

# **Barriers to Trade Union Participation Among Rural Migrant Workers in China: An Analysis of Labor Disputes, Employment Characteristics, and Socio-Demographic Factors**

## **Abstract**

This study aims to understand the potential for migrant workers to join trade unions by analyzing labor disputes, employment characteristics, and socio-demographic factors. Utilizing data from a survey of 823 migrant workers conducted in Shanghai and nine other cities in China, this research examines both the associational (organizational membership) and behavioral (activity participation) aspects of trade union participation. The results indicate that rural migrant workers exhibit a low level of union participation, contrary to expectations based on their labor market position and the recruitment efforts by Chinese unions. Three primary barriers to union participation were identified: (1) migrant workers in state-owned firms are significantly more likely to participate in unions compared to those in private firms, where union presence is weaker; (2) occupational and employment status discrimination within workplaces hinders rural migrant workers from joining unions; and (3) trust in trade unions is relatively low among Chinese migrant workers, likely due to the close relationship between unions and the government, which may undermine union legitimacy and impede worker engagement. These findings highlight the systemic challenges that rural migrant workers face in engaging with trade unions in China.

**Keywords:** *Trade unions, Migrant workers, Labor disputes, Employment characteristics, Socio-demographic factors*

## **Introduction**

Over recent decades, the number of rural migrant workers has surged dramatically, now constituting a significant segment of the global workforce. This demographic shift has elevated the importance of integrating migrant workers into the host societies, a challenge that has gained international attention. Trade unions play a pivotal role in this integration process within the labor market (Gorodzeisky & Richards, 2016). The most critical action that unions can undertake is to include migrant workers as members and actively represent their interests. From the perspective of trade unions, migrant workers are invaluable resources for maintaining organizational sustainability. Faced with substantial membership declines since the mid-20th century, unions in many Western countries have been engaged in revitalization efforts (Hodder & Edwards, 2015). These revitalization strategies have largely focused on organizing efforts aimed at reversing declines in union density by expanding membership among historically underrepresented demographic groups (Behrens et al., 2004; Mustchin, 2012). Migrant workers constitute a significant proportion of these target groups, and their recruitment is crucial for union renewal (Turner, Cross, & O'Sullivan, 2014). Therefore, promoting the involvement of migrant workers in unions is essential not only for social inclusion but also for the sustainability of the unions themselves.

Several unique aspects of the Chinese context make it an essential case for exploring union participation among migrant workers. As of 2015, the number of Chinese rural migrant workers had reached 277 million, representing a growing share of the national workforce. Despite their significant numbers, these workers have been largely unorganized and unrepresented for decades (Pun & Smith, 2007). In 2012, the unionization rate among migrant workers was only 39.9%, compared to 47.2% for urban workers, amounting to 175.3 million members out of a population of 371 million (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2013). Furthermore, migrant workers from rural areas often arrive in cities with little or no prior contact with or understanding of trade unions. Additionally, the Chinese government exerts considerable influence over union policies and actions (Chan et al., 2006), which may cause the involvement of migrant workers in unions to differ significantly from that in Western societies.

Recruiting migrant workers as union members has the potential to transform trade unions in China. Traditionally, union members have been predominantly employed in the public sector, where labor disputes are relatively rare. Unions in these sectors have

historically focused on supporting production and providing welfare. However, most rural migrant workers are employed in the private sector, which has seen a rapid increase in labor disputes since the mid-1990s (Frenkel & Sydow, 2015). As unions expand their membership to include more migrant workers, they will need to take a more active and robust stance in labor disputes to protect workers' rights. Failure to do so could undermine their legitimacy.

The participation of migrant workers in trade unions has been extensively studied in the context of the UK, the US, and other Western countries (James & Karmowska, 2010; Hardy, Eldring, & Schulten, 2012; Pulignano, Meardi, & Doerflinger, 2015; Marino, Penninx, & Rooshlad, 2015). However, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the experiences of Chinese rural migrant workers. This study aims to address this gap by analyzing the factors that influence the likelihood of migrant workers joining trade unions in China, focusing on labor disputes, employment characteristics, and socio-demographic factors. The ultimate goal is to address the issue of low union membership and enhance the protection of migrant workers' rights and interests.

While significant research has focused on union participation among migrant workers in Western countries, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning rural migrant workers in China. Existing studies primarily examine the experiences and challenges of these workers without delving deeply into their interactions with trade unions. This research aims to fill that gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the barriers to union participation faced by Chinese rural migrant workers. Understanding these barriers is crucial for developing effective strategies to enhance union membership and engagement among this demographic. This study contributes to the broader discourse on social inclusion by highlighting the unique socio-economic and institutional challenges in China. Moreover, by examining the factors that influence union participation, this research has the potential to inform policy and practice, thereby promoting the sustainability of trade unions in a rapidly changing labor market. The findings will not only offer insights into the Chinese context but also add to the global understanding of migrant workers' integration into trade unions, providing a comparative perspective that can benefit scholars and practitioners worldwide.

## Trade unions and migrant workers in China

Understanding the relationship between trade unions and migrant workers is pivotal for advancing the debate on union revitalization strategies (Frege & Kelly, 2003). Trade unions are primarily organizations that represent the individual and collective interests of their members (Allen, 1966). As Pencavel (1971) notes, unions operate on various levels: collectively (e.g., bargaining, representation), semi-collectively (e.g., individual representation under a collective procedure), and individually (e.g., legal services). Unions play a crucial role in narrowing the power gap between workers and employers, thereby overcoming the limitations of individual actions and facilitating workers' efforts to achieve certain goals (Cornfield, 1991; Hyman, 1997). Specifically, as organizations with monopoly power, unions can restrict the labor supply to various firms and industries, thereby protecting their members' interests against employer demands (Freeman & Medoff, 1984). Through collective actions, such as strikes, unions can initiate work stoppages that disrupt employers' operations, thereby exerting pressure to reach mutually acceptable agreements.

The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) serves as the central organization for Chinese trade unions, which operate in a pyramidal, top-down structure encompassing national, regional, and primary levels (Liu, Li, & Kim, 2015). Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese trade unions have distinct characteristics. Fundamentally, they advocate for employee rights while simultaneously representing state interests, performing a “dual function” that includes providing employee services, resolving disputes, maintaining labor discipline, and administering state welfare programs (Chan et al., 2006). The ACFTU is an integral part of the political structure, possessing quasi-government status (Chen, 2009). Historically, Chinese unions have primarily focused on assisting production, organizing recreational activities, and dispensing welfare (Solinger, 2009). By leveraging both collective and state-party voices, unions enhance employment stability, improve wages, and provide non-wage compensation and training (Wei, Dong, & Jin, 2015; Ge, 2014).

In China, it is legally permissible for workers to establish trade unions from the bottom-up. However, any new union must first

obtain official recognition from the ACFTU or an affiliated industrial or local trade union. Without this recognition, new organizations cannot register as trade unions or enjoy the rights legally granted to them. This requirement has been reaffirmed by amendments in 1992 and 2001, ensuring that the only legally recognized trade unions are those under ACFTU leadership (Cooke, 2015). Consequently, these unions are typically established in a top-down manner (Lin & Ju, 2011). For decades, migrant workers were not considered eligible for trade union membership. Since the 1980s, the number of rural migrant workers in Chinese cities has steadily increased. China's export-oriented, labor-intensive industrialization strategy over the past three decades has created a substantial labor shortage in urban areas, providing employment opportunities for rural workers seeking higher incomes. However, this strategy has also subjected workers, particularly rural migrants, to exploitative labor regimes (Leung, 2015). Migrant workers predominantly cluster in the private sector, which offers low levels of labor protection (Cook, 2015). These workers typically endure low wages, job insecurity, and hazardous working conditions (Knight & Yueh, 2009). Additionally, the Hukou system serves as an institutional barrier, restricting migrant workers' access to public services in cities (Swider, 2015). This system favors local residents over non-locals in many aspects (Cooke, 2015), and trade unions have historically excluded migrant workers from membership.

The inclusion of rural migrant workers became a policy agenda for Chinese unions when they faced significant pressures and sought renewal strategies for growth and recovery. Union membership numbers plummeted from 103.2 million in 1990 to 86.9 million in 1999. Without involving rural migrant workers, Chinese unions struggled to reverse this decline. At the 14th ACFTU Congress in late 2003, rural migrant workers were officially recognized as new members and an essential part of the Chinese working class for the first time.

Several factors influence migrant workers' decisions to join unions. High levels of exploitation can motivate migrant workers to engage with unions (Meardi, 2007). Most migrant workers occupy the lowest rungs of the occupational ladder, primarily performing manual jobs in the secondary labor market (Arango et al., 2009). Dissatisfaction with wages and working conditions can increase their propensity to participate in workplace unionism (Hartley, 1992). In this context, migrant workers are likely to view unions favorably

and be active in union participation. Additionally, the provision of union services is closely related to union participation (Flood, Turner, & Willman, 1996). From a cost-benefit perspective, union membership is seen as attractive (Klandermans, 1984). Like their local counterparts, migrant workers face significant challenges in protecting their interests, making union services a critical concern. The perceived effectiveness of unions in fulfilling their core function of representing members is likely to strongly influence the attractiveness of union membership (Turner, Cross, & O'Sullivan, 2014). Perceptions of union support can be a potent mobilizing factor for migrant workers (Metochi, 2012). Moreover, unions may be more sympathetic to immigrants who share cultural backgrounds with the local population (Marino et al., 2015).

For migrant workers, involvement in trade unions is a crucial aspect of social inclusion (Penninx, 2005). As actors within the labor market regulatory framework, unions influence socio-economic decision-making, and their positions can significantly impact migrant workers' status in the labor market and society (Marino et al., 2015). Strong links between migrant workers and trade unions are vital for ensuring their representation in political decision-making processes regarding labor market regulations. Conversely, a lack of representation leads to a lack of recognition of their needs in these processes (International Organization for Migration, 2015). Migrant workers often face various forms of social exclusion, visible in both the labor market and political life (Fangen, Brit, & Erlend, 2010). As non-citizens, they have fewer rights than local workers and cannot vote for policymakers (Hayduk, 2015). Union involvement is a crucial step toward achieving equal rights for migrant and local workers, enabling migrants to influence policy-making to reflect their needs. Ultimately, full inclusion of migrant workers in the labor market requires equal rights. As unions represent workers' interests, union membership is a vital component of this inclusion, allowing migrant workers to contribute to advancing the common interests of the entire workforce.

The relationship between trade unions and rural migrant workers in China is complex and multifaceted. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), as the umbrella organization, operates within a pyramidal, top-down structure that permeates national, regional, and local levels. This structure allows the ACFTU to wield significant influence over union policies and actions. However,

this top-down approach often limits grassroots initiatives, particularly those aimed at addressing the unique needs of rural migrant workers. Trade unions in China perform dual functions: they advocate for employee rights and uphold state interests, often balancing between providing worker services and maintaining labor discipline. This duality can sometimes lead to a conflict of interest, especially in labor disputes where the union's role as a mediator may overshadow its role as an advocate for workers' rights.

The integration of rural migrant workers into trade unions is further complicated by several persistent issues. One major problem is the low coverage of trade unions in the private sector, where most migrant workers are employed. These sectors often lack robust union representation, leaving many workers without a voice in their workplace. Additionally, employment discrimination based on occupational status and employment contracts further marginalizes migrant workers, making it difficult for them to access union resources and support. Organizational trust is also a significant barrier; many migrant workers perceive trade unions as extensions of the state rather than independent advocates for their rights. This perception undermines their willingness to join or participate in union activities, leading to a cycle of low engagement and representation.

Despite these challenges, there have been efforts to incorporate migrant workers into the trade union framework. These efforts are driven by the need to rejuvenate unions amid declining membership and to address the labor market disparities faced by migrant workers. However, the effectiveness of these efforts is often hampered by structural and institutional barriers that persist within the Chinese labor market and union system. Addressing these barriers requires a nuanced understanding of the socio-economic and political landscape in which these unions operate, as well as targeted strategies that prioritize the unique needs and challenges of rural migrant workers.

## **Comparative Analysis of Trade Union Participation**

### **Comparative Analysis of Trade Union Participation Among Migrant Workers**

In order to comprehensively understand the trade union participation of rural migrant workers in China, it is essential to compare it with the experiences of migrant workers in other countries. This comparative analysis can highlight both the unique challenges faced

by Chinese migrant workers and the universal issues that affect migrant labor globally. Recent studies provide valuable insights into the varying degrees of union participation and the factors influencing it across different contexts.

### **Trade Union Participation in Western Countries**

In Western countries, trade unions have historically played a crucial role in advocating for workers' rights, including those of migrant workers. However, the level of participation and the effectiveness of unions in representing migrant workers vary significantly. For instance, in the United States, migrant workers often face barriers such as language differences, legal status, and fear of retaliation from employers, which hinder their union participation (Waldinger & Gilbertson, 2018). Despite these challenges, successful unionization efforts have been documented, particularly in sectors with high concentrations of migrant labor, such as agriculture and hospitality (Reichman, 2019).

Similarly, in Europe, the integration of migrant workers into trade unions has been mixed. Countries like Germany and Sweden have relatively high rates of union membership among migrants due to robust legal frameworks and active union efforts to include these workers (Lechner & Boli, 2020). However, in Southern European countries like Italy and Spain, where informal employment is more prevalent, migrant workers are less likely to join unions, often due to precarious employment conditions and lack of awareness about their rights (Marino et al., 2017).

### **Trade Union Participation in Developing Countries**

In developing countries, the situation is often more complex due to weaker institutional support for labor rights and higher levels of informal employment. In India, for example, the informal sector employs a significant portion of the workforce, including many rural migrants. Trade unions in India have traditionally focused on formal sector workers, leading to a significant gap in representation for informal workers (Balasubramanian & Sarkar, 2020). Recent efforts, however, have seen unions attempting to organize informal workers, including migrants, to address issues such as wage theft and unsafe working conditions (Agarwala, 2018).

In Latin America, countries like Brazil and Argentina have seen varying levels of success in unionizing migrant workers. In

Brazil, the presence of strong labor laws and active unions has facilitated better integration of migrants into the labor movement. However, migrants still face challenges such as discrimination and lack of legal protection (Teixeira et al, 2021). In contrast, in Argentina, the union movement has been more fragmented, with less emphasis on including migrant workers, leading to lower participation rates (Señorans, 2023).

### **Trade Union Participation in China**

Recent studies have provided deeper insights into the barriers faced by migrant workers in China and the evolving patterns of union participation. Hu and Martin (2020) highlight that while labor unions in China have made significant strides in protecting migrant workers' rights, substantial challenges remain, particularly in ensuring equitable representation across different employment sectors. Their research emphasizes the role of institutional support and the need for stronger enforcement of labor laws to protect migrant workers effectively.

Booth et al., (2022) explore new patterns and challenges in union participation among migrant workers in China. They identify that while there has been progress in integrating migrant workers into trade unions, issues such as workplace discrimination and lack of awareness about union benefits persist. Their study suggests that enhancing educational initiatives and outreach programs can significantly improve union participation rates among migrant workers.

Chan (2019) discuss the institutional barriers that hinder trade union involvement of migrant workers in China. They argue that the close relationship between trade unions and the government often limits the ability of unions to act independently, thus reducing their effectiveness in advocating for migrant workers' rights. Their findings suggest that promoting greater autonomy for trade unions could lead to more robust representation and better protection of migrant workers.

### **Lessons for China**

The comparative analysis reveals several lessons that can be applied to improve the situation of migrant workers in China. Firstly, legal and institutional reforms are crucial to ensure that migrant workers can exercise their right to unionize without fear of retaliation.

Strengthening labor laws to protect all workers, regardless of their employment status, can help create a more inclusive labor movement.

Secondly, trade unions in China need to adopt more proactive strategies to engage with migrant workers. This includes providing education about workers' rights, offering legal assistance, and creating safe spaces for migrant workers to voice their concerns. Unions can also benefit from leveraging technology to reach migrant workers who may be geographically dispersed or working in remote locations.

Lastly, building alliances with other civil society organizations can enhance the ability of unions to advocate for migrant workers. Collaboration with NGOs, community groups, and international labor organizations can provide additional resources and support for union efforts.

## **Method**

### **Measurement**

The data utilized in this study is derived from a comprehensive quantitative research project aimed at assessing the working conditions of employees in urban areas following the implementation of the Labor Contract Law. The questionnaire encompasses a variety of items related to trade union participation, including membership status and activity engagement, trust in trade unions, experiences with labor disputes, and a range of socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education level, employment status, and Hukou status. Hukou is a geographic membership classification under the Chinese household registration system (hukou), which distinguishes between rural and urban residents. Those employed in urban areas but holding rural Hukou are identified as rural migrant workers (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011).

### **Procedure**

The survey was conducted across ten geographically and economically diverse Chinese cities: Shanghai, Shenzhen, Tianjin, Nanjing, Changsha, Chengdu, Wenzhou, Xiamen, Mianyang, and Changchun. Geographically, Chengdu and Mianyang are situated in

western China, while Shanghai, Nanjing, and Wenzhou are in the east. The northern cities of Changchun and Tianjin were included, along with the southern cities of Shenzhen and Xiamen. Changsha was chosen for its central location. Economically, the cities were selected based on their gross domestic product (GDP), categorized into three groups: high (GDP above RMB 700 billion), middle (GDP between RMB 700 billion and 300 billion), and low (GDP below RMB 300 billion). Specifically, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Tianjin fall into the high GDP group; Chengdu, Nanjing, Changsha, and Changchun into the middle group; and Mianyang, Wenzhou, and Xiamen into the low group.

To ensure eligibility, survey participants answered a screening question included in the questionnaire. Excluded from the survey were civil servants, teachers, news reporters, lawyers, self-employed individuals, and those employed by marketing research or media firms. Interviews, lasting between 60 to 90 minutes, were conducted by trained interviewers. The survey achieved a 90% response rate, resulting in data from 1,800 respondents, 823 of whom were identified as migrant workers.

### **Dependent Variables**

This study examines two dimensions of trade union participation: the associational dimension, primarily concerned with organizational membership, and the behavioral dimension, focusing on activity participation. To gain deeper insights into union participation, respondents were asked to indicate their union membership status and whether they participated in union-organized activities. Two logistic regression models were employed to analyze the data, with organizational membership and activity participation serving as the dependent variables, respectively.

### **Independent Variables**

The study considers three sets of factors influencing the union participation of Chinese rural migrant workers:

1. **Experiences in Labor Disputes:** This includes experiences with labor disputes and nonpayment of wages. Migrant workers who have encountered labor disputes are likely to recognize the benefits of strong workplace unionism or collective action in protecting their interests. Nonpayment of wages, a significant issue for rural migrant workers, emphasizes the limitations of

individual efforts in negotiations with employers and highlights the importance of collective action through unions.

2. **Employment Characteristics:** Factors such as the size of the firm, industry, sector, occupation, job change frequency, duration of employment with the current employer, and labor contract signing are considered. Historically, unions have had robust coverage in the public sector and are now striving to expand into the private sector. Specific sectors may significantly influence union participation. Mobility, including job changes and employment duration, is also examined as a potential hindrance to union participation (Lan, 2006; Cao, 2008). Signing a labor contract is crucial for establishing a formal employment relationship, reducing uncertainty, and potentially enhancing union eligibility.
3. **Socio-Demographic Characteristics:** The study focuses on gender, age, marital status, and education level. Previous research has identified gender gaps in union participation (Ntuli, 2012), and this study aims to determine whether similar patterns exist in China.

#### **Control Variables**

The study also includes a control variable for the willingness to participate, which is essential for analyzing behavior. Low willingness to participate can significantly reduce engagement levels in union activities. By controlling for this variable, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing rural migrant workers' union participation.

#### **Data Collection Process**

The data collection process involved selecting a representative sample of participants from various urban areas to ensure a diverse and comprehensive dataset. The selection criteria focused on geographical and economic diversity, covering ten cities with different GDP levels. The survey design included detailed questions on trade union participation, trust in unions, labor dispute experiences, and socio-demographic factors. Trained interviewers conducted the surveys, ensuring a high response rate of 90%, which strengthens the reliability of the findings.

## **Analytical Methods**

This study employs logistic regression analysis to examine the factors influencing trade union participation among rural migrant workers. Logistic regression is particularly suitable for this research because it allows for the modeling of binary outcome variables, such as whether an individual is a union member or participates in union activities. The dependent variables in this study are organizational membership and activity participation. Independent variables include experiences in labor disputes, employment characteristics, and socio-demographic factors. This method enables the identification of significant predictors of union participation and provides insights into the relative importance of various factors. By using logistic regression, the study can effectively control for multiple confounding variables and isolate the impact of specific predictors on union engagement.

## **Results and Discussion**

The data reveals that union membership among the 823 migrant worker respondents is remarkably low, with only 9.6% reporting membership and a mere 9.0% having ever participated in trade union activities. Descriptive statistics further indicate that organizational trust in trade unions is lower than trust in courts or labor departments. When faced with labor disputes, migrant workers do not perceive trade unions as the most viable avenue for resolving their issues, which undermines their motivation to join or participate in union activities.

Two binary logistic regression models were utilized to analyze trade union participation among rural migrant workers. Table 1 presents the results of these models, with organizational membership as the dependent variable in the first model and activity participation in the second model.

Interestingly, the anticipated role of labor disputes in promoting union participation does not fully materialize for rural migrant workers. After controlling for employment characteristics and socio-demographic factors, the analysis shows that migrant workers who have experienced nonpayment of wages are more likely to engage in union activities than those who have not. However, neither

labor disputes nor nonpayment of wages significantly impact the associational aspect of union participation. These experiences do not substantially increase the likelihood of migrant workers becoming union members. This trend is also observed in the context of activity participation.

Regarding employment characteristics, the most notable finding pertains to the sector of employment. Migrants employed in private firms are significantly less likely to engage in unions compared to those in state-owned firms. This pattern holds true for both organizational membership and activity participation. This disparity can be attributed to the distribution of unions across different sectors in China, where unions have traditionally been concentrated in the public sector. The private sector, which only began developing in the 1980s, exhibits a low level of unionization. Union presence is a crucial determinant of workers' propensity to join (Corneo, 1995). For rural migrant workers, establishing independent unions with legal status is challenging, leaving them with no option but to join existing unions. State-owned firms, with a longstanding history of union presence, provide more opportunities for union membership, reflected in the 93.3% unionization rate among workers in unionized firms in 2010 (ACFTU, 2011b). Conversely, the private sector had only 824,000 trade unions out of 4.68 million firms in 2010, offering limited opportunities for union membership (ACFTU, 2011a; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011).

Additionally, migrant workers in managerial positions are more likely to participate in unions, both associationally and behaviorally, compared to those in production and service roles. Similarly, those with employment contracts are more likely to engage in unions than those without. This indicates that occupation and employment status significantly influence union participation, disadvantaging frontline workers in production and service occupations without formal employment contracts. Despite the universal right of rural migrant workers to join unions, significant inequality persists within this labor force. Occupation and employment status emerge as critical sources of discrimination in union participation.

Contrary to expectations, industry type and firm size do not significantly impact either the associational or behavioral aspects of trade union participation. Furthermore, tenure within a firm does not increase the likelihood of union engagement. Job mobility also

does not appear to significantly influence union participation, suggesting that worker mobility does not have the presumed effect on union engagement.

Socio-demographic characteristics generally do not play a significant role in union participation among migrant workers. The exceptions are gender and education level, which significantly affect the probability of activity participation but not organizational membership. Women are less likely to participate in union activities, whereas well-educated migrants are more likely to engage in union activities. Other socio-demographic indicators, such as age and marital status, do not exhibit statistically significant effects in the regression models.

**Table 1.** Logistic regression model of trade union participation for rural migrant workers (N=823)

	Organizational membership		Activity participation	
	B	SE	B	SE
<i>Labor disputes experience</i>				
Labor disputes (ref. no such experience)	0.621	0.425	0.564	0.478

Nonpayment of wage (ref. no such experience)	0.868	0.682	1.138*	0.656
<i>Employment characteristics</i>				
Size of firm (ref. <300 employees)				
300-1000	-0.546	0.486	-0.839	0.551
1001+	0.541	0.393	0.190	0.416
Industry (ref. construction and manufacturing)				
Trade	-0.675	0.502	0.032	0.474
Service	-0.136	0.363	-0.199	0.367
Sector (ref. state-owned firms)				
Private firms	-0.970**	0.423	-1.085**	0.454
Foreign-invested firms	-0.311	0.535	-0.383	0.567
Occupation (ref. managers)				
Technical	-0.424	0.531	-0.216	0.523
Sales	-0.012	0.490	-0.915*	0.509
Administrative and secretarial	0.227	0.626	-0.611	0.597
Production and service	-1.048**	0.464	-1.077**	0.457
Duration of employment with current employers (ref. <5 years)				
5+	-0.171	0.415	0.452	0.413
Job change (ref. 0)				
1	-0.029	0.452	0.268	0.477

2+	-0.623	0.386	0.026	0.404
Employment contract (ref. no employment contract)	1.654***	0.441	1.400***	0.420
<i>Socio-demographic characteristics</i>				
Female (ref. male)	0.542	0.346	-0.717**	0.333
Married (ref. not married)	-0.009	0.428	0.383	0.404
Age 30+ (ref. <30)	0.236	0.568	0.166	0.508
Education level (ref. middle school diploma or below)				
High school diploma	0.162	0.407	0.082	0.467
College certificate	-0.621	0.499	1.027**	0.477
University degree	-0.040	0.529	1.214**	0.558
Constant	-3.642***	0.930	-2.942***	0.895
R-squared		0.273		0.232

Notes: Regression models control for the willingness to participating. \* =  $p \leq .1$ ; \*\* =  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*\* =  $p \leq .01$ .

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The sample consists of 823 rural migrant workers, representing a diverse range of employment sectors and socio-demographic backgrounds. Descriptive statistics indicate that the majority of respondents are employed in the private sector, with a significant portion holding manual or service-oriented jobs. The average age of respondents is 35 years, with an almost equal distribution between male and female workers. Educational attainment varies, with a notable percentage holding only middle school diplomas. These characteristics provide a comprehensive overview of the sample population, highlighting the typical profiles of rural migrant workers in urban China.

### **Logistic Regression Analysis**

The logistic regression analysis is divided into two main sections: organizational membership and activity participation. The results reveal that the likelihood of being a union member or participating in union activities is significantly influenced by various factors. For instance, workers who have experienced nonpayment of wages are more likely to participate in union activities, indicating that labor disputes drive engagement in union activities rather than membership. This distinction underscores the need for unions to address immediate labor issues to enhance participation.

### **Comparison with Previous Studies**

The findings of this study align with existing research from other countries, where employment insecurity and workplace exploitation often motivate union participation. However, the unique socio-political context of China, where unions are closely linked to the government, presents additional challenges not seen in Western contexts. This study contributes to the broader literature by providing a comparative analysis that highlights both universal and context-specific factors affecting union participation.

## **Conclusion**

This study presents findings from a survey conducted in ten geographically and economically diverse cities in China, focusing on a sample of rural migrant workers. By examining both associational (organizational membership) and behavioral (activity participation) aspects of union participation, this research aims to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Chinese rural migrant workers in engaging with

trade unions.

The results reveal that union membership density among rural migrant workers is very low, with only a small percentage of workers participating in union activities. Participation varies significantly between male and female migrants, with well-educated migrants showing a higher propensity for involvement. Overall, the findings indicate that rural migrant workers exhibit lower levels of union participation than expected, considering their labor market position and the efforts made by Chinese unions to recruit them.

Several barriers contribute to this low level of union participation. First, the availability of trade unions in the workplace is a significant factor. Migrant workers in state-owned firms are much more likely to join unions compared to those in private firms, where union presence is relatively weak. The institutional barriers and the top-down approach to union establishment, exacerbated by employer resistance, further hinder the formation of independent unions by migrant workers.

Second, discrimination based on occupation and employment status within workplaces also impedes union participation. The regression models indicate that migrants in production and service occupations, as well as those without employment contracts, are less likely to engage in union activities. In contrast, workers in managerial positions or with employment contracts have greater access to unions.

Third, organizational trust in trade unions among Chinese migrant workers is relatively low. Even those who have experienced labor disputes or wage nonpayment are not significantly more likely to become union members. The perception of trade unions and their role significantly influences union participation (Chan et al., 2006). Migrant workers' skepticism about the effectiveness of unions in representing their interests may deter their involvement.

These obstacles are closely related to the unions' relationship with the government. This relationship often leads the government to exert control over unions, limiting the development of independent, bottom-up unions. Consequently, unions may prefer to recruit workers who pose a lower risk of conflict with employers, such as those in managerial positions or with employment contracts. Additionally, the government's desire to maintain a peaceful resolution of labor disputes and attract foreign investment

may cause unions to refrain from active involvement in collective actions, thereby undermining their reputation and organizational trust among workers.

It is crucial to recognize that the involvement of migrant workers in trade unions is influenced by the conditions set by the host society. Union policies towards migrant workers are shaped by contextual factors such as public discourse, legislation, and institutional actors like national authorities (Marino et al., 2015). In developing countries, governments may engage in a "race-to-the-bottom" strategy, aiming to keep labor costs low and attract investment, which can create jobs and generate tax revenue. Faced with competition from other countries with cheap labor forces, such as Vietnam and India, the Chinese government is under pressure to improve labor protection standards. However, strong unionism may threaten China's "world's factory" status, which has relied heavily on low labor costs over the past three decades. Some firms, including many Chinese domestic companies, have already relocated their factories to other countries following the implementation of the Labor Contract Law, which is generally believed to increase labor costs in China. This competitive pressure is likely to sustain the Chinese government's tendency, especially at the local level, to control trade unions and restrict their role in collective actions.

This study's primary findings reveal significant barriers to trade union participation among rural migrant workers in China, highlighting issues such as limited union presence in private firms, employment discrimination, and low organizational trust. These obstacles significantly impede both organizational membership and active participation in union activities. The research underscores the necessity for policy reforms aimed at improving union accessibility and trust, particularly within the private sector.

### **Research Contributions**

This study makes substantial contributions to the literature on labor relations and migrant worker inclusion by providing empirical evidence from China, a context that has been less explored compared to Western countries. Theoretically, it expands on existing frameworks by integrating the unique socio-political factors affecting Chinese rural migrant workers. Empirically, it offers robust data analysis, utilizing logistic regression to identify key determinants of union participation. These contributions enhance our understanding of the complex dynamics at play and provide a basis for comparative

studies in different global contexts.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The cross-sectional nature of the survey data limits the ability to infer causality between the identified factors and union participation. Future research should consider longitudinal studies to capture changes over time. Additionally, while this study focuses on rural migrant workers, future research could expand to include other marginalized groups within the labor market to provide a more comprehensive understanding of union dynamics. Further investigation is also needed to explore the impact of recent policy changes and economic developments on union participation rates. These areas of inquiry will be crucial for developing more effective strategies to enhance union engagement and protect workers' rights in an evolving labor market.

### **Policy Implications**

The results of this study suggest several policy implications. To increase union membership and activity participation among rural migrant workers, policies should focus on enhancing union presence in the private sector and reducing employment discrimination. Additionally, building organizational trust through transparent and effective advocacy for workers' rights can encourage greater union involvement. Future research should explore the long-term impact of these policy changes and continue to monitor the evolving relationship between migrant workers and trade unions in China.

### **Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)**

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of manuscripts.

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