

RESPECT.
at work

UNION BUSTING:

AN INCONVENIENT
TRUTH

69^{0%}

of workplace reps
observed at least
**one form of union
busting**

54^{0%}

of workplace reps
observed two or
more forms of
union busting

43^{0%}

of workplace reps
say union busting
negatively impacted
their well-being

40^{0%}

of workplace reps
say employers
discouraged workers
from joining a union

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For many years, the scale of union busting activity in the Republic of Ireland has been downplayed. There has been little available research to counter the argument that those who attempt to organise their workplaces do so in relatively favourable conditions and with few repercussions.

In this groundbreaking study, Respect at Work, with assistance from researchers at Queen's University, Belfast, provide evidence for the first time about just how widespread the problem is and how damaging its impacts on union activists can be.

This study finds that, among a sample of union activists, a clear majority indicated that they had experienced union busting tactics when attempting to organise their workplace or act as workplace representatives. By a similarly wide margin, these workers said that union busting tactics had detrimental consequences for their mental health.

Taken together, these findings provide firm evidence of both the scale and impact of union busting in the Republic of Ireland, and raise the question of whether workers who try to unionise are offered adequate protection and rights under the law.

SURVEY AND METHODOLOGY

The **Respect at Work campaign** conducted this research with the assistance of academics from Queen's University, Belfast in the summer of 2024. The objective of the research was to find out directly from union activists and shop stewards their experience of employers' responses to union organising activities in the workplace.

159 workplace representatives across four unions – the Communications Workers' Union, the Financial Services Union, Mandate and SIPTU – participated in the study.

A number of interviews with activists were also carried out. Respondents were asked to identify if they had experienced any the following anti-union behaviours on the part of their employers :

- The employer **denied** union organisers access to the workplace
- The employer **discouraged** workers from joining the union
- The employer **distributed** anti-union literature
- The employer **victimised** union activists
- The employer **used management consultants** to avoid dealing with the union
- The employer **dismissed** union activists
- The employer **set up alternatives** to the union (e.g. non-union staff forum)
- The employer **threatened** closure or site relocation in response to union organising

The campaign also sought to determine whether observance of such behaviours influenced representatives' well-being. During the period the above behaviours were reported, we asked respondents if they experienced the following:

- I slept well
- I felt burnout
- I felt relaxed and at ease
- I felt physically unwell
- I could concentrate and think clearly
- I experienced low mood

We also asked respondents to what degree they felt the reported employer behaviour influenced their well-being in this period.

FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

The responses from workplace representatives indicated the following:

- The employer victimised union activists **42%**
- The employer discouraged workers from joining the union **40%**
- The employer used management consultants to avoid dealing with the union **40%**
- The employer set up alternatives to the union (e.g. non-union staff forum) **29%**
- The employer denied union organisers access to the workplace **25%**
- The employer dismissed union activists **23%**
- The employer threatened closure or site-relocation in response to union organising **16%**
- The employer distributed anti-union literature **15%**

The collected survey findings also showed that:

- **69%** of respondents observed at least one of the specified anti-union behaviours
- **54%** of respondents observed at least 2 or more of the specified anti-union behaviours
- **42%** of respondents observing 3 or more specified anti-union behaviours
- **31%** of respondents observed no instance of the specified anti-union behaviours on the part of their employer.

Open-ended responses from participants in the survey revealed specific anecdotes about anti-union behaviour from employers:



The company didn't want or wouldn't work alongside a union, it was intimidating



A lot of employees were terrified of joining in case they would be bullied by management or that management would find a reason to fire them



Open bullying and removal of opportunities of progression to staff who have attempted to organise



The **Respect at Work survey** also asked union representatives if, during the period the union was organising in their workplace, they experienced mental and physical symptoms related to their well-being.

As the campaign wanted to determine whether such reported outcomes might be linked to experiences of union busting, respondents were also asked to indicate to what degree they felt their employer's response to union organising influenced their reported well-being.

- **43%** reported that their well-being was influenced definitely, markedly or severely by their employer responses to union organising..
- Burnout, low mood and difficulty relaxing were reported as the most common negative well-being outcomes.

Analysis undertaken on behalf of the **Respect at Work Campaign** found that the one employer anti-union behaviour consistently associated with a variety of negative well-being outcomes was employer victimisation of union activists. Analysis found that union activists who reported employer victimisation were, on average, more likely to report:

- Poor sleep quality
- Burnout
- Less likely to report feeling relaxed or at ease
- Poorer self-reported physical health
- Difficulties in concentrating
- Low mood

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has helped to identify two inconvenient truths about union busting in Ireland:

- 1. A majority of union activists surveyed who organise union activities at work faced a negative employer response; and**
- 2. Employer responses, particularly victimisation, influenced union activists' well-being negatively.**

It is clear to the campaign that workers in Ireland trying to join and form a union can face a hostile environment and negative employer reactions. These are often discreet, including the use of hired consultants, and operate on multiple levels, such as victimising individual activists and discouraging union membership.

Such union busting is prevalent here in Ireland and existing legal rights do little to prevent it or substantively protect union activists.

The Respect at Work campaign recommend the following in the context of the transposition of the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages and the Action Plan required to raise collective bargaining levels in Ireland:

- 1** The Government to legislate for the High-Level Report on Collective Bargaining;
- 2** The Government to transpose into Irish law the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages and Collective Bargaining with a particular focus on providing:
 - a. Stronger legal protections for union members against victimisation and to prevent dismissal/discrimination for trade union activity;
 - b. Legal rights to paid facilities and time for union reps to introduce the trade union to colleagues and engage and represent members;
 - c. The right of union access and information for all workers to their relevant trade union at work; and
 - d. The legal right for all workers to freely talk about their conditions of employment at work with their colleagues and their trade union.



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