

Free-riders in Ireland: new study shines light on the ‘highly charged’ phenomenon

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A new survey on the characteristics of the ‘free-riders’ in Ireland – workers who are not members of a union but benefit from collective bargaining – finds that over 35% of workers at unionised employers are ‘free-riders’. There are distinguishing characteristics between those who have never been in a union and those who have ended their union membership, however, which could help inform how unions can appeal to workers.

‘Who are the union free-riders in Ireland? Evidence from the Working in Ireland Survey’ by UCD’s Professor John Geary and Dr María Jesús Belizón Cebada, details characteristics of younger, non-unionised workers, offering recommendations for unions on how to adapt to these differences when seeking new members.

A “free-rider” is a worker whose “gain is derived at the expense of union members who actively contribute to the collective endeavour, either by paying membership dues or by participating in collective action”.

Low level of political commitment to a trade union – even for unionised members

Free-riding, the authors say, is often perceived “to be a highly charged and emotive phenomenon. It is especially so when the term is deployed to denote a moral violation where the free-rider is castigated for not contributing to the collective good.”

The study distinguishes between two types of free riders: those who have never joined a union (‘never-have-beens’), and those who are former members of a trade union (‘leavers’). The never-have-beens are the larger category, constituting two-thirds of ‘free-riders’.

The union density figure for Ireland the authors use is 28% (down from 38% in 2003), with a collective bargaining coverage rate of 43% (down from 48% in 2009). Former union members constitute 16% of the workforce, while 56% have never been a union member.

Of those who have never been unionised, 80% work in non-unionised workplaces. Thirty-six per cent of former union members still work in unionised companies.

Using a wider approach, the net ‘free riding ratio’ is 35%, meaning 35% of the workforce are ‘free riders’. Another approach the authors use is to focus just on unionised companies, which, in turn, gives a slightly higher free-rider rate of between 37% and 39%. The free rider rate in the unionised private sector is 57%; in the public sector it is 28%.

PERCEPTIONS OF UNIONS

Union free-riding is more prevalent among young workers newly employed in their jobs and who earn low to medium salaries. Of the number of attributes that are detailed between the union members and free riders, the most significant distinguishing factor is job tenure: those who are newly or recently employed in their job are less likely to be in a union.

As the social custom of union membership has declined, the authors says, “so young workers entering the labour market feel under less pressure to join; simply put, the reputational risks and costs of free-riding are not what they used to be.”

The survey captures the views of union and non-union members towards trade unions, within unionised organisations, detailed in the following table:

| | Union leavers | Never been union member | Union members |
|--|----------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| High/moderate effectiveness of unions over... | | | |
| Employment T&Cs | 47% | 55% | 69% |
| Way work is organised | 28% | 37% | 45% |
| Adoption of flexible working conditions | 51% | 53% | 58% |
| Vote on the union | | | |
| Keep the union | 58% | 65% | 90% |
| Cease operation of union | 23% | 12% | 5% |
| Undecided | 19% | 23% | 5% |
| Political commitment to unions | | | |
| Not politically committed to unions | 70% | 73% | 60% |
| Politically committed to unions | 30% | 27% | 40% |

It appears that former members of trade unions in the private sector are more likely to harbour negative perceptions of trade unions than workers who have never been a part of a union (except for in the public sector, which has a much higher level of union power and where leavers are closer to union members in terms of positive views of their union).

Twenty-three per cent of leavers, as opposed to 12% of never-have-beens, are identified as “steadfast objectors” to union representation, in that they would vote to cease the operation of the union in their workplace if given the opportunity in a ballot, the authors note.

It is perhaps worth noting the low level of political commitment to a trade union by non-union workers – even for unionised members, 60% of whom are not politically committed to their union.

SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP

Another interesting finding in the study is that centralised/national wage bargaining is not likely to determine the level of free-riding, offering some rebuttal to the assumption that social partnership had a diminishing effect on trade unions.

The authors posit that workers who entered the labour market during the Social Partnership era (1987-2009) would have had less incentive to join a union, as the terms negotiated under national agreements applied to all workers in unionised workplaces.

“It might then be supposed that those workers – now entering middle age at the time of our survey – would have continued to free-ride after centralised bargaining came to an end, mainly due to inertia”, they add.

However, their data “reveal a more complex picture.” Older workers (those aged 44 or more years of age) are “considerably less likely to free-ride than those younger workers who entered the labour market when enterprise-level bargaining was re-established.”

Furthermore, age matters less than other factors in accounting for workers’ propensity to free-ride.

“Thus, we can fairly claim that the location of the conduct of bargaining – whether that be at a national level as it was up to 2009 or at a local enterprise level since then – did or does not play a decisive role in accounting for free-riding”, the authors say.

ADAPTING APPROACH

The authors make a several recommendations for unions, based on the findings of their survey.

Campaigns might usefully target the young: most free-riders are young never-have-been union members, they note.

There is “a great deal unions can do to alter these workers’ as well as union leavers’ preferences for non-union membership. Crucial here are these workers’ perceptions of union (in)effectiveness as they act independently to influence the likelihood of free-riding.”

They add that unions “might explain what unions do. One way to do this is to elucidate the distinction [...] where unions are and/or should not be seen solely as a ‘vested interest’ (i.e. a good for individual groups of workers) but that their work also involves of necessity a collaborative endeavour where they act as a ‘sword of justice’ (i.e. be a good for society).”

The authors say their evidence suggests that the latter union ambition (‘good for society’) “will likely land on fertile ground, as some free-riders at least are politically and ideologically committed to the broader political ambitions of trade unionism”.

One could also interpret the high rate of workers not being politically committed to unions meaning that the political dimension is not a driving factor in appealing to workers.

Regarding organising strategies, the authors advise for such “to be customised to the cohort of free riders to be approached”. Their research findings show that “in significant respects they are different from one another and have different predispositions in regard to union membership.

Finally, as many ‘never-have-beens’ work in poorly paid jobs, “consideration might usefully be given to soliciting union dues according to workers’ income.”

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