

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the product of a programme of Fabian Society and Changing Work Centre research on the future of private sector trade unions. The report charts the decline of British trade unions from being the most powerful union movement in the world to one facing a fight to remain relevant – and it sets out key steps on the road to recovery.

The research included analysis of trade union membership trends, a face-to-face survey with 1,339 workers, a series of focus groups across the UK with non-unionised private sector workers between the ages of 18 and 35, and a consultation with trade union leaders, officers and lay representatives. The research was supported by an advisory group of leading trade unionists and experts.

MEMBERSHIP DECLINE

Membership in the private sector is less than a third of what it was at its peak, falling from 45 per cent to 13 per cent of the commercial workforce between 1979 and 2016. The key drivers of this change were legislation, industrial change, shifting business practice, and changing attitudes.

Considerable headwinds will need to be overcome for private sector trade unionism to recover:

- Industrial change is going to make life more difficult for unions. The five fastest growing private sector industries have low levels of trade union density. Each has less than half the trade union density of the UK as a whole, and lower levels of union membership than the private sector average.
- Over the last 15 years people have become more individualistic in their attitudes to work. Our survey shows more of the workforce now want to deal with their pay individually, which marks a stark contrast to previous surveys which have shown a preference for collective pay bargaining. This finding was confirmed in our focus groups of young private sector workers.

However, despite the long-term decline of trade union membership, trade unions are still the UK's largest voluntary movement and they remain a powerful force in the labour market.

Only

13%

of the commercial workforce in the private sector are members of trade unions – compared to 45% in 1979

ENDURING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR UNIONS

The Fabian Society's survey of the workforce shows the decline in union membership has not been matched with a decline in support for the role of trade unions in the private sector workforce:

- Three in five private sector workers (59 per cent) think trade unions are necessary to protect working conditions.
- Only a minority (20 per cent) of private sector workers agree with the statement 'trade unions have no future in modern Britain'. 44 per cent disagree, and a quarter of them are neutral.

The focus groups with non-unionised private sector workers echoed this support for trade unions, but highlighted important challenges for the trade union movement:

- Workers are instinctively positive about trade unions. When asked about unions, the participants' main focus was on the constructive work they do, like improving pay and conditions.
- Workers have a good understanding of what unions do, which is both good and bad news for unions. Unions will need to do more than just explain their role in order to recruit new members.
- Many private sector workers think unions are simply 'not for me'. Unions are seen as working well for people in public sector, long-term or highly skilled jobs.
- Unions feel distant from young private sector workers' day-to-day experiences. Unions are seen as institutions from history or 'guardian angels': benevolent but distant forces for good.
- Many participants thought that trade union reps and leaders are not 'like me'. Unions have a diversity problem that is putting off prospective members.

However, people are open to joining unions if they can make an appealing offer that is value for money. The non-unionised workers who participated in our focus groups offered their advice to trade unions. We have distilled their ideas into five broad statements that sum up what would make them join a union. The workers would join a union if:

59%

of private sector workers think trade unions are necessary to protect working conditions

- **...it could help me personally.**
- **...membership was value for money.**
- **...the union worked with my employer.**
- **...I had the right information.**
- **...I had sufficient problems at work..**

A MEMBERSHIP RENAISSANCE

Trade unionists are clear about the scale of the challenge they face, with one saying: “We can’t rest on our laurels – we have to adapt.” But they also reject claims that private sector union membership is in permanent decline, with every trade unionist interviewed saying they expected to see union density begin to grow in time.

Stemming membership decline will require changes in the way unions recruit, organise and support workers. But reversing 40 years of falling density will require more than change to individual union practice. It will require unprecedented levels of collaboration and partnership, with unions working together to bring millions more into the movement, and working with government and business to ensure the voices of workers are fully heard as the UK economy enters its fourth industrial revolution.

On the basis of the insight from trade union leaders, officers and activists, we have developed 11 recommendations to drive a renaissance in private sector trade union membership. Many of them draw on existing good practice. Unions should:

- 1 Answer the ‘what can you do for me?’ question.** Unions need to be able to give prospective members a tangible idea of what they should expect as a member, using case studies and qualified promises to echo the marketing strategies of disruptive start-up businesses.
- 2 Be representative of the workforce.** Unions need to set out plans to ensure their reps, committees, staff teams and leadership are as diverse as the industries in which they organise.
- 3 Introduce discount membership rates.** Unions should offer discounted membership deals to under 35s and to workers in unrecognised workplaces – to bring in younger members and to acknowledge workers in unorganised workplaces tend to get less from their membership.

- 4 Provide ‘instant breakdown cover’ for workers with pre-existing problems.** Unions should follow the lead of the AA by committing to provide non-members with instant support for pre-existing issues in exchange for a fee and an upfront commitment to membership.
- 5 Reach out to the workforce of the future.** Unions should understand the journey that brings workers into their industries and occupations and deliver outreach activities in key parts of this pipeline, in order to educate future employees about how unions can support them in their career.
- 6 Invest in technology to reach hard-to-reach workers.** Unions should invest in the development of tools, apps and other tech-based solutions to make it economically viable to organise isolated and dispersed workers.
- 7 Establish career development centres.** Unions must support workers who don’t expect to be in their job or sector for life by helping them develop their careers – to help people prepare for the future, while also bargaining for the here and now.
- 8 Make the most of available data.** Unions are sitting on an abundance of data, much of which can be put to better use to improve the effectiveness of campaigns, recruitment strategies and overall decision-making.
- 9 Set standards across multiple workplaces.** Unions should consider establishing or promoting sectoral standards to improve work across multiple workplaces.
- 10 Collaborate to increase bargaining power.** In the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the TUC, unions should come together to agree a new collective mission to reverse historic membership decline. This should involve giving the TUC a new role as a clearing house for union membership, through which workers can ‘join the family’ of the union movement.
- 11 Build a new partnership with government and business.** Unions should extend a hand of friendship to good, responsible employers with a new cross-union kitemark scheme to reward good employment practice. In return, government and business should acknowledge the vital contribution unions can make, especially as the fourth industrial revolution gathers pace, and give unions access

to all workplaces and end union-busting. This new partnership should form the basis of a new industrial relations framework for the UK, complemented by sector-level forums for unions, employers and, where necessary, government to co-create plans to boost productivity, fill skills gaps and improve work for all.

These 11 recommendations together can pave the way to a trade union membership renaissance that can apply and sustain upwards pressure on wages, working conditions and fulfilment at work for decades to come.