



ETUI-REHS

Trade union membership in Europe

The extent of the problem and
the range of trade union responses

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This paper outlines some of the challenges faced by trade unions if they are to reverse the decline in membership sustained over the past twenty-five years. The paper comprises four sections. The first section charts the extent of the decline in unionisation in EU member states and the changes in the composition of the unionised workforce. The second section reviews the explanations of the decline, focusing on both the external threats and the inadequacies of union organisation. The third section identifies the challenge faced by unions if they are to increase membership. The fourth section reviews some features of the trade union response to decline and shows that a wide range of reforms have been implemented, although, as yet, they have failed to reverse the decline in membership.

The extent of decline and the changing composition of membership

Since 1980 trade union density has declined in many European countries (see Appendix for details). Estimates suggest that trade union density fell from 32.6 per cent in 1995 to 26.4 per cent in 2001 in the EU25. This fall is particularly marked among the new member states where density fell from 42.7 per cent to 20.4 per cent between 1995 and 2001, whereas in the EU15 density fell from 31.0 per cent to 27.3 per cent in the same period (EC 2004). Trade unions now represent a smaller proportion of the employed workforce in Europe than at any other time since 1950.

Although the ranking of countries by union density has remained broadly the same since 1980, the range between the most densely organised country (Sweden) and the least unionised (France) has risen from 61.1 percentage points in 1980 to 68.3 percentage points in 2002.

In the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and Belgium the extent of decline is marginal due to the presence of some variant of the Ghent system, within which trade unions have a role in the administration of unemployment benefit and insurance.

Within the trend of declining membership there have also been marked and inter-related shifts in the composition of the unionised labour force. Prominent among these shifts are:

- an increasing concentration of members employed in the public sector. In almost all countries the public sector is more unionised than industry, which, in turn, is more unionised than private sector services;
- union membership is becoming increasingly feminised. In several countries (see Appendix) women now comprise more than half of union membership;
- retired and unemployed people form an increasing proportion of union membership. Recent data suggest that between 15 and 20 per cent of trade union members in the EU are either unemployed or retired, with the range varying from under 1 per cent in Slovenia to 49.3 per cent in Italy (EIRO 2004a);
- in most countries there are reports of young and ethnic minority workers not joining unions in sufficient numbers, hence inhibiting the renewal of union organisation. Furthermore, the average age of trade union members in many countries is markedly higher than the average age of the labour force;
- a rising proportion of trade union members are employed in managerial, professional or associate professional occupations. Several of the unions and confederations that represent members from these occupations tend to highlight individual rather than collective membership identities, particularly on the issue

of pay. Furthermore, relations between union and member are different than those that characterise the ‘traditional’ organisation of manual workers. In consequence, different forms of collective solidarity are emerging.

The consequences of membership decline and concurrent shifts in the composition of the remaining membership are wide-ranging for trade union organisation. In particular, membership decline is associated with shortages in financial and material resources, which limit the opportunities to implement reforms to meet the challenges outlined above. Similarly, among the larger and more heterogeneous unions, shifts in the composition of membership require reforms of systems of union governance to ensure the representation, participation and involvement of members from previously under-represented groups. As most reforms require vested interests to be yielded, they are difficult and time-consuming to implement and may result in periods of introspection during which attention is almost exclusively directed towards internal union affairs rather than concentrating on issues pertinent to potential members.

Explaining the decline in union membership

In broad terms, explanations of membership decline have focused on external threats and internal union inadequacies. It should be noted, however, that some researchers have argued that potential members are more individualised than in the past and, thus, are less likely to join trade unions. The evidence on the extent of individualisation is mixed, but it is clear that potential members are more instrumental than in the past, which means that trade unions have to be seen to deliver ‘value for money’ if they are to recruit. It is also apparent that large numbers of potential members feel that they can best deal with their manager directly, rather than rely on a union representative as an intermediary, and thus also remain apart from unions. Another aspect associated with individualisation is that trade unions are now required to be seen to be targeting individual potential members with a ‘package’ of services appropriate to the specific needs of that potential member. The implication here is that this package must vary according to the industrial location, occupation and the personal characteristics of the potential member. Furthermore, unions that organise heterogeneous members must offer a range of member packages, rather than offer a single unified appeal to potential members.

External Threats: it is commonplace to see external threats subsumed within globalisation, increased international competition and deregulation. These developments certainly set the scene, particularly as trade unions continue to operate primarily within nation states, but most influential in directly promoting membership decline are:

- rising unemployment. In most countries trade unions offer relatively few services to the unemployed. In consequence, most trade unionists who become unemployed abandon their union membership;
- changing composition of the labour force. Employment is shifting from industry, where unionisation rates tend to be relatively high, to private sector services, where unionisation rates are lower. Associated with this shift are the growth of atypical forms of employment, employment at small workplaces and new forms of employment relationship. Trade union movements have yet to adjust to these developments with the consequence that members are being lost from industry at a higher rate than they are being recruited in private sector services;

- employers. A growing number of employers are resisting unionisation to a greater extent than in the past. While this tendency is often linked with US employers setting up operations within the EU, there is increasing evidence of European-based employers questioning the need for a union presence, particularly in the new member states. The coverage of collective bargaining is declining in many member states (both new and old). Attempts by employers to decentralise collective bargaining have also required trade unions to establish new co-ordination mechanisms, which several have failed to do, with the consequence that members may feel isolated from the union while at the workplace.

Internal Union Inadequacies: a wide range of arguments have been deployed to indicate that trade unions have yet to implement the reforms required to adjust to present (and future) circumstances. In general terms, these arguments suggest that trade unions remain wedded to the past. For trade unions there are issues of image to address and a need to convince potential members that unions are still relevant in the modern world. Among the examples cited to indicate the failure to modernise are:

- trade union practices are too formal and old-fashioned: as such, they put potential members off, particularly the young;
- trade unions are dominated by middle-aged men;
- in some countries trade unionists are still seen as primarily male and employed in manual occupations;
- representative structures and practices do not allow (or are inappropriate for) the participation of some groups of members;
- trade union leadership is often viewed as being ‘out-of-touch’ with current workplace realities.

What is clear is that the membership of many trade unions is becoming more diverse due to changes in the composition of the labour force. Furthermore, this increasing diversity is often concurrent with declining membership. In other words, trade unions have to adjust to increasingly membership diversity at a time of diminishing resources.

The challenge defined

In brief, the challenge for trade unions is threefold:

1. All too often the challenge is seen simply in terms of membership numbers. If trade unions are to attract and accommodate more heterogeneous constituencies they will have to represent more workers at small workplaces, more workers with higher rates of job turnover and to confront a wider range of employer resistance strategies. Any successful approach to membership growth must incorporate measures to meet these demands.
2. The issue of recruitment cannot be resolved without creating union agendas and internal channels of representation that meet the heterogeneous interests of, and conditions met, by potential members, particularly in private sector services.
3. The decentralised and diversified patterns of service provision combined with the concentration of corporate power reinforces the critical importance of maintaining or regenerating links between the different levels at which trade unionism operates (local, regional, national and international).

The nature of the trade union response

As most trade unions are dependent on contributions from members as their primary source of income, any decline in membership results in a decrease in financial and material resources. Furthermore, membership decline may result in less influence within political and bargaining spheres. Given the extent of the implications of membership decline it is surprising that so few unions have directed attention towards reversing decline. Many unions rely on their embeddedness within national politics to exert influence, even though the membership they organise is much lower than when the embedded position was initially established. In other words, too many trade unions are living on borrowed time.

There is a vast range of reforms that have been introduced in attempts to reverse the decline in membership. Among the principal means of reform are the following:

- mergers. Most mergers have resulted from membership and/or financial decline rather than strategic decisions to restructure. There is consistent evidence to show that members of small unions acquired by larger unions benefit from mergers, as the post-merger union is often able to provide a wider range of services to members than the smaller pre-merger union. There are also a few mergers that have resulted in constitutional reform, thus allowing the post-merger union to adjust to present circumstances. There is no consistent evidence, however, that shows that mergers have produced economies of scale that have released resources that have been used to recruit more members. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that the huge number of mergers that have taken place in recent years have made trade union structures more congruent with the divisions within the labour market;
- internet. An increasing number of trade unions use internet/electronic systems to provide services to members. This is particularly the case among unions that organise white-collar and professional employees. Furthermore, the use of such systems has enabled unions to extend the range of services that are available to members and to increase the intensity of communications from the union. These services and communications do not replace 'traditional' face-to-face contact with union representatives, but do enhance union visibility. Some unions also use the internet as a recruitment tool and allow members to join electronically.
- reforming the bargaining agenda. To accommodate the changing composition of union membership a wide range of 'new' bargaining agenda items have been pursued. Among the most prominent of these are family-friendly policies; policies designed to promote equality; bargaining on the allocation rather than the duration of working time; policies on training and retraining; and initiatives to make the principles and application of individualised pay systems subject to collective agreements.

Recruitment Strategies: an increasing number of trade unions are adopting variants of the servicing or the organising approach to recruitment. Although these approaches are often presented as being mutually exclusive, several unions pursue the two approaches simultaneously as part of strategies that target specific groups of potential members.

- Servicing. A servicing approach to recruitment relies on the provision of an extended range of services by the trade union. In recent years a vast range of 'new' financial services (discounted insurance schemes, holiday packages, health care, etc.) have been offered by trade unions. In most countries, financial

services have proved less attractive to potential members than new services directly related to work and the workplace, such as income maintenance insurance if the member is made redundant or career advice and job search facilities. Other services designed to extend the range provided by trade unions include will writing services and tax form completion services. The services introduced in the more recent past have followed extensive market research commissioned by trade unions to establish what members and potential members want. The use of market research by trade unions is now more widespread than at any other time in the past. For some time trade unions that represent professional workers have offered a range of professional services, such as professional indemnity insurance. This range of services is now being extended to embrace career development and (re)training issues.

- **Organising.** The intention underpinning organising approaches to membership growth is to intensify links between members and union representatives, to encourage more members to become engaged in union activities (including recruitment), and to generate forms of self-help among unionists at the workplace. The organising approach has its origins in the US and Australia, but is now employed in a variety of forms by European trade unions. Whereas the servicing approach emphasises the quality of the services offered by the union, the organising approach tends to view the employer as the opponent who is likely to act against the interests of the worker, hence s/he should join the union for protection.

While these two approaches certainly differ, it is becoming increasingly evident that trade unions must 'tailor' each approach to potential members to meet the particular circumstances of the potential members. A single appeal to join a trade union is no longer sufficient, as different groups of members have different requirements of trade unions and may wish to participate in trade unions in different ways

Questions for discussion

It is clear that trade unions must continue to lobby at national and international level to ensure that the external threats are minimised through legislation and other forms of regulation. In considering these questions such lobbying should be taken as a given and attention directed towards issues of internal union reform and activity.

- 1.** How might recruitment and organising activities be intensified and promoted to a higher profile within your trade union? What resources are currently designated to recruitment and organising? How might these resources be increased?
- 2.** Is the current form of trade union government appropriate to the current circumstances? How might trade union systems of government be reformed to encourage higher levels of membership participation and engagement?
- 3.** What does collective solidarity mean in the twenty-first century? Does the structure and government of your trade union facilitate the new forms of collective solidarity?
- 4.** Does the bargaining agenda of your trade union reflect the interests of potential members? How might the content of the bargaining agenda be reformed?

5. Does the structure of the trade union movement in your country 'match' that of the changed labour force? Are the borderlines of trade union structure congruent with those of the labour force? Is the structure of the European trade union movement appropriate to undertake the functions required of it and to deliver the services members require?

6. How do trade unions compete with the political right in the battle for ideas regarding regulation, reform and economic efficiency?

Appendix

Trade union density rates and indices of membership composition

	1980 %	1990 %	1995 %	2002 %	Female Proportion	Public sector Proportion
Sweden	78.2	80.0	83.1	78.0	52.7	47.9
Denmark	78.6	75.3	77.0	73.8*	48.5	
Finland	69.4	72.2	78.0	71.2*	50.5	
Cyprus				70.0		
Malta		54.4	56.0	62.8	27.0	
Belgium	53.4	53.9	55.7	55.8*		
Slovenia				41.0	49.4	76.2
Ireland	57.4	51.0	47.1	35.9	37.9	
Austria	58.4	46.9	40.7	35.4	31.8	39.7
Slovakia		78.7	57.3	35.4	49.6	70.9
Italy	54.5	38.8	38.1	34.0	38.3	53.1
Luxembourg		44.8	38.7	33.5*		
UK	55.1	39.3	34.1	30.4	43.7	47.4
Latvia				20.0	57.0	82.1
Greece		32.4	29.6	26.7*		
Czech Republic		78.7	46.3	25.1	57.9	44.5
Portugal		31.7	25.4			
Germany	34.9	31.2	29.2	23.2	31.2	39.3
Netherlands	34.8	25.5	25.7	22.1	34.2	28.8
Hungary			63.4	19.9	48.7	70.3
Estonia		90.6	31.6	16.6*		
Lithuania				16.0		
Spain	8.3	14.7	16.3			31.2
Poland			32.9	14.7*	55.1	76.6
France	17.1	10.1	9.8	9.7*	48.3	66.3

Source: EC, 2004 (for data 1990-2002) and Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000 (for 1980 data).

Note:

1. Entries marked by * refer to 2001 rather than 2002.
2. Density data for the EU15 are standardised and express trade union membership as a proportion of the employed, dependent labour force. The EU10 data follow national definitions and thus are not standardised.
3. Blank spaces indicate that there are no reliable data available.

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