

TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP AND INFLUENCE, 1999-2014

John Forth and Alex Bryson

Date: September 2015



About the National Institute of Economic and Social Research

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research is Britain's longest established independent research institute, founded in 1938. The vision of our founders was to carry out research to improve understanding of the economic and social forces that affect people's lives, and the ways in which policy can bring about change. Seventy-five years later, this remains central to NIESR's ethos. We continue to apply our expertise in both quantitative and qualitative methods and our understanding of economic and social issues to current debates and to influence policy. The Institute is independent of all party political interests.

National Institute of Economic and Social Research

2 Dean Trench St

London SW1P 3HE

T: +44 (0)20 7222 7665

E: enquiries@niesr.ac.uk

niesr.ac.uk

Registered charity no. 306083

This paper was first published in September 2015

© National Institute of Economic and Social Research 2015

Trade Union Membership and Influence, 199-2014

John Forth and Alex Bryson

Abstract

In this briefing note, we provide a current assessment of trade union membership and influence within the workplace. We use data from the Certification Officer, the Labour Force Survey, the British Social Attitudes Survey and the Workplace Employment Relations Survey to examine unions' fortunes over the period 1999-2014. We show that union membership density continues to fall in Britain, but that the network of workplace reps has remained relatively resilient. We also show that unions continue to deliver observable benefits for their members in respect of terms and conditions, but the size of those benefits has decreased over the past decade.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge funding from the Trades Union Congress

Contact details

John Forth (j.forth@niesr.ac.uk), National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 2 Dean Trench Street, London SW1P 3HE

Introduction

In this briefing note, we provide a current assessment of trade union membership and influence. The briefing updates earlier research that we published on these issues five years ago, when our focus was on the period from 1999-2009.¹ In the intervening years, the British economy has gone through the longest recession in living memory. We examine unions' fortunes over this period of economic hardship and assess the prospects for the future.

Data sources

We use the latest-available data from the Certification Officer (CO) and the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) to assess unions' current position in three areas:

- membership
- financial and organisational health
- influence within the workplace.

The findings are augmented with data from the Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) and the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS). A brief description of each data source is provided in the Data Appendix (page 6). In presenting our analysis, we eschew a lengthy commentary, instead providing a brief account of a wide array of information that is presented primarily in the accompanying charts (see pages 7-20).

Trade union membership

Aggregate trends

The long-term trend in union membership in the UK is well-known. The total number of union members is recorded by the CO from membership returns which have to be submitted annually by each trade union. These records indicate that the total number of members attained a high point of around 13 million in 1979, having risen more or less continuously since the 1930s (Figure 1). Since then, there has been a precipitous decline, such that there are now around 7.1m members in the UK: just over half of the 1979 figure.

The QLFS allows us to investigate the recent trends in more detail, although in doing so we switch our focus to Britain. Figure 2 shows the recent trend in union membership density, i.e. the percentage of all employees who belong to a trade union. In Britain, union density declined at an average of 1 percentage point per year between 1989 and 1997 – falling from 39 per cent to 30 per cent. It was then broadly stable from 1997 to 2003, but the hiatus was short-lived, with density falling by a further four percentage points over the past ten years to reach 25 per cent in 2014. If the current rate of decline continues, then density will be close to 20 per cent within a decade.

Differences among sub-groups

In the 1990s membership density fell among all groups of workers and in all sectors: it fell in the private sector and public sector; among men and women; among manual workers and non-manual workers; and among younger and older workers (Figures 3-6). The 2000s saw some stability in density rates for women, for non-manual workers, and for older and younger employees; but the last 4-5 years have brought declines once more among each of these groups, driven in large part by falling density in the public sector.

Figure 6 shows that, at each point in time, density is higher among older workers than it is among younger employees. However this does not imply that employees become more likely to join a union as they get older; instead it represents the effects of successive cohorts moving through the labour market, each with a lower propensity to join than the one before. Figure 7 shows this cohort effect

¹ Bryson A and Forth J (2010) "[Trade union membership and influence, 1999-2009](#)", NIESR Discussion Paper 362.

Bryson A and Forth J (2011) "Trade unions", in P Gregg and J Wadsworth (eds) [The Labour Market in Winter: The State of Working Britain](#), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

quite clearly and highlights that a key challenge for unions is to raise the appetite for union membership among young people.

One consequence of the different trajectories shown in Figures 3-6 is that the composition of union membership has changed in some notable ways over the past two decades. Figure 8 shows that union membership is now female-dominated. It has also become older and more educated, on average, and is increasingly dominated by workers in non-manual jobs and those working in the public sector. Some of these demographic shifts are common to the workforce more generally, but each of the changes has been more pronounced among union members than among non-members (Figure 9).

Some unions have fared better than others in the recent period of declining density. Figure 10 shows the ten largest unions by membership in 2009, using data from the CO. It shows their total reported membership in 2009 and 2013, plus the change over that four year period. Unite, PCS and CWU each lost at least 10 per cent of their members over this period. In contrast, USDAW increased its membership by more than 10 per cent. Membership density in the Retail and wholesale sector (USDAW's main recruiting ground) did not increase over the period 2009-2013 however (Figure 11), indicating that the union's membership gains were insufficient to expand its reach in the sector.

Managers' attitudes

Part of the overall story of declining membership is that workplace managers are less likely to actively support union activity now than in earlier decades (Figure 12). The final column of Figure 12 shows how the density of union membership varies with management attitudes, and clearly indicates that unions find it more difficult to organize when managers are either ambivalent towards union membership or in opposition to it.

Declining experience of union membership

Another feature of recent decades is that a growing proportion of employees have no experience of union membership. The percentage of all employees who have never been a member of a trade union has risen continually over the past 20 years such that, by 2009-10, over half of all employees were 'never-members' (Figure 13). In addition, large proportions of employees have no contact with unions at their workplace. In 2014, almost three-fifths (58 per cent) of employees were located in non-union workplaces, with this figure being particularly high in private sector service industries, such as 'Accommodation and food service' (Figure 14), and among young workers (Figures 15 and 16).² Employees' direct and indirect experience of unionism is therefore receding.

The twin challenges of extension and infill

These data suggest that one key challenge for unions is to extend their recruitment efforts into a larger number of workplaces, particularly as a means of reaching larger proportions of younger workers. However, there is also considerable scope for infill: that is, raising membership density in workplaces where unions already have a foothold. Overall, some 57 per cent of employees who know that there are union members at their workplace have actually joined. This figure exceeds 60 per cent in Utilities, Transport and public sector services, but falls below 45 per cent in 'Accommodation and food service', 'Finance and insurance' and 'Real estate activities' (Figure 17).

² Employees in 'non-union' workplaces are those who are not members of a union and who do not know of any colleagues at their workplace who are union members.

Organisational capacity

Financial resources

Data from the accounts that unions submit to the CO show that unions, as a group, were barely solvent in the period 1999-2003. Their total income barely exceeded their total expenditure: the ratio was just above 1 (Figure 18). In the period 2004-2008 they managed to increase their income whilst holding expenditure broadly steady, and this improved their financial position. The period since 2008 has been less healthy: over this period, income from subscriptions has been rising above the growth in earnings (Figure 19) but expenditure has been rising faster than prices (Figure 20), partly because of increases in expenditure on pensions. Unions' financial position thus looks fragile at the current time.

Organisational resources

On the upside, unions' organizational resources have remained broadly intact in recent years. The percentage of workplaces with a representative of a recognized trade union on-site fell dramatically through the late 1980s and early 1990s, but has been broadly stable since 1998 (Figure 21).

Another indicator of organizational strength is whether unions can persuade employers to negotiate with them over wages, and here some recent weakening is apparent. Figure 22 shows the percentage of all employees whose pay is set by collective bargaining between their employer and a trade union. The trend was broadly flat between 1999 and 2007, but the last seven years have seen a downward trajectory in both the private and public sectors. The fall in the public sector has been particularly pronounced (around 10 percentage points) and is evident across a range of public sector services.

Employee support for collective bargaining also appears to be declining. Among those employees whose wages are set by collective bargaining, the percentage who are union members has been falling over time (Figure 23). This reduces the subscription income that is available to support negotiating activities, and also arguably weakens the unions' negotiating position. The period since 2010 has seen some reduction in 'free-riding' in the private sector, but not in the public sector, where the share of free-riders continues to rise.

Union influence

One main economic objective for an employee in joining a union is to secure better terms and conditions than would be offered without union support.³ The solid line in Figure 24 shows that the average union member currently has gross hourly wages that are around 20 per cent higher than those of the average non-member. However, when comparing wage levels one needs to take account of differences in other characteristics that affect earnings (e.g. educational attainment). We do this with regression analysis, and find that union members currently enjoy a wage premium of around 7 per cent over equivalent non-members (see the dashed line in Figure 21).⁴ This wage premium has gradually fallen over time, apart from an uptick in 2009-2011, which probably reflects unions' ability to maintain their members' wages when the wages of non-union workers were being squeezed in recession. That effect was only temporary, however, with union members' wages now being affected by public sector pay restraint.

Following a similar methodology, we can show that union members also have longer holiday entitlements than non-members (Figure 25). Therefore, union membership does still lead to better terms and conditions for the average employee, but the size of this advantage appears to have diminished slightly in recent years.

³ There are, of course, other objectives, notably to secure protection from unfair treatment.

⁴ The method of regression analysis is explained briefly in the Data Appendix. It should be noted that, in practice, the wage premium arises through collective bargaining rather than through membership. In other words, one would not expect to find a wage premium for membership among employees covered by the same bargaining unit.

Another effect which unions are said to have in the workplace is to act as a ‘sword of justice’, ensuring that effort is more fairly rewarded. If unions still manage to do this, one would expect the wages of union members to be less dispersed than the wages of non-members. Figure 26 shows that this is the case, whether one considers simple gross hourly wages (where the wages of non-members are 20-25 per cent more dispersed than the wages of union members) or regression residuals (where they are 10-15 per cent more dispersed).⁵ This suggests that there is a larger idiosyncratic component to wages among non-members than among union members. That continues to be the case in 2012 as it was in 1994.

We can also examine employees’ subjective ratings of unions, using data from WERS. Looking at the evaluations of all employees in unionized workplaces, we find that unions are judged to be just as effective now as they were in the late 1990s (Figure 27). There may even have been some small improvements. Managers, for their part, have not hardened their views about unions’ impact on workplace performance (Figure 25), although they are becoming less convinced of the value of unions as a conduit for representing employees’ point of view (*ibid.*).

Summary

Union membership density continues to fall in Britain. Only one quarter of employees are currently union members and, if the current rate of decline continues, this proportion will fall to around one fifth within a decade. Unions then face a twin challenge: to extend their recruitment efforts into a larger number of workplaces, particularly as a means of reaching larger proportions of younger workers; and also to raise membership density in workplaces where unions already have a foothold. Organizing efforts will therefore have to increase, even above their current levels, if membership density is not to fall further in the coming years.

The network of workplace reps has remained relatively resilient in recent times and so a platform exists for such organising activity. Unions can also show that they still deliver observable benefits for their members in respect of terms and conditions. However, the size of those benefits has decreased a little over the past decade. The challenge will be to remain ‘effective’ (both in the eyes of employees and employers) if membership continues to fall.

⁵ The regression residual is that part of the employee’s wage that cannot be explained by their observable characteristics (their education, age, industry sector and so on).

Data appendix

Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS)

The QLFS is a large, household survey undertaken each quarter by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Questions on union membership are asked in the October-December quarter. The survey also provides a wide range of information about the employees' personal characteristics (e.g. gender, age) and their job (e.g. occupation, industry, size of workplace). Data on union membership are available from 1989 onwards and the survey currently provides data for around 30,000 employees each year across all industries and sectors. We gratefully acknowledge the ONS as the data collector and the UK Data Service as the distributor of the data to researchers.

Data from the Certification Officer (CO)

Data are taken from the Annual Reports of the Certification Officer. These annual reports contain information taken from the annual submissions which trade unions are obliged to make under the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 (as amended). The CO's Annual Reports are publicly available on the CO website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/certification-officer-annual-reports>

Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS)

WERS is a large workplace-based survey that has been undertaken six times in Britain over the past 25 years (1980, 1984, 1990, 1998, 2004 and 2011). The first surveys in the series covered workplaces with 25 or more employees, but this threshold was reduced to 10 or more employees in 1998 and to 5 or more in 2004/2011. The survey covers virtually all sectors of activity, including the public sector. Data is collected from the senior manager at the workplace with responsibility for employment relations and (since 1998) also from a random selection of up to 25 employees at the same workplace. Data are available for around 2,500 workplaces and around 25,000 employees at each time point. We gratefully acknowledge BIS, the ESRC, Acas, NIESR and UKCES as the sponsors of the survey, the National Centre for Social Research as the data collector, and the UK Data Service as the distributor of the data to researchers.

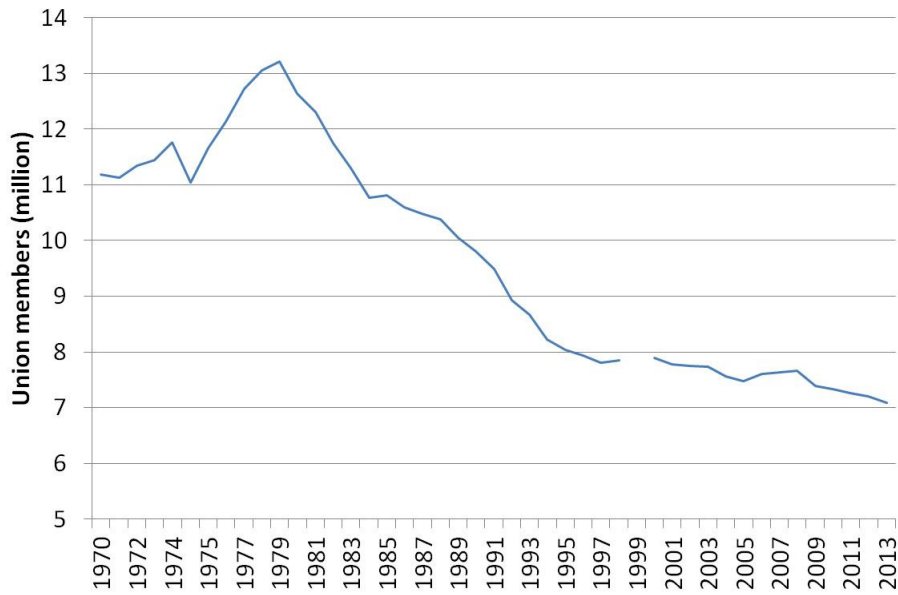
British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS)

BSAS is a general population survey that is designed to measure people's attitudes towards a range of social issues. The survey series began in 1983 and questions on employees' attitudes to work have been included on a number of occasions (although not every year). Data are available for around 3,500 employees at each time point. We gratefully acknowledge the National Centre for Social Research as the data collector, and for providing research access to the data.

Analytical methods

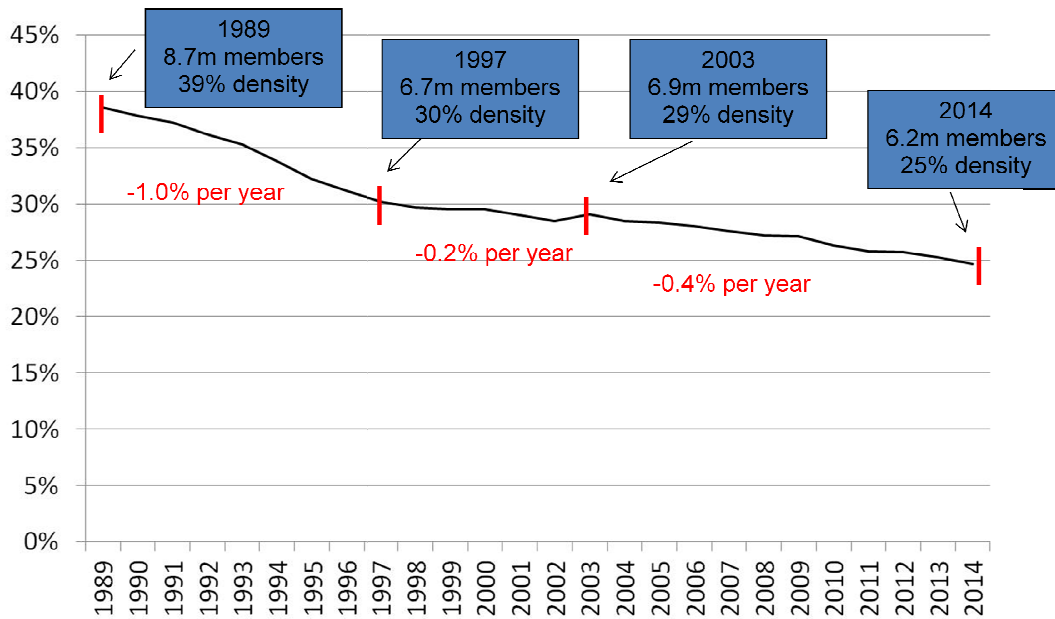
Most of the estimates provided in the briefing are in the form of percentages (e.g. the percentage of employees that are union members). Regression analysis is occasionally used when comparing outcomes (e.g. wage levels) among union members and non-members. The regression analysis allows us to remove those differences in outcomes that are simply a function of compositional differences between union members and non-members (e.g. differences in their education levels or average age). The regression analysis thus helps us to isolate that part of the difference in outcomes which is independently attributable to union membership. Our regression analysis controls for differences in: gender; age; educational qualifications; ethnicity; occupation (manual or non-manual); contract type (permanent or temporary); hours of work (full-time or part-time); size of workplace (number of employees); ownership (private or public sector); industry sector; and region.

Figure 1: Trade union membership, UK, 1970-2013



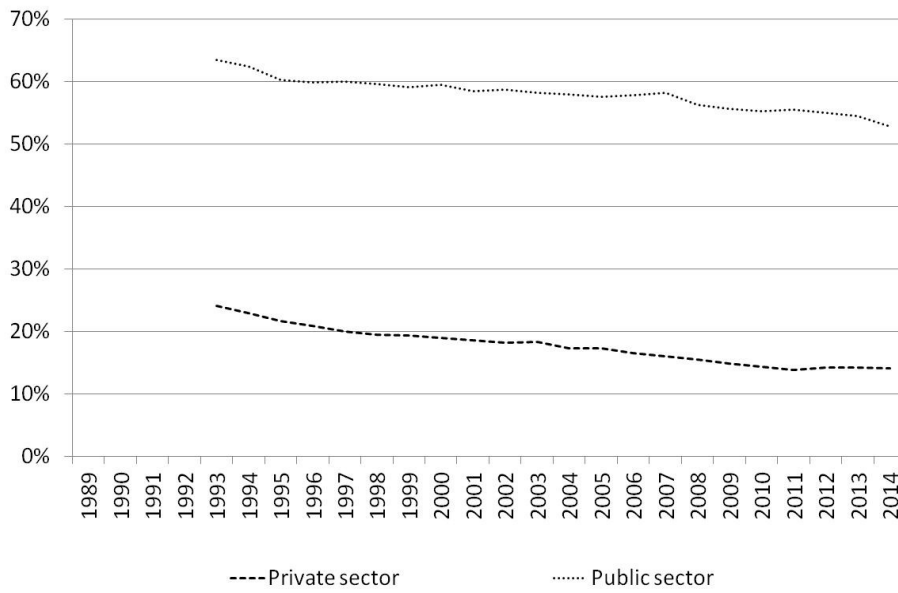
Source: Certification Officer

Figure 2: Trade union membership density, GB, 1989-2014



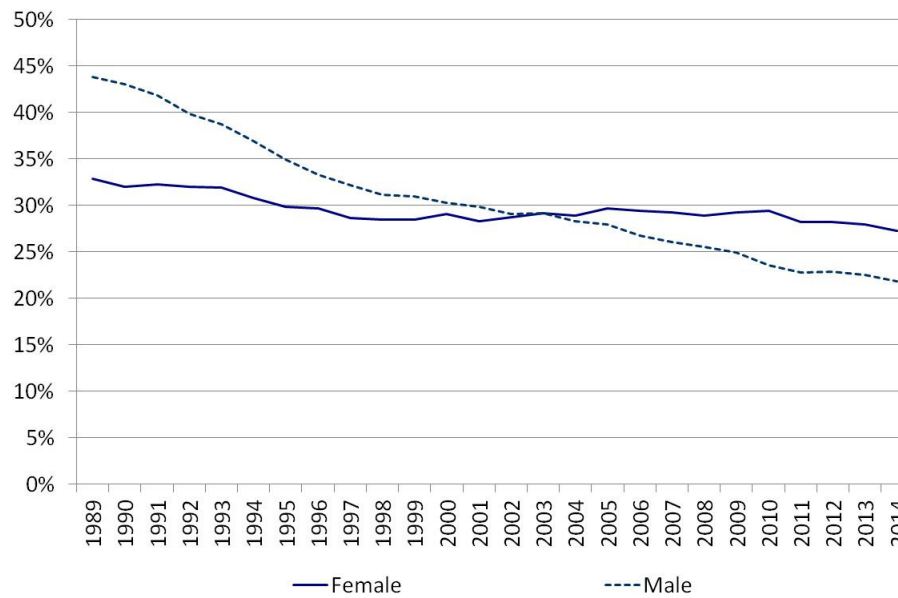
Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 3: Trade union membership density, by private/public sector



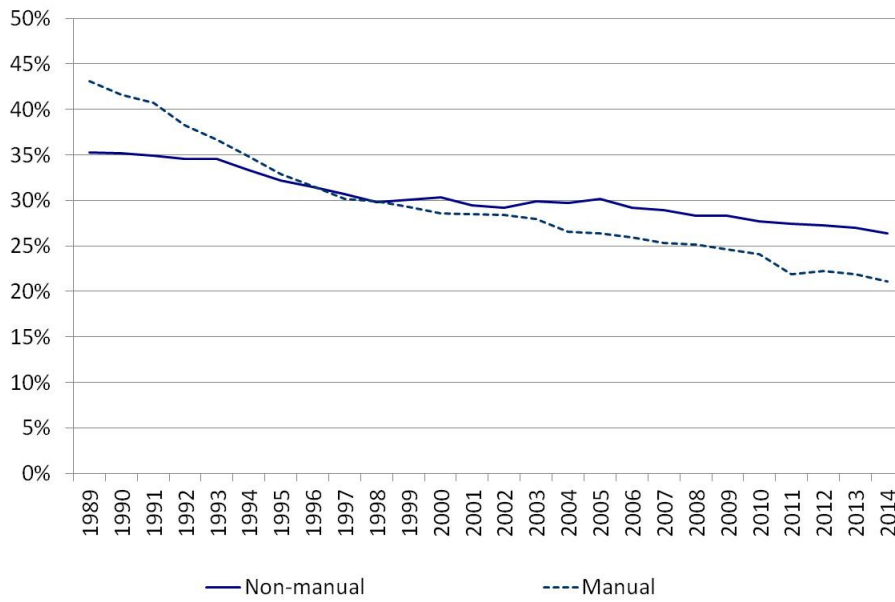
Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 4: Trade union membership density, by gender



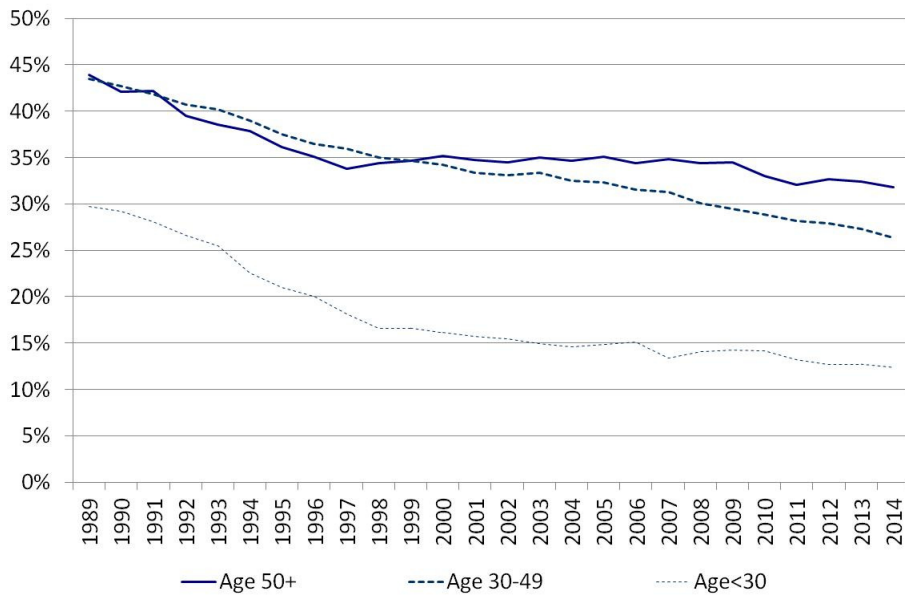
Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 5: Trade union membership density, by manual/non-manual occupation



Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 6: Trade union membership density, by age of employee



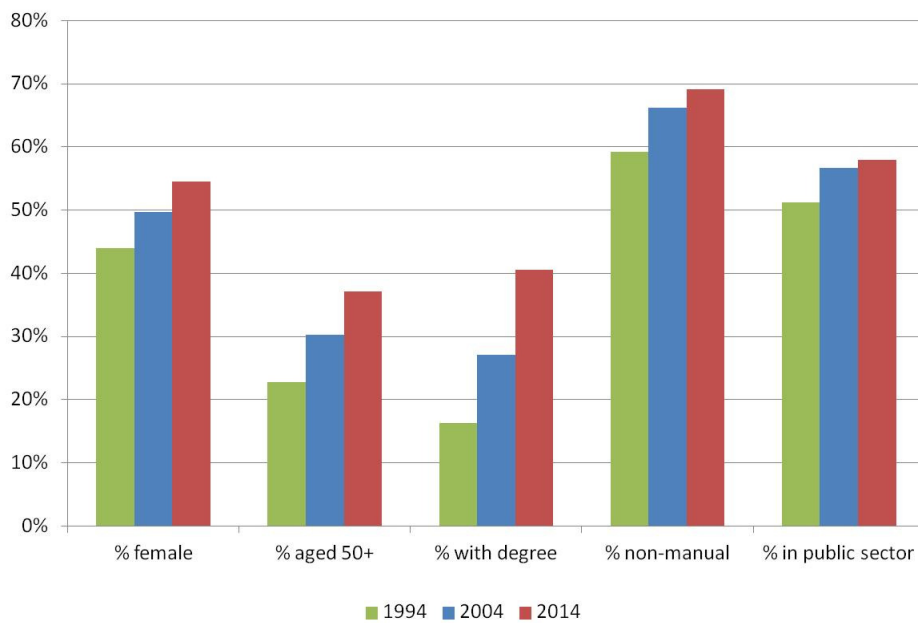
Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 7: Age and cohort effects on union membership density

Age:	Decade of birth				
	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s
25-29			33	23	19
30-34		41	32	25	22
35-39		40	32	27	
40-44	43	39	33	28	
45-49	43	39	34		
50-54	41	39	35		
55-59	38	37			

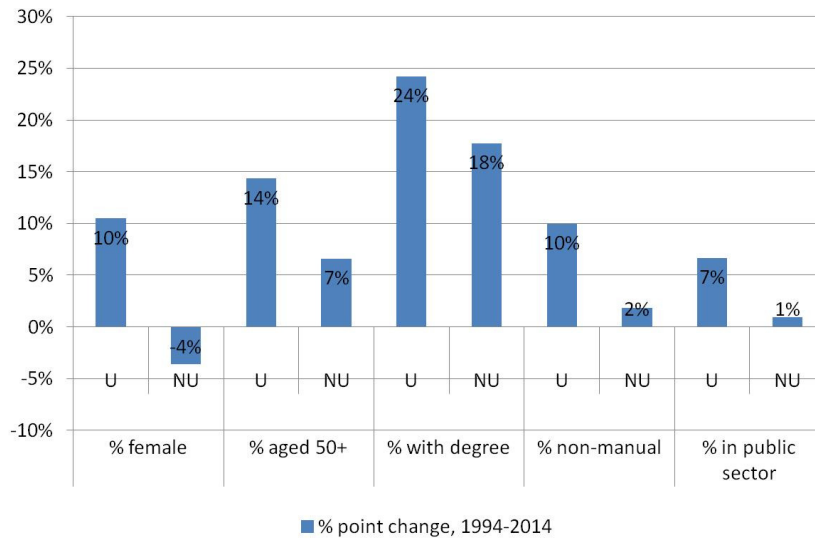
Source: Labour Force Survey, 1989-2014

Figure 8: Composition of union membership, 1994, 2004 and 2014



Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 9: Changes in populations of union members and non-members, 1994-2014



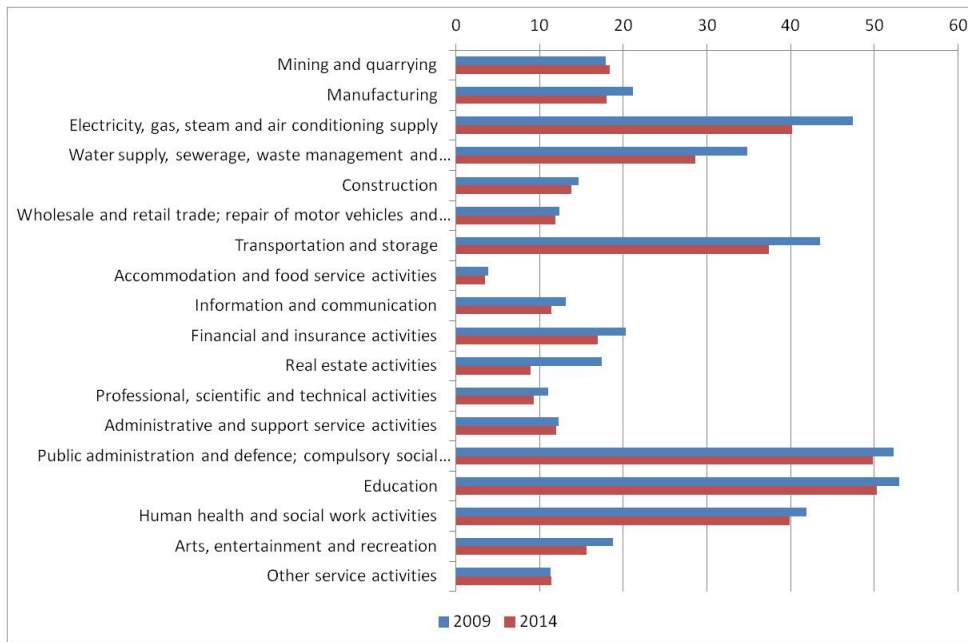
Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 10: Membership change for individual unions, 2009-2013

	2009	2013	2009-2013	
	Members	Members	Membership change	% change
Unite the union	1,635,483	1,424,303	-211,180	-13%
UNISON	1,362,000	1,301,500	-60,500	-4%
GMB	601,131	613,384	12,253	2%
RCN	400,716	425,652	24,936	6%
USDAW	370,763	415,843	45,080	12%
NUT	366,657	388,052	21,395	6%
NASUWT	322,142	336,736	14,594	5%
PCS	300,224	262,819	-37,405	-12%
CWU	230,968	201,875	-29,093	-13%
ATL	206,993	208,844	1,851	1%
Top 10	5,797,077	5,579,008	-218,069	-4%

Source: Certification Officer

Figure 11: Union membership density, by industry, 2009 and 2014



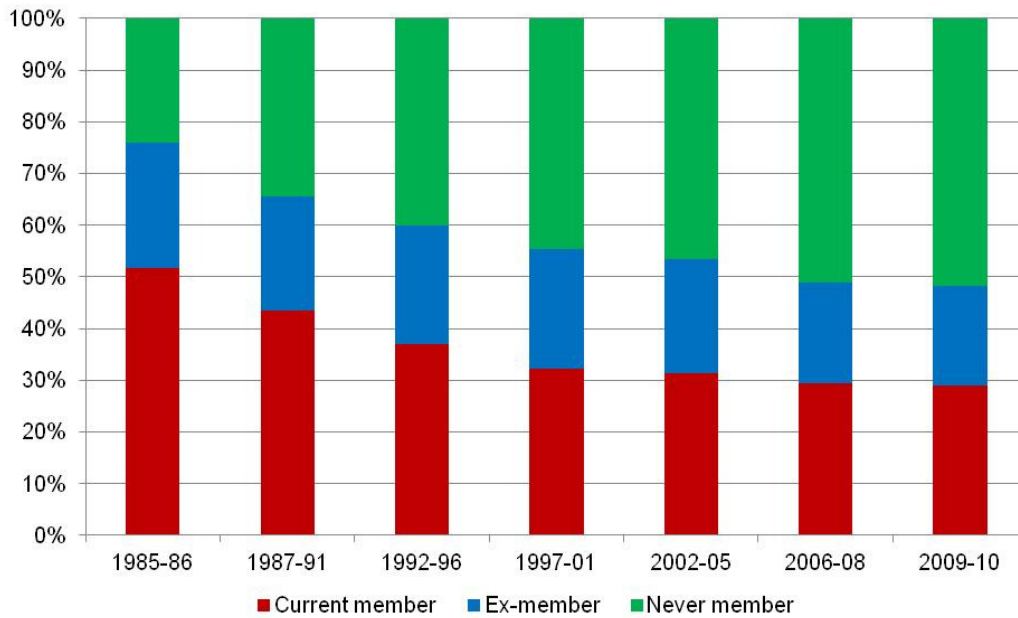
Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 12: Managers' attitudes towards union membership

	1998	2004	2011	Membership density in 2011
% of workplaces where manager is..				
In favour of union membership	28	20	19	50
Neutral towards it	55	63	65	13
Not in favour of it	17	17	16	3

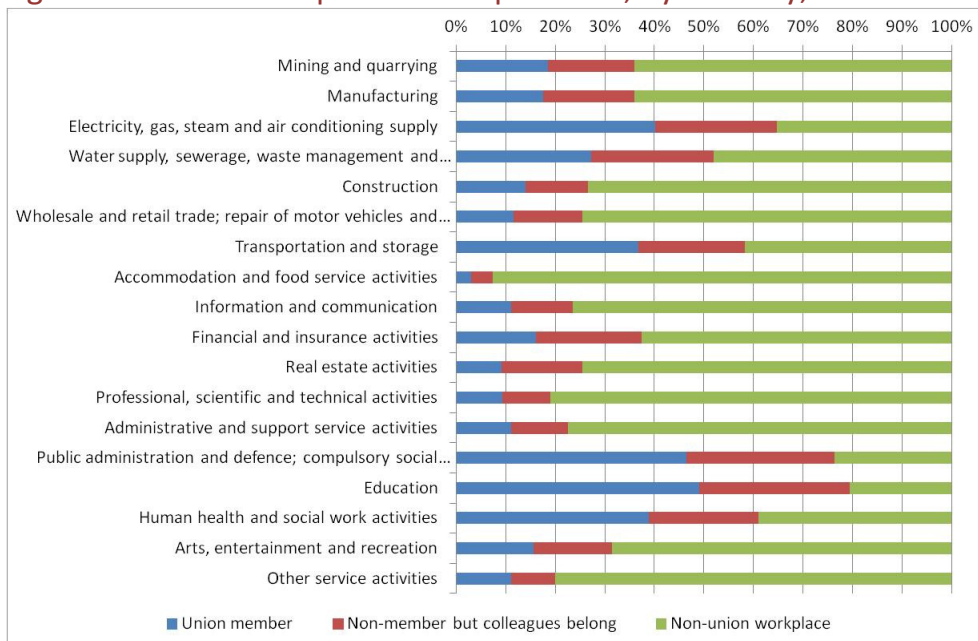
Source: Workplace Employment Relations Survey
 Base: all workplaces with 10 or more employees

Figure 13: Current members, ex-members and never members



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey

Figure 14: Membership and union presence, by industry, 2014



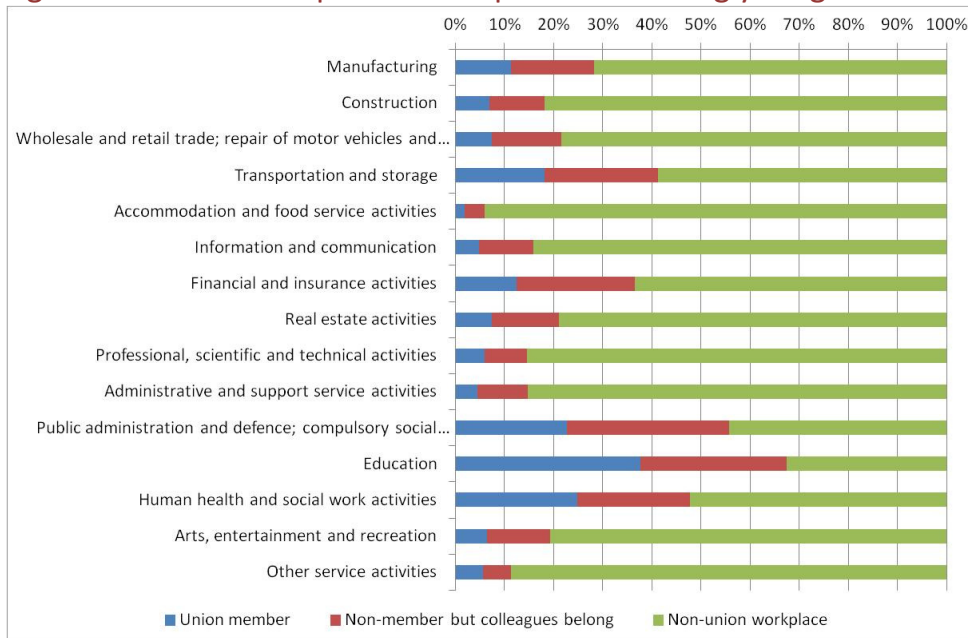
Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 15: Membership and union presence, by age

Age:	16-29	30-49	50+
Union member	12%	26%	32%
Non-member but colleagues belong	16%	19%	19%
Non-union workplace	72%	54%	49%
Density in workplaces with some members	44%	58%	62%

Source: Labour Force Survey 2013/2014

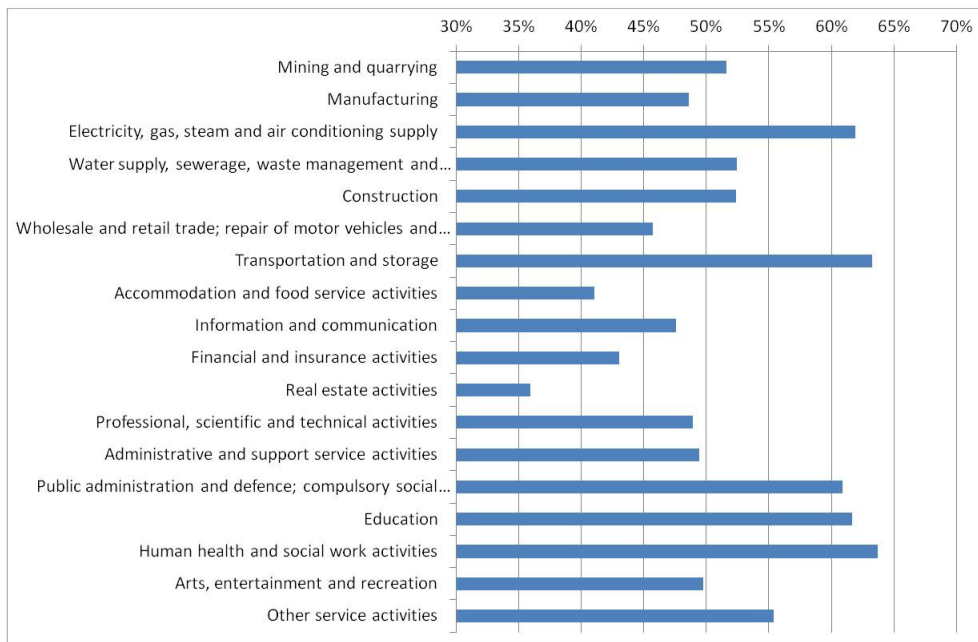
Figure 16: Membership and union presence among young workers



Source: Labour Force Survey 2013/2014

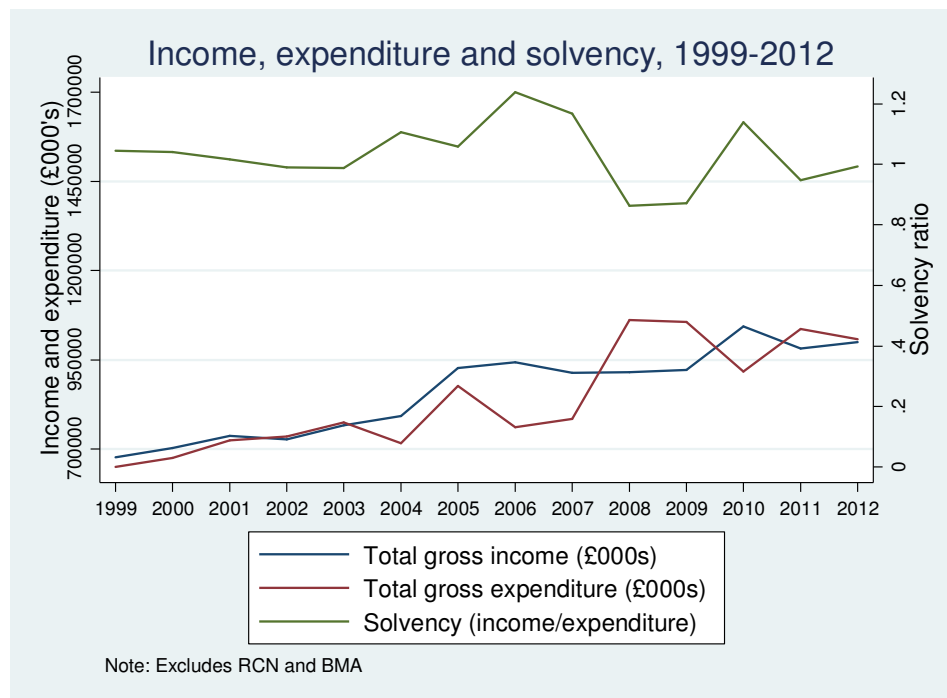
Base: employees aged 16-29

Figure 17: Membership density in workplaces with union members, by industry



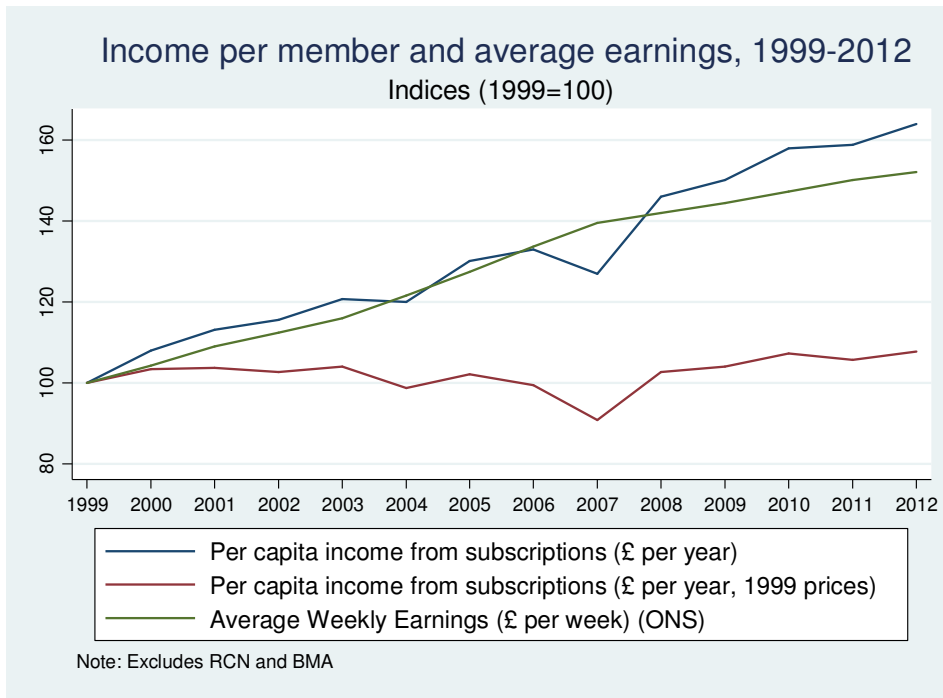
Source: Labour Force Survey 2014

Figure 18: Income, expenditure and solvency, 1999-2012



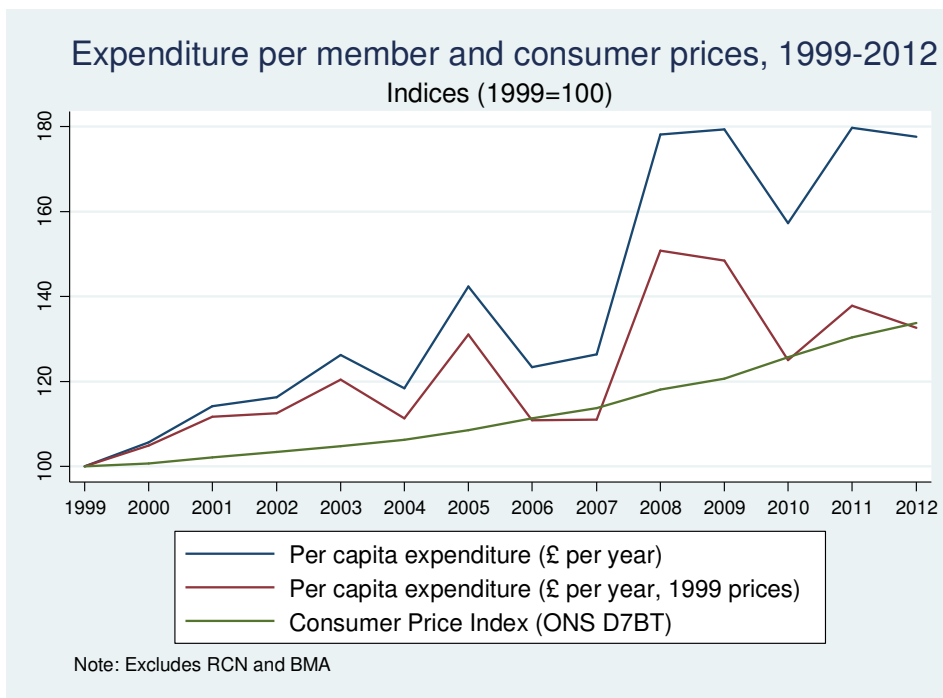
Source: Certification Officer

Figure 19: Income per member, 1999-2012



Source: Certification Officer

Figure 20: Expenditure per member, 1999-2012



Source: Certification Officer

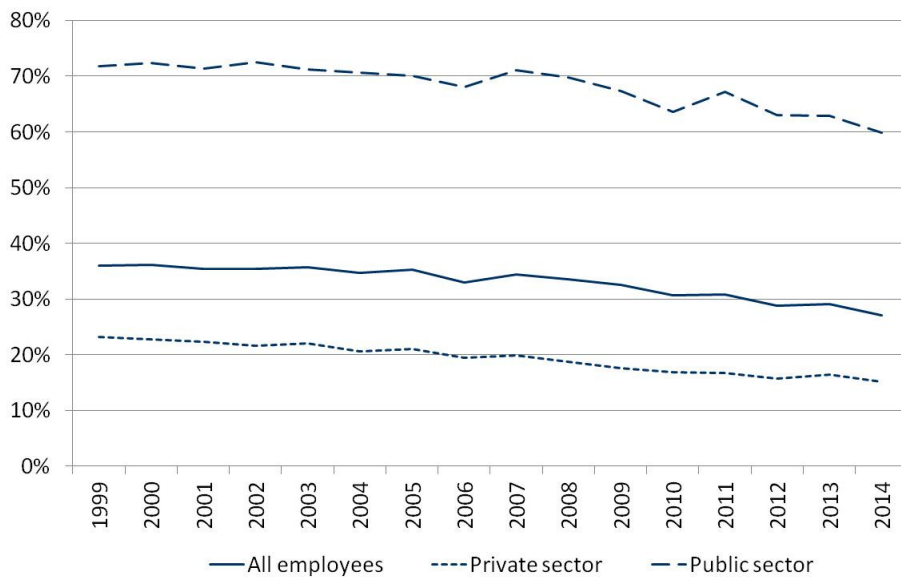
Figure 21: Presence of union reps at workplace level, 1980-2011

	1980	1984	1990	1998	2004	2011
<i>% of workplaces with a rep of a recognised union on-site:</i>						
All workplaces	50	55	38	26	23	23
Workplaces with a recognized union	79	83	72	69	62	63
<i>% of members in a workplace with an on-site steward</i>						
	92	93	85	83	79	81

Source: Workplace Employment Relations Survey

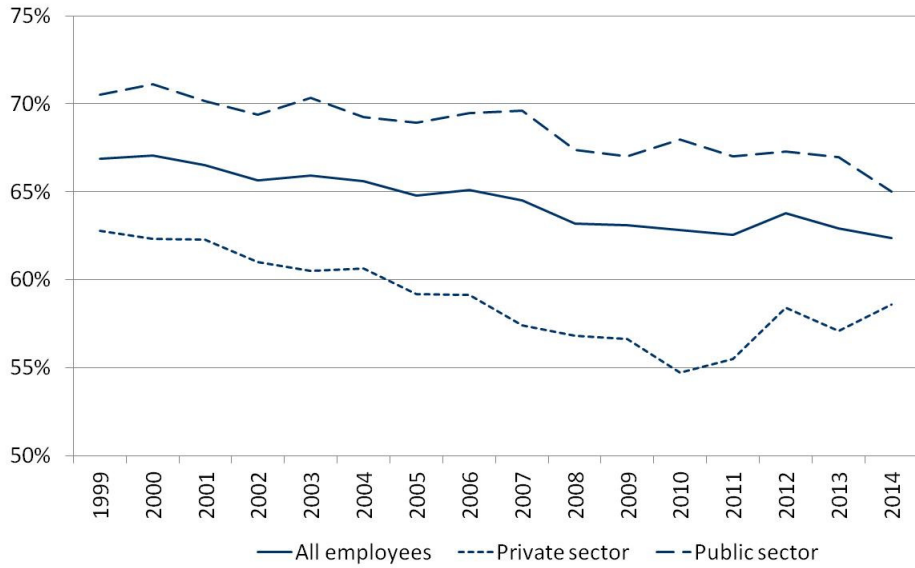
Base: all workplaces with 10 or more employees

Figure 22: Employees whose pay is set by collective bargaining, by sector



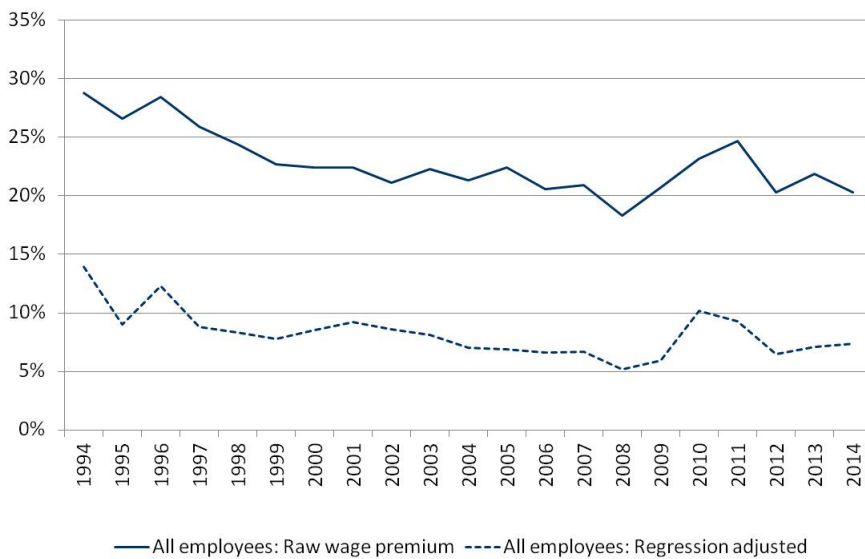
Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 23: Union membership density among employees whose pay is set by collective bargaining, by sector



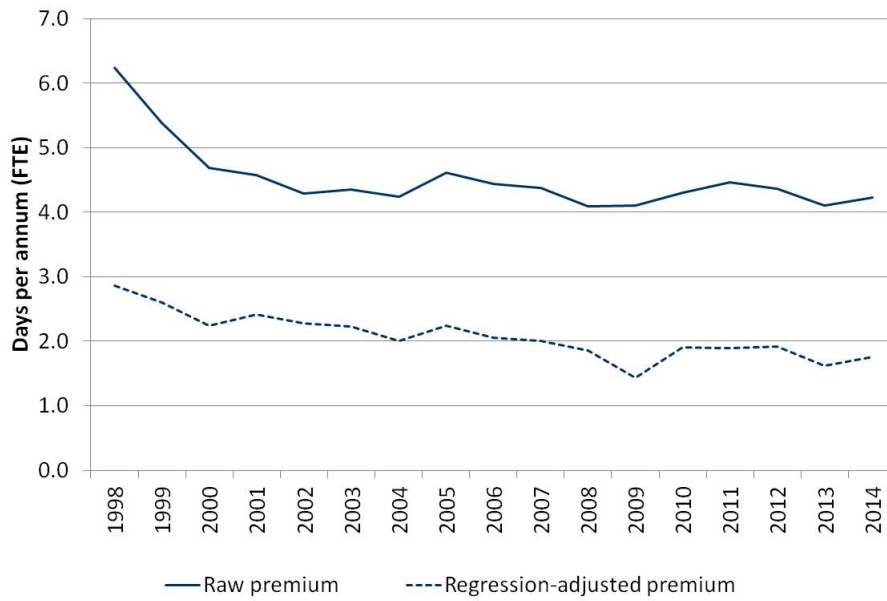
Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 24: Union wage premium



Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 25: Union premium on paid holidays



Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 26: Wage dispersion among union members relative to that among non-members



Source: Labour Force Survey

Figure 27: Employees' evaluations of unions at their workplace

	1998	2004	2011
% of employees agreeing that unions at this workplace...			
Take notice of members problems or complaints	66	67	69
Are taken seriously by management	51	54	55
Make a difference to what it is like to work here	41	42	43

Source: Workplace Employment Relations Survey

Base: all workplaces with 10 or more employees

Figure 28: Workplace managers' evaluations of unions

	1998	2004	2011
Unions help to find ways to improve workplace performance:			
Agree	26	22	24
Neither agree nor disagree	38	41	43
Disagree	36	37	33
We would rather consult directly with employees than with unions:			
Agree	74	78	80
Neither agree nor disagree	15	15	12
Disagree	11	7	8

Source: Workplace Employment Relations Survey

Base: all workplaces with 10 or more employees