

Main public-sector unions add 16,000 members in two years

Emmet Malone

6–7 minutes

The ongoing expansion of the public sector has enabled some of Ireland’s best-known trade unions to grow membership and revenues significantly since the pandemic despite the challenges faced by the wider movement.

Five prominent public-sector unions – the [Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation](#), the [Irish National Teachers Organisation](#), the [Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland](#), the [Teachers Union of Ireland](#) and [Fórsa](#) – added about 16,000 members between the start of 2023 and the end of 2024, bringing their total combined membership to 224,007 according to their various annual returns.

Subscriptions from members grew by about €3.5 million between 2023 and 2024, taking them to about €73 million combined, while the total reserves/assets of the five unions are put at €230 million in their respective financial reports.

Fórsa, which achieved a growth in membership of more than 7,000 over the two-year period, accounts for comfortably more than half of that reserves figure. The union’s accounts for 2024 show it has net assets of more than €136 million, which includes almost €50 million in investments, €37 million in cash and a pension surplus of €19.7 million. Of the total, almost €46 million falls under the heading “net current assets”.

The €136 million figure is up about €7.5 million on the previous year, while the union’s cash on hand is down about €2.5 million but the increase in its investments is almost equal to the overall growth in its assets.

The union’s overall position was helped too by an almost €2 million decline in general expenditure, which contributed to its surplus for the year after tax, increasing from €1.9 million to €6.5 million.

The union employed 140 people at the end of 2024, an increase of three on the previous year, with staff costs increasing by €835,000 to €10.94 million. When pension contributions are included, the total came to almost €12.5 million.

The numbers are less striking at the other unions but the INMO added about 3,700 members over the two-year period, taking it from 44,472 to 48,151, while subscription revenue increased by about €300,000 to €11.4 million. Staff costs rose from €6.48 million to €7.25 million.

The union had assets of €21.195 million, including cash of just over €11 million.

Buildings worth almost €20 million are listed as being held in trust for it by a separate legal entity.

The INTO, meanwhile, which is comparable in size to the INMO, took its membership from 43,788 to 45,948 between the start of 2023 and the end of 2024.

Its subscription revenue increased from €16.77 million to €17.96 million year on year, fuelled in part by an increase in membership fees from 0.75 per cent of income to 0.756 per cent.

Total expenditure increased from €15.82 million to €17.95 million, with salary costs up from €6.36 million to €7.81 million. The union employed 90 staff at the end of 2024, up from 81 a year earlier, with 36 of them described as management.

Not all of the members listed by the five unions in their annual reports are public-sector employees, although the vast majority are. Fórsa, for instance, represents thousands of workers in the public healthcare, education and local-government sectors across a wide variety of roles and grades but also organises a substantial number of cabin crew at Aer Lingus and Ryanair.

[[Talks on ending dispute over pensions for school secretaries and caretakers break down](#)Opens in new window]

Siptu has about 70,000 members in the public sector and, if added to the list, this brings the total number of workers represented to something approaching 300,000. Earlier this year, the total number of employees on the State's payroll was put at 425,000. Just over 50,000 of them were classed as civil servants, an increase of 16,000 in a decade.

Siptu's public-sector membership represents a little over a third of its total and is understood to have been growing too but its overall membership declined by 5,000 in both 2023 and 2024, an indication of the challenges faced in the wider landscape, and specifically the private sector.

The union says the recorded drops are not an entirely accurate reflection of the numbers, given its different types of membership and subscription rates, and says overall numbers are increasing again, but it also accepts it has lost significant numbers in a various closures and other collective redundancies.

The scale of the issue can be seen at perhaps its most extreme in the case of Mandate which, after some difficult years for the retail sector, the closure of big unionised employers such as Clerys and Debenhams, and some political infighting, lost about a third of its then 29,250 members between 2020 and the end of 2024.

The Financial Services Union, meanwhile, which represents workers in the country's main banks and has been seeking to organise the games sector and elements of the

wider tech sector, has experienced a far more modest decline in membership but was still down from 8,788 to 8,651 between January 2023 and December 2024.

Almost all of the unions record high levels of churn in the annual reports, with the FSU, for instance, recruiting 1,108 members during 2024 but losing 1,237. The predominance of women across the movement has become pronounced, with almost two thirds of the FSU membership female, a proportion that increases to 75 per cent in Fórsa, more than 85 per cent in the INTO and almost 95 per cent in the INMO.

[[Migrant health workers in Ireland living in fear of racist abuse, warns medic](#)Opens in new window]

Siptu's membership remains more than 60 per cent male.

The growing number of women across the union movement has helped to cushion the blow of declining male membership but the CSO put total numbers at about 530,000 in mid-2024, roughly equivalent to 22 per cent of the country's workforce, down from 33 per cent in 2005.

In the public sector it is much higher than that and the INTO's membership numbers correspond closely to the number of primary schoolteachers in the country.