

Employment of Young Workers under the Polish Labour Code

Zatrudnianie młodocianych w świetle polskiego Kodeksu pracy

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Received: 29 Jun 2026

Revised: 2 Aug 2026

Accepted: 30 Aug 2026

Published Online First: 12 Sep 2026

Abstract: The employment of young workers constitutes an important area of labour law in which the legislature seeks to reconcile two objectives: enabling young persons to acquire vocational qualifications while ensuring enhanced protection arising from their age, physical and psychological immaturity, and compulsory education obligations. This article analyses selected provisions governing the employment of young workers under Part Nine of the Polish Labour Code, with particular emphasis on the conditions for lawful employment, vocational training, light work, health protection, working time, and annual leave. The analysis shows that Polish labour law establishes a distinct protective framework for young workers while enabling them to acquire vocational qualifications and practical work experience. The applicable regulations seek to balance young persons' entry into the labour market with the protection of their health, education, safety, and development. Overall, young workers are afforded substantially greater statutory protection than adult employees.

Keywords: young worker, labour law, vocational training, working time, Polish Labour Code

Abstrakt: Zatrudnianie młodocianych stanowi istotny obszar prawa pracy, w którym ustawodawca dąży do pogodzenia dwóch celów: umożliwienia osobom młodym zdobywania kwalifikacji zawodowych oraz zapewnienia im szczególnej ochrony wynikającej z wieku, niedojrzałości fizycznej i psychicznej oraz obowiązku nauki. Celem artykułu jest analiza wybranych przepisów regulujących zatrudnianie młodocianych zawartych w dziale dziewiątym polskiego Kodeksu pracy, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem warunków dopuszczalności zatrudnienia, przygotowania zawodowego, wykonywania prac lekkich, ochrony zdrowia, czasu pracy oraz urlopu wypoczynkowego. Analiza wskazuje, że polskie prawo pracy ustanawia szczególnie system ochrony pracowników młodocianych, umożliwiając im jednocześnie zdobywanie kwalifikacji zawodowych i praktycznego doświadczenia. Obowiązujące regulacje służą zachowaniu równowagi między wchodzeniem młodych osób na rynek pracy a ochroną ich zdrowia, edukacji, bezpieczeństwa i rozwoju. Młodociani w rezultacie korzystają ze znacznie szerszej ochrony ustawowej niż pełnoletni pracownicy.

Słowa kluczowe: młodociani, prawo pracy, przygotowanie zawodowe, czas pracy, polski Kodeks pracy



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INTRODUCTION

Labour law is one of those branches of law through which the state performs its protective function in a particularly significant manner. This function is reflected, above all, in the legal provisions governing employees who are in a particularly vulnerable position, including pregnant employees and young workers. With regard to young workers, the legislature proceeds on the assumption that they require enhanced protection against the adverse effects of gainful employment.

At the same time, the employment of young workers has an important social and economic dimension. Employment enables young persons to acquire practical work experience, develop professional competencies, and facilitates their entry into the labour market. Conversely, excessive or improperly organised employment may pose risks to their health, interfere with the fulfilment of compulsory education requirements, and adversely affect their physical and psychological development.

Accordingly, the Polish Labour Code lays down detailed provisions governing the employment of young workers. These provisions constitute an exception to the general principles of labour law and are primarily intended to ensure the protection of young workers.

1. THE CONCEPT OF A YOUNG WORKER IN LABOUR LAW

The basic definition of a young worker is set out in Article 190(1) of the Polish Labour Code, pursuant to which a young worker is a person who has attained the age of 15 but has not yet reached the age of 18. Accordingly, the legislature has established both the minimum and the maximum age limits within which a person may be regarded as a young worker for the purposes of labour law. This is a statutory definition and applies exclusively to employment relationships. Consequently, the status of a young worker does not depend on the possession of full legal capacity or on any other criteria provided for under civil law. Rather, the decisive factor is solely the age of the person entering into employment. In practice, this means that a person who has reached the age of 15 may be employed, provided that all other statutory requirements laid down by labour law are satisfied. Upon attaining the age of 18, however, an employee ceases to enjoy the status of a young worker and becomes subject to the general provisions governing adult employees (Rączka 2024, 1154–1156).

The adoption of 15 years of age as the minimum age for employment is closely linked to the obligation of compulsory education and to international standards concerning the protection of children. The legislature assumes that only after completing primary education and attaining an appropriate level of physical and psychological maturity may a young person safely undertake employment.

Pursuant to the principle laid down in Article 190(2) of the Polish Labour Code, the employment of persons under the age of 15 is prohibited. This prohibition is not, however,

absolute. The Labour Code permits children under that age to perform work or other gainful activities in the fields of culture, the arts, sport, and advertising. In such cases, additional statutory requirements must be satisfied, including, in particular, the consent of the child's legal representative and the authorisation of the competent labour inspector.

A young worker is an employee within the meaning of the Polish Labour Code and is therefore a party to an employment relationship, enjoying the fundamental rights conferred upon employees. These include, *inter alia*, the right to remuneration, the right to annual leave, and the right to safe and healthy working conditions. At the same time, the status of a young worker entails a range of additional rights and protective guarantees. These include, in particular, restrictions on working time, a prohibition on assigning young workers to prohibited types of work, and the employer's obligation to ensure appropriate conditions for education and vocational development.

The status of a young worker is also associated with specific rules governing the capacity to enter into an employment relationship. Although a young worker does not possess full legal capacity, he or she may independently conclude an employment contract and exercise the rights and perform the obligations arising therefrom.

At the same time, the Polish Labour Code provides for the possibility of intervention by the young worker's legal representative where the employment relationship is contrary to the young worker's best interests. This solution represents a balance between ensuring a young person's autonomy in matters relating to employment and safeguarding his or her welfare and legitimate interests.

2. CONDITIONS GOVERNING THE LAWFUL EMPLOYMENT OF YOUNG WORKERS

The employment of young workers constitutes a distinct institution of labour law, subject to a separate legal framework reflecting the need to protect persons who have not yet attained full physical and psychological maturity. Accordingly, not every young person may lawfully be employed. The legislature makes the admissibility of employment conditional upon the fulfilment of specific statutory requirements. First, a young worker must have completed at least eight years of primary education. This requirement is closely linked to the constitutional right to education and the obligation of compulsory schooling. The legislature proceeds on the

assumption that entry into gainful employment must not take place at the expense of obtaining a basic education.

Secondly, the prospective young worker must produce a medical certificate confirming that there are no health-related contraindications to performing the work in question. The requirement to undergo a pre-employment medical examination performs a particularly important protective function. The assessment of a young worker's fitness for work falls within the competence of an occupational health physician. The purpose of the examination is to determine whether the proposed work is compatible with the young person's physical and psychological capabilities and whether it poses any risk to his or her health or development. Where the occupational health physician determines that the work performed endangers the health of the young worker, the employer is under a statutory obligation to assign the employee to suitable alternative work. If reassignment is not possible, the employer must terminate the employment relationship. This solution demonstrates that the legislature accords priority to the protection of the young worker's health over the employer's economic interests.

The Polish Labour Code provides that young workers who do not possess vocational qualifications may, as a general rule, be employed solely for the purpose of vocational training. This reflects the legislature's fundamental objective of enabling young persons to acquire vocational qualifications by combining education with practical work experience. An exception to this principle is the employment of young workers to perform light work. In such cases, the purpose of the employment relationship is not the acquisition of vocational qualifications but the performance of work appropriate to the young worker's age and physical and psychological capabilities. This legislative approach demonstrates that the employment of young workers is intended primarily to serve educational and developmental purposes, rather than merely to provide an opportunity for gainful employment.

Before permitting a young worker to commence work, the employer is required to comply with a number of statutory obligations imposed by labour law. These include, in particular, referring the young worker for a pre-employment medical examination, providing initial occupational health and safety (OHS) training, familiarising the young worker with workplace rules and applicable procedures, and ensuring working conditions that are appropriate to the young worker's age, level of maturity, and experience.

In conclusion, the statutory conditions governing the lawful employment of young workers perform an important social and protective function. Their primary purpose is to prevent situations in which employment could adversely affect a young person's health, education, or physical and psychological development. At the same time, these provisions enable young workers to acquire practical work experience and vocational qualifications that are essential for their successful integration into the labour market.

3. VOCATIONAL TRAINING AS THE PRIMARY FORM OF EMPLOYMENT OF YOUNG WORKERS

A fundamental feature of the statutory framework governing the employment of young workers is the principle that a young person who does not possess vocational qualifications should, as a general rule, be employed for the purpose of vocational training. Vocational training constitutes the principal and most common form of employment for young workers under Polish labour law. The purpose of this institution is to enable young persons to acquire vocational qualifications by combining theoretical instruction with practical work experience. Unlike employment involving light work, which is intended primarily to provide young persons with their first experience of working life, vocational training has a distinctly educational character and is designed to lead to the acquisition of specific vocational qualifications required for the pursuit of a particular occupation.

Vocational training constitutes a special form of employment for young workers in which the primary objective is not the performance of work for the benefit of the employer, but rather the acquisition by the young worker of vocational knowledge and practical skills. The legislature proceeds on the assumption that persons entering the labour market should be afforded the opportunity to acquire occupational competencies progressively, under the supervision of qualified employees and within an educational environment that provides appropriate learning conditions.

Pursuant to Article 191(2) of the Polish Labour Code, a young worker who does not possess vocational qualifications may be employed solely for the purpose of vocational training, unless he or she is employed to perform light work. Accordingly, vocational training constitutes the principal form of employment of young workers under Polish labour law.

Vocational training may take one of two forms: (1) apprenticeship training, the purpose of which is to enable the young worker to acquire full vocational qualifications, certified by the successful completion of the relevant examination; and (2) training for the performance of a specific type of work, which is intended to equip the young worker with the practical skills necessary to carry out particular occupational tasks (Rączka 2024, 1160).

Apprenticeship training is the more comprehensive form of vocational training, encompassing both practical instruction in the occupation concerned and complementary theoretical education. By contrast, training for the performance of a specific type of work is of shorter duration and less formal in nature, focusing primarily on the acquisition of defined practical skills. Apprenticeship training may last for a maximum period of 36 months, whereas training for the performance of a specific type of work may last from three to six months (Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 28 May 1996 on the Vocational Training of Young Workers and Their Remuneration).

A young worker is employed for the purpose of vocational training under an employment contract. Such a contract should specify, in particular, the type of vocational training, its duration and place, the arrangements for theoretical instruction, and the amount of remuneration payable to the young worker. The employment contract must be concluded in writing between the employer and the young worker. The consent of the young worker's parents or legal guardians is not required.

An employment contract concluded with a young worker for the purpose of vocational training is of a special nature, as its purpose extends beyond the performance of work to include the acquisition of vocational knowledge and skills. An employment contract for vocational training is concluded for an indefinite period. The legislature has expressly provided that the general provisions of the Polish Labour Code governing the conclusion and termination of employment contracts for an indefinite period apply to employment contracts concluded with young workers. Exceptions to this rule are laid down in Articles 195 and 196 of the Polish Labour Code (Suknarowska-Drzewiecka 2026, theses 2 and 4). The fact that such a contract specifies the duration of the vocational training does not alter its legal nature or transform it into a fixed-term employment contract expiring upon completion of the training period (Judgment of the Court of Appeal in Gdańsk of 11 January 2016, Case No. III AUa 1249/15).

Vocational training is not confined to the performance of work alone. The young worker is under an obligation to undertake theoretical education, which constitutes an essential element of an employment contract concluded for the purpose of vocational training. The employer is required, as far as reasonably practicable, to support the young worker's education, including its theoretical component. In particular, the employer is obliged to release the young worker from work to enable attendance at educational or training activities connected with his or her vocational education. Such activities may take the form of school-based or out-of-school instruction, including training provided by the employer or by another person employed by the employer (Sobczyk 2025a, thesis 1). The combination of theoretical instruction with practical work experience constitutes one of the principal advantages of vocational training, enabling young workers to acquire both the knowledge and the practical skills necessary to pursue a particular occupation.

A young worker undergoing vocational training is entitled to remuneration for work. The amount of such remuneration is determined as a percentage of the average monthly remuneration in the national economy. This approach is intended to ensure that young workers receive financial support while taking into account the educational nature of the employment relationship. Detailed rules governing the remuneration of young workers are set out in Sections 19 and 20 of the Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 28 May 1996 on the Vocational Training of Young Workers and Their Remuneration (Journal of Laws of 2018, item 2010, as amended).

Vocational training plays an important role from the perspective of both young workers and employers. It enables young persons to acquire vocational qualifications before reaching the age of majority, thereby enhancing their prospects in the labour market. At the same time, it provides employers with an opportunity to train future employees in accordance with their own operational needs and organisational requirements.

In the context of labour shortages and the increasing demand for skilled workers, vocational training has become an important instrument of labour market policy and a means of ensuring the continuity of vocational education and training across many sectors of the economy, particularly in the crafts, services, and manufacturing industries.

It should, however, be emphasised that vocational training must not be regarded merely as a cost-effective means of securing labour at lower wage levels. Its primary purpose remains the education of young workers and the development of their vocational knowledge, practical skills, and professional qualifications.

4. EMPLOYMENT OF YOUNG WORKERS IN LIGHT WORK

In addition to vocational training, the Polish Labour Code permits the employment of young workers to perform so-called light work. This form of employment is of particular importance during school holidays and for students seeking to gain their first experience of working life.

Pursuant to Article 200¹(2) of the Polish Labour Code, light work is defined as work which does not endanger the life, health, or physical and psychological development of a young worker and does not interfere with the fulfilment of his or her compulsory education obligations. Accordingly, light work must be appropriate to the young worker's physical and psychological capabilities, while taking into account the fact that education remains the young person's primary responsibility. Consequently, even work that does not require significant physical effort cannot be classified as light work if it prevents regular school attendance or adversely affects the young worker's educational progress.

An employer intending to employ young workers to perform light work is required to prepare a list of the types of work that may be assigned to them. Such a list may not be drawn up at the employer's discretion alone. Before it may be introduced, the employer must obtain the opinion of an occupational health physician responsible for providing occupational health services and submit the list for approval by the competent Regional Labour Inspector. Once approved, the list becomes an integral part of the employer's workplace regulations. Where an employer is not required to adopt workplace regulations, the list must be incorporated into a separate internal regulatory instrument (Sobczyk 2025b, thesis 3). This mechanism serves an important protective function, as it enables oversight of the types of work assigned to young workers and helps prevent abuses by employers.

Restrictions on working time are of particular importance in the employment of young workers performing light work. During the school term, a young worker's working time may not exceed 12 hours per week. Moreover, on any day on which the young worker attends school,

he or she may work for no more than two hours. During school holidays, a young worker may work longer hours; however, working time may not exceed seven hours per day and 35 hours per week. In the case of a young worker under the age of 16, daily working time is limited to six hours.

These statutory limitations are intended to ensure that employment does not interfere with the young worker's educational obligations or impose an excessive physical or psychological burden that could adversely affect his or her health and development.

5. SPECIAL PROTECTION OF THE HEALTH OF YOUNG WORKERS AND RESTRICTIONS ON THEIR WORKING TIME

One of the fundamental principles governing the employment of young workers is the provision of enhanced protection of their health. This protection encompasses mandatory medical examinations, the prohibition of employment in hazardous or prohibited work, restrictions on working time, specific occupational health and safety requirements, and the limitation of work to tasks that are appropriate to the young worker's age and state of health. These measures are intended to ensure the harmonious development of young persons while enabling them to acquire practical work experience under conditions that provide a high level of health protection.

A fundamental precondition for the lawful employment of a young worker is the production of a medical certificate confirming the absence of any health-related contraindications to the performance of the work concerned. Such medical examinations are conducted as part of the system of preventive occupational health care and are intended to determine whether the young worker's state of health permits the performance of the proposed duties without posing a risk to his or her health. Pursuant to Article 201 of the Polish Labour Code, an employer may not employ a young worker in the absence of a valid medical certificate. Where an occupational health physician determines that the work performed endangers the young worker's health, the employer is under a statutory obligation to assign the employee to suitable alternative work. If reassignment is not possible, the employer must terminate the employment relationship, while the young worker retains the right to compensation equal to the remuneration payable for the applicable notice period (Włodarczyk 2025a, thesis 3).

The most far-reaching measure for the protection of the health of young workers is the prohibition on employing them in prohibited types of work. The list of such work is set out in the Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 19 June 2023 on the List of Work Prohibited for Young Workers and the Conditions for Their Employment in Respect of Certain Types of Such Work (Journal of Laws of 2023, item 1240, as amended). It includes, *inter alia*, work involving excessive physical exertion, exposure to hazardous chemical substances, exposure to noise, vibration, or radiation, work involving an increased risk of occupational injuries and accidents, and work performed at heights or involving the operation of dangerous machinery. These prohibitions are mandatory in nature and reflect the legislature's objective of protecting the developing bodies of young workers from factors that could adversely affect their physical and psychological development.

The protection of the health of young workers is also ensured through specific statutory provisions governing working time. The legislature limits the maximum permissible daily working hours, prohibits the employment of young workers in overtime and at night, and grants them extended daily and weekly rest periods. These measures are intended to prevent excessive physical and mental fatigue and to ensure an appropriate balance between work, education, and rest. In particular, pursuant to Article 202 of the Polish Labour Code, the daily working time of a young worker under the age of 16 may not exceed six hours, whereas the daily working time of a young worker aged 16 or over may not exceed eight hours. For the purposes of calculating working time, the time spent attending compulsory educational activities under the school curriculum is included, irrespective of whether such instruction takes place during normal working hours. Furthermore, where a young worker's daily working time exceeds four and a half hours, he or she is entitled to an uninterrupted break of 30 minutes, which is counted as working time.

Moreover, Article 203 of the Polish Labour Code establishes an absolute prohibition on employing young workers in overtime or at night. It further provides that the daily rest period encompassing the night-time period must consist of at least 14 consecutive hours. In addition, every young worker is entitled to a minimum uninterrupted weekly rest period of 48 hours, which must include Sunday. These protective standards are considerably more favourable than those applicable to employees who have attained the age of 18.

6. ANNUAL LEAVE ENTITLEMENTS OF YOUNG WORKERS

The legislature has also introduced special rules governing the entitlement of young workers to annual leave. The leave entitlements of young workers are more favourable than those applicable to other employees, as they acquire the right to annual leave more rapidly. This reflects the legislature's recognition that young persons require more time for rest and physical and psychological recuperation. These provisions serve a protective function and are intended to reconcile employment with the educational process. As a result, young workers are able to take annual leave during school holidays.

Pursuant to Article 205 of the Polish Labour Code, a young worker becomes entitled to 12 working days of annual leave after completing six months of his or her first period of employment. Upon completing one year of employment, the young worker acquires the right to a further 26 working days of annual leave. Consequently, during the first year of employment, a young worker may acquire an aggregate entitlement of 38 working days of annual leave (Maniewska 2026, thesis 2). The initial entitlement of 12 working days is not deducted from the subsequent annual leave entitlement. It therefore constitutes an additional statutory benefit, with the result that a young worker may enjoy a total of 38 working days of annual leave during the first year of employment. This preferential leave regime is limited in its application in the calendar year in which the young worker attains the age of 18. In that year, the employee acquires the right to 20 working days of annual leave, in accordance with the general rules applicable to adult employees (Włodarczyk 2025b, thesis 1).

A further noteworthy feature of the statutory framework is the employer's obligation to grant annual leave to a young worker who is attending school during school holidays. The purpose of this provision is to facilitate the reconciliation of educational responsibilities with gainful employment while ensuring that young workers have a genuine opportunity for rest and recuperation. Where a young worker has not yet acquired the statutory entitlement to annual leave, the employer may, upon the young worker's request, grant annual leave in advance for the duration of the school holidays. This, however, is a discretionary power of the employer rather than a statutory obligation.

In addition, the legislature has provided for the possibility of unpaid leave during school holidays. Upon the request of a young worker attending a school for working students, the employer is required to grant unpaid leave of such duration that, when combined with the young worker's annual leave entitlement, it does not exceed two months. Importantly, the period of such unpaid leave counts towards the employee's period of employment for the purposes of determining employment-related statutory rights (Włodarczyk 2025b, thesis 4). This interpretation has been confirmed in the case law. In its judgment of 12 March 2013 (Case No. III AUa 846/12), the Court of Appeal in Katowice held that the period of unpaid leave granted to a young worker pursuant to Article 205(4) of the Polish Labour Code constitutes a period of employment within the meaning of Article 6(2)(1)(a) of the Act of 17 December 1998 on Old-Age and Disability Pensions from the Social Insurance Fund. The same position was subsequently adopted by the Court of Appeal in Szczecin (Case No. III AUa 12/17).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the statutory framework governing the employment of young workers leads to the conclusion that it is founded upon the principle of enhanced protection of this category of employees. This protection is reflected not only in the statutory conditions governing the lawful employment of young workers, but also in the special rules relating to working time, occupational health and safety, and annual leave.

The provisions contained in Part Nine of the Polish Labour Code give effect to the protective function of labour law while, at the same time, enabling young persons to acquire vocational qualifications and practical work experience. As a general rule, the current regulatory framework strikes an appropriate balance between the legitimate interests of employers and the need to safeguard young workers. Nevertheless, in light of the evolving nature of the labour market, it cannot be excluded that the existing legal framework will require further adaptation to address future challenges and changing economic conditions. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that the employment of young workers is not concerned solely with fostering their professional development and facilitating the acquisition of vocational experience. It also serves the equally important objective of ensuring enhanced protection of

the health, safety, and overall well-being of young persons during the formative stages of their participation in the labour market.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board / Ethics Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

AI Tools Declaration: Not applicable. The author declares that no use of AI tools requiring disclosure under the Seminare Policy on AI in Scholarly Publishing occurred in the preparation of this manuscript or in the underlying study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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