Trade Unions perceptions of young workers in the services sector in times of crisis

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Abstract
The low percentage of young workers joining trade unions is evidenced by many studies and is recognized by trade unions leaders as well. This low rate of membership is part of a broader context of erosion of unionization explained, among other factors, by the exit of the older unionized workforce and the decline in employment in sectors and companies with largest trade unions tradition, i.e. public administration and large enterprises. Portuguese trade unions have sought to attract young people through the creation of trade union branches and adherence to collective actions promoted by youth, especially during the current crisis. In order to better understand this weak support of youth to the trade unions and to collective mobilization, we conducted an analysis based on some results of semi-structured interviews with young workers (16-30 years) in new services sectors, more specifically, large supermarkets, fast-food and call centres. The results show the limited scope of trade unions’ strategies and we observe a generally weak relationship between social worlds of young people and the field of action of traditional trade unions. However, adherence to trade unions’ values increases with age and with the perception that they hold the capacity to influence the improvement of working conditions.

1. Introduction

In the current context of worsening conditions of work and life, the defence of workers’ interests tends to become increasingly dependent upon individual negotiations. There is a great imbalance of power in industrial relations. The concentrated power on key economic actors (TNCs and their alliances, global institutions like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank or the World Trade Organization) is not or is only slightly counterbalanced from the labour side. Trade unions’ power is weak and the protection of workers interests at a transnational level is also weak or non-existent. Trade unions action is faced with many difficulties: undermined by the crisis and by changes in the productive system, they have struggled to adapt their strategies and organization to the needs of very heterogeneous groups (by levels of training/qualification, sex, age, nationality, etc.) (Kovács, 2002, Cerdeira, 2005). Fragmentation and individualisation
of employment relationships underlying the prevailing production and management models render difficult the formation of relatively stable groups able to undertake collective action to defend commonly recognised workers interests. Due to the weakening of the trade unions movement and the increasing individualisation of labour relations, the ability to defend their interests and the ability to collective bargaining by workers in precarious employment situation are greatly reduced.

These trends, exacerbated by the financial and economic crisis, are particularly affecting young people, most of which are in a vulnerable position in the labour market, due to a strong increase of unemployment and precarious employment. The low rates of unionization of young workers, as evidenced by several studies, indicate that the organized defence of their interests is weak or non-existent. Besides, taking into account their lack of power to negotiate individually given their fragile position in the labour market, these workers are particularly subject to submission to requirements laid down by the employers. The detachment of young people in relation to unions is explained by many factors, among them the structural transformations in the labour market, a greater individualism among the young compared to previous generations, as well as the inability of unions to attract them and to meet their interests and concerns.

The almost universal vulnerability of young workers in a deregulated labour market in the context of the crisis and its weak unionization does not mean that there is homogeneity of perceptions of youth about unions. In this paper we present an analysis based on the results of semi-structured interviews with young workers (16-30 years) in some new services sectors, more specifically, large supermarkets, fast-food and call centres. Content analysis of the interviews identified four kinds of perceptions: positive perception of unionism and trade unions involvement; negative perception of unionism and individual defence of interests; critical perception of unionism and search for alternatives to the collective defence of interests and, finally, ignorance of unionism. These different types of perceptions are based on the differentiation between various segments of young workers.

2. Vulnerability of young workers in the labour market

Several studies indicate that young people are more exposed to the negative effects of the flexible labour market than the previous generations. The deterioration of the employment situation of this group is revealed by the increase in unemployment, precarious insertion in the labour market and the difficulty in accessing more stable jobs (Auer and Cazes, 2002; LópezCalle and Castillo, 2004; Guerreiro and Abrantes, 2004). Because of their weak position in the labour market, some authors consider that young people are the main victims of the increasing flexibility of labour markets in the context of globalization (Furlong, 1990; Joint-Lambert, 2000; Golsch, 2003). From this perspective, qualitative or functional flexibility with positive implications on employment (job content, learning opportunities, career prospects and remuneration)
benefits especially senior workers. In turn, quantitative easing with its negative implications strongly affects the young. Statistical data show that a substantial proportion of young workers has a fragile position in the labour market and that, in the Portuguese case, this fragility deeply worsened during the crisis, even when compared with senior workers (see Appendix). One manifestation of this weak position is the high unemployment rate which in the EU-27 increased from 11.7% in 2008 to 18.1% in 2013 and in the Portuguese case more than doubled between these years, from 13.2% to 28.1%.

Figure 1 – Youth unemployment (15-29 years), 2005-2013

![Graph showing youth unemployment rates for EU-27 and Portugal from 2005 to 2013.](source: Eurostat)

This fragile position of youth in the labour market is also evidenced by a higher incidence of precarious and flexible employment: 29.8% of young employees in the EU-27 and 43.5% in Portugal had temporary jobs in 2008, rising to 31.5% and 47.3%, respectively, in 2013.

Figure 2–Young employees (15-29 years) with temporary jobs (%)

![Graph showing the percentage of young employees with temporary jobs for EU-27 and Portugal from 2005 to 2013.](source: Eurostat)
In addition, there is a large fraction of young employees with part-time jobs. In the E.U. this percentage was 19.4% in 2008 and it evolved to 23.5% in 2013, i.e. a small increase of 4.1 percentage points. By contrast, in Portugal, where part-time work is less frequent and less desired, this percentage almost doubled (from 8.4% in 2008 to 15.7% in 2013).

Figure 3–Percentage of young workers (15-29 years) with part-time employment

![Figure 3](image)

Source: Eurostat

For many years, a high percentage of youth in Portugal has been forced to accept part-time jobs. Figure 4 shows that before the crisis already around half of part-time employment was involuntary but this percentage increased with the crisis.

Figure 4 – Percentage of involuntary part-time employment in total part-time youth employment (15-29 years)

![Figure 4](image)

Source: Eurostat
This strongly precarious integration of youth into the labour market in Portugal is observed even for those with a high level of education. A study on graduates of the University of Lisbon showed that, also in this case, the first job for 1999-2003 was marked by precariousness. In fact, only 11.7% accessed a job with a permanent contract. As for the remaining, 45.6% had a fixed term contract, 30.4% where in the regime of “recibo verde” (green receipt, usually false (forced) independents), 8.7% had a training post and 3.6% were scholarship students, with the salary (net) of the overwhelming majority (87%) below 1000 Euros (34% below 500 Euros) and only a minority (6.3%) above 1500 €, with no differences between men and women (Ahmed, 2009). These data indicate a very limited access to jobs with permanent contracts and career prospects that is the privilege of only a minority, even for young college graduates. This precarious insertion in the labour marker comes together with a frequent change of jobs, without access to the internal labour markets and, therefore, losing the opportunity to obtain job stability. According to the same study, 5 years after graduation only a quarter of young employees had a permanent contract (although representing an increase compared to the first job). Another study (Kovács, 2005) also found a tendency for the reproduction of employment situations, i.e. a substantial proportion of the individuals with permanent contracts were already previously in that situation and, in turn, individuals with temporary contracts were in a similar situation in the two previous jobs.

However, some authors consider that there is an internalization of flexibility and precariousness of young people that is very different from their parents. While parents are unhappy and resist the insecurity and flexibility of employment, young people adapt to deal with the precarious transitions and the uncertain future. Thus, from this perspective, youth workers in precarious situations do not aspire to follow the path of their parents, accept temporary jobs, work just to satisfy their needs of limited consumption and take advantage of free time to do what they like (Gorz, 1997). In a different approach, youth internalize the rhetoric of adaptability (Roberts, 1995; Bradley & Devadson, 2008).

3. The young and trade unions

3.1. The unionization of young

The weak adhesion of youth to unionization is a fact evidenced by several studies and recognized by trade unions’ leaders themselves. This low level of union membership is part of a wider context of unionization erosion explained inter alia by the deregulation of the labour market, with the exit of the older population from the market labour and decreased employment in unionized sectors and businesses of greater trade union tradition, namely, public administration (local and central) and large enterprises (Hyman, 1997). Restricted to flexible forms of employment and underpaid in sectors of low level of union density, young people today have a weak relationship with trade
unions. According to Visser (2013), the rate of unionization in the group 18-24 years reaches particularly low values in countries such as Hungary (4 percent), Italy (4.2 percent), United States (4.4 percent), Estonia (6.3 percent), the Netherlands (7.8%) and United Kingdom (9.6 percent). Even in the countries of Northern Europe (Finland, Sweden and Denmark), characterized by higher rates of unionisation (around 70%), the trade unions density of this age group is just over half that of the national average.

For Portugal, there are no official data available on the unionization of young people and there is only a scarce number of studies addressing this topic. A study by Dornelas (2009) is an exception, based on a supplementary module on unionization in Portugal of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). According to the author, youth (18-25 years) represent 5% of unionized workers in Portugal in 2006, the group aged 26-33 years take 20%, 34-49 years have 45.6% and those above 49 years own 29.4%. This gives an estimate of unionization rate of youth (18-25 years) around 6%, in 2006. The weak unionization of young people in Portugal is still referenced by another study that focused on new services sectors (call centre banking and telecommunications sector, trade in supermarkets and fast food). In a group of 246 respondents aged mostly between 18 and 26 years, only 6.9% were unionized Cerdeira (2005: 110).

This weak relationship of youth with unions is part of a broader trend of unionization erosion. Anyway, Portugal is one of the countries most affected by declining union density. As shown in Figure 5, within the 17 analyzed countries Portugal registered the biggest erosion over the past three decades, losing from 1980 to 2010, 64.8% of the number of union members and 49.4% of union density.

Figure 5: Union density and union membership in 1980 and 2010

Source: Based on ICTWSS database, Version 41, April.

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Concerned with the non-renewal of their bases, the unions have been creating youth branches in order to attract youth. However, the results of this initiative are relatively limited, with only a small reduction of the gap between the reality of work experienced by young people and the traditional field of industrial action from trade unions.

While for some authors one of the factors explaining the weak unionization of young people has been its adherence to individualistic values, others argue that it is not a question of individualism, but a mismatch between youth and trade unions. The claims of trade unions movement seem to be weakly adapted to the concerns and needs of young people. Trade unions do not show to be able to renew their strategies and modes of action in order to attract and organize youth (Tapia and Lange, 1994; Roberts, 1995; Paquet, 2005). By contrast, young people, particularly in the countries most affected by the economic crisis and by austerity policies, have shown a great commitment to the protests triggered by new social movements (Campbell and Martin Artiles, 2014).

3.2. The perception of young people about trade unions

In order to a better understanding of the weak adhesion of youth to the unions and to collective mobilization, we exploit some elements of an analysis on the perceptions of young people on Unions. This analysis is based on results of semi-structured interviews (conducted in 2011) involving young workers (16-30 years) in sectors most prone to youth employment, such as the new dynamic sectors most closely linked to the information society strategic activities (activities related to research and development and ICT) and the new commercial formats (commercial and catering chains installed in shopping centres). The investigation covered the Lisbon Metropolitan area, where there is a large concentration of these sectors.

Content analysis of the interviews identified four kinds of perceptions connected to different segments of young workers. The first type, the positive perception of unionism and trade unions involvement characterized the few young trade unions members who work in call centres, tayloristic symbols in information technology areas. The second type, the negative perception of unionism and individual defence of interests is observed on the segment with high qualifications in strategic areas valued by the labour market (telecommunications and information technology engineering, marketing, management). The third type refers to the critical perception of unionism and looking for alternatives to the collective defence of interests that characterizes the segment of young people with high qualifications but in areas little valued by the labour market, who have interesting jobs but held in precarious conditions (designers with “recibo verde” status (false independents), researchers dependent on a scholarship). Finally, the last type refers to ignorance of trade unionism, characterized by the segment of younger and less-skilled coming from families with low educational and economic resources, who have left school prematurely to being employed mainly in temporary work.
companies, commercial chains and transnational fast-food chains installed in shopping centres.

3.2.1. Positive perception of unionism and trade union involvement

Among the 30 respondents we found three young unionized. These three have in common the fact of working in call centres. From the analysis of the interviews we come to the conclusion that, in this growing subsector in Portugal, all respondents had some kind of contact with trade unions representatives. These young people have a positive perception about trade unions based on the improvements achieved in terms of wages and working conditions, especially after carrying out strikes.

_The strike can run well or can go wrong. Can be used well or it can be misused. But basically it is an attempt to cope, or to try to improve the conditions a bit. Many times you cannot. (...) But I think it is the best option that people have. (...) The idea I have is that the strike, when it’s done right, you can do a lot. And employees have really ... in this case the union that actually ends up making the force. Because if you try it individually, you are easily manoeuvred. "_(call centre operator)_

Despite some trade unions presence in the workplace, dissatisfaction with the performance of existing trade unions’ structures has led to the creation of the Union of Workers of Call Centres (STCC). This trade union, recently legalized (June 2014), without any connection with the structures of the major trade unions confederations (UGT and CGTP) wants to represent fifty thousand operators working in poor conditions throughout the country. Among its objectives are the following: sanction the professional status of call centre operator and ensure career progression; combat work pressure, improve working conditions and obtain wage increases, link operators to the companies that subcontracts the services or to the final recipient, among others. Currently this occupation, despite being characterize by a high turnover rate, it is increasingly seen not as a transitory occupation, but as a long-term career. Many young people who needed money to pay their college courses worked in call centres and saw this type of work as something temporary. However, they were staying in this type of work and there are now more and more people working there for 6-8 years, due to lack of employment alternatives compatible with their courses. Although in the call centres is predominating the age group of 20 to 30 years, lately many candidates with 40 and 50 years began to apply, after being unemployed because the company where they worked on closed. The increase in the number of jobs, the high concentration of workforce and the homogeneity of the situations of employment and precarious working conditions are favourable factors to the organisation of defence of collective interests in this subsector.

3.2.2. Negative perception of unionism and individual defence of interests
Those most qualified (undergraduate, graduate) in areas much valued by the labour market, coming from families with high economic and cultural resources, are characterized by individual defence of their interests. Upon completion of their studies followed by some employment experiences they can achieve professional stability and good career prospects. They seek personal fulfilment and professional development which are the main reasons for any voluntary mobility between jobs. They have conditions and opportunities to choose between jobs that require highly qualified work conducive to continuous learning and the development of new skills. Due to their strong position in the labour market, they can negotiate with the employers higher salaries and better working conditions. They have a negative perception of trade unions. Some insist on the need to change mentalities and orientations both for employers and workers, as witness the speech of a telecommunications engineer working in a multinational company:

"The problem in Portugal is that often we have entrepreneurs and employers with only 4 year of formal education that control how long the employees are in the bathroom. But there are also those employees who commit fraud on sick leave, work just a little but require a lot. Therefore, I think we need to change attitudes in one part or another. For example, unions in Germany at the telecommunications, because of some issues in the past and now of redundancies, they are well organized and responsible. First, they do not let any person to work more than 40 hours per week. If that happens then have to hire a new person. And I think many times what workers in Portugal are lacking ... I've seen it ... I've worked with people of various nationalities and they come in and are there all the eight hours working. Many Portuguese enter and go drink a coffee, it takes half an hour or something, after the mid-morning one more break, they extend too much lunch, mid-afternoon make another 45-minute snack and instead of the number of hours that they should work maybe they work only half. And then, often have to stay up to 7, 8, 9 hours to do what they should have done and did not do because they were mucking around. And I think it's necessary to change our mentality."

He considers that trade unions must fight for better working conditions and guarantying that the law is respected by employers. But rejects radical trade unions’ attitudes, considering them harmful.

"It's not adequate to have extreme positions. Because every once in a while we need to make some sacrifices for the viability of the company. And the sacrificial part has to be on both sides. This cannot be required only on one side of the relationship. It's like in a relationship between two people. If it's always the same part to give something then a moment arrives when a person saturates. And this cannot be so. Therefore there must always be a good balance between the parties. And I think that trade unions should be able to build bridges with employers in order to have this balance."
Within this privileged segment of young people there is also a very negative perception on trade unions, as appears in the speech of a young manager in the retail sector:

“Or maybe (trade unions) are a force of destruction that ultimately do not protect the workers. The actions of trade unions end up harming mainly 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 ends up being counterproductive, because the approach that trade unions make to enterprises on behalf of the workers is not constructive. In almost 100% of the cases, it is merely destructive. I see this because my shop has two union representatives with a strong union attitude and in fact they are highly destructive people (...)”

3.2.3. Critical perception of unionism and looking for alternatives to the collective defence of interests

This type of perception is found in the segment composed of young workers with high level of skills / training, but in areas considered non-strategic, i.e., little valued by the labour market, and in situations of precarious employment (“recibos verdes”, researchers supported by a scholarship). They have no possibility to individually negotiated higher and better working conditions and remunerations. They have an interesting occupation conducive to learning and development of skills which allows them to possess a high level of identification with the work they do. However, their employment situation implies instability, insecurity, without predictive possibilities about their future professional situation, strong economic vulnerability and restriction of social rights (based on stable employment). These young people tend to value the new movements for the defence of the interests of those who are in precarious employment situations. At the same time, many of them have great hopes and a strong motivation to get out of this situation, betting on emigration.

This segment of young people considers that new social movements are important to the collective defence of the young in precarious situations and, in their opinion, traditional trade unions are defending only the interests of their own members and are not interested or facing the problems of young people in precarious situations and are also clearly far away from the current reality of the labour market. Accordingly, this segment better appreciates other alternatives to protect the interests of young people in precarious employment situations.

According to a researcher with a research grant, trade unions have begun to pay some attention to precariousness, but do not reach precarious young workers yet.

"For many years, no one heard trade unions to talk about precariousness and green receipts, now there is an 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. Also because it makes no sense in the current trade unions’ logic. I think this logic has to change because this does not work. Because most workers today are in s precarious
situation. Workers of commerce and catering are precarious, have no possibility even to unionize and have no way to get organized, because people are working dispersed around. There's a great individualization of the employment relationship. There are no collective labour contracts. There are no canteens for people to join, even at lunchtime, so people cannot get together and realize that they have common interests and have common problems, thus they can't try to find common ways to solve their problems. It does not exist. Or, at least, more and more it is so. And this also implies that unions don't know how to reach out young people. I think the problem is on both sides.”

The research activity is mainly carried out by researchers with the status of fellows who are not considered as employees by unions.

"As far as I know there is no trade union representing grantees. I think it is an issue that should upset trade unions because there are researchers holding a scholarships but that are going to lose it, researchers that did already lose a scholarship, false independent researchers, researchers in the regime of green receipts which is still the worst. But so far I don't think there's any action taken by unions on this respect. And I think the young guys don't tend to adhere to trade unions either. But there are many trade unions that are already outdated and need to renew their ideas, doing things differently. They are no longer able to engage the young. (...). We are doing a job for so long and then, because the employment is non-existent, we no longer have any kind of support ... This is ridiculous taking into consideration that we're very specialized workers”.

She considers that it is not unions, but other organisations that are defending the interests of this segment of workers, in particular the Association of Scientific Research Students (ABIC) or the Association to Combat Precariousness - Precarious Inflexible (PI). Some improvement in the situation of these researchers has been attained thanks to the work of (ABIC)².

Grantees have become increasingly united and there have been some improvements. There was a time when we had no right nor vacation or maternity allowance. We had no right to anything. It's not like that for now”.

Despite the change of researcher status in 2004, there are still risks, particularly in relation to health problems, as it is her 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 a cancer because I work with radioactivity nobody is going to pay anything for my radioactive treatments because it isn't considered an accident at work. And that's something that scares me, because we can very easily have a problem that has to do with all exposures to the chemicals that we use, ² http://www.abic-online.org/
some of which have not been tested yet and we don’t even really understand well how it works and how dangerous it is.”

In turn, the Precarious Inflexible launched an online survey during the month of April 2014 to measure precariousness in the scientific work carried out in Portugal and the 'brain drain'. The results indicate that almost 78% of the researchers never worked in research with a contract of employment.

This association was created two years ago precisely to fight against precariousness with its various initiatives. In its manifesto the new association makes clear its relationship with trade unionism:

“Insecurity and the new issues of the world of work challenge the unionism. The assertion of a broad movement of precarious workers is not done opposing trade unions nor does it dispenses dialogue and joint action with the combative union field. To the illusion of a boundary that establishes impossibility, we oppose two urgencies: to rely on the strength that the precarious and the unemployed can bring to the fight and that this fight integrates unreservedly their concrete needs. (...) The creation of an association to combat precariousness with its genesis in the social movement allows us to assume a broader intervention space, open and democratic, which can make a deeper work and represent more people.”

It is also worth mentioning the Platform on the Internet called "Shame on you" created in March 2014 to report employers who advertise jobs shamelessly disguised stages requiring high qualifications (often a Masters degree, three or more years of experience, etc.) and paying the minimum wage or no wage at all. To the employer, a training post currently sometimes means to have the opportunity of disposing young skilled and highly qualified workers at a low or no cost at all. The purpose of the PI association is to expose the reality of the offers of jobs on the internet, contributing to the public discussion and creation of effective legislation. There is a growing support to this initiative manifested by the many reported cases appearing on the website. Offers deemed immoral and illegal in many cases are publicized. The contribution of the State in the range 80-100% of the costs of training posts created by businesses usually encourages companies to transform normal jobs in training post, increasing the precariousness with State support. Testimonies of those who were treated in a shameful way while workers or job applicants are also advertised3.

Some young people engaged in collective orientation also call for a more active role of the State for the protection of workers' rights. However, workers in precarious situations cannot count on the State to protect them:

“Can't say I feel support from the State. What I feel in Portugal is that I have to stand on my own. But at that level, the State could easily find which are the

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3 See http://ganhemvergonha.pt
companies that use fake green receipts. If I every month deliver a green receipt and if I have to pay every month those taxes to the State, it could easily seen that I get every month that payment from that company, and it is suspicious that it is a fake green receipt. And even when I was a trainee, the issue of unpaid internships, abuses on trainees and even in the selection of trainees were committed and the State didn’t do anything about it”.

The regulation and supervision are important mechanisms that the State should use to protect workers:

There should be more inspection campaigns. Because the laws are there, but then they are not respected, there is no control by the State. And that gives me the idea that the State has no interest in changing this or wants to make an effort. I do not see the State acting at that level! At least that's the image that passes.

The incipient inspection that is made is oriented towards the wrong direction, for example, in relation to illegal foreign workers or small businesses, instead of being directed to large enterprises:

“The most I see concerning the Labour Inspectors is when some news on television shows the labour inspectors going to Parque das Nações to verify if waiters are illegal in Portugal, because there are some foreigners. Or when they go after the poor woman who has a small cleaning company, where she works, her daughter and niece ... they go looking for maybe who doesn't matter: they're going after small firms ... which are usually small businesses that are familiar companies, people who are struggling to open a small business and are often obliged to have someone contracted, at least in the short-medium term, under the green receipts regime, in order to survive. Now, large companies that are for years and years employing people under the green receipts regime, even the State itself which has a lot of workers under this regime, it is more than proven that these workers are needed in the company and that, in this case, this regime is illegal. Therefore, I don't see the State acting where it is necessary.”

3.2.4. Ignorance of trade unionism

The segment of the younger and less-skilled workers, subject to a high degree of insecurity, has no information on trade unions and ignores its role. These workers are unaware of the new movements fighting against precariousness. They come from families with low educational and economic resources and they usually left school early to work. The insertion in the labour market has become necessary due to ruptures and family problems (divorce, parental unemployment of the father or the mother). Their employers are mainly temporary work firms, commercial chains and transnational fast-food companies installed in shopping centres. They alternate between insecure and poorly paid jobs interspersed with unemployment experiences. 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 tied to a route marked by
precariousness and unemployment, with no capability of individual and collective defence of their interests.

4. Conclusions

The negative effects of deregulation of the labour market, the economic and financial crisis and the austerity policies are affecting particularly young people, as indicated by the data on unemployment and unstable employment. At the same time, the weakening of trade unions and the low unionization of young people indicate that given their high vulnerability in the labour market, there are no or only very weak mechanisms for organized defence of youth interests. The continuation of this situation can lead to a further deterioration of working conditions and lives of young people. Under this threat came a new great wave of emigration. Unable to find work and a decent life, thousands of highly educated young people are leaving the country.

The fact that the majority of young people is being subjected to the pressure of unemployment and precarious employment and, at the same time, in general not unionized, could suggest that there are homogeneous perceptions, attitudes and orientations among youth. However, the results indicate there is a differentiation between youth segments that underlie different perceptions and values. The minority segment with positive perceptions about trade unions benefited from the trade unions’ action in a subsector more favourable to collective defence of interests. The segment with a strong position in the labour market presents a more individualistic orientation and negative perceptions about trade unions. These young workers develop strategies according to their career plans and career development. But another segment, composed of highly qualified young but with fragile positions in the labour market, is more oriented towards collective action to defend their interests through associations and movements focused on fighting precariousness. The segment of the younger, less qualified and more precarious, shows a complete lack of knowledge of both trade unions and the new social movements and associations. These young people are at risk of perpetuating the insecurity due to the lack of individual and collective capacity to change their situation.

Undoubtedly, the current economic and social context favours a certain acceptance of the precariousness by young people. Having a job, even precarious, is felt as a privilege, when the offer of employment is scarce and there is a permanent fear of losing their jobs. This attitude, in a sense, is the manifestation of a new mode of domination "based on the setting of a general and permanent state of insecurity, aiming to coerce the workers into submission and acceptance of exploitation" (Bourdieu 1998: 115). However, many young people do not accept this situation. Voluntary change frequently between jobs is a form of resistance. Others try to find a decent job in another country. And there are still others who value collective action, either within existing trade unions or those triggered by organizations that emerge as alternatives to traditional trade unions actions. The emergence of new associations devoted to fight precariousness, and the great support of young people to the protests organized by the
new social movements, show that a significant proportion of young people adheres to collective action to change their precarious situation. We are not necessarily facing a generation that internalizes the discourse of flexibility to better handle precariousness and insecurity than their parents, but we are dealing with different segments of youth, some being committed to the search for alternatives to the collective defence of interests. The critical perception about existing trade unions does not mean necessarily individualism and anti-unionism but, in some cases, discontent among young people with strategies and modes of action of trade unions, these being seen as lacking realism and ignoring the problems and the reality at work experienced by young people. Because of this experience, the young turn to alternative organizations that give priority to the fight against precariousness and propose broad intervention areas, open and participatory.

This means that, without recognizing the priority of the fight against precariousness and without meeting the problems and concerns of young people, the traditional trade unions will hardly be able to attract young people to their ranks.

Bibliografia


Appendix

Portugal: unemployment rate, percentage of employees with temporary contracts and annual earnings of young workers (15-29 years), compared to those of all workers (%)

Source: data from Eurostat