

# **An untapped resource for trade unions**

Mapping potential active contributors  
to union work in 14 European countries

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## **Policy recommendations**

- A critical mass of trade union members, i.e. beyond union activists, are willing to perform less-demanding tasks in support of their union; this is an internal union resource that is currently underutilised. As union tasks differ in terms of effort and time, they should be tested beforehand to estimate which kinds appeal to which categories of members.
- There is an opportunity for trade union representatives at the workplace as well: they should not shy away from interacting with members to involve them in union work. Also, members already active in online communities seem more likely to take on small tasks.
- Programmes for involving the rank-and-file in union work should be part of member retention policies. Strengthening union commitment through providing small tasks to ordinary members has the promise of stemming the outflow of members. While it is key to identify and address potential members interested in union activism, it is equally important to implement retention policies for members who are less strongly convinced.

## Introduction

There is no doubt that workers are still joining trade unions in Europe. For instance, several unions have seen a membership increase during the Covid-19 pandemic in those countries where they are involved in the administration of unemployment benefits (Waddington et al. 2023). The cost of living crisis and its associated upsurge in industrial action might boost membership as well – at least in those industries where unions still stand strong. Keeping those and other new members in the union is crucial in times of declining union density, especially as older unionised workers are exiting the labour market (in vast numbers). Strategies for retaining (new) members in the union are hence more than ever a matter of concern. This Policy Brief therefore puts the focus on existing union members (in respect of their continuing to be members) and not on examining the outcomes of organising campaigns targeted at potential members and membership growth.

### Data and method

To examine the willingness of trade union members to be more involved in union work, this Policy Brief utilises large-N micro-level data from the Internet and Platform Work Survey (IPWS) carried out by the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI). This is a representative cross-national survey among a simple random sample of working age adults aged 18-65. The fieldwork was harmonised and coordinated by Ipsos, with interviews realised via computer-assisted telephone interviewing. The research utilises data pooled from two survey waves, conducted in Spring and Autumn 2021, and covering fourteen European countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Spain. Individual level data of a maximum 3032 unionised wage- and salary-earners are studied; that is, the self-employed are excluded. Unemployed union members are also omitted from the analysis since no country in the sample has a welfare system where unions are institutionally embedded in the administration of unemployment benefits. Other so-called ‘non-active members’ like pensioners are likewise not part of the sample. While those member categories are not included in the analysis here, this does not imply that they should be ruled out beforehand from (community-oriented) union tasks.

Strengthening organisational commitment is crucial in stemming member outflow (Clark 2009). One way to achieve this is through involving members in union activities. Earlier research within the Belgian context has shown that about 41 per cent of newcomers to the union are (quite) enthusiastic about being involved more strongly in union work via less-demanding tasks (Vandaele 2020). Such tasks could entail, for instance, informing colleagues, friends or family about union demands or distributing flyers on union campaigns in public spaces. To test this finding’s reliability, this explorative Policy Brief examines

whether this finding is replicated in other countries. As such, the willingness among union members in 14 European countries – irrespective of whether they are new members or not – to carry out small tasks for their union is analysed. The main argument running through this Policy Brief is that there is indeed a critical mass of members willing to do so. This implies that unions could reckon on a larger pool of members than activists alone in supporting union work and building more vibrant organisations.

## **Taking on ‘small’ union tasks**

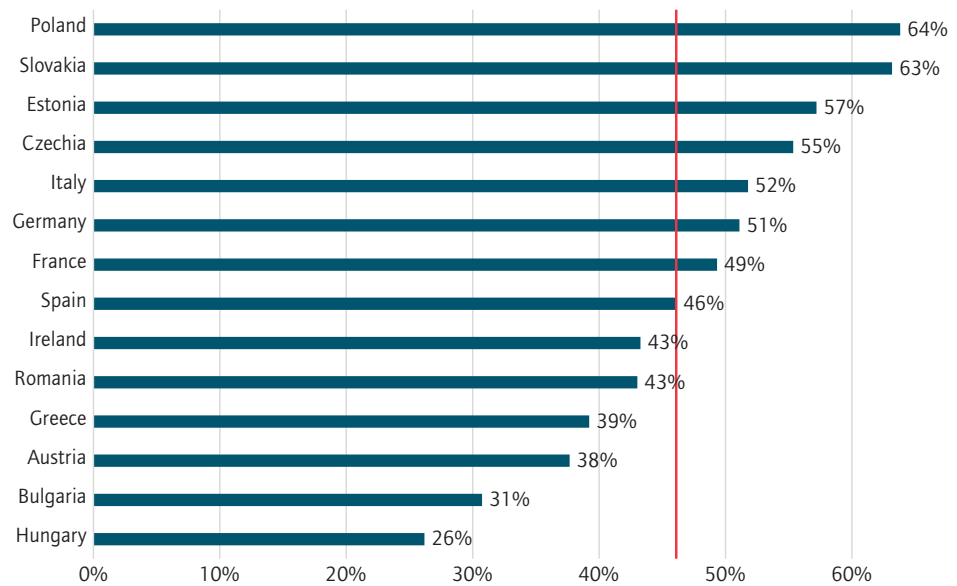
To gauge the possible extent to which the wider membership might volunteer for trade union activities, the following question was asked in the survey: ‘Would you be willing to take on some small union tasks within your trade union?’, with ‘no’ and ‘yes’ as answer categories. A number of caveats should be made – all of which relate to the questions needing to be brief and the answer options kept simple and limited in the context of a telephone survey.

First, ‘small’ union tasks remained unspecified, and validity should therefore be discussed. Tasks undoubtedly vary in terms of skill, stress and time. So, in reality, tasks will thus likely appeal to different member categories and consent will hence vary when tasks are defined (Vandaele 2020). Also, the word ‘small’ can be interpreted in diverse ways: a task could be considered less-demanding by the trade union but might be perceived otherwise by the rank-and-file (or vice versa). It is assumed, however, that the question neither suggested enduring union involvement nor implied becoming a full-time union activist or union representative.

Second, it is unknown to which trade union survey respondents belong. It is expected that most will be members of mainstream unions and be possessed of a rather passive interpretation of membership. Where some respondents are members of grassroots unions, then they might be less willing to taking on additional tasks. The reason for this is that they are very likely already to be participating in union work given the prevailing covenant-based union-member relationship within such unions (Snape and Redman 2004).

Third, the current activism and involvement of respondents is unknown. Those who are already activists or representatives in their trade union cannot be discerned from non-activists in the survey sample as this was not asked for. It is nevertheless believed that the overall majority of respondents are ordinary members and not union activists or union representatives.

Figure 1 Willingness to take on small union tasks in 14 European countries (%)



Source: ETUI IPWS.

While there are a couple of reasons why the percentage of union members inclined to participate in union work might be under- or overestimated, it is understood that this will, all in all, be within reasonable limits. The exact percentage is considered here of less importance than the finding itself that there is at least a critical mass interested in becoming more active in their trade union. Figure 1 provides an overview of the share of members willing to take on small tasks per country – though observations are lower than 100 for Greece and Hungary. Three inferences can be made.

First, considerable numbers are interested in becoming active in their trade union. The vertical line in the figure suggests that, on average, no less than 46 per cent of members in the survey sample are inclined to be more involved in union work. Two, variation is quite large across countries – ranging from one in five in Hungary to almost two-thirds in Poland. Even in two German-speaking countries, Austria and Germany, the difference is noteworthy. Third, willingness seems to be unrelated to unionisation rates and industrial relations systems. For instance, one can find countries in central and eastern Europe at the bottom and at the top of the ranking. It could only be speculated why this is the case. It may be that members are aware of poor union resources in general and are trying to overcome this through more or better involvement in union work. Union responsiveness might be of importance as well: either respondents might want to compensate for a perceived prevailing passiveness and laissez faire leadership within certain unions (Hennebert et al. 2021); or, on the contrary, they might want to supplement the existing practices of union activism.

## Who is willing to take on small union tasks?

This section aims to clarify which trade union members profess themselves ready to take on small tasks. Some socio-demographic characteristics are therefore considered in Table 1. The table lists the proportion of members who are interested in stronger involvement in union work for each characteristic. Thus, almost fifty per cent of men are interested compared to 44 per cent for women, although this difference is only statistically significant at the 10% level ( $F=3.39$ ;  $p=0.07$ ). Furthermore, there are almost no dissimilarities between age groups or when it comes to migrant status. Equally, if it concerns the educational attainment of survey respondents, there is again hardly any variation in intentions to take on small union tasks in the future.

Table 1 **Share of union members willing to take on small union tasks (%) by socio-demographic characteristic**

Characteristics	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	
Men	48.2%
Women	44.3%
<b>Age groups</b>	
18-35	44.5%
36-54	46.8%
55-65	46.7%
<b>Migrant status</b>	
Native	46.5%
Non-native	44.6%
<b>Educational attainment</b>	
Low	48.2%
Intermediate	46.5%
High	45.4%

Source: ETUI IPWS.

Table 2 lists some labour market characteristics of trade union members. A fairly similar share of members is willing to take on small tasks irrespective of their employment contract or working time. The differences are a little more pronounced when it comes to occupation, although not statistically significant, with the top five occupations being plant and machine operators and assemblers; craft and related trades workers; clerical support workers; professionals; and clerical support workers. The proportion of union members being interested in stronger involvement stands nevertheless above 40 per cent in all other occupations. Regarding industries and economic sectors, then there are significant differences in intention to participate in union work ( $F=2.17$ ;  $p=0.02$ ). The top five is as follows: professional and administrative services; public administration; industry; financial and insurance services; and education,

human health and social work activities. Willingness to be more active in the union is nevertheless widespread as the percentage stands above one-third in the other industries or sectors.

Table 2 **Share of union members willing to take on small union tasks (%) by labour market characteristics**

Characteristics	Percentage
<b>Employment contract type</b>	
Fixed term	48.6%
Open-ended contract	45.8%
<b>Working time</b>	
Part-time work	44.8%
Full-time work	46.8%
<b>Occupations</b>	
Managers, senior officials and legislators	44.8%
Professionals	47.4%
Technicians and associate professionals	42.7%
Clerical support workers	47.7%
Services and sales workers	45.3%
Skilled agriculture, fishery and forestry workers	44.0%
Craft and related trades workers	48.8%
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	54.7%
Elementary occupations	40.5%
Armed forces and security	44.3%
<b>Industries and sectors</b>	
Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing	35.9%
Industry	52.0%
Construction	42.0%
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles; transportation and storage; accommodation and food service activities	45.6%
Information and communications	41.1%
Financial and insurance activities	47.6%
Professional, scientific and technical activities; administrative and support service activities	56.5%
Public administration and defence, compulsory social security	56.1%
Education, human health and social work activities	46.2%
Arts, entertainment and recreation; other service activities	39.5%

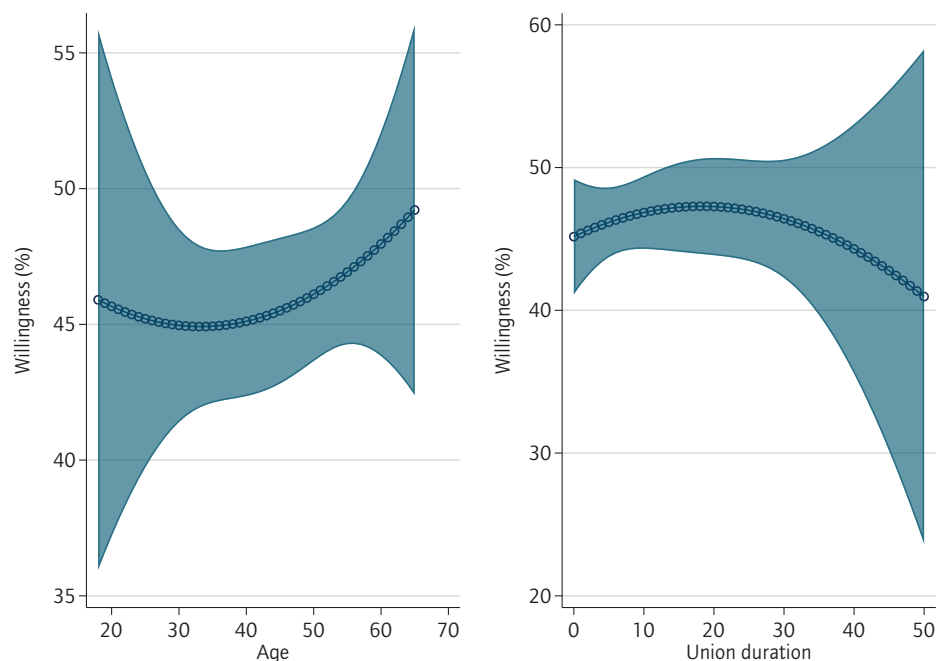
Source: ETUI IPWS.

## Age and membership duration

Member participation in the trade union is considered instrumental in strengthening member-union ties (Clark 2009). In turn, stronger organisational commitment is associated with a higher probability of staying in the union. In this regard, two features are of particular relevance: age; and the duration of union membership (Leschke and Vandaele 2018). First, the probability of joining a union is higher when workers are entering the labour market for the first time; that is, when they are young. Second, regardless of age, the probability of leaving a union is also higher in the first years of membership. It is thus interesting for union retention policies to analyse how willingness to participate in the union evolves with age and membership duration.

Figure 2 displays the estimates of members' willingness to take on small tasks and the 95% confidence intervals of the estimates for both age (left) and membership duration (right). The estimates are based on separate logistic regressions, weighted with post-stratification weights and controlling for gender, migrant status, educational attainment, employment contract type, working time, occupational group, industry or economic sector, place of residence, country and exposure to trade unionism (in terms of union attitudes, having colleagues or friends in unions and whether a union is available in the workplace). Age and experience (squared) are introduced separately to estimate their individual effects as length is dependent on age and are both controlled for when considering other variables.

Figure 2 **Willingness to take on small union tasks by age (left) and membership duration (right)**



Source: ETUI IPWS.

Regarding age, the pattern seems to indicate that willingness to participate in union work increases slightly with age. Yet, age is not significant in the logistic regression, implying that willingness is not age-based. Furthermore, the right panel of Figure 2 shows that this willingness is relatively high initially and increases up to about 10-20 years of membership after which it declines. Put differently, newcomers to the union who have no direct union experience are probably more likely to participate in the union than are long-standing members. Assuming that member involvement strengthens union commitment, this result would thus be particular good news in terms of stemming member outflow and reducing membership turnover rates. Yet again, however, the results are not significant. This implies that there is no clear pattern although not all relevant variables could be included in the context of this telephone survey.

## **Antecedents of union activism**

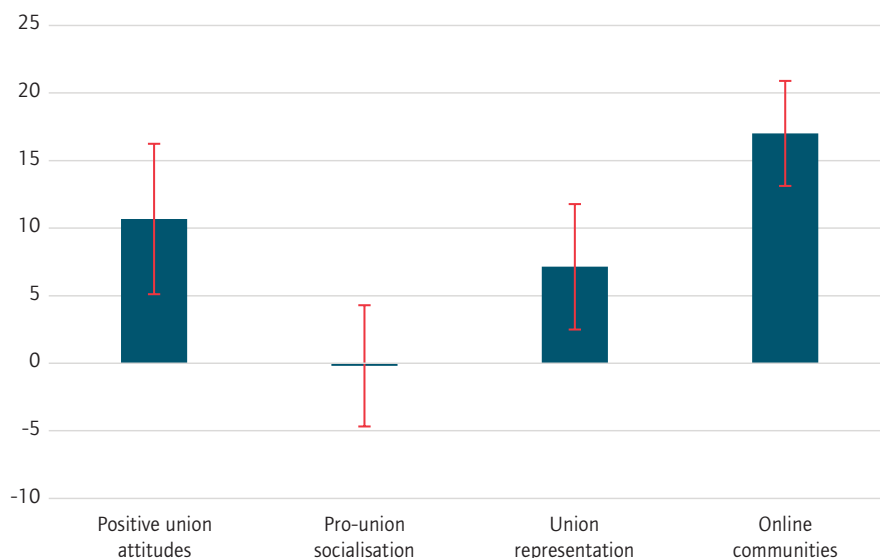
The previous sections have illustrated that member support for building stronger union engagement is widespread and that it does not substantially vary by age or membership duration. This section helps further in understanding members' willingness to take on small tasks by exploring some antecedents of trade union activism. From an attitudinal perspective, the theory of planned behaviour links intentions and behaviours via three types of beliefs identified as the psychological antecedents of activism (Fiorito et al. 2015).

The belief that one's personal involvement will make a difference to the union is, in particular, a strong, intrinsic driver for taking on small tasks (Vandaele 2020). General beliefs about trade unions and the views on union participation held by colleagues, family members and friends are assumed to contribute to union activism as well. Questions gauging the latter two – that is, pro-union attitudes and pro-union socialisation – are part of the ETUI IPWS survey but beliefs about one's own behavioural controls were not asked for in the context of this telephone survey.

Two other relevant variables positively associated with a higher probability of union activism are nevertheless included. Trade union representation in the workplace is seen as a proxy for possible personal interactions between union representatives or unionised works council members and ordinary members, encouraging the latter to be more active. Being active in online communities via discussing work-related issues online with other workers (for details, see Vandaele and Piasna 2023) is considered as prior union participation.



Figure 3 Willingness to take on small union tasks by selected antecedents



Source: ETUI IPWS.

Applying the same logistic regression as before, controlling for both age and membership duration, Figure 3 shows the marginal effects of these psychological and other antecedents of union activism. Thus, compared to members who think trade unions do not really help improve working conditions, members who hold more positive views – either ‘somewhat’ or ‘considerably’ – are significantly more likely to perform small tasks; that is, by around 10 percentage points. The impact of pro-union socialisation on intent to engage in union work is not statistically significant; but members with union workplace representation significantly show more interest in volunteering for union work compared to members without such representation. Lastly, members who are active in online work-related communities are significantly more likely to take on small tasks in comparison with members who abstain from such communities, by over 15 percentage points.

## Conclusions

The findings from 14 European countries demonstrate that a certain percentage of union members are willing to be more involved in union work. The actual size of this should be the subject of empirical investigation in each and every trade union. Even though exact percentages in each country should be taken with a pinch of salt, there remains a critical mass that would like to carry out voluntary work for their union. This is an internal resource that has not been fully explored by unions so far and which would be welcome in times of limited or shrinking union assets. As the nature of such tasks remained undefined, however, almost no statistically significant differences are found in terms of members’ socio-demographic and labour market characteristics.

In reality, union tasks which are low-demanding will, in all probability, appeal to different member categories as they will differ in terms of levels of

effort and skill (Vandaele 2020). Where specified, some tasks are likely to be more attractive to certain member categories than others. Member variety should thus be considered when implementing tasks. Also, tasks should be routine-like and tangible so that perceived entry barriers to union participation are as low as possible. Ideally, they would demonstrate the value of union participation to other members and non-unionised workers. Small tasks could then be included in a strategy towards a gradual deepening of member involvement on the basis of more demanding tasks. Such a developmental approach towards union engagement requires coherence, coordination and steering, and thus a prior union debate about resource allocation. It remains an open question, however, whether such a union-managed activism can overcome top-down approaches and evolve towards bottom-up and worker-led unionism.

While age and the duration of union membership are not statistically significant in the logistic regression, the results still contain insights into developing retention policies oriented towards strengthening union commitment through small tasks and for building ‘communities of members shaping and delivering the work of their union’ (Barlow 2022: 3). First, such policies should not solely target young union members. Put differently, it would be wrong to exclude a priori their older counterparts from policies to increase union participation; taking on small tasks seems equally appealing to them. Second, as member turnover is especially substantial in the first years of union membership (Leschke and Vandaele 2018), prioritising this period is crucial although newcomers to the union are statistically not significantly different in their willingness to take on small union tasks compared to those with longer membership durations. Third, retention policies should be diverse and not only aim at increasing union participation; members who show less interest in union work of course also need attention.

Additionally, the analysis confirms that antecedents for union activism as a dimension of union commitment are both attitudinal and relational (Hennebert et al. 2021). Positive pro-union attitudes and institutionalised workplace representation both significantly matter, whereas pro-union socialisation seems less important. Furthermore, members being active in online work-related communities demonstrates how such prior participation can offer a virtual entry point for further union engagement (see also Barlow 2022). Although mostly based on single items with binary variables, the results on the antecedents of union activism are consistent with the literature. Simultaneously, some antecedents, like own behavioural controls but also member-union value congruence, could not be tested (Hennebert et al. 2021). The latter is important since engaging members in an active way in the trade union is better underpinned by an articulated political vision and long-term objectives.

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