

Where have all the members gone?

Can trade unions attract members in the future, and will they survive the shift from an industrial to a service economy? Comparisons across Europe show that falling membership is not inevitable. Unions in northern Europe have succeeded in attracting women, part-time workers and white-collar workers.

Social changes and new developments in the world of work have meant that workers, especially young people, are less and less inclined to join a trade union. Trade unions are faced with the prospect of a disproportionately large share of older members, since the number of pensioners who are in unions has been increasing, while union density (union membership as a percentage of the working population) is falling. The German trade unions, for example, whose membership was boosted at the beginning of the 1990s as a result of reunification, have since lost over a quarter of their members. In the western part of the country alone, over a million members have left.

The German trade unions are not alone in facing this challenge, though it may be little consolation that many other Western European countries are also experiencing similarly declining membership levels. The reasons why the Nordic union movements of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have been successful in achieving high membership levels are more instructive. They not only profit from the fact that unemployment insurance is administered by trade unions, but because they are well established at both national and plant levels. Furthermore, the Nordic trade unions lead the way in terms of

recruitment of women and white-collar and part-time workers. Indeed, organisational reforms, recruitment campaigns and redefinitions of the roles of the unions could help consolidate membership levels or even reverse the current decline.

The trend towards an ageing membership

Continuing mass unemployment, massive job cuts and increasing early retirement rates have contributed to the downturn in trade union membership in Germany and in other European countries. While many younger workers and job seekers do not join a union at all, many people remain members when they retire. Pensioners now account for half of all trade union members in Italy, a quarter in France, and between 15% and 20% in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and the Nordic countries, whereas in Britain and Ireland they account for a much lower percentage. However, these non-active members are not counted when calculating net union density, which serve as an indication of a union's collective bargaining power (see figure overleaf). Although membership is falling in many Western European countries, there are nevertheless considerable differences in the levels

of unionisation and even in membership trends.

It is particularly striking that the number of trade union members in some of the Nordic countries and in Belgium is on the increase, despite levels of unemployment which were rising until recently. In Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Sweden, unemployment insurance is administered by the trade unions, and is increasingly being subsidised by the state. Even though one does not have to be a union member to benefit from the unemployment scheme, the unions take much of the credit for its existence.

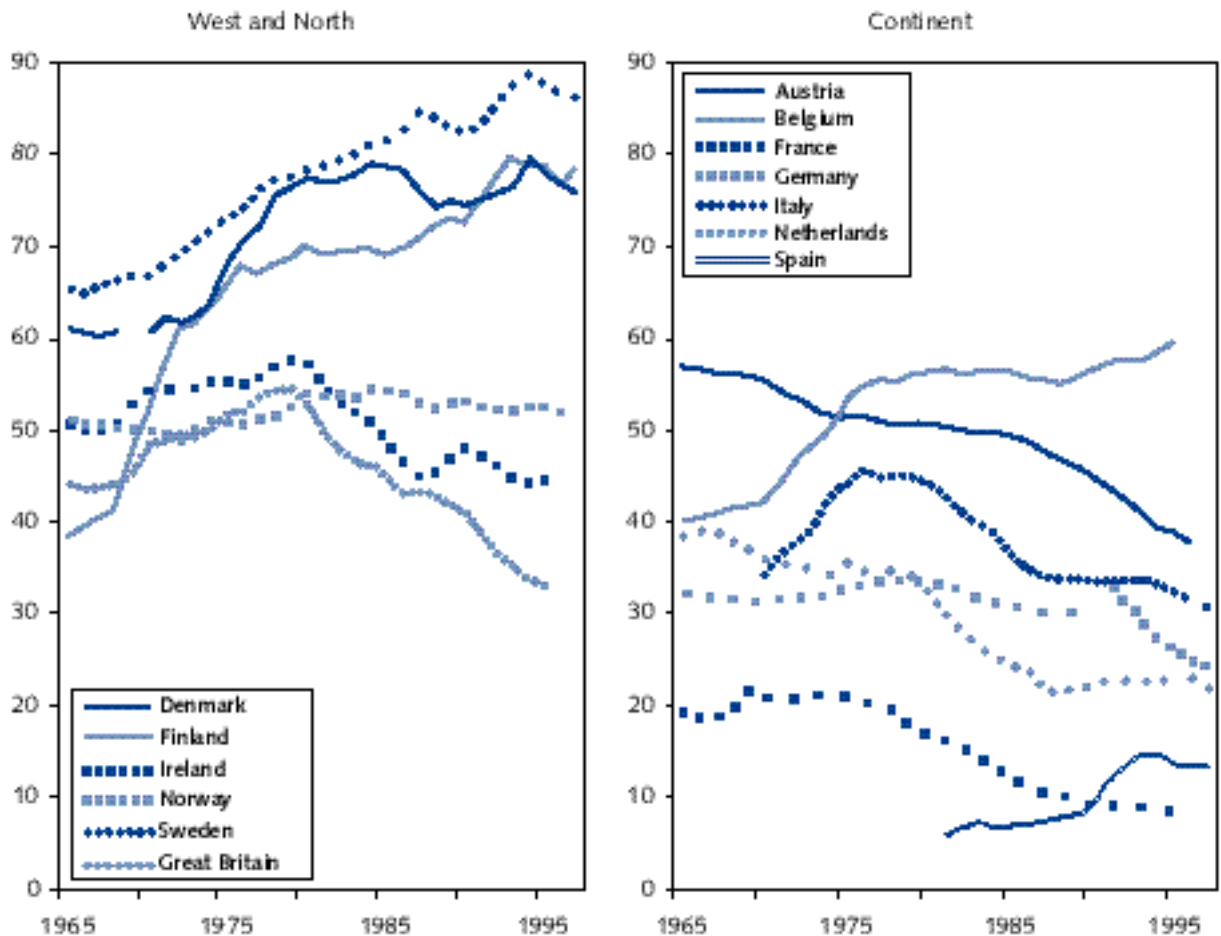
In Germany, as in other countries such as Norway, the state replaced this self-help role with mandatory insurance, particularly during recessions. Thus, the Netherlands have introduced a state-run insurance system, whereas in Belgium the trade unions have continued to be responsible for administering benefit payments (even for people who have taken early retirement), despite the fact that unemployment insurance is also compulsory for everyone in Belgium. This has enabled the Belgian unions to achieve higher membership levels. Although it is virtually impossible to regain this function once it has been lost, trade unions could still attract new members by offering new voluntary insurance schemes.

By

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Net Union Density in Western Europe since 1965



Source: B. Ebbinghaus/J. Visser: *Trade Unions in Western Europe since 1945*. London: Macmillan 2000.

Thus, positive incentives for joining a trade union can be just as important in determining membership levels as the negative consequences of non-membership. In the past, certain trade unions operated a 'closed shop' policy. In the Nordic countries, and also in Great Britain and Ireland, plant-level agreements were signed obliging employers to employ only union members. For instance, the spectacular increase in membership in Finland in the late 1960s is partly the result of an agreement with the employers' association to deduct union dues directly from workers' pay packets. However, the danger is that unions become too dependent on these coercive closed shop measures together with the automatic deduction of union dues. Things may go well for a period, but the problem of non-voluntary membership inevitably surfaces when political and legal circumstances become less

favourable. Britain is a case in point. During the 1970s, the trade unions continued to profit from operating a closed shop policy in certain industries. However, this was reversed when the Conservative government introduced legislation between 1980 and 1993 that systematically undermined and finally outlawed these practices, and employers became increasingly unwilling to co-operate with trade unions.

Industry versus plant level bargaining

Trade union activity at plant level is of central importance for the recruitment of new members. Once again, the Nordic trade unions provide us with a positive example. Basic collective rights such as the rights of shop stewards are laid down

in national collective agreements and are to some extent also supported by legislation. In contrast to the dual representative structure in German companies, shop stewards in the Nordic countries are the main representatives of workers' interests at plant level and also negotiate collective agreements with employers.

Consequently, the benefits of union membership are felt not only when conflict arises within a company. Membership also allows workers to influence union policy at the workplace level. The interplay between institutionalised collective bargaining at central and local level is a source of strength for the Nordic trade unions, while the high level of unionisation affords them considerable bargaining power even without any state intervention.

Collective protection is also provided by British and Irish trade unions, where union-negotiated

agreements only apply to union members and have to be enforced collectively in the event of disputes because of the almost complete lack of legal support. However, their success depends on their strength at plant level and their political influence. When the Conservative government and the employers went on the offensive in the 1980s, union membership and power were both gradually eroding. Collective bargaining was increasingly decentralised or completely circumvented. Whereas previously the majority of workers were members of a trade union and thereby protected by collective agreements, today the figure is only one in three.

In comparison with Germany, Austria's higher level of unionisation results from the unions playing a more active role in representing the workforce and in collective bargaining at plant level. Furthermore, the long-term decline in membership in countries such as the Netherlands, where relations between the social partners are institutionalised, demonstrates that integrating the unions into corporate structures at national level is no guarantee of stable membership and cannot replace recruitment at plant level. On the other hand, it is true that the Dutch trade unions have recently managed to halt the decline in their membership, thanks to internal reforms and their success in strengthening their role in tripartite arrangements at national level.

Dinosaurs in the service economy?

Will trade unions be able to make the transition from an industrial society to a service economy? In most European countries, the unions are well represented in the public sector, but this sector is increasingly subject to deregulation and privatisation. Even in Great Britain, the level of unionisation in the public sector is still three times as high as in the private sector, and union membership is also high in the state sector in France and Italy. In Germany, too, levels of membership in the public sector

(including civil servants) are higher than for white-collar workers in the private service sector. However, in contrast to the years during which the welfare state was expanding, employment in this sector is set to stagnate or decline in the foreseeable future.

Therefore, a crucial question to unions is: how can they expand membership in the private service sector and amongst white-collar workers in industry? If they had not successfully recruited white-collar workers in the private sector, the Nordic trade unions would never have been able to achieve their high membership levels. Given the success of blue-collar unions, white-collar workers and workers with graduate qualifications were prompted to form their own associations. In the Nordic countries, the creation of unions for particular professions made it easier to mobilise white-collar workers, despite their greater political heterogeneity. This contrasts with some other continental European countries, where trade unions representing particular ideological orientations compete with one another for members. In Belgium and Austria, white-collar unions are now the largest unions in the national union confederations. The fragmented picture which previously characterised Germany will be resolved by the amalgamation of the service sector unions of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) with the independent German Union of Salaried Employees (DAG). It remains to be seen, however, whether this super-union will be a success. New technologies, especially the internet, are opening up new ways of communicating with members and offer the prospect of information-based services which would appeal particularly to service sector employees.

The transition to a service economy is making it increasingly possible for women to enter employment. The Nordic countries lead the way not only in terms of the number of women who work, but also in terms of female union membership. In Denmark and Sweden, where membership levels are high, there is now no difference

between the percentage of male and female union members, in spite of the large numbers of part-time workers. The Scandinavian trade unions are also leading the way in opening up union leadership positions to women. Great Britain has also equalised male and female union density, although this is essentially the result of a drop in the level of unionisation among male workers. Women now account for 45% of all British trade union members.

In continental Europe, on the other hand, there is still a substantial gap between the sexes as far as union membership and representation are concerned. Trade unions in the Latin countries will not even 'reveal' the poor membership figures for women which are also partly due to the lower numbers of women in work. Prior to German reunification, the overall level (including pensioners) of unionisation amongst men in West Germany was twice as high as the level for women. Despite the changes of the 1990s, only one in five working women in Germany today is a member of a union, compared with one in three working men. Women are still in the minority, accounting for merely a third of the members of the Austrian trade union federation and since unification also for the DGB, and as little as a quarter of union members in the Netherlands.

These low membership figures are due not just to social factors, but also to the recruitment problems experienced by unions as a result of the spread of outsourcing, part-time work, and atypical employment contracts which are particularly widespread among the female workforce. These are the areas in which trade unions need to find new ways to recruit members and represent their interests, so that workers in irregular and atypical employment can also become long-term trade union members. ■

Suggested reading:

Bernhard Ebbinghaus/Jelle Visser: **Trade Unions in Western Europe since 1945**. London: Macmillan, New York: Grove, 2000