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COUNTRY REPORT  
**THE NETHERLANDS**



Amsterdam Institute for Advanced labour Studies (AIAS), University of  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Maarten Keune, Frank Tros



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Further information is available at <http://www.adapt.it/younion/>

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## INDEX

Introduction.....	1
<b>1.</b> Labour market position of young people in the Netherlands.....	3
<b>1.1.</b> Increasing instability in early careers.....	6
<b>2.</b> Membership and institutional position of youth in trade unions in the Netherlands .....	9
<b>2.1.</b> Ageing membership files of trade unions.....	9
<b>2.2.</b> Specific youth unions.....	12
<b>2.3.</b> Youth coordinators of sectoral trade unions.....	13
<b>2.4.</b> Youth unions under discussion .....	15
<b>3.</b> Views of young people about trade unions in the Netherlands .....	18
<b>3.1.</b> Experiences of the interviewees in recruiting and preservation of young members.....	20
<b>4.</b> Trade union activities .....	22
<b>4.1.</b> Information and education at schools.....	23
<b>4.2.</b> Youth union FNV Jong .....	25
<b>4.3.</b> Involvement of FNV Jong and CNV Jongeren in ‘SterkTeam’ and ‘Startersbeurs’ .....	26
<b>4.4.</b> Sector plans with labour market measures for the youth.....	27
<b>4.5.</b> Special unions for young workers in the supermarkets.....	28
<b>5.</b> Conclusions .....	31
<i>References</i> .....	33



## **Introduction**

Trade unions in the Netherlands traditionally have a pretty strong position in the Dutch society and economy, representing both their members and society at large, including the weaker sections of society (Boonstra et al. 2011). They negotiate collective agreements that cover some 80 percent of the working population, playing a key role in the definition of their wages and working conditions, and have important institutional positions in national bi- and tripartite institutions that exercise important influence on government social and economic policy. At the same time, the Dutch unions have seen the share of working people that are union member declining slowly but surely for quite some years now; today union membership stands at around 18-20 percent. Also, the average age of union members is rising and membership is especially low among young people.

As a result, the unions have been criticised increasingly concerning their overall representativeness and concerning the extent to which they represent the interests of a specific group of workers (in particular older workers) instead of those of the entire working population. Also, if present developments in membership continue, within a decade or two the unions may find themselves left with too few members to retain their place at the bargaining table and their seats in the national social dialogue institutions.

One of the obvious questions that this situation raises is what the relationship is between the Dutch unions and young people. The young could potentially be the source of new and more diversified membership and without the inflow of young members the long-term existence of the trade unions seems problematic. At the same time, many young workers have low quality jobs and could potentially benefit from union representation to improve their wages and working conditions. Still, for the moment, youth membership has been low and declining.

In this report we will discuss the relationship between trade unions and young people in the Netherlands. We conducted a large number of interviews with trade unionists from the various union confederations, from youth union organisations, with unionists involved in youth campaigns, etc. We also used a large number of documents and statistical sources. We will first provide an overview of the labour market situation of young people (section 1), followed by an overview of youth membership and of the institutional positions of young workers within the trade unions (section 2). In section 3 we discuss the views of young people concerning

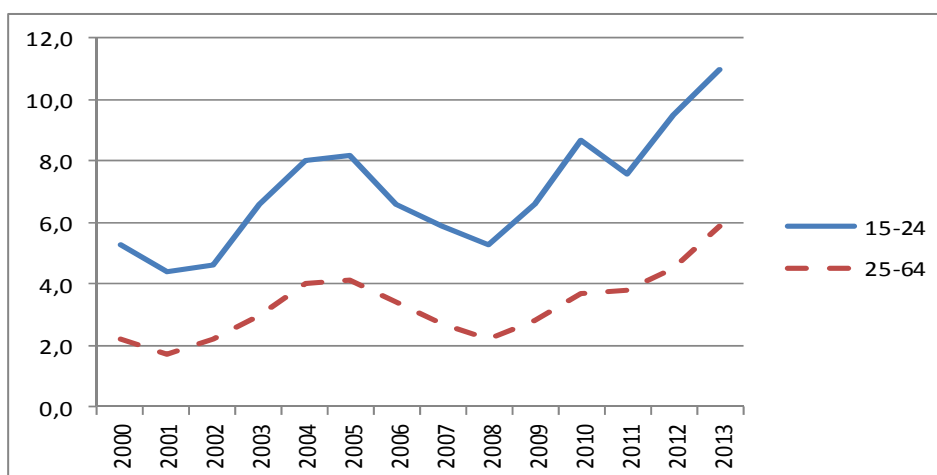
trade unions in the Netherlands, followed by an overview of trade union activities directed towards young people (section 4). Section 5 concludes.

## 1. Labour market position of young people in the Netherlands

Young people traditionally have a weaker position on the labour market than adults. Generally speaking, youth unemployment figures are twice as high as the average unemployment figures in the Netherlands. This is the case in periods of low economic growth and in periods of high economic growth. Figure 1 demonstrates clearly that unemployment among the youth in the Netherlands has increased substantially since 2008, the beginning of the financial crisis in Europe.

The unemployment figures for people that are aged 15 till 24 years more than doubled in the last 5 years: from 5.3% in 2008 to 11.0% in 2013. The unemployment rate has also (more than) doubled for the workers aged 25-64 years: from 2.2% in 2008 to 5.9% in 2013. Compared to many other EU-countries, the unemployment levels among young people in the Netherlands are relatively low. For the year 2013, only five European countries had lower levels of unemployment among the people aged 15-24: Iceland, Austria, Norway, Switzerland, and Germany.

Figure 1 – Unemployment percentages in the Netherlands, 2000-2013, by age groups 15-24 years and 25-64 years



Source: LFS: *lfsa\_urgaed*, update 24-04-2014.1

<sup>1</sup> Unemployment rates represent unemployed persons as a percentage of the labour force. Unemployed persons comprise persons who were: a. without work during the reference week, b. currently available for work, i.e. were available for paid employment or self-employment before the end of the two weeks following the reference week, c. actively seeking work, i.e. had taken



Unemployment among young people from non-western immigrant backgrounds is almost three times as high as the unemployment among young people without a migrant background (CBS, 2013). The Social-Economic Committee – the national tripartite body of employers, workers and independent experts – is marking this (in our view correctly) as a serious social problem (SER, 2014).

Unemployment statistics hide the shares of workers that have part-time employment contracts and wish to work more hours, as well as those who are discouraged and are not actively looking (anymore) for a job at all. The Netherlands counts for the highest amount of young workers that have a part-time contract in Europe (Eurofoundation, 2012: 14). Part-time work represents around 70 percent of youth employment in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the Labour Force Survey of Eurostat indicates rather low levels of young people in the Netherlands that are ‘involuntary’ in part-time jobs: 9.7% compared to 29.6% in EU-28.<sup>2</sup> An important reason for this is the high number of students that work next to their studies. Still, because of their bad labour market position, a substantial number of young people decides not to look anymore for a job and/or to continue their education. For these reasons, it is important to analyse i) employment rates and ii) statistics on ‘NEET’ = ‘Neither in Employment nor in Education and Training’.

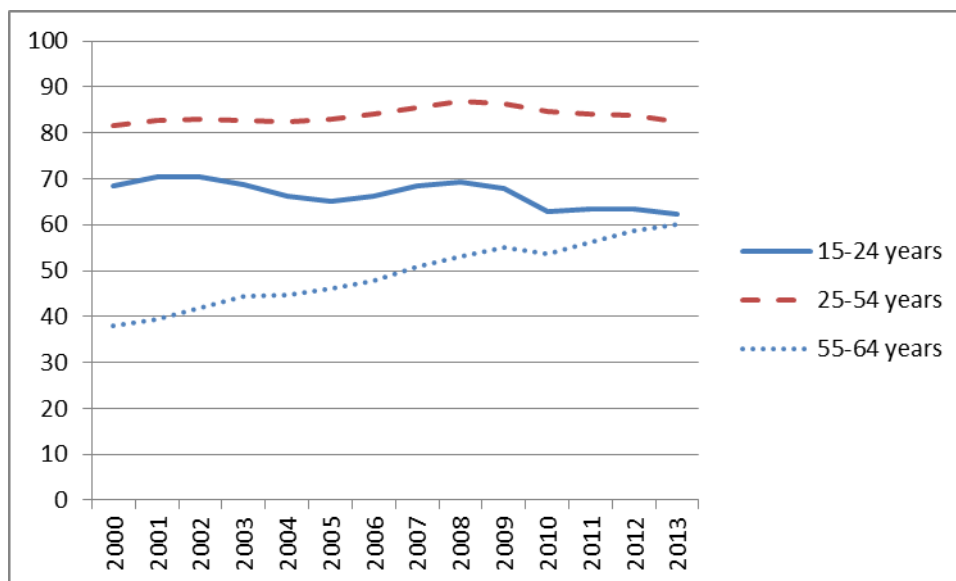
Figure 2 shows a clear decrease in employment rates among the youth in the Netherlands in recent years as a result of the crisis, from 69.3% in 2008 to 60.1% in 2013. Regarding the employment rates, we see more age differentiating patterns than in the unemployment statistics. In the last 5 years, employment in the youngest age category decreased sharper than in the middle-aged category. The employment rates among the older workers even increased, despite the economic crisis, as a result of the ‘active ageing’ policies in the Netherlands (such as the dismantling of early retirement arrangements and less generous pre-pension systems). Clearly, the young are among the major losers of the economic crisis.

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specific steps in the four weeks period ending with the reference week to seek paid employment or self-employment or who found a job to start later, i.e. within a period of, at most, three months.

<sup>2</sup><http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do;jsessionid=9ea7d07e30d8938c0682ea06426f832e91d65b05d8de.e340aN8Pc3mMc40Lc3aMaNyTbx0Ne0>

Figure 2 – Employment rates in the Netherlands, 2000-2013, by age groups

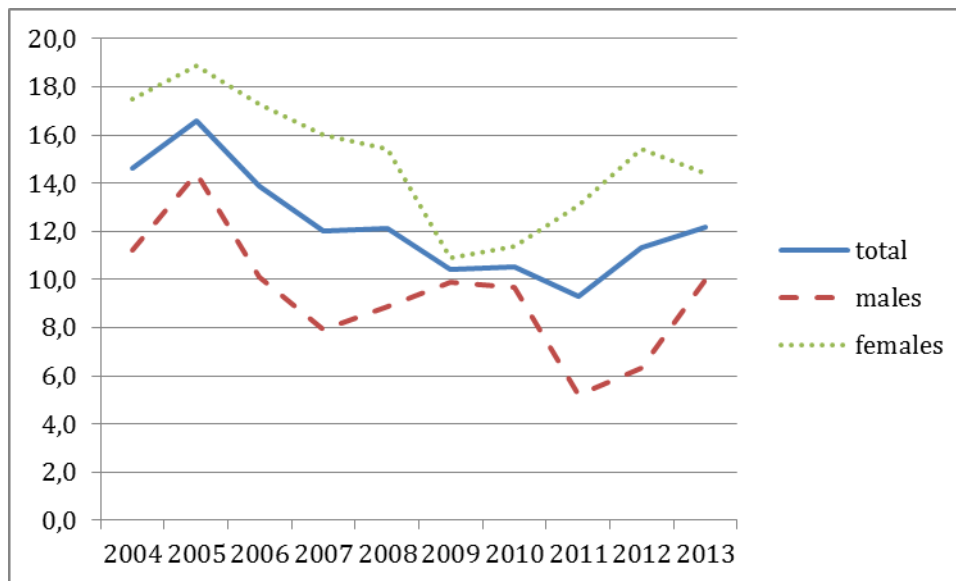


Source: LFS (*lfsa\_ergan*; update 24-04-2014)

The labour force survey of Eurostat shows the lowest NEET-rates (‘NEET’ = ‘Neither in Employment nor in Education and training’) in the Netherlands, both for males and females. Figure 3 shows some interesting gender differences however. Firstly, young women are to a higher extent neither in work nor in education, compared to young men. This gender difference also exists in other EU countries.

Secondly, we see sometimes contrasting tendencies between young women and men: in several periods their NEET rates do not move in the same direction and the difference between the two is sometimes small and at other times quite large. This suggest gender differences in the youth labour markets related to the economic sectors in which they work, differences in educational patterns and also influences of specific ‘school-to-work transition policies’ during the crisis. It is beyond the scope of this study, however, to go deeper into this subject.

Figure 3 – Young people (aged 15-24 years) neither in employment nor in education and training in The Netherlands



Source: LFS, *lfsa\_etpga*, update 08-05-2014

### 1.1. Increasing instability in early careers

Compared to other EU-countries, the shares of young Dutch workers with temporary contracts are a slightly above the average statistics for EU-27 (Eurofoundation, 2012:3-18). Figure 4 shows a very high age differentiation in the distribution of temporary employment contracts and regular employment contracts in the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> There are two main reasons why young people have a much higher chance to be on a temporary employment contract and not on permanent employment contracts. First, they have little past work performance and experience, which gives them low bargaining power and forces them to accept flexible contracts. Secondly, employers want to screen their work potential, including the higher educated young workers, before taking the risks and costs of open-ended contracts (Bukodi et al., 2008), so they use temporary contracts as a probationary device.

Labour market research in the Netherlands shows that in the 1990s the youth in the Netherlands had good access to permanent contracts through flexible contracts in the context of relatively high economic growth (Wolbers, 2008). But this so called ‘stepping stone mechanism’ of temporary work has performed less

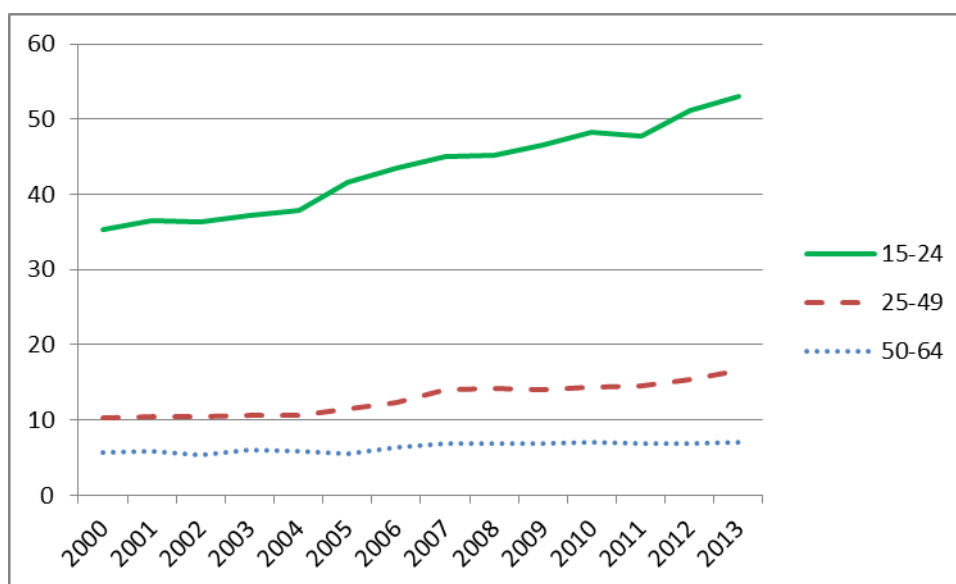
<sup>3</sup> ‘Regular’ means: indefinite final date in the contract.

well in recent years. At the end of the 1990s, around 50% of people in temporary contract made a transition into permanent employment within a year in the Netherlands. This rate dropped to an average level of 24% in the years 2003-2007.

The crisis years 2009 and 2010 displayed a further significant decrease to 18% and 16% (Wilthagen, 2011: 11). The use of temporary contracts is also speeding up in recent years. For example, between 2010 and 2011, the number of vacancies filled through permanent contracts plummeted from 83,000 to no more than 2,000 while 644,000 vacancies were filled through fixed-term contracts (UWV Kenniscentrum 2012). Also, a shift took place from permanent contracts and short fixed-term contracts towards longer fixed-term contracts: 57% of all new contracts are fixed term but with a duration of more than a year. Some 75% of the fixed-term contracts offer the prospect of, but do not guarantee, a permanent contract, giving them first of all the character of extended trial periods (ibid.; Houwing 2011).

One of the results of these developments is that workers in the Netherlands enter later and later in their working lives into their first permanent employment contract, while a growing number is for a long time (or indefinitely) stuck in repeating temporary contracts and occasional spells of unemployment. Also, because of this trend, workers in the Netherlands have to build up social right, such as pension rights and severance payment right, in shorter periods (see De Beer, 2013).

Figure 4 – Temporary employees as percentage of the total number of employees in the Netherlands, 2000-2013, by age groups



Source: LFS, *lfsa\_etpga*; update 24-04-20141

Clearly, the labour market position of young workers is weaker than that of adult workers and the difference between the two age groups is increasing. This could, in theory, be a reason for young workers to join trade unions since they could represent their interests. In the next section we will see if this is indeed the case.

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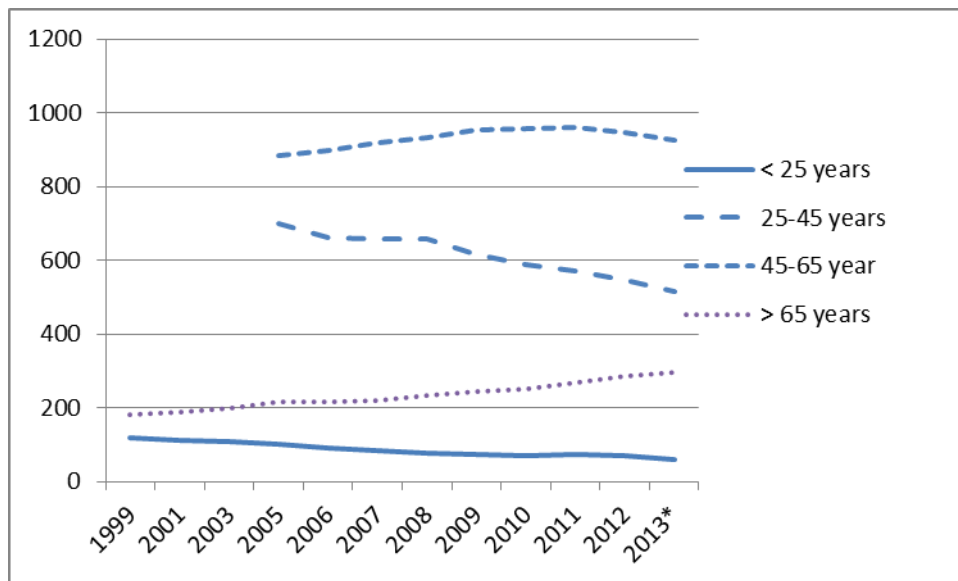
<sup>1</sup> A job is considered temporary if employer and employee agree that its end is determined by objective conditions such as a specific date, the completion of a task or the return of another employee who has been temporarily replaced (usually stated in a work contract of limited duration). Typical cases are: (a) persons with seasonal employment; (b) persons engaged by an agency or employment exchange and hired to a third party to perform a specific task (unless there is a written work contract of unlimited duration); (c) persons with specific training contracts.

## 2. Membership and institutional position of youth in trade unions in the Netherlands

### 2.1. Ageing membership files of trade unions

In 2013, 61.000 people aged less than 25 years were members of a trade union in the Netherlands. The numbers of young people organized by trade unions have declined in the last decades: in 1999, there were 117,200 young trade union members. In the same period, the numbers of members aged 65+ have increased (compare the two bottom lines in figure 5). Conclusion: there is an ongoing ageing process in the membership files of trade union organisations in the Netherlands.

Figure 5. Numbers of trade union members by age category in the period 1999-2013 in The Netherlands (in thousands).

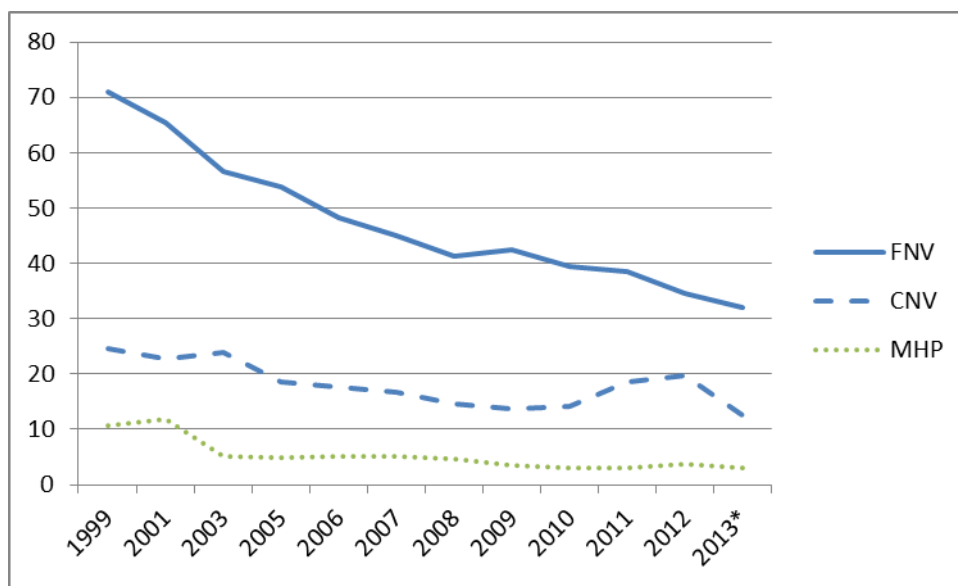


Source: CBS

Figure 6 shows the numbers of young trade union members in the three trade union federations in The Netherlands. The largest federation in the Netherlands FNV (with a social-democratic background) - organizes the highest shares of

young people in the Netherlands: in 2013 they had 32.000 members younger than 25 years. The second largest federation CNV (with a Christian background) registered 12.500 young members in the same year. The federation of trade unions for higher paid employees MHP, organized 3.100 young members in 2013.<sup>1</sup> Figure 6 shows a very sharp decline in young trade union members, especially in the FNV where the number of young members more than halved between 1999 and 2013.

Figure 6 – Numbers of trade union members aged less than 25 years by the 3 federations in the period 1999-2013 in the Netherlands (in thousands).



Source: CBS

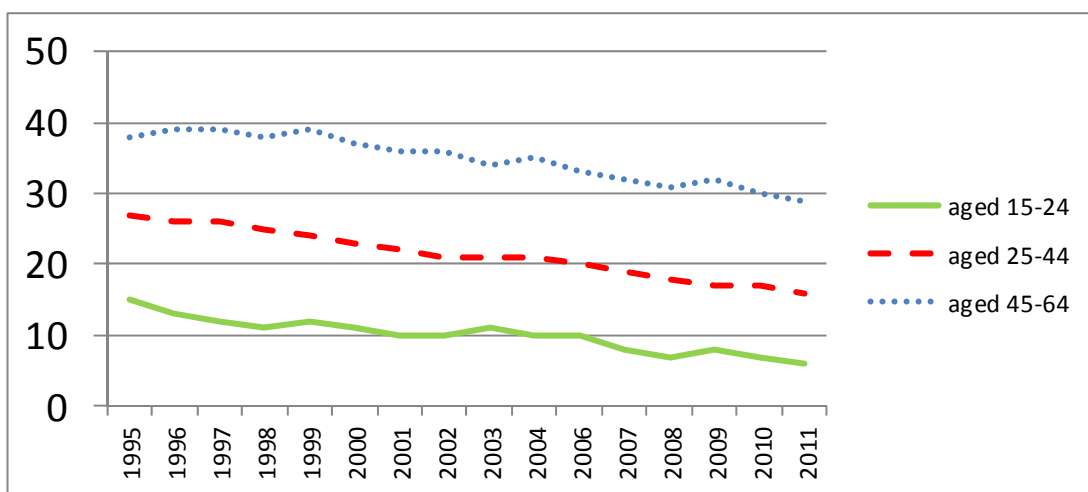
It is important to analyse not just absolute numbers of trade union memberships, but also to study so called ‘*net* membership levels’. Net membership levels refer to proportions of employed people that are organized by trade unions. Increasing absolute numbers of older trade union members and decreasing absolute numbers of younger members can be more or less the result of ageing working populations. Or do we see that the smaller numbers of young workers are also less organized than in the past?

Figure 7 presents the net membership levels of trade unions in the Netherlands in the period 1995-2011 in three age categories. The first conclusion is that the shares of workers that are organized by trade unions have decreased in

<sup>1</sup> Within the group of organised workers aged less than 25 years is 52.5 percent member of FNV, 20.5 of CNV, 5.1 of MHP and 22.0 of another trade union (in 2013).

all age categories. The second conclusion is that older people are relatively more organized by trade unions than younger people. Thirdly, it can be concluded that the membership levels among the youth decreased to a higher extent than among middle aged and older workers. In the period 1995-2011, the net membership levels of workers aged 15-24 years decreased from 15% to just 6%. In the same period, the net membership levels decreased from 27% to 16% in the age group 25-44 and from 38% to 29% in the age group 45-64.

Figure 7 – Percentages of employed people that is member of a trade union by age categories; 1995-2011 (=net membership)



Source: CBS, Statline 2

One of the problems of a growing underrepresentation of young people in trade union membership is the legitimacy of trade unions as lobby and consultative organisations for government and bargaining parties towards employers at the national, sector and company levels. In case of bargaining on (in)direct age related issues, the government and employers can even more question the unbalanced age structure of the trade unions' membership. This underlines the importance for trade unions to increase their youth membership levels.

<sup>2</sup> Last check at 23 may 2014: no newer data on net organisation levels, just new absolute numbers of membership are given for the last years.



## 2.2. Specific youth unions

The two largest trade unions confederation, FNV and CNV, both have created specific youth unions within their confederal structures to organize and represent young workers. *FNV Jong* (FNV youth) has 2800 members and *CNV Jongeren* (CNV youth) has 1400 members. Compared to the total numbers of young trade union members, these specific youth trade unions are organizing very low numbers of young people and also a low share of the total youth membership: FNV organizes in total 32.000 members younger than 25 years and CNV in total 12.500 young members. By far the most young trade union members are organized in the *sectoral* trade unions of FNV and CNV, which are representing the workers of all age categories. They are also small in terms of resources. *FNV Jong* has 5 board members and a personnel capacity of 8 FTE, besides working with a group of volunteers. *CNV Jongeren* has just the capacity of 1 FTE, and is working intensively with a group of volunteers. Still, the role and influence of the youth unions goes much beyond their membership levels.

Both youth trade unions are members of the boards of their trade union federations, next to the members of the sectoral trade unions (FNV and CNV). Since 2006, *FNV Jong* delivers one member of the in total 33 members of the Social and Economic Counsel of the Netherlands (SER) to represent the specific voice of young people in the labour market and in ‘school-to-work transitions’. The SER is a tripartite advisory and consultative body of employers' representatives, union representatives and independent experts appointed by the government, that aims to help create social consensus on national and international socio-economic issues<sup>3</sup>

If young workers want to be organized by a specific youth union, as well as by a ‘traditional’ sectoral trade union, this is only possible by ‘double memberships’, an uncommon solution. As a result, young people who want to be member of a trade union, often have to choose between a specific youth union or the trade union that is active in the sector in which they are employed. In practice, this internal structure of trade union federations can lead to competition between the youth trade unions and the sectoral trade unions in their marketing and communication strategies. The interviewees in both youth unions see the young workers who ‘have not yet chosen’ their sector of industry or who are in their ‘school-to-work transition’, as their target group. Both *FNV Jong* and *CNV Jongeren* are focused on attracting higher educated young people to get them to participate in ‘think tank’ projects on pension systems or flexible employment

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<sup>3</sup> See for info SER: <http://www.ser.nl/en/>.

relations. They also have a high media profile and are frequently invited to give presentations or to participate in debates.

Besides some differences in target groups, the youth unions are involved in different kinds of activities than the youth activities of sectoral unions. Both youth unions are mainly focusing on the lobby towards the national government - especially in the policy domains of youth unemployment and to a lesser extent also pensions – and have no or low access to collective bargaining which takes place at the sectoral and company levels. The youth coordinators/marketeers of the sectoral trade unions in FNV, responsible for youth marketing or coordination of youth projects in their sector, are more focusing on influencing the agenda's for collective bargaining (see further section 4).

Both chairmen of *FNV Jong* and *CNV Jongeren* are stressing the importance of having a specific youth union within the confederations. They forward the following arguments:

- Providing a platform for youth union membership.
- Preventing the image in society that trade unions are just older workers' organisations.
- Having more opportunities to forward the views of young people (with 'fresh' ideas) in discussion with older union leaders in the regular trade unions and the peak organisations (young members in big sectoral trade unions are 'overshadowed' by the large numbers of older people).
- Giving a place within the unions to students and young workers in instable working careers before having more stabilized careers and employment contracts in specific sectors/professions.
- Providing young people in secondary education and elsewhere with information about trade unions and the benefits of (future) membership.
- Organising volunteer work for younger members (young people are more committed to and enthusiastic about specific youth issues, such as youth unemployment, flexible contracts etc.).

### **2.3. Youth coordinators of sectoral trade unions**

Within a number of the regular sector trade unions there are youth coordinators and youth marketers who's task it is to reach out to young workers in the sector, to increase youth membership and to make sure the interests of young workers are take into account by the sectoral union. Also here the resources available are quite limited and young workers rarely are a priority for the sectoral

unions. Compared to the interviewees of the specific youth unions, the youth coordinators/youth marketers of the sectoral trade unions are stressing the importance of:

- Influencing collective bargaining in the sectors of industry in which young people are working, assuring that youth issues are included in the negotiations.
- Improving school-to work transitions in specific professions and sectors of industry.
- Providing young people in secondary education and elsewhere with information about trade unions and the benefits of (future) membership.
- Responding to specific 'cultures' and workplaces of young people in terms of communication strategies and activities.

Despite the sectoral structure of organizing younger and older workers together, the youth coordinators/marketers of the sectoral unions say that the young workers in the sectors are difficult to commit to more general issues in collective bargaining and are mostly motivated by participation in specific youth meetings and activities. Many young members find it also difficult to find a place within the union structures, to discuss about (complex) collective agreement issues or to argue with experienced older trade unionists about industrial relations issues. In this way, existing structures and practices seem to be obstacles to a more active participation of young workers in the unions.

The youth coordinators and marketers pointed to some tensions between their objectives and strategies and those of the specific youth unions. Whereas they see the sectors and/or employment domains of collective agreements as the most important ones to represent and organize young people, the youth unions focus more on public policy. Also, whereas the target groups within the sectors are defined by the type of work being performed in the sector, the youth coordinators argue that the youth unions sometimes seem to be oriented too much towards highly educated young people, possibly as the result of the personal profiles of the persons running the youth unions. Also, in some occasions it remains unclear who represents who, for example if all young union members are represented by the youth unions or not. At the same time, inter-sectoral coordination between youth coordinators and cross-sectoral youth activities do exist. For example, they cooperate in the information activities in schools that will be discussed in section 4.

## 2.4. Youth unions under discussion

Within the largest union confederation FNV, there is a continued (largely informal) debate about the pros and cons of having a specific youth union. During the 1990s, the then existing youth union of FNV was abolished because of decreasing membership and because of the argument that young people have the most interest in representing their interests in their respective sectors and professions, instead of in an age-related union that has no direct connection to their specific professional activities. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the discussion on the need for a specific youth union reappeared on the agenda because of the emergence of a new trade union organisation on the Dutch industrial relations scene called ‘Alternatief voor Vakbond’ (‘alternative to trade union’). This trade union was very critical to the established trade unions in the Netherlands and forcefully claimed that they only represent the interests of the older workers and ‘insiders’ in the labour market. In response to this, FNV started a youth network organization. This network organisation then requested to become a ‘real’ youth trade union with its own members, to gain more internal organisational power within the FNV. As a result, in 2011 the *FNV Jong* was established.

*FNV Jong* quickly gained a lot of media attention, especially because of the difficult position young people are facing on the labour market and because of the new union sound they transmit. Also, little by little, *FNV Jong* got a series of institutional positions on the earlier mentioned SER, advisory boards, committees and the like, representing the position of young people on issues like youth unemployment and education but also pensions and other less traditional youth issues. In the last year or so it also saw its membership increase from some 400 to some 2800 members. The leader of *FNV Jong* even likes to profile *FNV Jong* as the fastest growing FNV union.

Still, the achievements of the new youth union should be qualified. The membership level remains of course very low. Also, a part of the members are shared with one of the sectoral unions under a sharing agreement. Moreover, about half of them do not pay a membership fee since membership is offered for free in the first year. There seems to be little prospect indeed for the youth union to grow into an organization with high membership levels and mobilization capacity.

Then there are also a series of objections voiced shedding doubt on the usefulness of a special youth union. Some argued that the FNV has already for

quite some time been trying its best to indeed represent the interest of young people. In this view, the confederation is not simply an organization representing the interests of their members but as well of the interests of the rest of working people, including young people. It does so out of its societal function as well as to get rid of the image of an organization for old white men. And indeed, over the years the union has done a series of youth campaigns to get youth issues on the political agenda (including a campaign that is starting this year) and it has raised youth issues in public policy for a like the SER. Also in the negotiations for collective agreements the position and interests of the young are taken into account even though most of them are not union members, although opinion differ on the extent to which this is indeed done. But many collective agreements do include attempts to raise the wages of the lowest categories (often young people), to provide training to young workers, etc.

Also, it is argued that young people are simply hard to organize, as demonstrated by numerous, not very successful, organizing campaigns in the past, and that it is largely a waste of resources to try and organize them. In this view, people join unions later in life, when they get more responsibilities, including children and mortgages, and hence the need for more security. Organising young people should in this view not be the aim, with the exception of those in apprenticeship-type of arrangements which have a clear identification with their profession and sector. Rather, unions should invest in their name recognition and image as the key organisations providing support to workers, to prepare young people for future membership. Finally, some point to the danger that the existence of a special youth union may lead the sectoral unions to do less on youth issues, thus undermining rather than strengthening the position of young workers.

The FNV is currently undergoing a profound process of reorganization, with most sectoral unions merging into one single union organization. Within this process, it may also review its strategy towards young people and the position of *FNV Jong*. The main current ideas regarding the membership of young people in the FNV seem to be these:

- The specific youth union *FNV Jong* continues to exist for young people who have not yet chosen for – or are not yet working in - a specific sector.
- Young workers in the sectoral trade unions can be member of a ‘network’ for young people across the borders of sectoral trade unions (in the way that there will be also a network for women in the FNV).

- Members of *FNV Jong* who are establishing a career in a sector, should be ‘transferred’ and be motivated to become member of a non-age specific (regular) sectoral trade union.

The position of *CNV Jongeren* within the CNV organization seems to be less under discussion, compared to FNV. *CNV Jongeren* was already established in 1955 and is still a full union and not just a ‘network’. With just one salaried employee in the organization (the chairman) its resources and power are however limited.

### **3. Views of young people about trade unions in the Netherlands**

The results of an extensive survey in the Netherlands ('Nationale Enquete Arbeidsomstandigheden 2011'; NEA, 2012) suggest that trade unions in the Netherlands are largely invisible for young people. Some 60% of the respondents aged 15-24 years have never thought of becoming a member, compared to 42% of the workers between 24-54 years and 29% of the workers that are aged 55-64 years (see figure 8). Young people are not more critical towards trade unions in replying to the specific reasons that are questioned in this survey, such as 'the fee is too expensive', 'trade unions have no influence on my working conditions' or 'they don't stand up for my interests' (see figure 8). In NEA survey (NEA 2012), the respondents are also asked to give a score on a scale from 1 to 10 on several statements (see Table 1). Also here it can be concluded that the results from these opinion scores in this survey on 'importance' and 'satisfaction' on trade unions and collective agreements, are not correlated with age groups. Table 1 shows even a bit more positive scores among the young respondents. The interviewees of (youth) trade unions confirm that many young people do not have any idea – or at least have a very limited view – on the questions 'what is a trade union?', 'what are they doing?', 'what is a collective agreement?' Further evidence on this issue comes from the National Survey Side Jobs 2011, which shows that almost 75% of young people with a side jobs do not know what trade unions have to offer to them while 20% does not even know what a trade union is.<sup>1</sup> Hence, young people are not necessarily negative about unions, they first of all know little about them.

At the same time, other (international) surveys indicate that the population in general but also young people in particular show considerable support for collective employee representation and for the protective functions traditionally provided by union membership (D'Art and Turner 2008; Turner and D'Art 2012).

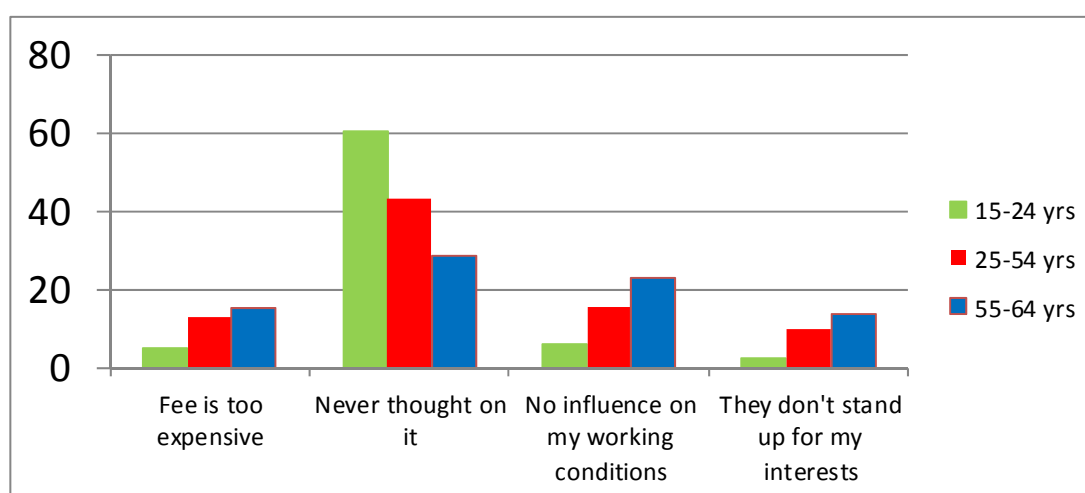
The results of these surveys fit the hypothesis of Vandaele (2012) who argues that there is a 'unsatisfied demand' among young people for trade union representation. At least, they do not contradict this hypothesis. The surveys seem to suggest that young workers would be much more open to trade union membership than present membership levels indicate if they would have more information about trade unions' activities in general and youth-oriented activities

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.zoekbijbaan.nl/bijbaan-nieuws/nut-vakbonden-onbekend-bij-jongeren.html>.

in particular (including the ones discussed in the previous section), if trade unions would be better in communicating with your people, or if unions would develop strategies that better link up with the day-to-day realities of young people’s working lives. The fact that young people know little about unions and have often simple never considered joining them underlines the need for unions to improve their name recognition and image among the young.

Figure 8 – Reasons of non-membership of trade unions in the Netherlands, by age groups (N=16,998)



Source: Nationale Arbeidsomstandigheden Enquete, NEA 2011 (2012).

Table 1 – Opinions on trade unions and collective agreement in the Netherlands, by age groups (N=16,998)

Statement	15-24 years	Total
‘To what degree is it important that trade unions exist?’ (N=20,443)	7.15	7.01
‘To what degree is it important that collective agreements exist?’ (N=21.388)	8.13	7.99
‘To what degree are you satisfied about your collective agreement?’ (N=11,517)	7.06	6.8

Source: Nationale Arbeidsomstandigheden Enquete, NEA 2011 (2012).



### **3.1. Experiences of the interviewees in recruiting and preservation of young members**

In the interviews we discussed the experiences of the trade unions with the recruiting of and preserving of young members. Recruiting young trade union members is perceived as a difficult task which is confronted with a series of difficulties but about which also some lessons can be learned. Clearly, young people are largely unaware of the added value of trade unions' services and they do not turn to unions when they need assistance. In case of problems at work or with social benefits, they are more inclined to ask help from their friends and families (see also: ADV Market Research, 2010). Many young workers think that trade union membership will be only interesting in later phases of their working careers, when they have a permanent employment contract.

Many of the interviewees also perceive young people's orientations to be less focused on taking action regarding to prevention of problems in their further working career or income provision. What is more, they often perceive that only few young workers are interested in collective and solidarity-related issues (besides the issue of youth unemployment, that young people find very relevant!) and that their orientation is a more individualistic one. They are often confronted with young people asking them *how can I profit from becoming a member of a trade union?* Trade union marketers often have difficulties to show the added value of membership and to overcome the problem of 'free riders' in the context of collective bargaining.

In addition, the interviewees argue that young union members are often not comfortable with being open regarding their union membership. It is not seen as 'cool' when a young woman or man has to show that she/he has searched for 'protection' from a trade union. Young union members see membership as an 'individual insurance' for just themselves. This closed, individualistic orientation of young members, the interviewees argue, hinders the active participation of young members' in trade union activities, as well as the promotion of union membership through word-of-mouth advertising. It is of course important here to underline that the perception of many of the interviewees does not entirely correspond to the survey results presented in the previous paragraph. This may well point to a mismatch between the needs and labour market experiences of young people and the discourse and services offered by trade unions. Also, while their labour market position, for example in the form of flexible contracts, may force an individualistic view of their interests on young workers, one could argue

that especially flex workers with a weak bargaining position can potentially benefit from collective representation.

The interviewees also point out that promotional activities for recruiting new young people, for example through special fee discounts in the first year or by partial memberships (just information, but no individual services) do seldom lead to longer-term membership. Most of them cancel their memberships at the end of these special membership actions.

Finally, and very importantly, they stress that the key to getting young members, but also to getting members in general, is personal contact with the workers in their working situation, with due regard for the specific needs, background and context of the particular worker.

#### 4. Trade union activities

In this section we will give an overview of a number of specific trade union activities directed towards young people, be it workers or students. This overview is not exhaustive but is meant to provide a general picture of the types of activities that Dutch unions have developed in this respect and what the strong and weak points of these activities are. Table 2 summarises the activities we selected and which will be discussed in more detail below.

Action name	Brief description	Reasons of trade unions' actions	Strengths	Problems
<i>Regular initiatives</i>				
<b>Information and education at schools</b>	Trade unionists visit schools to give students and apprentices lessons on labour issues	Marketing instrument in promoting the visibility of trade unions and new memberships among to the youth	Proving face-to-face contacts between young people and unions. Raising awareness of union issues	It is unclear if new memberships lead to longer commitments
<b>Youth union FNV Jong (2012 -)</b>	Special trade union for young people	Promoting 'voice' on specific youth issues i) within the trade union federation and ii) towards politics and society	Involvement in national and local projects on youth unemployment. Organisation of young people in transition from school to work.	Low membership level. Competition with sector unions
<b>Supermarket sector FNV ( Co-operation FNV-Jong and FNV Bondgenoten)</b>	Special trade union for young workers in the supermarket	Low quality of work in supermarket sector	Cooperation FNV Bondgenoten and FNV Jong. Focus on sector	Limited resources for recruitment.

	sector		with very high share of young workers and serious quality of work problems.	
<b>Ad-hoc actions</b>				
<b>‘SterkTeam’ (National taskforce on youth unemployment, 2013+2014)</b>	Promoting work-training placements for the youth.  Project: ‘Startersbeurs’	Youth unions’ involvements in projects and labour market measures for the youth.	Some visibility for youth unions in their actions to combat youth unemployment	It does not promote memberships among the youth. Low financial budgets of this taskforce.
<b>Sector plans in combatting the crisis/unemployment (2014 – 2015)</b>	Reservation of minimum 400 million Euro for sector agreements (50/50 public/private financing)	Using the opportunity of 50% co-financing by the government for sector specific labour market policies for the youth.	High financial budgets for youth measures. Sector unions are initiators and signing parties (together with employers).	It does not promote trade union membership among the youth.

#### 4.1. Information and education at schools

Trade unions in the Netherlands organize regularly information meetings at many schools in the Netherlands. Sector unions – such as *FNV Bondgenoten* (industry and services), *FNV-Bouw* (construction) and *ABVAKABO-FNV* (health sector) - offer informative and interactive lessons at vocational schools in their relevant labour market and professional sectors. Youth union *FNV Jong* provides education and other communication campaigns to general schools at different levels (from secondary education to universities).

These lessons aim at giving information concerning basic issues in industrial and employment relations, such as ‘what unions do’, ‘what is a collective agreement’, and about some sector and youth specific issues regarding work-training contracts, workers’ rights in temporary and in other flexible contracts, and professional education in the early careers.

These information and education meetings have two main objectives. One is the general awareness raising among young people concerning the goals and activities of trade unions. This is both seen as a general educational objective and an investment in the future of trade unions: informing young people today about what trade unions are and do may lead them to join the unions in later stages of their working life. The second is the recruitment of members. Indeed, in recent years, for example *FNV Bondgenoten* has formulated a youth strategy with clear targets in recruiting new members through school visits and through other campaigns. In 2013, *FNV Bondgenoten* has registered 2,500 new members as a result of the information lessons at schools, twice as many as in 2010. However, it is unclear how many new, young members continue to be trade unions member after their first-year registration. Especially in sectors where trade unions offer first-year reductions in the membership fees to young people - or even sometimes free memberships - the risk of losing young young members after this year is very high. Still, *FNV Bondgenoten* claims it does manage to get a fair amount of new long-term memberships through these activities, even if the percentage that becomes long-term member is low. *FNV Bouw* offers young people in the construction industry the option to be ‘half member’, without providing individual legal assistance. Also here are the transitions towards full and long-term memberships low.

School-visits of trade unionists and trade union volunteers contribute clearly to increasing the unions’ visibility among young people. According to the interviewees it is important that at least one of the instructors is young him/herself to ‘speak the same language’ as the students and pupils and to combat the stereotype that trade unions only exist of, represent and organise older workers. Sector unions have the opportunity to make more tailor-made lessons by providing specific information on professions, sector labour markets, and relevant collective agreements.

## 4.2. Youth union FNV Jong

Trade union *FNV Jong* is established in 2012 as one of measures of the federation FNV to modernize the internal trade union organization. Before 2012, FNV has just a ‘network’ for young members. As a full trade union, *FNV Jong* has his own board and is a member of the confederation FNV. Young people from the age of 15 years can become members of *FNV Jong*. *FNV Jong* – as well as their colleagues from the youth union in the second large federation in the Netherland CNV (*CNV Jongeren*), claim that specific youth unions can play a role in promoting awareness within the trade union movements about the specific interests, positions and perceptions of young people and new generations of workers. Another reason for the existence of youth unions is that they organize young students and workers in their first careers year, before they enter in more established careers in specific sectors of industry. So, they have a role in recruiting members at younger ages and ‘transferring’ them later to the sector unions.

Towards their members, *FNV Jong* provides information and individual support in issues such as work-training contracts, youth minimum wages, small part-time jobs, income facilities for students, drawing up CV’s, training courses in making application letters for vacancies, networking strategies towards employers, etc. In their political and media lobby activities, *FNV Jong* focuses on topics such as promoting decent work-training contracts, combatting youth unemployment, improving workers’ rights in flexible employment contracts, high quality and reasonable priced education, good pensions for new generations and combatting age discrimination among the youth. *FNV Jong* is involved in national and local campaigns, platforms and labour market measures to combat youth unemployment (see also below).

Besides some strengths in the approach of specific youth unions (especially in the domains which are not or less covered by sector unions) there are internal debates within the FNV organisation concerning the added value and position of *FNV Jong* as being an autonomous trade union, instead of being a cross-sector FNV network (nowadays, there are FNV networks for women, lesbians-gays-trans-bi’s and migrants). *FNV Jong*’s membership level is low: 2.800 members. There is a certain competition and rivalry between *FNV Jong* and (the small youth departments of) sector unions. Recently, a new co-operative structure has emerged between *FNV Jong* and *FNV Bondgenoten* in the sector of supermarkets. (see below).

### **4.3. Involvement of FNV Jong and CNV Jongeren in 'SterkTeam' and 'Startersbeurs'**

*FNV Jong* and *CNV Jongeren* are involved in the national taskforce on youth unemployment 'SterkTeam' named after its leader Mirjam Sterk. Since 2013, this 'think tank' is organising campaigns and platforms and is supporting networks and labour market measures with local governments and employers to smoothen the transitions from school-to-work. The aim of this taskforce is not to create jobs for the young, but to contribute to more and better work-placements, internships and apprentices to keep young people 'fit' and motivated for the labour market.

Through initiating and communicating actions in the taskforce, the youth unions can gain some visibility towards young people, employers and national and local governments. This makes them part of the public policy-making scenery and allows them to contribute to improving the labour market experience of young people. However, there is no evidence however that this has stimulated young people to become trade union member. Another problem is the remarkably low budget of this taskforce: 50 million Euro for two years.

*FNV Jong* and *CNV Jongeren* have co-initiated some specific projects in this taskforce. Of these, the 'Startersbeurs' is the most elaborated one. The aim of 'Startersbeurs' is to give unemployed people in the age category of 18-26 years the opportunity to learn and work in a business environment or in a public sector organisation.<sup>1</sup> In this program, the employer gives the graduate or school-leaver a work-training contract for at least 6 months. The employer has to provide for an individual learning or training plan for the participant in this program. In this plan it is indicated how the organisation will support, monitor and certify the development of skills and competences of the trainee. The young trainee is compensated by at least 500 Euro net a month. Both the employer and the local government have to contribute to this monthly benefit and to other costs that are related to this placement. In some local areas, such as Tilburg, the employer has also to contribute 100 Euro each month in an 'individual saving account' that can be used by the young participant for further training or education after the traineeship.

An academic evaluation study of 'Startersbeurs' in September 2014 counts a total number of 1500 young people and 152 municipalities that have been

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.startersbeurs.nu/>.

registered in this program (Lievens et al, 2014).<sup>2</sup> A remarkable finding is that almost 87% of the participants are graduates from universities and colleges of advanced/higher education. Around 50% of the participants have found work during their ‘startersbeurs’-participation or within a month after termination of the traineeship period.

The strength of ‘Startersbeurs’ is that from its inception this project has had a lot of (sympathy creating) attention in the media, including TV, radio and newspapers. Both youth unions *FNV Jong* and *CNV Jongeren* are in the media presented as co-founders and supporters of this project, together with prof. Ton Wilthagen from the University of Tilburg. The weaknesses of this programme are the rather ‘soft’ aims of this project: jobs for youth are not created and many traineeships do not result in employment. Furthermore, the limited compensation young people receive during their Startersbeurs period has led to criticisms that the project promotes the use of overly cheap labour and does not respect the youth minimum wage. And this in a context in which the FNV is becoming more outspoken against the existence of a youth minimum wage in the first place, and argues for a decent adult wage for all workers of 18 years and older. Partly in response to these critical notes – as well as for legal reasons - the employers have to declare that the work-training contracts in the ‘Startersbeurs’ do not aim for profit and that they are not displacing regular jobs.

#### **4.4. Sector plans with labour market measures for the youth**

A number of the trade unions belonging to the FNV and CNV play an important role in agreeing sector measures with employers (and their associations) to promote training and jobs for younger workers. In response to the economic crisis, the national government has launched a fund of 600 Million Euro in 2014 and 2015 for the co-financing of labour market measures in bipartite sector agreements. An important condition that is set by the government is that at least one third of this fund has to be spent on combatting youth unemployment.

It can be concluded that all sector plans that have been seen and approved by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment include concrete labour market measures for young people such as increasing the numbers of apprenticeships and jobs for new young workers in the sectors.<sup>3</sup> The strict administrative and

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald Lievens, Wendy Wesseling, Ton Wilthagen, Ruud Muffels (2014) *Eerste evaluatie startersbeurs. instrument voor werkzoekende jongeren*, Reflect, Tilburg University.

<sup>3</sup> Actieteam Crisisbestrijding, *Overzicht van Sectorplannen*, 28 august 2014.



valorization rules regarding the 50% co-financing from the government oblige the social partners to define concrete plans and targets in their measures. Employers and trade unions have the obligation to achieve at least 60% of their targets in numbers of jobs, apprentices, work-training contracts etc. for young people in their sectors. Otherwise, the subsidies will be revoked. This administrative system is highly enforcing the commitments of the social partners to implement sector measures that indeed improve the position of young people in the labour market.

Another strength of these actions is that the labour market measures for young people in sector plans are mostly embedded in existing professional training and labour market institutions at the sector and local level. The sector plans are - compared to the Taskforce on youth unemployment 'SterkTeam' – far less 'ad hoc' actions.

The weakness of the trade unions' actions in making sector plans is that their efforts are just in a very limited degree leading to more trade union 'visibility'. Most of the bargaining processes and agreements in the context of sector plans stay outside the view of the media and the workers (at least those who are not member of the bargaining parties). This lack of visibility of the contributions of trade unions is a general feature of most collective bargaining at the sector and local levels in the Netherlands. But the specificity of the strong government involvement in the sector plans makes the communication about the added value of the trade unions' actions even more diffuse.

#### **4.5. Special unions for young workers in the supermarkets**

*FNV Bondgenoten* has for a long time been aiming to improve the wages and working conditions of young people working in supermarkets. The sector counts with some 260,000 employees, of whom 70 percent is below 25 years of age. It is one of the sectors where permanent and full-time contracts are becoming really scarce. According to the FNV, around 80 percent of employees are flex workers with temporary, zero-hour or other flexible contracts, while almost 60 percent has a contract for less than 16 hours per week.<sup>4</sup> Permanent full-time employees leaving the sector are generally replaced by several young persons on small temporary contracts. This allows the supermarkets to employ mainly very young employees and to benefit from the low youth minimum wages in the Netherlands. Hardly any new employees that are above eighteen years of age are hired or get new contracts. Also, according to the unions, the supermarkets do not always

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.fnv.nl/artikelen/Supermarktmedewerker/>

respect the rules of the collective agreement: in a number of cases the supermarkets do not pay the wage supplements for evening hours to young employees on small contracts; they do not always pay the full working time (when workers continue after their normal hours); etc.<sup>5</sup>

The supermarkets have for some years been involved in so-called price wars, trying to increase their market share by lowering prices. The FNV considers that they are waging these wars at the expense of the young people in the sector, fostering lowly paid jobs, lowering the quality of work and eliminating career possibilities. Already in 2008, it made the position of young workers a key issue in the negotiations of the collective agreement for the sector. They managed to reduce the influence of the youth minimum wages by assuring that also for young employees experience is reflected in their wages. In 2011, *FNV Bondgenoten* and *FNV Jong* teamed up to mobilise young supermarket workers, to promote decent work in the sector as well as the required respective adjustments to the collective agreement. In particular they argued for abolishing the youth wages in the sector and to make the adult wage applicable to all workers in the sector. And although they did not manage to achieve this completely, they did achieve a much greater wage increase for young workers of 18 years and younger (6.8 percent) than for the rest of the sector (3.8 percent), effectively reducing the gap between the collective agreement based wages of the younger and older workers.

More recently, *FNV Bondgenoten*'s supermarket union and *FNV Jong* set up the *FNV Jong Supermarket* section of the union, as an attempt to better organize the young workers in the sector and to better defend their interests.<sup>6</sup> Young supermarket workers joining the initiative become member of both *FNV Bondgenoten* and *FNV Jong* and enjoy the services of both organisations. Initially the first year of membership was offered for free to make it attractive for workers to join. Young supermarket workers are offered influence in the negotiations of the collective agreement, assistance with problems at work, juridical and career advice, assistance with their tax form, and access to a series of discount programmes. Also, the website of the new union offers information on the content of the collective agreement as well as an FAQ section<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cnvdienstenbond.nl/nieuwsbericht/supermarkten-nemen-cao-afspraken-voor-jongeren-niet-zo-nauw/#.VCmlGRYzRoA>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://fnvjongsupermarkt.nl/>.

<sup>7</sup> CNV Jongeren has a similar cooperation with the CNV Dienstenbond, with much of the same objectives and activities. They also offer a joint membership for workers under 23 in the supermarket sector, with a special starters fee of Euro 2.50 per month for the first year.

A major strength of this initiative is the focus on one of the sectors with most young employees and with serious problems with the quality of work. Also the cooperation between *Bondgenoten* and *FNV Jong* is a strength, since it aims to coordinate youth activities across the institutional borderlines within the union movement. It is less clear if this cooperative initiative also brings in additional resources for campaigning and recruitment.

## **5. Conclusions**

Young workers have a relatively weak labour market position in the Netherlands, both in terms of high youth unemployment and low quality of employment. For this reason, they could potentially benefit from union representation to improve their wages and working conditions. For the trade unions, young workers could potentially be the source of new and more diversified membership and the basis for the unions' long-term relevance and existence. Still, although both parties might benefit from a more intimate relationship, youth membership has been low and declining.

Low youth membership cannot simply be explained by an assumed lack of interest from the side of young people or by their supposed individualistic attitudes that do not match with trade union objectives and values. Indeed, surveys rather point towards a lack of knowledge about unions among young people, combined with a latent support for collective employee representation and for the protective functions traditionally provided by union membership. However, unions have not yet found a comprehensive way to fill the knowledge gap and tap into the potential interest of young people in unions.

The Dutch unions have developed a number of activities to represent the interests of young people and recruit them as members. Some of these activities are part of broader union activities and therefore not very visible as youth initiatives. This concerns for example the inclusion of youth issues in regular collective agreements. But they have also developed a range of specific youth initiatives, ranging from the establishment of youth unions that promote the interests of young people both within the unions themselves and in public policy fora, to information programmes in school, to participation in sector plans with youth objectives and in a national youth employment task force.

Still, youth trade union membership remains very low. One way to address this problem is to further cement the reputation of unions as representatives of young workers by increasing the visibility of what unions do and can do for young workers as well as strengthening their participation in public policy fora. However, while such activities may be important to shape the conditions to increase youth membership, they are unlikely to indeed lead to a substantial increase in membership.

To address the low youth membership and youth participation in the unions more comprehensively the key point of concern seems to be the lack of weight that these issues carry within the unions. Although many youth activities are developed, the priority and resources assigned to youth activities are often limited and sometimes symbolic and a clear coordination is missing. What is more, within the unions there is still a debate concerning the necessity and potential effectiveness of attempts to organize young workers. As a result, youth activities are often of a too general nature, reach too few young people and often do not manage to establish a direct and personalized contact with potential young members. Making organizing young workers a real priority, backed up by real resources is a necessary step if the Dutch unions want to secure their long-term survival. Among others, this would require extensive direct one-to-one contacts between trade unionists and young workers at the workplace to promote membership, develop long-term relationships and provide tailor made services, including more educational and labour market services for young members in their early working careers (e.g. guidance in school-to-work transitions and vocational training). Similarly, it would require adjustments in the internal organization and practice of the unions to provide young members with better options to become active within the unions and to effectively influence their policies. In particular, young workers seem to lack well-organised representation and ‘voice’ in collective bargaining processes in the sectors and companies.

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