



Trade union membership - Who's leaving?

Australia 2008-2010

The decline of trade union membership across developed economies, including Australia, has been well established. This fact sheet seeks to enhance our understanding of movements in Australian union membership by considering the profile of those who leave unions¹. Data from the first four waves of the Australia at Work study² was used to investigate the individual level characteristics of those who quit unions in 2008-2010.

The analysis was performed on individuals who were employed during at least two consecutive years of the study and were a member of a union in the initial year. The dependent variable of the model was binary, either they "stayed" a union member or they "left". A standard logistic regression model was used to estimate which characteristics are correlated with exit from unions. The independent variables that were investigated comprised of demographic characteristics (such as sex, age, education and household characteristics), firm characteristics (such as sector, tenure, agreement type, form of employment, hours, wage, skill, workplace size and union workplace presence), attitudes (towards union membership and managers) and changes between the pair of years (derived variables indicating changes in; location, employer, industry, hours, wage, skill and union workplace presence). Regional variation was captured via a regional dummy variable, however usual state of residence was not included in the model since preliminary investigation found it wasn't significant in this analysis.

Ultimately, the unweighted data was pooled across the three years 2008-2010 to increase the sample size. Individuals were counted once for each pair of years they stayed a union member and once for each time they left, (including after rejoining), therefore there were at most 3 observations per individual. This resulted in 4,480 observations from 1,929 individuals. Of the 4,480 observations there were 359 instances (8.0%) where a union member left. The year of the observation was included in the model as an independent variable.

¹ Information in this fact sheet is an extract from a research paper by Yarbrough & Yu (forthcoming). The full paper is available from the authors upon request.

² The *Australia at Work* study is being conducted by the Workplace Research Centre at the University of Sydney. The project is funded by the Australian Research Council's Linkage Grant scheme and the industry partner is Unions NSW. Further financial support is provided by CFMEU Energy & Mining Division, CFMEU ACT Branch, NSW Nurses' Association, the Police Federation of Australia, the SDA, the CEPU, the QLD Nurses Federation and the Nurses Federation (Victorian Branch). *The study* is a five-year longitudinal telephone survey of people who were aged 16 to 58 years in 2007 and in the Australian labour force in March 2006 (i.e. prior to the implementation of the *Work Choices* legislation on 27 March 2006). New entrants and re-entrants to the labour force after March 2006 were not 'in-scope' for the study. For more information: <http://www.australiaatwork.org.au>

What did we find?

Of the survey respondents who were already a member of a union and stayed in employment, the key factors associated with a high likelihood to leave their union membership (at least temporarily) were: primarily **mobility**; change of employer and change of industry. Other important results in membership retention were firm characteristics such as union workplace presence and agreement type, attitudes such as an individual's desire to be a member and demographics such as age.

In Summary:

- An individual who **changes employer** was more than 4 times as likely to have lapsed union membership in the following survey compared to a similar person who stays with the same employer.
- Those who **changed industry or location** were 2.6 and 1.5 times more likely to leave, respectively. An individual who changes location *and* employer is more than 6 times as likely to quit union membership as someone who doesn't change either.
- Respondents who **did not perceive union presence at their workplace** were more likely to leave their union membership. Also **loss of union presence in the workplace** (independent of changes in employment or location) was found to increase the odds of a member leaving their union membership by 3.7 times compared to someone who was continuously at unionised or continuously at non-unionised workplaces.
- Those on **individual contracts** were twice as likely to leave their union membership, compared to those on collective agreements or awards. Members employed in the **private sector** were more likely to leave than those in the public sector.
- In general the **younger** the individual, the more likely they were to leave their union membership (although when approaching retirement age the likelihood of leaving begins to increase again). The odds of a 25 year old exiting were nearly twice that of a 40 year old.
- Those whose highest level of **education was below a trade qualification** were more likely to leave their union membership, as were those with **dependent children**. **Singles** were more likely to quit than married people.
- Those who **didn't want to be a member** or who **trusted their managers** were associated with a higher likelihood to leave their union membership.

What do our findings suggest?

The results indicate that many factors related to an individual's decision to leave a union are due to transitions within working life, many of which are linked to household situation and changing economic conditions. In order to retain members unions need to engage effectively with these transitions within working life. Unions might consider a range of strategies, such as providing some status of membership for a short period of time whilst a member is between jobs. If unions keep in contact with individuals who change industry, they could promote a referral scheme with information about other appropriate unions.

The findings also highlight the importance of other research, such as investigating the factors associated with leaving union membership isolated from the event of leaving one's employer (see the paper and Fact sheet No. 22). Further research into which factors are associated with joining a union could also provide a more holistic analysis of the membership transitions into and out of unions.