

# Shrinking?

## No, unions are growing

Everyone knows that unions are in decline. But are they? **Peter Hall-Jones** mixes some number crunching with politics and comes up with a very different conclusion.

**S**hock horror probe: unions are back! In fact it turns out that they never went away. Not only are they growing, a fact that flies in the face of the conventional wisdom, but the data suggests that a lot more growth is going unrecorded, and that the potential for sustained growth has never been higher. On top of this, they are finding new ways to unite and organise across borders. In this surprising report, the New Unionism network suggests that we owe it to ourselves to stop perpetuating the myth of union decline.

### THE NUMBERS

The ILO did its last international report on trade union membership ten years ago, in 1997. Nobody else keeps proper international figures. It might be interesting to ask, then, why everybody is going around saying that the movement is in decline. But that is a political question. Let's stick with the numbers for a while.

There are surprisingly few numbers around. In order to get the best sample we concentrated on the five year period since the last study - from 1998 to 2003. This is the period for which we have the most information. There are two major sources to call on, both being collections of material gathered together from national sources. These are the ILO (International Labour Organisation) and the EIRO (European Industrial Relations Observatory).

Taken together, we can use these numbers to produce comparable figures for 39 countries (Table 1). Of these, 23 (59%) experienced union membership growth since 1998.

**Table 1 – Trade Union Membership**

Country	1998	2003	Change 1998-2003	% change
Australia	2,037,500	1,866,700	-170,800	-8.38%
Austria	1,480,000	1,407,000	-73,000	-4.93%
Belgium	3,013,000	3,061,000	48,000	1.59%
Bulgaria	778,000	515,000	-263,000	-33.80%
Canada	3,938,000	4,178,000	240,000	6.09%
China	89,134,262	133,977,709	44,843,447	50.31%
Cyprus	167,000	175,000	8,000	4.79%
Denmark	2,166,949	2,147,296	-19,653	-0.91%
El Salvador	120,185	138,447	18,262	15.19%
Finland	2,119,882	2,168,924	49,042	2.31%
France	1,650,000	1,830,000	180,000	10.91%
Germany	9,798,000	8,894,000	-904,000	-9.23%
Greece	656,000	639,000	-17,000	-2.59%
Iceland	106,896	120,851	13,955	13.05%
India	7,229,000	6,407,000	-822,000	-11.37%
Ireland	463,000	515,000	52,000	11.23%
Italy	10,763,000	11,266,000	503,000	4.67%
Japan	12,093,000	10,531,329	-1,561,671	-12.91%
Latvia	252,000	180,000	-72,000	-28.57%
Luxembourg	112,000	139,000	27,000	24.11%
Malaysia	739,636	789,163	49,527	6.70%
Malta	82,000	87,000	5,000	6.10%
Netherlands	1,906,400	1,927,500	21,100	1.11%
New Zealand	306,697	334,044	27,347	8.92%
Norway	1,484,501	1,508,412	23,911	1.61%
Pakistan	314,945	276,000	-38,945	-12.37%
Philippines	3,686,778	3,916,684	229,906	6.24%
Poland	3,200,000	1,900,000	-1,300,000	-40.63%
Republic of Korea	1,401,940	1,606,000	204,060	14.56%
Singapore	272,769	417,166	144,397	52.94%
Slovakia	854,000	576,000	-278,000	-32.55%
Spain	1,741,000	2,196,800	455,800	26.18%
Sri Lanka	799,821	640,673	-159,148	-19.90%
Sweden	3,797,598	3,826,000	28,402	0.75%
Switzerland	785,419	792,498	7,079	0.90%
Syrian Arab Republic	949,305	595,049	-354,256	-37.32%
Taiwan	2,921,400	2,901,972	-19,428	-0.67%
United Kingdom	6,744,000	6,833,000	89,000	1.32%
United States	16,211,000	15,776,000	-435,000	-2.68%
<b>TOTALS:</b>	<b>196,276,883</b>	<b>237,057,217</b>	<b>+40,780,334</b>	

### SPECIAL CASE: CHINA AND EASTERN EUROPE

From this point on it rapidly gets political. We included China in the table above, simply because that was the data the ILO gave us. But most union commentators would argue that China should be treated as a separate case. The national federation (ACFTU) is not generally regarded as being sufficiently independent from the state to meet certain definitions. Furthermore, the Hong Kong liaison office of the ICFTU argues, some of the membership growth may exist on paper only.

It's an interesting argument, because on the one hand we are counting as a negative the loss of manufacturing jobs (and union members) in developed countries, and on the other hand we are refusing to count the corresponding increase that this transfer has generated in China. Given that we are talking about an extra 44,843,447 "unionised" workers, our totals are completely dependent on how we treat this question. It would be interesting to hear from the globalisation think tanks on how to resolve this, because it isn't a question which is going away in a hurry.

The next challenge the same people might consider is what one does with the numbers from Eastern Europe, where trade union membership used to be more or less mandatory. In particular, the reversal of this policy led to huge losses in four Eastern European countries and the reunited Germany. (The same countries then went through massive changes in industrial relations legislation, deindustrialisation, and huge increases in unemployment). Like China, it would seem natural to treat these figures as something of a special case. But how?

### GROWTH IN UNDEVELOPED WORLD

In the meantime, let's consider the rest of Europe separately. Here we find that membership has increased by 1,401,636 members over the given period, or 3.6%. This includes growth in more than three quarters (83%) of the countries involved.

Anyone for more politics? The countries with the most wealth tend to be the ones with the best infrastructure for measuring statistics. If we look at the 39 countries listed above we can see this clearly. And yet it is the less developed countries which are increasingly the hosts of the manufacturing sector. Could it be that a huge amount of union growth is going unrecorded as a result? Table 2 looks at the meagre data we have from such countries, and suggests that an increase in the manufacturing base seems to be accompanied by a sturdy increase in union membership.

**Table 2 – Trade Union Membership**

Country	1993	2003	% change
China	101,761,000	133,977,709	32%
India	3,134,000	6,407,000	104%
Malaysia	694,197	789,163	14%
Philippines	3,196,750	3,916,684	23%
Singapore	235,723	417,166	77%

Source: <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/portal/dbases.htm>

This continues the trend identified in the last ILO report, where some of the largest national increases were: South Africa (130.8%), Bangladesh (58%), Republic of Korea (61%), the Philippines (69%), Thailand (77%) and Zimbabwe (54%).

Let's face it, more and more data is getting lost as globalisation shifts the centres of production. Union membership numbers are being lost. In most countries union membership figures do not seem to

be centrally recorded at all.

How can we know, for instance, if membership is increasing throughout Africa? The last ILO report suggested that it was, but what has happened since? Clementine Dehwe, coordinator of the Global Unions HIV Project, reports that in some countries profiteers take workers' fees claiming to be from the union, only to pocket the proceeds. Now there's a category which has not been considered: the dues-paying non-member. And then there are those whose membership is stored in notebooks or card systems which nobody has the resources to collate. Or the workers in Arabian Gulf countries where unions are outlawed, and/or subject to heavy legal restrictions. Again, membership is not counted.

One can see why the ILO has been wary of tackling another global report!

### UNION DENSITY: DOUBTFUL INDICATOR

There is another factor which has impacted negatively on union statistics during the last ten years. Without knowing to what extent, membership figures are significantly reduced when data audits take place, especially during times such as union mergers. People who haven't paid for years are discarded. One senior public sector unionist who lived through a decade of such mergers in Australia estimated that up to 20% of

**Table 3 – Trade Union Membership**

	USA	Canada	Aus	NZ	Japan	Korea	EU	Total
1998	16211.4	3553.0	2037.5	306.7	12093.0	1484.2	36335.8	70537.4
2003	15776.0	4036.5	1866.7		10531.0	1606.0		
% change 98-03	-2.69	13.61	-8.38	9.16	-12.92	8.21	-0.21	-1.99

“membership loss” during that time was generated by simple improvements in record keeping.

The standard measure of union strength is “membership density” – the proportion of people in the workforce who are union members. This is a dubious indicator. At best it can only tell part of the story. If a factory starts up and employs three hundred workers, union density decreases overnight. Obviously the union must first find these new workers, and then it must strive to recruit them. It does so without any extra resources. This takes time. More importantly, though, the employment context has also changed. These new workers are employed in countries where employers are more free than they were a few years ago to use industrial mechanisms to prevent them from becoming unionised.

Let's extend the same scenario to a global scale. Between 1970 and 2000 the size of the world's labour force more than doubled. A recent study suggests that over 3 billion people are working or looking for work, a number which is expected to grow by 430 million by 2015, with new entrants coming from developing countries. So unions must race just to stand still in terms of membership density.

As we have seen, they are succeeding in that membership is growing. And yet the “density” measurement portrays them as dwindling.

Dutch academic Jelle Visser, perhaps the world's leading authority on statistics relating to union membership and activity, shows that between 1998 and 2003,

membership density fell by less than 2% (Table 3).

Unfortunately we do not have corresponding data from the ILO regarding the concurrent change in size of the paid labour force. However from the data we do have, we can assume that it is far in excess of +2%. In other words, the erroneous picture of unions dwindling is created by the fact that unions are not keeping pace with the growth in the workforce.

Union growth figures are often confused or distorted by such factors which are beyond the control of unions but make the statistics look grimmer than they should. Changes in legislation or even definitions can have a huge effect. A single decision can render years and years of successful recruitment campaigns invisible.

The problem is not that unions are shrinking. No matter how we look at the figures, there are more countries experiencing membership growth than membership decline. On top of this, there are many factors mentioned above which suggest that large amounts of membership growth is unaccounted for. Again: the problem is not that unions are shrinking. It is that they are not growing as fast as they might.

#### NEW TACTICS, NEW FORMS

Recognising this, there seems to be a collective pressure building within the union movement for new ideas, new tactics and new forms. “Global alliances”, often involving Union Network International and the North American-based Service Employees International Union, are paving the

way for a new form of international solidarity, where alliance partners “act nationally but think globally” in industries such as cleaning, telecommunications, transport, security and catering.

An initiative discussed in January 2007 may also lead to the world's first multinational union, bringing together unions from the UK, Germany and the US to build a united voice for over six million members, many working in multinational companies. And the merger last year of two international union confederations has created the largest workers' body ever seen, representing upwards of 168 million workers in more than 150 countries – the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). On top of this comes February's announcement of “the Council of Global Unions”, a new body including the ITUC, global union federations and the OECD Trade Union Advisory Committee.

Union decline is a myth, and it is time we stopped perpetuating it. The real challenge for the union movement is not to save itself from collapse; it is to find a strategy for growth and influence at a time when the potential has never been so good. LB

*This is an edited version of an article Peter Hall Jones wrote for New Unionism which networks across borders in order to join working people, union reps and social movement activists in developing new forms of solidarity: [www.newunionism.net](http://www.newunionism.net)*