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# **Trade Union Membership among the Migrant Community**

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The UK has experienced high levels of in-migration from all parts of the world over several decades. This Research Note presents new estimates of trade union membership among migrants in the UK. Levels of membership among migrants are lower than those employees who were born in the UK, although levels rise as time spent in the UK increases. Low levels of membership are particularly apparent among migrants from A8 and A2 countries, for whom union membership is approximately a third of the UK average.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The main source of data regarding union membership within the UK is the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) and official government statistics on trade union membership are based on this source. The Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) is responsible for publishing official figures on trade union membership via its annual Statistical Bulletin 'Trade Union Membership'<sup>2</sup>. Estimates of membership focus on 3 key measures:

- Union density: The percentage of those in employment who are a trade union member.
- Union presence: Whether or not a trade union or staff association is present within a workplace.
- Union coverage: Whether the pay and conditions of employees are agreed in negotiations between the employer and a trade union.

The Statistical Bulletins produced by BIS provide estimates of union density, presence and coverage by a variety of personal and job related characteristics including age, gender, ethnicity, income, major occupation, industry, full and part-time employment, sector, nation and region. In the context of the recent immigration crisis facing the European Union, this Research Note presents new estimates of trade union membership among migrants in the UK derived from the LFS<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Migration to the UK

The UK has experienced a high level of in-migration from all parts of the world over several decades. The emergence of a large migrant population within the UK was initially a consequence of large-scale migration from outside Europe in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the permanent settlement of these migrants. This was initially driven by the migration of workers from former colonies in response to increasing demand for often cheap labour which could not be recruited from the resident labour force to support the rebuilding of industry and public services after the Second World War. From the 1970s onwards, increasing controls were placed on international labour migration, but immigration continued due to family reunification. From the late 1980s onwards, increasing political and economic turmoil in origin countries and the greater ease of travel increased the numbers of migrants (many arriving as

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/trade-union-statistics>

<sup>3</sup> The Labour Force Survey is produced by the Office for National Statistics. The data sets have been accessed via the UK Data Service, University of Essex, Colchester. None of these organisations bears any responsibility for the analysis or interpretations presented here.

asylum seekers) while economic liberalisation and sustained economic growth increased the demand for migrants from outside the EU.

Within the European Union, freedom of movement of labour is one of the four fundamental freedoms (alongside free movement of goods, services and capital) guaranteed by EU law. This has led to the steady removal of national barriers to migration (e.g. via the Single European Act of 1986 and the Schengen Agreement of 1985). The Lisbon Strategy of 2000 sought to increase rates of geographical labour mobility as a way of improving EU economic competitiveness and growth. Expansion of the EU into in 2004 brought about a surge of migrants from the 8 new Eastern European member states who found work in the three member states (the UK, Ireland and Sweden) which opened their borders to “A8” migrants immediately.<sup>4</sup> By far the largest number of A8 migrants to the UK came from Poland, with over 250,000 entering between May 2004 and June 2006 compared to a Polish-born population of around 60,000 according to the 2001 Census<sup>5</sup>.

A further eastward expansion of the EU borders occurred in January 2007, when Romania and Bulgaria (the “A2” countries) joined the EU. In light of the unexpected scale of A8 migration, the migration of workers from A2 countries to the UK was restricted to skilled workers, workers on the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Scheme (SAWS) and Sector Based Schemes (SBS), the self-employed, students and ‘self-sufficient persons’. Transitional controls on A2 migrants ended at the end of 2013. There has also been an increased emphasis on managing migration from outside the EU over the past decade. In particular, the introduction of the Points Based Scheme (PBS) in 2008 by the UK Home Office aimed to re-orientate international migration to meet skill shortages and restrict the entry of less skilled workers. However, poorer economic prospects in the continental EU relative to the UK has resulted in increasing net immigration from the established (“A14”) countries of the EU.

The response of trade unions within the UK to migrant workers has recently been considered within a programme of research undertaken at Manchester Business School<sup>6</sup>. Their research concludes that whilst a variety of policies have been adopted by unions to encourage diversity and support Black and Minority Ethnic groups and that the union movement in the UK is more geared to working with migrant workers, most of this activity is at an early stage and that trade unions in the UK have been reluctant to set up alternative provisions for migrant workers like

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<sup>4</sup> Cyprus and Malta also joined the EU at the same time but are typically excluded from discussions about the migration flows that followed enlargement.

<sup>5</sup> Drinkwater, S., Eade, J. and Garapich, M. (2009), “Poles apart? EU enlargement and the labour market outcomes of immigrants in the UK”, *International Migration*, 47,161-190.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.research.mbs.ac.uk/ewerc/Portals/0/docs/LeverhulmeUK.pdf>

those that have emerged in other countries. Where progress has been made in engaging with migrant workers, the success of this activity has been dependent on specific circumstances such as ‘a strong regional branch, committed union officers or external funding’.

### 3. Union Membership Among Migrants

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is a survey of households living at private addresses in the UK. Over recent years, the LFS achieves interviews with some 45,000 households per quarter. Information is collected for approximately 100,000 individuals, of which approximately 60% are of working age making it the largest regular household survey conducted in the UK. Like other government surveys, the LFS collects information from sample households or individuals that can then be used to present a representative picture of the characteristics of the UK population as a whole. Whilst the LFS is designed to provide accurate estimates of different demographic and labour market phenomena at national and regional levels, there are limits to which the data from a single survey can be used to provide an accurate picture for detailed sub-sets of the population such as migrants. To overcome problems associated with the relatively small sample sizes, the approach taken in this Research Note is to combine LFS data sets that cover the years 2007-2014<sup>7</sup>.

While this approach of pooling data has been necessary to ensure that estimates of union membership among the migrant population are based upon sufficiently large sample sizes, a number of caveats remain. The analyses present an ‘average picture’ of the characteristics of the migrant population covering a number of years. The analysis is not able to provide an accurate picture of the *current* levels of trade union membership among the migrant community. The pooling of data over a number of years will also mean that the estimates produced in this report will not reconcile with the most recent statistics produced by BIS.

Table 1 presents the patterns of responses provided by respondents to the LFS with respect to questions on trade union membership. Figures relate to employees aged 16 and over. Figures are presented for those born in 1) the UK, 2) the A8 countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia), 3) the A2 countries (Bulgaria and Romania), 4) Other EU countries and 5) migrants born outside of the EU. Respondents to the LFS are first asked whether or not they are a member of a trade union. The analysis reveals that migrants report lower levels of trade union membership than UK born respondents. Among those born in the UK, 27% of respondents report being a member

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<sup>7</sup> Those individuals who responded to the trade union membership questions in Wave 1 of the LFS may therefore appear in our sample twice if they remain within the LFS for 5 Waves. For the purposes of presenting broad summary statistics of trade union membership among the migrant community, we do not attempt to remove these repeated observations from our combined sample.



of a trade union. This is compared to just 9% of those migrants who were born in A8 or A2 countries. Levels of membership are higher among migrants born in other EU countries and non-EU countries (21%). It is also observed that non-reporting of union membership is higher among respondents from A8 (3%) and A2 (4%) countries than those born in the UK (1%). However, the level of missing data among migrants is not sufficient to account for the lower levels of membership.

Within the LFS, respondents who reported that they themselves were not members of trade unions are then asked (with the exception of home workers) whether any of the people at the respondent’s place of work are members of a trade union or staff association. Combined with union membership, this question is designed to measure whether trade unions are present at the respondent’s workplace. Table 1 reveals that migrant respondents are more likely to provide a missing response to this question compared to UK born respondents. This is particularly apparent among migrants from A8 countries (16%).

**Table 1: Trade Union Membership by Migrant Status (LFS 2007-2014, UK, Employees)**

	UK-born	A8	A2	Other- EU	Non-EU	Total
<b>Membership/Presence</b>						
1. Member	27.2	8.8	9.2	21.4	20.8	26.1
2. Free Rider	18.9	14.1	12.0	19.1	16.7	18.6
3. Non Member - No Presence	38.0	56.4	57.9	41.2	44.2	39.0
4. Non Member - Home Worker	5.0	2.6	5.6	5.6	4.4	4.9
5. Non Member - Presence						
Unknown	9.7	15.5	11.6	11.3	11.9	10.1
6. Membership Not Reported	1.2	2.5	3.8	1.2	2.0	1.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Coverage</b>						
7. Yes	28.7	12.7	11.3	24.3	21.5	27.6
8. No	60.5	69.6	75.4	63.9	65.8	61.2
9. No Answer	10.8	17.7	13.3	11.8	12.8	11.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Official Statistics</b>						
Membership (% excl 6)	27.5	9.1	9.5	21.7	21.2	26.4
Presence (% 1+2, excl 6)	46.7	23.5	22.0	41.1	38.3	45.3
Coverage (% excl 9)	32.2	15.5	13.1	27.6	24.6	31.1
Sample Size	254,898	5,454	449	6,685	21,975	289,461



Official publications on trade union membership also estimate the coverage of collective agreements which is defined as the proportion of employees in the labour force whose pay and conditions are agreed in negotiations between the employer and a trade union. The LFS asks all respondents whether the pay and conditions of the respondents are 'directly affected' by agreements between employers and trade unions(s). In the case of migrants from A8 countries, almost 1 in 5 (18%) fail to provide a valid response to the union coverage question. This is compared to 11% of respondents born in the UK.

The bottom panel of Table 1 shows how the responses to the questions in the LFS are utilised to derive official estimates of trade union membership, presence and coverage. The relatively small proportion of non-responses to the trade union membership question means that official estimates of trade union membership align relatively closely to the actual proportion of respondents who report being a member of a trade union. Whilst the overall average level of trade union presence within the LFS is estimated to be 45%, this figure falls to 24% among respondents born in A8 countries and to 22% among respondents from A2 countries. Migrants from Other EU (41%) and Non-EU (44%) countries take up an intermediate position.

Finally, official estimates of trade union coverage exclude those people who did not provide a valid response to the question. This does have the effect of preventing the higher levels of non-response to this question from having a dampening effect on estimated rates of coverage derived for migrants. Nonetheless, levels of trade union coverage derived for migrant employees from A8 countries (16%) and A2 countries (13%) are estimated to be less than half that estimated for UK born employees (32%).

The problem with making simple comparisons in the overall levels of trade union membership by migrant groups is that the observed differences between migrant groups may not necessarily be caused by migrant status. The likelihood of being a migrant will be associated with a variety of personal, job and workplace characteristics which may themselves also be correlated with trade union membership; thereby confounding comparisons in rates of trade union membership by migrant status. For example, economic migrants tend to be young, work in the private sector and in the initial years of migration, men tend to outnumber women. Given that within the UK, levels of union membership are higher among women, older workers and those employed in the public sector, the lower levels of membership reported among migrant groups, particularly among recent migrants from A8 and A2 countries, could simply reflect these compositional differences.

The most straightforward approach to overcoming such difficulties is to make comparisons of membership rates by response type and mode for specific population sub-groups. For example, if comparisons between different migrant groups is being confounded by differences



in the age composition of these two groups as described above, then this can be accounted for by making comparisons by age group. This approach is taken in Table 2. The analysis reveals that differentials in membership, union presence and union coverage by migrant status appear to persist after accounting for selected personal and job related characteristics. For ease of exposition, our discussion focuses upon variations in union membership.

- In terms of gender, it can be seen that the low levels of membership among male employees is generally more pronounced among migrants. This is with the exception of those from A8 countries, where membership rates are actually higher among men.
- In terms of age, it can be seen that differentials in membership levels between migrants and non-migrants are more pronounced among younger age groups. With the exception of migrants from A8 countries, membership levels among those migrants aged 50+ are broadly comparable to those of UK born employees.
- In terms of hours and contractual status, full time employees and those on permanent contracts exhibit higher rates of union membership. Migrants from A8 countries on non-permanent contracts exhibit rates of union membership of less than 4%.
- In terms of sector, migrants from Non-EU countries and Other EU migrants who are employed in the public sector exhibit rates of membership of 48-49%, similar to rate of membership among UK born public sector employees (57%). Employment within the public sector however does not appear to counteract the relatively low levels of membership observed among migrants from A8 and A2 countries.
- The propensity of migrants to become members of trade unions increases with the length of time spent in the UK. Among those who arrived prior to 2004, 25% are members of unions – similar to the national average of 26%. Even after taking in to account duration in the UK, migrants from A2 and A8 countries appear to be uniformly less likely to be members of unions. This could reflect the sectors in which these groups of employees have found work.
- Underreporting of union membership among proxy respondents appears to vary in importance between migrant groups. Levels of membership derived from proxy respondents are particularly low among migrants from A2 countries.

It should also be acknowledged that while care has been taken to ensure that sample sizes are not unduly small, it remains the case that in some areas analyses are based on relatively small sample sizes and would not be regarded as sufficiently robust by BIS to be considered as providing the definitive view of union membership among the migrant population. Nonetheless, the analysis reveals that levels of union membership are particularly low among migrants from A2 and A8 countries. These low levels of membership persist even when these groups gain employment within the public sector.



**Table 2: Trade Union Membership by Migrant Status and Selected Characteristics (LFS 2007-2014, Employees)**

	Union Membership						Union Presence						Union Coverage					
	UK	A8	A2	Other- EU	Non- EU	Total	UK	A8	A2	Other- EU	Non- EU	Total	UK	A8	A2	Other- EU	Non- EU	Total
<b>Gender</b>																		
Male	25.3	9.8	6.7	18.2	17.7	24.1	43.2	24.2	15.1	35.8	33.5	41.7	30.0	15.7	10.3	24.3	21.5	28.8
Female	29.8	8.3	12.1	24.9	25.4	28.9	50.2	22.8	28.1	46.0	44.0	49.0	34.4	15.3	15.6	30.7	28.5	33.5
<b>Age</b>																		
16-29 yrs	14.3	6.7	1.5	10.9	8.9	13.6	31.9	20.2	13.0	27.9	23.3	30.8	21.3	12.9	7.2	18.9	13.3	20.3
30-49 yrs	30.7	10.8	13.6	22.2	21.4	29.0	50.8	26.1	28.0	43.2	39.2	48.9	34.7	17.3	17.1	28.6	25.1	33.2
50+ yrs	33.9	13.5	27.0	31.2	32.2	33.6	52.7	28.3	32.0	49.3	49.7	52.3	37.0	19.3	18.6	33.4	33.2	36.6
<b>Contract</b>																		
Permanent	28.2	9.7	10.0	22.3	22.3	27.2	46.9	24.3	21.8	41.2	38.9	45.6	32.5	16.0	13.3	27.7	25.3	31.5
Not Permanent	16.8	3.3	7.0	13.4	10.4	15.5	43.4	17.2	24.4	39.4	32.6	41.1	26.3	9.9	11.7	26.2	18.0	24.7
<b>Hours</b>																		
Full-time	29.7	9.5	10.2	22.0	23.3	28.4	48.5	24.6	23.5	41.0	40.5	47.0	33.7	15.7	14.1	27.8	26.2	32.5
Part-time	21.9	7.1	6.3	20.5	15.2	21.1	41.9	18.4	15.3	41.2	31.8	40.7	27.9	14.4	9.0	26.8	20.0	27.1
<b>Sector</b>																		
Private	15.4	7.9	7.1	11.2	11.4	14.8	30.5	20.2	16.0	25.3	23.6	29.5	18.0	13.0	9.5	13.7	13.1	17.3
Public	57.0	24.1	27.5	48.5	47.7	55.9	86.1	66.8	66.7	81.2	77.9	85.2	66.8	46.9	43.1	63.0	55.5	65.7
<b>Year Arrived</b>																		
before 2004		13.2	22.6	25.3	25.7	25.2		28.3	39.6	45.8	43.9	43.8		18.8	20.4	30.5	28.6	28.7
2004-2007		10.4	9.0	13.2	13.4	12.1		26.0	18.5	31.5	29.3	28.0		16.7	11.8	21.8	17.9	17.7
2008-2010		4.5	2.2	9.0	7.0	6.4		17.3	19.0	24.0	18.9	19.1		12.1	12.6	15.8	10.3	11.6
2011-2014		2.9	1.1	8.0	3.0	4.0		11.9	8.2	19.5	16.5	15.4		8.5	6.6	13.2	9.0	9.7
<b>Response Type</b>																		
Personal	30.0	9.8	11.3	22.0	23.2	28.8	51.3	25.4	25.5	42.8	42.1	49.8	34.0	15.9	14.0	27.3	25.9	32.8
Proxy	22.8	7.7	6.1	20.9	17.2	21.9	37.7	20.0	15.3	37.3	30.7	36.7	28.5	14.6	11.3	28.2	22.0	27.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>27.5</b>	<b>9.1</b>	<b>9.5</b>	<b>21.7</b>	<b>21.2</b>	<b>26.4</b>	<b>46.7</b>	<b>23.5</b>	<b>22.0</b>	<b>41.1</b>	<b>38.3</b>	<b>45.3</b>	<b>32.2</b>	<b>15.5</b>	<b>13.1</b>	<b>27.6</b>	<b>24.6</b>	<b>31.1</b>