



Opinion

**by the European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions
(CESI)**

Youth Unemployment

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Initial position

Unemployment has become one of the greatest problems facing societies in Europe and it has a particular impact on young people. According to information provided by the European Commission, more than 7.5 million young people are unemployed today, with the 20% youth unemployment quota standing at almost double that for the entire work force (in some countries, the quota is in excess of 40%). Youth unemployment is thus higher in general than general unemployment and is accompanied by certain factors which further exacerbate the problem, in particular the heightened danger of descending into poverty and the risk of social exclusion (27% of under-17s in the EU live below the poverty line). Within the group of young people, certain groups are especially at risk of becoming unemployed: women, young people with disabilities and people with a migrant background.

The term ‘lost generation’ has now become a byword not just for those young people who slip into unemployment because they do not have enough academic qualifications or professional experience, but rather also for young academics, who, in spite of their qualifications, still experience great difficulties in finding a job. Here, Spain in particular serves as a good example time and again. Unemployment and poverty in Europe are therefore coming into ever sharper focus on the political agenda and, more and more, are prompting people to question the austerity measures being driven by governments in the Eurozone in these times of crisis. The EU summit at the end of January 2012 also saw heads of state and government examining this issue and taking decisions related to it. This said, the EU paper does not provide for the signatories going beyond their current commitments as regards expenditure and the European Commission is only able to act on a limited basis, given that the issue of employment is, for the most part, an issue of Member State competence.

It is clear that reducing youth unemployment does not just present an opportunity to save money for public budgets, as the Commission, amongst others, suggests in its ‘Youth Opportunities Initiative’. Above and beyond this and first and foremost, youth unemployment amounts to a problem of societal stability and cohesion, both of which are on the line and bring the Social Model under threat, given that the latter is based on people all being able to have a stake in a professional and social life.

In general terms, one might assert that well trained, qualified young people have better chances on the labour market than those with fewer qualifications. Those young people who are not in the working world, are not studying and are not in general/professional training are particularly at risk. The economic and financial crisis is increasing the trend towards long-term youth



unemployment. Indeed, the European Commission also uses its ‘Youth Opportunities Initiative’ to point out the following factors, which are at the root of youth unemployment:

- Leaving school early with no qualifications
- Lack of necessary skills and employment experience
- Precarious employment, followed by periods of unemployment
- Limited job prospects
- Insufficient or inappropriate active labour market programmes

Since, in the European Commission’s view, the main responsibility when it comes to fighting youth unemployment plainly lies at the door of the Member States, including their regional and local levels, the Commission is offering its support but demanding that the Member States take immediate measures, in particular:

- Preventing pupils from dropping out of school early
- Developing skills which are needed on the labour market
- Supporting people in their first forays into the world of work and training courses within the company
- Access to the labour market

These measures will be supported at EU level through the provision and greater use of money from the European Social Fund for measures to promote employment, through calling for innovative concepts to support the transition from school to work (in a nutshell: a better implementation of dual professional apprenticeships via a greater level of involvement from industry and the public sector), a larger range of high-quality internships, a better implementation of the ‘European Youth Guarantee’, which is meant to ensure that young people do not remain unemployed for longer than four months, and through promoting a greater level of mobility on the part of young people.

CESI’s position

CESI welcomes and supports the fact that the Commission is focusing on the issue of youth unemployment as well as the will to change this difficult situation. There can be no doubt that the competence to achieve these goals lies in the hands of the Member States, who need to fulfil their responsibilities to this end.



In principle, using the ESF amounts to a welcome additional measure to make funds available. Still, it should be mentioned that the scope of the ESF is relatively narrow and can only ‘top up’ the financial expenditure of the Member States.

CESI cannot support a disproportionate transition towards flexible working conditions, which works on the premise that young people need to be highly flexible with regard to the hours they work and where they work in order to meet the requirements of the labour market. In particular, doing away with normal working conditions to make way for short-term working conditions ought not to be further promoted. Here, the Commission itself recognises that young people are overrepresented amongst the holders of short-term jobs. Even if young people can sometimes move from what is initially a short-term arrangement to a permanent job, this only applies where short-term jobs are the exception. Rather, the general trend tends rather to reside in an increase in short-term working conditions and precarious situations, which have a damaging effect on the ability of young people to plan their professional, personal and family lives and ultimately also exacerbate the demographic problem. The Commission’s implicit call for a flexicurity approach thus stands in stark contradiction with the conclusion reached earlier, i.e. that young workers are disproportionately strongly affected by the drop in unlimited contracts and are thus exposed to the risk of remaining trapped at the low end of a segmented labour market, with no prospect of improving their situation.

Nor is a higher level of professional mobility a solution in itself. Even if programmes such as Erasmus can point to a large level of success and geographical flexibility is no doubt accompanied by professional advantages, this cannot fundamentally raise the expectations of an entire generation: a boundless mobility at the expense of social and family ties and responsibilities cannot be perceived as the ideal for all young people and would only intensify demographic distortions.

CESI welcomes the conclusion that it falls to the Member States, including their regional and local levels, to take responsibility for education, social and employment measures and it supports the Commission in its demand for a greater level of involvement on the part of companies and the public sector. However, CESI would like to allude to the inconsistencies inherent in calling for reductions on public expenditure and the dismantling of administration as part of an austerity wave and the new fiscal package and at the same time extending public employment programmes and the supervision of young people by authorities. Here, national and European policies are called for in order to establish priorities. Here, CESI ranks the fight against youth unemployment as a priority issue.



Brussels, March, 2012