

A striking question

What is the future for trade unions?

- Trade unions have seen a sharp decline in membership in contemporary times.
- The current climate should be advantageous for unions to boost their popularity.
- There have been some signs of growth; however, doubts remain about the sustainability of membership gains.
- Jelle Visser, emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, uses a scenario analysis to explore potential futures for this foremost arm of labour organisation.

Rising consumer prices, tight labour markets, and a new appreciation for government and market regulation in a post-pandemic world appear favourable for a resurgence in trade union membership. However, unions face challenges in changing labour market conditions, a perceived loss of relevance, and embedded interests that can drive the organisation down divisive and counterproductive avenues.

Jelle Visser, emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, explores four scenarios for the future of trade unions: marginalisation, dualisation, substitution, and revitalisation. Drawing on data and research from 12 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member states, Visser examines theories for each scenario and weighs arguments for and against their likelihood.

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 brought 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 as well as protective strategy.

However, the tactic is vulnerable to its dependency on continued cooperation with management and the avoidance of political hostility from within the hollowed-out core of union membership (large firm vs public sector workers). As such, if dualisation is destiny for the trade union, this path might also be its demise.

Substitution

Trade unions have been a response to the worker’s need for representation and protection. However, like any invention or

product, trade unions face competition. In the future, they may be replaced by new actors, which could provide wage setting, labour standards, workplace voice, and social insurance whilst adapting to new conditions.

The heterogeneity of contemporary work across online, remote, and highly flexible contexts suggests that new forms of representation will fill the union void. From social movements to mandatory state standards, through to employee schemes and private insurance, many other forms of labour representation and protection exist, and they each provide a distinct offer for a more diversified and fragmented workforce.

However, each substitute has its limitations and none can fully replace the range of tasks and activities undertaken by the trade union. For example, non-union solutions may lack the power to enforce settlements through the threat of collective action. Meanwhile, state agencies are impeded by their distance from the workplace. Overall, in the substitution scenario, the future of unions relies on their ability to adapt to changes, learn from new solutions, and find their place alongside them.

Revitalisation

Union revitalisation involves experimenting with new structures, purposes, and outreach to improve worker protection and boost recruitment. The process dates back to the mid-19th century when unions had to adapt to economic downturns and appeal to newly emerging unskilled labour. However, their success was impeded by the conservative politics of the time. Later, Political Industrial Unionism found a supportive foundation in the expanding administrative state of the post-war era, but faced challenges of its own, including the difficulty of organising non-manual workers.

Women, service workers, and migrants began to transform the trade unionism of the 2010s by organising campaigns, but their impact has been uncertain. Some argue for a social movement approach to unionism, in which workplace concerns are seen as part of broader social struggles, while others prioritise adapting to the needs of a wider range of workers. Revitalisation in the 2020s will involve making unions relevant to various groups, including highly educated skilled workers, utilising new communication methods, and attracting young people through digital platforms.

Visser concludes that union revival is possible if the state recognises the positive impact of union involvement in employment relations and is willing to intervene in favour of unions.

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So, what is the future of trade unions? While there has been some growth in membership and bargaining wins, doubts remain about long-term sustainability. Factors like unstable work, attitudinal divides, and a decline in perceived relevance pose serious challenges. Visser’s scenario analysis shows that a number of paths are possible, and that in order to survive, or at least co-exist among alternative forms, unions must adapt to new conditions. Visser concludes that union revival is possible if the state recognises the positive impact of union involvement in employment relations and is willing to intervene in favour of unions. Meanwhile, union revival depends on building a bedrock of state recognition and strategic alliances across wider society.

Personal response

What historical examples of union revitalisation offer the most relevant lessons for today?

Three historical episodes of revitalisation contain lessons for today and need further studying:

- (1) the ‘New Unionism’ at the end of the 19th century faced with the task of uniting the ‘unorganisable’ mass of unskilled workers, most of whom were not tied to a particular trade, employer, or site, and were at the time resisted or ignored by the unions of the skilled ‘aristocracy of labour’, who were in fact, threatened out of existence by technological change;
 - (2) the ‘New deal’ unionism in the 1930s, where the issue was to gain recognition for representation within mass manufacturing sites as a basis for fair labour contracts through collective bargaining, and
 - (3) the Women’s Movements, from the 1970s through to the 1990s, which fought for changes in the leadership, policy agenda, and at times, the methods of the unions, gaining more influence steadily and seeking a better balance between work and family life.
- (1) and (3) are a lesson in new leadership and cooperation 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 technology or politics had changed, and they did not build the bridges that could have possibly allowed the union to ‘break out’ 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 Sweden’s 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 the 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, Unionen 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.



Details



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Bio

Jelle Visser is emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Amsterdam where he was, for many years, director of the Amsterdam Institute of Advanced Labour Studies (AIAS). He created the international renowned ICTWSS database on labour market institutions, collective bargaining, and unions, continued since 2019 by the OECD.



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Further reading

Visser, J, (2023) *Will they rise again? Four scenarios for the future of trade unions.* [online] *Economic and Industrial Democracy*. [Accessed 22/03/2024]

Visser, J, (2019) *Trade Unions in the Balance: ILO ACTRAV Working Paper.* [online] *International Labour Organization*. [Accessed 22/03/2024]