Trade Union Membership 2017: Statistical Bulletin

On 31 May 2018, the Government published the ‘Trade Union Membership 2017: Statistical Bulletin’, which provides details on UK trade union membership in 2017.¹

The headline figures show that between 2016 and 2017, union membership increased in the private sector by 70,000, and by 19,000 across the economy overall. This is positive news following the previous year’s report which found that overall union membership decreased by 275,000 between 2015 and 2016.

Overall union membership and density
Around 6.2 million employees² in the UK were trade union members in 2017. The level of overall union members slightly increased by 19,000 over the year from 2016 (a 0.3% increase). Alongside the marginal rise in trade union membership levels, there was a sharper increase in the number of UK employees between 2016 and 2017. As a result, the proportion of employees who were trade union members fell to 23.2% in 2017, from 23.5% in 2016.

For all in employment³, trade union membership was 6,566,000 in 2017, up from 6,563,000 in 2016. Trade union density for all in employment was 20.7%, down from 21% in 2016.

Public and private sector union membership
Union membership levels in the private sector were around 2.7 million, an increase of 70,000 since 2016. The proportion of trade union members amongst private sector employees rose slightly from 13.4% to 13.5%. In the public sector, union membership levels fell by 51,000 to 3.54 million in 2017. Trade union density in the public sector fell from 52.7% to 51.8% in 2017.

Union membership by gender
Female employees are more likely to be a trade union member. The proportion of female employees who were in a trade union was around 25.6% in 2017, compared with 20.9% for male employees. There were 3.38 million female employees who were trade union members in 2017, compared with 2.84 million male employees.

² People who regard themselves as paid wage and salary earners
³ Includes employees and the self-employed, those with a job they were temporarily away from, and those on government supported training and employment programmes.
**Union membership by age**
Older workers account for a larger proportion of union members than younger workers. About 39.8% of trade union member employees were aged over 50 in 2017, but 28.8% of employees are in this age group.

Employees aged 16-24 account for just 4.3% of trade union members, whilst 13.4% of employees are in this age group. Employees aged 25-34 make up 19.3% of trade union members, whilst 24.8% of employees are in this age group.

**Union membership by ethnic group**
A higher proportion of UK born employees are in a trade union compared with non-UK born employees. About 24.6% of UK born employees were in a trade union in 2017, compared with 16.3% for non-UK born employees.

The proportion of employees who were trade union members was highest in the Black or Black British ethnic group at around 24.1% in 2017 (2.3 percentage points lower than in 2016), followed by the White ethnic group at 23.8%. The proportion of trade union members amongst employees in Mixed, Asian or Asian British and Chinese/other ethnic groups was lower, at 20.4%, 18.8% and 11.5% respectively.

**Union membership by employment status**
Permanent employees were more likely than those in temporary jobs to be union members in most occupations. The proportion of permanent employees who were trade union members was 23.9% in 2017, compared with 13.1% for temporary employees.

Full-time employees were also more likely than those in part-time work to be union members; 24.7% of full-time employees are in trade unions, compared to 19.1% of part-time employees.

**Union membership by occupation**
Employees in professional occupations were more likely to be trade union members than other employees. Around 41% of employees in professional occupations were union members, compared with 21% in associate professional and technical occupations, 16.7% in administrative and secretarial occupations, 17.3% in skilled trades occupations and 14% in sales and customer service occupations.

**Union membership by income**
Middle-income earners were more likely to be trade union members than either high or low paid employees. About 33.7% of employees who earned between £500 and £999 per week were members of a trade union, compared with 20% of employees earning £1,000 or more per week. The proportion of employees earning less than £250 per week who were trade union members was 11.3%.

**Union membership by industry**
Employees in education were more likely to be trade union members than any other industry sector, whilst employees in accommodation and food service activities were least likely to be union members. Around 48% of employees in education were union members, compared with
44.5% in energy and water, 35.6% in transportation and storage (which includes postal services), and 9.5% in information and communication (which includes telecommunications).

**Union membership by size of workplace**
The proportion of employees who belonged to a trade union in larger workplaces was 31% in 2017 (0.5 percentage points lower than in 2016), compared with 14.4% in the workplaces with less than 50 employees (0.2 percentage points lower than in 2016).

Around 65% of employees in larger workplaces reported that a trade union was present in their workplace. This compares with 29% of employees in workplaces of less than 50 employees reporting the presence of a trade union in their workplace.

**Union membership by nation and region**
Employees in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are more likely to be trade union members than in the UK as a whole. Around 34% of employees are trade union members in Northern Ireland, compared with 28% in Scotland, 30% in Wales and 22% in England. Within England, regions in the north have the highest proportion of employees who were trade union members. Trade union density was 29.3% in the North West and 28.5% in the North East compared with 17.6% in London and 19.1% in the South East.

**Trade union wage gap**
The trade union wage gap, defined as the percentage difference in average gross hourly earnings of union members compared with non-members, rose sharply from 14.5% in 2016 to 16.9% in 2017, in the public sector. The private sector trade union wage gap is 7.1% in 2017, down from 7.6% in 2016.

CWU Research
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