

## The role of learning and education in trade union efforts to organise young and precarious workers

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### Abstract

*Due to increasing precarisation, trade unions face challenges of organising young and precarious workers. Although research informs of innovative union strategies in this regard, there is a gap in understanding the role of learning and education in trade union efforts to organise young and precarious workers. This paper addresses this gap by drawing on industrial relations and adult education scholarship to examine a case study of innovative strategies of the Trade Union Youth Plus (TUYP) that has since 2011 operated in Slovenia. Findings show that dialogical approaches to education played a crucial role in the establishment and development of TUYP and its innovative proactive fieldwork and communication tactics, which increased unions' dialogical capacity to engage with, organise and unionise young and precarious workers, and ultimately also led to the transfer of knowledge from TUYP to the wider trade union movement. The article shows that dialogical approaches to education are a necessary prerequisite for organising and unionising young and precarious workers and for revitalising trade union organisations.*

**Keywords:** workers' education, radical adult education, dialogical education, trade unions, young and precarious workers

### Introduction

This paper is responding to calls to debate ways in which we can understand the relationship between social change and adult education and learning. In the context of growing precarisation and linked challenges for organising, it explores the role of adult education and learning in trade union efforts to organise young and precarious workers. While a growing industrial relations literature examines and has identified innovative

ISSN 2000-7426

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<http://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.5859>

[www.rela.ep.liu.se](http://www.rela.ep.liu.se)

union strategies to organise these workers (Keune & Pedaci, 2020; Samaluk & Greer, 2021; Tapia & Turner, 2018; Vandaele, 2019), there is a gap in understanding how trade unions actually learn to enter in dialogue, raise class and political consciousness amongst young precarious workers and transfer this knowledge within the wider trade union movement.

This paper addresses this gap by drawing also on radical adult and workers' education literature (Elias & Merriam, 2005; Holst, 2018; Kump, 2012; Samaluk & Kunz, 2022; Sauviat, 2015) to explore a case study of an innovative hybrid Trade Union Youth Plus (TUYP) that was established in 2011 within the largest Slovenian trade union confederation. TUYP has since evolved from an experimental project into a sustainable trade union organisation that utilises education and learning to provide a bridge between youth, precarious workers and trade unions. The paper is structured as follows: first the conceptual framework is introduced; this is followed by the presentation of the case study and methods used. Then the findings section is presented and finally the findings are summarised and discussed.

## **Education and learning in the trade union movement**

### ***Radical adult education***

Education and learning have always been at the core of the trade union movement, whose aim is not only to represent the interests of workers, but also to educate workers to strengthen their capacities and empower them to transform society (Sauviat, 2015). Trade unions are thus important actors in developing and practicing workers' education, which can broadly be defined as a 'sector of adult education which caters for adult in their capacity as workers and especially as members of workers organisations' (Hopkins, 1985, as cited in Sauviat 2015, p. 8). Much workers' education is based upon a radical adult education philosophy that first developed within the so-called old movements and trade unions that started emerging at the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century to raise working-class' political consciousness and empower them to struggle for their rights (Kump, 2012). Philosophical foundations of radical adult education are grounded within Marxist traditions and especially the works of Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire, who were active within labour and literacy movements, and argued that education is never neutral but linked to hegemonic struggles that demand raising political consciousness of workers' and other oppressed groups in order to engage in counter-hegemonic struggles and transform societal structures of oppression (Sauviat, 2015; Kump, 2012).

Inherent in Gramsci's concept of hegemony is the struggle for power that is not only maintained through force, but mainly through ideological means, the so-called cultural hegemony that maintains power by gaining consent for dominant ideas, which are reinforced by dominant cultural, religious and educational institutions (Kump, 2004). The concept of hegemony thus presupposes an educational relationship in which people learn to accept dominant norms and practices (Brookfield, 2005). Since hegemony is based upon consent, there is always also room for counter-hegemonic struggles that can challenge unequal power relations. Gramsci positioned these struggles within Marxist conflict theory and argued that working class needs to learn to think critically about power and control and develop working-class consciousness to organise for political transformation (Brookfield, 2005). For that working class needs to create its own 'organic intellectuals' - activists and persuaders, who would become cultural, educational workers and/or organic trade union leaders that would spread working class culture amongst

masses and work with and on their behalf (Sauviat, 2015; Kump, 2004, Brookfield, 2005). His philosophy of practice that took place in study circles, clubs and communities connected to working class political organisations and trade unions was thus crucial for development of radical adult education theory and practice (Kump, 2004).

Influenced by Marxist, including Gramsci's ideas, also Freire struggled for emancipation of the oppressed groups through education, by focusing on raising political consciousness about dominant hegemony and developing counter-hegemonic struggles. However, unlike Gramsci, Freire's (2000) critical pedagogy did not only focus on the working class, but spoke in general of oppressed groups. He argued that oppressors normalise unequal power relations through consent to hegemonic ideas, many of which are being (re)produced through education. Freire thus critiqued the 'banking' approach of mainstream education, which he identified as an instrument for oppression, where teachers act as depositors to provide 'common sense' knowledge and pupils act as depositories that uncritically receive and adopt such knowledge. In opposing the 'banking' approach to education, Freire (2000) advanced a dialogical, problem posing, education, where the oppressed can gain political consciousness of the world and their situation within. Freire's critical literacy programs were thus not just about educating people *how to read the word* but *how to read the world* (McLaren, 2021).

Through a dialogical approach education becomes the practice of freedom, which is grounded in the recognition that people and their world are inter-dependent (Freire, 2000). Furthermore, a dialogical approach also breaks the hierarchical relationships between teacher and student and turns both into critical co-investigators, who learn from each other and can thus also take the role of one or the other (Freire, 2000). While Freire's general view of oppression underplayed class analysis crucial for critical workers' education, Gramsci paid little attention to the pedagogical role of organic intellectuals in the development of counterhegemony (Schugurensky, 2000). In their shortcomings a dimension of complementarity emerges that is relevant also for contemporary workers' education centred around raising political and class consciousness, the making of organic intellectuals and organising increasingly precarious workers and wider social groups to challenge hegemony and transform society (Sauviat, 2015; Schugurensky, 2000).

The work of the above-mentioned thinkers also shows that radical adult education works particularly well in periods of change in the mode of production or of political transition (Walters, 1989, and Mayo, 2006, as cited in Sauviat, 2015). In such times political education can move from a single organisation or group to other proletarian organisations/groups or social movements of oppressed groups that can together form 'an historical Block' to counter hegemony and achieve social transformation (Sauviat, 2015, p. 21).

### ***Weakening of trade unions under neoliberal globalisation***

The history of European labour movements shows that unions became stronger in the aftermath of the 2nd World War and with the development of socialist and Keynesian welfare states. This was soon challenged by neoliberal globalisation that weakened the trade union movement in the West and in post-socialist states and caused its move away from radical adult education traditions (Kump, 2012). Workers' education thus shifted towards delivering and encouraging policies of life-long learning and skill acquisition enabling union members to survive and develop in the capitalist labour market (Holford, 2009). Here we also see that workers' education can have different goals and objectives that change over time. These can be instrumental or transformative and thus range from raising class consciousness, action and social transformation, to providing stability and

coherence to society, and focus on individual development, improved socio-economic contributions from the workers and the development of workers' organisations and their capacities (Cooper, 2007; Sauviat, 2015).

The hegemony of contemporary global neoliberalism is also constantly disrupting modes of production and causing cyclical political, social, economic and environmental crisis. Consequently, it increases the precarisation of workers that is characterised by unstable working, employment and living conditions. This produces new challenges for the trade union movement on how to engage and organise growing precarious workers, whose temporary work or non-work statuses hinder access to workplace trade union structures, and the next generation entering these volatile labour markets (Keune & Pedaci, 2020; Smith et al., 2019). Moreover, it opens questions regarding (young) precarious workers' education. By drawing on contemporary radical adult education scholarship, we can see that increasingly precarious populations are putting forward new demands and are practicing a more inclusive radical adult education through horizontal and direct forms of democratic action and mobilisation that also stimulate new spatial and organisational forms (Holst, 2018; Kump, 2012). With regards to the latter, we are for instance witnessing the emergence of new social movements, self-organised groups and grassroots indie and hybrid unions that engage with non-unionised precarious workers and wider social groups in transitions, are co-led by young, precarious and migrant workers and are centred upon mutual learning and building 'communities of struggle' from which collective sense of injustices and organising emerges (Holst, 2018; Kump, 2012; Però, 2020; Samaluk & Greer, 2021; Samaluk & Kunz, 2022).

Nevertheless, traditional trade unions are still facing various challenges to reach and organise precarious workers and the next generation, and there are several explanations of what creates the divide between established unions and these workers. These include flaws in union strategy and their inadequate engagement with workers and their communities, young and precarious workers might not self-identify as workers or might occupy precarious legal and social statuses that prevent them from entering unions, cultural clashes and conflicts in their encounters with unions or workers' precarious lives and their exclusion from the workplace, occupational and wider community (Holgate et al., 2018; Però, 2020; Piore & Safford, 2006; Samaluk & Greer, 2021; Tapia, 2013). Although not explicitly pointing this out, this industrial relations scholarship also indicates that trade unions often lack knowledge on how to approach, start a dialogue and engage with young and precarious workers. While this scholarship also identifies innovative union strategies to organise young and precarious workers (Samaluk & Greer, 2021; Tapia & Turner, 2018; Vandaele, 2019), there is a gap in understanding how trade unions actually learn to enter in dialogue and engage with young and precarious workers. This article addresses this gap by exploring the role of education and learning within contemporary trade union movement.

### ***Trade union movement learning and education***

Within social movements, generally two main forms of education prevail. The first is external education aimed at the general public, politicians and other actors and comes in the form of various public engagement or public protests and the second is internal education that takes place within social movements (Kump, 2012), including trade union movements and their trade union organisations. Radical (workers) education can thus on the one hand focus on external education to establish a dialogue, raise awareness amongst non-unionised workers and wider social groups and create political pressure. External trade union education can thus also act as a public pedagogy that can work at the

intersection of education and politics and can enact new ‘concerns for the public quality of human togetherness and thus for the possibility of actors and events to become public’ (Biesta, 2012, p. 693). External trade union education can thus enact new public concerns regarding emerging labour issues. By bringing precarity, prolonged youth transitions or vulnerability of migrant workers into the public and political agenda, unions help broaden the public understanding concerning these issues, stimulate wider mobilisation and also improve the public image of trade unions (Samaluk, 2017).

On the other hand, it can focus on internal education that is linked to learning and knowledge transfer within (trade union) movements (Kump, 2012) and trade union organisations. The aim of workers’ education is therefore also to develop trade union organisations and increase their capacities to address new and emerging challenges (Sauviat, 2015). Research on organisational learning in trade unions shows that apart from learning related to solving problems and learning how to learn to find solution to new and emerging problems, learning within trade unions also involves critical scrutiny and redefinition of unions’ existing learning strategies and structures, and ultimately of their understanding of trade union organisations (Zoll, 2003, as cited in Hyman, 2007). With regards to the later it is important to take into account trade unions’ democratic rationale, internal diversity and potential conflict over organisational identity and purpose, which may in the dialectical process of learning promote reflection and learning rather than hinder them (Huzzard, 2001, as cited in Hyman 2007). In this reflection unions can uncover their hidden knowledge and unlearn their conventional knowledge and routines that is often needed in strategic innovation. Research shows that in order for reflection to occur, unions must increase their ‘dialogical capacity’ (Culpepper, 2002, as cited in Hyman 2007, p. 204) through intra- and inter-union communication channels and must become ‘discourse organisations’ (Zoll, 1991, as cited in Hyman 2007, p. 204). As such labour movements also have the potential to become incubators of new knowledge and to expand new and alternative knowledge and understanding (Kump, 2012). Internal learning and education within trade union organisations is also needed to enact a public pedagogy (Biesta, 2012) that is able to interrupt traditional trade unions’ lack of engagement with the wider public and non-unionised workers.

This article explores the role of education and learning within contemporary trade unions facing challenges to engage with young and precarious workers by asking the following questions: 1) What role does learning and education play in the establishment and development of innovative trade union practices to enter in dialogue, engage with and organise young and precarious workers? 2) What learning and knowledge transfer can be observed among trade union organisations in relation to these innovative practices? 3) What are the wider transformative effects of these innovate trade union practices?

## **Case study and methods used**

This paper presents a case study of a hybrid TUYF that emerged as a response to the effects of the 2008 economic crisis in Slovenia and has since greatly transformed workers’ education and trade union organisations. Slovenia has been characterised by efficient welfare state institutions that were preserved during its gradual post-socialist transition, thus providing relatively stable employment and social security. During transition trade unions began to take over functions previously performed by the work councils and have then quite quickly in 1990’s achieved a relatively high levels of density that lasted for more than a decade (Stanojević & Broder, 2012). This started to change with external pressures that came with its entry into the EU in 2004, the Eurozone in 2007 and the subsequent global financial crisis accompanied by more invasive EU governance.

Through these external pressures Slovenian neo-corporatist model acquired features of ‘competitive corporatism’, visible in the policy of wage restraint, the intensification of work and increased pressures on the labour force (Stanojević & Broder, 2012). Moreover, the economic crisis brought to growth in precarious work and unemployment and had a particularly negative impact on youth transitioning from education to work (Samaluk & Greer, 2021). This was combined with deunionisation trends and difficulties that unions faced in reaching the growing precarious workforce and those in prolonged transitions from education to work (Samaluk & Greer, 2021; Samaluk, 2017; Stanojević & Broder, 2012).

Apart from creating special structures for its younger members, Slovenian unions did not actively engage with youth transitioning between education and work (Samaluk & Greer, 2021). Nevertheless, in these adverse conditions, combined with damaging governmental proposals for structural reforms to limit students’ income, abolish student work and replace it with temporary and income-limited ‘mini-jobs’, youth started mobilising against these reforms (Samaluk, 2017). These unfavourable conditions combined with new opportunities to augment shrinking trade union resources by utilising EU funds, also led to the creation of new types of trade union practises and organisations that worked to revitalise trade unions through the innovative organisation of non-unionised (young) precarious workers and wider social groups (Samaluk, 2017; Samaluk & Kall, 2023). Amongst this was also the hybrid TUYP that is unique in its proactive organising approach towards non-unionised and non-represented youth occupying various precarious work, student or unemployment statuses. The hybrid TUYP, at the centre of this study, was established in 2011 as part of these efforts within the largest Slovenian trade union confederation, the Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (AFTUS), which comprises of 22 affiliated trade unions mainly from the private, but also the public, sector.

This study is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews, including follow-up interviews, with nine TUYP activists and confederation and affiliated union’s officials. This purposive sample was selected based on participants role in the TUYP, the confederation and some other affiliated unions and provided in-depth insights into innovative TUYP practices, learning, knowledge transfer and its transformative effects on confederation, its affiliates and the wider trade union movement. Moreover, organisational documents, such as yearly reports and programme guidelines and other material available on TUYP’s and confederation’s web and social media sites were also analysed. Initial fieldwork was done in Slovenia in 2015, followed by six new and follow-up interviews between 2017 and 2024. Interviews were carried out in Slovenian and were then transcribed and thematically analysed through the process of coding and categorisation of codes into relevant themes (Charmaz, 2006). Here presented data was translated into English. All quotes presented have been anonymised and are accompanied by the information on the year of the interview, interviewees’ role in the TUYP or the confederation and any changes in their role over time.

## **The role of learning and education in the establishment and development of the TUYP**

As mentioned earlier, youth started mobilising and self-organising due to growing crisis of youth unemployment and precarity. Their self-organising struggles included informal meetings between student organisations and trade unions, where they shared and discussed current problems and possible solutions related to the growth in non-standard employment and connected precarious education-to-work transitions of youth:

In 2011[...] we started discussing what could be done to organise and unionise youth [...] at that time there was a lot of talk about precarious workers on civil-law contracts and the fake self-employed [...] and within our visible, starting environment, we talked about student work, students, pupils and the unemployed [...] These are groups that could once become trade union members [...] we all know that social dialogue is very important in Slovenia and if you want to be part of it, trade unions are your only option [...] At that point we connected with AFTUS, because we had no experience [...] we started discussing how to establish a trade union. (TUYP activist 1, 2015)

Adverse conditions thus stimulated informal dialogue between youth and trade union, which led to mutual learning and exposed the need to organise precarious and non-represented youth within trade unions. This dialogue led to the formation of an independent TUYP within AFTUS in 2011, which opened up to unrepresented young precarious workers and wider social groups (such as students and the unemployed) who often did not identify with and were not represented by the unions.

This initially experimental establishment of TUYP thus also opened Pandora's box for the internal learning needs necessary for the formation of new organic TUYP leaders:

In the beginning, it was really an experiment [...] No one took us quite seriously and we did not have any serious influence, I would say the first years, on the functioning of the association [...]. Quite honestly. This also suited us, because you have to form yourself first. (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024)

By becoming part of confederation, TUYP activists could fully utilise their newly gained access to internal and external trade union education organised within internal Trade Union Academy and the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI): 'We sent our activists on trainings of the confederation, and we very much utilised ETUI's trainings. Here I must emphasise ETUI's Young Trade union Leader's programme, which is the best, according to my opinion' (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024). This internal and external trade union education thus mainly increased TUYP's general trade union capacities and enhanced activists' leadership skills. However, their know-how on how to engage and organise young and precarious workers developed mainly through learning by doing. This type of learning really became possible after TUYP was able to employ activists. Since the hybrid TUYP does not act as a representative trade union financed by membership, the ability to employ activist was closely linked to their innovative ways of tapping into alternative sources of funding:

The first difference started to happen with the projects. We relatively quickly acquired the status of an organisation in the public interest in the field of youth work [...] This is a very important thing in Slovenia, because it allows you at least one piece of funding that was stable [...] you need some stability, to pay activists [...] once we were able to hire at least for the duration of the project, our strength has increased. Not only within the union, but first of all in terms of content, when you have people employed, they can deal with these issues [...] Then we started to build our expertise in terms of the content. That's when we increased our power, also towards confederation. Plus, when we had something to show. (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024)

While the dependence on project funds also came with high risks linked to uncertain and temporary project funding, their unique status as a youth organisation and their increasing know-how to gain various divers project funds, provides a stable access to such funds (Samaluk & Kall, 2023) and thus also some stability in the making of organic union

leaders and in maintaining the core activist base with unique expertise and know how on organising young and precarious workers.

## **Workers' education to establish a dialogue and organise young and precarious workers**

Project funds also allowed TUYP to offer and organise awareness raising workshops on education-to-work transitions in secondary schools. Since education-to-work transitions became increasingly long and precarious due to economic crisis, these became a topic recognised and much welcomed by teachers, who wanted to aid their pupils:

We started to offer education-to-work transition workshops for free [...] and because the crisis was so big at that time, also teachers recognised this theme as essential to help their pupils with this transition [...] then we started applying to projects that allowed us to do free workshops in schools [...] And today TUYP has this network of schools and through that we managed to get trade unionism into the catalogue of compulsory elected subjects. (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024).

With this innovative proactive fieldwork approach, the TUYP succeeded in bringing trade unionism into the educational field, which had previously been off-limits for trade unions: 'When we started, we wanted to get to youth and youth is in schools, however then no one at the confederation dared to think [...] that we will ever have access to schools [...] And we broke that wall' (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024). Entering the educational field was a crucial turning point for unions as it allowed them to connect and engage in dialogue with previously unreachable youth and the next generation of workers.

Through educational activities in schools the TUYP raises awareness amongst pupils about 'precarious work, decent work, employment and social rights and trade unionism' (TUYP activist 3, 2024). TUYP awareness raising workshops organised in secondary schools are based on a dialogical approach and aimed at raising political and class consciousness amongst youth about risks at transitions and workers' rights. Youth employment related themes were also later included into the formal curriculum through the mandatory active citizenship content component in secondary vocational education programs (Zavod RS za šolstvo, 2019). Consequently, the demand for TUYP workshops has increased enormously over the last two, three years and involves around 1000 pupils per year (TUYP activist 3, 2024). TUYP also cooperates with some higher education teachers and the public Employment Office and through these channels organises workshops for students in particular programs and subjects or for the unemployed. In their campaigns for internships in welfare professions, TUYP also organised campaigns, info points and events at faculties educating the next generation of welfare professionals (Samaluk & Greer, 2021). Moreover, they also use integral and EU project funds to develop other innovative, informal educational and experiential learning methods, such as for instance *Escape room against violations on the labour market*. This is a puzzle escape room game that simulates real encountered labour market violations, which participants have to deal with by discovering clues and accomplish tasks in order to fight violations and finally escape the room (Mladi Plus, 2022). By doing that the TUYP is advancing a dialogical, problem posing, education, where youth can gain political and class consciousness necessary to navigate transitions.

EU funded projects have also allowed TUYP to reach youth in different Slovenian regions, by doing workshops in schools and other places across Slovenia and by implementing a travelling trade union school. These educational activities aimed at



raising youth's political consciousness about education to work transitions, discrimination on the labour market, the role of trade unions and youth activism:

The two biggest things are that we are all over Slovenia [...] and we are conducting a traveling trade union school [...] a series of trainings, workshops [...] where we teach young people about entering the labour market, then discrimination in employment, examine violations of job advertisements, then introduce them to trade unions - what they are, why they are important, what workers' councils are, then activism, youth participation, and at the same time, we have different specific content at each training in each region[...] Then, in all statistical regions of Slovenia, we also have trainings in secondary and vocational schools, where we focus more on entering the labour market. (TUYP activist 4, 2017).

With their travelling trade union school, the TUYP gained new members, as well as gained and trained new activists and developed regional councils:

Project Signpost was aimed at gaining new membership, mainly activists, on local level and we succeeded [...] now we started developing regional councils [...] because we actually had the chance to go there, meet people, organise workshops and if anyone was interested introduce them [to trade union work]. (TUYP activist 5, 2017)

TUYP's radical adult education approach has played a crucial role in gaining new trade union members amongst non-represented and precarious youth. According to another activist each workshop brought approximately five new members (TUYP activist 4, 2017). As the economic crisis deepened, TUYP effectively addressed emerging needs by starting to engage also with older precarious workforce, which was rapidly aging out of the category youth due to prolonged precarity:

We were supposed to cover youth up to the age of 35, but this age is increasing enormously [...] We are thus approached by people, who identify with that and don't perceive us as a stagnant trade union [...] and this is why a 37 or 38 old woman becomes a member of TUYP [...] Youth Plus on the one hand means more active youth [...] willing to change things and on the other it means not that young anymore. (TUYP activist 1, 2015)

Unlike traditional youth committees, where membership is based upon chronological age and worker status, TUYP regards youth as a social category that has increased enormously due to widespread precarisation. As such it also welcomes precarious 'youth plus' workers, who are unable to reach social adulthood due to persistent precarity, even though they have already passed the youth-normative chronological age.

Through their proactive fieldwork approaches TUYP activists also themselves learned about new types of precarious work and emerging platform workers. This consequently also informed and shaped their innovative and enduring proactive awareness raising tactics to enter in dialogue, engage with and gradually unionise platform workers:

Each time we started communicating with them they wouldn't accept us. So, we needed a different approach. We looked for them, ran after them [...] and did fieldwork research on their working conditions, started talking to them and offering them our services, but there was not much interest [...] we also did a fieldwork campaign, where we offered them meal breaks, were fixing their bikes, offered them access to toilet, everything that should be provided by their employer [...] and we offered them the right to organisation and representation [...] we tried for three years to get to know them, to prove ourselves, to organise them [...] This is proof that trade unionism is a long haul run. (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024).

This case study shows that engagement with platform workers sparked mutual learning that pushed the TUYP to introduce innovative fieldwork approaches. These went beyond mere proactive communicative tactics and demanded in-depth research and learning about platform workers conditions, which ultimately led to targeted campaigns that responded to the aspects of workers' rights disregarded by the above-mentioned food delivery platforms. This allowed them to enter in dialogue with platform workers and gradually built trust and class consciousness amongst them. This long process of conscientisation was a necessary precondition for their ultimate organising and unionising, which resulted in TUYP's new member section of over 150 platform workers. Dialogical approach to education can also be observed in TUYP's innovative communication tactics to reach and engage with youth through various communication and then relevant social media channels:

It's crucial that you are everywhere [...] We have Facebook, Twitter, webpage [...] newsletter, in which we inform about our current work. Since we are working with youth, this is key, as through these channels we get a lot of support from youth, they join, follow us. (TUYP activist 5, 2015)

Furthermore, these innovative communication tactics also allow TUYP to 'increase pressure, because we can show that we do work instead of others' (TUYP activist 2, 2015). In contrast to traditional trade union work, where there is mainly lobbying within social dialogue institutions, TUYP innovative communication tactics enable lobbying directly towards institutions by engaging in public debates. By doing so they show that public concerns related to class struggles can be exposed and negotiated through means other than the traditional protective institutions.

TUYP's use of various innovative communication channels and their increasing public and mass media exposure can thus also be viewed as a public pedagogy, which on the one hand enacts new concerns related to precarious work and youth precarity and on the other demonstrates that trade unions can be different and engaged with youth problems and youth struggles: 'Trade unionism can be different [...] that they are not about old men on same positions for 30 years, but for young people wanting a better future and willing to fight for it' (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024). Therefore, through its public pedagogy TUYP is also significantly changing the public image of trade unions, which are consequently also becoming much more inviting for youth and women:

It is in the interest of trade unions to have visibly active young trade unionists [...] Many times trade unions were perceived as some obsolete structures led only by old men and it is in their interest that they have young people appearing in public and clearly stating that they are trade unionists. (TUYP activist 5, 2017)

When TUYP started out trade unionism was not very popular amongst youth. However, its public engagement and public pedagogy, which enacted new public concerns related to youth and precarious workers, showed that trade unions can be different and can involve and work for the next generations and precarious workers.

## **Learning and knowledge transfer amongst trade unions**

Initially there was quite some resentment within the confederation and affiliated unions towards TUYP, and it took a lot of time and effort before other affiliated trade unions recognised TUYP's innovative tactics and started learning about them. Gaining internal

recognition involved a lot of internal communication to raise awareness about the need to organise young and precarious workers and to showcase TUYP's tactics to do so:

When we organise an event, protest, make a statement [...] we photograph everything [...] I then create a short message and add photos. I have now started to send this also internally across confederation, so that they know what we do, that we get a positive response [...] Then we started a survey amongst member trade unions, on how many young members they have, what they do for them, are they aware of precarity [...] We will present this at the presidency of confederation and we will emphasize this gap, in a nice way. Trade unions are extremely traditional and unchanging institutions and this is visible in so many ways. One is this communication that is lacking internally, and non-awareness of the reality of workers, who are not employed members. There's a lot of sexism within. (TUYP activist 5, 2015)

Internal communication initially enabled TUYP to showcase their innovative trade union work and enter into dialogue with other affiliated trade unions. This gradually brought them sufficient legitimacy to research member unions' engagement with the next generation of workers and to identify gaps, which they needed to communicate in a manner that would be acceptable within quite traditional organisational culture. These tactics point to inward enacted public pedagogy aimed at the labour movement, which enacts new concerns and the need for trade unions to adopt new approaches and again return to radical adult education traditions, which demand 'a sort of militancy [...] by putting activism up front' (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024).

TUYP's public pedagogy enacted through internal showcasing of their innovative practices has brought them internal recognition that has consequently led to internal confederation's learning and education in the form of internal workshops and training:

When we had something to show, this resulted in the fact that individual affiliates started to invite us. It started with trainings, workshops, when they saw that we have knowledge they lack. Social media were a breaking point; they opened the doors for us [...] We were no longer an experiment. (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024).

TUYP thus evolved from an experiment into an innovative hybrid trade union that has a lot of new knowledge to offer to the confederation and its affiliates on how to enter in dialogue and engage with young and precarious workers and increase their general dialogical capacity towards existing and potential members. In the course of these efforts TUYP has designed a Handbook on how to get new young members and has then organised workshops for all affiliated unions to present this handbook and tactics to approach, include and involve the next generation in trade union work (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024). Their inward enacted public pedagogy has thus brought wider learning and knowledge transfer into the confederation and its affiliated unions.

As a result, some affiliated unions have started to cooperate closely with TUYP in order to utilise their innovative tactics and know how. Out of 22 affiliates TUYP cooperates closely with seven affiliates. These are mainly those working in sectors with growing precariousness, such as hospitality, transport, retail, education and those, where the leadership recognises TUYP's innovation: 'Those unions that noticed precarisation or worsened working conditions in their sectors [...] or where leaders of trade unions were open for us and recognised that our innovation helps spread trade unionism' (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024). TUYP organises workshops and training for these affiliates, as well as cooperates with them in the field and in specific campaigns. Through these activities they transfer their knowledge and know-how on how to reach and engage with the next generation and increase trade union membership amongst youth (AFTUS

confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024), what tactics to use to reach and organise atomised and mobile precarious workers (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024) and emerging platform workers (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024). Since the TUYP is not a representative, but a hybrid trade union working proactively to reach and organise young and precarious workers, it also acts as a bridge between these workers and trade unions and thus try to refer their existing and emerging precarious members over to affiliated sectoral unions (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024). Although some affiliates are still sceptical towards TUYP's hybrid status and tactics, there is a growing recognition within confederation and its affiliates of TUYP's important role in trade union revitalisation.

As a result, TUYP activists have also gradually begun to cover youth, precarious work, digitalisation and communication related educational themes within the confederation's internal Trade Union Academy (Zveza svobodnih sindikatov Slovenije, 2022) and became trainers for new activists (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024). Moreover, TUYP also itself acts as producer of new generation activists and young union leaders and thus also acts as a pool from which other affiliated trade unions employ new activist and organic trade union leaders (Affiliated union official, 2019). Some former TUYP activists have consequently become employed within the confederation or some affiliated unions, where they are transferring TUYP's know-how related to 'communication, fieldwork, expert or legal services' (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024) and as such make traditional trade union organisations more proactive and engaged with public pedagogy for all workers, not only their members.

Currently there are two former TUYP activists employed in the AFTUS confederation communications team, who are increasing the confederation's dialogical capacity by teaching affiliated unions how to renew and utilise their websites and social media to attract new and better engage with their existing members (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024). They have also turned the confederation's website and social media into an effective information hub that can be utilised by members and the wider public (TUYP activist 1, 2015) and can increase affiliated unions and the confederations' public pedagogy efforts. These public pedagogy efforts were particularly visible during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, when they reacted swiftly to provide all relevant information on their website regarding the changed workers' conditions and addressed inquiries of members and non-members alike, which consequently also increased membership (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024). Another example of opening up to non-members and wider public are the newly introduced confederation's Open Days, happening on 1<sup>st</sup> May, international worker's day, that is also a public holiday in Slovenia. Open Days have been taking place yearly since 2019 and are aimed at attracting new members by opening to all interested workers and the wider public to inquire about workers' rights and trade unionism (AFTUS confederal official and former TUYP activist 1, 2024).

TUYP's innovative tactics and their role in the wider transformation and revitalisation of the trade union movement also became recognised beyond Slovenian borders. TUYP is acting as an international example of good practice and engages in transnational partnership projects, where it transfers its knowledge and know-how to partner unions in many other European countries, amongst which are now also German and Austrian trade union confederations, Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB) and Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund (ÖGB):

At international level they often approach us for training, they want us to share our know-how. We were approached by the main Austrian confederation ÖGB, so that ÖGB-Jugend, would come to us and that we show them, what we do. In June the delegation from DGB is

coming, their youth division [...] Very often we get calls, invitations that we introduce our good practices. (TUYP activist 3, 2024)

Moreover, TUYP's innovation and its production of trade unions' next generation organic union leaders has also been recognised at the EU level. Consequently, in 2019 the then TUYP leader, first became elected as the President of the Youth Committee of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and in 2023 she became part of ETUC's leadership team. In a new role as ETUC's confederal secretary, that former TUYP activist is responsible for strengthening trade union youth structures and trade union renewal, which is closely connected to practices developed by TUYP:

This renewal is often connected to things that we did at TUYP, so that you include new categories of workers, that you are open, that you have different communication approaches, that you modernise, that you address wider issues, that you strengthen internal structure and external recognition [...] On the EU level TUYP is recognised as an example of good practice for various fields. (Former TUYP activist 2, 2024).

In this new position a former TUYP activist is thus transferring TUYP's knowledge and know-how to the ETUC and its affiliated country confederations.

## Discussion and conclusions

This paper explored the role of education and learning within the contemporary trade union movement in order to effectively engage with and organise young and precarious workers. It focused on a case study of TUYP that emerged in Slovenia as a response to the crisis prone growth of youth unemployment and precarity and has later become an important actor in the revitalisation of the wider trade union movement.

Findings show that education and learning played a crucial role in the establishment and development of TUYP and took place through informal dialogue, more formalised internal and external trade union education, as well as through their actual (field)work. Through these various forms of learning TUYP activists gradually developed into organic union leaders with unique expertise and know-how on how to engage and organise young and precarious workers. TUYP's activists thus also acted as 'organic intellectuals', who became educational workers reaching out and entering in dialogue with young and precarious workers. Their innovative proactive fieldwork tactics to reach young and precarious workers in domains with no trade union presence involved Freirean (2000) dialogical, problem posing, approach to education, where youth gained political and class consciousness. This dialogical education came in the form of awareness raising workshops in secondary schools, universities and other places where youth congregate, experiential learning methods and a travelling trade union school across Slovenia through which they also gained new members, as well as trained new activists and developed regional councils. Through their proactive fieldwork approaches TUYP activists also themselves learned about new types of precarious work and emerging platform workers, thus breaking the hierarchical relationships between teacher and student and turning both into critical co-investigators (Freire, 2000).

These fieldwork approaches thus sparked mutual learning that brought to innovative trade union tactics that were gradually changing workers' class consciousness and ultimately led them to organise and unionise to challenge exploitative conditions. These findings again confirm that dialogical approaches to education can change workers' consciousness and can lead them to challenge hegemony and transform society (Kump, 2012; Sauviat, 2015) and are as such also a necessary precondition for organising and

unionising precarious workers. The findings thus show that workers' education should not only cater for adults in their present capacity as workers and union members (Sauviat, 2015), but also in their future capacity as workers and potential union members, with whom unions must first engage in dialogue in order to organise and unionise them.

Findings show that dialogue has also increased through TUYP's innovative communication tactics, which have significantly boosted trade unions' dialogical capacity to engage with young and precarious workers, to build political pressures and ultimately to promote a public pedagogy (Biesta, 2012) that enacts new concerns related to precarious work and youth precarity and offers alternative ways to organise youth. All this has ultimately also contributed to improving the public image of trade unions and made them more inviting for young people. TUYP's innovative communication tactics were also crucial in establishing a dialogue with other trade unions about their learning needs. These tactics point to an inward enacted public pedagogy aimed at the labour movement, which on the one hand exposed the need for unions to learn new approaches to work effectively with young and precarious workers and on the other revealed a hidden knowledge existing within the TUYP, which brought to internal recognition and knowledge exchange.

Within the confederation's internal learning and education TUYP consequently took the role of an expert, transferring its knowledge and know-how to some other affiliated trade unions on how to enter in dialogue and engage with young and precarious workers and how to increase their general dialogical capacity towards existing and potential members. TUYP is however not only an incubator of new knowledge and an advocate of radical workers' education traditions, but also acts as an entry point for new generation activists and is thus also producing trade unions' next generation organic leaders. This study not only confirms the findings of previous research that dialectical processes of learning promote reflection and learning within trade union organisations (Hyman, 2007), but also shows that it can contribute in important ways to the transformation of trade union organisations.

This study demonstrates that TUYP's innovative education practices grounded within radical adult education traditions have had some important transformative and revitalisation effects on the confederation, its affiliated unions, as well as the wider European trade union movement. TUYP is today recognised as having developed an international good practice and is consequently transferring its knowledge and know-how to trade unions across Europe. Findings thus confirm previous research (Sauviat, 2015) that radical workers' education is crucial in periods of economic and political crisis, where it can move from a single organisation to other union organisations and the wider labour movement to effectively address and challenge growing youth precarity.

Although limited in scope and size, this qualitative study points to the essential role of radical adult education in the contemporary trade union movement and shows that even a small trade union from the Central and Eastern European periphery that harnesses these radical workers' education traditions can have a significant transformative and revitalising impact on the wider European trade union movement.

## **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

## Funding

This article was researched and written with the kind financial support of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI Analytical No. 2451-103-12-21) and ARIS-Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency within the framework of the program group Pedagogical-andragogical research - Learning and education for quality life in the community (P5-0174).

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank all interviewees for their time and insights, as well as anonymous reviewers and editors for their insightful comments on the earlier versions of this article.

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