CHRO ASSOCIATION

The Future of Unions Is Activism

What trade unions with dwindling membership need to do to survive—and what companies need to do to respond

The Paradox of Declining Membership

As member-led organizing wanes, employee activism and corporate campaigning are on the rise and reshaping how power is exercised at work. For decades, trade union membership in the developed world has been in free fall. Today, it stands as roughly one third of its mid-twentieth century peak and half of its 1980s level—when the world's major union leaders were household names.

In 150 of the world's economies, around 519 million of roughly 3.5 billion workers are union members—but around 200 million of them belong to China's state-run ACFTU, where it could be argued this is not fully voluntary. Globally, union membership stands at around 10% of the workforce, which coincidentally matches the low participation in the United States. The CEO of Unions Inc, if he or she existed, would have been replaced many, many times over.

What this means: Power is shifting from traditional member-driven structures toward rights-based processes, new forms of representation (social media activity, supply chain rights), and cross-border accountability.

Recent Key Examples

Driving Apps and Gig Work (UK and EU): Achieved influence through litigation, not membership or social activism. The UK Supreme Court's 2021 ruling resulted in a big win stating that Uber drivers are workers, not contractors.

Fast Food and Low Wage Service (US): SEIU's "Fight for $15" campaign reshaped minimum wage policy without significant membership in that sector. It operated as a movement-style coalition with media and regulatory pressure.

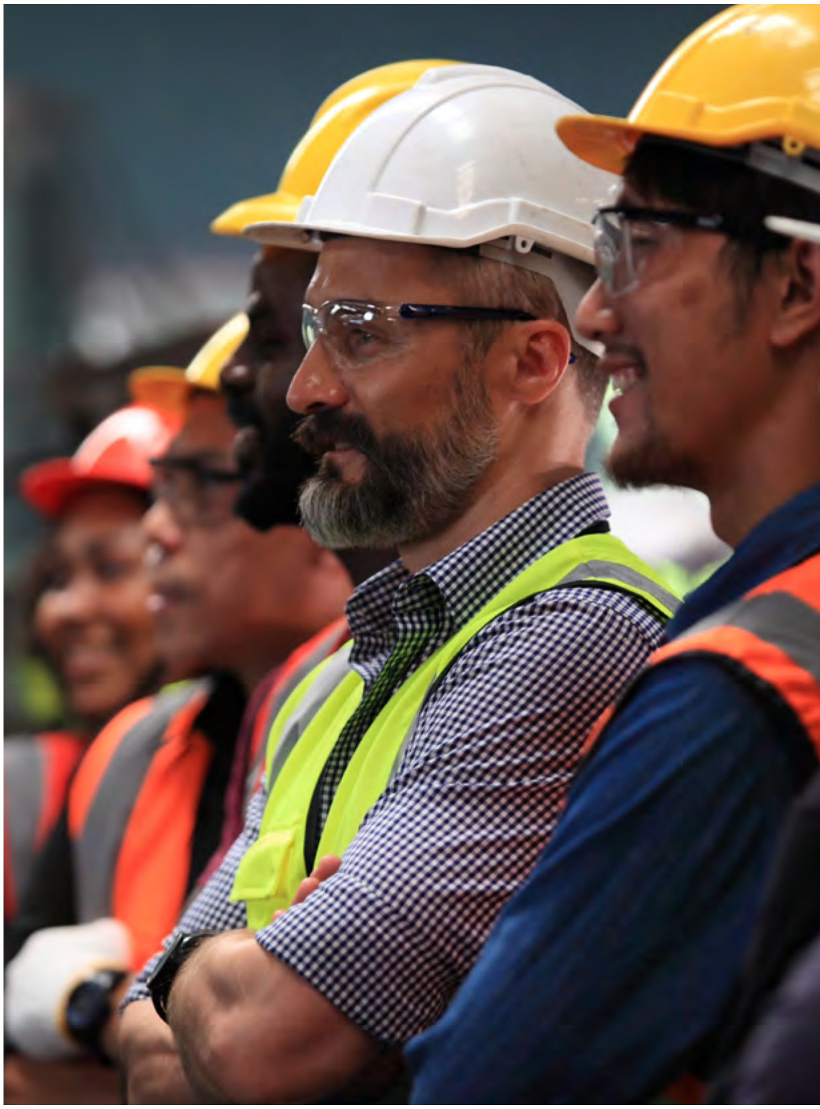
Automotive and Manufacturing (Sweden and Broader EU): In 2023, Tesla refused to sign a Swedish collective agreement. The decision mobilized a Nordic-wide blockade across docks, postal services, and electrical trades. Influence through solidarity, not membership.

Warehousing and Logistics (US, EU, Latin America): High-profile campaigns like the "Make Amazon Pay" coalition united trade unions, warehouse workers, climate activists, and tax justice groups. Even unsuccessful campaigns that were lost at the ballot box have been won in the public arena, triggering congressional hearings, federal labor-board scrutiny, and changes to election procedures that membership alone could not have produced.

Consumer Technology (US): Worker-led campaigns such as Apple Retail Union and Communications Workers of America used petitions, anonymous storytelling, and social media hashtags to start a movement and pressure leadership.

Public Sector and Teaching (US): Teachers' unions have found success with a "bargaining for the common good" model, joining with parents and other stakeholders to "benefit the whole community." This activism model has been adopted across multiple U.S. cities.

Three Future Scenarios for Trade Unions



Scenario#1

A massive revitalization effort that doubles current membership to 1985 levels. This would require rebuilding the union's image, a more relevant service provision, and adding union membership in growth sectors (technology and services).
Likelihood: LOW.

Scenario #2

A "resigned business as usual." Unions could mirror private sector strategies in cost-cutting initiatives, mergers, property divestitures, and staff reductions. Some, but not all, unions may follow this path.
Likelihood: MODERATE.

Scenario #3

Unions move away from the notion of universal representation and double down on areas of current strength like the public sector, the auto industry, banking, the docks, media, and extractive industries.

In sectors where membership is traditionally low (technology, retail, hospitality, logistics, and most of the private service economy), unions would reinvent themselves as social activist organizations, trading bottom-up member mobilization for top-down corporate campaigns and high-profile advocacy.
Likelihood: HIGH.

519 million

Estimated number of union workers out of 3.5 billion workers in 150 of the world's economies

Scenario #3 Is the Most Likely—What Does This Look Like?

In areas where unions are less strong, they will change form to look more like social activist organizations taking on big causes on the large stage, and use corporate campaigns to serve their broader member interests "top down" rather than "bottom up."

- **Legislative Pressure:** Unions persuade governments to pass laws that lower thresholds for recognition, such as in the UK and Southeast Asia. Where works councils or negotiating committees exist, they are pushing to expand their powers, modelling them on Germany-style codetermination rights and seeking injunctive actions to delay or block management decisions. The underlying strategy here is to shift their power base from membership to rights.
- **Cross-Border Supply Chain Litigation:** New national laws on supply chain human rights have opened the door to cross-border complaints about alleged labour malpractices. Through jurisdiction shopping, complaints can be filed in courts far from those where the alleged conduct occurred. The international trade union IndustriALL has produced comprehensive guides on using CSR reporting and supply chain legislation to pressure multinational companies.
- **Narrative and Media Leverage:** Unions have created a public narrative of success by amplifying high-profile settlements through the media, such as the major success of the International Longshoremen's Association on the docks in 2024. Purely complaint-driven campaigns (such as the Starbucks Workers United strike) have proven far less successful.

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The CHRO Response: A Six-Step Framework

In a world of shrinking membership, the question isn't whether unions survive, but how they transform—and how your workforce strategy stays ahead of the curve.

1. Be realistic about risk in the countries where recognition depends on majority member support. Other than perhaps in the UK and Southeast Asia with new and more relaxed laws, the risk of a successful organizing campaign based on membership growth is down. HR strategies should focus less on fear of unions and combatting campaigns and more on building and sustaining a positive employee experience and engagement environment.

2. Establish a monthly dashboard for measuring the employee relations environment on key sites that includes, but goes beyond, employee surveys, polls, and social media monitoring—an employee relations barometer. Build a dashboard comprising data that are already available, like unwanted attrition, quality, and productivity, and factor in business continuity vulnerability. Don't look for the top and bottom sites—your line managers already know who they are. Focus on sites that are deteriorating so actions can be taken before the site falls into chronic decline.

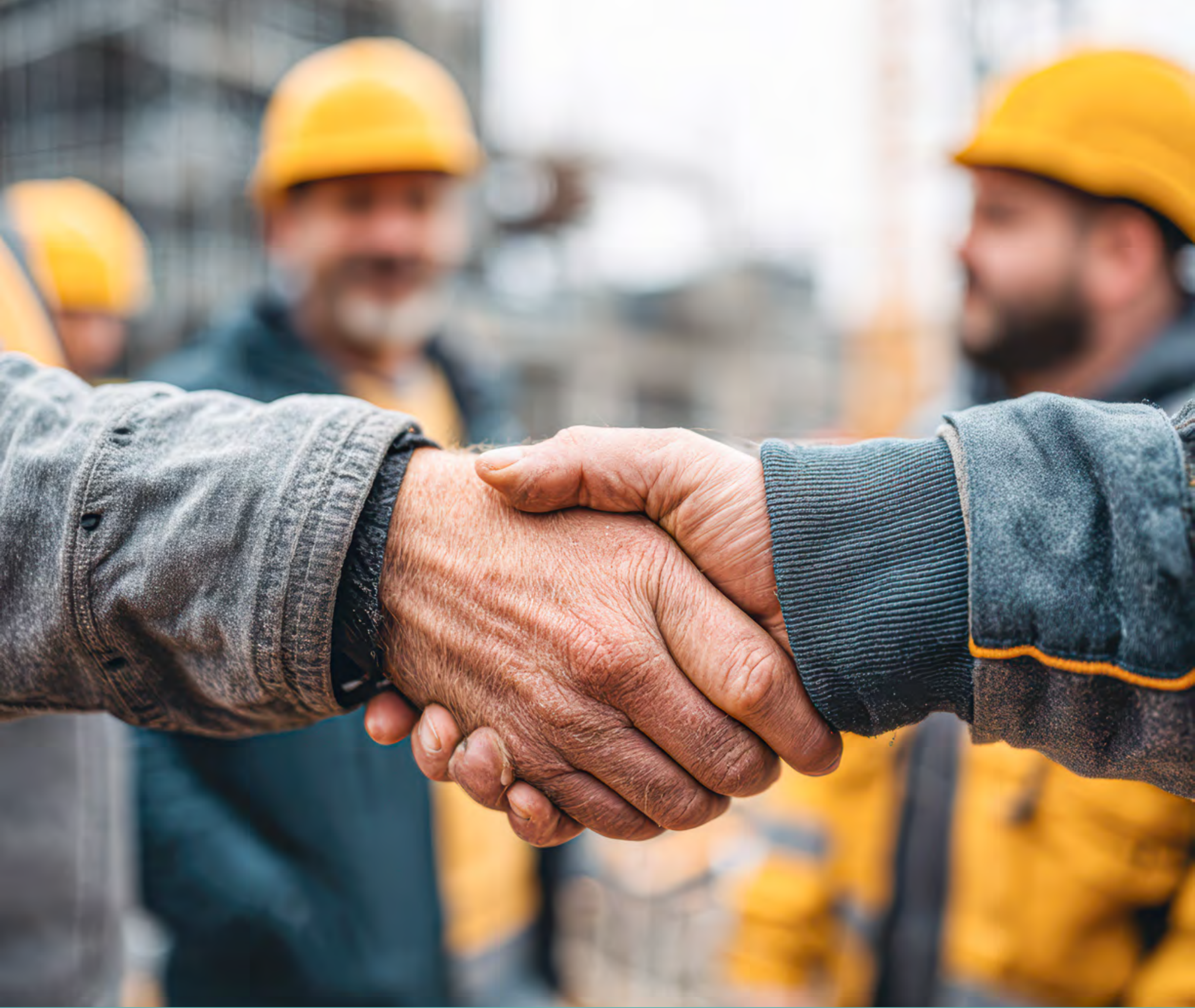
3. Collective organization trigger points often arise from unresolved or badly managed individual issues. Even the best managers make mistakes. Fix employee escalations "fair and fast."

4. Where you have influential works councils or other elected bodies, make sure they represent the makeup of your workforce and put their interests first. Build constructive relationships and don't be passive in elections or ballots and allow minority activists to gain power. If you have areas of activist capture, build a plan to deal with it.

5. Assess your entire workforce value chain for employment and human rights risks that could trigger a corporate campaign.

6. Organisation risk is not a year-round constant. Set up an employee relations calendar that sets out key moments in the year. These might be elections, negotiations, important works council or representative meetings, and major business decisions with a negative workforce impact. Plan for them and monitor the outcomes.

It's also important to establish core principles for how these maxims will differ country by country. There is no global, one-size-fits-all solution. Where it is possible and in the interest of the company to remain union free, do so. Where employee representation exists, build constructive relationships with representatives that genuinely reflect your employees' interests. Where disruptive activists hold power, develop a plan for change.



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