

The Scottish Membership Challenge – A Summary

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Over the past two decades, there has been a radical change in Scotland's industrial base and in patterns and types of employment. These changes have taken place together with the attacks on trade union organisation, which occurred throughout the eighties and most of the nineties. Trade unions in Scotland have already moved to meet many of the challenges presented by these changes, but it is universally acknowledged that more needs to be done to ensure that a new generation of trade unionists emerge to build a stronger and even more effective movement in the decades to come.

This changing face of the Scottish workforce has been reflected by a fall in Scottish trade union membership.

- 37% of Scottish workers are union members whereas more than half of all employees were in membership in 1981;
- Between 1980 and the millennium, STUC affiliated trade union membership in Scotland fell from almost 1.1 million to less than 630,000;
- Trade union density in manual trades fell from 43% to 28% while it only fell from 35% to 31% in the non-manual sector;
- Whereas male trade union membership fell from 43% to 30%, female membership was much more steady showing a fall from 32% to 29%;
- Density figures for Scotland show that membership remains significantly higher than the UK average

Evidence suggests that anti-trade union laws have been a key factor in restricting unions' ability to recruit.

- In the four years prior to the Employment Relations Act 1999, recognition deal in the UK totalled 354, whereas in the subsequent four years new deals reached 1101;
- Recognition deals in Scotland since number 247 representing 13% of UK recognition deals. This is significantly higher than the UK average.

Recruiting young workers

For every five workers who leave trade union through retirement, only one worker under the age of 20 is currently being recruited.

- only 5% of members aged 16 to 20 are members of a trade union growing to just 11% for 16-24 years olds;
- 14% of full-time employees of this age are members whilst only 5% of young people who work part-time belong to a trade union.

Yet young peoples' general attitudes to unions are no less positive than those of earlier generations.

- When asked their opinions on trade unions, 63% of workers under 30 said strong trade unions are needed to protect the working conditions and wages of employees, compared with only 47% of over 30s;
- 37% of 16-24 year olds had very or mainly favourable attitudes to trade unions compared with 9% who reported unfavourable views of trade unions;
- Yet 42% percent of 16-24 year olds felt they knew nothing at all about trade unions whilst 44% said they did not know very much;
- 40% of non-unionised young workers stated that they were not union members because they had not been asked.

Lower membership among young people is a product of the types of jobs they are employed in - 60% of young non-members work in workplaces with no union presence. Young workers tend to have a different industrial distribution from older workers, disproportionately represented in those sectors of the economy which are not well unionised.

- The retail sector accounts for just 6% of trade union members but 20% of 16-29 year olds are employed in this industry;

- In comparison health and social work accounts for 18% of trade union members, but employs only 8% of 16-29 year olds.

The public-private split

The problems faced by union organisers in the public and private sectors are markedly different.

- Current trade union density in the private sector has fallen to just 21%;
- Recruitment in the public sector is traditionally high with 66% of public sector employees currently being a member of their trade union;
- 55% of workers in the private sector have never been a member of a trade union;
- Over 50% of public sector workers leaving their union, other than through retirement, do so because they move to a job in the private sector or to a non-recognised workplace;
- Just 22% of private sector workplaces have union recognition agreements in contrast to full recognition in the public sector.

Making progress with part-time workers

Despite the fact that the greatest fall in trade union membership has been amongst males, women are still less likely than men to be a member of a union. In particular, the low union density area of part time workers is overwhelming dominated by women and students.

- 45% of trade unionists in Scotland are female,
- only 22% of part-time workers are union members compared to 39% of full-time.
- 87% of part-time workers are women;

- 80% of students work part-time in addition to their studies.

This low membership density can be partly attributed to the difficulty of union representatives in recruiting part-timers to trade unions. However, part-time employees have favourable attitudes to unions though they are unsure as to what unions can do for them.

Reversing the Scottish membership decline

Over the past two decades, Scottish membership fell by 2% year on year. Yet over the past two years, STUC affiliated membership has shown a modest increase. This increase is confirmed by LFS figures which show trade union density in Scotland on the increase.

In the context of the extreme recruitment difficulties faced by Scottish unions, the increase in membership represents a significant organisational success. The task now for Scottish trade unions is to build on this work to reach the next generation of workers with positive messages that much has been, and even more can be, achieved through the collective voice of working people in Scotland.

Full version of research document: "Unions Work: The Scottish Membership Challenge" is available on the Unions Work website, www.unionswork.org or by contacting the STUC.