

# GENERATION NEXT UP: EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIPS OF AFL-CIO YOUNG WORKER GROUPS

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July 2012

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\* This paper is part of a larger research project still in progress and is a draft. The author would like to thank members of the research team: Jeff Grabelsky, Ken Margolies, and Todd Dickey (Cornell University, Industrial & Labor Relations School) and David Reynolds (Wayne State University, Labor Studies Center).

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### **Introduction**

The turbulent economic climate has placed a heavy burden on young people around the globe. In the United States, those under 35 years of age have experienced high rates of unemployment and often remain dependent on their parents for financial support because of an inability to find employment or work that provides a living wage. Even young workers able to secure better jobs must confront the threat of layoffs, stagnant wages, and declining benefits. Labor unions in the United States have recently begun to realize the importance of reaching out to young workers including those who currently belong to unions as well as those who work in nonunion jobs and the unemployed.

One of the most pressing challenges confronting organized labor today involves their ability to engage young worker and to cultivate young leaders. The American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the largest federation for unions in the U.S., has a strategic initiative designed to reach out to young people. (A number of AFL-CIO affiliated unions have also developed programs of their own). In 2009 the AFL-CIO launched the Next Up program to mobilize younger workers. The AFL-CIO has strategized that young workers and young union members are critical to ensure the survival of U.S. labor unions into the future. Young union members will need to step into leadership positions, as much of labor’s “baby boomer” leadership and membership nears retirement age. One strategy to accomplish this has been for the AFL-CIO to encourage the formation of young worker groups that are connected to AFL-CIO bodies at the state federation, Area Labor Federation (ALF), or Central Labor Council (CLC) levels. (Each state in the U.S. as well as Puerto Rico has its own AFL-CIO federation with over five hundred ALF’S and CLC’s organized in cities and communities). This paper examines these groups and how they relate to the larger labor movement.

### **Constituency Groups in the U.S. Labor Movement**

The literatures on women and people of color within unions provide a number of case studies that explain the process of how union members through separate organization and activism were able to have labor unions begin to address their issues and concerns. The literature on women and unions in the United States presents examples of how women have overcome the obstacles of under-representation among union membership and union leadership and the challenges of getting gender concerns on the union agenda (Milkman, 1985; Cobble, 1993; Cobble and Bielski, 2002). The United Auto Workers (UAW) was the first union in the U.S. to have a women’s department at the national level, and the activism of women’s committees and the Women’s Department contributed to the UAW’s

progressive position on gender (Gabin, 1985, 1990). The organizing of the Harvard Clerical and Technical Workers Union (HUCTW) in 1988 exists as another successful example of women's labor activism (Hurd, 1993; Eaton, 1996; Hoerr, 1997). Researchers have also presented historical accounts of self-organization by workers of color in the labor movement including: the formation of unions by black workers in Milwaukee during the early 1900s (Trotter, 2007); the formation of caucuses for African American women in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters during the 1920s (Chateauvert, 1998); and the role of the Civil Rights Movement in the UAW (Meier and Elliot, 1979). This literature on constituency groups emphasizes the importance of separate organizations for the representation of identities within the union setting.

While there has been a long tradition of organizing around gender and race among unionists in the U.S. labor movement, separate organizing for young workers has not been as prevalent. Still, there the U.S. labor movement has made some attempts at galvanizing young people. The AFL-CIO in 1968 help found Frontlash, a non-profit organization to assist young people and minorities in registering to vote and engaging in voter education. A few chapters formed in cities around the U.S. with connections to central labor councils but with limited scope. The chapters' work moved from voter registration and education to social activism with campaigns against sweatshop and child labor and in support of the Solidarity movement of the 1980s in Poland. After a decline in the number of chapters and members, the AFL-CIO quietly folded the group in 1997 and moved its activities into other departments. In 1969 the Teamsters and United Autoworkers (UAW) formed the Alliance for Labor Activism (ALA) in part to address the growing distance between the then young "boomer" generation and the labor movement brought on in large part by their divide over the Vietnam war (Widick, 1969).

Former AFL-CIO President John Sweeney developed two programs for young people after his election in 1995. The Union Summer program, still in existence today, places college students during the summer as paid interns in union organizing or mobilizing efforts with the goal of providing them education about labor issues and experience working for unions (Hornblower, 1996). The Organizing Institute initially sought to recruit recent college graduates for union organizer training and placement in organizing departments of AFL-CIO affiliated unions (Foerster, 2003). (The Organizing Institute continues but now accepts a broader range of students, including rank-and-file unionists of all ages). Both of these efforts focused on bringing young students into the labor movement as staff and not on creating an organizational structure for young union members or workers within the labor movement.

The current Next Up initiative by the AFL-CIO prioritizes the mobilizing and development of current young unionists aged 35 and under who now make up approximately 25 percent of the membership of AFL-CIO affiliated unions (Schoeff, 2009). The young worker organizations connected to regional AFL-CIO bodies exist as the central element of this initiative and the focus of this paper.

## **Research Methods**

Eight organizations were selected for study: Next Generation United (NGU) in Rochester, New York; Young Emerging Labor Leaders (YELL) in Oregon; Next Generation South Bay in San Jose, California; Young Workers United in San Francisco, California; the Colorado Young Worker Project based in Denver, Colorado; Young Trade Unionists in Baltimore, Maryland; the Futures Program at the Massachusetts AFL-CIO; and the Futures Program at the Greater Boston Labor Council (GBLC). Documents available both in hardcopy and online from each of the organizations were thoroughly reviewed and analyzed to determine organizational histories, structures, policies, and activities. Fifty-two in-depth interviews with leaders and members of the organizations as well as leaders of the AFL-CIO central labor bodies and affiliated unions were conducted. Interviewees were selected using the “snowball” method where initial contacts suggest further people to be interviewed. The author and members of a research team including four other academic researchers conducted the interviews. The interviews were semi-structured. Each interviewer used an interview protocol with specific questions but also allowed for interviewees to add any information that they deemed relevant. (For interview protocol see Appendix A). The interviews lasted between half an hour to an hour, and detailed notes were taken during the interviews for analysis and coding. Researchers also observed on-site membership meetings, social events, political actions, and fundraising activities for the groups. Participants were made aware of the researchers’ role and the study.

## **AFL-CIO Young Worker Group Relationships**

For the success and longevity of the worker groups a key factor remains their ability to forge and maintain supportive and productive relationships within the labor movement particularly with the central labor bodies connected to them. These relationships hinge on the level of acceptance that veteran labor leaders offer the groups and their young leaders and members. The young worker groups also rely on the national AFL-CIO and the network of similar groups for support. In order to explore young worker groups with greater depth, this paper examines these key relationships. What are the current states of the relationships for the young worker groups? What facilitates positive relations? What hinders the relationships?

### *Young Worker Groups and Central Labor Bodies (CLC, ALF, State Federation)*

Relationships between the young worker groups and the AFL-CIO central labor councils (CLC’s), area labor federations (ALF’s) and state federations connected to them are shaped by the genesis of the groups and their subsequent levels of independence. Many of the young worker groups formed through direct actions on the part of federation leadership. The top leadership at the Oregon AFL-CIO, President Tom Chamberlain and Secretary Treasurer Barbara Byrd, decided in 2009 to cultivate constituency groups in the state, and along with statewide chapters of

the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, and Pride at Work for LGBTQ unionists, they developed Young Emerging Labor Leaders (YELL). In Baltimore, Ernest Grecco, president of the Metropolitan Baltimore Council of AFL-CIO unions, Roderick Easter, head of the Baltimore Building and Construction Trades, and Michael Smith, President of the National Association of Letters Carrier Local 176 and Secretary Treasurer of the CLC, attended the national AFL-CIO's Leadership Institute in 2009. The Leadership Institute requires union leader participants to work on a six-month long practical project that involves actually putting the plan into action. The Baltimore leaders decided to have as their project the rejuvenation of the Young Trade Unionists, a group that had been active in the late 1960s and had spawned a number of prominent current union leaders, including Grecco. In its 2007-2008 strategic plan, the Massachusetts AFL-CIO proposed the formation of the Massachusetts Futures Committee to "educate young people about the labor movement and develop tomorrow's labor leaders today." With encourage from the Massachusetts state federation, the Greater Boston Labor Council (GBLC) under the guidance of President Rich Rogers formed its own Futures Committee. Rich Rogers was active with Frontlash as a young trade unionist during the 1980's. The South Bay Labor Council in San Diego also took a proactive approach and passed a CLC resolution in 2010 to form Next Generation South Bay.

Other groups formed more "organically," including Next Generation United (NGU) in Rochester, New York, where a group of younger union activists socializing after a meeting of the Rochester Area Labor Federation in the spring of 2009 decided something needed to be done to encourage greater involvement from younger unionists. James Bertolone, ALF President, joined their conversation later in the evening and quickly supported their idea to form a young worker group. The Colorado Young Worker Project also formed through the mutual interest of Denver Area Labor Federation leaders and young unionists. As a worker center, Young Workers United in San Francisco exists entirely independent of the San Francisco Labor Council.

Groups that formed through leadership initiatives or with early involvement and buy-in from leaders reported greater acceptance and participation from both AFL-CIO leadership and veteran affiliate union leaders. Members of YELL, Young Trade Unionists, and the Futures Committees expressed the highest levels of support from their federations, with top leadership actively championing the groups. Federation leadership backing signals to the larger central labor body and to affiliated unions that the group has legitimacy and should be promoted and supported.

The official organization standing also impacts the groups' relations with the central labor bodies because it determines their power over decision making within the body. YELL exists as an official constituency group within the Oregon AFL-CIO, giving them a seat on the General Board but not on the Executive Board. All members of the Executive Board also sit on the General Board, but the General Board does not vote on political endorsements and financial matters, thus limiting

YELL's organizational influence. The Baltimore Young Trade Unionists have committee status in the CLC, allowing them to attend CLC meetings as active but non-voting participants. The CLC president also appoints the group's Board Chair, giving the federation more control. NGU has constituency group status via the ALF's bylaws but is treated as a committee because NGU's president has a seat on the executive committee. The Massachusetts and Boston Futures Committees do not have official organizational status within the federation but each has a seat reserved on their respective Executive Boards. South Bay Next Generation and Colorado Young Workers Project do not have official status but are directly connected to the federation.

The funding arrangement reveals more about the relationship between the groups and the central labor bodies. Most do not have an official line item in the federation's budget but have received funds informally. The Oregon AFL-CIO has provided monies for materials and promotional items for YELL along with some travel support for the group's leaders and members to attend conferences. The Baltimore CLC supplies an expense account for the Young Trade Unionists but manages it and must approve all expenditures. The groups fundraise independently and often receive donations from affiliate unions.

The young worker groups present a somewhat alternative model of separate organization within unions. One member of South Bay Next Generation explained, "Our structure is different from unions. We want to train future leaders but not necessarily using the traditional model." All of the organizational arrangements allow for a certain level of flexibility for the groups because of their relative autonomy from the federation. The flexibility allows them to more quickly plan activities and actions without having to go through the traditional, bureaucratic decision-making process of the central labor bodies. This also provides more opportunities for the young worker groups to forge relationships with organizations outside of the traditional labor movement.

#### *Young Worker Groups and Veteran Union Leaders*

The groups rely on support from the affiliate unions and their leaders to help recruit young unionists and to encourage their continued engagement with the groups. A number of groups reported support from affiliates. One veteran union affiliate leader in Baltimore expressed his support by saying, "I'd like to see some members of the group (Baltimore Young Trade Unionists) in (union) leadership positions in the next few years." This leader does not worry about the rise of young leaders. "If you (current union leader) are doing your job, you have nothing to worry about. You have appointed a member of your local to the Young Trade Unionist Board, and this person regularly reports back (to the local)."

In Oregon supportive union leaders have provided YELL members from their unions with paid time off and travel support to attend youth related labor events and activities. Baltimore's Young Workers United regularly invites union leaders to

speak at their meetings with the dual intent of providing educational and networking opportunities for members. The visits serve as an introduction to the group for the veteran unionist guests who also view the invitation to speak as recognition of their status in the labor movement. While this helps to legitimize the group, a relationship between veteran unionists as “experts” and young unionists as “students” limits the opportunities for the young to have impact on unions and may frustrate them, leading to disengagement.

Getting support from affiliate unions and veteran unions has not always been easy. A local union leader in Rochester commented, “We say we want new blood, but actual structures and the way policies work really discourage that.” Young unionists have also made this observation. A leader of Next Generation South Bay said, “We (Next Generation) are not a priority for anyone yet so we are tokens for most affiliates, except the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and California Faculty Association (CFA) who are organizing young people.” Some local union leaders acknowledged feeling threatened by having young members from their unions becoming more visibly involved in labor activism because they feared that this signaled a desire for these young members to run against them for elected office. One member of NGU in Rochester said, “The autonomy of NGU makes leadership insecure.” For example, one affiliate with members in NGU abruptly stopped its members from being involved with NGU because the affiliate’s local union leaders did not approve of a member of NGU’s leadership team.

The other fear expressed by union veterans about young worker organizing involved concern over the types of activities that the groups might undertake, especially in the realm of politics. The independence of the groups, while viewed as an asset by most union leaders, led to this concern. The presence of nonunion members in some of the groups and their connections with outside community and political organizations also raised concerns from a few union veterans. A veteran union leader in Rochester said that he was concerned that non-union members within NGU “would steer NGU in a different (i.e. further left) direction.” Another union leader revealed that it would be a big problem for the AFL-CIO if the young worker groups began independently endorsing candidates separate from the federation.

### *Young Workers and Labor Organizations (Central Labor Bodies, Unions)*

Many of the young unionists interviewed expressed some level of frustration at being pushed aside within the labor movement because of their age and lesser degree of experience. The young workers interviewed expressed a desire to be respected and to have influence. According to a member of Young Workers United in San Francisco, “It is hard as a young person to feel part of the labor movement.” Some young interviewees also wanted their input on the functioning and structure of unions to be considered. A number of young workers group members talked about wanting more transparent and democratic organizations that allow greater access for members and the community, aspects found in the young worker groups.

### *Young Worker Groups and National AFL-CIO Young Worker Program*

The national AFL-CIO has had a direct relationship with the young worker groups. Oregon's YELL started after the 2009 national AFL-CIO convention resolution calling on state federations, ALF's, and CLC's to develop young worker programs. In California, South Bay Next Generation formed after the first national AFL-CIO sponsored Next Up conference held in 2010. This conference had over 400 participants coming to Chicago for the event, and the 2011 Next Up Conference in Minneapolis drew over 600 young workers. Just prior to the 2010 conference, the AFL-CIO national office had officially launched the Next Up initiative to get more young workers engaged with the labor movement.

For the groups that started prior to the AFL-CIO initiative, the federation has still had influence through the offering of networking opportunities such as the annual conference and the creation of a young worker advisory committee. The AFL-CIO has also hired a full-time staff person to head Next Up and has members of Secretary Treasurer Liz Shuler's office also working on the initiative. Shuler has been instrumental in identifying the need for the AFL-CIO to prioritize outreach to young workers. In her early 40's, Shuler is considered herself to be young given her position as second in command of the AFL-CIO. National union leadership in the U.S. has been highly skewed in terms of age, race and gender for some time, with a disproportionate number of leaders being over the age of 50, male, and white.

### *AFL-CIO Young Worker Groups and Affiliate Union Young Worker Groups*

The young worker groups form their own structures and agendas independent from the national AFL-CIO and each other. However, the groups do convene at the Next Up conferences and have leaders who meet through the AFL-CIO's young worker advisory committee. They also communicate via their Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. Much of the communication between the groups focuses on sharing experiences and advice about the functional and organizational aspects of the groups. For example, the conferences offer workshops where groups share their experiences with how to structure the groups, build relationships with the larger labor movement, recruit new members, raise funds, and plan events. The relationship between NGU in Rochester and Next Generation South Bay in California presents an example of the strong "mentor" or "sister" relationship that can develop between two groups, a model that may prove useful for the AFL-CIO if they wish to expand the number of young worker groups around the country.

### *Young Worker Groups and Progressive or Community Organizations*

All of the groups in the study have a connection to the Occupy movement, providing a link for labor unions and the AFL-CIO to this new and growing movement. The relationship between the young work organizations and Occupy evolved naturally because of their shared demographics. Young people represent a significant

presence in Occupy, and young unionists have played a role in Occupy groups around the nation. Members of the young worker groups have varying levels of involvement with Occupy from occasionally attending Occupy events to regular participation in Occupy working groups.

The young worker groups have also forged relationships with other progressive and community organizations. Next Generation United, the oldest of the groups, has the closest ties to these organizations and works with Metro-Justice, a Rochester grassroots organization with a social justice mission; the Rochester branch of the International Socialist Organization (ISO); the Green Party; and the Working Families Party. The Colorado Young Workers Project has relationships with the Colorado Progressive Coalition, a nonprofit advocate organization working on state issues; New Era Colorado, a group organizing college students for social and political action; and 9to5 Colorado, a women's advocacy organization focused on workplace gender equality. Next Generation South Bay also works with community organizations and has as part of their mission statement a commitment to coalition building.

As an organization we work to connect labor, community, and student groups...We think it is really important to build bridges between social justice organizations and to actively support each other's work.

The GBLC Futures Committee's mission statement also makes clear its intention to reach beyond organized labor. "The GBLC Futures committee also seeks to reach out to progressive allies to advance the cause of economic justice." The commitment of young worker groups to building bridges for the labor movement with other movements and the community remains an important contribution beyond their founding missions of involving more young people with labor.

## **Conclusion**

The AFL-CIO young worker groups present an opportunity for the U.S. labor movement to strengthen its ties to the younger generations. The groups rely heavily on the support, both political and financial, of the central labor bodies and the affiliated unions. Some groups have more backing because they were formed directly or with heavy involvement from current labor leaders, while others have a more distant relationship from the AFL-CIO because of their independence. A certain level of independence facilitates the ability of the groups to function more creatively and spontaneously than traditional labor organizations. The connection between the groups and the Occupy movement, along with other progressive movements and community organizations, demonstrates this. Still, staff, funding, and other resources become necessary to sustain the groups, leading to potential dependence on the central labor bodies and affiliated unions. For the AFL-CIO to make the most of these groups, they need to maintain a delicate balance between providing support and guidance while still allowing the groups to have the freedom to generate new ways of functioning and fresh approaches to labor issues.

## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Protocol**

1. What is the current thinking and practice of these central labor body leaders and staff related to engaging young workers and developing young leaders?
2. What motivated them to get started? Who drove the new work?
3. How and why did their thinking and practice evolve and develop?
4. In what ways were young leaders directly involved in the evolution and development of the central body's youth initiatives?
5. What were the main barriers – internal and external – to building the youth programs and how were they overcome?
6. What new techniques and technologies, tactics and approaches have been deployed to more effectively engage youth in the institutions and activities of the labor movement?
7. What have been the results of the best practice youth initiatives? How have young workers and leaders been transformed by their participation in these initiatives?
8. How have the incumbent leaders, established staff, central labor bodies and their affiliated unions been transformed by their engagement with young workers and young leaders?
9. What are the greatest strengths of these youth programs? What are their most significant weaknesses?
10. What are the most important lessons that can be learned from these best practices for other central labor bodies – as well as local and national affiliates – that are committed to more effectively engaging young workers and developing young leaders?
11. What additional lessons might labor leaders learn from these young worker and young leader programs about revitalizing the union movement at a time when working people's organizations are the target of constant and ruthless attacks?

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