



**Project Title:**

**An analysis of the effects that participation in social partnership has had on trade unions density levels in Ireland.**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	3
METHODOLOGY	10
PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS	15
CONCLUSION	28
BIBLIOGRAPHY	30
APPENDICES	35

**ABSTRACT:**

Trade union density rates have been declining all over Europe and Ireland is no exception to this trend. This study is concerned with determining the effect, if any, that participation in social partnership has had on this development. It looks at events in Ireland since the early 1980s and compares them to developments in other countries. This comparison focuses particularly on Britain where the unions' relationship with the State is considered to have been based on a much more confrontational footing than that experienced here. The period in question saw many changes in the global market and these have had profound consequences for the labour market and traditional trade union relationships. This study suggests that these fundamental changes were the main causes of the decline in union density levels and that participation in social partnership did not have any significant impact on the issue.

The last few decades have seen a steady decline in trade union density levels across the developed industrial world and Ireland is no exception to this. British and Irish trade unions started to take divergent paths in the 1980s. The miners' strike in Britain in 1983 marked the beginning of an era in which the British Government adapted a confrontational approach to industrial relations while Irish unions experienced a more inclusive approach and participated in social partnership with employers and the State between 1987 and 2009. Trade union membership has fallen in both countries and this study will attempt to examine the reasons for this decline and to assess if involvement in partnership has had any significant impact on it one way or the other. Britain provides a good area of comparison because of these different approaches but also because of the many similarities between both labour markets and trade union organisations with some trade unions straddling both jurisdictions.

Much has been written about the decline in union power internationally and I will use some of this in my literary review for the purpose of providing context and understanding. The literature review will also present material from the different perspectives on social partnership and it will also include material specific to trade union experiences in Britain.

I initially intended to focus my research on a direct comparison of the experiences of trade unions in Britain and Ireland over the 30 year period between 1983 and 2013, but this proved to be problematical. The main problem was gathering data from the British side. There is plenty of statistical data available on the subject but the accessible qualitative data appears to be repetitious and suggests that there is general agreement on the causes of union density decline in that country. As it was not possible for me to gather new data through interviews, I decided to concentrate my study on the reasons for Irish union density decline

and the part, if any, that participation in social partnership played in it and to use the British data for comparison purposes.

There has been much debate about the benefits and pitfalls that were created by trade union participation in social partnership and these continue to the present day. Many people do not rule out the possibility that some form of tripartite partnership might return at some stage in the future and it is to be hoped that this study will help to shed some light on the subject.

## CHAPTER TWO

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As this study is concerned with social partnership and its effect or otherwise on union density levels, this literature review focuses on material relating to these topics. It looks at material dealing with social partnership from a trade union perspective as well as material dealing with union density decline internationally with particular attention being paid to developments in Britain.

Pat McCartan (2002) was quite supportive of social partnership and stated that union participation in social partnership was not motivated by union weakness or low union density figures. He surveyed eight medium to large businesses in the private sector and collected the data through semi-structured interviews with ER managers, local trade union representatives, employer associations and trade union officials. He concluded that the agreements and related industrial relationships were robust and that they enjoyed the enthusiastic support of the unions, the government and the employers.

This study does not include data on union strength but it is informative nevertheless because it outlines how unions and management had very much bought in to the partnership ideal. Job security was seen as the top priority and although there was an element of mistrust, particularly in foreign owned companies, neither side could foresee the return to a more adversarial relationship.

Kieran Allen (2010) was more critical of union involvement in social partnership. He charted how this involvement brought about changes in the union movement which meant that it was ill prepared for the Government backed employer's onslaught on wage levels. A gulf had appeared between the leadership and members, with the leaders being more committed to partnership than their members. He used Eurostat figures to demonstrate that since 1981 the Irish workers' wage share as a percentage of the economy was consistently

lower than the EU average and that Ireland also had the lowest level of spending on social protection in the EU15. Union density rates declined among manual workers in particular and migrant workers were not recruited. These factors along with the employers' determination to undermine union activity resulted in union membership becoming more concentrated in the public sector and this allowed employers to create a division between public and private sector workers. He concluded that although social partnership was supposed to be built around rhetoric of partnership, that employers used it as an opportunity to create non-union workplaces and the unions' failure to organise the private sector allowed the employers to impose wage cuts.

Freeman and Pelletier (1990) examined the impact of legislation on British union density. The UK had the highest trade union density of any OECD country in the 1970s but this had fallen faster during the 1980s than in either the USA or Japan. They said that there were three possible explanations for this, it was caused by the recession, it was the result of the shift from manufacturing or it was caused by the Thatcher government's industrial relations legislation. They investigated these questions using a quantitative analysis of union density and related it to the economy and the favourableness or otherwise of labour legislation. They also compared it to Ireland which had a similar industrial relations system and was experiencing a similar recession but which had not passed any laws which weakened unions. Their major finding was that Thatcher government labour laws caused much of the 1980s fall in British union density with legal changes causing density to fall by 9.4 percentage points between 1980 and 1986, which was effectively the entire decline in UK density during that period.

Bryson and Gomez (2005) looked at the percentage of employees that had never become union members. They found that the decreased likelihood of workers becoming members rather than the hemorrhaging of existing members was behind the decline in union

membership in Britain. They theorised that there were three possible explanations for the emergence of these “never-members”. It could be that the type of members that never traditionally joined unions had increased as a proportion of the workforce, the type of workers that became members in the past are less inclined to do so now or perhaps they are still inclined but are being constrained from doing so. They analysed data from the British Social Attitudes Survey Series for the period 1983-2001. This survey is restricted to employees working at least 10 hours a week and is compiled through the use of interviews and questionnaires. They found a steady rise in never-members over the years with a significant rise in the 1990s relative to the 1980s. They found that a little over half of the rise in never-members was down to the rise of their share of the labour market, with the remainder perhaps being an indicator of changing preferences for union membership.

They concluded that the biggest determinant of never-member probability is whether or not an individual is employed in a union recognised workplace. However, the decline in union density in unionised workplaces is also significant, with never-membership being responsible for three quarters of it. This indicates that the rise in never-membership is not just down to employer resistance or concern about the organising costs of becoming a member.

Waddington and Whitson (1997) examined why people joined unions, in an effort to examine different explanations for union membership decline. They surveyed in excess of 11,000 new union members between 1991 and 1993 and asked them why they joined and how they were recruited. The participants were evenly divided between the sexes, covered both the public and private sectors and included occupations across the spectrum from managerial to unskilled labour. It had been suggested by some, that an attitude change towards a “new individualism” in society and the workforce was the cause of reduced bargaining power of the unions. They found little support for this individualisation

explanation and established that, on the contrary, collective reasons remained central to union joining in most industries and occupations.

The data supported the explanation that the decline was caused by the power shift towards employers brought about by high unemployment and restructuring. They concluded that the ability of the employer to resist union recognition or even an effective union presence had made unions unavailable to potential members.

Turner and D'Art (2008) combined CSO data with data from the European Social Survey to assess the potential representation gap union density levels and the demand for trade unions. The representation gap is the difference between actual union membership figures and the demand for it. They examined union density across different industrial sectors, occupations, gender, age and educational levels. The overall figure in 2004 was that 77% of employees considered that unions are a necessary protection, but the union density level was only 34%. This gap is particularly high in the private service sector among younger people in low skill occupations. They argued that this was a result of employer opposition to union recognition and recommended changes in legislation which would allow speedy and clear determinations in disputed cases. They suggested this weakening of unions at shop-floor level was possibly exacerbated by national level bargaining. They encouraged unions to conduct more active recruitment campaigns in both unionised and non-unionised firms, quoting research which indicated that 76% of non-union workers in unionised companies were never asked to join.

Another study done by D'Art and Turner (2006) looks at union organisation and employer response at a time when our economy was booming and social partnership was in full swing. It is informative in light of subsequent events as it sheds light of employer attitudes even during the partnership years. They noted the decline in union membership and

they investigated whether new codes of practice and the passing of the Industrial Relations Amendment Act 2001 had any effect on the issue of union recognition. They challenge the popular theory that structural changes in employment and industry are the main causes of union membership decline.

They maintain that an implicit assumption of the structural theory is that there is no demand from employees for union membership and they point out this is not the case, with a survey in 1998 reporting that 59% of non-union employees would join a union, if given the chance.

They also considered the institutional explanation of the decline, which attributes it to the country's historical development and the institutions that govern industrial relations. They conducted case studies of union recognition campaigns in two Irish firms. One was small/medium sized and the other was a subsidiary of a multinational corporation. They concluded that the Act was inadequate in the matter of facilitating union membership and that employer hostility and intimidation of union members were features in each of the two cases which they examined.

Ireland has one of the highest levels of foreign direct investment in the world and foreign owned multi-national corporations (MNCs) play a significant role in our economy and in the area of industrial relations. Jonathan Lavelle (2008) found that US MNCs are less likely to recognise unions than companies from other countries.

He compiled a comprehensive list of MNCs which distinguished between foreign and Irish owned. The foreign owned MNCs had at least 500 employees worldwide with at least 100 employed in Ireland and the Irish ones had at least 500 employees with at least 100 employed abroad. He identified and contacted a total of 414 companies that filled these criteria.

He had a response rate of over 60% and, with the assistance of the ESRI and the University of Limerick, 260 interviews were held with the most senior people responsible for IR in each organisation. The evidence supported the theory that foreign MNCs are introducing home country practices. US companies are less likely to engage with unions with just 42% of them doing so, compared to 70% of non-US companies. Perhaps, more strikingly, half of the unionised MNCs had engaged in double-breasting over the previous five years. This is the process where unionised companies resist unionisation when opening new sites.

It would appear that many factors affect the issue of union membership. These studies have shown that changing work practices, legislation, union perception, foreign direct investment, employer resistance and union inaction have all played a part in union density decline over the years and it would appear evident that union involvement in partnership agreements has had a bearing on all of these issues.

Opinions vary widely on the issue of union participation in social partnership. Its supporters would argue that participation meant that the unions avoided marginalisation and devised a strategy to balance competitiveness and equity (Allen 2010) while some would say that its sole purpose was to “emasculate” the trade union movement (WSM 2008). It has also been suggested that governments only adopted trade union policies when it suited them and that it was Fianna Fáil’s intention from the start to stabilise the economy and they never intended to have a Scandinavian style corporatist state (Murphy and Hogan 2008).

Whichever opinion is correct, there can be little doubt that social partnership has played a decisive role in the area of industrial relations and union density levels in Ireland for the approximately 22 years that it existed and I believe that a study of its effects on union strength would be beneficial for any future consideration of union involvement in such partnerships. The readings suggest several potential causes for the decline in union density

across the western world and it is to be hoped that this study will reveal whether these have had any significant effect in Ireland or were their effects mitigated to some extent by the existence of social partnership.

## CHAPTER THREE

## METHODOLOGY

The subject of this study is very complex and covers a broad area and I decided to use a mixed methods approach for this research. I used quantitative data to illustrate the positions in different countries in areas such as union density decline and labour market formations. This data is relevant and very useful but this study required that it be complimented by data acquired through a qualitative approach as well. Qualitative research uses inductive as well as deductive logic, it accepts subjectivity and it allows researchers to approach studies from different perspectives and realities (O’Leary 2014:130).

A mixed methods approach has many advantages but the main one as far as this study is concerned is that it adds depth to numbers by adding narrative and it helps to give a better insight and to build a broader picture (O’Leary 2014:147). The first type of analysis that I used was Secondary Data Analysis. There are many different definitions of Secondary Data Analysis but it is generally accepted that it involves an empirical exercise carried out on data that has already been compiled (Smith 2006:4). It was important for the purpose of this study to compare developments in Ireland with what was happening in other countries during the same period and I decided to do this by using documentary analysis. Documentary analysis is defined as reviewing and analysing written text as a primary source of research data (O’Leary 2014:250). It was necessary to understand how the situation had progressed in Britain and elsewhere and I used documentary evidence for comparison purposes.

Duffy (2010:135) outlines how it is important to know how reliable that documents are when deciding which ones to use. He says that the analytical method most likely to be used in small-scale educational research for determining this is “internal criticism” which inquires about such things as who produced it and what sort of document it is. For the

purpose of this study I decided to use a PhD thesis and peer reviewed journal articles for the most part.

I used the library website to search for relevant information, using search words such as “social partnership” and “union density” and most of the relevant information was extracted from online journals such the Industrial Relations Journal. It was suggested to me by one of the interview respondents that I contact Dr. Jack McGinley in Trinity College Dublin as his PhD thesis was concerned with social partnership. He was very helpful and with the assistance of our library I was able to obtain a one day pass to TCD library where I reviewed his thesis. As well as giving me some extra information on Irish social partnership, it also gave me some very useful data concerning British trade union issues.

The next part of my study involved interviewing people who had been involved in the trade union movement in the relevant period. Interviewing is a method of data collection that involves researchers seeking open-ended answers relating to a number of topics. While interviews have the potential to provide good in-depth qualitative data, I also had to be aware that data collected in this way can be very subjective in nature. I also had to be careful not to lead the respondents in any way (O’Leary 2014:217-218). The data which had been produced by the document analysis along with the information in my literature review helped to give me a better understanding of the issue and allowed me to frame the questions which I asked. I interviewed three people face-to-face and one via telephone. They were all retired but had all been involved in the trade union movement at a national level. I had met one of these some years ago in a work environment and he expressed his willingness to participate when I contacted him. As well as supplying a lot of useful information, he was also extremely helpful in a gatekeeper role and supplied contact details and vouched for me with the other respondents.

As I was not sure exactly what the main issues were going to be, I decided to use semi-structured interviews. There are many advantages to using this type of interview but the main one for the purpose of this study was that it afforded me the opportunity to start with a defined plan to cover certain areas of the topic and also allowed me to follow the flow of the conversation and to follow any interesting tangents that might deviate from the plan (O'Leary 2014:218). The respondents were chosen for their experience and knowledge of the subject and were thus selected by the Purposive Sampling Method which Chambliss and Schutt (2013:97) define as targeting people for a specific reason which is usually based upon their unique position. These interviews were broadly confined to the respondents' view on social partnership and the reasons behind union density decline in this country.

As is important in all research, I had to be very aware of many ethical issues in carrying out any study. I had read and was mindful of the guidelines as laid down by Maynooth University. There are many general principles that needed to be followed when conducting research. It is important that studies are conducted with scientific integrity and that each participants' interests must be protected. Their participation must be voluntary and informed (Denscombe (2010:331). I was also mindful of the fact that no harm of any kind, including emotional or psychological should come to any of the participants and it is important that confidentiality and, if desired, anonymity is ensured (Flick 2014:64). Every effort was made to ensure the participants' anonymity in this study and they are referred to as Respondents A, B, C and D. I asked each face-to-face respondent beforehand if it was alright to record our interview and they all agreed.

All recordings and transcripts were stored on a computer which was password protected. All of these assurances were included in the consent form which was given to each participant (See Appendix A). I was mindful at all times that it is important to act courteously

to all participants and not to “spoil” the field for other researchers in the future (O’Leary 2014:219).

I used a grounded theory approach to analysing the data. This approach means that researchers work inductively and generate theories from the data that is produced. This does not mean that the study is haphazard, it needs a well defined plan and and it is flexible and iterative (O’Leary 2014:118). The grounded theory approach involves using the constant comparative method to code and categorise data with the intention of arriving at concepts that explain a phenomenon. It allows the researcher to highlight any similarities and differences that exist and to check out developing theories as they emerge (Denscombe 2010:115-116). It is difficult for qualitative researchers to know when enough research has been done using the grounded theory approach but it is generally accepted that this point is reached when further pieces of data fail to add anything new to the study (Denscombe 2010:117). I separated the data into different themes and the categories that emerged were along the expected lines as outlined in my introduction. As O’Leary (2014:309) says, technically data produced by inductive means should determine the themes that emerge rather than the predetermined themes that are discovered by deductive means but the distinction between the two is unlikely to be clear and researchers are likely to use both when “mapping” their data.

Time and space constraints have meant that I have had to limit this research to certain areas. As mentioned in the introduction it was not possible to conduct interviews with British union members and my research in this area was confined to documentary analysis. There were also limitations to the Irish side of this research. Obviously it was necessary to get a good overview of the trade union view on the question and it was therefore essential to get as many perspectives on this as possible. This study would have been greatly enhanced if it had been possible to also get the views from the employer’s side and interviews with relevant people in organisations such as IBEC and the American Chamber of Commerce Ireland

would have been invaluable. It would also have been very helpful to interview people from the Government side who were involved in the process. Unfortunately time constraints did not allow for these so I confined my study to the union perspective on the issue and a comparison with Britain.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This chapter is concerned with outlining the key findings of the study and will deal with the main themes which emerged from the research. There is quite a bit of overlap between the themes but the main ones that became apparent were the decline in union density rates internationally with a special focus on Britain, the decline in Ireland and the effect that social partnership had on this and on the union movement in general. This section will start off by using statistics to contextualise the relationship between Ireland and Britain in terms of the labour market and union density levels. It will then outline how economic, political and labour market changes impacted on trade unions generally and it will then conclude with an examination of how the situation developed in Ireland.

According to the OECD (2015a), union density in Ireland fell from 54.3% in 1983 to 29.6% in 2013 and from 48.2% to 25.4% in Britain compared to the OECD average of 31.2% and 16.9% respectively. These figures represent a 47.3% decline in Britain while Ireland's is slightly lower at 45.5% and almost identical to the OECD average of 45.8%.

As the table below shows, the labour market in 2013 was very similar in both countries with the only significant difference between them being in the agriculture sector.

	Services	Construction/Industry	Manufacturing	Agriculture
Ireland	68.1%	16.3%	10.2%	5.1%
Britain	73.1%	17.0%	8.9%	1.0%

OECD (2015b)

These figures are indicative of the very big changes which have occurred in the labour market over the past few decades. For example, the period between 1983 and 2013 saw

employment in mining and quarrying in Britain decline from 295,000 to 71,000 and manufacturing from 5.123 million down to 2.564 million while jobs in the service sector jumped from 17.777 million to 27.237 million during the same period (ONS 2015).

The major changes in employment practices during the period that this study is concerned with had an effect on the issue of centralised bargaining because the emergence of more flexible employment contracts and the deregulation of labour markets produced many challenges to it. (Ebbinghaus 2004:574).

Economic decline and changing political attitudes had major repercussions for British unions in particular where successive Conservative administrations from 1979 onwards attempted to challenge the autonomous approach to trade union organisation and they tried to increase the influence of individual members on all the major areas of union activities (Lockwood 2004:91). It is worth noting here that, in practice, these measures did not alter the political complexion of trade unions or result in the participation of the more moderate members in union affairs (Lockwood 2004:102). These measures helped to ensure that Britain witnessed the sharpest fall in unionization in Europe and they lost five million members between 1979 and 1995 and union density fell from 51% to 33% (Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999:137). Another factor which affected trade unions during the 1990s was that socialist and labour parties all over Europe tended to distance themselves from the unions in attempts to attract the middle class electorates (Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999:140).

There was an average of 62 occurrences of union de-recognition in Britain each year between 1992 and 1996. In 1997 for example, trade unions gained 16,000 new members but lost 13,000 through de-recognition at the same time (McGinley 2000:189). Conservative legislation was not the only factor that influenced the internal affairs of trade unions. A

combination of economic factors, the industrial relations climate and a change in members' attitudes also helped to bring about changes in union management (Lockwood 2004:103).

As outlined in Chapter Three, Irish unions decided to partake in social partnership. This resulted in Ireland going from low ranking in European tables of Corporatism to middle ranking (McGinley 2000:iv). As respondent C said:

*“We had a look at what was happening in the UK with unions in trouble and believed that social partnership might offer some degree of protection from Thatcherism...the PDs were coming on the scene and had similar attitudes to unions.”*

According to McGinley (2000:53), this was never an option for the British unions because the TUC had never been able to engender a sufficiently cohesive policy to bring competing trade union interests along to social partnership. The absence of centralised bargaining combined with the decline in union density rates meant that bargaining coverage in Britain declined spectacularly from 70% in the early 1980s to barely over a third in 2004 (Ebbinghaus 2004:579). Ireland by contrast has a significantly higher level of collective bargaining coverage of 44% in 2009 compared to 29% in Britain (Eurofound 2009). Union decline was more pronounced in Britain than Ireland during the 1980s where the “changing legal context of industrial relations” attributed to this to a significant degree (Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999:140). This ties in with Freeman and Pelletier's (1990) assertion, as mentioned in my literature review, that legislation was the main cause of decline in union density during the 1980s.

In spite of these different approaches, the two trade union movements had many similar experiences and unions in both countries were forced to consolidate their union structures which resulted in many mergers and the public sector unions still play an important role in both countries with some unions straddling both sectors (Ebbinghaus 2004:575-577).

Membership decline did stop in both countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s but despite this rise in figures, both the British and Irish membership figures fell behind employment growth (Ebbinghaus 2002:467).

As seen in the literature review there are conflicting opinions on the effect that taking part in social partnership had on trade union density and on the public perception of trade unions as a whole.

Respondent B felt that overall, participation in social partnership was very good for society as a whole and that it provided very many positives for the trade union movement. He said

*“It gave people a role in terms of shaping public policy that they otherwise wouldn’t have had and I am not just talking unions.....we would never have even got the limited success which we did get without centralised bargaining.”*

When asked if participation in social partnership had had a positive or negative effect on the trade union density levels, he replied:

*“In my opinion participation resulted in a slightly negative effect but it was “very marginal.....I’m not sure if it made a substantial amount of difference on union density...marginalisation of unions is a worldwide phenomenon for many reasons and centralised bargaining would be well down on the scale.”*

He pointed out that social partnership was not the beginning of national agreements and that *“in 1983 union membership levels were at an all time high and that was after a decade of central bargaining.”* He also said that the agreements were *“more democratic in the sense that every agreement was voted on by the members and that didn’t always happen in every case beforehand.”*

Respondent A also felt that involvement in social partnership was “*good for the union movement and the economy...we didn’t benefit as much as we could have done but it helped the union membership because there was no hostility to unions.*” He added that it was of particular benefit to the public sector unions. He said that:

*“They got all the increases that the private sector got.....they also got specials as well. They had this internal relativity, the guards related to the nurses and so on and if anyone got something they all got it.....it was a bit of a sham and the politicians played along with it, I suspect, because Dáil Deputies’ salaries were tied in with higher civil servants and all that.”*

He thought that IBEC went along with social partnership because this domination by the public sector unions meant that the “*bottomless pit of public money would pay for it and for a small cost the employers got stability in return.*” As mentioned in Chapter Two, McCartan (2002) talked about both unions and employers buying into the partnership ideal but it is unlikely that he was thinking about it from this perspective.

Respondent D felt that social partnership was good at the macro level in regard to the environment and the economy and it was heading in the right way but that the government never put enough money into the institutions such as the Labour Court and Rights commissioners that was needed to back it up. He also felt that there were too many issues that could not be settled between agreements. He said:

*“There was a lot of sitting and waiting for the next agreement.....and some officials got lazy and the rank and file were not included.....social partnership was never drilled down into the members.”*

Respondent C was also quite supportive of social partnership and thought that it was very good for union members. He was of the opinion that those who claim that participation resulted in a decline in union density were people who were always sceptical

about participation anyway. However, he did believe that there were some negative aspects to participation as well. He said that it is argued by some that “*what was good for the members may not have been good for the institutions*” and while he did have “*some sympathy*” for the argument that partnership may have caused unions to become more remote from their members he added “*it doesn’t explain declines in countries which had no social partnerships, where in some the decline was faster, so to blame partnership is a bit simplistic.*” This statement possibly ties in with Allen’s (2010) observation that one of the ways that social partnership changed the union movement was that the leaders were more committed than the members.

Respondent C felt that there may be some truth in the assertion that involvement in social partnership “*may have contributed to the unions’ inability to respond militarily when deals were broken, some would say why are we only protesting now??.....there may be some truth in it.*” He added that trade unions did not get enough credit for what they had achieved at social partnership level and that in general people do not realise just how much they had accomplished. He used the granting of two new bank holidays as an example. He said:

*“when we got the two new bank holidays a few years back, everyone referred to them as EU days, they were never referred to as union days, the unions didn’t get credit....we made a mess of a good opportunity.”*

When asked what effect he thought participation in social partnership had on the relationship between the unions and their members, Respondent A felt that it had begun to weaken before that. He felt that the “*conscious link between workers and the union*” were damaged when the practice of collecting contributions on the shop floor ceased and that this connection was further loosened by social partnership because it meant that members voted nationally rather than at local level as would previously have been the case and “*therefore*

*they lost their connection with their own workplace and the union's place in it.*" This observation would suggest that the changes in the union movement as outlined by Allen (2010) may not have been wholly caused by social partnership but had in fact started beforehand. Respondent A added that there was also an awareness in some workplaces that the companies could have afforded more generous increases than those granted in the national agreements and that this may have led to further ambivalence towards social partnership and perhaps also contributed to the weakening of the bond with members.

All of the respondents were asked what they thought were the main causes of union density decline over the years and they were all pretty much in agreement on them.

Respondent C felt that the biggest cause was the changed attitudes of multi-national corporations. He said that the IDA used to advise foreign multi-nationals that Ireland was a heavily unionised environment and they would recommend that they should allow one union to represent the workers in each factory. He said "*they even convinced committed non-union companies to come anyway and deals were worked out beforehand.*" Respondent B also referred to this time and said "*we were recruiting members before the jobs were even in existence.....we were recruiting companies, not members.....unions lost all ability to try and win members.*" He went on:

*"Silicon Valley type companies, in particular, made trade union recognition a major deciding factor on where they would set up business because they wanted to replicate what they had in California."*

Respondent A had a different take on this topic. In his experience the Irish management in some of these foreign owned companies "*did not want home country practices because they had a vested interest in that if the workers got better conditions or pension schemes, they would get that as well.*" He felt that the behaviour of union members

was a bigger factor in the emergence of non-union workplaces because it caused a great deal of the hostility among both foreign and local employers. He said

*“Some union members are contentious and troublesome and would put employers off.....sometimes union members would behave abominably and wouldn’t give cooperation.....these practices goaded several employers into opening up new facilities on the pre-condition that they be non-union.”*

This respondent obviously did not agree with Allen’s (2010) assertion that employers used social partnership as an opportunity to bring in non-union practices.

This respondent had brought up the issue of “double breasting” as outlined by Lavelle (2008) even before he was asked the question. When the other correspondents were asked if they had come across this practice of unionised companies insisting that new facilities would be non-unionised workplaces, they all said that they had. They said it became the norm and they also agreed with his assertion that US companies are less likely to recognise unions than companies from any other country. Respondent C said that this even happened with those companies that had previously had good working relationships with unions. He gave an example of one very profitable American company and which had never experienced any union problems but the local management informed him that he had been instructed by his head office that they were not prepared to wait for the usual two/three month negotiation stage whenever they wanted to make major changes and that if the union insisted on a union presence in their proposed new facility that they would move it elsewhere and as well as moving elsewhere that they would remove the facility for union fees to be deducted at source in the existing factory. It is probably fair to say that this is an example of the power shift to employers which enabled them to be able to resist trade unions as mentioned by Waddington and Whitson (1997). Respondent B said that this attitude to unions was widespread even in American companies which were fully unionised back home.

Respondent A also said that another factor which had a big impact on the issue of union density was the emergence of a new type of worker. He said:

*“This breed of worker was better educated with degrees and such and was superbly self-confident.....they didn’t need us and they could play the market because there were plenty of jobs and that generated no requirement for a union.”*

Respondent C also referred to this and he said *“capitalism continues to adapt and they have convinced many workers that it is up to their own talent whether they succeed or not.”*

These respondents seemed to grant more significance to the effect that individualism had on the trade unions than that stated by Waddington and Whitson (1997) in Chapter Two.

Respondent A felt that *“anti-union sentiments were not a result of social partnership.....it was the influence of people thinking of a different way of doing business, Ryanair for example.”*

While all respondents accepted that employer hostility was one of the major factors which caused the decline in union density, they were in agreement that it wasn’t the only factor involved. Respondent A, for example, felt that the emergence of the practice of sub-contracting work was the biggest single factor. He added:

*“It was exacerbated by the arrival of immigrants into uncertain industries such as catering and security and these are not done in-house anymore.....many immigrants had different expectations of unions depending on where they came from.....the decline would have happened with or without social partnership.”*

Respondent B also regarded sub-contracting as a big factor in the decline of union density levels and he said that *“the fact that is no requirement for employers to pay redundancies and such is a major attraction.”*

McGinley (2000:210-211) puts the decline down to a few different reasons. He says that the main reasons were the shift to the service industry which has never had a tradition of being a unionised sector, the rejection of unionised workplaces by multi-national corporations and the increase in the number of workers in the tourism and leisure sector which tends to be seasonal. He says that there is a tendency for many of those employed in this area to operate in the black/grey economy. This practice threatens the legitimate small or medium sized companies which tended to be unionised. He also says that the restructuring and early retirements in the semi-state public sector have had a very big effect.

Respondent C pointed out that it was “*much easier to organise in big areas of labour.*” He said that along with the reduction of large centres of manufacturing that there is also a process of de-centralising other areas as well. He gave the area of psychiatric nursing as an example. He said

*“There used to be psychiatric institutions around the country and we could have had hundreds of members in each one but now many of them are broken up and people are being cared for in the community where it is much harder to organise.”*

Respondent B felt there was some truth in the claim that new workers were not pursued to join unions. He said:

*“it used to be in the shop steward’s interest to have members, I think he got a small percentage (laughs), but it was in no-one’s interest to follow them up, it wasn’t dissatisfaction, it is just that they were not asked.”*

This statement ties in with Turner and D’Art’s (2008) suggestion that national level bargaining may have weakened unions at shop floor level with the majority of non unionised workers in unionised workplaces never being asked to join. It is also an example of Allen’s

(2010) statement that there was a failure in recruiting new members was a big factor in the decline.

Respondent B felt that another major factor is a lack of militancy. He said “*workers don’t want to go on strike, they have too much to lose.....they have mortgages, we used to be all in Corporation houses and rents went down when the money wasn’t there.*”

McGinley (2000:181) feels that the failure to ratify the Constitutional right to form a trade union through legislation has led to an increasingly disgruntled trade union membership. When asked about the lack of legislation guaranteeing union recognition, Respondent B said “*we liked the British legislation and when it came out we said yeah we want that, but now it is obvious that it hasn’t been very successful and had has limited effect on union density.*”

When asked if the opportunity of participating in social partnership was available in the future would he recommend it, Respondent C said that he would, but on certain conditions. First of all, trade unions would need to be changed from the servicing to the organisational model and union recognition would have to be legislated for. He concluded by saying: “*yes, I would be for it, but it would have to include the members, they would have to be involved in a meaningful way.*”

Initially I was a little unsure as to how many interviews I would need to conduct in order to get the trade union perspective on the subject but it seemed that I had achieved that after my fourth. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Denscombe (2010:117) spoke of the difficulty for qualitative researchers, using the grounded theory approach, to know when they had gathered enough data and he suggested that you had probably reached “saturation” point when no new data emerged from the research. I seemed to arrive at this point in my study, at least in the areas to which I was confined to by the limitations of my research.

My experience of carrying out the interviews fell very much in line with the comments of Bell (2010:161). He says that one of the biggest advantages of using interviews is their adaptability and the opportunity that they provide for the examination of different areas. He also warns of their subjective nature and the need for the awareness of the danger of bias coming play in any research. I was lucky in this study in that the respondents may have disagreed on some points, they were broadly in agreement on the more fundamental issues.

The period that this study is concerned with was a very volatile time in many ways. Social and cultural changes have meant that our society is barely recognisable from the one of thirty years ago. Our economic performance has fluctuated dramatically over the years and this has resulted in major changes in terms of the job market and employment levels, particularly over the last eight or nine years. This rollercoaster ride has produced many challenges for the trade union movement and its members.

Bryson, Ebbinghaus and Visser (2011:97) wrote that in the year 2000, EU political leaders declared that economic growth and an advance to a knowledge society along with strong social cohesion would be the goals of the next decade, but unfortunately nobody asked them what might happen if employment growth turned out to be founded on destabilizing the employment relationships which were in popular in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. This study shows that the Irish labour market came under the same pressures as those experienced in other countries and that their effects were probably magnified because of our open economy.

Bryson, Ebbinghaus and Visser (2011:98-99) also point out that unionization levels were lower in 2008 than in 1980 in all comparable countries but that the ranking of countries has hardly changed. This would suggest that the relationship between the unions and the market plays very little part in the rate of union decline. This study suggests that participation

in social partnership did bring many benefits to trade unions and workers and that it did provide a more harmonious working environment, particularly in the early years. It also appears that lessons have been learned by the trade union movement which may be put to good use at some stage in the future. However, it also suggests that participation did contribute to the weakening of ties between union members and their organisations.

As far as the main question of this study is concerned, it appears that participation in social partnership did not make any appreciable difference to the rate of decline in union density rates. The main causes of this decline are to be found in the areas of changing work practices and corporate governance. There are many similarities between the British and Irish labour markets. The public private divide is roughly the same and the divisions in the private sector are very alike. They may have had very different journeys to arrive at their destination but they have both ended up in roughly the same place as far as union density levels are concerned.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## CONCLUSION

This chapter is concerned with a brief review of this study and some reflection on the research process. Participation in social partnership has been a big feature of trade union activity in this country since the 1980s. My initial question concerned what effect if any that this participation had on the decline on union density figures. I decided that a comparison with the British experience would be very informative for many reasons, not least for their proximity. There are many similarities between the two trade union movements but the British unions' relationship with the state and employers was at the opposite end of the spectrum from partnership and involved a much more confrontational approach.

My literature review was concerned with different perspectives on social partnership and the reasons behind union density decline in other countries with a special focus on Britain. I used secondary data to compare the respective union density levels and labour market composition and I used interviews with senior trade union officials who were deeply involved in the partnership. Unfortunately, I was not in a position to garner the views of the employers or the State and I had to rely on documentary analysis alone to gather data on the British experience.

My study suggests that the decline is caused by global changes in labour markets and work practices and that participation in partnership has had a minimal effect on this. This is in line with the experiences in other comparable countries and it shows that our own particular brand of semi-corporatism did not insulate our trade unions in any significant way.

Of course, the impact of partnership on union density levels is not the only possible consideration when deciding on the value of tri-partite participation. There is enormous potential for much more research on the subject. As mentioned earlier, the period in question saw many changes in the economy and the labour market and it would be informative to

examine the situation as it was at different times during the lifetime of social partnership. This would offer the opportunity to determine its effects in times of economic boom and also in times of economic recession. It would also be useful to examine what social changes were brought about by partnership and how these impacted on workers and society as a whole. Comparative workplace analyses on issues such as wage levels, work practices and days lost through strikes would also be interesting and it would also be worth investigating whether the different approaches had any effects on the physical and mental well-being of the workers involved.

This study suggests that whether you love it or hate it, social partnership has the potential to be a powerful force in many ways but trade unions need to look elsewhere for solutions that will halt the decline in union membership.

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**APPENDIX A.**

**COPY OF CONSENT FORM**



**Introduction:** My name is Paraic Breheny and I am a final year undergraduate student at Maynooth University. I am studying for a Bachelor of Social Science degree and I am conducting research as part of my Sociology subject. My supervisor is Dr. Peter Murray. Email: [peter.murray@nuim.ie](mailto:peter.murray@nuim.ie). Phone: (01) 7083594.

**Study Information:** My project concerns an analysis of the effect, if any, that participation in Social Partnership has had on Trade Union membership and density levels in Ireland.

**Study Participation:** I will conduct a comparative analysis between Ireland and Britain. The study will focus on the time span from the early 1980s to the present day. I will examine all relevant statistics and any studies which are pertinent to the subject. I will also conduct semi-structured interviews with senior trade union officials. I expect that these interviews will last a maximum of one hour.

**Participant Rights:**

Participants are assured that there is no obligation on them to take part.

They are free to withdraw from the research at any time.

Anonymity and confidentiality are assured if required (No names or identifying information will be used and all data will be treated confidentially).

All interview data will be stored on file under password protection and all such data will be destroyed on completion of the project.

**Further Information:** My Email address is [paraic.breheny.2013@nuim.ie](mailto:paraic.breheny.2013@nuim.ie) and my phone number is 087/2584789. I wish to express my gratitude and appreciation to you for participating in this project.

**Consent:**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read and understand the information provided in regard to this research. I give my consent to participate in this study in the manner set out above.

**Signed,**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_