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What kind of union culture for the young generation? **ETUC Youth Conference Barcelona 2004**

In March 2003 ETUC Youth organised a Conference on young people and trade unions titled *Our Future: Our Unions!* with support from the Commission. During this event, we debated young people's membership of and involvement in trade unions.

It had to be admitted that young people have a low level of representation and show little interest in participating in this type of so-called traditional organisation.

Before suggesting avenues that might lead to solutions, we focused on the reasons why trade unions are so unattractive to young people.

One essential reason was a lack of knowledge about trade unions, what they are and the purpose they serve.

The participants also emphasised the lack of information at their disposal with regard to other national trade union models in Europe and especially the European dimension of trade unionism.

- What are the different trade union models in Europe?
- What values do they promote?
- What are the main initiatives undertaken by national organisations and what are their links with ETUC's activities?
- What are the worker representation models in each country's companies?
- How is bargaining conducted?
- What are ETUC's structure and operations?
- Social dialogue: an ETUC priority
- How can we work together more efficiently to build a union force in Europe?
- What trade union culture is European youth developing today?

To answer all of these questions, the ETUC Youth Committee and its new, recently elected bureau felt it essential to organise a conference initiative that would enable young European trade unionists to grasp the national trade union realities experienced by their young (or not so young) colleagues and to gain a better insight into the role of and actions undertaken by ETUC as a European confederation representing almost 78 organisations in 34 European countries.

The conference was also an opportunity to develop a European dimension for solidarity and partnership among young people in member organisations through learning how to work together despite our differences and diversities, and across generations, to help build a European trade union culture.

The Conference took place over three days in late June/early July (date to be specified) and brought together almost 80 young people from across Europe (European Union and accession countries) along with experts so that the participants could debate trade unionism in Europe more effectively.

The Conference had two main working topics:

- the European dimension of trade unionism and the values promoted;
- national or regional models of trade unionism.

To sum up, three goals and expectations emerged clearly:

- establish contacts between young people from ETUC member organisations, networking;
- acquire a better understanding of European trade union models as well as the role of and need for the European dimension in trade unionism;
- establish the foundations for a European trade union culture in a spirit of cooperation, involving construction of European trade unionism, which is a genuine civic approach aimed at appropriating or re-appropriating collective action.

Opening session

Juliane Bir, coordinator of the ETUC Youth Committee, opened the conference by welcoming the participants and the first speakers.

After briefly presenting the framework in which this meeting was taking place, namely the Barcelona Cultural Forum, she explained the Conference's goals while following the agenda's chronology.

She also talked of the specific situation of working young people (unemployment, precarious work) and its impact on young people's relationship with a trade union, a relationship which frequently does not exist for many reasons (the poor image of trade unions, association with political parties, ageing representation in a movement viewed as made up of old men, etc.).

To debate this, various speakers formed the opening panel.

Firstly, **Maria-Helena André**, ETUC Deputy General Secretary, took the floor to present the challenges faced by trade unionism today, thus establishing the framework for the entire range of discussions.

Before that, she pointed out that the conference was taking place in Barcelona during work culture week, which was a genuine opportunity for debate and profile-raising for trade unions.

It was an opportunity for us to develop work outside our organisations, to exchange ideas on our policies, as well as a chance to look at ourselves internally and to organise our practices more efficiently.

She also thanked the youth committee for setting up this initiative.

Her contribution was structured into three points:

- What challenges?
- What tools?
- What actions 'in-house'?

What challenges?

She cited three main challenges:

- 1- enlargement, with the arrival of 10 new countries into the European Union
- 2- the poor economy (increased inequality, higher unemployment rates, particularly among young people)
- 3- the new constitution where there has been minimum progress on the social dimension, a constitution on which the citizens will be consulted and on which it will be important to go to vote!
the new Parliament
the new Commission

So many challenges which mean it is more important than ever to join forces!

What tools?

- 1- the Lisbon strategy, i.e. the European employment strategy which sets guidelines for Member States in terms of employment, guidelines implemented at national level and national action plans, submitted for evaluation after realisation

- 2- social dialogue, negotiation of agreements at European level
- 3- the social partners' action programme (promotion of social dialogue, reinforcement of the social partners' role and of their independence in Central and Eastern European Countries)

What actions in-house?

Trade unions are often viewed as outdated and bereft of a public profile; their role is not clearly understood.

Why? One of the reasons is certainly the transition from heavy industries to new industries which has led to a substantial loss of trade union activists.

Today, we must be able to listen to the different forces represented in the labour market.

These include young people (!), women, migrants and people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Active recruitment policies must be implemented to promote this.

After thanking Maria Helena for her contribution, Juliane handed the floor over to **Alexandros Liakopoulos**, President of the Youth Committee, so that he could respond to the next question: '*Our Future: Our Unions! But how?*'

Alexandros communicated key messages to the participants in a dynamic and stimulating address.

Young people are not the movement's future: they are its present!

Perhaps they have a culture of the future, but most importantly they are the driving force of today.

For him, it is essential to go beyond personal considerations, the individual's own culture; we must have a shared collective approach.

He also set out the challenges facing us in his view:

- changes in the labour market which more than ever are forcing us to demand quality employment for everyone even more strongly;
- to deal with the operations of political parties, where there is an impression that decisions are frequently made in secret. Here again, we note that young people are participating less and less, and for good reason;
- to question the development of social forums, the participation of young people in alternative movements;
- to highlight our essential tools: the ability to negotiate, to sign agreements;
- the need to motivate, mobilise young people to ensure active civic participation.

After these two contributions, **Amparo Serrano**, a researcher at the institute, was invited to present the question of young people in employment and more specifically its consequences on the youth/trade unions relationship.

This report will not list the details of the speech which can be found annexed to this document.

The speech dealt with the following three points:

- 1- an overview of youth trade unionism;
- 2- the reasons put forward to explain the 'involvement crisis':
 - a. youth culture

- b. the position of young people in the labour market
- 3- employment conditions, organisational changes and changes in the structure of the economy.

This was followed by a debate involving all participants.

A panel of young trade unionists then met to present good national practices: the young generation of trade unionists has a trade union culture shared with their elders but different communication tools:

- Youth training, SEK, Cyprus, Andreas Matsas;
- The Internet as a tool, CGT, France, Romain Altmann;
- Citizens@work conferences, TUC, UK, Becky Wright and Vince Maple;
- Eye-catching posters, shock campaigns, FO, France, David Ollivier;
- Trade union videos, DGB, Germany, Domenico Perroni;
- Young people-collective negotiations (website), UGT, Spain, Oscar Lobo San Juan;
- Trade union elections, CCOO, Spain, Nuria Rico Gonzales.

This very lively panel was the opportunity to present innovative practices with modern communication tools, suitable language and appropriate communication.

Young people and trade union culture: what are the findings?

The following session was chaired by **Domenico Perroni**, Vice President of ETUC Youth.

Domenico reiterated the main phases of our work by going back over the messages communicated during the morning.

He then explained the content of the workshops and how they were to proceed. The participants were divided up in accordance with the languages spoken while ensuring a regional balance in each of the groups.

This first working group's goal was: the participants had to engage in more in-depth discussion on the concept of trade union culture based on three questions.

A rapporteur was appointed to present the report during the plenary session.

Question 1:

In your view, is there a trade union culture for the current generation of youth?

⇒ If so, why?

⇒ If not, why not?

Question 2:

Generally speaking, in your opinion what expectations do young people have of trade unions?

Question 3:

Do these expectations differ depending on whether the young person is unionised or not?

- ⇒ If so, why?
- ⇒ If not, why not?

Tools:

Personal, professional and trade union experiences.

Here is a summary of the main components found in the plenary session reports, compiled by **Dimitra Makri** (GSEE), **Alexandre Dias** (UGT-P) and **Michaël Holdinghausen** (DGB).

Is there such a thing as a trade union culture?

The answer tended to be 'no', for the following reasons:

- a lack of knowledge of trade union history and successes;
- young people do not see the benefits of being unionised;
- trade unions do not know how to 'sell' their success well;
- a lack of trade union education;
- a lack of vision among trade unions who are poor at linking their actions to members' claims and expectations;
- a lack of communication;
- a problematic link to political parties;
- a bureaucratic image;
- a lack of a relationship between labour market issues and young people;
- a need to reorganise trade unions in view of changes in the labour market.

What are young people's expectations?

Young people's expectations are no different from the expectations held by previous generations:

- preference for stable employment;
- the need to guarantee collective agreements;
- decent wages;
- the desire to have a free and independent trade union movement;
- trade unions with a higher public profile;
- trade unions that promote the interests of different categories of worker.

Different expectations depending on whether a person is unionised or not?

Not really.

The main difference is that members can criticise the trade union's actions, while following the organisation's regulations.

What European culture for trade unionism?
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Hana Lackovicova, Vice President of ETUC Youth, took over as chairperson to present a new panel. The subsequent contributions aimed at highlighting a training-information aspect of the European dimension of trade unionism.

Juliane Bir, ETUC Secretariat, first presented the ETUC and more specifically social dialogue (speech enclosed).

Michael Holdinghausen (DGB) continued by presenting European works councils and the European project implemented in this context with young trade unionists (speech enclosed).

Finally, **Patricia Grillo**, the ETUC press officer, spoke on the ETUC's communication policy, which is a genuine driver in promoting a more attractive image of trade unionism.

First, she presented the challenges involved in genuine communication. Through communication we can explain how trade unions handle economic and social problems faced by workers and citizens now and in the future. It means trade unions no longer being viewed as organisations engaged in outmoded struggles! It can explain the essential role of trade unions in a different way and refresh their image. She also referred to the quality communication that some NGOs can offer -- proactive, engaging communication.

This naturally does not mean modelling ourselves on such bodies closely, but perhaps drawing inspiration from their format.

She then presented the communication service:

- the press
- the campaigns
- the communication tools

Finally, she raised the possibility of working together to integrate young people more effectively and of offering them the opportunity to participate in these activities.

A fruitful exchange led to the following suggestions:

- incorporate a section on young trade unionists' 'good practices' on the website;
- prepare a press release following the conference (enclosed);

After the panel, Hana presented the second workshop where the working groups' method reflected the method used in the first workshop.

This involved answering the following question:

How can trade union culture be reinforced and promoted to young people?

- at national level;
- at European level.

The second working group was able to identify how to bolster trade union culture among young people on the basis of presentations and the results from the first working group.

The results presented by **Cory Greenland** (GWU) and **Edward MATHEWS** (ICTU) were as follows:

- allow young people to acquire the skills and capacities required for their integration, and develop the central role of recruitment;
- continue to combat all forms of precariousness, ensure the application of social rights;
- develop campaigns for young people particularly at European level and transpose these to national level;

- focus on the need to share information between national confederations and to exchange thoughts on good practices;
- compile mailing lists to distribute information;
- organise studies and research on our membership to target our actions;
- meet young people where they are found (mention of universities, go into companies);
- use the media;
- work on image, develop a vision;
- promote European and international cooperation.

<h2>Closing session</h2>

Lastly, **Alexandros Liakopoulos**, President of ETUC Youth, chaired the closing session.

He emphasised how fruitful these working days had been and the good fortune we had had in forming a group of almost 80 young trade unionists from throughout Europe where we could share our experiences.

In answer to some questions, he first stated that we *are* the European Union, that the social partners, the ETUC, the youth committee *are* and *create* the EU.

He also specified that we might need to re-appropriate a vision of the European Union within trade unions and towards the exterior, for society in general.

Following this, **Maria Helena**, who was present during the reporting on all the workshops, responded to the various points brought up.

Firstly, the question of being part of the European Union or not does not arise: we are the European Union.

As regards the need to have a vision for this EU, she pointed out that we do have one, otherwise we would not be together! It is based on solidarity, cohesion, social justice, the construction of a better society, competition with a human face, etc.

Social dialogue is also part of this vision! It is a priority, not an option. Dialogue first: confrontation later.

Moreover, as trade unionists, we must adhere to a uniform language in all debating and discussion forums including political parties.

Failing this, our current or potential members would be faced with total confusion.

She next dealt with the place of young people in the trade union movement, the support they would require to help them to reach leadership positions and especially the need for efficient youth mainstreaming within other policies.

Finally, her last comment supported a proposal for a recruitment campaign where it would be necessary to reflect on different angles and aspects of work.

This involves undertaking work on the image and message that we wish to address.

Alexandros then took the floor to thank Maria Helena for her contribution and her support within the ETUC.

Before closing the conference, he thanked the participants, the interpreters and the ETUC team for their work in preparing and holding the Conference.

Finally, **Juliane** thanked the entire Bureau for its excellent teamwork.