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Country report Ireland

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1.1 Introduction

This report examines the processes of building and maintaining trust, as well as the sources of trust and distrust between social partners across different levels in Ireland. It explores the role of trust in industrial relations, focusing on how social partners perceive its impact on social dialogue and collective bargaining. We analyse various dimensions of trust, key obstacles to its development, and the broader implications for industrial relations. The findings are based on interviews with stakeholders and experts in three sectors at national, sectoral, and company levels. The report is part of the TRUE EUROPE research project, which investigates the determinants and outcomes of trust in social partner relations. Interviews were conducted in eight countries, focusing on the metal, transport, and banking and finance sectors. We explored trust levels across different social dialogue topics—from core issues like wages to less contentious areas such as digitalisation, skills and training, and health and safety.

Key findings in this report are informed by semi-structured interviews (see Table 1 below) undertaken with managers and union representatives between July 2024 and March 2025. A total of 21 interviews were conducted, the majority in person, with the remainder carried out via Zoom. The interviews generally lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded, except in three cases where notes were transcribed immediately following the interviews. Given Ireland's decentralised nature of collective bargaining, most interviews (15) were undertaken at the local level. The study involved interviews with manager-union representative dyads responsible for setting working conditions in two large multi-union organisations, FinanceCo (financial sector) and TransportCo (transport sector), and in a smaller automotive component firm, MetalCo.

Table 1. Interviewees: levels and sectors

Level	Banking & finance	Metal	Transport	Cross-sectional	Total
Local Level					
Employee rep.	4	1	3		8
Employer rep.	2	1	4		7
Sectoral Level					
TU official	1	2	3		6
EO official	NA	NA	NA		
TOTAL	7	4	10	0	21

At the local level, interviews were conducted with seven managers (including two former senior managers, a Managing Director, two HR managers, and two Industrial Relations managers) and eight union representatives (four officials and four shop stewards, three of whom were also on a European Works Council). At the sectoral level, six union officials were interviewed. None of the three selected sectors have sectoral-level employer representatives. It is also important to highlight that, at the national level, social partners do

not participate in collective bargaining. As a result, we focused our data collection predominantly on local-level collective bargaining.

1.2 Industrial relations at national and sectoral level

Ireland operates within a liberal pluralist industrial relations regime (Visser, 2024), which is based on a tradition of voluntarism - meaning that collective bargaining between employers and trade unions takes place largely without state intervention. Trade unions are generally the only channel for workers' representation at the company level, given the Irish Government's minimalist approach to "hard" regulation of information and consultation rights when transposing EU Directive legislation, which makes it difficult to establish works councils. Moreover, Ireland does not have statutory recognition of trade unions, allowing employers to refuse to bargain collectively. Collective bargaining is decentralised and fragmented and occurs mostly at the company or workplace level. In this context, trade union density is circa 25% and collective bargaining coverage is 34% (Eurofound, 2024). Collective agreements are generally not legally binding in Ireland.

There are State bodies that assist with dispute resolution, including the implementation of collective agreements. One of the most important State institutions is the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC). In addition, the Labour Court (which is not a judicial body) deals with individual and collective dispute referrals, often being the court of last resort. The recommendations of the WRC and Labour Court are not legally binding, however, except when they relate to decisions relating to the implementation of labour laws. Finally, the Health and Safety Authority is the national statutory body with responsibility for ensuring that all workers are protected from work-related injury and ill health. It enforces occupational safety and health law, promotes accident prevention and awareness, and provides information and guidance.

At the national level, the two main social partners involved in tripartite or bipartite fora are the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC). There was a tripartite social partnership system in Ireland from 1987 to 2009, although the provisions from these social pacts were not legally binding. The global financial crisis of 2008 was a key factor in the demise of social partnership in Ireland. In 2016, a tripartite Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF) was established to bring together representatives of employers and trade unions with the Government to discuss economic, employment and labour market issues. This forum has been instrumental in addressing challenges related to Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic (Eurofound, 2024). In addition, the Low Pay Commission, a bipartite body approved by the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, is responsible for reviewing and discussing the national minimum wage rate. The social partners also sit on two other tripartite bodies, namely the National Economic and Social Council, dealing with environmental and housing issues, and the National Economic Dialogue, established in 2015, to discuss societal interests, including the budget development process.

At the sectoral level, there is limited collective bargaining in the private sector. Specifically, there is no multi-employer bargaining in the banking and finance, metal, and transport sectors. Some sectoral bargaining occurs (supported by the Labour Court) to establish minimum rates of pay and conditions of employment in certain sectors, such as construction, security, and contract cleaning. In the public sector, successive national agreements were concluded by the ICTU and the relevant government department since 2010: the Croke Park Agreement (2010), the Haddington Road Agreement (2013), the Lansdowne Road agreements (2015 and 2017), the Public Service Stability Agreement (2018) and the Building Momentum agreements (2021 and 2022) ([Eurofound, 2024](#)). At the local level, collective bargaining mainly takes place in large, unionised private sector companies. In many large companies, there are multiple unions representing workers in different occupations, and they negotiate separate collective agreements. Nevertheless, some unions may use a single table bargaining process where all trade unions recognised by an employer negotiate together. Accordingly, collective bargaining in the private sector is mostly decentralised and sometimes fragmented.

Industrial relations in banking & finance, metal, and transport

This report examines three sectors: banking and finance, transport and metal. Industrial relations in the banking and finance sector, which employs circa 107,000 people, with approximately 47,000 employed in the banking subsector ([Statista, 2025](#)), are decentralised. Collective bargaining occurs only in a few large banks. The main union representing retail banking employees is the Financial Services Union (FSU), while SIPTU, Unite and Mandate also have some members representing other occupations (e.g. security and cleaners) in the financial sector. On the employer side, there is a sectoral trade association, Financial Services Ireland (a trade group within IBEC), which is not involved in social dialogue with the trade unions. Accordingly, collective bargaining is decentralised, generally consisting of a single-employer arrangement (Eurofound, 2019). There have been no strikes in the sector since 1992 (FSU, 2025).

There are no sector-specific social partners in the metal sector (which employs just under 79,000 workers nationally) ([Eurofound, 2018:15](#)). Nevertheless, SIPTU, Connect and Unite represent workers in some metal companies (Eurofound, 2018:15). Also, IBEC - the cross-sector employers organisation - has members (companies) from the metal sector and has been involved in company-level collective bargaining (Eurofound, 2018). As in most private sector industries, only single-employer collective agreements were in place in 2015 in the metal sector, covering circa 6000 employees (Eurofound, 2018). The majority of metal companies are small and medium-sized, and manufacture structural metal products used for construction projects, machinery and equipment, and precision engineering sub-components. In 2015, the average number of employees per company was 21 ([Eurofound, 2018:15](#)). Industrial action is rare in the metal sector. In some companies, there is a tradition of workplace partnership, with high levels of trust between management and trade unions. A notable example is Aughinish Alumina, which has sustained workplace partnership and high-trust union-management relations for over two decades (Dobbins & Dundon, 2016).

Although industrial relations in the transport sector is organised by subsectors (e.g. air, road, railway and water), most of these subsectors include large, highly unionised companies that are public, semi-state, or privatised. Also, there are no employers' associations in the transport (sub)sector(s) ([Eurofound, 2017](#)). Unions are generally fragmented, with multiple unions representing different occupations in large organisations ([Eurofound, 2022](#)). Specifically, SIPTU represents some workers in each subsector ([Eurofound, 2017; 2022](#)). In addition, Connect, Forsa, Unite, the National Bus and Rail Union, and the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association represent specific occupations in each subsector. Collective bargaining takes place at the company level ([Eurofound, 2017; 2022](#)), while each occupation may have separate collective agreements within an organisation. Finally, there have been strikes in several subsectors in recent years (e.g. in 2024, in air and road transport organisations).

1.3 National and sectoral level interactions and trust

Characterising national and/or sectoral level interactions

While collective bargaining in Ireland's private sector primarily occurs at the enterprise level, as of 2025, three active Joint Labour Committees (JLCs) set employment conditions and minimum pay rates in the Contract Cleaning, Security, and Early Years/Childcare sectors. In addition, there are six inactive JLCs due to employers refusing to participate. The Labour Court has been responsible for organising Joint Labour Committees (JLCs) since its establishment in 1946. However, a rise in legal challenges by led to the dismantling of the 1946 JLC model, following a 2011 court ruling (*John Grace Fried Chicken v Catering JLC*) that found it unconstitutional, confirmed in *McGowan v Labour Court* (2013). The Irish Government subsequently introduced the Industrial Relations Amendment Act (2015) to reinstate a limited State-led institutional form of sectoral bargaining and other matters. They have also introduced several legal amendments in response to increased legal actions by employers. Employer actions against the JLC and other State-led sectoral bargaining forms can be described as a division between larger employers and those representing SMEs who do not wish to be bound by any form of national or sectoral agreements.

In a context of relatively high trust in public institutions and among people in Ireland (OECD, 2024; [European Union, 2024](#)), there is moderately high trust between social partners at the national level. Although there were no legal obligations for cross-sectoral social partners to bargain collectively at the national level, the two main social partners, ICTU and IBEC, voluntarily negotiated several social pacts that set pay increases and other conditions between 1987 and 2009. Also, despite the collapse of social partnership due to the 2008 financial crisis and the government's austerity measures, there was no fallout between the social partners in 2009. They continued to interact informally to address major economic issues until 2016, when it was formalised in the LEEF. Interestingly, Danny McCoy, the Chief Executive Officer of IBEC since 2009, considers that joint collective actions with ICTU are needed to address key challenges that people and businesses face in Ireland, including the

housing crisis and environmental issues. This recognition of the utility of collaboration at this level is likely to motivate trust between these key stakeholders.

Given the weak institutionalisation of sectoral collective bargaining, the level of trust between social partners may vary across sectors contingent on their shared history of cooperation and/or conflict and social partners' ideology. The absence of employers' associations and multi-employer collective bargaining in the banking and finance, metal, and transport sectors means that the variations in trust levels across these sectors largely depend on the shared history of cooperation and/or conflict and social partners' ideology, as well as personal relations at the company level.

Anchoring trust in institutions and trusting lower-level actors

Overall, our study respondents generally agreed that Ireland's voluntarist institutions and decentralised collective bargaining contribute positively to building trust between local actors at the company level. All managers were happy with the limited state intervention in relations between them and unions and considered that the support provided by the WRC and the Labour Court facilitates building trust. Union respondents also confirmed that generally, the WRC and the Labour Court contribute to developing trust. However, an experienced union official reported that the lack of statutory recognition of trade unions hinders the development of trust between unions and employers. Specifically, this respondent argued that the voluntarist institutional framework was an '*employer veto*' system in practice, given that

..employers can ignore unions even if their membership is over 80%..... if an employer recognises unions, the WRC has a positive impact....It is useless if an employer is not willing to show up. It should be mandatory for employers to engage in collective bargaining and with the WRC and Labour Court. (#5 IE)

Effects of trust according to national and/or sectoral level actors

At the national level, sectoral representatives highlighted the broader societal value of trust-based collective bargaining. Specifically, they pointed to the role of trust in fostering social cohesion, particularly in times of national crisis, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, when cooperation between unions, employers, and the state proved essential. Furthermore, mutual trust is seen as a foundation for more stable and consistent policymaking, supporting long-term strategic planning.

1.4 Local level interactions and trust

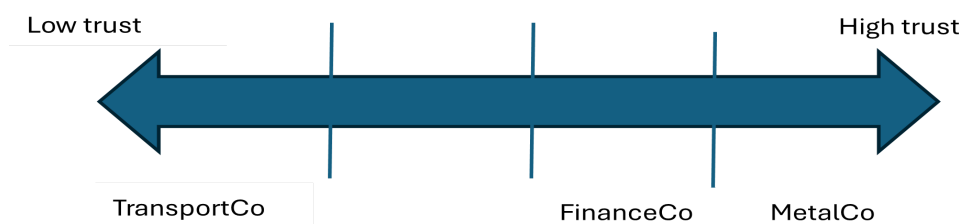
Characterising local level interactions

The primary actors at the local level are management and union representatives. In FinanceCo and TransportCo, union representatives include shop stewards and union

officers. MetalCo is represented by shop stewards. Company representatives are HR and employee relations representatives (at the senior and operational level). FinanceCo recognises three unions, but its primary dealings are with one white collar union which represents its main employee group. TransportCo recognises five unions, each union being the sole and exclusive bargaining agent for particular worker groups within the organisation. MetalCo recognises one union and bargains with them on pay and other issues.

Figure 1 below sets out where each company sits on a continuum of low to high trust. TransportCo is characterised as having low trust, echoed by both unions - *"I don't believe there is trust present"* (#8 IE) and managers. It could be said that TransportCo also shows examples of high distrust, certainly when looking at the union's view of senior management (as opposed to how they view HR and IR managers they are dealing with). Research suggests that trust and distrust are distinct constructs, and that distrust is more deliberate than having low trust. It is often rooted in past negative experiences and previous breaches of trust. Trust and distrust both entail certain expectations, but *"whereas trust expectations anticipate beneficial conduct from others, distrust expectations anticipate injurious conduct"* (Lewicki et al., 1998: 444). We will see later that past negative experiences at TransportCo did increase distrust expectations on the part of unions.

Figure 1: Continuum of trust



MetalCo is characterised as being high trust, with union and management working in partnership to ensure the viability of the organisation during uncertain times. Before they adopted the partnership model, both union and management at MetalCo acknowledged that relations were very adversarial, with the traditional piece work payment system in particular causing instability in staff pay, leading to frequent disputes with SIPTU. In the mid-2000s, management and unions collaborated to develop a partnership approach with its first focus on managing customer complaints, which at that time was a significant challenge for the company. Upskilling and new processes for teamwork were introduced, which led to decreased customer complaints and paved the way for the introduction of lean manufacturing and new technology. According to the shop steward, this was an easy transition as it *"was just the next step. So, the spade work was done"* (#21 IE).

Finally, FinanceCo is characterised as having mid-level trust. Whilst management and some union representatives believe there is high mutual trust, this can vary depending on what is being negotiated. In addition, FinanceCo has a second union (representing a small number of employees) which is seen to be a more low-trust relationship. In describing differences

between the two unions, the relationship with the white-collar union is characterised by mutual trust, but:

the [other union] official is nearly coming in with a bag over his head to meet me in a hotel somewhere in Dublin, because he's afraid he's going to be seen meeting with me, there's not that level of mutual trust (#7 IE).

The majority of respondents indicated that they interacted informally with each other on a regular basis. In FinanceCo, there is a permanent employee relations team that interacts with the union daily on an informal basis, with one manager indicating, *"I speak with the union [my counterpart] more than with my husband"* (#7 IE). Each month, there are formal meetings scheduled with union representatives and management and formal structures to support employer-union collaboration. Within this meeting, both employee representatives and management agreed on the agenda. Union representatives can request managers from specific functions to join this meeting, should they have any queries. Both parties stress the importance of informal communication, with one manager highlighting *"the informal conversations that happen as well, which is key to how we get things done"* (#7 IE).

Trust was shown to vary across levels within FinanceCo and operate in a dynamic way. Various levels of management had counterparts within the union, so if there were bad relations within one dyad (senior manager and senior union representative), then the dyad at the next level would work to maintain communication and trust. This structure also ensures some continuity when personnel changes occur, so that the trust is not based solely on specific personal relationships. Differential trust across levels also came up in TransportCo where the manager indicated strong trust with their union counterparts but commented that trust decreased at higher and lower levels of the hierarchy:

...I have observed a lessening of trust there... gap between union officials and shop stewards and shop stewards and the worker members. Equally, there was probably an increased tension between HR management and senior management and in the business. (#10 IE)

Trust within organisations and their impact on union-employer relations was also highlighted in the interviews. One respondent described how their own managers within the organisation undermined the CB process by communicating changes that had not been properly vetted through the appropriate channels involving industrial relations managers and unions.

A new HR Manager joined FinanceCo, who was significantly anti-union. In their 3 years in the position, they never met with the union, instead leaving it to the industrial relations team to deal with union issues. This period (what one union representative termed the *"Deep Freeze"*) culminated in a period of low trust. Senior management distrusted the union, and unions distrusted senior management. A new HR manager was subsequently appointed, who was an internal appointee. He is more open to dealing with unions resulting in an shift in trust levels. By having more support at the senior level, *"it was an eye opener for the business to see that they (union) can be a trusted stakeholder"* (#7 IE).

In TransportCo, there is also an HR employee relations team interacting formally and informally with the five unions. There are formalised long-established, structured fora with periods of engagement on terms and conditions and workplace changes, while the daily interaction process is less structured than in the other two companies. Unlike in FinanceCo, the process is ad-hoc and inconsistent, contingent mostly on when it is needed to address specific issues. Only representatives of one (out of the five) unions indicated that shop stewards have regular bimonthly meetings with their line manager (#12 IE). Both parties indicated they could informally contact their counterparts to discuss any issues. A union official said that there is *"always stuff going on, meaning daily you are in contact. They could ring us and say, we want to meet you to talk about something, or ...we'll ring them"*(#14 IE). However, union respondents noted that the provisions agreed upon with the employee relations team are often altered by senior management or may not be fully implemented in practice. A union representative indicated: *'Everything is a battle...they [management] are gaslighting us. ...They tell us one thing and do another thing. ...they give us nothing unless they are forced to do so'* (#11 IE).

The primary focus of bargaining at the local level was pay, pensions and general terms and conditions, which is done through formal collective bargaining structures. All actors acknowledge that bargaining on pay-related matters was the most contentious issue and also the most important. Within FinanceCo and TransportCo, strategic changes resulting in altering workplace practices and terms and conditions are also covered. In TransportCo, collectively negotiated pay increases are often linked to changes in work practices, including technological changes, roster, as well as outsourcing and/or insourcing of non-core services, and are often contentious. In FinanceCo, issues such as technology or training and development are not covered in collective bargaining but rather informally. Examples of high-trust negotiations (not formal collective agreements) included changing working hours in a new era of almost peopleless branch offices as well as the introduction of a right to disconnect policy, one of the first organisations to introduce such a policy in Ireland. In MetalCo, changes to improve productivity are not part of collective negotiations. There are joint management and shop stewards' structures seeking to co-create solutions addressing technological changes and other aspects that increase productivity, that meet regularly, separate from the collective bargaining process. At TransportCo, in response to technological change, unions prioritise job security and want *"to make sure that it's beneficial for the staff as well, and we're not losing jobs in the process because and so what was negotiated was this kind of job security. Job security is main priority"* (#12 IE).

For all companies, Health and Safety was seen to be an issue where high trust exists. In FinanceCo, it was reported that *"We're not going to negotiate to a lower level of health and safety. So that's a non-negotiable thing"* (#6 IE). Even in TransportCo *"in terms of safety, there is relatively high trust"* (#8 IE; #13). One example in TransportCo was the introduction of a peer support system as example of trust in setting it up:

its express purpose is to provide support for staff, confidential and non-judgmental.... That has been and remains extremely successfulit was sold to them as a cost-saving. That's how we got them on board (#8 IE).

Finally, in MetalCo, it was reported by both parties that the company has provided support for workers with mental health or addiction issues beyond those stated in the company handbook, although it is not part of a collective negotiation. A union representative reported:

...that one of the guys in here came in to me on a Friday evening, saying that things were getting too much for him So in fairness, to [MetalCo], I phoned the HR manager, and we got them into [institution] by Sunday. And the company paid for all that themselves, so they would have been very good in that way (#20 IE).

The management confirmed that the company supports individual workers with personal issues, including paying for treatment and providing a salary during treatment that could be up to 9 months (#19 IE). We know that a high degree of trust in the other party increases the probability of integrative bargaining and reduces that of distributive bargaining (McKersie et al., 1965). We see here that the interests of both partners on Health and Safety were focused on collaboration and integrative bargaining due to health and safety being something of common interest. This cooperation in the area of Health and Safety could be rooted in genuine shared values, or it could be an instrumental alignment of interests. MetalCo interviews suggest the former, with both parties showing a mutual recognition of the moral imperative to protect worker well-being. In terms of health and safety, both unions and management perceive each other as acting with integrity and genuine concern for employee welfare. Alternatively, in the other two companies, the trust observed in the context of health and safety was more instrumentally driven, grounded in aligned interests rather than shared values. From this perspective, both parties stand to benefit—unions through improved working conditions for their members and legitimacy, and management through reduced absenteeism, lower accidents and enhanced reputation as an employer.

In contrast, negotiations on pay were more contentious and appeared to be more aligned with distributive bargaining. All three companies have collective pay agreements, and all agree that it is the most contentious issue. TransportCo, in particular, had significant industrial unrest due to pay negotiations. In describing their pay bargaining process, the manager discussed different dynamics across each union group. Some were focused on job security, some on changes to pay scales and levels, and others were more focused on pay, status, and rostering. In describing how pay is negotiated, *"We have ...with the exception of [one specific occupation], generally, managed to negotiate on pay with the unions as a collective group"* (#15 IE). One union sat outside the collective umbrella and negotiated separately. These were a particularly high-skilled, high-status occupational group with significant power to disrupt the organisation should they go on strike. An industrial dispute did occur in recent times and was perceived negatively by some of their other union counterparts, with one saying their pay dispute should not have happened and was a case of *"very privileged workers seeking a bigger piece of the pay pie"* (#18 IE). This union has a higher union density than other unions in the company which have seen their membership decline. Nienhueser and Hossfeld (2011) suggest that trust is more important for the weaker party, which could suggest that a stronger union who have more power is less focused on maintaining mutual trust.

Korsgaard et al. (2018) highlight that trust is likely to change as the conditions that contribute to or undermine trust vary. The white-collar union within FinanceCo acknowledges that they, for the most part, have a successful relationship with the employer, and both parties acknowledge the difficulties associated with engagement, where the two parties often have conflicting priorities, particularly around pay, when they have competing interests. In TransportCo, it was reported that:

After meetings when we agree to changes or pay rises or whatever, I will trust those outcomes when what we agreed are put in writing and implemented, and on time, as stated in the agreements. Actions speak louder than verbal agreements and we need the written agreement to keep them honest, which sounds distrustful, but that's my experience! (#16 IE).

Anchoring trust in higher level institutions

All respondents indicated that higher level national institutions, such as the WRC and Labour Court, play a pivotal role in ensuring agreement is reached during collective bargaining. There was strong agreement that these institutions worked well (*"It provided a framework for both ourselves and the union to roll our sleeves and get the job done"* - #7 IE) and were staffed by knowledgeable staff who used the structures and legislation well. From a union perspective, *"The Labour Court is a great system. It's a stabilising force within Irish industrial relations"* (#5 IE). The WRC was seen as a useful forum to reach a consensus and avoid industrial conflict. Unions viewed the WRC in two ways:

Now, everybody wants a result that avoids industrial conflict, but you can only do that if one of two things happens....One is you actually come to a consensus, great. The other is if one side realises the other side is actually going to go all the way to the end of this, and one side basically concedes within the process, those are the only two ways out... And it's very obvious when you go in there, that the goal is to basically drive you into find a solution" (#11 IE).

The companies differed in how they engaged with these institutions to reach an agreement. At FinanceCo, the WRC and Labour Court were seen as important backstops that fostered trust and encouraged resolution without formal escalation. The mere threat of going to the Labour Court often focused negotiations, with one manager noting: *"suddenly there might be that last little tweak that gets the thing agreed... the actual existence of the Labour Court... leads to agreements being made that wouldn't be made if [it] wasn't there"* (#6 IE). The WRC was viewed as a helpful mediator—*"like marriage guidance... they go from one side to the other to try and get to an agreement"*—and while it could not impose outcomes, it provided useful endorsements that *"say this is reasonable"* (#6 IE). Although FinanceCo had used the WRC several times, it had not gone to the Labour Court in years, seeing it as a last resort: *"you sort of lost control... neither side really likes going to the Labour Court"*. With a strong foundation of mutual trust, the company preferred to resolve issues internally: *"it's rare that we air our dirty laundry in public... we'll use all the resources we have to try and resolve the issues between us"* (#7 IE). The same was true at MetalCo, where improved union-management relations under the partnership approach saw Labour Court visits drop from once a year to just once in 16 years. That sole case—changing shift

work from two to three shifts—was a mutual decision: *“it was the right thing to do for both parties”* (#19 IE) to finalise compensation. Like FinanceCo, both sides at MetalCo view the WRC and Labour Court as last-resort options.

In contrast, TransportCo saw the Labour Court as a key mechanism for reaching agreement, frequently referring cases and often operating with the expectation that disputes would always end up in the Labour Court. This is particularly the case in dealings with a particular occupational union that holds greater bargaining power and where a mutual distrust exists between the parties. If you are in the Labour Court, then it is assumed *“there is no trust, and you are there because you cannot reach an agreement”* (#8 IE). Other unions within TransportCo preferred to deal with issues in-house and rarely referred matters to either the WRC or Labour Court. We know from previous research (Lewicki and Bunker, 1995) that in cases where there was low trust between unions and management, strong institutional trust was seen to act as a stabilising force before escalating into industrial conflict. In TransportCo, which was characterised as having low mutual trust and adversarial employment relations, all stakeholders highlighted the importance of institutions such as the Labour Court and the WRC to provide neutral, third-party intervention in disputes. This indicates that if a company and union have a history of conflict, they may still engage in bargaining because they trust that the Labour Court or WRC will step in if needed.

The use of Labour Court recommendations and other agreed frameworks developed through these institutions was shown to be critical in bringing parties to the table and trusting them to reach an agreement. Although both personal and process-based trust are considered important, discussions highlighted the crucial role played by agreements reached via external institutions. At FinanceCo, for example, both union representatives and managers referenced a past agreement, [the X Agreement], agreed several years ago. This agreement outlines recommendations for both parties, emphasising the importance of early consultation and engagement when considering potential changes. All respondents referred to this as a crucial resource to allow for trusting behaviours to continue. A senior manager highlighted *“the union trusts us that we do the right thing most of the time, and they work with us on those once we're keeping within the realms of our X agreement”* (#6 IE). It is seen as the *‘bible’* in addressing any issues that arise.

Effects of trust according to local level actors

The effects of trust for local actors in collective bargaining are significant, shaping both the process and outcomes of negotiations. When trust is present, it facilitates more open communication, reduces conflict, and enhances cooperation between unions and management. Conversely, a lack of trust can lead to adversarial bargaining, delays, and a greater likelihood of disputes. This report shows examples where high trust can foster stability, continuity, and more constructive engagement between unions and management, even amid ideological or structural tensions. At the organisational level, trust has been shown to strengthen strategic planning and communication, facilitate integrative bargaining on shared priorities such as health and safety, and enable informal problem-solving in

sensitive areas like mental health. It also contributes to overall productivity. As a manager at MetalCo noted, when trust is high:

nobody's focused on fighting or negative stuff. They're only focused on improving the company. So the company's productivity and profitability improve, and employees benefit because the company can afford payday (#19 IE).

Trust enables organisations to manage personnel changes without eroding institutional memory or damaging long-standing relationships. For employees, trust enhances job security and job quality, supports greater voice and agency, improves access to workplace supports, and fosters more meaningful engagement with management.

Dimensions and bases of trust at local level

Various forms of trust were evident among key actors in each company. Calculus-based (CBT) trust was evident across all of the companies. Calculus-based trust suggests that contextual factors such as social and/or legal incentives can compel trustworthy behaviour. In weighing up options to trust, they ask if the extent to which the benefits of acting in a trustworthy manner outweigh the costs, then the trustor can be confident that the trustee will act accordingly. Interviewees gave examples reflecting CBT where trust is extended conditionally, based on performance and risk management. Examples given include strategic concessions, honouring past agreements due to the risk of legal or reputational damage and low-risk initiatives. In FinanceCo, for example, a union official mentioned that management is happy to provide support for initiatives dealing with domestic violence, menopause, mental health, "as these policies do not cost much" given that few workers use such support (#5 IE). It is far more difficult to negotiate pay increases applying to all workers because they are significantly more costly. Similarly, in MetalCo, the manager was explicit that support for mental health and other personal issues was cost-effective. He confirmed that such actions have huge benefits for the organisation in that the initial investment pays off tenfold. MetalCo also gave examples of all employees receiving full pay whilst on a reduced work week (due to supply chain issues during Covid). Also, in TransportCo, the company agreed to implement certain policies (e.g., IVF support for women) not out of altruism, but because they are relatively inexpensive while enhancing the company's reputation and ability to attract female employees (#12 IE). This instrumental form of trust is grounded in rational calculations of costs and benefits. Both unions and managers at TransportCo highlighted differences in perceptions of trust:

...it seems like it's one way traffic.....the company are being asked all the time to make certain moves, you know, to build the trust. But we're not seeing evidence that that is being recognised or valued by the other side, and that they're equally coming to the table to demonstrate that we can trust them (#9 IE)

We also saw evidence of identification-based distrust proposed by Lewicki et al. (2016). This distrust is reinforced often in public actions where both parties accuse each other of taking advantage of the other resulting in both sides feeling undermined. One manager (#15 IE) described a union publicly "*bad mouthing management*" via the media which damaged

trust. A union representative similarly noted senior management's *"disrespect to the union,"* where instead of presenting joint agreements collaboratively, management insisted on acting unilaterally: *"we're just gonna keep doing what we're doing"* (#11 IE).

Research shows that calculative trust is gradually replaced by relational trust through repeated interactions. We find evidence of this also with relational trust evident across key actors where there are daily interactions between union representatives and their management counterparts to deal with queries and issues as they arise. Koorsgard et al. (2028) emphasise that trust evolves over time, either strengthening or deteriorating as relationships between parties develop and mature. Evidence in this study shows that maturing relationships strengthen trust. MetalCo showed how formal partnership arrangements meant there was strong collaboration and communication between management and unions. This was done both formally and informally. In contrast, TransportCo gave examples of a lack of consistency in relationship building with the more senior management constantly rotating roles in their wider enterprise making it difficult for senior management to understand the employees and the business or to embed themselves in the organisation – *"I think our current CEO is my 17th"* (#14 IE).

Relational trust was identified as a key factor impacting trust and successful collective bargaining. It is built over time through repeated positive interactions and a history of cooperation. This type of trust is crucial for fostering collaboration and effective communication. When managers and union representatives trust each other, it can lead to smoother negotiations, better problem-solving, and a more positive workplace environment. The relational trust between HR and unions was well established across the organisations. Most of the union counterparts identified relational trust as being pretty good with their HR counterparts and vice versa (with one exception). A key aspect that aligns with relational trust is cognitive trust (McAllister, 1995). Cognitive trust is built on evidence of another party's competence and consistency in interactions. One party's competence or ability has been shown to impact on trusting behaviours. In FinanceCo, for example, a large-scale pension change was negotiated and agreed by the union and management. The manager driving this change believes his expertise in pensions was a critical factor in helping reach an agreement: *"I'm a pensions expert.... You have to make a massive effort to try and explain things from the point of view of the person you're talking to"* (#6 IE).

Knowledge and reputation were also brought up by other managers across the three organisations. All managers acknowledged the importance of reputation, visibility and knowledge of the company. Key actors mentioned reputation was critical *"So your reputation means an awful lot for both sides, right?"* (#10 IE). In TransportCo, a manager emphasised the importance of *"knowing the business"* and *"fully understanding the job role/s of the person/group you are meeting"* (#18 IE). This reflects a key dimension of relational trust — trust that is built through interpersonal connections, reliability and dependability. As the manager notes, this knowledge enables them to *"bring some authenticity and build trust with people by knowing them fully as employees,"* (#18 IE), highlighting how trust is relationally constructed through shared understanding and respect.

A union representative said that there were strong personal relationships with senior HR and union officials (#13 IE).

Consistency and integrity are fundamental components of relational trust, as they foster reliability and predictability in interactions over time. Key actors in collective bargaining emphasised that maintaining consistency in agreements, commitments, and decision-making processes was crucial for building and sustaining trust. When social partners, such as union representatives and managers, can depend on each other to uphold negotiated terms, it strengthens the foundation of trust and enhances cooperation. Conversely, when agreements are frequently altered or not implemented as expected, it undermines relational trust, leading to scepticism and potential conflict in the bargaining process. The key principles for trust were *“robust principles, which are honesty, fairness, consistency, respect”* (#6 IE). The importance of integrity in developing trust is reflected by a union representative who emphasises that trust in CB is *“one that is a transaction between people who are mostly honest in their intentions, mainly conducted without rancour but trust is made and re-made on each engagement”* (#16 IE).

Knowledge-based trust is a function of the parties having a history of interaction where communication and courtship are key (Shapiro et al., 1992). Knowledge-based trust can be reduced with changes in personnel. As one manager noted *“When X came in, the union pulled back and held back a little bit more on us because they didn't trust him. You have to work up the trust. And it's through engagements. It's through what you deliver with these people”* (#7 IE). The organisations that characterised relations as high or medium trust gave evidence of activities and examples aligning with active investments to protect and maintain trust. Two key trust-building strategies are the willingness to share information and control (Kougianniou et al. 2021). For instance, both MetalCo and FinanceCo demonstrated practices such as proactively sharing information about proposed organisational changes. At MetalCo, the use of a partnership model also contributed to trust by giving employees a greater sense of autonomy and influence over their work.

The development of trust from calculus-based trust to knowledge-based trust and ideally to identification-based trust (full trust) was not evident in this research. While theory proposes a natural, stage model of trust development in interpersonal relationships, trust within the context of collective bargaining (CB) extends beyond the individual manager-union representative dyad. It is also shaped by the broader organisational and external environments in which the relationship is embedded, both of which can significantly influence how trust develops. For example, in TransportCo, a union representative argued that trust was less about interpersonal dynamics and more about long-standing organisational processes and culture. As he put it: *“the level of trust has very little to do with the people involved. It's a cultural issue... when you have a sustained method of doing business over time, that's where your trust is or isn't”* (#13 IE). This suggests that even well-intentioned efforts to build trust can be undermined by a culture of distrust, particularly when leadership turnover is frequent (*“The average CEO's terms are three to five years”* (#13 IE)) and structural change is slow.

Factors impacting on trust

This section explores key additional internal and external factors that impact trust in the collective bargaining process that have not already been discussed.

Cooperation versus competitive behaviour in CB: FinanceCo and MetalCo demonstrated a cooperative approach to collective bargaining, fostering trust between unions and management. In contrast, TransportCo exhibited a more adversarial and competitive dynamic, with both unions and management emphasising power struggles. Some insightful quotes from both union and management representatives highlight these contrasting approaches. In MetalCo, unions and management developed a partnership approach to employee relations in response to increasing management-union conflicts and industrial disputes. In response to these issues, a joint union-management effort was initiated, proposing a collaborative approach to improve competitiveness, upskill the workforce and address individual issues more constructively, thereby reducing union-management conflicts. In FinanceCo, the binding X Agreement was an agreement that anchored both union and management to trust in early collaboration and consultation. The focus is on trying to reach a consensus in bargaining where the interests of both parties are satisfied, whilst acknowledging some give and take:

I always say that a good industrial relations agreement should make nobody happy, right? Because everybody should feel a degree of pain if it's a good deal, and it's never what either side started with. (#6 IE)

Competitive behaviour in CB was seen in one union's negotiation with management in TransportCo. The union's view of requesting a pay raise was *"the pay claim was a very simple one. It was inflation... wasn't a pay rise"* (#8 IE). Management did not agree and stated what works better is *"being in a room with a group people who are engaged in looking after their own interest, but looking at, you know, being open to look after the general interest, having the vision to understand that the company did well is actually in their interests"* (#15 IE). Management's perception was that the union had put in an extortionate claim with *"no reality to ever achieve it....their view was, we want to deliver everything on that claim, and there won't be any compromise."* (#10 IE). This was not helped by changes in leadership where *"there's been a change in leadership of the trade union, but also there's relatively new leadership in some of senior roles within the organisation, and kind of facing off of that relationship"* (#10 IE).

Shared ideology and values between unions and management contribute to higher levels of trust. FinanceCo and MetalCo displayed a degree of ideological congruence, particularly regarding the role of unions and the importance of fair negotiation processes. Ideological alignment — or at least mutual acceptance of each other's role — plays a crucial part in enabling trust between unions and management. In contexts where partnership arrangements are embedded, these ideologies were found to create a structured environment in which trust is not purely personal but reinforced by shared expectations and norms. As a manager in TransportCo explained, *"We've got the basicswe've got that company union agreement in place that can't be broken, that's custom and practice."* (#18

IE) These cooperative goals promoted open-minded engagement between employee representatives and workplace relations teams, leading to better resolution. FinanceCo did show how an incongruence in values can significantly rupture trust, however. The introduction of a “union-busting” HR manager at FinanceCo led to a temporary period of low trust where union-management communication and consultation significantly declined. However, this was a specific form of an integrity breach attributed to one person and not the organisation as a whole. Hence, the relationship was not broken as such, but frozen and then unfrozen when that person moved on. It did not lead to distrust. In TransportCo, ideological differences were seen to have contributed to a trust deficit. One union adopted a more adversarial stance, focusing on power dynamics, while management prioritised efficiency, cost-cutting, and shareholder value at what unions perceived as driving work intensity and lower job security. One union representative stated that the company's main objective is to “get people to work hard at a high standard, meeting higher targets but for decreasing terms and conditions on an ongoing basis” (#16 IE). From an organisational perspective, managers highlighted that many senior managers do not see the value of wasting time engaging with unions to drive change.

Norms of Interaction and Communication Processes: Mutual trust was evident in many cases, supported via norms of interaction. Norms of interaction refer to the established patterns, expectations, and behaviours that shape how social partners—such as unions and management—communicate, negotiate, and collaborate in collective bargaining. Relational norms and trust play a key role in guiding reciprocal interactions and individual behaviours, helping to create a more cooperative environment (Arranz et al., 2012). These norms or routines can also support trust between organisations as they shape behaviour in inter-organisational exchanges (union and management), and trust can emerge based on norms of reciprocity (Hurley, 2023). Effective communication and consultation mechanisms played a crucial role in sustaining trust, while breakdowns in communication often led to distrust. MetalCo had “It would have been a very much open-door policy to management, and it was fairly good to work, especially as a shop steward” (#17 IE). FinanceCo had clearly established processes for interaction, supported by the X Agreement, which established when and how communication happens and the expectation of consultation. Communication was also important. In TransportCo a manager highlights “don't assume that people know, don't assume that people understand, explain the why” (#18 IE).

Contextual Factors: Interviews also reveal that external factors can influence trust. Gillespie et al. (2020) argue that trust is always important in organisations, but it becomes particularly vital during crises and disruptions. MetalCo shows how trust and collaboration can strengthen during periods of uncertainty. When a key supplier contract with a large European organisation was lost, union-management negotiations prioritised shared interests to ensure the company's survival. In contrast, the financial crash of 2008 eroded the high-trust relationship in FinanceCo (#1 IE, #2 IE, #5 IE). Management unilaterally changed pensions from defined benefit to defined contribution, justifying the move as an opportunity created by crisis: “a crisis is a time for change. It would have been, it'd be quite difficult to try and do that if you weren't in a crisis” (#6 IE). There was also recognition that renewed profitability might now test trust, as union expectations rise: “expectations are much

higher... they believe their members should reap the benefits... and that's thrown up some challenging conversations" (#7 IE). Similarly, at TransportCo, crisis conditions enabled concession bargaining about outsourcing. As one manager put it, *"doing nothing is gone as an option. So that allowed the development of a conversation"* (#15 IE). These cases show how crises can act as catalysts in employee relations—sometimes strengthening trust through joint problem-solving, as seen in MetalCo and TransportCo, and sometimes straining it, as in FinanceCo, when one party leverages the crisis unilaterally. In all three, urgency was present, but only in two was it used collaboratively to manage the challenge and build trust.

In TransportCo, COVID-19 significantly disrupted operations and trust. Unions noted it was *"very hard to rebuild trust"* after management decisions during the crisis (#12 IE). Staff were placed on 50% pay for a period, and although management engaged with all unions to protect jobs and the company's survival, reaching agreements and retaining most staff, unions were critical of some decisions and their long-term consequences. While management viewed the period as one of high-trust collaboration, unions saw lasting damage to trust. In FinanceCo, COVID also affected trust, particularly through the loss of face-to-face interactions and how it impacted how they worked to maintain open dialogue and engage in active trust. One manager reflected that virtual engagement was a major challenge: *"you're used to reading the room... it was so impersonal... things just got a little bit fraught"* (#6 IE).

One final contextual factor identified by one respondent was the role of social media platforms. Previously in negotiations, a manager stated that *"I would have been very confident that if a deal was done in a room, that any union was going to advocate for acceptance of that deal, that that deal would pass"* (#15 IE). Social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp groups now make it that much more difficult for both management and union officials as *"you're battling against punchlines, one-line stories"* (#15 IE). There is now a greater need for communication on management's part, when previously they would have seen that as union ground that they did not want to step on toes by going into *"union turf"*. The challenge set out was that unions are formally saying they are in favour of an agreement but then there are informal WhatsApp groups with members and shop stewards advocating against (for a variety of reasons some valid and some more focused on self-interest) but it is *"very difficult to counter because often industrial agreements are compromise or nuanced" something which is lost in social media"* (#15 IE). Confidentiality also emerged as a trust issue in FinanceCo, where early consultation on changes depends on mutual discretion. One manager described a suspected breach but trusted the union enough to assume it came from her own side: *"I do my own little investigation, and it's never the union. They don't breach trust because they know it would undermine their ability to deliver for members"* (#7 IE).

Trust repair and trust maintenance play a pivotal role in trust management, particularly in ongoing relationships such as those in collective bargaining. When trust is broken—whether through perceived breaches of agreements, lack of transparency, or unilateral decision-making—it can have lasting consequences, leading to resistance, breakdowns in

cooperation and conflict. However, research suggests that trust repair is possible through consistent actions, open communication, and demonstrated commitment to rebuilding credibility. Recognising and addressing trust violations proactively is essential for maintaining long-term, functional relationships between social partners. Respondents identified times when trust violations took place, both from union and management perspectives. Some of these are set out above, around pay and responses to COVID and are centred on the organisational level. We also saw perceptions of trust violations at the individual level (i.e. the management-union dyad). In high-trust contexts, these violations were usually dealt with via active trust and strategies associated with active trust. Active trust was evident in many cases (see table 2 below). Active trust suggests that trust is ongoing, requiring continuous reproduction even once established (Möllering, 2013).

Table 2: Active trust and strategies

	Characterised by
High Active Trust (MetalCo)	Regular collaboration, open dialogue, and co-created solutions.
Medium Active Trust (FinanceCo)	Some transparency and cooperation, while occasional breakdowns in trust-building efforts.
Low Active Trust (TransportCo):	Minimal effort in relationship-building, frequent confrontations, and lack of reliable communication.

Trust repair and trust maintenance are both essential concepts in trust literature. Trust repair is primarily concerned with restoring trust to a past state following a breach or violation that damaged trust (Gustaffson et al., 2021). Trust repair literature contends that when trusting relationships are destabilised or violated, then active investment is needed to protect and maintain trust. The repairing of trust is said to be a dynamic relational process (Kim et al. 2009). Respondents acknowledged times when trust was broken or damaged and its impact on mutual trust. For example, *“Trust is .. like climbing up a mountain.. one slip and you're down at the bottom, but it's loads of steps to try and get up the mountain (#6 IE)*. Respondents gave examples of trust repair strategies following a perceived trust breach, including apologies. FinanceCo mentioned a recent case where *“it all falls down if we are deemed to have breached them, like the X union only last year, had taken a case against us for what they perceived was a breach of one of those collective agreements and I suppose it can have a detrimental ripple effect” (#7 IE)*. This was followed by a meeting between union and management to discuss what happened and why, in order to repair the trust violation. In contrast, there was no meeting (‘debrief’) between the union officials and management following industrial action in 2024 in TransportCo, which contributed to further diminishing trust (#9 IE, #12 IE). Structural mechanisms were also used, which incorporated control mechanisms into the relationship (Sharma et al., 2023). Both

FinanceCo and MetalCo emphasised their union-management agreements as essential contracts that define acceptable behaviour and uphold mutual responsibilities.

In contrast to trust repair, maintaining trust involves preserving it over time and preventing its decline. Kelly et al. (2025) have identified several strategies within the trust maintenance process to stop trust being damaged, many of which were evident in this study, suggesting '*mutual agency to maintain their trusting relationship*' (p. 18). Creating a shared mental model focused on (1) open dialogue and (2) perspective-taking to consider their counterpart's position. In MetalCo they framed crises as shared challenges and negotiated solutions together through partnership. In FinanceCo, there was evidence of both open dialogue and perspective taking. One manager describes how she proactively dealt with a relational trust threat:

And you know, we all believe we're right. X (union rep) was the middle man no different to myself. So we kind of sat down....understand the different pieces. I explained the impact that the case had on our stakeholders on our side and the feeling and the sentiment, and similarly, it was good to get an understanding of things on his side and the view of his committee in particular. (#7 IE)

1.5 Conclusions

Given Ireland's decentralised collective bargaining model, this study shows that trust between managers and unions at the company level can vary greatly across companies and over time due to internal (e.g. leadership changes of parties) and external (e.g. economic boom or bust) factors. Trust between unions and managers emerges through a mix of personal relationships, established processes, and institutional supports. Below, we summarise our key findings.

Bases of trust: Trust in Irish employment relations spans relational, knowledge-based and calculative-based trust. The findings across companies suggest that

- **Relational trust** serves as a crucial linchpin in fostering trust between social partners, as it is built through ongoing interactions, mutual understanding, and the perception of goodwill.
- **Organisational culture and ideology matter:** Long-standing relationships, shared values, and ideological alignment can sustain trust, while adversarial mindsets or mismatched priorities can undermine it.
- **High trust in health and safety issues:** Trust is typically strongest in areas where union and management interests are clearly aligned, such as health and safety, enabling more integrative bargaining.

Institutional trust provides scaffolding: In contexts where there was low mutual trust (or high distrust), institutions such as the WRC and Labour Court are crucial frameworks to facilitate negotiation and resolve conflict. At a societal level, trust in these institutions underpins industrial peace and creates a framework for fair conflict resolution, maintaining confidence in the broader system of labour relations.

Active trust maintenance is essential: Trust requires continual effort, open communication, and responsiveness to breaches to remain robust. It can be strengthened through consistent behaviour and mutual understanding, but easily damaged by unilateral decisions, leadership changes, or crises like COVID-19. Previous breaches, failures to uphold agreements, or perceived violations can significantly erode trust.

Trust fosters better outcomes: Where trust exists, it enhances collaboration, reduces adversarial bargaining, supports innovation (e.g. workplace change, job redesign), and improves worker support systems (e.g. mental health initiatives). Trust is associated with a better relationship with the other party and with more risk-taking behaviour (e.g. information sharing, making concessions).

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