

**Beyond the
General Election –
The Future
for Unions**

Unions21

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Introduction

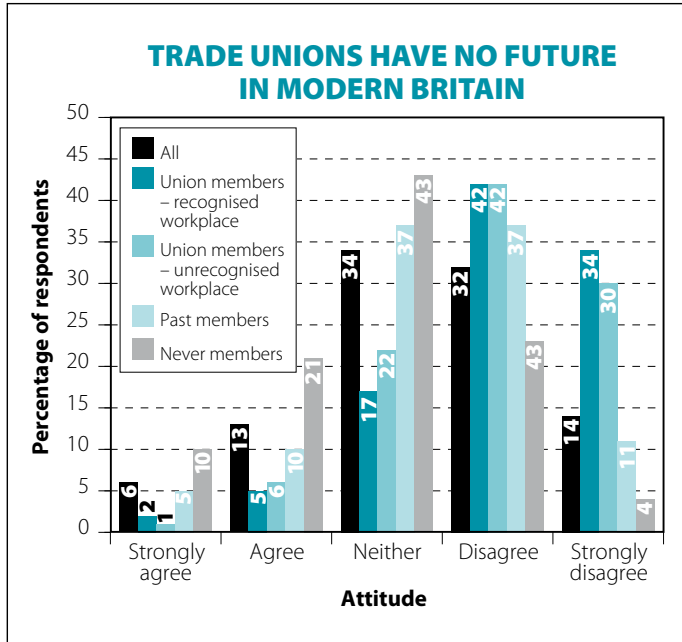
In 2001, the TUC commissioned a British Workplace Representation and Participation Survey to examine the future of trade unions in modern Britain. Professor Richard Freeman (Harvard University) and Wayne Diamond (LSE) led an extensive research project based on this survey and two TUC publications resulted – *What Workers Want* (2001) and *A Perfect Union?* (2003).

Ten years on workplaces, the economy and the political situation look quite different but the need to renew the debate about the future of trade unions has never been more important. Professor Freeman gave permission to Unions 21 to use questions from the 2001 survey, and in January 2010 YouGov ran an online survey on this basis. A total 2,224 working people replied and their responses were weighted to ensure a representative sample by union membership, industry sector and business size. Responses were also structured by gender, age, working pattern, pay level, grade and regional location.

This briefing provides an initial summary of results from the survey. It focuses on union presence and effectiveness in the workplace. The survey also asked a series of questions about how work is managed, what workers think about this, and perceptions of union/management relationships. Unions 21 will publish a further briefing focussing on these issues. Work will also be undertaken to provide a more detailed analysis of findings and to draw comparisons, where applicable, with the 2001 survey.

Do unions have a future in modern Britain?

It is sometimes said that unions have no future in modern Britain, but the evidence from our survey does not support this view.



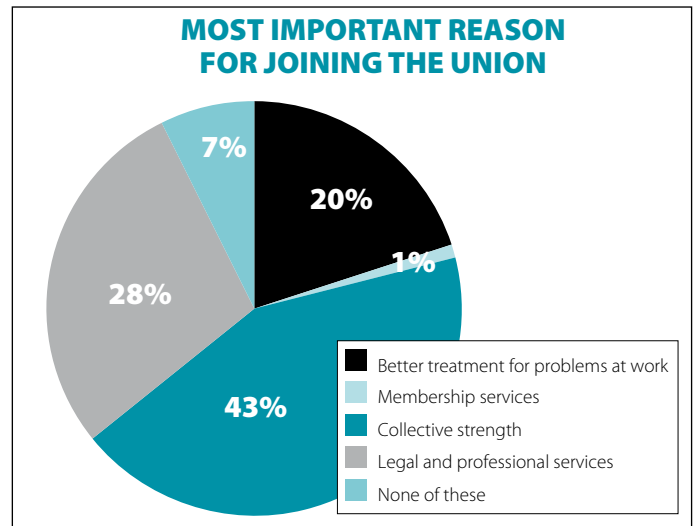
Overall, workers are twice as likely to disagree than agree with this statement, though attitudes do depend on current membership status, as shown in the chart above.

One in five workers overall but almost one half of members strongly agree that strong unions are needed to protect pay and conditions. Workers in the private sector and those in smaller organisations are most likely to disagree. Workers in the public sector and those earning from £200-£400 per week are in strongest agreement.

However, opinion is divided as to whether trade unions are old-fashioned: 36% of workers overall agree that this is the case, 35% disagree and 29% have no particular view.

Why do workers join a union?

Yet the idea of solidarity is clearly not old-fashioned. The most important reason given for joining a union – cited across most sectors and business sizes – is that the more people join a union the more effective it is. This accounts for four in ten of all members. The second most important reason for all groups of respondents is the legal and professional services offered by the union (27% overall). The third most important reason is the belief that you get better treatment if you have a problem at work (19% overall). The influence of friends and colleagues is a less important factor and membership services hardly feature at all as an incentive to join.



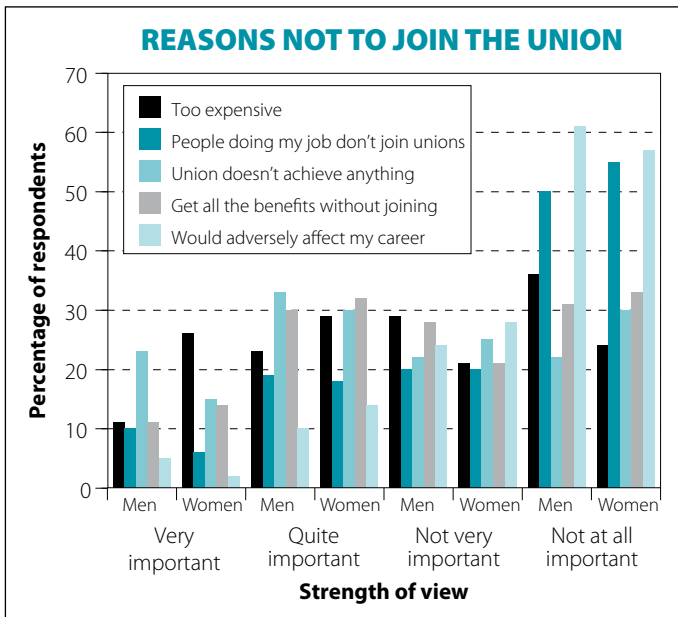
The same order of importance for reasons for joining applies irrespective of management status, gender or age group. Access to legal and professional services is of paramount importance in the health sector and ranks equally with collective strength in the education sector. Workers earning from £200-£300 per week are also strongly motivated to join to get better treatment if they have a problem at work.

What about non-members?

Nine per cent of all workers in non-union workplaces say they would be very likely to join if a union was set up and they were asked to join; a further 26% say they would be quite likely to join. Workers earning between £400-500 per week are twice as likely as the average (17%) to say that they would be very likely to join if asked. Just 2% of the highest paid say they would be very likely to join.

45% of non-members overall in unionised workplaces say they have been asked to join the union and 55% have not been asked. Although there were insufficient responses to draw statistically valid conclusions, responses to this question from different groups tend to support other research that shows that workers are more likely to be asked to join a union if they work in a large workplace. This will, therefore, exclude some of the lowest paid and voluntary sector workers who work in smaller workplaces.

Non-members in unionised workplaces are a tougher membership proposition. Only 3% say they would be very likely to join the union if asked by a workplace rep, though a further 16% say they would be quite likely to do so. Non-managers and women would be more likely than the average to join if asked.



Cost is the most important reason given by women for not joining a union, whereas men are more likely to believe that the union does not achieve anything.

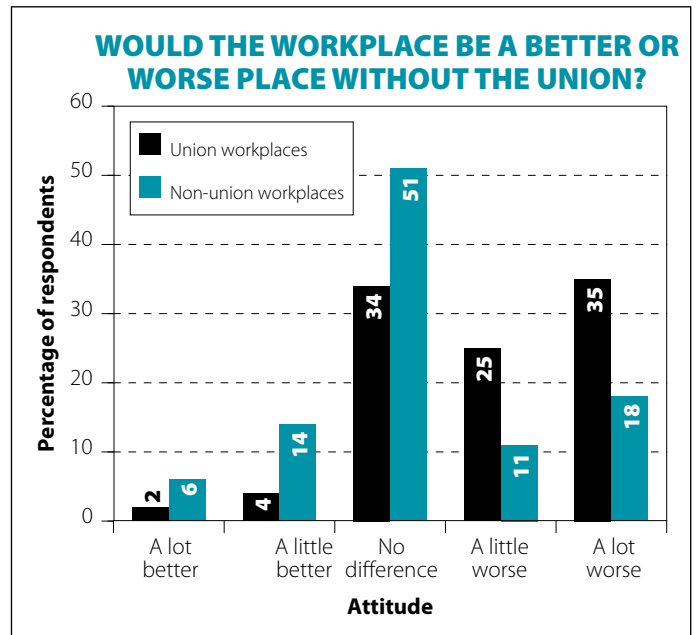
Interestingly, concerns that people doing similar jobs don't join the union or that union membership would adversely affect an individual's career are not major factors in decisions not to join a union.

Around one in five non-members say that their perception that the union doesn't achieve anything is a very important factor in their decision not to join. 18% of never members say that getting all the benefits anyway is a very important factor in their decision not to join the union.

Added union value

Only 6% of workers with a union at their workplace think that it would be better if there were no union compared with 60% who think that it would be worse. Just 9% of past members and 13% of never members think that their workplace would be a better place to work without a union. However, a third of workers overall think that a union presence would make no difference, 55% of non-members and 51% of the lowest-paid workers (earning up to £200 per week) think so.

Attitudes among workers currently without a union in their workplace are still favourable overall, though less clearly so. However, a significantly higher proportion of these workers think that having a union would make no difference, as shown above right.



Similarly only a small proportion of workers think that the union in their workplace has too much power – 8% overall, 4% of members and 12% of non-members. Just over half of union members and one third of non-members think that the union has too little power. Over half of workers in manufacturing and real estate think that their union has too little power. 16% of the highest earners (over £800 per week) think the union in their workplace has too much power.

Unions in the workplace

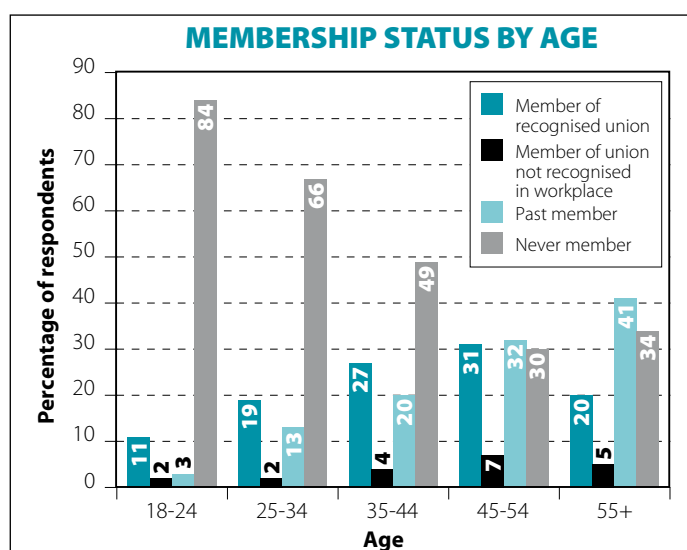
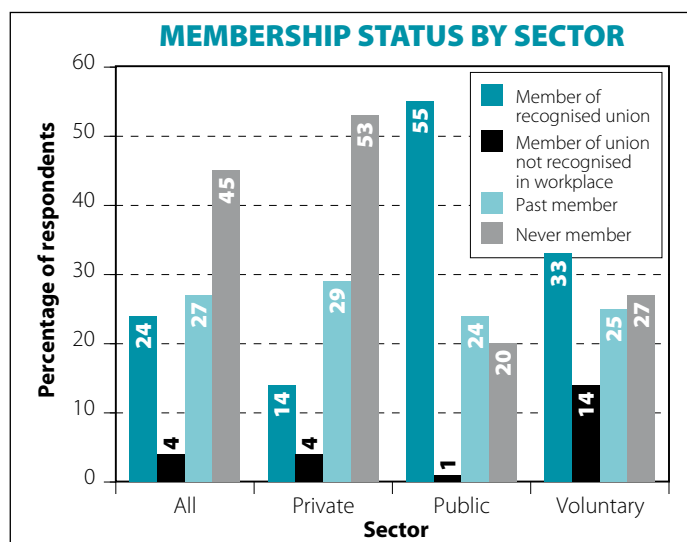
Overall 38% of workers reported that there is an independent union at their workplace that they can join, but only one quarter of workers in the private sector said so. This compares with 85% in the public sector and 44% in the voluntary sector. The likelihood of having an independent union in the workplace grows with organisation size, from 4% of the smallest workplaces (2-23 employees) to 60% of workplaces over 1,000. 12% of private sector organisations, 15% of voluntary sector bodies and 7% from the public sector reported the presence of an in-house staff association.

- In at least four out of five workplaces with a union presence, the union is recognised for negotiating pay and conditions.
- 16% of never members and 31% of past members reported that they work in a place with a recognised union, but 9% of never members do not know whether a union is present or not.
- Young workers (18-24) are least likely to report that there is an independent union in their workplace (just one in five) but one in five say that they don't know.
- 88% of those working in public administration/defence workplaces and 80% in education say there is

an independent union in their workplace compared with just 8% in hospitality and 11% in construction.

Trade union membership

Trade union membership varies significantly by sector and age group, as shown below. It is notable that more than one half of workers in the private sector, two thirds of those aged 25-34 and eight out of ten young workers (18-24) have never been union members. However, 29% of workers in the private sector and at least 20% of workers aged over 35 have been members in the past. Workers earning between £500-£800 per week are more likely than either the higher or lower paid to be union members. Workers in the voluntary sector are much more likely than those in either the public or private sectors to belong to a union that is not recognised in their workplace – a state of affairs that, judging by responses to other questions about union effectiveness, causes some dissatisfaction.



Just 8% of workers in the private sector say their employer is in favour of unions, compared with 30% in the public sector and 20% in the voluntary sector. A third of private

sector workers do not know what their employer's attitude would be.

- Members of recognised unions are almost three times more likely than average to report that their employer has a favourable attitude to unions. Members not in recognised workplaces are more likely than any other group to say that their employer is opposed to unions.
- 40% of never members do not know what their employer's attitude would be.

Contact with the union

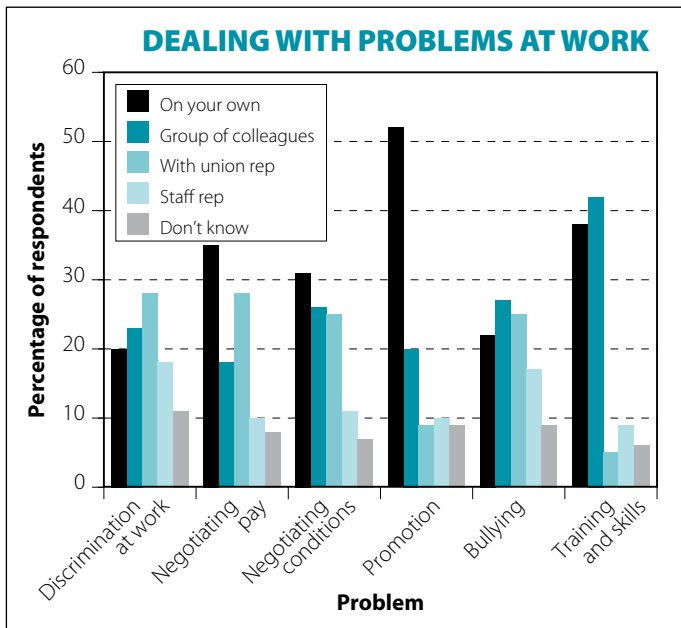
Among those with a union in their workplace, 17% overall and 26% of union members in recognised workplaces say that they are in frequent contact with their union rep. However 6% of past members and 7% of never members say they are in frequent contact with a union rep. One third of workers overall and two thirds of never members have never been in contact with a union rep.

Dealing with issues in the workplace

The chart overleaf shows that, with the exception of issues relating to promotion, there is still a fairly strong preference to deal with a range of workplace issues collectively – though not always through the union. For example:

- Only in organisations employing 500 or more people would a union rep be the first port of call in dealing with problems of discrimination at work. Union members would be most likely to consult their rep, whereas non-members would prefer to consult a group of colleagues.
- Workers in the private sector have a clear preference to negotiate pay on their own (44%) compared with 20% who would prefer to do so with a group of colleagues and 20% through a union. 45% of non-members would prefer to negotiate pay on their own, but 13% would prefer to do so through a union.
- Workers in public administration/defence, health and social work, education and transport/communications would all prefer to negotiate pay and conditions through the union, but there is quite a strong preference to negotiate pay individually across a range of other sectors – financial intermediation, real estate/business activities, other community services, manufacturing, construction, wholesale/retail and hospitality.
- Despite the growth of union learning representatives, workers across all sectors would generally prefer to deal with training and development issues on their own or

with a group of colleagues. Fewer than one in ten prefer to see this as a union issue.



Workers see the top priority for unions as providing protection against unfair treatment, as shown below.

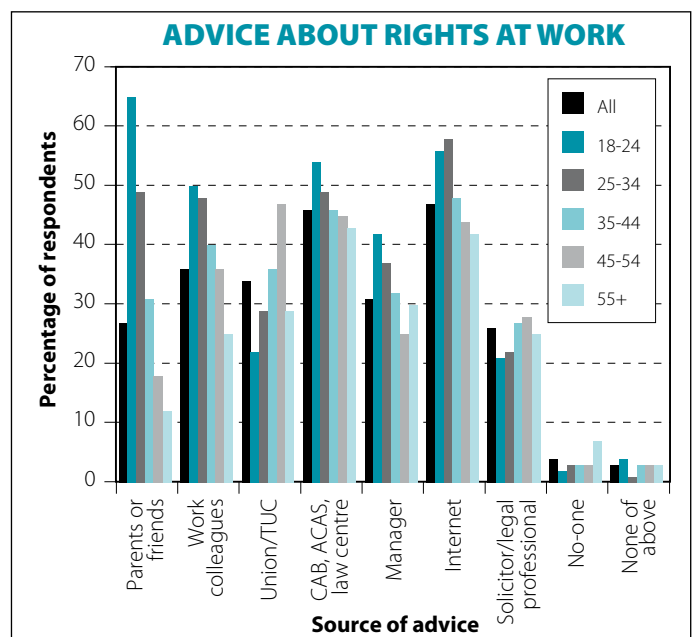
	Very important %	Quite important %	Not very important %	Not at all important %
Setting pay, benefits and bonuses	61	30	6	2
Protecting existing jobs	65	27	6	2
Promoting equal opportunities for women and ethnic minorities	49	33	12	6
Working with management to improve quality/productivity	37	44	14	5
Making work interesting and enjoyable	21	32	36	10
Protecting workers against unfair treatment	77	19	3	1
Obtaining information about management plans	43	44	10	3
Ensuring good pension provision	64	28	4	3

- Around half of all workers with a union in their workplace say that protecting equal opportunities is very important, and this is not affected by differences in union membership status.
- Six in ten workers overall say that setting pay, benefits and bonuses is very important, but this varies by sector. It is also particularly important to workers earning between £200-£400 per week.
- Union members are more likely than non-members to think it important to obtain information about management plans. Workers in the private sector are less likely than the average to think that this is important.
- Protecting workers against unfair treatment is a high priority for most groups, but especially so in transport/communications (84%) and other community services (88%).

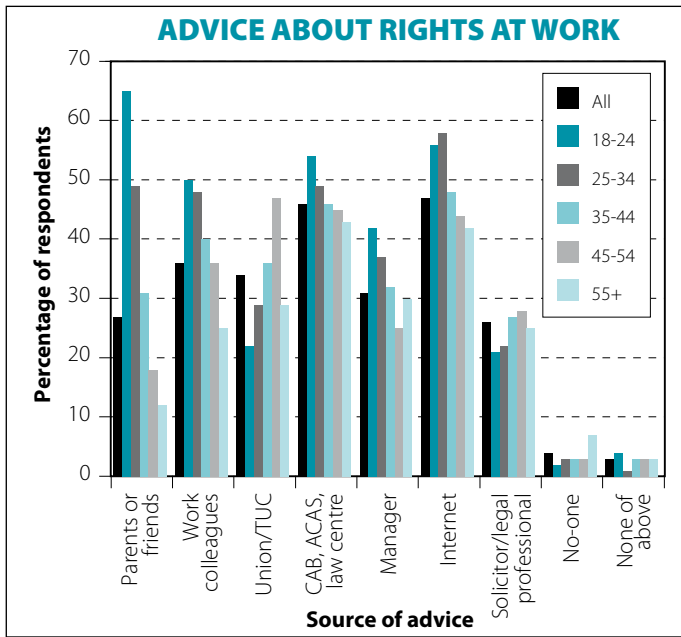
- Workers in the public (70%) and voluntary (68%) sectors are more likely than those in the private sector (58%) to say that ensuring good pension provision is very important.

Advice about rights at work

92% of union members in recognised workplaces said that they would consult their union about rights at work and 80% of workers in unrecognised workplaces would do so. Furthermore, 22% of past members and 7% of never members said that they would consult a union. However, unions are not an automatic port of call for most workers, as shown below, and the internet has become a key source of advice for most groups.



- Workers in the private sector are more likely to go to a Citizen's Advice Bureau, ACAS, law centre or other advice centre; to look on the internet; ask their work colleagues or manager; seek advice from parents or friends; or go to a solicitor or other legal professional than they are to seek advice from a trade union or the TUC.
- Workers in financial intermediation, real estate/business activities and manufacturing are most likely to consult the internet for advice, with workers in wholesale/retail and hospitality equally likely to consult the internet or an advice centre.
- Workers in public administration/defence, education, health and social work are most likely to consult a union. Those in manufacturing, transport/communications, and other community services would be most likely to consult an advice centre.
- Just 13% of workers in construction and 14% in hospitality would look first for advice from a union.



Young workers (18-24) are most likely to consult parents or friends outside work or to look on the internet, whereas established workers (45-54) are most likely to turn to a union or the TUC for advice.

Conclusion

Our survey confirms not only that there is a future for unions but that there are also plenty of opportunities to build on and strengthen our membership base.

The evidence in this survey of workers' enduring belief in the benefits of collective strength is important because it plays to core trade union values and provides a sound basis from which to promote the benefits of membership to non-members – including those who already claim to be in contact with union reps. Gaining recognition in workplaces with existing union members, in particular in the voluntary sector, would also reap dividends.

Equally, there is clear evidence that members value highly the professional services provided by unions and that non-members also recognise the need for such support – hence the substantial proportion resorting to ACAS, CAB or other legal services, some of whom will not be aware that such services can be accessed through union membership.

However, there are some significant challenges to demonstrate that the collective voice is most effectively exercised through the union route, though it would appear that these stem more from ignorance and indifference than from hostility to unions. For example although unions have made major investment in electronic communications, it is not clear that this has yet fully met workers' preference for sourcing information from the internet. It is also important to note that workers have a fair degree of confidence in

tackling a number of workplace issues on their own. Whilst this may be misplaced, it has implications for the way in which unions present their role to potential members.

The survey also confirms that there is a plethora of workplace experiences, and therefore no simple or singular narrative about unions and the world of work. It is evident that, whilst there are shared values and some core objectives, different groups have different priorities. Without understanding these, membership drives can easily become off target. It is instructive to look at the reasons workers give for not joining unions and also to reflect that provision of membership services – in which many unions have invested heavily – appears to have hardly any influence on membership decisions.


More detailed analysis of the data by age, gender, sector, management status, earnings level and regional location will surely prove profitable to anyone seriously addressing what's needed to retain and grow membership beyond the General Election.

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