

# Understanding Union Commitment Among Young Workers: A Cross-Theoretical Perspective

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Article abstract

This study aims to shed light on the main determinants of and barriers to union commitment among young workers and, more generally, the relationship young workers have with union life. So far, the relationship between young workers and unionism has been examined mainly in terms of the challenges of access to unionization that confront young workers, a group generally underrepresented in union membership. The more specific issue of union commitment among young workers, once they become unionized, has remained largely underexplored in the literature. Using quantitative and qualitative data from an empirical survey of young unionized workers in the Quebec public service, our study identifies and compares the main factors that explain union commitment among young unionized workers and the theoretical underpinnings. It also seeks to shed light on the barriers to this commitment and identifies the organizational measures that could facilitate union commitment among young workers, based on the perceptions expressed by young union members. Our findings indicate that unions should adopt multidimensional organizational measures to foster union commitment among young workers, with a first step being to increase personalized contact between local union representatives and young members. Such investments at the local level are critical, as shown by our quantitative and qualitative findings. Thus, any reform or measure aimed at encouraging union involvement of young workers should not be limited merely to structural aspects but should also take into account the attitudinal and relational underpinnings of young workers' commitment to their union. By shifting the focus from youth unionization to young members' involvement in union bodies, our study will contribute to debate about union representation and the generational renewal of the labour movement's activist base.

# Understanding Union Commitment Among Young Workers: A Cross-Theoretical Perspective

Marc-Antonin Hennebert, Chloé Fortin-Bergeron  
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This study aims to shed light on the main determinants of and barriers to union commitment among young workers and, more generally, the relationship young workers have with union life. Using quantitative and qualitative data from an empirical survey of young unionized workers in a Canadian public service, the results show the multifaceted nature of union commitment among young workers and reveal the importance of its attitudinal, instrumental and relational underpinnings. Based on the perceptions expressed by young union members, our study also contributes in an original and critical way to reflections on the organizational measures that unions can implement to encourage commitment among young workers.

**KEYWORDS:** Young workers; generational renewal; union commitment; cross-theoretical perspective; mixed methods.

## Introduction

At a time when the generational renewal of trade union forces is a key issue and workers from Generation Y, or “millennials,” are entering the labour market, recent studies have revived interest in the relationship between young workers and unions (Hodder, 2015; Smitt *et al.*, 2019; Tapia and Turner,

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2018; Vandaele, 2018). This article extends that research by shedding light on the main determinants of and barriers to union commitment among young workers. Whereas the relationship between young workers and unions has been mainly examined in terms of the union density differential between younger and older workers (Gomez *et al.*, 2002; Haynes *et al.*, 2005; Waddington and Kerr, 2002), much less attention has been paid to union commitment among young workers (Laroche and Dufour-Poirier, 2013). Thus, by shifting the focus from youth unionization, most often mandatory in the Canadian context when a union is already present in a workplace,<sup>1</sup> to young members' involvement in union bodies, our study will contribute to the literature on union representation and the generational renewal of the labour movement's activist base. By drawing on an extensive empirical survey of young union members in a Canadian public service, we seek to identify and compare the main factors that explain union commitment among young unionized workers. The literature has identified various explanatory factors that fall mainly within four theoretical perspectives, which suggest the existence of an attitudinal, instrumental, psychological and relational basis for this commitment. However, to our knowledge, no study has attempted to empirically demonstrate the specific and relative contribution of these theoretical perspectives and explanatory factors. In this context, our study shows the multifaceted nature of union commitment among young workers. It also shows that, in order to foster this commitment, unions should enhance personalized contact between local union representatives and young members.

The first part of this article will cover the previous literature on the relationship between young workers and unionism and present the study's conceptual framework. The second part will present the study's specific context and its methodology, which is both quantitative and qualitative. The third part will present the main results, while the fourth and final parts will cover, in practical terms, the organizational measures that unions can take to support union commitment among young workers.

## **Union commitment among young workers: a conceptual framework**

The relationship between young workers and unionism has been examined mainly in terms of the challenges of access to unionization that confront young workers, a group generally underrepresented in union memberships

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1. In Canada, a large proportion of collective agreements include union membership clauses. For example, the latest analyses of collective agreements in Quebec reveal that union membership is mandatory for nearly 72% of unionized employees. (Ministère du Travail du Québec, 2019)

(Booth *et al.*, 2010; Simms *et al.*, 2018). The literature has relatively little to say about union commitment among young workers once they have become unionized (Tapia and Turner, 2018). By improving our understanding of the main determinants and barriers of union commitment among these workers, it should become easier to identify union strategies to help young members become more actively involved. Beyond union membership, youth involvement in union life ensures a better integration of their interests and points of view within the union (Dufour-Poirier and Laroche, 2015), and ultimately helps secure leadership succession within union bodies, a key issue for many unions (Waddington and Kerr, 2002).

Young workers can manifest this commitment through their willingness to work for the union, for example by participating in meetings and committees, by becoming a union representative or, less tangibly, by feeling loyal and responsible to the union (Kelloway *et al.*, 1992). Although few studies have investigated union commitment among young workers, some have offered various theoretical perspectives to explain such commitment (Serrano Pascual and Waddington, 2000; Tailby and Pollert, 2011).

The most frequent explanation is that low union commitment among young workers is due to their growing individualism and growing attitudinal and cultural alienation from unionism (Allvin and Sverke, 2000). This perspective, which is in line with sociological studies on modernity and individualization (Giddens, 1990; Inglehart, 2008), attributes the decline in union commitment among young workers to their changing values or changing attitudes toward the labour movement and its actors. For some scholars, this change has gone farther in Generation Y (1980–1995)—often described as resistant to any form of authority and as expressing a need for independence and autonomy (Cates, 2014; Swerhun *et al.* 2014). Despite the debate about how young workers' values have evolved in recent years, the literature on determinants of union commitment has emphasized the role of the attitudinal perspective (i.e., pro-union attitudes and value congruence with the union) as an explanatory factor (Bamberger, Kluger and Suchard, 1999; Deery *et al.*, 2014; McShane, 1986). Two hypotheses can thus be formulated:

**Hypothesis 1a:** *The more positive the “pro-union attitudes” of young workers, the more likely it is that they will become involved in their union.*

**Hypothesis 1b:** *The more young workers perceive that their values are congruent with those of their union, the more likely it is that they will become involved in their union.*

A second hypothesis attributes the low union commitment among young workers to the pragmatic nature of their commitment and their negative perception of union instrumentality. This hypothesis is from an economic

perspective, which postulates that activist commitment is inspired by essentially utilitarian motivations (Farber, 2001). Some studies indicate that young workers now appear to have a more “bourgeois” mentality than do older age groups and attach more importance to the economic dimensions of their job, their career advancement and their financial security (Akkermans *et al.*, 1991). In this sense, they are committed to the union to the extent that they see potential benefits from this commitment, thus reinforcing the instrumental aspect of their relationship with unionism (Paquet, 2005). Based on these studies, which suggest an instrumental basis for union commitment among young workers, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

**Hypothesis 2:** *The more young workers have a positive perception of the instrumentality of their union, the more likely it is that they will become involved in the union.*

Several studies also emphasize that job satisfaction can be an important determinant of union commitment (Bamberger *et al.*, 1999), an assumption based on a psychological approach toward an individual's experience at work. Although some studies have pointed to a positive relationship between job satisfaction and union commitment (Dong-One, 2009), most have shown that employees are more inclined to become involved in their union if they are dissatisfied with their job (Fullagar and Barling, 1989). We thus formulated Hypothesis 3a, which is particularly relevant to young workers. As some studies have shown, such workers are more likely to resolve their dissatisfaction by leaving their organization (Tailby and Pollert, 2011). Studies showing this type of “exit strategy,” however, are mainly based on samples of young non-unionized or precarious workers, leaving open the question of the effects of job dissatisfaction on union commitment among young workers who are already unionized.

**Hypothesis 3a:** *The more young workers are satisfied at work, the less likely it is that they will become involved in their union.*

A second psychological approach refers to organizational commitment. While union commitment is often viewed as being in opposition to organizational commitment because of the duality of interests inherent in the employment relationship, an alternative perspective suggests that workers can be simultaneously committed both to their organization and to their union (Redman and Snape, 2016; Magenau *et al.*, 1988). In fact, studies from this perspective have demonstrated that workers can be dually committed to their union and their organization (e.g. Ezirim *et al.*, 2011; Robinson *et al.*, 2012; Redman and Snape, 2016). Moreover, some studies have shown organizational commitment to be an explanatory factor for union commitment (Monnot *et al.*, 2011). Because these studies have rarely been based specifically on young workers, this explanatory factor should be empirically validated with them. Following this reasoning, we formulated Hypothesis 3b.

**Hypothesis 3b:** *The more young workers are involved in their organization, the more likely it is that they will become involved in their union.*

Some studies have explained union commitment among young workers from a relational perspective, focusing on the importance of the relationship between union representatives and their members. The hypothesis most often put forward suggests that low union commitment among young workers could be explained by a lack of direct and personalized contact with their union representatives at the local level. Some studies have associated the main barriers to union commitment among young workers with their deficient socialization, the difficult integration of their concerns into union agendas and the lack of leadership from local union representatives (Freeman and Diamond, 2003). Studies have also revealed that members develop a stronger sense of attachment to their union when they identify with the values it promotes and its local actors (Deery *et al.*, 2014; Twigg *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, value congruence between the union's representative and its members has been identified as particularly important in building a positive and engaging relationship between the union and its members (Fortin-Bergeron *et al.*, 2017). This kind of value sharing appears to be a determining factor in explaining why the level of union commitment among young members differs from that of their older counterparts (Allvin and Sverke, 2000). We thus formulated the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4a:** *The more young workers perceive that their values are congruent with those of their local union representative, the more likely it is that they will become involved in their union.*

Recent literature on union leadership has shown that local union representatives, through the behaviours they adopt, can contribute significantly to developing a sense of belonging and union commitment among members (Twigg *et al.*, 2007; Metochi, 2002). Commitment appears to be particularly fostered by behaviours associated with transformational leadership theory—which refers to leaders with an inspiring vision who act in the collective interest, who question the ways of doing things and who provide their members with support (Cregan *et al.*, 2009; Plimmer and Blumenfeld, 2012). Conversely, commitment appears to be undermined by union representatives with a laissez-faire leadership style—who are absent and avoid making decisions (Fortin-Bergeron *et al.*, 2018). To our knowledge, the effect of this union leadership variable on union commitment has not been specifically tested among young unionized workers. We thus formulated the following two hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 4b:** *The more young workers are in contact with a union representative who demonstrates transformational leadership, the more likely it is that they will become involved in their union.*

**Hypothesis 4c:** *The more young workers are in contact with a union representative who demonstrates laissez-faire leadership, the less likely it is that they will become involved in their union.*

## Study context and methodology

### Study context

In Canada, union “membership and coverage tend to come with the job” (Gomez *et al.*, 2002: 523). Indeed, for the vast majority, unionized workers have that status because their workplace already had a union when they began working there. The unionization gap between younger and older workers is thus less significant than in many other countries, making Canada ideal for in-depth examination of union commitment among young workers once they become unionized. Our study took place in the Canadian province of Quebec, where in 2013 the union density rate was 24.7% among 15-24 year-olds and 39.4% among 25-34 year-olds, compared to 39.5% for all workers (Institut de la Statistique du Québec, 2014). Our study’s participants were from the Quebec public service, which had a high union density of 81.7% in 2014 (Labrosse, 2015). Public servants aged 35 or under make up approximately 15.3% of the province’s entire regular workforce (Secrétariat du Conseil du Trésor, 2017). We selected this sector and this region because of the high union density and because the population was less affected by some structural and economic variables while providing a homogeneous research context.

The study was conducted jointly with a non-union association that encompassed more than 4,000 young unionized employees aged 35 or under who were working for the Quebec public service, irrespective of their employment status or category. Created in 1998, the association’s mission has been to ensure the integration and development of young workers within public service agencies and ministries. In 2015, it decided to survey its members about how they perceived and dealt with public service unions. A study was subsequently undertaken with two main phases of data collection and two distinct methodologies, one quantitative and the other qualitative.

### First study —questionnaire survey

The first phase was a large-scale survey using online questionnaires aimed at all 4,000 members of the association. All members received an email with a web link to the questionnaire and were asked to fill out the questionnaire

within a month. A link to the questionnaire was also added to the association's web page. In total, 503 questionnaires were collected and considered acceptable. The 12.5% response rate was comparable to rates usually obtained for internal surveys conducted by the association. The final sample was 42% male and 58% female. Over half of the respondents had permanent employment status (64%), while 36% had non-permanent status. Their average seniority was 5 years and 3 months, and most (79%) had a university degree.

All items, drawn from previously validated measures, were assessed using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = totally disagree and 7 = totally agree). Given that the original scales were all in English, the items were translated using Brislin's (1980) back-translation method. The questionnaire was pre-tested with 20 association members to ensure that the items were clear and easy to understand. Details of the original scales used to measure the variables and their internal consistency coefficients ( $\alpha$ ) are presented in Table 1. The results for internal consistency were all above 0.7, a threshold considered to be "acceptable" in the social sciences (Cortina, 1993). To ensure the distinct nature of the variables in our model, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The theoretical measurement model showed a good fit to the data ( $X^2 = 3988.38$ ,  $df = 1972$ ,  $CFI = .938$ ,  $TLI = .934$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.045$ ). More specifically, we compared our theoretical model (nine-factor model) with a one-factor model (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The one-factor model was significantly inferior to our theoretical model ( $\Delta X^2 (36) = 12213.828$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Our constructs were therefore unique (i.e., the respondents evaluated each variable independently).

**TABLE 1**  
Measurements

VARIABLES	AUTHOR(S)	NO. ITEMS	SAMPLE ITEM	(A)
Pro-union attitude	McShane (1986)	8	<i>Unions are a positive force in this country.</i>	.948
Organizational commitment	Meyer and Allen (1997)	8	<i>I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career in this department / agency.</i>	.886
Job satisfaction	Babin and Boles (1998)	9	<i>I feel fairly well-satisfied with my present job.</i>	.924



Union instru- mentality	Sverke and Kuruville (1995)	7	<i>There is a strong likelihood that my union will help increase my salary in the coming years.</i>	.932
Union commitment	Kelloway et al. (1992)	12	<b>Loyalty</b> <i>I feel a sense of pride being a part of this union.</i> <b>Responsibility to the union</b> <i>It is the duty of every member to keep his/her ears open for information that might be useful to the union.</i> <b>Willingness to work for the union</b> <i>I am willing to put in a great deal of time to make the union successful.</i>	.925 .812 .916
Transfor- mational leadership	Podsakoff et al. (1990)	12	<i>My local union delegate offers an inspiring vision.</i>	.970
Laissez-faire leadership	Avolio et al. (1999)	2	<i>My local union delegate is absent when needed.</i>	.897
Value congruence	Cable and DeRue (2002)	3	<i>My personal values match my union / union delegate's values and ideals.</i>	.969

We used stepwise multiple regressions, a particularly useful method when one is seeking to identify the most significant variables within a set of potentially explanatory variables (Stafford and Bodson, 2006). This type of regression analysis incrementally includes those variables that explain the highest proportion of variance in the dependent variable (i.e., union commitment) while considering the other independent variables in the regression model. Ultimately, this method identifies in order of importance those variables that most significantly contribute to variance in the dependent variable and eliminates those whose effects are marginal (Hair et al., 2014).

## Second study - focus groups

The second phase was group discussion. Participants were selected through an invitation that the association had sent to its members. Four focus groups (n = 41) were organized in two different cities. Each group had between 7 and 12 participants who worked for different public service agencies and ministries. To facilitate discussion, we developed a semi-structured interview guide that included open-ended questions about the young members'

perceptions of unionism, their union commitment and the barriers to it and measures that the unions could take to stimulate this commitment. The main goal of the focus groups was to “grasp [spell out in concrete terms] the meaning of the answers to the questionnaires,”[Traduction libre] while providing a complementary perspective to the data we had collected through quantitative research (Baribeau, 2010: 34). The discussions were always led by the principal investigator, who created a forum that would be conducive to sharing of personal views and to discussion between participants. The discussions were recorded and transcribed in full for content analysis using Atlas.ti software.

## Results

This section presents an overview of the level of union commitment among young workers in the Quebec public service, followed by commentary on the factors that explain this commitment and the barriers to it.

### A picture of union commitment in the Quebec public service

First, it should be noted that the average level of union commitment among our respondents was 3.57 (1 = totally disagree and 7 = totally agree). This average appears to be slightly lower than levels generally observed in studies on union commitment (Cantano *et al.*, 2001). It also conceals variations in the three dimensions of union commitment. In fact, the results presented in Table 2 show a higher level for sense of responsibility to the union (i.e., recognizing, accepting and respecting union duties) than for union loyalty and willingness to work for the union. Thus, although our respondents appeared to be relatively reluctant to get involved and invest time in their local union, they believed they had some responsibility to the union, including ensuring that the collective agreement was followed and respected in their workplace.

To further explore these results, we analyzed the levels observed for each of the three dimensions of union commitment in relation to our respondents' socio-demographic characteristics. We performed analyses of variance (ANOVA) to determine whether the three dimensions differed significantly by gender, by employment status and by seniority. Only one dimension differed significantly by gender: willingness to work for the union ( $F(1, 457) = 6,249, p < 0.05$ ). Men expressed a stronger willingness than women to work for the union, the means being respectively 3.17 and 2.73. For differences by employment status, non-permanent workers ( $M = 4.499$ ) rated their sense of responsibility to the union,  $F(1, 459) = 4,498, p < 0.05$ , more highly than did permanent workers ( $M = 4.21$ ). This higher sense of responsibility among non-permanent workers could be explained by a perception that the union

**TABLE 2**  
**Descriptive Statistics and Correlations**

Variables	Mean	S. D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Loyalty	3.38	1.55										
2. Responsibility to the union	4.31	1.39	.589**									
3. Willingness to work for the union	2.90	1.85	.696**	.558**								
4. Org. Commitment	4.32	1.26	.183**	.117*	.116*							
5. Job satisfaction	5.30	1.14	.72	-.021	.007	.635**						
6. Pro-union attitude	4.81	1.43	.790**	.585**	.585**	.112*	.017					
7. Union instrumentality	3.37	1.42	.793**	.506**	.557**	.188**	.100*	.665**				
8. Transformational leadership	3.83	1.54	.550**	.322**	.339**	.067	.083	.380**	.524**			
9. Laissez-faire leadership	2.94	1.20	-.239**	-.008	-.098	-.049	-.110	-.186**	-.008	-.463**		
10. Value congruence - union	3.83	1.58	.817**	.584**	.597**	.136**	.021	.782**	.719**	.743**	-.210**	
11. Value congruence - rep.	3.95	1.59	.654**	.491**	.551**	.120*	.029	.602**	.542**	.457**	-.335**	.688**

provided them with some protection despite their precarious status. Lastly, there were no significant differences by seniority for any of the three dimensions of union commitment. It seems that union commitment among young members was as strong among those who had just joined the public service as among those who had been members for some years.

**Main determinants of union commitment among young members**

Tables 3, 4 and 5 present the results of multiple regression analyses for each of the three dimensions of union commitment. Our results lend support to three of the four theoretical perspectives considered in this study (i.e., attitudinal, instrumental, relational). Of the eight antecedents tested, our analyses showed four main determinants of union commitment among our respondents. Member–union value congruence, union instrumentality and pro-union attitude were significant for all three commitment dimensions. Leadership of local union representatives was significant for the dimensions of loyalty and responsibility to the union. These four determinants varied slightly in importance from one dimension of union commitment to another. As for the other variables in the original model (i.e., organizational commitment, job satisfaction and identification with the union representative’s values), they did not provide any additional explanatory value. The four main determinants we identified accounted for nearly 79% of the variance in union loyalty, 40% of the variance in responsibility to the union and 39% of the variance in willingness to work for the union. Below, we describe and examine the influence of each of these determinants, using quantitative and qualitative data.

**TABLE 3**  
**Regression Analysis for Union Loyalty**

MODELS	MODEL 1 β	MODEL 2 β	MODEL 3 β	MODEL 4 β
Member–union value congruence	.820***	.547***	.379***	.352***
Union instrumentality		.388***	.342***	.299***
Pro-union attitude			.262***	.262***
Transformational leadership				.119***

F	513.52***	370.87***	287.05***	227.21***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.67	0.75	0.77	0.78
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		0.08	0.02	0.01

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**TABLE 4**  
Regression Analysis for Union Responsibility

MODELS	MODEL 1 β	MODEL 2 β	MODEL 3 β	MODEL 4 β	MODEL 5 β
Member–union value congruence	.572***	.361***	.267***	.277***	.248***
Pro-union attitude		.277***	.240***	.244***	.245***
Union instrumentality			.174**	.198***	.156*
Laissez-faire leadership				.138***	.189***
Transformational leadership					.143*
F	122.23***	70.22***	49.69***	40.01***	33.49***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.33	0.36	0.37	0.38	0.39
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		0.03	0.01	0.01	0.01

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**TABLE 5**  
Regression Analysis for Willingness to Work for the Union

MODELS	MODEL 1 β	MODEL 2 β	MODEL 3 β
Member–union value congruence	.584***	.410***	.290***
Union instrumentality		.247***	.215***
Pro-union attitude			.188*

F	129.73***	73.96***	52.18***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.34	0.37	0.40
$\Delta R^2$		0.03	0.03

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

### Value congruence between young members and their union

Our results reveal that congruence with the union's values was the most important determinant of union commitment for our respondents. Thus, embracing the values of their union appeared to be an important incentive for them to work for the union. In fact, this variable was found to be the one most strongly associated with each of the dimensions of union commitment ( $\beta_{\text{loyalty}} = .352, p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{responsibility}} = .248, p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{willingness to work for the union}} = .290, p < 0.001$ ). Such a finding is particularly relevant, as this variable provides an additional explanatory perspective to Bamberger *et al.* (1999) model, together with more recent studies on union commitment (Deery *et al.*, 2014; Twigg *et al.*, 2007).

While our quantitative data showed the importance of value congruence between young members and their union in the commitment process, our qualitative data (Table 6) elucidated the perceptions that young public servants had in this regard. Specifically, the comments revealed an apparently broad disconnect between the discourse and values of the union and those of young public servants. According to many respondents, their union was not open to the positions and values of young members, with some also criticizing the union for taking an educational approach toward them of "promoting the traditional values of unionism instead of creating an environment of exchange or defining new, more modern issues" (Table 6). For others, this difference in values could be attributed to "a lack of information and communication from the union to young members," due to the union's ways of operating and its mission and values. For many, the negative effects of this lack of information about union activities and their objectives was exacerbated by the negative image of trade unions that is sometimes conveyed in the media and in public opinion (Table 6). This negative image can in fact lead young people to develop an *a priori* negative perception of the compatibility of their values with those of the unions. Several respondents also stated that they were not familiar with their union's objectives, positions or achievements; this lack of familiarity undermined their ability to share and identify with the values of their union. Nevertheless, young members were strongly influenced by the value congruence that we found in the quantitative analyses and which was a powerful driving force behind their union commitment.

### Perception of union instrumentality among young members

Our results show that union's capacity to improve employment and working conditions is another important explanatory factor of union commitment among young members. The final models presented in Tables 3, 4, and 5 reveal that union instrumentality is the second most important explanatory factor for two commitment dimensions ( $\beta_{\text{loyalty}} = .299, p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{willingness to work for the union}} = .215, p < 0.001$ ), while it emerges as the third most important one for responsibility to the union ( $\beta = .156, p < 0.05$ ). Previous studies have likewise identified perception of union instrumentality as an important explanatory factor for union commitment among young members (Allvin and Sverke, 2000; Haynes *et al.*, 2005; Paquet, 2005).

Thus, the analysis of our qualitative data shows that union commitment among young union members was linked with a certain pragmatism toward their "desire to influence their own working and wage conditions" or assert their rights. For many young members, any commitment to the union would also require a feeling that they could have a real impact on their union's decisions. However, some factors appeared to act as barriers to their desire to work for their union. Several respondents described feeling powerless to influence their union's priorities and agenda, which appeared to favour the interests of older members. Some respondents pointed to this limited capacity to influence the union agenda by the small numbers of young members in the public service and their under-representation on union decision-making bodies. For others, willingness to work for the union seemed to be hindered because the union was not strong enough and, especially, because they felt powerlessness vis-à-vis an employer who was also the legislator (Table 6). Although our study was carried out in the Quebec public sector, which enjoys high job security, some respondents stated that their fear of job-related retaliation limited their commitment to the union (Table 6). Finally, some young people were not involved in union life on a sustained basis because such involvement would consume too much time and energy (Table 6). To sum up, although our quantitative data demonstrate that union instrumentality was positively associated with the three dimensions of union commitment, the critical comments made by our respondents revealed numerous barriers that kept them from acting on this positive perception.

### General attitude toward unionism

The final models presented in Tables 3, 4, and 5 also show that young workers' views of unionism were an important explanatory factor for their commitment. The general attitude toward unionism emerged as the second most important explanatory factor for sense of responsibility to the union ( $\beta = .245, p < 0.001$ ) and the third most important one for the other two union commitment dimensions ( $\beta_{\text{loyalty}} = .262, p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{willingness to work for the union}} = .188, p < 0.05$ ). In the focus groups, young workers pointed to the public's

rather negative view of unionism, particularly in the public service. Many respondents felt that unionism in the public service was perceived as “a big ship, moving along on a course that can’t be changed,” an image sometimes sustained by the coverage of unions in the mass media. The public’s negative view of unionism can thus act as another barrier to young workers developing a positive attitude toward the labour movement and, subsequently, to feeling committed to their union.

### Leadership of local union representatives

The leadership behaviours of the local union representatives emerged as determining factors for loyalty and sense of responsibility to the union. More specifically, the results of our quantitative analyses (Tables 3 and 4) indicate that transformational leadership helped representatives foster loyalty ( $\beta = .119$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and a sense of responsibility ( $\beta = .143$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) to the union among young workers, while laissez-faire behaviours appeared to be associated with the development of a sense of responsibility to the union ( $\beta = .189$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

While the findings for transformational leadership echo those of other studies (Metochi, 2002), those for the influence of laissez-faire leadership provide an additional explanatory perspective to studies on the role of local union leaders. In fact, our findings suggest that, when faced with a representative who was rather absent or who played a more passive role, young workers developed a sense of responsibility to their union, keeping their ears open for information that might be useful to the union and ensuring that the collective agreement was respected. In other words, when faced with union representatives who exercised their duties rather passively, young union members tended to adopt compensatory attitudes and behaviours toward their union.

The qualitative data show the important role of local union representatives, particularly in socializing young members into their union. For example, young members were more likely to work for their union if directly approached by their representative than if given a general and non-personalized invitation. These results are particularly revealing because our respondents’ perceptions (Table 6) indicated that they currently had rather limited and often non-existent contact with their representative. Many of them stated that they did not know their representative and were unfamiliar with his/her role and responsibilities.



**TABLE 6**  
**Barriers to Union Commitment**

ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS	ANALYTICAL SUB-DIMENSIONS	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
Limited capacity to influence the union agenda [S]	Divergent interests relating to demands	Decisions are made based on the interests of permanent workers who've been in office for over 20 years, who absolutely want to keep all their acquired rights, and can't understand that the world is evolving.
	Representation in decision-making bodies	There isn't a single young person in my union leadership. There are also very few young union delegates. In short, little representation, therefore, little time spent on the concerns of young people in our union bodies.
	Small numbers of young workers	The problem is demographic: the number of young people is too small to impose change.
Negative image of unionism [M]	Public opinion	Unionism in the public service is perceived as a big ship, moving along on a course that can't be changed.
	Media coverage	The greatest barrier is that all unions are put in the same boat and they're currently attracting bad press. Some unions deserve this negative publicity but this overshadows others that are really fighting for their members.
Disconnect from the union's discourse, values and culture [S]	Degree of openness	I went to a meeting once. There was no way to express a different view without getting rebuffed. It was such a bad experience! From now on, I'd rather try to influence my employer's decisions on my own, through my personal involvement.
	Orientation of action	I have the feeling young employees don't have the same view of outright opposition to managers as older employees, who seem to consider employer representatives as the enemy.
	Values and positions	The discourse is very focused on the values of baby-boomers rather than on the values of younger people

ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS	ANALYTICAL SUB-DIMENSIONS	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
Logistical barriers and temporal constraints [T]	Demands of union work	<p>The very long time it takes to get permanent status and, as a result, the high turnover rate, prevents young employees from getting attached to their union.</p> <p>I feel that if I want to work for the union, I won't be able to, based on my availability. It takes a lot of time, and working for the union amounts to doing volunteer work.</p>
	Work-family balance	Family life is more important to me. As a young parent, I'd rather focus on my family in the coming years instead of becoming a union representative.
Lack of information and socialization [S]	Union communication and education	When I arrived, I was asked to sign a union membership card. No one told me who the representative was, whether there were meetings, how often, etc. .... In three years, the first time I heard anything about the union, other than deductions from my pay for union dues, was this year because of the possibility of a strike.
	Socialization and relationship with union representatives	I don't even know my union representative. I wouldn't know where to begin to get involved in the union.
Deficient union power [M]	Sense of powerlessness vis-à-vis the employer	The feeling of powerlessness: we need to know we can make a difference through our involvement. Unfortunately, with an employer who's also the legislator, it's hard to believe we can have a real impact.
Fear of reprisals [M]	Career path	I think it's considered bad form to talk about the union or appear to be pro-union in some work teams.
	Precariousness	Casual employees don't get involved in the union, to be on the safe side. It's well known that it's better to wait to get permanent status before getting involved in the union.

Notes: The level of support for these findings is represented as follows: S = Strong support, many participants' comments were in agreement with this point of view; M = Moderate support, some participants' comments were in agreement with this point of view; T = Tentative support, a small group of participants' comments were in agreement with this point of view.

## Discussion

Although our study had the aim of identifying the factors that explain union commitment among young workers, the qualitative phase also had the aim of giving young union members a chance to speak about organizational measures that could facilitate their commitment.

Numerous studies have shed light on the recent actions taken by some unions to review their image, agenda, practices and structures so as to give their young members a voice and to echo their concerns (Bailey *et al.*, 2010; Hodder *et al.*, 2018). The most common initiatives are in line with a logic of participatory democracy. The focus is on developing union training specifically for young members, on increasing the use of new digital communications, on implementing personalized processes to welcome young members, on simplifying the procedural rules of union life, on moving assemblies and meetings to times that facilitate work-family balance, and on implementing mentoring programs. Other measures are more in line with a logic of representative democracy and aim to reform the unions' structures and governance system to ensure better representation of young workers. Some unions have adopted the following measures: reserving a discussion period during union forums (meetings, conventions, conferences) for subjects that concern young members; guaranteeing proportional representation when leaders are elected and when positions are reserved for young activists on the union executive and on decision-making bodies; and creating youth committees to provide them with their own space for formulating demands (Hodder, 2015; Vandaele, 2013).

Although the comments of the respondents in our study echoed the diverse measures identified in the literature (Table 7), two relevant findings emerged. First, one particular initiative stood out, namely the importance of putting in place a process of organizational socialization (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) (i.e., a process to welcome new young members, communicate with them and socialize them at the local level). Our qualitative data show that young members lacked information on how their unions operated and the goals they pursued. In this regard, as shown by the "experience good" model (Bryson and Gomez, 2003), if workers are welcomed into a union and experience a positive relationship with one of its local representatives, particularly in their early career, they will subsequently adopt a positive attitude toward unionism, thus becoming fertile ground for future commitment (Freeman and Diamond, 2003; Oliver, 2010).

Second, although our respondents referred to logistical and structural measures that could be adopted by unions (e.g., creating youth committees, reserving positions for young members on decision-making bodies), they emphasized the importance of unions reviewing their image, practices and orientations so as to stimulate greater interest among young members. Many

respondents suggested that the unions use communication technologies more extensively, improve the efficiency of traditional labour relations practices (collective bargaining, grievance handling, etc.), ensure a more constructive relationship with employers, review the services they offer, make participation in union bodies more accessible and adopt a more positive public discourse that goes beyond simply diagnosing problems and focuses more on proposing projects and solutions.

**TABLE 7**  
**Organizational Measures Facilitating Union Commitment among Young Workers**

ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
Welcoming and socialization processes	Just knowing my union representative, that would be a big plus. I've never seen him in 2 years ... It would also be useful to have training to properly understand the union that represents us and how it works. I signed my union membership card, but I've never been given any explanation about what it does and how it operates.
Structure and governance	It's important to me that a certain proportion of union elective positions be reserved for young members. Focusing more on youth committees within unions and making sure there's representation on the union executive.
Procedures and logistics	Move to 2.0! Use social networks, online voting and put more information online. Basically, it's a question of adopting best practices (Web 2.0) for consulting members. It's important to streamline the structures, give a voice to all members and make room for debate and questioning.
Review of the union's agenda, practices and discourse	Promote excellence in all respects...and change the discourse on maintaining acquired rights...Not always be in a confrontational mode with the employer...have a positive discourse...and really work toward finding solutions. Unions should promote new issues. For example, they could become advocates for sustainable development and take action to change management practices in this sense (e.g., demanding compensation for public transit or travelling by bike, showering facilities, etc.).

The perceptions of the young workers we met are both good and bad news for trade unions. Starting with the good news, our respondents did not question the *raison d'être* of these organizations, and all of them recognized the legitimacy of unions and their role in the workplace. However, the perceptions of our respondents showed a significant gap between their organizational ideal and the real *modus operandi* of their unions. In this regard, the changes desired by our respondents cannot be considered superficial

or purely cosmetic, as they imply major transformations in union practices and union leadership. More particularly, our respondents' comments show that although unions can take initiatives to foster union commitment among young members, structural measures often adopted by trade unions (e.g., youth committees) can provide only a partial response to the challenge of integrating young members into unions. In this sense, the lesson is clear: fostering youth commitment cannot be pursued successfully unless union leaders recognize the importance of this goal and the necessary changes it implies. Integrating this point into their strategic agenda would definitely be a good way to start.

### Limitations and future directions

Our study has certain limitations that lead us to suggest avenues for future research. First, because of the cross-sectional nature of our research design, we could not confirm the causalities implied in our research hypotheses. This limitation could be overcome through longitudinal research. Second, all variables in our study were assessed with the same source (i.e., young workers). Although we cannot completely rule out the possibility of common method variance (CMV), the comparison of our theoretical model with the 1-factor model (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988) shows that the respondents evaluated each variable independently. Therefore, we believe that common variance does not undermine our conclusions. Nonetheless, future studies could use multiple sources to measure the determinants and the union commitment variables. Lastly, because our study's aim was to shed light on the factors that may promote or hinder the union commitment of young workers once they join a union, our data do not allow us to determine whether these factors differ significantly from those of older workers. For instance, we cannot rule out that value congruence and leadership shown by local union representatives may be new factors of union commitment that are valued by all unionized workers, and not specifically by young members. While these findings will add to the literature on union commitment (Bamberger *et al.*, 1999), future research is needed to confirm whether they apply only to young members.

### Conclusion

Our study's aim was to shed light on the determinants of and barriers to union commitment among young workers. Based on quantitative and qualitative data from a large empirical survey of young unionized workers in a Canadian public service, the results show the multifaceted nature of union

commitment among young workers and reveal the specific importance of its attitudinal, instrumental and relational underpinnings. Three observations stand out from our study.

First, when we analysed the influence of the four main determinants previously identified in the literature on union commitment (i.e., union instrumentality, pro-union attitude, organizational commitment and job satisfaction—see Bamberger *et al.*, 1999), we found that only union instrumentality and pro-union attitude appear to have had an influence on young workers' commitment. In this regard, our findings on their instrumental and attitudinal perspectives concur with the literature, showing that union instrumentality (H2) and pro-union attitude (H1a) were the second or third most important factor for each of the commitment dimensions. Our qualitative findings likewise showed two major barriers to union commitment: perception of a limited capacity to influence the union agenda, and the sometimes negative image of unionism. Both of these barriers are associated with instrumental and attitudinal perspectives. However, contrary to findings for union commitment among unionized workers in general, the psychological perspective (H3a and H3b on job satisfaction and organizational commitment) marginally explained the dynamics of union commitment among young workers.

Second, our study shows the relative importance of novel explanatory factors in union commitment among young workers. In this respect, union commitment among young workers appeared to be largely influenced by congruence with the union's values (H1a) and the leadership style of local representatives (H4b, H4c), variables that emphasize the importance of the attitudinal and relational underpinnings of union commitment among young workers. Our qualitative data are consistent with this finding: the major barriers to union commitment were the limited contact between young members and their union representatives, together with a perception of disconnect with the union's discourse, values and culture.

Third, our study points to practical measures that unions could adopt if they wish to ensure the representativeness of their decision-making bodies and the generational renewal of their activist base. These measures should include a change in union discourse, practices and agendas, with an increase in personalized contact between union representatives and young members. Such measures have concrete implications for unions, and how they allocate their limited resources. Nonetheless, our study indicates that such investments at the local level are critical and, thus, any reform or measure aimed at encouraging union commitment among young workers should not be limited merely to structural aspects, which are most often confined to the senior hierarchical levels of unions.

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## SUMMARY

This study aims to shed light on the main determinants of and barriers to union commitment among young workers and, more generally, the relationship young workers have with union life. So far, the relationship between young workers and unionism has been examined mainly in terms of the challenges of access to unionization that confront young workers, a group generally underrepresented in union membership. The more specific issue of union commitment among young workers, once they become unionized, has remained largely underexplored in the literature. Using quantitative and qualitative data from an empirical survey of young unionized workers in the Quebec public service, our study identifies and compares the main factors that explain union commitment among young unionized workers

and the theoretical underpinnings. It also seeks to shed light on the barriers to this commitment and identifies the organizational measures that could facilitate union commitment among young workers, based on the perceptions expressed by young union members. Our findings indicate that unions should adopt multi-dimensional organizational measures to foster union commitment among young workers, with a first step being to increase personalized contact between local union representatives and young members. Such investments at the local level are critical, as shown by our quantitative and qualitative findings. Thus, any reform or measure aimed at encouraging union involvement of young workers should not be limited merely to structural aspects but should also take into account the attitudinal and relational underpinnings of young workers' commitment to their union. By shifting the focus from youth unionization to young members' involvement in union bodies, our study will contribute to debate about union representation and the generational renewal of the labour movement's activist base.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude vise à mieux comprendre les principaux déterminants et obstacles à l'engagement syndical des jeunes et, plus globalement, la relation qu'ils entretiennent face à la vie syndicale. Jusqu'à présent, la relation entre les jeunes et le syndicalisme a surtout été étudiée sous l'angle des défis qui se posent quant à l'accès à la syndicalisation des jeunes travailleurs, un groupe généralement sous-représenté dans les effectifs syndicaux. La question plus spécifique de l'engagement syndical chez les jeunes, une fois ceux-ci syndiqués, demeure nettement moins explorée dans la littérature. À partir de données quantitatives et qualitatives provenant d'une enquête réalisée auprès des jeunes travailleurs syndiqués dans la fonction publique québécoise, cette étude identifie et compare les principaux déterminants de l'engagement syndical des jeunes syndiqués et leurs fondements théoriques. Sur la base des propos exprimée par les jeunes syndiqués, elle cherche également à comprendre les obstacles à cet engagement et identifie les mesures organisationnelles qui pourraient faciliter l'engagement syndical chez les jeunes travailleurs. Les résultats de cette étude montrent que si les mesures devant être adoptées par les syndicats sont pluridimensionnelles et dépendent des contextes propres à chaque organisation, elles devraient néanmoins avoir pour point de départ de chercher à densifier les rapports personnalisés entre les représentants syndicaux locaux et les jeunes membres. Les résultats quantitatifs et qualitatifs indiquent également que de tels investissements au niveau local sont essentiels et, par conséquent, toute réforme ou mesure visant à encourager l'engagement syndical des jeunes ne devrait pas se limiter aux seuls aspects structurels, mais devrait également tenir compte des fondements attitudeux et relationnels de l'engagement syndical des jeunes travailleurs. En déplaçant la focale de la syndicalisation des jeunes vers leur engagement au sein des instances syndicales, cette étude contribue au débat sur la représentation syndicale et le renouvellement générationnel de la base militante du mouvement syndical.