



# INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN IRELAND

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## CHAPTER 3

### *Trade Unions*

#### INTRODUCTION

The study of work, management, law, politics and economics is not complete without an examination of trade unions, which are the most common form of employee representation across the world. In much the same way that students' unions were created by students for students, trade unions were created by employees to give a collective voice to employee needs. Employees believed that they would have more bargaining power to improve their conditions by acting together than by acting individually. When trade unions emerged they were strongly resisted by employers but, particularly after World War II, employers grew to accept and negotiate with them and union membership grew strongly. Some employers viewed negotiating with a trade union as more advantageous than negotiating with employees individually and, particularly in western European countries, trade unions were seen as a legitimate and essential part of a democratic society.

Trade unions have had important effects on individuals and societies. Research shows that unions can increase the life satisfaction of citizens and stimulate people's participation in politics and elections (D'Art and Turner 2007b; Flavin *et al.* 2010). However, since the 1980s, trade unions across the world have been finding it more difficult to retain members. It could be argued that employees do not want trade unions in a modern economy. Yet surveys across Europe indicate that the vast majority of people, including employers and managers, consider that workers need trade unions in order to protect their pay and working conditions. In this chapter, we examine the factors that influence union joining and these help to explain why the percentage of employees who join unions is dropping. We examine how unions are responding to this challenge and we consider whether other organisations can be viable alternatives to unions. First, we will explain what trade unions do, examine how and why they emerged and discuss trade union organisation in Ireland.

#### WHAT ARE TRADE UNIONS?

Trade unions have traditionally been seen as the most effective means of countering employer power and achieving satisfactory pay and working conditions for employees. The basic strength of a union lies in its ability to organise and unite employees. Sidney and Beatrice Webb (1920: 1) wrote the first comprehensive history of trade unions and defined them as 'a continuous association of wage earners with the objective of improving or maintaining conditions of employment'. Unions generally try to achieve this objective through collective bargaining, i.e. negotiation with a single or multiple employers on the pay and conditions to apply to a group of employees. While the Webbs'

definition aptly describes the workplace collective bargaining role of trade unions, it fails to explicitly address the broader societal role of trade unions in advancing employee interests in the political arena. In essence, trade unions are organisations that aim to unite workers with common interests while seeking to define those interests, express them, safeguard and advance them through their interactions (particularly collective bargaining) with individual employers, employer associations, government, government agencies and other parties.

In the workplace, unions engage in a range of activities. They:

- give information and advice to employees on working rights and employment law;
- represent employees when they have grievances at work, e.g. pay, working hours, work duties, bullying, etc;
- sanction industrial action by employees in a dispute with their employer;
- represent employees when management initiate disciplinary procedures/actions against them;
- represent employees in cases/disputes in state dispute resolution body hearings, e.g. the Labour Court;
- contribute to the development of management policies and procedures, e.g. on equality;
- challenge management decisions that they believe are not in employee interests;
- engage in collective bargaining by negotiating with employers on employees' pay, conditions, the introduction of change in the workplace, redundancies, etc;
- offer services to members, e.g. discounted travel and car insurance;
- offer education and training to members on issues such as employment law and the representation of members; and
- organise campaigns to recruit new members into the union.

At a national level, unions:

- lobby and make submissions to the government and its agencies on a range of issues, e.g. the introduction of employment law, the government's budget, the economy and social welfare;
- present trade union views in the media; and
- engage in collective bargaining with multiple employers and governments in order to set pay and conditions for employees across an industry or nationally (the extent to which this happens varies across countries).

#### THE ORIGINS AND GROWTH OF TRADE UNIONS UP TO THE 1970s

The early 'combinations' of workers were almost exclusively composed of skilled craftsmen or 'journeymen', as they were known. They were purely local bodies and their existence was often tenuous. The historical development of trade unions is inextricably linked to the development of industrial relations. The current nature of the trade union movement in Ireland has its origins in the dramatic changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, beginning in Britain in the eighteenth century and later spreading

**Table 3.1***Case Study**What Unions Do – the Student Nurses' Dispute*

In December 2010, the Department of Health announced plans to phase out payments to student nurses on rostered clinical placements. Fourth year student nurses, during the thirty-six-week period when they are rostered for full duties, received a payment of 80 per cent of the minimum of the staff nurse scale. Under the proposed changes, this would be reduced to 76 per cent of the minimum point on the new lower scale in 2011. In 2012 the rate would be reduced to 60 per cent; in 2013 to 50 per cent; in 2014 to 40 per cent; and the payment would be abolished in 2015. According to the Department, the plans would result in anticipated savings of €32.5 million.

The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) general secretary Liam Doran said the cuts were 'cruel and unnecessary' and called it the introduction of 'slave labour' in the health service. Nursing unions – INMO, supported by SIPTU, and the Psychiatric Nurses Association (PNA) – launched a campaign with a lunchtime protest on 9 February 2011 involving about 6,000 nurses and midwives. A protest march and rally was held in Dublin on 16 February. The nursing unions also planned a ballot for industrial action for existing fourth year students who were on placement, up to and including strike action. In addition, the INMO took a case to the Labour Court, claiming that the Department of Health/HSE breached their obligations under the EU Information and Consultation Directive in the manner in which they introduced the pay reduction for student nurses.

In October 2011, the Minister for Health announced that the pay rates for student nurses and midwives would be reduced in stages over the coming years, but that the cuts would not be as deep as those set out by the former minister. Pay rates for student nurses in their fourth year on placement would be set at 76 per cent of the staff nurse salary in 2011. In 2012, the pay rate was set at 60 per cent and from 2013 onwards the pay rate is reduced again to 50 per cent of the first point of the relevant staff nurse/midwife salary scale. The original proposal to eliminate from 2015 the payment for student nurses for their work placement period has been dropped. The INMO said that in view of the minister's decision, a planned national protest against the cuts (which was scheduled for 9 November 2011) would be postponed. It said that this would allow time for nationwide consultation and balloting on the revised arrangements. The INMO balloted its student nurse members on the issue and they voted to accept the amended government proposals.

*Discussion Points*

- 1 Why do you think the unions engaged in a protest and rally first, rather than go on strike?
- 2 Would you consider the unions' campaign to be a successful one or not?
- 3 If you were one of the students involved, how would you have voted in the ballot?

Source: Farrelly (2011a); Wall (2011b)

to Europe and North America. There was a gradual change from a largely peasant society based on agriculture and craft production to an industry-based society with new social divisions where greater numbers of people worked in the 'factory system' and relied on wages for their existence. In this new order, people now worked together in much larger numbers and on much more tightly defined tasks. This scenario led to the emergence

of modern management as a result of the need to plan, control, direct and organise the use of equipment, capital, materials and people in the factory system. By and large, early factory owners adopted authoritarian approaches to workers. Working conditions were poor, working hours were long and 'sweated labour' was common. Workers themselves could do little about this situation, since they had little or no economic or political power. It was only the skilled workers who were successful in establishing any significant permanent unionisation in Ireland up to the early twentieth century. Until 1850 even the trade unions of skilled workers were modest and local in terms of their organisation. A new type of trade union was prompted by the foundation of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) in the UK in the period 1850 to 1851.

In Ireland in the early 1900s the growth in influence and power of the 'new unionism', which primarily sought to organise unskilled workers, was most obviously manifested in the leadership skills of Jim Larkin who founded the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) in 1909. Many employers refused to engage with this trade union, and since the workers were unskilled, they had little power as individuals and they could easily be replaced. Therefore, unions such as the ITGWU frequently engaged in industrial action in the form of strikes in order to force employers to recognise and negotiate with them and to improve the pay and conditions of members. The festering conflict between employer and worker interests came to a head in the Dublin Lockout of 1913 (Yeates 2000). The fallout from this bitter dispute initially dealt a severe blow to the ITGWU: their membership declined from 45,000 in 1913 (prior to the lockout) to 5,000 afterwards. However, by 1919 membership had recovered to 100,000 (Boyd 1972; McNamara *et al.* 1988). An important effect of this turbulent period was that it served to accelerate the organisation of employees into trade unions and employers into employer associations, thus placing an ever-increasing emphasis on industrial relations. After the difficulties and confrontation of 1913, labour relations slowly moved towards a more constructive approach based on negotiations and bargained agreement. The union movement had arrived and employers had to take steps to accommodate it. This was done through multi-employer bargaining via employer associations and through the employment of labour relations officers to deal with personnel and industrial relations matters at organisation level. The period 1914 to 1920 has been described as the 'first phase of rapid mass union membership growth in Ireland', when union membership rose from 110,000 in 1914 to 250,000 in 1920 (Roche 1997: 54; Roche and Larragy 1986).

The decade of the 1920s saw a reversal in unions' fortunes. Membership fell in the face of economic recession and external competition, as the government pursued an open economy policy. However, union membership rose steadily from the early 1930s. Between 1930 and 1940, trade union membership increased from 99,500 to 151,600; the percentage of employees who were union members rose from 20 to 26 per cent (Roche 1997). This trend reflected the acceleration in the level of industrialisation and economic activity. This was aided by the closed economy policy and promotion of infant industries, pursued by the Fianna Fáil government from 1932 onwards.

The rate of growth in union membership slowed during World War II, a development that Roche (1997) attributes to a cyclical downturn in economic activity

**Table 3.2***Dublin Lockout 1913*

Jim Larkin moved to Belfast as a union organiser in 1907. He subsequently extended his organising activities to Dublin and other Irish cities and he established the ITGWU in 1909. James Connolly subsequently became active in the labour movement and joined the ITGWU, becoming an organiser in Belfast. In August 1913, Larkin's union organised to have 200 union members in the Dublin Tramway Company abandon their tramways on O'Connell Street after the chairman, William Martin Murphy, refused to allow workers to join the unions. (Murphy also had business interests in Clerys Department Store and the Irish Independent and Evening Herald newspapers.) However, Murphy had replacement workers operating the tramways within one hour. Murphy then persuaded other employers to lock most of Dublin's unionised workers out of their jobs until they signed a document renouncing the ITGWU. The lockout lasted six months and saw violent riots, thousands of people evicted from their homes, an unknown number killed, thousands living in poverty and severe increases in infant mortality. By December 1913 and January 1914, workers eventually succumbed, renounced the ITGWU and returned to work.

*Source:* Doherty and O'Riordan; Yeates (2003)

(and employment) as a result of the war, combined with the effects of wage tribunals that controlled the level of wage rises and thus restricted union influence on wage movements over the period. The period of fastest growth in union membership was during the immediate post-war years from 1945 until the early 1950s. Aggregate union membership increased from 172,000 in 1945 to 306,000 in 1955, representing a growth in membership of 80 per cent and an increase in employment density of 64 per cent (from 28 per cent in 1945 to 46 per cent in 1955). One reason for this growth was the greater cohesion of the union movement in negotiating increases in pay and improvements in employment conditions through the 'wage round' system (see Chapter 13). The establishment of the Labour Court in 1946 symbolised the advent of a more tolerant or supportive approach to trade unions on the part of the Irish state. A similar change in state strategy was responsible for the granting of recognition to public service unions and the establishment of the civil service conciliation and arbitration schemes, the first of which was introduced in 1953 (see Chapter 5).

**Table 3.3***Measures of Union Membership: Density*

- **Workforce density:** The percentage of the total civilian workforce, i.e. including those employed and those seeking employment, who are trade union members.
- **Employment density:** The percentage of civilian employees who are trade union members.

For the remainder of this chapter, 'union density' refers to employment density.

The 1950s witnessed a continued but much less rapid increase in trade union density, although the economic recession of the 1950s slowed union growth. The economic climate of the 1960s was quite different and was marked by significant economic expansion and

employment growth. The decade saw continued steady growth in union membership and density, along with other developments including the growth in the number and importance of shop stewards and the growth in white-collar trade unionisation. The early 1970s saw a slowing of the pace of unionisation, with only modest growth in levels of union membership. Roche (1997) attributes this to a saturation effect, where there was almost full unionisation in those sectors of the economy where unionisation was easiest to achieve (e.g. in manufacturing industries, rather than in small firms). After 1976 there was a further increase in unionisation due to the expansion of the public sector by the Fianna Fáil government elected in 1977. (Developments in unionisation after 1980 are discussed later in the chapter.)

#### HOW TO ESTABLISH A TRADE UNION

Trade unions are defined under the 1941 Trade Union Act as bodies carrying on negotiations for fixing wages or other conditions of employment. This legal definition of trade unions is very broad and embraces employer organisations. Apart from certain 'excepted bodies' (e.g. the Irish Hospital Consultants Association and the Irish Dental Association), only 'authorised' trade unions holding a negotiating licence are permitted to engage in collective bargaining on pay and working conditions. Trade unions must first register with the Registrar of Friendly Societies and then apply for a negotiation licence from the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. To get a licence, a union must meet criteria in three areas:

- **Notification:** Trade unions must notify the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) at least eighteen months before applying for a licence.
- **Membership:** Trade unions must have a minimum of 1,000 members in order to gain a licence.
- **Finance:** Trade unions must have deposits ranging from €25,395 for up to 2,000 members to €55,869 for more than 20,000 members. They must also have €1,016 for each additional 1,000 members (or part of 1,000 members) in excess of 20,000 members to a maximum of €76,184.

#### TYPES OF TRADE UNIONS

Not all employees have the same interests and it is for this reason that multiple trade unions have been established to cater for differing needs. For example, the union representing nurses is likely to have different concerns from those of clerical staff or doctors in a hospital. Trade unions in Ireland have traditionally been grouped into three broad categories: craft unions, general unions and white-collar unions. It should be noted that it is extremely difficult to categorise unions as 'pure' craft, general or white collar, so the categorisation should be interpreted as broadly indicative of union types.

*Craft* unions represent the first form of union organisation. They have their origins in the early unions that emerged in Britain at the start of the nineteenth century. Craft unions catered for workers who possessed a particular skill in a trade where entry was

<b>Table 3.4</b>	
<i>Largest Trade Unions in the Republic of Ireland, 2010</i>	
<b>Trade Union</b>	<b>Membership (% of ICTU membership)</b>
<b>Craft</b>	
Technical, Electrical and Engineering Union (TEEU)	39,000 (6.7%)
Union of Construction and Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT)	8,750 (1.5%)
Building and Allied Trades Unions (BATU)	4,000 (0.7%)
<b>General</b>	
Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU)	199,881 (34.4%)
Mandate (The Union of Retail, Bar and Administrative Workers)	40,286 (6.9%)
Unite	31,594 (5.4%)
<b>White Collar</b>	
Irish Municipal Public and Civil Trade Union (IMPACT)	63,566 (10.9%)
Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO)	40,100 (6.9%)
Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)	31,363 (5.4%)
Communications Workers' Union (CWU)	19,550 (3.4%)
Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI)	18,025 (3.1%)
Irish Bank Officials' Association (IBOA)	16,002 (2.8%)
Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)	15,800 (2.7%)
Civil and Public Services Union (CPSU)	13,775 (2.4%)
Public Services Executive Union (PSEU)	12,000 (2.1%)
<i>Source: Data provided by ICTU</i>	

restricted to workers who had completed a prescribed apprenticeship programme or equivalent. Craft unions no longer control entry to the trade and their relative influence has decreased over time in accordance with increased mechanisation and consequent de-skilling. However, craft unions remain an important part of Ireland's industrial relations system (see Table 3.4).

*General* unions adopt an open approach, taking into membership all categories of workers regardless of skill or industry. The origins of general trade unions lie in the organisation of semi-skilled and unskilled workers employed in the large factories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Britain and Ireland. They initially organised general labourers and dock-workers and were noted for both their aggressive bargaining style in attempting to improve pay and working conditions of their members and for their greater political consciousness in attempting to advance working-class interests. Their development in Ireland is especially associated with the arrival of Jim Larkin in 1907. He was general secretary of the ITGWU and later became general secretary of the Workers' Union of Ireland, which was a breakaway union from the ITGWU, formed in 1924. The largest union in the country is the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), which was formed in 1990 following the



merger of the ITGWU and the Federated Workers' Union of Ireland (FWUI). The FWUI was a descendent of the Workers' Union of Ireland. SIPTU has many other organisations affiliated to it or in receipt of support from it, e.g. the Professional Footballers' Association of Ireland (PFAI) and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ).

*White-collar* unions normally cater for professional, supervisory, technical, clerical and managerial grades. Such workers have long-established unions: the Irish National Teachers' Union (INFO) formed in 1868, the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) formed in 1899 and the Irish Banks Officials' Association (IBOA) formed in 1918 (Logan 1999). There was significant growth in white-collar union membership in the period from the late 1960s until the early 1980s. The dramatic growth in the services sector, particularly in the public sector, was a significant factor facilitating the growth of white-collar unionisation. While some white-collar workers were reluctant to join trade unions, Kelly (1975) notes that poor job design and general quality of working life were important factors encouraging white-collar unionisation. Another significant aspect in white-collar unionisation was the large advances in pay and conditions secured by blue-collar unions representing manufacturing and craft workers, which encouraged hitherto more conservative white-collar workers to unionise. Today, most of the largest white-collar unions are in the public sector.

#### HOW TRADE UNIONS ARE GOVERNED

At workplace level, the shop steward or employee representative is the key union representative. Their role is to represent employee interests on workplace issues, liaise with union officials and keep members *au fait* with union affairs. In practice, shop stewards may become involved in much workplace bargaining involving local grievances or disputes. On more serious issues, their role is to support the trade union official and give feedback to the membership. Shop stewards are elected or appointed by fellow trade union members at elections, which normally take place once a year. Shop stewards are also employees of the organisation and, as such, must perform their normal job. The Code of Practice on Duties and Responsibilities of Employee Representatives from the Labour Relations Commission states that such representatives should be afforded 'necessary' time off to perform their representative duties and should not be dismissed because of their union activities. Equally, trade union representatives are charged with representing their members in a fair and equitable manner and co-operating with management in implementing agreements. A section committee is normally comprised of an elected group of shop stewards. It allows stewards representing various sections/groupings in the organisation to meet regularly in order to discuss common problems and decide on policy.

Many unions have a branch system in which the branch acts as a channel of communication; disseminates policy and instructions downward and the views of the membership upward; manages the internal affairs of the union; and strives for improvements of the terms and conditions of employment for members (McPartlin 1997: 82). The branch comprises a group of trade union members, normally from different organisations but working in a particular geographical area, although the branch can

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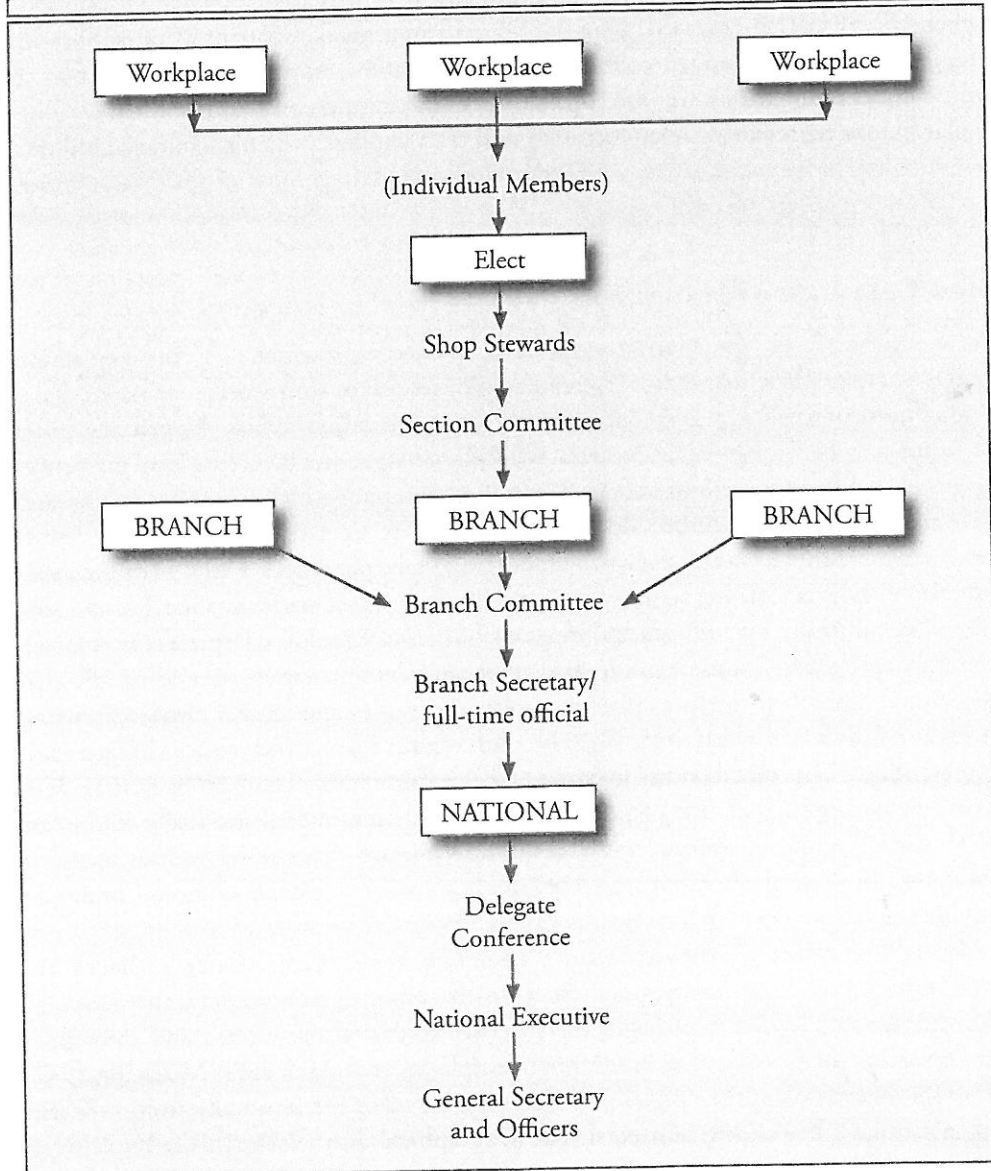
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sometimes be based in a single workplace. The branch decides policy at ordinary general or general meetings and at the branch annual general meeting. The election of union officers takes place at the annual (ADC) or biannual delegate conference. The general officers are usually full-time employees of the union and usually consist of a general president, a general secretary, a general vice-president and a general treasurer. Motions concerning the union and its policies are also discussed and voted on. The ADC is comprised of branch delegates, the union's National Executive Council (NEC) and the union's General Council. As well as forming resolutions, a second function of the ADC is to act as a controlling body to which the NEC and the general officers of the union are

**Figure 3.1**  
*Indicative Trade Union Structure*



accountable. In particular, it appoints a union's full-time branch officials and appoints staff employed by the union. Most of a union's revenue comes from membership fees and many employers facilitate unions by deducting fees from employees' pay ('deduction at source'). Membership fees vary across unions. In the case of SIPTU, fees in 2012 were on a progressive scale from €1 a week for someone earning €127 or less to €4.70 a week for someone earning over €500. Unemployed members pay €0.30 a week (2012, [www.siptu.ie](http://www.siptu.ie)).

#### IRISH CONGRESS OF TRADE UNIONS

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) is the central co-ordinating body for the Irish trade union movement (union confederation). Most trade unions are affiliated to ICTU and they retain a large degree of autonomy over their activities. Unlike the unions affiliated to it, ICTU does not represent individual members or negotiate for them in the workplace. Instead, its function is to voice the common interests of unions to government, state bodies, employer organisations and the media. It also nominates people to participate on various national institutions or agencies (e.g. the Labour Court) and it represents Irish unions internationally through membership of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). Another key function of ICTU between the years 1987 and 2009 was to represent member unions in the negotiation of national wage agreements, along with the government, employer associations, farming and voluntary sector representatives (see Chapter 13).

ICTU was established in 1959 as a result of a merger between the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) and the Congress of Irish Unions (CIU). This merger served to heal a longstanding rift in the Irish union movement, which was partially related to personality differences but also as a result of ideological differences and differences between Irish and British unions (IDS/IPD 1996). The CIU was founded in 1945 and had primarily represented some ten Irish-based unions (most notably the ITGWU), while the ITUC, which was founded in 1894, was composed of the remaining Irish- and British-based unions. In 1958, the year prior to the merger, the CIU had unions with 188,969 affiliated members, while the figure for the ITUC was 226,333 (McCarthy 1977). At the end of 2010, ICTU had forty-nine unions affiliated to it in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland – with 581,376 members in the Republic and 217,711 members in Northern Ireland (data provided by ICTU).

Ultimate decision-making power within ICTU is vested in the delegate conference. Here, delegates from affiliated unions consider various resolutions presented by union delegates and those adopted become ICTU policy. Both trade unions and trades councils (voluntary groupings of unions on a regional or local basis) are allowed to send delegates to these conferences and to vote on motions; voting rights are based on membership size. The ICTU Executive Council is elected at the delegate conference and is responsible for policy execution as well as general administration and management. Various committees operate under the auspices of ICTU. One is the Disputes Committee, which deals with disputes between member unions around jurisdiction over membership. The Demarcation Committee deals with inter-union disputes concerning which union should

organise particular workers (see Table 3.5) and the Industrial Relations Committee deals with applications for an 'all-out' picket in disputes. An all-out picket obliges all union members employed in the organisation in dispute not to pass the picket, i.e. a protest in which striking workers encourage other workers not to work and try to persuade management to concede to their demands. An all-out picket differs from a normal picket in that only members of one union participate in the latter (see Table 3.6).

**Table 3.5***What Is Demarcation? Central Bank Dispute*

In 2006, a dispute arose between the Central Bank and SIPTU in relation to work being carried out by counting staff at the counting section of the Central Bank Currency Centre. The union claimed that the counting staff should not be carrying out vault work, since it did not form part of their duties and there were supervisory staff trained and available to do the job. Management argued that it could delegate work as it deemed appropriate in order to meet its operational needs. The dispute could not be resolved at local level and was referred to the Labour Court (see Chapter 5). The Court recommended that the supervisors should, whenever possible, be assigned to the vault work. Only in cases of their unavailability should the counting staff be called upon. The Court said that counting staff should continue to co-operate where requested and should avail themselves of opportunities to work in the high-security area.

*Source:* Central Bank and SIPTU (Labour Court Recommendation No. LCR18568)

**Table 3.6***An All-Out Picket: Blarney Woollen Mills*

In January 2010, ICTU sanctioned an all-out picket of the Blarney Woollen Mills in Bunratty, Co. Clare as a result of two chefs being made compulsorily redundant at the Bunratty restaurant. A union official said 'essentially the ICTU has requested that all trade union members not pass the picket at the Blarney Woollen Mills. We expect that it will affect drivers and delivery persons as well as union members who would ordinarily use the premises'.

*Source:* Farrelly (2010a)

**WHY DO PEOPLE JOIN OR NOT JOIN TRADE UNIONS?**

The process of union joining is not as straightforward as someone deciding whether to join or not. There are a significant number of factors that can affect the process of union joining and we examine some of these in this section. There are two steps to union joining: (1) the availability of a union and (2) the decision to join a union (Green 1990). Regarding availability, key determinants of membership are that a union has access to a workplace and that people are asked to join a union (Kerr 1992). If someone works in an organisation that does not have union members (or does not recognise or negotiate with unions), then there is much less chance that they will be asked to join a union. There are a range of *structural* factors that influence union supply, i.e. a change in the social structure and social values (Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999). These can include type of job or sector, change in the type of job, firm size, proportion of part-time workers and extent of a collectivist or individualist orientation (Beaumont and Harris 1991; Blanchflower 2006; Green 1991; Roche 1997). In certain types of jobs, industries and

occupations, trade unions have a strong presence, while in others they have a weak presence. There can be a self-fulfilling cycle where strong union presence leads to more new members, which in turn allows unions to maintain a strong union presence.

One of unions' greatest difficulties is recruiting members in organisations and industries where they have a weak presence. In Ireland and many other countries, trade unions tend to have a stronger presence in the public sector than the private sector. Table 3.7 shows that union density is highest in public administration and defence, education and health. Within the private sector, unions have generally been strong in traditional manufacturing jobs (e.g. food and drink) and weak in services sector employments and hi-tech manufacturing jobs. Unionisation is lowest in food and accommodation services and agriculture. The low density in agriculture is unsurprising given that the sector is characterised by self-employed people and small holdings. The food and accommodation sector has low unionisation rates internationally and this is related to the nature of employment – part time, seasonal and small-sized businesses. Smaller organisations are less likely to have a union and unionisation is highest in organisations with over a hundred employees. Over time, the structure of the labour market has changed, with a decline or stagnation of employment in traditionally highly unionised sectors and growth in sectors which have traditionally posed difficulties for union penetration, e.g. electronics/computing and private services (Roche 1997; Roche and Ashmore 2001).

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Union Density (%)</b>
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	7
Industry	29
Construction	25
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	16
Transportation and storage	53
Accommodation and food service activities	6
Information and communication	23
Financial, insurance and real estate activities	35
Professional, scientific and technical activities	13
Administrative and support service activities	17
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	81
Education	61
Human health and social work activities	50
Other NACE activities	15

*Source: CSO (2010)*

Individual characteristics can affect union joining, e.g. age, gender, education levels and political orientation. In many countries, unionisation is higher among older workers and full-time employees; this is also the case in Ireland. Traditionally, men had higher

unionisation rates than women, since women tended to work in jobs that were short term and 'marginal to the main (male) labour force' (Turner *et al.* 2008: 481). Some argued that women were less interested than men in trade unions; however, a number of studies show that women have positive attitudes towards unions and are active in them (Wajcman 2000: 187; Walters 2002; Turner and D'Art 2012). While men still have higher union density rates in many countries, in Ireland 35 per cent of women are union members, compared to 32 per cent of men (Blanchflower 2006; CSO 2010).

**Table 3.8**

*Who Are More Likely to Be Union Members in Ireland?*

- Employees aged 45–59
- Employees in the Midlands area
- Irish nationals
- Married people
- Employees in professional and associate professional jobs
- Those with third-level education

Source: CSO (2010)

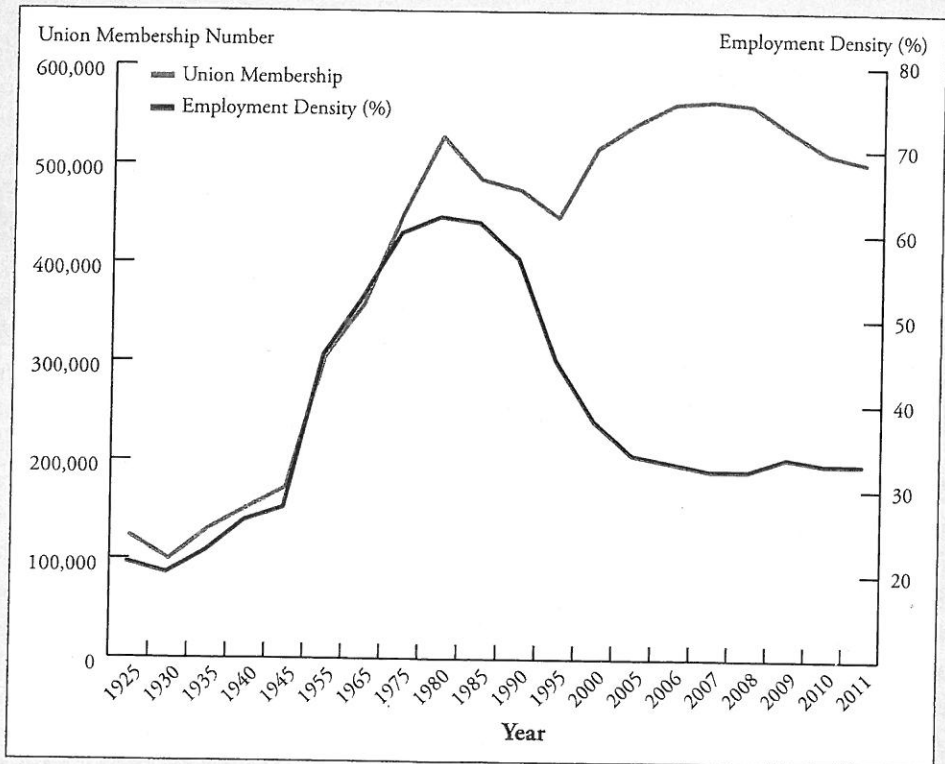
Another set of factors that is important in determining union membership is that of *cyclical factors*, i.e. the impact of unemployment and inflation on unionisation (Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999). It might be expected that people will be less inclined to join trade unions when the economy is in recession and unemployment is high and vice versa (Roche 1997). It has been argued that people will be more likely to join unions when wage levels rise, since unions receive credit for the increase (credit effect), and when inflation rises, since people seek to protect the value of their wages (threat effect) (Roche and Larragy 1989). If we examine union membership and density trends in Ireland, we can see that the business cycle was particularly influential in the 1980s. Union membership and employment density peaked in 1980 but then fell throughout the 1980s. This decline is principally attributed to the economic recession and increased unemployment. The harsh economic climate of the early to mid-1980s dramatically changed the industrial relations environment. This period, which was characterised by widespread company rationalisations and redundancies, significantly altered the power balance in negotiations, with adverse consequences for unions. Employers increasingly sought to address issues such as payment structures and levels of wage increases, the extent of demarcation and the erosion of managerial prerogative by trade unions.

The business cycle was again influential when the economy began to recover in the 1990s and boomed until the late 2000s. As employment increased, so did the number of people joining unions. Between 1990 and 2007, the number of union members had increased by 15 per cent, from 491,000 to 565,000. However, union density continued to fall throughout the economic boom. Why did this happen? As a hypothesis, let us say that the number of people in employment in a country is 100,000 and 50,000 of these are union members, i.e. the union density rate is 50 per cent. Let us imagine one year later: the number of people in employment increases to 150,000 and the number of union members grows to 55,000. The union density rate would *fall* to 36.6 per cent.

A similar scenario happened with Ireland's unionisation. Even though more people were joining unions, the increase in union membership could not keep pace with the increase in employment, so union density actually fell. Union density continued to decline until a slight increase occurred in 2009. It is likely that this is due to the fact that union membership did not fall at the same pace as employment when the economy went into recession. In addition, employment and union density remained strong in the public sector, though recent large-scale redundancies in the public sector may contribute to a decline when new figures for density become available.

The economic recession of the late 2000s has had a similar impact on human resources as the 1980s, with companies introducing pay freezes, wage cuts, redundancies, re-deployment and reduced working hours (Roche *et al.* 2011). Research suggests that HR managers believe they have engaged with unions on how to respond to the recession, but union officials believe that management have sought to introduce change unilaterally and ignore collective agreements (Roche *et al.* 2011). Roche *et al.* (2011: 239) have concluded that 'the recession has debilitated trade unions' and they have been unable to respond to the recession more assertively because of the scale of the recession, the collapse of national wage agreements and because employees are subdued and fearful for their jobs.

**Figure 3.2**  
*Trade Union Membership and Density, 1925–2011*



Source: Figures for 1925–1990 from DUES Data Series (Roche 2008); figures for 1995–2011 from CSO <<http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/labourmarket/2011/TableS11a.xls>>  
For a discussion on the differences in data sources, see Roche (2008b) and CSO (2010).

*Institutional factors* focus on the effects of a 'country's particular historical development and the specific national institutions governing industrial relations' (D'Art and Turner 2006b: 168; Roche 1997). Key issues here include the nature of collective bargaining, employer ideology (including their attitudes to trade unions) and the role of government in regulating the operation of labour markets and industrial relations interactions. In relation to employer attitudes to unions, we noted earlier that Irish employers grew to accommodate and negotiate with unions, particularly after World War II. Unions that are recognised by employers are more likely to grow (Bain and Price 1983). However, trade unions have been finding it more difficult to gain recognition from employers and union officials have reported an increase in the use of coercive tactics by employers who did not want to recognise unions (D'Art and Turner 2005, 2006b).

An important issue in the Irish context is the managerial values of MNCs because Ireland is so heavily reliant on foreign direct investment. In 2010, foreign-owned companies supported by the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) employed almost 140,000 people and almost 72 per cent of these were in US-owned companies (Forfás 2011). The country of ownership of MNCs is important because it can influence the managerial values of the MNC in the host country, i.e. Ireland. Evidence suggests that there is a 'country of origin' effect, with a trend of union avoidance among US-owned companies coming into Ireland since the mid-1980s, particularly in the information technology and financial services sectors (Geary and Roche 2001; Gunnigle *et al.* 1997; Lavelle 2008). A large-scale study of MNCs has found that 42 per cent of US-owned companies recognise unions compared with 81 per cent of Irish companies (Lavelle 2008). It has been argued that this is due to the 'anti-union sentiment characteristic of the US national business system' compared with the more pluralist tradition of the Irish system (Lavelle 2008: 58). Even when MNCs are long established in one part of the country and recognise trade unions, many of these same companies later set up newer, non-unionised plants in another part of country. This practice is known as 'double breasting' (Gunnigle *et al.* 2009; Lavelle 2008). The increased resistance of employers to unions is not unique to Ireland. It has been suggested that there has been 'renewed unilateralism in personnel issues pursued by company management' internationally and that, with globalisation, trade unions have become more exposed to threats by companies to move locations (Pedersini 2010: 5).

#### A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Compared to other countries, Ireland's union density is in the middle: higher than the US and UK but much lower than Scandinavian countries (see Table 3.9). The overall trend is one of falling union density across OECD countries between 1980 and 2009. The international decline in unionisation has been explained by rising unemployment, the changing composition of the labour force, more union-resistant employers, politics and internal union inadequacies (Pedersini 2010; Waddington 2005).

As an institutional factor, national politics are a key determinant of unionisation trends (Schmitt and Mitukiewicz 2011). It has been argued that countries with close links to social democratic parties (Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland) had small



Table 3.9

*Union Density in Selected OECD Countries, 1980 and 2009*

	1980 (%)	2009 (%)
Australia	48.5	19.0
Austria	56.7	28.6
Belgium	54.1	52.0
Canada	34.0	27.3
Denmark	78.6	68.8
Finland	69.4	69.2
France	18.3	7.6*
Germany	34.9	18.8
Iceland	66.2	79.4*
Ireland	54.3	33.7
Italy	49.6	34.7
Japan	31.1	18.5
Luxembourg	50.8	37.3*
Netherlands	34.8	19.4
Norway	58.3	54.4
Portugal	54.8	20.1
Sweden	78.0	68.4
Switzerland	27.7	17.8
United Kingdom	49.7	27.2
United States	22.1	11.8

\*2008 figures  
Source: For comparability purposes, the following dataset is used: [http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=UN\\_DEN#](http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=UN_DEN#).  
For an explanation of sources, see [http://www.oecd.org/els/employmentpoliciesanddata/Trade%20union%20density\\_Sources%20and%20methodology.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/els/employmentpoliciesanddata/Trade%20union%20density_Sources%20and%20methodology.pdf).

decreases in union density since 1980; 'liberal market economies' (Ireland, US, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Japan) had sharp drops in density; and countries with Christian democratic traditions (Germany, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Switzerland) had moderate declines in union density (Schmitt and Mitukiewicz 2011: 3). In addition to having social democratic parties in government, some Scandinavian countries operate a 'Ghent' system, under which unemployment benefits are administered by trade unions, giving employees a strong incentive to join; this has contributed to higher union density. A liberal market economy (e.g. Ireland) is one in which employers have a lot of freedom to pursue their own employment practices (Roche *et al.* 2011). While Irish trade unions have links to the Labour Party, the party has historically been relatively small and not as influential in politics as Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. These parties appeared to be supportive of trade unions, setting up bodies like the Labour Court and negotiating with them on national wage agreements (or

social partnership). In the 1960s and 1970s, state agencies recommended to MNCs that they recognise trade unions; however, this practice had been abandoned by the 1990s (Gunnigle *et al.* 2009). In addition, it has been argued that the national wage agreements and government policy allowed MNCs to avoid unions and governments have refused to introduce statutory union recognition legislation, i.e. a law that would compel employers to recognise and negotiate with a union (McDonough and Dundon 2010).

Caution is needed when interpreting union density rates in different countries, since the figures do not always give a full picture of union strength. Another measure of union strength or influence is collective bargaining coverage, i.e. the percentage of employees whose pay and conditions are governed by a collective bargaining agreement, whether or not they are members of a union (see Table 3.10). The coverage of collective bargaining is a major issue. If a country has an industrial relations system in which collective bargaining agreements can cover a large percentage of employees, then trade unions may not be too concerned about a lower union density. In many European countries there is provision for extending union–employer agreements reached at sectoral, industry or national level to non-union workers in an industry or to a wider section of employees in an economy. This is referred to as the ‘extension of collective bargaining’ and is frequently done in legal systems where the agreements are legally binding. This extension of collective bargaining means that the coverage of collective bargaining is routinely greater than union density. For example, in France only 8 per cent of employees are in a union but 90 per cent of employees are covered by a collective bargaining agreement.

If countries have an industrial relations system in which collective bargaining agreements generally cover union members only, then a fall in union density presents a major problem for unions and for employees. This is the case in Ireland, where there is no general provision for extension of collective bargaining and, as a result, a steep decline in union density generally means a decline in collective bargaining coverage as well. This represents something of a crisis for unions, particularly in the private sector (which has much lower unionisation than the public sector). Of course, even in countries with declining density and bargaining coverage, there are examples of individual unions that have shown considerable strength through bargaining power, political engagement, high levels of member activism and improved pay and conditions, e.g. the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) in Britain (Behrens *et al.* 2004; Connolly and Darlington 2012). However, the overriding picture for the union movement in many countries is bleak.

The responses of political and financial institutions (institutional factor) to the global financial crisis (cyclical factor) has influenced collective bargaining structures in some countries. When Greece received loans from the IMF/EU/ECB, these bodies in turn demanded radical changes to labour market regulation and wage determination, including a shift from national and sectoral collective bargaining to firm-level bargaining. Koukiadaki and Kretsos (2012: 292) argue that:

... the priority that is given to firm-level agreements over those concluded at sectoral level, in conjunction with the prohibition on extending agreements,

points to significant deregulatory trends in the collective bargaining system, with negative implications not only for workers but also for employers who are members of the signatory organisations of the sectoral collective agreements, who now face being undercut.

In Ireland, trade unions, employer organisations and the government could not agree new pay rates in negotiations on a new social partnership agreement in 2009 in the context of the recession and the negotiations collapsed. This means that collective bargaining shifted from the national level to the firm level for those private sector firms that were part of social partnership previously.

**Table 3.10**

*Collective Bargaining Coverage in Selected OECD Countries, 2008*

High CB Coverage (%)		Low-Medium CB Coverage (%)	
Austria	99***	Switzerland	48
Belgium	96	Portugal	45**
Sweden	91	Ireland	44
Finland	90*	Australia	40
France	90	United Kingdom	32.7**
Iceland	88	Canada	31.6**
Netherlands	82.3	Japan	16
Italy	80**	United States	13.1***
Denmark	80*		
Norway	74		
Germany	62**		
Luxembourg	58		

\*2007 \*\*2009 \*\*\*2010  
 Source: ICTWSS (Database on Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions, Wage Setting, State Intervention and Social Pacts)

#### WHY DO INDIVIDUALS DECIDE TO JOIN UNIONS?

Traditionally, in some heavily unionised industries and companies, employees had no choice but to join a union. Unions operated a 'closed shop', whereby every employee was required to be a member, often with the approval of employers. When everyone was a union member, there was no 'free rider' problem. A free rider is someone who is not a union member but who still receives the pay and conditions negotiated by a union. However, the closed shop practice has dwindled and most new members voluntarily choose to join. Generally there are four categories of reasons for people joining unions. One is a collectively based reason, where people join because they want the benefits of collective strength and they want to address a perceived injustice, have support if they encounter a future problem and improve pay and conditions (Wheeler and McClendon 1991). A number of international studies show that the collective category is the

strongest motivation for people to join unions (Peetz 1997; Tolich and Harcourt 1999; Waddington and Whitson 1997). A second category is individual based, where people want the services offered by a union, e.g. legal advice and financial services. While legal advice can be a strong reason to join a union, studies indicate that the financial services offered by unions (e.g. cheaper car insurance) are rarely an attraction for potential members (Kerr 1992; Tolich and Harcourt 1999; Waddington and Whitson 1997). A third category is ideological: people join because they believe in trade unions. A fourth reason for people joining is peer related: people feel they should join because their relatives and colleagues are already members.

#### WHY DOES A DECLINE IN UNIONISATION MATTER?

There are a whole range of consequences that result from a decline in unionisation – for the individual, the organisation and society. For a non-unionised individual, it means that they may have to rely on their own individual bargaining power to seek to defend or improve pay and conditions. However, if they do not have unique skills (e.g. those of a star football player), they may have very limited bargaining power. There may be an internal employee association in the company (see later discussion) but these would not have the collective power a union can bring. Part of a union's role within an organisation is a democratic one in which they challenge management decisions, try to ensure decision making is fair through the introduction of rules and procedures, and act as a voice mechanism for employees. If employees do not have access to a union, these benefits may be lost. In addition, disputes within an organisation may be less likely to be resolved collectively in the absence of a union and disputes can become individualised. This phenomenon is already evident in the types of disputes that are referred to state dispute resolution bodies. The number of cases referred by individuals to the Rights Commissioners (who deal with individual disputes) increased dramatically between 2000 and 2010 (see Chapter 5). The high number of individual cases has led to significant delays in disputes being resolved. This contrasts with the Swedish industrial relations system, which has strong trade unions, a collective orientation to dispute resolution and lower levels of individual disputes (Teague 2009). At a societal level, research shows that countries with high union density are associated with lower levels of income inequality (Blanchflower 2006). Unions do this directly through collective bargaining, which reduces wage dispersion (the spread of wages between higher and lower paid) within a firm. Similarly, when collective bargaining is at sectoral or national level, wage dispersion across firms is reduced (Freeman 2007). Indirectly, trade unions lobby governments to make economic and political choices that reduce inequality. Strong trade unions tend to be associated with social democratic governments and larger welfare states, and these reduce inequalities (Bradley *et al.* 2003; Baccaro 2008).

It could be argued that a decline in union density is not problematic if there is a fall in the demand for unions, i.e. if people no longer need unions in a modern economy. However, the evidence suggests otherwise. In a 2002 survey of fifteen EU countries, 72 per cent of respondents agreed that workers need trade unions in order to protect their pay and working conditions (Turner and D'Art 2012). In the survey, 72 per cent of Irish

non-union employees believed that workers needed strong trade unions. Even among young employees, who have generally lower unionisation rates than older employees, research suggests that the former can have even more positive attitudes to unions than the latter (Haynes *et al.* 2005). The difference between actual unionisation rates and attitudes to unions suggests there is a *representation gap* – the proportion of employees who would join a union but are unable to (Freeman and Rogers 1999). There are two key issues that arise as a result of this phenomenon. The first is that because the fall in unionisation has meant less collective strength and revenue for unions, they have had to enact various strategies to manage and reverse the decline. The second is the question as to whether or not there are alternatives to unions that can satisfy the representation demands of employees. We will now examine each of these issues.

#### TRADE UNION RESPONSES TO DECLINE

##### **Rationalisation**

Trade unions have responded to the decline in unionisation in a number of ways. Some unions have rationalised by ceasing to operate, transferring membership and finances to another union or merging together to form a new union. Between 1977 and 1998, there were eighteen transfers of engagements and eight amalgamations (Wallace *et al.* 2000). Two significant mergers were that between the Federated Workers' Union of Ireland and the ITGWU to form SIPTU in 1990; and between the two British-based unions, Amicus and the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU), to form Unite in 2007. Irish governments have supported the rationalisation of unions and the Industrial Relations Act 1990 makes available financial assistance to unions who attempt (successfully or not) to merge. Unions in other countries have also merged in order to try to improve their position. Merging is a complicated process involving tensions amongst officials and large transaction costs. Research suggests there are mixed results from union mergers and they do not always lead to greater efficiency or improved services for members (Undy 2008; Waddington 2005).

##### **Recruitment and Organising**

A second strategy aimed at responding to the decline in unionisation has been an increased emphasis on recruitment of new members in workplaces where unions already exist and in non-unionised workplaces. Traditionally, unions did not invest heavily in recruiting new members because of strong unionisation and closed shop arrangements. Particularly since the mid-1990s, Irish trade unions invested more in recruiting by employing specialist recruitment officers who would target certain types of employees and industries. For example, SIPTU has targeted young people, women, atypical workers, workers in MNCs and migrant workers. They have also focused on industries that were considered 'ripe' for union drives, e.g. security, construction, hotels, catering, cleaning and nursing homes (Dobbins 2003, 2004). Other unions, such as IBOA, Mandate, Unite and CWU, invested in recruitment initiatives (Dobbins 2008).

Unions in other countries have also made extensive efforts to recruit more people such as students, migrant workers and women (Pedersini 2010).

More recently, unions have sought to organise workers as well as recruit them. Organising is the idea that workers are 'empowered' to define and pursue their own interests through the medium of collective organisation (Heery *et al.* 2000: 38). Instead of members being reliant on the full-time union official to serve their needs, they would become more active and try to address their needs collectively themselves within an organisation. This emphasis on organising arose because union officials were spending too much time representing the problems of individual employees; they had very little time to recruit new members and members had an expectation of being 'serviced' by the union rather than being active in it. This problem was also experienced by unions in the US, UK and Australia and unions there sought to move away from 'servicing' much sooner than Irish unions.

SIPTU has undergone significant internal restructuring in order to allow union officials to concentrate on organising and representing members on collective issues rather than representing individual members with employment rights issues. Union officials now represent members in one sector rather than companies in different sectors, allowing them to build up knowledge of a sector and generate organising activity. Members refer their individual rights problems to the union's Membership Information and Support Centre, which assigns an Advocate to the case. SIPTU aims to spend 25 per cent of membership fees on organising by 2013, up from 6 per cent in 2007 (Higgins 2009a). Research to date indicates that union efforts at organising have yielded mixed results (Murphy and Turner 2011, 2012). Challenges for unions include difficulties in gaining access to workplaces and union organisers relying on employees with previous union membership experience to become activists (Murphy and Turner 2011, 2012). Union attempts to reverse the decline in density will be a difficult task in the current economic and industrial relations climate, with increased unemployment, globalisation and the ability of MNCs to change locations in order to avoid unionisation.

### **Union Recognition**

Since union access to a workplace is critical in the process of union joining, Irish unions have lobbied for legislation to deal with employers who are opposed to them. There is no constitutional or legal right to union recognition. Union recognition is the process whereby 'trade union(s) are formally accepted by management as the representative of all, or a group, of employees for the purpose of jointly determining terms and conditions of employment' (Salamon 2000: 189). Historically, this lack of statutory provision in relation to trade union recognition was not a major problem in Irish industrial relations. Most medium and large employers traditionally recognised and concluded collective agreements with trade unions. However, unions have been finding it increasingly difficult to gain recognition from employers. While trade union action or a recommendation of the Labour Court may convince employers to accede to union recognition, it is largely an issue of management discretion. Employers can choose to recognise and negotiate with one union, multiple unions or none. It was in this context that unions lobbied

for legislation, the result of which was the Industrial Relations Acts 2001–2004 (see Chapter 2). Given that unionisation is falling and unions are finding it more difficult to get access to workplaces, and that these trends are unlikely to be reversed at least in the medium term, the next section examines whether there are viable alternatives to unions for employees.

#### ALTERNATIVES TO TRADE UNIONS? INTERNAL COMPANY ASSOCIATIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

In the absence of a trade union, employees in some companies may have no alternative mechanism for collective representation. In other organisations, there are internal structures that have a representative function; these include employee forums, works councils and employee associations. They are introduced by management either voluntarily or because of legal requirements, e.g. the EU Works Council Directive and the EU Directive on Information and Consultation. Such structures can be used for information sharing or to allow employees to participate in decision making, though the extent of this varies widely. The issue of employee participation is discussed in more detail in Chapter 12. Unlike trade unions, an employee association consists only of employees who work in the same organisation. Joining an employee association gives some of the benefits of collective organisation: by joining together, workers can present a united front to employers and redress some of the bargaining imbalance. Employee associations provide a collective voice for employees without the introduction of an 'outside' third party, and management may view these associations as easier to deal with and less likely to engage in confrontation. However, work-based associations have been criticised because of their lack of independence, i.e. they are often established and resourced by management. The issue of independence has gained particular prominence following the finding in the Ryanair case that the company's employee representative committees could have engaged in collective bargaining. As noted in Chapter 2, there is now a live debate as to whether Ireland meets the requirement for worker organisation independence as required by the ILO. Employee associations may also be at a serious disadvantage due to the absence of an external organisation structure and lack of access to bargaining expertise or legal advice. These factors may combine to limit the bargaining power of employee associations in their interactions with management. Traditionally, trade unionists have taken a cynical view of employee associations, seeing them as a poor apology for a real trade union and responsible for inhibiting collective solidarity.

Other possible alternatives to trade unions are bodies that have been variously termed 'non-worker organisations', 'community unions', 'quasi-unions', 'non-bargaining actors', 'non-member organisations' and 'civil society organisations' (Williams *et al.* 2011: 70). These include charities, voluntary associations, advocacy bodies, social movement organisations and non-governmental organisations such as citizens' advice bodies and migrant worker centres (Abbott *et al.* 2011). It has been suggested that the activities of these bodies partly fill the vacuum left by the decline in unionisation and that they challenge unions' 'alleged neglect of interests grounded in gender and minority status or in vulnerable labour market positions' (Heery *et al.* 2012: 156–77). Unlike

employee associations, but like trade unions, these civil society bodies are independent of management and are external to the organisation. They are not established like trade unions with the objective of advancing employees' pay and conditions, but some of their activities are similar to those of trade unions. They advise employees on their rights, engage in political lobbying and campaigns and try to influence legislation (Abbott 2006; Fine 2007; Meager *et al.* 2002; Pollert 2008; O'Sullivan and Hartigan 2011). Others have, on occasion, undertaken activities previously the preserve of unions, e.g. acting on behalf of individual employees or groups who have problems in the workplace and representing them in hearings of state dispute resolution bodies (O'Sullivan and Hartigan 2011). It has been argued that the legitimacy and non-adversarial approach of voluntary organisations allow them to influence employers (Heery 2010; Williams *et al.* 2011). However, there is still a view that there is no viable alternative model of employee representation to trade unions and that only workers' collective power can counter the power of employers (D'Art and Turner 2006b; Smith and Morton 2006). In this sense, civil society organisations are an inferior form of employee representation because they do not have a constant presence in the workplace and cannot exert employees' collective power.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This chapter has reviewed the growth, operation and evolution of trade unions in Ireland. Unions have had a tumultuous history that has somewhat come full circle. They are lobbying the government for measures to help them get recognition by employers and increase membership – key issues for unions a hundred years ago. The review of union joining indicated that union membership is not a simple process of a person deciding whether or not to join one. There are many factors that affect whether or not individuals have access to a union and this is critical to the union joining process. A key influence on union stability across countries is the institutional environment – in particular, how supportive employers and political parties are of unions. The approach of employers to unions varies considerably from one of support, to acceptance to outright opposition. In Chapter 4 we will examine employer representative bodies, which have traditionally accepted and negotiated with unions.