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ABSTRACT

Key Words: Union density; Trend; Demand; Representation gap.

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INTRODUCTION

In many countries between 1980 and the mid-1990s trade union density registered a considerable decline (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000). Overall, trade unions now represent a smaller proportion of the employed labour force in Europe than at any other time since 1950 (Verma and Kochan, 2004). In Ireland, union density is at its lowest point since the 1950s (D'Art and Turner, 2003). Beyond the interests of officers, officials or committed members should union decline be a cause for general concern? Historically, unions have provided significant services to workers at enterprise and national level. At enterprise level unions serve to protect the interests of members and ensure a measure of fairness. A survey of non-union firms in Britain found employees were unlikely to have opportunities to air grievances or resolve problems in ways that were systematic and designed to ensure fairness of treatment (Millward et al., 1992: 365; Towers, 1997). Unions also play a role in helping management to manage better. Indeed, there appears to be a strong positive relationship between the spread of high commitment management practices and a union presence in the workplace (Cully et al., 1999: 133). Furthermore, trade unions not only emphasise the human aspect of the labour commodity but in imposing a check on the exercise of power both express and foster democratic values and culture. These benign effects are not only confined to firms, but also affect the wider society. There is substantial evidence that trade union membership provides a stimulus to both electoral and political participation (D'Art and Turner, 2005a). Finally, unions have been among the most important causal mechanisms in the development of welfare states (Radcliff, 2006). In Europe they have played a key role in shaping social policy and the European social model. The result has been a de-commodification of labour (Hyman, 2005).

Yet, many commentators argue that the processes of industrial restructuring, economic globalisation and the emergence of a post-industrial knowledge economy are forcing a fundamental change in the nature of work and the role of trade unions (D'Art and Turner, 2006a). As a consequence of these putative changes, decline in union membership and density levels may simply reflect a decline in the demand by workers for union representation. An implicit aspect of the 'decline in demand' thesis is that the functions unions

provide are no longer necessary or relevant in the modern economy. However, rather than declining demand there is substantial evidence to indicate that employer opposition to trade unions is a much more significant element in the decline in union density (D'Art and Turner, 2005b; Geary, 2006).

In this paper, by using data from the CSO we examine firstly the trend in union density across different industrial sectors, occupations, gender, age and educational levels; and secondly the existence of a potential representation gap by comparing union density levels from the CSO data and the responses from a European-level survey regarding the demand for trade unions. 'Union density' throughout this paper refers to employment density; that is, the proportion of employees in the employed labour force who are members of a trade union. 'Representation gap' means the difference between actual union membership and density levels, and the demand for union membership and services. The existence of a representation gap points to a potentially unfulfilled demand for union membership. In practice, this is difficult to accurately measure and is often estimated from employee attitudes, particularly non-union employees, towards trade unions. The demand for trade unions is measured here by the extent to which employees perceive a need for strong trade unions to protect their working conditions and wages.

IS THERE A DEMAND FOR TRADE UNIONS?

A number of explanations have been advanced to account for trends in union membership and density levels. In particular structural explanations have exercised a strong attraction for scholars. The structural approach ascribes union decline to long-term socio-economic changes (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 1999). These explanations attribute union decline to changes such as the shift from manufacturing to service employment, related occupational transformations from manual to mental work, an increasingly integrated global economy and the decline in left politics and associated working-class projects (see Bain and Price, 1983; Booth, 1986; Deery and De Cieri, 1991). An implicit assumption of the structural explanation is that union representation is unnecessary and there is no demand from the growing number of employees in the new sectors of the economy

and workplaces. Indeed, the Irish Business and Employers' Confederation (IBEC) (2003) have claimed that the vast majority of private sector workers choose not to be in trade unions. In the UK, for example, Bryson and Gomez (2005) argue that such changes as the increase in non-manual jobs, service-type employment, jobs in the private sector, working women and part-time work have conspired against unions by shifting an increasing proportion of employment to workers who are traditionally less inclined to unionise. Yet, it appears that the single most important factor determining the probability of never being a union member is 'whether or not an individual is employed in a workplace with a recognised union' (Bryson and Gomez, 2005: 87). Although there is substantial evidence to suggest that the significance of structural factors in union decline may be exaggerated, nevertheless, this explanation retains a significant attraction in the literature (for critical discussion refer to D'Art and Turner, 2004; Kaufman, 2001; Disney, 1990).

UNION REPRESENTATION AND LABOUR MARKET CHANGES

A corollary of the structuralist position is that substantive changes in the advanced industrial societies have undermined or made redundant the demand for trade unions in the workplace. A major change identified is a shift away from industrial manufacturing employment to employment in the services sector of the economy.

Hypothesis 1: The decline in union density will be greater among service workers between 1994 and 2004, and the representation gap will be smaller for service workers than other sectors.

A second apparent substantive change is the growth of knowledge occupations and the decline of manual blue-collar work. Knowledge work can be defined as work that requires cognitive, rather than manual, skills to identify and solve problems and manipulate information in a creative way to add value to an organisation (see Zuboff, 1988; Winslow and Bramer, 1994). There has been a general and significant upward shift in occupational levels in the European Union. From 1995 to 2001 the share of low-skilled

people in the working age population declined from 46 to 39 per cent, while that of the medium- and high-skilled rose from 38 to 43 per cent and from 15 to 19 per cent respectively (European Commission, 2003). Higher-level knowledge occupations are likely to command relatively high levels of income and good working conditions, and consequently employees in such occupations are less likely to perceive a need for a trade union. In the absence of data for 1994, the focus is on the differences at one point, 2004.

Hypothesis 2: Union density and the representation gap will be lower among higher occupational groups.

UNION REPRESENTATION AND INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

It has been argued that new forms of work that require long periods of education and training have fostered the diffusion of individual orientations at the expense of traditional forms of union solidarity (Lash and Urry, 1987; Zoll, 1996; Valkenburg, 1996). Thus, employees with higher levels of education are more likely to manifest an individualist orientation and, as a consequence, union representation will have little or no appeal. Consequently, employees with high levels of education are less likely to join a trade union.

Hypothesis 3: The higher the educational level, the lower the union density level and the representation gap.

Other factors often cited as impacting on the demand for unions are the increasing participation of women in the labour force and the decline of interest in unions among younger workers. Generally, the historical experience in industrialised nations is for much of woman's work to be relatively short-term and marginal to the main (male) labour force. This tended to discourage female workers from adopting a collectivist response to the issues of pay and conditions (Lockwood, 1966; Hyman and Price, 1983). One explanation for women's reluctance to join and participate in trade unions emphasises the gender difference. According to Smith (1981: 53), women in the past were viewed as 'naturally timid and unwilling to fight and [had] no place in the rough arena of union

struggle'. From this perspective, women's behaviour is principally interpreted in relation to their gender, which predisposes women to be less interested in trade unions given that union activity is supposedly characterised by 'proletarian masculinity and militancy' (Wajcam, 2000: 187). Women, it was argued, disliked the possibility of strikes, pickets and violence (Forest, 1993: 328). Thus, the 'stereotype' has endured that women are disinterested in unions and identify mainly with family issues (Briskin and McDermott, 1993: 7-8). This identification with home and family responsibilities appears to be consistent with a number of studies from the United States in the 1980s (e.g. Fiorito et al., 1986). Through a process of socialisation, it is suggested, women are taught to be relatively passive and less confrontational than men and more willing to be resigned to the existing job conditions and less likely to engage in aggressive activities such as strikes (Wheeler and McClendon, 1991; Schur and Kruse, 1992). Alternatively, there is considerable evidence to indicate that women are just as likely as men to have positive attitudes towards unions (Turner and D'Art, 2003; Walters, 2002), to vote for union recognition (see Premack and Hunter, 1988; Schur and Kruse, 1992: 100) and be active union members (Klandermans, 1992; Lawrence, 1994: 94). Here we test whether women are less likely than men to join a union in the period 1994 to 2004.

Hypothesis 4: The decline in union density will be greater among females than males between 1994 and 2004 and the representation gap will be smaller for females than males.

In a period of union decline in many European countries it can be argued that younger workers have less experience of trade unions and will display significantly lower levels of attachment to collective organisations. On the other hand, it is possible that older workers' attitudes, particularly those at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy, towards management have become more entrenched over time and more likely to perceive management negatively (D'Art and Turner, 2002). Consequently older workers are more likely to perceive a need for trade unions. Furthermore, younger workers are more likely to enter the labour market with

higher levels of education and core knowledge skills than older workers.

Hypothesis 5: The decline in union density will be greater among young workers between 1994 and 2004 and the representation gap smaller for younger workers.

DATA AND MEASURES

The analysis here is based on two data sources. First, we rely on the CSO (2005) release on union membership trends from 1994 to 2004 based on the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS). The QNHS provides the basis for quarterly labour force estimates in Ireland. Information is collected continuously throughout the year with 3,000 households surveyed each week to give a total sample of 39,000 households in each quarter. The second source of data on Irish employee attitudes used here comes from the European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS is a biennial multi-country survey covering over 20 states. The first round was fielded in 2002/2003. The survey is funded jointly by the European Commission and the European Science Foundation and directed by a central coordinating team. The Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD) is the distributor of the ESS data. Data collection was by means of face-to-face interviews of around an hour in duration. The objective of the ESS sampling strategy is the design and implementation of random (probability) samples with comparable estimates based on full coverage of the eligible residential populations aged 15 years and over. A total of 2,046 completed questionnaires were returned in the Irish survey. This represented a response rate of 64.5 per cent. Employees accounted for 43 per cent (882) of the responses, self-employed 12 per cent (252) and those not at work 44 per cent (899). In order to correct for possible biases a design weight is used in the statistical analysis below. The design weight corrects for these slightly different probabilities of selection, thereby making the sample more representative of a 'true' sample of individuals aged 15 or over in each country.

MEASURING THE 'REPRESENTATION GAP'

The representation gap is calculated as the difference between actual density rates from the QNHS and the demand for trade

unions as measured by the ESS. Employee demand for trade unions in the ESS is based on the response to the following question: 'Employees need strong trade unions to protect their working conditions and wages' scored from 1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = disagree; to 5 = strongly disagree. We assume that those who either strongly agree or agree believe that trade unions are an essential mechanism of protection for employees in the workplace. However, a positive response to the question among non-union employees cannot be directly linked to the intention to join a union or joining behaviour itself. A positive response may plausibly be interpreted in two ways. In the first case non-union employees with positive attitudes towards unions are possibly frustrated joiners. This could occur where there is no union presence in the workplace, thus removing the availability of choice for employees (Green, 1990). Alternatively, the employer erects barriers to union joining making it difficult and costly for employees, thus frustrating the intention to become a union member (for the Irish case see D'Art and Turner, 2006b).

A second plausible explanation is that while most non-union respondents believe that unions are 'in general' needed to protect workers, they also feel that union membership is not necessary in their particular case either because unionisation is perceived to have little benefit or they work for a 'good employer'. This may partly explain the results of a national survey of employee attitudes where 79 per cent of non-union respondents in unionised companies reported that they would vote for continued union representation in their companies (Geary, 2006: 8). It may also be the case that some non-union respondents recognise that a unionised sector indirectly benefits the non-union sector by setting standards in wage levels and conditions of employment.

Although it is not possible here to establish the accuracy of these various explanations, it is likely a combination depending on the employee's sectoral location (public or private sector; industry or services) and employer attitudes to trade unions. What can be assumed with reasonable certainty is that agreement with the need for strong trade unions indicates a substantial measure of sympathy and support for trade unions. In favourable circumstances, such as

employer neutrality or support, this is more likely to translate into actual union membership.

TRENDS

First we examine the distribution of responses for the dependent variable that employees need strong trade unions to protect working conditions and wages. A total of 77 per cent of employees either strongly agreed or agreed that employees need unions to protect them, 9 per cent had no opinion and 14 per cent strongly disagreed or disagreed (Table 1). Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, two-thirds of the self-employed agreed that employees need strong unions while 19 per cent disagreed. However, the overwhelming majority of those not at work (82 per cent) agreed while only 8 per cent disagreed. It is also notable that 72 per cent of non-union employees believed that workers needed strong trade unions; and non-union employees working in unionised firms reported higher levels of agreement (74 per cent) compared to non-union employees working in non-union firms (68 per cent).

These responses would appear to indicate a substantial demand or at least sympathy for trade unions among all respondents. In the following analysis the focus is solely on employees in the labour force and excludes both the self-employed and those not at work.

UNION DENSITY DECLINE AND THE REPRESENTATION GAP

Union density in Ireland declined from 45 per cent (432,900) in 1994 to 34 per cent (521,400) in 2004, a decrease of 11 percentage points (CSO, 2005). There are substantial variations across the different sectors of the economy. While density levels have declined in both the public and private sectors, the decline is significantly greater in the private sector. In the mainly public sector areas, density declined from 66 to 59 per cent, a decline of 7 percentage points (Table 2). However, the mainly industrial sectors (manual and skilled) have experienced the sharpest decline of 16 percentage points, from 51 to 35 per cent. The decrease is particularly notable in construction and transport but is also substantial in production industries. Union density declined by 6 percentage points in private services from 25 per cent in 1994 to 19 per cent by 2004. Hotels and

Table 1: The Demand for Unions: Employees, Self-Employed and Those Not at Work

‘Employees need strong trade unions to protect their working conditions and wages’						
	Agree strongly %	Agree %	Neither %	Disagree %	Disagree strongly %	Total % (N)
Employees	28	49	9	12	2	100 (872)
Self-employed	9	55	17	16	3	100 (250)
Not at work	26	56	10	7	1	100 (865)
Total (N)	25 (491)	53 (1054)	10 (209)	10 (203)	2 (30)	100 (1987)
Employees at work						
Union member	36	52	6	6	1	100 (355)
Non-member	22	48	12	15	3	100 (517)
Non-members						
Union present	23	51	7	15	5	100 (106)
No union present	22	46	14	16	3	100 (391)

Source: ESS (2002/2003).

restaurants, and the financial services experienced the largest declines, 11 and 12 percentage points respectively. Consequently, there is no support for the first part of Hypothesis 1: that the decline in union density would be greater among service workers between 1994 and 2004. Indeed, the decline in the mainly industrial sectors is greater by a margin of 10 percentage points.

Despite the decline in union density levels the results from the ESS survey indicate substantial agreement with the statement that workers need strong trade unions to protect their working conditions and wages: 76 per cent of respondents in the mainly industrial sectors, 70 per cent in the services sectors and 85 per cent in the public sector. As Table 2 indicates, there are potential representation gaps (calculated by subtracting the density level in each sector in 2004 from the responses in the ESS survey) across all three main groups. However, the representation gap is greater in the services group at 51 per cent compared to 41 per cent in industrial sectors and 26 per cent in the public sector. Thus, there is no support for the second part of Hypothesis 1: that the representation gap would be smaller for service workers than other sectors.

Table 2: Union Density and Economic Sector*

	QNHS		ESS N = 849	
Employment sector	Union density May 2004 %	Change in percentage points 1994 to 2004 %	Employees agreeing with need for strong trade unions %	Potential gap in 2004 for employees^a %
Private sector – mainly industrial				
Production	37	-16	77	-40
Construction	27	-20	71	-44
Transport	47	-19	78	-31
Sector total^b	35	-16	76	-41

(Continued)

Table 2: (Continued)

	QNHS		ESS N = 849	
Employment sector	Union density May 2004 %	Change in percentage points 1994 to 2004 %	Employees agreeing with need for strong trade unions %	Potential gap in 2004 for employees ^a %
Private sector – mainly services				
Wholesale	20	-3	72	-52
Hotels	10	-11	71	-61
Other	18	-3	84	-66
Finance	22	-12	57	-35
Sector total	19	-6	70	-51
Mainly public sector				
Public administration	75	-1	86	-11
Education	59	-9	81	-22
Health	51	-7	87	-36
Sector total	59	-7	85	-26

Source: CSO (2005) and ESS (2002/2003).

*Agriculture, forestry and fishing have been omitted, as only a small number of workers are sampled from this category.

^a This is derived by subtracting union density in 2004 from the percentage of employees agreeing with the statement that strong unions are needed to protect workers.

^b Totals for each broad group (industry, services and public sector) are calculated by summing the number of unionised respondents in the group as a proportion of the total number employed in that group. The change in percentage points in union density is calculated in a similar manner. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number and totals may not add up to exactly 100.

Legend: Production Industries; Construction; Transport, storage, communication; Wholesale and retail trade; Hotels and restaurants; Other services; Financial and business services; Public administration and defence; Education; Health.

In Table 3 the nine occupational categories are divided into five skill levels. For ease of analysis we have further divided the nine groups into three distinct skill levels: higher-skill, levels 1 and 2; intermediate skill, level 3; and lower skill, levels 4 and 5 (see Turner and D'Art, 2005). Union density levels in 2004 are highest among the professional and associate professional occupations and lowest in sales, personal services and other occupations. Across the three groups, union density is highest in the skill level 1 and 2 occupations (41 per cent) and the lowest in skill levels 4 and 5 (30 per cent). Conversely, the proportion of respondents in the skill level 4 and 5 occupations agreeing with the statement that workers need strong trade unions to protect their working conditions and wages is

Table 3: Union Density and Occupation

	QNHS	ESS <i>N</i> = 862 ^a	
Occupational category	Union density May 2004 %	Employees agreeing 'need for strong unions' %	Potential gap for employees %
Skill levels ^b 1 and 2			
1. Managers and administration staff	29	53	-24
2. Professionals	45	70	-25
3. Assistant professionals/ technicians	49	72	-23
Sub-total ^c	41	65	-24
Skill level 3			
4. Clerical and secretarial	36	77	-41
5. Craft/related	34	84	-50
Sub-total	36	80	-44

(Continued)

Table 3: (Continued)

	QNHS	ESS <i>N</i> = 862 ^a	
Occupational category	Union density May 2004 %	Employees agreeing 'need for strong unions' %	Potential gap for employees %
Skill levels 4 and 5			
6. Personal/service	30	88	-58
7. Sales	19	89	-70
8. Plant operatives	41	88	-47
9. Other occupations	29	86 ^d	-57
Sub-total	30	88	-58

Source: CSO (2005) and ESS (2002/2003).

^a The number of respondents included in the ESS varies in each table due to missing data in the various measures.

^b This follows the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ABS, 1997). The nine major occupational groups are divided into five distinct skill levels (see Turner and D'Art, 2005).

^c Sub-totals for each broad skill level are calculated by summing the number of unionised respondents in the group as a proportion of the total number employed in that group.

^d Only seven respondents are returned in this occupational category.

88 per cent, compared to 65 per cent in the skill level 1 and 2 occupations. Thus, the potential representation gap is considerably higher in the former group at 58 per cent compared to 24 per cent among the skill level 1 and 2 occupations. This provides partial support for Hypothesis 2: that the representation gap will be lower among higher occupational groups but the substantive part of the hypothesis that density would be lower among higher-level occupations receives no support.

As Table 4 indicates, there is a strong relationship between educational level and union density level, with increasing education associated with increasing density levels. Consequently, there is no support for Hypothesis 3: that higher educational levels would be

Table 4: Union Density and Education

	QNHS	ESS N= 871	
Educational level	Union density May 2004 %	Employees agreeing 'need for strong unions' %	Potential gap for employees %
No education/primary	31	90	-59
Lower secondary	33	84	-51
Higher secondary	33	82	-49
Post-leaving	36	72	-36
Third level no degree	40	60	-20
Third level degree+	38	62	-24

Source: CSO (2005) and ESS (2002/2003).

associated with lower union density levels. On the other hand, the proportion of respondents agreeing with the need for strong unions is also directly related to education, with 90 per cent of respondents with no education/primary level education agreeing compared to 62 per cent of respondents with degree level education. Thus the potential representation gap is significantly higher among respondents with lower levels of education. This provides partial support for Hypothesis 3, which predicted that higher educational levels would be associated with a lower representational gap.

In the period 1994 to 2004, the decline in density levels was greater for males than females: 12 percentage points compared to 10 (Table 5). Indeed, the proportion of males and females in unions is almost equal in 2004. Nevertheless, 80 per cent of female respondents in the ESS survey believed that workers needed strong unions compared to 74 per cent of male respondents and the potential representation is also greater for females at 46 per cent compared to 39 per cent for males. Consequently there is no support for Hypothesis 4: that the decline in union density would be greater among females than males and the representation gap smaller for females than males.

Table 5: Union Density and Gender

	QNHS		ESS <i>N</i> = 872	
	Union density May 2004 %	Change in percentage points 1994 to 2004 %	Employees agreeing 'need for strong unions' %	Potential gap for employees %
Male	35	-12	74	-39
Female	34	-10	80	-46

Source: CSO (2005) and ESS (2002/2003).

Table 6: Union Density and Age

	QNHS		ESS <i>N</i> = 871	
Age Group	Union density May 2004 %	Change in percentage points 1994 to 2004 %	Employees agreeing 'need for strong unions' %	Potential gap for employees %
15-19	8	-12	79	-71
20-24	22	-11	90	-68
25-34	30	-17	71	-41
35-44	41	-13	73	-32
45-54	46	-6	82	-36
55-59	45	-10	85	-40
60-64	43	-6	72	-29
65+	21	-1	79	-58

Source: CSO (2005) and ESS (2002/2003).

In general, decline in density levels is associated with age, with the greatest decline occurring in younger age categories rather than older categories (Table 6). The proportion of respondents in the younger age groups (aside from the 15 to 24 years category) agreeing with the need for strong trade unions is weaker compared to the older age categories. Yet, the potential representative gap is

significantly higher for younger age categories than older age categories. Consequently, there is support for the first part of Hypothesis 5: that union density decline would be greater among young workers, but no support for the prediction that the representation gap would smaller for younger workers.

CONCLUSION

Using CSO data for union density between 1994 and 2004 and the ESS survey, five hypotheses were examined. There was no support for Hypothesis 1: that the decline in union density would be greater among service workers or that the representation gap would be smaller for service workers compared with workers in other sectors of the economy. For Hypothesis 2 there was partial support that the representation gap would be lower among higher occupational groups. However, the substantive part of the hypothesis that density would be lower among higher-level occupations received no support. The narrower representation gap and higher union density among this group may be partly explained by their location in the public sector, where union availability and union joining are non-problematic. Again for Hypothesis 4 there was no support for the propositions that the decline in union density would be more pronounced among females or that the representation would be smaller for females than their male counterparts. Finally, the first part of Hypothesis 5, that the decline in union density would be greater among young workers, was confirmed. Yet there was no support for the prediction that the representation gap would be smaller for younger workers.

Overall, the evidence from the ESS indicates substantial agreement among employees with the need for strong trade unions. In total, 77 per cent of employees agreed that unions are a necessary protection at work. This indicates a significant gap between these attitudes and the union density level of 34 per cent in 2004. The potential representation gap is particularly high in private sector services among younger workers in low skill occupations. How can these gaps be explained? Elsewhere we have argued that employer opposition is a significant factor in the decline of private sector union density levels (D'Art and Turner, 2005b). The absence of a trade union in the workplace and employer opposition to recognising a trade union removes any real choice of union membership for many workers.

One way to close the representation gap is to seek changes to the 2001 Industrial Relations Amendment Act to allow speedy and clear determinations in cases of disputed recognition. Equally important is the need for trade unions to regularly conduct organising campaigns in both existing unionised and non-union firms. A strategy of union organising requires committed and active union shop stewards/union representatives on the shop floor. It is possible that union organisation at shop-floor level may have weakened in recent years, particularly in the private sector. This may be a consequence of bargaining at national level and increased employer opposition. For example, research indicates that only 24 per cent of non-union members employed in unionised companies were ever asked to join a union, while the remaining 76 per cent had never been approached to consider union membership (Geary, 2006). Attempts by trade unions to address the representation gap must rely on the organising skills of union officials and the activism of shop-floor union members. In that event the strength of shop-floor organisation and activism will be a critical factor in closing the union representation gap.

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