

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Organised by transitions: the self-organisation of next-generation welfare professionals in Slovenia

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Much is known about innovative union strategies to organise young workers, but little is known about how and why they self-organise outside of unions. Based on field research in Slovenia, we examine ‘next-generation welfare professionals’, a diverse group of students, unemployed graduates and precarious workers attempting to enter state-regulated, and relatively well unionised education and social protection professions. We argue that their self-organisation is a direct consequence of their precarious education-to-work transitions and consequent disembeddedness from the workplace and professional community. Their grievances stem from a mismatch between strict professional entry requirements and scarce paid internships, which lead to long unemployment spells, unsupportive active labour market schemes, and a fear of social exclusion. Their initial tactic was to establish communities from which a collective sense of injustices and self-organising emerged and they targeted policymakers with demands for sustainable government funded internships. Although their relations with established trade unions are not close, they do receive organisational support from the Trade Union Youth Plus that organises students, the unemployed and precarious graduates stuck in a transitional stage of ‘waithood’. Our findings show the need for unions to become more present within transitional zones that, are shaped by state policies.

Key words education-to-work transitions • self-organising • young workers • trade unions • education • social protection • waithood • Slovenia

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Introduction

Young people have become an increasingly important priority for trade unions worldwide, and a growing literature examines union strategies to organise them

(Keune, 2015; Martinez Lucio et al, 2017; Samaluk, 2017b; Simms et al, 2018; Tapia and Turner, 2018; Vandaele, 2019). These studies show that the precarious employment situation of young workers calls for innovation, which unions can promote by providing a supportive, autonomous space (Cha et al, 2018). Much of the innovation, however, takes the form of self-organisation outside union structures (Atzeni, 2016; Weghman, 2019). Why do young people so often organise outside of union structures?

We examine campaigns of people entering state regulated education and social protection professions in Slovenia, where education-to-work transitions are increasingly long. Instead of defining participants as young workers (that is, in terms of age and employment status), we use the term 'next-generation professionals' to reflect the way they self-identify, their diversity in status and age, and their aim to move into professions. We understand 'youth' as a social category shaped by contextual social processes and examine people in 'waithood', who may have aged out of age-stratified categorisations of youth but are still caught in education-to-work transitions and lack many of the expectations and responsibilities associated with adulthood (see Honwana, 2012).

Several institutional features of Slovenia shape this experience. For those entering welfare professions, the transition from education to stable work may be extended because of the need for internships or equivalent work experience to become fully licensed professionals. Although requirements are strict, government support declined after the 2008 economic crisis and were replaced by intermittent EU-funded schemes. This has created a mismatch between established regulations and actual chances in the labour market, thus prolonging and deepening the precarisation of aging next-generation professionals (Samaluk, 2021).

The problem is not that unions are absent from the occupations these workers are entering. Supported by neocorporatist institutions unique in the post-socialist world (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012), Slovenia's public-sector occupational unions shape the legal regulation and negotiate the collective agreements that cover all workers in education and social protection (Stanojevič and Broader, 2012). Although these unions have youth structures, they do not organise those in education-to-work transitions. This void has been filled by the Trade Union Youth Plus (TUYP) that has since 2011 organised and supported students, unemployed and precarious graduates as an affiliate of Slovenia's largest union confederation. This article examines why and how self-organisation develops by those caught in education-to-work transitions in this institutional context.

We find that next generation professionals self-organise, because of fear of or actual social and labour market exclusion created by a mismatch between state-regulated entry requirements and the absence of traditional state-funded entry level internship schemes. Their initial tactic was to establish communities from which self-organising, based on a collective sense of injustice, emerged. Their targets were policymakers from which they demanded sustainable entry routes into the workplace and professional community. In the course of their self-organisation, these next-generation professionals turned to unions for assistance; but given their particular statuses, grievances and tactics, their home was within TUYP rather than established occupational unions.

In the next section, we position our study within the sociology of work and industrial relations literatures. Then we describe our sample of interviewees and

reasons for examining their self-organisation and mobilisation in this context. In three findings sections, we describe activists' grievances, tactics and relationships with established trade unions. We conclude with limitations and broader implications of our study for understanding unions and precarious young people's self-organisation.

(Self-) organisation of Young and Precarious Workers

Our central question is why and how next-generation professionals self-organise while targeting a well unionised public services labour market. For most scholarship on trade unions, analysis starts with existing organisations and institutions. Mobilisation theory (Kelly, 2002) and its recent developments (McAlevy, 2016; Holgate et al, 2018) identify various stages of collective action in and around the workplace: a sense of injustice, leadership, framing of grievances and action. However, this situation is different for precarious workers only weakly embedded in the workplace and community, and where leadership and issue framing may develop as a product of unexpected and rapid mobilisation, rather than being its necessary prerequisite (Atzeni, 2009; Però, 2020). Inspired by this scholarship, we take a bottom-up perspective on the process and formation of self-organisation of next-generation professionals and their relationships with established trade unions.

Many unions have well-established channels to recruit young people. In the dual education systems of Germany and Austria, for example, apprenticeships act as a channel to recruit young workers (Keune, 2015; Tapia and Turner, 2018; Vandaele, 2019), and in Germany via statutory youth and apprentice committees (Holst et al, 2014). Other unions have long-established youth structures at the workplace, regional, sector and/or confederation levels (Keune, 2015: 22–3). Most unions traditionally engaged with young workers once they reached the stage in their life-courses when they had attained the status of worker, or at least trainee, in an organisation with a strong union presence (Lowe and Rastin, 2000; Keune, 2015).

Union membership among young people, however, has declined in nearly every country, raising the question of how unions will recruit the next generation (Keune, 2015). Vandaele (2012) reports that youth representation at the confederal level does not necessarily lead to the recruitment of more young people. Furthermore, some traditional recruitment channels have broken down; in Germany, for example, a growing share of the workforce attends university rather than doing an apprenticeship (Holst et al, 2014). Moreover, due to increasing precarisation and prolonged education-to-work transitions youth rapidly ages-out of age-capped categorisation of 'youth' used in policymaking or some traditional trade union approaches (Simms et al, 2018; Samaluk, 2021). Precarious employment is the central challenge for unions organising young people: it is obviously difficult for them to reach precarious workers who lack access to workplace trade union structures (Keune and Pedaci, 2020; Smith et al, 2019).

Industrial relations scholars have identified innovative union strategies to organise young people. Unions might strengthen their existing youth-oriented structures and embrace issues important to young people to improve their image and make membership more attractive (Sarrano Pascual and Waddington, 2000). To make youth structures more effective, unions can grant them autonomy to develop innovative tactics (Cha et al, 2018) and expertise, especially through leadership training (Tapia and Turner, 2018). Unions also provide services to help young people navigate training

and internship opportunities that comprise education-to-work transitions and support their political demands as precarious workers (Simms et al, 2018). German unions, for example, established a presence at universities to provide services to a growing student base and help them enter the labour market (Behrend and Hipp, 2017). Some unions' success in addressing youth precarity comes with their focus on statuses rather than age categories (Keune, 2015; Samaluk, 2017b), and union involvement in policymaking has proven crucial for updating the institutions governing education-to-work transitions (Durazzi and Geyer, 2020).

Many campaigns, however, take the form of self-organising outside of union structures. There are hybrid types that contain elements of innovative union strategies and self-organising (Cha et al, 2018), of which TUYP is an example. As Atzeni (2016) notes, however, much organising of precarious workers is not produced by a union strategy, but rather emerges from workers' everyday interactions. What, then, has produced the divide between established unions and self-organised young people?

One answer points to a flaw in union strategy, namely an inadequate engagement with workers and their communities. McAlevey, for example, argues that unions should take a more bottom-up, 'no shortcut' approach to organising that takes into account the 'whole worker': 'a person embedded in a range of social relationships in the workplace and in the community' (2016: 19). Drawing on McAlevey (2016) Holgate et al (2018) suggest that an effective analysis of unions' failures in organising requires a conceptual distinction between deep organising and shallow mobilising. Like Tattersall (2012), these scholars argue that changing power relations requires a long-term process of developing organic leaders fighting injustices that are not only connected to the workplace; unions fail, Holgate et al (2018) argue, because they pursue only short-term gains by activating an existing base of support without building new power resources. This is an important modification to Kelly's mobilisation theory, where the sole focus on micro-level action neglects the organisational strategy of unions to build sustained gains.

A second answer points to aspects of young, precarious workers that prevent them from entering unions. Precarious workers might not collectively self-identify as workers, because they occupy complex legal and social statuses (Samaluk, 2017b) or self-organise around other axes of identity such as sexual orientation, race, gender or ethnicity (Piore and Safford, 2006). They might develop organisations that are less bureaucratic than unions, experience culture clashes when they encounter unions, and choose to stay outside to retain their freedom to act (Tapia, 2013). Self-organised workers may have had past negative experiences with established unions (Però, 2020) or different priorities that bring them into conflict with unions (Weghmann, 2019). These workers may act collectively within community-based organisations that conflict with unions when they compete for recognition as the representatives of workers (Heery et al, 2012). These scholars point to structural barriers and features of worker agency that undermine union organising and coalition-building strategies.

We propose an alternative explanation that moves beyond the strategic challenges facing unions and starts with workers' precarious lives and their disembedding from the workplace and professional and wider community. As Castel (2003), argues, precarity is not only a matter of lacking quasi-permanent employment, but is more fundamentally a vulnerable position in society with a risk of social exclusion. The cause of vulnerability is not only weak labour-market attachment; it is also a weakening of other social bonds, a disembedding from what industrial relations scholars call the

community outside the workplace. These problems can be intensified by workfarist active labour market policy (ALMP) schemes designed by the state to construct precarious work as an acceptable or required alternative to unemployment (Dörre, 2015; Greer, 2016; Rubery et al, 2018). For instance, research on education-to-work transitions of welfare professionals shows that the replacement of traditional internships with workfarist ALMP schemes not only hinders the next generation's integration into the labour market and professional community, but also causes precarious ageing and age discrimination in accessing entry level 'youth' ALMP schemes (Samaluk, 2021).

Age-capped categorisations of youth used by unions do not fit well into the social processes found in education-to-work transitions. As these transitions become more extended, people enter what Honwana (2012: 4) refers to as *waithood*. She observes in four African countries a prolonged and involuntary delay in attaining 'adulthood' due to hindered ability to integrate into the labour market and establish families. She finds that these people in transitions are not passively waiting for their situation to change, but employing various survival strategies within a given context and structural constraints. Bishara (2021) shows that in Morocco and Tunisia, jobless university graduates, steeped in leftist student activism, have organised for a right to work in the context of high graduate unemployment.

The Slovenian case shows the relevance of this literature based on the North African experience on mobilisations in Europe and the relationship between the trade union movement and people making these transitions. While we know of self-organisation of unemployed persons and their conflicts with established unions (Wegmann, 2019), little is known about self-organisation of next-generation welfare professionals whose education-to-work transitions are regulated by the state and their targeted public services labour market which is relatively well unionised. This can offer new insights on ways established unions can recruit the next generation of workers despite their lack of embeddedness in the workplace or occupational community.

The cases: education and social protection professions in Slovenia

Neocorporatist Slovenia has had historically strong welfare institutions that offered good conditions for development of quality and well unionised public welfare services. This article focuses on preschool, primary and secondary education that in 2019/20 employed 42,117 persons (4.5 per cent of active population) and social protection ('socialno varstvo') that comprises diverse social services aimed at the social integration of various vulnerable groups and in 2011 employed 1.7 per cent of the active population.¹ While sectors differ in size, both education and social protection are state-regulated professions characterised by clear entry requirements, a compulsory induction period in early career recruitment and professional licensing. For lack of better terms, we refer to workers in these fields as 'welfare professionals'.

Until 2007–08, entry into these professions was organised through government-funded internship schemes that enabled stable paid and organised induction into professions. These first became replaced by voluntary internships, which became outlawed in 2014, and later by intermittent and conditioned European Social Fund (ESF) and Youth Guarantee (YG) quasi-internship schemes (Samaluk, 2021). Apart from the elimination of government-funded internship schemes, post-crisis austerity measures also capped public sector hiring and decreased funding of public services

that dramatically reduced alternative entry level jobs in both public sector and non-governmental social protection providers and predominantly public sector pre-primary, primary and secondary schools (OECD, 2017; Smolej-Jež et al, 2017; Samaluk, 2021). Reduced funding and caps in hiring reduced employment and led to a threefold increase of unemployed youth with tertiary education and increasingly long spells of unemployment for graduates seeking to enter these professions (ZRSZ, 2015). While post-crisis period had an overall negative effect on youth unemployment and education-to-work transitions, it created a 'waithood' effect, for next-generation welfare professionals, who can only become licenced after undergoing a compulsory post-graduate induction period previously secured through government-funded internships.

Graduates from various disciplines and faculties can enter these professions, but to do so they need a six-month (or 840 hours) induction experience, which became very difficult to obtain in the absence of traditional internships and alternative entry-level jobs. While the Bologna reform also brought some expansion of university places, increasing the graduates' pool, a major pressure point was created by lack of entry-level jobs (Samaluk, 2021). The number of people who found sufficient entry-level jobs and could apply for professional exams in education dropped from 2031 in 2008 to 1124 in 2016.² Between 2005 and 2015 the number of teachers up to 30 years old dropped by 8 per cent (OECD, 2017). On ESF quasi-internship schemes in social protection, running between 2010 and 2015, only 159 out of 476 interns kept jobs after their internship period (SZS, 2015). New entrants also faced a general post-crisis increase in non-standard employment. In education there was a 2 per cent increase in part-time employment between 2008 and 2014³ and in social protection programmes in 2015, only 40 per cent of workers were employed full-time and one third were employed through ALMP schemes (Smolej-Jež et al, 2016). Owing to the mismatch between work-related entry requirements and chances to meet these in the absence of traditional internship schemes, the Slovenian social protection and education professions are places of particularly precarious education-to-work transitions (Samaluk, 2021), despite strong union presence.

Both professions are characterised by a strong public sector union presence, SVIZ and VIR in education, and Since07, SZSSS and SZSVS in social protection.⁴ Despite some union success in easing austerity measures (Stanojevič and Klarič, 2013) and the 2016 return of public spending in social protection and education to pre-crisis levels (Smolej-Jež et al, 2017), austerity and continuous fiscal discipline became stabilised through European funds that also brought EU-funded temporary project work into public sector welfare provision (Samaluk, 2017a; Greer et al, 2019). Jobs in these professions thus became more precarious and entry-level jobs more restricted. Traditional government-funded internships became replaced with occasional and conditioned EU-funded quasi-internship and other workfarist ALMP schemes available for particular age and/or unemployed groups. While the EU funded quasi-internship schemes offered similar conditions to traditional internships in terms of pay and quality, they were temporary and set according to EU funding cycle priorities. Moreover, their take-up depended on employers' willingness to undergo bureaucratic procedures, and they were conditioned either on age, geographical regions or retirement of already employed staff, thus becoming very difficult to access and producing age discrimination (Samaluk, 2021).

While unions were pointing to problems related to the reduced government funding for these public services through social dialogue institutions, they never actively

engaged with workers outside of their public-sector strongholds and included the youth only by creating special structures for younger members. TUYP, by contrast, has a strong presence within education-to-work transitions and supports students, unemployed and precarious workers, including the self-organising next-generation professionals. TUYP emerged in the post-crisis period due to growing youth precarity and operates as an independent union within the largest Slovenian union confederation, but it is also recognised as a youth organisation, which gives access to institutions and funding beyond those available to recognised social partners. Their focus is not on youth as an age-based category, but on ‘youth plus’, covering also older people in increasingly prolonged and precarious education-to-work transitions. Because its membership is small and transient, it finances its activities using various sources of project funding, from small-scale government and municipal funds available for youth organisations, to larger EU funds, such as the Youth Guarantee and ESF. Although projects are temporary, they give TUYP autonomy in organising and servicing ‘youth plus’ beyond the immediate labour market. They have been active for nearly a decade and succeeded in abolishing unpaid internships and, together with the self-organised groups explored in this article, winning EU funding for quasi-internship schemes (Samaluk, 2017b).

Methods and sample used

This study draws upon 53 individual or group semi-structured interviews with 13 key informants and 47 next-generation professionals. These include follow-up interviews at different stages of campaigns and professionals’ career paths, allowing us to track the progress of campaigns over time. Interviews were conducted in the Slovenian language, either in person or through Skype between 2014 and 2019. The fieldwork took place during two different but related projects. First was on the marketisation of social services (2014–16), where we first identified the issue of self-organisation. This was then thoroughly explored in a separate project about education-to-work transitions in the studied sectors (2017–20). A small minority of interviews was done during the campaigns studied, and the majority of interviews afterward.

The sample of next generation professionals consisted of nine men and 38 women, reflecting the feminised nature of the education and social protection professions. The sample included diverse ages, between 22 and 54 years old, thus taking into account intersectional differences and including also ‘youth plus’, who experience precarious education-to-work transitions. All five participants in their forties or fifties were women, who either experienced health-related study interruptions or had changed career paths due to job loss. The criteria for sample selection thus went beyond age-capped categorisations and rather focused on participants’ precarious social conditions and status, characterised by partial or complete disembeddedness from the workplace and/or professional community. Participants thus occupied different work and non-work statuses: seven were students, 14 were unemployed, 24 had temporary jobs and two had permanent contracts (both subject to project funding). When presenting data, we add information on key informants’ and next generation respondents’ position during the campaign and use acronyms indicating whether they were active in social protection (SP) or education (EDU) campaigns and their role in it. Participants were recruited through public events, trade unions, especially the TUYP, online forums and Facebook groups, where they self-organised, through

alumni groups, and through the snowballing technique. Interviews lasted between half an hour and two hours and probed participants' strategies and experience in accessing entry level jobs and their early career experience, their engagement with trade unions, their reasons to self-organise and their mobilising tactics.

The 13 key informants included 11 leaders and activists from occupational trade unions, the union confederation, TUYP, and social movements, as well as a policymaker in education and the leader of an umbrella body for non-profits. Interviews with key informants probed unions' engagement with the next generation caught in education-to-work transition, their insights on and engagement with policymaking in a post-crisis context, especially in relation to early-career recruitment and employment conditions in the two professions.

Aside from interview data, we used several other sources to better understand mobilising and organising tactics and trace the development of individual campaigns. These included official reports, student dissertations, documents, publications and conversations on forums and social media newsfeeds which next-generation professionals used to self-organise and raise awareness about their campaigns, and observation notes from conferences and other events co-organised by the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Ljubljana in April and September 2015 and March 2018. Aside from helping to organise one of these events, we were not involved in the campaigns.

The analysis started with the transcripts of interviews with next-generation professionals and was done through the process of coding that was later organised into identified themes (Charmaz, 2006), such as grievances, organising spaces, organising tactics, engagement with other actors and trade unions. Identified themes guided the analysis of key informant interviews and texts gathered through secondary sources. Analysis finished with data triangulation deriving from all available sources. All quotes used in this article have been translated from Slovenian into English.

Findings

The self-organisation of next generation professionals resulted in two campaigns by social work students (2009–2010 and 2013–15) and one by education graduates (2015–16) (see Table 1). The social work students won government action that secured ESF support for 580 quasi-internships for 2013–15, 100 quasi-internships funded through the Youth Guarantee (YG) scheme in 2016, and 65 quasi-internships funded by the ESF in 2017, all for social protection occupations. The number of places secured through these EU funded quasi-internship schemes was comparable to traditional internships, thus offering success in numbers, but they were based on temporary EU funding, which latter campaigns tried to overcome by demanding sustainable governmental funding for internships. In education, graduates pressured the government into securing more YG-funded quasi-internship schemes, loosening restrictive conditions and eligibility criteria and ultimately securing more stable financing of internships. The first campaign of social work students was prior to the formation of TUYP; the latter two were supported by TUYP. Despite some differences, the three campaigns had important similarities in terms of (1) grievances (related to the education-to-work transition), (2) tactics (targeting the government through a mixture of pressure and influence), and (3) union involvement (distance from occupational unions and engagement by TUYP). Table 1 provides a summary of the three campaigns.

Table 1: Comparison of three campaigns

	Social protection, first generation (2009–10)	Social protection, second generation (2013–15)	Education (2015–16)
How initiated	Social work students: discussions in the Faculty of Social Work	Social work students: discussions with the first self-organised group in the Faculty of Social Work	Graduates all over Slovenia: online discussion on the forum Young Teacher
Unions involved	ZZZS Since07	TUYP Since07	TUYP SVIZ youth committee
Other actors	Faculty of Social Work Association of Social Workers of Slovenia Social Chamber of Slovenia Autonomous Metelkova Zone and Social Centre ROG	Faculty of Social Work Association of Social Workers of Slovenia Social Chamber of Slovenia Student group (ISKRA) International academics on the European Conference for Social Work in Ljubljana	Student group (ISKRA) Political actors in education boards
Grievances	Poor prospects on the labour market. Cancellation of government-funded paid internships. Expansion of unpaid internships.	Expiration of ESF-funded quasi-internship scheme and continued poor prospects on the labour market.	Widespread unemployment; gap in funding for paid internships; public-sector hiring cap; mismanagement of Youth Guarantee quasi-internship scheme; exclusion of over-29s year-olds and pre-school teachers.
Tactics	Building alliances. Rally (14.10.2009). Negotiations with ministry. Coordination role on new quasi-internship scheme.	Building alliances. Awareness raising through public event (19.11.2014), info points, newsletter and social media. Manifesto for paid work (5.10.2015). Rally (21.4.2015). Participation in public consultation (11.5.2015). Negotiations with ministry.	Building alliances. Awareness raising through public event (18.1.2016) and social media. Manifesto for paid work (5.10.2015). Petition (17.1.2016). Negotiations with ministry.
Accomplishments	2010–13: ESF-funded quasi-internship scheme with 580 places	2016: Youth Guarantee-funded quasi-internship scheme with 100 places (age-cap 29). 2017: ESF-funded quasi-internship scheme with 65 places.	More Youth Guarantee-funded quasi-internship schemes. Loosening restrictions on the conditions for employers and inclusion of pre-school teachers into the schemes.

Precarious transitions as the source of grievances

The activists we interviewed were protesting about the failure of government to secure paid internships to bridge the gap between graduation and entry-level jobs needed to become licenced professionals. Problems included gaps in the funding of internship schemes, the unsustainability and underutilisation of EU-funded quasi-internship schemes by employers, the scarcity of places, and restrictiveness of eligibility criteria.

In social protection, campaigns started in 2009 at the Faculty of Social Work, which is the leading trainer of social workers in Slovenia, where also the curriculum encouraged students to collectively research the factors shaping their exclusion and re-frame individual issues as collective grievances:

‘In my second year... you have practice, voluntary work, you network and then you notice that organisations cannot employ you. For some time, you are apathetic and then you start to research things... in one seminar we started talking about these things. The whole group got together to research this problem.’ (Social work student, activist1 in the first SP campaign)

Social work students discussed their poor prospects on the labour market and their vulnerability in a group project; this collective framing of injustices faced encouraged them to self-organise: ‘The following conditions encouraged us to organise: wish to secure our future and fear of unsuccessful search for internships that leads to social exclusion’ (Sušnik, 2010: 23). From this initial group project an organic leader emerged, who started running the campaign along with few other motivated students: “From this group emerged a few motivated individuals, who continued along my side for the next two years” (social work student, activist1 in the first SP campaign).

Self-organised social work students identified strongly, and sometimes exclusively, as next-generation social protection professionals: “We wanted to give priority to social workers in accessing these internships, so that our discipline is presented more numerously in social protection profession” (social work student, activist1 in the first SP campaign). Although graduates from various diverse disciplines can enter social protection, the Faculty of Social Work is one of the main producers of next generation professionals, thus offering the basis for this self-identification and a supportive community for self-organising. Social work students were thus already defined as a group within the supportive educational environment that encouraged the collective framing of injustices faced and offered a space for self-organising.

In education, by contrast, self-organising included graduates from diverse faculties, atomised individuals with poor job prospects who had moved back to their family homes and were thus scattered across the country. Their postgraduate period was characterised by exclusion from the workplace and moving out of the communities where they had lived and studied. These scattered graduates came together through the online Forum Young Teacher where they shared information and experiences relating to their education-to-work transitions and thus developed a sense of collective purpose through online organising: “It was hard in a sense that we were from all over Slovenia... we came together on this Forum Young Teacher and also on Facebook” (teacher chaining temporary contracts, activist1 on EDU campaign).

A call for collective organising of the ‘community of next-generation teachers’ (forum.mladiucitelj.si, 3 November 2015) emerged on the forum after the Ministry

of Education announced that the gap in provision of internships will be addressed through age-capped subsidies to employers funded by the EU's Youth Guarantee scheme. This call stimulated a lively discussion full of personal experiences with waithood characterised by unsuccessful attempts to find alternative entry routes to the profession, often caused by the scheme's age cap or the scarcity of employers using the scheme. As one graduate told us, gaps in provision of internships increased graduates' precarity and waiting time to enter the labour market and developed a sense of collective purpose that prompted self-organisation in 2015:

'This was a real crisis, this year and a half, two years, when there were no internships... then we connected through the Forum Young Teacher and started the petition and putting pressures on the ministry.' (Unemployed education graduate, activist2 on EDU campaign)

The initial call for action led to organised efforts to collect evidence on these issues and address injustices faced: "one called the ministry and another one did something else, and we reported, shared information" (unemployed education graduate, activist3 on EDU campaign). Activists divided tasks among themselves and each took a lead on specific tasks through which they started collecting evidence, sharing information, writing reports and organising petitions. This organising took place online: "We organised through the internet... divided tasks among us and put them together through online correspondence" (teacher chaining temporary contracts, activist1 on EDU campaign).

To broaden their reach and awareness, another activist started a Facebook group, 'For equal employment opportunities in education', that acted as a hub covering all activities of the group, calling to action and having 1,291 members. Despite these differences in organising, graduates in education faced similar problems.

In both professions, participants faced gaps in provision of internships and criticised EU-funded quasi-internship schemes for lacking sustainability. The second campaign of social work students in 2013, for example, started in response to the expiration of the scheme created as a result of earlier mobilisation. Activists organising the earlier mobilisation warned the then first-year students that:

'This is only a five-year project, and we should start thinking how to enforce continuation. When the last tender came out in 2013, we sent a letter to the ministry, demanding that they secure continuous financing of internships. Almost every month we sent a letter there, called, enquired.' (Social work student, activist1 in the second SP campaign)

In addition to placements being temporary, they also acted as subsidies for employers. TUYYP had been monitoring the implementation of these and other ALMP schemes funded through Youth Guarantee and pointed to this problem:

'The problem with Youth Guarantee schemes is that they reinforce precarity... Even if they cover job placements, these are temporary, because they are covered through cycle-limited EU funds... We inform about these schemes, because a lot of employers and young do not know about them and thus also these bad options remain unused, but at the same time we criticize these measures.' (TUYYP activist1)

These administrative problems were a source of grievances. While the direct recipients of EU subsidies were employers, many had not heard of the schemes, did not know or could not meet the conditions attached, or were reluctant to deal with bureaucratic application procedures (Samaluk, 2021). One result was their underutilisation. Of EU-funded schemes advertised between 2010 and 2017, the three largest in education had take-up rates ranging from 2 to 40 per cent. In social protection, the range was from 69 to 100 per cent, and only two were fully subscribed (Samaluk, 2021).

Moreover, Youth Guarantee schemes had an age cap excluding all next-generation professionals who were older than 29 years. Grievances over age discrimination were particularly pronounced among education graduates, many of whom exceeded this cap, as discussed on online forum: “This is not only a problem of young people, you try to find work, years go by and you do not fall under the category ‘young’ anymore. After your 30s you’re nobody’s problem anymore” (forum.mladiucitelj.si, 9 November 2015). Our sample included 21 such participants. While campaigns in social protection were all organised by younger students, organisers sought to raise awareness of these problems among older graduates (unemployed social work graduate during the second SP campaign).

Their experiences with these problems precipitated self-organisation of education graduates: “We came to the surface because of the way the ministry handled the problem with internships, because this is not a systemic solution” (teacher chaining temporary contracts, activist1 on EDU campaign). Their petition to the Ministry of Education summarises well their grievances: the 18-month gap in internships; the public sector hiring cap; the mismanagement of the first Youth Guarantee quasi-internship scheme that awarded only 6 out of 300 available places; discriminatory criteria that capped applicants’ ages at 29 and excluded pre-school teachers; and patching systemic problems in education-to-work transitions with unsustainable EU-funded schemes.

To summarise, the first generation of self-organised social work students was driven by grievances related to risks of postgraduate unemployment and social exclusion and the government’s role in perpetuating the precarious situation of people in education-to-work transitions. The second generation of self-organised social work students was driven by the instability of the schemes won by the earlier group. The self-organisation of education graduates was more directly driven by an experience of ‘waitthood’ but also similar grievances about the government’s inadequate response to their precarious situation, in particular the lack of internships and restrictive criteria attached to quasi-internship schemes.

Tactics: pressure, influence and administration

These campaigns started in different ways, but all targeted policymakers to create more and sustainably funded internships. Activists worked with unions, professional institutions and social movements as they organised protests, wrote letters and organised petitions, and received sympathetic media coverage. They negotiated with ministries, EU funding was secured, and in social protection key activists found employment managing the new paid internship schemes.

In the first wave of mobilisation by social work students in 2009–10, the core organising group consisted of a few activists supported by academics in the Faculty of Social Work and the Association of Social Workers of Slovenia (Sušnik, 2010).

Students also reached out to other actors to build alliances and get wider support for their demands:

‘The next step was to connect with all key institutions. We connected with Social Chamber, the Association of the Centres for Social Work, we greatly cooperated with trade unions: ZSSS confederation and the occupational unions. Youth Plus was still in the making... Also, SVIZ supported us... the president [of Since07] had a speech at our rally.’ (Social work student, activist1 in the first SP campaign)

Trade unions were among the ‘key institutions’ they approached, alongside the employer association and the Social Chamber, a professional body that regulates social protection. Although in 2009 trade unions signed an agreement about some open questions in social protection institutions, where the need to secure internships are also mentioned, funding and timelines were not specified (Sušnik, 2010). It was thus the self-organised group’s mobilising efforts which created sufficient pressures for its delivery. Tactical support for mobilising did not, however, come from unions, but social movements:

‘I had no idea how to increase pressure, how to mobilize... I was lucky that in our core group... two... were active at Autonomous Metelkova Zone and Social Centre ROG... they helped me with tactics how to build pressure when someone is not responsive, also media pressure... We had a couple of meetings with the ministry but they did not take us seriously. We knew this won’t lead anywhere, so we started mobilising.’ (Social work student, activist1 in the first SP campaign).

For expertise in mobilisation, students turned to the Autonomous Metelkova Zone and Social Center ROG, a former barracks and a former factory in Ljubljana, which served since the 1990s as hubs for alternative artistic and left-wing activist scenes and shared with self-organised groups their experience on how to build pressure and mobilise. Such advice also came from the ZZZS’ new generation activist responsible for the later establishment of TUYF, who also secured equipment for the rally (Sušnik, 2010).

‘The preparation of the rally was enormous... it turned out successfully and from then on it started rolling. The minister informed us that he established a working group... Then it all went very quickly.’ (Social work student, activist1 in the first SP campaign)

The rally was a tipping point of the campaign which was also accompanied by sufficient media coverage that demanded the minister’s response and led to campaigners being invited to the negotiating table; these negotiations finally led to first EU-funded quasi-internship scheme covering 580 places between 2010–13.

This mobilisation and the scheme that resulted laid the foundation for the next generation of students to self-organise. As before, a group of student activists worked continuously for two years to secure new funding. While there was some cross-over between the two social protection campaigns, these remained relatively discrete and

were led by different generations of self-organised students: “A couple of random students gathered and decided to do something... We named ourselves, we set the tasks and we invested the next two years in it” (social work student, activist2 in the second SP campaign).

While leadership was more dispersed in the second campaign, these activists also reached out to the Social Chamber, employers, faculty and student organisations, plus the TUYP, which had in the meantime been established and was fighting for the same cause (social work student, activist1 in the second SP campaign). With the aid of TUYP, they organised Infopoints to collect signatures for a petition (‘the Manifesto – for paid work!’) and educate other students about the problem, as revealed by another student who was not active in campaign: “All the information on what was happening during the campaign came to us” (social work student during the second SP campaign). They also organised a public event, ‘The future of internships in social protection’ at the Faculty for Social Work, which included speakers from the faculty, the ministry, public sector and NGO service providers, interns, students, career advisors and trade unions. Students also reached out to an international group of social work academics who gathered in Ljubljana in April 2015 (the European Conference for Social Work) and had one foreign academic speak at their rally (Vidonja, 2015).

Initially, these activists were not taken seriously by the ministry (social work student, activist2 in the second SP campaign). They built further pressure by urging the Prime Minister and the Human Rights Ombudsman to intervene with the ministry on their behalf. They also formed a Facebook group, where they posted information. Moreover, activists published a newsletter, Po-moč (Help-Power), to inform students about the issues and campaign, including information on actions:

The student group for solving internships has spent the last two years appealing to the ministry to solve the problem with internships, but apart from two replies, a meeting and empty words, we got nothing. We decided that we had enough, so we sent the letter... with demands to secure funding for internships... otherwise, we will demonstrate on 21 April. (Vidonja, 2015: 6)

Also this time, the rally and accompanied media coverage led to success. According to news coverage, this rally brought together around 150 students and members from support organisations (STA, 2015). While this number seems small in relative terms, it covers approximately two generation of social work students and 1 per cent of the overall workforce in social protection. Although the second campaign was tactically richer, the toll of austerity, continuous fiscal discipline and increasing conditionality of EU funding led to the creation of fewer positions and shorter EU-funded projects.

Education graduates used similar tactics. After initial discussions and division of tasks, they built alliances with student organisations and the TUYP: “We connected with student group Iskra and TUYP, who have been fighting for internships for a long time (not just ours also in social protection)” (forum.mladiucitelj.si, 8 November 2015). They organised an event with the TUYP called ‘Who’s afraid of youth!’ to discuss problems with internships and how to self-organise, to increase pressure on policymakers and find new ways to continue their struggle. The group presented a petition to the ministry with 2,876 signatures and made their activities visible on a Facebook feed with letters to the ministry, stories of graduates, provision of news,

information about the issues, and announcements of events. The number of people who signed the petition exceeds the dropping numbers in the access to professional exam and is indicative of the growing number of unemployed graduates within the gap generation, who could not attain the compulsory induction period to enter the profession. With these joint actions they tried to increase pressure on the ministry, as explained by one of the campaigners: “We prepared petitions. Then there was this public event about internships and we tried to put more pressures on the ministry” (unemployed education graduate, activist2 on EDU campaign).

These pressure tactics and their outreach to relevant political actors brought them to the negotiating table: “We went to political actors involved in education boards and through them we got to the minister, and then a working group for internships was formed at the ministry, which involved all trade unions, universities, our youth representatives” (teacher chaining temporary contracts, activist1 on EDU campaign).

A working group was formed involving affected graduates, and negotiations resulted in the removal of the requirement to employ interns on permanent contract, which were in practice impossible to meet unless an intern replaced a retiree. They also won inclusion of pre-school teachers in the internship scheme.

An important consequence of self-organisation of social work students was that the schemes they helped secure and networks built through long-term organising opened doors into postgraduate employment (social work student, activist3 in the second SP campaign). All activist students quickly found temporary entry-level jobs, either on the schemes they helped secure or on other projects. For the first group of social-protection campaigners, taking up coordinator roles on these novel EU-funded projects proved crucial for securing internships, as explained by an activist, who benefited from the scheme: “When I graduated, I applied for internships, because this new scheme opened... the [named lead activist] wrote the whole project. I know this because I was active on the protest then... I think if it wasn't for her there would be no internships” (social work student, activist2 in the first SP campaign).

Entrusting the lead activist with the project design and coordination proved successful, as schemes in social protection had much higher take-up than in education, where project coordination was done by bureaucrats at the ministry (Samaluk, 2021).

To summarise, the first group of social-work student activists turned to unions, professional and employer organisations, and social movements to support their rally and petition, and convinced the ministry to act. Building on this campaign and supported by TUYP, the second generation of social-work students and educators used similar tactics. Campaigners succeeded in securing new temporary EU-funded schemes and in easing the requirements on the established schemes.

TUYP and the established unions

While the campaigns centred on re-instituting paid and sustainable internships, campaigners looked to established occupational unions for support in lobbying the government. Unions have no legal barriers to organise next-generation professionals (SZSSS-Activist1), and they shared their concerns about hiring freezes (STA, 2015: 1), acknowledged both the limits of traditional age-based youth committee approaches (SZSSS-Activist1), and saw a need for organising next-generation professionals (Since07-Activist). Nevertheless, the stability and growth of unionisation within public services discouraged occupational unions to engage proactively with the next

generation, who rather waited for them to become sufficiently embedded into the workplace by passing their trial period (SZSSS-Activist2) or by stringing together temporary employment contracts at one employer (teacher chaining temporary contracts).

Precarious early career workers therefore lacked information about the benefits of trade union membership or their eligibility for it (Youth Guarantee education intern). Activists were also reluctant to join, because they were disappointed by occupational unions' priorities: "I am not a member. Why? They do not represent my interests... They represent older generations, who are on permanent contracts and have no worries. There is too little work done for the young" (teacher chaining temporary contracts, activist1 in the EDU campaign). Others bemoaned the failure of established unions to organise broadly:

'SVIZ is too positioned towards those already employed, towards their members. They do not put enough effort... into the future... we are their potential members, and it would be easier also for them, if problems with internships and recruitment in education, would be addressed in a systemic fashion. This should be in their interest.' (Unemployed education graduate, activist2 in the EDU campaign)

Consequently, very few interviewees were union members. Two belonged to TUYP, three to SVIZ, and none to the occupational unions in social protection.

Established unions maintained a distance from the self-organised. In education, for example, SVIZ delegated this role to its Youth Committee and one of its activists participated in events, press conferences and negotiations at the ministry. Similarly, in social protection, unions supported campaigners discursively, by framing injustices as a threat to professional standards, but they rarely supported campaigners in their capacity building: "In our talks with the ministry only Social Chamber, Association of Centres for Social Work, the faculty and TUYP helped us" (social work student, activist 1 in the second SP campaign).

TUYP, by contrast, offered support to self-organised groups in capacity building, through aforementioned tactics of joint events organising and media exposure, giving advice on pressure tactics and voice to affected students. As one education student told us, "TUYP made me aware of problems with internships. One of their activists came to our faculty and tried to activate us. So, we got involved in collecting signatures" (education student, activist3 in EDU campaign). The union was more reserved: "They supported our petitions, but they did not actively engage with our struggle. TUYP engaged" (unemployed education graduate, activist2 in the EDU campaign). In contrast to the reactive response of unions, TUYP helped to organise the petition and events, organised press conferences, and helped the campaigners to build solidarity among atomised groups. The relationship of self-organised groups with unions was similar in social protection:

'Since07 helped us then, they also came to protest to say they support us. However, with TUYP we cooperated throughout, they really supported us and came several times to our faculty... their role was very important in our struggle.' (Social work student, activist3 in the second SP campaign)

While established unions reacted to struggles of self-organised groups by offering discursive support, TUYP helped build their capacity throughout with co-organising actions and events, by voicing their concerns directly to the government, securing access to national institutions and events debating or negotiating precarity, youth and ALMPs and increasing media exposure.

For those transitioning into the labour market, TUYP acted as a first link to trade unionism: “I became aware of internships through TUYP... when their representative came to our faculty... this is when I became interested [in trade unions]... I am not yet a member but am interested in becoming one” (education student, activist3 in EDU campaign). Activists from self-organised groups became members of TUYP after seeing their organising efforts: “Before the protest, when we were going to various meetings... TUYP was always beside us. I see our trade union as a big advocate of young, students, graduates... I am a member” (social work student, activist2 in the second SP campaign).

Since TUYP did not act as an end station, their membership has always been low and transient, but its major role was to act as a first link to trade unionism and to channel activists into trade union work. Two student activists ended up working on TUYP organising projects after graduation and one was later employed on another confederation’s project. Also among TUYP key informants there was key informant who was another education graduate, who amid poor job prospects ended up working on a trade union project to promote apprenticeships and internships. Also, occupational unions saw TUYP as a link to the next generation:

‘We... connect with [young people] through TUYP. Under the confederation we also run several projects and we employ, as we say, from the pool of TUYP and through that we expand the network and get young people.’ (SZSSS-Activist1)

Occupational trade unions realised the importance of TUYP for broadening the Slovenian trade union movement’s agenda and improving its public image (SVIZ-Activist).

The main criticism of TUYP was that it was under-resourced and, compared to occupational unions, possessed limited power:

‘I was very satisfied with TUYP, they fight for young and are very active, but they have limited power, they are still a small union. I miss a more active role of SVIZ. I think they should take a stronger stance to fight for the young... I was pleased with their activist, but they put a breadcrumb, where you should put the whole cake.’ (Teacher chaining temporary contracts, activist1 on EDU campaign)

The need for union resources to organise people in education-to-work transitions was also voiced by TUYP activists: “If the confederation were smart, they would give us some resources. We do everything to secure resources ourselves. We apply on various tenders. But if you constantly have to fight for survival... to continue fighting, quality can quickly decline. This should be in no one’s interest” (TUYP activist 2).

All self-organised groups we examined reached out to occupational trade unions, but union support was reactive. TUYP, by contrast, assisted in self-organising, by

working with campaigners providing advice and contributing to campaigns in other ways that enhanced their capacity for self-organising, mobilising and negotiations. TUYP thus became the occupational unions' main link to the next generation. While occupational trade unions establish a link with the next generation through TUYP, they would need to put more of their own resources in order to keep this bridge sustainable and increase membership among the next generation.

Discussion and conclusion

Earlier, we have explored the self-organisation of next-generation welfare professionals caught in precarious education-to-work transitions. These professionals approached unions for assistance, but their statuses as students, interns, temporary workers and unemployed people made them fall through the cracks in Slovenia's union landscape. TUYP emerged in the transitional zones of the labour market and supported the self-organised. Our study is the first to examine the self-organisation of next-generation professionals and therefore offers a fresh perspective on why and how those caught in prolonged education-to-work transitions self-organise while targeting well unionised public services labour market.

These next-generation professionals self-organised outside of the occupational unions, we argue, because of the precarious and prolonged nature of their transitions. We contribute to the literature on unions and young workers by showing how this extended period of precarity – which may be characterised as 'waithood' (Honwana, 2012) – affects the relationship between people making education-to-work transitions and established trade unions. The issue is not just precarious work in the sense of poor jobs that could be addressed through stronger workplace union structures and collective bargaining, although these matter. The more fundamental problem is prolonged precarity in education-to-work transitions and the risk of exclusion from the labour market that it entails (Castel, 2003; Samaluk, 2021). In this transitional zones, workers were not yet embedded within a (unionised) workplace or a professional community.

Students and graduates entering the education and social protection fields thus had grievances that were not about the workplace, but rather concerned risks for or actual prolonged social and labour market exclusion. Their targets were policymakers from which they demanded sustainable entry routes into the workplace and professional community. Their initial tactic was to work collectively and establish communities from which collective sense of injustices and self-organising emerged. The self-organisation of people in precarious transitions thus differs from the classic images of workers mobilising against workplace injustices (Kelly, 2002) or of organising for change in both the workplace and community (McAlevy, 2016; Holgate et al, 2018). Our study contributes additional evidence to literature on self-organisation of precarious workers that shows that organising efforts are primarily centred on the development of communities of struggle from the mobilisation of which the sense of injustices and organic leaders develop (Atzeni, 2009; 2016; Però, 2020).

It also shows that building these communities within education-to-work transitions is much more challenging for those who have already left universities, thus supporting the view that unions should start engaging with youth when they are still in education (Behrend and Hipp, 2017) and that student activism experiences can be important for subsequent organising (Bishara, 2021). While social work students were still

embedded in a supportive educational community in the Faculty of Social Work, which encouraged them to critically assess precarious education-to-work transition and offered a physical space for organising, unemployed and precarious graduates in education were completely atomised, yet found their organising space online. All self-organised groups also used social media as an outreach channel to those affected by decreased entry routes, to build alliances, increase their voice and pressure on the government. While online organising tactics are nothing new, these spaces still require more scrutiny by industrial relations scholars and trade unions, which are still lagging behind in using social media for mobilisation, recruitment or renewal (Hodder and Houghton, 2015; Samaluk, 2017b).

Despite the challenges, however, these activists were successful. Although this study does not provide a clear roadmap to successful self-organising, it does shed some light on the particular features of the Slovenian context that are conducive to success. First, because Slovenia is a small country with a vibrant civil society, it was possible through modestly-sized actions and coalitions with the key actors in the sector to get media coverage and the attention of government. Second, because of Slovenia's corporatist institutions, there is a tendency to include social groups in policies that affect them, not only in legislation, but also programme design and administration.

Studies of union strategy are correct in saying that young workers can benefit when established unions deploy their resources on their behalf. Established unions were important allies for the campaigners in our study, even when contact occurred after self-organisation had already taken place. Piore and Safford's (2006) argument that the non-work identities of workers make unions less relevant simply does not hold here. While it is true, as Weghman (2019) shows, that union solidarity with the unwaged is often not forthcoming, we observed little conflict. A hybrid union focusing on those in education-to-work transitions, TUYP, served as a bridge between the two, and developed an ability to support self-organised groups outside of union strongholds. It also served as an eventual conduit of some of the self-organised into eventual union activism and membership. The agency of established unions therefore matters.

The agency of the self-organised also matters, however. The accomplishments of the campaigns we examined, though small-scale and temporary, made a difference in the two professions. Perhaps campaigners would have won more than just temporary internships if the occupational unions had taken more leadership in political advocacy or committed resources to organising students, interns and unemployed graduates. However, the fact remains that, despite Slovenia's favourable institutional arrangements and grassroots energy, occupational trade unions' engagement stayed mainly at the discursive level and emerged as a response to the next generations' mobilising efforts or within traditional institutions and strategies. In contrast, TUYP operated within transitional zones beyond the unionised workplace and could therefore increase the capacity of unemployed and precarious workers to organise.

This study is grounded in the Slovenian context and concerns education-to-work transitions within state regulated welfare professions that creates specific relationships between graduates, the state and relatively well unionised public services labour markets. However, it has wider implications for how unions can reach beyond traditional spheres of work and collective bargaining to connect with younger, non-waged and precarious workers (Martinez Lucio et al, 2017; Tapia and Turner, 2018). We show that unions organising young people based on assumptions about biological age and the linked life cycle will lose their effectiveness, as education-

to-work transitions are increasingly prolonged and precarious, and next-generation professionals commonly age out of the category 'youth'. More important is for unions to be present in the transitional zones between education and work in which people in 'waithood' cycle in and out of waged work. Because government shapes their everyday struggles with unemployment benefits, activation schemes and job search, unemployed and precariously employed workers target their demands at the state, in Slovenia, but also in North Africa (Bishara, 2021), Britain (Coderre-Lapalme et al. 2021), and elsewhere in Europe (Giugni, 2016).

The article has shown how traditional trade union organisations can maintain a presence in these transitional zones with the aid of hybrid unions such as TUYP. Complementing existing research (Samaluk, 2017b; Cha et al, 2018), we argue that these hybrids act as a bridge between the next generation and traditional trade unions. Like many other non-profits dependent on project funding, however, TUYP is in a precarious position and would benefit from more committed and continuous support from trade unions. Without continuous supports for hybrid unions like TUYP, the unions' bridge to the next generation will remain unstable and their presence for precarious workers temporary.

Notes

¹ Employed in education, Slovenian Statistical Office: <https://www.stat.si/StatWeb/News/Index/8907>; Employed in healthcare and social protection, Slovenian Statistical Office: https://www.stat.si/StatisticniDnevi/Docs/Radenci%202012/prispevki/Zver,%20Apohal_zaposlenost%20v%20zdravstvu%20in%20socialnem%20varstvu%20_prispevek%20%20__9.11.2012_.pdf

² Data obtained from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.

³ Teachers according to working time, Slovenian Statistical Office: https://pxweb.stat.si/SiStatDb/pxweb/sl/10_Dem_soc/10_Dem_soc__09_izobrazevanje__90_Arhiv__15_kadri_izobraz__05_09529_osnovnosol/0952901S.px/

⁴ SVIZ stands for Sindikat vzgoje, izobraževanja, znanosti in kulture Slovenije (Union for Childcare, Science, and Culture in Slovenia); VIR for Sindikat delavcev v vzgojni, izobraževalni in raziskovalni dejavnosti Slovenije (Union for Childcare, Education and Science); Since07 for Sindikat centrov za socialno delo (Trade Union for Centers of Social Work); SZSSS for Sindikat zdravstva in socialnega skrbstva Slovenije (Trade Union of Health and Social Care in Slovenia); and SZSVS for Sindikat zdravstva in socialnega varstva Slovenije (Trade Union of Health and Social Protection in Slovenia).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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