



Union membership statistics in 12 countries

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Industrial relations practices differ widely among the developed countries, and union membership data serve as important background information for understanding how relationships between labor and management have evolved over time. Internationally comparable data would be helpful in assessing the relative roles of unions in different countries.

This report investigates the comparability of union membership statistics in the United States and 11 foreign countries and concludes that international comparisons should be made with caution. The figures published by each country are useful indicators of broad trends, but they should not be used to compare levels of unionization, commonly termed union density (union membership as a percent of paid employment).¹ In some cases, the unadjusted data also present a distorted indication of comparative trends.

Data adjusted for differences in coverage show that the gap between the United States and other countries in union density is not as wide as the unadjusted statistics would indicate. However, the United States remains a country of low union density in comparison with Canada, Australia, Japan, and most of Western Europe.

The United States is unique among the countries studied in that union density has fallen continuously since the

mid-1950's. However, during the 1980's, it declined or stagnated in most of the countries examined. Sweden and Denmark had the highest levels and were also the only countries in which union density rose consistently until at least the mid-1980's. Unions in both Scandinavian countries have been highly successful in recruiting women and members of the growing service sector.

The material presented here is based on data and information compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as well as on several detailed studies by other researchers. George Bain and Robert Price's 1980 study yielded union membership data and presented a full discussion of problems associated with measurement of union-related data in the United States, Canada, Australia, and selected European countries.² Kenneth Walsh's and Jelle Visser's subsequent work examined methods of measurement of such data in many European countries.³ Visser's 1991 update expanded coverage to several non-European countries.⁴ The present report draws on Visser's work for adjustments of the European countries' data to a more internationally comparable basis.

Comparability issues

The statistical offices in most developed countries have compiled data on union membership for many years. Table 1 presents these regularly published data for each country studied. However, differences in sources, reporting techniques, definitions, and coverage of the data render comparisons across countries difficult. These differences often reflect the widely varying institutional frameworks within which the unions operate. For instance, the fact that Swedish and Danish unions manage unemployment benefit funds means that unemployed union mem-

bers remain on the membership rolls in these countries. This is somewhat less likely in other countries, where unemployment may lead to a lapse in union membership, especially if the duration is long.⁵ In addition, retired and self-employed persons who belong to unions are included in the figures for some countries but excluded in others.

Sources. Union membership data are derived from two sources: household surveys and reports undertaken by the unions themselves. Currently, the United States is the only country that derives its time series data on union membership from a household survey. Other countries, including Australia and Canada, have also experimented with the survey technique, but data are available only for a few years. Australia has published results from supplements to its household surveys in August 1976, May 1982, and August 1986, 1988, and 1990. (See table 1.) In Canada, data exist from surveys on labor market activity carried out from 1986 to 1989. The Canadian surveys report union membership on a somewhat different basis than the U.S. and Australian surveys.⁶

In all of the countries studied besides the United States, including Australia and Canada, regularly published union membership data are obtained from the reports of unions. The data either emanate directly from the individual unions and confederations or are supplied by the unions and confederations to government statistical agencies, which then compile and publish the data. From 1930 to 1980, a BLS series was also obtained directly from the labor unions, by way of a biennial questionnaire. The organizations that responded to the questionnaire provided, through their own determination,

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the average number of dues-paying members. This BLS series is shown, along with the series from the Current Population Survey, in table 1.

France has no direct source of union membership statistics. Neither the government nor the unions compile any national data. The figures for France in table 1 are based on several individual studies and confederation reports that were collected and analyzed by Visser.⁷

Definitions. There is no internationally agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a union. Each country has its own perception or interpretation. In the United States, the definition has changed over the years to become more encompassing and includes employee associations that act like unions insofar as they represent employee interests and engage in collective bargaining. For example, members of the National Education Association, the American Nurses Association, and police and firefighters' associations are now included in U.S. union membership statistics. In other countries, the trend has also been toward including persons belonging to employee associations.

Visser prefers the definition used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics: "an organization, consisting predominantly of employees, the principal activities of which include the negotiation of rates of pay and conditions of employment for its members."⁸ This definition encompasses "employee organizations and professional associations, even when collective bargaining is not their main activity; however, it excludes associations [that] are dependent on employers, [that] reject collective in favor of individual representation, do not seek a role in negotiations, or consist mainly of self-employed persons."⁹ Visser uses the Australian definition as a guideline in formulating his own definition of a union. Thus, he focuses on members of organizations whose principal activities are collective bargaining and consultation with employers. Organizations of self-employed persons (for example, professionals, salespersons, and small farmers) are excluded because they do not engage in such activities.

The Italian data reported in table 1 cover only the three major union con-

federations. Members of independent, nonaffiliated unions, found mainly in the public sector but also in financial services, are not included, because no reliable data exist for them. Also not included are organizations of managerial staffs, which have become increasingly important in the 1980's. Visser estimates that the understatement ranges from 4 to 8 percentage points in adjusted union density.¹⁰ This spread implies an understatement of about 500,000 to 1 million members in the 1980's. The three Italian confederations estimate that there are probably over 4 million members of independent unions.¹¹ However, this figure includes self-employed, retired, and unemployed members, whereas such persons are excluded in Visser's estimate.

Data coverage. Data derived from labor force or household surveys report on union members who are employed wage and salary workers. The unemployed, the self-employed, and members who are out of the work force due to retirement or other reasons are not encompassed by these statistics.

For the statistics derived from union reports, the method of counting members varies from union to union. Some unions include only fully paid-up workers, while others also cover members who are exempt from payment of full dues, such as those who are unemployed, working part time, retired, disabled, on strike, or receiving education or training. While many unions count as members only those whose dues are paid, others tabulate their members by counting the number of union votes cast. Australia's unions report data on both "financial" members (dues-paying members no more than 6 months in arrears) and total membership. In 1990, total membership was 12 percent higher than financial membership.

A good illustration of the impact of the difference in coverage between membership data based on household surveys and membership data based on union reports is provided by the two series available for the United States and Australia. (See table 1.) It is obvious that quite different figures on union membership are obtained by using the different sources. The first se-

ries for the United States (based on union reports) shows significantly higher figures than the second series, which is based on the Current Population Survey (CPS). In 1980, a year in which employee associations are covered in both U.S. series, the union reports yield about 2 million more members than the CPS. Likewise, Australia's two series show large differences. In 1988 and 1990, for example, the membership data from union reports were more than 700,000 higher than the household survey figures.

In Denmark and Sweden, the majority of the unemployed are likely to remain union members because the unions in those countries manage unemployment benefit programs. To some extent, unemployed members are also included in the membership figures in other countries that rely on union reports. According to Walsh, "Unions have attempted to retain their unemployed members in many cases, or at least to keep them in touch with the union. This usually involves the payment of a token subscription or even complete remission of dues."¹² Bain and Price note that many unemployed workers try to maintain their union membership in order to receive information about job openings, in order to acquire access to openings that exist in closed trades, and also for social and political reasons.¹³ However, Walsh points out that the long-term unemployed tend to allow their membership to lapse.¹⁴

There are no unemployed union members in the U.S. and Australian survey series, which question only employed wage and salary workers. The Canadian survey questions all persons surveyed about their union affiliation, but reports separately on union membership among wage and salary workers.

There is some evidence that the union report series in the United States included decreasing numbers of laid-off workers during the 1970's.¹⁵ This also occurred in some European countries, particularly during the recession of the early 1980's. Walsh reports that "the rapid increase in the numbers unemployed can be considered the most important factor which has reduced union membership in some of the countries such as . . . Italy, the Netherlands,

and the U.K.”¹⁶

Although union members who are retired from the work force are not

counted in the survey-based statistics, such persons tend to be included in the union reports. Many unions grant full

lifetime membership to long-serving members, and retired members may wish to maintain their links with the

Table 1. Union membership in 12 countries, unadjusted data, 1955-90

Year	United States ¹	United States ²	Canada	Australia ³	Australia ⁴	Japan	Denmark	France	Germany	Italy ⁵	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	United Kingdom
Number (thousands)														
1955	16,802	—	1,268	1,802	—	6,286	861	2,554	7,499	5,536	1,221	1,722	663	9,738
1960	17,049	—	1,459	1,912	—	7,662	987	2,592	7,687	3,908	1,354	1,879	728	9,835
1965	17,299	—	1,589	2,116	—	10,147	1,075	2,914	7,986	4,011	1,462	2,161	783	10,325
1970	21,248	—	2,173	2,331	—	11,605	1,170	3,549	7,958	5,530	1,524	2,552	795	11,187
1975	22,361	16,780	2,884	2,833	—	12,590	1,359	3,882	8,623	7,707	1,710	3,053	887	12,026
1976	22,662	17,403	3,042	2,800	2,513	12,509	1,445	3,865	8,736	8,241	1,726	3,165	905	12,386
1977	22,456	19,335	3,149	2,798	—	12,437	1,553	3,833	8,800	8,459	1,770	3,287	897	12,846
1978	22,880	19,548	3,278	2,831	—	12,383	1,629	3,677	9,095	8,680	1,785	3,396	905	13,112
1979	22,435	20,986	—	2,874	—	12,309	1,734	3,535	9,217	8,816	1,792	3,334	900	13,289
1980	22,228	20,095	3,397	2,956	—	12,369	1,793	3,374	9,261	9,005	1,789	3,413	904	12,947
1981	—	—	3,487	2,994	—	12,471	1,840	3,383	9,341	8,930	1,736	3,455	902	12,106
1982	—	—	3,617	3,012	2,568	12,526	1,900	3,237	9,226	8,910	1,724	3,505	901	11,593
1983	—	17,717	3,563	2,985	—	12,520	1,965	3,118	9,109	8,860	1,647	3,573	896	11,236
1984	—	17,340	3,651	3,028	—	12,464	1,989	3,079	9,017	8,988	1,583	3,644	890	10,994
1985	—	16,996	3,666	3,154	—	12,418	2,034	2,944	9,324	8,861	1,540	3,762	882	10,821
1986	—	16,975	3,730	3,186	2,594	12,343	2,064	—	9,351	8,925	1,542	3,818	877	10,539
1987	—	16,913	3,782	3,240	—	12,272	2,119	—	9,344	9,167	1,554	3,840	882	10,475
1988	—	17,002	3,841	3,291	2,536	12,227	2,073	—	9,388	9,543	1,568	3,855	886	10,238
1989	—	16,960	3,944	3,410	—	12,227	2,079	1,970	9,463	—	1,607	3,868	887	—
1990	—	16,740	4,031	3,422	2,660	12,265	2,034	—	—	—	1,426	—	892	—
Percent of total civilian wage and salary employees														
1955	33	—	31	64	—	36	59	21	44	57	41	62	32	46
1960	31	—	30	61	—	33	63	20	40	34	42	62	33	45
1965	28	—	28	46	—	36	63	20	38	33	40	68	32	45
1970	30	—	31	43	—	35	64	22	37	43	38	75	31	50
1975	29	22	34	48	—	35	72	23	39	56	42	83	35	53
1976	28	22	36	47	42	34	75	22	40	60	42	85	37	55
1977	27	23	36	47	—	33	79	22	40	60	43	88	36	57
1978	26	22	37	47	—	33	83	21	41	62	43	90	36	58
1979	25	23	—	47	—	32	84	20	40	62	42	87	36	57
1980	25	22	35	47	—	31	86	19	40	62	41	88	35	56
1981	—	—	35	47	—	31	91	19	40	62	39	89	35	55
1982	—	—	38	47	40	31	94	18	40	62	39	91	35	54
1983	—	19	37	47	—	30	96	18	40	62	38	92	35	53
1984	—	18	37	47	—	29	93	17	40	63	36	93	35	52
1985	—	17	36	47	—	29	92	17	40	61	34	95	32	51
1986	—	17	36	46	37	28	89	—	40	61	34	96	32	49
1987	—	17	35	45	—	28	91	—	40	63	33	97	32	49
1988	—	16	35	44	34	27	88	—	39	65	33	96	31	46
1989	—	16	35	44	—	26	90	11	39	—	33	95	31	—
1990	—	16	36	43	34	25	88	—	—	—	28	—	31	—

¹ Data from biennial surveys of labor unions and employee associations headquartered in the United States. For 1955, 1960, and 1965, data exclude members of employee associations. In 1970, excluding employee associations, union membership, as a percentage of civilian wage and salary employees, was 27 percent.

² Data from Current Population Survey. For 1975 and 1976, data exclude members of employee associations. For 1975–80, data are for May. For all other years, data are annual averages.

³ Data from reports from unions and confederations. For 1955–84, data are for December 31, and coverage in some unions was limited to dues-paying members, while other unions covered various other members—unemployed, retired, and honorary members, as well as members whose dues were in

arrears. Beginning in 1985, data are for June 30 and include all persons regarded as members by unions.

⁴ Data derived from household surveys, include employed union members only, and exclude persons aged 70 years and over. For 1976, data are for February; for 1982, data are for March–May; and for 1986, 1988, and 1990, data are for August.

⁵ Data exclude independent unions, which represented an estimated 4 million members (including pensioners and self-employed and unemployed members) in the late 1980's.

SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics, compiled from various national statistical sources. For France, data are from Jelle Visser, *European Trade Unions in Figures* (Boston, Kluwer Law and Taxation Publishers, 1989), pp. 53–78. Dashes indicate data not available.

union. In some cases, the provision of death benefits through the union may be an incentive to stay associated with the union.¹⁷ The number of retired union members is increasing as the population ages in developed countries. For example, almost one-third of all union members in Italy are pensioners, up from 10 percent in the early 1970's. Pensioner unions are now the largest single union group in each of the Italian confederations. There are also significant numbers of pensioners in the union membership figures for the Netherlands (17 percent), Germany, and Sweden (about 12 percent each). In Denmark, the proportion of retirees in union membership figures was low until 1976, when reforms made early retirement from the labor force more attractive and made early retirement benefits payable through funds closely associated with the unions. Pensioners now comprise an estimated 8 percent of Danish union membership.¹⁸

Self-employed persons may also join unions, although they are less inclined to do so than are wage and salary workers. According to Visser, significant numbers of small tenant farmers and their families, as well as other self-employed persons such as newspaper vendors, are members of the Italian union confederations. Although self-employed persons may also form unions in the United States, they are not included in the CPS series because only wage and salary workers are questioned about their union status.

Military personnel may also belong to unions in the European countries. However, in the United States, Canada, and Japan, armed forces personnel are prohibited by law from unionizing. Military unions exist in Australia, and their members are included in the union reports series, but they are excluded in the survey series, which covers only civilians.

Reporting errors. Union membership data are subject to inaccurate reporting, both in household surveys and in union reports. In household surveys, sampling errors as well as nonsampling errors, such as inaccurate proxy answers, can occur. For example, the respondent may not be completely informed about the employed person's

union membership. However, the administrative union reports are subject to greater inaccuracies. In most cases, membership statistics provided by unions are submitted on a voluntary basis, and there is little or no verification of the data. Most unions have difficulties in keeping accurate and up-to-date union membership records. Members who have left the union, either voluntarily or by death, may not be deleted promptly from the rolls. Furthermore, overlapping membership can cause inflation of the figures. Thus, workers who are members of two or more unions will be counted more than once. This does not occur in the household surveys, which enumerate each person's union membership only once.

A union may also inflate its number of members for prestige, to impress employers and members, and to show strength to rival unions. On the other hand, a union may deflate its membership numbers to lessen per capita payments to federations, political parties, lobbyists, and the government.¹⁹

Base for density ratio. Union density is, ideally, a measure of those who join unions as a percent of all those eligible to join. However, such a definition would shift over time, and it would not permit a common definition across countries. Therefore, in table 1, the size of civilian wage and salary employment is used as the domain of potential union membership. This is a convenient, although not entirely appropriate, denominator for the density ratio because not all reported union members are employees. For instance, where pensioners, self-employed persons, the unemployed, and military personnel are included in union membership figures, the civilian wage and salary employment denominator will not encompass all the persons in the numerator. Consequently, the density ratios in table 1 (except for the household survey series in the United States and Australia) will be overstated to a degree that varies from country to country.

Density ratios are often calculated as a percent of the nonagricultural labor force or nonagricultural employment. However, all of the countries studied have some degree of union organization among agricultural work-

ers. The figure is very low in the United States, where only 2 percent of all farm workers belong to unions. In some countries, however, union density in agriculture is extensive. For example, more than 90 percent of all agricultural workers are organized in Italy, about half are in Sweden, and one-third are in Denmark.²⁰ Because there is such agricultural unionization, it was decided in this report to include agricultural workers in the denominator of the density ratio.

Use of the labor force instead of only employed workers may be a more logical denominator in some countries where unemployed workers tend to remain on union membership rolls. In the United States, however, such workers are not included in the CPS series; thus, U.S. density figures are more logically computed on the basis of employment. But for countries such as Denmark and Sweden, where unions maintain unemployment benefit funds, it would be more appropriate to include the unemployed in the denominator and base the ratio on the labor force. Alternatively, adjustments could be made to the numerator to exclude unemployed members of unions.

Adjusted statistics

In order to facilitate international comparisons, a common concept of coverage had to be selected. The following analysis presents data adjusted to cover union members who are employed wage and salary workers. This coverage is in accord with the current U.S. method, and it is also the most feasible one for adjustment purposes. It is a restrictive concept, excluding union members who are unemployed, self-employed, or retired. Therefore, it focuses on those union members who are most directly influenced by union activities. Unions are largely geared to catering to the needs of those who are employed, acting, for example, as agents in collective bargaining negotiations or on behalf of a member in a grievance case.

Table 2 shows union membership data adjusted to a civilian employed wage and salary workers basis for 3 years—1970, 1980, and 1989, unless otherwise indicated. Data for Canada, the United States, and Australia were

Table 2. **Union membership and union density in 12 countries, adjusted to employed member basis,¹ 1970, 1980, and 1989**

Country	Employed union membership (thousands)			Civilian wage and salary workers (thousands)			Density ratios (percent)		
	1970	1980	1989	1970	1980	1989	1970	1980	1989
United States.....	—	20,095	16,960	70,645	89,950	106,924	—	22	16
Australia.....	² 2,513	³ 2,568	⁴ 2,536	² 5,946	³ 6,415	⁴ 7,398	² 42	³ 40	⁴ 34
Canada.....	—	—	4,028	—	—	12,089	—	—	33
Japan.....	11,605	12,369	12,227	32,830	39,470	46,550	35	31	26
Denmark.....	1,102	1,585	⁵ 1,731	1,837	2,097	2,320	60	76	⁶ 75
France.....	3,549	3,374	1,970	15,941	17,752	17,924	22	19	11
Germany.....	7,168	8,328	8,082	21,747	23,366	24,224	33	36	33
Italy.....	4,646	7,650	6,930	12,730	14,432	14,747	36	53	47
Netherlands.....	1,451	1,539	1,351	4,001	4,362	4,912	36	35	28
Sweden.....	2,325	3,115	3,415	3,415	3,877	4,071	68	80	84
Switzerland.....	758	849	⁷ 782	2,556	2,578	⁷ 2,764	30	33	⁷ 28
United Kingdom.....	10,060	11,652	⁴ 9,214	22,479	22,991	⁴ 22,276	45	51	⁴ 41

¹ Data are adjusted to cover employed wage and salary union members only. Pensioners, the unemployed, and self-employed union members are excluded.

² 1976.

³ 1982.

⁴ 1988.

⁵ March 1990.

⁶ March 1990 union membership as a percent of 1989 wage and salary workers.

⁷ 1986.

SOURCE: Employed union membership for European countries from Jelle Visser, "Trends in Trade Union Membership," chapter 4 in *OECD*

Employment Outlook (Paris, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, July 1991), p.101. Visser's estimates for Italy have been further adjusted by BLS to include members of independent unions in 1980 and 1989. Visser's density ratios for Italy, excluding the independent union members, were 49 percent in 1980 and 39 percent in 1989. Data for the United States and Australia are from household surveys, which question only employed wage and salary workers about their union affiliation. Data for Canada are from the Labour Market Activity Survey and represent union membership in the first paid job during the year. Japan's data are from union reports, which do not include many retired, self-employed, or unemployed members. Dashes indicate data not available.

taken directly from household surveys and require no adjustments because they relate to membership of employed wage and salary workers only. For the European countries, Visser has recalculated the reported membership figures to exclude retired, self-employed, and unemployed workers, where their numbers are significant. He has also excluded members of armed forces unions, where they exist. Data from Japanese union reports were not adjusted, because the number of workers who were not wage and salary workers and who should be excluded from the figures appeared to be very small. The adjusted figures presented in table 2 provide a better basis for comparison than the unadjusted series shown in table 1.

No adjustments are possible for some of the differences noted earlier, such as double counting, deliberately inflated union membership, or reporting errors. However, Visser makes comparisons of union reports (adjusted to include only employed union members) with survey data, for the countries and years where this is possible, and concludes that "these factors lead

to some overstatement in membership statistics reported by unions, but the overstatement is in most cases slight, provided union membership is defined consistently."²¹

Adjustments. Visser uses a combination of methods to adjust the data from union reports.²² Sometimes the data necessary for adjustment were available from union or confederation records Visser consulted. In most cases, he uses ratios derived from the data for large confederations to adjust the figures for all unions in the country. In several instances, he depends on studies carried out by other researchers. And in a few cases, he makes estimates for a country based on data from another country with a similar union system.

Adjustments are made to exclude self-employed union members only in those countries in which their numbers are significant—most notably, Italy. These adjustments are based on union records. The available data on union membership allow the exclusion of the unemployed (between 1 and 5 percent of gross membership) in France, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Swit-

zerland. The Danish data are adjusted using a ratio from a Belgian study which indicated that 80 percent of all unemployed workers are union members. In both countries, unions are involved in the administration of unemployment insurance, so this procedure appears to be reasonable. Based on a national study, 2 percent of reported union members were estimated to be unemployed in the United Kingdom in the 1980's. No adjustments were made for unemployed union members in Germany and Japan because the numbers were believed to be very small in both countries.

In Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, union reports on retired members allowed for a reasonably accurate estimate of their share. The adjustment ratio for retired workers that applied to the Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions was used to adjust the data for its sister organization in Denmark. For France, adjustment factors were derived from a national study. Some retired workers may be included in the Japanese statistics, but union density declines substantially among

employees aged 45 and over, suggesting that the number is small. In the future, this may change, however: at its annual meeting in June 1991, the All Japan Postal Labor Union decided to begin a Postal Union Club as a lifetime union membership system that would include former members. The system, to begin in January 1992, was reported to be the first of its kind in the Japanese labor movement.²³

Visser notes that the Italian data exclude independent unions, but he does not make an adjustment with regard to this point. He simply says that the standardized series for Italy is likely to underestimate the level of unionization in the 1980's compared with the 1970's and relative to other countries. BLS has made an additional adjustment to the Italian figures for 1980 and 1989 in table 2, to include an estimate of the number and share of the nonaffiliated union members. For 1980, 4 percentage points were added to the union density (as adjusted by Visser to an employed member basis) and 500,000 persons to the adjusted union membership. For 1989, 8 percentage points and about 1,100,000 persons were added. These are rough adjustments based upon the estimated ranges supplied by Visser. Since independent unions have been increasing their membership in Italy in the 1980's,

the lower end of the range was taken for 1980 and the higher end for 1989. This may be a conservative estimate, as it is well below the figure of more than 4 million supplied by the confederations. However, that figure is not adjusted to an employed member basis.

Results of adjustments. Table 3 shows that, for Australia, Canada, and all the European countries (with the exception of France, for which there is only Visser's adjusted series and no unadjusted series), adjusted density ratios in 1989 (or the latest year available) are usually significantly lower than the corresponding unadjusted ratios. The largest adjustments are for Italy and Denmark, followed by Sweden and Australia. Canada and Switzerland have much lesser adjustments. Clearly, administrative sources tend to overstate employed union membership to varying degrees across countries.

It is also important to note the differences in trends between the adjusted and unadjusted data. In all cases except the United Kingdom, the adjusted series show lower growth or greater losses in union membership than the unadjusted series. In Australia, Germany, and Italy, the adjusted data indicate declines in union membership during the 1980's, while the unadjusted data

show increases. In general, this difference is because there were more unemployed or retired persons omitted in the latter part of the 1980's than at the beginning of the decade.

Comparative levels. Despite adjustments to exclude significant numbers of unemployed and retired union members, the two Scandinavian countries, Denmark and Sweden, remained the countries with the highest unionization levels. (See table 3.) Sweden had 84 percent of its wage and salary workers unionized in 1989, while Denmark had 75 percent unionized. After these two countries, there is a significant drop to Italy, where nearly half of the wage and salary workers belonged to unions in 1989, and the United Kingdom, where about 2 out of 5 were union members in that year.

Most of the remaining countries were in the range of one-quarter to one-third of employees unionized. The United States and France were the countries with the lowest levels of unionization.

Comparative trends. In terms of absolute numbers, adjusted union membership increased only in Denmark and Sweden (and probably in Canada) during the 1980's. The French union move-

Table 3. **Comparison of adjusted and unadjusted union membership statistics, 12 countries**

Country	Density ratio, 1989		Percent change in union membership, 1980-89		Percentage point change in density ratio, 1980-89	
	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted
United States	16	16	-15.6	-15.6	-6	-6
Australia ¹	34	44	-1.2	9.3	-6	-3
Canada	33	35	—	16.1	—	0
Japan	26	26	-1.1	-1.1	-5	-5
Denmark ²	75	88	9.2	13.4	-1	2
France	11	—	-41.6	—	-8	—
Germany	33	39	-3.0	2.2	-3	-1
Italy ³	47	65	-9.4	6.0	-6	3
Netherlands	28	33	-12.2	-10.2	-7	-8
Sweden	84	95	9.6	13.3	4	7
Switzerland ⁴	28	32	-7.9	-3.0	-5	-3
United Kingdom ⁵	41	46	-20.9	-20.9	-10	-10

¹ 1988 for density ratio; 1982-88 for changes.

² 1990 for density ratio; 1980-90 for changes.

³ 1989 for adjusted density ratio, 1988 for unadjusted density ratio; 1980-89 for adjusted changes, 1980-88 for unadjusted changes.

⁴ 1986 for density ratio; 1980-86 for changes.

⁵ 1988 for density ratio; 1980-88 for changes.

NOTE: Adjusted and unadjusted data are the same for the United States and Japan.

SOURCES: Tables 1 and 2. Dashes indicate data not available.

ment experienced the largest decline, losing more than 40 percent of its membership between 1981 and 1989. British unions lost about one-fifth of their total membership, and by the end of the decade, American unions lost 1 out of every 7 members they had in 1980. Lesser losses were experienced by unions in the Netherlands, Italy, and Switzerland. Membership in Australian and Japanese unions declined only slightly during the 1980's.

Denmark's increase in union membership did not keep pace with the country's rise in paid employment, so that every country studied except Sweden experienced a decline in adjusted density ratios during the 1980's. The decline was the greatest in the United Kingdom, at 10 percentage points, followed by France and the Netherlands. The United States, Australia, Japan, Italy, and Switzerland all had density decreases of 5 or 6 percentage points. The smallest losses in union density occurred in Denmark and Germany.

Unions fared better in the 1970's than in the 1980's. During the 1970's—with unadjusted data used for Canada and the United States and adjusted data for the other countries—about 10 million union members were added to the rolls in the 12 countries studied. By contrast, between 1980 and 1989, some 7 million union members were lost. During the earlier decade, union membership increased in all countries studied except France, and union density rose in seven of the countries. The United States, Australia, Japan, and France were the only countries with declining union density in both decades. In all four cases, the declines were milder in the 1970's than in the 1980's.

Explanatory factors

Trends in and levels of union density are diverse, and there is no common explanation of the data described above. An indepth treatment would require a wide-ranging investigation of economic, social, institutional, and political factors in each country. This section will only mention the major factors and refer the reader to other national and international studies for further information on the subject.²⁴

Except in the Scandinavian countries, unions lost members in the em-

ployed labor force in the 1980's. One factor common to all of the countries studied that may have contributed to this stagnation or decline was the deep recession in all of them in the earlier part of the decade. During that time, many union members lost their jobs and eventually left their unions.

A longer term factor that may have been operative was the changing composition of the work force, away from the more highly unionized industrial sector and toward the service sector, which historically has been more difficult to organize. Employment in the "smokestack" industries (iron and steel, automobiles), the traditional source of union strength, was stagnant or declining in most countries, including the United States, during the period studied. In addition, the agricultural sector, typically an area of low unionization, became so small that movement out of it no longer contributed significantly to union density growth. Increases in the part-time and temporary work forces were factors in some countries, notably Japan and France.²⁵ Such workers are only slowly being organized into unions. The rising proportion of women in the labor force also was undoubtedly a factor. Unionization rates for women are well below those for men, except in Scandinavia.²⁶

Other factors that have been mentioned in various studies are union organizing skills and efforts, union militancy and labor strife, and government policy, as in the United Kingdom, where legislative changes greatly narrowed the scope of union power in the 1980's.²⁷ In the United States, the 1980 deregulation of trucking and the airlines brought intense competition between union and nonunion firms in these industries.²⁸ Societal attitudes toward unions also played a role: membership losses in Japan have been attributed to a widespread lack of faith in unions by society as a whole.²⁹

Within Europe, France stands out as a country with relatively low union density and particularly sharp losses in membership. Except for a couple of peak years (1936 and 1946), union representation was never very high in France. According to Visser, "In no other country in Western Europe is the trade union system to such a degree

pluralistic and conflictual."³⁰ Factionalism and mutual animosities among French unions have contributed to their decline. In addition, many of the other factors mentioned were operating in France in a mutually reinforcing way.³¹

The Swedish and Danish unions are also distinct cases. Significant elements in their continued growth and high levels of density were their successes in unionizing women and in organizing the service sector, particularly commercial and financial services. In both countries, there is a long history of organizing white-collar workers; consequently, a large proportion of clerical workers in commerce and finance are union members. In Sweden, union density approaches three-quarters of all workers in the finance, insurance, real estate, and business services sector; in the United States, only 2 percent of workers in that sector are unionized. Sweden and Denmark are also the only countries studied in which the gap in the unionization of males and females has virtually disappeared. In the United States, 19 percent of all male wage and salary workers are unionized, while the figure for women is 13 percent. In most of the other countries studied, the disparity is even wider. For example, in Germany, almost half of the male wage and salary workers are unionized, but only about one-fifth of the women are. □

Footnotes

ACKNOWLEDGMENT: Joyanna Moy, an economist in the Division of Foreign Labor Statistics, supervised the collection of and performed complicated adjustments to the data for this report.

¹ *Union density* is a commonly used term in the national and international literature on union membership. See, for example, George Bain and Robert Price, *Profiles of Union Growth* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980); Kenneth Walsh, *Trade Union Membership: Methods and Measurement in the European Community* (Brussels, EUROSTAT, 1985); and Jelle Visser, "Trends in Trade Union Membership," chapter 4 in *OECD Employment Outlook* (Paris, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, July 1991), pp. 97-134. Some authors use the term to denote union membership as a percent of the labor force, while others use it to mean union membership as a percent of total or nonagricultural wage and salary employment. In this report, union density is defined to be union membership as a percent of total civilian wage and salary employment.

- ² Bain and Price, *Profiles of Union Growth*.
- ³ Walsh, *Trade Union Membership*; and Jelle Visser, *European Trade Unions in Figures* (Boston, Kluwer Law and Taxation Publishers, 1989).
- ⁴ Visser, "Trends in Trade Union Membership."
- ⁵ Walsh, *Trade Union Membership*, pp. 16–17; and Visser, "Trends in Trade Union Membership," p. 98.
- ⁶ The Canadian Labour Market Activity Survey is designed to collect information on labor market participation patterns over a 1- and a 2-year period. The sample represents the civilian, noninstitutionalized population aged 16 to 69 years. Because the survey collects information on up to five jobs worked during the year, several measures of unionization rates are possible. Based on the first wage or salary job held during the year, the 1989 unionization rate was 33 percent of all first-paid jobs. Based on all paid jobs held during the year, the unionization rate was 30 percent. The first-job ratio is used in this report. Unadjusted data based on union reports compiled by Labour Canada indicate a union density of 35 percent in 1989. The figure of 33 percent published by the Canadian Labour Market Activity Survey is in line with Visser's finding that the data from Labour Canada overstate union membership to a small extent because the majority of Canadian unions include unemployed members but exclude retired persons from their membership figures.
- ⁷ Visser, *European Trade Unions*, pp. 53–78; and "Trends in Trade Union Membership," pp. 101, 124.
- ⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Trade Union Statistics, Australia*, June 30, 1990, p. 5.
- ⁹ Visser, "Trends in Trade Union Membership," p. 99.
- ¹⁰ Visser, "Trends in Trade Union Membership," p. 125.
- ¹¹ Report from U.S. Embassy in Rome dated March 15, 1988.
- ¹² Walsh, *Trade Union Membership*, p. 16.
- ¹³ Bain and Price, *Profiles of Union Growth*, p. 7.
- ¹⁴ Walsh, *Trade Union Membership*, pp. 16–17.
- ¹⁵ Michael Goldfield, *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 9.
- ¹⁶ Walsh, *Trade Union Membership*, p. 16.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- ¹⁸ Visser, "Trends in Trade Union Membership," Annex 4A, pp. 121–28. See also Visser's study, "In Search of Inclusive Unionism," in *Bulletin of Comparative Labour Relations*, number 18 (Boston, Kluwer Law and Taxation Publishers, 1990), p. 33.
- ¹⁹ Bain and Price, *Profiles of Union Growth*, p. 5.
- ²⁰ Visser, "In Search of Inclusive Unionism," pp. 42–43.
- ²¹ Visser, "Trends in Trade Union Membership," p. 98.
- ²² For a full discussion of these adjustments, see Visser, "Trends in Trade Union Membership," Annex 4A, pp. 121–28.
- ²³ *Japan Labour Bulletin*, August 1, 1991, pp. 2–3.
- ²⁴ See, for example, Larry T. Adams, "Changing employment patterns of organized workers," *Monthly Labor Review*, February 1985, pp. 25–31; David G. Blanchflower and Richard B. Freeman, "Going Different Ways: Unionism in the U.S. and Other Advanced OECD Countries," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 3342 (Cambridge, NBER, April 1990); Jeff Bridgford, "French Trade Unions: Crisis in the 1980's," *Industrial Relations Journal*, Winter 1990, pp. 126–35; Richard Freeman and Jeffrey Pelletier, "The Impact of Industrial Relations Legislation on British Union Density," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, July 1990, pp. 141–64; Goldfield, *The Decline of Organized Labor*; Kazutoshi Koshiro, "Labour Relations in Public Service in Japan," *Public Service Labour Relations: Recent Trends and Future Prospects* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 1987), pp. 145–76; Pradeep Kumar, "Union Growth in Canada: Retrospect and Prospect," in W. Craig Ridell, ed., *Canadian Labour Relations* (Ottawa, Ministry of Supply and Services, 1986), pp. 95–160; William Moore and Robert Newman, "A Cross Section Analysis of the Postwar Decline in American Trade Union Membership," *Journal of Labor Research*, Spring 1988, pp. 111–24; Hidesuke Nagashima, "Japanese Labor at a Turning Point," *Japan Update*, Summer 1988, pp. 15–17; John Niland, "How do Australian unions maintain standing during adverse periods?" *Monthly Labor Review*, June 1986, pp. 37–39; David Peetz, "Declining Union Density [in Australia]," *Journal of Industrial Relations*, June 1990, pp. 197–223; Yonatan Reshef, "Union Decline: A View from Canada," *Journal of Labor Research*, Winter 1990, pp. 25–36; Brian Towers, "Running the Gauntlet: British Trade Unions Under Thatcher, 1979–1988," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, January 1989, pp. 163–87; Leo Troy, "Is the U.S. Unique in the Decline of Private Sector Unionism?" *Journal of Labor Research*, Spring 1990, pp. 111–43; Jelle Visser, "In Search of Inclusive Unionism," and "Trends in Trade Union Membership," pp. 103–106; and "Why are Part-time Workers Not Well Unionized?" *Japan Labor Bulletin*, February 1, 1989, pp. 5–7.
- ²⁵ "Why are Part-time Workers Not Well Unionized?" pp. 5–7; and Bridgford, "French Trade Unions," p. 132.
- ²⁶ Visser, "Trends in Trade Union Membership," pp. 115–17.
- ²⁷ Towers, "Running the Gauntlet," pp. 167–72; and Freeman and Pelletier, "The Impact of Industrial Relations Legislation," pp. 141–64.
- ²⁸ Adams, "Changing employment patterns," p. 28.
- ²⁹ Koshiro, "Labour Relations in Public Service," p. 149.
- ³⁰ Visser, *European Trade Unions*, p. 54.
- ³¹ Bridgford, "French Trade Unions," pp. 129–33.