time as older union members unsuccessfully try to get their younger peers to appreciate the union struggles of the past.
- Union cultures reflect the tastes and experiences of older members and these often don't appeal to younger members.

Young workers' attitudes about unions

Many studies show that young workers do not necessarily dislike unions at higher rates than adults, but they have had little contact with them and thus little or no information about unions. Given the decline in the number of union households this is not a surprising result. Union organizers report being met with blank looks and complete lack of awareness about union history, union benefits, or even how unions function making the challenge in organizing young workers as not "Union Yes" or "Union No" but "Union What?"

One study found that when young workers and adult workers were asked if they

March, 2010

believed workplace problems are better solved with individual solutions than collection solutions, the proportion of youth and adults who answered, “yes” was the same.

A veteran labor activist and educator who has witnessed the entry to the labor movement from the “greatest generation” on, said she didn’t think that young people today are any more individualistic or apathetic than earlier generations, only that the labor movement needed to find a place for them to be active and to feel like the work they were doing was important.

Young workers have many issues unions could address

With unionized job opportunities shrinking and the pressures of debt climbing, more and more young people must work two or even three jobs to stay afloat. Temp work, contracting, and freelancing all add to an increasing unstable work environment for young people.

The government payroll survey that relies on employment records found that since the recession, "the ones who are being hit the hardest and will have the most difficult time recovering are America's young workers.

Issues of two (or more) tier pay and working conditions are also especially relevant to young workers who are likely to be newly employed and therefore on the lowest tier.

Many employers may feel that their young workers can be easily manipulated or bullied and many young workers face harassment and disrespect on the job. While this is not unique to young workers, many are so new in the workplace that they do not know how speak up for themselves or address the issue.

March, 2010

Young people face financial burdens, debt, and the high cost of living. Many young people are parents, primary caregivers, or are helping their family.

Making room in unions for young people

Some unions are learning that they are not as welcoming to young members as they thought. Many youthful members report being called "kids" and otherwise being made to feel talked down to, immature, and that other people did not consider them full members. Younger workers find their suggestions are often met with an attitude that the young member does not know enough to have any ideas worth considering. Without much knowledge of unions a young worker attending a union meeting may feel left out unless someone welcomes them without condescending, translates the jargon used and explains how the union works.

There are many examples of new initiatives and successful approaches unions are using to organize and involve younger members. These include organizing youth conferences, reaching out to young people to attend leadership trainings and encouraging them to run for leadership positions. Unions are holding events for their members at restaurants popular with younger members, featuring younger members and their activities on the union's web page, using social networking and electronic communications and making their handouts and flyers attractive to younger generations.

Unions are using new ways of communicating with younger workers such as text messages, email, social networking sites, blogs, twitter, and videos. However, unions should be careful not to think reaching young workers is solely a matter of using new

March, 2010

technology.

Reaching out to Young Workers

Like for any group in a union, reaching out to young workers is basic organizing. Good organizers listen and specifically address unique needs and cultural differences and know that the way to reach any particular group is to find leaders from that group who can then help organize the others.

Demystifying union terms can be immensely helpful and using simple, straightforward language is usually best when speaking to a young person with little knowledge of unions. When young workers feel they do not have the right terms and jargon to express themselves they may feel like their voice does not have a place in the union.

Union leaders and activists need to show how unions can help younger workers address their important issues before giving lectures about past struggles or they risk sounding like they are stuck in the past. Encouraging young workers to share their knowledge of new technology or other skills can be an important way to encourage intergenerational dialogue and understanding.

Examples of other ways unions are reaching out to younger members include: social events, concerts, poetry slams, open mic. nights, film nights, artistic events, soccer games and having current music at union events.

To reach young potential members unions host events to help young people learn how to enter union represented professions, provide programs for the children of members and other young people they recruit through schools and community

March, 2010

organizations and offer summer internships. Unions have connections with student groups, young people's leadership organizations, community colleges and professional and vocational schools to provide services and information, work together on issues of mutual concern and develop relationships.

Introduction

Young people have played a critical role in shaping the future of their country from civil rights to economic policies to the very culture of the nation. After years and years of antiunion actions, laws, and attitudes, the need for young people to step into the fight for workers rights is as critical as ever, particularly for future generations.

Based on the demonstrated need for clarity and information on the issues, The Cornell Labor Extension embarked on a long term project to look at young workers and see how generational attitudes, economic downturns, presidential races, global markets, new technology, different organizing strategies, and more effect young people and their involvement in organized labor. Over the summer of 2009 we conducted a preliminary survey of unions from the private sector, public sector, and building and construction trade unions to determine the level of concern and action regarding the need to take special or extra measures to increase the involvement of young workers in their organizations From an initial list of x organizations we were able to interview contacts from 20. Of those 6 were in the BCT, 5 were in the public sector and 9 were in the private sector. The 20 organizations included International Unions, large New York based local or regional union bodies and worker centers.

In addition, we performed extensive literature reviews on the topics of young people and activism, labor, generational attitudes, relationships to technology, and economic opportunities. We looked at websites, social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace, and conducted interviews and focus groups to get a clearer picture of both what was going on nationally as well as in New York specifically. The purpose of this work is to provide advice to union leaders as well as create a platform

March, 2010

for addition research on the topics covered.

What we found was a plethora of needs, concerns, and strategies to reach out to young workers. Some unions saw absolutely no need to organize and energize young workers in particular, while others viewed it as a top priority. Some unions were already making headway and had successful programs for bringing in young people and fostering leadership. Most unions were using or beginning to explore the positives and negatives of communicating and out-reach to workers through email, networking sites, text messaging, and short video clips. Most of all we found a labor movement struggling to reach out to young people and a new working generation struggling to make ends meet.

Industry	# of unions surveyed	# of unions which see a need to involve young workers	# of unions which have a youth committee	# of unions Which have held a youth conference	# of unions which use new media	# of unions which have leadership development programs for young members	# of unions which provide internships for young members
Building & Construction Trades	6	6	0	0	4	3	1
Public Sector	5	5	1	5	5	1	0
Private Sector	9	7	0	1	7	4	3

Who are "young workers"?

For the purpose of our study we defined young workers and as anyone between ages 18-35. Within that grouping we found significant distinctions. For example unions in the retail sector especially described the unique aspects of organizing and representing workers who were still in high school. Still, for unions with an older work force many defined young workers as anyone under age 40. We found age 18-35 to be a category that many unions used and a good number for making generational analysis. While picking the age range was relatively simple, defining a generation was much more complicated and the literature on young people was full of sometimes conflicting generalizations and trends.

Generation Y'ers or the Millenials are the names for the generation generally defined as being born between the mid-80's to the late-90's, the generation that was raised to be comfortable with technology, and never knew life that wasn't changing rapidly, permeated with media entertainment, and a weakened and declining labor movement. Most of the generalizations and stories about the Yers are negative and wary. Yers, sometimes known as "Generation Ritalin", are often described as fast paced but positive individualists. One New York Times writer described his young coworkers as having, "the warp-speed processing of information, the need to speed through careers, the self-esteem on steroids" (Mui). Speed is a typical characterization of young people who came of age in an era of instant email communication, Facebook updates, and text messaging.

Speed and comfort with technology was also a characterization of the slightly older "Generation Xers" or those born roughly between 1965 to the late 70's. While

March, 2010

similar to Xers in many ways, Yers are often characterized as more pessimistic and cynical about job opportunities. The Yers entered the job around the early 90's, a time when, "Wall Street investors were pushing for short-term profits over long-term stability. Global competition created new pressures for companies to cut costs...Generation Xers became the first group of young adults faced with building their lives in this volatile new economy" (Draut, 62). Consequently Xers are often described as more cautious with less of a sense of entitlement than Yers.

Another characterization of young people is that they are apathetic politically and are more interested in the antics of movie stars than the war in Iraq, the newest Blackberry than healthcare. One author described the young generations jaded attitude towards politics before the most recent 2008 election as, "If the whole political system is ineffective, why bother to get in the game?" (Draut 19). This attitude extended to young people's analysis of success and government in that, "young adults learned at an early age to look to themselves for their own security and success...now as they struggle to buy homes and start families, they're questioning their own self-reliance and self-worth rather than whether our nation's priorities are in the right place" (Draut 19). This mixture of gung-ho individualism and lack of political analysis seemed be generally prescribed to the Generation Xers and Yers especially in comparison to the dominant baby boomers. That was until the 2008 election when young people finally entered the political landscape as strong actors of social change.

Obama's election coined another name for young people, "Generation O". With young people pushing ahead in record numbers on the Obama campaign and showing up to vote, the generalizations about Generation Xers and Yers political views seemed

March, 2010

inaccurate. “More 18- to 29-year-olds went to the polls this year than in any election since 1972 ...And 66 percent voted for Mr. Obama, according to exit polls by Edison/Mitofsky” (Cave, par. 8). With Obama’s new plan to fund more volunteering opportunities with organizations like Americorps (Swarns) and Michelle Obama traveling across the country to urge young people to volunteer, it is possible that involvement of young people in the most recent election will bring in a wave of community and political involvement that will challenge the stereotypes of young people. To what degree that activism will be and can be applied within the labor movement is an open question.

Why Organize Young Workers?

Many unions see a growing need to organize young workers and energize current young members. In the survey we conducted with twenty one unions, both at the local and national level, organizers, presidents, executive board members, education directors, and staff overwhelmingly agreed that involving more young workers in the labor movement was important. In fact, 19 of the 21 unions surveyed saw a need to organize young workers and/or reach out to young members. Several unions have formal resolutions on involving young people and finding new ways to connect with young workers.

For many unions, organizing young workers and fostering young leadership is seen as essential to increasing union membership and power. Generational differences in union density leave many union members, leaders, and supporters worried for the future, and with good reason. In fact, as of 2008 young workers had the least amount of union density with less than 5% of young workers part of a union (Smiley, #13). In

March, 2010

comparison “youth unionization rates...are two and a half times lower than those of adult workers” (Gunderson, Gomez, Meltz Gomez, Gunderson, Meltz), which indicates a future working world with extremely low union density.

Still, for many unions recruiting and engaging young workers was only partly a matter of increasing their numbers as the baby boomers age and young people enter a more and more unorganized workplace. One union’s policy paper stated that “we desperately need the active participation of young workers – not just to add to our membership base but to bring renewed and enthusiastic energy, ideas, and challenges” (Canadian Auto Workers). As the paper pointed out, targeting young workers can go beyond simply increasing numbers; young workers can inject new ideas and make sure unions stay relevant to incoming trends and needs.

A resolution from another union states that, “organizing young workers is crucial to maintaining a vital, growing labor movement” (<http://www.afscme.org/resolutions/1988/r28-170htm>) and resolved that an advisory committee on young and new workers be, “charged with the task of identifying issues of special concern to young and new workers and opportunities and programs to attract and inspire this segment of the working population”. These types of formal resolutions are just one indication of a growing awareness that young workers are vital to the future and power of unions and the continuation of the labor movement.

In the interviews we conducted, many individual leaders and staff from different unions shared similar though varied reasons for reaching out to young workers and members. Several unions, particularly in the building and construction trades, expressed concerns over preserving a skilled workforce and, as older members look to

retirement, bringing in new members. In contrast to years past, the children of construction workers choose to enter the professions and high tech fields rather than follow their fathers into the trade. In the public sector many unions also expressed concern with an aging workforce and need to get more young members involved in fights such as campaigns against privatization. In the private sector several unions had even more varied concerns. Particularly in the retail and health sector where young people are entering and working at high numbers and union density is low, the need to reach out to young workers was extremely relevant.

But in addition to the labor movement needing young people to increase numbers, inject new ideas, preserve skills, and continue a struggling movement, young workers are also in need of unions. Generation X and Y have also been known as "Generation Debt". Over the past thirty years the government has issued more and more loans to fund students to go to college and less and less grants (Kamenentz 18). This has resulted in almost two-thirds of college students taking out loans to pay for college and, as of 2005, the average debt for students who have just graduated is between \$17,600 and \$23,485 (Kamenentz 18). Tuition has risen two to three times faster than inflation (Kamenentz 19) and more and more students are hiking up debt on credit cards to pay for college and other expenses. In fact, "one in five college students has credit card debt of \$3,000 to \$7,000" (107 Draut). In households headed by someone who is twenty-five to thirty-four, debt has increased an average of 70% since the 1980's (after factoring in inflation) to an average debt of \$55,000 (Greenhouse 272). Before young workers even launch into a career they are already bogged down in debt that for many the young people the future looks grim. A 2006 Pew Research Poll said

March, 2010

that 50% of adults thought that life would be worse for the next generation (268 Greenhouse) and with the cost of education going up and enormous debt holding many young people from investing in their future.

But it is not just college and credit card debt that dampens the future of many young people. Younger workers are entering a work force in a post industrial American economy that has undergone waves of off shoring, first of many high paying blue collar jobs, and now white collar jobs as well. "One respected consulting firm, Forrester Research, estimates that 3.4 million American white-collar jobs will be sent offshore between 2003 and 2015" (Greenhouse 93). As off shoring takes its toll on job opportunities, particularly those with higher union density, sectors with low union density such as the service sector, are growing.

With unionized job opportunities shrinking and the pressures of debt climbing, more and more young people must work two or even three jobs to stay afloat. Temp work, contracting, and freelancing all add to an increasing unstable work environment for young people. In this country, the benefits for young people joining a union are becoming increasingly important. The "Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) study entitled 'Unions and Upward Mobility for Young People' that young union workers (ages 18-29) earned 12.4% more, on average, than their non-unionized counterparts" (Jacobsen). This increase in wages is incredibly important for many young workers, many of whom are struggling to pay off ever increasing debt.

But the benefits do not stop there. In the study by CEPR, they found that, "young union members are 17% more likely to have employer-provided health insurance and 24% more likely to have an employer-provided pension plan" (Jacobsen). While pension

March, 2010

and health insurance are not always of obvious importance to many young workers who are perhaps less likely than older workers to be worried about their health and retirement, the long term benefits are still enormous both for individual workers and for the future health and comfort of rising generations.

Young People's Attitudes about Unions

There are many assumptions, both true and untrue that continue to effect discussions, organizing strategies, and attitudes toward young workers. One of the most common widely held views is that young workers do not like and are uninterested in unions. In a study of American workers, researchers found that indeed, "youths had a lower preference for unionization than did adults (47 versus 53 percent)" (Gomez, Gunderson, Meltz). At the same time, adults who favor union representation have a 121% higher chance of being in an already unionized work place than a young person who favors union representation (Gomez, Gunderson, Meltz). This indicates a relationship between having experienced a unionized work place and attitudes towards unions. Many studies show that young workers do not necessarily dislike unions at much higher rates than adults, but they have had little contact with them and thus little or no information about them. Given the decline in the number of union households this is not a surprising result. Where in years past organizers could count on at least some workers in a unit who came from a "union family" or who had a positive experience themselves with organized labor fewer and fewer workers have that background.

One survey of Brisbane University students (Australia) showed that 20% of students surveyed had no opinions about union and 50% had no firm opinions in any

March, 2010

way toward unions This is despite the fact that many of these students had already been working for an average of 5 years (Oliver). While this may indicate simple neutrality, the researcher thought that in fact many of the students did not know anything about unions and thus had no opinion about them. Another study of Canadian workers found that people who had family members who were or are part of unions were more likely to favor unionization, "with the effect being more than three times as strong for youths than for adults...the probability of preferring unions is 0.37 higher for youths from families with an existing union member, while it is 0.11 higher for adults in the same circumstances" (Oliver).

This again seems to suggest that if young people have close exposure to a union, such as through a family member, they would be even more likely to prefer unionization and the same study proposed that since many young people have not formed opinions of unions yet, they are more open to changing their minds.

The study of Brisbane students found that 12 months after graduation 60% of the student's perceptions of unions had not changed. However, 38% of the graduates perceptions of unions had changed to be more negative toward unions, with only 2% having a more positive view of unions (Oliver). While the scope of the study is incredibly limited, it does indicate a need for young people to be exposed to unions before they starting working full time.

The lack of contact with unions and lack of education on unions is an issue that has been expressed in a focus group of organizers we conducted. Several organizers expressed the difficulty in "finding a hook" or finding some sort of reference a potential young member might have about unions. The organizer described being met with blank

March, 2010

looks and complete lack of awareness about union history, union benefits, or even how unions function. In the experience of organizers we interviewed the challenge in organizing young workers was not “Union Yes” or “Union No” but “Union What?”

For decades unions have lamented the lack of education on unions in high school or earlier. Indeed the New Labor Forum recently printed an article that exposed how education about the labor movement had been largely left in the hands of large corporations. Many history text books often have only one paragraph that represents labor unions as an important but now dead part of American history. While some unions have been trying to change union education in schools, the enormous challenges of organizing workers, passing pro-union legislation, and upholding the rights of members, any effort to bring “labor to the schools” is unlikely to get the resources needed to make a significant difference.

While young people may have less education on unions, they also have different attitudes towards being in the workplace. A poll by the Associated Press found that in the United States “Young adults were more likely to side with the unions than people over 65” (Lester) when it came to current campaigns in the media many young workers are more likely than older workers to feel that workers should have more political power. One organizer we surveyed said that the young workers she often interacts with have to deal with the perception of being treated as unequal because of their age and are often not respected because they are assumed to be just kids trying to make a few bucks to spend recreationally. These issues and young people’s awareness of them leave a great organizing opportunity.

While there is a great opportunity to organize young workers, awareness and

sensitivity to their role as workers is important. One common stereotype about young workers, particularly those on the younger end of the spectrum, is that they are only working for "fun" and use their money recreationally. However, as outlined before, young people face financial burdens, debt, and the high cost of living. Many young people are parents, primary caregivers, or are helping their family. "There's a common misconception that [young Americans] have these debts because they're buying iPods or cable TV," said William Strauss, coauthor of *Millennials Rising: The Next Generation*. "It's not that. It's student loans and housing." (Greenhouse 274). The stereotype that young workers do not need their jobs must be overcome and replaced with the notion that young people are working to build their future through education, to provide for a families, or simply struggling to make ends meet.

Another stereotype of young workers is that they are generally more individualistic than other generations. However, one study found that when young workers and adult workers were asked if they believed workplace problems are better solved with individual solutions than collective solutions, the proportion of youth and adults who answered, "yes" was the same (Oliver). And though a common characterizations of Generation X and Generation Y focus on their supposed individualistic and self centered nature, many young union leaders and union veterans just don't buy it.

In an interview in the Radical History Review with Sonya Mehta of the San Francisco based workers center Young Workers United, Mehta said that at YWU, "We decided that young people have always been the driving force of social change and revolution. I think young people have a pure sense of justice, fairness, and equality and

will fight for it. But if no one asks you to do anything, you are not going to do anything” (162-3). A veteran labor activist and educator (Lois Gray) who has witnessed the entry to the labor movement from the “greatest generation” on, said she didn’t think that young people today are any more individualistic or apathetic than earlier generations, only that the labor movement needed to find a place for them to be active and to feel like the work they were doing was important.

Challenges of Organizing Young Workers

As many of the organizers told us, there are numerous challenges in organizing young workers. One of the main ones is that many young workers, particularly on the younger end of the spectrum, do not view their current jobs as a "career" but rather one in a series they will have before settling (hopefully) into long-term employment. Several organizers expressed this as a challenge in organizing young workers since some may feel less inclined to "stay and fight" and would rather just find a new job. One organizer said that while this did create a challenge, she liked to think of organizing young workers as a type of "union education". Though the worker might not stay at the job and enjoy the union benefits for a long time, they would carry their positive impression of the union and the lessons they learned into their next job.

In addition to high turnover because of age, young workers tend to work in industries with high turnover rate, such as retail, the service sector, or the food industry. "One obvious factor, contributing to low union density among the young...is that youths occupy jobs that have low union coverage rates, such as retail and private services” (Meltz 209). Young workers and their peers are less likely to work in a unionized

March, 2010

workplace simply because of the sector they may be employed in, so helping them understand the union benefits is harder because they have likely never been in a union or an organizing drive before. As the use of subcontracting increases, the chance that young workers will have the opportunity to be unionized decreases. High turnover rate and subcontracting create a working world where it is unlikely for young workers to be in a union and may make them less likely or enthusiastic about an organizing campaign.

In many unions, though not all, there are lacks of young organizers that can reach out to younger workers. Many of the organizers we spoke with said that it was a challenge to involve young workers if the union representative or organizer was not somewhere in their age group. Bryan Neath, the director of the UFCW's national training and education department, said, "Union drives are more successful when run by people 'looking like the people you want to represent'...the young listen to the young" (Harris). Another organizer spoke of the catch-22 of training young people to be organizers and but by the time they were proficient they were no longer young! Still, the need to involve young people as union representatives and organizers is key to helping young workers feel both at ease and feel that the union staff reflects them in some ways.

In addition, our surveys revealed that many young workers do not see themselves as "workers". Their sense of class identity and being a "worker" was simply not present. This can easily be traced to the decline of the union movement and visibility in their lifetime. Lack of coverage in the mainstream media about unions and a culture that more and more promotes individual solutions to societal ills has chipped away at the working class identity that many young people now lack. Helping young workers define "their issues", building community, learn more about their local and all of the

March, 2010

labor movement, and becoming involved in a campaign are all important ways that can help young workers begin to see themselves as "young workers" and actors of change.

Key Issues for Young Workers

Young workers also have a set of issues that are in some ways similar and in some ways different from other generations of workers. Like most workers, young people must face low wages, slashed benefits, layoffs, harassment, and more on the job. Still, young people can sometimes be affected disproportionately. For example, the system of seniority often leaves young workers as the first to be laid off. The government payroll survey that relies on employment records found that since the recession, "the ones who are being hit the hardest and will have the most difficult time recovering are America's young workers. Nearly 2.2 million young people, ages 16 through 29, have already lost their jobs in this recession" (Herbert). As companies cut costs, the last hired are often the first fired.

Issues of two tiering are also especially relevant to young workers who are likely to be newly employed and therefore second tier. "Manufacturing companies have pushed hardest for a lower wage tier for their young workers, and as a result this phenomenon is most prevalent among the nation's 13.7 million factory workers" (Greenhouse 264). Even in the service sector, companies push for two tiering as a way to divide the workforce and the system leaves less opportunities for future generations of workers.

Young workers also come into a work place where more and more jobs are part time or "just in time" workers who are hired when there is a swell in demand and cast

aside when business slows. "The number of just-in-time workers climbed from 15.5 million in 1995 to 18.1 million in 2005" (Greenhouse 128). Many young workers struggle to be employed where they can work full shifts. In addition, some are supporting themselves through school or are young parents and may need extra flexibility with management to juggle their hours. In terms of education, some unions we surveyed have gone even a step farther than simply helping their young members schedule shifts that work for them. Many unions had scholarship programs for workers or their children. One organizer said that she has helped young workers figure out financial aid forms and has even written letters to financial aid departments. Continuing education while working is an incredible challenge and a place where unions can aid their young members into becoming both successful students and workers.

Many young workers also face harassment and disrespect on the job. While this is not unique to young workers, many are so new in the workplace that they do not know how speak up for themselves or address the issue. Many employers may see that their young workers can be easily manipulated or bullied while other employers may not take the work of young people seriously or talk down to them because of the worker's age. Supervisors and managers often also hold the stereotype that young workers are working for "fun" and do not need the money. They may feel that they can be less professional with young workers. Young people may not know their rights or prefer to quit rather than deal with the issue head on. Unions that educate young workers about their rights and gain their trust and help them deal with disrespect and harassment in the workplace may find that this is the key to connecting with young workers.

In addition, the younger generations are the most diverse in American history

with more and more young people identifying themselves as being from biracial and mixed backgrounds. “Gen Y cuts a very different racial profile from previous generations. According to Census 2000, children under the age of 18 are less likely than adults to be white, and are twice as likely to identify themselves as being of more than one race” (Takahashi). More and more advertisers try to appeal to young people using models of mixed or ambiguous race and diverse artistic and musical genres, such as hip-hop, are wildly popular across ethnic lines (Takahashi). Because of this, young people they may be especially intolerant of racism in the workplace and be open to building relationships and reaching out the other members across ethnic and racial lines.

Several of the unions we surveyed said they also were very much aware of gender diversity and sexism. Many of the sectors dominated by young workers, such as the service sector and retail, are also dominated by women. Making sure that young women see other women in leadership positions and feel that the union is a safe space to speak, learn, and grow as a young female member and leader is also important to keeping young women involved. Sexual harassment, though it affects people across age and gender, is often experienced by young women both in the workplace, in their communities, and even in a union setting. Making sure young women and all workers are protected against sexual harassment with strong language in the contract and a clear policy about appropriate behavior in union gatherings is an important way to help young women feel safe and like full members in the union.

One of the unions we surveyed also said that they worked specifically on homophobia and heterosexism in the workplace and actively strived to make their union

March, 2010

a safe space for LGBTQ members. At Young Workers United Sonya Mehta described an indigenous immigrant worker from Mexico who was gay. He had to deal with racism, nativism, and homophobic harassment at work:

He came to us at Young Workers and attended the é and they completely accepted him. And not everyone is sexually liberated and for homosexual rights — far from it...but they said: “They are discriminating against the gays and they are discriminating against the Mayans and it is not going to work!” I think it is partly because they see that these English speakers, these young people are coming to their actions supporting them. They see that solidarity. And from our side, the English speakers, we see that the immigrant workers are not a threat. They are great people and that we are all on the same side. Ochoa, 169

Working the union a safe place for LGBTQ members of all ages is important not just to build solidarity and trust of a membership, but part of cultural and political change that values LGBTQ members of society.

Similarly, some young workers are very much aware of immigration policies and issues. Many young workers themselves are immigrants and some are undocumented. Several of the trade unions we surveyed were developing or had bilingual instruction and felt they had to reach out to young immigrants to keep the union strong. Depending on the sector and makeup of the membership, inviting young workers to immigrations rallies, trainings, ESL classes, citizenship classes, and more can be a great way to get them involved and have them feel like the union is aware of their concerns.

Making sure that meetings and other events are translated into one or several languages if there is a need is also an important way to make sure that not just young members, but members of all language backgrounds feel that they have a place. Many

March, 2010

unions have begun to provide Spanish language classes so that all members can communicate better. At the same time one organizer we spoke with said that she felt like many young immigrant members were likely to identify with ethnic group and culture rather than through being a youth. Working on immigration issues can be a great way to reach out and get them involved.

In other ways, some issues may seem less relevant or pressing to young workers. Pensions and healthcare benefits may not feel as critical to young people as they may to other generations of workers. Still, in many thanks to the young and expressive Obama campaign healthcare has become an issue on the forefront of American politics and young workers are very much aware of it. "More than one-fourth of the 45 million workers under age thirty-five do not have health insurance from any source, by far the highest rate of any age group" (Greenhouse 267). Young workers are disproportionately without health insurance and awareness of lack of coverage and a broken medical care system is growing among young workers. Showing movies like "Sicko" and mobilizing young workers to go to rallies and marches for better healthcare can be a great way to mobilize and agitate them.

Many unions also mobilized workers for the Obama campaign and that sparked excitement in many of their young workers. SEIU Local 1199 hosted members and outside people to reach out for Obama and at one point made around 1/2 million calls for Obama in just eight hours. Other unions, such as the Canadian Auto Workers, have found that reaching out to their workers on issues like climate change have invigorated young members and help them feel like the union is a modern, active movement that reflects their wider concerns. They event sent young workers as part of a delegation to

March, 2010

the UN summit on climate change.

Still, many organizers expressed a frustration with their young workers, worrying that they seemed uninterested in learning about the union, being involved in a meaningful way, or even listening to the organizer. Some organizers said it seemed like young workers were not interested in being part of the union and were more worried about their social lives. Below I will discuss the challenges of making room for young workers in long standing union structure and some of the best ways of reaching out to young workers to get them involved.

Making Room for Younger Members and Leaders

In one of our interviews the organizer discussed the struggle within the union with what to call young workers. Many of the youthful members said that being called "kids" made them feel talked down to, immature, and that other people did not consider them full members. One organizer said that her union did a survey to see what workers wanted to be called. Young workers did not want to be called kids and while no workers found the phrase "youth" offensive, no worker of any age considered themselves to be a "youth". Unsurprisingly, older workers did not like be called "old people" either. The young members decided they liked to be called "young workers", "young members", or "young people". Workshops and discussions were held with all members to make sure that "young" would be replace the words "kids", "youngsters", "youth", and "children". While this may seem like a small step, it is one way that young workers can feel like the full, responsible, and important members of the union that they are.

In fact, the issue of what to call young workers goes deeper than simply names. It

March, 2010

strikes at the heart of young workers struggle to be taken seriously in their union and be given an important role in the organization. At an event attended by young workers they said over and over again to the other generations, "we are not your children! do not talk down to us or try to mother us!". When a young worker feels mothered, guilt tripped, or ignored there is a natural alienation that occurs. One young member was in her union for seven years before she became active because her initial introduction to the union was so unwelcoming and confusing.

I walked into that meeting and it was a bunch of union jargon and a bunch of older people. It didn't feel warm. It didn't feel welcoming. I kind of felt insulted when I asked a question. These people held all the knowledge and they didn't make me feel welcome or really a part of it. I guess I just felt embarrassed that I didn't know anything. It's kind of like sitting in on a physics class if you're an art student -- it's very intimidating. I didn't want people to think I was stupid, because I wasn't stupid. I was just uninformed. It turned me off for seven years. (Staebell)

The member then went on to say that if someone had taken the time to personally welcome her, to ask her if she had any questions, to explain the jargon and union structure to her, she might have become involved right there on the spot. Her involvement only began when her rep. asked her if she wanted to go to a youth conference and she realized that her union really was interested in involving young people. It was only the lack of welcoming, sympathetic faces that threw her off.

In addition to simply being welcoming and helping young people understand the union, many young people are intimidated and don't feel welcomed by the older, more conservative union hierarchy. The leadership that not only does not reflect them age wise, but may also lack ethnic and gender diversity.

March, 2010

Within the leadership of unions there are contradicting goals. “Many union leaders also fear the success of organizing the unorganized. Power within unions is likely to shift, as are membership expectations of leaders---changes that could result in the loss of power and privilege for existing leaders” (Yates, 2). While changes in leadership may be resisted or feared, young members should be encouraged to run for leadership positions and be supported in their efforts.

A young member of one union attending a Cornell labor studies course on leadership described what happened when he made a simple suggestion to the older leadership. Pointing out that few younger members attended the union’s annual golf tournament he proposed adding a soccer event which was rejected out of hand. If such experiences are commonplace then it must be addressed and changed if unions want to avoid turning off younger potential activists and future leaders.

Fortunately, there are many examples of new initiatives and successful approaches unions are using to organizing and involve younger members. Of the union organizers and organizing directors we surveyed said they specifically reached out to young people for leadership trainings and encouraged them to run for leadership positions. One female leader in our focus group said about the Northeast Labor Women's Summer School “I’m ready to pass the baton onto other younger women...I really think that there are other women who need these tools so that they can carry on the work”. Some unions have allocated a space on their national board for a young person, while some locals conduct “youth-only” or “recently-hired” meetings to give young people a chance to ask questions and voice their concerns.

A number of unions and workers centers have tried other tactics to welcome and

involve young people and make them feel like they the union. Sonya Mehta of Young Workers United said that their meetings were informal and relaxed with pauses for updates on celebrity gossip. Decisions were done by consensus and after meetings attendants often go out for drinks together. Similarly SEIU CIR which organizes medical interns, the majority of which are under age 35, said that they try to cater events for their members. This included holding events at particular bars and restaurants, representing their diverse membership on their web page, making their handouts and flyers attractive to younger generations.

While traditions should be respected or upheld, when planning events unions should consider what generation of people will be attracted by certain locations, music, speakers, and advertisements and seek to appeal to everyone in the membership or the specific groups wanted at the event. This could include using language that is accessible to young workers. The member from Ferry and Marine Workers' Union said she felt that, “our [young workers] voices have been thwarted because of all the jargon. It's not a really a cool thing” (Staebell). Demystifying union terms can be immensely helpful and using simple, straightforward language is usually the best bet when speaking to a young member or potential member who has little background with unions. When young workers feel they do not have the right terms and jargon to express their needs, thoughts, and concerns they may feel like their voice does not have a place in the union.

Out to Young Workers

Like any group in a union, reaching out to young workers is, as one union

March, 2010

educator put it, "is just simple organizing 101". In other words, the basic organizing principles and techniques of listening and specifically addressing unique needs and cultural differences should be applied regardless of who is being organized.

Experienced organizers know that the way to reach any particular group is to find leaders from that group who can then help organize the others.

As stated before, young workers want to be treated with respect, compassion, and patience. In one organizer training video made by the American Federation of Teachers, new teachers (many of them from right to work states) were filmed in a focus group as they discussed their first experiences with their union. Many described veteran union activists who were immediately frustrated with them when the teacher hesitated to immediately join or raised questions. The veterans often jumped to calling them "freeloaders" and responded to the hesitant teachers as if they were immoral, ignorant or antiunion. The AFT video is designed and used to make sure such approaches and reactions are replaced with those that are more productive. However, when shown to activists and leaders from a variety of unions the AFT focus group video provokes nervous laughter. They admit that too often long-time unionists do not relate well to newer members and instead start a self-fulfilling prophecy confirming that the new comers do not want to get involved.

The more successful way to activate young (or any aged) members is to take the time to listen to their concerns and then embark on a discussion on the union. Sonya Mehta of YWU commented that, "I think young people don't want to be lectured at and be forced to listen to you talk at them for an hour or two about what you think. They want to be engaged" (Ochoa 175). Working on developing a relationship of trust and

March, 2010

mutual understanding can help young workers feel like they can trust the union and that they are valued as members and workers. One organizer we surveyed said she felt that it was important to "explain" the union differently to young workers. Older workers, she said, often connected with the idea of the union being an old, powerful institution that brought about the nation the weekend, child labor laws, and overtime pay. For young workers, this image didn't always appeal. She said that explaining the union as a movement that they could be a part of, as a vibrant force where they could work together with others for common goal was much more appealing to young generations.

Introducing the union as a movement bringing changes for the future can be an important way to "hook" young workers. Later, sharing the under-taught dramatic history of the labor movement can help young workers get excited and involved. However, timing as in all things is vitally important. Starting a union's relationship with a new member by giving classes or lectures about how better wages, benefits and working conditions were won through years of hard work before first finding out what the new worker thinks of the current situation can be counter productive. Many people have a family member who tells them about walking to school barefoot in the snow to make the point that things were much harder in the old days. Such stories rarely generate an appreciation of current conditions or the struggle that produced them. Instead, such stories give the impression that there are no current issues and anyone who is not satisfied is ungrateful.

Once the immediate issues facing workers are discussed and acknowledged, the union's history can be introduced to help find and evaluate possible solutions. Once a worker sees the union as a vehicle for addressing issues they care about, facts about

the union's history and how it operates become relevant. At that point new workers should be given resources and have conversations with reps that can help them understand how the union works and the lessons its history. Presenting this information in the preferred mediums of younger workers such as videos, you-tube clips, music, and youth conferences can be enormously helpful in getting young workers to feel enthusiastic and excited about learning about the movement.

In fact, the young worker from the Ferry and Marine Workers Union said that a youth conference was a pivotal turning point for her involvement and said she would encourage one day conferences on almost anything but especially topics young workers say they are interested in. "Whether it's health and safety or youth organizing or just organizing. Whatever. Get them the knowledge, and then they're going to feel like they're going to be an important part. Then invite them to things like conventions. This is what's going to make them want to lead. If they feel like they're a part of something, they're going to do it" (Staebell). Sending young members to youth conferences and conventions has also been enormously successful for many unions.

A number of unions including SEIU, TWU Local 100, and UFCW have held youth conferences or have them planned in the near future. AFSCME's New Wave Conference is a very recent and informative example of the power of conferences. It came about as part of a larger youth initiative that began with an Oregon local youth campaign that was started by young members concerned with the lack of young people who attended the national conference. This local campaign developed into a nationwide young AFSCME member's initiative and more than 500 members, all under age 35, attended the last conference in Chicago. The conference included an electronic town

March, 2010

meeting where members could share goals, concerns, and strategies. There were also numerous workshops that included organizing, how to address the media, development of leadership skills, and more. While the lasting effects of the conference will only be fully realized in the future the success of an initiative and event that began with a local's young members and expanded to a national level leads by example.

Another way that unions have appealed to young people is by organizing social events and concerts. The success of these events has been mixed. One organizer said she was incredibly excited about organizing community events for her young workers only to have a lukewarm response. She attributed this to the fact that many young workers already have a social life and want their union to fill a different need in their life. Said that she had organized a lot of different events but she said that in areas with vibrant nightlife young people were less likely to come to "social" events. Still, many unions have found organizing social events to be helpful. From the unions we surveyed there were a plethora of different events from open mics to Thirsty Thursdays to Family Film nights to soccer games to concerts.

Choosing an artist for a concert is incredibly important, especially when considering the audience. The role that music has played in the labor movement has been enormous from spreading awareness to building solidarity to creating community and culture. However, the old songs in their folk music mode often have limited appeal to younger workers. Now there are many popular bands that also sing about workers struggle and solidarity. The Irish alternative punk-rock band the Dropkick Murphys cover old classics such as "There is Power in a Union" and "Which Side are You On?". They also write their own material about being working class, having an immigrant

March, 2010

background, and finding power in being united (Uehlein). Other artists such as rock artist Bruce Springsteen, folk singer Ani DiFranco, folk singer Michael Franti, Paula “Bomba” Gonzalez, the rap metal band Rage Against the Machine, and hip-hop artist Son of Nun all make music about working class struggle and uniting for justice. The Canadian Labor Congress launched a successful music festival and labor compilation CD for Labor Day in 2000 (Uehlein) that they continue to sell.

Still, having the big names is not always necessary. Reaching out to the American Federation of Musicians can be an effective way to get lesser-known artists and create inter-union solidarity. A union can also look to their own membership and most likely find young workers who are part of bands, hip-hop groups, or even dance ensembles. Hosting a musical event that is put on by young workers can be a dynamic way to reach out to young members and show them that the union supports them not just in the work place, but in their musical endeavors as well.

Several unions have hosted other artistic events and endeavors. One worker center that organizes in the retail sector is developing an art collective of retail art made by its members. It also is in the middle of doing a video project that collects member’s testimonials that was proposed and is being taken on by members. Enlisting the help of a young artistically inclined members to design a flyer, pamphlet, or banner can get a young worker excited about being involved and find their niche.

Reaching out to young people who are not already in unions can be a challenge but an important endeavor for many unions. Unions that organize in the health sector often go to nursing and medical schools to talk about the benefits of being in a union. One union public sector said that their members often went to car shows where there were lots of

young people to show off their mechanic skills. Some unions forged relationships with local community colleges, technical schools, and even high schools to provide information to students on their unions and industries.

One union hosted a Youth and Technology summit with local students. AFTRA has a West Coast “Looking Ahead” program for young home-schooled entertainers where they can get help with their work and socialize with other kids in the entertainment industry. It also helped parents of young entertainers connect and discuss how it feels to be a guardian in this industry. The program has been successful in helping young entertainers cope with the stresses of the industry and has demonstrated to both parents and the young members how much the union values them.

Many unions also host summer internships and programs to attract young potential staff members. SEIU 32BJ has a “Youth Brigade” program for the children of members and other young people they recruit through schools and community organizations. The participants get to be involved in different aspects of the union from current campaigns to education events to learning about labor history. The program is run by graduates, many of whom go on to work in the labor movement. Numerous unions also are part of yearlong internship programs facilitated through different universities that help introduce to young people what it is like to work in the labor movement.

Some unions have even combined their summer internships with yearlong campaign involvement. The Unite Here Hotel Workers Rising summer internship introduced students from across the country to different aspects of hotel organizing

March, 2010

campaigns at locals across the country. After the internship was over, students were encouraged (and many did) continue to aid in the campaign, bringing workers to visit their schools and on their own initiative making sure that their universities were not investing in companies that were part of the campaigns. A new Unite Here campaign Stir It Up will be a coalition between university students, on campus food service workers, and Unite Here organizers. A lot of unions have also made connections with student labor groups as a way of attracting young people to work in the labor movement and get experience with organizing.

Many unions have also made connections with student groups, such as the Steelworkers connections with anti-sweatshops organizations such as United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) and the Student Labor Action Project (SLAP). Working together with similar interests not only strengthens the power of anti-sweatshop campaigns, but allows students in USAS and SLAP know about the USA labor movement. Many unions also reach out to community groups, workers centers, places of worship, young people's leadership organizations, and cultural centers to attract young people and create community-union solidarity.

Other tactics unions have used are establishing mentorship programs, both between leaders in the union and younger members, and young members with even younger members. The building and construction trades unions have the opportunity through their apprenticeship programs to create deep connections with young workers and teach them about the trade and the union. Some of the unions in the entertainment industry have a mentorship program that connected young nonunion musicians with the "voices of experience" or more seasoned members in the music industry. Still, finding a

balance between leading and listening to a young mentoree is important. Many young workers caution against “mothering” that can happen in mentorship relationships and reminded the other generations present that learning and mentoring can happen “both ways”.

Young people also have important skills, such as navigating new technology, which can be valuable to older members. Encouraging young workers to step up and share their knowledge can be an important way to encourage intergenerational dialogue and understanding.

Whenever planning event, new coalition, program, or anything else to attract and involve young workers it is important to first survey the young membership and see what their interests are. For some unions and workers centers, hosting events that foster a strong sense of community was integral to making young members feel at home. For many young people, simply learning more about the union and union history gave them the confidence to become more involved. Seeing the past struggles of a movement, a local, and their own workplace was a way they could connect with the union.

New Technology

The use of websites by International and Local Unions is almost universal. The grand majority of all the unions were surveyed said they were also had or were looking into setting up a page on an online social networking site like Facebook or Myspace. UFCW has a special page connected to Facebook for their members.

New online spaces such as Youtube and Flickr give unions the opportunity to use

March, 2010

videos and pictures to communicate with members, the media, and the country. Union blogs open up spaces for uncensored discussions and interactions. Tools like Twitter, text messaging, instant messaging, and email give unions the ability to instantly communicate with one or hundreds of members with just the push of a button. A combination of Twitter, Facebook, and blogging helped network thousands of young people in huge protests that echoed across the world. The possibilities of new technology are endless and open. But with the positive aspects of new technology must also be weighed with the negative aspects as unions step into a new technological era to reach out and communicate with young people.

Using technology as a way to communicate with young people has been proven to be effective. In the Obama campaign mass text messages, bog posts, and twitter updates engaged and activate the younger generation. Obama, or more accurately Obama aids and staff people, sent mass text messages to supporters thanking them for their hard work. In a recent New York Times article, Ellen Steiner, 23, a graduate student at the University of Colorado, Denver, said the direct style “makes me feel like I really was part of something great.” (Cave, 1). Indeed, the fast and informal communication style of the Obama campaign in many ways reflected the way young people themselves use technology. “It would be hard to overestimate how much communication and an informal tone means to this generation. They have poured out their foibles and triumphs on blogs, MySpace, or Twitter. Older Americans see this as dangerous exhibitionism, but young adults believe the conversation leads to open-mindedness and consensus.” (Cave, 1). Using new technology to reach out to young people is a way of communicating that young people can relate to. It also engages a

March, 2010

generation that has grown accustomed to a fast-paced multimedia world.

Obama also spoke to the hopes of a generation. He used words like “change” and “hope” in his speeches and spoke in terms of broader social change. The ability of the Obama campaign to use language to reach out to young people is important. Discussing a positive, big picture view of social change makes the union more appealing. Concentrating on the future of the union, the union as part of a larger social movement, can make the union message and goals inspirational.

Still, a union campaign is different from a presidential election and the “ask” is much bigger. They are not being asked to make a short term commitment of making a few phone calls, registering voters, or going to vote themselves. In a union setting a young worker may be asked to put their job on the line, to attend numerous meetings, to speak up for themselves and others as they never have done before, to take a long term role in a movement where they will be working for respect and dignity in the workplace.

The unions we surveyed emphasized that while technology has served them well as new ways of communicating and reaching out to younger workers, a text message or an email are supplements not replacements for face to face conversation and relationship building. New technology should only be a means to that end and not become a way of developing superficial relationships with no real commitment underneath.

One of the newest and most exciting new technologies are the social networking sites. In particular, Facebook and Myspace are two sites that engage millions of young people and that many unions are now using. Facebook and Myspace can be a way of

March, 2010

inviting workers to an event, sharing pictures, bouncing ideas off workers, and just increasing networking between members. One organizer said that sometimes workers would ask her questions on Myspace that they did not feel comfortable asking in person, such as delicate inquiries about changing immigration status. Networking sites, like blogs, give workers the opportunity to engage in discussions and bounce ideas off each other's "walls" in an open, uncensored manner.

Some unions have even used Facebook or Myspace as a way of increasing the visibility of their union. The Freelancers Union has a "button" that members can put on their Facebook page that lets their "friends" and often other Freelancers see about their union. The "My Union" application developed by the Trade Unions Congress of Ireland and Great Britain let members also have a "button" on their Facebook page proclaiming which union they are in.

Some unions have even developed their own networking sites. Include UFCW The Canadian Auto Workers have developed a successful Youth Network because many of their young members were spread far and wide and did not have a lot of young people in their local. The Youth Network gave young workers the opportunity to engage in an online community of peers where they could discuss issues, develop new ideas, and make friends with their young sisters and brothers across the country. Unite Here also developed a networking site for their summer interns that was successful for a period of time in connecting their interns who were scattered across the country and helping them share resources and ideas.

Another important technological tool is blogging. Many of the unions we surveyed are now using blogs to communicate and get ideas from their members. Some of the

positive aspects of blogging are that members can speak their mind and have a more direct mode of communication with all levels of leadership in the union. In a blog “discussion” all those involved are on equal footing and status. Some of the unions we surveyed said that this made the upper leadership in their union uncomfortable while others said this was a great tool that made members feel empowered to speak their mind. Another upside of blogging is unlike other online tools like email and websites, blogging gives the passive viewer the opportunity to become actively engaged. Every viewer can post and engage in the content, adding their own opinions and views, usually without censure.

However blogging also has some downsides. Without some security measures they can be quickly infiltrated or dominated by antiunion bloggers. Many union blogs make their members sign in with passwords and names and reserve the right to remove explosively antiunion material or bloggers. In addition, as with any online source, any of the material on the site can be read by anyone including management. This has happened both with management infiltrating sites and with court orders. As with emails, Facebook and Myspace posts, and any other technological tools members should be assume that management can read what they say and be trained in proper online safety guidelines.

Many unions are using email to communicate with members of all generations, but younger members are more likely to be comfortable with it than other generations. One of the benefits of using email is that using “blast” programs the union can instantly send massive amounts of information to as many members as the union has email addresses. However, there also runs the risk of email overload and recipients simply

clicking “delete” every time they see a new message from the union. Using email sparingly and being strategic and clear with subject headings is a good way to make email communication more effective.

Text messaging is easy, fast, and appealing to young people. Organizers and communications directors who use text messaging advice text messages should never be sent to members unless the members are familiar with the sender’s number and have a relationship with the person sending the message. Mass text messages from unfamiliar sources can be a nuisance and a huge turnoff. Mass text messages should be used sparingly while individual texts should be used for updates and short confirmations and questions, but never used to replace the power of a good conversation. Sometimes it may be a struggle to get a young member to have an actual conversation in person or even on the phone, and text messages can be useful in setting up conversations.

Another fast and exciting tool is Twitter. In Moldova and in the recent Iran election protests, young people used Twitter to stage protests and move crowds. Young people using Twitter has scared governments so greatly that in Iran the government cut internet access as an attempt to squelch the uprisings. In the USA labor context, numerous unions such as AFSCME are on Twitter making constants updates about healthcare campaigning and current events. Several unions we surveyed said they used Twitter during contract bargaining and town hall meetings updates could made, even minute-by-minute. Still, one union we spoke to said that Twitter took too much time to maintain and update. Over time, unions will decide if it makes sense to use Twitter as a constant news feed, at certain strategic times, or not at all.

March, 2010

Other important tools that unions can utilize are pictures and videos. On blogs, social networking sites, Flickr, and union websites pictures can be a good way to create awareness about what happened at an event, show the “face” of the union, and excite members. Most young people are used to having pictures of themselves online and having young people visible online at union events is an appealing way to attract not just the members featured, but other young people as well. Similarly, video links on social networking sites, blogs, union websites, and Youtube can be used much like pictures are. They can additionally be used to link young members to media coverage of an event or to disseminate information. The American Federation of Musicians uses short videos to explain union benefits to their members. Not surprisingly the Writers Guild made extremely entertaining videos posted on YouTube to highlight the issues of their 2008?9? strike and generate public support

In addition to using short clips to explain about events or union benefits, video clips can also be used to energize workers. The witty Youtube video “What to grocery CEOs make compared to grocery workers?”

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfQ_667f6z0) posted by a UFCW Local in the Northwest during contract negotiations illustrates the pay disparity in a witty yet almost memorable way. The video is short enough to be engaging (2:41 minutes) but the visuals of seeing endless numbers of loafs laid out to represent the CEO’s salary are so sharp and stark the clip makes a strong impression.

Labor educators often use video clips to make a point or to add humor to a class. Similarly if not overused, a short funny clip from a popular TV show or news source can be used to frame discussions, inform and entertain in union meetings to liven up

March, 2010

meetings set a familiar and informal tone that many young people enjoy and find prefer as a means to receive information.

One union that uses technology exceedingly well is SEIU CIR. As stated above, they organize intern residents who are mostly under age 35. One CIR staff member we interviewed said that he found that interns and residents were so busy that text messaging was the most effective way to communicate with CIR members. CIR also found that it was often easy to get members to engage in “online activism” such as online letter writing and petition signing. CIR uses email and online tools to keep members informed about politics, current events, and unions’ news and events. They were so effective that when their members were polled they said that after using online sources, CIR communications were the second most common way they stayed up to date about the news.

Younger workers are certainly more comfortable with technology than previous generations but unions should be careful not to think that reaching young workers is solely a matter of using the new technologies. It is also important for unions to avoid defining younger members as simply users and consumers of electronic media.

In Conclusion

This study was just a preliminary study of a deep and varied problem for the labor movement, for young people, and for our future as a country. We found along the way that unions at the local, state, regional, and national level are extremely varied in the way they think about and engage with young workers. Many unions are struggling to balance the challenges of an outsourced economy, an economic crisis, and lack of

March, 2010

significant pro-union legislation in decades. Workers and unions are struggling to protect the rights and wages that they already have.

At the same time many unions were excited about reaching out to young people and young people are excited to get involved in their union. Unions are thinking of new and imaginative ways to engage with young people and young workers are responding. The new Obama administration and young people's role in getting Obama elected gives many people in the labor movement's hope for the future. Technology gives union different ways of communicating with workers.

This report is a small one. Topics such as health and safety, an important issue for young people, were not mentioned. More studies of young people's attitudes toward unions, especially in the United States, need to be conducted and assessed. We were not able to interview many union leaders from locals outside of New York State and many interviews could not be conducted because of time constraints. A historical perspective on young people in unions was also not included in this report. In conclusion, young people need to take control of their future and their country and become involved in their unions. Unions need to recognize the power of a rising generation and tap into the possibilities of an involved, young membership. This report is just a small glimpse into some of the issues that are facing young people and unions and what they are doing about it.

References:

- Annis, Roger. "New Zealand Union Campaigns to Organize Young Workers." *SocialistVoice*. Socialistvoice.ca, 26 Nov. 2007. Web. June & July 2009.
- Barnett, Vickie. "The use of information technology in a strike." *Journal of Labor Research* 24.1 (2003): 55-72. Springerlink.com. SpringerLink, 1 Jan. 2003. Web. June & July 2009.
- Barry, Ellen. "Protests in Moldova Explode, With Help of Twitter." *New York Times* 8 Apr. 2009, Europe sec. *New York Times*. 7 Apr. 2009. Web. June & July 2009.
- Bryson, Alex, Rafael Gomez, Morley Gunderson, and Noah Meltz. "Youth-Adult Differences in the Demand for Unionization Are American, British, and Canadian Workers All That Different?" *Journal of Labor Research* 26.1 (2005): 155-67. Springerlink.com. Springer New York, Dec. 2005. Web. June & July 2009.
- Bussel, Rachel K. "Anya Kamenetz, Author, *Generation Debt: Why Now Is A Terrible Time To Be Young*." *The Gothamist*. Gothamist, 2 Feb. 2006. Web. June & July 2009.
- Canada Auto Workers. *Planning for Generational Change: Youth and the CAW*. Caw.ca. Web. June & July 2009.
- "Chapter 19: Young Workers." *Caw.nca. Proc. of Collective Bargaining: Political Action Convention*. CAWTCA, 2008. Web. June-July 2009.
- DiRomauldo, Tony. "Geezers, grungers, gen-Xers and geeks - a look at workplace generational conflict." *Wistechology.com*. Wisconsin Technology Network, 14 Aug. 2006. Web. June & July 2009.
- Draut, Tamara. *Strapped Why America's 20- and 30-Somethings Can't Get Ahead*. New York: Anchor, 2007. Print.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Nickel and Dimed On (Not) Getting By in America*. New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2002. Print.
- Fine, Janice. "Debating Labor's Future." *The Nation*. Thenation.com, 14 July 2005. Web. June & July 2009.
- Gomez, Rafael, Noah Meltz, and Morley Gunderson. "Comparing Youth and Adult Desire for Unionization in Canada." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* Vol. 40. Issue 3 (Sep 2002)

March, 2010

Greenhouse, Steven. *The Big Squeeze*. United States: Anchor, 2009. Print.

Harris, Lorna. "Youthful proposition from unions." *Canadian HR Reporter* [Toronto] 30 Oct. 2008, 21st ed., sec. 18: 31-31. *Proquest*. Web. June-July 2009.

Haynes, Peter, Jack Vowles, and Peter Boxall. "Explaining the Younger-Older Worker Union Density Gap: Evidence from New Zealand." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 43.1 (March2005): 93-116. *GoogleScholar*. Blackwell Publishing. Web. June-July 2009.

Jacobsen, Kelly. "Employee Free Choice Act Offers Benefits for Young Workers." Web log post. *Futuremajority.com*. Future Majority, 23 Mar. 2009. Web. June & July 2009.

Lester, Will. "Poll: Labor Unions Gain Sympathy." *CommonDreams.org*. Associated Press, 29 Aug. 2001. Web. June & July 2009.

Lim, Paul J. "Youth Is Wasted on the Generation Y Investor." *New York Times*. New York Times Company, 19 Mar. 2006. Web. June & July 2009.

Mui, Nelson. "Here Come the Kids: Gen Y Invades the Workplace." *New York Times* 4 Feb. 2001, New York ed., Style sec. *New York Times*. New York Times Company, 4 Feb. 2001. Web. June & July 2009.

My Union. Digital image. *My-union*. Trades Union Congress. Web. June & July 2009.

Ochoa, Enrique. "'Young people have a pure sense justice, fairness, and equality and will fight for it': An interview with Sonia Mehta of Young Workers United." *Radical History Review* 102 (Fall2008): 161-79. *Duke University Press*. Duke University Press. Web. June-July 2009.

Oliver, Damian. "Young people, unions, strategies." *Evatt.labor.net*. Evatt Foundation, 13 Sept. 2005. Web. June & July 2009.

Schmitt, John. "Unions and Upward Mobility for Young People." *Center for Economic and Policy Research* (2008): 1-12. *Scribd.com*. *Cepr.net*, 2008. Web. June & July 2009.

Smiley, Erica. "Young workers discuss future in labor movement." *People's World*. *Peoplesworld.org*, 14 May 2008. Web. June & July 2009.

Staebell, Nicole. "Facing the future: what's hot and what's not for young people." *Our Times* Dec.-Jan. 2008/2009: 21. *Proquest*. Web. June-July 2009.

March, 2010

Takahashi, Corey. "Ideas & Trends; Selling to Gen Y: A Far Cry From Betty Crocker." New York Times 8 Apr. 2001, New York ed., Week in Review sec. New York Times. New York Times Company, 8 Apr. 2001. Web. June & July 2009.

Uehlein, Joe. "An Overture into the Future: The Music of Social Justice." *Union Songs*. Web. June-July 2009. <<http://unionsong.com/reviews/overture.html>>.

Vielhaber, Mary E., and John L. Waltman. "Changing Uses of Technology." *Journal of Business Communication* 45.3 (2008): 308-30. Sage Journals Online. 2008. Web. June & July 2009.

Williams, Ray. "Generation Y Poised To Dominate the Workplace." National Post. Canada.com, 13 June 2009. Web. June & July 2009.

Yates, Charlotte. "Forum: Reorganizing Unions Rebuilding the Labor Movement by Organizing the Unorganized: Strategic Considerations." *Studies in Political Economy* (Autumn 2004): 171-79. Web.

"Young Workers: The Wage Gypsies." Workers Online. Labor Council of NSW, 15 Nov. 2005. Web. June & July 2009.