A Qualitative Investigation on the Future Role of Trade Unions in Ireland's Employment Relations Landscape

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Abstract

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The trade union movement has been a defining part of the employment relations landscape in Ireland for over a century. In recent years, trade unions in Ireland have experienced a decline in density levels following the end of social partnership, in addition to facing further challenges between resistance from employers and an unsupportive legislative framework. Bearing these factors in mind, this research set out to investigate what the future role of trade unions will be in Ireland's employment relations landscape. A qualitative investigation adopting a semi-structured interview process was used to conduct this research, with interviews taking place with senior trade union leaders representing a range of different trade unions across various sectors of employment in addition to a public representative. The results of the research have found that while trade unions continue to face challenges in relation to areas such as legislation and attracting young people into the movement, their role within the employment relations landscape in the short to medium term will remain essential. Challenges aside, there are also some opportunities presented to trade unions in the future, as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic casts renewed interest and relevance on their role within employment relations and representing the interests of workers. COVID-19 has also acted as a disruptor for the trade union movement and society more broadly in Ireland, challenging perceptions on the value of the collective over individualism. As the pandemic continues to unfold, investigating the ramifications of this may provide an area of future research to assess what the long-term impact of COVID-19 will be on the trade union movement and their future role in Ireland's employment relations landscape.

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List of Abbreviations

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

Human Resources (HR)

Human Resource Management (HRM)

Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)

Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO)

Information Technology (IT)

Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITWGU)

Multinational Corporations (MNCs)

Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs)

Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP)

Teachta Dála (TD)

United Kingdom (UK)

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1.   Context of the Trade Union Movement in Ireland

The trade union movement has arguably played a defining role in shaping the employment relations landscape in Ireland. Notable milestones in the movement's history stretch back to the 1913 lockout, which saw workers organise en masse via the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) up to the recent social partnership model which heralded cooperation between unions, the state and employers until the economic downturn of 2008 occurred. Since the demise of social partnership, trade union density (i.e. the proportion of employees who are members of a trade union) in Ireland has declined from 32% in 2011 to 24% of employees in 2019, which represents an overall 8% decrease in trade union density (Fulton, 2020).

Some of the factors which have contributed to the decline of trade union density have been examined by other researchers. During the era of social partnership, trade union membership became heavily concentrated in the public sector with membership levels remaining at over 85%, while in contrast the private sector had low levels of trade union membership at 20% and in particular within the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) at 11% (Allen, 2010). Low union recognition amongst FDI firms in Ireland coupled with a Human Resource Management (HRM) strategy of rewarding employees based on individual performance accelerated the decline of union density in these sectors (Allen, 2010).

D'Art and Turner (2011) reinforce the assertion that social partnership did not lead to a positive outcome for trade unions in Ireland, going as far to argue that it was ultimately a Faustian bargain. This arguments aligns with Allen (2010), in that trade union recognition did not accelerate with FDIs under social partnership and employers ultimately increased their hostility towards unions in this period. D'Art and Turner (2011) note that although social partnership allowed trade unions access to decision makers representing the state and employers, this did not equate to any tangible level of change as represented by the decline in trade union density during this period and the lack of trade union recognition amongst private sector employers.

In light of these findings, it can be argued that the trade union movement finds itself in a weakened position in the post social partnership landscape, particularly in the private sector. By not securing union recognition from employers during the social partnership era coupled with an increased hostility from employers towards unions in this period, the relevance of trade unions could be brought into question in the employment relations landscape of the future. Alongside this, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) has also found that union density amongst young workers (i.e. those who are 24 and younger) has decreased from 30% in 2004 to 18% in 2014 (Vandaele, 2017). This presents a further challenge to the trade union movement in remaining relevant.

1.2.   Trade Unions in the Landscape of COVID-19

Despite the challenges outlined above, as the COVID-19 outbreak has swept across Ireland since March 2020 trade unions have formed a part of the national response to the crisis and the wider discourse. As a national lockdown was implemented to curtail the spread of COVID-19, ICTU had begun advocating for a temporary wage subsidy scheme and other income supports for workers directly impacted by the pandemic (Kavanagh, 2020). Prior to the end of March 2020, the Government of Ireland introduced a temporary wage subsidy scheme and increased the pandemic unemployment payment for workers who were let go as a direct result of COVID-19.

Concurrent to lobbying on policy decisions which affect workers at state level, trade unions representing workers across many sectors of employment ranging from education to healthcare and retail have been vocal in outlining the challenges and concerns of the workers which they represent. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) for example has been highlighting issues their members have faced in relation to sourcing childcare while working on the frontline of the pandemic. Mandate trade union, which represents workers in the retail, bar and administrative sectors recently called for the introduction of compulsory mask wearing in supermarkets and shops (Mandate Trade Union Ireland, 2020). As soon as a day after Mandate issued its call, the Government of Ireland announced in mid-July that the wearing of face coverings would now be compulsory in all retail settings (RTE, 2020a). These examples highlight how trade unions have managed to be a part of the national discourse throughout the COVID-19 crisis, and how their

representation of their members can have a direct manifestation on decisions which are made at state level.

Given the wide reaching consequences of COVID-19 across society and the many changes it has already induced in both the economic and employment landscape, the research will factor in and explore the impact of COVID-19 on trade unions in Ireland and how it may shape their future role in employment relations and society.

1.3.   Summary

Trade unions in Ireland have historically played an integral role in the employment relations landscape in Ireland. In recent years however, trade unions have experienced a decline in density and certain sectors in particular such as the private and FDI sectors have not seen trade unions featuring significantly in them. The era of social partnership also did not lead to any significant legislative changes to advance the recognition of trade unions or collective bargaining rights. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic however has propelled trade unions into the response and narrative of managing COVID-19 and in particular relating to matters of employment and workers' rights. This research will aim to investigate what future role trade unions will have in Ireland's employment relations landscape. The research will include a review of existing literature in relation to trade unions and will focus on qualitative research methods via the form of interviews with leaders from the trade union movement and public representatives. The interview data will be analysed and the research will include recommendations and an overall conclusion on the future of trade unions in Ireland's employment relations landscape.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. The Trade Union Landscape in Ireland and Internationally

Across the literature reviewed on industrial relations and the current landscape for trade unions in Ireland and internationally, there is relatively broad agreement that unions across the board are in decline, both in terms of density and influence with key stakeholders such as employers and the state.

In Ireland for example, since the end of the social partnership era most authors have agreed that trade unions were left with no greater power than prior to this era and it has been argued that unions were left in a weakened state after social partnership ended. Doherty (2011) argues that the relationship developed under social partnership between unions, the state and employers was ultimately a relationship of pragmatism and that its overall achievements were arguable. The lack of "ideological foundations" were an inherent factor in the demise of social partnership as it struggled to withstand the effects of the economic downturn that occurred in 2008 and trade unions found themselves in an increasingly difficult position to negotiate from (Doherty, 2011, pg. 384).

There is some argument made for the case that social partnership did manage to deliver some benefits. Wage agreements negotiated at national level for unionised employees which resulted in increased pay led to a spill-over effect for employees in the private sector who also benefited from increased rates of pay (Turner and Flannery, 2016). The absence of social partnership however, coupled with a reduction in trade union density and coverage may lead to a reversal of any benefits gained alongside driving further driving wage inequality (Turner and Flannery, 2016). In this context, social partnership had some value in securing pay increases for unionised employees, however the vacuum created by its absence may negatively affect wage growth.

The decline of trade unions is not a unique circumstance to Ireland. When looking further afield trade unions have experienced a similar decline in density and influence, however the reasons vary to those of Ireland. Moen (2017) outlines that the rise of new forms of employment including agency work and temporary work is a method which is applied by employers to weaken the bargaining power of unions. In addition to the rise of more

precarious forms of work, the argument is made that offshoring and outsourcing work is another mechanism for employers to circumvent existing trade union agreements in their countries of origin as well as bypassing labour laws in individual countries (Moen, 2017). In light of these findings, a view could be formed that the evolving world of work in terms of new types of employment emerging such as agency work and the gig economy alongside the globalisation of the world's economy could be factors which trade unions have struggled to adapt to.

Giovanis (2017) supports the view that the changing nature of work and the employment relationship i.e. the relationship between employer and employee has altered the industrial relations landscape. The meaning of the term employability is now more focused on the capacity to find employment which does not necessarily refer to stable, long-term employment or jobs that have traditionally offered other benefits separate to pay and the right to collective bargaining (Giovanis, 2017). The rise of new and often precarious forms of employment has changed the nature of the relationship between employers and employees in many instances. Aspects of employment which were previously a given in many jobs such as tenure and benefits are no longer guaranteed in many cases of employment. This supports the findings of Moen (2017) which indicate that employers have used new forms of employment to bypass unions and collective agreements. The literature suggests that unions have thus far struggled to adapt to a changing employment landscape.

Another factor which has been linked to the decline of trade unions in the United Kingdom (UK) is financialisaton. Financialisaton can be defined as "a distinct phase of capitalism in which profits increasingly accrue through financial channels rather than production" (Grady and Simms, 2018, pg. 493). It has been argued that financialisaton has presented new challenges for unions in their ability to organise and act effectively. Grady and Simms (2018) argue that the increased prevalence of financialisaton across all sectors of employment and everyday life has prioritised the generation of capital over labour rights. Financialisaton has contributed to an environment in which workers are divided by those who are in secure forms of employment versus workers who are in precarious forms of employment, therefore creating a more challenging environment for unions to create a culture of solidarity amongst workers which is key to their success (Grady and Simms, 2018).

It could be argued that the advent of financialisaton coincides with the rise of globalisation. As other literature has suggested, globalisation and more specifically the outsourcing of employment has been used as a mechanism by employers to circumvent working with trade unions and as a way to bypass national labour laws. The pursuit and prioritisation of capital through financialisaton coupled with globalisation has created an employment relations landscape which is significantly different to that of previous decades. This new landscape has arguably been to the detriment of trade unions by limiting their capacity to be effective and to organise. In Ireland, the decline of trade unions has largely been attributed to the collapse of social partnership, however a view can be formed that the factors which have contributed to the decline of trade unions elsewhere i.e. globalisation and financialisaton may also have contributed to the decline of Irish trade unions considering Ireland's significant reliance on the FDI sector. A key thread throughout all of the literature reviewed is that trade unions are operating in a highly evolving employment relations landscape where traditional forms of work and employee relations are changing. In some cases, this pace of change has been difficult for trade unions to adapt to. Considering the current landscape for trade unions, the next question to be asked is what does the future hold for trade unions? The following section of the literature review will investigate this question further.

2.2. Employment Relations in Ireland

In order to assess the future role of trade unions in Ireland, it is helpful to examine the wider context of the employment relations landscape with a particular focus on developments since the 2008 economic crash.

When the economic crash of 2008 occurred and the subsequent recession which followed it, Ireland's economy and employment market experienced a significant blow. Year on year from 2008-2013, unemployment levels grew with an annual average unemployment level of 6.4% in 2008 hitting a peak in 2012 at 14.7% and falling slightly in 2013 to 13.1% (CSO, 2015). Research by Hyman (2018) and Porta and Portas (2020) would suggest that the economic crash of 2008 has served as an instigator for change and bolstered labour movements and other movements for social change across Europe in countries which were impacted by austerity and unemployment. A counter argument to these views however is

presented by Roche and Teague (2012) in research on whether recessions have a transformative impact on employment and work using evidence from Ireland. After the crash and in the subsequent years which followed it, most companies did not pursue any significant programmes for change. In spite of the severity of the recession and its wider impact that occurred across Irish society as a result, there was no radical adaptation in firms approach to employment relations (Roche and Teague, 2012). Instead, the immediate and medium term focus remained on navigating through the course of the recession with human resource (HR) specialists and senior managers content to use existing tactics in their approach to employment relations (Roche and Teague, 2012). Unlike the views of Hyman (2018) and Porta and Portas (2020), Roche and Teague (2012) do not present an argument that the post-crash 2008 recession has had a transformative impact. Instead they argue that most firms have maintained the status-quo in their approach to employment relations.

The employment relationship in Ireland exists in many forms, with a range of different types of contracts and working arrangements in place, e.g. contract workers, part-time employees, interns and other types of employees in different working arrangements beyond this. In the 1970's capitalism was in the midst of its purported golden age, with theorists at this time drawing the conclusion that a process of formalisation would take place in labour markets which replaced informal work with more stable, regular work in developed economies (Bobek and Wickham, 2018). In contrast however, the opposite has occurred since the 1970's in Ireland, with sectors such as hospitality providing zero hour or flexible contracts to workers with no guarantee of set hours while sectors such as financial services and information technology (IT) have moved away from direct employment to contracted (Bobek and Wickham, 2018). In some cases, informalisation was encouraged by government policy in Ireland through internship programmes, with a particular increase of these practices observed after the economic crash of 2008 (Bobek and Wickham, 2018).

When examining how the employment relationship has evolved over the last number of years in Ireland, based on this research a view can be formed that informal and casual employment has become more commonplace in Ireland in addition to contract employment. Alongside this, trade union density in Ireland has decreased from 33% to 25% from 2008 to 2019 (Fulham, 2020). Taking into consideration the views of Moen (2017) and

Giovanis (2017), who outlined respectively an increase in precarious forms of employment coupled with a change in the meaning of the term employability, an argument can be made that the increase of informal types of employment has not been favourable to Irish trade unions. This argument is supported by the decline in trade union density which has been experienced by trade unions in Ireland since 2008, supporting the assertions of Moen (2017) and Giovanis (2017) that the rise of precarious employment has been to the detriment of trade unions. This may be attributed to unions traditional organising model of employees in workplaces forming the backbone of union membership, however contract workers or those who are classified as self-employed in the gig economy do not necessarily fit with this model of organising. The question remains on how trade unions in Ireland will adapt to this and engage with these workers outside of their traditional organising model.

A defining trait of employment relations in Ireland over the last number of years of which the aftereffects are still in place today was social partnership. In its 22 year existence from 1987-2009, some positive advances were achieved, particularly in the first 13 years of social partnership which contributed to productivity led growth (Teague and Donaghey, 2015). The acceleration of financialisaton in the Irish economy after this period however was a significant contributing factor to the decline of social partnership as trade unions became stuck in a wage-price spiral in their approach to social partnership, which subsequently led to social partnership losing its functionality and to its ultimate demise (Teague and Donaghey, 2015). In conjunction with this argument, Roche and Teague (2014) note that any mechanism which is used to try and develop employee voice in organisations inevitably encounters challenges, as there is a perpetual contradiction between management allowing any function which gives employee voice too little power while employees will inevitably seek out more power than what they are given. The development of mutual assurances between management and employees never fully occurred in workplaces during the era of social partnership in Ireland, and in addition to Ireland's high level of FDI based organisations trade unions were unable to act as the broker to cultivate a true system of partnership between employers and organisations, therefore leading to a system of social partnership which was not durable or developed enough to withstand a significant shock (Roche and Teague, 2014).

After social partnership collapsed, trade unions attempted to negotiate and bargain with employers, and looking specifically at the public sector this can be seen in deals such as the Haddington Road agreement which attempted to preserve some conditions of employment for existing workers while exchanging the burden of austerity measures to new employees or temporary workers (Bach and Stroleny, 2013). In taking on an approach to manage the effects of austerity measures, trade unions representing workers in the public sector in Ireland have found themselves having to participate in forms of concession bargaining while their members have had a relatively muted reaction to this approach (Bach and Stroleny, 2013).

While there are arguments made that social partnership made some incremental gains in areas like wages during its existence, based on the research above social partnership ultimately did not advance the status of trade unions in Ireland nor did it foster solid partnerships between management in organisations and employees. When the demise of social partnership occurred, trade unions found themselves trying to hold on to some of the previous gains which were made under social partnership, and in the process of doing so entered into concessions in negotiations with employers which was met with muted responses from their members. In its 22 year existence, social partnership did not lead to any significant legalsative advancements for trade unions.

The employment relations landscape in Ireland has been shaped by many factors over the years, including the trade union movement. In reviewing existing research, the 2008 economic crash did not yield any major changes in employment relations in Ireland with most companies relying on existing methods to navigate the crisis and the recession which followed it. Alongside this, a rise in precarious and informal work has occurred post 2008, coupled with a fall in trade union density in Ireland after the demise of social partnership.

2.3. The Future of Trade Unions

The literature reviewed on the current landscape for trade unions in Ireland and internationally arguably portrays a challenging employment relations landscape for trade unions. Within this landscape the next area to investigate is what the future potentially

holds for trade unions and how they can adapt to the new environment in which they find themselves in.

As examined in section 2.1. of the literature review, the societal and employment relations context in which trade unions operate has evolved rapidly over the last number of decades. The acceleration of change in employment relationship and how employers and employees interact with each other has arguably presented trade unions with the question of where they will position themselves in this new relationship. Hyman (2018) proposes that the economic model on which western societies are based upon has been undergoing a new great transformation, with the last comparative great transformation witnessed in the 19th century with the advent of free market ideology. According to Hyman (2018), the three driving forces behind this contemporary new great transformation are the onset of globalisation, financialisaton and the changing role of the state in many western nations in taking a more light touch approach to areas of public policy and the regulation of financial markets. These factors which are attributed to the new great transformation support the findings of Moen (2017) and Grady and Simms (2018) that both globalisation and financialisaton are contributing factors to the decline of trade unions in recent years. As multinational corporations (MNCs) have pursued a globalist agenda, this has had a transformative impact on the employment relationship insofar as employers have circumvented national labour laws and outsourced work to other countries. Alongside this, the consolidation of capital has occurred through the process of financialisaton, which has placed the growth of profit as a priority for private industry and governments to the detriment of strengthening labour laws (Grady and Simms, 2018).

An argument can be made that each of these factors which are driving the great transformation have created a more individualistic employment relationship. This is witnessed in MNCs where benefits and salaries are often negotiated on a one-to-one basis between the employee and their employer, or in newer forms of employment where individuals are classified as self-employed as seen with the popular food delivery service Deliveroo. Trade unions have traditionally depended on collectivism and solidarity between workers in order to organise and bolster membership in workplaces. Although this can still apply in certain settings where traditional forms of the employment relationship are more

prevalent, e.g. in the public sector, the individualisation of the employment relationship spurned on by the great transformation has presented a challenge to trade unions which have relied on collective action from workers to affect change and drive membership.

In light of these findings, it could be asked what is next for trade unions in the ever evolving employment relations landscape? While Hyman (2018) has highlighted the new great transformation and its resulting effects which have not been kind to trade unions, his research does not conclude that the landscape for trade unions is one which lacks a future. Instead, Hyman (2018) puts forward an argument that trade unions need to become more internationalist, develop links with other groups seeking social change such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and crucially to be able to articulate a vision of an alternative socioeconomic model which is credible and attractive. Hyman (2018) draws on examples of solidarity from Spain and Greece when they were struck by the 2008 economic crash, discussing the collective provision of basic commodities in communities such as food and healthcare which circumvented the market economy, fostering a sense of social cohesion and empowering those who were impacted by austerity and economic instability. Porta and Portas (2020) put forward an argument which support this view. The authors outline that a neoliberal economic model which has been purported since the millennium has caused blue collar workers and the trade union movement to lose its identity, while the power of capital within the economy and in politics has been strengthened (Porta and Portas, 2020). In spite of this however, the economic crisis of 2008 and the ensuing recession has spurned on social movements in many countries including Ireland which were adversely affected by the crash, linking in the trade union movement with a variety of groups and other social movements seeking change through the form of demonstrations and campaigns. In the view of Porta and Portas (2020), this mobilisation of trade unions although outside their core role, represents a renewal of the movement albeit in a different form to previous decades.

Although trade unions have struggled in recent years to adapt to the evolving nature of the employment relationship and the pace of globalisation, the findings of the authors above suggest that the shock of the previous economic crash of 2008 and the ensuing change created by that have given the trade union movement new relevance. While trade unions

still do not hold their more traditional role in employment relations as seen in previous decades, the links trade unions have fostered with other social causes and movements coupled with an increased sense of collectivism in groups which were adversely impacted in the previous recession of 2008 have potentially created a new space for trade unions to position themselves in. As Hyman (2018) outlined, movements which are seeking to propose an alternative socioeconomic model need to be able to put forward a credible and attractive alternative to the current socioeconomic system. Trade unions may be able to find a renewed sense of purpose and a place in determining what precisely that alternative vision will be in cooperation with other groups seeking to propose an alternative.

Ibsen and Tapia (2017) outline that governments will not rebuke policies which have supported the weakening of labour laws and the role of trade unions unless there is pressure placed on them to change. Tying in with social action movements along with non-union organisations such as nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) allows unions to have a platform in which they can have a place for driving their aims, while also circumventing some of the loss of power unions have experienced since the increasing drive for globalisation has occurred (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017). Whereas trade unions previously may have had the strength to lead social action movements in isolation, declining union density and loss of influence with governments and employers suggests that closer partnerships with like-minded, non-union organisations could prove beneficial to unions in achieving their aims. This supports the arguments made by both Hyman (2018) and Porta and Portas (2020) in that trade unions should make a wider connection with movements for social change such as NGOs.

When examining the future of the trade union movement it is also necessary to look at the positioning of unions amongst young people. Contrary to the belief that young people are not as politically aware or active as older generations, it has been found that young people engage with political activism and social issues through more contemporary methods which would fall outside unions traditional means of organising, e.g. organising through social media (Cha et. al, 2018). Many of the concerns young people engaged in social activism have overlap with the issues trade unions aim to address in terms of precarious employment, poor working conditions and low pay alongside social justice and equality

issues (Cha et. al, 2018). By engaging with this cohort of young people who are involved with social movements, trade unions may be able to find their relevance again amongst younger workers which may also support the recruitment of younger trade union members. This supports the argument proposed by Ibsen and Tapia (2017), who argue that trade unions should branch out from their traditional base in order to remain relevant and to be able to effect change.

In looking more closely at the future role of the trade union movement, it is evident from the literature reviewed that unions will need to change tact from their traditional methods of organising to stay relevant and have an impact on issues which they campaign for. This can be achieved by working more closely with external groups such as NGOs and engaging with young people who have become politically motivated. The opportunity for trade unions within an Irish context to engage with young people in social movements could be particularly effective. Considering the large cohort of young voters mobilised by recent campaigns such as marriage equality, the repeal of the 8th amendment and indeed the 2020 general election which saw a shift away from traditional political parties in terms of how young people voted, an opportunity for trade unions to engage with this appetite for change may be presented.

2.4. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

While it is still a highly evolving situation, the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown of society which ensued to control the spread of the virus has significantly changed society and the work. Aside from the public health threat posed by the virus, COVID-19 has already had a serious impact on Ireland's economy and by extension employment, with the unemployment rate in Ireland rising from 5.3% in March 2020 to 28.2% in April 2020 (CSO, 2020). Concurrent to this, working from home has become standard practice for all who are in a position to do so and workers in sectors such as healthcare and retail were termed as essential workers in the midst of the pandemic in Ireland. Given how the shifts in work and the employment landscape as a result of COVID-1I have occurred so rapidly, the pandemic will likely have an impact on trade unions. The next section of this research will explore some of the issues in relation to employment which COVID-19 may present.

The term essential worker was used to define a list of types employment where workers could still attend their workplace as a lockdown of society occurred due to the pandemic, with a full list of essential workers published at the end of March 2020 (RTE, 2020b). Many of the jobs on the list were roles which were essential to the normal functioning of society, e.g. shop assistants and waste collectors, however they were also jobs which are typically associated with low pay and poor terms and conditions of employment.

This paradox is highlighted by Cubrich (2020), who discusses that the pandemic has illustrated the need and reliance society has on low-income workers in sectors such as retail and distribution while they face a higher level of risk from the virus due to the level of interaction their roles require them to have with their colleagues and the public. Cubrich (2020), argues that low wages, insecure employment and a lack of benefits for low-income workers were all realities prior to the pandemic and that the onset of COVID-19 has cast further light on these disparities. To counter these disparities, a proposal is made for a living wage versus a minimum wage and for policies and programmes to be put in place by employers to maximise the safety of their workforce and to invest in tangible benefits for their staff (Cubrich, 2020).

While issues around low pay and short-term employment have been known for some time along with these practices increasing in Ireland since 2008 as Bobek and Wickham (2018) highlighted, the pandemic has drawn attention to these issues in a way which may not have occurred otherwise. The contribution and value of essential workers was made clear throughout the pandemic, with Cubrich (2020) putting forward the argument that low wage workers are as essential to the labour market as much as higher earners. This potentially places trade unions in a unique position where issues which are core to their ethos and campaigning, e.g. a living wage and challenging precarious forms of employment, have now been thrust into the public discourse. How trade unions will ultimately respond to and potentially utilise this discourse remains to be seen.

In a recent paper, Williams and Kayaoglu (2020) discuss the impact of the pandemic on undocumented or undeclared workers. The paper describes three primary ways in which workers can be undeclared. These include not registering an employee's employment status for the purposes of avoiding tax and labour laws, under-declaring employees who are paid

in part with a registered salary with the remainder as undeclared income, and finally workers who are falsely registered as self-employed despite operating under the same conditions as paid employees (Williams and Kayaoglu, 2020). With the exception of the final categorisation as self-employed people are entitled to the pandemic unemployment payment (PUP) and wage supports in Ireland, as observed in research carried out by Bobek and Wickham (2018), informalisation of employment has increased in Ireland as have practices of declaring part of an employee's income while the remainder is paid off the record in cash. Williams and Kayaoglu (2020) note that undeclared employment exists in some form for a significant portion of the world's working population, with some 61.2% of employees or 2 billion people primarily employed in the undeclared economy. Although the research does not provide a figure for undeclared work in Ireland, a 2017 report by Williams et al. estimates that as much as 13% of labour input in the private sector in Ireland is undeclared, with another report by Arnold et. al (2017) outlining a significant proportion of undeclared employment is carried out by migrant workers.

Since the onset of the pandemic, trade unions have been vocal on issues pertaining to employment and workers. As the research above highlights, COVID-19 had drawn new relevance on to issues such as low pay and precarious employment. This new relevance may present an opportunity for trade unions to put forward their arguments further under renewed public interest.

In May 2020, ICTU published a document titled *No Going Back: A New Deal towards a safe and secure future for all.* In this document, ICTU (2020) outlined their policies for a post-covid society and highlighted that areas such as the welfare state and the value of essential workers in society have been brought into a new, sharp focus. Within the document, a number of key areas are outlined which include ending low pay and precarious work, the introduction of a living wage, strengthening collective bargaining rights and legal recognition from employers of trade unions in Ireland in addition to policies on wider areas relating to housing and health (ICTU, 2020). Many of the areas outlined in the document tie in with issues which have been raised in other research throughout this literature review, therefore indicating trade unions in Ireland are considering these areas and what role the trade union movement will play in defining policy in the aftermath of COVID019.

The document concludes that this current crisis differs greatly from that of the 2008 economic crash, and that the response therefore must focus on building a new economic model and address structural problems which exist across society in areas like housing and health (ICTU, 2020). The publication details a more radical vision for the trade union movement in Ireland and its policies across a number of areas. How trade unions see themselves adapting to the change instigated by COVID-19 is an area which remains to be investigated.

2.5. Conclusion of the Literature

As the literature review outlines, trade unions in Ireland and further afield have been experiencing a challenging landscape to operate in since the 2008 economic crash. Falling trade union density has been recorded since 2008, and as Bobek and Wickham (2018) outline the increase in financialisaton in Ireland has driven a further increase in informal employment practices which has not been to the favour of trade unions. The fall of the social partnership model has also coincided with the decline in trade union density, while the positive results of social partnership are arguable. While the years from 2008 up to now have not necessarily yielded any great improvements for the trade union movement in Ireland, the findings of Porta and Portas (2020) indicate that the 2008 economic crash has invigorated social movements of which trade unions have formed a part of, while Hyman (2018) argues that society is undergoing a new great transformation, which provides an opportunity for trade unions to be a part of the alternative who are articulating the vision for an alternative and credible socioeconomic model.

As this research is being conducted, the COVID-19 pandemic is occurring throughout the world and in Ireland. The impact of COVID-19 i on employment and wider society has already proven to be significant. The research of Cubrich (2020) and Williams and Kayaoglu (2020) illustrate some of the issues which are faced by low paid and unregistered workers respectively, which are also typically core issues for trade unions. In the publication by ICTU (2020), an outline for society after COVID-19 has been articulated with the trade union movement forming a key part of this.

Considering the factors which have influenced trade unions in Ireland up to now and the significant period of change which is currently underway as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the question of what the future holds for trade unions in Ireland can be asked. The next of this research will outline further detail on the research question.

Chapter 3: Research Question and Objective

After conducting an extensive review of existing literature relating to the trade union movement both in Ireland and abroad, it is evident that trade unions across the board have faced a variety of challenges over the last number of years, particularly since the previous economic crisis of 2008 and the fall of social partnership in Ireland at this time. These challenges include a decline in trade union density and difficulty in asserting the role of a trade union in the modern employment relationship, given an unsupportive legislative framework for trade unions in Ireland and employer hostility.

Concurrent to where trade unions find themselves currently and the variety of factors which have led them to this point, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has already reshaped the working world and it has had a significant impact on employment in Ireland. Considering the context which has shaped trade unions to date and the era of change COVID-19 has initiated, the following research question and objectives aim to shed some light on where the trade union may find itself in Ireland's future employment relations landscape.

3.1. Research Question

The research question of this dissertation is as follows: **What is the future role of trade unions in Ireland's employment relations landscape?**

3.2. Research Objectives

Bearing in mind the overall research question as stated above, the following objectives of the research have been identified to break down the overarching aim of the research:

- **Understanding the context and evolving role of trade unions in Ireland:** To understand the positioning of the research and the role which trade unions have in Ireland, the research will investigate how the role of the trade union movement has evolved in Ireland and how it may develop in years to come.
- **The role of young people within the trade union movement:** The research will investigate the role of young people within the trade union movement and how this role may develop.

- **The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent opportunities and threats resulting from the pandemic:** Given the extraordinary circumstance initiated by the onset of COVID-19, the research will aim to determine how COVID-19 has impacted the trade union movement, in addition to examining if any opportunities or threats are presented to trade unions due to the level of change instigated by the pandemic.

By investigating the areas outlined above, the researcher aims is to provide insight on what role trade unions will hold in Ireland's future employment relations landscape.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1. Introduction

According to Shuttleworth (2019), research entails the gathering and analysis of data in order to address an overarching research question. The definition of research can vary depending on the nature of the study which is being undertaken, for example, a purely scientific view of research would present a hypothesis which is either to be proven or disproven or to provide an answer to an exact question, whereas qualitative research may be more open ended, using observational science and not seeking to address a specific hypothesis (Shuttleworth, 2019). Regardless of the nature of the study which is being however, Shuttleworth (2019) suggest that all research requires interpretation from the researcher and keeping as open a mind as possible when conducting the research. Bearing this in mind, the researcher has identified a research question in light of reviewing existing literature and is carrying out an investigation based on this review. In completing this report, the researcher will be guided by taking an open minded and impartial approach to conducting the study.

The aim of this research is to provide an insight on what role trade unions may have in Ireland's future employment relations landscape. The following chapter will outline the design of this research, information on the participants and sampling, the method used to analyse data and it will also provide an overview of ethical considerations and research limitations in addition to further areas.

4.2. Research Design

There are two primary research methods used to conduct research which are qualitative and quantitative. In qualitative research, the researcher examines the issue which they are investigating in its everyday context and provides an answer to a question based on the information the research participants have acquired through their own experiences already (Smythe and Giddings, 2007). Qualitative research involves listening to and interpreting the voice of the research participants and this can be carried by using qualitative research tools such as interviews, analysing texts or observing participants (Smythe and Giddings, 2007). In

contrast, quantitative research involves the collection of numerical data which is then analysed by the use of mathematical methods such as statistics in order to provide observations on the topic which is being investigated (Sukamolson, 1996).

To achieve the objectives of this study, the researcher has opted to use a qualitative approach for the purpose of gaining an in-depth understanding of what the future role of trade unions in Ireland's employment relations landscape may be. In providing an overview on what qualitative research entails, Smythe and Giddings (2007) observe that qualitative research adds vibrancy and meaning to information. The literature which has been reviewed by the researcher provides a breadth of quantitative data on areas such as declining trade union density levels, a rise in the level of informal employment practices and the various factors which have led to the decline of trade unions in recent years. Yet there remains to be interpretation on what this data means and how these factors are viewed by those within the trade union movement in Ireland. As a method, qualitative research "speaks to the soul and brings 'knowing'… Real people's stories, specific to unique context, culture and time will point in the direction of understanding" (Smythe and Giddings, 2007, pg. 57). The researcher has opted to use a qualitative research approach by using semi-structured interviews to contextualise the information gained on trade unions thus far and to interpret what the future role of trade unions in Ireland may be from hearing the perceptions and lived experiences of senior figures from the trade union movement.

In reviewing previous studies of literature relating to trade unions and employment relations, qualitative research methods including interviews and case studies are used by Hyman (2018) and Cha et. al (2018), therefore the use of qualitative research methods has been utilised by other researchers on this topic which validates that it is an appropriate methodology to use for this study.

4.3. Sampling and Participants

In selecting the research participants to take part in this study, purposive sampling was used by the researcher. Purposive sampling is used in research to select participants with a pre-defined set of traits who hold the information the researcher is seeking as a result of their knowledge and experience (Tongco, 2006). In choosing purposive sampling, the researcher

considered a variety of key criteria in order to select the research participants. These criteria were as follows:

- **Seniority within the organisation:** As this research is focused on the future of the trade union movement in Ireland, the researcher determined that it was necessary to gain access to senior leaders within trade union in order to gain sufficient insight and quality data. All of the research participants hold senior leadership roles within their organisations, with the exception of one participant who was a public representative.

- **Spread of representation within the trade union movement:** In order to gain representative data from across the trade union movement from organisations representing different types of workers in different, the researcher compiled a list of trade unions in the Republic of Ireland by sector as defined by ICTU's classification of unions. The sectors from which the trade unions leaders were selected from in this research included; General Union, Retail, Professional and White Collar, Teaching and Miscellaneous.

- **Perspectives outside of the trade union movement:** The researcher believed it would be beneficial to interview some participants from outside the trade union movement in gaining their perceptions on the future role of the trade union movement. In doing so, the researcher identified an elected public representative who is a sitting Teachta Dáila (TD) and a representative from an employer representative organisation. The researcher was unable to gain access to a representative from an employer's representative organisation however.

A total sample size of 8 participants were identified and invited to partake in semi-structured interviews with the researcher. The researcher was successful in securing 7 interviews with participants who were contacted. 6 of the participants held leadership roles within a variety of trade unions in Ireland and one public representative who is a sitting TD with a background in industrial relations also took part in the research. Table 1 provides anonymised information on the demographics of the research participants.

4.4. Demographics of Research Participants

The table below provides an overview of the demographic of the research participants, including their trade union sector, seniority level and gender. Seniority level did not apply to Participant D as they are not employed by a trade union. The trade union sector has been categorised in line with ICTU's categorisation of affiliated unions and trades councils.

Table 1

Name of Participant	Trade Union Sector/Other Background	Seniority within Organisation	Gender of Participant
Participant A	Miscellaneous	Senior Management	F
Participant B	Professional and White Collar	Senior Management	F
Participant C	Teachers Union	Senior Management	M
Participant D	Public Representative (TD)	N/A	M
Participant E	Professional and White Collar	Senior Management	M
Participant F	Distribution Retail and Transport Unions	Senior Management	M
Participant G	General Unions	Senior Management	M

4.5. Research Measures:

The research participants were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews with the researcher. In carrying out these interviews, the researcher developed a list of 8 questions which addressed the research objectives as outlined in section 3.2. of this study. The

questions were developed by the researcher in consultation with the supervisor of this research, with 3 drafts developed until the 4th and final copy of interview questions was completed. The researcher developed these questions based on gaps identified in existing research after reviewing existing literature and by also aiming to address the research question of this study and its objectives. A full copy of the questions can be found in appendix 5. An interview scheduled outlining the dates and duration of each interview is also provided in table 2. Each interview took on average approximately 30-40 minutes to complete, with some interviews lasting slightly longer or shorter than this duration.

4.6. Interview Schedule

The semi-structured interviews took place on the dates and times outlined in table 2, interviews typically took between 30-40 minutes to complete.

Table 2

Name of Participant	Interview Date	Interview Duration
Participant A	01/07/2020	27 minutes
Participant B	30/06/2020	31 minutes
Participant C	30/06/2020	40 minutes
Participant D	08/07/2020	18 minutes
Participant E	02/07/2020	28 minutes
Participant F	15/07/2020	60 minutes
Participant G	31/07/2020	34 minutes

4.7. Research Procedure

The participants for this research were recruited by the use of the researcher's own network to gain access to senior trade union officials. The researcher contacted a trade union official working in ICTU who the researcher knows on a personal basis to explain the study and the level of participants the researcher was seeking to gain access to within the trade union movement. Following on from this, the official contacted 6 senior trade union leaders from a variety of trade unions with an initial phone call to introduce the researcher. The

participants were then followed up with directly by the researcher, with each of them receiving an email detailing the purpose of the research, why they were being contacted and also an attachment of 2 forms which were a research consent form and a research information form. These documents can be found in appendices 2, 3 and 4 respectively. The process of contacting participants as outlined applied for all of the research participants with the exception of 1 public representative who the researcher contacted directly to take part, with no prior introduction made by the trade union official from ICTU.

Following on from this, participants responded by email to agree to take part in the interview for this study. The researcher arranged interviews with each of the participants to take place on set dates and times. Due to the ongoing situation with COVID-19, all of the interviews took place via Zoom video conferencing technology. The researcher set up the meeting links on Zoom and emailed each participant with individual invitations based on the interview time which was agreed. Video and audio was used for the interviews, at the start of each interview prior to recording the researcher provided an overview of the research and asked each participant if they had reviewed the research information and consent forms. As the meetings were not able to take place in person, a copy of the consent form was posted to each participant to sign and return to the researcher on completion of their interview. Each interview was recorded on Zoom with a copy of the interview stored on the researchers laptop which is encrypted and password protected.

4.8. Data Analysis

The method by which data will be collected for this study is through the use of semi-structured interviews. Keeping in line with this, the data will be analysed in accordance with qualitative data analysis methods for interviews. When conducting the interviews, it is anticipated that the researcher will take field notes as participants answer questions which are addressed to them. Further to this, the researcher will analyse the interview data after the recordings of the interviews have been completed in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) outline of the six phases of thematic analysis. In line with this outline, the researcher will code the interview data based on the responses participants give and will also transcribe any notable quotations from the participants to include in this study. Once each interview has been coded and reviewed, the researcher will collate each code and in line with Braun

and Clarke's (2006) guide the researcher will commence the process of narrowing down themes which have emerged from the data and analysing whether these themes form a coherent picture from the data. As Smythe and Gidding's (2007) discussed, qualitative research is formed from the lived experiences of the research participants and provided data with meaning. Once themes which have emerged from the data have been identified, the researcher will title each theme and will communicate what has emerged from these themes in order to provide meaning and a story to the data.

4.9. Limitations

The researcher acknowledges that there are some limitations in relation to this study. The researcher has identified these limitations as follows:

- **Lack of Employer's Perspective:** It was the researchers intention to interview a participant from a leading employer's representative organisation who held a senior management role with a background in industrial relations in order to gain a diverse mix of views on the future of the trade union movement. Having made some success with initial contact, the researcher did not receive any further correspondence from the employer's body representative and due to time constraints, the researcher did not seek out any further employer's body representative. The view from an employer's perspective would have been beneficial for this research.

- **Sample Size:** The sample size of 7 participants may be a limitation of the research in gaining a broad and diverse mix of views on the future role of the trade union movement in Ireland. The researcher identified a total of 26 trade unions in Ireland which have active members and are varying in size of membership and scale. The researcher acknowledges that the study would have benefitted from a larger sample size and from a broader mix of backgrounds of research participants, including those from smaller sized trade unions and potentially civil society organisations/NGOs.

- **Research Methods:** Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection for this study. Further research methods may benefit this research, for example in the form of focus groups with trade union members/other officials and

document analysis. Due to time constraints the researcher was unable to undertake research methods beyond semi-structured interviews.

4.10. Ethical Considerations

All forms of research and in particular research which deals with human participants carries ethical considerations. The researcher has identified the following ethical considerations in relation to this study and measures taken to address them.

- **Data Protection:** As this research has entailed the collection of personal data from the research participants, it must be in line with the guidelines for data protection (GDPR). Data has been gathered from the research participants in the form of recorded interviews. To protect the data of the participants, the researcher has stored all interview data on an encrypted laptop which is also password protected. Participants have also been informed of their right to access the data at any point during the study and after its completion. Audio recordings of the interview will be maintained for a period of 2 years after submission of this dissertation, after which all interview data will be deleted by the researcher. The interview recordings will also not be shared with anyone unless requested by the National College of Ireland examination board or the participants themselves. All participants have consented for the use of their interview data in this research.

- **Anonymity of Participants:** The sample of participants as outlined in section 4.3. identifies a specific subset of participants which the researcher is seeking to interview. In order to protect the identities of the participants as much as possible, the researcher has anonymised all interview data and has removed all identifying factors relating to the participants and the organisations in which they work.

4.11. Research Methodology Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher has provided a rationale for adopting a qualitative research method in relation to this study. Based on the research question which is being investigated and from drawing on prior examples of literature in relation to this topic, the researcher believes that a qualitative research method using semi-structured interviews is the most suitable approach to adopt for this study. The researcher has considered the sample of

participants needed in order to sufficiently address the research objectives and questions, as well as providing a detailed overview of the research process, the process for data analysis, limitations of the research and ethical considerations. The next section of this study will focus on the analysis and findings of the interview data which has been collected.

Chapter 5: Analysis and Findings

5.1. Introduction

This chapter will analyse the data and provide an overview of the findings from the research material. As outlined in section 3 of this study, the researcher set out to find an answer to the question on what is the future role of trade unions in Ireland's employment relations landscape? Within this question, 3 primary research objectives were identified by the researcher. These are:

- **Understanding the context and role of trade unions in Ireland**
- **The role of young people within the trade union movement**
- **The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent opportunities and threats facing trade unions resulting from the pandemic**

To obtain an answer to this question, the researcher has carried out a series of 7 semi-structured interviews, with 6 participants holding senior leadership roles within a mix of trade unions in Ireland and 1 public representative with a background in industrial relations. A full breakdown of the demographics of the research participants can be found in the table in section 4.4. and the questions which were put to the research participants can be found in appendix 5

As outlined in section 4.8., the researcher undertook a qualitative analysis of the interview data by using a combination of coding and deciphering themes from this by listening to recordings of the interviews alongside reviewing the researchers notes which were compiled as the interviews were taking place. From this process, 5 key themes have been identified from the data which are:

- Evolving Role of the Trade Union Movement: ***"We have to have a voice that reflects what most people who go to work want"***;
- Legislative and Constitutional Constraints: ***"We need to bring our case to them with alternative legislation on what we believe serves the interest of workers best"***;
- Relevance of the Trade Union Movement: ***"The mantra I've been preaching is the need to be relevant, the need to be visible, and the need to be empathetic"***;

- The Role of Young People in the Trade Union Movement: *"There's a big job of work trade unions have to do to persuade young people to join them"*;
- COVID-19 as a Disruptor for the Trade Union Movement: *"Clearly COVID-19 presents us with a 1945 moment in how we can question everything and how it's done, and put forward the argument for a new social contract"*;

The following section will provide an analysis and the findings of the themes as outlined above.

5.2. Evolving Role of the Trade Union Movement

As previous research has indicated, the landscape for trade unions in Ireland has altered significantly since the end of social partnership in 2008. Doherty (2011) discussed that trade unions did not make substantive gains during the period in which social partnership was in place while Roche and Teague (2014) noted that the structures which underpinned social partnership were not strong enough to withstand a major shock when the financial crisis hit in 2008.

In examining how the context of trade unions has evolved in Ireland and how it has affected their current positioning, different views on the impact and fall of social partnership were expressed by the participants. Commenting on how social partnership changed the activities of trade unions, Participant E spoke of how this weakened relationships that existed within the trade union movement:

"That period itself (of social partnership) saw a very big change in terms of the activity of trade unions from employment bargaining to national or sectoral bargaining. One of the unintended consequences of that was the weakening of the workplace relationships between workplace officials and union committees between the ordinary member, and a weakening of the shop steward network. So much of the business was being dealt with at a national or sectoral level, and the membership input was the occasional ballot from time to time."

The views of Participant F on social partnership align with those of Participant E, in that social partnership may have led to a level of detachment of trade unions from their ordinary

members: *"We didn't believe it was true social partnership, it was social partnership to a limit. We believed it removed unions from its core which was workplaces. It centralised everything and brought us closer to the state and to the government."*

Although Participants E and F make the argument that social partnership led to a detachment in trade unions from their members and to a centralisation of union activity, a view was also expressed that blame was shifted on to trade unions after the economic crash as a deflective tactic *"The establishment in 2008 attacked workers and the trade union movement. They tried to put the blame on social partnership as an intent to distract from the fundamental message of the crash in 2010, which was that capitalism as a project had failed"* (Participant G).

The research suggests that the era of social partnership changed the dynamics of the relationship trade unions held with their members, in that ordinary trade union members and activists held less of a voice within the movement as a result of trade union activities taking place in a more centralised manner at national or sectoral level. Coinciding with this, Participant G expressed a view that trade unions were targeted after the economic crash in an effort to pin blame on them. Doherty (2011) discussed that after the fall of social partnership, the trade union movement became more fragmented and during this time anti-union employers also made further ground in the wake of trade unions not having strengthened their bargaining or representation rights under social partnership. Given the voice of the trade union movement had become more centralised and less engaged with its members while social partnership existed, an argument can be made that in the years that followed 2008, trade unions had to reposition their role within the employment relations landscape and rediscover what the voice of the trade union movement was in the absence of partnership.

While the period from 2008 onwards heralded uncertainty for the trade union movement, it did not mark the capitulation of trade unions either. Participant A remarked on the discourse which surrounded trade unions at the time of the economic and the impact on membership levels:

"You had a lot of the commentariat saying this will be the end of the trade union movement. Actually, the reverse happened. We didn't lose a huge number of members and where we lost members, we replenished them with new members. I think the trade union movement will continue to play a key role in working lives in Ireland."

The view of Participant A in that trade unions will continue to play a key role in working lives in Ireland was reflected broadly by the other participants. Although challenges remain for the trade union movement to contend with, 7/7 of the participants expressed that they were hopeful for the future role of the trade union movement and its position in representing workers. There was little to no desire expressed for a return to the old model of social partnership, however some participants did note that any formation of a new social contract should involve trade unions. Commenting on the evolving role of trade unions and the challenges they face, the view of Participant F was *"I'm confident that we can rise and meet those challenges, individually as trade unions and collectively as a movement".* Each participant also viewed trade unions as having an essential role to play in society, with Participant D stating *"they have a very significant role to play in our society"*, while Participant C believes that trade unions will have a role in developing any form of new social contract *"I believe the trade unions voice will be central to any new contract developed by this government."* Participant A also outlined the benefit which trade unions bring to adding a diverse mix of perspectives *"Ireland as a nation gets value from having a balance of voices from the trade union movement and employers".*

Broadly speaking, the role of the trade union movement has evolved since social partnership from a highly centralised entity which focused largely on negotiating pay and conditions to a movement which had to find new ground following the collapse of social partnership. The research has found that although the trade union movement has challenges to contend with, there is a sense of optimism amongst the participants on what future role trade unions will play and how their role will further evolve. The next section of this analysis will further assess some of the challenges facing trade unions, opportunities presented to them and the watershed moment which COVID-19 has potentially initiated for trade unions.

5.3. Legislative and Constitutional Constraints

While the role of trade unions has evolved in Ireland over the years, one area which has arguably remained static is legislation and in particular the legal recognition of trade unions and collective bargaining rights. 6/7 participants referred to legislation throughout the course of the interview process, with the majority of participants viewing legislation relating to trade unions in Ireland as weak, compounded by an absence of constitutional rights for workers and their involvement in trade union activities.

Commenting on the current legislative framework for trade unions in Ireland, Participant G provided the following outline:

"Semi-friendly worker pieces of legislation are attacked on the basis of being anti-constitutional. Part of the discussion we're having now as a trade union movement is what's our response to that? Are we going to continue with substandard legislation or are we going to challenge that? Is more of the same good enough here or do we start thinking creatively here about what we're going to do?"

The views of the other participants broadly supported those of Participant G, in that legislation in Ireland is generally not favourable towards trade unions and that there has been resistance to legislation put forward by the trade union movement. The impact of this can be tangibly felt by trade unions as Participant D highlighted *"We have a peculiar system in Ireland where frankly because of our weak institutional collective bargaining framework, our trade union density is low compared to other European countries"*. The challenge of weak legislation also manifests itself in trade unions struggling to attract members who are in more precarious forms of employment where there is employer resistance to trade union activity, with Participant A noting that *"Another challenge is to connect with people who are vulnerable and afraid to engage with the movement. I think we'll need help with legislation to do it, and we haven't been successful in doing that since Jim Larkin was around."*

The research indicates that the trade union movement has struggled to garner support for legislation which would advance their aims and that this problem has existed for a significant period of time as Participant A referred to, noting that trade unions have been unsuccessful in this area since Jim Larkin's time. A weak collective bargaining framework

may also have a knock on effect on density levels and explain why a country such as Norway, which has a similar sized population to Ireland, has 70% collective bargaining coverage and in turn density levels of 51.3% (OECD, 2018). Another example is Denmark, where collective bargaining coverage is at 80% which is reflected by a density level of 66% (OECD, 2018). Therefore link can be made between higher density levels when there is higher collective bargaining coverage.

Although the legislative framework is weak in Ireland in relation to legal recognition of trade unions and collective bargaining rights, trade unions are continuing to lobby across a number of fronts. For example, Participant B, whose trade union represents medical workers highlighted how the outbreak of COVID-19 has prompted an immediate need for lobbying on their part *"We're lobbying very hard to amend health and safety legislation to include COVID-19 as an occupational injury. It currently isn't and we believe that's wrong. ICTU are centrally involved in that as well and in lobbying the minister"*. As lobbying for legislation on immediate threats presented by COVID-19 takes place, there is also a recognition that trade unions need to make a case for improving their current legislative standing in order to progress *"We need to get our act together and decide that there is a public interest case to be made for stronger union and collective bargaining laws. We won't get that straight away because we're not the majority."* (Participant D). Similar to these views, participant F argues that trade unions will have to be more strategic in their approach to legislation:

> *"We're going to have to be much more strategic in respect to how we advance the rights of workers, our members and workers generally. We're going to have to look at bits of legislation that have failed us and we're going to have to look at the intention of the legal fraternity and certain employers and ask is there another way of looking at creating better, more robust legislation."*

While the importance of strengthening legislation has been highlighted by a number of the participants, having a focus on individual employment rights and legislation was noted as an area that is not necessarily in the best interests of trade unions. Participant G discussed the changes which have occurred in employment legislation over previous decades up to now:

"Since the 80's, there would have been a change in the level of individual employment rights legislation. Individual employment rights legislation has shifted us into individualism instead of collective rights. People use individual legislation now to enforce their rights versus using collecting legislation to advance their rights."

While they are a strong advocate for legislation, Participant F also highlighted the risks associated with statutory legislation:

"But too much legislation can be a bad things for the trade union movement as well. If you do too much in the way of statutory entitlement, then you have members asking why do they need to be in a union at all? … We would always argue your that your statutory rights, they're not a ceiling. The union bridges the gap between the floor and what else can be gained within reason."

As seen in section 2 of this study, authors such as Bobek and Wickham (2018) have observed a rise in new forms of employment which are focused on the individual and that this type of employment has increased in prevalence since 2008. Moen (2017) further outlined that MNCs in pursuing globalisation have managed to circumvent labour laws and create a more individualistic employment relationship between employers and employees. Coupled with an increase in individual employment legislation versus collective as indicated by this research, an argument can be made that changing practices from employers in individualising the employment relationship further coinciding with an increase in individual employment legislation has not created a landscape in Ireland which is conducive for unions in trying increasing density and accessing workers in sectors where trade union density is low, such as the FDI or hospitality sectors.

To counter these legislative challenges, Participants D and F both put forward an argument that to achieve stronger legislation, trade unions should pursue a constitutional solution. In discussing this, Participant D noted:

"My view is if we're required to have that constitutional referendum to have trade union rights and collective bargaining rights that are considered to be the norm, then let's have that argument. Let's have that campaign. We need to involve those people who are

hungry for change into our campaign to address income inequality in this country through better trade union rights and better collective bargaining rights."

The views of Participant F coincided with those of Participant D *"I think there's a growing confidence within the trade union movement that we should be working towards a constitutional referendum and workers meaningfully having the right to associate"*. Given that Participant G highlighted earlier that legislation has been rebuked on that basis that it is anti-worker, a referendum to insert collective bargaining rights and the right to representation into the constitution could significantly advance the position of the trade union movement in and address issues such as low density.

The research has indicated that legislation in relation to trade unions has not advanced in Ireland in recent years and lack of collective bargaining rights has been a hindrance to the progression of unions. There is a focus on building collective legislation going forward versus individual employment legislation, with some views that a constitutional referendum will be a means to strengthen trade unions in Ireland.

5.4. Relevance of the Trade Union Movement

A further theme which emerged from the data was the relevance of the trade union movement. 5/7 participants discussed relevance throughout the course of their interviews, primarily in two forms:

- Ensuring the trade union movement will remain relevant going into the future was viewed as a key challenge by a number of the participants.
- While relevance was highlighted as a challenge, participants also believed that trade unions have drawn attention to how they are relevant since the onset COVID-19.

Commenting on the challenge posed by being relevant, Participant B drew attention to the need to communicate this message more broadly:

"The greatest challenge is being relevant to our members. We need to make sure people understand why trade unions are relevant and we need to sell that message a bit better …. We have to show workers why it's important to organise in a trade union, and employers, and why it's in their interests to organise collectively."

Tying in with this view, Participant C also discussed remaining relevant as a challenge for the future and how communication will have an essential role in overcoming this:

Going beyond the initial years, the challenges are going to be to continue to be relevant. Communication is going to be key to how relevant we are going to be. The more success you have, the more people will gravitate towards you. But it's not just about simple success you get with pay and conditions. There's other supports that the trade union movement can give to people around issues like equality or issues in their working lives."

In this extract, Participant C has drawn attention to trade unions remaining relevant through communication and achieving success, however the link has also been established to the trade union movement remaining relevant by supporting wider issues around equality and areas that go beyond pay and conditions. Other participants also drew attention to how trade unions will need to think not only about their traditional core issues around pay and conditions, but also on wider societal issues which effect their members and those who are working in order to be relevant. For example, the views of Participant B on this were as follows:

"I think trade unions on societal issues and workplace related issues have to be relevant. We have to have the voice that reflects what most people who go to work want. Like they want decent childcare, like they want access to good universal healthcare, like they want good quality educational at all levels, like they want a good social welfare system that is related to their income."

Participants D and E also drew attention to this same point, with Participant D noting that trade unions have to reflect the needs of their members across a range of areas and co-operate with other groups in trying to achieve this: *"They (trade unions) have a function in working with NGOs and other sections of society … it's about the other experiences their members have, it's about housing, it's about access to healthcare, it's about social rights".* Participant E also spoke of a similar need for trade unions to understand the needs of their members in order to remain relevant *"The mantra I've been preaching is the need to be relevant, the need to be visible, and the need to be empathetic. Put simply, it's about*

understanding the issues facing our members, to speak out on their behalf, and to be seen to be active in doing so".

The findings of this research demonstrate that there is a willingness and desire for trade unions to co-operate with other movements on wider social issues, and that this is viewed by some of the participants as essential in ensuring that the trade union movement remains relevant into the future. These findings also tie in with research undertaken by Hyman (2018), Ibesen and Tapia (2017) and Porta and Portas (2020) who each support the argument that trade unions should develop links with other social movements and NGOs in order to further advance their aims and work with like-minded groups who are seeking similar change and focusing on similar issues to those of the trade union movement.

Whilst discussing relevance as a challenge and emphasising the need for trade unions to focus on a broader array of social issues, Participants A, B and C all noted the impact that COVID-19 has had on bringing renewed public interest on to the role of trade unions and their wider relevance. Participant C discussed the response of the trade union movement to the crisis so far and how it may change people's perceptions of trade unions:

"During the COVID-19 crisis thus far, the trade union movement has played a leading role in workers' rights and safety. I don't believe there would be a national return to work protocol only for the work that was done by ICTU and affiliates to sort of drag the government into that space … People are beginning to realise that trade unions are very important especially in more trying times. That might hold us some good stead".

In responding to the crisis, trade unions have also played a practical role in supporting their members who are working on the frontlines. For example, Participant B whose union represents medical workers spoke of the practical supports which are being provided to their members *"We demonstrated that we have the ability to adjust and to assist in times of crisis ... We set up a helpline which was manned out of hours. If there was a problem with personal protective equipment in Donegal, our helpline would get that call and we would contact the relevant person in the HSE".* As illustrated by this example, trade unions have also played a direct role in aiding the efforts against COVID-19 whilst working with other stakeholders in areas such as developing workplace safety protocols. As Participant A put it

"The *Covid-19 pandemic has proven the relevance of trade unions"*. Given the increasing frequency of trade unions appearing on the media for example and having a role in developing protocols and legislation, this is a view which may well be validated.

The relevance of the trade union movement was raised as a key challenge which trade unions will have to contend with in the future. The findings of this research indicate that there is a recognition amongst the participants that trade unions will need to broaden their focus beyond traditional issues such as pay and conditions and engage with wider societal challenges such as housing, access to healthcare and other areas. In ICTU's (2020) recently published *No Going Back* document, policies have been set out for a society based on an alternative socioeconomic model in the aftermath of COVID-19. The document naturally refers to core union issues such as legislating for collective bargaining rights, however there is also policy ideas put forward for areas including childcare, poverty and education amongst others. The document sets out what it calls *"A New Deal for Workers and Households"* (ICTU, 2020, pg. 17). As seen in the findings of this research, COVID-19 has brought renewed interest on to the relevance of trade unions. How the trade union movement will ultimately respond to and potentially capture this renewed interest in addition to working towards achieving the vision which it has set out in the *No Going Back* publication remains to be seen.

5.5. The Role of Young People in the Trade Union Movement

One of the research objectives of this study was to determine how trade unions view the role of young people within the trade union movement. Through the interview process, the researcher found that 6/7 of the participants specifically discussed matters surrounding young people and their relationship with trade unions. This is set against a backdrop where research carried out by ICTU found that the role of trade unions is not well understood by young people in broad terms and unionisation rates amongst young people in Ireland (i.e. workers aged 24 and under) are at circa 18% (Vandaele, 2017).

Firstly, when looking at young workers in Ireland existing research such as that carried out by Bobek and Wickham (2018) has found that as informalisation in employment has increased in Ireland, both from employers and sometimes supported by government policy,

young people are particularly prone to this as new entrants to the employment market. This is also in an age where the meaning of the term employability is now more commonly used to refer to an individual's ability to find employment rather than having employment in a job which offers security and good conditions (Giovanis, 2017). Participant D drew a link between the low numbers of young people involved in the trade union movement and the employment conditions young people often experience in Ireland:

"I find it a little jarring that there are so few young people who are involved in trade unions, while there is a tendency to see a concentration of young people and women in low paid employment focused in certain sectors where there is low trade union density … We need to make the connection between high density and high pay and conditions, and we need to make the connection there and not be ashamed of that."

Supporting these views, Participant A also noted that sectors which have low trade union density levels tend to have more younger people and also women employed within them *"In hospitality 10% of that sector is unionised. 25% of retail is organised. There are strong characteristics across those sectors. The characteristics are low pay, low hours and they tend to employ women and young people".* Based on the views expressed by Participants A and D, the research suggests that both younger people and women tend to be employed in sectors which low levels of density. Whether there is a link to wider issues of inequality and poor conditions faced by both young people and women in the workplace in these sectors beyond pay and conditions is an area that may be worth further investigating.

Commenting on how to address the challenge of the trade union movement engaging with young people, Participants B, C and F all spoke of a need for trade unions to engage with people before they enter the workforce and exploring different methods on how to do that. In discussing this area, Participant B gave their views on what actions trade unions need to take to inform young people *"Educate young people before they enter the workforce. We need to educate them on their rights and not just the bare minimum which they can find out themselves".* Participant C also spoke of the need to engage young people prior to entering the workforce and highlighting the role they play in society potentially through different subjects in the education system:

"In the future all trade unions are going to have to engage younger people much earlier than when they join the workforce. I think it's important for trade unions to have a presence of the school curriculum, whether it's on history or SPHE so students realise that we are a key partner in any society."

While Participant F agreed that trade unions need to engage with young people at school level, they also put forward the argument that building networks between the trade union movement and young people needs to involve a multifaceted approach *"I don't think it stops with primary education. It goes into secondary and third level groups. I think there's engagement with student union groups which needs to happen and we have done that successfully as well"*

This research and that of others has indicated that participation levels of young people in trade unions tends to be low, the views expressed by the participants would indicate that the trade union movement has further progress to make in engaging young people effectively and developing their understanding of the role of trade unions. As Participants B and C highlighted this could involved developing understanding of trade unions in school curriculums. However, to fully develop understanding and engagement of trade unions amongst young people, a longer-term pathway including engagement from school up to involvement with third-level students and student unions could prove beneficial as Participant F highlighted. Given that young people tend to be employed in sectors which are prone to low pay and precarious work, gaining further access to them could prove highly beneficial for trade unions.

In addition to developing understanding of trade unions across various levels of the education system, Participant D also expressed a view trade unions should consider taking on more young people as trade union officials *"One thing that trade unions could do, without being ageist, is to recruit more full-time organisers and officials who are younger and who will be able to relate to the direct experience of the people we are trying to attract into the trade union movement"*.

The findings indicate that trade unions have a body of work to undertake in improving both young people's understanding of trade unions and their participation levels. A longer-term

strategic objective of the trade union movement may involve establishing a presence in school curriculums and developing awareness of trade unions from an early level, while further enhancing engagement at third-level. Young people in Ireland in recent years have played key roles in both the marriage equality and repeal the 8th campaigns, therefore if trade unions can develop links at third-level and further engage with social issues this could prove beneficial. A shorter-term objective may be to increase the recruitment of young people into trade unions in order to bolster representation of young people across the trade union movement.

5.6. COVID-19 as a Disruptor for the Trade Union Movement

As previously discussed in this study, COVID-19 has been a major disruptor to the world of work and employment but also in society more broadly. Every workplace across the country has had to change and adapt their working practices in light of the pandemic, whether that involved shifting to remote working entirely for employees who are able to do or significant changes to how work is carried out in settings ranging from medical care to retail. As COVID-19 has had a significant impact on employment and drawn health and safety practices and conditions of workplaces into new light, this has naturally impacted the trade union movement as well. While the pandemic is still a new and unfolding situation, it has already been a disruptor for the trade union movement and a catalyst of change which this next section of the research will discuss.

Throughout the interviews conducted, 7/7 of the research referred to COVID-19 and its effect on trade unions in various forms. Some of these effects have already been referred to in this section of the study, however some other notable points which emerged related to how the pandemic has drawn collectivism versus individualism in society into new light and also the impact on how trade unions will organise in a new socially distanced era.

In discussing collectivism versus individualism, Participants E, F and G each referred to how attitudes towards collectivism have shifted in Ireland over the years. Commenting on this, Participant F noted *"I think we've seen an increase in individualism. There's a rise in materialism as well. You have that lethal combination which runs contrary to the notion of collectivism which is what trade unions are about".* Participant E also expressed a similar

view on this, noting there has been a rise in individualism in recent years and how this has presented a challenge for trade unions *"We've seen bit of a turn back to the collective in recent times … The way to build towards fairness and equality is through collective organisation. Individualism is the enemy to that, it's used by our opponents to evade that kind of progress"*. Participant G referred to individual employment legislation shirking collective legislation in recent years which has also fed into the growth of individualism *"Another key challenge is the primacy of individual rights over collectivism. We are seeing increasing evidence of that in the labour courts striking down collective wage agreements"*.

Each of the participants above have drawn attention to the rise in individualism in Ireland in recent years and how this has been counterproductive for trade unions in fostering a sense of collectivism which is inherent to their existence. This rise of individualism coincides with other factors such as the increasing prevalence of FDI's in Ireland determining salaries and benefits based on employees individual performance as observed by Allen (2010), in addition to the fragmentation of the trade union movement after social partnership collapsed which Doherty (2011) referred to. While participants noted that the incidence of individualism has increased in Ireland, there was also an acknowledgement that COVID-19 may create a turning point in Ireland in how society will view collectivism over individualism in the future.

Participant F noted the impact COVID-19 has had on introducing a sense of collectivism into communities and its implications for trade unions :

"I think COVID-19 has created a new awareness and has reintroduced to some degree the notion of community, solidarity and collectivism again …. One of the interesting things coming out of the UK last week was an increase in trade union membership. A lot of it has been attributed to COVID-19, a lot of the increase is coming from public health sector workers and other workers who for the first time are being made aware of trade unions and the role of trade unions beyond pay and conditions. You have a critical issue now of health and safety and people's lives."

Participant C also referred to an increase in trade union membership levels since the advent of COVID-19 and its linkage to collectivism:

"In the last 6 months, in COVID times, the membership has grown fairly dramatically … It's possibly because members realise that in relation to their terms and conditions and pay if there's another recession, that it might be better to have the protection in a union and have the solidarity of being in a group where we're all in it together."

The term all in this together has been frequently used in Ireland since the onset of COVID-19, heightening awareness of collective action to combat the virus. Participant F discussed the potential effect of this type of discourse:

"I think COVID-19 has shown us that collective understanding has really seeped back in. I think that could be an interesting barometer to use in a few years, everyone now realises that the state has a bigger role to play in our lives … and to see if that social solidarity space emerges differently than what's been the case up to now, that'll be a different landscape for trade unions to move things on".

Participant E spoke of the impact of COVID-19 as a profound moment which has the potential to alter the perception of the trade union movement significantly:

"There is more of a receptiveness to trade union ideas and collective solutions at any time since Thatcher and Regan came to power. I think that's a huge opportunity … Clearly Covid presents us with a 1945 moment in how we can question everything and how it's done and put forward the argument for a new social contract. That's part of the general discourse now."

As discussed by Cubrich (2020), COVID-19 has highlighted the paradox of essential workers in often falling into the category of low-paid workers as well despite the necessity which has been place on their roles throughout the pandemic. Research carried out by Williams and Kayaoglu (2020) presents a case for governments to address the issue of undeclared employment, which disproportionately effects vulnerable workers who are often migrants with little social protections in place. Participant E has highlighted that COVID-19 presents a 1945 moment in how society operates and how there is a case for a new social contract. While it is too early to conclude how the affect effects of COVID-19 on society this will manifest, the attention drawn to issues such as the value of essential workers coupled with

wider societal issues may present a renewed platform for trade unions to put forward their case.

In terms of the impact of COVID-19 on how trade unions organise, two participant expressed conflicting views on this. Participant E viewed the increased prevalence of remote working as a challenge to how trade unions will manage to organise themselves in the future:

"One of the worries for trade unions is that it's almost a given that union organisation operates on the basis people go to a workplace. You get them together in a workplace, you communicate in a workplace and you bargain with the employer in a workplace … Whereas now, huge areas of work are being done remotely. The ability of unions to consult with, organise and direct their members is much more challenging, even beyond the point of full control".

While Participant E viewed the advent of remote working as a challenge to how unions will organise, Participant F believed that there is a wider benefit for trade unions in the increased use of technology as a result of COVID-19:

"Employers increasingly don't allow you to put info into the workplace, which is access. And fewer are releasing their workers to do trade union representation training … One thing that has inspired me greatly over the last number of weeks is this platform (video conferencing technology) we're using. I'm having a meeting next week with 144 shop stewards who won't have to leave their sittings rooms or kitchens or bedrooms to engage with their trade union."

Participant E also acknowledged that while organising may prove to be more challenging as a result of remote working, there has been an improvement in other aspects of membership engagement *"One thing which I think is a positive is the level of interaction with individual members has been very noticeable … Within one hour, we had 4,500 opens for a bulletin we sent to SNAs with an update. The way individual members interact has changed".* Like other organisations, the use of technology has increased significantly for trade unions during the pandemic. Based on the evidence provided by Participants E and F, the method by which trade unions engage with their members into the future may be significantly altered.

It is clear that the impact of COVID-19 has been felt across the trade union movement in a variety of forms. The pandemic has presented trade unions with a plethora of new considerations, challenges and even opportunities in its wider societal effects. What has been drawn from this research is that shifting attitudes and values in Irish society, specifically a shift towards collectivism and discourse on the need for a new social contract may present an opportunity for trade unions to propel themselves into a renewed space of relevance and importance within both society and the employment relations landscape. Equally, the rise of remote working and use of technology has changed how trade unions conduct their business and engage with their members, and likely have lasting effects. Based on these findings, the researcher believes that the COVID-19 pandemic can be classed as a disruptor for the trade union movement and, in time, its significance in the course of the trade union movement will likely come to further light.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1. Introduction

This research set out to find an answer to the question: *What is the future role of trade unions in Ireland's employment relations landscape?* The question was derived from a review of existing literature on trade unions both in Ireland and internationally, in addition to reviewing data which has shown a decline in trade union density levels occurring in Ireland in recent years. From this, three primary research objectives arose out of the question which were:

1) Understanding the context and evolving role of trade unions in Ireland.
2) The role of young people within the trade union movement.
3) The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent opportunities and threats facing trade unions resulting from the pandemic.

This chapter will discuss the key findings which emerged from the data gathered through the interview process and it will interpret this data in light of the literature reviewed in section 2.

6.2. Reimaging the role of the trade union movement: membership and wider stakeholders

Previous research has found that during social partnerships 22 year existence in Ireland, the trade union movement did not make any substantial or long lasting gains from this period. Doherty (2011) found that the relationship which existed between trade unions, employers and the state under social partnership was underpinned by pragmatism and focused on incremental gains in areas such as wage agreements. Given the pragmatism which social partnership was based upon, Roche and Teague (2014) argue that a true system of partnership between management, employees and trade unions never materialised in Ireland and as the economic crash of 2008 unfolded, the model was not strong enough to withstand this shock thus leading to its demise.

The results of this research found that social partnership led to a centralisation of trade union activities which thereby led to a level of detachment from the membership of trade unions and removed their role in workplaces, as Participants E and F both outlined. As social partnership capitulated, trade unions have arguably had to reposition themselves on a number of fronts in terms of engaging with their members after becoming more centralised entities and establishing their position in an environment where employers have become more hostile to trade unions which is compounded by a weak legislative framework. The findings of this research indicate that trade unions in the present day now view engagement with their members as a key priority, in addition to advocating on a wider array of issues than pay and conditions on areas such as housing and health. Given the period of social partnership was largely focused on pay and conditions, particularly towards the latter part of its existence, this represents a shift in the objectives of trade unions in focusing on wider societal issues in addition to their core issues.

Trade unions in Ireland can take some solace from their willingness to focus on a wider array of social issues and link in with other likeminded civil society organisations. The findings of Ibsen and Tapia (2017) and Porta and Portas (2020) both suggest that the trade union movement can seek to affect change and reassert their relevance by cooperating with other organisations with similarly aligned objectives and values. By continuing on this path and further establishing its voice on wider societal issues, the trade union movement may be able to build further links and connections thereby enhancing its positioning and role in society.

The need to remain relevant was discussed by the research participants as a key challenge for trade unions going into the future. The findings of this research indicated that there is some apprehension on the part of trade unions in remaining relevant and it was expressed that communication and messaging on the role trade unions have could be improved. Cha et. al (2018) discussed that young people organise and engage with social issues online and that many of the issues and concerns young people face around precarious work and low pay align with issues trade unions aim to address. As part of a broader strategy, trade unions in Ireland could consider how organising online could work into the future and making trade union membership as accessible as possible in a virtual setting. The role trade

unions have played in responding to and providing support throughout the COVID-19 pandemic was raised as a positive point in reasserting the relevance of trade unions. Considering how this could be further built upon and communicated could also prove to be beneficial for trade unions.

While the role of trade unions has evolved, legislation relating to trade union recognition, the right to organise and collective bargaining has remained largely unchanged in Ireland. The research found that legislation was widely viewed as weak by the participants and that over the years there has been a further emphasis on individual employment legislation over collective legislation. Since 2008, informalisation of employment in Ireland has also increased in frequency (Bobek and Wickham, 2018) alongside an employment relationship which has become increasingly individualised (Allen, 2010) which naturally are both inhibiting factors for trade unions ability to organise. Pursuing a constitutional referendum to insert trade union recognition and collective bargaining rights into the constitution was raised by both Participants D and F. Bearing in mind the legislative barriers trade unions have faced to date, giving serious consideration to how the case for a constitutional referendum could be advanced may prove beneficial to trade unions in the long term.

The findings of the research indicate that the positioning of trade unions and how they conduct their affairs has changed since social partnership. Determining the future direction of the trade union movement may also require some reimagining of what its wider role in both employment relations and in society more broadly is.

6.3. The case for increased engagement with young people

Throughout the interview process, there was a recognition that the trade union movement needs to do more to engage and attract young people. Vandaele (2017) determined that the understanding of the role of trade unions is typically not strong amongst young people in Ireland. Yet as it came to light over the course of the interview process, young people are often employed in sectors which are plagued by low pay and poor conditions and also prone to the informalisation of employment which Bobek and Wickham (2018) spoke of. The importance of informing, engaging with and involving young people into the trade union movement is an area which will be essential for trade unions future viability and success.

Participants B, C and F all spoke of the need to educate and engage with young people on the role of trade unions from school-age up to third level. Looking beyond engagement and providing information, Participant D also spoke of the benefit of trade unions recruiting more young people into trade unions as organisers and officials. While trade unions have traditionally relied on recruiting officials from the shop steward network, targeting recruitment of young people in sectors where density is low and there is a higher proportion of young people employed could prove beneficial for trade unions. Young people involved in the trade union movement will be in a position to speak to the lived experiences of their peers and illustrate the relevance of trade unions. The role of young people within the trade union movement should therefore be a key consideration for the future.

6.4. COVID-19 as a turning point?

Over the course of this research, COVID-19 and its effects was a significant overarching feature of every interview. Already there is research calling for the value of those deemed as essential workers to be recognised through higher remuneration and better conditions (Cubrich, 2020) and for an end to undeclared employment through voluntary programmes providing state support (Williams and Kayaoglu, 2020). While research along these lines may have been conducted in spite of COVID-19, the pandemic has drawn their relevance into new light.

As seen throughout the course of this research, the impact of COVID-19 has been regarded as having drawn the role of trade unions into new relevance while also presenting new opportunities and threats. It was noted by some of the research participants that COVID-19 may well have an impact on an increased sense of collectivism in society over individualism. Participants E and F noted that while individualism had increase in Irish society in recent years, COVID-19 and the need it wrought for individuals to rely on each other and state intervention may foster an increased collective mindset, which would be a natural fit with the ideology of trade unionism. Alongside this shift in mindset, trade unions have been active across different media platforms throughout the crisis and have played a role in the development of legislation relating to the workplace. How trade unions organise and moving to a more virtual landscape has also been drawn into attention and as Participants C

and F noted, trade union membership in the UK has been increasing since the onset of the pandemic.

Hyman (2018) argues that society is undergoing a new great transformation and that this inevitably will draw further attention to how socioeconomic systems are organised, including the organisation of capital and labour. If this great transformation was already underway as Hyman (2018) outlined, then the COVID-19 pandemic will likely serve to accelerate that transformation and perhaps even change its course. While Ireland and the world still grapples with the pandemic, discourse on a new social contract in the aftermath of COVID-19 and what that may look like has already begun. Given the world of work has been altered alongside the challenges in society COVID-19 has created in terms of employment, provision of healthcare and the new found value society has placed on essential workers, the trade union movement may find itself at a juncture in its role in Irish employment relations and society as a result of the pandemic.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1. Conclusion

Trade unions have been a feature of employment relations in Ireland for over a century. While the face of the trade union movement has evolved since the days of the ITWGU lockout in 1913, its role as a representative for workers across a range of sectors of employment has remained. In more recent years, the advent of social partnership saw trade unions have a seat at the table with the state and employer representative bodies, however the economic crash of 2008 saw this model of partnership collapse as it was not strong enough to withstand the shock of this crisis. The years which followed the downfall of social partnership have arguably been contentious for trade unions in Ireland – declining density levels combined with increasing employer hostility to trade unionism and an unsupportive legislative landscape has not been conducive for the trade union movement in repositioning itself after the fall of social partnership. The literature reviewed also suggests that trade unions both in Ireland and globally have experienced decline in recent years due to a multitude of factors. These factors range from a more individualised employment relationship driven in part by MNCs pursuing globalisation alongside the acceleration of financialisaton, which has seen the consolidation of capital occurring in various settings in the economy. Concurrent to this, policy makers here in Ireland and further afield have broadly pursued a light touch approach to labour laws in recent years and in regulating financialisaton as it has occurred.

While the factors above may suggest a pessimistic outlook for trade unions in Ireland, that is not necessarily the case. Although density levels have declined, they have held steady in recent years, holding between 23-24% since 2016 (Fulton, 2020). In addition to this, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent effects potentially presents a turning point for trade unions in Ireland. The findings of this research indicate that since the outbreak of the pandemic, trade unions in Ireland have played a role in the response to the crisis both in terms of providing supports to their members and in assisting with wider efforts to combat the virus. This crisis differs significantly from the economic crash of 2008, in that it has altered employment and society in a way that few could have predicted. While

the full implications of COVID-19 and its aftermath on society will take time before they are fully understood, a heightened sense of solidarity and collectivism across society may prove to benefit trade unions which are naturally aligned to these values. The increased profile of trade unions as a result of the pandemic may also provide an opportunity for the trade union movement to reposition itself as a leading voice on broader social issues in Ireland, with the *No Going Back* document published by ICTU (2020) providing an example of this. Further to this, if the trade union movement is able to effectively engage young people in Ireland, who have been pivotal in materialising major social changes such as marriage equality and the repeal of the 8th amendment from the Irish constitution, this could also breathe new life into trade unions.

While the path ahead for trade unions is by no means certain and challenges remain, there are also opportunities and reason for optimism. Trade unions play an important role within the employment relations landscape in Ireland and in the short to medium term future will likely continue to do so. How the role of the trade union movement evolves in the longer-term and what position they will have in the employment relations landscape and society more broadly is a question which may need to be revisited in future research in the wake of the turbulent course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

7.2. Recommendations

In light of the findings of this research, the researcher recommends the following actions:

- Appointment of Youth Development Officer(s) to develop and implement a youth engagement and recruitment strategy for trade unions. This role could either be appointed by individual trade unions or in an affiliate body with an overall remit for youth engagement across the trade union movement. A salary on a scale of circa €40,000-50,000 dependent on experience level could be offered for the role. **Implementation: Short-medium term timescale.**
- Targeted recruitment campaigns towards young people to increase the level of youth organisers and officials in the trade union movement, with the wider objective of increasing youth membership. Salaries offered on entry-level point of scales in trade unions for organisers. **Implementation: Medium term timescale.**

- Formation of a trade union working group to commence the process of campaigning for a constitutional referendum on trade union representation and collective bargaining to take place. In time, the working group would likely need to involve sympathetic parties outside of the trade union movement and political representatives. **Implementation: Long term timescale.**

7.3. Future Research

As the research has been carried out in the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, future research at a later point may be warranted to assess any further implications for trade unions in Ireland in light of the pandemic.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Personal Learning Statement

Undertaking this research has been an enjoyable yet challenging experience. I have never completed a dissertation or thesis previously, so the process of carrying out my own research was new to me. On a personal level, it has also been a difficult year – the loss of my close friend in December 2019 had a significant impact on me, coupled with the change caused by COVID-19 and juggling the pressures of work there were times where I really questioned whether I would be able to complete this research.

But sitting here now I am glad and relieved to say that I have met that challenge and I believe I have learned from this process. Some of the key points which I have taken away from completing this thesis are:

- I have found academic writing and researching academic literature a challenge previously, however with this project I really enjoyed researching this topic and finding out more about it, both through existing literature and the interview process. I am glad to have found an area of research which I am genuinely interested in and enthused by.
- If I had to do this project again or undertake a similar piece of research, I would definitely allow myself more time. While I tend to work well under pressure and have a tendency to get my energy when a deadline is approaching, a body of work like this takes a lot of time to complete and review. I hope to take that lesson of managing my time more efficiently away from this project.
- Overall, I believe the experience of undertaking this MA programme has added to my skillset as a researcher and as a professional. It was not easy to undertake a masters while working full-time and fitting in other activities around that, but I am glad that I have proven to myself that I was capable of achieving this.

While my thesis is by no means perfect, I am happy that I was able to complete it and I hope it has raised some interesting points to note. Completing this MA programme has been insightful, enjoyable and challenging at times – I am glad to have pushed myself to complete the programme and I look forward to applying the skills learned in my working life and beyond.

Appendix 2: Email to Participants

Dear [Name],

I hope you are well.

My name is Adrian McCarthy, I am a final year masters student in Human Resource Management at the National College of Ireland. I am following up with you in relation to recent contact you received from Fiona Dunne in ICTU in relation to participating in my research.

For my dissertation I am undertaking research on the future role of trade unions in the employment relations landscape in Ireland. As part of this, I am seeking to interview leaders of trade unions to gain their views on a number of areas including how they see the role of trade unions developing in Ireland, opportunities and threats which may be facing trade unions in the future and what impact Covid-19 is going to have on unions.

Fiona has indicated that you would be interested in participating in the research which I am delighted to hear. I have attached an information form and a consent form which I would ask you to review as well in your own time.

I have set aside the dates below to hold the interviews if you have availability at any time on any of the following:

- 26th June
- 30th June-03rd July inclusive
- 7th-8th July

I am available at any time on those dates in the morning, afternoon or evening. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes to complete and it will be held on Zoom.

If you have any queries please don't hesitate to contact me with them and thank you for your interest in taking part in this research.

Kind regards,
Adrian

0879103872

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

The Future Role of Trade Unions in Ireland's Employment Relations Landscape

Consent to take part in research

• I…………………………………………….. voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

• I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

• I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

• I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

• I understand that participation involves answering a series of questions in an interview conducted by the researcher.

• I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

• I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

• I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

• I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

• I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the dissertation which this research is a part of.

• I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.

• I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained by the researcher on their laptop which is encrypted. The data will be stored in a password protected folder and only accessible by the researcher until October 2020 when the examinations board of the National College of Ireland has confirmed the results of the researchers dissertation, after which this data will be deleted.

• I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam board's decision.

• I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

• I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Adrian McCarthy,

MA student in Human Resource Management,

National College of Ireland

18140637@student.ncirl.ie

087 910 3872

Signature of research participant

Date

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

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Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix 4: Research Information Form

The Future Role of Trade Unions in Ireland's Employment Relations Landscape

Information Sheet for Research Participations

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT

My name is Adrian McCarthy. I am a masters student in the National College of Ireland studying for an MA in Human Resource Management in addition to working full-time in recruitment/HR. To fulfil the requirements of my masters programme, I am completing a dissertation on the future role of trade unions in Ireland's employment relations landscape. The aim of this study is to provide an insight on what direction trade unions in Ireland are going in and how they will fit into the employment relations landscape of the future.

WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?

Participating in this research will involve taking part in an interview where you will be asked for your views on areas including how the role of trade unions has developed over the years, succession planning in trade unions, examining opportunities and threats facing trade unions, exploring the future role of trade unions and what impact Covid-19 has had on trade unions. The interview will be audio-recorded and a transcript of key information from the interview will be compiled.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

You have been invited to take part in this research as either having direct experience within trade unions or in the wider employment relations landscape as an employers or public representative. Participants were selected from leading trade unions, employer representative bodies and public representatives due to their knowledge on this topic.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You have the right to refuse participation, the right to refuse to answer any question in the interview and you may withdraw from the research process at any time without any consequence.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

The research will aim to provide an insight on what role trade unions will have in Ireland's future employment relations landscape. It will examine a number of areas relating to the future of trade unions which may provide greater clarity on the direction on trade unionism in Ireland. There are no considerable risks to participants identified from participating in this research.

WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?

Your participation in this research will be fully confidential and all data will be anonymised, including any references to other individuals or organisations in the course of the interview. Confidentiality will only be broken if the researcher has a strong belief that there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either the participant or another individual (e.g. physical, emotional or sexual abuse, concerns for child protection, rape, self-harm, suicidal intent or criminal activity) or if a serious crime has been committed. Non-anonymised data in the form of signed consent forms and audio recordings are collected and retained as part of this research process and will also be treated with the utmost confidentiality.

HOW WILL INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?

Signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in a folder on my laptop until after my degree has been conferred. The laptop is secured with encryption and a password, the data will be stored in a password protected folder and will only be accessible to myself. A transcript of interviews in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a further two years after this. Under freedom of information legalisation, you are entitled to access the information you have provided at any time.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The results of the study will be used to fulfil the requirements of submitting my dissertation to achieve my masters.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

If you would like more information, please feel free to contact me at 18140637@student.ncirl.ie or on 087 910 3872. The supervisor allocated by the National College of Ireland for this research is Dr. Catherine O'Reilly who is also contactable at catherinemoreilly@gmail.com or on 087 259 2814 should you have any queries.

Thank you for your time and participation in this research.

Appendix 5: Interview Questions

1. How has the role of trade unions in Ireland evolved over the last number years in your view?

2. How would you see the role of trade unions developing in Ireland into the future?

3. How has Covid-19 impacted your trade union and its members? Does the current crisis differ from the previous shock of 2008-2010?

4. What do you anticipate as being the greatest challenge trade unions will face in the future?

5. What are the opportunities available to trade unions in the future? Does the Covid-19 pandemic provide any opportunities for the trade union movement?

6. How do you manage succession planning in your trade union?

7. What are your views on developing graduate training/development programmes within trade unions? Would you consider implementing such programmes in your own organisation?

8. Where do you envisage your own trade union 5 years into the future?

9. Are there any other views you would like to share?