

# **Young Workers' Perceptions of Trade Unions in Portugal**

## **Les perceptions des jeunes travailleurs à l'égard des syndicats au Portugal**

### **Las percepciones de jóvenes trabajadores sobre los sindicatos en Portugal**

Ilona Kovács, João Dias et Maria da Conceição Cerdeira

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article cherche à cerner comment les syndicats sont perçus par les jeunes travailleurs au Portugal, ainsi qu'à identifier les divers types de perceptions. Notre analyse, qui tient compte tant des facteurs structurels que des expériences subjectives, repose sur des entrevues semi-structurées auprès de jeunes personnes travaillant dans des secteurs à forte concentration d'employés jeunes. Le fait que les jeunes travailleurs sont de plus en plus exposés aux pressions du chômage et du travail précaire pourrait faire croire qu'il y a homogénéité dans leurs perceptions à l'égard des syndicats et de l'action collective. Toutefois, nos résultats montrent que les perceptions des jeunes ne sont pas homogènes et qu'elles sont rattachées à des segments distincts de population, caractérisés par diverses conditions socioéconomiques, telles que le statut familial, le niveau d'éducation et le poste détenu en emploi. Par le biais d'une analyse de contenu des entrevues, nous avons pu identifier trois types de perceptions : positives, négatives et critiques. Un dernier segment, les jeunes travailleurs peu qualifiés, provenant de familles ayant peu de ressources éducationnelles et économiques, et ayant quitté l'école prématurément, n'avaient ni l'information ni la compréhension sur les syndicats.

Nos résultats appuient la thèse qu'une éducation diversifiée ainsi que les premières expériences sur le marché du travail, lesquelles caractérisent les processus de transition vers l'âge adulte, modèlent la relation entre jeunes travailleurs et syndicats, en particulier, la motivation à adhérer à un syndicat. Saisir la diversité d'expériences et de perceptions des jeunes travailleurs demeure un défi pour la recherche en relations industrielles, de même que pour le mouvement syndical. Cela peut donner aux syndicats de précieuses clés qui leur permettront d'adapter leurs stratégies afin de recruter de nouveaux jeunes membres ainsi que de mobiliser les intérêts latents des jeunes travailleurs lors d'actions collectives.

# Young Workers' Perceptions of Trade Unions in Portugal

Ilona Kovács, João Dias and Maria da Conceição Cerdeira

**Capturing the different perceptions related to distinct educational and work experiences is fundamental for assessing the propensity of young people to unionize. However, the literature has paid little attention to this subject in the Portuguese context. In this paper, we analyze young workers' perceptions of trade unions in Portugal, considering their individual life and work trajectories. It is argued that, despite the great vulnerability of young workers and their weak unionization, their perceptions of trade unions are not homogeneous. The results obtained from content analysis of semi-structured interviews reveal three main types of perceptions linked to different segments of young workers, characterized by different work and life experiences and socio-economic positions: positive perceptions, negative perceptions and critical perceptions.**

**KEYWORDS:** perception, unionism, precariousness, young workers, Portugal.

## Introduction

One of the major challenges facing unions today is the recruitment of young workers, given the progressive decline in union density and the aging of its members (Ebbinghaus *et al.*, 2011; Bryson *et al.*, 2011). Although to varying degrees, unionization rates among young people are lower and have been declining faster than among older workers in almost all EU countries (Pascual and Waddington, 2000; Visser, 2006). This subject has received significant attention, with some explanations put forward for the low union density of young people in different socio-economic contexts, for example, in Great Britain (Waddington and Kerr, 2002; Tailby and Pollert, 2011), Ireland (Turner and D'Art, 2008), Canada (Lowe and Rastin, 2000; Gomez *et al.*, 2002), Greece (Kretsos, 2011) and New

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Zealand (Haynes *et al.*, 2005). In Portugal, trade union density has declined by more than 60% since 1978, and it is currently at its lowest level (Cerdeira and Padilha, 1990; Stoleroff and Naumann, 1993; Cerdeira, 1997; Dornelas, 2009; Sousa, 2011; Estanque *et al.*, 2013; Portugal and Vilares, 2013; Costa *et al.*, 2015). However, academic research on youth and trade unions in the Portuguese context is scarce. This paper seeks to contribute to filling this gap. The Portuguese case is of particular interest since it is one of the EU countries most affected by the recent financial crisis, which has accentuated the institutional fragility of trade unions and the vulnerability of young people in the labour market.

The debate on the factors likely to explain the low unionization of young workers has paid considerable attention to the values of young people at work and their attitudes towards trade unions (Waddington, 2014). Yet, few studies have analyzed young workers' perceptions of trade unions in light of their individual life and work trajectories despite the fact that the decision to join a union is influenced by factors "embedded in the context of an individual's work history" (Lowe and Rastin, 2000: 217).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze young workers' perceptions of trade unions in Portugal, in articulation with a variety of structural factors such as the socio-economic context, family background related to economic and cultural resources, and educational attainment and interaction with personal agency aspects such as initiative and reflexivity. Our purpose gives rise to two main questions: what type of perception do young workers have about unions and how are these perceptions articulated with their work and life pathways? The analysis is underpinned by contributions from industrial relations research and the transition trajectories developed by youth studies, which consider the interaction between structural factors and subjective experiences.

The study is based on content analysis of semi-structured interviews with 40 young workers from service sectors. The article is structured as follows. First, we contextualize the low union density of young people in Portugal. Then we present the theoretical framework that underpins the study. Section three discusses the research methodology. The fourth section summarizes the research findings. The article ends with a discussion of the results and conclusions.

## **Unions and young workers in Portugal: an overview**

The low level of unionization of young workers represents only one facet of a wider context of decline in unionization, albeit with significant variations between countries (Ebbinghaus *et al.*, 2011). It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the factors that explain the crisis of trade unionism, but the literature includes structural changes in the economy and society, the development of institutional

and political conditions unfavourable to trade unions, and the insufficient response of trade unions to the challenges of globalization and transformations of the labour market (Hyman, 1997; Ebbinghaus, 2002; Estanque *et al.*, 2013). Since its peak of about 61% in 1978, trade union density in Portugal has fallen steadily, to reach 35% in 1988, 23.4% in 1998, 20.5% in 2008 and 18.5% in 2013 (Visser, 2016). The Portuguese trade union movement has experienced the second largest decline within the OECD, corresponding to a fall of 62.5% in union density and 54.5% in union members from 1980 to 2012 (OECD, 2016).

This great erosion is concomitant with other weaknesses in the Portuguese industrial relations system, characterized by Visser<sup>1</sup> (2009: 49) as “polarised/State-centred”. These weaknesses include high hostility between employer and employee organizations, frequent State intervention in collective agreements, low presence of workers’ organizations at the workplace (only 8% of establishments, Eurofound, 2015) and a quite complex and fragmented structure of trade unions<sup>2</sup>. The most influential confederations are CGTP (*Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses*) and UGT (*União Geral de Trabalhadores*), that accounted for 64% and 25% of unionized workers respectively in 2013 (Visser, 2016). While CGTP identifies itself as representative of a class-based trade unionism and pursues an anti-capitalist struggle, the UGT is closer to a trade unionism of social integration and promotion of social dialogue (Hyman, 2001; Costa, 2015). These differences can be seen in their diverging approaches to changes in industrial relations, labour market and social policy. Over the past three decades, the UGT has signed more than two dozen tripartite agreements on social consultation covering very diverse topics, including labour laws reforms. By contrast, the CGTP has engaged in political and social mobilization against the implementation of most of these agreements, arguing that some matters were unfavourable to workers and jeopardized their acquired rights.

Such emphasis on acquired rights has contributed to a significant segmentation of the labour market. From the 1980s until 2012, the Portuguese labour law evolved according to a strategy designated by Regini (2000) as “flexibility at the margin”: it protected workers with “standard” employment while facilitating the dissemination of precarious jobs. This evolution has led to an employment system that, over the years, has included very high levels of unstable employment in the European context, which particularly afflict young people when entering the labour market.

Table 1 shows the greater vulnerability of Portuguese youth in comparison with the EU28 and the increase in this vulnerability with the economic recession. The employment rates for Portuguese young people (39.4%) are lower than those for the EU28 (47.3%). Moreover, they have higher rates of temporary employment, involuntary part-time employment, unemployment, long-term unemployment and risk of poverty and social exclusion. A comparison of 2007

TABLE 1

**Vulnerability indicators of young workers (15-29 years), Portugal (PT) and EU28 (%)**

	2015		Change between 2007 and 2015 (percentage points)	
	PT	EU28	PT	EU28
Employment	39.4	47.3	-10.7	-3.1
Temporary employment	52.2	32.4	9.3	2.4
Involuntary part-time	55.0	33.8	4.4	7.6
Unemployment	22.8	16.1	8.9	4.1
Long-term unemployment	8.1	5.9	3.8	2.3
Young people at risk of poverty or exclusion	31.1	29.0	6.1(a)	2.1(a)

(a) Change between 2007 and 2013.

Source: Eurostat, European Union Labour Force Survey database (accessed January 2, 2017)

(pre-crisis) with 2015 shows that the situation of young people in the labour market has deteriorated in the EU28, but this deterioration has been even greater for the Portuguese young workers in all items (except for involuntary part-time).

As Costa *et al.* (2015) and Costa (2015) highlight, the focus of trade union discourse on acquired rights and standard employment generates tensions, distance and distrust with regard to the nature of trade union intervention during protest actions organized by precarious workers. Dornelas (2009) reports that about 60% of Portuguese wage earners declare that they do not sympathize with any existent trade union, even though 65% consider the role of unions to be very important in protecting employment and improving working conditions for wage earners.

Unfortunately, there are no official data on youth unionization in Portugal. However, the few studies addressing this topic converge to put it at a very low level. Dornelas (2009) reports that young workers (aged 18-25) represented only 5% of the unionized workers in Portugal in 2006, against 20% for the group aged 26-33, 45.6% for workers aged 34-49, and 39.4% for those over 49. Portugal and Vilares (2013) point to similar trends, stating that a 10-year increase in the average age is associated with an increase of five percentage points in the rate of unionization. However, the attitude of young workers in relation to trade unions is quite positive. They attach even greater importance than older groups to the role of trade unions in employment security and improving working conditions (respectively 4.05 and 3.72 on a 1-5 scale, Dornelas, 2009). Thus, we can conclude that, in Portugal, as in most other OECD countries, young people are considerably less unionized than older workers, and a positive relationship between age and union density is observed (Waddington and Kerr, 2002; Kretsos, 2011; Waddington, 2014).

## Theoretical framework

Some literature has suggested that the low rate of unionism of young workers is due to a change in attitudes towards trade unions among the young. According to this view, young people today are more individualistic and instrumental than previous generations and, as a result, they are less likely to join trade unions or to engage in collective actions (Phelps Brown, 1990; Brown, 1992; O'Bannon, 2001; Cates, 2014). One argument supporting this view, mainly based on studies about the United Kingdom, claims that the rise of the neo-liberal agenda and the legal constraints imposed on trade unions by successive conservative governments after 1979 produced a generation ("Thatcher's children") that is more oriented towards individual consumption and ideologically opposed to trade unionism (Brown, 1992). Another asserts that the new models of human resource management and the development of flexible production systems promote individual responsibility and concomitantly weaken traditional collective solidarity (Kochan *et al.*, 1986; Pascual and Waddington, 2000; Papinot, 2009; Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011).

Yet, studies conducted in several countries show that young workers are as equally, or even more pre-disposed to join unions as previous generations (Gomez *et al.*, 2002; Haynes *et al.*, 2005; Turner and D'Art, 2008; Waddington and Kerr, 2002; Tailby and Pollert, 2011; Kretsos, 2011). Thus, explanation for the lower unionization of young workers must be sought in other factors. Cates (2014), for example, emphasizes change in values at work and inadequacy in the services offered by the unions. While young people aspire to quick career progression based on performance evaluation, the unions fight for progression based on seniority, which is usually slow. Payne (1989) and Spilsbury *et al.* (1987) highlight job and workplace characteristics. They consider that the lower unionization of young people reflects an "exposure effect", characterized by the location of young workers in professions and industries that are little unionized. Constraints to unionization in other studies include employers' resistance to unionization (Macias, 2003) and the difficult working conditions of young people (Pascual and Waddington, 2000; Gomez *et al.*, 2002; Kretsos, 2011; ILO, 2013, 2016).

Another explanation for the low level of unionization among young workers highlights changes in the transition process from youth to adulthood. It is argued that, while in the post-war period this transition was marked by linearity, homogeneity and predictability, today it is discontinuous, uncertain, differentiated and individualized. In the current context of instability, individualization and growing risks, young people need to be able to cope with uncertainty, reflect, make choices, negotiate constraints and opportunities and actively shape their own biographies (Roberts, 1995; Roberts, 2012; Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2001; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Furlong *et al.*, 2003). Lowe and Rastin (2000) found

that attitudes and behaviours are formed in multiple work experiences that mediate the transition of young people from school to work. However, there is little empirical evidence on the differentiation of trajectories, considering the dynamic interaction between choices, individual actions and structural constraints (Bradley and Devadason, 2008; Lehmann, 2004; Furlong *et al.*, 2011).

Following Lowe and Rastin (2000), we consider that the transitions perspective is useful for understanding the relationship between young people and unions, namely their attitudes and propensity for unionization. Thus, our approach is focused on individual working and life experience. It takes into account the interaction between a variety of structural factors such as socio-economic context, family background related to economic and cultural resources and educational attainment, together with personal agency aspects such as capacity to choose, negotiate and actively shape one's own life (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977; Bourdieu, 1980, 1988; Bradley and Devadason, 2008; Lowe and Rastin, 2000; Furlong *et al.*, 2003; Furlong *et al.*, 2011; Roberts, 2012).

## Methodology

Because our analysis of young people's perceptions is grounded in the context of their work experiences and individual biographies, it is necessary to resort to a qualitative approach. This methodological option is justified by the exploratory nature of our study, given the lack of research on the topic. This qualitative study was conducted without any claim concerning the representativeness of the sample. It assumes that the experience of the individuals included in the sample will enable us to apprehend young workers' perceptions of trade unions in the current socio-economic conditions.

Many studies limit the category of young people to those aged 15-24 years. This study, by contrast, opted to extend the upper limit to 30, in order to capture more elongated trajectories due to a longer stay in school or return to school. The longer trajectories also overcome the difficulty of clearly identifying the age of becoming adult (Furlong *et al.*, 2011). Information was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2013 and May 2014. Our sample was designed in accordance with the objectives of the study. It comprised 40 young workers (aged 16-30) evenly distributed across four service sectors: activities of research and development, call-centres, large shopping areas, and fast-food chains installed in shopping centres. These sectors are representative of the youth labour market trends in the Portuguese context, which include non-standard work arrangements (part-time employment, temporary work, dependent self-employment, and informal employment), irregular working hours and low salary<sup>3</sup>. The study covered the

Lisbon Metropolitan Area, which hosts a large concentration of these sectors. The respondents were selected by a set of criteria in order to take into account the relevant characteristics for the study, including gender, age, education levels and family background. Table 2 gives the distribution of our sample according to these four characteristics

**TABLE 2**  
**Distribution of respondents**

	Variable	Number
Gender	Male	20
	Female	20
Age group	16-24	21
	25-30	19
Education	Higher education	12
	High school	16
	Incomplete high school	12
Social origin	Working-class	16
	Lower-middle classe	12
	Middle class	6
	Upper-middle class	6

There are no data that make it possible to assess the degree of coverage by collective agreements and trade union density of these specific sectors. At a more aggregated level, coverage of collective agreements is high. In 2014, it was between 97.5% for commerce and 76.1% for research activities. However, trade union density is very low, ranging from 8% in the catering sector to 2.4% in research activities (Portugal and Vilares, 2013).

The interviews were based on a guide with five topics: 1- class and family background; 2- education/training trajectories; 3- employment paths; 4- expectations for the future; and 5- relations with unions and other civic organizations. The latter topic included the following questions: Are you unionized? What are the reasons for unionization or non-unionization? What do trade unions represent for you? What do you think about the existing unions? Are there union representatives in your workplace? Have you ever gone on strike? Who do you ask for help when you have a problem at work? Are you a member of other civic or recreational associations?

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The resultant information was classified according to the five topics presented above. The cross-sectional



and longitudinal analysis carried out enabled us to link young workers' perceptions with the dimensions studied and with their individual working and life paths. Each type must be understood in the Weberian sense, that is, as a constructed conceptual framework and not as the decoding of reality in its complexity.

## Research findings

The results obtained by content analysis of the interviews confirm the trends recorded by the aforementioned studies on the unionization of young people within the Portuguese context. In our case, only a small proportion of respondents were unionized (7.5%) and one third (35%) showed unfamiliarity with trade unions. Three main types of perceptions towards unions emerged: positive, negative and critical. As expected, the differentiation in perceptions is entwined with different segments, characterized by different socio-economic positions, defined by family origin, education level and insertion and position in the labour market.

### Positive perceptions of unionism and trade union involvement

In our sample of 40 respondents, 30% held positive perceptions on unionism and trade union involvement. One quarter of these respondents were unionized and their positive perception was based on the improvements achieved in terms of wages and working conditions. This is the case of a 25 year-old man, from a lower middle class family, who works full time as a call centre operator, despite still studying at university. He has a permanent contract with a temporary work agency, and has been working for three years in the same call centre, earning 700 euros per month. Even though his contractual situation is stable, he is very dissatisfied with the content of his job and the lack of career prospects. He actively participates in associations and does volunteer work at cultural events. He sees the union's role as very important for improvements to wages and working conditions:

The union, by carrying out the strike, got improvements in wages, facilities and working conditions (...). I think that a strike can go well or it can go wrong. It can be used well or misused because the unions here are very attached to the communist side. I do not see myself in that field. It is a little complicated. But, basically, it is an attempt to cope, or to try to improve the conditions a bit. (...) employees really have no power without trade unions as we are easily manipulated when acting individually.

He participated in a strike when, after a year of monthly contracts, he was finally going to get an annual contract:

At that time, I had a problem with a supervisor and I was afraid that my contract would not be renewed (...). And I remember I was on strike and the temp agency supervisors

were taking pictures to see who was there. By chance, it turned out to be more bluff than anything else because they did not go after anyone. But I felt that “ok, this may go very badly and I’ll soon be out of work”.

Even those who are not union members (the majority of the segment holding positive perceptions) consider that unions protect and defend the workers, as exemplified in the following statements. A 29 year-old woman, who has worked in several restaurants with a permanent contract, then without a contract and currently has a 6-month temporary employment agency contract to work in cinemas, earning 615 euros. She combines university studies with work:

The role of trade unions is crucial for workers, especially nowadays when workers do not have much protection; so, the union exists to defend their rights. My boyfriend is unionized. I’m not unionized because the branch in which I usually work is not covered by unions.

A 23 year-old man with 12 years of education and a two-year masseur course, who works part-time in a call centre earning 450 euros via a permanent contract with a temporary employment agency, but whose dream is to work as a massage therapist:

I’m not unionized. I’ve been close to joining but I ended up not signing. For me, the union means having someone to support me in my rights. I know that even as a non-union member, they would intercede for me. (...). Without them, many conditions that I have today would not have been granted—including salary increases.

Interestingly, the positive perception of unions proved higher among call centre operators than in other occupational groups<sup>4</sup>. Currently, this occupation, despite its high turnover rate, is increasingly perceived not as a transitory occupation but as a long-term career. Many young people who formerly needed money to pay for their college courses worked in call centres and considered this type of work to be something temporary (Kovacs and Casaca, 2008). However, they have ended up staying in this type of job and there is now an increasing number of workers who have been there for 6-8 years due to a lack of employment alternatives compatible with their university degrees. The rising number of jobs, the high workforce concentration and the homogeneity of the employment situations, as well as precarious working conditions are all factors favourable to organizing in defence of the collective interests in this activity.

### **Negative perceptions of unionism and individual defence of interests**

The percentage of respondents with negative perceptions about unions was 25%. Out of this group, 40% are well qualified (undergraduates, graduates), work in areas greatly valued by the labour market, come from families with high

economic and cultural resources, and are characterized by an individual defence of their own interests. Upon completion of their studies, some employment experiences followed in which they were able to achieve professional stability with good career prospects. These respondents seek personal fulfilment and professional development, which constitute the main reasons for any voluntary mobility between jobs. They are able to, and have the opportunities to choose between jobs that require highly qualified labour conducive to continuous learning and the development of new skills. Due to their relatively strong position in the labour market, they are able to negotiate higher salaries and better working conditions with their employers. An example of a very negative perception is the case of a 26-year-old manager at a large retail company, who is from a family in the upper middle class. After obtaining a master's degree in management, he began teaching at a private university on a fixed-term contract. He simultaneously began working in the marketing field of a French multinational company where he could have stayed on a permanent contract. However, he chose not to accept it because he found a better opportunity in a large retail company that offered him better career prospects, which met his expectations. An extremely negative perception emerges from his opinion about trade unions:

Trade unions are a force of destruction that ultimately do not protect workers. The actions of trade unions mostly end up harming the workers themselves. (...) And this has nothing to do with political opinions; this has to do with my analysis of the facts. (...) I think that they end up being counterproductive because the approach trade unions take to enterprises on behalf of the workers is not constructive. In almost 100% of cases, it is merely destructive. I see this because my shop has two union representatives with strong union attitudes and in fact they are highly destructive people (...).

The discourse of a computer engineer (a 30-year-old with a permanent contract in a software company) represents a good example of the perception that unions are unnecessary, because problems get solved individually: "I never wanted the unions to solve problems. I solve them in an individual way. I'm not much about allying myself to other people."

Although rare, this anti-union discourse also appears among low-skilled young workers, as illustrated by the speech of a 23 year-old young man from a family with low economic and cultural resources who, after several poorly paid informal jobs, is now a blue-collar worker at a hypermarket with a fixed-term contract earning 700 euros:

Every month you need to give them money. And what do they do? They strike for the union leaders to appear on television. After that, the strike is over. Life goes on. A strike here, in Portugal, is for what? For nothing! People have still not put that into their heads.

## Critical perceptions of unionism and searching for alternatives to the collective defence of interests

This type of perception (10% of the sample) emerged from the segment composed of young workers with high levels of skills/training but in areas with low demand in the Portuguese labour market and who face precarious employment situations (dependent self-employed and research grant holders, some aiming to obtain degrees and others working on research projects, but both with annual contracts). They have no scope for individually negotiating higher and better working conditions and remunerations. They engage in motivating work conducive to continuous learning and skill development, which enables a high level of identification with the work they do. However, their employment situations entail instability and insecurity resulting from the impossibility of predicting their future professional situations, high economic vulnerability and restrictions on social rights (those based on stable employment).

For this critical perception, the case of a 29 year-old woman, a researcher in molecular biology in a university attached laboratory represents a good example. She started out on an unpaid internship. Then, for 18 months, she received a scholarship (745 euros) paid by the institution under a research project. After that, she obtained a doctorate scholarship paid by the FCT (Foundation for Science and Technology), renewable annually for four years. All this time she worked on the same project:

The fellow's position is a very precarious situation. I do not mind having a doctoral fellowship, because I am in training and at the end I will get a degree, which is important for my curriculum. But, after completing the PhD, the fellowship ends and, as long as I do not get another fellowship, I have nothing and no means of support... so, I have to search for employment abroad.

Research activities are mainly carried out by researchers with the status of grant holders who are not considered employees by unions:

As far as I know, there is no trade union representing grant holders. I think it is an issue that should upset trade unions because there are researchers that hold grants but are going to lose them, researchers that have already lost their grants, false independent researchers, which is the worst case. But, so far, I don't think there has been any action taken by the unions on this issue. And I don't think the young guys tend to join trade unions either. There are many trade unions that are already outdated and need to renew their ideas and do things differently. They are no longer able to engage the young. (...). We have been doing a job for so long and then, because the employment relationship is non-existent, we no longer have any kind of support... This is ridiculous taking into consideration that we're very specialized workers.

This researcher considers that it is not the unions but rather other organizations that are defending the interests of this segment of workers, especially the Association of Scientific Research Grants Holders (ABIC) and the Association to Combat Precariousness (*PI-Inflexible Precarious*). Some improvements in the situation of these researchers have been obtained due to the work of ABIC:

Grant holders have become increasingly united and they have obtained some improvements. There was a time when we had no rights, neither vacation nor maternity leave. We had no right to anything. Now, it's not like that.

Despite the 2004 change in researcher status, there are still risks, particularly in relation to health problems, as in this respondent's case:

I work every day with hazardous substances that are carcinogenic and we have no health insurance to cover these risks. If I have an accident at work, I'm covered, but if I happen to develop cancer because I work with radioactivity, nobody is going to pay anything for my treatment because it isn't considered a workplace accident. And that's something that scares me because we may very easily have problems that happen due to all the exposure to the chemicals that we use, some of which have not been tested yet and we don't even really understand well how they work or how dangerous they are.

In turn, the *Inflexible Precarious* association<sup>5</sup> launched an online survey during April 2014 to measure the extent of precariousness in the scientific research field in Portugal. The results indicate that almost 78% of researchers had never worked in research on an employment contract, and have found themselves in this situation for 5 to 15 years with only 15.7% having an employment contract<sup>6</sup>.

Among the false independent workers, some also believe that unions are not able to defend the interests of young workers. This perception emerged from the speech of a 29-year-old designer, who had been working for three years in a small computer games firm. He comes from a working-class family. After some experience of poorly paid informal jobs, interspersed by two years of unemployment, he considers that having this job (earning 1500 euros before taxes for 40 weekly working hours) amounts to a great privilege:

For many years, no one heard trade unions talk about precariousness and false independents, now there is some effort to look at this new reality. But I guess they don't want people in their ranks that do not have a stable job. This is because it makes no sense for the current trade union logic. I think this logic has to change because this does not work, because most workers today are in precarious situations. Workers in retail and catering are precarious, have no opportunity even of unionizing and have no way to get organized because people are working in dispersed surroundings (...). There are no collective labour contracts. There are no canteens for people to join up even at lunchtime, so people cannot get together and realize that they share common interests

and problems, thus they can't try to find common ways to solve their problems (...). And this also implies that unions don't know how to reach young people. I think the problem lies on both sides.

He appeals for a more active role from the State in protecting worker rights, in particular for false independents:

I can't say I feel any support from the State. What I feel in Portugal is that I have to stand on my own. But, in these terms, the State could easily find out which companies uses false independents. I get that same payment from the same company and this is already a suspicious case of false independents. And even when I was a trainee, the issue of unpaid internships, abuse of trainees and even the selection of trainees were all taking place and the State didn't do anything about it.

The movement against the abusive recourse to traineeship by many firms led to the creation of the Internet Platform "Shame on you", set up in March 2014. This platform denounces employers who advertise jobs shamelessly disguised as internships while requiring high qualifications (often a master's degree and three or more years of experience), but paying only the minimum wage or no wage at all. To many employers, a training post currently means having the opportunity to have young, skilled and highly qualified workers at a low cost or no cost at all. Since the State contributes in the range of 40 to 75% of the costs incurred by training posts, companies are encouraged to transform normal jobs into training posts, thus increasing precariousness with State support. Thus, regulation and supervision are deemed important mechanisms that the State should apply to protect workers, as the above mentioned false independent claims:

There should be more inspection campaigns. Because the laws exist, but they are not respected, there is no control by the State. And that gives me the idea that the State has no real interest in changing this or really wants to make an effort. I do not see the State acting at that level! At least that's the image that comes across... Large companies have for years and years been employing false independents. Even the State itself has a lot of workers under this regime.

It should be noted that there has been a legislative change regarding the situation of false independents. In July 2013, parliament voted on the *Legislative Citizen's Initiative-Law against Precariousness*. The *Bill* was rejected. However, a new *Law* (63/2013) was approved establishing a procedure to ensure the signing of employment contracts due and enforcing all rights missing in situations of false independents. The law establishes a mechanism that does not require the worker's initiative and reverses the burden of proof, requiring that the employer prove that this is not a dependent work situation. Since 2013, the *Inflexible Precarious* association has opened an online complaints channel and now

provides legal advice, serving as an intermediary between the workers and the public authorities.

The alternative organizations mentioned by this segment of respondents meet the concerns of young people by making their precarious employment situations visible and mobilizing them through new forms of action, new language and creative uses of cyberspace (Soeiro, 2012). However, the interest in these organizations is also entwined with an awareness of the expansion of insecurity, which requires a fight against precariousness not only by young people, but by all workers, as stated by the previously cited grant holder:

I think it's very important that not only young people, but all precarious workers join together because we are increasing in number, and even colleagues of my parents, who have an old employment contract, are beginning to feel immense pressure to give up the rights that they have already earned. And I hope that workers are able to regain the privileges they were able to get after the April 25 revolution. At that time, workers were able to fight for so many benefits, which they are now losing one by one and we simply watch quietly, saying nothing. I think that's the worst thing we can do. I hear so often the phrase: 'Things are like this!'. But things do not have to be so! I think people can fight in order to achieve basic things...

Finally, it is noteworthy that the largest segment, that is, 35% of respondents did not know anything about unions or other organizations for the defence of worker interests. This segment of younger and less-skilled workers, subject to a high degree of insecurity, held no information on trade unions and was unaware of their role. They have never been contacted, but have also never tried to get information about trade unions in their own professional fields. Some respondent statements illustrate this unawareness. A 16 year-old girl with nine years of schooling, living with an unemployed mother and a younger brother, working informally in a *café* and holding a temporary job in a franchised restaurant said: "I have no idea of what trade unions are".

A 19 year-old man, with nine years of schooling, from a working-class family, working for two years on temporary contracts in several franchised restaurants and stores in shopping centres expressed a similar view: "I am not interested in these issues. I was never interested in finding out more about it".

These workers are also unaware of new organizations that fight precariousness. They come from families with low educational and economic resources, and usually leave school early to begin work. Entering the labour market has become necessary due to ruptures and family problems (divorce, parental unemployment). Their employers are mainly temporary work firms, commercial retail chains or transnational fast-food companies operating in shopping centres. They alternate between insecure and poorly paid jobs interspersed with unemploy-

ment. Although they desire to return to school, this seems problematic due to the difficulty of combining work and studies. Young people in this segment are at high risk of being trapped in a cycle marked by precariousness and unemployment, with no capability for either individually or collectively defending their interests.

## Discussion and conclusions

The fact that many young workers are exposed to the pressures of unemployment and atypical work while, simultaneously, generally not being unionized, might suggest that they have homogeneous perceptions, attitudes and orientations. However, our results show that different youth segments hold differentiated perceptions and values. Unionized young workers with a very positive perception have benefited from trade union actions. They come from lower middle class families and have completed secondary education. Some are studying at university. Their work experience is linked to call centres. The non-unionized young workers with positive perceptions obtained positive information about trade unions through direct contact by the union or through unionized family members or friends, which highlights the importance of social capital to give support to union values (Gomez *et al.*, 2002). Their work experience is varied, relating to call centres, catering and retail. Despite this positive perception, diverse interviewees mentioned the lack of union availability in their workplace. In this respect, our results meet those obtained by other studies concerning some of the obstacles to the unionization of young people, in particular the lack of knowledge and information about trade unions, as well as the lack of contact with trade union representatives (Waddington and Kerr, 2002; Haynes *et al.*, 2005).

The segment with a relatively strong position in the labour market displays a more individualistic orientation. Our results indicate that this privileged segment with high education levels and coming from families with high economic and cultural resources accumulate advantages related to personal agency. These young people have the ability to choose from multiple opportunities and to negotiate in the logic of reflexive management of their biographies. They decide based on their ambitions and projects, are oriented towards the individual defence of their interests, and consider unions unnecessary (Beck, 1992; Furlong *et al.*, 2003). However, in addition to the privileged segment of young workers, we also found anti-union attitudes among young people with low level of schooling and precarious jobs, who come from families with low levels of economic and cultural resources. Overall, we can conclude that only a relatively small segment (25%) of the sample of young people interviewed features the anti-union attitude. In other words, there is little opposition to trade unionism (Waddington and Kerr, 2002; Dornelas, 2009).



The segment of highly qualified young workers with fragile labour market positions, whose activity is motivating but whose status is precarious (dependent self-employed, grant holder researchers), focuses more on alternative collective actions to defend their interests. This group accounts for a tenth of the interviewees. Despite their critical stance, they have no anti-union and no anti-collectivist attitudes. They are critical about existing unions because they do not give voice to the interests of young people in precarious situations (Estanque *et al.*, 2013; Costa *et al.*, 2015). They consider the fight against precariousness a priority but through alternative organizational forms of collective actions.

The trajectory of younger and less qualified workers, who come from families with low levels of educational and economic resources, is marked by early insertion in the labour market. These young people are forced to work to help support the family in difficulties. Their frequent changes of job do not spring from new opportunities for upward mobility. On the contrary, their options are limited and they are at risk of being trapped in a sequence of precarious jobs. They report a lack of knowledge about trade unions and the new social movements and associations, as well as a lack of contact with unions. They can be considered to hold a neutral position with regard to trade unions.

Our results do not corroborate the individualization thesis, which postulates that the weakening of structural factors and the generalization of the reflexive and active behaviour of young people leads to the biographies of choice (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Wyn and Woodman, 2006). We found that there are segments of young workers building their life conditions without choice or with very limited choices available. Our results support the thesis that the social origin and socio-economic conditions of young people shape their pathways and their ability to choose. Thus, the transition processes of young people continue to be influenced by structural factors, despite the trend towards differentiation and individualization. As a result, the different perceptions towards trade unions are linked to socio-economic background, economic and cultural family resources, level of education and work and labour market experiences. In other words, agency is not free of structural constraints but limited, and the individualization is structured (Bradley and Devadson, 2008; Lehman, 2004; Furlong *et al.*, 2011).

Our study presents the limitations of an exploratory work, focused on little unionized sectors and based on a not necessarily representative sample. Thus, some care must be taken when making generalizations. A future research agenda may extend the study to other more unionized sectors and include large-scale cross-sectional surveys at national and international level. Capturing the diversity of young workers' experiences and perceptions is a challenge to industrial relations research and the heterogeneity of perceptions should be taken into account in future research. This heterogeneity is also relevant for trade unionism,

as it can provide unions with insights to adapt their strategies and organization structures to the working life diversity of young workers and to mobilize their latent interests in collective action.

## Notes

- 1 The author distinguishes four industrial relations regimes in Western Europe: Nordic corporatism (Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark), social partnership (western continental Europe), liberal pluralism (UK, Ireland, Malta and Cyprus) and polarized or State-centred (Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Greece).
- 2 The degree of union concentration is 0.278 (2008), on a 0-5 scale (Visser, 2016).
- 3 The selection of young workers was done in two steps. First, five employers were selected in each sector from lists obtained from business associations. Afterwards, two young workers were selected in each employer, in a way that respected a balance between male and female elements in the sample.
- 4 It should be noted that, after the interview phase (2014), call centre workers created a new trade union for this industry.
- 5 This association was founded in 2012 by the *Inflexible Precarious* movement launched in 2007 specifically to fight precariousness through various initiatives.
- 6 <http://www.precarios.net/?p=10116>, accessed on 08.12.2014

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## SUMMARY

### Young Workers' Perceptions of Trade Unions in Portugal

This paper seeks to capture how unions are perceived by young workers in Portugal and to identify different types of perceptions. Our analysis considers both structural factors and subjective experiences and is based on semi-structured interviews with young people working in sectors with a high concentration of youth employment. The fact that young workers are increasingly exposed to the pressures of unemployment and precarious work might suggest that there is homogeneity in their perceptions about trade unions and collective action. However, our results show that young workers' perceptions are not homogenous and that they interconnect with distinct segments, characterized by different socio-economic conditions, as defined by family status, education level and position in the labour market. Three types of perceptions were identified by content analysis of the interviews: positive, negative and critical perceptions. A final segment of younger and less-skilled workers, of families with low educational and economic resources and having left school prematurely, have neither information nor any understanding about unions.

Our findings support the thesis that diversity of educational and early labour market experiences, which characterize transition processes to adulthood, shape the relation between young workers and unions, in particular the motivation to join unions. Capturing the diversity of young workers experiences and perceptions is a challenge to industrial relations research, as well as to trade unionism. It can provide unions with important insights into how to adapt their strategies to recruit new young members and to mobilize the latent interests of young workers in collective action.

KEYWORDS: perception, unionism, precariousness, young workers, Portugal.

## RÉSUMÉ

### Les perceptions des jeunes travailleurs à l'égard des syndicats au Portugal

Cet article cherche à cerner comment les syndicats sont perçus par les jeunes travailleurs au Portugal, ainsi qu'à identifier les divers types de perceptions. Notre analyse, qui tient compte tant des facteurs structurels que des expériences subjectives, repose sur des entrevues semi-structurées auprès de jeunes personnes travaillant dans des secteurs à forte concentration d'employés jeunes. Le fait que les jeunes travailleurs sont de plus en plus exposés aux pressions du chômage et du travail précaire pourrait faire croire qu'il y a homogénéité dans leurs perceptions à l'égard des syndicats et de l'action collective. Toutefois, nos résultats montrent que les perceptions des jeunes ne sont pas homogènes et qu'elles sont rattachées à des segments distincts de population, caractérisés par diverses conditions socioéconomiques, telles que le statut familial, le niveau d'éducation et le poste détenu en emploi. Par le biais d'une analyse de contenu des entrevues, nous avons pu identifier trois types de perceptions : positives, négatives et critiques. Un dernier segment, les jeunes travailleurs peu qualifiés, provenant de familles ayant peu de ressources éducationnelles et économiques, et ayant quitté l'école prématurément, n'avaient ni l'information ni la compréhension sur les syndicats.

Nos résultats appuient la thèse qu'une éducation diversifiée ainsi que les premières expériences sur le marché du travail, lesquelles caractérisent les processus de transition vers l'âge adulte, modèlent la relation entre jeunes travailleurs et syndicats, en particulier, la motivation à adhérer à un syndicat. Saisir la diversité d'expériences et de perceptions des jeunes travailleurs demeure un défi pour la recherche en relations industrielles, de même que pour le mouvement syndical. Cela peut donner aux syndicats de précieuses clés qui leur permettront d'adapter leurs stratégies afin de recruter de nouveaux jeunes membres ainsi que de mobiliser les intérêts latents des jeunes travailleurs lors d'actions collectives.

MOTS-CLÉS : perception, syndicalisme, précarité, jeunes travailleurs, Portugal.

## RESUMEN

### Las percepciones de jóvenes trabajadores sobre los sindicatos en Portugal

Este artículo busca a captar cómo son percibidos los sindicatos por los jóvenes trabajadores en Portugal e identificar diferentes tipos de percepciones. Nuestro análisis considera los factores estructurales y las experiencias subjetivas y está basado en entrevistas semi-estructuradas con jóvenes que trabajan en sectores con alta concentración de empleo juvenil. El hecho que los trabajadores jóvenes son crecientemente expuestos a las presiones del desempleo y del trabajo precario puede sugerir que hay homogeneidad en sus percepciones sobre los sindicatos y la acción

colectiva. Sin embargo, nuestros resultados muestran que las percepciones de los jóvenes trabajadores no son homogéneas y que ellos interconectan con diferentes segmentos caracterizados por diferentes condiciones socio-económicas, definidas por la situación familiar, el nivel de educación y la posición en el mercado de trabajo. Tres tipos de percepciones son identificados mediante el análisis de contenido de las entrevistas: percepciones positivas, negativas y críticas. Un último segmento de trabajadores más jóvenes y menos calificados, provenientes de familias con bajo nivel de recursos educacionales y económicos y que han abandonado la escuela prematuramente, no tienen ninguna información ni comprensión con respecto a los sindicatos.

Nuestros resultados soportan la tesis que la diversidad de experiencia educacional y las primeras experiencias en el mercado de trabajo, que caracterizan los procesos de transición a la vida adulta, moldean la relación entre los jóvenes trabajadores y los sindicatos, en particular la motivación a adherir a un sindicato. Comprender la diversidad de percepciones y de experiencias de los jóvenes trabajadores constituye un reto para la investigación en relaciones industriales y para el sindicalismo. Esto puede ofrecer a los sindicatos un esclarecimiento sobre la manera de adaptar sus estrategias de reclutamiento de nuevos miembros jóvenes y sobre la movilización de los intereses latentes de los jóvenes trabajadores en la acción colectiva.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** percepción, sindicalismo, precariedad, jóvenes trabajadores, Portugal.