Conférence internationale du CRIMT 2015
CRIMT International Conference
Les jeunes et le syndicalisme: entre inclusion et participation ou exclusion et désaveu?
Analyse critique de deux organisations au Québec
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ANALYTICAL AND THEORETICAL TRACKS

Identity

Democracy

Modes of socialization
ANALYTICAL TRACK

• **Few studies** expose their involvement in **unions once they are unionized** (Colgan & Ledwith 2002, Tailby & Pollert 2011, Vandaele 2012)

• **Little empirical evidence** supporting young workers’ low propensity to participate in union life (Freeman, Boxall and Haynes 2007, Gómez, Gunderson and Meltz 2002) and increased individualism (Peetz 2010)

• **Multiple studies** have shown **genuine efforts on the part of unions to connect with young workers and increase their participation in unions** (Hodder, 2014; Laroche and Dufour-Poirier 2013, Dufour-Poirier and Laroche, 2015; Vandaele, 2012, 2014), notably through YC’s (Durand-Allard, 2014)
THEORETICAL TRACK

- **Identity** (whether YMs feel they belong to the union and endorse its agenda: *feeling of community, emotional bond*) (Colgan and Ledwith 2011; Lotte Hansen 2004; Hyman 1997)

- **Socialization** (whether and to what extent YMs wish to establish and consolidate new relationships in the union, through formalized and distanciated channels: *internal network density*) (Bailey et al. 2009; Haynes et al. 2005)

- **Democracy** (whether YMs feel they have an influence over the content of the union’s agenda, its future orientations, its implementation, and whether YMs can access strategic info and positions: *active agents of change*) (Bielski Boris et al., 2013; Roholt et al., 2013)

  - Lack of research specifically relating to young workers, rarely addressed in the literature, especially in unionized sectors (Hodder, 2014)
**TO ENSURE UNION RENEWAL AMONG YOUNG MEMBERS: A MIX OF INFLUENCES!**

- **A combination of both (Lotte Hansen, 2010):**
  - A normalization strategy (top-down)
  - A transformative and grassroots strategy (bottom-up)

- **Our MAIN contention:**
  
  1. This combination enhances young members’ feeling of belonging to the union; increases internal network density; and encourages young members to help implement more participatory forms of democracy, notably through YC’s
RESEARCH METHOD (2009-2014)

• **Qualitative methodology** (*intra/inter-case analyses*)

• **Case A:** Mid-sized union federation in public health sector with youth committees at various levels (70,000 members)

• **Case B:** Large-sized confederation in Quebec with YC’s at various levels (300,000 members)
  
  – 41 focus groups with more than 430 young members (case A, n=180; case B, n=250; some militants, union officials, professionals, others not)
  
  – 22 individual (90 min) interviews with 10 national union leaders and 12 young leaders in both org.
  
  – Documents re: educational program and initiatives (union newspapers, reports, web sites, etc.)
YOUTH COMMITTEES’ MAIN TASKS

• **UOA:** Youth Committees (local and national levels)
  – 2 big gatherings held every year (n=200, under 30, 40% are green, 60% regular participants)
  – Both formal and informal initiatives (mainly official meetings and communicational means and unofficial get-togethers!)

• **UOB:** Youth Committees (local and national levels)
  – More diversified strategies covering the basics of unionism but also larger sociopolitical issues/topics
  – 3-day program held twice a year (n=40-50, under 30)
  – Big gathering held once every 3 years, accompanied by production of formal proposals meant to influence UOB’s future and strategic orientations
1) Help young members to develop a sense of identity that could spark union activism

**Focus of struggle: at the local level**

Timely and concrete improvement of their employment experience and working conditions

Disparities in treatment, inequality

“Seniority is at the root of intergenerational tension. I think it’s hard to get young members involved when unionism is essentially based on seniority. Why get involved when it takes ten years to get decent working conditions? As soon as we want to touch seniority, it causes friction but, at the same time, addressing this issue could encourage young members to get involved!” (Interview B-2)
1) Help young members to develop a sense of identity that could spark union activism

**Findings:**

- **UOA:** demands need to be linked to the realities of their working lives rather than broader social causes

  "As for international solidarity… well, here in the workplace, that doesn’t affect us. If we defend international solidarity, it doesn’t affect me personally. Or my co-workers either. When it is reported from the Confederal Council that the xxx has defended [international causes], is that going to change something on my pay slip? Is it going to help improve my working conditions? Unfortunately, the answer is no.” (Group A-3, speaker 4).

- **UOB:** There is a desire for cross-cutting protests that would bring progressive forces from Quebec society together around common goals

**Focus of struggle: beyond the workplace**
1) Help young members to develop a sense of identity that could spark union activism

**Challenge 1:**

**For both organizations:**

1. Ensuring that the principles for internal representation are not based exclusively on age but also address considerations related to the precarious employment experienced by young members.
2) Help young members to understand how the decision-making bodies operate so they can participate and... learn!

Findings:

Young members would like:
• The union’s message to be more accessible
• The number of delegates to be increased at the local level

“When you go to your first General Assembly, there’s the content itself but there’s also the way it’s delivered. There’s so much protocol, it’s hard to get your bearings. We should try to just use ordinary language to talk about things, keep things simpler. In my experience, it’s during the activities that you can really talk about things, when you’re on solid ground, without all the union jargon. Otherwise, you can’t understand a thing!” (Group A-2, speaker 3)

Educational and communicational programs have been developed to help young members gain broad skills, challenge the traditional ways of doing things and get more actively involved in their own union organizations.
2) Help young members to understand how the decision-making bodies operate so they can participate and... learn!

Challenges 2, 3 and 4:

2. Getting enough union leave to allow young members to attend training sessions and various get-togethers of all kinds:

“When the local executives can’t even get enough leave to take care of their own files, because the amount of leave granted is so limited, you can understand why they can’t allow any leave to be used so a young member can participate in [the meeting organized by the CNJA]”. (Interview A2-1)

3. Ensuring follow-up of training and assessing how well enclosed messages have been integrated by the young members:

“Sure, I can organize a good training session but I’m not there afterwards to see how things are going in the local union. I won’t see if a young member is kicked out of the union and I can’t advise them on the strategies they should use to promote their point (...)” (Interview B2-1)

4. Reviewing communication and training strategies from a BU diffusion perspective.
3) Help young members to become agents of change within their union organizations

In UOA, young members would like:

• Their interests and aspirations to be taken into greater consideration in the union’s agenda, values and practices.
• To have better access to positions and decision-making channels within UOA so they can help bring about concrete change within the organization.

In UOB, young members appear to be more aware of their capacity to be heard within the internal structures and to bring about change:

“We have to take up our place, take the bull by the horns if we really want to change things!” (group B-15, speaker 4)

BUT... There are still obstacles at the local level!
3) Help young members to become agents of change within their union organizations

Challenge 5:

5. Allowing young members to integrate into the union structures... Making room for them!

Allowing them to challenge things, to protest.

There’s a need for openness at the local level.

To maximize the benefits of educational and training programs and youth committees’ initiatives (official and unofficial).
Further reflections...

- Priority needs to be given to planning for the next generation of union leaders and union activism:
  - Substantial resources need to be invested (e.g. education)

- In order to:
  - Create a sense of identity based on their precarious employment experience
  - Develop a better understanding of union structures and practices
  - Enhance their capacity to move things forward, internally!

- At the local level, obstacles still make it difficult for young members to express their points of view and participate in decision-making bodies (e.g. union leave, follow-up measures, communication strategies...)
Further reflections...

• New forms of participatory and decentralized democracy are essential in order to truly encourage young members to participate in their union organizations (underlying political risks to do so...) (Blondiaux, 2008)

• How can we help young members integrate into the discussion channels but also, and especially, bring a wave of creativity into the ranks that will lead to change in the agenda, strategic orientations and practices of the organizations concerned?

• At the same time, young members need to DARE to participate!
Further reflections...

- Excerpt from a speech by André Melançon, a Quebec filmmaker, to young workers in his industry sector (Sunday, March 15, 2015):

  Surprise us, challenge us, push our boundaries.  
  Make us laugh, make us cry, it’s important!  
  Make us think, it’s essential!  
  Make us dream, it’s crucial!  
  Suggest new and different ways of seeing the world... (trans.)