

'Free-riders' approaching 30% of public sector workers

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The number of non-union members in the public sector is approaching 30%, according to Professor John Geary of UCD, speaking to a Fórsa union conference last week.

Speaking at a joint session of the union's Services and Enterprises and Local Government divisional conferences, Professor Geary set out new findings on non-union members who were covered by collective bargaining, referred to by many union organisers as 'free riders' who benefit from union negotiations but decline to become members.

The findings are based on the UCD Working in Ireland survey from 2021. Earlier findings from the same 2,000-respondent survey found union density to be 28%, with women making up 54% of union members and 16% of the workforce having been union members in the past but are no longer members (*see IRN 06/2022, 'Trade union membership 'increasingly a female phenomenon' - survey*).

The new findings, which focus on non-union members covered by collective bargaining, found that in unionised employments in the private sector, 57% of workers are non-union members. Of these, 17% were union members in the past, while 40% have never been members.

In the public service, 28% of workers are not union members. Of these, 12% have been union members in the past, but are no longer members. The remainder (16%) were never union members. Figures for the commercial semi-state sector are similar, with 29% outside unions and 12% having been members in the past.

Of non-union members in unionised employments who had never been in a union, the study found that they were roughly evenly balanced in terms of gender. But they were significantly more likely to be younger, with 64% of 15-24 year olds in this category and just 28% of over-44s. Long-tenured employees are also more likely to be union members.

Professor Geary said that the bulk of non-union members in unionised employments were employed in three sectors: human health; education; and ICT, professional, scientific, technical, administrative and support sectors.

STEADFAST OBJECTION

In terms of this group's attitude towards unions, steadfast objections to unions (to the point of being willing to vote to cease union operation), was found in 23% of 'free-riders' who have left unions and just 12% of those who have never been in a union.

The remainder are either undecided (19% of leavers and 23% of 'never-have-been members') or they are in favour of continued union representation (58% of leavers and 65% of never-have-beens). A third of leavers and a quarter of never-have-beens exhibit a political commitment to trade unions.

Professor Geary said there was "no viable basis to compel workers to join a union" and deploying peer pressure or shaming is a potentially dangerous strategy, slipping into harassment and coercion.

Instead, he recommended reminding these workers of what has been won for them by unions and involving them in union activities, to see how the union works.

'GOOD FAITH' PROPOSAL

ICTU general secretary Owen Reidy told the same joint session of the conference that the success of the 'good faith engagement' element of the High Level Group proposals on collective bargaining would depend on how punitive the penalties are on employers for not engaging.

If this can be got right, he said there are three scenarios: some employers will go through the motions, ending up saying 'thanks but no thanks'; some will breach the process and will end up in courts facing penalties; and there will be others, "with whom a dynamic will be created, through persuasion or power", where employers decide it is in their strategic interest to engage.

The High Level Group report says there is nothing contradictory about forcing the parties to engage, while also not compelling them to reach agreement. To those who question this, Mr Reidy asked: "Do we want to be compelled to reach an agreement?" Surely, he said, unions should have a right to go back to members and ballot. "We want the power and leverage to get an agreement that's acceptable to us."

He said that what gave him most hope in the UCD survey is that 66% of 16-24 year olds, "in spite of us, quite frankly, in spite of some of the things we have done – or haven't done – see the trade union movement as a vehicle for change". He added that unions "need to stop patronising" young people and listen to them.