



CASE STUDY

The Youth Turn in Labour Politics

**TAIWAN'S WORKING HOURS REFORM
& LESSONS FOR GLOBAL YOUTH
ACTIVISM**

DEMOCRACY
MOVES

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Executive Summary

This case study follows Taiwan’s working-hours reform movement from 2000 to 2018, focusing in particular on the movement’s “youth-turn” in 2016. The study will articulate how a transformation in the movement’s composition—from union leaders to youth activists—precipitated a parallel transformation in the movement’s organizational forms and protest tactics. The significance of this case, as it will be seen, lies in its illumination of general barriers to effective political mobilization and organization faced by young activists globally.

Researchers for this study conducted key informant interviews to develop a detailed description of the organizational structure and tactics of the Youth Labour Union 95, a labour NGO. The YLU95 stands as a critical case in representing a great number of unseen forms of organizing that are absent in discussions of the youth-turn in Taiwanese labour politics. While existing literature characterizes youth engagement in labour politics exclusively through the lens of street protest and performance art, it will be argued that special attention paid to youth activists who break the mold of those stereotyped in Taiwan’s youth-turn—such as those interviewed from the YLU95—reveals that the youth-turn is not as much of a break with traditional unions, but really a critical intervention upon traditional trade union organizing strategies.

As such, it will be argued that while the characterization of the youth labour movement as fundamentally different, connective, disorganized, etc is useful in some regards, it is, on the other hand, a stereotype that inadvertently narrows the full field of diverse modes of labour struggle, some of which provide models of sustained and materially-efficacious labour organizing. Alongside the project of building upon the scholarship surrounding Taiwan’s youth turn, this analysis will also identify valuable lessons learned from the work of these activists—i.e. best practices for fundraising, leadership recruitment, membership base expansion, and organizing for digital collective bargaining.

The contention is that the YLU95 illuminates a site of innovation that prepares the broader labour movement for a new frontier of labour struggles—one that is rapidly

approaching with the expansion of atypical work and the integration of a new generation of workers into the workforce even beyond Taiwan.

Summary of Recommendations:

1. **Identity Construction on Campuses:** As a form of recruitment, engage in activities of identity construction on university campuses. Use focus groups, community surveys and data visualization to bring together the experiences of disparate individuals who may share the collective identity of young workers. Such initiatives will form invaluable relationships to later draw upon in the organization of demonstrations and collective action.
2. **Renew Membership:** Institutionalize relationships with student associations, clubs, and similar organizations in order to foster a pipeline from universities to the membership base.
3. **Increase Public Awareness:** Empower young organizers to experiment with outreach and consciousness-raising campaigns, and encourage the development of activities that are accessible and entertaining (such as a labour film festival).
4. **Outreach as a Service to Young Workers:** In order to reach young workers who are otherwise underrepresented by traditional unions, use outreach campaigns as an opportunity to offer tangible services such as legal guidance and advocacy.
5. **Move from Individual to Collective Action:** To move beyond a case-by-case model of conflict resolution, towards the cultivation of collective action, aggregate similar cases and their individual needs together to explore the potential of launching a formal digital campaign, enabling digital collective bargaining outside of traditional union settings.
6. **Archive Tactics and Alliances:** Collaborate and support activist-led new sources. They can serve to spotlight a diversity of strategies and tactics that would otherwise evade the attention of mainstream media outlets. They also play an important role in prolonging media exposure beyond the news cycle

and institutionalizing memory of the impact and alliances formed during street protests.

7. **Survive on Minimal Financial Resources:** To support the long term survival of an organization under limited financial resources, prioritize maintaining a minimal baseline of activity while allowing the organization to fade in and out of operation as needed. If unable to pay leadership, draw from a community of already-salaried organizers or NGO workers, make duties flexible and minimal, and allow long breaks from the organization.
8. **Long Term Planning:** Use consciousness-raising activities to establish bridges to more institutionalized forms of labour politics, enabling the kind of long term planning that is integral to winning disputes against employers or making legislative changes.

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Brian Hioe, 2018 Buddhist-themed protest against the Labour Standards Act

Background

Taiwan's History of Working-Hours Reform

The length of the workday has historically been a central issue to labour movements everywhere; labour disputes are fought not only for higher wages but also over workweek regularity, overtime formulas, and scheduling protections. Securing a higher hourly wage, for instance, will not be experienced as an improvement of working conditions without existing complementary protections against underwork, overwork, zero-hour contracts, and the predatory expansion of part-time work.

A number of the highest-profile labour struggles in Taiwan have focused on legislation over working hours. As of 2016, employees in Taiwan worked an average of 2034 hours annually, equating to the fourth longest working hours worldwide. As such, numerous presidential candidates have run on the premise of reforming the Labour Standards Act, a piece of key legislation. As scholar Ming-sho Ho documents in his comprehensive study on working hours reform Taiwan, the country's working hours were incrementally shortened in 2000, and again 2015, but then faced setbacks under the policy flip-flopping of President Tsai Ing-wen in 2017-18.

During her presidential campaign of 2016, Tsai Ing-wen worked closely with the Workers Struggle Link (工鬥連線), a coalition of labour unions, activists and organizations. She campaigned on a labour policy that would bring workers' two full leave days per week which would close an existing loophole in the Labour Standards Act that allowed employers to distribute 40 hours across six days without having to pay overtime (Ho 2020, 413). With this new labour policy, workers would be compensated for overtime and move towards a 5-day workweek.

After Tsai Ing-wen secured the presidency, however, the DPP backtracked on its promises to push for two full 'leave days.' While the party was able to bring other improvements to working conditions—such as the creation of a more

employee-friendly formula for calculating overtime and rest days—the DPP, on the other hand, abandoned other central pro-worker plans, for instance, to reinstate Taiwan’s seven national holidays. They also opted for a gradualist approach to the two-leave days plan, implementing a intermediary, more employer-friendly ‘one leave and one rest day,’

The party faced backlash from all sides, including labour activists as well as pro-business groups. However, labour union leaders “were conspicuously silent for... not [wanting] to defend a reform of working hours that had abolished national holidays” (Ho 2017, 415). As a result, in the public eye, labour unions were perceived to have ultimately failed to articulate a unified and coherent set of demands, splintering over whether to throw their weight behind the two-leave-days model (over the employer-preferred ‘one leave and one rest day’), or stand their ground as critics of the abandonment of Taiwan’s national holidays.

As the political influence of labour union leaders in Taiwan appeared to decline, a second controversial revision of the Standards Act in 2017 would bring a wave of new political actors onto the scene. After William Lai captured the premiership, his administration proposed a radical overhaul of worker protections in favour of employer-flexibility. The revision abolished the worker-friendly formulas for calculating overtime, increased the legally permitted maximum for overtime, and gave employers the flexibility to legally have workers on duty for 12 continuous days (Ho 2017, 415). The proposal shocked lawmakers and sparked nation-wide protests. While labour protests were not new by any means, the 2017 demonstrations saw a shift in the demographic profile of participants. Previous battles for working-hours reform in 2000–2006 and even in 2016 looked very different from those that emerged in 2017.

The Youth-Turn in Taiwan's Labour Politics

The protests in 2016 and 2017 marked what scholars have dubbed 'the youth-turn' in Taiwan's labour politics. The cause for the sudden involvement of these new actors can largely be attributed to the deteriorating economic situation faced by young recent-graduates. Interviews conducted with youth activists themselves, in conjunction with an analysis of the labour statistics from 2000-18, reveal that young people who had not yet accumulated any work experience nonetheless held tremendous stake in the fate of labour struggles. Indeed, this cohort (recent graduates, in particular) face bleak prospects on the domestic job markets, face uncompetitive starting salaries across industries (exacerbated by "credential inflation"—i.e. the effect of the rising number of graduates met with a decreasing reward of having a university degree)[cite econ], all while struggling under unprecedented levels of student debt (Lin 2010).

Government statistics report that the unemployment rate of individuals with a college/post-graduate degree increased from 2.63% in 1997 to 5.86% in 2009, exceeding the unemployment rates of groups at all other educational levels. Beyond degree-holders, the average employment rate for all young people aged 20-24 stood at 14.85%, the highest of any age group, by mid-2009. Chih-Chun Wu argues that these statistics strongly imply a dire financial situation for undergraduates and recent college graduates, a precarity that is reflected in student behavior, e.g. trends in overloading pre-professional coursework, working part-time jobs to avoid paying back loans after graduation, rates of burnout, etc.

Many young people feel that they live under the so-called "22k curse", which colloquially refers to the NT\$22,000/mo starting salary earned by recent university graduates. Young people also commonly understand that the macroeconomic decline in Taiwan's growth is a result of local companies taking their production lines to cheaper labour markets in China and South Asia (VanderKlippe 2016). Referring in interviews to the 'brain drain' that has been a consequence of higher salary

opportunities in mainland China and Singapore, young people understandably feel that their financial situations are precarious.

In light of these conditions, labour campaigns that in 2000 were led by national labour union presidents were, by 2016 and 2018, helmed by independent activists from regional labour unions and other local movement organizations. This change in leadership follows numerous failures to win legislative battles and sustained victories, after which national unions were widely perceived to have forfeited their role in Taiwan's labour politics. The steady trend toward deinstitutionalization of the working-hour movement culminated in its 2017 transformation into a youth-led protest movement. Scripted rallies became spontaneous demonstrations as the mantle was passed to young activists. By 2018, movement composition had shifted to young people without any organizational ties and often with little to no working experience.

In these protests of 2017–8, on-site surveys conducted by National Tsinghua graduate students found that among a sample of over 600 protesters, a majority (76 percent) were young people between the ages of 20 and 34. A similar majority had no affiliation or membership with a labour union. Such a profile of participants suggests that most were not formally organized by union leaders but, rather, had found their way to these protests through spontaneous and novel networks. A key statistic produced by this survey indeed supports such a view: 80 percent of participants reported receiving news of the protest from social media (Ho 2020, 417).

Scholars of the working hours movement have identified an overall trend towards disorganization (Ho 2020, 421)—a shift from hierarchical, organization-based, collective action to instead, as with the 2014 Sunflower movement, spontaneous, digitally enabled, 'connective action'. The Sunflower Movement attracted a generation of Taiwanese youth that were already increasingly joining political campaigns regarding environmental regulations, media reform, wage stagnation etc., and mobilized them around the dispute of increased trade liberalization with China which was perceived to benefit corporations at the expense of increasingly disgruntled service workers (Ho 2019, 2). In addition to a spectacular occupation of the Legislative

Yuan, student protesters of the Sunflower Movement also issued forth a great variety of new protest tactics that were enabled by increased connectivity via social media and instant messaging.

The nature of this type of ‘connective action’ dissolves traditional boundaries of protest, marking a decentralized form of advocacy that follows an emerging logic that, in step, drives numerous major movements of this decade—the most familiar images recall the human microphones of Occupy Wall Street and the spontaneous and swarming protests of the Arab Spring. In this era of collective action, it may not be a surprise that class politics in Taiwan has moved away from the hierarchical, highly scripted, and rigid organizational structure of labour unions, giving way instead to a youth-led movement with (dis)organization as an explicit strategy.

Significance | The Global Youth-Turn in Labour Politics

The youth-turn in Taiwanese labour politics is but one historically specific development in a global trend of young people entering into domestic labour movements. Globally, traditional union leaders everywhere are confronting the rise of a generation that is positively inclined toward collective representation but one that often has limited knowledge of unions and union structure (Tapia and Turner 2018, 395; Waddington and Kerr 2002), or as in the case of the U.S., a generation that has shown little ideological resistance to joining a union (Pew Research Center 2015) but one that has likewise fostered a vibrant Alt-Labour movement outside of traditional union settings.

What determines the modes of youth participation depends on factors such as the perceived success of traditional labour organizing, their reception and apprenticeship by leaders, and the material resources available to them. Young workers in France, for instance, are more likely to mobilize without unionizing, as unions have been depicted as archaic and “external to youth activism” (Be roud et al. 2015; Tapia and Turner 2018, 396). Further, young organizers in the U.S. context often make the critique that unions remain entwined in a troubled relationship with workers, one that is characterized by “hierarchical power structures; intimate yet ineffective relationships with the

Democratic party...fighting for protective, concessionary, and isolated goals while disregarding the foundation of our problem—class-based economic inequality” (Haut 2009, 98). As a result of this legitimate perception of U.S. unions in crisis, many young activists find themselves joining “worker’s alliances” and “worker’s centers,” that is, non-union groups that are a part of a growing Alt-Labour movement (Eidelson 2013). In fact, one of the organizations closely studied in this research—the Youth Labour Union 95, i.e. a labour NGO—can also be classified as an Alt-Labor group.

In contrast to this characterization of the growing irrelevance of traditional labor, there has also been an international trend to revitalize labour politics via a direct recruitment of young activists. Some of largest unions in the United States like the SEIU have launched initiatives that, to relative success, have not only fostered young leaders but also learned from them, even sometimes transforming union structure itself in service of reaching more young people—as with the SEIU Millennials initiative (Tapia and Turner 2018, 400).

Successful empowerment of young leaders in Labour, both inside and outside the union setting, proves crucial at a moment when young people are increasingly underrepresented by unions (Pedersini 2010; Vandaele 2018; Tapla and Turner 2015, 395) Young workers are the most likely to be employed in industries that have not established collective bargaining or representation rights. They are likewise more likely to be atypically employed, i.e. working internships, part time, and gig jobs, which are precarious, contingent, and beyond the protection of unions.

In light of young people’s working conditions as well as the decline of union influence in these spheres of employment, the question of how to empower young people’s engagements in the labour movement, of what conditions enable their success in securing wins for young works, becomes more pressing than ever. As such, this case study will follow Taiwanese youth labour activists and organizers in their approach to common organizational challenges. It will analyze the strategies and tactics adopted from a variety of perspectives, i.e. current organizers, past organizers, journalists, etc, and conclude with a selection of best practices for youth labour organizing in general.

Research Questions

1. Are young people able to successfully carry on labour politics in these disorganized/decentralized forms?
2. What is the political efficacy of emergent trends in the youth labour movement, i.e. disorganized and spectacular street protests?
3. What alternative modes of youth-labour politics are sidelined by this particular characterization of the Taiwanese youth-labor movement? Are these modes any more efficacious?

Research Approach & Methods

To approach these research questions, a literature review was compiled of existing English language scholarship on the youth-turn in Taiwan's working hours movement, of which Ming-sho Ho's recent 2020 study stands out as a particularly comprehensive piece. Ho's research raises challenging questions and criticisms about the viability of the emergent protest-style and strategies of youth activists. In particular, Ho articulates common criticisms of youth activism in general—that youth-led street performances risk being performative, as a purely representational politics, and that engagements with new media are ultimately unsustainable, resulting in mere moments rather than a movement. This research builds out these criticisms by using a broader scholarship than Ho does, and it further grounds them from the practitioner's perspective through interviews with actual youth activists, organizers, and journalists involved in Taiwanese labour politics.

In our analysis, we determine that these criticisms hold only of a narrow characterization of youth activism. This characterisation, however, relies on stereotypes propagated by mainstream Taiwanese media outlets. A close study of youth-led, specialized journalistic sources, as well as the work of young organizers

working in Taiwan's Alt-Labour groups, reveals that such characterizations exclude alternative and potentially more politically efficacious modes of youth-led engagement in labour battles. A large part of this case study thus uses interviews to elaborate on this alternative characterization, illustrating the ways that they transcend traditional criticism, and fall into a new set of challenges themselves. By its end, this research will have identified new sets of barriers to youth-labour activists as well as a concurrent set of innovative solutions that have succeeded on the ground.

For this research, we analyzed internal documents used for organizer trainings. We also used external reports compiled for presentation at international conferences. In addition to these materials, key informant interviews were conducted with young journalists with numerous years of experience reporting on trends in the movement, organizers at a youth-focused labour NGO (Youth Labour Union 95), activists who have staged demonstrations such as that against the Labour Standards Act revisions. Interviews were conducted remotely over the span of 3 months in 2020. Interview questions primarily centered around interviewee's practical experience either being an activist or engaging with activists; questions to organizers focused on organizational structures/logics and practical strategies for sustaining the organization or network (e.g. fundraising).

Literature Review

The presence of new actors and new tactics attracted intense scrutiny by traditional union organizers and scholars alike. Youth activists were not interested in traditional union rallies or in shouting out their demands at labour demonstrations. Instead, they were dressing up in costumes, ruthlessly satirizing politicians over the internet, and organizing massive street protests overnight using Facebook. Was this type of activism working? Was it sustainable?

As scholars reflect on the developments of 2017, it is not uncommon to hear the more general critique that youth activism remains ineffectively performative. Ivan Krastev,

for instance, is invoked to express the sentiment that new connective protests lack any kind of “concrete programme.... reduc[ing] street protest to ‘a kind of performance art’ for its own sake,” a shortcoming that follows closely on the heels of youth activists who steer away from scripted and casted protests, opting for voluntary and flash-mob activism, sometimes relying on literal performance art to impact media narratives (Krastev 2014). Take, for instance, the tactic of ‘cultural jamming’ so integral to the youth labour activists:

Having grown up in an environment saturated by media messages, young participants found the tactics of ‘cultural jamming’ – a deliberate act of appropriating and subverting a mainstream cultural image or expression to spread the protest messages – to be convenient tools. Young activists creatively re-purposed William Lai’s praise of altruistic works such as ‘accumulating moral merit’ (做功德), a popular belief and saying among Taiwanese, to make a mockery of the government’s attempt to loosen the work-hour regulation. Lai’s off-the-cuff expression was re-interpreted as the government’s attempt to force overworked workers to accumulate moral merit for employers. Students from more than a dozen universities across the nation pasted ‘Merit Yuan’ (功德院) labels over street signs directing traffic to the Executive Yuan. Later, a mock Buddhist ceremony was held in front of the Executive Yuan. Tsai Ing-wen, William Lai, and Lin Mei-chu (Minister of Labour) were portrayed as three deities, and nine participants, clothed in Buddhist tapestry, performed a sutra recitation over the proposed Labour Standards Act amendment. The mock ceremony ended with a ritual shaving of heads by some volunteers (Ho 2020, 417).

This critique of youth activism is that while such performances indeed dazzle and enrapture, the ensuring media attention is ultimately unsustainable. The virality of a moment such as the mock Buddhist ceremony is one that fades within days or months. Thus, scholars critique such acts as producing “moments rather than movements” (Gitlin 2013). A transformative labour movement requires more permanent engagement than that which young labour activists have championed.

In addition to this critique, other scholars take issue with the performative and symbolic dimension of such tactics. Street protests, while often witty and intellectual, do not appear to connect directly with workers and their needs, thus appearing more akin to a publicity stunt than any kind of material effort to reform working conditions. It is in response to critiques such as these that scholars like Ho ultimately caution against the disorganizing trend of youth movements. “The refusal to utilize institutional avenues, such as lobbying lawmakers,” she writes “proved a mistake. In the years to come, if Taiwan’s workers are to enjoy better legal protection of their working conditions, they will have to rebuild their organizational basis in one form or another.” (Ho 2020, 419)

The following analysis will problematize aforementioned critiques of the youth-turn of Taiwan’s working-hour reform movement. Instead of focusing on street protests, we build out a conception of the organizational networks behind these demonstrations. Through interviews and primary engagements with youth labour organizers, street protests appear as one mobilization strategy among many. This research will set these efforts in the context of more traditional and recognizable activities of organizing, base building, fundraising, and collective bargaining. This analysis will also reveal novel tactics and strategies that arise out of the disorganized nature of youth labour movement.

This study, then, will not follow previous scholarship in the assumption that Taiwan’s youth movements are engaged merely in a form of representational politics, confined to symbolic and fleeting effects. Instead, it will articulate a more nuanced perspective of the ways that youth labour activists remain in conversation with traditional union organizing—that is, youth activism is not a total break from tradition—while simultaneously forwarding critical and creative solutions to the ways that such organizing has historically failed young people and workers. As such, it will be argued that while the characterization of the youth labour movement as fundamentally different, connective, disorganized, etc is useful in some regards, it is, on the other hand, a stereotype that inadvertently narrows the full field of diverse modes of labour

struggle, some of which offering models of sustained and materially–efficacious labour organizing.

From there, we re-examine the critical research question driving so much of this literature: to what extent have youth activists effectively advanced Taiwan’s labour politics? What are the conditions for their political success? And, finally, what can other movements learn from them?

Analysis

Activists, Unionists, & New Frontiers

In this analysis, it will be argued that the critiques of youth labour movements discussed above rely on a mischaracterization of the youth–turn in labour politics. Through a series of key informant interviews, this case study presents a critical case of youth activism that represents a broad series of activities and organizational structures that go far beyond their mischaracterizations. Building out this expanded conception of Taiwanese youth labour activists allows us to refocus our efforts beyond these largely theoretical critiques, instead adopting a framework enables us to consider a more grounded set of challenges faced by youth labour activists. These critiques are practitioner-generated and responsive to real challenges on the ground. As such, this case study will conclude with a discussion of best practices to approach this more relevant set of critiques/challenges.

The Youth Labour Union 95

The Youth Labour Union 95 is widely recognized among activists for providing generous support for workers through casework. The group “provides legal consultations, participates in worker–management negotiations, and even organizes press conferences to draw greater attention to these cases” (Hsin-ching 2010). The labor group first emerged at the height of Taiwan’s struggle for the NT\$95 minimum wage, adopting this as their calling-card issue, the group named themselves the Youth Labour Union 95.

Despite its name, YLU95 is not a union but a labour NGO. For this reason, its members and leaders often refer to it as an alliance. YLU95's status as an NGO allows the organization to avoid strict labour laws that bar unions from forming without at least 30 members. Its status also allows the alliance to broaden its focus beyond a single company or industry, focusing instead on young workers employed in department stores, food service, beauty salons, seasonal jobs, internships etc. Young workers, YLU95 representatives stress, too often slip between the cracks of traditional union representation. Young workers face an extremely precarious economic situation, being that they primarily work "atypical jobs" that are part-time, subject to scheduling irregularity, ineligible for benefits or insurance, and are far less likely or able to advocate for their rights or organize within their workplace.

YLU95's organizing activities can be broken down into three arenas. First, the organization works with students across a network of hundreds of universities, putting on activities to raise awareness of the rights of young workers, and conducting surveys of labor-rights infractions in the commercial areas surrounding the university. Second, the organization runs a hotline through which individuals can request legal aid and guidance in disputes with their employers. Finally, the organization also aggregates complaints to strategically launch high-profile demonstrations and media campaigns against their representative's employers, even successfully establishing unions in some cases. Currently, the YLU95 has a leadership team of around 30 part time organizers and work to represent around 90-100 young workers at a time.

We have chosen the YLU95 as a critical case in the youth labour movement because it represents a great number of unseen forms of organizing that are absent in discussions of the youth-turn in Taiwanese labour politics. As I will argue in more detail below, the YLU95 troubles the critique that youth activism is a purely performative engagement in labour politics. This critique relies on the classification of youth activism as a purely representational politics, i.e. of workers whom they have little relation to, yet the YLU95 is a representative case of activists' efforts to represent themselves, i.e. young workers in particular, as the new frontier of labour struggles.

Furthermore, the YLU95 also presents a serious challenge to the stereotype that the youth-turn in labour can primarily be seen in an increase in new disorganized forms of street protests and performances. Of course, such characterizations welcome the critique that youth-led efforts are ultimately unsustainable—that they contribute a series of viral moments rather than a sustained movement. The YLU95, on the other hand, demands that we expand this characterization; activists from YLU95 indeed engage in spectacular street demonstration but these demonstrations are but one public-facing element in a much broader and more familiar repertoire of institutionalized and sustained organizing strategies.

Below, I present the results from interviews conducted with YLU95 organizers and leaders as well as journalists who have covered the youth labour movement.

Results & Discussion

Table 1, below, summarizes our findings from primary research of internal and external reports by YLU95, as well as from interviews conducted with the chairman, directors, organizers of YLU95, and journalists familiar with the youth labour movement from New Bloom (an activist-led publication that focuses on domestic social movements). The table identifies 8 challenges faced by youth-activists in organizing young workers. Each challenge is accompanied by a response forwarded either by YLU95 or an informally affiliated activist.

It will be argued from these results that special attention paid to youth activists who break the mold of those stereotyped in Taiwan's youth-turn—such as those interviewed from the YLU95— reveals that the youth-turn is not as much of a break with traditional unions but really an innovation upon familiar organizing strategies. These innovations, importantly, prepare the broader labour movement for a new frontier of labour struggle, with the expansion of atypical work and the integration of a new generation of workers into Taiwan's workforce. A study of these particular challenges and responses ought to displace extant critiques of the youth-turn based on heavy-handed and narrow stereotypes of what activists are up to.

Table 1. Organizing Young Workers: Expressed Challenges and Responses

| | Challenge | Response |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | Young people may resist identifying with their part-time or atypical jobs, making it harder to appeal to ‘young workers’ as a single identity. | Accept that organizing young workers largely must occur on their own terms. When possible, engage in identity construction on campuses. |
| 2 | Workers are constantly aging out of the category of ‘young workers’, making it hard to maintain a stable base. | Set up relationships with university clubs, creating a pipeline so that the organization remains in contact with new young workers. |
| 3 | Raising public awareness of labour issues is particularly tricky in the case of Taiwan given that labour issues do not feature prominently in mainstream public discourse. | Set up public-facing forms of consciousness-building that double as cultural attractions or forms of entertainment. YLU95 organizers have found success in running an annual labour Film Festival. |
| 4 | Informational events primarily attracted research students and social activists but failed to see adequate representation of ordinary student workers | Set up a hotline for workers to make direct contact; advertise the hotline by offering tangible services (such as on demand legal advice and guidance on labour disputes) |
| 5 | A case-by-case approach to engaging with workers is ultimately very individualistic and decentralized; there’s no clear way to begin motivating collective action. | Collaborate with union leaders. However, if working outside a union setting, aggregate similar cases together and once a critical mass is formed, launch a media campaign to build a base and enable digital collective bargaining. |
| 6 | That protests are, to a significant extent, reliant on media coverage for their impact on public discourse. However, the impact of these protests fade at the speed of their news coverage. | Establishing activist-led news sources can institutionalize memory of these alliances and prolong media exposure. |
| 7 | Stable funding sources are difficult to come by; paying organizers and leaders a fair salary is nearly impossible. | Draw from a community of already-salaried organizers or NGO workers, make duties flexible and minimal, allow long breaks from the organization. |
| 8 | Long term goals of making legislative change or winning significant disputes against employers risk being eclipsed by more approachable initiatives like consciousness-raising activities.employers. | Consciousness-raising activities should not be discounted; they provide a critical foundation for more ambitious labour struggles. Media campaigns can build bridges to more institutionalized and electoral forms of labour politics. |

Expanded Description of Table 1.

1. Resistance to Identify as Workers

Challenge: Young people may resist identifying with their part-time or atypical jobs, making it harder to appeal to ‘young workers’ as an identity or broad category.

For Vera 陳曉雯, a director of the YLU95, young workers prove notoriously difficult to organize given their perceived hesitance to relate to the social category of a worker. She attributes this to the fact that “the life-trajectories of young workers have often not been finalized/decided” such that “even if they are working, they might not think that they will work all their lives, let alone for the same company or industry.” In contrast to older workers who are more likely to identify with their jobs or careers—a result of having worked for years in the same industry or under the same employer—young workers are more likely to work in non-career jobs that are perceived as temporary. Under these conditions, young workers lack the ‘worker’ identity or consciousness that traditional organizing strategies presuppose. The unionization of workers across a single industry or factory is not guaranteed to reach young workers in the same ways they did for their parent’s generation.

Response: Accept the fact that organizing young workers largely must occur on their own terms. But, where possible, engage in activities of identity construction on university campuses.

When asked to describe YLU95s recruitment methods, Ray 鄭中睿, the organization’s chairman, details a survey that they conduct on university campuses that simultaneously allows the organization to better understand students’ needs while also raising awareness of youth labour issues. He describes an activity whereby the organization surveys students with part time jobs, prompting reflection of their working conditions, to those of their peers, and of their employers compliance to labour laws. Through the survey, the organization produces a map of the university

campus and surrounding commercial areas, and uses a red mark to highlight locations where illegal practices and dangerous working conditions have been reported. Through the production of this map, the organization is able to bring together the experiences of many disparate individuals who may not yet identify with one another. Having visualized their shared experience in this way, the YLU95 promotes the construction of workers identities on university campuses, forming invaluable relationships to later draw on in the organization of demonstrations and collective action.

2. “Young Worker” is a Transient Category

Challenge: Workers are constantly aging out of the category of ‘young workers’, making it hard to maintain a stable base.

When asked about the unique challenges of working with young people in particular, interviewees have cited the inability of YLU95 to secure a stable base. This difficulty primarily stems from the fact that the category of ‘young workers’ as a highly “mobile” and “transient” identity—individuals are constantly aging in and out of the social category. That young workers often age out of part-time work and atypical jobs, move industries, or simply cease self-identifying as a young person, all means that the organizational base of the YLU95 turns over every few years. This poses numerous obstacles to the survival of the organization: its membership base lacks a stable core, i.e. of a group of permanent members, from which the leadership team can be renewed (currently, many of the leaders can no longer be considered young workers themselves); additionally, much of the organizations energy must be spent on recruiting members to avoid having a significant among of the membership base age out of the organization’s target group.

Response: Set up institutional relationships with university clubs and student organizations, creating a pipeline so that the organization remains in constant contact with new young workers.

When asked what the organization has done to address the issue, Ray 鄭中睿 has emphasized the importance of returning to university contacts to ensure the organization keeps in touch with students and their juniors. YLU95 has numerous institutionalized relationships with “dissident student associations and clubs” that together form a pipeline of students into various labour organizations. Indeed, one of the lead organizers we interviewed, Catta, initially found her way to the YLU95 through these university networks. After spending time at similar labour advocacy groups (The Cold-Blooded High Tech Youth 高科技冷血青年), she joined the YLU95 because of its association with a university club that she had long term affiliations with.

3. Lack of Public Awareness of Labour Issues

Challenge: Raising public awareness of labour issues is particularly tricky in the case of Taiwan given that labour issues do not feature prominently in mainstream public discourse

In an external report, organizer Por-Yee Lin writes that “the ‘labour movement’ [is] unfamiliar or weird for the majority of Taiwanese people in their everyday life, especially for young people” (Lin 2010). The reason for these conditions can be attributed to historical factors, Lin writes, for “the Kuomintang government in Taiwan had suppressed left-wing activists and any labour movements for a long period, from 1945 to the end of the 1980s. As a result, the independent labour movement in Taiwan lacks a strong historical tradition and only emerged after the 1980s” (Lin 2010).

Response: Set up public-facing forms of consciousness-building that double as cultural attractions or forms of entertainment. YLU95 organizers have found success in running an annual Labour Film Festival.

In our interview, Catta Chou described an initiative that she led that would provide an accessible and un-intimidating way for young people to educate themselves about labour issues. Working with international film makers and labour organizers, Catta

founded Taiwan's Annual International Labour Film Festival. In an interview with New Bloom, she discusses the importance of film for educational purposes: "Because the union history in Taiwan is really, really short," she reasons, "a lot of times we can't really imagine what workers can do, or what unions can do. In a way, all of these films—because they are mostly from Western countries or other foreign countries—are actually importing some examples from abroad. When you see them, you know people out there, they're doing things like this. This is material for people in Taiwan to think about what we can do in Taiwan" (Chuang 2018). Chou's work on the labour film festival illustrates the importance of investing in educational campaigns, especially those that are leisurely and enjoyable, as a form of consciousness building in a setting where public discourse does not yet center labour issues. The annual film festival is able to reach a substantial audience without demanding too much time and financial resources from organizers as it relies on international networks to provide films as well as local governments for event funding. Such activities thus serve as an example of a low intensive way to raise awareness of labour issues.

4. Lack of Direct Worker-Involvement

Challenge: Informational events primarily attracted research students and social activists but failed to see adequate representation of ordinary student workers.

In an external report, organizer Por-Yee Lin details efforts of YLU95 to host four small conferences on the issue of youth poverty from 2005 to 2006. These conferences, Lin writes, "provoked good discussions, but the participants were almost all research students or social activists, not 'ordinary' workers or students" (Lin 2010). The inability of the organization to survey the voices of workers, if allowed to continue, presents numerous problems of representation. If organization leaders do not bring ordinary workers into the basic structure of the organization, they risk adopting strategies and priorities that do not represent actual workers' needs. Internationally, similar challenges have emerged in the form of contentious relations between workers and intellectuals. Recall the troubled role of intellectuals in South Korea's Minjung Protests and Paris May '68.

Response: Set up a hotline for workers to make direct contact; advertise the hotline by offering tangible services (such as on demand legal advice and guidance on labour disputes)

In response to such worries, YLU95 launched an online campaign in June 2007 to aid young people in fighting for business compliance to a recent revision of labour law that, amongst numerous other reforms, raised the minimum wage dramatically from NT\$66 (approximate US\$2.10) per hour to NT\$95 (approximate US\$3) per hour. To engage with workers directly, they opened an ‘appeal hotline number’ for part-timers seeking help with understanding these changes or professional guidance advocating for their legal rights. “Surprisingly,” Lin writes, “this way broke the obstacles of the past in connecting with young workers, and we received more than three phone calls and emails from different young workers every day to get help in claiming their labour rights”(Lin 2010). Among common grievances are those about employers “not paying for National Health Insurance,” “not paying salaries or overtime,” “offering compensation below the minimum wage,” or “requiring workers to pay large ‘breach of contract’ penalties when leaving” (Hsin-Ching 2010).

5: Transitioning from Individual to Collective Action

Challenge: A case-by-case approach to engaging with workers is ultimately individualistic and decentralized; there’s no clear way to begin motivating collective action.

Most of the calls received by the YLU95 hotline were about “individual labour rights, not issues of collective action.”(Lin 2010) For instance, organizers report that their casework primarily involved services like “providing relevant legal information, assisting the aggrieved workers in sending legal attest letters to their employers, applying for mediation from the CLA, or accompanying the workers during mediation or negotiations with management” (Hsin-Ching 2010). The organization saw itself engaged in conflict resolution at the individual level or in isolated events—an

apprentice at a single beauty salon, one or two students employed at a chain restaurant nearby. Case work meant that most of the work involved giving advice for the individual or approaching an employer on behalf of a few workers. In an external report, YLU95 organizers express frustration that this way of engaging young workers did not encourage building relationships between workers; it made it difficult to exert collective pressure on the employers (relying instead on appeals to labour laws); and it meant that unionization was always a nebulous goal down the road, as callers were primarily concerned with the immediate resolution of their particular situation.

Response: Collaborate with union leaders. However, if working outside a union setting, aggregate similar cases together and once a critical mass is formed, launch a formal media campaign to build a base and enable digital/viral collective bargaining.

YLU95's strategy for helping young workers broke along two axes: "For us, one way is to ask the government to intervene, and the other way is to raise public pressure." (Lin 2010) The former is a response to individual rights violations, the YLU95 representative would call employers directly and inform them of the illegality of their actions. The other method, raising public pressure, addressed more directly the issue of collective action. In 2008, the organization targeted the illegal behavior of a bakery chain (85°C, a household name with nearly 450 stores across Taiwan and the Mainland) which violated the rights of an estimated 10,000 young workers. The organization staged press conferences, public protests, and performative demonstrations (one of which mobilized a fake queue outside one of the stores, boycotting the business by not buying anything). The strategy allowed this small organization to surmount organizational barriers to achieve collective action. They write, "although as a small union (or a labour NGO), we cannot monopolize labour's power collectively to bargain with the employers, we can still bargain with these employers by raising public pressure and criticism, especially when the company cares about its public image." (Lin 2010) The members of YLU95 have found that "Overall, the companies of the service sector care more keenly about their image. In our experience, two-thirds of the companies of the service sector are willing to negotiate with us after the media has covered the labour problems they have, especially if their behaviors are seen as

illegal” (Lin 2010). Ultimately, as organizers reflect on this initiative, the primary frustration was that the individuals they aided would disappear after their cases were resolved. They faced a challenge common to many youth movements: organizational staying power (Hsin-Ching 2010). The hope was that the work done with young workers would spur them to lead unionization efforts at their workplaces or to initiate collective bargaining with their employer; however, ultimately, it was difficult to bridge this gap between collective and individual casework.

6. Alliances Formed During Protests are Temporary

Challenge: That protests are, to a significant extent, reliant on media coverage for their impact on public discourse means that youth activists across issue areas tend to reproduce successful events, leading to a lack of diversity in tactics. Further, the impact of these protests fade at the speed of their news coverage.

In an interview with Brian Hioe, who has been a prominent participant and journalist in Taiwan's social movements, he describes what he perceives to be a chronic lack of diversity in protest tactics. For instance, Hioe explains that “there's a tendency for social movements to appeal to the central government.” Youth activists will go to the legislature, the presidential office, the Ministry of Labor, and the Council of Ministers Affairs, etc. “and all of these buildings are located in the same area, so we see the same parade routes over and over again, year after year. And you see the same people do the same thing over again.” While Hioe acknowledges that these patterns indeed might reflect Taiwan's socio-economic and legal situation—since Taiwan has a strong central government that can indeed intervene in numerous sectors—he also suggests that this may be a consequence of the sensationalist nature of protest movements. The reliance of activists on mainstream media means that, over time, tactics are chosen based on their ability to capture media attention, over considerations of what makes sense of the particular cause. Another potential problem with activists' reliance on mainstream media attention is that the impact of these protests dissipate at the speed of the news cycle. If activists are reliant on

media outlets to maintain public pressure on the central government, then control over this pressure ultimately lies in the hands of reporters rather than organizers.

Response: Establishing activist-led news sources can spotlight a diversity of tactics as well as institutionalize memory of these alliances and prolong media exposure.

New Bloom Magazine initially grew out of a community of activists. As one of its original founding editors, Hioe describes the organic relationship between contributors and the activist community, as many are themselves involved in a wide variety of causes ranging from the anti-nuke movement to LGBTQ+ issues. An advantage of New Bloom's embeddedness in this expansive activist network is that writers are often personally called to scenes of demonstrations. The publication's exclusive access allows it to cover, in great detail, protests that might otherwise evade the attention of mainstream outlets.

When asked about any undercovered protests that broke the mold of the usual tactics seen in Taiwanese youth movements, Hioe cited his reporting of a mock-Buddist ceremony held over the Labour Standards Act. Hioe's reporting served to spotlight a unique demonstration for the benefit of fellow activists, thus encouraging the diversification of protest tactics. Additionally, activist-led publications such as New Bloom play a central role in creating institutionalized memory of the impact and alliances formed during street protests. As such, activist led news sources have a positive role to play in, not only prolonging media exposure beyond the mainstream news cycle, but also in archiving the know-how developed during these moments.

7. Surviving on Minimal Financial Resources

Challenge: Stable funding sources are difficult to come by; paying organizers and leaders a fair salary is nearly impossible

In every interview conducted for this study, financial limitations were cited as the primary challenge in the YLU95 achievement of its goals. The lack of financial and human resources, Lin writes, directs the organization's priorities away from traditional forms of organizing (such as membership expansion) and reorients it towards consciousness raising. Additionally, the YLU95 is largely unable to pay its organizers and leaders a full time salary. This has raised concerns about the organization's ability to

Response: Relying on volunteer work can be unsustainable, but there are steps that organizations can take to mitigate these risks: draw from a community of already-salaried organizers or NGO workers, make duties flexible and minimal, allow long breaks from the organization.

Organizers working at YLU95, according to its chairman, do not depend on the organization for their salaries. They are often employed by local unions. New Bloom Magazine adopts a similar organization structure, where contributors work full time at NGOs and are given extreme flexibility in terms of how to contribute to the publication. Brian Hioe, when asked to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of adopting this kind of structure, describes the trade off as one between the preservation of energy and long term planning. Contributors can take years long haituses from working with the team and are expected to maintain a very minimal baseline level of activity. This allows the magazine to essentially "fade in and out of operation," to bring in contributors when it is necessary to maintain a more sustained period of activity. Hioe attributes the magazine's success to this loose structure: it is its ability to oscillate between a stable 'holding pattern' and periods of sustained growth that has allowed the New Bloom to survive 7 years without funding.

8. Long Term Planning

Challenge: Long term goals of making legislative change or winning significant disputes against employers risk being eclipsed by more approachable initiatives like consciousness-raising activities.

In an external report, YLU95 describes that their approach to organizing was severely constrained by limited financial and human resources. Rather than prioritize membership expansion or “the organizing mode of traditional trade unions” (which would likely not succeed due to the mobility and job uncertainty of young workers), the organization chose to focus instead on “raising a deeper labour consciousness for many young workers as the priority.” The worry with such an approach is that these short term initiatives eclipse long term planning for making real legislative change or for winning significant disputes against employers.

Response: Consciousness-raising activities should not be discounted; they provide a critical foundation for more ambitious labour struggles. These campaigns can build bridges to more institutionalized and electoral forms of labour politics.

Consciousness-raising initiatives like the Taiwan International Labour Film Festival or YLU95’s media campaign against 85 Degrees Bakery are integral to the organization’s outreach. In the case of the film festival, Catta writes that organizing the funding for the event allowed her to establish a close working relationship with the Taipei local government. She writes “we are very lucky, partly because the commissioner of the Department of Labour of Taipei City Government is one of our people—she’s a unionist. She was working for one of the NGOs in Taipei, so she knows what we are doing and she trusts us. This case illustrates that consciousness raising initiatives can build lasting relationships with more institutionalized forms of labour politics. Furthermore, demonstrations like that against the 85 Degrees Bakery won the organization media exposure that was integral to future organizing that led to more traditionally recognizable wins like the formation of the Sales Workers Union.

Conclusion | Addressing Critics & Identifying Best Practices

In this study, we conducted key informant interviews to develop a detailed description of the organizational structure and tactics of the YLU95, an organization that stands as a critical case in troubling stereotypes perpetuated by extant literature. From this description, we have the tools to address two prominent criticisms of the youth labour movement. First, YLU95 challenges the depiction of youth activists as engaged in mere performance that is purely representational. As a second matter, their organizing also goes beyond fleeting viral moments, without discounting the worth of virality entirely.

Addressing Critics

Sensationalist street politics and social media activism is worth critiquing if practiced in isolation. Yes, they are sensationalist and superficial; yes they are fleeting. But it would be a mistake to think that youth activism stops at the street protest. We have described an organization and network of activists that sees virality as an integral step to mobilizing young workers, but as importantly one step among many, i.e. as one strategy of outreach among many, integrated in a very broad and familiar repertoire of organizing strategies. Numerous interviewees see street protests and performance art as public-facing demonstrations that ultimately serve as a means to developing more long term goals. These strategies are simultaneously efforts to raise public awareness, as well as a way to boost recruitment through demonstrating the power of collective pressure, the former being essential roads to a more institutionalized and sustained campaign running in the background, among workers themselves.

This insight leads directly into a challenge of the first critique. The youth-turn in Taiwanese labour politics appears performative only if we accept that young activists take themselves to be representatives of victimized workers, i.e., that they are

engaged in a politics that ultimately does not concern them. However, if we understand the youth-turn in Taiwan's labour politics, not as the displacement of former participants (workers) or a former form of politics (unionism), but rather as a moment of recognition that labour issues have become, for an increasing number of workers, a youth issue—as the very existence and survival of the YLU96 should testify to—then we will recognize youth activism as anything but representational. Youth politics is not a performance for its own sake, or as a performance to represent the victimized—it is a mode of political engagement in itself, not for another. Youth activists are representing themselves, as young workers, as a class that escapes traditional forms of representation.

As such, the YLU95 should demand a revision of our understanding of youth activism, as offering numerous revisions on traditional practices without wholly overturning them, merely demanding that they better suit the needs of an increasingly precarious class of young workers in Taiwan.

Recommendations & Best Practices

From these interviews with organizers at the Youth Labour Union 95, as well as with independent journalists from New Bloom Magazine familiar with the youth labour movement, we have developed a unique series of challenges and responses that sheds light on a great number of unseen forms of organizing that are absent in discussions of the youth-turn in Taiwanese labour politics. Having paid special attention to this group of youth activists who break the mold of those stereotyped in Taiwan's youth-turn, we present the following best practices for organizing the youth labour movement (potentially even beyond the Taiwanese context). The contention, here, is that the YLU95 is a site of innovation that critically engages with traditional modes of organization (such as that of trade unions) such that lessons learned by its organizers may prepare the broader labour movement for a new frontier of labour struggles—one that is rapidly approaching with the expansion of atypical work and the integration of a new generation of workers into the workforce even beyond Taiwan.

Identity–Construction on Campuses:

1. As a form of recruitment, engage in activities of identity construction on university campuses. Use focus groups, community surveys and data visualization to bring together the experiences of disparate individuals who may share the collective identity of young workers. Such initiatives will form invaluable relationships to later draw upon in the organization of demonstrations and collective action.

Renew Membership:

2. Institutionalize relationships with student associations, clubs, and similar organizations in order to foster a pipeline from universities to the membership base.

Increase Public Awareness:

3. Empower young organizers to experiment with outreach and consciousness-raising campaigns, and encourage the development of activities that are accessible and entertaining (such as a labour film festival).

Outreach as a Service to Young Workers:

4. In order to reach young workers who are otherwise underrepresented by traditional unions, use outreach campaigns as an opportunity to offer tangible services such as legal guidance and advocacy.

Move from Individual to Collective Action:

5. To move beyond a case-by-case model of conflict resolution, towards the cultivation of collective action, aggregate similar cases and their individual needs together to explore the potential of launching a formal digital campaign, enabling digital collective bargaining outside of traditional union settings.

Archive Tactics and Alliances:

6. Collaborate and support activist-led new sources. They can serve to spotlight a diversity of strategies and tactics that would otherwise evade the attention of mainstream media outlets. They also play an important role in prolonging media exposure beyond the news cycle and institutionalizing memory of the impact and alliances formed during street protests.

Survive on Minimal Financial Resources:

7. To support the long term survival of an organization under limited financial resources, prioritize maintaining a minimal baseline of activity while allowing the organization to fade in and out of operation as needed. If unable to pay leadership, draw from a community of already-salaried organizers or NGO workers, make duties flexible and minimal, and allow long breaks from the organization.

Long Term Planning:

8. Use consciousness-raising activities to establish bridges to more institutionalized forms of labour politics, enabling the kind of long term planning that is integral to winning disputes against employers or making legislative changes.

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