Policy Brief

Membership of unions and employers' organisations, and bargaining coverage: Standing, but losing ground

September 2025

Key findings

- Trade union membership continues to decline across the OECD. According to the latest data of the OECD/AIAS ICTWSS database, union density has halved since 1985, falling from 30% to 15% in 2023/24. This decline has been widespread, though few countries – notably Iceland, Belgium and, to a lesser extent, Canada, Korea and Norway – have bucked the trend.
- There was a small increase in union density in several OECD countries during the COVID-19 pandemic which, however, was largely driven by compositional effects, and did not reflect a lasting resurgence in union membership.
- Differences in unionisation between women (14.2%) and men (14.9%) are small. In contrast, unionisation in the public sector (41.3%) is much stronger than in the private sector (10.1%).
- Membership to employer organisations, with a share of employees in the private sector working in firms affiliated to an employer association at around 55% in 2023/24, has remained relatively stable (it was 59% in the 1980s). Employer representation is strongest in countries where affiliation is compulsory, such as Austria, or where sectoral bargaining is the norm, such as the Netherlands and Sweden.
- The share of employees covered by collective agreements fell from 47% in 1985 to 33.6% in 2023/24. The decline was especially pronounced in Central and Eastern European countries and in countries that undertook major reforms during the 1980s and 1990s, such as New Zealand and the United Kingdom in the 1980s and 1990s or Greece more recently.
- High coverage persists in countries with multi-employer bargaining systems. Countries where sectoral agreements are widespread – often supported by strong employers' organisations – continue to exhibit broad bargaining coverage, even when trade union membership is low.

Collective bargaining and workers' voice are fundamental labour rights and, as recognised in the OECD Jobs Strategy 2018 (OECD, 2018[1]), essential tools for building inclusive labour markets. However, since the 1980s, collective bargaining systems have gradually eroded. Trade union density – the share of workers who are union members – has declined in most OECD countries, falling from an average of 30% in 1985 to 15% in 2024. This long-term decline has occurred in the majority of countries, although union membership has increased in a few, such as Iceland and Belgium, and remained relatively stable in Canada, Korea, and Norway. Similarly, collective bargaining coverage – the share of workers covered by a collective agreement – fell from 47% in 1985 to 33.6% in 2024 across the OECD.

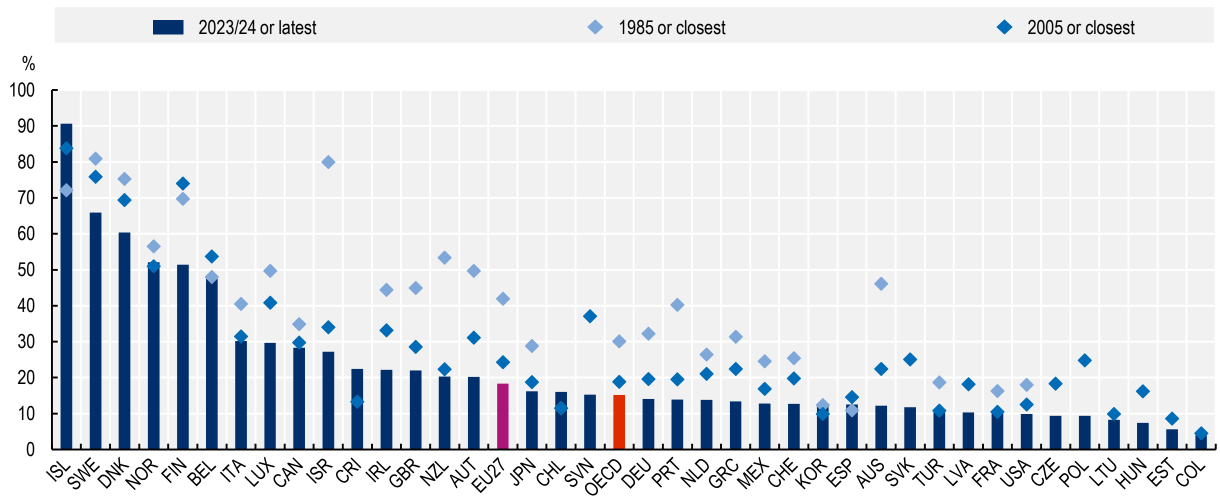
This policy brief builds on the OECD work on collective bargaining (OECD, 2019[2]) and provides an update on membership to trade unions, membership to employers' organisations and collective bargaining coverage using the latest version of the OECD/AIAS database on Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions, Wage Setting, State Intervention and Social Pacts (ICTWSS) released in September 2025. The database was initially developed by Prof. Jelle Visser at the University of Amsterdam (AIAS-HSI) and, in 2021, it has been transferred to the OECD. The maintenance and update of the database has been possible thanks to the financial assistance of the ESF+ - Employment and Social Innovation strand (2021-2027) under agreement No. VS/2022/0100. The database is available at https://oe.cd/ictwss-20.

Trade unions continue losing ground

Trade (or labour) unions are voluntary organisations of workers that are present in all OECD countries. On average across OECD countries, 30% of workers were members of a trade union in 1985. The corresponding figure was 19% in 2005 and today is only 15% (Figure 1). These averages mask huge variations across countries – only 4.7% of workers are unionised in Colombia, 5.6% in Estonia, 7.4% in Hungary, while more than 60% are union members in Sweden and Denmark, and 90% in Iceland.

Figure 1. Trends in union density

Percentage of employees, 1985, 2005 and 2023/24 or latest year available



Note: No data in 1985 for Colombia, Costa Rica, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Slovak Republic, and Slovenia.1985 refers to 1984 for Israel, Mexico, and Portugal; 1986 for Chile and Greece; and 1987 for Luxembourg. 2005 refers to 2004 for Greece and Hungary; 2006 for Israel, Latvia, Lithuania, and Portugal; and 2007 for Colombia. The latest year refers to 2019 for France; 2020 for Greece, Hungary, Luxembourg, and Portugal; 2021 for Latvia; and 2022 for Lithuania, Poland, the Slovak Republic, and Slovenia. "OECD" and "European Union (27)" are the employee-weighted averages of union densities across the 38 OECD countries and the 27 EU countries, respectively.
Source: OECD/AIAS ICTWSS database version 2.0, https://oe.cd/ictwss-20.

Figure 1 shows that declining unionisation is common to most OECD countries – see Box 1 for a short note on how membership to trade unions is measured. Only Iceland, Chile, and Spain have experienced an increase in trade union density since 1985. In Central and Eastern European countries, the decline in union density has been quite dramatic, due to the collapse of the union affiliation rate after the fall of central planning (stabilised at 10% over recent years). In several countries, there was an increase in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic – and somehow also reflected in the OECD average (see the statistical annex for the full time series). This was, however, only driven by composition effects (i.e. non-unionised workers losing their job more than unionised workers).

In 2024, the union membership rate was above or close to 50% only in countries where unemployment benefits are administered by union-affiliated institutions (sometimes called the "Ghent system", as found in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden and, partly, as the government also plays a significant role, Belgium) and in Norway. However, as noted in OECD (2019[1]), even the Ghent system has been increasingly challenged and eroded by the development of private insurance funds offering unemployment insurance without requiring union membership leading to a decrease in trade union density.

Differences between women and men are small: on average across the OECD, 14.2% of women in employment were unionised in 2024, vs. 14.9% of men. In contrast, unionisation is much stronger in the public sector, with 41.3% of employees unionised in 2024 compared to 10.1% in the private sector.

Box 1. How is membership in trade unions measured?

Trade union density is the proportion of employees who are union members. A trade union is understood as an employee organisation engaged in negotiating pay and working conditions. This includes some professional associations but excludes employer-dependent or individual-representation-focused bodies.

There are two main methods for estimating union density:

- Survey-based estimates: Derived from labour force or social surveys, this method allows detailed breakdowns (e.g. by age, gender, sector), though it misses cross-border or non-resident workers.
- Administrative membership statistics: Based on data from unions, government questionnaires, or official registries. As these figures often include non-employees (retirees, unemployed, self-employed), adjustments are made to exclude them and get "net" membership figures used to compute consistent union density rates. These sources also cover in principle cross-border or non-resident workers but are more difficult to verify, in particular when provided by trade unions.

Note: More detailed information is provided in the methodological note available at https://oe.cd/ictwss-20.

Employer and business organisations show more stability

Employers, business and employer organisations are the other key actors of collective bargaining. In most OECD countries outside Europe, employer associations represent the interests of business (i.e. lobby and voice) but do not bargain collective agreements, with most – if not all – bargaining taking place at the firm level. However, the role of employer organisations in wage bargaining processes is institutionalised in many European countries (even if, in some cases, it is possible to be a member of an employer association and be bound by a collective agreement, such as the so-called "*OT-Mitgliedschaft*" in Germany).

Box 2. How is membership to employers' organisations measured?

Employer organisations can be classified as economic, social, or mixed, depending on their focus. Only those engaged in collective bargaining – directly or through their members – are relevant for the OECD/AIAS ICTWSS database. As such, purely economic associations are excluded.

An employer organisation is typically included if it represents at least 5% of employees in organised firms, or if it participates in key tripartite or bipartite institutions overseeing collective bargaining.

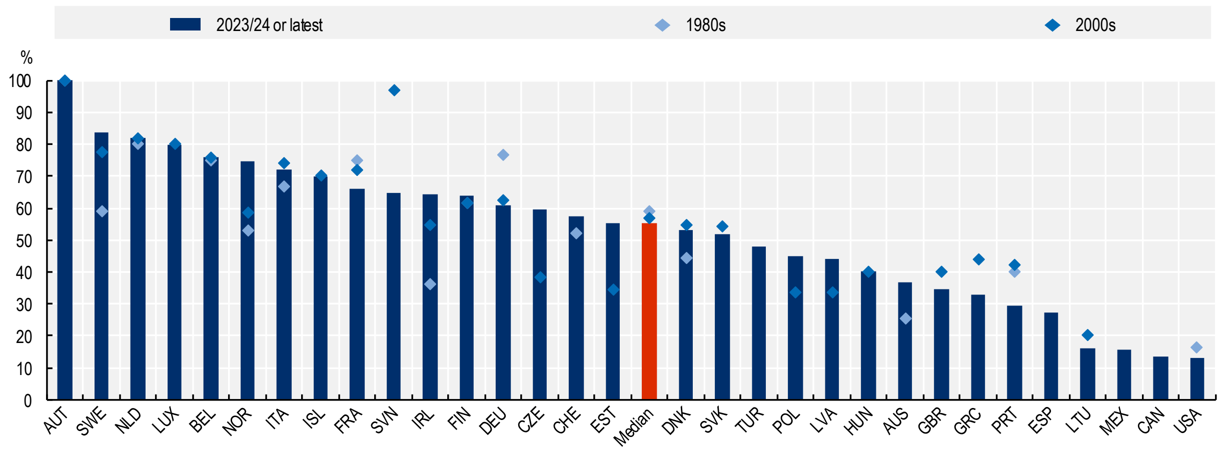
Official and up-to-date statistics on the number of workers covered, as distinct from the number of affiliated firms, are very limited, partial and often based only on self-reported data. Further difficulty in providing a precise assessment arises also from the possibility for firms to belong to several employer associations. The OECD/AIAS ICTWSS database relies on data from surveys, self-reported information, and expert assessments.

Note: More detailed information is provided in the methodological note available at https://oe.cd/ictwss-20.

Using available information (see Box 2 for a note on how membership to employers' organisations is measured), Figure 2 shows that around 55% of employees in the private sector worked in firms affiliated to an employers' organisation in 2023/24, which is just four percentage points lower than in the 1980s. Like trade union density, employer organisation density varies considerably across OECD countries: it is low in Canada, Lithuania, Mexico and the United States, but up to about 80% in Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden (and at 100% in Austria due to compulsory affiliation for all firms).

Figure 2. Employer organisation density

Percentage of employees in the private sector



Note: The latest year refers to 2012 for Hungary; 2014 for Belgium; 2016 for Lithuania, Slovenia, and Switzerland; 2017 for France, Greece, and the United Kingdom; 2018 for Australia, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Mexico, the Netherlands, and the Republic of Türkiye; and 2022 for Finland, Luxembourg, Poland, and the Slovak Republic. "Median" is the median value across the 31 OECD countries shown in this chart (not including Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Israel, Japan, Korea, and New Zealand).
Source: OECD/AIAS ICTWSS database version 2.0, https://oe.cd/ictwss-20.

Most countries for which time series are available show a remarkable stability, except Slovenia where compulsory affiliation for all firms was ended in 2005. Differences across OECD countries in employer organisation density only partially mirror those in trade union density. In Austria, Belgium, Finland or Sweden both trade union and employer organisations display high rates, while in Central and Eastern European countries, Korea or Türkiye both memberships rates are low. However, based on the number of employees covered, Iceland and Denmark, for instance, combine one of the highest union densities among OECD countries with an average employer organisation density; and Czechia, Estonia and France have a high employer organisation density together with low trade union density.

Less and less workers covered by collective agreements

The share of employees covered by collective agreements also declined significantly over the past 30 years. This indicator is key for comparing the relative strength of collective bargaining across countries since it captures the extent to which workers' employment conditions are actually influenced by collective negotiation – see Box 3 for a summary of how bargaining coverage is measured. On average across OECD countries, it shrunk by almost a third, from 47% in 1985 to 33.5% in 2023/24 (Figure 3).

Box 3. How is collective bargaining coverage measured?

Collective bargaining coverage represents the share of employees covered by valid collective agreements in force. In the framework of the OECD/AIAS ICTWSS database, it is important to note that i) coverage includes multi-level agreements (national, sectoral, firm-level), but avoids double-counting; ii) only agreements signed by bona fide trade unions are included; iii) national-level minimum wage agreements are excluded for comparability purpose; iv) expired agreements may still count if their terms legally persist ("after-effect").

There are two ways of measuring the bargaining coverage rate:

- *Unadjusted coverage*: Percentage of *all* employees covered, regardless of eligibility.
- *Adjusted coverage*: Percentage of *eligible* employees covered among those with the right to bargain, i.e. excluding those employees without the right to bargaining (e.g. armed forces, police, civil servants in some countries) but covered by statutory regulation.

Data sources include administrative records, national registers, surveys, or reports from unions and social partners. To track the scope and dynamism of bargaining, the number of new agreements signed, those in force, and the number of workers newly covered are also monitored.

Note: More detailed information is provided in the methodological note available at https://oe.cd/ictwss-20.

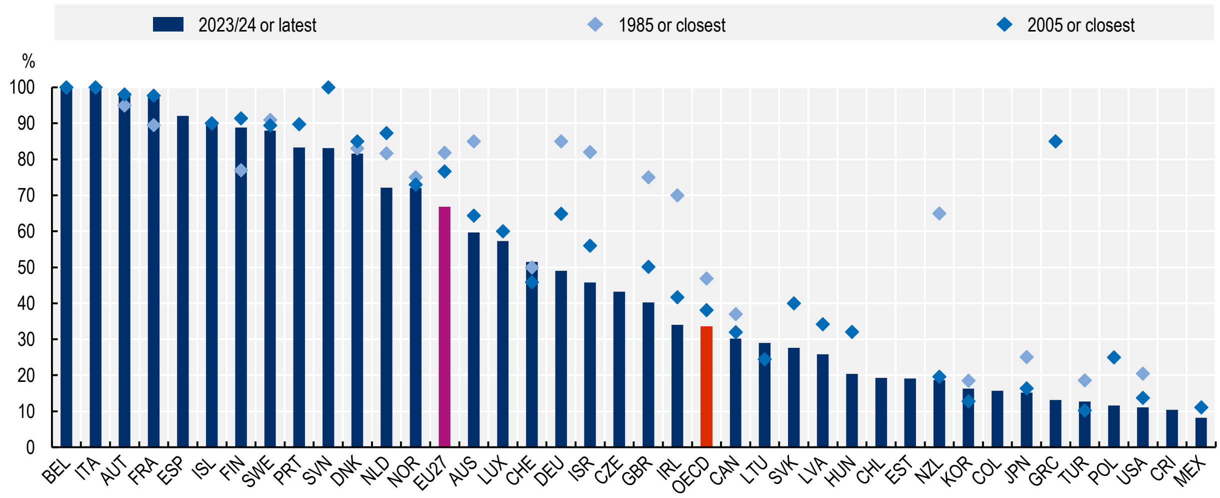
As with trade union density, the decline was the strongest in Central and Eastern European countries. Steep decreases were also observed in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom where reforms aimed at limiting the role of sectoral bargaining took place in the 1980s (in Australia, recent legislative changes, including the Secure Jobs, Better Pay Act in 2022, were designed to increase the number and scope of collective agreements). Coverage has remained relatively stable in most other European countries except for Germany, Greece and the Netherlands.

Only 10 of the 27 EU countries are above the 80% threshold set by the EU Directive on adequate minimum wages (Directive (EU) 2022/2041) which triggers the obligation for EU member states to "provide for a framework of enabling conditions for collective bargaining" and "establish an action plan to promote collective bargaining to progressively increase the collective bargaining coverage rate".

Collective bargaining coverage is high and stable only in countries where multi-employer agreements (mainly sectoral) are negotiated (even in several of the Southern European countries where trade union density is quite low), in some cases thanks to administrative extensions that extend the validity of collective agreements to the entire sector. A second key element which matters for bargaining coverage is the relative strength, and willingness to negotiate, of employer organisations since they negotiate and sign collective agreements which in most countries then apply to all workers of their affiliated firms, regardless of whether or not they are trade union members. Indeed, in all countries except Greece and Mexico, the share of workers covered by a collective agreement is higher than the share of unionised workers. When interpreting the data, it should be noted that a high level of bargaining coverage does not necessarily indicate a robust bargaining system. High coverage may mask a fragmented system, limited union bargaining power or a significant number of expired agreements whose terms are still formally valid.

Figure 3. Trends in collective bargaining coverage rate

Percentage of employees covered by a collective agreement as a share of those with the right to collectively bargain, 1985, 2005 and 2023/24 or latest year available



Note: No data in 1985 and 2005 for Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czechia, Estonia, and Spain. No data in 1985 for Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, and Slovenia. 1985 refers to 1980 for Iceland; 1982 for Israel; and 1990 for Greece.2005 refers to 2000 for Luxembourg, and Poland; 2004 for Australia, Finland, France, and the Slovak Republic; and 2006 for Israel. The latest year refers to 2016 for Colombia and Slovenia; 2017 for Greece and Ireland; 2021 for Estonia and Switzerland; and 2022 for Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Norway. "OECD" and "European Union" are employee-weighted averages of the adjusted collective bargaining coverage rates across the 38 OECD countries and the 27 EU countries, respectively.
Source: OECD/AIAS ICTWSS database version 2.0, https://oe.cd/ictwss-20.

Concluding remarks

Membership rates alone do not fully capture the influence of trade unions and employer organisations, and these indicators are closely tied to the structure of the collective bargaining system itself and often reflect long-standing historical trajectories. Nonetheless, they remain useful proxies for assessing whether these organisations represent a broad base of workers and firms – or only a narrow segment.

Recent data confirm a continued decline in membership and coverage rates. Yet, individual negotiation is rarely a realistic alternative for most workers, who often lack the leverage to effectively bargain on their own. From addressing wage inequality and job quality to managing the impact of technological change and supporting workers affected by the green, digital and demographic transitions, collective bargaining and workers' voice can play a vital role in complementing public policy and delivering more tailored, balanced outcomes than state regulation.

References

OECD (2019), *Negotiating Our Way Up: Collective Bargaining in a Changing World of Work*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/1fd2da34-en. [2]

OECD (2018), *Good Jobs for All in a Changing World of Work: The OECD Jobs Strategy*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264308817-en. [1]

The figures in this policy brief can be found in the accompanying Excel file available at https://oe.cd/ictwss-20.

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