



POLYCRISIS AND YOUNG WORKERS



ITUC CSI IGB

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
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GENDER INEQUALITIES IN THE WORLD OF WORK	4
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CLIMATE CHANGE AND A JUST TRANSITION	5
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WAR AND CONFLICT	7
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THE RISE OF THE FAR RIGHT AND THREATS TO YOUNG TRADE UNIONISM	8
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GENERATIONAL CHANGE IN TRADE UNIONS	9
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TECHNOLOGY	11
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INTRODUCTION

We are living in times of **polycrisis**, a concept that does not refer to a single emergency but, rather, to the convergence of multiple interrelated crises affecting our societies at the same time: economic, ecological, social, political, technological and care crises. For **young workers**, this means a reality marked by precarity, exclusion and structural violence. In a system in permanent crisis, being young and being a worker has, in many cases, become a double disadvantage.

This report, launched by the Youth Committee of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), seeks to highlight how this polycrisis is impacting the lives, rights and expectations of the younger generations in the world of work. Focusing on six key issues – violence against women, environmental destruction, armed conflict, the rise of the far right, generational renewal in trade unions, and technological change – we analyse the challenges facing young workers from a global, critical and trade union perspective.

Each topic will be addressed with a general introduction that will frame the situation and will be supported by **case**

studies focusing on a region, country or trade union organisation. The aim is to show, through concrete examples, how organised young people are resisting, putting forward proposals and taking action in response to a system that offers them no future. For while the data and the situation are grim, so too is the resolve of young trade unionists to fight, with creativity and solidarity, in every corner of the globe.

This report is not intended to serve as a mere diagnosis, but also as a political tool – a tool for debate, for developing proposals and strengthening the action of young trade unionism at every level. Faced with a system in crisis, young workers are responding with organising and hope. Because trade unionism is not a thing of the past: it is, more than ever, an urgent bid for the future.

The task of constantly renewing and updating our movement is one that falls to all of us who make up the ITUC. But it is the young people, for generational reasons, quite simply, who can facilitate and guide these vital changes.

Our movement, although a century old, has always been open to change in pursuit of our primary objective, to represent and defend workers.

Written by Marco Pérez Molina, UGT Spain

GENDER INEQUALITIES IN THE WORLD OF WORK

Gender gaps and inequalities are clearly manifest in the context of the polycrisis and are linked to multiple factors in the world of work, such as:

- The lack of opportunities. Women and young people experience difficulty accessing formal employment and leadership positions. For women, the issue is linked to the absence of public policies on care, flexible working hours and obstacles to promotion due to maternity leave.
- Barriers to labour market access for migrants, Black/Afro-descendant people, people from Indigenous communities and women of reproductive age.
- Job losses caused by the climate crisis disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable sectors, which are mainly women and young people.

Historically, women and particularly young women have been solely assigned roles related to reproduction (work in the private sphere, in the home and unpaid care), while men have been assigned a “more productive role”. This gender division of labour not only limits women’s access to the labour market but also exposes them to more precarious, informal, poorly paid and invisible jobs, directly affecting their economic autonomy and their ability to

become agents of change in the social, political and trade union sphere.

We are currently facing a series of challenges linked to the fight against violence in all its forms, workplace harassment and sexual harassment, and discrimination in the world of work and trade unions. This violence has an adverse impact on the participation of women and minorities in workplaces and civil society, making its eradication and efforts to prevent it essential. For young workers, the ratification and proper implementation of International Labour Organization Convention 190 (on violence and harassment) is therefore a matter of urgency.

To tackle these realities in the context of the polycrisis, action is needed to:

- Achieve fair and inclusive societies and trade unions, with a view to eradicating all forms of discrimination and creating healthy workplaces that are free from violence, sexual harassment and workplace harassment.
- Place care at the heart of sustainable living. Social dialogue with governments is crucial to achieving comprehensive national care systems based on respect for human rights.
- Strengthen social protection and non-discrimination at work, ensuring equal opportunities and treatment in employment; providing access to trade union training and education, as well as professional development; guaranteeing access to occupations without gender bias and ensuring decent and equitable working conditions.

- Ensure occupational health and safety with an intersectional perspective, to provide safe and healthy working environments for all people.

Young workers recognise that the fight against gender violence and for equality in the workplace cannot be separated from the interconnected challenges characterising the

polycrisis. Unity within trade unions, with the real and meaningful participation of women, young people and gender- and sexually-diverse people, is therefore key to moving towards the changes we want to see.

Written by Nallely Domínguez, Social Policies Secretariat, CSA-TUCA

CLIMATE CHANGE AND A JUST TRANSITION

Since the industrial revolution, massive reliance on fossil fuels has driven unprecedented economic development, but at a heavy social and environmental cost. The climate crisis is no longer a future threat: it is a present-day threat to our societies, our health, our jobs, and our ecosystems. Droughts and floods are leading to the loss of agricultural land and forced displacement. Increasingly extreme temperatures are endangering health and safety at work, or making certain jobs impossible.

A Just Transition means ensuring that no one is excluded or left behind: workers, communities in the South and vulnerable populations must be supported and protected in this process of change. International cooperation and funding are essential. Rich countries must support the most vulnerable, to ensure a fair and sustainable transition.

Aside from climate change itself, policies to combat climate change, such as investment in greener production,

also have a major impact on workers, with the shutting down of certain production activities, the need to retrain for jobs in greener production, etc.

CASE STUDIES: UNEQUAL IMPACT

BELGIUM

In 2019, tens of thousands of young people took part in dozens of school strikes for the climate. Their calls for strong and urgent climate action were ignored by politicians. Two years later, in 2021, Belgium experienced major flooding linked to climate change. Dozens of people lost their lives. Access to gas, electricity and drinking water was made more difficult in several regions. The hardest hit were, notably, the most vulnerable people, who tend to live in lower-cost (rental) housing, often located in flood-prone areas, and are less likely to have access to insurance, etc.

Employees in polluting sectors and companies, such as metallurgy, chemicals and energy, fear losing their jobs. New, greener production often requires higher qualifications and fewer staff.

There is no job security, and anti-social policies are only creating more precarious work and fuelling attacks on the unemployed, etc.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Although essential in the fight against climate change, the energy transition raises major ethical issues linked to the extraction of strategic minerals such as cobalt, lithium and rare earth elements. These resources often come from countries in the Global South, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Chile and Indonesia, where working conditions are precarious and at times dangerous, particularly for young people and children.

The consequences include pollution, deforestation, food insecurity, armed conflict and social alienation. Despite its low CO₂ emissions, DR Congo is severely affected by global warming (floods, droughts, seasonal disruption).

The paradox is that, despite being seen as a 'solution country' thanks to its forests and hydroelectric potential, the DRC is paying a heavy price for a green transition that is often unequal and unfair.

Industrialised countries are the main culprits, being major consumers and offshoring the impacts with no guarantee of fair practices, despite agreements such as the Critical Raw Materials Act.

YOUNG PEOPLE

While the challenges are considerable, the transition also offers huge opportunities, particularly for the world of work (new jobs offering better working conditions, retraining and educational benefits, etc.). It has the potential to deliver far greater advantages than the status quo and to tackle the root causes of structural socio-economic inequalities. To materialise these opportunities, it is crucial that all stakeholders, especially workers and young workers, be involved in the development and implementation of climate strategies and policies.

Young workers can take action to make their working environment more sustainable in their own occupational fields. They can train for green jobs and adapt to new ecologically sustainable sectors. They have the power to call for policies that take on board their working conditions in the context of climate change.

By uniting within collectives, trade unions or movements, they can press for a fairer transition.

Written by Hervé Kambiniam Salambote, CDT DR Congo, and Elise Graeghs, FGTB Belgium

WAR AND CONFLICT

BELARUSIAN YOUTH CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

We live in a time defined by conflicts — political, military, and societal. They are all deeply interrelated, often leading from one to another. Politicians, eager to satisfy their electorates, increasingly turn to military tools to distract the people from deeper economic and social problems. Leaders such as Putin, Trump, and Netanyahu have been known to dazzle domestic audiences with displays of military power abroad, drawing attention away from more pressing internal issues.

It's always the youth who suffer most from military conflicts. Young people are sent to the frontlines. They are exploited as a cheap workforce to produce weapons. It's young minds that are being re-educated by the military propaganda in schools and universities, when states choose a warpath. They are forced to give and lose everything for vague ideas of artificial patriotism and dying for the Fatherland.

Belarus has long been caught in an escalating political crisis. Since the rise to power of its first — and still only — president, Alexander Lukashenko, all state institutions have gradually fallen under his control, as opposition voices have been suppressed. Belarusian youth have always been a central target of this crackdown. The regime seized control of all of the youth organisations and united them under one umbrella —

the Belarusian Republican Youth Union. Once independent and autonomous, it has become a mouthpiece of the new government ideology.

Together with many other youth organisations, it has shaped a new generation of young Belarusians — loyal, militant, and silent. They have been taught to obey those who give orders and to despise anything that challenges those orders. Most importantly, they have been discouraged from thinking critically. Loud slogans such as “the sacred past,” “life for the Homeland,” and “death to the enemies” serve to distract from everyday problems — a war strategy in times of peace. It's a continuous preparation for conflict, fuelled by another kind of conflict — a fight for minds. A war for youth.

In 2020, after 26 years of unrelenting war for the Belarusian youth, the most apparent outcome seemed to be the unshaken victory of Lukashenko's system. However, the new generation of Belarusians decided to take another path. They began to question the only status quo they had ever known. Overnight, the old ideology dissolved, and — united by a sense of solidarity — they took to the streets to peacefully win the war. They carried flowers, not weapons. They wore white, not camouflage. They didn't win...

Since then, Belarus has become the most isolated land in Europe, ruled by one of the most repressive regimes in the world. Those unable to flee were imprisoned. Others were silenced. I don't know if a war against a cruel regime can be won with flowers when they're being struck down by real bullets. But I do know this — the fight for the minds of the youth is not yet lost.

As trade unions, we must pick up this fight. Once we succeed, there will be no space for bloody conflicts in the fair, democratic, and equal society we are striving to build.

Written by Yauheni Dzenisenka, BKDP Belarus

STANDING IN INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Let history remind us that peace is not a side issue to the labour movement. It is core union work.

Just as unions defend fair pay and safe workplaces, we must defend the right of all workers – especially young workers – to live free from war, militarisation, and repression. To allow youth to have their formative years overtaken by conflict is to betray entire generations; whether through the conscription of young people in Belarus and Myanmar, the

starvation and brutalisation of children in Gaza and Sudan, and everywhere that youth are being robbed of safety, learning, and joy.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, unions are heeding the call. The Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) has **condemned crimes against humanity and affirmed peace as central to the work of unions**. We are not alone. A global movement is growing.

And in that movement, unionists must never be neutral. We must never be silent.

Because when youth are being targeted, re-educated, and conscripted – whether into armies or ideologies – it is the labour movement that must become the counter-force: the voice that insists no one should have to trade their youth for someone else's war.

Written by Zoë Port, Aotearoa New Zealand

THE RISE OF THE FAR RIGHT AND THREATS TO YOUNG TRADE UNIONISM

In recent years, we have witnessed a worrying rise of extreme right-wing political forces, both in Europe and Latin America. This phenomenon – often presented under the banner of 'freedom', 'order' or 'national recovery' – represents a direct attack on democratic values, labour rights and the role of trade union organisations, especially those made up of young people.

In the European context, the electoral growth of extreme right-wing parties

has been particularly strong among young voters. Research shows that in countries such as France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Portugal, ultra-conservative parties have achieved significant results among the under-35s. This is partly attributable to the massive use of social media as a primary source of information: over 80 per cent of young people rely solely on the Internet for information, and less than half of them verify the content they consume. This facilitates the propagation of populist, nationalist, authoritarian and deeply anti-union narratives.

In both Europe and Latin America, these parties promote a worldview that holds trade unions responsible for economic problems, accusing them of being obstacles to development, competitiveness or modernisation. They propose deregulating labour markets, limiting collective bargaining and reducing trade union influence on business decisions. They also promote policies that restrict fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, the right to strike or equality before the law, promoting hate speech and discriminatory practices that weaken social cohesion.

The Argentinian case confirms this trend. The rise to power of extreme right-wing forces has been accompanied by a systematic advance of anti-union practices, hate speech and a campaign to delegitimise workers' organisations. Basic labour rights, such as the right to strike, collective bargaining and freedom to organise, have been directly attacked under the pretext of combating 'trade union mafias'. Social protest has been criminalised and trade union representatives have been stigmatised, particularly young trade unionists, who face dismissal, threats and persecution.

This process rests on ideological discourse that denies the historical memory of the workers' movement, disdains the role of the state and promotes individualistic, meritocratic and exclusionary values. It promotes a logic of forced 'entrepreneurship' and labour flexibilisation that cloaks the destruction of decent, stable and collectively represented work.

Faced with this scenario, we reaffirm that young trade unionism is a vital tool for resistance and democratic construction. Young organised workers play a key role in the defence of the rights won and in the struggle for a future with social justice. It is therefore crucial that these authoritarian practices be denounced and condemned internationally and that global solidarity networks be strengthened to protect those who defend labour and democracy all over the world.

Written by Melina Nahir Santilli, CGT-RA Argentina, and Aleksandra Zdanowska, FNV Netherlands

GENERATIONAL CHANGE IN TRADE UNIONS

Generational renewal within trade unions is an increasingly pressing concern. The dominance of neo-liberal ideology, which advocates deregulation, flexible working, reduced state intervention and the primacy of the market, has contributed to the demonisation and marginalisation of trade unionism. Unions are often presented as obstacles

to progress, which has discouraged young people from taking part and has contributed to the ageing of their membership.

In this context of a precarious labour market and job insecurity, young people tend to see traditional trade unions as rigid, obsolete or even risky for their careers. Many are turning to informal or alternative forms of worker

representation that are closer to their day-to-day realities.

This situation has various consequences:

- The decline in youth engagement weakens the ability of unions to represent all workers.
- The media and political narratives reinforce the negative perceptions, further alienating young workers.
- The normalisation of neoliberalism marginalises collective rights in favour of corporate competitiveness.

Yet trade unions remain essential to the protection of workers' rights and the fight against inequality. Strategic renewal is needed:

- To reinvent recruitment and organising strategies, to reach and inspire young workers.
- To modernise the trade union discourse to reflect the language, values and aspirations of the younger generation.
- To diversify leadership and participation, to better represent a changing workforce.

Reviving the engagement of young people is not just an option but a necessity for the long-term survival, relevance and power of the trade union movement. It requires radical changes in organising methods and an overhaul of the meaning of collective action in the 21st century.

Furthermore, digital transformation and the rise of platform work have created new spaces for social engagement, but also new forms of exploitation. Young workers are over-represented in these sectors, making it crucial for unions to be innovative in their approaches through digital organising, alliances with youth movements and the defence of inclusive policies that reflect current economic realities.

The situation is even more pressing for workers in the informal economy, who are often deprived of basic social protection, stable incomes and representation. A large proportion of young workers, particularly in developing countries, are in informal or precarious employment. Trade unions need to extend their reach and develop innovative and flexible organising strategies to connect with these workers, ensuring that their voices are heard and their rights defended. Supporting workers in the informal economy is not only crucial for social justice, but also for the long-term vitality and inclusiveness of the trade union movement.

To meet these challenges, trade unions must become spaces for empowering young people and giving them a sense of belonging. This means promoting intergenerational dialogue, encouraging young leadership and creating safe and democratic environments where young workers can voice their concerns and shape the future of the trade union movement. Only then will trade unions be able to regain their role as a dynamic force for social justice and equality in the modern world.

Written by Kera Hodabalo Tchanoutema, CNTT Togo, and Satyajeet Reddy Gongolla, INTUC India

TECHNOLOGY

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into the workplace has been widely promoted as a path to efficiency, innovation, and even a better work-life balance. But behind this optimistic narrative lies a growing contradiction. For young workers, particularly in the Global North, AI is not decreasing workloads, it is intensifying them. The pressure to perform faster, process more data, and adapt to ever-changing digital tools is reshaping work expectations, increasing mental strain, and deepening precarity. AI has become a productivity trap: workers are expected to do more, not less, and for the same or lower pay.

CASE STUDY: GERMANY – AI IN DIGITAL MARKETING AGENCIES

In Germany, especially in Berlin and Hamburg, digital marketing agencies have rapidly adopted generative AI tools such as ChatGPT and Midjourney, and other automation platforms for content creation and analytics. These tools are marketed as ways to make work more efficient. However, junior employees, many of whom are under 30, report a different reality.

Instead of reducing their workload, AI has raised expectations. A single worker is now expected to write ten campaign texts per day (instead of five), generate visuals, proofread AI outputs, and deliver faster analytics. The human workload hasn't halved, it has doubled, while AI outputs often need reworking, leading to cognitive fatigue and burnout.

Trade unions such as ver.di have begun documenting these issues, noting that AI tools are often introduced without negotiation or regulation. Young workers on probationary or temporary contracts feel unable to refuse increased demands. They also report anxiety over being replaced by the very tools they are forced to use, leading to deteriorating mental health and a climate of silent competition.

Conclusion:

AI, when introduced without clear ethical frameworks, collective agreements, or youth-inclusive consultations, risks worsening existing inequalities. For young workers, especially in competitive, tech-driven sectors, AI is not just a tool, it's a structural pressure point.

Trade unions must:

- Demand transparency in AI implementation.
- Advocate for workload limits and digital rights.
- Ensure youth voices are central in negotiating new tech norms.
- Push for mental health protections and fair compensation.

Artificial intelligence should not be a mechanism for extracting more labour from the young.

It must be used to humanise work, not intensify it.

Written by Nikola Bobic, CATUS Serbia

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