

TRADE UNION DENSITY IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND, 1960-1979.

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Trade union density, that is, *actual trade union membership expressed as a proportion of potential membership*, has long been recognised as a key datum in the study of industrial relations. In comparative analyses of industrial relations systems, variations in membership density have similarly been held to be of critical importance. It is regrettable, in consequence, that some confusion currently surrounds estimates of trade union density in the Republic of Ireland. The most widely-cited figures at present are those contained in the comparative data on membership density which are prepared on an occasional basis by the Statistical Office of the European Economic Community. Table 1 sets out these estimates for nine member countries of the Community for the years 1970, 1975 and 1978.

Table 1: % of Employees Members of Trade Unions
in EEC Member Countries 1970 - 1978

	1970 %	1975 %	1978 %
Belgium	66	75	76
Denmark	70-75	70-75	70-75
France	22	23	28
Germany F.R.	38	41	42
Ireland	49	55	65
Italy	50-55	50-55	60
Luxembourg	55	50-55	50-55
Netherlands	36	38	37
United Kingdom	47	50	55

Source: Eurostat, *Social Indicators for the European Community 1960-1978*. Statistical Office of the European Economic Community, Brussels.

This table was reproduced in the Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Industrial Relations (1981) and its contents have since been cited elsewhere [Rottman and O'Connell, 1982]. As may be seen member-

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ship density in this country was put at 65% in 1978, the third highest of the nine member countries. This may be contrasted, for example, with the estimate of 58% for membership in 1979 contained in the most recent Fact Sheet on Labour Relations in Ireland prepared by the Department of Foreign Affairs (1982).

It is clearly unsatisfactory that such widely divergent estimates should exist in respect of such a basic datum as trade union density. In addition to conflicts between different sets of figures, questions may also be raised about the internal consistency of the EEC statistics. These show a very substantial increase in membership density from 55% to 65% between 1975 and 1978. As trade union membership is estimated by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to have increased by slightly over 7% between 1976 and 1979, an increase in membership density of this magnitude would have required a drop in the employee workforce over the period in question. This did not occur — a factor which may cast some doubt on the overall reliability of these figures.

In the remainder of this article we will attempt to see if more authoritative estimates of the density of trade union membership over the past two decades can be provided. In making such estimates, two independent sets of statistical data — each with its own attendant problems — are obviously involved. These are: (i) total trade union membership in the Republic of Ireland and (ii) total potential membership of trade unions, that is, the number of employees eligible to be trade union members, so as to provide the density of trade union membership.

Total Trade Union Membership

There is no single official source detailing the total number of organised employees in the Republic.¹ However, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has published estimates, drawing on information collected by the Registrar of Friendly Societies, the Department of Labour and by the ICTU itself. While a more unified and systematic method of data collection would obviously be desirable, the ICTU estimates, which are set out in Table 2, constitute the most reliable figures available for the period with which we are concerned.²

Table 2: *Trade Union Membership in the Republic of Ireland
1960 — 1979*

1960	328,000	1974	441,000
1966	363,800	1976	465,000
1970	386,800	1979	498,900

Sources: *Trade Union Information*, July 1961, February-March 1967, June 1971, October-December 1974, November-December 1975, Spring 1978, Summer 1980, Winter 1980-1981.

Potential Trade Union Membership

The pool of potential trade union members may be taken initially to be the employed workforce in both agricultural and non-agricultural employment, that is, the total workforce excluding employers and self-employed.³ The total number of employees at work are given in Table 3; these do not include the unemployed, who will be considered separately.

Table 3: *Agricultural and Non-Agricultural Employees at Work*

	Non-agricultural employees at work (Total A)	Employees at work in agriculture and fisheries (Total B)	Total employees at work (A + B)
1961	578,400	57,700	636,100
1966	643,100	48,000	691,100
1971	642,700	35,600	678,300
1975	742,500	28,000	770,500
1977	760,600	28,000	788,600
1979	821,300	28,000	849,300

Source: Calculations by Prof. J.J. Sexton, ESRI, drawn from *Censuses of Population* 1961, 1966, 1971, and *Labour Force Surveys* 1975, 1977, 1979.

While trade union membership is based on the employee workforce, not all employees are in fact eligible for membership of a trade union. Members of the Gardai and of the Defence Forces are subject to statutory restrictions regarding trade union membership. Therefore it is customary, in Ireland as in Britain, to exclude these from statistics of potential trade union membership.⁴ The numbers in these services over the period with which we are concerned are set out in Table 4.

Table 4: *Numbers in the Gardai and the Defence Forces*

	Gardai (Total C)	Defence Forces (Total D)	Total Gardai and Defence Forces (C + D)
1961	6,646	8,450	15,096
1966	6,531	8,249	14,780
1971	6,709	9,050	15,759
1975	8,481	13,653	22,134
1977	9,569	13,372	22,941
1979	9,943	15,318	25,261

Source: Department of Justice; Department of Defence.

If these employees are subtracted from the total employee statistics, the result is a more accurate rendition of the total 'target population' of potential trade union members; Table 5 gives these figures.

Table 5: *Total Agricultural and Non-Agricultural Employees at Work, excluding Members of the Gardai and Defence Forces*

	Total employees at work (A+B in Table 3)	Gardai and defence forces (C+D in Table 4)	All relevant employees at work (Total E = (A+B) - (C+D))
1961	636,100	15,096	621,004
1966	691,100	14,780	676,320
1971	678,300	15,759	662,541
1975	770,500	22,134	748,366
1977	788,600	22,941	765,659
1979	849,300	25,261	824,039

Sources: As for Tables 3 and 4 above.

The criteria for establishing the boundaries of potential trade union membership are not altogether clear in relation to certain other categories of the workforce. For example, members of religious orders, other than those who practice another profession, such as teaching, would normally not be considered to be potential trade union members; the same is true of domestic servants in private employment. However, there are difficulties in disaggregating such data; the numbers concerned are not large, and it is not customary in comparable British studies to exclude these groups.

Table 6 below contains data on the unemployed, as these have not been included in the foregoing statistics. Current practice for comparative purposes is to include the unemployed with those at work in the total number of potential trade union members; Table 6 also shows this new total.

Table 6: *Potential Trade Union Membership, comprising relevant Employees at Work and the Unemployed⁵*

	Unemployed	Relevant employees at work (Total E in Table 5 above)	Potential trade union membership
1961	42,500	621,004	663,504
1966	40,300	676,320	716,620
1971	49,400	662,541	711,941
1975	73,000	748,366	821,366
1977	88,600	765,659	854,259
1979	74,000	824,039	898,039

Sources: *ESRI Quarterly Economic Commentary*, May 1982, table entitled "Population Aged 15 Years or Over Distinguishing Persons at Work, Unemployed and Economically Inactive, 1960-80";⁵ and sources as in tables 3 and 4 above.

Trade Union Density

It will be noted that the years for which trade union membership figures are readily available (1960, 1966, 1970, 1974, 1976, 1979) are not the same as those for which the labour force figures are available (1961, 1966, 1971, 1975, 1977, 1979). However, the trade union membership figures are based in part on three-year rolling estimates⁶, a factor which may help to reduce the not very significant degree of distortion which this slight discrepancy in dates may cause.

Trade union density has been defined above as the proportion of employees who are trade union members, out of the total employee workforce, including the unemployed. However, the inclusion of the unemployed may not necessarily be the most desirable procedure for all purposes. Trade union density figures are generally taken to be an indication of unions' collective strength, particularly for purposes of collective bargaining. This might suggest that only that part of the labour force which is at work should be deemed relevant in calculating the density of trade union membership. However, it is commonly accepted that overall labour market conditions have an important influence on the bargaining power of trade unions. This consideration would suggest that the unemployed should be included in the total of potential trade union members.

As these two different estimates of trade union density may be required for different purposes, both are set out below, in Tables 7a and 7b.

Table 7a: Trade Union Membership as a Proportion of Potential Members Among Those at Work, Excluding the Unemployed

Trade union members (Table 2)		Relevant employees at work (Total E of Table 5)		Trade union density (First estimate)
1960	328,000	1961	621,004	52.8%
1966	363,800	1966	676,320	53.8%
1970	386,800	1971	662,541	58.4%
1974	441,000	1975	748,366	58.9%
1976	465,000	1977	765,659	60.7%
1979	498,900	1979	824,039	60.5%

Table 7b: *Trade Union Membership as a Proportion of all Potential Members, including the Unemployed*

Trade union members		Total relevant employees, at work and unemployed (Aggregate total, Table 6)		Trade union density (Second estimate)
1960	328,000	1961	663,504	49.4%
1966	363,800	1966	716,620	50.8%
1970	386,800	1971	711,941	54.3%
1974	441,000	1975	821,366	53.7%
1976	465,000	1977	854,259	54.4%
1979	498,900	1979	898,039	55.6%

REFERENCES

- Ireland — Labour Relations, Fact Sheet 17/82, (Department of Foreign Affairs)
- Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Industrial Relations (Stationery Office, Dublin, 1982), p. 21.
- Rottmann, D.B. and P.J. O'Connell, "The Changing Social Structure", in F. Litton (ed), *Unequal Achievement, the Irish Experience 1957-1982*. Institute of Public Administration, Dublin 1982, p. 75.

NOTES

1. See *Trade Union Information*, November - December, 1975, p. 4, on the various sources from which membership estimates for different sections of the trade union movement may be derived.
2. B. Hillery and A. Kelly have also calculated figures for trade union membership for years 1945-70, which may be more accurate than those of ICTU (See *Management*, April 1974). However, comparable figures have not yet been published for the 1970s, so ICTU figures alone are used here. The alternative figures, for comparative purposes, are: 1960: 318,600; 1965: 357,100; 1970: 398,800.
3. Total employee statistics may be calculated from the *Census of Population*, Vols. on Industries and Occupations, 1961, 1966, 1971, and from the *Labour Force Surveys* 1975, 1977, 1979.
4. See, for example, R. Price and G.S. Bain, "Union Growth Revisited: 1948 - 1974 in Perspective", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. XIV, No. 3, November, 1976 (339-355); and G.S. Bain and R. Elsheikh, "The Labour Force", in A.H. Halsey (ed), *Trends in British Society Since 1900*. London: Macmillan, 1972.
5. The calculations given in this table are used, in view of the variety of estimates available of unemployment figures, because they represent a consistent, year-by-year set of estimates.
6. These are the returns made to the Department of Labour by unions holding negotiating licences under the terms of the Trade Union Act, 1941.