

How do young people understand their rights as workers and industrial relations? Examples from the restaurant industry in Finland

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Young people and access to social rights as workers

- Young people face many barriers in terms of accessing decent jobs, but they also have insufficient knowledge about their rights as workers
- Trade unions could be one institution to support access to decent work and supplying young people knowledge about their social rights
- But how do young people perceive trade unions and their role?
- This presentation asks:
 - How do young workers in the precarious, low-skill restaurant sector perceive trade unions and their role and how are their perceptions shaped by the industry context?

Research project and data

- Part of a larger research project on young workers in logistics and hospitality
- Interviews with 42 young workers in the Metropolitan Helsinki area (aged 18–35)
 - 18 in restaurants (14 women & 4 men)
 - [28 in warehouses (10 women, 18 men)]
 - Interview themes: work experiences and requirements, subjective perceptions of work, unions, problems and issues at work and attempts to solve them.

Young people and trade unions: previous research

- No major attitudinal differences towards unions, but qualitative change
 - Positive views of unions
 - Lack of trust in the trade unions' abilities to change their individual situation
 - A shift from solidaristic to instrumental attitudes. What do I get from a union membership?
- Young people work in sectors less covered by unions, in smaller workplaces
 - Precarious jobs, or “stopgap” jobs, high turnover
 - → consequence for how young workers can be socialized into unions

Why don't workers attempt to organize collectively to make things better? (1)

- General findings
 - Some lack knowledge about their rights as workers: employment contracts, wage payments, working hours, work tasks, employers' responsibilities
 - Confusion about unions and so called independent insurance funds. What is the difference?
 - But: even if young workers knew about their rights, difficult to demand their rights to be respected in the context of high unemployment and precarious, part-time work
 - Power relations

Working in restaurant industry is precarious and working conditions are adverse

- High employee turnover, low pay, some career possibilities
- Part-time work and flexible scheduling: Unpredictable working hours, dependency on managers' favouritism
- Understaffing, hectic pace
- No routinization, work tasks and workdays are unpredictable
- Requires teamwork



Why don't workers attempt to organize collectively to make things better? Reasons similar to previous research

- Working as students: why join if this is only a temporary job for me, not my actual career?
- Precarious work, small workplaces, high turnover and heterogenous workforce → little possibilities for organising at work
- Membership motivated by the access to earnings-based unemployment benefits, not solidaristic attitudes

Why don't workers attempt to organize collectively to make things better? Other reasons

- Union perceived as weak
 - Young workers in restaurants witness that work conditions deteriorate all the time, no improvements despite that the industry is technically unionized

“Every time there is a “scandal” or news story about work conditions in the service sector, I always read the stories and think, no offence to those making things public, and it’s good that they are made visible, but is this really a news story? Like OMG, they did not have breaks. I think to myself that not once in my 10 years of working in so many different restaurants have I had a real break” (Oona, 26, restaurant worker for 10 years)

- A profound experience that no one cares and even if the adversities of restaurant work become a public issue, nothing ever changes.

Why don't workers attempt to organize collectively to make things better? (3)

- Unions are rooted in the legacy of industrial work and its labour process
 - Bureaucratic union tools ill suited for work that requires flexibility in terms of work tasks and working hours (e.g. breaks)
 - The major concern = the constant rush and understaffing hard to solve through the tools available for unions.
 - Example: A 10-minute break in the collective labour agreement is not a viable solution when a moral obligation to help coworkers makes it impossible to take a break at all.

Why don't workers attempt to organize collectively to make things better? (4)

- Disillusionment in relation to union power and their practices.
 - E.g. the collective labour agreement does not have a real power in protecting employees in the face of flexible scheduling.

“There are many rules about working hours [in the collective labour agreement], like how long a shift can last and how much time between shifts, but they can all be agreed on with the worker. And then it's enough just to ask the worker if it's ok that you will have a 12-hour shift this weekend” (Jessika, 27, chef for 10 years)

How do workers cope if not by organising collectively? Informal strategies at work

- 1 Positive professional identity and normalizing
 - Workers normalize adverse conditions
 - Being able to manage their difficult work enables a positive identity
 - Grievances as a violation to their professional work ethic

“ I seek for difficult positions to get ahead of other people and develop my ability to endure pressure’ (Santtu, 26, working in restaurants for 10 years)

“There is nothing I can’t manage” (Natalia, 26, restaurant worker for six years)

How do workers cope if not by organising collectively? Informal strategies at work

- 2 “Individual bargaining” → being extremely flexible as long as employers are also flexible
 - Negotiations over working hours and taking off work
 - Possible for experienced workers with pre-existing networks and other safety nets

“The catering business was really flexible. I think I did like 220 hours per month [---] I think it brings some nice variation, and I was able to negotiate that I take longer breaks, like I went skiing in Lapland for three months and they agreed on that right away. [---] Of course, we were required to be flexible as well and stay until the end of the events. You can’t really work by the predefined hours in catering but just have to stay until the end. So, it was like reciprocal flexibility. (Sanna, 30, working for 10 years in restaurants, catering and cafes)

How do workers cope if not by organising collectively? 2 Collective norms

- Workers take high responsibility to each other, a normative pressure to not let anyone down
- High solidarity to each other

“Workers do too much. My coworkers personally push it so much. Like, they come to work when they were sick or be like “I can’t take sick leave; otherwise, no one will cover this shift” (Oona, 26, working for 6 years in restaurants)

- Mutual responsibility could ensure that workers unite against an employer to collectively try to better their working conditions
- In service industries, strong solidarity developed not as a force against oppressive practices but as a coping mechanism in the face of adversities.

Conclusions

- Young people do not have enough knowledge of their rights as workers and acceptable working conditions
- In contemporary service work, young workers lack opportunities to be socialized into this knowledge, let alone unions
 - Hectic work, no time to discuss, not breaks to discuss
 - Small workplaces, weak union representation even if the industry remains unionised,
 - Co-workers come and go, no chance to develop bonds at work

Conclusions

- Or, even if they have knowledge, there are identity-based and cultural factors and collective workplace-based norms that prevent them from seeking better working conditions collectively
 - Young workers identities (as workers) can hamper their motivations for collectively organize for better conditions
 - Emphasis on flexibility, surviving hard work gives positive feelings
- Interactive service work is hard to regulate through traditional means, such as bureaucratic regulation

Conclusions

- Power in restaurant work rested in personal networks, good reputation and long experience, not in collective power.
- Strong solidarity, but not as a force against oppressive practices but as a coping mechanism in front of adversities and a collective norm that delineates what a good coworker is.
- Individualization as responsabilization
 - Particularly in restaurant work strong tendencies to take individual responsibility
 - Using individual bargaining and individual negotiations
 - Disillusionment in front of capital: working conditions seem to deteriorate despite of union efforts
 - Individualization does not mean a lack of solidarity, but new forms of solidarity, such as

Warehouse work: Monotony, isolation and bureaucratic relations

- Monotonous and physically demanding work (picking work)
- Isolation at work: No teamwork, individual performance targets, no possibility to socialize (even talk) while working, little contact to supervisors
- Temporary contracts as control device: Rumours of “screening” of best performing workers -> stress over performance and work contract renewal for new workers
- High employee turnover, competitive pay, weak career possibilities
- Standard hours, predictability
- High routinization + algorithmic control
- Working individually, no teamwork
- Regulated work conditions



Mixed relationship with unions

- Transitory work, joining considered irrelevant
- Larger workplaces, solid union presence
- Bureaucratic union practices well suited for routinized and standardized work
 - > e.g. negotiations over pay structure
 - Some satisfaction with union involvement in negotiations over the pay structure
 - some disillusionment with the fairness of the process over pay negotiations

Informal strategies: autonomy and control

- Unions less suitable or tackling the main issue at work: monotony and boredom
- Highlight autonomy: no supervision, freedom at work
- Taking control over work by controlling own performance level
 - Possible for experienced workers with high performance (gained through experience and physical abilities)

Individualized solidarity in warehouses

- Because of isolation and individualized work, no teamwork, no mutual help and cooperation
- Failing and succeeding individually
- No strong solidarity based on webs of interdependence or mutual help
- Opposing position in relation to the employer, maintaining the “traditional” conflict between labour and capital
- But not as a collective front but as individual workers engaging in isolated acts of resistance, such as restricting output or taking unwarranted freedoms

Conclusions

- Restaurant work
 - Power in restaurant work rested in personal networks, good reputation and long experience, not in collective power.
 - Strong solidarity, but not as a force against oppressive practices but as a coping mechanism in front of adversities and a collective norm that delineates what a good coworker is.
- Warehouse work
 - Power rested in permanent contract and high performance, based on the history of collective power of unions and their negotiation power
 - Weak solidarity at work, but benefits from longer histories of organizing within the sector and the long-term negotiations practices between the employer and the union.

Conclusions (2)

- Individualization as responsabilization
 - Particularly in restaurant work strong tendencies to take individual responsibility, particularly in terms of not failing the shift
 - Using individual bargaining and individual negotiations
 - Disillusionment in front of capital: working conditions (restaurants) and pay (warehouses) seem to deteriorate despite of union efforts
 - Individualization does not mean a lack of solidarity, but new forms of solidarity
 - In restaurants: mutual help
 - In warehouse work: lack of solidarity did not stem from individualized attitudes, but isolation at work