

LinkAge

Labour market integration
of vulnerable age groups
through social dialogue

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The economic crisis started in 2008 after decades of transformation of labour relations in Europe. Over the past 30 years, the employment rate has grown, especially in the case of women; however, employment has increased mainly in the service sector at the expense of the industrial or manufacturing sector, where unions were fully established, meaning that the number of companies with a low union presence has increased. Along with this change in occupational settings, there have been other changes detrimental to union power: the increase in part-time employment; the diversification of labour contracts, leaving many people without collective bargaining; the growth of permanent job insecurity; and the expansion of the underground economy in some countries (in the South). Altogether, the presence of unions in companies has diminished and union membership has declined. In short, we can say that the changes in the labour market in recent decades have led to a decline in the importance of collective bargaining, and the continuing loss of union strength.

In this context, the project studies the action of trade unions in relation to two groups differentiated by age: young (up to 25 years) and older workers (over 55). Furthermore, there is a specific demographic situation, marked by the ageing population, which is already a reality, but which will be reinforced over the coming decades. Younger workers are vulnerable because of their lack of work experience, but so are older workers because they participate less in training processes, and, hence, are more affected by long-term unemployment. Furthermore, due to the ageing of the population, the

difficulties in exiting working life with good labour conditions are accentuated.

In relation to young people, the main problem they face is unemployment, a problem which has grown during the crisis, but which existed before. The reports of the countries participating in the study show that there is a close relationship between level of education and unemployment, so that those most affected by unemployment are the less educated young people (except in Italy, where youth unemployment punishes the most qualified more). In addition, young people experience a rate of temporary employment much higher than the average (especially in Spain, where two-thirds of contracts are temporary).

With the crisis, these problems, which were already structural, have intensified. In all countries, the youth unemployment rate is growing faster than the general unemployment rate. In Italy it has reached 35.3%; in Spain it is over 50%; in Austria it is quite low at 10%, but almost three times the average; in the UK it is higher than 31%, and so on. The young suffer more than the general population from the consequences of the lack of employment policies and job training. But the most significant issue indicated in the reports is that the importance of the level of educational attainment has been accentuated: a lower educational level means fewer possibilities to get out of unemployment. In groups without studies or with lower qualifications, unemployment is much higher and is easily converted into long-term unemployment. This takes place without any major public debate; neither have unions formulated any significant policies in this regard. In recent years, however, unions have begun establishing campaigns and proposals on youth employment, but their weakness in this area is clear.

Public policies for youth employment have started late and are sparse. In some countries, the focus is on increased training: in Austria, young people are maintained in the educational system as long as possible; in the UK the introduction of policies in relation to edu-

cation and training for young workers is planned; in Italy, Spain and Poland, little has been done in this area (in Spain the participation of young people in vocational training courses has been declining in recent years). Financial incentives for hiring young people have also been implemented (in Belgium it is the main measure to boost youth employment).

Unions are part of this weakness of youth employment policies, but in recent years union proposals in this area have increased: in Italy, measures have been proposed to big businesses for the recruitment and training of young people; in Austria, the focus is on training. Furthermore, union participation of young people is declining (except in Belgium, where it is still high), as was already the case before the crisis, and this does not contribute to the unions focusing on youth issues. In social dialogue, trade unions have made some proposals, but these do not form part of the core of their demands.

As regards older workers, for many years the main debate has evolved around retirement from working life. Before the crisis and the accompanying budget cuts, many workers could retire early with relatively generous pensions, and unions focused their actions on defending the best retirement conditions, while supporting early retirement. Currently, public authorities encourage a delay in exiting the labour market and, hence, develop policies in that direction. In all countries participating in the study, governmental measures in this regard have been detected, based on hindering early retirement and delaying the retirement age. In some countries, such as Belgium, measures have also been adopted to promote the employability of older people, some in the field of training and others building on incentives for the recruitment of older workers.

Unemployment does not plague older workers as much as younger ones. When a worker over 55 becomes unemployed without being able to benefit from early retirement, however, there is a high risk that he or she will fall into long-term unemployment. On the other hand, although it is not as high as that of young people, the unem-

ployment rate has also increased for older workers during the crisis (in Spain it has doubled).

There is some awareness of discrimination against older workers, at least with regard to the possibility of being laid off in favour of younger workers. Some stereotypes still seem to exist in this sense: older workers are less productive than younger ones, do not adapt to new technologies, need more sick leave, etc.

Some countries have proposed measures to combat discrimination against older workers (the UK) and, especially, to improve their employability. In Belgium, hiring subsidies have been implemented and the training of older workers has been enhanced, work schedules adjusted, etc; all this aiming to make them stay as long as possible in the labour market. Also in Austria, companies that hire older people are financially supported, and part-time working is applied to keep older people active in the labour market. But the most common measures in all countries, are those aimed at increasing the retirement age and avoiding early retirement. Overall, it can be argued that active policies specific to older workers have been scarce, and the most recent policies focus on extending the working age. Very little has been done in the field of working conditions or the training of these workers.

Neither has this been a prominent issue for unions. While young people have special union structures which safeguard their interests, older workers do not, although some unions (the Belgian and the British) have departments for diversity in which age is taken into account. What seems to be common in the countries participating in the study is that it was not until very recently (in various countries not until 2011) that unions began to consider the situation of older workers as a topic of interest. While the focus had previously been on retirement, unions are now putting forward proposals that revolve around issues such as the adaptation of working hours and conditions to facilitate the maintenance of older people in employment, support in their access to training, and demands for financial

support from the state for their recruitment. The increase in the average age of trade unionists themselves also facilitates a greater focus on these issues.

Trade unions are to some degree taking into account the struggle against stereotypes that favour generational conflicts. For example, in several countries (United Kingdom, Italy, Austria) the younger generations perceive a strong transfer of resources to the 'baby boom' generation to which pensions have to be paid; or young workers believe that their careers are being slowed down by older workers. Unions are also supporting programmes that help explore the usefulness of the experience of older workers, as well as linking them to social organizations or programmes to promote self-employment of older workers. There are some good practices in this area, but these are very limited (the exception is Belgium, where unions are active in the fight against age discrimination).