

# Trade Union Activism

## Survey Report and Recommendations

IRISH CONGRESS OF TRADE UNIONS  
YOUTH COMMITTEE

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# TRADE UNION ACTIVISM

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## Survey Report and Recommendations

### Background

The 2015-2017 programme of the ICTU Youth Committee identifies key areas for action targeting young workers and members which includes research, education, awareness raising, communications, organising and campaigning.

An important first step is to ascertain the views of those members we represent, to ensure they are consulted and that their key priorities are included in our work and good channels of communications are established with all members.

It was agreed, by the Committee, that we would seek information from all trade union members to identify their current levels of engagement, their propensity to act, understand their motivations, seek their opinions on how better the movement can be organised and learn about their concerns and their priorities.

### Who we are

The primary aim of the ICTU Youth Committee is to be the voice of all young workers and members, ensure youth issues are a priority within the trade union agenda and that the voice of youth is heard in all decision-making and policy planning fora.

As the voice of young workers, Congress Youth campaign on issues of particular concern to young people, workers and trade union members which include access to decent employment opportunities, better working conditions, an end to pay discrimination, improvements in job security, adequate housing, quality health care, accessible education and developing a more open inclusive and multi-cultural society in Ireland.

Congress Youth is an important link for young people within the movement as it plays an active role in advising the agenda of the Executive Council of Congress through its observer status on the Council. Congress Youth continues to strive to create a dynamic space in which young workers can engage more effectively with the movement, identify youth-specific issues of concern and ensure they are prioritised within the broader trade union agenda. On a collaborative basis it seeks to ensure that every generation has access to better opportunities, both in the workplace and in society and that decent work and decent conditions are a reality for all.

### Survey Aims

The aim of this research was to learn more about young workers' levels of engagement in the trade union movement, understand their motivations and propensity to participate, their ability to take action and their opinions on the shape and future of the movement.

The exercise itself will also provide information to the Committee on nature of access with members, the best channels of communications for engaging with them along with identifying their priority issues.

It is intended that the findings and recommendations from this research will inform the work programme of the Congress Committee.

## Methodology

A survey was designed by officers of the Committee using the online survey instrument, Poll Daddy, from which we could analyse information from the responses received.

The survey itself sought to identify levels of activism amongst young workers across a number of age profiles, their propensity to engage in union activities along with their views and opinions on the relevance of the movement to them and the future shape of the movement.

The survey was disseminated through representatives on the Youth Committee, in trade union journals, trade union websites and highlighted via various social media channels along with direct emails to affiliate networks.

A total of 14 questions were asked, 4 of which were closed and 10 open-ended to allow respondents the scope to provide additional information. Responses were coded by theme from which a thematic analysis was conducted.

## Summary Analysis

In total 429 respondents completed surveys.

### Respondent Profile

Respondents identified themselves as primarily employed in the services of the state, with 41% directly employed in the Public Sector and 55% in Education.

Only 4% of respondents were outside these two sectors.

Response was highest amongst the 26-34 (37%) age group with the 18-25 cohort (11%) being amongst the lowest respondent group. The two groups between age 35 and 54 responded in equal measure (22%).

88% were trade union members, with the largest grouping as expected coming from the public sector, PSEU (57%) with the next highest the teaching unions combined (22%). The lowest response came from SIPTU and UNITE accounting for 1% each.

## Key Findings

As the source of the responses primarily came from the Public Sector, the data is skewed towards issues of particular relevance to this sector including new entrants pay, Croke Park and Haddington Road agreements, and the pay restoration agenda. Engagement and activism issues will also be somewhat biased due to the significantly higher union density in those sectors. The findings include:

### *Joining a union*

- Unsurprisingly, the top reasons for joining a union were level of support and protection afforded by membership and colleague/family encouragement to join (68% combined). This indicates the continued importance of peer organising at local level and ensuring that local branch structures are fully engaging with new workers.
- The least popular reasons for joining were “understanding your rights” (1%) and low cost for new members (1%) which may indicate that a small number of workers entering employment are not aware of their rights and see low subscription rates as an incentive to join.

- Only 5% indicated they joined to “have their voice heard”, which has implications for both membership, priority agenda and structural issues.
- Of the 12% who were not union members, the top ranking reason for not joining was “marginalisation, perceived lack of support and solidarity” (68%) with only 9% indicating they “saw no benefit” with 21% indicating ‘cost and finance’ as a barrier to trade union membership.

#### *Membership benefits*

- When asked of the benefits of joining a trade union, 33% indicated ‘*pay and conditions and employment rights*’ as the primary benefit closely followed by ‘*information, advice, support and services*’ (28%). 21% stated ‘*representation when facing an allegation, security and professional difficulties*’ as benefits for union membership while 13% identify ‘*strength in numbers and solidarity*’ as benefits of joining a trade union.

#### *Relevance to Youth*

- Only 54% considered the movement relevant to younger members, representing little more than half the respondents.
- The main reasons cited included perceived relevance “*more relevant to older workers with young people discriminated against*” (56%) followed by 21% indicating ‘*disengagement of young people*’. Whether real or perceived, this is a clear indication of intergenerational disconnect which needs to be addressed. Strategies and structures should be established to encourage and enable more active engagement of younger workers in the trade union movement.
- 9% cited the movement was outdated and not progressive with 8% blaming a lack of communications as the reason for such disconnect.

#### *Relevance to Youth*

- Priority for youth issues (35%) along with improved communications and inclusive union structures (28%) are among some of the suggestions to improve the movement for younger people. However, responses were rather vague in terms of the “how to?” and may require additional interrogation of such issues.
- When asked about their level of activism, the majority indicated that they were either very or somewhat active (88%) with 12% inactive. 62% indicated they had no wish to increase their union engagement at this time. The top reason cited for not seeking deeper engagement was ‘*inadequate representation and disillusionment*’ (48%) with ‘*family commitments, time and work constraints*’ a clear second (26%). Only 4% claimed they had no interest at all.
- When asked how their trade union could encourage them to become more active, 35% wanted youth issues to be better represented and prioritised, followed very closely by improved communications (32%) with structural modernisation taking third place (18%).

## Key Recommendations

### Communications

- Create more effective two-way communications channels and networks with members by harnessing the power of online social media including facebook, twitter, instgram;
- Identify more effective ways of communicating union membership benefits and services to workers, including regular updates on union successes;
- Create an online calendar of union events taking place throughout the year;
- Make use of online advertisements (YouTube, Google Ads) to highlight the benefits and services of membership;
- Build online trade union networks to which members can engage more easily;
- Enhance networking by providing trade union application forms to ask members to include their social media details (optional) for contact and inclusion in union networks;
- Create more trade union awareness and visibility by building deeper engagement with external organisations (third level campuses, colleges, schools) and attending events (career fairs, festivals, youth centres) to provide themed information of interest to young people.

### Organising

- Incentivise organising, when conducted by lay activists rather than paid organisers such as certification of commendation;
- Build on developing a dialogue with workers particularly in workplaces that do not have active structures members or shop stewards;
- Establish a series of engaging introduction or induction sessions for workers such as “Lunch and Learn”, “Snacks and Facts”, on a particular work related theme with the opportunity for workers to join and engage with the branch/local structure.

### Awareness raising & training

- Establish awareness programmes at primary and third-level by using additional resource support for YouthConnect at second and Further Education level;
- Encourage young members to engage with their union as soon as they join the union;
- Provide for basic training (intro to unions and historical importance of the movement) to younger/new members as soon after they join as possible; Young members and potential members should be shown the difference that trade unions have made in the past, wins achieved and how trade unions have improved workers’ employment rights;
- Provide engagement training regularly to all new/young members to ensure they understand the structures and mechanisms of their union and can participate fully;
- Create and effectively monitor structures that allow each potential trade union member to be approached individually and handed the application form.

### Membership benefits

- Assess the possibility of extending union membership benefits to include dental cover, discounts, competitions etc.;
- Establish and/or further invest in an online/phone service where members can access information and support quickly and efficiently;

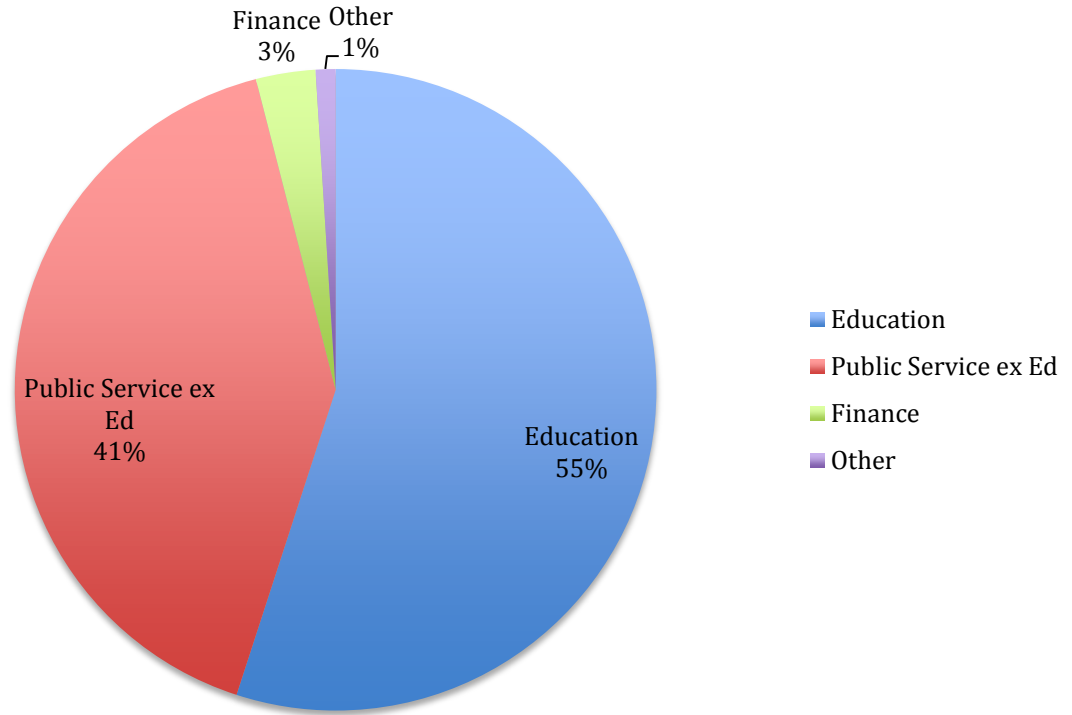
- Provide to all new members with an induction pack, invitations to a union event to meet with the local branch officials and national officials (where appropriate), as soon after they join as possible;
- Assess how subscription fees are determined, in light of the precarity and low-income of young workers.

### **Union structures**

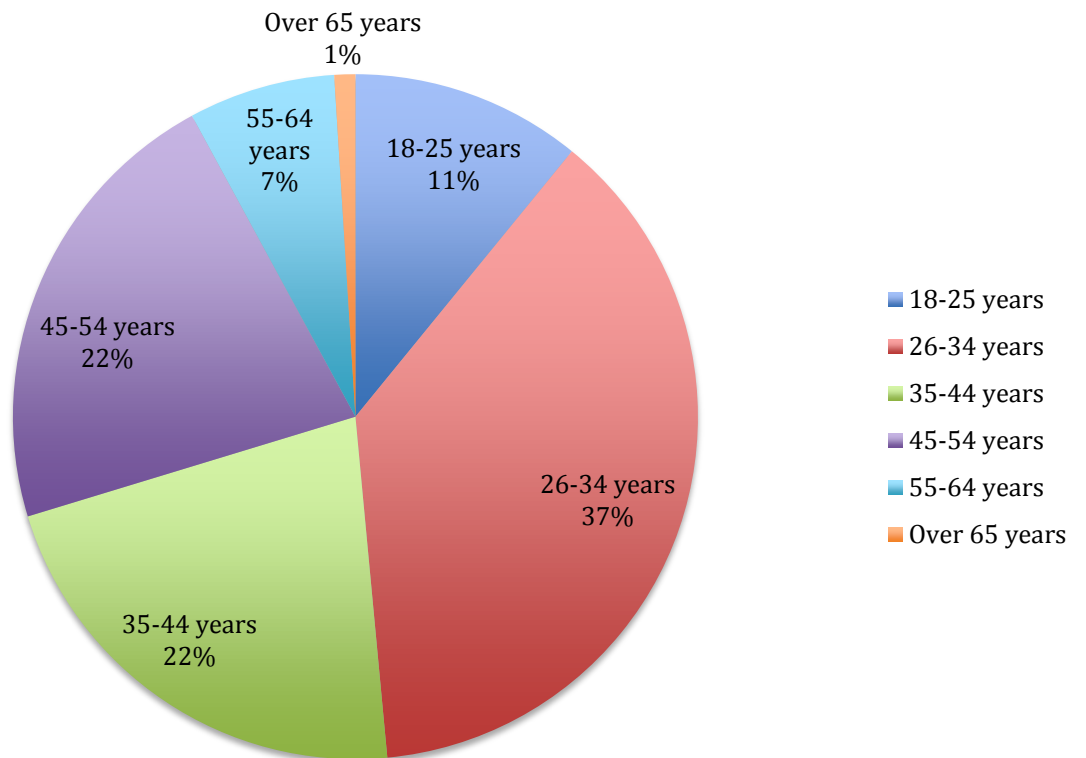
- Commit to focus on youth issues and improve engagement with youth to tackle the levels of disconnect and disenfranchisement of young members;
- Modernise and adapt trade union structures to be more inclusive of all members; Rules that impinge on youth involvement need to be amended to allow for greater transparency among members;
- Develop strategies for more meaningful engagement with less active members or potential members;
- Introduce a policy of youth targets no less than 15% under age 35, for all union events including conferences, training opportunities, seminars, branch officers, executive committees etc.;
- All unions should establish a well-resourced and supported Youth Committee/ working group/campaign group or other networking forum which is led by young members, is youth focused and issue based. Opportunities should also be created to ensure this group/forum develops links and relationships with other union groups and Congress Youth.

## Data Analysis

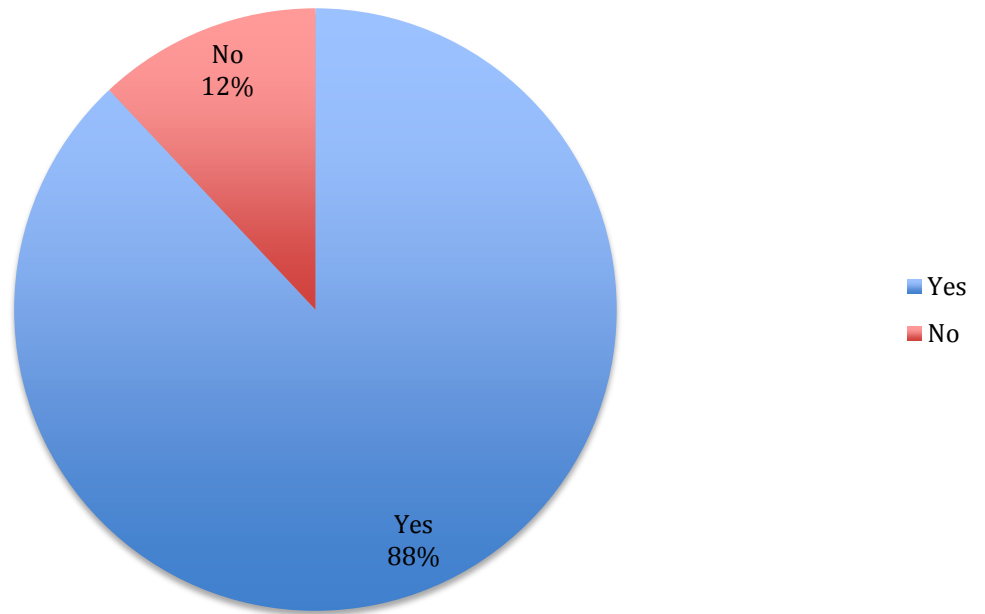
### 1. Work Sector



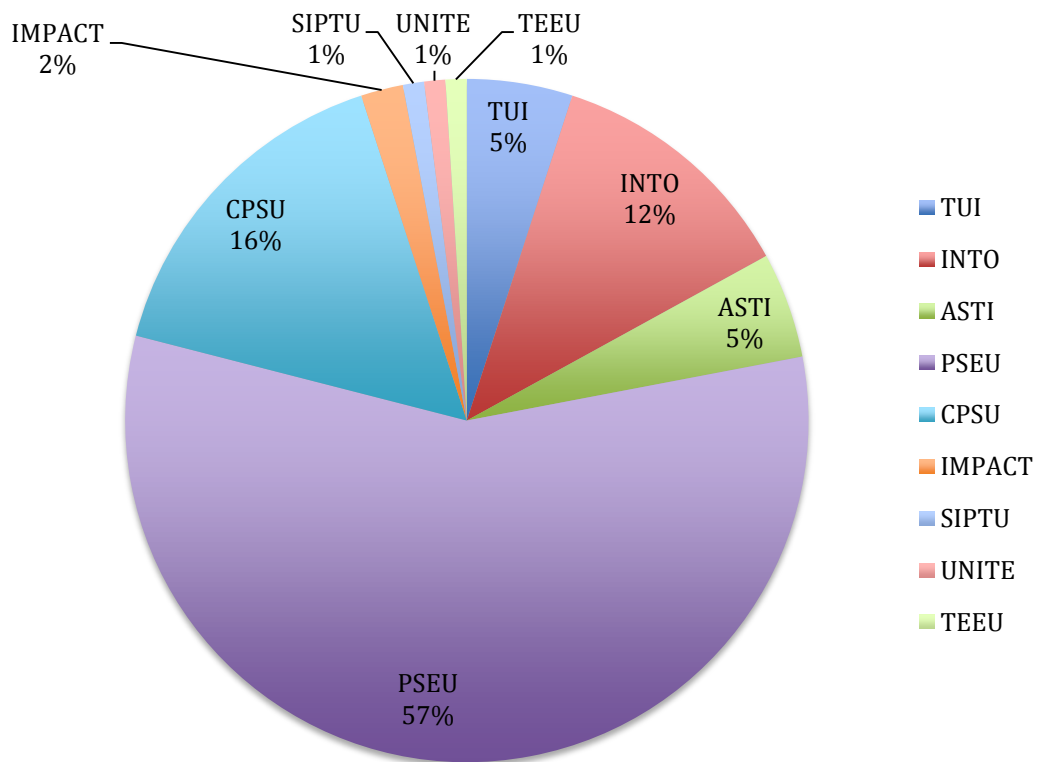
### 2. Age Profile



### 3. Member of a Trade Union

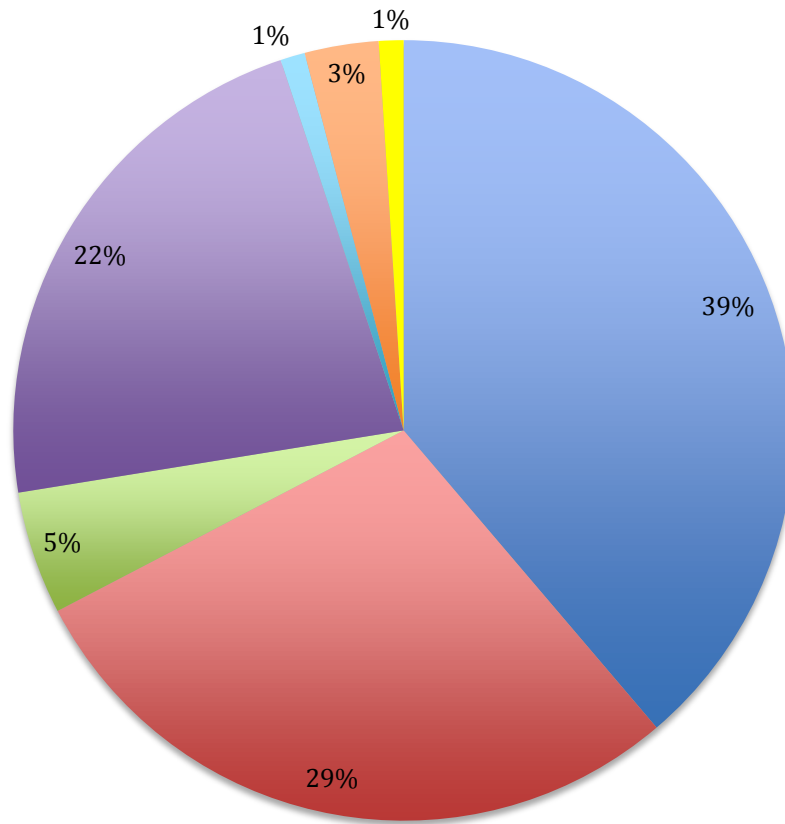


### 4. Trade Union Membership



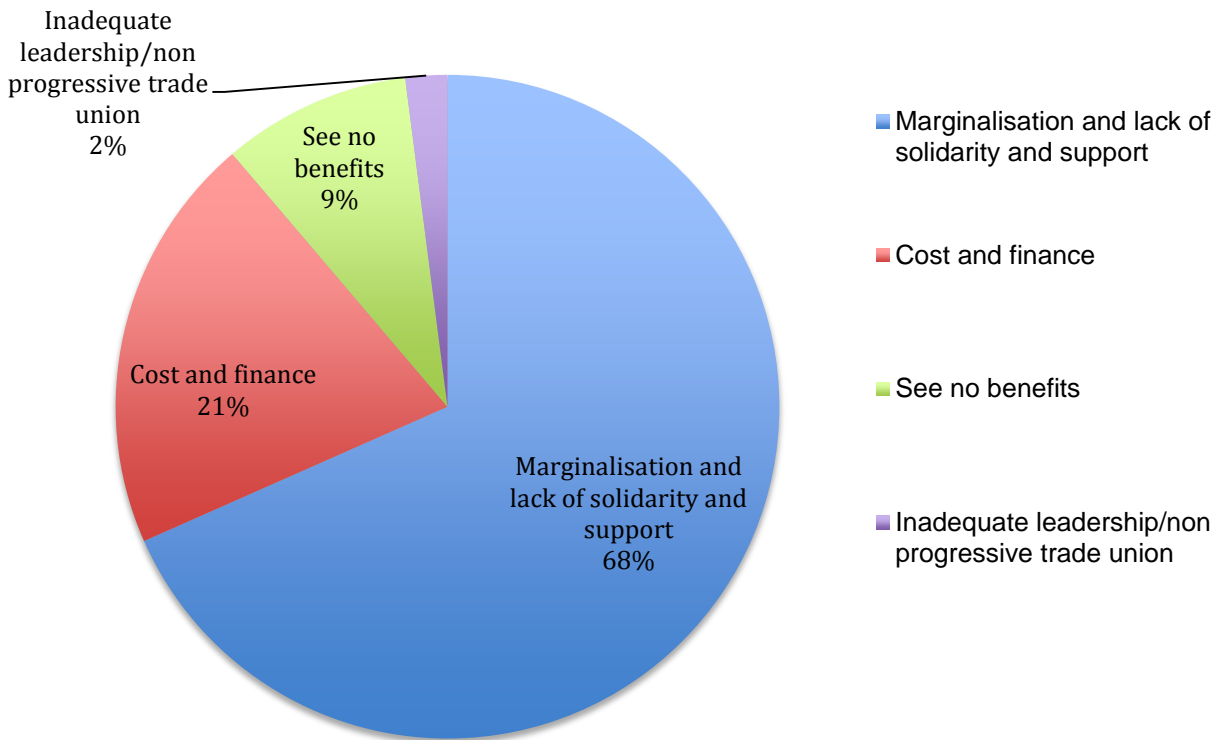


## 5. Why did you join a trade union?

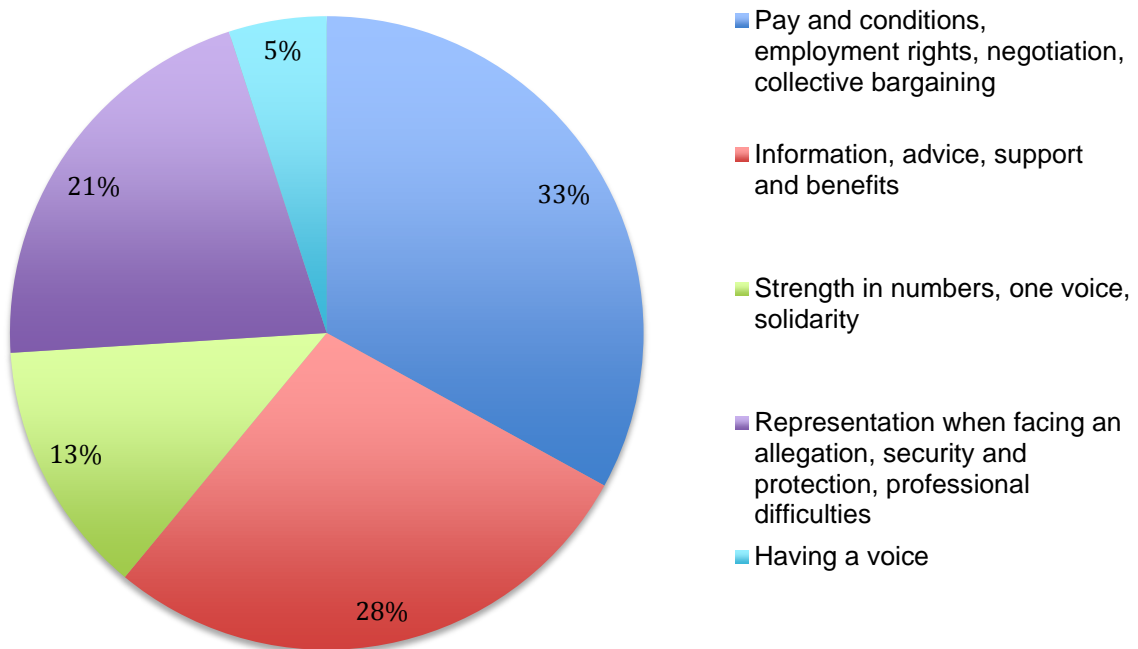


- Trade union support, protection, security, protection benefits, representation and safeguarding employment rights and pay and conditions.
- Advised by colleagues, everyone else's joins, family involvement
- Have my voice heard
- Committed to the Trade Union movement, stronger united, solidarity
- Gain an understanding of rights
- Fear of a workplace complaint
- Low cost for new members

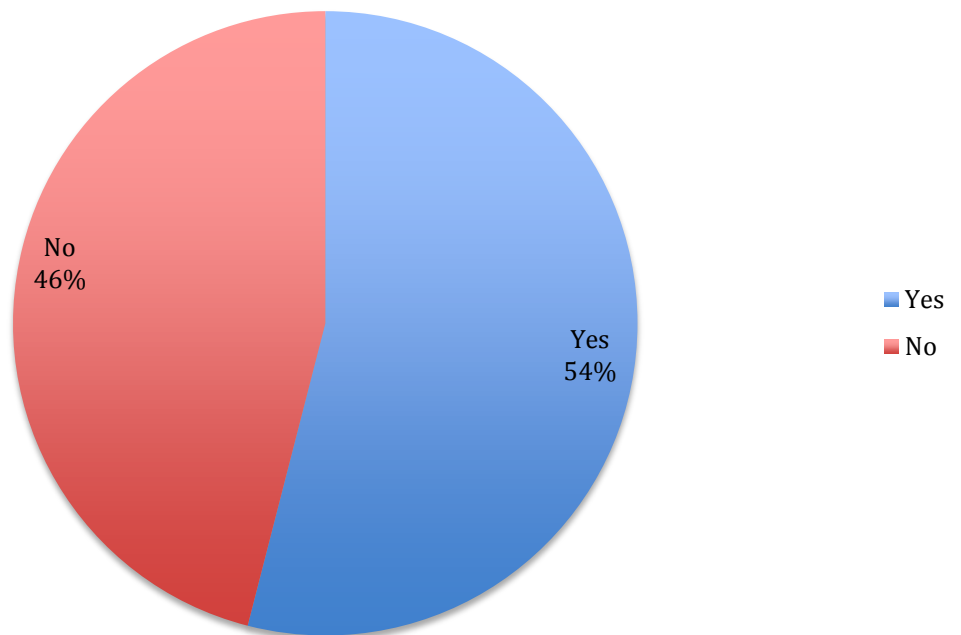
**6. If you are not a member of a trade union, why did you not join?**



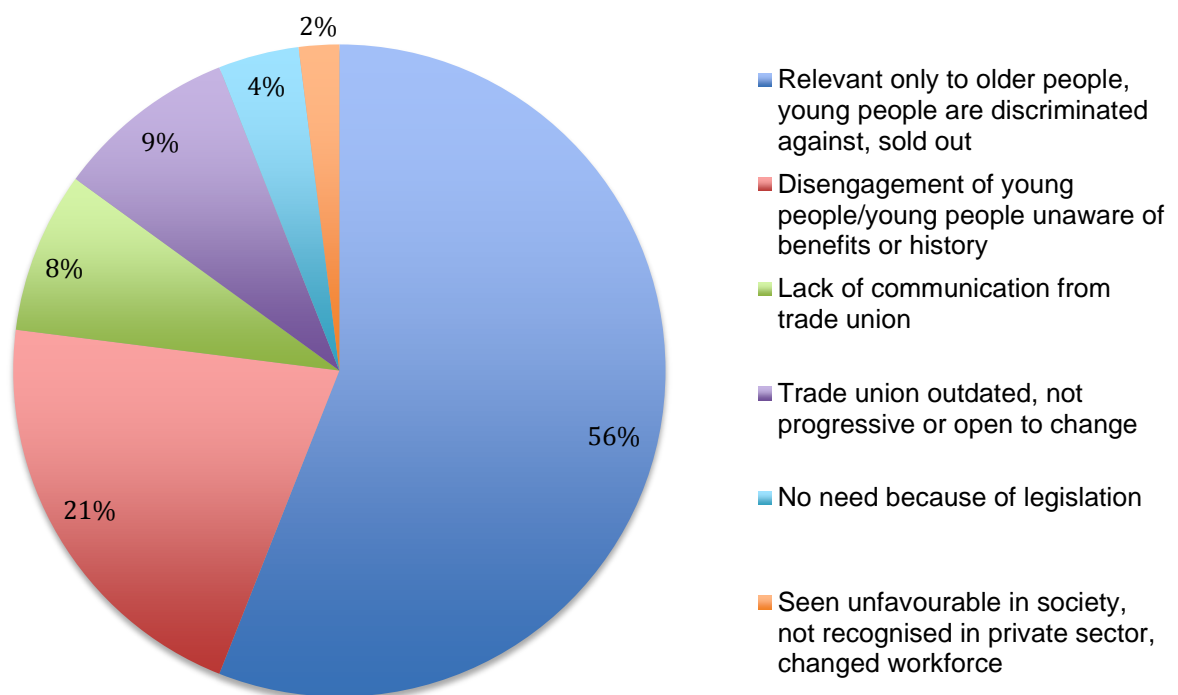
**7. What do you see as the most important benefits of joining a trade union?**



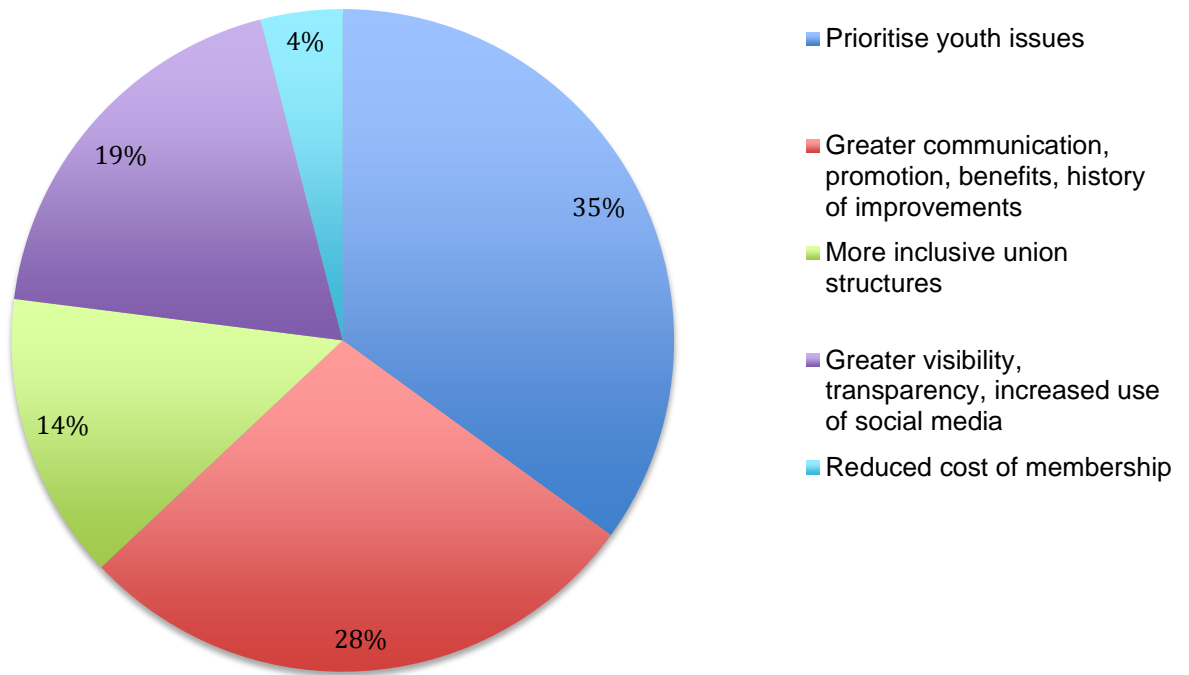
## 8. Do you consider the Trade Union Movement relevant to young people today?



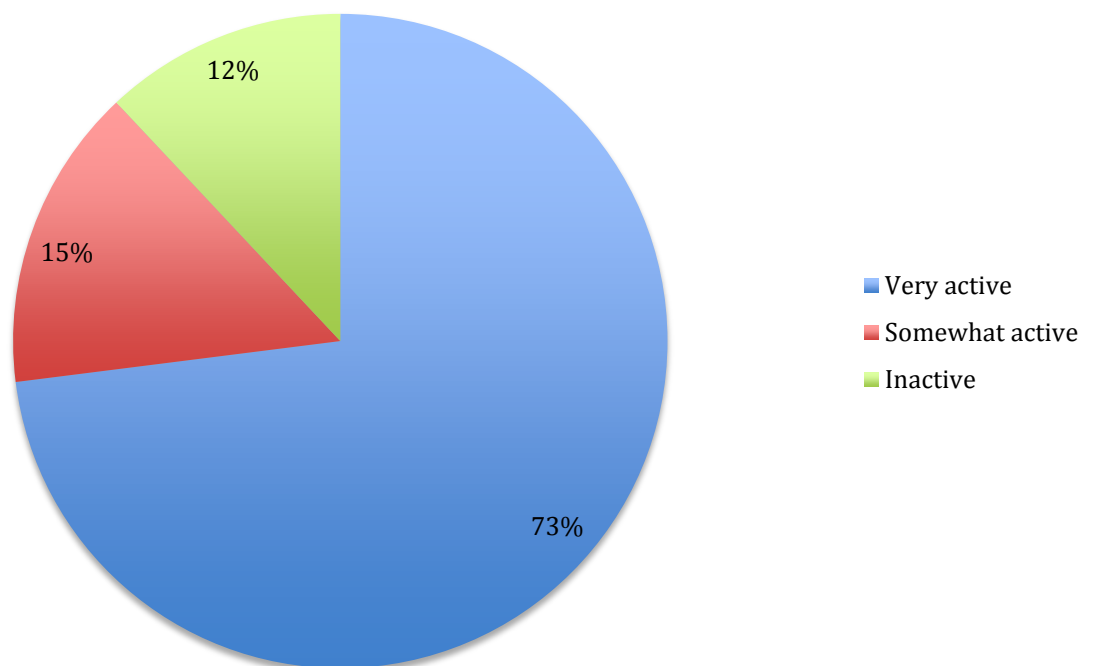
## 9. If not, why not?



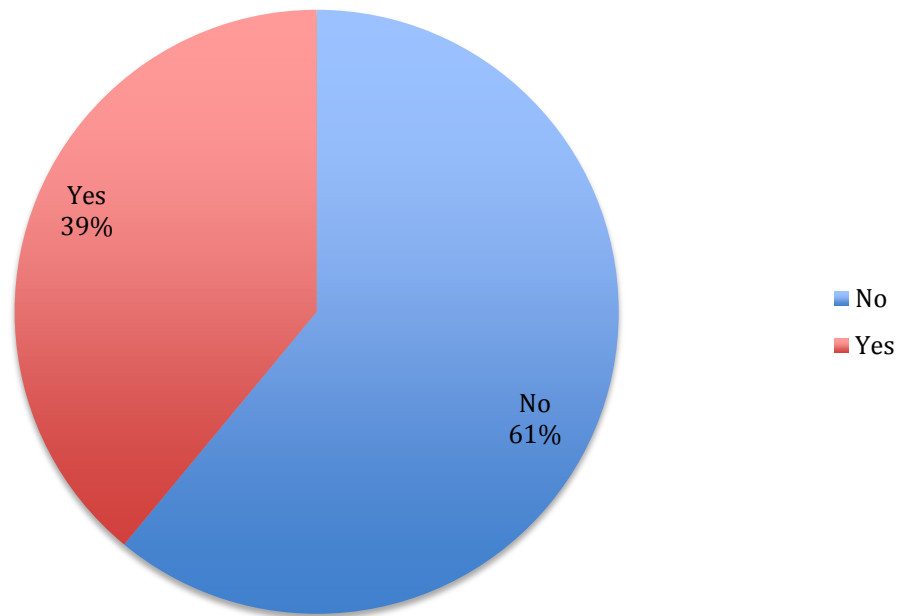
**10. How could the trade union movement become more relevant to young people?**



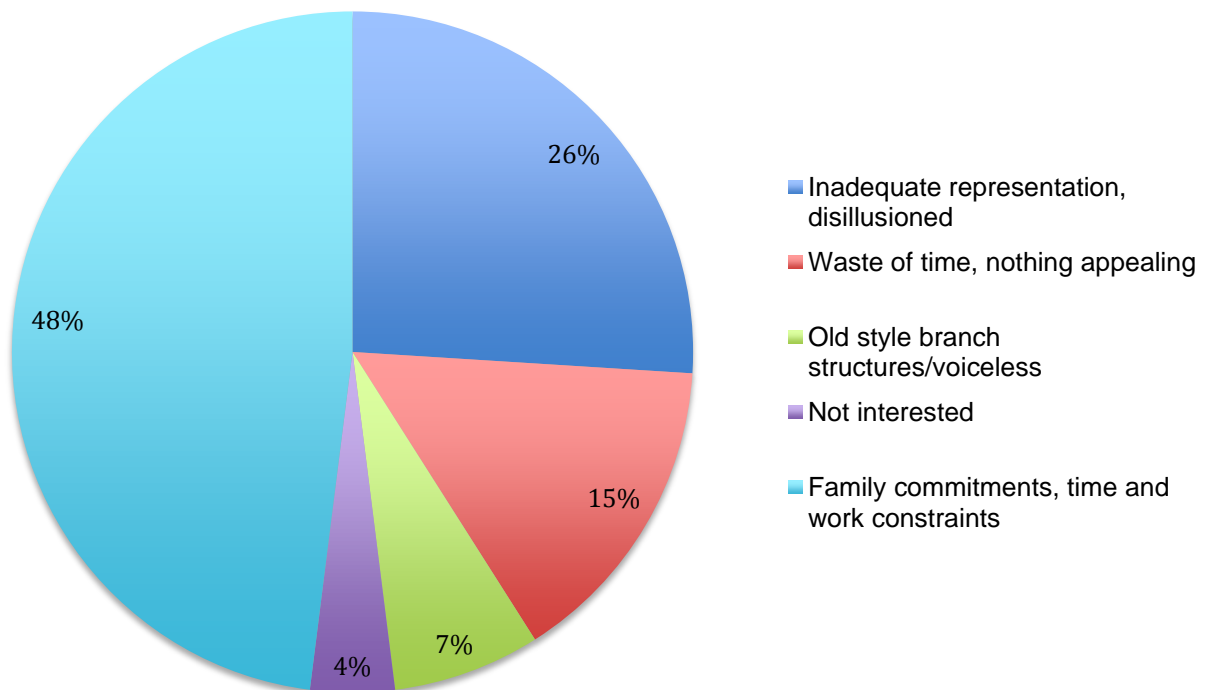
**11. If you are a trade union member, please state how active you are.**



## 12. Would you like to engage more actively in your trade union?



## 13. If not, why?



#### 14. How can your union encourage you to be more active?

