

Union voice in Ireland

First findings from the UCD Working in Ireland Survey, 2021

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This is the first in a series of reports that detail preliminary findings from the UCD Working in Ireland Survey, 2021. This report looks specifically at the structure of union membership, members' and non-members' disposition towards unions, the perceived effectiveness of unions and the coverage of collective bargaining.

Report Headlines

- Despite the decline in union density, trade unions remain an important means of representing employees in Irish workplaces.
- The growth in female participation in the labour market is matched by growing numbers of women joining trade unions. Indeed, union membership is increasingly becoming a female phenomenon. There are now more women than men in trade unions.
- Support for union representation among non-union employees is noteworthy: as many as four out of every ten non-union workers would be willing to vote to establish a union in their workplace. Young workers are particularly well disposed to seeking union representation.
- Sixteen per cent of the national workforce were union members in the past but are no longer.
- The highest concentrations of union membership are in the public sector. The hospitality sector has the lowest levels.
- On the whole, Irish trade union members are positively disposed towards union membership, value being members, and are generally committed to retaining union representation. Four out of every five unions members would vote to maintain the union in their workplace.
- We estimate the coverage of collective bargaining to be 43%. A previous estimate derived from a similar employee survey in 2003 found it to be 53%. This represents a decline of almost 19% over a period of 18 years. (Using other data sources, the OECD estimated that collective bargaining coverage in Ireland in 2017 was 34%).

1. The context: the decline of union voice in Ireland

union membership stands at **516,000** members

While trade unions have witnessed a significant decline in their membership numbers in recent decades, they remain an important mechanism of employee voice in Ireland. As of mid 2021, according to results from the Central Statistics Office's Labour Force Survey (LFS), union membership stands at 516,000 members. In 2005, it stood at approximately 540,000 members and, since then, while the numbers have oscillated up and down somewhat, the overall trend has clearly been one of decline. More worryingly for union leaders, however, is that this continued fall in membership has occurred when the total size of the national workforce increased by almost 350,000 over the same period (2005 to 2021). Not surprisingly, then, the proportion of the national workforce in unions – a measure we refer to as trade union density – has declined steadily and precipitously.

The decline in union density, however, goes back many more years, and is clearly evident from the mid 1980s. Back in the early 1980s, now some 40 years ago, around 60% of the workforce were union members. Now, it is estimated to be around one in four. Any recorded increase in trade union density over the last four decades has tended to be rare, small and short-lived, such as that which occurred at the time of the Great Recession in 2008. But shortly thereafter, the trend of a decline in union density continued in both the public and private sectors and became markedly steep (Walsh, 2017).



The reasons for union membership decline are usually explained in terms of structural shifts in employment that include the demise of traditionally unionised sectors, the growth in atypical and precarious forms of employment as well as an employer preference not to recognise unions for the purposes of negotiating employees' terms and conditions of employment. For their part, trade unions have been faulted for not dedicating sufficient resources to organising and mobilising workers in non-union enterprises to join trade unions.

Union voice in Ireland

Union membership in Ireland is now concentrated primarily in the public sector (health, education, public administration and defence). Formerly highly unionised sectors such as manufacturing, construction and transport have now comparatively low levels of union density. Elsewhere, and particularly in the new expanding sectors of the economy, such as in high-tech and social media, unions are a minor presence or are completely absent.

Currently, employees in Ireland have the right to join a trade union and to seek to have that union recognised for the purposes of collective bargaining



Our consideration of the evidence derived from the *Working in Ireland Survey* takes place at an important public policy juncture. Currently, employees in Ireland have the right to join a trade union and to seek to have that union recognised for the purposes of collective bargaining. However, an employer is legally entitled to refuse to grant his/her employees union representation. Thus, union representation and access to collective bargaining, and ultimately whether a collective agreement will ever be arrived at, remains in large part in the gift of employers. In the past year, however, the Irish Government has convened a High-Level Group to consider legal provisions for sectoral collective bargaining, enterprise bargaining and trade union recognition. This is due to report in the coming months. In the background to the Group's deliberations is the European Commission's proposal for a directive on adequate minimum wages in the European Union. While debate is ongoing as to the measures and strictures that might apply to any such directive, it is commonly thought that the initiative could potentially represent a watershed in European industrial relations as it is the first time that the Commission has proceeded to initiate legislation to ensure provision for adequate minimum wages and, more significantly, to strengthen collective bargaining in Europe. The latter provision will apply, as matters stand currently, to Member States where the coverage of collective bargaining is less than 70% of the workforce.

2. The UCD Working in Ireland Survey, 2021: A source of new evidence



The UCD Working in Ireland Survey, 2021 is the first major piece of survey research that examines people's work and employment in Ireland since O'Connell et al.'s (2010) study of *The Changing Workplace*. The UCD survey is also the only representative survey to comprehensively examine the quality of work during the COVID-19 pandemic. It draws from a nationally representative sample of 2,076 people of working age in paid employment across the country. Both employees and self-employed workers were eligible for inclusion in the study. The survey was conducted between May and August 2021. The data were weighted for age, gender, region and economic sector to agree with the then most recent population estimates as derived from the Labour Force Survey (Q1 2021). Ipsos MRBI was commissioned by UCD to carry out the fieldwork for the Working in Ireland Survey 2021.

3. Concepts and measurements

In our study we ask respondents whether they are a member of a trade union. In doing so, our wording differs somewhat from the LFS question wording. The LFS asks whether respondents are members of a trade union or staff association. By contrast we focus solely and specifically on trade unions which, unlike staff associations, are more likely to be independent of management and to have links with entities (i.e. trade unions) outside the workplace. Like the LFS, the figures we report here in this report relate only to employees currently in waged employment. As such, our measure of trade union density excludes those in union membership who are retired, unemployed or student members. This estimate of union density is commonly referred to as the net union density rate and it provides a more accurate representation of union presence in the workforce.

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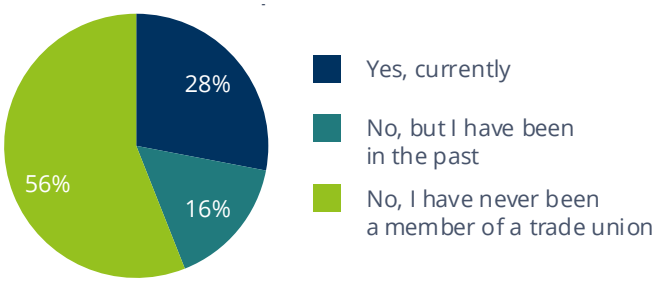
Findings



Union membership

In the Working in Ireland Survey, 28% of employees reported they are trade union members. This is a little higher than the equivalent figure found by the LFS of 2021Q2 which recorded union density at 26%.

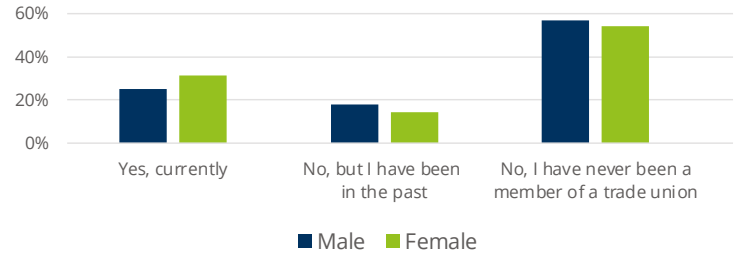
In our study we are also able to identify the proportion of those employees who are not currently union members but who had been at some point in the past. We found that almost 23% of those who reported that were currently not in union membership had been union members previously. Overall, this represents 16% of the national employee workforce and is considerably larger than we might have imagined prior to undertaking our study.



25% of male employees as compared with 32% of female employees are union members

When union members are profiled on the basis of individual-level characteristics, it is notable that there are now significant gender differences in levels of union density: 25% of male employees as compared with 32% of female employees are union members. There is also a marked difference in the gender composition of union membership. It too is increasingly becoming more female. Some 15 years ago there was little difference, but now 54% of union members are women while 46% are men. Resigning from union membership was also more evident among male employees than it was among females: some 18% of males as compared with 14% of females reported that they had been trade union members in the past.

Union Membership by Gender

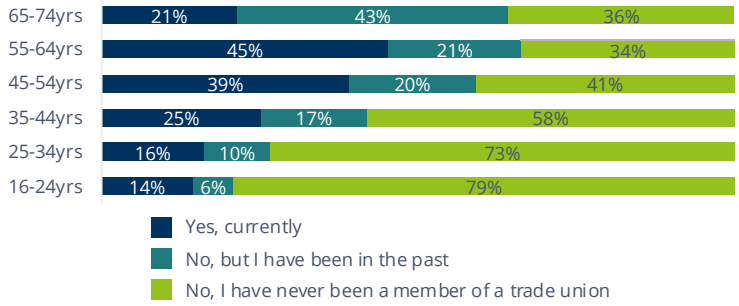


We also examined the spread of union membership across different age cohorts. Density levels were found to be highest among those employees aged between 55 and 64 years of age (45%), followed by those aged between 45 and 54 years of age (39%). Among younger age cohorts, the proportion of employees who are in union membership is considerably lower, falling to 15% on average for those aged between 16 and 34.

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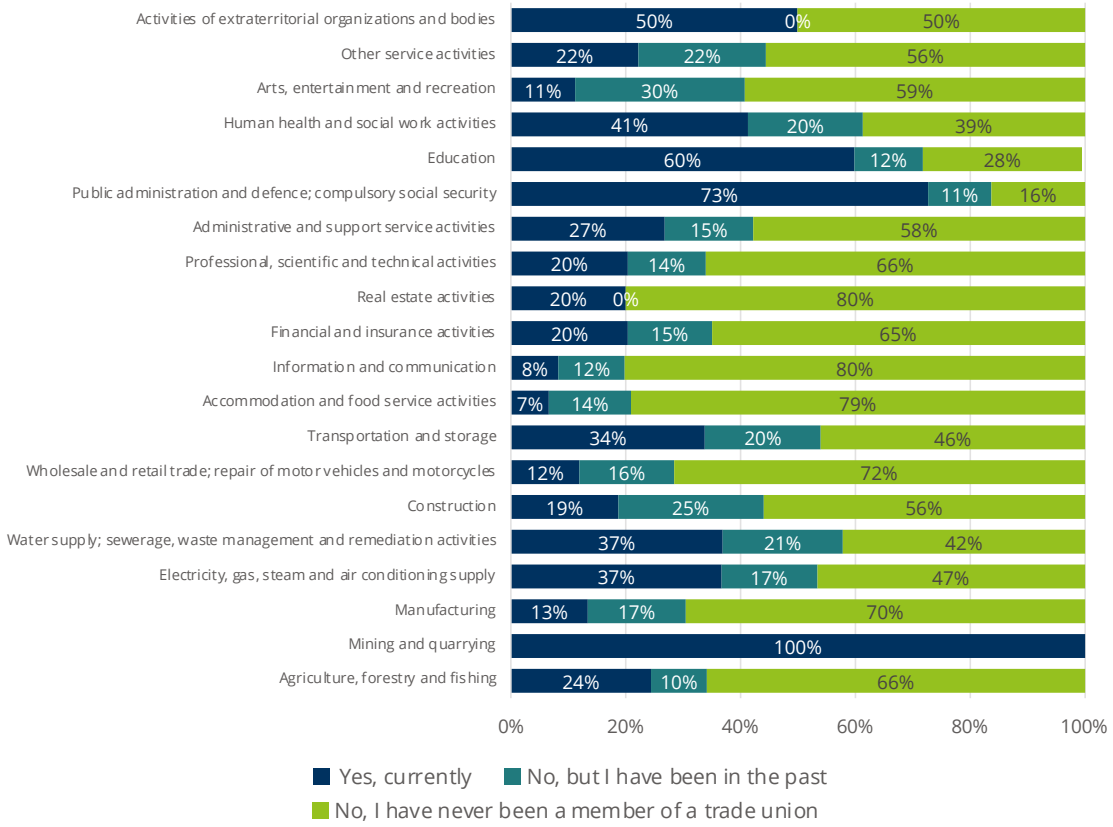
A striking feature of the data is the proportion of those employees aged between 65 and 74 who are not in union membership currently but who had been in the past.

Union Density by Cohort



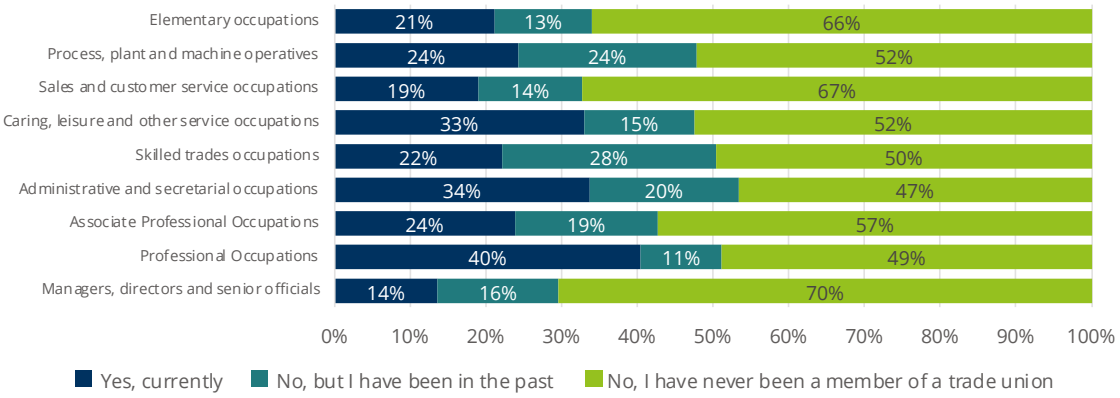
The highest concentrations of union membership are in public administration, defence, followed by education, health, and by the water and energy supply industries. The hotel and restaurant sector has the lowest levels of unionization, followed by information and communication industry. Not far behind is manufacturing and construction with 13% and 19% respectively. (Note: the mining industry is very small in Ireland and the number of respondents in the survey is very small).

Union Membership by Sector



There are some pronounced variations in union density across occupations. Those occupying professional positions have the highest levels of unions density at 40% and, apart from managerial positions, density is lowest in low skilled occupations in manufacturing and services together with skilled crafts people.

Union Membership by Occupation



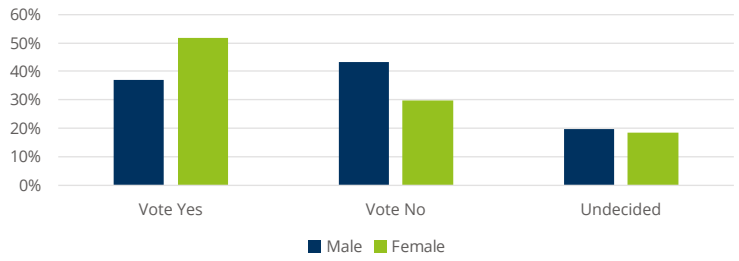
Desire for union representation

In an attempt to gauge non-union members disposition towards trade unions, we asked if a vote to establish a union was held in your organisation today, would you vote yes to establish a union. Forty-four per cent of non-union member respondents indicated that would vote yes to establish a union while 37 per cent said they would not. Nineteen per cent were undecided.

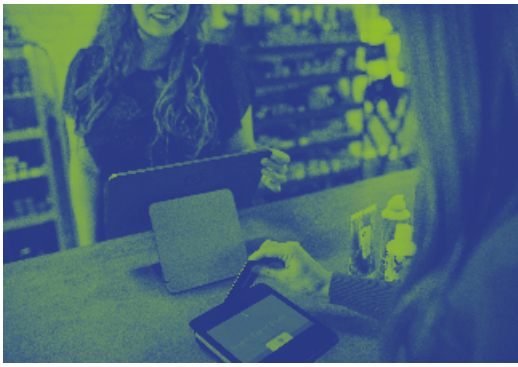
Forty-four per cent of non-union member respondents indicated that would vote yes to establish a union

Female employees show a greater likelihood of being more well disposed towards union representation.

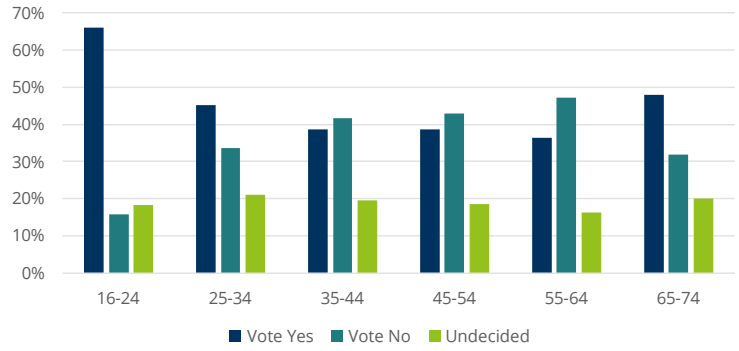
Preferences for Union Representation among Employees Working in Non-unionised Workplaces by Gender



Significantly, too, younger cohorts, principally those between 16-34 years of age and who have the lowest levels of union membership were also among those who were the most well disposed to voting for union representation.



Preferences for Unions in Non-unionised Employers by Age



A similar question was asked of those who worked in unionized organisations as to whether they would vote to retain union representation. Almost 4 out 5 respondents confirmed their continued support for union representation by indicating they would vote to keep the union. Only 9% said they would vote to have the union discontinue in its role. Twelve per cent were undecided.

Collective bargaining coverage

Collective bargaining is the term used to describe the process whereby an employer deals directly with trade union representatives in matters relating to the negotiation of employees' terms and conditions of employment. The resulting collective agreement exists to ensure that when labour is sourced and deployed it is in a manner which accords with the terms of the agreement or with employees' contract of employment. Thus, collective bargaining is conceived as a means both of setting the cost of labour and as a rule-making process in respect of, for example, employees' job descriptions, hours of work, working practices, effort levels, leave entitlements, health and safety, and so on.

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Determining the proportion of the national workforce whose terms and conditions of employment are covered by collective bargaining is a difficult exercise in the absence of data derived from nationally representative labour force surveys. In Ireland, we typically rely on statistics derived from administrative sources and estimates provided by government ministries, employers' organisations and trade unions. These estimates are then provided to international organisations like the OECD which has recorded collective bargaining coverage in Ireland in 2017 to be 34%.

In this report, we estimate the coverage of collective bargaining in Ireland by asking our respondents whether there is a trade union recognised by the organisation where they work that negotiates workers' pay and/or conditions of employment. Forty-three per cent of employees reported the existence of such an arrangement. To place this figure in an international context we can say that it is above that recorded as

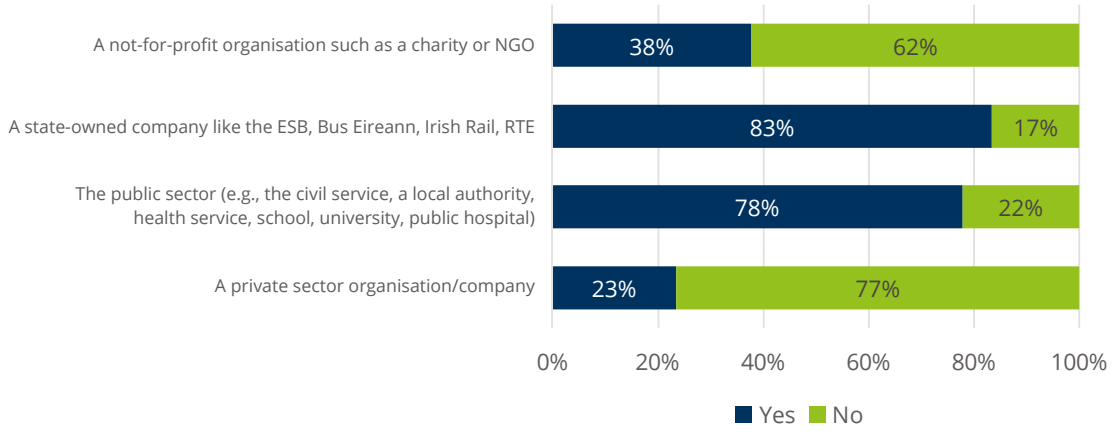
the average by the OECD for all its member countries. countries like the UK and New Zealand but considerably below that of the Scandinavian countries, Austria, Germany and the Netherlands. It should be noted, however, that our figure is probably a generous estimate of the coverage of collective bargaining in Ireland as some of our respondents occupy managerial positions and, while they might work in unionised organisations, the terms of any collective agreement are unlikely to apply to them.

Of more significance, however, is that our estimate of the coverage of collective – 43% – represents a decline on the last estimate as derived by similar means from *The Changing Workplace Survey of 2009*, which found that 48% of employees were employed in workplaces where there was a union presence (O'Connell et al., 2010). This latter estimate represented a further decline as measured in a previous iteration of the national workplace survey in 2003 when it was found to be 53% (O'Connell et al., 2004). This continual decline in the reach of collective bargaining over the past 18 years is perhaps not surprising and mirrors the decline in union density over the same period, which in 2003 was 38%, and in 2009 was 32%. It needs to be borne in mind, too, that national pay agreements negotiated between employer representative organisations, trade unions and governments ceased to operate in 2009 and this along with the cessation of the operation of various Joint Industrial Councils, accounts, in part at least, for some of the decline in collective bargaining coverage.

43% of employees were employed in workplaces where there was a union presence

In an attempt to see which workers are covered by collective agreements we looked at variations across broad sectoral categories. The results are reported in the table overleaf. They show high levels of coverage in state-owned companies, the public sector, and considerably less so in not-for-profit organisations and in the private sector. Not surprisingly, too, collective bargaining coverage is associated with workplace size, the larger the workplace the more likely its employees ' terms and conditions of employment are covered by collective agreements.

Collective Bargaining by Type of Organisation

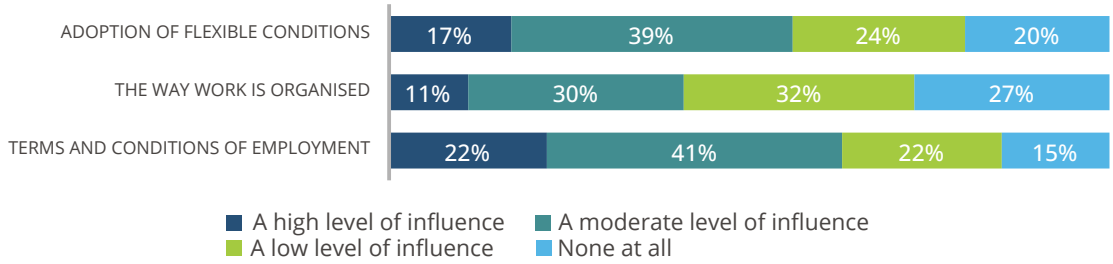


Union influence

Finally, while estimates of union density and the coverage of collective bargaining provide some indication of the role and importance of trade unions, they are of course limited in that they do not give any direct estimation of the outcome of collective negotiations. In an attempt to address this issue, we enquired of our respondents of the level of influence they perceived unions exercised at workplace level over a range of items. The question was only asked of those working in organisations where management recognised unions for the purposes of collective bargaining. The issues explored included: the adoption of flexible working conditions, the organisation of work, and employees' terms and conditions of employment (pay, working hours, etc.). The results are reported in the table opposite. Of the three items measured, union influence is seen to be greatest in respect of employees' terms and conditions of employment and the adoption of flexible working conditions. Here, at least 50% of respondents believed unions exercise at least a moderate or a high level of influence. Union influence is perceived to be considerably less in respect of the third item – the organisation of work – with almost 60% indicating that unions exercise little or no influence.

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Respondents' Perception of Trade Union Influence at Workplace Level



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