

# Why Do Members Leave? The Importance of Retention to Trade Union Growth

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## Abstract

Drawing on survey results from three British trade unions, this paper examines why members leave trade unions. In this study, as anticipated, a great many members left their unions because of some change to their employment circumstances (they were made redundant, they changed employers, or they retired). A significant proportion left because they were dissatisfied with some aspect of union organization. The paper also demonstrates that the proportion of members leaving because of dissatisfaction varied according to a range of factors, including union "type" and sector of organization. The research implies that if unions are to reverse membership decline and promote retention, they must address a range of issues in addition to introducing new means of organizing and recruitment.

The substantial, long-term decline in British trade union membership and influence since 1979 has promoted a burgeoning academic literature on the reasons for decline and on strategies for union renewal. The recent literature on union responses to membership decline examines the relative merits of partnership, servicing, and organizing strategies (Brown 2000; Heery 2002). Although the nature and the extent of the distinctions between these strategies has been questioned (de Turberville 2004), proponents of the different strategies argue that they are concerned with recruitment and retention. Emphasis within the literature, however, is placed on the recruitment of new members. In contrast, this article focuses on membership retention and, in particular, on the reasons members leave trade unions. It examines union leaving by reference to the quality of workplace organization and variations in union structural "type." Drawing on surveys of individuals who left three trade unions, the article demonstrates that member dissatisfaction with aspects of union organization and activity is widespread and underpins the decision of many members to leave trade unions. The article thus argues

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that a reappraisal of retention strategies is required if unionists are to renew structures and activities.

To examine these issues, the article comprises four sections. The first section takes as its initial points of departure three related literatures covering the strategies implemented to reverse decline, the extent of member satisfaction with union representation, and union structure. The second section outlines the method employed to assemble the data and identifies the variables used in subsequent sections. The third section reviews the different reasons members left the three trade unions studied, and identifies dissatisfaction with the performance of trade unions as accounting for a large proportion of leavers. The fourth section focuses on the leavers who were dissatisfied with their union by examining their participation in union activity, the source of their dissatisfaction, and their relations with unionism after leaving.

### Three Points of Departure

Shortcomings in the number of shop stewards, the material and political resources available to shop stewards, and the support received within the workplace from the union are identified as weakening or undermining organization at unionized workplaces and, hence, contributing to membership decline (Cully et al. 1999; Brown et al. 2000; Millward, Bryson, and Forth 2000).<sup>2</sup> Advocates of the partnership, servicing and organizing strategies recommend different approaches to address these shortcomings.<sup>3</sup> Proponents of the partnership approach expect partnerships between unions and employers to generate improved procedures, a wider range of facilities for union workplace representatives, and a shift away from workplace autonomy toward company-coordinated activity, all of which will contribute to improved union performance at the workplace (Ackers and Payne 1998; Brown 2000; Terry 2003). In contrast, the servicing approach assumes that unions can organize full-time officials more effectively to solve problems for workers through formal procedures and institutions. In this approach, the interests of union members at the workplace are represented and serviced by union staff, on which the performance of the union at the workplace is thus heavily dependent. Many trade unions in Britain, including the three that participated in this research, have recently introduced packages of financial services, including discounted insurance and mortgage schemes, union credit cards, and holiday discounts similar to the Union Privilege Benefit Programs (UPBP) introduced by the AFL-CIO as part of the strategy to improve services to members. This study examines whether financial services enhance rates of retention. Advocates of the organizing model argue that membership decline is more likely to be reversed through the mobilization of larger numbers of active members and

the development of more intense relations with members, which, in turn, encourages member participation and union commitment (Heery et al. 2000; Jarley 2005; Russo and Banks 1996). From this perspective, commitment to the union is generated through involvement rather than the provision of support. This article examines features of these approaches to workplace organization and assesses how they impinge on union leaving.

This study draws on a second literature that focuses on member (dis)satisfaction with union representation (Rose and Chaison 1996; Diamond and Freeman 2001). In this context, member satisfaction has been defined in terms of three "facets" of the union: (1) as it impacts "basic" trade union issues such as pay and benefits, (2) as it affects quality-of-work issues such as job interest and workers' voice, and (3) as it relates to its members regarding such issues as union visibility, information provision, and performance in handling grievances (Fiorito, Gallagher, and Fukami 1988). The first two facets are intended to capture instrumental aspects of the relationship between members and union, whereas the third is concerned with elements of the social exchange integral to union membership. This article assesses whether deficits in these facets influenced members to leave unions in Britain. Furthermore, it acknowledges that on each facet of satisfaction there is no reason to expect men and women to share identical views (McBride 2001; Munro 1999). Differences in the sources of dissatisfaction between men and women are thus also examined.

Using approaches similar to analyses of member satisfaction, two recent studies addressed why members leave unions in Britain. Based on the distinction between the employed and unemployed, Gallie (1996, 140-174) examined reasons "for no longer being a union member." Among the employed, 45 percent of respondents cited their principal reason for leaving was moving to a job where a trade union was absent. In addition, over a quarter of leavers explained their departure in terms of seeing no benefit to membership. The second reason for leaving may have alternative explanations: perhaps unions were simply absent or they were present but ineffective, but these alternatives were not explored in detail (1996, 171). Among the unemployed, 75 percent of respondents reported that their principal reason for leaving a union was that they left work, confirming that British trade unions tend to offer a narrow range of services to the unemployed (Barker, Lewis, and McCann 1984).<sup>4</sup> For our purposes, the utility of these findings is limited without a detailed analysis of the impact of union effectiveness on leaving, although an important point regarding member dissatisfaction is the hint that union ineffectiveness, however defined, may account for over a quarter of union leavers.

A second study examined why members left UNISON (Waddington and Kerr 1999b). This study demonstrated that 67.6 percent of leavers left UNISON because of some change in their job situation; 18.2 percent left due to problems with structure and organization of UNISON, and a further 7.7 percent left because of some disagreement with the policy implemented by UNISON (1999b, 188). Thus, member dissatisfaction with aspects of union organization and policy account for over 25 percent of union leavers. As the authors acknowledge, the focus on UNISON necessitated a reliance on public sector data. There is no *a priori* reason to suggest that these results can be generalized to the private sector. Furthermore, the absence of a comparison with other unions makes it difficult to assess whether the results are principally a function of the organization and policy of UNISON, unions more generally, peculiarities associated with the public sector, or some other unidentified factor.

Neither the literature on renewal strategies nor the literature on member satisfaction treats union structure and government as having an explanatory function. The implication is that renewal strategies can be implemented or member satisfaction improved independently of the structure and the system of government of the union involved. A consequence of long-term membership decline in Britain and in many other industrialized countries, however, has been the extensive restructuring of the union movement through mergers. Most of the larger British unions, including the three that participated in this study, are the result of mergers and have undergone wide-ranging structural reform. The larger unions resulting from the merger process are viewed as a means whereby resources can be concentrated and economies of scale secured, thus constituting a basis for union renewal (Stratton-Devine 1992; TUC 1999). Merger involvement has also tended to promote higher levels of industrial and occupational membership heterogeneity within the larger unions, more complex forms of union government, and the introduction of new forms of financial management (Undy et al. 1996; Waddington, Kahmann, and Hoffman 2005). In turn, these developments have raised issues concerned with the maintenance or regeneration of union articulation and the quality of member support offered by unions with different structural characteristics. The three unions that participated in this study have structures that differ markedly in terms of the breadth of the recruitment bases, forms of union government, and membership composition. This article examines the impact of these structural differences on the pattern of union leaving and points to variations in the pattern of union leaving between unions of different "types."

### Survey Design and Sample Composition

These arguments are assessed through data drawn from three separate surveys of union leavers conducted between 2001 and 2004. For reasons of confidentiality, the participating unions are labeled union A, union B, and union C. Each union organizes different combinations of members by gender, sector, and occupation. Furthermore, the three unions operate with different systems of union government. The three unions affiliate to the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

Union A is the most recently formed of the three unions and organizes exclusively within a single, broadly defined industry. It is the smallest and most homogeneous of the three. More than 60 percent of the members are women, and membership is concentrated in several large companies, although the proportion of members employed in other, smaller companies has risen in recent years. In most of its principal areas of organization, union A does not compete for members with other unions. In one of the larger companies and in several of the smaller companies, however, union A competes for members with a range of staff associations and a small number of other TUC-affiliated unions. Union A operates with a "basic" set of provisions intended to encourage the participation and involvement of women, comprising inter alia a women's committee, regional equality (sub) committees, a national equality secretary, and commitments to raise the proportion of female full-time officers and to highlight issues of policy of concern to women. Due to the membership distribution, the constitution of union A does not make provision or establish distinct industrial sections, unlike unions B and C.<sup>5</sup> The questionnaire was distributed in union A on a monthly basis for a year to all who left. A total of 19,057 questionnaires were distributed; 2,602 were returned, a return rate of 13.7 percent.

The merger that resulted in the formation of union B took place before the founding mergers of either union A or union C. Union B organizes members in industry, and public and private sector services, although members in private sector services are outnumbered by their counterparts in industry and the public sector. The membership comprises 35 percent women distributed, albeit unevenly, across the three sectors. Throughout the range of its recruitment base, union B competes for members with a range of professional associations, staff associations, and TUC-affiliated unions. Similarly to union A, union B operates with a basic set of provisions intended to encourage women to participate and become involved. Unlike the procedure used for union A, the questionnaire was distributed to the 10,621 union B members who had left during the last month. The overall rate of questionnaire return was 11.3 percent (N=1,201).

Union C is the largest of the three participating unions. Although some members are organized in industry and private sector services, the overwhelming majority are employed in the public sector. More than 70 percent of the members of union C are women. Union C competes for members across the range of its recruitment base, principally with several professional associations and other TUC-affiliated unions. Union C operates with a more extensive range of measures designed to encourage the participation of women than either union A or union B. Integral to these measures is the application of the principal of proportionality, whereby the gender composition of any committee established within the union matches that of the membership represented by the committee. The questionnaire was distributed in union C on the same basis as in union B; that is, 12,000 questionnaires were distributed to the leavers taken from the membership record during the previous month. A total of 1,842 questionnaires were returned, constituting a return rate of 15.4 percent.

Clearly, employing the two different approaches to the distribution of the surveys ran the risk of the returns in union B and union C being distorted by a specific, short-term event, such as a large company or site closure that coincided with the survey distribution. Respondents were asked to specify the names of their employers prior to leaving the union, so it was possible to check whether such events had occurred. This checking procedure indicated no large concentrations of respondents from a particular employer, suggesting that no such distortion had taken place.

In addition to the name of their employer, respondents were asked to specify their job title prior to leaving the union. The responses on employer and job title were classified using the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) and Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) respectively. By grouping these responses after their classification by SIC and SOC, the following six categories were generated:

- Industry: comprises all of manufacturing and the utilities
- Public sector: includes health, education, local government, and the civil service
- Private sector services: comprises transport, finance (banking and insurance), distribution, entertainment, and miscellaneous services
- White-collar staff: includes all those classified as managers, administrators, professionals, and associate professionals
- White-collar workers: includes clerical, sales, and personal and protective service occupations
- Manual workers: employed in craft occupations as plant and machine operatives or in unskilled manual occupations

The distribution of respondents disaggregated by gender, and these categories within the three unions are shown in table 1. As the number of respondents from union A in manual occupations and union C in industry is very small, these categories are disregarded in the analysis that follows.

Table 1  
The Membership Composition of the Three Unions

Membership Proportions	Union A	Union B	Union C
	(smallest union)		(largest union)
	%	%	%
<i>By Gender</i>			
Women	64.8	42.0	73.3
<i>By Sector</i>			
Industry	/	43.9	3.6
Public sector	/	28.1	88.1
Private sector services	100.0	28.0	8.3
<i>By Occupational Type</i>			
White-collar staff	45.2	16.5	44.2
White-collar workers	53.1	15.8	22.0
Manual workers	1.7	67.7	33.8

#### *Reasons for Leaving*

The aggregate results on leaving are illustrated in table 2. In essence, three broad categories of union leavers are identified: (1) those who left because of issues arising from their job situation such as retirement, being made redundant, and fear that union membership would harm promotion prospects (hereafter, "promotion prospects"), and changing jobs to a new workplace where the union was not recognized/present (hereafter, "changed job"); (2) those who left due to dissatisfaction with the union, and (3) those who left for other reasons. From the outset, it is apparent that these three unions show marked variations in the patterns of leaving. In particular, aggregate changes in job situation accounted for 66.0 percent of leavers from union A, but only 54.3 percent from union C, and 51.7 percent from union B.

Among the four subcategories related to job situation, the only issue that was consistent in effect across the three unions was "promotion prospects," which was cited by less than 1 percent of leavers. In contrast, "changed job" ac-

Table 2  
Why Did You Leave the Union?

	Union A %	Union B %	Union C %
Retired	19.6	16.0	33.6
Made redundant	24.6	18.5	6.8
Harmed promotion prospects	0.5	0.8	0.6
Changed job	21.3	16.4	13.3
Aggregate job situation reasons	66.0	51.7	54.3
Dissatisfied with the trade union	17.8	33.8	29.4
Another reason	16.2	14.5	16.3
	N=2,602	N=1,201	N=1,842

counted for between 13.3 percent and 21.6 percent of leavers. The proportion of leavers due to "changed job" is directly related to the proportion of union membership in the private sector. The proportion of union leavers that cited "changed job" was lowest in union C, which had the fewest members in the private sector. No doubt, the lower density rates in both industry and private sector services have a marked effect on the impact of "changed job."

The proportion of leavers that cited redundancy as the reason for leaving varies from 6.8 percent in union C to 24.6 percent in union A. As with "changed job," there is a direct relationship between the impact of redundancy and the proportion of a union's membership employed in the private sector. Union A was particularly susceptible to the impact of private sector restructuring and the associated loss of jobs and members because the union was concentrated in a single industry and among employers where restructuring has been wide-ranging and long-term.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, redundancy in the public-sector-dominated union C was less influential, reflecting the relative employment stability in the sector.

Employment stability in the public sector also appeared to influence the proportion of union leavers that had retired. In union C, a third of all union leavers were retirees, about double the rate in union A and union B. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of retirees who left union C did so when they reached the formal retirement age (women, 60 years; men, 65 years), suggesting a degree of employment stability and continuity. In contrast, a substantial number of the retirees from union A had retired prior to formal

retirement age, indicating that they had taken some form of early retirement package offered in conjunction with the extensive restructuring in the industry organized by union A.

Leavers indicated widespread dissatisfaction with the unions. The extent of dissatisfaction varied markedly across the three unions. Almost 18 percent of leavers from relatively homogeneous union A cited dissatisfaction, whereas no fewer than 33.8 percent and 29.4 percent of leavers from the more heterogeneous unions B and C cited dissatisfaction as the principal reason for leaving. Expressed as a proportion of the annual turnover rates of the three unions, these proportions equate to a total of 77,728 members per year who leave the three unions because they are dissatisfied with the union. The large proportions of leavers who cite dissatisfaction as the reason for leaving suggest that wide-ranging union renewal in the three cases is some way off. Of course, this is not to argue that renewal is not present in pockets within the three unions. Furthermore, considerable numbers of the leavers who provided details for "another reason" did so in terms of dissatisfaction with the performance of the union over a specific event, thus indicating that the extent of dissatisfaction mentioned above is likely to be the lower limit of a range.<sup>7</sup>

Occupation and sector across the three unions did not consistently affect the extent of dissatisfaction. In union A, for example, the proportion of dissatisfied leavers was similar among white-collar staff (17.5 percent) and white-collar workers (16.3 percent). Similarly, in union B, occupational differences in the proportion of dissatisfied leavers did not vary markedly, but were consistently high: white-collar staff, 31.5 percent; white-collar workers, 31.7 percent; and manual workers, 29.8 percent. In contrast, the proportion of manual workers in union C that left because they were dissatisfied with the union was lower (26.9 percent) than for white-collar staff (30.7 percent) and white-collar workers (31.3 percent).

In union B, wide variation was seen in the extent of dissatisfaction by sector. Leavers from industry were less likely to cite dissatisfaction (25.3 percent) than were leavers from the public sector (31.3 percent) who, in turn were less likely to cite dissatisfaction than their counterparts from private sector services (36.2 percent). Dissatisfaction with union B is thus inversely related to the extent of union organization. Even in industry, however, the sector least affected by dissatisfaction in union B, there was a larger proportion of dissatisfied leavers than from the more homogeneous union A, suggesting that membership heterogeneity may promote dissatisfaction. Whereas in union B dissatisfaction was more pronounced in the relatively weakly organized private sector services, this situation was not replicated in union C where rates of dissatisfaction were similar in the public and private sector services.

This may be explained by the history of private sector service organization in union C. The overwhelming majority of the members in private sector services organized by union C work in privatized services that were formerly part of the public sector and were relatively well organized. In contrast, union B organizes segments of private sector services that are sparsely unionized with poorly developed networks of representatives.

Table 3 illustrates the pattern of leaving by gender. The variations between unions mentioned above are largely replicated in the gender breakdown. While no consistent gender effects are seen regarding promotion prospects and retirement, at several points gender effect is apparent. Women, for example, are more likely than men to cite leaving because they "changed job" or for "another reason." Why more women than men cite changed jobs remains a puzzle. Among the women who specified "another reason" for leaving, many mentioned leaving for maternity or a career break.

Table 3  
Why Did You Leave the Union?  
By Gender

	Union A men %	Union A women %	Union B men %	Union B women %	Union C men %	Union C women %
Retired	24.0	15.5	14.9	17.5	28.8	35.3
Made redundant	25.8	21.8	21.7	14.2	7.2	6.7
Harmed promotion prospects	0.5	0.5	0.9	0.6	1.0	0.5
Changed job	15.9	22.4	14.7	18.7	12.7	13.4
Aggregate job situation reasons	66.2	60.2	52.2	51.0	49.7	55.9
Dissatisfied with the trade union	20.0	15.1	35.4	31.4	37.9	26.3
Another reason	13.8	24.7	12.4	7.6	12.4	17.8
	N=916	N=1,686	N=697	N=504	N=492	N=1,350

Men were more likely than women to state that they left because they had been made redundant. In the two unions with significant private sector membership, 4.0 percent (union A) and 7.5 percent (union B) more men than women cited redundancy. In the three unions, men were also more likely to mention dissatisfaction with the union as a reason for leaving than were

their female counterparts. The accentuation of dissatisfaction among men is consistent with earlier findings (see Waddington and Kerr 1999b).

To summarize, union leavers showed widespread dissatisfaction with the three participating unions. The lowest level of dissatisfaction as a reason for leaving was 17.8 percent, found in the most homogeneous of the three unions. The rate of dissatisfaction within the more heterogeneous unions rose to around 30 percent. It should be noted, however, that the pattern of leaving was not simply a function of membership heterogeneity. The pattern of leaving varied by gender; men were more likely than women to cite dissatisfaction with the union. Occupation and sector did not have a consistent effect on dissatisfaction among leavers. The variation in the extent of dissatisfaction between and within unions raises the question: What aspects of union performance promote the dissatisfaction? We now turn to this question.

#### *The Leavers Who Were Dissatisfied with Their Unions*

This section examines in two stages the leavers who were dissatisfied with their union. The first stage identifies the sources of their dissatisfaction and assesses the variation in these sources of dissatisfaction by reference to gender, sector, and prior union involvement. The second stage examines the choices regarding unionism leavers made after they departed from union A, B, or C, and the factors that might encourage them to rejoin. Occupational differences in the sources of dissatisfaction between and within unions were marginal. Results on occupation are thus not presented in this section. From the outset it is worth noting that the median length of membership among the dissatisfied leavers differed markedly. Leavers dissatisfied with union A had been members between 10 and 11 years, whereas the median length of membership among their counterparts from union B was between 2.5 and 3 years, and in union C median length of membership was between 5.5 and 6 years. It thus appears that dissatisfaction with union A was the result of events that prompted relatively longstanding members to leave. In contrast, leavers from union C and, particularly, union B were less likely to have established a long-term commitment to the union.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Why Were the Leavers Dissatisfied with their Unions?*

Table 4 illustrates the responses only of those who had left the three unions because they were dissatisfied. Respondents were asked to complete all options of the question.

Comparing the scores of the dissatisfied leavers reveals generally lower scores in union A than union C, which, in turn, tend to be lower than in union B. The higher scores in unions B and C are thus consistent with the

**Table 4**  
**Why Were You Dissatisfied with the Union?**

	Union A	Union B	Union C
Too little was done to improve pay and conditions.	+60.2	+57.3	+55.8
Representatives did not contact me.	+47.6	+72.7	+59.3
Not enough help was given to members with problems.	+40.5	+63.9	+63.0
Membership was too expensive.	+39.7	-12.3	-5.5
The union did not do enough on health and safety.	+20.9	+42.8	+34.1
The union was too close to the employer.	+18.6	+13.0	+13.0
I was unable to influence union decisions.	+11.1	+9.6	+13.0
Little or no information was provided.	+6.3	+50.4	+23.7
The union was unwilling to cooperate with the employer to solve problems at work.	-0.7	+33.2	+29.0
I did not wish to participate in industrial action.	-38.6	-45.4	-15.8
	N=463	N=406	N=542

**Notes:**

These data are based only on the respondents who stated that their reason for leaving was dissatisfaction with some aspect of union organization or activity.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether a particular reason was very important, fairly important, neutral, not very important or not at all important in their decision to leave the union. The scores presented in Table 3 were calculated by subtracting the proportion of respondents stating a reason to be not very important or not at all important from the sum of the proportion of respondents stating the reason to be very important and fairly important. The more positive the score presented in table 4, the greater the degree of dissatisfaction with the union.

argument that dissatisfaction is more intense in the more heterogeneous unions. It is also apparent that the same three sources of dissatisfaction occupy the top three positions in the ranking, albeit in a different order, in all the unions. Two of these three sources of dissatisfaction are elements of the social exchange facet integral to union membership: "Representatives did not contact me" and "Not enough help was given to members with problems." These two sources of dissatisfaction occupied the first two positions in the ranking for the more heterogeneous unions B and C, and positions two and three in union A. Given the vast range of evidence in Britain demonstrating that new members join and existing members stay because they require "sup-

port from their union if they have a problem at work" (Kerr 1992; Sapper 1991; Waddington and Kerr 1999a; Waddington and Whitston 1997), it is predictable that if such support is not forthcoming, members will be dissatisfied and leave.

"Too little was done to improve pay and conditions," which appeared at the top of the ranking in union A and at position three in unions B and C, is clearly an instrumental facet of the relationship between union and member. Given the intensity of the restructuring and job losses in the industry organized by union A, it is perhaps no surprise that employers had been able to resist larger pay increases. What is apparent, however, is that a failure to secure larger pay increases was a significant source of dissatisfaction in each of the three unions.

After position three in the ranking, there is considerable variation in the positioning of the different sources of dissatisfaction. Two other sources of dissatisfaction are prominent in the rankings for the three unions: "The union did not do enough on health and safety," an instrumental facet, and "Little or no information was provided," a social exchange facet. Again, these are "basic" trade union issues that are longstanding within any trade union agenda, rather than being "new" issues on which trade unionists must develop a position. Given the extensive network of health and safety representatives sustained by the three unions and the legal support available on health and safety, the prominence of this issue as a source of dissatisfaction should be a matter of considerable concern from the union perspective.

Three issues directly address the unions' capacity to mobilize members and relations with employers. The high negative ratio scores attached to "I did not wish to participate in industrial action" indicate no reluctance among the leavers to participate in industrial action if circumstances required. In other words, the leavers did not object to mobilization. The influence of relations with employers was mixed. In union A, for example, "The union was too close to the employer" was a greater source of dissatisfaction than "The union was unwilling to cooperate with the employer to solve problems at work," suggesting that certain relationships or partnerships with employers are more likely to stimulate members to leave. In contrast, leavers from unions B and C emphasized the unions' unwillingness to cooperate with employers as a source of dissatisfaction rather than proximity to employers. Leavers from unions B and C thus appeared to favor closer relationships with employers than existed at the time of their departure.

Significant differences between the unions are also apparent regarding the impact of membership costs. In unions B and C the cost of membership received a negative score, indicating that it was not seen as a source of wide-

spread dissatisfaction, but in union A the cost of membership appeared at position four in the ranking and was a source of considerable dissatisfaction. Membership subscriptions had been raised in all three unions in the years prior to the distribution of the surveys. It would thus appear that the issue of membership contributions was politically more sensitive in union A than elsewhere. This sensitivity may also have contributed to more longstanding members forming the leavers' cohort in union A compared with those of unions B and C. It also highlights the difficulties faced by smaller unions in achieving economies of scale and thus limiting increases in membership subscriptions.

The responses disaggregated by gender follow the same broad pattern identified in table 4. There were, however, some marked variations in the sources of dissatisfaction between the genders. A consistent gender effect is apparent on four sources of dissatisfaction: "I did not wish to participate in industrial action," "Membership was too expensive," "Representatives did not contact me," and "The union did not do enough on health and safety." The issue of industrial action was marginal as a source of dissatisfaction throughout the unions, although women consistently assigned the issue lower negative scores than their male counterparts. Similarly, the expense of membership was marginal in unions B and C, but more central as a source of dissatisfaction in union A. In all three unions, however, women reported greater dissatisfaction than men with the expense of membership, perhaps due to the lower levels of pay women tend to receive. This argument would have been strengthened had women consistently emphasized that their unions were doing "too little to improve pay and conditions." Men in unions B and C, however, were more likely than their female counterparts to cite pay and conditions as a source of dissatisfaction.

Women were also more dissatisfied than men regarding both contact with representatives and health and safety provisions. The absence of contact between representatives and female members is clearly a significant policy issue for the three unions. Although the three unions had implemented policies to increase the number of female full-time officers and lay representatives, the absence of contact reported by women indicates that either large numbers of female unionists are at workplaces that union representatives do not visit, or representatives are more likely to ignore women when visiting the workplaces. Both options are likely to contribute to an explanation. The absence of contact reported by men and, particularly, women, however, indicates that change is required. Similar arguments apply to the issue of health and safety, which was also cited as a source of dissatisfaction by more women than men. Given the extensive networks of health and safety representatives maintained by

the three unions and the legal support that underpins their activities, there should be no reason to expect a lower level of health and safety provisions for women. Explanations could include less developed networks where women are employed, a reduced emphasis on health and safety matters of specific concern to women, or higher expectations among women on health and safety standards.

When describing the government of the three unions, we noted the more extensive measures intended to promote the participation and involvement of women in union C compared with those of unions A and B. Dissatisfied female leavers from unions A and B were more likely to cite, "I was unable to influence union decisions" than were their male counterparts, whereas the opposite was the case in union C. Moreover, the dissatisfaction score among female leavers was much lower in union C (+7.2) compared with that in union A (+19.1) and union B (+19.8). In other words, apparently the system of government in union C based on proportionality had successfully enabled women to have more influence on union decision-making. This system, however, had not noticeably affected the number of women from union C who cited, "Representatives did not contact me," which remained higher than among the men and comparable with that in the other two unions.

The reasons for dissatisfaction disaggregated by sector illustrate an influence of sector on the pattern of member dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction with union B arising from issues associated with support and information was most pronounced in the weakly organized private sector services. For example, the scores are higher in private sector services than industry or the public sector regarding the help given to members with problems, health and safety provisions, information, and the capacity to influence union decisions. Similarly, in union C, leavers employed in the minority private sector services were more dissatisfied than their public sector counterparts regarding contact with representatives, health and safety provisions, and information. In other words, where workplace organization is least well developed in the two unions, member dissatisfaction is most pronounced.

The surveys also allowed examination of the impact of prior union involvement on union leaving. Respondents were asked to specify whether they had held a representative position within the union, regularly attended branch meetings, voted in union elections, attended branch meetings only on special occasions, or participated in union education and training programs. On the basis of this information two analyses were conducted. The first showed that although there was variation in the proportion of dissatisfied leavers who had been involved in these forms of union activity between the three unions, there was no relation between this variation and the sources of dissatisfaction

that prompted members to leave. The second analysis contrasted the involvement in these union activities of those who had left because of issues related to their employment circumstances and members who had left because they were dissatisfied. The results are available in table 5.

Table 5 shows no substantial or consistent differences in the participation rates in union activities between the two groups of leavers. To the contrary, variation within each of the three unions is broadly consistent between the two groups, although dissatisfied leavers were more likely to have held a representative position and were more likely to have attended union education/training courses. Advocates of the organizing model suggest that commitment to the union may be generated by involvement. The absence of any relationship between union participation, the source of dissatisfaction, and the reasons for leaving raises three points regarding the relationship between commitment to the union and retention. First, apparently there are limits to the commitment to the union generated by involvement defined along these five dimensions. Second, higher levels of involvement among dissatisfied leavers in terms of holding representative positions and attending union training courses were insufficient to persuade these unionists to retain their membership. Third, if the organizing model is to raise levels of involvement in the union and, hence, commitment, it will be necessary to raise levels of involvement markedly above those recorded here if retention rates are to be improved.

Recent developments in the servicing model are also questioned. Rates of subscription to the financial services offered by unions A and B did not differ between the two groups of leavers. In other words, the recent development of the servicing model has also proved ineffective in raising union retention rates.

#### *The Views of the Dissatisfied Leavers toward Unions*

Does dissatisfaction with one union result in a reluctance to join another? The average age of the dissatisfied leavers (union A, 42-43; union B, 41-42; union C, 45-46) suggests that leavers had opportunities to join other unions, but relatively small proportions did so (union A, 11.3 percent; union B, 24.1 percent; union C, 27.1 percent). Dissatisfaction with one union would thus appear to dissuade most leavers from joining another. The marked discrepancy between the rate of joining another union among the dissatisfied leavers of union A compared with those of unions B and C is also likely to have been influenced by the wider range of competing unions available to leavers from unions B and C.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the relative absence of unions that compete with union A and, thus, other unions that the leavers might join, is likely to have restricted the rate of joining another union.

Table 5  
Union Participation and Reasons for Leaving

	Union A Left due to employment circumstances %	Union A Dissatisfied leavers %	Union B Left due to employment circumstances %	Union B Dissatisfied leavers %	Union C Left due to employment circumstances %	Union C Dissatisfied leavers %
I held a representative position.	5.5	7.1	7.6	8.7	7.1	9.8
I regularly attended branch meetings.	6.3	8.4	18.9	14.9	12.0	13.9
I only attended branch meetings on special occasions.	16.3	15.0	26.1	28.4	35.2	28.2
I voted in union elections.	63.5	58.8	49.6	56.9	65.4	61.6
I attended union education/training courses.	7.2	8.1	6.8	7.9	6.4	8.0
	N=1,713	N=461	N=617	N=403	N=998	N=539

Very few of the dissatisfied leavers had been asked by union representatives to stay in the union (union A, 9.2 percent; union B, 7.5 percent; union C, 8.2 percent). Procedures in the three unions thus could be improved to ensure higher rates of contact between leavers and representatives. Contact would be most effective shortly after the member leaves. At present, however, it might take several months before a leaver is removed from the membership register. Such a time lag effectively eliminates the ability of representatives to contact leavers. Nevertheless, the dissatisfied leavers who had not joined another union were asked what might encourage them to rejoin the union they recently left. Leavers responded with two main concerns that suggest arguments union representatives might make in an attempt to persuade leavers to rejoin. Leavers indicate they would rejoin if they could be convinced that improvements had been made to provide "support to members who had a problem" and "more help was provided to improve pay and conditions." This confirms the basic finding of this study: members want support from their union. If support is not forthcoming, some members will leave.

### Conclusions

A majority of leavers from each of the three unions left because of some change to their employment circumstances. In this regard, the British results are similar to those found in the United States (McDonald 1986). The strategic advantages of organizing the public sector are evident in so far as the low rates of redundancy and changed jobs ensure that members, once recruited, are likely to retain their membership until retirement. A significant proportion of leavers do so because they are dissatisfied with the unions' performance. In the three unions that participated in this study, the extent of dissatisfaction ranged from 17.8 percent to 33.8 percent. Union, gender, and sector influenced the extent of dissatisfaction. In broad terms, the more heterogeneous the membership, the greater the likelihood of leavers citing dissatisfaction with the unions' performance, and men are more likely to cite dissatisfaction as a reason for leaving than are women. More specifically concerning sector, the highest rates of dissatisfaction in union B were found in private sector services where the union was attempting to build organization rather than in either industry or the public sector where union B had longstanding organization and relatively dense networks of workplace representatives. The sources of dissatisfaction are fairly constant across the three unions. In particular, the three unions were weak in ensuring contact between members and representatives, in providing assistance to members with problems, and in improving pay and conditions. These "traditional" trade union issues figure large in both the reasons for staying in a union and

the reasons that might entice the leavers to rejoin. Thus, improvements in these areas must be integral to trade union renewal.

The extent of dissatisfaction among the leavers of the three participating unions indicates that wide-ranging union renewal is some way off. No evidence indicates that the introduction of packages of financial services within the ambit of the servicing model has lessened dissatisfaction. Given that many British unions face financial difficulties, the prospect of deploying additional full-time officers to eradicate the sources of dissatisfaction identified here appears to be unlikely. Partnership and organizing are directed toward improving union organization at the workplace. As such, the two strategies have the potential to reduce member dissatisfaction and thus the number of members who leave. Improvements in the links between representatives and members, the health and safety provision, and assistance to members with problems are certainly emphasized within the organizing approach (Russo and Banks 1996; Heery et al. 2000). Similarly, improvements in the provision of information and the number of workplace representatives are intended as an outcome of partnership (Brown 2000; Terry 2003). The findings on cooperation with and proximity to the employer, however, are ambiguous regarding the likely impact of more extensive partnership arrangements. Irrespective of whether partnership or organizing approaches are adopted, women require improvements in the provision of workplace support, particularly in the areas of contact with representatives and regarding health and safety provisions.

As in most industrialized countries, unions in Britain are engaged in an extensive process of restructuring through mergers. This process has been encouraged by, and has received longstanding support from the TUC (1947, 1963, 1999). In the absence of the constitutional authority to impose a structure on British unionism, the TUC has offered encouragement and support that has focused on the establishment of larger trade unions, and has downplayed issues associated with increasing membership heterogeneity. Within TUC-affiliated unions, the political advantages of larger relative membership size, coupled with the absence of an overriding "logic" to the merger process, such as industrial unionism, has resulted in many of the larger unions organizing increasingly heterogeneous memberships. Furthermore, in several unions, increasing membership heterogeneity is concurrent with membership decline, thus generating financial and political tensions.

The results presented here highlight the problems of a strategy based on trade union restructuring by mergers and call into question the efficiency of unions with heterogeneous memberships. In particular, increasing membership heterogeneity is associated with a larger proportion of union leavers who depart because of dissatisfaction with aspects of union performance.

Moreover, the intensity of dissatisfaction with aspects of union performance is more pronounced in heterogeneous unions. Three points regarding systems of union government and financial management arise from the above. First, the sections operated by unions B and C do not appear to mitigate markedly the impact of membership heterogeneity on dissatisfaction. Second, new forms of representation and participation introduced as part of the merger process may reduce membership dissatisfaction, as illustrated by the results from women in union C. Third, and in contradiction to the above, the sensitivity of union A members to the rising cost of contributions indicate that the smaller size of the union may have precluded the achievement of economies of scale and thus contributed to member dissatisfaction.

What do these results tell us about the prospects for membership growth? It is apparent that more is required than recruiting new members. A comprehensive strategy for retention is integral to union growth. The results also demonstrate that many trade unionists are isolated at their place of work. Many leavers, for example, mentioned that they were not contacted by the union, received little or no information from the union, and were unable to influence union decision-making. In other words, a key requirement is to regenerate articulated union structures and activities whereby links between members and the wider union are established or intensified. The absence of any marked or consistent impact of membership participation on reasons for leaving, however, suggests that the regeneration of union articulation requires more than simply greater rates of membership participation. If restructuring through mergers continues, and all indications are that it will, union government must adopt wide-ranging reform as an integral element to the merger process and to reduce the adverse effects arising from increasing membership heterogeneity.

#### Notes

- 1 The author thanks Paul Jarley, Christian Lévesque, Ann McBride, Gregor Murray, and two anonymous referees for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Contributions from delegates attending the CRIMT Union Renewal: Assessing Innovations for Union Power in a Globalized Economy Conference, held at HEC, University of Montréal, November 18-20, 2004, also led to text improvements.
- 2 Of course, advocates of both partnership and organizing would also argue that the extension of the coverage of trade unions is paramount to any future renewal. As the concern here lies primarily with union leavers, that is, members leaving the union while employed at unionized workplaces, the issue of extending the union coverage is not addressed in this article.

- 3 The terms partnership, servicing, and organizing are used throughout the British industrial relations literature. Although there are differences between unions and within countries in the measures that might comprise the two strategies, servicing and organizing in Britain and the United States refer to essentially the same phenomena. In more recent usage partnership, however, is a term borrowed from European industrial relations literature, albeit used in a rather different form in Britain than in Europe. Partnership has no direct counterpart in the United States. In practice, partnership in Britain refers to agreements between companies and unions, the purpose of which are to seek "mutual gains" in terms of improved company performance, union security, and workplace well-being (see Ackers and Payne 1998). Although not an exact equivalent, a term used in the United States that includes many of the features associated with partnership is "value-added" unionism.
- 4 It should be acknowledged that unions in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden offer extensive services to the unemployed in the form of management of unemployment insurance or benefit schemes. In consequence, the relationship in these three countries between unemployment and union leaving differs significantly from that in the UK (see Jørgensen et al. 1992).
- 5 There is a longstanding tradition of unions with distinct industrial sections in Britain. These sections may be called trade groups, service groups, sectors, or a range of other titles. The term section is used throughout this paper to protect the anonymity of the participating unions.
- 6 The author conducted an earlier unpublished survey of leavers from union A that produced a very similar result, with redundancy accounting for almost one quarter of leavers.
- 7 Comments such as "The union did nothing when X [a member] was unfairly treated" and "I have never seen a union representative at my workplace" are commonplace in the detail of "another reason." In other words, a proportion of the responses presented here as "another reason" could plausibly be allocated to the "dissatisfied with the performance of the union" category.
- 8 The author conducted a complementary series of hitherto unpublished surveys of members of the three unions. The surveys indicated the median length of membership to be: union A, 13-14 years; union B, 6.5-7.0 years; and union C, 11-12 years. In other words, the median length of membership of the leavers from the three unions was shorter than that of members, and markedly so in unions B and C.
- 9 Multi-unionism is commonplace at many British workplaces. Hence, it is possible for a member to leave one trade union and join another while remaining in the same job and being employed by the same employer. Furthermore, there is no equivalent of exclusive jurisdiction with the consequence that several trade unions may be attempting to organize particular groups of workers.

There is, thus, a marked contrast between Britain and the United States in the possibilities for members to transfer from one trade union to another.

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