



#GLOBAL INTERN STRIKE

THE GROWING CAMPAIGN AGAINST UNPAID INTERNSHIPS AND THE ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS

A PSI BRIEFING

INTRODUCTION

Unpaid internships represent one of the least examined youth labour trends of the past few decades; and one with concerning flow-on effects for the wider labour market. While a more traditional apprenticeship program provides long term training with a guaranteed job at the end, interns are increasingly used by government agencies, NGOs and the private sector as a low-cost, contingent workforce. On top of receiving little or no remuneration, interns often work without a contract, basic workers' rights such as healthcare or protection from harassment, despite usually doing real work of real value for their employer. This leads to a displacement of other workers, downward pressure on wages and a significant exclusionary effect on those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds who cannot afford to work for free.

Unpaid internships are a profoundly precarious form of work, with young employees often hoping that their position might turn into a paid position; as long as they don't 'rock the boat.' While this can make organizing difficult, unions can play a key role in monitoring the 'intern economy,' by representing interns who face workplace issues, encouraging employers to adopt better practices and lobbying governments to defend the rights of young workers.

By engaging youth on this issue, which can often represent the earliest stage of their involvement in the labour market, unions can demonstrate their relevance and establish stronger and potentially life-long links with emerging generations of workers.

BACKGROUND

To many older people, internships are often seen as a short and fairly insubstantial 'work experience' activity. However, the past 30 years has seen a huge increase in the number of young people taking on these positions, for months and sometimes years on end, completing back to back internships in the hope of perhaps one day landing a fixed job. For example, in the US in the 1980s fewer than 10% of college graduates took on an internship; today that figure is above 70%. This trend has been exacerbated by the economic recession, with cynical employers looking to cut costs by exploiting young people facing a severe unemployment crisis.

“Unpaid experiences were by far the most common in the social services industry... followed by education, government, healthcare, other support services, recreation & hospitality”
National Association of Colleges and Employers Survey, 2015

Furthermore, internships have spread across a wide range of industries. They are now particularly prevalent in a number of key sectors which PSI affiliates represent including public administration, legal systems, politics, healthcare, public media, and academia as well as national and international civil services. Unpaid interns can be found across the world, working at the production lines of the notorious FoxConn corporation in China, to car manufacturers in India and even at the United Nations and its agencies. One particularly disturbing example recently emerged from Italy where it was revealed that the Italian Ministry of Education made **a deal** with multinational corporations including McDonald's to funnel over 100,000 students from class rooms across the country into unpaid internships under the guise of 'work experience.' This led students in Milan to occupy a McDonald's restaurant and sparked the engagement of Italian Union CGIL, who had previously spent years attempting to unionize the fast food workers whom the corporation is now attempting to displace by employing unpaid students.

Clearly the notion of an internship has evolved into a major labour market trend, across major industries, both public and private and across the world; with insufficient oversight, regulation or resistance.

PSI ENGAGEMENT: THE UN PICTURE

PSI has been very pleased to welcome the affiliation of a range of International/NGO Staff Unions to our federation as well as the recent affiliation of the UN Staff Union in New York to the American Federation of Teachers, enabling us to improve **our support** for workers in the international sector.

Through our work within the UN System and these affiliates, PSI has noted a dramatic and very concerning explosion in the number of interns employed by the organisation. In the mid-1990s, the UN employed a few hundred unpaid interns a year; by 2014 this number had increased to 2200 interns per year, representing over one million hours of unpaid labour. The UN plays a very clear norm-defining role across the world, and their significant use of unpaid interns sets a worrying precedent for employers across all sections of the labour market. For this reason, PSI decided to launch our campaign on intern rights by targeting the UN in the hope that advancements there would have a ripple effect on other employers across the world.

PSI conducted meetings with our affiliates who represent workers at the UN, ILO and other intergovernmental bodies through the Coordinating Committee of International Staff Unions and Associations (CCISUA). From these meetings it was agreed to:

1. Create **a representation** for interns within staff union organisations, through Intern Boards
2. Support the calls of intern rights groups for remuneration, by **proposing a change** in UN policy to the Fifth Committee which decides on budgetary issues
3. Work with existing intern rights organisations such as the **Fair Internship Initiative** and the **Global Intern Coalition** to advance the issue in talks with administration
4. **Write a letter** from the Council of Global Unions to the UN administration, calling for a change in policy and further engagement on this issue
5. To hold a **side-event** to the Human Rights Council on how unpaid internships undermine Human Rights
6. To work with other NGOs, UN accredited groups and Human Rights experts to create institutional allies within UN bodies



Interns join a May Day march alongside colleagues from staff unions. - Photo Credit: Diego GS

GOING GLOBAL

PSI made the decision to work with the **Global Intern Coalition**, a diverse group of intern rights organisations from across the world, to carry out the first ever 'Global Intern Strike.' The goal was to extend our scope beyond the UN to the wider economy, to encourage other unions to engage and to highlight that the internship phenomenon is, at its core, a labour issue.

PSI assisted in the drafting and dissemination of the global sign-on letter which allowed organisations to express their support for the action as well as with the organisation of media releases and the local Geneva protest. In the lead-up to the action, many interns reported threats and intimidation from their employers, including at the UN. After communications with the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression and behind the scenes discussions with the significant help of our affiliates, the UN was pressured into sending an email to over 20,000 of their staff allowing interns to take part in the global protests.

On February 20th, 2017, the UN day for Social Justice, a variety of actions were carried out in Phnom Penh, Mumbai, Delhi, Izmir, Vienna, Geneva, Brussels, Washington DC, New York and Toronto. This included marches, walkouts, photo campaigns, workshops and panels.

The Global Intern Strike resulted in significant support from a wide range of unions and progressive organisations including:

- **ETUC Youth**
- **Union Solidarity International**
- **ITUC Youth**
- **Party of European Socialists**
(representing over 200 MEPs)
- **Europe Ecologie**
- **EU Parliament Youth Inter-Group**
(representing over 100 young MEPs)
- **European Youth Forum**
- **CCOO, UGT, C.Juventud** (Spain)
- **UDU, FP CGIL** (Italy)
- **SSP-VPOD, UNIA Geneve, Terre des Hommes, Les Verts** (Switzerland)
- **The Green Party (England and Wales)**
- **Association of Canadian Financial Officers**



The event also resulted in significant media coverage with over 50 articles published in outlets such as **Business Insider, Reuters, Politico, Sud Deutsche, EuroNews & Asia One.**



#GlobalInternStrike



SUCCESS STORIES

I. EU OMBUDSMAN RULES AGAINST UNPAID INTERNSHIPS

“Not paying trainees may very well be a practice that appears to be neutral but which, in the words of the ILO, in fact has a negative impact on less privileged persons”
Emily O'Reilly, European Ombudsman

In the days before the strike, the EU Ombudsman delivered a **scathing ruling** against the EU Institutions, focused on the EEAS, for their use of over 700 unpaid interns per year which called for an end to unpaid positions. The ruling described how unpaid internships create a vicious circle where only the privileged get ahead. The ruling delivered momentum and visibility to the strike, with intern groups now looking how to use Ombudsmen and other legal avenues in other contexts including against private sector employers and the UN.

II. CHANGING TONE TOWARDS INTERN ACTIVISM

As a direct result of increased campaigning, the 2016 **UN World Youth Report** contained, for the first time, an entire section on internships which, in strong language, “warns that an increasing number of companies and organizations are offering, often full-time and unpaid, internships for recent graduates. In many of such incidents, the internship is not necessarily linked to specific educational outcomes, but replaces the work of regular paid workers.”

“Many young people are calling for stronger regulations and the development of benchmarks for quality internships to avoid exploitation”

UN World Youth Report 2016

Additionally, the decision by UN management to send an email, days before the event, to all staff and interns allowing participation in the Global Intern Strike marks a significant development. Just weeks before the action, the UN attempted to prevent staff from participating in the Women’s March; a decision for which they received much criticism. In the past interns have been told that joining organisations like the Fair Internship Initiative and taking part in protests could jeopardize their careers and a UN spokesperson recently insultingly told media that ‘interns don’t work’. However, in the widely spread email, it was stated that “the Administration recognises the important contribution of interns to the work of the Organization” and that “staff and/or interns may attend activities... supervisors should allow both staff members and interns to participate in these activities.”

III. EMPLOYERS DEVELOP BETTER PRACTICES

As a result of increased intern activism and awareness of this issue, some UN agencies such as UNICEF have begun to pilot paid internship programs. The WHO Alumni Association has attempted to create a scholarship stipend program to attempt to demonstrate best practices and the issue has been raised at the WHO Executive Board. The ILO, as a result of the dedication of the ILO Intern Board and support from the ILO Staff Union, raised the intern stipend at the start of 2017 by 20%. The ILO is also

taking a closer look at internships as a labour issue across the labour market with some officials **discussing** the possibility of a new standard on internships.

Furthermore, a coalition of over 30 employers came together to create the **We Pay Our Interns** coalition, of which PSI is a member. The group aims to define good practices through a charter for internship employment in the NGO sector and encourage other organisations, such as the UN, to adopt better internship policies.



WHAT NEXT?

IV. FURTHER CAMPAIGNING

PSI will build on the current momentum to conduct outreach with our affiliates as well as the wider labour movement and progressive organisations to determine joint strategies and the potential for wider campaigning on this issue. PSI will identify regions and countries where the internship phenomenon is particularly profound or problematic.

V. CONTINUED PRESSURE ON EMPLOYERS

Alongside our affiliates, PSI will continue to lobby the UN to pay its interns as well as to reinstate P1 positions and end the abusive use of short term, precarious contracts throughout UN agencies. PSI will examine the possibility of mobilizing affiliates in Member-States to advance these issues through UN Country Missions. We will also coordinate with UN Staff Unions to prepare a request for the UN Secretariat to implement the necessary administrative changes for the creation of a paid internship program, financed through existing budgets.

VI. A UNION FOR INTERNS?

PSI will discuss with affiliates and partners the potential for unions to actively represent interns within the workplace. Such a move would ensure that the precarious position of interns and the opportunities this creates for abuse is mitigated by the strength of organized labour. It would also enable a recruitment of workers into unions at a young age and demonstrate a willingness to defend the rights of 'non-traditional' employees.

VII. CALLS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND STANDARDS

We will support efforts by the ILO and other organisations to conduct widespread research on internships as a labour trend and to develop strong and clear guidelines on what constitutes an internship, including the necessity for remuneration, workplace rights, objectives verified by a learning institution and safeguards to ensure interns are not replacing regular employees.





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