

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Young Workers Struggle to Find Good Jobs

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac, Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia (CATUS)

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

Here in Serbia, we have a saying for the youth section that I belong to for many years, we say, "You are the union too." So when we talk to young people, we want them to know that they are part of the union. They are also the structure of the union, and we depend on them.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hello, sisters and brothers, and welcome to The Solidarity Center Podcast, an interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shawna Bader-Blau. I'm also the Executive Director of the Solidarity Center in Washington, D.C. We're the largest US-based international worker rights organization. We empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, for justice in their communities, and for greater equality in the global economy--and for one just future. Today, we're taking a look at what it's like to be a young person trying to find a job in Serbia, a country at the heart of Europe that was once part of the former Yugoslavia. One in four young people in Serbia are not employed and not in school. Many are seeking work outside Serbia, migrating to countries like Germany.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Others are taking jobs in the country's growing informal economy as programmers, customer service reps telecenter workers and delivery drivers, where they have no job security and get low wages. People coming out of high school or college should be able to find good jobs, not only in Serbia, but everywhere. So what can be done to improve this situation? My guest today, Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac, will describe how unions in Serbia are offering young workers a path to decent jobs through education, training, and support. Bojana is a political scientist and expert advisor at the International Department at Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia, CATUS. And as former president of the CATUS youth section, she continues to be deeply involved in young worker outreach. Her work in Serbia offers lessons for labor movements everywhere, working to address the job gaps for young people.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Welcome to the Solidarity Center Podcast, Bojana. So glad you could join us today. Could you start by introducing yourself?

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

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Well, Shawna, hello. And my name is Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac. I work in the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia, which is SSSS in Serbian. And I have been working in the International Department for more than last 12 years. And my primary job is expert advisor for projects and for different aspects of social policy and employment. And during the last 12 years, I have been dealing with the different issues, such as a youth policies on national level, on regional level, even on European level, then migration policies, then certain topics such as the works councils, then progression of Serbia to European Union through the process of stabilization and many other different topics. And on personal notes, I'm a mother of two little girls, who are still in the kindergarten, and we have different challenges on everyday basis regarding the COVID pandemics and the socialization and preparation for school, etc.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Wow, the next time we do a podcast, I'd love for you and I just to talk about the school issue and COVID, it's been really hard, hasn't it? It's been hard.

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

Yes, it's being hard. And I think we will definitely tackle a few issues in our discussion today.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Well, thank you for sharing a bit about your background. It's really great to talk to you today. Someone with such a breadth of experience as an activist and a leader in your country and in the labor movement. Bojana, I want to talk a little bit about your experience working with young people in Serbia. What's it like to be a young person in Serbia today? Maybe share a little bit with our listeners about a young person graduating from high school or college, and they want to start their career, they want to get a job. What's it like for them? What do they face?

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

Thank you for this question. So I have been working with young people within the trade union movement for last, let's say 11 and a half years. And before that, I also have experience with students while I was a student activist on my faculty, and we have faced, let's say, more theoretical principle of progress to the labor market. Let's say we were always hoping that young people can easily transit to the labor market from the educational system. But in reality, it's getting even more and more difficult. And transition is longer, especially for younger women than younger men. That is one of the reasons that young women, since they cannot easily find decent jobs, actually do go to further education, and they

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are better educated in general than most of the young men. But on the other side, young men more easily get going to other countries.

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

They leave the country in order to find better jobs and better job perspectives. But let's say that here it is typical that you are actually not working the job that you were trained to do. Because, let's say, around 60 percent of young people in Serbia actually work on positions they were not educated for. So that is very important because you can see that people are pretty flexible. They do not try to occupy positions that were in their heads, that were imagined, but people here have a general education, which is pretty broad, so they can relatively easily switch or occupations or positions.

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

And so that has both opportunities and challenges, because it is really hard to advance in career when you're starting something which is completely new. So people generally look for jobs for more than two years. So that's long-term employment for a very young person. They are not jobs vacancies for their occupations and professions that they were trained for. So we need to provide more links between education and what is needed on the labor market on one side, and also to develop more sets of skills for younger people who are there looking for jobs.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

What you're talking about, I think will resonate with a lot of our listeners, even what you said about college, in the United States we have one million more women in higher education right now than men across the country. And for very similar reasons when somebody graduates and goes to a job that is not what they were trained for, they go to a different job. Do these jobs tend to meet people's expectations in terms of salary and benefits?

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

Well on certain occasions. Yes, but as you may have been informed, in Serbia we have many jobs on platforms, and the Serbia is actually one of the countries in with highest per capita number of people employed on digital platforms. So in Europe, we are on the first or on the second place on number of people who are earning salaries via platforms. Both on platforms, such as let's say Upwork, or for people who offer their services. But also we have now an expansion of platforms for deliveries, such as Glovo or other ones that are not so recognized in other countries. So many of young people who actually... Especially men, let's say between ages of 25 and 40, they actually work for delivery platforms. And that is the way they start their between jobs. And usually that's not a permanent job for most of them.

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Shawna Bader-Blau:

We've been finding that all over the world, that platform employment of all kinds, especially, and including platform delivery has been exploding, even before the pandemic, but definitely during the pandemic, we've seen a huge rise in many countries from Europe and Africa, all across Asia and North America. I know CATUS and with you and the lead did a survey of young people in Serbia and other countries in the region about how COVID has affected job situation for folks. What'd you find out in the survey?

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

Well, because of the emergency state that was invoked in many of the countries in Europe and in all our neighboring countries, such as those who were parts of the former Yugoslavia, we decided to make a trade union network and to ask our peers from other countries how, in which ways they were affected, especially in sense of working rights and conditions during the pandemic. And also because we have noted that there were many violations of political and citizens rights in many of those countries, such as there were closures, they were curved. There was no possibility for anyone to make protests or strikes or anything. There were processes against people who were trying to point out that occupation and safety and health were not recognized at workplaces or they were not respected. But we try to see how the situation overall affected young people, because last the world global crisis in 2008, 2009 had the greatest impact, especially on position on young people in the labor market.

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

We did a survey in end of May, 2020 and beginning of June. And what we found out is that people were very comfortable in sense of, let's say they were satisfied in manners that governments actually conducted measures that was communicated well to them. But the employers measures, especially for people who were working in informal economy were not well accepted because let's say that governments, they made good regulations, but there were no equipment and instruments on the market that could be used on working places. So young people felt really confused. Also, many of those contacted my Confederation in order to make some impact on public transportation systems, because during curfews, you could not use public transportation to go to work. So people from rural areas did not have ways to go to work or go back home on everyday basis.

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

So, that's like what young people experienced. They were fired. There were cuts of salaries. There was a great pressure, especially on young women with children at home who could not go to kindergarten, also to people who were under special medical treatments, who could not get medical provisions or

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medicines, let's say costs of salaries. For some people, it was really confusing the working hours. And some worked for less hours, some worked for a lot of overtime hours that were not paid. Some experienced very ergonomic conditions at home offices because they never had opportunities to actually provide for themselves good tables, laptops, headsets, phones, instruments for work. And also many of those people experienced a rise in bills. They paid for electricity, for food, for transportation. And also there were some who were actually happy because they were working from homes. Let's say there is a big polarization of assessment of what it is like to work at home. So more young men enjoyed working from homes than young women. So one of the largest issues in this aspect was the work-life balance. It's one of the most important topics.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

After the break we'll talk about how the lack of jobs in Serbia and elsewhere is forcing a huge number of young workers to migrate to other countries for work. And how Serbian unions are launching an app-based campaign to enable young people to learn about unions and their rights on the job.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hi there, it's Shawna again. I just wanted to take a minute to invite you to check out RadioLabour, the International Labor Movement's radio service. RadioLabour produces daily newscasts about union events and issues and it also produces special programs to support labor campaigns around the world. Check out RadioLabour at radiolabour.net, and find out more about worker rights struggles around the world and how the movement is supporting their efforts for decent wages, fair treatment, and strong communities. Follow and subscribe at radiolabour.net.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Well, I'm so glad we're recording this podcast, because you've just described, I think a fairly universal experience of the ups and downs of working and living in this pandemic. But you're sharing it through the eyes of young people's work experience, which is very important to lift up. I know you talked to 500 people or so, somewhere around there for this survey, what did folks tell you? You know, besides the numbers and the details, what are some of the things that people said to you?

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

We had direct comments in the survey from all of the countries that were already... Like some of those said that unions, in their companies, were quite passive and they were disappointed by it. So they expected more involvement from the side of the unions to conditions of work in their particular jobs. Some were also saying that the employer just laid them off without any comments, without any

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conversation. Some people said, especially in Slovenia, which was surprising for us, that they were left without anything. That they did not have anyone to talk to. Because for example, they had only contracts for certain types of part-time work. And when the contracts ended, they were left without any payments or salaries. Some people were saying, "My payment was late for weeks, and I never knew if the employer will ever contact me again. And how can I ever reach for money rights?"

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

They felt left behind. Everyone felt left behind, because there were no responses from anyone. But for my Confederation, we have open the particular web page on our website, devoted exclusively to COVID-19 issues. And we were also streaming different ideas and initiatives to the social economic council. And what was very well expected was the situation in Northern Macedonia, where it was shown that where social economic council is very effective and the social dialogue is effective, young people are quite satisfied. Because it's in the general public, that unions are making moves. They are filing initiatives, they have certain voice, and it's being recognized and their influence is highly valued. And I think those results really came out as something specific. And as a good example.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

And I should just share for our listeners, this survey was conducted among young people across Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, and reached more than 500 people. You mentioned something early on that I wanted to ask you a little bit more about. You mentioned that young people felt left behind. They felt they'd been left alone. And you also mentioned that they, in many of the countries, wanted more from their unions. They weren't seeing enough action from their unions. And on the other hand, you just gave a good example of a situation where unions were publicly advocating and in the public sphere, and that people had a better perception of unions even among the youth. So I wonder if you could share a little bit more about that issue of young people and unions. How have people in general, young workers, new entrance to the labor market viewed the labor movement during this pandemic?

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

Well, I think that generally, young people don't see unions very much. Because in these countries, in my region, unions are kind of also in transition as well as the whole states and the businesses economies. We have large contradictory positions, both from the sides of government and employers regarding the unionization, and young people often see unions as something which is not really necessary. They often hear stories like that because the representatives of officials say that the laws are good and we are in a transition, so things need to change. And young people don't know what actually to expect from the unions. We made a mobile Android application called Labor Rights For You, in order to be able to

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approach to young people specifically, and to teach them in a very funny and entertaining way through a quiz, they can learn a lot on their labor rights and they can even reach us on different platforms and different social media anonymously, or even offline.

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

So they don't need to pay anything. They don't even need to be members. We just wanted to be more visible, more approachable, and to be where they are. So I really think we need to find answers for the times that we're living, because it's the 21st century. Young people today, let's say age 15, they all have TikTok or some other application. They all communicate only via messengers, direct messaging, et cetera. So we need to be there where they can find us. They don't want to go online, they don't want to Google about the union. They just want to find answers. So we need to make an approach, which is more quick, easy, concrete, and more efficient in every way.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

When I was listening to your talk, I'm thinking about how many people in Serbia, in particular, who are finding employment through platforms, I bet through apps and most certainly often through their mobile phone. So, the innovation and the idea you had to develop labor rights for you as an android app, right there on someone's phone, right next to where they find a job, pretty ingenious idea. Has that been picking up? Have a lot of people have been using that?

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

Yes, but we actually even haven't started a campaign yet, because in Serbia, we had a good COVID situation during the summer, and we expected the schools to be approachable during the autumn. But now the situation is different. We wanted to present the application to young people. We wanted to make some kind of leaflets and some small rewards for teams who have good results in the quiz. And it's going to be paused for some time, because now it is not possible. So I hope that many more young people will actually have the opportunity to learn through the quiz and to, let's say, advance their information and knowledge on labor rights.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Well, as you launch that campaign, I look forward to hearing more about it. And then we'll share with our listeners updates about how that's going and so folks can learn about that program. You mentioned something earlier about one phenomenon with young people in Serbia you were talking about, but also in the region, is often out-migration—leaving to find employment elsewhere. And you've worked on

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migration. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about the labor movement and this question of people leaving the country for work. And what's the labor movements perspective on that?

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

Well, the labor migration is, let's say, a very long topic and it's been a topic for many years now. And specifically, in my region, we have been dealing with different movements of people voluntary and involuntary during last couple of decades. So the migrations are constant and many countries around my country have actually benefited from the migration processes, because they have gained a lot of skillful workers and the young families. So even though it's quite disturbing for citizens of countries or the region I belong to, so many other do have benefits. And many of the unions in the region deal with these issues. There are a few networks of the unions, and let's say coordination by the European Trade Union Confederation, the ETUC, who has a working group on migration processes. And there are being efforts to let's say, share the union membership for a person who comes, let's say from my country to one of the countries in the region. We are still kind of testing the ideas because not all countries of the region are members of the European union and different legislations are being implemented.

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

Some countries have already gone through that phase and they already accept each other as members as each owns, but we will see now what will happen, because the processes are ongoing and they're constant, and they're even more intensive after the pandemic, the last year's first wave. So what is specifically situation in Serbia is that we say that each year, by migration processes or through those processes, we lose one city of 50,000 inhabitants. So there is a large deep population process in Serbia ongoing, and specific younger people with higher education are leaving. There are no sufficient measures to combat that, because in the bottom of the processes is the employment issue and a question of decent work, because our survey also demonstrated that number one issue. For all countries in the region and all young people is decent employment and potential to find a job for each person in a way that is transparent and efficient and without corruption.

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

Because in my country, young people see, they have perception that belonging to a political party is prerequisite to find a job. It's even a higher ranked than education. So young people do not want to be dependent, when they see that they cannot influence their own job and they cannot find a loan for an apartment and to start a family or to be medically insured. So people, even when they find a job, they want to leave the country in order to find more secure, more decent, and more prospective job.

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Well, I mean, that's a powerful finding that so many people are saying their number one priority is decent work with dignity, fair opportunity. And tying that to independence, when I hear you talk, that's really what democracy and decent work are all about. With all your work with young people across the region and in Serbia, what's the future you want for young people like yourself and those who are coming up after you. What's the future you want to see for them?

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

It's a really good question. And I talked to different people about that every day, because here it's not so common for a young woman to be, let's say, politically active or to be a leader, or an inspirational leader or to stand or to have a voice even. And I try to see many other young women who are, let's say vocal, who want to express their opinion and who want to say what is important for them. What is important is public infrastructure, public services. I think that my vision is for young people to have a voice, for them to know exactly what they want so they can advocate for themselves and for other people in a close community. I think young people in my region are kind of detached from political life. In one hand, they say they have certain values which are more liberal and democratic, but in reality, they are pro-authoritarian and they like strong leaders.

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

They like other people who have a strong voice, and they don't want to be visible to other people. They just want to stay behind. I want everyone to have education and a voice, because I think young people really need to stand for themselves. They need to be more vocal. They need to get together. They need to put down the phones or devices. They need to talk to each other more and to approach to different organizations to be involved into, let's say, advocating, making policies, realization of policies. That's what we also try to do with our young activists. To make them more active and more visible. We want not just to analyze what they said. We want them to advocate what they said.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Well, let me tell you, it's really a thrilling, wonderful opportunity for me to listen to, and the ideas and the activism of a young, inspirational woman of the labor movement like yourself. And I really want to thank you to my sister, Bojana, for meeting with us today. Thank you for doing the work you do.

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

You're very welcome. And thank the AFL-CIO and the Solidarity Center for their support, to the unions in my country, in Serbia, regarding the occupational safety and health program, that actually made a great team of experts from the unions on this very sensitive and very important topic. And thank you for

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inviting me to join this great network of union representatives from all over the world. It's really been a pleasure for me.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I've been to Serbia, and I've visited those programs and met these leaders. Many, many wonderful women leaders in the labor movement fighting for occupational safety and health. And so I'm really glad we had an opportunity to share in solidarity with you through that work as well. Bojana, is there anything I didn't ask you about today that you really want people to know?

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

Well, here in Serbia, we have a saying for the youth section that I belong to for many years, we say, "You are the union, too." So when we talk to young people, we want them to know that they are being part of the union. They are also the structure of the union, and we depend on them, and they are the future of the union. So we are inviting them always to approach, to come, to participate and to be leaders of the union. So you are the union. Everyone is the union, and together we are stronger.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Awesome, beautiful image. Thank you, Bojana. Thank you for talking today.

Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac:

Welcome.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

So much of what Bojana said today about young workers and Serbia is happening in many countries around the world. Young workers with few job options are forced to take any work, especially platform-based jobs to get by. Others leave their country with the hope of finding decent, secure work elsewhere, looking for a chance to fairly compete on a level playing field--exactly what democracy and economic fairness are all about. When we think about the future of work, it must be first of all, decent work, and achieving decent work requires the fundamental elements of democracy that, as Bojana expresses so well today, are achieved when workers, beginning with young workers, know their rights and can join together to win them through unions.

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Thanks again to Bojana Bijelovic Bosanac for sharing with us the challenges, young workers in Serbia and other countries face in getting decent jobs, and how her union, CATUS, is providing them opportunities to learn about their rights at work and tap into the collective strength of union membership.

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The Solidarity Center podcast is a member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network. And our show is produced and engineered by Adam Yoffe. A special thanks to the staff of the Solidarity Center, who assisted with this podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world, we work to ensure a righteous future for workers, dignity, freedom, equality, and justice.

For the Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.