

[businesspost.ie](https://businesspost.ie)

## **Ictu general secretary: 'This perception that we are old, middle-aged men resistant to change is a caricature'**

Ellie Donnelly July 30, 2024

12–15 minutes

---

Stagnant trade union membership is a worry “for all sorts of reasons”, according to Owen Reidy, general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (Ictu).

Central Statistics Office (CSO) data shows that in 2005 approximately 555,000 employees were members of trade unions. However, this had fallen to around 507,000 by mid-2023, despite the number of people employed here growing from 1.98 million in 2005 to 2.7 million people in 2023.

Ictu is more familiar with these declining figures than most, as the umbrella organisation for most of the country’s unions.

“It worries me for a whole lot of reasons, and it should worry other people, because the issue of representativeness is important,” Reidy told the Business Post.

### **Are you a Business Post subscriber?**

Get your money's worth by signing up to our daily newsletter, and receive Ireland's best business journalism to your inbox every morning.

Click [here](#) to sign up.

“Trade union movements have many roles in society, but one is moderator and manager of dissent and frustration in the workplace. If the trade union movement is hollowed out, you have less capacity to do that.”

According to research carried out by UCD academics in 2021 as many as four in ten non-union workers would be willing to vote to establish a union in their workplace, with younger workers particularly interested seeking union representation.

“There are many workers who are happy enough in their work, their company treat them well, and there's no desire for a trade union, that's fine. But we know from research in UCD that there are many who want it,” Reidy said.

“Making sure that employers’ bodies and union bodies are adequately represented should be in the interest of the government. The government has to encourage, persuade, cajole, incentivise the employers in the retail and other sectors, where there's a demand for trade unionism, to meet us halfway. And they need to use budgetary measures for that, legislation, public policy. I'm not

saying they should force employers to the table, not at all, but they should give them an inducement.”

### **Risk and resources**

There are several factors behind why trade union membership in Ireland has not increased, despite a significant increase in the work force here in recent years, Reidy said.

One is that many workers who want to be in a union are not going to risk going on strike to be allowed join a union, according to Reidy.

“And I think in spite of the regime, and the lack of support, and public policy work, we’re actually holding our own,” he said.

The other reason is that unions need to put more resources into organising.

“We need to modernise the trade unions,” he said.

“But the main issue is the fact that if a majority of workers want to unionise, in most cases, they have to be prepared to take strike action to achieve that,” Reidy said.

“And in a tight labour market, a lot of people aren't prepared to do that, they’ll go get another job. Or they're not prepared to risk what that might mean, being blacklisted and all that kind of stuff, in their sector or industry,” he added.

Look at the profile of the trade union movement, most members are white collar employees, who are third level educated, according to Reidy.

### **Our top stories**

“Their attitude is ‘we need a union’ whether they are public or private. Let workers decide freely. If there are workers who feel ‘I'm doing fine, my company treats me with respect. I don't need collective bargaining’, that’s grand. But we know there are many workers out there who feel differently and they should be facilitated,” he said.

“We’re a wealthy country, but we still have 12-13 per cent of our workforce in deprivation because of the salary they are on versus the cost of living. So there's still a lot of people for whom work doesn't pay. There is always going to be higher paid workers, there is always going to be lower paid workers, but we need to look at those sectors where low pay is endemic and more prevalent and see what can we do,” he added.

### **More women than men**

The UCD research from 2021, which was carried out by, Professor John Geary, UCD and Dr Maria Belizón, also found that the growth in female participation in the labour market is matched by growing numbers of women joining trade unions and that there are now more women than men in trade unions. This is not a

surprise to Reidy, who said that Ictu's membership is currently around be 55 per cent women compared to 45 per cent men.

"Look at the areas of the economy we're organised in; public service, education, health, services in the private sector. A lot of female dominated occupations and careers. The profile of the person who wants to join is female and younger, and that's brilliant," Reidy said.

The world of work is "changing", he said, and the trade union movement will have to change to reflect this.

"We have to modernise, we have to renew. We have to engage [more]. And we have to engage more with young workers, we need to hear what it is they need from us, and we need to give it to them. Because if not, they'll find other vehicles to advance their interests. So we have to constantly modernise and evolve," he said.

"This perception that we are old, middle-aged men resistant to change is a caricature, at times we haven't helped ourselves, but it's a caricature," Reidy added.

### **Collective bargaining laws**

The government has yet to adopt an EU directive on collective bargaining, which the state is required to implement by November 2024. The directive requires countries to "promote the building and strengthening of the capacity of the social partners to engage in collective bargaining on wage setting at sector or cross-industry level".

"The directive, it's not an optional thing, it's not a voluntary thing. It says the member state must promote collective bargaining. I've said to the government 'show me the legislation in Ireland or the public policy where you actually facilitate, encourage and promote collective bargaining,'" Reidy said.

"We need legislation that does that. It also requires the state to facilitate the right to exercise collective bargaining for workers who want to do it. There's many workers who don't, that's fine, there's many workers who do. And it requires the state to introduce protections for those who wish to engage in collective bargaining."

The directive will be a "game-changer" if Ireland implements it properly, Reidy claimed.

"We have a couple of problems, we have [business lobby group] Ibec saying 'nothing to see here. We don't need to do anything' and we have a government who seems obsessed with SMEs, particularly in the last four or five months. For us, [implementing the directive] is the number one issue and is the most potentially transformative issue," Reidy said.

Reidy said he doesn't see how the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF) – a body including the government, unions and business group – can have a future if the directive is not implemented.

"We've said to government, we don't expect you to do everything by the middle of November, but we expect to see a significant start," Reidy said.

"We have left the new Taoiseach and his senior colleagues under no illusions that this is the most fundamental issue for the Irish trade unions right now and we need to see some progress."