

# **Organising young workers in the Public and Commercial Services union**

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# Organising young workers in the Public and Commercial Services union

Andy Hodder

## Introduction

This paper analyses the relationship between trade unions and young workers using the Young Members' Network (YMN) of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) as a case study, and is part of a wider research project on organising within the union. PCS is the largest civil service union in the UK with a membership of approximately 280,000 and primarily represents lower and middle grade civil servants and those now working in the private sector on Government contracts. Existing research examining the relationship between young workers and British trade unions is predominantly quantitative in nature and tends to focus on the views of young people in non-unionised sectors. This leaves a gap for qualitative insight into the approach of a union operating in an environment with longstanding recognition and a relatively high density level such as the British civil service. The paper is split into four sections. The first provides an overview of the literature exploring the levels of unionisation amongst young people and briefly looks at the historical development of young member structures within the British union movement. The reasons for low membership are explored before the methods are outlined in the second section. Serrano Pascual and Waddington<sup>1</sup> analysed the steps taken by unions to deal with low membership levels in this group and found that union activities are concentrated mainly in the following areas: reforming union organisation to encourage membership and participation, highlighting an agenda appropriate for young people and changing the image of trade unions. In the third section, the development of the PCS YMN is then tested against these three concepts. It is argued in the final section that the PCS has developed a strong network of young activists and is leading the way in terms of engaging with and representing young workers, embedding this work within existing union structures. However, its success in the future may be limited due to changes to the external environment in which the union is trying to organise.

## 1) Overview of the literature

Union growth theorists provided the first analysis of the relationship between young workers and trade unions. Shister<sup>2</sup> argued that younger workers showed a greater propensity to unionise than older workers and offered the following explanations for his claim. Firstly, it was suggested that young workers usually experience shorter lengths of service, meaning they are less loyal to their employer. Secondly, and related to the first point, young workers have less to lose if they are dismissed or discriminated against as a result of union activity and will find it easier to get new jobs. Thirdly, young workers are better educated than their older counterparts. As a result of this, leadership is more likely to develop amongst younger workers, as the better educated are less willing to accept unfair treatment at work. Lastly, young workers do not view trade unionism as a new or unknown concept, but rather it is seen as normal, having grown up in an era where trade unionism is the natural way of dealing with labour disputes.

Whilst Shister's wider theories on union growth were generally accepted, the lack of evidence provided to back up his claims regarding young workers has been criticised by Bain and Elsheikh<sup>3</sup> amongst others. It has since been proposed by Bain and Elias<sup>4</sup> that membership of trade unions is actually lower amongst young people and there is in fact a positive correlation between age and union membership. In addition to this, later work by Blanchflower<sup>5</sup> found that the 'probability of being unionized follows an inverted U-shaped pattern in age, maximizing in the mid-to late 40s'.

Several writers have postulated many reasons as to why young people tend not to join trade unions, the majority of which reflect the opposite of Shister's arguments, as predicted by Bain and Elsheikh. These can be split into three separate but not mutually exclusive categories and will now be explored in more detail. The first suggests that young people possess negative attitudes towards trade unionism and are more individually orientated in their outlook on working life. There has long been a concern about the apathy of young workers<sup>6</sup> and further to this is the claim by Blanchflower<sup>7</sup>, that young workers don't need unions as much as older workers. This claim is not new, with young workers believing they are well provided for and thus not having a need for trade unionism<sup>8</sup>.

Levels of union membership have suffered as successive governments sought to decollectivize the employment relationship<sup>9</sup>. Such moves towards individualisation were assisted by the promotion of anti-unionism amongst employers, particularly in the private sector<sup>10</sup>. The deindustrialization of the UK and the decline of traditional unionised industries in the 1980s coincided with rising unemployment and, contrary to Shister's concept, Cregan has suggested that 'persistent levels of high unemployment did make some youth look askance at union membership if they feared employer victimization'<sup>11</sup>. Shister's notion of trade unionism being the norm was arguably still the case up to the 1970s but workers' exposure to unionism is rapidly 'becoming a less reliable means of increasing union membership among the young'<sup>12</sup>. As a result of this, young people have been termed 'Thatcher's children'. This decline in union values is unlikely to be reversed due to the concurrent decline in the "passing down" of union tradition through social and family networks<sup>13</sup>. However, recent research has found the ideological concept not to have any significant impact on young people's views on trade unionism<sup>14</sup>, with young people instead being referred to as 'malleable'<sup>15</sup> and 'blank slates' and actually expressing more favourable views towards unions than older workers<sup>16</sup>.

The second reason put forward encompasses changing labour markets and employer resistance to unions. Where this argument differs from Shister's is in the notion that this is likely to have negative implications for trade unionism in terms of the supposed increase in the individual orientation of young workers. As noted by Shister, young people have often been described as being mobile or a generation that 'is light on its feet... not looking for "decent employment"'<sup>17</sup>. Studies have shown

that young workers tend to exit as a result of unfair treatment at work rather than unionise or try to combat such treatment collectively<sup>18</sup>. The increase in flexible, temporary and part-time work, particularly amongst young people in sectors where union organisation is weak or non-existent is widespread and effectively excludes such workers from the opportunity to be union members<sup>19</sup>. Haynes et al<sup>20</sup> went even further to suggest that young workers are 'located in smaller, private-sector workplaces with lower unionization rates because they are less likely to organize' but acknowledge it is more likely to be a cost-cutting strategy. This has wider implications for union membership as Bain and Elsheikh suggested that older workers have had more opportunities to join unions due to having worked longer<sup>21</sup>. However, more recent research has suggested that if a worker doesn't join a union by the age of 40, they are not likely to join at all<sup>22</sup> and if younger workers' continued experience of employment is in the non-unionised sectors, it is likely to have a knock-on effect for future union membership.

The third reason cited for low union membership amongst young people is 'attributed to union inefficiencies in terms of recruitment strategies, deficits in internal union democracy, gerontocracy in union leadership and the exclusion of young workers from the unions' decision-making process'<sup>23</sup>. Whilst it is likely that each of the three reasons discussed contributes to low-union density amongst young workers, the approach of Undy et al<sup>24</sup> suggests that the internal factors affecting union growth play more of a role than the external factors discussed above. Of all the reasons offered for low-levels of young workers' union membership, unions make their own history, but not necessarily in circumstances of their choosing, to paraphrase Marx. Consequently what follows is a brief discussion of how British unions have dealt with the issue of young workers in a bid to increase their membership.

Research in this area (and specifically in a British context) is not extensive, although there are notable exceptions<sup>25</sup>. The literature is also predominantly quantitative in nature, focussing mainly on non-unionised sectors and the young workers themselves<sup>26</sup>. This presents a gap for qualitative insight into the relationship between trade unions and young workers in a unionised environment, analysing the extent to which the engagement and representation of young workers has been embedded within existing union structures.

The relationship between trade unions and young workers in Britain is not straightforward. Unions have long recognised the importance of young workers to the future of the movement but the extent to which their needs have been catered for, structurally and representationally, is questionable. Confederation level structures supporting the growth of young unionisation in Britain have been mixed to say the least. Initial TUC discussions around young workers focussed on educational provisions until 1927 when a motion was passed calling for 'organisation of women and young workers'<sup>27</sup>. This was soon followed by a motion aimed specifically at increasing the organisation of young workers, which was passed in 1928 but such actions were deemed unnecessary the following year<sup>28</sup>. Further attempts at setting

up youth advisory councils and youth conferences were made in 1948 and 1956, again without success<sup>29</sup>. It was not until 1970 that the first TUC Youth Award was presented, followed in 1974 by the establishment of the TUC Youth Conference. By comparison, the STUC established its Youth Advisory Council and annual Youth Conference in 1938 and was one of the first youth specific union structures in Britain. Other early developments amongst individual unions were found in the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the Scottish Area of the National Union of Mineworkers and the Civil Service Clerical Association (CSCA)<sup>30</sup> although the CSCA Youth Advisory Committee was disbanded in 1952 as it was deemed by the union leadership as being too militant<sup>31</sup>.

It is difficult to analyse the success of these youth sections, in part due to the fact that British trade unions used not to classify their members according to age<sup>32</sup>. However, Ryan suggested that youth committees played only 'a fitful role in representing youth interests'<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, Cole noted that union provision for young workers provided 'The weakest spot of the Trade Union movement' going on to suggest that 'Most Trade Unions are in spirit adult bodies, and do not accommodate themselves too easily to the ways of youth'<sup>34</sup>. The overall attitude of the union movement towards young members had not appeared to change by the 1980s as Payne suggested that 'Young unionists are tomorrow's union leaders, but they may not be getting the experience in unionism which they need to prepare them for this role'<sup>35</sup>.

This attitude appears to have changed in recent years. The re-launch of the TUC in 1994 saw a change in focus and an increase in resources being put towards increasing the number of young trade unionists. A survey of 64 of the 96 British unions conducted in 1998 found that 77 per cent of the unions placed a high or moderately high priority on recruiting young workers, the third highest group targeted behind part-time and female workers<sup>36</sup>. A further survey linked specifically to the TUC Organising Academy, conducted in 1999, found that 85 per cent of the unions involved with the initiative placed a high or moderately high priority on targeting young workers for recruitment, the second highest group behind female workers<sup>37</sup>. A third survey was conducted of 81 organising projects linked to the Organising Academy and found that 67 per cent of the projects had the objective of increasing young members, with 53 per cent aimed at increasing the number of young activists (both 3rd behind attempts to increase women and ethnic minority members and activists)<sup>38</sup>.

The success of these projects was measured in the survey, which revealed that 814 out of a total of 5797 new members recruited (fourteen per cent) and 29 out of a total of 355 new activists (eight per cent) were young<sup>39</sup>. This suggests that getting young workers to join unions may be one thing, but getting them to become active is much more difficult, possibly due to the 'mismatch between what young people say they want and what unions think they ought to want'<sup>40</sup>. Despite initiatives by unions, the TUC and the GFTU, trade union density amongst young people actually declined in

the period 2000-2010. Table A1 shows that density declined substantially with levels being just four per cent for those aged 16-19 in 2010. Whilst density has declined for all age groups (total UK union density was 26.6 per cent in 2010), the level of membership amongst the lower age groups has consistently been significantly less than in the older age groups.

Before continuing with this paper, it is important to define what is meant by a young worker. Existing studies each have a different definition of a young worker, making contrasts and comparisons between the works difficult. This is further complicated by unions themselves. Although a number of unions have developed specific young member activist networks or groups, many have different definitions as to what constitutes a young worker. Table A2 provides an overview of the differences between fifteen British unions. According to this table, the youngest age at which a worker ceases to qualify as young is 27, a view shared by Equity, Unison and USDAW. By contrast, the British Dental Association (BDA), the University and College Union (UCU) and the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) state that workers are considered to be young up to the age of 35. Such differences make comparisons between unions and federations difficult. The average upper age of a young activist within a British union has been calculated at 29.7, which is higher than the TUC Youth Committee limit of 27 but lower than the ETUC Youth Committee of 35.

Detailed accounts of young worker campaigns by British unions are not common and focus specifically on young workers themselves and not on the integration of younger members into the union structures. In their analysis of the relationship between trade unions and young workers, Serrano Pascual and Waddington identified three main 'measures that have been specifically introduced as a means to attract and engage with young people'<sup>41</sup>. Union activities were concentrated in the following areas:

- Reforming union organisation to encourage membership and participation
- Highlighting an agenda appropriate for young people
- Changing the image of trade unions

These areas, although distinct, are not mutually exclusive and together they are used by unions to increase the number of young, active trade unionists. A number of measures have been implemented by unions to reform union organisation, including a review of existing internal structures as well as the development of new ones to establish the relevance of trade unionism to the changing workforce<sup>42</sup>. The organising approach can in brief be summarised as instilling the value of self-organisation into members, moving away from a reliance on full time officials and emphasising the importance of rank-and-file tactics<sup>43</sup>. Such a change in union organisation has been commonplace in the UK since the mid-1990s but will not be discussed here as many have charted its development<sup>44</sup>. However, it must be noted that few have specifically explored the relationship between organising and the level

of engagement in trade unionism amongst young workers. In order to successfully organise young workers, unions must pursue an agenda appropriate to young people. It is argued by Serrano Pascual and Waddington that initiatives such as focussing on labour market concerns and other issues specific to young people have been used as a successful recruitment tool and may assist with developing levels of participation<sup>45</sup>. The final area relates to the wider image of trade unionism. Many young people's views on trade unions are strongly influenced by the media and whilst unions can do little about how they are portrayed in the mainstream press, other forms of communication and education are vital to promote a positive image of trade unionism. As such, a range of methods are being used to 'bring the perception of trade unions closer to young people'<sup>46</sup>.

The development of the Young Members' Network (YMN) within the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) will now be tested against the three concepts identified above to see how successful the PCS has been in embedding the young workers' issues into the fabric of the union. As previously stated PCS is the largest civil service union in the UK and primarily represents lower and middle grade civil servants and those now working in the private sector on Government contracts. The union has a membership of 285,877 (31/5/11) and PCS density in the civil service is 51.3 per cent with the total trade union density in the civil service being 67 per cent<sup>47</sup>. The civil service was subject to radical changes aimed at increasing levels of efficiency and effectiveness, resulting in the contracting out and privatisation of non-core public services<sup>48</sup>. The impact upon the size of the civil service is evident. In 1977 there were 746,000 staff but by the end of 2011, this had decreased to approximately 444,000. Accordingly, PCS have adopted an aggressive organising approach together with a high profile political campaign in response to attacks on jobs, terms and conditions (notably redundancy pay and pensions) but research into the approach of the union is limited, with two notable exceptions<sup>49</sup>. The PCS YMN is open to workers aged 27 and under and PCS has approximately 17,000 members young enough to join the network.

## 2) Methods

The data form part of a wider research project on union organising within the PCS, with respondents being a mixture of full-time officials and lay-representatives from across the union. It is acknowledged that 'unions are using a wide range of organising methods and techniques and they could differ between unions and between companies'<sup>50</sup>. As such, the wider research project analyses the organising approach of the union, focussing on whether the PCS approach to organising is uniform across different public sector departments. A mixed methods approach was taken, encompassing semi-structured interviews with 20 full-time officials (FTOs) and 39 lay officials of all ages and the collection and analysis of primary documents. As the project developed, the importance of the YMN to the PCS organising approach became increasingly evident and the interviews deliberately raised the issue of young members in the context of the PCS approach to organising. Observations were also undertaken at a range of union meetings, including specific YMN events,

such as the PCS Young Workers' Week 2010 North-West regional rally, the TUC Young Members' Forum Open Meeting 2010, the PCS Young Members' Fringe meeting at the 2011 ADC and the 2012 PCS Young Members' Forum. The research was undertaken against the background of attacks on terms and conditions proposed by the Coalition Government. The data present the views of a limited number of union officials in one British union and therefore cannot be claimed to be representative of the PCS or the wider union movement. However, despite these limitations, the data is useful as it provides detailed insight into PCS strategy on organising young workers.

### 3) Discussion

#### *i) Reforming union organisation*

PCS was formed in 1998 following a series of mergers between more than 40 unions representing civil servants, and culminated in the merger between the Public Services, Tax and Commerce union and the Civil and Public Services Association. Following a change in union leadership in 2001, PCS has switched politically “to the left’ of the mainstream TUC”<sup>51</sup> moving away from the partnership agreement signed in 2000 and pursued by the previous General Secretary. The election of Mark Serwotka as General Secretary led to ‘both an increased emphasis on a militant bargaining agenda, with “ambitious” bargaining goals; and a willingness to use collective mobilisations, such as strikes, to achieve the union’s bargaining aims’<sup>52</sup>.

This change in leadership led to a change in industrial policy in terms of union organisation and it is clear that for PCS, the move to organising represented a wider political initiative, rather than just a change in practice and tactics<sup>53</sup>. Formed in 2000, the PCS Organising and Learning Services department (O&LS) began producing National Recruitment Strategies, aimed at increasing union membership. A *Get Active* campaign was launched in 2003, laying the foundations for groups and branches to get new activists more involved in the union. Building on this success, O&LS made the ‘deliberate decision to change the emphasis of our work towards building proper sustainable workplace organisation’<sup>54</sup> and produced the first National Organising Strategy (NOS) of the union, now an annual document written by the union’s National Organising Department and adopted by the Annual Delegate Conference (ADC).

This first strategy stressed the desire to ‘become an organising union where members understand the importance of collectivism and the importance of winning together, rather than expecting the union to do things for them’<sup>55</sup> and recognised that the move towards organising represented a ‘large change of culture and a long-term objective’<sup>56</sup>. The document also provided the first signs that the union was taking the issue of young members seriously, announcing the establishment of the Young Members’ Network (YMN) and the creation of a full-time Youth Organiser post within the National Organising Department. Writing in 2002, PCS General Secretary, Mark

Serwotka noted that 'If trade unions are to survive and thrive, we need to recruit young people'<sup>57</sup>. Serwotka went on to state that, because of this, it was union policy to 'reach into the areas of the workforce where young people are concentrated and must recruit within this age range to become a recognised, and therefore effective, union'<sup>58</sup>. A survey of over 25,000 young members was conducted in 2003 and following that, the network was developed with one of the main objectives being to 'bridge the gap between being a member and getting active in the branch'<sup>59</sup>. The YMN Magazine was launched in 2005 and is now produced quarterly. The progress of the YMN was discussed in more detail in the 2005 NOS and again in the 2006 NOS, listing examples of the events and activities young members were involved with.

2006 saw the launch of the PCS Young Members' Charter (YMC) at the inaugural Young Members' Forum. The Young Members' Forum was developed as the Annual General Meeting of the YMN and provides members with the opportunity to meet and discuss a wide range of issues relating to the union. The Charter set out the priorities and demands of young members in the union and called for 'the whole of the union to meet these demands and actively encourage the next generation of activists in PCS'<sup>60</sup>. In order to build a successful YMN across the union, the charter stated that 'there should be a young members' contact in every branch to work with the young members' network'<sup>61</sup>. Whilst this may not be possible in some branches where the number of young members is small, if the union is serious about the YMN, the position of Branch Youth Officer should be included within the model branch constitution, similar to the current requirement for a Branch Women's Advisory Committee but this is not currently the case. Indeed, 'Young members should be given a fair chance to play their part in the ordinary union branches alongside their older and more experienced fellow members'<sup>62</sup>.

Despite not being included in the model branch constitution, the role of Branch Young Members' Officer or Branch Youth Officer has been outlined by the PCS. The YMN produced a role description which, over time, has been adapted to fit in with group plans to improve the coverage of their activists. For example, the PCS Office for National Statistics Representatives Recruitment Plan<sup>63</sup>, includes a detailed explanation of the role, expanding on the version produced by the YMN. A motion was submitted to PCS ADC 2012 to change the model branch constitution, as set out in the PCS Rulebook, to include the role of Branch Young Members' Officer. It was hoped that such a rule change would lead to an increase in the number of young activists in the union but the motion was guillotined and not voted on. Whilst some branches have added these positions to their constitution, making it a compulsory position should, in theory, encourage more to take on the role.

Although branch and group 'health-checks' conducted by the National Organising Department monitor the number of young activists in relation to the number of young members, more could be done to ensure that young members become involved in the union. For example, the low membership of the YMN could be accounted for by

the fact that when joining the union, you have to 'opt in' to the YMN. However, it has been suggested that trade unionism is a form of experience good, 'which by its nature is physically intangible, [and] ideally must be "sampled" in some way to convey its benefits to the consumer'<sup>64</sup>. Interview data confirms this and suggests that a number of activists and FTOs would prefer young members to automatically be part of the network and therefore receive the targeted communications (such as emails, briefings and magazines) in the belief that it would 'have a knock on effect on the number of people [active]'. Existing research further supports this and notes that 'successful union efforts to improve network density among young workers may lead to greater union knowledge, participation and active engagement in the pursuit of union community and political goals'<sup>65</sup>.

Following on from the adoption of the YMC in 2006, the first Young Members' Advisory Committees (YMACs) were established in the two largest groups of the union, with the aim of increasing the number of these advisory committees across the union<sup>66</sup>. The YMN was democratised through the adoption of the Young Members' Constitution at 2007 ADC, the idea being that 'the establishment of democratic structures within the Young Members Network will enable it to build and develop its campaigning and organising work'<sup>67</sup>. The YMN is co-ordinated by the National Young Members Committee. This is elected annually and made up of ten regional convenors and four officers (chair, vice chair, equalities officer and secretary), with the officers being elected at the Young Members' Forum. Simms noted that 'The key to a successful youth network is that a union needs to listen to it and not instruct it. This has not always been the strongest feature of British trade unions, but we must allow a mainstream voice for young people within our union structures'<sup>68</sup>. In this respect, the importance of having clear structures is evident in the PCS.

The views of the YMN are represented on the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the union through the NEC Youth Forum, which liaises between the NEC and YMN. Nationally and regionally, the PCS YMN is an organising network, rather than an equalities network. At a group or branch level, however, young members' interests are represented in an advisory capacity, which may lead to confusion amongst the membership, with one participant stating that the national commitment to young members 'needs to be matched at group and branch level'. Another participant noted that some branches view the YMAC as 'a talking shop'. When asked if the YMAC was taken seriously, the same participant replied by saying 'it's not that they don't take us seriously...they just forget', whereas another commented 'I would say they feel included in a way but its whether they get listened to...you just feel like you're paid lip service'. The YMACs are however considered by officials to be key to providing opportunities for younger members as they enable them to 'develop an experience of the higher level ends of the union without necessarily having to go through the natural process'. It was also suggested that the YMACs are seen as 'a progression route and...very effective'.

Between 2008 and 2011, updates on the YMN in the NOSs detailed progress on specific YMC initiatives. 2010 saw the first Young Members' Organising Strategy, a separate policy aimed at increasing the number of young activists within the union, across all groups. Regions are also charged with developing their own strategies, which focus primarily on recruitment and increasing participation in the union. The focus placed on the YMN within the NOS became less prominent as the strategies evolved, possibly reflecting the advances made in embedding the network into union structures.

Over time, the NOSs became dominated by statistics. However, this data is difficult to use for purposes of comparing changes in membership/activist levels due to the number of different variables documented in each NOS. As a result of this, it is only possible to analyse the number of young activists for the four year period between 2006 and 2009<sup>69</sup>. Table A3 shows the number of young activists actually decreased during that period but remains around five per cent of the total number of activists within the union. There is a lack of young people working in the sectors that PCS organises in and this goes some way to account for the low levels of membership amongst young people. This has been exacerbated by a recruitment freeze imposed upon the civil service in May 2010. Such external factors inhibit union growth, as noted by Undy et al who argued that 'external agents of change have done little more than present union leaders and their allies with additional problems to solve'<sup>70</sup>. The recruitment freeze and on-going departmental cuts have led to an ageing workforce in the civil service. As one full-time official noted 'Does the civil service give sufficient numbers of young people genuine and proper employment opportunities?... I think the answer to that question is probably not'. Many interviewees stressed the problem of a lack of young people to recruit and organise, with one branch official stating 'if we get anybody in here who looks under 27, I'm not joking, I'm in there!'

In 2002, the average age of a PCS member was 41 and the average age of a civil servant was the same<sup>71</sup>. Using figures provided by the PCS, the average age of a PCS member in 2011 was 45, the same as the average age of a civil servant. If the age of the membership base is increasing, it is no surprise that the age of an activist is also increasing. According to the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey, the average age of a union representative was 46<sup>72</sup> which is the same as the average age of a PCS activist. Some officials also noted that the age of PCS activists has been a problem for some time with one official stating that 'for years and years I think we neglected the development of young activists', with another noting that 'the problem we've always had within PCS...is our activist base is not young by any stretch'. PCS young members have a tendency to work on fixed term contracts, often in call centres. As such, branches which include call centres tend to experience high levels of membership amongst younger workers. One respondent described call centres as 'the modern equivalent of sending kids up chimneys' and suggested that the young call centre workers were 'strongly motivated to see the benefits of an effective trade union'.

However, only a small proportion of branches contain call centres and several participants have suggested that low activist levels across the rest of the union may be the result of some union officials not wanting to encourage younger members to speak up despite the increasing importance of the YMN. One respondent noted that 'It is harder for young people in unions to ascertain the authority in their branches and their groups to get what they want to achieve and to get young members' issues on the agendas'. Confirming this view, another suggested that more experienced officials can be 'quite reluctant to sometimes give away things... 'cos of your age and that, they're unsure'. One possible reason for this may be due to the view held that 'you really need to be involved in the union for a long time to build up the experience rather than just stepping into the role'. Another respondent echoed these thoughts, stating that they 'came from a tradition... where you wouldn't even consider standing for a GEC position unless you'd done your time as a branch rep doing those sort of horrible horrible cases and actually become reasonably proficient'. Several people still view young members as the trade unionists of the future, with one respondent admitting 'it's a cliché, but it's a cliché 'cos it's true, young members are the future of our union'. This may contribute to the low level of young people engaged with the union and the National Young Members' Organiser has been quoted as saying 'I hate it when people describe them as the trade unionists of the future. They are the trade unionists of now – with serious issues to contend with'<sup>73</sup>.

One way to counter these views is by encouraging younger activists to shadow more experienced officers in their roles, before progressing onto the roles themselves. This has been documented<sup>74</sup> and evidence from a different group suggests it works, noting the number of 'people that have grown up through the young members' network in the group and we've got young members actually who would still class as young members on our Group Executive Committee'. To encourage young members to become more involved, regular emails are sent out inviting them to join the network. One way in which the PCS has tried to raise awareness has been through making campaigns relevant to younger people and these attempts will be looked at in the following section.

#### *ii) Highlighting an agenda appropriate for young people*

As suggested by Serrano Pascual and Waddington, 'an agenda appropriate for young people must address their situation within the labour market and any shift in attitudes'<sup>75</sup>. The close links between the YMN and the NOSs have been demonstrated above, and it was perceived as vital to link the union campaign against cuts to pension schemes to young members as this issue will have a large impact on them. Of course, 'unions should not devote their resources entirely towards specific campaigns targeted at younger workers', however organising efforts 'need to be cognisant of younger workers' more instrumental approach to union membership and less developed understanding of how unions work'<sup>76</sup>. In support of this, the PCS have stated that 'even union organisers make this mistake, trying to recruit young people with materials offering style over substance'<sup>77</sup>.

At a national level, guidance was produced for branches on the main issues facing young members. Indeed, the union attempted to highlight aspects of the national campaign for industrial action and tailor them towards the large number of young members in the union. This was done by stating that 'The main issues facing young members are low pay/debt worries and job insecurity. These threats are related to the key demands of our national campaign. When talking to young members about the ballot, these are the key issues to focus on'<sup>78</sup>. The guidance also made the link between young members and pensions, which is often perceived to be a difficult issue to get young members onside with, as one respondent put it, 'it's not as agitational with them as it is with other members'. Another went further to suggest that 'one problem we have with young members is the current dispute, they know their goose is cooked, so to speak'. In an attempt to deal with this problem, a feature on how young members dealt with the reality of the cuts was provided in the union magazine<sup>79</sup> and numerous examples of young members' views have been increasingly appearing in all PCS publications. In addition to this, the union has been using quotes from a number of celebrities (such the actor Benedict Cumberbatch) to increase the profile of its campaigns against cuts<sup>80</sup>.

The various different levels of PCS have assisted in creating an agenda appropriate for young people. At a national level, the YMC provides issues for young people to organise around, such as pay, pensions, casualisation, job security, social justice and wider community initiatives. This 'back to basics' approach, focuses directly on the labour market issues affecting young members of the PCS and is similar to work done by other unions<sup>81</sup>. The Young Members' Network magazine provides updates on progress on these initiatives and other union activities. These include reports on the annual National Young Trade Unionist Week, which was launched by PCS in 2006. During this week, events take place around the country and over time, the week has gained support from other unions (including the Communication Workers Union, Unison, Unite and the RMT) and the wider public on the issues affecting young people today<sup>82</sup>. The YMN has also forged links with a variety of organisations such as Youth Fight for Jobs, UK Uncut and the Workers Beer Festival. The Workers Beer Festival gives young unionists the opportunity to volunteer at various festivals across the country, including Glastonbury, Reading and Leeds. Such links serve a dual purpose. Whilst they can be used to increase awareness as they are built around issues that affect younger workers, they are also aimed at altering the image young people in the wider public have about trade unions<sup>83</sup>.

If young members are going to engage with union business they require a level of training, at both national and group level, to ease their transition into the union. Indeed, it has been suggested that the 'main barrier to participation of young members is the lack of training and awareness of PCS structures and their role'<sup>84</sup>. Such training is provided through occasions such as the annual Young Members' Forum. This event provides a unique opportunity for young members to work with other young trade unionists from across the country. The event takes place over

three days and members attend presentations by senior union officials, as well as workshops on a number of issues including 'How the union works', 'Pensions – how it affects you', 'Economics for dummies' and 'Tackling under-representation in PCS'. Such training is vital for young members and is replicated at a group level by the YMACs. These training sessions also take place over three days and cover issues such as 'the make-up of PCS, how young members fit into the trade union structure, running a campaign and how members make a difference'<sup>85</sup>.

As well as advising the Group Executive committee on union policy, it was decided that the advisory committees would be given project work to conduct, in addition to their role in advising. The YMAC projects are designed to raise awareness of particular issues that affect young people and in the past topics have included the cuts, pensions, cancer awareness and social class. 'Jargon busters' have also been developed by YMACs for younger members due to vast number of abbreviations used. As one group magazine commented, 'PCS seems to be full of BECs, GECs, AGMs, ADCs and a whole load of AOB!'<sup>86</sup>.

Part of creating an agenda appropriate for young people is promoting the opportunities for younger workers to become involved in union activities. There is sometimes the view that it is difficult for older union officials to recruit young workers into the union due to their age. 'The cohesion of youth as a separate interest group within the union cannot be taken for granted. The separateness of youth is indeed limited by the lack of clear lines between the work of youths and adults in many contexts'<sup>87</sup>. Despite the above point by Ryan, some older respondents claimed that as they were not young, they did not know what the main issues facing young members were and therefore were unable to campaign and organise around young workers' issues. This is problematic, as Graham noted that 'you cannot assume that young workers will all have the same issues or that they will necessarily be different to that of their older colleagues'<sup>88</sup>. Yet some branches are in danger of entering a vicious circle due to this line of thinking, as the recruitment and engagement of young members is never going to improve whilst the branch officials believe they cannot do anything to improve it. One full-time official commented that 'there's a lot of old-school people that have become entrenched'. This claim appears to be supported by the views of branch officials, one of whom stated 'it needs another 18 year old or at least somebody that remembers being 18 to know what's gonna appeal to them'. At a branch executive committee discussion around young members, several officers commented on the differences between young and old people, making comments such as 'it's just a different generation now', and 'you've got to think like a young person'. These views were held across different groups within the union. Another branch and group officer stated 'it's very difficult to know what young people would like, what they want and how they want it'. With the age of trade unionists rising, one possible way to engage with young members would be to change the image of trade unions.

### *iii) Changing the image of trade unions*

The impact of the public image of trade unions has increased in importance over time. As one participant noted 'it's a bit depressing to see the kind of, well, people like me I guess, the sort of middle-aged, white blokes' and this is widely perceived as being the standard image of trade union officials. The use of public opinion polls to assess union image, however, is not without its problems, being general in nature, and therefore unable to explain the industrial and occupational differences in union density<sup>89</sup>. In addition, the impact the media plays in the public perception of trade unions cannot be understated<sup>90</sup>. Comments from branch officials state that 'a lot of young people today have grown up in a period where...the unions have got a bad rap', implying that the negative portrayal of trade unions in the media has led to a decrease in membership. Another union representative suggested that the media projection that 'unions are baddies' has further implications as 'once you see or hear that when you're younger, it has an effect on you later in life'. Indeed, Walsh issued a stark warning in stating that 'unless trade unions acknowledge the continuing role the media are playing in determining their effectiveness, the consequences are likely to be grave'<sup>91</sup>.

PCS is attempting to stem the negative media portrayal of unions in a number of ways, and issued detailed guidance on press releases and how to deal with media questions as part of the campaign pack for industrial action in 2011<sup>92</sup>. The importance of social media to trade unionism is one that has not gone unnoticed by PCS and the union is moving towards the 'e-union' concept identified by Diamond and Freeman<sup>93</sup>. Whilst the creation of sustainable online 'structures of union engagement that are innovative, open and creative is not easy'<sup>94</sup>, the notion that union presence online is particularly relevant to younger workers builds upon the premise that 'the Internet represents the future for a growing segment of workers who spend more time online than anywhere else'<sup>95</sup>. The union is increasingly using internet sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to lobby and promote the wider union message and regularly provides guidance for members and activists on how to make the most out of such technology<sup>96</sup>.

In addition to the importance of the media in union image, it has been argued that 'the greatest weapon for unions might lie in education at school, so those youngsters with core characteristics become members when joining the work-force, regardless of union presence or power at any particular workplace'<sup>97</sup>. PCS have been involved with this concept for some time and at the TUC Congress in 2006, representatives from the PCS YMN 'successfully proposed a key amendment calling for the benefits of trade unionism to be promoted amongst young people within schools, colleges and universities' with the aim of deciding 'how best to put pressure on the Government to build into the national curriculum the social benefits of trade unionism'<sup>98</sup>. This work continued to be noted in the NOS<sup>99</sup> which detailed the development in proposals to include trade unionism in the national curriculum. The union has been training young trade unionists to go and talk to school pupils but this has been problematic due to a lack of facilities time available to do this kind of work.

In 2010 and 2011 motions were put to the ADC regarding this and the successful 2011 motion instructed the union to 'negotiate a policy that allows trade union activists paid time off work to promote this program as part of the government's agenda for citizenship within schools'<sup>100</sup>. Progress on this is on-going but it is too soon to tell how successful this will be.

Existing research shows that 'teachers generally present students with a conservative picture of the world of work which is ideologically weighted towards the needs and criteria of employers'<sup>101</sup>. This is likely to have contributed to the widespread 'perception of the absence of social and collectivist values amongst young people'<sup>102</sup>. Many participants shared the view that people generally are not 'as union minded as they used to be'. This can be best described by the following quote, stating 'you've usually got to sell the union to young members and by sell, I don't mean marketing... [but] actually explaining what a union is because I think that consciousness has gone'. This lack of consciousness can also be partly attributed to the decline in the likelihood of young workers having parents who are trade union members<sup>103</sup> and it is hoped that the YMN can provide 'the re-awakening of exactly this consciousness that both the trade union movement and young workers need'<sup>104</sup>.

In addition to the work being developed between the union movement and schools, there have long been calls for trade unions to develop 'closer links with students and the NUS'<sup>105</sup>. In 2006, a partnership deal was finally signed between the TUC and NUS<sup>106</sup> and PCS worked with NUS to organise a national demonstration held in Manchester in January 2011. One participant suggested that the union involvement in the 'student demonstrations have had a massive impact on the attitude of young members'. Serrano Pascual and Waddington<sup>107</sup> noted that unions have been developing their links presence on university campuses for some time, the aim being to increase awareness of trade unionism. A motion was passed at the 2011 PCS ADC, requesting 'regional offices to continue supporting the activity of PCS young members in cross-union/student campaigning'<sup>108</sup> and observations made at the PCS Young Members Forum 2012 saw young members calling for the PCS nationally to make stronger links with the NUS.

#### 4) Conclusions

Using Serrano Pascual and Waddington's framework<sup>109</sup>, the development of the PCS Young Members' Network has been analysed and due to the lack of extensive research into the relationship between young workers and trade union structures, this study has been exploratory. It is evident that the organising agenda adopted by PCS has changed the union from being moderate in purpose to being more militant<sup>110</sup>, with the ultimate purpose of 'building proper sustainable workplace organisation'<sup>111</sup>. This suggests that PCS is clear in what it is organising for and the shift in attitude represents a wider political initiative<sup>112</sup>. It has been clear through the development of the PCS NOSs, that the YMN has been a priority of the union. Existing research suggests that 'changes at the policy and rhetorical level do not

necessarily result in changes at the interface with members and potential members<sup>113</sup> and as such, Freeman and Diamond are pessimistic in their analysis of youth specific initiatives, suggesting that unions 'cannot easily modify their operations to fit specific groups and... the programmes ghettoize young members'<sup>114</sup>. However, it is argued by one full-time official that this change in focus and purpose, which led to the development of the YMN, is likely to have been assisted by the fact that 'there are so many younger reps who have grown up with that [organising] model in mind and understand what they have to do to make it a reality'. Through attempting to improve the image of the union movement and embracing an agenda that young people can relate with, PCS have developed a YMN aimed at increasing the number of young members and activists and have begun to successfully embed this into existing union structures.

These democratic structures are crucial to the success of the network in the future. Despite relatively low young activist levels, the fact that PCS young members have won the TUC award for youth every year since 2009 goes some way to highlighting the successes of the YMN. However, as was noted in the first NOS, successful organising takes time and organising has always been viewed as the long term objective of the union<sup>115</sup>. As noted by Gomez et al, 'Effective union organizing today can have multiplier effects well into the future, as it leads to more union family members and more union-friendly family and peers, both of which enhance preferences for unionization, especially among youths upon which future unionization is built'<sup>116</sup>.

With only eight years since its inception, it is too early to say how successful the YMN and initiatives will be in the future as they will be determined by a combination of internal and external factors. As such, three main areas have been identified for further investigation in both the short and long term and to assess the value of the framework adopted in this paper. In the short-term, the impact of the proposed changes to the model branch constitution to include the role of Branch Young Members' Officer needs to be monitored, should the membership approve the change. In the long-term, the extent to which union activity in schools and the links made with the NUS and student demonstrations can reinvigorate a union consciousness amongst young people has implications for the union movement overall. Perhaps of greatest concern to the PCS is how the extent to which the imposed civil service recruitment freeze and other changes in the external environment will impact upon the number of young workers the PCS can engage with. At the time of writing, the recruitment freeze is set to continue until 2015 and with the average age of both the PCS member and activist rising, there may soon be very few young workers to organise into a network, despite the best efforts of the union.

## Appendix

Figure A1: Abbreviations

|      |                                    |
|------|------------------------------------|
| ADC  | Annual Delegate Conference         |
| AGM  | Annual General Meeting             |
| AOB  | Any other business                 |
| BEC  | Branch Executive Committee         |
| ETUC | European Trade Union Confederation |
| FTO  | Full time official                 |
| GEC  | Group Executive Committee          |
| GFTU | General Federation of Trade Unions |
| NOS  | National Organising Strategy       |
| NUS  | National Union of Students         |
| O&LS | Organising and Learning Services   |
| STUC | Scottish Trades Union Congress     |
| TUC  | Trades Union Congress              |
| YMAC | Young Members' Advisory Committee  |
| YMC  | Young Members' Charter             |
| YMN  | Young Members' Network             |

Table A1 – Trade union density by age groups, 2000-2010<sup>117</sup>

|          | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
|----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 16 to 19 | 5.4  | 5.3  | 4.9  | 5.2  | 3.9  | 3.3  | 5.2  | 3.8  | 4.3  | 4.1  | 4.0  |
| 20 to 24 | 14.3 | 14.3 | 13.5 | 14.0 | 13.5 | 13.2 | 13.1 | 12.9 | 12.2 | 11.8 | 12.0 |
| 25 to 29 | 23.1 | 22.6 | 22.0 | 22.4 | 22.7 | 21.8 | 21.9 | 19.6 | 20.2 | 20.9 | 19.6 |
| 30 to 34 | 28.2 | 28.0 | 26.7 | 28.5 | 26.8 | 26.9 | 24.7 | 25.1 | 24.9 | 24.1 | 22.5 |
| 35 to 39 | 33.5 | 31.5 | 32.3 | 32.5 | 31.0 | 29.3 | 28.9 | 30.0 | 27.4 | 27.6 | 27.0 |
| 40 to 44 | 37.2 | 36.4 | 35.9 | 36.1 | 34.6 | 35.0 | 35.2 | 33.4 | 33.2 | 30.5 | 31.1 |
| 45 to 49 | 40.3 | 39.3 | 39.7 | 38.8 | 39.9 | 37.7 | 37.7 | 36.9 | 35.4 | 36.1 | 34.1 |
| 50 to 54 | 38.5 | 39.4 | 39.0 | 39.8 | 39.3 | 40.6 | 39.9 | 39.1 | 38.4 | 37.6 | 37.6 |
| 55 to 59 | 36.7 | 35.9 | 34.8 | 35.4 | 36.2 | 37.5 | 36.4 | 38.5 | 38.2 | 39.0 | 37.1 |
| 60 to 64 | 30.7 | 32.0 | 28.7 | 30.6 | 28.4 | 27.5 | 28.4 | 30.1 | 28.9 | 30.2 | 28.2 |
| 65 to 69 | 14.4 | 10.2 | 14.6 | 13.3 | 8.8  | 15.6 | 15.3 | 12.9 | 19.2 | 16.5 | 13.7 |
| Over 70  | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | 9.3  | 7.9  | 12.6 | 7.3  |

Table A2 – Upper age limit on youth sections of British trade unions

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| British Dental Association (BDA)   | 35 and under |
| Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU)         | 27 and under |
| Communication Workers Union (CWU)  | 30 and under |
| Equity   | 26 and under |
| GMB  | 27 and under |
| National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) | 30 and under |
| National Union of Teachers (NUT)   | 35 and under |
| Public and Commercial Services union (PCS)                                 | 27 and under |
| Prospect   | 30 and under |
| National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT)               | 30 and under |
| Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA)                              | 35 and under |
| University and College Union (UCU)   | 35 and under |
| Unison   | 26 and under |
| Unite  | 27 and under |
| Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW)                     | 26 and under |
| Average age  | 29.7         |

Table A3 – Number of young PCS activists

| Date recorded | No. of young activists | Young activists as a percentage of total activists |
|---------------|------------------------|--|
| 31/12/06      | 514                    | 5.07%  |
| 31/12/07      | 521                    | 5.09%  |
| 31/12/08      | 497                    | 4.61%  |
| 31/12/09      | 524                    | 4.68%  |

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<sup>7</sup> Blanchflower, 'International Patterns of Union Membership', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Wray, 'Trade Unions and Young Workers', *International Labor Review*, p. 309.

<sup>9</sup> W. Brown, S. Deakin, and P. Ryan, 'The Effects of British Industrial Relations Legislation 1979-97', *National Institute Economic Review*, 161:1 (1997), pp. 69-83.

<sup>10</sup> D. McCabe, 'Individualization at Work?: Subjectivity, Teamworking and Anti-Unionism', *Organization*, 14:2 (2007), pp. 243-266.

<sup>11</sup> C. Cregan, *Young People in the Workplace: Job, Union and Mobility Patterns*, (London: Mansell Publishing Limited: 1999), p.182.

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<sup>15</sup> Lowe and Rastin, 'Organizing the Next Generation', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, p.203.

<sup>16</sup> Freeman and Diamond, 'Young workers and trade unions', pp. 36 and 39.

<sup>17</sup> G. Standing, *Work after Globalization*, (Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited: 2009), p.259.

<sup>18</sup> R. Gomez, M. Gunderson and N. Meltz, 'Comparing Youth and Adult Desire for Unionisation in Canada', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 40:3 (2002), p.523.

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