

# **DO NOT QUOTE**

## **WHY DO MEMBERS LEAVE? THE IMPORTANCE OF RETENTION TO TRADE UNION RENEWAL**

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**This paper is not for quotation**

### *Abstract*

*Drawing on survey results from three large British trade unions, this paper examines why members leave trade unions. As anticipated, large numbers of members leave because of some change to their employment circumstances (made redundant, changed employer or retired). A significant proportion of members left their union, however, because they were dissatisfied with some aspect of union organisation and performance. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates that the proportion of members leaving because of dissatisfaction varies according to a range of factors, including union 'type' and sector of organisation. The implications of the research are that if unions are to be renewed and membership is to increase, a range of issues to promote retention need to be addressed in addition to developing new means of organisation and recruitment.*

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The substantial and long-term decline in British trade union membership and influence since 1979 has promoted a burgeoning academic literature on the reasons for decline and on strategies for union renewal. The recent literature on union renewal examines the relative merits of partnership and organising, the requirements each strategy places on union organisation and their implications for member-union-management relations (Brown 2000; Heery 2002; Kelly and Badigannavar 2004). While proponents of partnership and organising argue that these strategies are concerned with both recruitment and retention, emphasis within the literature is placed on the recruitment of new members. In contrast, this article focuses on membership retention and, in particular, on the reasons why members leave trade unions. It examines union leaving by reference to the quality of workplace organisation and variations in union structural 'type'. Drawing on survey results of leavers from three large trade unions, the article demonstrates that as many as 77,728 members could be retained by these unions each year if member dissatisfaction towards the unions could be eliminated. The article thus argues that the reappraisal of retention strategies is required if unionists are to renew or revitalise their structures and activities.

A range of competing positions have emerged in the literature on union renewal, many of which tend to focus on two inter-related debates. The first debate revolves around the question: is there evidence of union renewal and, if so, how widespread is it? The second debate focuses on the strategies that might be employed to generate union renewal. In practice, those involved in the second of these debates tend to assume that there is little or no evidence of wide-ranging union renewal and are concerned to encourage strategies through which renewal may be brought about.

Developments within the workplace are at the heart of the two debates. A series of publications argues that there is widespread evidence of renewal, particularly in the public sector and recently-privatised services, based on case study evidence of workplace-based union members asserting their immediate interests (Fairbrother 1994a; 1994b; 1996). From this perspective, it is the resilience of workplace organisation and the capacity of workplace-based activists to support and mobilise members that constitutes the basis for renewal. Assuming this view to be correct, it follows that the pattern of union leaving in the public sector would differ from that in industry or private sector services, as resilient workplace organisation in the public sector acts to limit member dissatisfaction with the union and, hence, the number of members that leave.

Whereas the position adopted by Fairbrother assumes union renewal to be visible and underway, advocates of both the partnership and organising approaches place the requirement for further improvements in the quality of union performance at the centre of any attempt to renew union organisation. Shortcomings in the number of shop stewards, the material and political resources available to shop stewards, and the support received within the workplace from the union are identified as weakening or undermining organisation at unionised workplaces (Cully *et al.* 1999; Millward *et al.* 2000; Brown *et al.* 2000).<sup>1</sup> Advocates of the partnership approach expect union workplace performance to improve as a result of a wider range of facilities afforded to union workplace representatives, a shift away from workplace autonomy and the improved procedures that arise from a partnership with employers (Ackers and Payne 1998; Brown 2000; Terry 2003). The emphasis within the partnership approach is thus placed on the quality of member servicing and support provided by lay and full-time union representatives to members at the workplace. In contrast, proponents of the

organising model argue that renewal is more likely to be achieved through the mobilisation of larger number of active members, able to develop more intense relations with members, which, in turn, encourages member participation and commitment to the union (Heery *et al.* 2000; Jarley 2005). From this perspective, commitment to the union is generated through involvement, rather than the provision of servicing or support. This article examines features of the two approaches to workplace organisation integral to the partnership and organising strategies and assesses how they impinge on union leaving.

Proponents of the positions outlined above do not treat union structure as having an explanatory function. The implication is that renewal, partnership or organising strategies can be implemented independently of the structure of the union involved. A consequence of long-term membership decline in Britain and in many other industrialised countries, however, has been the extensive restructuring of the union movement through mergers. Most of the larger British unions, including the three that participated in this study, are the result of mergers and have undergone wide-ranging structural reform. The larger unions resulting from the merger process, referred to by some as super-unions (Willman and Cave 1994), are viewed as a means whereby resources can be concentrated and economies of scale secured, thus constituting a basis for union renewal (Stratton-Devine 1992; TUC 1999). Merger involvement has also tended to promote higher levels of industrial and occupational membership heterogeneity within the larger unions, more complex forms of union government and the introduction of new forms of financial management (Undy *et al.* 1996; Waddington *et al.* 2004). In turn, these developments have raised issues concerned with the maintenance or regeneration of union articulation and the quality of member support offered by unions with different structural characteristics. The

three unions that participated in this study differ markedly in terms of the breadth of their recruitment bases, the forms of union government and membership composition. The article thus also examines the impact of this structural differentiation on the pattern of union leaving and points to variations in the pattern of union leaving between unions of different 'types'.

Two recent studies have explicitly addressed why members leave unions in Britain. Based on the distinction between the employed and unemployed, Gallie (1996:140-174) examined the reasons 'for no longer being a union member'. Among the employed, moving to a job where a trade union was not present was cited as the principal reason for leaving by 45 per cent of respondents. In addition, over a quarter of leavers explained their departure in terms of there being no benefit of membership. Whether this means that unions were present, but ineffective, or simply absent are acknowledged as alternative explanations of the second reason for leaving, but were not explored in detail (1996:171). Among the unemployed, leaving work was cited by over 75 per cent of respondents as the principal reason for leaving a union, thus confirming the view that British trade unions tend to offer a narrow range of services to the unemployed (Barker *et al.* 1984).<sup>2</sup> For our purposes the absence of a detailed analysis of the impact of union effectiveness on leaving limits the utility of the findings, although the hint that union ineffectiveness, however defined, may account for over a quarter of union leavers is an important pointer.

A second study examined why members left UNISON (Waddington and Kerr 1999b). This study demonstrated that 67.6 per cent of leavers left UNISON because of some sort of change to their job situation, 18.2 per cent left due to problems with structure and organisation of UNISON, and a further 7.7 per cent left because of some disagreement with the policy implemented by UNISON (1999:188). It thus

demonstrates that member dissatisfaction with aspects of union organisation and policy account for over 25 per cent of union leavers. As is acknowledged by the authors, the focus on UNISON necessitated a reliance on primarily public sector data. There is also no *a priori* reason to suggest that these results can be generalised to the private sector, although these results call into question Fairbrother's argument that renewal has already taken place in the public sector. Furthermore, the absence of a comparison with other unions makes it difficult to assess whether the results are principally a function of the organisation and policy of UNISON or unions more generally, peculiarities associated with the public sector, or some other unidentified factor.

To examine these issues, the article comprises three sections. The first section outlines the method employed to assemble the data and identifies the variables used in subsequent sections. The second section reviews the different reasons why members leave the three trade unions and identifies dissatisfaction with the performance of trade unions as accounting for a large proportion of leavers. The third section focuses on the leavers who were dissatisfied with their union and examines their participation in union activity, the source of their dissatisfaction and their relations with unionism after leaving.

### **SURVEY DESIGN AND SAMPLE COMPOSITION**

The data through which these arguments are assessed are drawn from three separate surveys of union leavers conducted between 2001 and 2004. For reasons of confidentiality, the participating unions are labelled union A, union B and union C. Each of these unions organises different combinations of members by gender, sector and occupation. Furthermore, the three unions operate with different systems of union government. The three unions affiliate to the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

Union A is the most recently formed of the three unions and organises exclusively within a single, broadly-defined industry. It is the smallest and most homogeneous of the three participating unions. Women comprise about 60 per cent of the members and membership is concentrated in several large companies, although the proportion of members employed in other, smaller companies has risen in recent years. In most of its principal areas of organisation union A does not compete for members with other unions. In one of the larger companies and in several of the smaller companies, however, union A competes for members with a range of staff associations and a small number of other TUC-affiliated unions. Union A operates with a 'basic' set of provisions intended to encourage the participation and involvement of women, comprising *inter alia* a Womens Committee, Regional Equality (Sub-) Committees, a National Equality Secretary and commitments to raise the proportion of women full-time officers and to highlight issues of policy concern to women. Due to the peculiarities of the distribution of the membership, the constitution of union A does not make provision for the establishment of distinct industrial sections, unlike unions B and C.<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire was distributed in union A on a monthly basis for a year to all leavers. A total of 19,057 questionnaires were distributed of which 2,602 were returned, constituting a return rate of 13.7 per cent.

The merger that resulted in the formation of union B took place before the founding mergers of either union A or union C. Union B organises members in industry, public sector and private sector services, although members in private sector services are outnumbered by their counterparts in industry and the public sector. Women comprise 35 per cent of the membership and are distributed, albeit unevenly, across the three sectors. Throughout the range of its recruitment base union B competes for members with a range of professional associations, staff associations

and TUC-affiliated unions. Similarly to union A, union B operates with a 'basic' set of provisions intended to encourage the participation and involvement of women. Unlike union A, the questionnaire was distributed in union B to the 10,621 leavers who had most recently left. The overall rate of return of the questionnaires was 11.3 per cent in union B (N=1,201).

Union C is the largest of the three participating unions. Although some members are organised in industry and private sector services, the overwhelming majority of members are employed in the public sector. More than 70 per cent of the members of union C are women. Union C competes for members across the range of its recruitment base, principally with several professional associations and other TUC-affiliated unions. Union C operates with a more extensive range of measures designed to encourage the participation of women than either union A or union B. Integral to these measures is the application of the principal of proportionality, whereby the gender composition of any committee established within the union 'matches' that of the membership represented by the committee. The questionnaire was distributed in union C on the same basis as in union B; that is, 12,000 questionnaires were distributed to the most recent leavers. A total of 1,842 questionnaires were returned, constituting a rate of return of 15.4 per cent.

Clearly, employing the two different approaches to the distribution of the surveys ran the risk of the returns in union B and union C being distorted by a specific, short-term event, such as a large company or site closure, which coincided with the distribution of the survey. As each respondent was asked to specify the name of his/her employer prior to leaving the union, it was possible to check whether such an event had occurred. This checking procedure indicated that there were no large

concentrations of respondents from a particular employer, thus suggesting that no such distortion had taken place.

In addition to the name of their employer, respondents were asked to specify their job title prior to leaving the union. The responses on employer and job title were classified using the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) and Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) respectively. By grouping these responses after their classification by SIC and SOC, the following six categories were generated:

- Industry: comprises all of manufacturing and the utilities;
- Public sector: includes health, education, local government and the civil service;
- Private sector services: comprises transport, finance (banking and insurance), distribution, entertainment and miscellaneous services;
- White-collar staff: includes all those classified as managers and administrators, professional and associate professionals;
- White-collar workers: includes clerical, sales, and personal and protective service occupations;
- Manual workers: employed in craft occupations, as plant and machine operatives or in unskilled manual occupations.

The distribution of respondents disaggregated by gender and these categories within the three unions is as follows:

- Union A. By gender: men, 35.2 per cent; women 64.8 per cent. By sector: private sector services 100 per cent. By occupation: white-collar staff, 45.2 per cent; white-collar workers, 53.1 per cent; manual workers, 1.7 per cent.
- Union B. By gender: men, 58.0 per cent; women 42.0 per cent. By sector: industry, 43.9 per cent; public sector, 28.1 per cent; private sector services

28.0 per cent. By occupation: white-collar staff, 16.5 per cent; white-collar workers, 15.8 per cent; manual workers, 67.7 per cent.

- Union C. By gender: men, 26.7 per cent; women 73.3 per cent. By sector: industry, 3.6 per cent; public sector, 88.1 per cent; private sector services 8.3 per cent. By occupation: white-collar staff, 44.2 per cent; white-collar workers, 22.0 per cent; manual workers, 33.8 per cent.

As the number of respondents from union A in manual occupations and union C in industry is very small, these categories are disregarded in the analysis that follows.

### **REASONS FOR LEAVING**

The aggregate results on leaving are illustrated in Figures 1, 2 and 3. In essence, there are three broad categories of union leavers: those that had left due to a change in their job situation, which includes retired, made redundant, union membership harmed my promotion prospects (hereafter, promotion prospects), and changed job and union was not recognised/present at my new workplace (hereafter, changed job); those that had left due to dissatisfaction with the union; and those had left for another reason. From the outset, it is apparent that there are marked variations in the pattern of leaving from the three unions. In particular, aggregated changes in job situation accounted for 66.0 per cent of leavers from union A, but only 54.3 per cent from union C and 51.7 per cent from union B.

INSERT FIGURES 1, 2 and 3

Among the four sub-categories of changes in job situation, the only issue that was consistent in effect across the three unions was ‘promotion prospects’, which was cited by less than one per cent of leavers throughout. In contrast, ‘changed job’ accounted for between 13.3 per cent and 21.6 per cent of leavers. The proportion of leavers due to ‘changed job’ is directly related to the proportion of union membership

in the private sector. The proportion of union leavers that cited 'changed job' was lowest in union C, which had the fewest members in the private sector. No doubt, the lower density rates in both industry and private sector services have a marked effect on the impact of 'changed job'.

The proportion of leavers that cited redundancy as the reason for leaving varies from 6.8 per cent in union C to 24.6 per cent in union A. As with 'changed job', there is a direct relationship between the impact of redundancy and the proportion of a union's membership employed in the private sector. Union A was particularly susceptible to the impact of private sector restructuring and the associated loss of jobs and members because the union was concentrated in a single industry and among employers where restructuring has been wide-ranging and long-term.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, redundancy in the public sector-dominated union C was less influential, reflecting the relative employment stability in the sector.

Employment stability in the public sector also appears to influence the proportion of union leavers that had retired. In union C retirees comprised a third of all union leavers, which is about double the rate in union A and union B. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of retirees that left union C had done so when they had reached the formal retirement age (women, 60 years; men, 65 years), suggesting a degree of employment stability and continuity. In contrast, a substantial number of the retirees from union A had retired prior to formal retirement age, indicating that they had taken some form of early retirement package offered in conjunction with the extensive restructuring in the industry organised by union A.

Dissatisfaction with the performance of their unions is widespread among leavers. The extent of dissatisfaction varies markedly across the three unions. No fewer than 17.8 per cent of leavers from relatively homogeneous union A cited

dissatisfaction, whereas 33.8 per cent and 29.4 per cent of leavers from the more heterogeneous unions B and C cited dissatisfaction as the principal reason for leaving. Expressed as a proportion of the annual turnover rates of the three unions, these proportions equate to a total of 77,728 members per year who leave the three unions because they are dissatisfied with some aspect of union performance. The large proportions of leavers who cite dissatisfaction as the reason for leaving suggest that union renewal in these cases is some way off. Furthermore, considerable numbers of the leavers who provided details for ‘another reason’ did so in terms of dissatisfaction with the performance of the union over a specific event, thus indicating that the extent of dissatisfaction mentioned above is likely to be the lower limit of a range.<sup>5</sup>

Figures 4, 5 and 6 illustrate the pattern of leaving by reference to the sex of the respondent. The variations between unions mentioned above are largely replicated in the gender breakdown. While there are no consistent gender effects regarding promotion prospects and retirement, there are several points where there is an apparent gender effect. Women, for example, are more likely than men to leave because they changed job and to cite ‘another reason’. Why more women than men cite changed job remains a puzzle. Among the women that specified ‘another reason’ for leaving, large numbers mentioned that taking maternity leave or a career break underpinned their leaving the union.

INSERT FIGURES 4, 5 AND 6

Men are more likely than women to state that they had left the union because they had been made redundant. In the two unions with significant private sector membership, 4.0 per cent (union A) and 7.5 per cent (union B) more men than women cited redundancy. In the three unions men were also more likely to mention dissatisfaction with the union as a reason for joining than were their female

counterparts. The accentuation of dissatisfaction among men is consistent with earlier findings (see Waddington and Kerr 1999b).

The variation in the pattern of leaving by occupation and sector within each union is illustrated by the two panels of Table 1. In each of the unions there are marked variations in the manner of union leaving by occupation. White-collar staff were more likely than white-collar workers to leave union A because they had been made redundant. In contrast, white-collar workers from union A were more likely than white-collar staff to have changed jobs, suggesting that clerical grades are more interchangeable in the current labour market than managerial grades. The impact of retirement, promotion prospects and dissatisfaction with the union were similar across the two occupational groups.

#### INSERT TABLE 1

Union B comprises members from three occupational groups and three sectors. Retirement accounted for a larger proportion of leavers among white-collar workers and manual workers than among white-collar staff, who, in turn, were most likely to have left union B due to a change in job. The relationship between leaving, changed job and white-collar staff in union B thus contrasts with that in union A where white-collar staff were the least likely to have left because of changed job. No significant differences in the pattern of leaving due to promotion prospects, redundancy or dissatisfaction with the union are apparent across the three occupational groups. The pattern of leaving union B also varies by sector, indicating that sector effects remain in place irrespective of the union. In particular, the proportion of leavers citing retirement ranges from 11.1 per cent in industry through 17.4 per cent in private sector services to 27.6 per cent in the public sector. Redundancy, in contrast, affects only about 9 per cent of leavers from the public sector and private sector services,

whereas no fewer than 35.1 per cent of leavers from industry had been made redundant, reflecting the continuing effect of restructuring on union membership. The impact of changed job in union B was most marked in private sector services, suggesting that the impact of higher rates of job turnover in private sector services require different approaches to union organisation. There is also a wide range of dissatisfaction by sector with leavers from industry less likely to cite dissatisfaction than leavers from the public sector, who, in turn are less likely to cite dissatisfaction than their counterparts from private sector services. Dissatisfaction with union B is thus inversely related to the strength of union organisation. Even in industry, however, the sector least affected by dissatisfaction in union B, there was a larger proportion of dissatisfied leavers than from the more homogeneous union A.

Manual workers from union C were more likely to cite retirement as the reason for leaving than either white-collar staff or white-collar workers, but were the least likely to cite dissatisfaction with the union as the reason for leaving. Irrespective of occupation, leavers from union C were relatively unaffected by redundancy compared to their counterparts from unions A and B, illustrating the effects of membership concentration in the public sector. As a corollary, retirement accounts for over a third of leavers in the public sector from union C. Whereas in union B dissatisfaction as a reason for leaving the union was more pronounced in the relatively weakly organised private sector services, this situation is not replicated in union C where the rates of dissatisfaction were similar in the public sector and private sector services. The reason for the similarity is that the overwhelming majority of the members in private sector services organised by union C work in privatised services that were formerly part of the private sector and were relatively well organised. In contrast, union B organises segments of private sector services that are sparsely

unionised with poorly developed networks of representatives. The high rates of dissatisfaction among leavers from union C, however, calls into question Fairbrother's (1994a; 1994b) argument that union renewal is in evidence in the public sector and in privatised services.

To summarise, there is evidence of widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of the three participating unions, reflected in the pattern of union leaving. The lowest level of dissatisfaction as a reason for leaving was 17.8 per cent, found in the most homogeneous of the three unions. The rate of dissatisfaction within the more heterogeneous unions rose to around 30 per cent. It should be noted, however, that the pattern of leaving is not simply a function of membership heterogeneity. The pattern of leaving varies by sex, with men more likely to cite dissatisfaction with the union than women, by occupation and by sector. The variation in the extent of dissatisfaction between and within unions raises the question: what aspects of union performance promote the dissatisfaction experienced by union leavers? It is to this question that we now turn.

### **THE LEAVERS WHO WERE DISSATISFIED WITH THEIR UNIONS**

This section examines the leavers who were dissatisfied with their union in two stages. Initially, it identifies the sources of their dissatisfaction with union performance. The section then examines the choices regarding unionism made by the leavers after their departure from union A, B or C and the factors that might encourage them to re-join. Occupational differences in the sources of dissatisfaction between and within unions were marginal. Results on occupation are thus not presented in this section.

From the outset two points are worth noting. First, the median length of membership among the dissatisfied leavers differed markedly. Leavers dissatisfied with union A had been in membership between 10 and 11 years, whereas the median

length of membership among their counterparts from union B was between 2.5 and 3 years and union C was between 5.5 and 6 years. It thus appears that dissatisfaction with union A was the result of events that prompted relatively long-standing members to leave. In contrast, leavers from union C and, particularly, union B were more likely to have failed to establish a long-term commitment to the union.<sup>6</sup> Second, there was no significant impact of prior union involvement on the dissatisfied leavers.

Respondents were asked to specify whether they had held a representative position within the union, regularly attended branch meetings, voted in union elections or only attended branch meetings on special occasions. While the proportion of dissatisfied leavers that had been involved in these four forms of union activity varied between the three unions, there was no relation between this variation and the sources of dissatisfaction that prompted members to leave. Advocates of the organising model suggest that commitment to the union may be generated by involvement. The absence of any relationship between union involvement and the sources of dissatisfaction with the unions indicates that, at the very least, there are limits to the commitment to the union generated by involvement defined along these four dimensions.

#### Why were the Leavers Dissatisfied with their Unions?

Tables 2, 3 and 4 illustrate the responses of those who had left the three unions because they were dissatisfied, to the question; ‘why were you dissatisfied with the union?’. Respondents were asked to complete all options of the question. The ‘ratio’ score was calculated by subtracting the ‘not very important’ and ‘not at all important’ scores from the sum of the ‘very important’ and ‘fairly important’ scores. The more positive the ratio score, the greater the degree of dissatisfaction with the union.

INSERT FIGURES 2, 3 and 4

Comparing the ratio scores of the dissatisfied leavers of the three unions reveals generally lower scores in union A than union C, which, in turn, tend to be lower than in union B. The higher ratio scores in unions B and C are thus consistent with the argument that dissatisfaction is more intense in the more heterogeneous unions. It is also apparent that the same three sources of dissatisfaction occupy the top three positions in the ranking, albeit in a different order, in each of the three unions. Two of these three sources of dissatisfaction are directly related to union performance: ‘representatives did not contact me’ and ‘not enough help was given to members with problems’. These two sources of dissatisfaction occupied the first two positions in the ranking for the more heterogeneous unions B and C, and positions two and three in union A. Given the vast range of evidence in Britain demonstrating that new members join trade unions and existing members stay in unions because they require ‘support from their union if they have a problem at work’ (Kerr 1992; Sapper 1991; Waddington and Kerr 1999a; Waddington and Whitston 1997), it is predictable that if such support is not forthcoming members will be dissatisfied and leave. The point remains, however, that inadequacies of union performance are the source of much of member dissatisfaction.

‘Too little was done to improve pay and conditions’, which appeared at the top of the ranking in union A and at position three in unions B and C, clearly embraces more than the union in so far as employers have to yield pay increases. Given the intensity of the restructuring and job losses in the industry organised by union A (see Figure 1), it is perhaps no surprise that employers had been able to resist larger pay increases. What is clear, however, is that in each of the three unions a failure to secure larger pay increases was a significant source of dissatisfaction.

After position three in the ranking there is considerable variation in the positioning of the different sources of dissatisfaction. Two other sources of dissatisfaction with union performance are prominent in the rankings for the three unions: 'the union did not do enough on health and safety' and 'little or no information was provided'. Again, these are 'basic' trade union issues that are long-standing within any trade union agenda, rather than being 'new' issues on which trade unionists need to develop a position, suggesting that the source of dissatisfaction is the quality of union 'delivery'. Given the extensive network of health and safety representatives sustained by the three unions and the legal support available on health and safety, the prominence of this issue as a source of dissatisfaction should be a matter of considerable concern from the union perspective.

Three issues directly address the capacity of the unions to mobilise members and partnership. The high negative ratio scores attached to 'I did not wish to participate in industrial action' indicate no reluctance among the leavers to participate in industrial action if circumstances required. In other words, the leavers did not object to being mobilised. The influence of partnership was mixed. In union A, for example, 'the union was too close to the employer' was a greater source of dissatisfaction than 'the union was unwilling to co-operate with the employer to solve problems at work', suggesting that closer relations with employers in the form of partnership are more likely to stimulate members to leave the union. In contrast, leavers from unions B and C emphasised the unions' unwillingness to co-operate with employers as a source of dissatisfaction rather than proximity to employers. Leavers from unions B and C thus appeared to favour closer partnerships with employers than existed at the time of their departure.

Significant differences between the unions are also apparent regarding the impact of the cost of membership. Whereas in unions B and C the cost of membership received a negative ratio score, indicating that it was not seen as a source of widespread dissatisfaction, in union A the cost of membership appeared at position four in the ranking and was a source of considerable dissatisfaction. Membership subscriptions had been raised in all three unions in the years prior to the distribution of the surveys. It would thus appear that the issue of membership contributions was more politically sensitive in union A than elsewhere. This sensitivity may also have contributed to more long-standing members forming the leavers' cohort in union A compared to those of unions B and C. It also highlights the difficulties faced by smaller unions in achieving economies of scale and thus limiting increases in membership subscriptions.

Although Table 5 shows that the responses disaggregated by sex follow the pattern identified in Table 4, there are some marked variations in the sources of dissatisfaction between the sexes. A consistent gender effect is apparent on four sources of dissatisfaction; 'I did not wish to participate in industrial action', 'membership was too expensive', 'representatives did not contact me' and 'the union did not do enough on health and safety'. The issue of industrial action was marginal as a source of dissatisfaction throughout the unions, although women consistently assigned the issue lower negative scores than their male counterparts. Similarly, the expense of membership was marginal in unions B and C, but more central as a source of dissatisfaction in union A. In all three unions, however, women reported greater dissatisfaction than men with the expense of membership, perhaps due to the lower levels of pay women tend to receive. This argument would have been on firmer ground had women consistently emphasised that the unions was doing 'too little to

improve pay and conditions'. Men in both unions B and C, however, were more likely than their female counterparts to cite pay and conditions as a source of dissatisfaction.

#### INSERT TABLE 5

Women were also more dissatisfied than men regarding both contact with representatives and the health and safety provision made available through the union. The absence of contact between representatives and women members is clearly a significant policy issue for the three unions. Although the three unions had implemented policies to increase the number of women full-time officers and lay representatives, the absence of contact reported by women indicates that either large numbers of women unionists work at workplaces not visited by union representatives or are more likely to be ignored by representatives when the latter visit the workplaces where women work. Both of these options are likely to be contributory factors to an explanation. The absence of contact reported by men and, particularly, women, however, indicates the extent of change that is required if unions are to renew. Similar arguments apply to the issue of health and safety, which is also cited as a source of dissatisfaction by more women than men. Given the extensive networks of health and safety representatives maintained by the three unions and the legal support that underpins their activities, there should be no reason to expect a lower level of health and safety provision for women. Explanations could include less developed networks where women are employed, a reduced emphasis on health and safety matters of specific concern to women or higher expectations among women on health and safety standards.

When describing the systems of government of the three unions, we noted the more extensive measures intended to promote the participation and involvement of women in union C compared to those of unions A and B. Table 5 illustrates that

dissatisfied women leavers from unions A and B were more likely to cite ‘I was unable to influence union decisions’ than were their male counterparts whereas the opposite was the case in union C. Moreover, the rate of dissatisfaction among women leavers was much lower in union C (7.2) compared to that in union A (19.1) and union B (19.8). In other words, it would appear that the system of government in union C based on proportionality was successful in involving more women in decision-making. This system, however, has not had a noticeable effect on the number of women from union C that cited ‘representatives did not contact me’, which remained higher than among the men and comparable to that in the other two unions.

Table 6 shows the reasons for dissatisfaction disaggregated by sector and illustrates the influence of sector and union on the pattern of member dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction with union B arising from issues associated with support and information was most pronounced in the weakly organised private sector services. For example, the ratio scores are higher in private sector services than industry or the public sector regarding the help given to members with problems, health and safety provisions, information and the capacity to influence union decisions. Similarly, in union C leavers employed in the minority private sector services were more dissatisfied than their public sector counterparts regarding contact with representatives, health and safety provisions and information. In other words, where workplace organisation is least well developed in the two unions, member dissatisfaction is most pronounced.

INSERT TABLE 6

Public sector leavers from unions B and C were less likely to cite ‘too little was done to improve pay and conditions’ than their counterparts from either industry or private sector services. There was, however, no consistent relationship between

unions B and C and the proximity to or distance from employers across the sectors, suggesting that the different policies pursued by the unions influences perceptions of employers.

### The Views of the Dissatisfied Leavers towards Unions

Does dissatisfaction with the performance of one union result in a reluctance to join another union? The average age of the dissatisfied leavers (union A, 42-43; union B, 41-42; union C, 45-46), indicating that they had the opportunity to join another union if they so chose. The proportions that did so, however, were relatively small (union A, 11.3 per cent; union B, 24.1 per cent; union C, 27.1 per cent). Dissatisfaction with one union would thus appear to dissuade most leavers from joining another union. The marked discrepancy between the rate of joining another union among the dissatisfied leavers of union A compared to those of unions B and C is also likely to have been influenced by the wider range of competing unions available to leavers from unions B and C. In other words, the relative absence of unions that compete with union A and, thus, other unions that the leavers might join, is likely to have restricted the rate of joining another union.

Very few of the dissatisfied leavers had been asked by union representatives to stay in the union (union A, 9.2 per cent; union B, 7.5 per cent; union C, 8.2 per cent). Procedures in the three unions thus could be usefully improved to ensure higher rates of contact between leavers and representatives. Contact would be most effective shortly after the member had left. At present, however, it might take several months before a leaver is removed from the membership register. Such a time lag effectively eliminates the utility of representatives making contact with leavers. Bearing this point in mind, Table 7 reports the reasons that leavers who had not joined another union suggested might stimulate them to re-join the union they had recently left. It

thus presents the case that the representative might make to the leaver in an attempt to persuade him/her to re-join. The question on re-joining was not included in the leavers' survey conducted with union B, hence the union is excluded from Table 7. In addition, Table 7 reports the reasons why members of unions A and C retain their union membership.<sup>7</sup>

#### INSERT TABLE 7

From the outset, it is apparent that most of the reasons listed in Table 7 are marginal to both re-joining and retention. Furthermore, the order of the reasons for re-joining and retention remains similar. This confirms the basic result of this study; that is, members want support from their union and if support is not forthcoming some members will leave. The provision of support to members with problems at work and in securing improvements to their terms and conditions of employment is central to re-joining and retention. In union A improvements to the terms and conditions of employment assume relatively greater importance to re-joining than to retention. Similarly, and continuing the theme raised earlier, the issue of membership contributions is more prominent in union A than in union C. It is also noteworthy that no fewer than 25.1 per cent of dissatisfied leavers subscribed to at least one element of the package of financial services offered by union A, demonstrating the ineffectiveness of such services as a means of raising rates of retention.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

A majority of leavers from each of the three unions left because of some change to their employment circumstances. The strategic advantages of organising the public sector are evident in so far as the low rates of redundancy and changed job ensure that members, once recruited, are likely to retain their membership until retirement. A significant proportion of leavers do so because they are dissatisfied with the

performance of the union. In the three unions that participated in this study the extent of dissatisfaction ranged from 17.8 per cent to 33.8 per cent. Union, gender and sector influenced the extent of dissatisfaction. In broad terms, the more heterogeneous the membership of the union the greater the likelihood of leavers citing dissatisfaction with the performance of the union, and men are more likely to cite dissatisfaction as a reason for leaving than are women. More specifically concerning sector, the highest rates of dissatisfaction in union B were found in private sector services where the union was attempting to build organisation rather than in either industry or the public sector where union B had long-standing organisation and relatively dense networks of workplace representatives. The sources of dissatisfaction are fairly constant across the three unions. In particular, the three unions were weak in ensuring contact between members and representatives, in providing assistance to members with problems and in improving pay and conditions. These 'traditional' trade union issues figure large in both the reasons for staying in a union and the reasons that might entice the leavers to re-join. Thus, integral to trade union renewal must be improvements in these areas.

The extent of dissatisfaction among the leavers of the three participating unions indicates that union renewal is some way off. More specifically, the high rates of dissatisfaction among the leavers from unions B and C employed in the public sector and from union C employed in private sector services suggests that the renewal observed by Fairbrother is, at best, localised. Both partnership and organising are directed towards improving the performance of unions at the workplace. As such, the two strategies have the potential to reduce member dissatisfaction and thus the number of members that leave. Improvements in the links between representatives and members, the health and safety provision and assistance to members with problems are certainly emphasised within the organising approach (Russo and Banks

1996; Heery *et al* 2000). Similarly, improvements in the provision of information and the number of workplace representatives are intended as an outcome of partnership (Brown 2000; Terry 2003). The findings on co-operation with and proximity to the employer, however, are ambiguous regarding the likely impact of more extensive partnership arrangements. Irrespective of whether partnership or organising approaches are adopted, improvements in the provision of workplace support are required by women, particularly in the areas of contact with representatives and regarding health and safety provisions.

As in most industrialised countries, unions in Britain are engaged in an extensive process of restructuring through mergers. This process has been encouraged by, and has received long-standing support from, the TUC (1947; 1963; 1999). In the absence of the constitutional authority to impose a structure on British unionism, the encouragement and support offered by the TUC has focused on the establishment of larger trade unions and issues associated with increasing membership heterogeneity have been downplayed. Within TUC-affiliated unions the political advantages of larger relative membership size, coupled to the absence of an overriding 'logic' to the merger process, such as industrial unionism, has resulted in many of the larger unions organising increasingly heterogeneous memberships. Furthermore, in several unions increasing membership heterogeneity is concurrent with membership decline, thus generating enormous financial and political tensions within unions.

The results presented here highlight the problems of a strategy based on trade union restructuring by mergers and call into question the efficiency of unions with heterogeneous memberships. In particular, increasing membership heterogeneity is associated with a larger proportion of union leavers departing due to dissatisfaction with aspects of union performance. Moreover, the intensity of dissatisfaction with

aspects of union performance is more pronounced in heterogeneous unions. The performance of large, heterogeneous unions is thus far from 'super', as some would have us believe. Three points regarding systems of union government and financial management arise from the above. First, the sections operated by unions B and C do not appear to mitigate markedly the impact of membership heterogeneity on dissatisfaction. Second, the introduction of new forms of representation and participation as part of the merger process may reduce member dissatisfaction, as illustrated by the results from women in union C. Third, and in contradiction to the above, the sensitivity of members in union A to the rising cost of contributions indicate that the smaller size of the union may have precluded the achievement of economies of scale and thus contributed to member dissatisfaction.

What do these results tell us about renewal? It is apparent that renewal is about more than recruiting new members. A comprehensive strategy for retention is integral to union renewal. The results also demonstrate that many trade unionists are isolated at their place of work. Many leavers, for example, mention that they were not contacted by the union, received little or no information from the union and were unable to influence union decision-making. In other words, a further key feature of renewal is the regeneration of articulated union structures and activities whereby links between members and the wider union are established or intensified. If restructuring through mergers is to continue, and there is no reason to suggest that it will not, wide-ranging reform of union government is required as an integral element of the merger process and as a means to reduce the adverse effects arising from increasing membership heterogeneity. Integral to this reform is the recognition that the circumstances and requirements of members of industry, the public sector and private

sector services very markedly, thus necessitating different approaches to union government and policy.

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**FOOTNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup>. Of course, advocates of both partnership and organising would also argue that the extension of the coverage of trade unions is paramount to any future renewal. As the concern here lies primarily with union leavers; that is, members leaving the union while employed at unionised workplaces, the issue of extending the union coverage is not addressed in this article.

<sup>2</sup>. It should be acknowledged that unions in Denmark, Finland and Sweden offer extensive services to the unemployed in the form of management of unemployment insurance or benefit schemes. In consequence, the relationship in these three countries between unemployment and union leaving differs significantly from that in the UK (see Jørgensen *et al.* 1992).

<sup>3</sup>. There is a long-standing tradition of unions with distinct industrial sections in Britain. These sections may be called trade groups, service groups, sectors or a range of other titles. The term section is used throughout this paper to protect the anonymity of the participating unions.

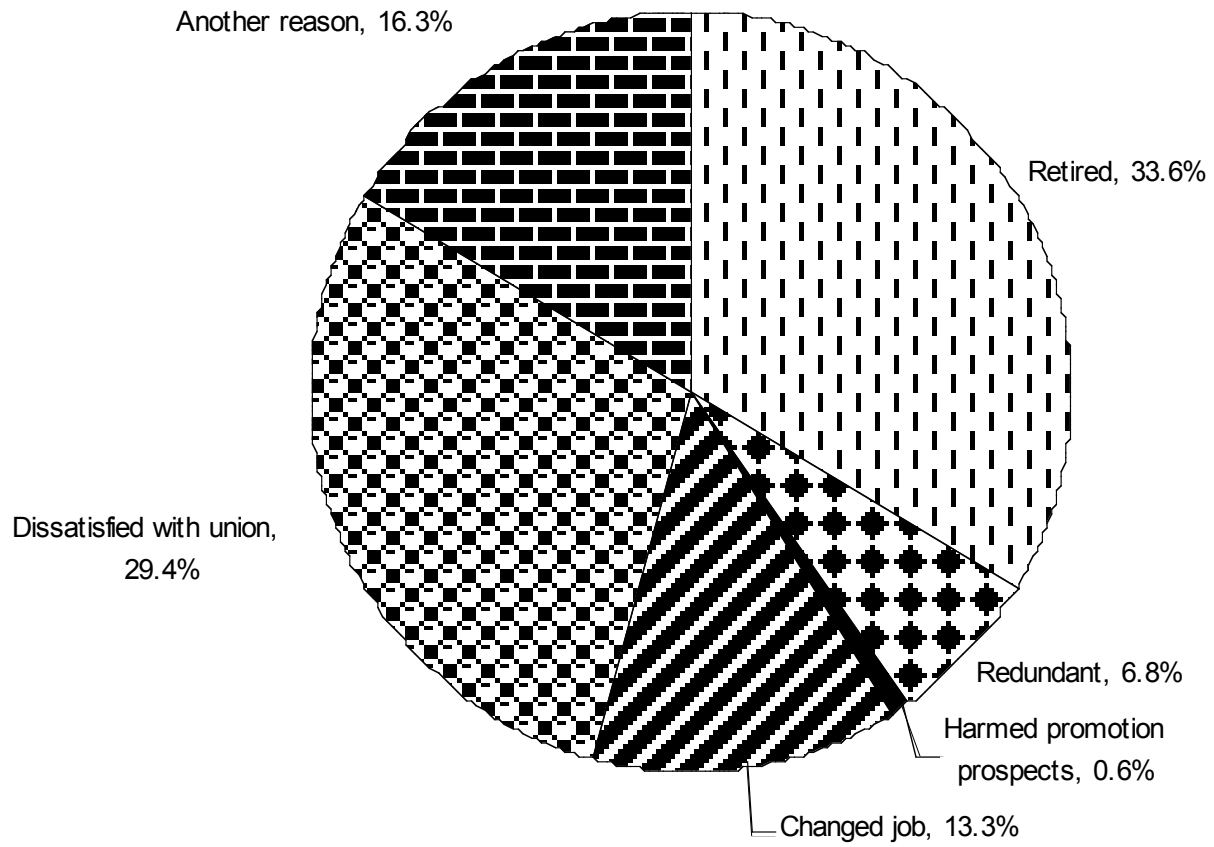
<sup>4</sup>. An earlier unpublished survey of leavers from union A conducted by the author, for example, produced a very similar result, with redundancy accounting for almost one quarter of leavers.

<sup>5</sup>. Comments such as ‘the union did nothing when X [a member] was unfairly treated’ and ‘I have never seen a union representative at my workplace’ are commonplace in the detail of ‘another reason’. In other words, a proportion of the responses presented here as ‘another reason’ could plausibly be allocated to the ‘dissatisfied with the performance of the union’ category.

<sup>6</sup>. A complementary series of hitherto unpublished surveys of members of the three unions, also conducted by the author, indicated the median length of membership to be: union A, 13-14 years; union B, 6.5-7.0 years; and union C, 11-12 years. In other words, the median length of membership of the leavers from the three unions was shorter than that of members and markedly so in unions B and C.

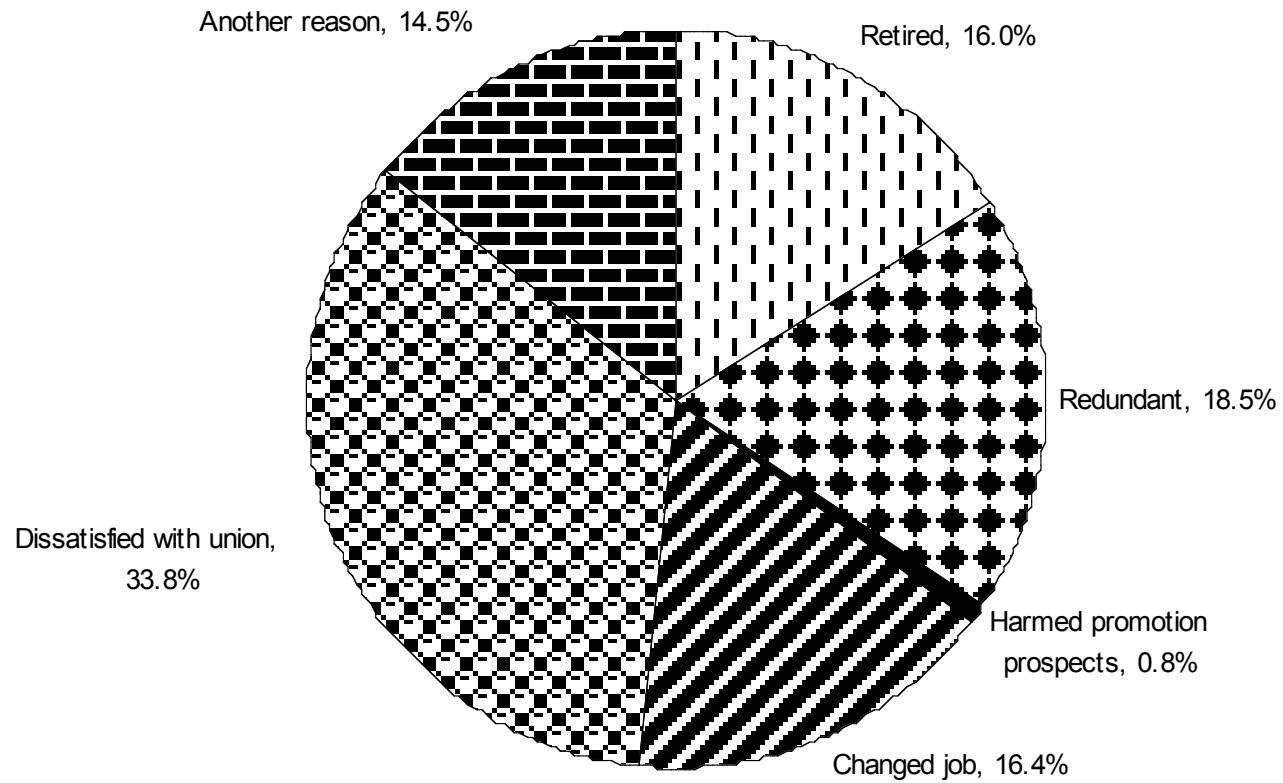
<sup>7</sup>. The two surveys of members were conducted within the same time period as the surveys of leavers.

**Figure 3: Union C  
All Leavers**



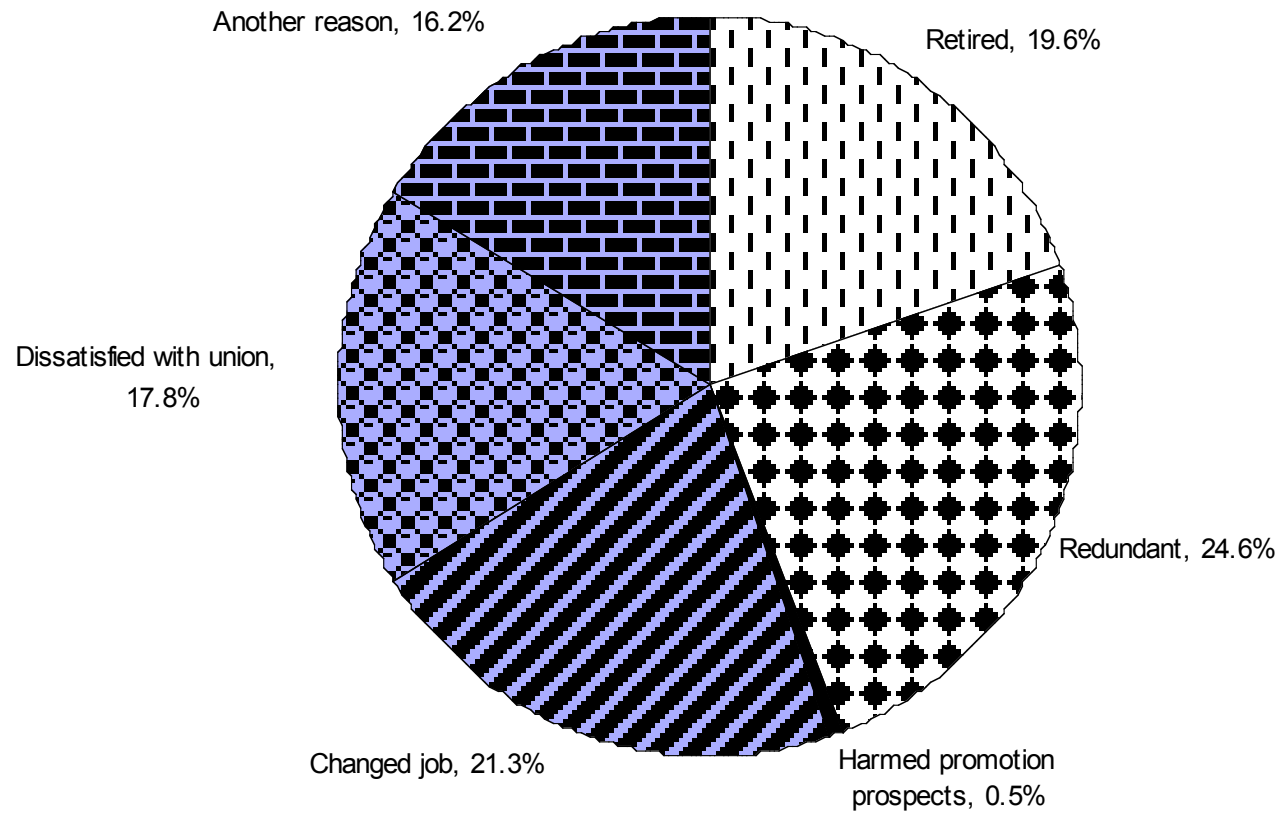
**N = 1,842**

**Figure 2: Union B  
All Leavers**



**N = 1,201**

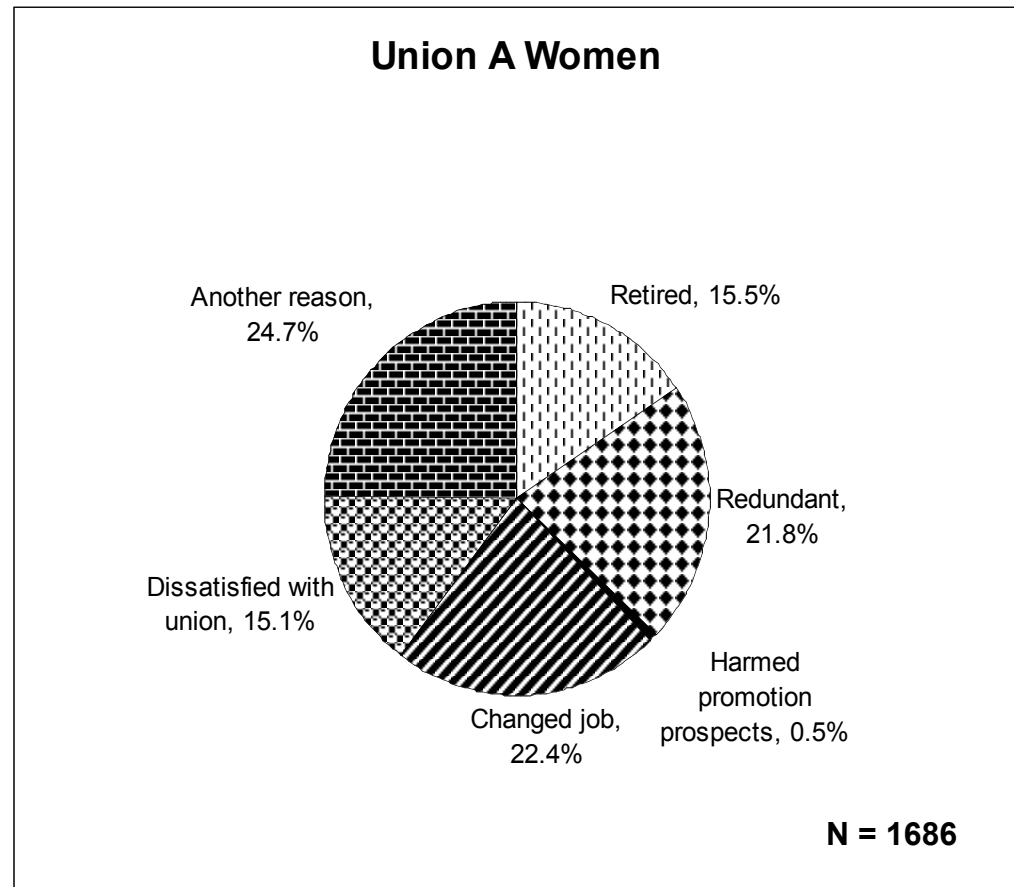
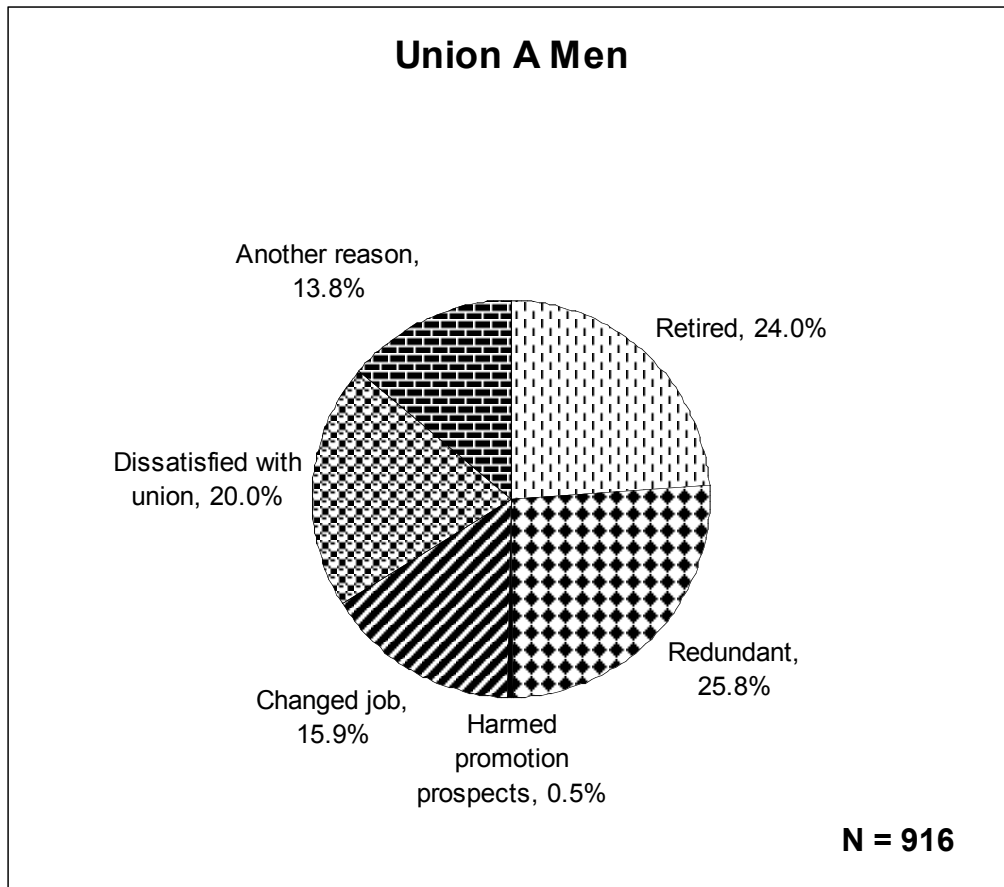
**Figure 1: Union A  
All Leavers**



**N = 2,602**

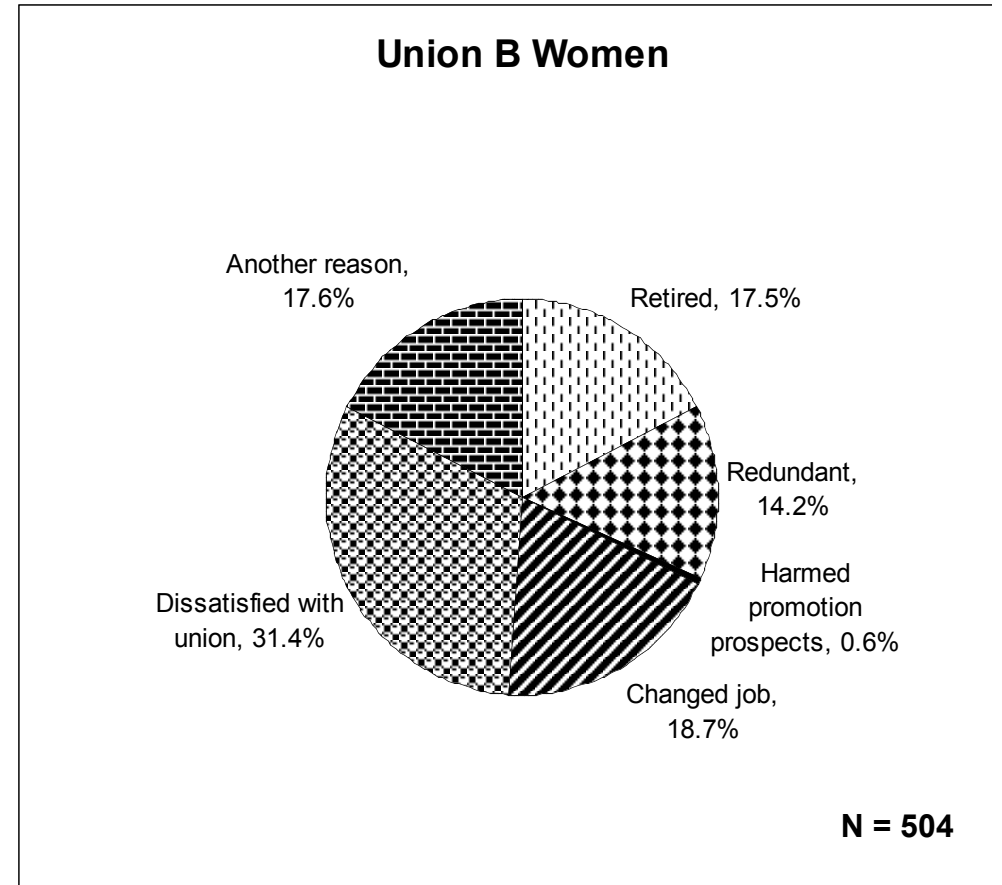
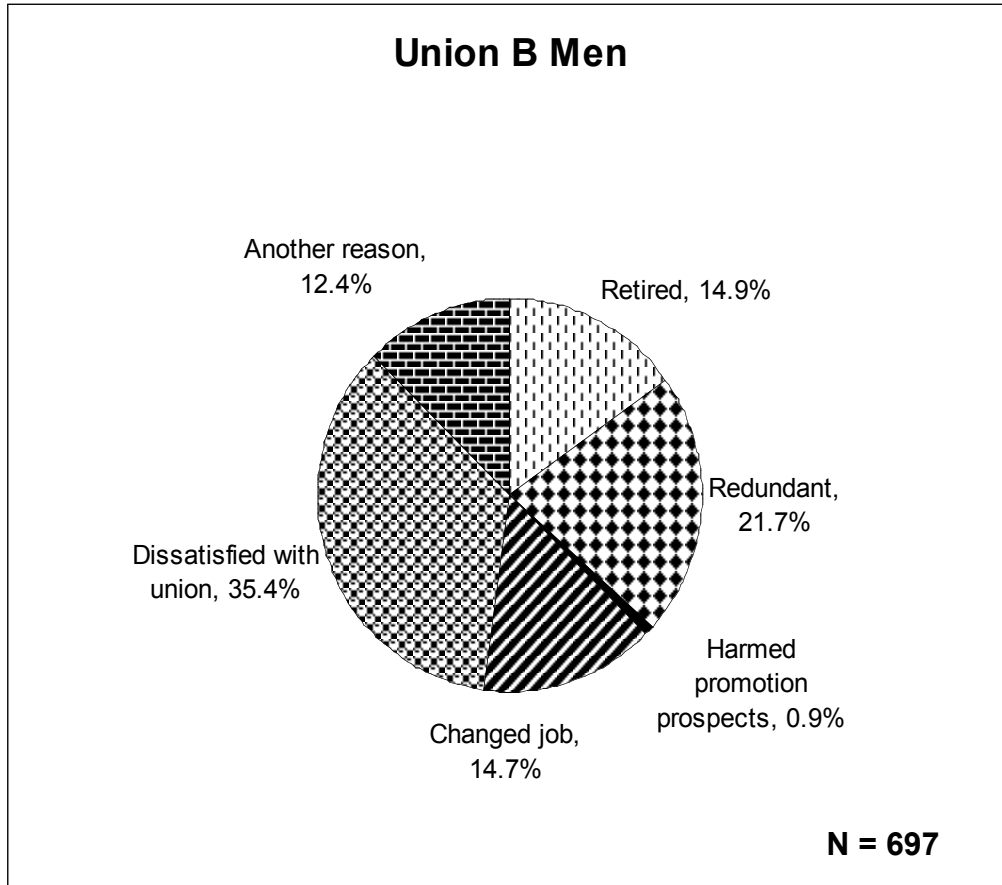
**Figure 4.**

**Union A: Leavers by gender**



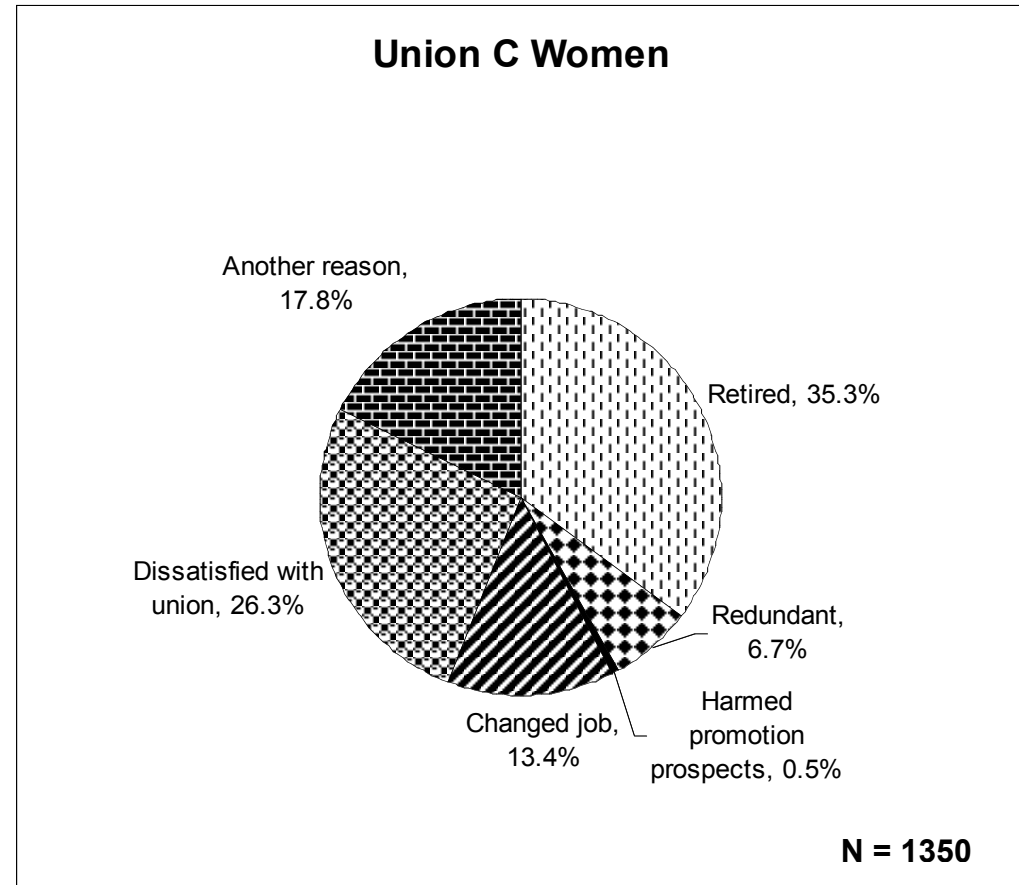
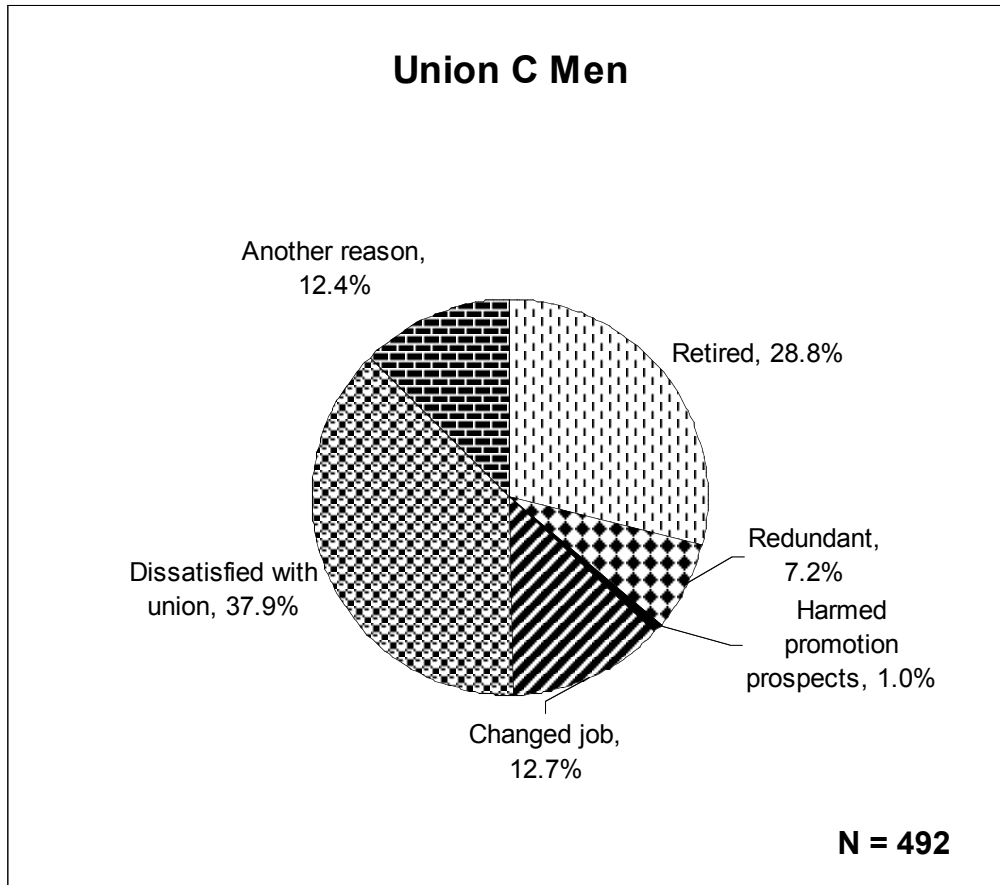
**Figure 5.**

**Union B: Leavers by Gender**



**Figure 6.**

**Union C: Leavers by Gender**



**TABLE 2****WHY WERE YOU DISSATISFIED WITH THE UNION?****UNION A**

	<b>Very important %</b>	<b>Fairly important %</b>	<b>Neutral %</b>	<b>Not very important %</b>	<b>Not at all important %</b>	<b>Ratio</b>
Too little was done to improve pay and conditions	57.8	17.2	10.2	2.3	12.5	+60.2
Representatives did not contact me	47.5	19.4	13.8	2.6	16.7	+47.6
Not enough help given to members with problems	52.8	10.7	13.4	3.3	19.7	+40.5
Membership was too expensive	37.9	25.3	13.2	4.4	19.1	+39.7
The union did not do enough on health and safety	35.5	14.7	20.5	3.6	25.7	+20.9
The union was too close to the employer	38.1	12.1	18.2	5.9	25.7	+18.6
I was unable to influence union decisions	28.3	15.0	24.5	4.2	28.0	+11.1
Little or no information was provided	26.3	13.2	27.3	8.9	24.3	+6.3
The union was unwilling to cooperate with the employer to solve problems at work	22.9	14.2	25.1	6.5	31.3	-0.7
I did not wish to participate in industrial action	10.7	5.7	28.6	5.7	49.3	-38.6

N=463

Note: These data are based only on the respondents who stated that their reason for leaving was dissatisfaction with some aspect of union organisation or activity.

**TABLE 3****WHY WERE YOU DISSATISFIED WITH THE UNION?****UNION B**

	<b>Very important %</b>	<b>Fairly important %</b>	<b>Neutral %</b>	<b>Not very important %</b>	<b>Not at all important %</b>	<b>Ratio</b>
Representatives did not contact me	67.0	14.1	10.6	1.8	6.6	+72.7
Not enough help given to members with problems	67.1	11.7	6.3	2.3	12.6	+63.9
Too little was done to improve pay and conditions	56.9	13.8	16.0	1.8	11.6	+57.3
Little or no information was provided	54.2	14.6	12.7	5.7	12.7	+50.4
The union did not do enough on health and safety	48.6	14.4	16.8	2.9	17.3	+42.8
The union was unwilling to cooperate with the employer to solve problems at work	40.2	15.1	22.6	5.5	16.6	+33.2
The union was too close to the employer	43.8	6.5	12.4	5.5	31.8	+13.0
I was unable to influence union decisions	27.1	11.7	31.9	6.9	22.3	+9.6
Membership was too expensive	19.7	13.3	21.7	5.4	39.9	-12.3
I did not wish to participate in industrial action	7.6	5.9	27.6	5.4	53.5	-45.4

N=406

Note: These data are based only on the respondents who stated that their reason for leaving was dissatisfaction with some aspect of union organisation or activity.

**TABLE 4****WHY WERE YOU DISSATISFIED WITH THE UNION?****UNION C**

	<b>Very important %</b>	<b>Fairly important %</b>	<b>Neutral %</b>	<b>Not very important %</b>	<b>Not at all important %</b>	<b>Ratio</b>
Not enough help given to members with problems	59.2	15.0	14.6	2.7	8.5	+63.0
Representatives did not contact me	52.1	20.5	14.0	5.8	7.5	+59.3
Too little was done to improve pay and conditions	50.3	20.3	14.5	6.2	8.6	+55.8
The union did not do enough on health and safety	36.3	19.4	22.7	6.2	15.4	+34.1
The union was unwilling to cooperate with the employer to solve problems at work	32.7	18.6	26.4	5.9	16.4	+29.0
Little or no information was provided	32.7	19.1	20.1	9.4	18.7	+23.7
The union was too close to the employer	32.2	12.0	24.6	6.9	24.3	+13.0
I was unable to influence union decisions	24.0	16.0	33.1	7.2	19.8	+13.0
Membership was too expensive	18.2	17.5	23.0	6.2	35.0	-5.5
I did not wish to participate in industrial action	18.0	10.7	26.8	7.7	36.8	-15.8

N=542

Note: These data are based only on the respondents who stated that their reason for leaving was dissatisfaction with some aspect of union organisation or activity.

**TABLE 5****WHY WERE YOU DISSATISFIED WITH THE UNION?**

	Union A Men	Union A Women	Union B Men	Union B Women	Union C Men	Union C Women
Not enough help given to members with problems	36.0	44.7	64.7	62.8	65.0	61.8
Representatives did not contact me	38.9	54.6	68.1	79.8	52.4	62.9
Too little was done to improve pay and conditions	55.7	63.9	61.7	49.9	61.0	53.1
The union did not do enough on health and safety	7.1	32.8	34.9	55.0	28.8	37.0
The union was unwilling to cooperate with the employer to solve problems at work	-11.1	9.3	34.4	31.1	29.6	28.7
Little or no information was provided	6.3	6.2	42.8	62.9	20.0	25.8
The union was too close to the employer	16.7	20.4	12.5	13.7	28.0	4.6
I was unable to influence union decisions	2.3	19.1	3.5	19.8	23.2	7.2
Membership was too expensive	29.7	48.1	-16.5	-5.3	-16.8	1.1
I did not wish to participate in industrial action	-52.9	-25.1	-49.1	-39.4	-32.6	-6.3

**Note:** only the ratio scores are reported in Table 5. See text for the method of calculation of the ratio scores.

**TABLE 7****WHAT WOULD PROMPT YOU TO RE-JOIN (STAY IN) THE UNION YOU RECENTLY LEFT?**

	<b>Union A Re-joining %</b>	<b>Union A Retention %</b>	<b>Union C Re-joining %</b>	<b>Union C Retention %</b>
Improvements in the support provided to members at their place of work	29.8	72.2	56.2	64.5
More help to improve pay and conditions	29.3	14.5	18.6	14.2
I believe in trade unions and want to take part	N.A.	10.8	N.A.	17.0
Reductions in the level of membership contributions	14.6	N.A.	6.2	N.A.
Improvements in member services	9.0	1.0	4.5	0.6
Improved union training and education	2.6	0.2	0.4	0.5
Improvement in the public campaigning of the union	2.4	0.3	1.7	0.5
Improvements in the range and quality of financial services	1.7	0.3	2.5	0.9
If more people at work were members I would re-join	1.6	0.6	2.1	0.9
Another reason	9.0	1.0	7.9	0.9
	N=411	N=2,291	N=395	N=1,952

**Source:** Data for ‘re-joining’ are drawn from the surveys of leavers. Data for retention are taken from the unpublished results of survey of members of unions A and C. For the re-joining question respondents were asked to provide one reason that might persuade them to re-join, whereas the members’ surveys required respondents to rank the different reasons in the order of importance to them. The results presented here refer to only the issues placed at position one in the ranking.

**Note:** N.A.: not asked.

**TABLE 1****LEAVING BY OCCUPATION**

	Retired %	Redundant %	Promotion prospects %	Changed job %	Aggregate changes to job situation %	Dissatisfied with the union %	Another reason %
Union A: white-collar staff (N=1,176)	19.3	31.0	0.5	17.3	69.1	17.5	14.3
Union B: white-collar staff (N=198)	10.7	19.5	1.3	20.8	52.3	31.5	16.2
Union C: white-collar staff (N=814)	30.7	8.0	0.3	13.7	52.7	30.7	16.6
Union A: white-collar workers (N=1,382)	19.4	19.9	0.7	25.5	65.5	16.3	18.3
Union B: white-collar workers (N=190)	20.1	18.0	2.1	13.7	53.9	31.7	14.4
Union C: white-collar workers (N=405)	30.1	10.0	0.4	15.3	55.8	31.3	12.9
Union B: manual workers (N=813)	17.5	22.5	1.1	16.9	58.0	29.8	12.2
Union C: manual workers (N=623)	37.0	3.8	1.3	12.5	54.6	26.9	18.5

**LEAVING BY SECTOR**

	Retired %	Redundant %	Promotion prospects %	Changed job %	Aggregate changes to job situation %	Dissatisfied with the union %	Another reason %
Union B: industry (N=527)	11.1	35.1	1.7	15.0	62.9	25.3	11.8
Union B: public sector (N=338)	27.6	8.8	2.8	14.7	53.9	31.3	14.8
Union C: public sector (N=1,623)	34.0	5.1	0.6	13.1	52.8	30.1	17.1
Union A: private sector services (N=2,602)	19.6	24.6	0.5	21.3	66.0	17.8	16.2
Union B: private sector services (N=336)	17.4	8.9	1.3	22.1	49.7	36.2	14.1
Union C: private sector services (N=153)	24.0	16.0	2.0	17.0	59.0	28.0	13.0

**TABLE 6**  
**WHY WERE YOU DISSATISFIED WITH THE UNION?**

	Union A Private Sector Services	Union B Industry	Union B Public Sector	Union B Private Sector Services	Union C Public Sector	Union C Private Sector Services
Not enough help given to members with problems	+40.5	+49.6	+59.1	+77.3	+64.3	+60.0
Representatives did not contact me	+47.6	+70.5	+75.0	+70.8	+54.5	+92.6
Too little was done to improve pay and conditions	+60.2	+68.9	+34.8	+64.8	+53.6	+65.4
The union did not do enough on health and safety	+20.9	+31.3	+27.9	+72.1	+35.0	+47.8
The union was unwilling to cooperate with the employer to solve problems at work	-0.7	+25.0	+30.0	+37.5	+32.6	-13.1
Little or no information was provided	+6.3	+49.4	+45.3	+58.9	+21.6	+32.0
The union was too close to the employer	+18.6	+11.2	-15.9	+32.7	+14.4	+8.1
I was unable to influence union decisions	+11.1	+11.9	-24.4	+31.5	+14.6	+0.1
Membership was too expensive	+39.7	-8.6	-30.8	-8.1	-8.3	+13.0
I did not wish to participate in industrial action	-38.6	-46.7	-62.2	-35.8	-13.6	-36.2
	N=463	N=172	N=104	N=130	N=493	N=49

**Note:** only the ratio scores are reported in Table 6. See text for the method of calculation of the ratio scores.