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**Marginalisation**

Under the marginalisation scenario, trade unions are set to become irrelevant and will lose all influence on labour markets in the near future. Indeed, current trends in union membership may point in this direction. In OECD countries, union density has halved in a generation. Meanwhile only Sweden, Denmark, and Belgium have a majority of employees organised in unions. The decline in union membership can be attributed to many factors, including unemployment, disinflation, austerity policies, and changes to benefit systems. But it also runs deeper. The institutions and social fabric of the industrial era have been weakened, and with them, the pillars of the strong trade unionism of the 20th century.

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Labour markets have transformed and created a divide between well-educated professionals on one side, motivated by individual self-betterment and the belief in meritocracy, and less skilled workers on the other, for whom collective action remains crucial, but unions are often disappointing. Moreover, the experience of short-term and insecure work has made young people less likely to meet together and join unions. Without recruiting the next generation of workers, trade unions will cease to exist as mass membership organisations.

**Dualisation**

In the dualisation scenario, trade unions focus on the most recruitable pool of potential members, thereby neglecting outsiders. Here, the priority becomes securing the loyalty of workers in already well-unionised corners of the labour market.

In OECD countries, the majority of union members are employed in large firms and the public sector. This concentration does not necessarily reflect a policy of differential treatment. Instead, limited resources and power can explain the gap. For example, sector-wide agreements have carried greater responsibility than union membership securing satisfactory pay for some workers. But an increasing use of opening clauses has undermined these agreements, and greater inequality within sectors, weakening solidarity and concentrating union membership mostly in larger firms where support can still be mobilised.

Dualisation can also be a deliberate strategy. Unions may cooperate with management to maintain a stable core of well-compensated, unionised employees, while the periphery is left without representation to endure low pay on temporary and insecure contacts. Since unions wish to expand the business profits of which they seek to gain a larger share, dualisation may be seen as a mutually enriching and cooperative strategy with social forces outside the union movement, while (2) is a lesson in the crucial importance of politics, political support, and public policy. Is there a historical precedent for union marginalisation from which we can learn? There are several examples of once mighty unions which ‘died’ because they did not see that the times (the type of industry, occupation, politics, or the way of conducting their business) had changed. Famous examples are National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in Britain and International Typographers Union (ITU) in the USA. Both were, in the course of decades, reduced from very powerful organisations; NUM, which had caused the fall of a conservative government in the 1970s with hundred thousand members reduced to a pitiful few, with total numbers down to 82 in the year 2023. Down from 160,000 in the late 1950s, the last 60 typographers of the ITU joined the Communication Workers of America in 1986.

The lesson to be learned from such examples is that the leaders of these unions were hardened in their methods that had once worked very well and had gained them acclaim. But they did not see in time that that technology or politics had changed, and they did not build the bridges that could have possibly allowed the union to ‘break off’ either on its own, or through a merger, and find a new lease of life in other sectors with a new field of activity, mission, leadership, and membership.

My example of a successful union is Swedish largest private sector union of white-collar employees, Unionen, formed through a merger in 2008. It has since grown from 403,623 to 685,000 members in 2023. The union makes itself relevant across the economy and recruits across various professions and occupations, including students, self-employed individuals, platform workers, and people setting up their own business. The union negotiates sectoral agreements and has a dense network of firm-level representatives who help in negotiating firm-level agreements detailing sectoral agreements. Furthermore, the union offers unemployment insurance and benefits, offers advice and personal assistance, and assists members in case of grievances.

With other international unions, Unions has designed a highly innovative programme of using the internet for evaluating the quality of platforms used by their members and engaging in what might become a model agreement for workers using platforms.

What are the key tensions in the trade union movement that make deciding on a path difficult? The same difficulties arise in any organisational change. However, with the crucial difference compared to business organisations, a democratic membership organisation change is always costly in the short term and threatening to existing constituencies and interests in the organisation. Gaining the majority vote or at least the passive consent of the present members is crucial. This usually requires an even more imaginative leadership.