

BARRIERS TO TRADE UNION PARTICIPATION AMONG UNIVERSITIES STAFF

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Abstract: *Trade unions provide a collective voice for employees through representation and collective bargaining, yet participation among Malaysian university staff remains modest. Drawing on a focused literature-based synthesis in the public university context, this paper consolidates the main barriers that suppress union membership and engagement. Evidence points to persistent information deficits and weak workplace communication about union roles, often reinforced by limited exposure and intergenerational communication gaps. Individual-level deterrents, such as growing individualism, competing work and family responsibilities, and low perceived relevance, interact with concerns about union influence and effectiveness, reducing willingness to participate. Participation is further constrained by structural and institutional factors, including indirect organisational resistance that discourages union activities and dilutes collective voice. The synthesis highlights that improving participation requires clearer value communication, modernised union strategies aligned with contemporary staff concerns, and trust-building engagement through transparent governance and constructive union–management dialogue.*

Keywords: *trade unions; participation barriers; university staff; higher education; industrial relations; Malaysia*

Introduction

A trade union is a tool to thwart the management from implementing any anti-worker policy (Kosuri, 2023). Additionally, it serves as a conduit between management and employees. It communicates policy decisions and worker objections. Despite each union's independence, management would be unable to carry out worker-related policies without their collective bargaining agreement (Ahmed, 2022). Trade unions did not develop from mediaeval Craft Guilds, but rather from spontaneous assemblies of workers seeking to improve their working conditions. Their efforts to maintain wage standards began in the 18th century with local trade clubs that suffered legislative repression as a result of the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800, which prevented workers from banding together to change salaries and working conditions.

Despite ongoing legal vulnerabilities, the repeal of these acts in 1824 resulted in an increase in union organisation and activity. Unions evolved from secret societies to recognised organisations over time, with significant achievements including the formation of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), collective bargaining, and political initiatives linking unions to the Labour Party. They address periods of considerable political and industrial conflict, particularly during and after World Wars, when unions gained strength and social prestige while also experiencing failures, such as the General Strike of 1926. The story culminates with the shift from conflict to cooperation in the aftermath of the Great Depression, describing how unions responded to changing economic landscapes and established their roles as essential partners in industry, particularly during WWII (Flanders, 2022).

However, employer strategies intended to thwart unionization attempts are the main cause of the major organizational difficulties faced by trade unions in Malaysia (Mat, 2023). These strategies include firing union leaders, creating substitute "yellow" organizations, and taking advantage of loopholes in labor regulations. Renesas Semiconductor's case study serves as an example of union busting, in which workers who supported union activities were subjected to intimidation, incorrect classification, and retaliatory measures. While intimidation methods target migrant workers, restricting their participation in union initiatives, employers often use bribery to deter organization. Further undermining union recognition and collective bargaining rights are the drawn-out legal procedures and the absence of government assistance, which are indicative of continuous violations of the Industrial Relations Act. In Malaysia, these structural problems impede workers' rights and cause union dispersion (Hwa & Sukumaran, 2024).

The topic we will discussing about is the issues of trade union in higher level of education which in university public sector. In Malaysia educational sector discussed in this article Nonetheless, academic staff members' participation in the union is rather modest. For instance, according to reports, there are only 587 members of PKAUTM overall, while Universiti Teknologi Malaysia employs around 1600 faculty members (37%). This is a small percentage. distinct from MITASA, which has 2,393 members out of 7,820 employees (31%). In addition to representing the union's power, the number of members also shows how productive and successful the union's work is. As a result, a trade union's membership count can be seen as a crucial factor in assessing and conveying the organization's power and standing. In fact, research indicates that public sector employees are less likely than private sector employees to join unions. However, since the unity of union members determines a union's power, this issue needs to be resolved. In order to strengthen the union's position as a representative of academic staff and to fight for their rights and welfare, more academic staff involvement particularly in the union at the university level will be able to increase the union's density (Abdull Rahman et al., 2023).

Literature Review

Awareness can be defined as our conscious comprehension of the circumstances, issues, or topics that are all around us. Consider it the light that shines on previously obscure areas of knowledge. (*Understanding Awareness: Definition, Importance, and Impact • CSR Education*, 2024). Meanwhile, awareness campaign is a planned, focused attempt to raise public knowledge of a certain issue, problem, or objective. An awareness campaign's objectives are to educate, broaden people's understanding, and motivate them to act or alter their behavior.

The purpose of the study was to determine the primary barriers to academic staff participation in labor unions, particularly in public universities. According to (NUTP), diligent educators in schools are among those who experience high levels of job pressure and stress issues that impede their ability to be productive).According to Pauzi and Koris (2020), the university's trade unions were founded to support the mental and psychological well-being of its employees in order to guarantee that work-related stressors could be effectively managed.

Factors of barriers for academic staff participation in labor unions (public universities)

According to (Annuar, 2021), the finding tells the existence of relations between the trade unions and the law of the country does not have great relations. First, they said that they are not well-informed about the trade unions. Communication between younger and older workers make them does not know about the existence of the trade unions and does not know about the goal and the impact of trade union. This study shows that young people are frequently thought to be more sensitive to issues of freedom and democracy.

However, old workers and young workers would achieve a better result in working the trade unions out if they can work together (Mrozowicki & Trappmann, 2020). Compared to older workers, younger workers are less interested in joining a union (Berry & McDaniel, 2022). This is mostly because workers don't communicate with one another or have limited information about unions. For young workers, this makes the function of unions ambiguous and irrelevant. For senior employees, the circumstances are different. They have greater experience and are aware of the complexities or issues that arise in the job. This hesitancy does not, however, imply that young employees are anti-union. This discrepancy arises from their inability to keep up with older union members, who think and act differently than they do (Waddington & Kerr, 2008) Indeed, young people may join unions if they are properly informed and understand the value of unions (Annuar, 2021).

According to Abd Aziz et al., (2023), trade unions decrement among workers because of changes in trend and resurrection of individualism. Followed by this article shows personal factors become the highest reason on this study affecting union membership (Aziz et al., 2022). Young workers nowadays can be seen firm with their personal factors which contribute to the reason why they not involving in Trade Union. Respondents in this study also responded that personal development could be regarded in terms of activities that boost a person's talent, potential, job, awareness and ability to realise dreams and achieve success. According to Kobie (2022) we can observe that young workers are stepping up for themselves in the work place show how resilient and firm their life concept compared to olde workers shows how strong their resurrection of individualism in them.

According to Loganathan et al., (2023) in their research, based on a survey of relevant research, this study examines the potential causes of union commitment. Union commitment is beneficial

for developing economies, empowering workers to negotiate, and promoting gender equality in the workplace. Companies may view their employees as a strategic asset to their long-term success. According to Soh et al. (2021) some of their respondent vote for having another commitment such as family and work commitment prevent them from joining trade union. Meanwhile, Mohamed and Sulaiman (2022) investigate that how important to balance lifestyle and work especially to women as they need to play ‘dual role’ in life. Union commitment can be chosen by the member to stay as members, the union's willingness to put extra effort on behalf of the unions and the member's faith in and understanding of the union's goal (Li et al., 2019). Hence, it shows that constraint of joining unions to prioritise others responsibility need to be investigated more to increase the joining of academic staff in trade union.

And lastly, in this study on of the reason worker does not want to join trade union is the staff itself does not interest in joining trade union (Ismail, 2022). Abdul Majid et al. (2021) stated that members stay and dedicate themselves to their union because of its effectiveness in negotiating, organising, politics, member solidarity, and many other areas. Members’ satisfaction with union representation is higher if unions show their effectiveness (Blanchflower & Bryson, 2022). Union representative function is one of the influential roles in the union which may affect the trade union membership. According to Soh et al. (2021) also shows that few of respondent did not interest in joining trade union.

Challenges for academic staff participation in labor unions

The deficiency of alignment with international labour standards leaves Malaysian unions ill equipped in addressing involvement of workforce demands (Abd Razak & Nik Mahmud, 2021). Among academic personnel in public institutions, concerns about the relevance, impact, and effectiveness of unions continue to limit involvement. Research by Abdul Rahman et al. (2023) indicated that academic staff regard union duties and functions as inadequately influential, while peer influence, membership criteria, and personal obligations further discourage participation resulting in only low involvement levels. However, Yusof (2025) highlights that restrictive labour legislation, limited flexibility in university governance, and a gradual adaptation of unions to demographic and technological changes have weakened union capacity to attract and retain academic members, creating structural barriers to unionisation within higher education institutions.

According to O’Sullivan et al. (2020) and Trif et al. (2023), unions respond effectively depend on particular condition that provide caused casualisation in several occupations. In terms of the propensity for each occupation to have standard or non-standard employment over a lifetime of employment, we conclude that school teachers can be categorised as an ‘insider’ occupation, that school secretaries have evolved to an ‘outsider’ occupation, while lecturing academics are most at risk of transitioning from an insider to an outsider occupation. However, Mammal (2020), comes with the study of the large number of foreign workers that works in Malaysia which affected the trade unions involvement among Malaysian workers.

Changes in the nature of work also provide substantial problems for trade unions (Beaumont, 2024). In service-based industries like hospitality, insurance, clerical work, and education, where there is a considerable need for female labour, employers are increasingly favouring employing part-time or temporary employees, especially women. Because these workers are not engaged on a full-time or permanent basis, they are generally discouraged from joining trade unions. According to research on Malaysian labour, women's unionisation rates have decreased as a result of the feminisation of some industries, the growth of non-standard and

insecure employment, and unions' limited outreach to temporary and part-time workers (Jabr, 2023). Furthermore, studies of female workers in Malaysia reveal disparities in union representation, awareness, and access for women in manufacturing and service industries, indicating that many women are still ignorant of the significance of labour unions in defending their rights and working conditions (Blake, 1982). Additionally, part-time work arrangements make it easier for these groups to manage work and family obligations. Married women in particular have more time to devote to household duties, which further decreases their propensity to join unions that demand a more consistent presence at work (Ismail, 2024).

Conclusion & Recommendation

In conclusion, trade unions play a vital role in protecting the rights and welfare of university staff by serving as mediators between academic employees and university management. They are essential in ensuring fair treatment, equitable pay, and transparent decision-making processes within higher education institutions. Historically, unions developed from worker assemblies rather than medieval craft guilds, and their growth accelerated after the repeal of restrictive laws such as the Combination Acts in 1824. This allowed trade unions to expand their influence and gain formal recognition through organizations such as the Trades Union Congress (TUC), which became instrumental in defending workers' rights and setting labor standards.

In the context of Malaysian universities, however, unionization among academic and non-academic staff remains relatively weak compared to other countries. Despite existing legal frameworks that allow the establishment of unions, various challenges hinder effective unionization. Many universities, whether public or private, often display resistance toward union activities through indirect tactics such as administrative pressure, discouragement, or the formation of alternative staff associations that serve to dilute union influence. This resistance undermines the fundamental purpose of unions—to represent the collective voice of staff members in matters concerning employment conditions, academic freedom, and job security.

For example, at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), only 37% of academic staff are union members, illustrating a concerning level of disengagement among employees in the higher education sector. This low participation rate may stem from multiple factors, including fear of employer retaliation, lack of awareness about union benefits, or perceptions that unions are ineffective in addressing academic-specific concerns. Furthermore, younger lecturers and researchers are often less likely to join unions, viewing them as outdated or irrelevant in the modern, performance-driven university environment. This generational apathy weakens the continuity and sustainability of union advocacy within academia.

Economic pressures and institutional reforms within universities also exacerbate the problem. The growing emphasis on research output, contract-based employment, and performance metrics has created a competitive environment that discourages collective solidarity. During economic downturns or funding cuts, unions struggle to negotiate better terms as job security becomes the primary concern for many academic staff. Consequently, union leaders often face difficulties mobilizing members to advocate for fairer workloads, improved working conditions, and academic autonomy.

To strengthen the role of trade unions within Malaysian universities, several ways are necessary. First, there must be stronger legal and institutional recognition of academic unions to ensure that university managements engage in fair and transparent collective bargaining.

Second, unions should modernize their approach by addressing contemporary academic issues such as work-life balance, mental health, research funding, and contract employment to attract younger members. Finally, fostering a culture of trust, collaboration, and open dialogue between university administrators and unions can help create a more balanced and inclusive academic environment.

Several way to combat the challenges by strengthen the relationship trade unions at Malaysian public institutions. Since many employees especially women and part-timers remain ignorant of the role unions play in defending rights, enhancing working conditions, and offering professional support, it is imperative to increase awareness and education about the advantages of union membership. Often make webinars, seminars, and workshops that can help increasing comprehension and engagement, as can tailored educational materials sent via email or social media. Additionally, unions should create flexible membership choices that allow non-permanent and part-time workers to engage without making a long-term commitment. Increasing women's participation through women's committees, mentorship programs, and campaigning for causes including employment possibilities, flexible work schedules, and childcare assistance.

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