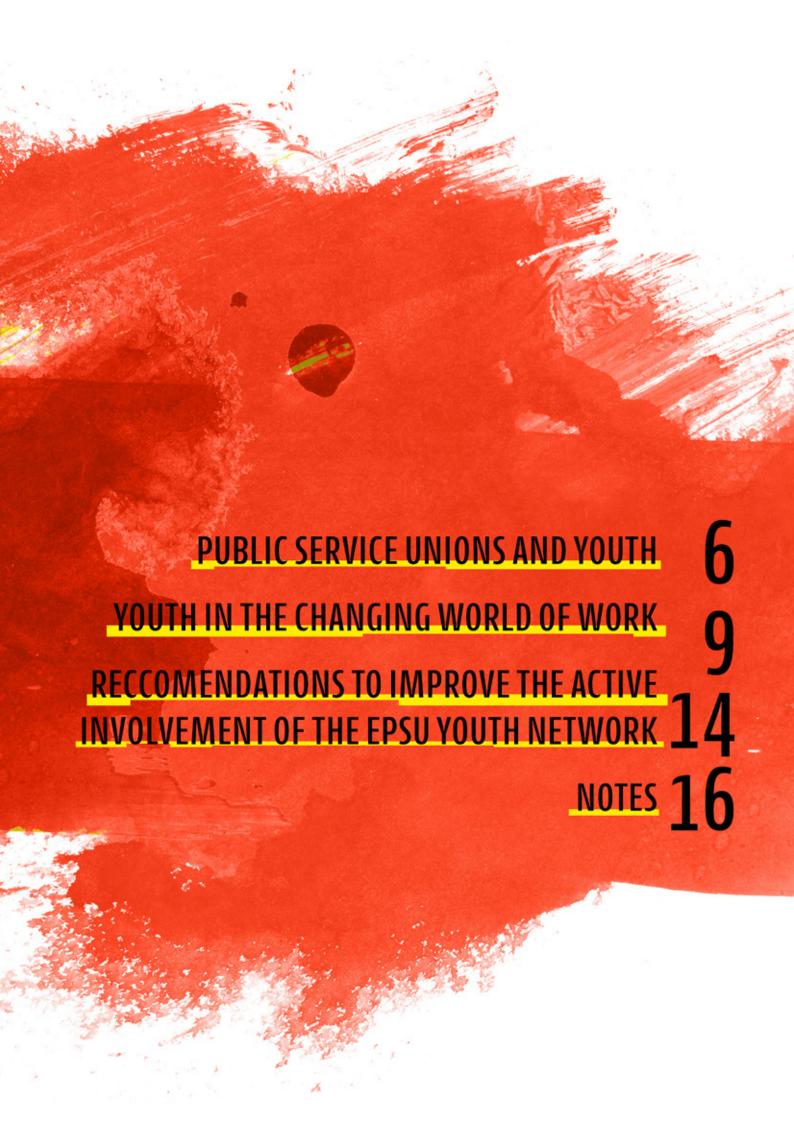


Plan - equipping the next generation of public service union leaders for the future world of work











The world of work is going through a rapid and irreversible transformation. Climate change and demographic change are fundamentally altering the shape of the economy, whilst the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated labour market trends such as digitalisation, the use of precarious contracts and flexible working conditions. These changes pose new opportunities but also create new challenges for workers, especially for young people. Whilst the global labour shortage could give workers more leverage to demand favourable conditions, there is an alarming rise in inequality, instability, and living costs, which has a disproportionate impact on youth.

The role for trade unions in this transformation should seem obvious. As the world of work becomes more and more unstable, there will be an increasing need to ensure workers' rights are protected. But in reality, union membership is declining, and as a result, so too is their relevance and influence over the labour market. The future of trade unions will depend on their ability to adapt to the needs and priorities of new workforces.

Union membership is particularly declining amongst young people. That is not to say that young people have less of a need for trade unions. As is explained above, the current economic crisis is hitting young workers and job seekers particularly hard. Nor does it mean that young people have less interest in the issues that are rocking the labour market. In fact, youth groups are at the forefront of these struggles, from leading the fight against climate to standing up for social justice. But over the last few decades, unions have increasingly failed to position themselves as a solution and potential ally to young workers facing these challenges.





In order to regain their influence over the labour market, unions need to reflect in their membership the whole workforce. To demonstrate their relevance in the changing world of work, unions too need to lead change and represent the priorities of both current and future generations of workers. And to revitalise the core of the labour movement, unions need to have young workers active in all levels of union structures.

This action plan outlines a number of possible steps to increase the active involvement of the EPSU Youth Network in the overall work of EPSU. This will ensure that young public service workers have a say on labour market issues which will ultimately impact them the most, and that unions can continue to position themselves as a solution to these issues. It is also necessary to ensure that the skills and knowledge to protect workers in the face of disruptive labour market trends are passed on to potential future trade union leaders.

The next section provides some context specific to public service unions and the need for youth inclusion. Then, there is a section on youth in the changing world of work. The final section outlines a number of recommendations to improve youth involvement in EPSU. These recommendations will form the basis of the Youth Network preparation for the 2024 EPSU Congress.

PUBLIC SERVICE UNIONS AND YOUTH

Public service jobs have traditionally been more stable forms of employment, but from the waste sector to the care sector, workers are increasingly employed on precarious, zero-hour and temporary contracts.¹ On top of the low pay and strenuous working conditions that characterise many public service sectors, this makes the professions we all depend upon ever less attractive. The added burden caused by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the labour shortage, especially in the health and social services sectors.²

However, the staff shortages in public services did not begin with the COVID-19 pandemic. Research commissioned by the EPSU Youth Network shows that a decade of austerity measures and job cuts following the financial crisis resulted in the disappearance of many entry-level public service jobs.³ Fewer and fewer workers were hired whilst the remaining workforce aged closer to retirement. The report finds that on average across four public service sectors, the number of young workers aged 15-24 actually fell between 2008 and 2019.⁴ As older cohorts of workers are now either retiring or changing profession, these sectors need to find ways to attract young workers in order to tackle low levels of recruitment and retention. For public services and the communities that depend on them, trade unions have never been more important.

But across Europe, trade union membership is declining at an alarming rate.⁵ It is especially falling amongst young people, and as a result, the average age of union members is now significantly higher than the average age of the overall workforce.⁶ Without successful initiatives to gain more active, young members, there is a high risk that the majority of active union members will retire in the coming decade,⁷ which calls into question the very existence of the union movement.

To increase membership amongst young workers, it is first necessary to understand the reasons why young people are not joining trade unions. Whilst there have been some suggestions



that younger generations are less aligned with the collective ideology of trade unions, as is explained in the introduction, young people are in fact highly inclined towards collective social issues. Rather, most research finds that young people do not join trade unions due to a lack of understanding about what the union movement is. In particular, young people often perceive unions as stuck in the past and out of touch with the modern labour market. It is therefore up to the unions to reach out to young people and demonstrate their continued relevance and importance in the changing world of work.

For public service unions, there is another important benefit of increasing their active, youth membership. To improve the attractiveness of public services sector jobs to young workers, it is important to have young people involved in negotiating conditions, as the priorities of younger generations may differ to those of older cohorts of workers. Unions need to reflect not only the work force they represent, but also the work force they seek to represent.

In recognition of the fundamental need to increase youth involvement in the union movement, the EPSU Youth Network was established over a decade ago. Since then, the Youth Network has commissioned various pieces of research and has led numerous projects focussed on recruiting and organising young workers. The EPSU Youth report published in 2021, Organising Young Workers, looks at six case studies of union initiatives to organise young workers. The report demonstrates that there is no right or wrong way to attract young workers, but unions must continue to be creative and take initiative.¹¹ The six case studies in the report serve as inspiration for unions looking for new ways to organise young workers.

However, another key takeaway from the report was that even successful campaigns to organise young workers don't necessarily result in more active young members. In fact, the initial success from organising campaigns is often short-lived as new and potential members stop engaging in union activities.¹² Consequently, young members don't have a say on labour market issues which often affect them the most, and the next generation of union leaders is not being formed. Ensuring the future of the labour movement and empowering a new generation of union leaders requires strategies to improve the inclusion and active involvement of young workers.

The EPSU Youth Network Steering Group identified three priority areas where the input of young workers will be fundamental in the next EPSU congress period: demographic change, climate change and digitalisation. These phenomena will impact younger generations the most and will shape their entire working lives. Rather than simply being left to face the consequences, young workers must be actively involved in shaping structural change in a way that addresses the concerns and priorities of their generation.

The readiness and ability of young people to tackle these issues is exemplified in youth-led movements such as Fridays for Future, which has become a leader in the global fight against climate change. Making space for young workers in union structures will help to drive the fight

from inside and bring fresh and innovative ideas and approaches. The energy and activism of youth, combined with the expertise of experienced union members, will create a more dynamic labour movement. More representative unions will also have greater leverage in collective bargaining with employers and can result in better agreements. In this way, youth involvement in union structures can have a positive impact on industrial relations and society as a whole.

The priorities identified above will impact all EPSU sectors. It is therefore important to increase the inclusion and active involvement of EPSU Youth Network members throughout the EPSU committees, working groups and networks. The following section demonstrates joint necessity for unions and young people to tackle these issues together.



The recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine is hitting young workers and jobseekers especially hard.¹³ This is nothing new. In general, youth are much more susceptible to economic crises and instability in the labour market because they are already at the bottom of the job ladder.¹⁴ Not only do they face troubles entering the labour market, but for many young people, finding a job is no longer a way to avoid poverty. The risk of in-work poverty for young people aged 16-24 fell slowly following the 2008 economic crisis and has begun to climb again since the outbreak of the pandemic¹⁵. The figures available for 2021 paint a worrying picture, and these come before the escalation of the current cost of living crisis.¹⁶ In the coming decades, demographic change, climate change and digitalisation will continue to cause instability in the world of work.

Demographic change

The old age dependency ratio – between the inactive elderly population (65+) and the population of working age (15-64) – is projected to almost double in the EU from 32.5% in 2019 to 57% in 2100.¹⁷ This global structural shift will pose major challenges. With fewer young people entering the labour market, future generations will be faced with labour and skills shortages, a potential decrease in productivity and innovation, and social protection systems that are stretched thin.¹⁸

The already existing rise in inequality means that today's youth – the elderly of the future – will face much more precariousness in old age. Whilst this generation will live longer, uneven wealth distribution and widening gaps in household income will lead to a higher rate of pensioner poverty and more complicated health and care needs.¹⁹

Demographic change will especially put pressure on public services. The OECD has noted that countries will need to increase their care workforce by 60% by 2040 just to maintain the current ratio of carers to elderly people.²⁰ But in addition to the ageing population increasing

the demand for health and care services, care workers themselves tend to be older than average workforce.²¹ Other public service sectors also have an older than average workforce, and as these workers retire, there will be a lost knowledge cost as well as a rise in training and recruitment costs.²²

The challenge will be to ensure that today's youth and future generations have the skills to be gainfully employed and respond to the needs of changing societies.²³ Tackling demographic ageing in a way that is fair, ensuring adequate social protection systems and maintaining quality public services necessitates intergenerational cooperation and a just reallocation of labour and resources.

Climate change

Public services will also face significant pressure due to the critical consequences of climate change, including floods, droughts, wildfires, and extreme heat. Emergency service workers such as firefighters and civil protection staff will be faced with more frequent and dangerous emergencies, whilst new health risks will put even greater pressure on health services.²⁴

Another big impact of climate change is increased household energy insecurity. The disproportionate impact of this on young people has been made clear by the current energy crisis that has gripped Europe.²⁵ Youth are amongst the groups most at risk of homelessness as a result of soaring energy prices,²⁶ with many already having to cut back on daily expenses or unable to heat their homes.²⁷

Ensuring intergenerational justice and a just transition to net-zero economies requires youth involvement and representation at all levels of decision making. Indeed, young people are a key stakeholder group in this transition as climate change will define their entire future, but they are often neglected as such. A Generation Climate Europe report on the State of Youth Engagement in the Implementation of the EU's Just Transition Mechanism found that: "young generations have not been considered by state authorities as a key stakeholder to approach for the writing of [Territorial Just Transition Plans]." As initiators and drivers of the just transition, unions must ensure that young workers are fully involved in discussions and policy making.

Digitalisation

The impact of digitalisation on the world of work and particularly on young workers was the focus of the 2022 Annual EPSU Youth Network Meeting.

In all public service sectors, digitalisation and automation are altering the nature of work. This takes various forms across the sectors, even creating new online services such as eGovernment.²⁹ It impacts not only service delivery but also the tasks workers perform, the skills that they need and their working conditions.³⁰ Whilst digital solutions have the possibility



to positively transform public services and the jobs of public service workers, this is not without risks. A large 2018 survey of worker representatives and trade union representatives across the EU found that the biggest concerns of workers in relation to digitalisation are the destruction of jobs, new forms of 'digital taylorism' and an increase in precarious work.³¹

Indeed, one of the most cited pros of digitalisation is that it creates more jobs than it destroys. But much of the research that finds more jobs being created than destroyed does not distinguish between precarious and zero-hour contract jobs and full-time employment.³² Therefore, whilst digitalisation may be creating more jobs, there is little to suggest it is creating more quality jobs or contributing to a more equal and accessible labour market.

The prevalence of precarious work amongst young people, including zero-hour contracts, agency work and disguised employment, is one reason this demographic faces such a high-rate of in work poverty.³³ Of course, precarious employment is not only an issue that young workers face, some reports even suggest that atypical contracts could outnumber standard contracts in the not-so-distant future.³⁴ But currently a much higher percentage of young people find themselves in precarious situations. In 2018, temporary employees accounted for 43.3% of employees in the EU aged 15 to 24, as opposed to only 12.1% of employees aged 25 to 54.³⁵ Consequently, a disproportionate number of young workers are left outside of collective bargaining agreements, and do not benefit from adequate social protection, Occupational Safety and Health or a liable employer.

At the same time, it is much harder for unions to organise workers in precarious jobs.³⁶ These workers are more likely to work alone and for companies or organisations without union structures, therefore, they are less likely to come into contact with union representatives. Amongst those that do, many do not consider the work as part of their lifelong career, thus are less likely to consider joining a union whilst in that job.³⁷ Digitalisation and the rise in non-standard employment therefore goes hand in hand with trade unions weakening influence over the labour market.

Other aspects of digitalisation that pose a major threat to workers' rights are data handling and work intensification.³⁸ Data increasingly influences the management and organisation of workplaces, which raises concerns as to how it is collected, stored, used and for what purposes.³⁹ Unions are also concerned to find out whether or not the data is biased, and what instructions have been given to algorithms and Artificial Intelligence systems.⁴⁰ At risk is workers' rights to privacy and freedom from discrimination.

Work intensification is an outcome of the blurring between home and work life. This was significantly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic when workers in the majority of sectors had to work from home.⁴¹ New forms of 'smart working' and 'flexible working' mean that workers are increasingly expected to be reachable or 'on-call' even in their non-working hours.⁴²



In this digital future, it is important that young people have the tools to ensure transparency and accountability in relation to the use of data and to protect workers 'right to disconnect'. Whilst the concept of youth as 'digital natives' might suggest young people are more inherently equipped for this, more recent research agrees that "young people do not inherently possess the skills for safe and effective use of technologies, and skills acquired informally are likely to be incomplete".⁴³ Young people too must therefore have the necessary digital education and training to identify the risks and protect the rights of workers in the future.

At the same time, young workers in all their diversity have dynamic skills and competencies, fresh ideas and innovative approaches. ⁴⁴ They may be more able to identify the opportunities and solutions that digitalisation can offer the labour movement, and generally have more competence in terms of digital communication. ⁴⁵ This can be of great importance to unions looking to revitalise their image and organise new workers. It is also worth noting that young people may be more or less concerned about certain elements of digitalisation than older cohorts of workers and their priorities too should be considered in collective agreements. Unions therefore need to take an intergenerational perspective to digitalisation and develop strategies and collective agreements with the full involvement of youth.

At the 2022 Annual EPSU Youth Network Meeting participants identified and considered some of the key issues to address in collective agreements on digitalisation, including jobs and skills, work-life balance, platform workers' rights, workers' data rights and protection, and health and safety protection.





RECCOMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF THE EPSU YOUTH NETWORK

This section outlines some strategies discussed by the EPSU Youth Network steering group on how to improve the active involvement of young members in EPSU structures. It does not include strategies to organise and recruit young workers as this is discussed in detail in the EPSU Youth Network report on Organising Young Workers. These recommendations will form the basis of the EPSU Youth Network preparation for the 2024 EPSU Congress.

Know the members. A necessary starting point is to map current youth involvement in EPSU structures in terms of sector, country, type of employment, and level of union engagement. Currently, EPSU does not have an age-disaggregated database, but this can be used to understand where bigger efforts are needed to improve youth participation and representation. Where involvement is high, good practices can be gleaned and applied in other sectors. The data can also give some indication as to the main issues faced by young members. For example, if many young workers are in precarious employment, this can be a relevant issue to address together. Importantly, knowing where the youth members are can help to identify potential future union leaders.

Set clear targets. If age-disaggregated data is collected, this can be used to set clear targets on the active involvement of young members, and to monitor whether or not it is improving. At the last EPSU Congress in 2019, a target of 10% youth participation in meetings was set, but this was never monitored, and with no data on participants' ages it cannot be assessed. Even if this was achieved, 10% is still very low, and participation does not necessarily equate to meaningful involvement or voting rights. For the next EPSU Congress period, the target should be raised to 20% not only for participation in meetings, but also membership in Standing Committees and Working Groups, and there should be a system in place to monitor this. One possible idea is to **set quotas** for certain meetings or decision-making bodies. For example, the ETUC has set a quota of 25% youth membership for Congress delegations. This means that every fourth delegate per delegation must be younger than 35, and delegations that do not respect the quota are penalised with a proportional reduction of voting rights. Other federations have

comparable requirements for decision making bodies. For example, EFFAT has 6 seats with voting rights dedicated to youth representatives in its Executive Committee.

Encourage youth participation. In addition to the set targets, further measures should be taken to promote youth participation and inclusivity. When looking to ensure the representativeness of EPSU decision making bodies, including individual elected positions, age should be considered as well as gender and geographical balance. Furthermore, if unions want to bring an extra member to a meeting, for example as an observer, this should be a youth member. One idea that has been tried already is to **implement a mentoring system**, where youth members accompany Steering Committee or Working Group members to meetings. This is meant to give young unionists an insight into the different areas of union work, including at European level, and the policy and decision-making processes. However, since this was proposed for EPSU the issue of costs has arisen, because many unions do not have the funds themselves to bring a youth 'mentee' and not enough money was allocated to the EPSU Youth Network budget for this. In the next Congress period, more money should be allocated for the mentoring system, and if there are not enough funds to cover all participants who want to bring a mentee, there could be an application system.

Mainstream the youth perspective. In the same way that gender and climate friendly perspectives are mainstreamed in policy making, the youth perspective should also be included. Not only in considering the priority areas identified above – demographic change, climate change and digitalisation – but in all policies such as psychosocial risks to third-party violence. To ensure the youth perspective is taken into account, one idea is to require the policy sector updates to the Executive Committee to note the youth aspects of the work, in the same way they are required to note the gender aspects. This will ensure that across sectors, EPSU policies reflect the youth angle.

Capacity building. EPSU should continue to provide funds for capacity building projects for Youth Network members through the youth budget. This is crucial to ensure the necessary skills and knowledge for the future of the labour movement are passed on to the next generation of union leaders. The Youth Network Steering Group identified a number of skills where trainings are needed, including negotiation, lobbying and advocacy, project proposals and funding applications, public speaking and policy analysis.

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EPSU is the **European Federation of Public Service Unions**. It is the largest federation of the ETUC and comprises 8 million public service workers from over 250 trade unions across Europe. EPSU organises workers in the energy, water and waste sectors, health and social services and local, regional and central government, in all European countries including the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. It is the recognised regional organisation of Public Services International (PSI).

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The **Competence Centre on the Future of Work** was founded in 2021 by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation and it is based in Brussels. It aims to promote the debate on the future of work by bringing progressive approaches into the forefront based on social democratic values.

The Competence Centre addresses multidimensional aspects of the work itself by focusing on digital transformation, new forms of work, new technologies at the work place and social responses to digitalisation.