



Michèle Auga

# Trade Unions and Right-Wing Populism in Ireland

## The Irish Trade Union Movement

Ireland's trade unions are largely gathered under a single confederation – The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), comprising 43 unions representing over 700 000 workers island-wide. SIPTU, a general union, accounts for nearly one-third of this membership. Union density peaked at 62 percent in the 1980s but is now around 26 percent, with collective-bargaining coverage at 35 percent. Public administration, education, health, energy and water workers tend to be the most unionised, while hospitality, IT and low-skill manufacturing remain least organised.

The defining feature of Ireland's trade union framework is its voluntarist system. Although freedom of association is constitutionally guaranteed, there is no obligation for employers to recognise unions. Thus, bargaining occurs at enterprise level, and agreements are rarely enforceable in court. Two specialised instruments are crucial for imposing sector wide standards: Sectoral Employment Orders (SEOs), which require ratification by the Labour Court before they can be applied universally, and Joint Labour Committees, which target weakly organised sectors. The right to strike is not protected by the constitution, although as long as strict balloting laws are followed, and appropriate notice is given, immunity from legal action is protected by the Industrial

Relations Act 1990. Recent developments as a result of the Supreme Court ruling on *O'Neill Limited vs. Unite The Union* (2024) found freedom of association to include at least some protected percentzone of freedom« for unions to organise, and raised the bar for issuing strike-stopping injunctions.

Despite weak legal foundations, Irish unions have demonstrated an impressive ability to influence policy. Most notably, three-year »social-partnership« pacts ran from 1987–2010, which stabilised the economy and limited strikes by exchanging moderate wage rises for tax and service cuts. Although the model collapsed after the 2008 financial crash, public-sector pay is still set through multi-year deals. ICTU also sits on the Labour Employer Economic Forum with Irish Business and Employers' Confederation (Ibec), giving direct access to government ministers. Despite turbulence since 2010, Irish unions still enjoy broad political legitimacy and have avoided hostile anti-union legislation seen elsewhere in Europe.

## The Far-Right in Ireland – Recent Developments and Strategic Positioning

Ireland was long considered immune to far-right politics. A number of factors have been posited as to why this may be the case, including the Catholic Churches historic role in

maintain social conservatism, Sinn Féin's role in tying nationalism to left wing politics, and Ireland's Proportional Representation – Single Transferable Vote (PR-STV) election system. Under PR-STV, each constituency elects several representatives, and candidates must rely on vote transfers from other parties. This rewards broadly acceptable figures and makes it difficult for fringe or polarising candidates to succeed. Because forming a government often requires coalition deals to secure a majority, power tends to remain with moderate, mainstream parties. The system also forces parties to maintain strong local organisations across the country – something far-right movements in Ireland have so far lacked. Although right-wing figures and parties have emerged throughout the state's history, they have rarely presented any significant threat to the political status quo. In recent years however, a visible Far-Right has emerged and demonstrated an ability to influence narratives, consolidate support, and even win seats on local councils. Although this movement was certainly present and growing beforehand, the outbreak of Covid-19 and subsequent lockdown measures acted as a catalyst, helping them to capitalize on the institutional distrust that had steadily been growing since the 2008 financial crash, and the subsequent years of austerity. As lockdown measures eased, their focus turned to new issues – primarily the increasing numbers of displaced refugees and asylum seekers entering Ireland.<sup>1</sup> While anti-migrant politics have remained a core part of this movements motivating concerns, they also oppose LGBTQ+ rights, environmental initiatives, and Ireland's membership of the EU, among other issues. These positions are defended with a populist reasoning that these are the concerns of a minority of »out of touch« elites, and run counter to the interests of »real« people.

In June 2024 the Far-Right saw their biggest electoral successes to date.<sup>2</sup> The timing of the local elections proved beneficial to candidates running on an anti-migrant platform, with polling showing immigration to be the number one issue with which voters were concerned, following a series of high-profile demonstrations which took place outside proposed sites for asylum seeker accommodation.<sup>3</sup> Candidates leveraged the protests, connecting migration to the housing crisis with slogans like »Ireland is full«. These elections, and the European Parliament elections which took place at the same time, represented the first opportunity for newly formed Far-Right parties to test their electoral viability. These parties included:

- The National Party, formed in 2016, which represented a bridge between an older era of Far-Right politics, largely grounded in Irish culture and heritage, and the newer, more populist and conspiratorial Far-Right that emerged post-Covid.
- The Irish Freedom Party, founded in 2018 by Hermann Kelly, a former press officer for Nigel Farage, who looked to emulate UKIP's model by running against Ireland's membership of the EU, trying to create interest in an »Irexit« movement.

- Ireland First, a solidly anti-immigration party, founded by Derek Blighe, a Bricklayer from Fermoy Co. Cork and self-described »citizen journalist« who built an audience online reporting on anti-lockdown demonstrations, before pivoting to covering anti-migrant demonstrations.
- The Irish People, the most fringe and conspiratorial party, which also made anti-migration policies the core of its platform, while opposing trans-rights far more aggressively than any other party.

Five candidates running on anti-migrant platforms were elected to local councils, including members of both the National Party and the Irish Freedom Party.<sup>4</sup> Among the independents elected were Malachy Steenson and Gavin Pepper, prominent figures in the anti-migrant demonstrations which took place in East Wall and Ballymun-Finglas respectively. While these candidates have certainly benefited from their increased platforms, the weakness of Ireland's local councils<sup>5</sup> means they lack the political levers to take direct action against migrants, trade unions, the mainstream media, etc. Although vocal critics of pro-migrant alliances in which the Irish trade union movement is heavily involved, these elected officials have not targeted trade unions or their members directly.

The Far-Right felt momentum to be on its side going into the general election five months later. In the run up to these elections, the Far-Right continued to strategize, identifying that the presence of multiple candidates running on anti-migrant platforms within relatively small constituencies had led to vote splitting, costing the movement seats. To avoid repeating this mistake in the general election, The National Alliance was formed, an electoral pact comprising The National Party, Ireland First, and The Irish People, with the Irish Freedom Party being notably absent (likely motivated by party's attempt to present themselves as more moderate). Ultimately this alliance failed to produce any elected TD's. In fact, the National Alliance failed to achieve its basic objective of avoiding vote splitting, with almost all constituencies in the country running at least two Far-Right candidates, going as high as five in some cases.<sup>6</sup> The political environment had also changed, with housing and cost of living once again overtaking migration as the issue with which voters were most concerned.

Ireland's Far-Right appears to have gone into a minor crisis as a result of this outcome. In early 2025, the Irish Freedom Party's only elected representative Glen Moore, resigned from the party, citing leadership issues under Hermann Kelly, who was later ousted.<sup>7</sup> Ireland First leader Derek Blighe also stood down, initially endorsing Anthony Casey as his replacement, before withdrawing this support, alleging electoral misconduct.<sup>8</sup> The National Party has continued to move rightwards under Patrick Quinlan's leadership, and has continued to court younger voters. Meanwhile, the Irish People appears to have disappeared entirely. Although some pundits touted the result as a clear repudiation of the Far-Right, this analysis is premature. It would be a mistake

to measure the movement's popularity solely by Oireachtas seats. Far-right narratives on immigration have already permeated mainstream discourse, and are being shared by some established political parties and independents, who appear to be moving rightward on the issue.<sup>9</sup> The Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael led government has shifted visibly on this position, expanding the 'Safe Countries of Origin List' and accelerated processing, while tripling deportation order in the first months of 2025.<sup>10</sup> Following criticism of being »too soft« on immigration, and a disappointing result in the 2024 local elections Sinn Féin began pivoting toward firmer control, promising an Immigration Management Agency, tighter rules on where centres go, and formal community consultation. Independents, most notably the Rural Independents group, have also tabled Dáil motions calling for caps on asylum, while attacking the EU Migration Pact.

Although Far-Right parties appear to be in crisis, the movement more broadly remains strong. Leadership vacuums will close, and new strategies will emerge. The Far-Right has continued positioning themselves as being anti-government disruptors of the »status quo«. They have also leaned further into republicanism, the belief that Ireland should be a single, independent republic, ending British rule in Northern Ireland. However, this has been complicated by recent incidents of Far-Right figures allying themselves with unionists – who explicitly oppose Irish unity – to jointly oppose immigration.<sup>11</sup> Street violence and intimidation targeting migrants continue with minimal legal consequences. The Far-Right are also moving further into civil society with The National Party and Clann Éireann visibly present in a pro-life rally which drew over three thousand participants.<sup>12, 13</sup> Unity talks are still on the table, although leadership disputes and controversies over engagement with unionists have slowed things down. The National Party has been conspicuously absent from these talks, although its presence has been observed elsewhere in Europe. Members of the youth wing Óige Náisiúnach have met with Italian nationalist's Casaghi, where they discussed »the importance of the distinct identities of European peoples«. <sup>14</sup> They also spoke at an »Irish Night« in Ghent with Flemish nationalists about their common enemy – »International finance and the parasites that uphold it«. <sup>15</sup> These proactive attempts to connect with likeminded allies across Europe appear to be unique to the National Party for the time being. Such links illustrate the emerging »global radical right«<sup>16</sup>: a transnational web of rallies, media, and online channels coordinating a shared »civilizational fight« against elites and immigration. Cross border collaboration has also been identified in a recent UNISON report, which found that Far-Right networks in Britain and the Republic of Ireland played a key role in amplifying anti-immigrant activity in Northern Ireland.<sup>17</sup> Outside of Europe, the Irish Far-Right's closest right-wing alliances appear to be with American movements and figures. Former KK Grand Dragon Frank Silva has spoken with members of the Far-Right, and shared strategies for going viral.<sup>18</sup> Right-Wing US media figures like Steve Bannon, Tucker Carlson and Nick Fuentes have also regularly amplified Ireland's Far-

Right, and helped spread their narratives to American audiences.<sup>19</sup> This exposure has had tangible benefits for figures like Keith Woods,<sup>20</sup> an Irish Far-Right influencer who monetizes a predominantly US audience, and former National Party leader Justin Barrett, who has been revealed to have received many small donations from US donors.<sup>21</sup> This closeness is also reflected in Far-Right narratives and tactics originating in the US finding their way into the Irish Far-Right's Playbook, including seeding doubts about election integrity and calls to »Stop the steal« following unsuccessful elections.<sup>22</sup> This trans-Atlantic exchange of Far-Right narratives is not a new phenomenon, and has already identified in France and Germany (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2020).<sup>23</sup>

## The Power Resources Approach – How the Far-Right is Targeting Trade Union Movements across Europe

The Power Resource Approach views union power through four interconnected resources – structural, organisational, institutional and societal. Using this lens, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung published the findings of twelve individual country reports analysing how their respective trade union movements have been targeted by the Far-Right, identifying broad trends in strategies and responses.<sup>24</sup>

Institutional power, rooted in unions' influence over legal agreements and labour policies, is currently the central point of attack for Europe's Far-Right movements. Attacks here undo decades of union progress instantaneously. It is generally far more difficult and politically costly to re-establish these frameworks, than it is to dismantle them, and so unions first instinct has been to defend existing legal scaffolding, rather than renegotiating.

Societal power derives from unions' capacity to shape public opinion through alliances, campaigns and storytelling. Far-Right movements undercut this power by portraying unions as elitist and branding them as »too political« for commenting beyond workplace disputes. Unions are responding by joining anti-racist coalitions, and staging mass rallies on issues such as living costs and housing, to grow networks, and establish trade unions legitimacy beyond the workplace.

Organisational power flows from membership, finances and participatory structures. Far-Right groups are undermining this power by creating »patriotic« trade unions which frame common workplace issues as consequences of migrant workers »undercutting« native workers. However, these approaches require sustained effort to maintain, and have met mixed successes to date. Unions have responded by leaning into recruitment drives and shop-floor education programmes.

Structural power hinges on workers' market position – their ability to halt production and their replaceability, and is undermined by Far-Right actors fragmenting workplaces by

promoting racialised narratives that pit native »insiders« against non-native outsiders. However, recent changes to union's structural power are more commonly the result of global economic trends rather than focused anti-union strategy, making the immediate threat from the Far-Right less clear.

## Irish Far-Right Impact on Workers and Trade Unions Responses

Applying the Power Resources Approach to the Irish context, it becomes clear how much of an outlier Ireland is, both as a result of its Far-Right being in a relatively nascent state (and thus having little institutional power), and the voluntarist nature of Ireland's trade union movement.

The Irish Far-Right's most visible assaults are their attacks on frontline workers first. Such attacks can impact organisational power by chilling participation, and making visible union activity more costly on an individual level. A 2024 UCD study of 26 library staff reported rising fear and demands for extra security following far-right intimidation.<sup>25</sup> As well as removing and burning books they deemed to be »pornographic«, members of the Far-Right intimidated library staff directly, filming them, pushing them, and calling them paedophiles. Public-transport workers face similar abuse, with SIPTU noting a sea change in passenger behaviour, and documenting over 1000 cases of abuse since late 2023,<sup>26</sup> while schools and teachers are targeted with »grooming« accusations over SPHE reforms. Unions have responded to these escalations with increased security measures, dedicated training, policy resolutions, and public mobilisations, all of which emphasise the protection of vulnerable workers as being of utmost importance to the defence of organised labour as a whole.

Beyond frontline abuse, Ireland's Far-Right threatens organisational power by spreading narratives to sow division and threaten solidarity. Harmful narratives targeting migrant workers, blaming them for everything from low pay to grooming children, are used to isolate them, and exclude them from participating in society. This isolation bleeds into all aspects of life, including organisation. ICTU's *Stronger Together* campaign prescribes training, tougher policies, and better representation, as a way to counter these tactics.<sup>27</sup> Among the training offered is Training the Trainers, which affords union employees and reps an opportunity to learn how to counter racism in ways that are sustainable and inclusive, while a leadership training programme specifically catering to ethnic minority union members helps to promote their participation in, and advancement through, union structures. Stronger Together has also produced a toolkit, designed to give affiliates a ready-made playbook for countering any far-right organising that breaks out within its constituent unions and organised workplaces.

Ireland's Far-Right have had some success in capturing the public narrative and pushing the boundaries of acceptable

discourses rightwards, helping to build their societal power. They have staged high profile demonstrations in Dublin, and drawn media attention while protesting outside school, libraries, and proposed sites for refugee accommodation. The response of Ireland's unions to the Far-Right attempts to demonstrate they speak for a »silent majority« have been somewhat successful. Public solidarity actions have played a key role, perhaps best exemplified by the Ireland for All demonstration in which ICTU were lead organisers, which took place in February 2023, and which was estimated to draw 50,000 attendees.<sup>28</sup> At a more local level, individual unions have participated in counterdemonstrations in flash-point communities where anti-migrant demonstrations have mobilised. The Irish trade union's movement's role as leaders, organisers, or even just participants in these demonstrations has helped preserve the labour movement's moral legitimacy, while building and maintaining cross-societal alliances.

Ireland's Far-Right currently holds little institutional power, and so counter to what is being observed in comparative European contexts, the institutional power of Ireland's trade unions has gone largely untroubled. The Far-Right have no direct means to rewrite labour law or dismantle collective bargaining machinery. However, as previously discussed, they have demonstrated an ability to influence the rhetoric, and indeed the policy of more mainstream parties. Although the institutional framework remains broadly intact, vigilance is essential.

## Strategic Responses from Unions

ICTU's all-island structure ensures that racist or anti-migrant flash points in Dublin, Belfast, or smaller towns across the island, are all understood as part of the same problem, meaning solutions also need to be unified. The electoral weakness of Ireland's Far-Right, for now, means that their impact on unions often targets organisational power, experienced as online harassment portraying unions – and in some cases specific high-ranking members – as members of an elite class, unconcerned with the day-to-day experiences of »normal« people. Attacks also come in the form of workplace harassment and street violence. In the absence of any Far-Right threat of legislative rollback on institutional power for the time being, unions have responded by emphasizing security, training and education, and rapid response mobilization. Nevertheless, the increasing prevalence of Far-Right counter-strategies in core policy documents demonstrates that unions understand this threat is not episodic, but rather, an inevitable structural threat to organized labour which will require a collective response.

An important lever in countering the Far-Right, will be taking advantage of trade union's societal power, and foregrounding their ability to deliver economic justice, and telling a story that competes with dominant Far-Right narratives. Disillusionment with the status quo, and the government's failure on housing, the cost of living, and childcare, have left people receptive to anyone offering to disrupt the status-quo.



While this has benefited Far-Right figures who peddle simplistic solutions to these complex problems, trade unions can capitalise by demonstrating why a strong trade union movement is the most effective solution, undermining the Far-Right's scapegoating approach. The New Economic Model, recently published by ICTU and The Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI) proposes a framework as to how this can be achieved, outlining how shared prosperity and reduced deprivation can lead to more robust, resilient economies, as opposed to being a »trade-off«. The framework affords greater access to decent work, income security, and essential services, ensuring economic shocks don't disproportionately impact low- and middle-income households. Irish Trade Unions are consistently securing impactful wins for Irish workers and a consistent economic justice frame could help highlight how these results are and to the benefit of workers everywhere. In June 2024, SIPTU successfully helped lift statutory minimum hourly rates for 33,000 workers in early learning and childcare<sup>29</sup> and secured sectoral ERO's raising the minimum wage for private security workers<sup>30</sup> and contract cleaners.<sup>31</sup> Across public services, ICTU's Public Services Committee secured a three year pay deal (worth 9.25 percent across the period).<sup>32</sup> While these are all impressive and impactful achievements in their own right, The New Economic Model helps demonstrate how they are all a part of the same story.

The Irish trade union movement's organisational power shows significant potential, should the current approach to inclusive organizing and migrant led leadership continue and be expanded. Unions can ensure seats for migrants in their executives and secure funding for dedicated diversity officers, steps which are already being taken by some unions as a result of ICTU's Stronger Together campaign, which although still in its early days, is demonstrating a solid foundation of concrete capacity-building actions on which to build. Investment should also continue into political education and digital resilience, to arm members with the skills to debunk digital hate, and show that what is being shared online does not always reflect what's actually happening in the world. At a branch level, unions can invest in training to help workers understand complex issues, while keeping LGBTQ+ and migrant networks visible and active. This will consolidate members and build resilience to Far-Right narratives and talking points, ensuring members are inoculated against Far-Right narratives.

Such an approach will be complemented by unions demonstrating their institutional power, invoking disciplinary clauses, equality legislation or social dialogue forums to remind members that racism breaches not only union rules and core values, but fundamental workplace laws. Such actions will help unions maintain credibility in the public eye, while demonstrating a willingness to take action and promote inclusivity to ensure migrants feel welcome throughout the movement.

Finally, Unions cannot defeat the Far-Right alone, and should continue investing in broad, values-based alliances,

standing up for fairness and equality, and defending the most vulnerable in society. NGOs, migrants' groups and women's organisations are obvious allies in the fight against the Far-Right, and can contribute to the societal power movements gain through numbers. It also offers new opportunities for organizing and demonstrating, particularly if unions are willing to get involved at a more granular, community-focused level. These alliances can help to make racism more socially costly, while demonstrating that the trade union's commitment to solidarity and equality is universal, and goes beyond workplace issues.

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