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building tomorrow's unions

# THE CHANGING WORLD OF WORK

# THE FUTURE OF UNIONS

BECKY WRIGHT

ANALYSIS BY MARTIN MCIVOR

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SEPTEMBER 2021

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**Acknowledgements**

This publication has been made possible through the contributions of our supporter unions and a grant from the BFAWU.

We are grateful to the Warwick Institute of Employment Research for supplying historical and forecast data underlying the 2020 Working Futures reports published by the Department for Education.

**Unions 21**

Unions 21 is a forum for unions to explore our shared challenges. As unions, we work collaboratively to develop practical projects and ideas which build tomorrow's unions.

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## KEY FINDINGS

Outside the public sector, union density is highest in industries that are set to grow slowly or contract, and lowest in those set to create the most new jobs. This means that if sectoral union densities do not change, total union membership growth will be largely confined to the public sector, and overall density will continue to fall.

## INTRODUCTION

Building on our broader report on the Changing World of Work, this paper examines the relationship between union membership and the change in sectors/ occupations. This is to inform debate and discussion within trade unions as to how we meet the challenge of the future. We have done this analysis because the latest official trade union statistics show that the highest trade union membership densities are to be found predominantly in the public sector areas of health and social care, education, and public administration and defence. In both the short and long term, this is a problem for unions because it is out of balance for overall employment.

Indeed, a closer look at the certification officer returns for 2020 shows that the pandemic brought a mixed picture across sectors and occupations. While there were notable outliers, we can see in more detail how unions in the public sector grew (albeit it at a smaller percentage from 2019). Unions in the private sector broadly declined. Anecdotally, unions have reported higher than usual retirements and also in some instances density is broadly stable with head counts also being reduced in workplaces.

With all of this in mind, we wanted to explore what will be the predicted implications for unions given where industries and occupations will rise and fall. Therefore, here we will ask what will be the challenge for unions, how might we adapt to the change in **occupations** within a sector as well as the changes of **industries**. Lastly, we will look to highlight discussion on what unions may wish to do to build for now and the future.

# WHERE ARE WE IN RELATION TO FUTURE EMPLOYMENT?

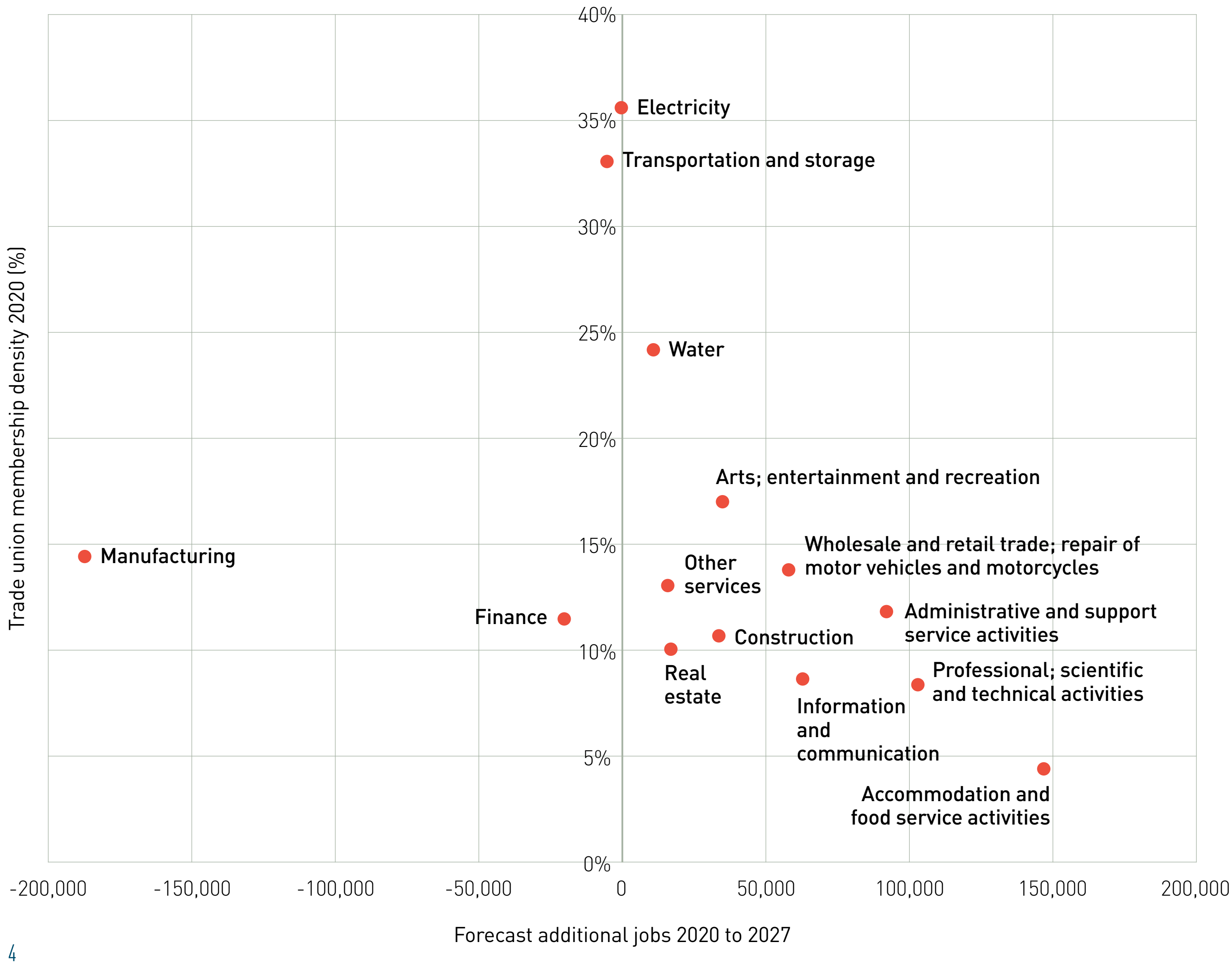
**In our accompanying paper, we laid out where and how we think sectors and occupations may change. Our trend report noted the following – rise in health and social care, accommodation and food/beverage and support services. What we did not do is map across the impact that this could have on unionisation and unions.**

The first key piece of analysis for unions to note is that if current sectoral density levels are unchanged, the Working Futures forecast of 700,000 additional jobs between 2020 and 2027 would equate to an additional 165,000 union members. However, of these only 24,000 would be outside the public sector (broadly defined) and union 'density' across the labour market as a whole would have fallen by around three percentage points.

Figure 1 highlights the overall private sector picture, mapped out against *additional* job growth. This is because the private sector is where the overwhelming majority of workers are. Here you can see clearly the growth in accommodation and food services. It is worth noting that this pattern is somewhat flattered by the fact that union density is still comparatively high in utility and transport sectors, which were historically part of the public sector, and where employment is expected to be broadly stable or see some modest growth. Indeed, we can expect that union density will come under continued pressure in these areas while largely

## Figure 1. Union density vs forecast jobs growth (private sector)

Source: Unions 21 analysis of Working Futures data and BEIS Trade union statistics (see page 8)



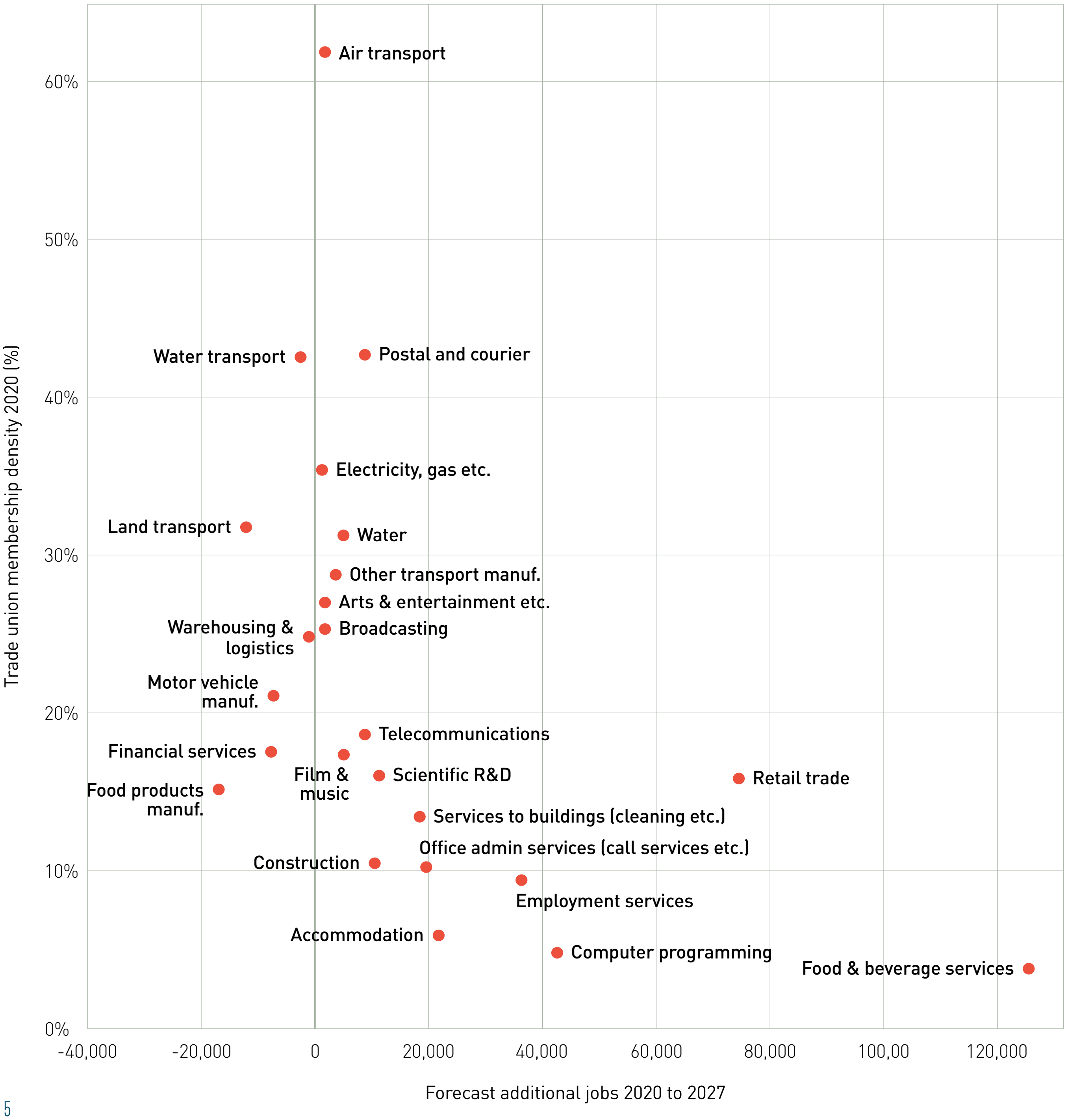
missing out on major employment growth in food and beverage services.

This leads us to warn that *if sectoral union densities do not change, total union membership growth will be largely confined to the public sector, and overall density will continue to fall*.

However, even this prediction could easily prove optimistic, given that trade union density rates have been falling across most industries for most of the past two decades.

## Figure 2. Union density vs forecast jobs growth (selected private sector industries)

Source: Unions 21 analysis of Working Futures data and BEIS Trade union statistics (see page 8)



# A PUBLIC SECTOR CHALLENGE AS MUCH AS A PRIVATE SECTOR ONE

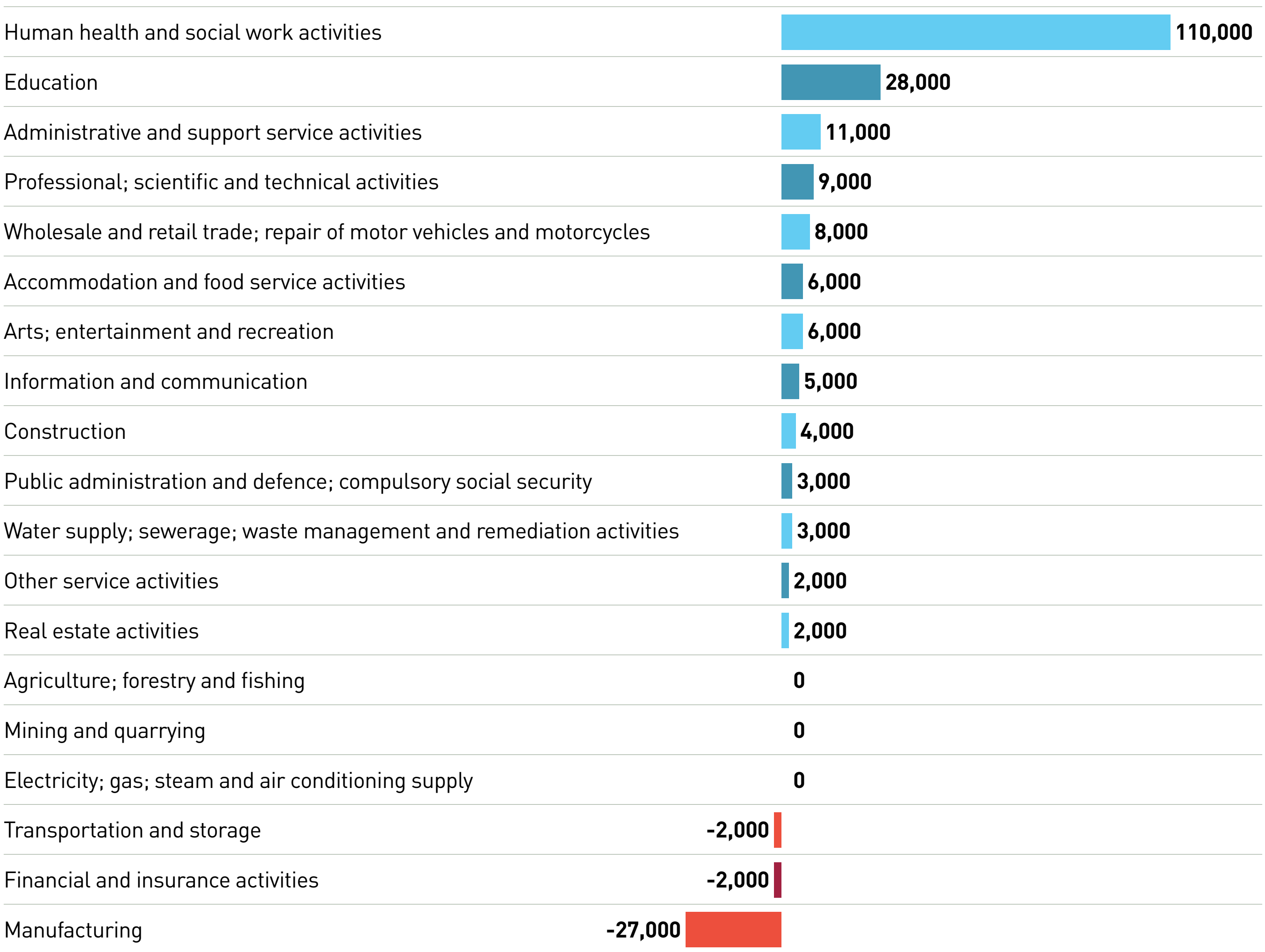
**For private sector unions, the challenge can be seen as fairly straight forward. Figures 1 and 2 clearly lay out the need to organise in growth sectors. However, the membership challenge isn't just in the private sector. The change in occupations and industries affects public sector unions too.**

While unions in the public sector may gain some comfort in their relatively 'secure' position that they will have in terms of membership, the occupational change could present a real long-term challenge.

Consider the following scenario. While job growth in health and education is likely to grow in all areas, there will be a relative shift from 'professional' to those which are considered lower qualified (and paid). At the moment, collective bargaining occurs through various mechanisms at both the local and national level. Union density is highest within occupations that are professional or occupational. This is a significant contributing factor to industry density levels.

## Figure 3. Forecast union membership growth 2020-27 assuming constant sectoral densities

Source: Unions 21 analysis of Working Futures data and BEIS Trade union statistics (see page 8)



What happens to unions if job growth in their industry is concentrated in lower density areas where workers might have a weaker link to the profession or sector? There will be a real challenge for unions on how to maintain density and maintain collective bargaining coverage. We can already see unions opening up membership to auxiliary roles and so more work in this area may need to occur.

The other side of the change challenge for public sector unions is highlighted by figure 3. Even if density remains static, the fall in private sector membership would mean the increasing gap between the public sector unionised workforce and private sector workers. Attacks on hard won benefits through collective bargaining will be harder to protect and extend.

## WHAT DO WORKERS THINK?

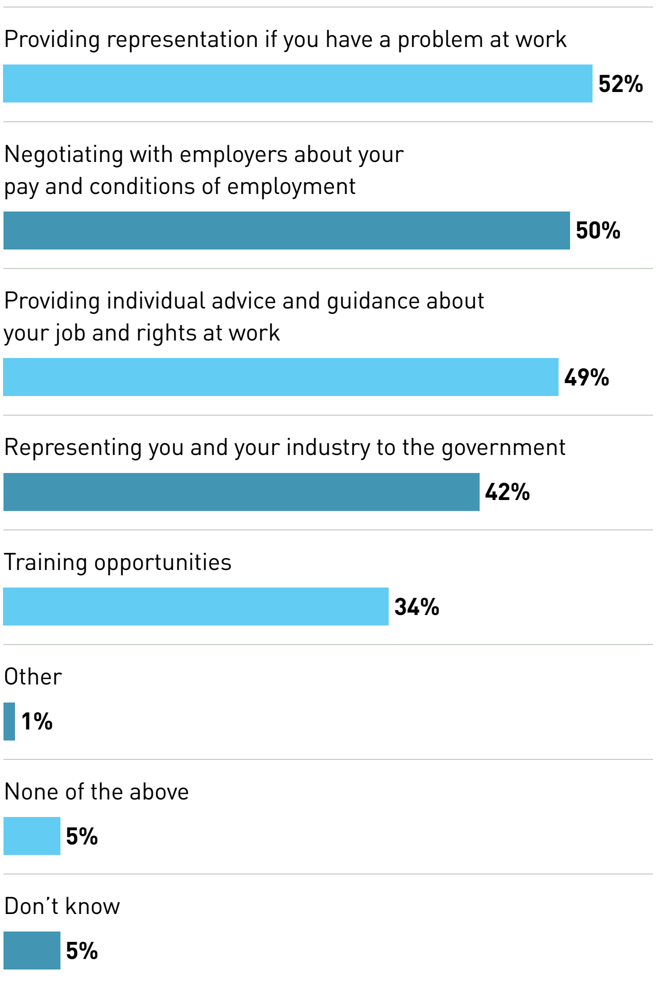
**Many jobs that we have today were not present when unions were created. Some jobs were not even present ten years ago. Even jobs that have remained over the years are not necessarily carried out in the way that they were when first created.**

To accompany this initial research, we worked with the polling firm Survation to explore the attitudes of workers to explore how workers view voice at work, how issues are resolved and unions. The sample covered all main industries and occupations, ages and size of employer. For some questions, we purposefully sought to get the views of those who already work in sectors which we have identified will see job growth, and an existing level of union density.

At the time of writing, COVID-19 was still the main concern for workers. This concern was broken down into specific worries related to employment prospects, return to work (and the associated health and safety concerns) and staffing shortages. Across all areas of employment, over 70% of respondents thought they were treated well by their employer, and nearly 60% said that they were happy with how decisions were made at work. When we broke this particular view down, we could see that the larger the workplace, the more likely it was for workers to want to have more say in decision making. For context, SMEs account for 60% of overall employment with 4.2 million out of the total

### Q9. "Trade unions have various functions. Which of these activities, if any, do you think could benefit you and your colleagues?"

Source: Survation/Unions 21 poll August 2021



16.6 million workers being employed by a micro employer (1-9 people). Public sector employment skews towards large employment.

Related to that point, results offer possible evidence that the employer, the higher satisfaction was with how an employer treated you. Wholesale and retail and accommodation and food/beverage workers were also slightly more likely to consider their employer as treating them well. Where we do not have any evidence to suggest causation, there could be a correlation in this sector with the size of employers. Professional, scientific and technical workers were more likely to want a say in work and seek a senior manager to look for resolution of their issue.

In terms of attitudes specifically in regards to unions, forty-four percent thought that unions played a positive role in society with 42% having a neutral or no opinion.

Lastly, we also asked the respondents which activities would be the most attractive to those not in membership and to consider whether existing membership options work.

From this, we can see that there is a clustering of the main aspects of union work – negotiations, representation and information, advice and guidance on work rights. Overwhelmingly, the factors that would motivate respondents to join could be themed into knowing who and how to join, seeing the effectiveness of the union and also other colleagues willing to join. A very small number of people said price factored into the motivation to join (although making unions free was an option that 21% of respondents asked for).

## MOVING FORWARD

**There is no one size fits all solution to these problems; unions will have to determine their own policies and actions based on their operating environments.**

**However, across all unions, this raises important and timely questions which relate not just to our individual unions but across the movement. We all have a shared interest in maintaining existing strength while also making it possible for workers in growth sectors (mainly in the private sector) to join. How we can do this is now an important discussion.**

### FIGURE SOURCES

**Figure 1:** https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/trade-union-statistics-2020

**Figure 2:** https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/trade-union-statistics-2020

**Figure 3:** https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/trade-union-statistics-2020

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Design: www.wave.coop