Chapter 2

Austria: Trade unions in a world of ‘contested stability’?

Vera Glassner and Julia Hofmann

By European comparison, the Austrian trade union system is the most unitarian, with only one organization, the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB, Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund). The ÖGB incorporates seven sectoral/industry trade unions. Austrian trade unions are embedded in a complex system of industrial relations and workers’ participation. The representation of labour interests rests on three formally independent pillars: first, the national trade union federation ÖGB and its (multi-)sectoral/industry organizations; second, the Austrian Chamber of Labour (AK, Arbeiterkammer), membership of which is mandatory, and which acts as the statutory employee interest organization of all employees; and third, employee interest representation at the company level, which comprises board-level representation through employee representation on supervisory boards and works councils (Betriebsräte). Unions usually negotiate at national (or regional) industry level on pay and other working conditions, while works councils negotiate at enterprise level on issues such as additional benefits related to pay or work pensions.

Like most of European unions, Austrian unions have been confronted with a process of constant membership decline over the past thirty years. Since 2016, however, unions have been able to halt this trend and now

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1 The authors would like to thank Susanne Pernicka (JKU Linz) and colleagues of the department for economic science and statistics at the Chamber of Labour Vienna for their valuable comments on this chapter.

2 Broad sectors of economic activities such as private/public.

3 Industry (within a sector), for instance, metalworking, finance/insurance, health care.
have around 1.2 million members. The Covid-19 crisis has once more led to membership losses, totalling around 20,000 people between 2019 and 2021. Because of the uncertain future of the pandemic and its effects on the labour market at the time of writing (2022), it was not yet clear whether this was just a one-off event or whether it heralds a longer trend of membership decline.

While net union density in Austria is moderate in European comparison (around 26 per cent in 2020), collective bargaining coverage is extraordinarily high. Around 98 per cent of workers are covered by collective agreements. The encompassing scope of collective bargaining results mainly from companies’ obligatory membership of the Chamber of the Economy (WKO, Wirtschaftskammer) and the legal extension of collective bargaining coverage to employees who are not union members. Collective bargaining generally takes place at the industry level and is highly coordinated and synchronized within and between industries. The wage agreement in metalworking serves as an orientation mark for bargaining actors in other manufacturing industries, as well as in commerce and the public sector. Together with Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, Austria belongs to the group of ‘persistently low-strike countries’ (Vandaele 2016), which means that strikes and industrial conflicts are generally rare.

Even though on the surface it seems that unions have been fairly successful in enforcing their interests, a closer look at the dynamics in the country shows that the ‘Austrian model’ is contested on both the political and the collective bargaining level. The general power shift from labour to capital has induced changes in economic and social policies, as well as attempts to decentralize collective bargaining. Political power shifts to the right have further challenged the role of social partnership and the culture of compromise and balancing interests. Over the coming years, unions will thus be well advised to adapt to these multiple challenges.
Table 2.1 Principal characteristics of trade unionism in Austria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total trade union membership</strong></td>
<td>1,661,000</td>
<td>1,442,000</td>
<td>1,199,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women as a proportion of total membership</strong></td>
<td>30 %</td>
<td>32 %</td>
<td>36 %*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gross union density</strong></td>
<td>59 %</td>
<td>45 %</td>
<td>32 %*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Net union density</strong></td>
<td>52 %</td>
<td>37 %</td>
<td>26 %*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of confederations</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of affiliated unions (federations)</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of independent unions</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collective bargaining coverage</strong></td>
<td>95 %</td>
<td>98 %</td>
<td>98 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Principal level of collective bargaining</strong></td>
<td>Cross-industry/industry</td>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Days not worked due to industrial action per 1,000 workers</strong></td>
<td>0**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Historical background and principal features of the industrial relations system**

In international comparison, the Austrian industrial relations system is often characterized as well-developed and highly stable over time. One reason for this lies in the ‘post-war consensus’ which tried to avoid a repetition of the bitter pre-Second World War divisions by guaranteeing different forms of power sharing between the relevant societal actors and the strong inclusion of various interest groups in political decision-making. This intention and the economic situation after the Second World War—including weak private capital—fostered cooperative relations between labour and capital in the post-war period (Talós and Hinterseer 2019). It found expression in so-called ‘Austro-corporatism’ (Pernicka and Hefler 2015).

One of the main features of Austro-corporatism is the chamber system and related to this the important role of social partnership. The ÖGB is one of four acknowledged social partners. The other three are the Chamber of Labour (AK), the WKO and the Chamber of Agriculture (LK, Landwirtschaftskammer). The Austrian chamber system has a long history and was re-established after the Second World War with the aim...
of representing the interests of (mainly occupational) interest groups vis-à-vis other interest groups and the state. These chambers ensure that the interests of specific groups are included in policymaking processes and offer services such as legal advice and representation for their members. Unions benefit especially from the Chamber of Labour and employers’ mandatory membership in the Chamber of the Economy because one of the WKO’s main tasks is to negotiate collective agreements (see below).

The AK, which acts as the statutory employee interest organization of all employees in Austria, provides free legal advice on issues such as labour law and social benefits, and offers workers legal protection in labour court cases. Although such services are also provided by trade unions, the relationship between trade unions and the AK is supportive rather than competitive. They regard each other as partners acting on sometimes similar, sometimes different fronts. Unions tend to be more combative, while the AK relies more on its role as an expert organization. In general, the AK supports unions (which have fewer material and personal resources) in their interest representation policies and through its expertise on a wide range of issues, such as collective bargaining, for example by providing data on macroeconomic and industry developments. As many employees have access to legal advice via their obligatory chamber membership, becoming a union member in Austria is rather a question of individual norms and values or a sign of support for the work of unions or works councils. Moreover, in recent years unions have tried to organize vulnerable labour market groups (for example, one-person businesses in package deliveries), which by employment status are non-AK members (as they are classified as ‘employers’, not ‘employees’ in a strictly legal sense), but work under highly dependent and vulnerable working conditions.

The industrial relations system was especially successful in the so-called ‘golden age of Fordism’, when political and social reforms were based on a demand-driven economic policy, including a strong state, nationalized industries and a large public sector, characterized by high levels of economic growth (Pernicka and Hefler 2015). From the beginning of the late 1980s, but especially since Austria’s accession to the European Union (EU) in 1995, there was a shift from ‘demand-side corporatism’ to ‘supply-side corporatism’ (Traxler 1995), through which the industrial relations system—and especially the employee side—came under increasing pressure. Privatization policies and internationalization, as well as growing unemployment and rising inequality weakened labour organizations. Moreover, political shifts since the 2000s—such as two periods with right-wing government coalitions involving the conservative
People’s Party (ÖVP, Österreichische Volkspartei) and the extreme-right Freedom Party (FPÖ, Freiheitliche Partei Österreich) (2000–2007 and 2017–2019) – have also challenged the role of social partnership and put pressure on labour organizations in particular. The dependence of the social partners and the chamber system on legal and political support became particularly evident during these periods.

**Structure of trade unions and union democracy**

The Austrian union system is the most unitarian in European comparison, with one single organization, the ÖGB. There are virtually no other trade unions outside the ÖGB.\(^4\) The ÖGB covers – de facto – all trade unions and union members in Austria. Legally, the ÖGB is an autonomous association that is an umbrella organization of independent trade unions (Karlhofer 2001). The ÖGB has budgetary and personnel autonomy and may authorize strikes. In European comparison, the ÖGB exhibits a high degree of formal centralization. The ÖGB’s affiliated unions, however, are densely integrated into decision-making structures. They enjoy, depending on their membership strength, autonomy with regard to their membership and financial policies vis-à-vis the ÖGB. For instance, the affiliates autonomously collect fees from their members. In collective bargaining, the relationship between the ÖGB and its affiliates is more balanced in favour of the latter; while the ÖGB formally signs all collective agreements actual negotiations are carried out by the trade unions.

Three criteria are relevant for the demarcation of trade unions’ organizational domains: political/ideological alignment, employee status and sectors/industries (Traxler et al. 2001: 40). The ÖGB encompasses the entire party-political spectrum, including social democratic, Christian, leftist-communist, independent-green, and right-wing Freedom Party–affiliated unionists, as well as (party-politically) independent unionists. Thus, the ÖGB incorporates a wide variety of political and ideological

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\(^4\) The Austrian Freedom Party set up its own trade union in 1998. The majority of its members were from the police. The trade union was not entitled to conclude collective agreements and had 10,000 members (Traxler et al. 2001: 45), but it was dissolved a couple of years later. Today, there are two employee organizations outside the ÖGB, neither of which is entitled to engage in collective bargaining: (i) an employee organization linked to the Freedom Party (the Freie Exekutivgewerkschaft), which has members almost exclusively among the armed forces, and (ii) an employee organization for medical doctors (Asklepios) founded in 2015 and having around 2,000 members.
views, within which social democrats are dominant in all industries, with
the exception of the public sector, in which Christian trade unionists are
in the majority (see subsection ‘Political relations’).

The ÖGB incorporates seven sectoral/industry trade unions. The GPA
Union (formerly: Union of Salaried Private Sector Employees) (GPA,
*Gewerkschaft GPA*), which is the largest union, organizes (mostly) private
sector employees from all industries, as well as journalists and all *workers and employees in the graphical industry*. The Union of Public Services (GÖD,
*Gewerkschaft Öffentlicher Dienst*) organizes civil servants and employees in
public administration, health care, education and other professions at fed-
eral and state (or provincial) level. The Union of Production Workers (PRO-
GE, *Die Produktionsgewerkschaft*) organizes mainly blue-collar workers
from manufacturing industries. Younion (*Die Daseinsgewerkschaft*) covers
public sector workers from districts and municipalities, as well as workers
in arts, media, sports and the free professions. Vida (*Gewerkschaft vida*)
organizes mostly blue-collar workers in private services and transport. The
GBH (*Gewerkschaft Bau–Holz*) union organizes construction and wood-
workers. And the GPF (*Gewerkschaft der Post- und Fernmeldebediensteten*)
organizes postal and telecommunication workers. Because of the unified
union system and the de facto non-existence of unions not affiliated to the
ÖGB, inter-union competition is low.

**Table 2.2** Membership of sectoral/industry trade unions, 2003–2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>285,601</td>
<td>273,970</td>
<td>279,965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GÖD</td>
<td>229,262</td>
<td>234,346</td>
<td>255,910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMT</td>
<td>205,418</td>
<td>230,878</td>
<td>230,268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GdG</td>
<td>172,549</td>
<td>152,592</td>
<td>144,480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GBH</td>
<td>149,784</td>
<td>116,376</td>
<td>114,269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GdE</td>
<td>92,627</td>
<td>144,492</td>
<td>130,528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPF</td>
<td>66,756</td>
<td>50,787</td>
<td>43,499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGDP</td>
<td>48,697</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANG</td>
<td>37,593</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GdC</td>
<td>32,747</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTV</td>
<td>34,236</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDJP</td>
<td>18,327</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KMSfB</td>
<td>11,603</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total ÖGB</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,385,200</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,203,441</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,198,919</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ÖGB (2021b).
While demarcation based on sector (private/public), industry and (within an industry) branch is most relevant for structuring trade union organization, employee status has lost its formally important role. Since the late 1990s, a process of harmonization of the pay and conditions of blue- and white-collar workers has taken place, mostly through collective bargaining but also by legislation. Formally, separate agreements remain to be concluded for both groups of workers, but wages and conditions, such as terms of notice, have been aligned in many cases. This process is still ongoing, however. In organizational terms, there is no strict separation of unions organizing exclusively blue- or white-collar workers.

According to its statutes, the federal congress is the highest-level body of the ÖGB. Around 500 delegates entitled to vote decide on the ÖGB’s policy goals and elect the president, vice presidents, ÖGB executive and controlling commission. The federal executive board is the highest-level decision-making body and decides on important issues, such as strikes. Representatives of the (multi-)industry unions, as well as of the women’s, pensioners’ and youth departments are represented in the federal executive board. The board nominates, together with the trade unions, delegates entitled to vote in the congress. The executive board manages the current policies and assets of the ÖGB. The controlling commission monitors compliance with the ÖGB’s statutes and its financial and economic activities. Rank-and-file members are usually not involved in the ÖGB’s political decision-making (although they are not formally excluded from decision-making by the statutes).

The trade unions have adapted their organizational structures to workforce changes. The interests of working women were traditionally addressed in women’s departments within the ÖGB and its affiliates, analogous to special departments for young people and pensioners. Against the background of the growing share of women in the total labour force, however, the ÖGB decided in 2005 that women should be represented on ÖGB bodies in accordance with their share in membership. Likewise, GPA implemented a positive action plan, including a women’s quota in all bodies in 1997. Gender mainstreaming plans were adopted in several unions in the 2000s (Blaschke 2015; Traxler and Pernicka 2007).

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5 Economic activity within an industry; for instance, within the metalworking industry automotive production constitutes a branch.
Transnationalization of the labour market and increasing east–west labour migration have raised awareness among trade unions of the need to address migrant workers (Griesser and Sauer 2017). The ÖGB has no specific formal structures to represent migrant workers and rather pursues a policy of regarding them as ‘normal members’. Workers without Austrian citizenship (or EU/European Economic Area citizenship since Austria’s accession to the EU in 1995) have been allowed to stand as candidates in Chamber of Labour and works council elections since 2006. Nevertheless, migrant workers are underrepresented in employee representation bodies (Michenthaler et al. 2013).

Mergers began to gain momentum in the 2000s (see Table 2.3). The Union of Metal, Mining and Energy Workers (GMBE, Gewerkschaft Metall-Bergbau-Energie) merged with the Textiles and Garments Trade Union (TLB, Gewerkschaft Textil-Leder-Bekleidung) in 2000 to form the Metalworking and Textiles Union (GMT, Gewerkschaft Metall-Textil). The main reasons underlying trade union mergers were changes in economic structure and in the composition of the labour force, as well as expected efficiency gains by scale and synergy effects arising from unified trade union structures and bundling of resources (Traxler and Pernicka 2007: 208). Another driver of union mergers was the big financial losses of the union-owned BAWAG bank in 2006, which resulted in a severe financial crisis for the ÖGB. Thus, three mergers took place in the same year, resulting in the Metalworking, Textiles and Food-processing Union (GMTN), the Union of Salaried Employees, Printing, Journalism and Paper (GPA), and the Transport and Service Union Vida (see Table 2.3). In 2009, two other mergers took place. The Municipal Employees’ Union (GdG) merged with the Trade Union for the Small Arts, Media, Sports and Liberal Professions (KMSfB) to become ‘Younion’ (Die Daseinsgewerkschaft) in 2015, while the Metalworking, Textiles, Agriculture and Food-processing Union (GMTN) merged with the Union of Chemical Workers (GdC) to form the manufacturing industries union PRO-GE.

In strategic terms, the organization of a larger share of workers in a larger number of industries was supposed to increase inter-branch coordination in collective bargaining and membership strategies. In most cases, mergers involved at least one large and powerful union and one
or more smaller unions. Mergers were also aimed at ensuring the viability of smaller unions (the merger between the Metalworking, Textiles, Agriculture and Food-processing Union and the Chemical Workers’ Unions, however, rather resembled an amalgamation, that is, a merger between equals). Merger processes were not free of conflicts. Initially, in the mid-1990s the ÖGB planned to reduce the number of unions from fourteen to three, covering manufacturing, services and the public sector. These plans were not supported by their affiliates, however. For instance, the breaking up of the Private Services Union GPA to establish the principle of industry-wide unionism (for instance, one union per company) was not carried out because of union resistance (Traxler and Pernicka 2007). In particular, mergers involving powerful unions, such as the GPA and the Metalworking and Textiles Union, were the outcome of bottom-up processes driven by sector/industry unions (Traxler 2001). This underscores that the ÖGB’s influence is not all-encompassing; rather trade unions were able to maintain a certain level of autonomy.

Table 2.3 Trade union mergers in Austria since 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Merging trade unions</th>
<th>New trade union</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td><strong>Gewerkschaft Metall-Bergbau-Energie (GMBE)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Gewerkschaft Metall-Textil (GMT)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Union of Metal, Mining and Energy Workers</td>
<td>Metalworking and Textiles Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Gewerkschaft Textil-Leder-Bekleidung (TLB)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Textiles and Garments Trade Union</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td><strong>Gewerkschaft Metall-Textil (GMT)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Gewerkschaft Metall-Textil-Nahrung (GMTN)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metalworking and Textiles Union</td>
<td>Metalworking, Textiles and Food-processing Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Gewerkschaft Agrar-Nahrung-Genuß (ANG)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Food and Agrarian Workers’ Union</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td><strong>Gewerkschaft der Privatangestellten (GPA)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Gewerkschaft der Privatangestellten, Druck, Journalismus, Papier (GPA-djp)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Union of Salaried Employees</td>
<td>Union of Salaried Employees, Printing, Journalism and Paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Gewerkschaft Druck, Journalismus, Papier (GDJP)</strong></td>
<td>2020 renamed: GPA Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Printing, Journalism and Paper Union</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
One important indicator of trade union strength is net union density, that is, the share of union members in the total of active, employed people. Net union density is also used as a proxy indicator for a union’s organizational power resources. As in most European countries, union membership in Austria has declined over time. According to ÖGB data, there were 1,442,400 union members in 2000, falling to 1,198,919 in 2020 (ÖGB 2021a). Net trade union density was around 37 per cent in 2000 and declined to 27 per cent in 2019 (OECD 2021).

**Unionization**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Merging trade unions</th>
<th>New trade union</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Gewerkschaft der Eisenbahner (GdE) Union of Railway Employees Gewerkschaft Handel, Transport, Verkehr (HTV) Commerce and Transport Union Gewerkschaft Hotel, Gastgewerbe, Persönlicher Dienst (HGPD) Hotels, Catering and Personal Services Union</td>
<td>Gewerkschaft vida Transport and Service Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Gewerkschaft der Gemeindebediensteten (GdG) Municipal Employees’ Union Gewerkschaft für Kunst, Medien, Sport und freie Berufe (KMSfB) Trade Union for the Small Arts, Media, Sports and Liberal Professions</td>
<td>Gewerkschaft der Gemeindebediensteten - Kunst, Medien, Sport, freie Berufe (GdG-KMSfB) Union for Municipal Employees and the Small Arts, Media, Sports and Liberal Professions 2015 renamed: Die Daseinsgewerkschaft (Younion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Gewerkschaft Metall-Nahrung-Genuss (GMTN) Metalworking, Textiles, Agriculture and Food-processing Union Gewerkschaft der Chemiearbeiter (GdC) Union of Chemical Workers</td>
<td>Produktionsgewerkschaft (PRO-GE) Union of Production Workers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ compilation based on Stückler (2000) and Adam (2006, 2007).
The factors involved in the union membership decline are manifold. Structural changes in the labour market, such as the sectoral and occupational composition of the workforce, an increasing share of (often part-time employed) female employees and a partial precarization of employment relations have resulted in a shrinking of organizational power. Privatization of formerly state-owned companies and industries and EU economic liberalization policies have eroded former union strongholds. Finally, social factors such as individualization, a pluralization of values and orientations and the disintegration of traditional political affiliations have reduced the number of workers who become trade union members (Bacher et al. 2019; Peetz 2010;).

De-industrialization and ‘tertiarization’ of the economy – that is, the growth of services – have changed the composition of the labour force (Mesch 2004). While in 2004, 26.9 per cent of the total workforce was employed in manufacturing, this share had fallen to 22.7 per cent by 2018 (AK 2005; WKÖ 2019). In contrast, the share of employees in public and private services rose from 68.5 per cent in 2004 to 73.8 per cent in 2018. The share of blue-collar workers in manufacturing declined from 64 per cent in 2004 to 53.5 per cent in 2018. Developments in employment are largely mirrored in the membership figures of ÖGB unions. The GPA, organizing largely white-collar workers in manufacturing, has gained members, while PRO-GE and Vida, organizing mainly blue-collar workers in manufacturing, private services and transport, report declining memberships. Likewise, membership has grown in the public sector union GÖD and the private sector union GPA, while the postal and telecommunications union GPF, the woodworkers’ union (GBH), the transport and services workers’ union vida and younion (municipal workers) are recording membership losses. Since 2016, the trend towards a constant decline in ÖGB membership has been reversed. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, has led to a recurring membership loss of around 18,000 people. Because of the uncertain future of the pandemic and its effects on the labour market, it is not yet clear whether this was just a one-off event or a precursor of a longer trend of membership decline.
The ‘feminization’ of the labour force – the share of women in total employment grew from 43.7 per cent in 2000 to 47 per cent in 2019 (Statistik Austria 2020a) – has also affected trade union membership. The share of women among union members constantly increased from 32 per cent in 2000 to 36.4 per cent in 2019 (ÖGB 2021a). In the public sector, female members constitute the majority, and among salaried employees in the private sector almost half of all members are women. Although union organization is higher among men (34 per cent), density rates of female workers are declining to a lesser extent than those of men (in 2018: 774,700 union members were men, and 436,800 were women). The share of women among new members was 42.2 per cent in 2019, and the annual increase in membership was highest among young people (ÖGB 2020).

In 2017, around a quarter (24 per cent) of dependently employed persons were migrants, in other words, without Austrian nationality.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) The largest share of workers (2017) are German (11 per cent), around one-quarter (24 per cent) are from the former Yugoslavia (excluding Slovenia) and Central-Eastern Europe (23 per cent; with 9 per cent from the EU8, excluding Romania and Bulgaria), as well as 9 per cent from Turkey and 10 per cent from Romania and Bulgaria. The rest are citizens of other western European and non-European countries.

**Table 2.4** Female union members and their share in total membership, 2003–2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>124,749</td>
<td>122,486</td>
<td>131,767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GÖD</td>
<td>111,858</td>
<td>125,191</td>
<td>142,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMT</td>
<td>35,963</td>
<td>34,281</td>
<td>35,177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GdG</td>
<td>88,701</td>
<td>75,905</td>
<td>75,875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GBH</td>
<td>6,497</td>
<td>3,574</td>
<td>3,936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GdE</td>
<td>5,818</td>
<td>46,961</td>
<td>43,171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPF</td>
<td>16,106</td>
<td>11,880</td>
<td>10,372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGDP</td>
<td>35,921</td>
<td>73.8 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANG</td>
<td>8,614</td>
<td>22.9 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GdC</td>
<td>4,663</td>
<td>14.2 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTV</td>
<td>12,634</td>
<td>36.9 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDJP</td>
<td>3,429</td>
<td>18.7 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KMSfB</td>
<td>3,669</td>
<td>31.6 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total ÖGB</strong></td>
<td><strong>33.1 %</strong></td>
<td><strong>34.9 %</strong></td>
<td><strong>36.4 %</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ÖGB (2019a, 2021b).
Austria: Contested stability of trade unions

(Titelbach et al. 2018). The share of migrant workers is significant in agriculture, hotels/restaurants and company-based services, such as cleaning, construction and among agency workers in manufacturing. Large numbers of migrants are working in private households (for example, old-age care). According to estimates based on the European Social Survey (2018), the union density of foreign workers is significantly lower than among non-foreign workers: approximately 17 per cent of non-Austrian citizens versus 28 per cent of Austrian citizens. Moreover, in line with the general trend towards a membership decline in recent years, migrant membership has also declined.

The growth of atypical employment, such as part-time work, fixed-term and freelance agency work and contingent work, is a particular challenge for trade unions. Part-time work, which is particularly widespread among women, has increased the most, from 16 per cent in 2000 to 28 per cent in 2019 (Statistik Austria 2020b). Between 2008 and 2017, contingent employment (fewer than 12 hours per week) grew by 33.6 per cent, fixed-term work by 31.8 per cent and agency work by 22 per cent (Knittler 2018). Since the harmonization of social security contribution regulations for fixed-term and regular work the former type of work has declined. Atypically employed workers are often employed for a limited time period, labour turnover is high and workers are physically dispersed or separated from core labour forces. This makes it difficult for trade unions to approach them. According to European Social Survey (ESS) data (2018), 15 per cent of workers with fixed-term contracts were union members, compared with 26.5 per cent of workers with open-ended contracts, and only 6 per cent of self-employed workers were members, compared with 25.5 per cent of employed workers.

Confronted with continuing declines in membership and financial losses, trade unions increased their efforts and repertoires of action in addressing (potential) members. They began to exchange experiences about practices in organizing and campaigning with unions from other countries such as the United States and Germany in the early 2000s. Centrally orchestrated, industry-wide organizing campaigns have been rare in Austria, however. Rather, trade unions have expanded educational training for works councils, including also a shift in focus from legal knowledge to practical action, including membership recruitment.

Trade union membership strategies vary between industries (Pernicka and Stern 2011). Usually, unions’ approaches are a combination of campaigns to raise awareness of union representation, questioning workers
about their problems and wishes at work, collective bargaining and mobilization for collective action, often making use of social media. Unions in health care and social services are most active and visible, for instance, engaging in public action in shopping streets or city centres to raise awareness of workers’ issues, such as the ‘care crisis’ resulting from understaffing and bad working conditions. More recently, the PRO-GE union initiated the *Sezonieri* campaign, focusing on agricultural workers, in addition to the ÖGB-linked ‘UNDOK’ platform fighting undocumented work. Unions provide advice on legal matters, mostly in labour and social law, but also in other areas, such as tax and residence regulations, in several languages (mainly Turkish, Serbo-Croatian/Bosnian, Hungarian). Most unions employ bi- or multi-lingual officers.

The GPA has responded to the growing diversity of its membership by establishing special interest bodies, so-called interest groupings, such as self-employed and temporary agency workers, IT specialists, professional and executive staff, and migrants (Pernicka 2005). In the meantime, however, resources for interest groupings have been cut and their intra-organizational influence has further decreased. The focus now lies more on recruiting new members.

To summarize, collective bargaining and representation by works councils still dominate trade union policies. Campaigning, organizing and membership participation approaches are advancing and becoming increasingly professionalized (especially by the efforts of committed individuals). These activities largely remain small-scale, however.

**Union resources and expenditure**

Austrian unions are financed mainly from voluntary membership fees. A much smaller part of union revenues (around 8 per cent) comes from sales and operational income. Members pay a monthly fee of 1 per cent of their gross income, including overtime bonuses and other surcharges, excluding special payments such as Christmas or holiday bonuses, as well as compensation of expenses. Under special circumstances, such as parental leave or civilian services, members are exempted from paying membership fees. There are also possibilities to reduce fees, for instance, for unemployed/marginally employed people, retirees, pupils or students or persons on sickness benefits. Trade union fees are fully tax deductible.
The sectoral/industry trade unions collect fees from their members, while the ÖGB receives a share of total membership fees. Legally, the affiliates are not separate associations but part of the ÖGB. But both the ÖGB as the peak-level organization, as well as the trade unions have their own budgets. The ÖGB’s financial resources were severely threatened when BAWAG, a large bank owned by the ÖGB, lost a huge amount of money in financial speculation, which was made public in 2006. The bank’s bailout plan, however, legally required the ÖGB to sell BAWAG, as well as its shares in the Central Bank, and to be liable to the extent of its assets. Moreover, the ÖGB was obliged to inform the Central Bank about its strike fund, previously a well-kept secret (Traxler and Pernicka 2007: 212). Burdened with huge liabilities, the ÖGB had to sell much of its properties and followed an austerity programme during the ensuing years. Nevertheless, austerity policies have focused mainly on sales and consolidation of assets rather than cutting staff or services for members.

As outcomes from collective bargaining, such as annual wage increases, apply not only to trade union members, but to all workers belonging to a particular collective agreement’s domain, getting higher wages are not a big incentive for workers to join a trade union (Traxler and Behrens 2002). Nevertheless, unions always refer to the fact that high union membership as an integral part of their organizational power is essential for their position in collective bargaining. In addition, they offer their members services, such as free legal protection in labour law cases, legal advice and consultation, as well as several benefits for purchases, leisure and culture. Because Austrian workers are also mandatory members of the Austrian Chamber of Labour, becoming a union member is often more likely to be a question of norms and values (being part of a bigger community) than a question of direct material benefits.

Making up around 92 per cent of annual revenues, membership fees are essential for trade unions’ survival. Thus, structural changes in the labour market and the general economic situation have a direct impact on their financial resources. In economic downturns and periods of high unemployment, on the one hand, union resources generally decrease because of the reduced fees for unemployed members or because members leaving the union when they lose their job. In economic upswings, on the other hand, union resources generally increase.

Unions were fairly successful in stabilizing their financial resources over the past ten years. Revenues from membership fees increased
between 2009 and 2019 from €195 million to €247 million; liabilities continuously decreased.

The ÖGB is an association and is thus non-profit-orientated. The annual revenues cover, more or less exactly, annual (mostly personnel and operational) expenses, which were €120 million (personnel expenses) and €132 million (operational expenses) in 2019. The ÖGB had around 1,800 employees in 2018. The number of employees has slightly declined in the past ten years, as has the number of local offices (ÖGB 2019b).

The effects of the current Covid-19 pandemic on their financial resources are not yet clear. The strong increase in unemployment – despite the widespread use of short-time work and a decline in union membership rates in 2020 and 2021, may lead to a slight financial loss over the coming years.7

**Collective bargaining and unions at the workplace**

The negotiation of wages and working conditions is one of the central tasks of trade unions. Collective bargaining takes place within a dual system for the representation of labour interests, with the ÖGB and the sector/industry unions carrying out negotiations, for example on collective agreements, while works councils (or specific employee representation bodies in the public sector) represent employees’ interests at the workplace. While trade unions settle wages and a wide range of working conditions in collective agreements, works councils are entitled to conclude company/works agreements (*Betriebsvereinbarung*) with the management on certain legally prescribed issues devolved upon them by labour law and collective agreements. Although works councils are formally independent from unions, the vast majority of works councillors are also union members. Usually, there is close cooperation between trade unions and works councils. Works councils benefit from unions’ expertise and organizational power, while works councils provide access to the rank-and-file and are essential for recruiting members.

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7 Even though the use of short-time working has played an important role in saving jobs – at the peak of the pandemic in spring 2020 approximately 1 million people were on short-time working (Tamesberger and Moser 2021) – the average unemployment figure in 2020 increased considerably from around 300,000 in 2019 to around 400,000 in 2020 (AMS 2021).
An indicator of the workplace organization of employees is the density of works councils, measured by the share of workers represented by a works council in the total workforce. The representational density of works councils has decreased slightly since 2000. Roughly, 55 per cent of workers were represented by a works council in 2000 (Hermann and Flecker 2009), falling to 52.5 per cent in 2019. Employee representation at the workplace (2016) varies between industries, and is highest in the public sector (90 per cent), industry and crafts (61 per cent) and lowest in retail (30 per cent) and tourism (15 per cent). In addition, works council density varies with size of firm in terms of the number of employees, increasing with company size. According to a study on working conditions in Austria, a declining share of workers say that they have contact with works council representatives at the workplace (Eichmann and Saupe 2014).

Collective bargaining takes place in a multi-level hierarchical legal framework, whereby minimum standards in basic working conditions, such as maximum working time, health and safety or dismissals, are regulated by law. Collective agreements set legally binding minimum standards of pay for the entire wage scale and a wide range of working conditions, such as working time, and special bonuses such as holiday and Christmas remuneration. Social partners agreed on a minimum wage of €1,500 in collective agreements in 2017. Currently, all collective agreements (with very few exceptions) provide for a minimum wage above this mark. The goal of a new minimum wage of €1,700 was included in the ÖGB’s working programme in 2018 (Hofmann and Zuckerstätter 2019). Works councils are entitled to negotiate works agreements on issues such as working time, telework/home office or surveillance procedures, at company level. They monitor adherence to collective agreements at the workplace and ensure workers’ voice and codetermination in certain areas of company policy. Usually, conditions set at decentralized levels can only be favourable to employees (‘favourability principle’). Only under exceptional circumstances, and in agreement with the social partners, can collective agreements permit downward derogation at the company level.

These figures derive from the Working Climate Index 4/2016 and 4/2019, a survey initiated by the Chamber of Labour for Upper Austria in 1997, which is updated on a regular basis (AK 2016, 2019).
Around 98 per cent of workers are covered by collective agreements. The broad scope of collective bargaining results from companies’ obligatory membership of the WKO and the legal extension of collective bargaining coverage to employees who are not union members (Glassner and Hofmann 2019; Traxler and Behrens 2002). Besides the WKO a number of voluntary employers’ organizations, for instance in finance and banking and in social services, conclude collective agreements, provided they are of significant economic relevance in terms of their memberships. On the employees’ side, the ÖGB and its seven affiliated industry unions negotiate collective agreements. Usually, collective agreements are settled at industry level between (multi-)industry unions and the industry/branch associations of the WKO. Collective bargaining law allows for company-level collective agreements only in exceptional cases (mostly for big, formerly stated-owned companies, such as airlines and railway companies). Collective agreements are legally binding for all workers employed in a company that is a member of an association that is a signatory party to a collective agreement. In the first half of the 2000s, trade unions actively contributed to the stabilization of the collective bargaining system by concluding agreements in formerly uncovered industries such as Information and Communications Technology (ICT), universities, non-university research, social services and agency work (Hermann and Flecker 2006). For a small fraction of workers not covered by collective agreements minimum wage norms stipulated by the federal arbitration agency apply (for instance, for janitors and caretakers).

Collective bargaining is highly coordinated and synchronized within and between industries (Traxler et al. 2008). The annual negotiation round starts in autumn in the metal industry. The wage agreement in metalworking serves as an orientation mark for bargaining actors in other manufacturing industries, as well as in commerce and the public sector. Since the turn of the century, the pattern-setting effect of the metal industry has lost ground and multiple smaller ‘pattern-setting rounds’, such as the public sector and social services, or the ‘spring round’, starting with the electronics and chemical industries, have emerged (Glassner and Hofmann 2019).

Despite the formal stability and inclusiveness of the collective bargaining system signs of erosion and increasing conflicts may be observed. The long-term fall in trade union density has weakened labour’s bargaining position. In addition, the share of workers represented by a works council has declined over time. Trade unions point to the problem that some
employers in metalworking and other industries attempt to apply agreements—such as the crafts agreement—that are more favourable for them, rather than agreements, such as the industrial agreement, that should apply on the basis of the company’s size and mode of production (Pernicka et al. 2020). The diversity of employers’ positions in international production chains, their profitability and market positions has widened with the internationalization of the metal industry. The growing divergence of employers’ and employees’ interests is increasingly hampering the conclusion of an industry-wide agreement. An open conflict erupted in metal that resulted in the dissolution of the industry’s bargaining platform, comprising the WKO industry associations of the metal industry and the unions PRO-GE and GPA in autumn 2011. The metalworking and machinery industries, dominated by small- and medium-sized companies, rejected the union wage demands and terminated the practice of joint negotiations. The trade unions in response mobilized for industrial action, the first strike in metal for many years. Separate agreements had been concluded in metal since autumn 2012. To date, wage increases had been equal for the entire industry, while an increasing number of qualitative issues, such as working time arrangements, became more diversified.

Negotiations in the metal industry have been more contested and conflict-ridden since then (Pernicka et al. 2020). For trade unions, the annual settlement of a uniform wage increase for metal has become a feat of strength. Representatives of some industry associations have publicly complained that collective agreements are too rigid and costly. The unions have responded by announcing company assemblies and warning strikes, most recently in 2018. One year before, the government unilaterally changed working time regulations and unions sought to compensate the emerging disadvantages for workers with a favourable collective agreement. Collective bargaining has also become more conflictual in other industries, such as social services and banking.

To conclude, collective bargaining is less stable than the extraordinarily high level of bargaining coverage might suggest. Despite its— in European comparison—outstandingly encompassing bargaining system, support has waned over the years among some employers, and beneath the surface of the almost full bargaining coverage, some are withdrawing from collective bargaining and circumventing collective agreements (for instance, in metalworking and foundries, bakeries). Finally, political attacks on statutory membership of the chambers underscore the ‘borrowed stability’ of industrial relations (Glassner and Hofmann 2019).
**Industrial conflict**

Together with Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, Austria belongs to the group of ‘persistently low-strike countries’ (Vandaele 2016), which means that strikes and industrial conflicts are generally rare. Their negligible role in industrial relations is because of so-called ‘Austro-corporatism’ and social partnership, which was based on cooperation and compromise. In ‘normal’ collective bargaining rounds the sheer threat of a strike by unions is usually sufficient to persuade the employers’ side back to the negotiation table and to reach a compromise. Also in socio-political disputes (such as disputes over the pension or health care system) trade unions usually rely on their connections to political parties or the government or on social partnership negotiations. Thus, unions strongly rely on their institutional power resources (Glassner and Hofmann 2019).

Since 1945, strikes and industrial action have rarely been used to pursue workers’ interests in Austria. Also in the period from 2000 to 2020 analysed here, the number of days not worked was generally very low: from 2000 to 2009 the average was 41 days, and from 2010 to 2017 it was only two days (Appendix A1). While internationally ‘days not worked’ are used as an important indicator of strike frequency, this indicator is not very helpful to grasp the few signs of industrial action in Austria as it is often zero (see Figure 2.1). The ÖGB thus uses an alternative indicator: total strike hours. For the Austrian case this is especially useful as most strikes are so-called warning strikes, which last only a few hours and are thus not included in the ‘days not worked’ indicator. Besides, unions often call for works assemblies instead of (warning) strikes. This is a very ‘Austrian way’ of interrupting work. In these work assemblies, important company issues are discussed while actual work is stopped, but they do not appear in official strike statistics.
Figure 2.1 shows strike activity per year between 2000 and 2019. We only see three peaks in the data: 2003, 2011 and 2018. The 2003 peak was because of bigger, nationwide political confrontations. Since 2000, Austria had had its first neoliberal-conservative government with the participation of the extreme-right FPÖ, which tried to weaken the unions’ institutional power and to abolish compulsory membership of the chambers, one of the fundamental principles of social partnership (Astleithner and Flecker 2017). The government also tried to reshape and downsize social security systems by emphasizing a stronger role for individual private provision. During this time, there was a lot of political tension in the air. One reform attempt in 2003 caused the situation to escalate. The ÖVP-FPÖ government had planned a pension reform disadvantaging employees, which was followed by huge protests and strikes organized by the interest organizations of labour and civil society. This major resistance was partly successful, as it forced the government to take back some planned reform steps. Thus, these rare, but in part successful political protest experiences still play an important role in trade unions’ collective memory and were re-activated several times later on (Hofmann 2017).

Note: Data regarding the days not worked per 1,000 employees is calculated with the Eurostat indicator for the number of employees.
Source: ÖGB (2019a), WKO (2019), see also appendix.
While these forms of protests and strikes aimed at political initiatives, there was also some industrial action in relation to collective bargaining. Especially in the metal industry tensions increased during collective bargaining rounds. These growing tensions explain the peak in strike indicators in 2011. In this context, the re-introduction of the public announcement of wage claims by the unions to build up public support, as well as strike threats became a more important part of unions’ ‘action repertoires’.

The 2018 peak points to the autumn collective bargaining round, which was highly influenced by the new legislation on the so-called ‘12-hour-day’. Unions tried to correct the ‘social imbalance’ of this law. They demanded compensation via higher wages, as well as more influence for workers over working time arrangements in companies and more vacations. They were rather quick to use the threat of measures such as works assemblies or (warning) strikes as employers did not want to make such concessions.

In recent years, there have been some signs of a ‘tertiarization of industrial conflicts’ as employees in the social and health care systems, whose professional ethos usually prevents them from striking, have become more and more protest prone. In early 2019 the bargaining round in social services was accompanied by strikes before a compromise was reached. In the following year, collective bargaining in social and health care was again highly conflictual: the unions demanded a reduction of weekly working time to 35 hours, with full wage compensation. Followed by a campaign called ‘35 hours are enough’, they drew attention to the fact that in the social and health care sector (in which employees are predominantly female) most employees work part-time as their job is physically and psychologically too demanding to work a full 40-hour week. As the employers, mostly non-profit organizations, argued they could not finance a 35-hour week, care workers went on strike in February 2020. The protests stopped dead due to the Covid-19 pandemic, however, and the bargaining partners agreed on a compromise, including wage increases and a working time reduction to 37 hours.

**Political relations**

Because of the closely interwoven system of Austro-corporatism, trade union relations with politics are generally close in Austria. Their political influence unfolds along two paths: (i) via their role as social partners
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and (ii) via their personal and organizational links to political parties. Within the (and because of the country’s small size) closely connected political system, trade unions are very well equipped with institutional power resources.

The ÖGB is one of four acknowledged social partners. The other three are the Chamber of Labour, the Chamber of the Economy and the Chamber of Agriculture. Trade union membership is voluntary, but membership of the other social partner organizations is mandatory. While all organizations are generally open to all political ideologies, traditionally, the ÖGB and the AK lean towards social democracy, with the exception of the two most Western states Tyrol und Vorarlberg, which are more conservative in their orientation. In the other chambers Christian-conservative ideologies dominate.

Political critique of the influence of social partners on Austria’s political system has gained momentum since the 1980s: the ‘Austrian model’ has become increasingly contested at the political level. Especially the extreme-right party FPÖ, which was in government once in the 1980s and twice since 2000 (2000–2007; 2017–2019), has tried to minimize the social partners’ influence. At the beginning of the 2000s, the government of the conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) and the extreme-right FPÖ actively challenged social partnership. Social and labour policies were for the first time negotiated without properly involving the social partners (especially the labour side). The FPÖ has repeatedly tried to abolish compulsory membership of chambers, an institutional feature that helps to maintain the extraordinarily high collective bargaining coverage (Glassner and Hofmann 2019), but it has not been successful so far.

Although it has become more and more evident in recent years that the normative commitment to social partnership could reach its limits when power relations change, unions still stick to the system of social partnership at the political level. It has guaranteed them an institutionalized channel to influence social policymaking and labour legislation. Moreover, public attitudes are generally in favour of social partnership (Profil 2018). The power shift because of the sudden end of the right-wing coalition between the FPÖ and the ÖVP in 2019 and the entry of the Green Party as coalition partner of the ÖVP might have fostered hopes of a revival of social partnership. Lo and behold, the management of the Covid-19 pandemic has been strongly shaped by the social partners, including the legislation on short-time working (Schnetzer et al.
2020; Tálos and Hinterseer 2019). It still remains to be seen, however, how long this ‘revival’ will last.

The connections between trade unions and political parties are traditionally strong. Especially the historical alliance with the Social Democratic and Christian Democratic parties has helped unions to bring their influence to bear. Around 30 per cent of all ministers from 1945 to 2015 had a social partner background, including two ÖGB presidents. Through their individual party membership, several unionists were and still are also members of the Austrian Parliament. Two presidents of the ÖGB even became (vice-)presidents of the parliament. While the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ, Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreich) predominantly recruited ministers and members of parliament from the ÖGB and the AK, the ÖVP recruited from the WKO and the LK (Ennser-Jedenastik 2017). Moreover, within the Social Democratic and the Christian-conservative party there are ‘union and employee related subgroups’. For instance, there are union representatives in the party executive of the SPÖ, and one sub-organization of the ÖVP is the Austrian Federation of Employees (ÖAAB, Österreichischer Arbeitnehmerinnen- und Arbeitnehmerbund), which is not a trade union but rather an ‘interest group’ for employee concerns organized within the ÖVP.

When Sebastian Kurz became leader of the ÖVP in 2017, he tried to limit the influence of different interest groups within the party. This included a reduction of the influence of the ÖAAB (Puller 2018). But, recent developments, such as the coalition government with the Green Party which is in power since 2019 and the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, have entailed a reinvigoration of ties between the ÖVP leadership and the ÖAAB. Traditionally, social and labour policy is not strong in Green parties, but the Austrian Greens also have union connections via the independent-green faction in the ÖGB (including one Green MEP) and the Chamber of Labour. FPÖ also has a ‘union-wing’ (the Freiheitliche Arbeitnehmer), but their influence is low giving its Janus-faced social and economic orientation. While FPÖ voters are more likely to support (ethnocentrist) social policies, the party’s leadership tends more towards neoliberal economic positions and is thus not much in favour of trade unions (Flecker et al. 2019). There is another party in the Parliament, which is not particularly union-friendly: the small liberal party New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS, Das Neue Österreich und Liberales Forum). Similar to the FPÖ, NEOS is against compulsory chamber membership and habitually describes unions as ‘modernization blockers’.
Societal power

As institutional power and relations to politics were well-developed trade union resources in Austria, for a long time the extension of societal power was not a strategic union focus. Nevertheless, awareness of the need to enter into coalitions with other civil society actors has grown over the past twenty years. The general power shift from labour to capital, as well as special political situations such as governments with FPÖ participation in the early 2000s encouraged a rethink on this issue. Emerging transnational social movements (such as the Alter Europe movement) have also contributed to unions’ rising awareness of the importance of coalition-building (Hofmann 2017).

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the ÖGB or its affiliates have been co-organizers or supporters of numerous demonstrations, such as the protests against the two ÖVP/FPÖ governments or against right-wing extremism and fascism. Unionists have been active in social movements such as the Alter Europe movement and in longer-term alliances, such as the alliance ‘Paths out of the crisis’, which was formed during the financial and economic crisis from 2008 onwards, or the campaign for the rights of seasonal migrant workers in agriculture (Sezonieri). In recent years, there has rarely been a big, civil society demonstration without the participation of the ÖGB or at least one of its affiliates. Campaigning know-how is also continuously being built up, for example via union education courses. Sometimes, the coalitions with civil society actors have even had a clearly visible outcome, such as a drop-in centre for undocumented workers (UNDOK), which was initially set up by a group of civil society actors, unionists and political activists and is now located at ÖGB headquarters in Vienna.

Contacts between central civil society actors (such as Attac or the national poverty conference – an umbrella organization of social NGOs) and unions are thus fairly well developed (Strickner 2014). Here, the fact that Austria is spatially and demographically modest in size might also play an important role. The number of activists is manageable and thus networks are easier to build up. Having said all that, we would still argue that the associational power of unions is low, for two reasons: first, the influence of civil society engagement on politics is in general modest, whereas the unions’ influence on politics as a social partner was strong until the recent past. This provoked and still provokes unions to focus their efforts on the latter. Second, it is often only a handful of unionists
who are active in coalition-building with civil society. Thus, to date, coalition-building as a strategy has not really penetrated the depths of union organizational structures.

According to the literature, ‘real’ social movement unionism (Kelly 1998) would involve not only unions building alliances with other progressive forces, but also that they ‘recreate themselves as social movements’ (Frege and Kelly 2004: 137). This would mean changing their strategies to influence politics not only from the negotiation table but also and perhaps even more so through protests in the streets and at enterprises. Such a strategic shift has not yet manifested itself in Austria. Indeed, from time to time, unions organize massive campaigns. One recent example are the demonstrations against the extension of the working day to 12 hours, in which more than 100,000 people participated (Stern and Hofmann 2018). Collective bargaining rounds have also become more and more conflictual in recent years. Nevertheless, these campaigns are selective and do not indicate a substantial shift of strategies, rather an extension of the unions’ repertoire of contention.

Another way of gaining societal power is to expand discursive power (Urban 2010). If unions are able to intervene in public debates, their societal power gains strength. The use of traditional media channels (via TV, adverts or their own print media) is very well developed in Austria. Nowadays, however, social media is rapidly gaining discursive power. Unions jumped on the social media train quite late, but they have shown a high degree of professionalization in this area in recent years. Public relations via social media are now part of established union marketing. Several campaigns are already designed as online-only; existing print media is now also available as an online version. Still there is room for improvements: while the Facebook accounts of the ÖGB or its affiliates do not receive more than 60,000 likes, the ÖGB has over 1 million members who need to be reached.

**Trade union policies towards the European Union**

Trade unions have been rather supportive of European integration since the 1990s. The ÖGB contributed to the largely positive public vote in favour of the country’s accession to the EU in 1995. The unions have been much more reserved vis-à-vis the Europeanization of social and labour market policy and the EU’s ‘eastern enlargements’, however. The ÖGB, against the background of large gaps in wage levels and working
conditions between Austria and its CEE neighbouring countries, pressed for long transition periods before the Austrian labour market was fully opened. Nevertheless, Austrian unions were, and still are among the most active in their (financial and organizational) support for CEE trade unions.

The ÖGB’s transnational work focuses on shaping interest policies at European level through formal institutional channels, such as the ÖGB’s office in Brussels, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) on a broad range of issues, such as European labour market and social policy. Furthermore, ÖGB regional offices participate in nine interregional trade union councils (IRTUCs) together with unions from Italy, Slovenia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Germany and Switzerland. The aim of this interregional cooperation is to counter wage and social dumping, exchange information on collective bargaining and wage developments, and provide advice on workers’ rights. The union council between western Hungary and Burgenland, the most eastern region of Austria, functions particularly well and has established cross-border networks in various industries and at company level (Hammer 2010).

The transnational coordination of collective bargaining to counter wage competition between countries within the euro zone was the main aim of interregional trade union networks set up to coordinate wage polices in a number of industries (Glassner and Pochet 2011; Pernicka and Glassner 2014). The Austrian metalworking union was among the most active, together with unions from Germany and the Benelux countries, in shaping policies for the European coordination of wage setting (the collective bargaining committee of the European Metalworkers’ Federation/IndustriAll has been headed by an Austrian unionist since 2007). The transnational coordination of wage bargaining has lost much of its relevance since the financial crisis of 2008/09. In political terms, the focus has meanwhile shifted from bargaining policy coordination towards a European minimum wage policy at the level of the ETUC (Schulten et al. 2015). One network, however, the ‘Vienna Memorandum Group’, founded in 1999 by metalworking unions from Austria, Germany, Slovenia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary, is still active. Unionists continue to meet biannually to fight wage and social dumping and to exchange information on collective bargaining developments.

Furthermore, the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBW) has established a European database on wages and basic working conditions, providing information in many languages.
Industry unions’ transnational activities are usually less formalized and rather issue-specific. One example is the ‘Fair work’ platform of the construction and woodworkers union’s (GBH) regional office in Styria, which provides (online and face-to-face) bilingual information for migrant and posted workers to promote equal wages for equal work in industries prone to wage and social dumping (Krings 2019). Ensuring fair working conditions for agricultural workers is the aim of the Sezonieri campaign, initiated by the PRO-GE, Vida and NGOs in 2014.

The traditionally strike-averse ÖGB unions usually do not take industrial action during European Action Days. Usually, they send delegates to the assemblies or solidarity notes. This contrasts with the approach of southern European unions that often call for Europe-wide strikes and industrial action (Pernicka and Hofmann 2014; Hofmann 2017). It is noteworthy that during the general strike in 2003 the Austrian railway union successfully mobilized the Hungarian railway union for transnational strike action (Hammer 2010).

All (multi-)industry unions engage with their respective industry-level European trade union federations. Engagement is far-reaching in the metal industry, with PRO-GE regularly participating in meetings called by IndustriAll, as well as in construction and forestry (GBH), in private services (GPA, Vida) and in the public sector, for example, in health care, social services, gas and electricity (Younion). Likewise, unions participate in European sectoral social dialogue. Involvement, however, depends on the degree of activity of the – currently – 43 sectoral social dialogue committees. It may vary considerably between industries and over time.

European works councils (EWCs) are important institutional resources for transnational labour action. EWCs have been particularly active in the automotive sector to avoid competition between multinational companies in different countries (Greer and Hauptmeier 2012; Pernicka et al. 2017). Trade unions perceive EWCs as an important institutional resource and tend to express pro-active attitudes towards transnational labour cooperation.

**Conclusions**

From an international comparative perspective, Austrian trade unions still enjoy largely favourable conditions. Particularly in collective bargaining, trade unions are influential actors equipped with
far-reaching bargaining autonomy and supportive institutional conditions, such as companies’ mandatory membership of the Chamber of the Economy and the legal bindingness of collective agreements for non-unionized workers, which ensures bargaining coverage of the vast majority of workers. Labour law provides for high standards of worker protection and working conditions. Precarious employment is increasing but is still only of minor importance in comparison with other countries. The monitoring of working conditions is supported by state agencies, such as the Labour Inspectorate, and is fairly effective in European comparison. At the company level, works councils enjoy comparatively broad codetermination rights and the support of a unified union movement. The large (but declining) majority of works councillors are union members.

Referring to the four possible futures of trade unions presented by Visser (2019), which path will Austrian trade unions take? The dangers of ‘marginalization’, ‘substitution’ or ‘dualization’ do not seem to be too great considering the strong institutional backing trade unions still enjoy. ‘Revitalization’ as a probable future scenario of the union movement, however, seems to be too optimistic, as membership-focused approaches and organizational renewal have not been fully embraced by unions. Thus, a future of ‘stability’, added to Visser’s (2019) four futures of trade unions, seems to be most probable for unions at this point in time. This future does not follow automatically, however. Rather, it requires continued efforts on the part of trade unions in order to strengthen membership, in particular among young, migrant and female workers, and to pursue inclusive strategies of collective bargaining and representation of labour’s interests vis-à-vis employers and the government.

Trade unions in Austria are affected – as all European unions are – by global structural change and growing economic and social inequalities, driven by increasing international competition, market liberalization, the emergence of monopolistic platform companies, and an increasingly heterogeneous labour force. The rise in unemployment, the closure of production sites, national and European digitalization and decarbonization policies are exacerbating structural change. To date, unions have been negatively affected by many of these processes. Overall, these developments have accelerated the shift of power relations to the detriment of organized labour.

Looking more closely at labour relations, multiple challenges come to the fore. The constant decline in union density, the dependence on
institutional resources that ensure a high collective bargaining coverage, and the subordinate importance of membership policies are some of the most important. The weakening of social partnership and the side-lining of organized labour, as well as changing values among younger generations of managers, politicians and journalists that are hostile towards or ignorant of the idea of social partnership and negotiated compromise have contributed to the trade unions’ loss of relevance as powerful societal actors.

To summarize, we would like to highlight three densely interrelated challenges.

First, and starting from a rather abstract level, unions are confronted with a dilemma between a membership logic and a logic of influence unfolding in a very specific way. Comparatively extensive institutional resources for instance in collective bargaining have led to a fairly passive reliance on them and a neglect of organizational renewal. At the same time, the withdrawal of institutional power in national social dialogue has forced unions out of political decision-making and into an oppositional role, a role into which the unions have not yet grown. Unions, largely lacking experience in industrial action, have to gain further experience in mobilization, protest and building alliances with civil society actors in order to strengthen their institutional power.

Second, reliance on institutional power is risky. Changes in governmental coalitions with far-right and neoliberal parties might induce a withdrawal of institutional resources, as previous – and persistent – attacks on statutory membership of chambers have shown. Trade unions in Austria, a small and export-dependent economy, traditionally support a moderate wage policy, aiming at macroeconomic stability and international competitiveness. Unions, having deeply internalized their role in social partnership, are traditionally strike-adverse.

Third, statutory membership of chambers does not automatically translate into smooth and conflict-free collective bargaining and outcomes favourable for organized labour. Neither does it imply the quasi-automatic conclusion of collective agreements, as recent conflicts in metalworking – in which every year the employers publicly question the negotiation procedures – have shown. Nor does it guarantee all-encompassing compliance by companies or parts of industries, as illustrated by, for instance, the initial refusal of foundry companies to recognize the metalworking agreement in 2019.
The current Covid-19 pandemic has deepened long-standing problems. In the short term, unions are suffering from membership losses arising from mass unemployment. The current resurgence of social partnership has indeed allowed the trade unions to assert themselves in crisis management, as indicated, for example, by the rapid conclusion and implementation of short-time working agreements. As experience from the 2008–2010 crisis shows, however, ‘crisis corporatism’ might be transitory and built on borrowed stability.

The Austrian labour movement rests upon three pillars; works councils at the company level, collective bargaining at industry level, and trade unions at sectoral/industry and national levels. All three areas of action are densely intertwined and have to be strengthened synchronously. Trade unions have to address processes of erosion in all three areas. The question of how to do so successfully remains of the utmost importance for trade unions, and not only in Austria.

References

All links were checked on 20 April 2021.


ÖGB (2019a) Österreichische Streikstatistik seit 1945, Vienna, ÖGB.


ÖGB (2020) Mitgliederstatistik gesamt nach Gewerkschaften (2019), Vienna, ÖGB.
ÖGB (2021a) Mitgliederstatistik und Mitgliederbewegung seit 1945, Vienna, ÖGB.
ÖGB (2021b) Mitgliederstatistik gesamt nach Gewerkschaften (2020), Vienna, ÖGB.


**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AK</td>
<td>Arbeiterkammer (Chamber of Labour)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FPÖ</td>
<td>Freiheitliche Partei Österreich (Freedom Party Austria)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GBH</td>
<td>Gewerkschaft Bau–Holz (Union of Construction and Woodworkers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GdG</td>
<td>Gewerkschaft der Gemeindebediensteten, Kunst, Medien, Sport und freie Berufe (Municipal Employees’ Union)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GÖD</td>
<td>Gewerkschaft Öffentlicher Dienst (Union of Public Services)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>Gewerkschaft GPA (GPA Union)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GPF</td>
<td>Gewerkschaft der Post- und Fernmeldebediensteten (Union of Postal and Telecommunications Workers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LK</td>
<td>Landwirtschaftskammer (Chamber of Agriculture)</td>
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<td>NEOS</td>
<td>Das Neue Österreich und Liberales Forum (New Austria and Liberal Forum)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ÖAAB</td>
<td>Österreichischer Arbeitnehmerinnen- und Arbeitnehmerbund (Austrian Federation of Employees)</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
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<tr>
<td>ÖGB</td>
<td>Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund (Austrian Trade Union Federation)</td>
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<td>ÖVP</td>
<td>Österreichische Volkspartei (Austrian People’s Party)</td>
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<td>PRO-GE</td>
<td>Die Produktionsgewerkschaft (Union of Production Workers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPÖ</td>
<td>Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreich (Social Democratic Party of Austria)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vida</td>
<td>Gewerkschaft vida (Transport and Service Union)</td>
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<tr>
<td>WKO</td>
<td>Wirtschaftskammer Österreich (Chamber of the Economy Austria)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Younion</td>
<td>Die Daseinsgewerkschaft (Union for municipal employees and the small arts, media, sports and liberal professions)</td>
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