

## Three charts on: the changing face of Australian union members

Written by The Conversation

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Despite public perception, figures indicate that white collar workers are more likely to be a member of a union than people working in traditionally blue collar professions. Shutterstock

What comes to mind when I say union member? Perhaps it conjures up a blue collar construction or factory worker. Well data on unions shows it's more likely to be a lawyer or teacher.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates an increase in the number of professionals hold a union ticket in today's Australia. The number of union members who listed their occupation as "manager" (89,900) or "professional" (543,300) easily exceeded the combined number of those who recorded their calling as a trade or technical worker (195,200), a sales worker (89,800), a machinery operator or driver (138,600) or a labourer (146,800).

So the image that many of us have of a union member – a militant building worker who belongs to the Construction Forestry Mining & Energy Union – is a misnomer. In fact, despite the CFMEU's prominence in the media, union density in the construction industry stands at only 9.4%.

In the private sector, union density now stands at 10.1%. In the public sector, the percentage of workers in this domain holding a union ticket falling by 4.9 percentage points to 38.5% between 2013 and 2016.

### **A history of change**

Many reasons have been put forward to explain the decline in Australian unionism – enterprise bargaining, laws unfriendly to unions, managerial hostility and youth indifference. However it's clear that union decline has broadly tracked the declining share of jobs held by blue-collar workers.

Union decline can be broken into three broad periods. Between 1954 and 1976, declining union density moved in lock-step with the blue-collar working class's declining workforce share.

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Between 1971 and 1996, union decline occurred at a slower pace than the fall in the blue-collar share of the workforce, as unions had success in recruiting white-collar workers and professionals. This more than offset declines in blue-collar membership.

From 1996 onwards, unions became increasingly dominated by professionals as blue-collar membership collapsed.

Today, union members can be categorised into three groups:

1) Managers and professionals 2) Blue-collar workers engaged in trade work, labouring, machinery operation and driving 3) Unskilled and semi-skilled workers engaged in sales, clerical work and community and personal service.

As blue-collar unionists became increasingly rare figures within the ranks of the trade unions, so it was that union membership became increasingly dominated by managers and professionals.

In many ways the increasing domination of union membership by professionals should not surprise us. Since 1986, the industries largely staffed by professionals and semi-professionals (such as media and information systems, finance, health, education and education) have provided more jobs than traditional blue-collar industries.

The problem for unions is that as the workforce has changed, they have got the worst of both worlds. Since 1996, union density has clearly fallen more sharply than the blue-collar share of the workforce. However, unions have not been able to win over enough professionals to offset the loss of blue-collar unionists.

### Missing the mark

Part of the problem in securing new members for unions is that professional recruitment is largely confined to one cohort: those employed in publicly-funded or regulated industries, such as education and health. In these areas, unions still represent around a third of the workforce.

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By contrast, in areas of professional employment characterised by private-ownership and market-competition (i.e. media, finance, professional services) unions perform poorly. In finance and insurance, union density stands at 9.7%. In professional and scientific services – an area that employed more than a million in 2016 – only 2% of the workforce has a union ticket.

This data reveals union membership is increasingly confined to one area of the economy – professional and semi-professional employment in publicly-funded and regulated areas. Leaving the rest of the workforce behind.

*Bradley Bowden does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.*

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