Recounting France's trade unions

Is France characterized by a particularly low level of unionization compared to other European countries? This is what the comparative literature on trade unions suggests. In this policy brief, we question this idea and trace a different history of the evolution of the level of unionization in France. Current estimates are based on a double extrapolation of membership data from the two main unions — the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) and the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT) — and the results of workplace elections.

Based on representative surveys of the French population, including polls and international surveys, we estimate that the level of unionization was underestimated until the late 1970s.

- According to representative surveys, the level of unionization in the 1970s would not have been 20%, but almost 40%, which is similar to that of our European neighbors.

- Our time series is consistent with official estimates from the 1990s onwards. This means that the extent of deunionization in the 1980s may also have been significantly underestimated.

- We also provide an estimate of the level of unionization between 1949 and 1969. Here again, our estimates are above those currently in circulation.

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Introduction

According to DARES (Direction de l'Animation de la Recherche, des Études et des Statistiques), the statistical service of the Ministry of Labor, France has had one of the lowest levels of unionization in Europe since the 1960s (Pignoni, 2016). According to these estimates, France is an exception, since it has had few unionized workers despite numerous social struggles in the 1970s, which are a sign of strong union power.

How do we measure the level of unionization, defined as the proportion of employees who are unionized? In most developed countries, official estimates are based on self-reporting by workers in national surveys.[1] Thus, a worker is considered to be a member of a trade union if he or she declares to be so when questioned in a survey. Since 1996, France has also used this approach, without revising the series prior to 1996. Before this date, the level of unionization in France is estimated by relating the amounts of union dues paid to the main unions to the dues payable by each member. In other words, only workers who pay their dues regularly are considered to be truly unionized. The choice between these two methods, although seemingly trivial, can lead to significant differences in the estimate of the number of unionized workers and thus in the calculation of the level of unionization. These differences are particularly apparent for France when we compare two historical series: the one proposed by DARES, based on union dues data until 1996, and the one we estimate from polling and survey data that have not been used until now (Figure 1). The estimates of the level of unionization based on surveys are clearly higher than the DARES series in the 1970s, but then converge from the end of the 1980s.

In this policy brief, we propose a new historical series of the level of unionization of employees in France, based on polls and representative surveys of the French population from 1970 to 2018 as well as a retropolation for 1949 to 1968. This new series has the advantage of being based on a uniform definition of the notion of a unionized worker over the entire period. For this reason, and others that we will discuss below, we believe that this series provides a better approximation of the level of unionization than the currently available series.[2] This policy brief details the possible causes of discrepancies between levels of union membership measured by representative surveys from the 1970s onward and those based on membership dues data provided by unions. Finally, we provide estimates for the 1950s and 1960s.
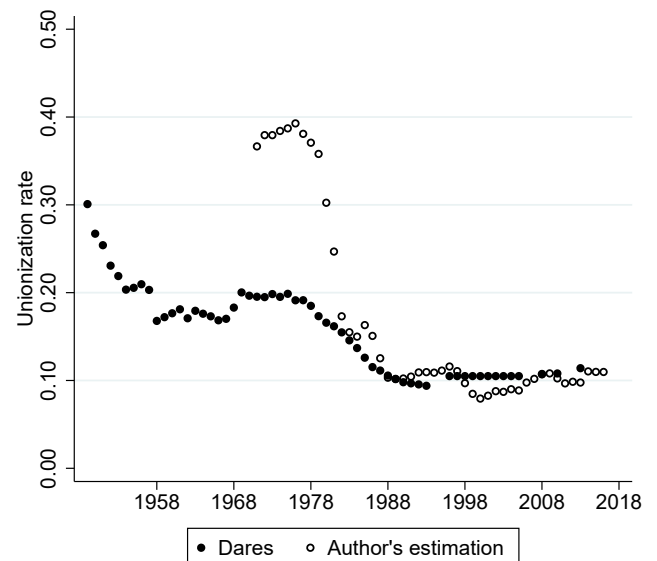

Figure 1: Comparison of the unionization level in France estimated by the authors from survey data or by DARES from administrative data

Note: The graph shows the distribution of unionization levels estimated from several surveys since the 1970s and compares them with the DARES time series.
Interpretation: The graph shows the distribution of unionization levels estimated from several surveys since the 1970s and compares them with the DARES time series.
Sources: Dares, authors' calculations based on polls, international surveys and public surveys.
Coverage: All French employees.

Measuring union membership from dues data

Measuring CGT and CFDT membership

Until the 1980s, union members paid their dues each month by buying stamps to stick on their membership card (Figure 2). The number of members of a union can then be obtained by dividing the number of stamps sold in a given year by an estimate of the average number of stamps paid per year per member (Box 1). This is what Bevort (1995) does for the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) and the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT), which are historically the two main unions in France. He assumes that the average annual number of stamps paid per member is constant and equal to 9. Labbé (1995) and Andolfatto (2006) follow this choice, but have more recently settled on the assumption of 8 stamps (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2019; Andolfatto and Labbé, 2021).

However, there is little accurate and reliable information

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[1]Since 1973, the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the United States has used the Current Population Survey (CPS). The question used is: "In this job, are you a member of a trade union or an employee association similar to a trade union?" In Germany, too, surveys have been used since 1980, and in the UK since 1989.

[2]Other series measuring unionization in France coexist with the DARES series: the Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions, Wage Setting, State Intervention and Social Pacts (ICTWSS) project, hosted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and a new series produced by Andolfatto and Labbé (2021). Both of these series are also based on contributions from major unions and are very similar to the DARES series, although somewhat higher.

Box 1 : Retired members' stamps

The total number of stamps sold also includes those purchased by retired members. In theory, these should be subtracted to obtain the net unionization rate. Here, Labbé (1995) and Pignoni (2016) take different approaches. Labbé (1995) does not subtract anything. For his part, Pignoni (2016) makes a uniform subtraction of 13%, without justifying this figure as far as we know. This corresponds roughly to the proportion of retirees in the membership of the CGT, according to its statements (see Bevort (1995), p. 45). But Andolfatto and Labbé (2021) point out (p. 11) that retirees are supposed to buy only one stamp per quarter, so their share of stamps is smaller than their share of union members.

The proportion of stamps to be deducted is therefore certainly somewhere between Labbé's 0% and Pignoni's 13%. But here we come back to the same problem: we would need to know the average number of stamps paid by active workers on the one hand, and by retirees on the other, in order to establish an exact correction coefficient. We can only point out that our series (see Fig. 6) is clearly above Labbé's, even though he does not subtract any retirees, which suggests that the stamps paid by unionized retirees represented only a small proportion of the total.
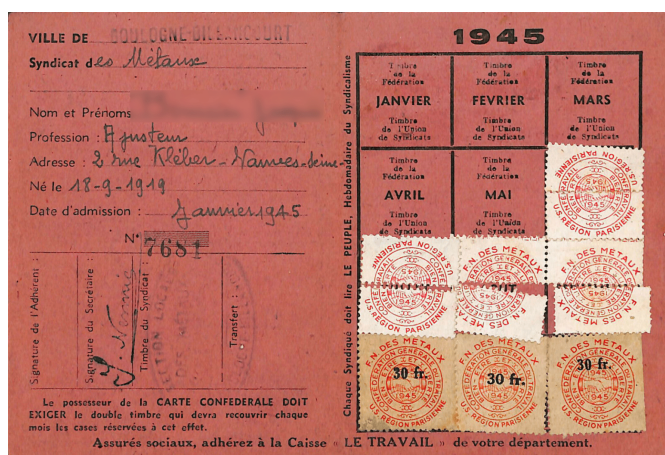

Figure 2: A 1949 CGT member's union card with seven stamps

on the average number of stamps per member. In the 1950s, the CGT counted the number of annual cards sold, and found a number fluctuating between 7.0 and 8.5 stamps per card. Bevort (1995) suggests that the reason the CGT stopped publishing the information was to mask the decline in the number of stamps paid per member, as suggested by several calls to order issued by the CGT in the 1960s. Bevort (1995) quotes *Le Peuple*, the CGT newspaper, which gives averages "*depending on the year [...] of 6, 7 or 8 monthly dues per year*".[3] It thus seems that Bevort maintained the figure of 9 stamps in spite of the information to which he had access, for the sake of homogenization. It seems clear that, for the CGT, the average number of stamps per member in the 1970s was well below 9.

From CGT and CFDT membership to unionization rate

In addition to the choice of average number of paid stamps per member, an additional step is needed to go from the membership of the CGT and CFDT to the total level of unionization. This involves measuring the relative importance of these unions compared to the others. According to a method introduced by Labbé (1995), we can extrapolate the unionization level by assuming that the share of a confederation in the total union membership is the same, at a given moment, as its vote share in workplace elections. This hypothesis is reasonable in principle, but Labbé (1995) cannot test it directly.[4]

However, while the hypothesis of alignment between the relative importance of unions among members and the results of workplace elections is plausible *a priori*, one can also imagine several reasons for rejecting it. For example, it is possible that the extreme left-wing militancy typical of the post-1968 period in France, and the creation in 1968 of *sections syndicales d'entreprises* (unions at the level of the establishment which are not obliged to affiliate to a confederation), led to an increase in membership of small local unions which did not participate in workplace elections in the 1970s. More generally, the two main unions, the CGT and the CFDT, may have more resources and expertise to mobilize voters in workplace elections, which could lead to an under-representation of other unions in these elections compared to their relative importance among members.

In conclusion, while the assumptions necessary to move from membership data to unionization level are credible, they introduce an additional degree of uncertainty to that of the number of stamps. It is for these two reasons that we adopt a different method for estimating the unionization level.

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[3]More precisely, *Le Peuple* reports 7 stamps (n° 814, December 16-25, 1970), "between 7 and 8" (n° 893-894, May 1-15, 1972), 7.1 (n° 969, July 1975) and 8 (n° 1040, June 16-30, 1978).

[4]Labbé (1995) confirms this hypothesis by examining three sectors for which the membership of the CGT, the CFDT and the FO (Force ouvrière) is known: public finance; post, telegraph and telephone (PTT); and public and health services. He notes that in each of these sectors, the vote shares of the three unions in the workplace elections are relatively close to the directly known shares of the workforce (the error is less than 10%). However, these sectors can hardly be considered as representative, since all three are in the public sector. Moreover, these verifications concern the 1980s and 1990s, or the 1960s in the case of the PTT, but not the 1970s, which is our subject here.

Table 1: Surveys and polls mobilized to estimate the unionization level between 1970 and 2017

Type of source	Name	Years
Post-election & opinion polls	Crédoc, Agorométrie, post-election surveys	1977, 1978, 1981, 1989-2015, 2017
International surveys	Eurobarometer, European Value survey	1970, 1971, 1975-1977, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1989-1992, 1994, 1996
Public surveys	EPCV, SRCV	1996-2004, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2016

Measuring union membership from survey data

Our method exploits data from national and international surveys, and opinion and post-election polls, to estimate the unionization level for each survey-year pair. This approach uses the same type of data: representative surveys of the French population (Table 1); and *a fortiori* uses the same definition of unionization, which is the one used by DARES since 1996. Another advantage is that this measure of unionization is transparent. It uses the answer to a simple question: "*Are you a member of a trade union?*" Finally, this method does not require any extrapolation or arbitrary assumptions. The quality of the estimate of union membership depends entirely on the quality and reliability of the surveys.

We have several reasons to consider that our sources are reliable. First, although they are different in nature and collected by different organizations, they give consistent results. In particular, in the 1970s, they all lead to a considerable increase in the estimate of the unionization rate (Figure 3).

From 1990 onwards, we observe a convergence of our series with the official series. This date corresponds to the development of the automation of stamp payments, which generalizes the purchase of 12 stamps per year for each member. It should be noted that after 1996, our main source is the same as that of DARES: the EPCV survey (Enquête permanente sur les conditions de vie des ménages). However, DARES (Pignoni, 2016), as well as the OECD, revised the unionization rate upward by 2.5 percentage points because the question about unionization in the EPCV is inserted into a more general question about participation in associations (parent-teacher associations, tenants' associations, etc.) which could lead some respondents to skip the question about union membership. After 2013, the SRCV survey (Statistiques sur les ressources et conditions de vie) and the Conditions of Work survey isolate the unionization question from other associations and both find a unionization rate above 10%, while another component of the SRCV survey, in which the union question is framed as in the EPCV survey, finds a rate of 8%.
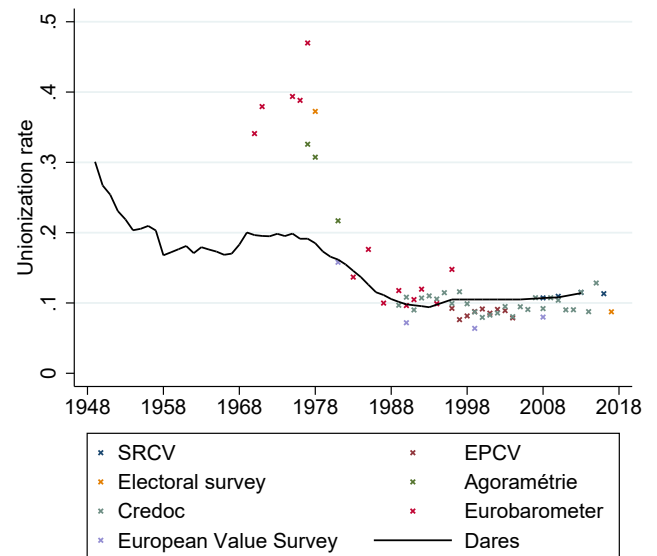

Figure 3: Comparison of unionization levels in France estimated from survey and administrative data

Notes: The graph presents the distribution of unionization levels estimated from several surveys since the 1970s and compares them to the DARES time series.
Interpretation: In 1978, the unionization level in the Agorométrie survey was 30%, whereas it is 20% in the series published by DARES.
Sources: Authors' calculations based on multiple polls, international and public surveys.
Coverage: All French employees.

Comparative work with other European countries is underway (Batut, Lojkine, and Santini, 2021). It shows that surveys and polls in Italy, Germany, and Great Britain give results in line with the official series (Figure 6). This supports the use of surveys to estimate the unionization level in France.

The new estimates we propose challenge the idea that France is an exception in terms of unionization and instead point to a strong mobilization, comparable to other European countries, in the years following the May 1968 labor and student protests.

Moreover, according to our data, unionization rates fell by more than a factor of three over a decade during the 1980s. This is a much more rapid decline than previously estimated. However, a similar decline can be observed in the number of days not worked due to strikes: according to DARES (2021),[5] it fluctuated around 4,000 days per year per 1,000 employees in employment between 1972 and 1977, and fell below 1,000 for the first time in 1985 (Figure 4).

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[5] Mercier (2000) and Camard (2002) point out the limitations of these data, but do not suggest that the trend over time is biased. The volatility of strikes is higher than that of union membership, but the trends are similar.
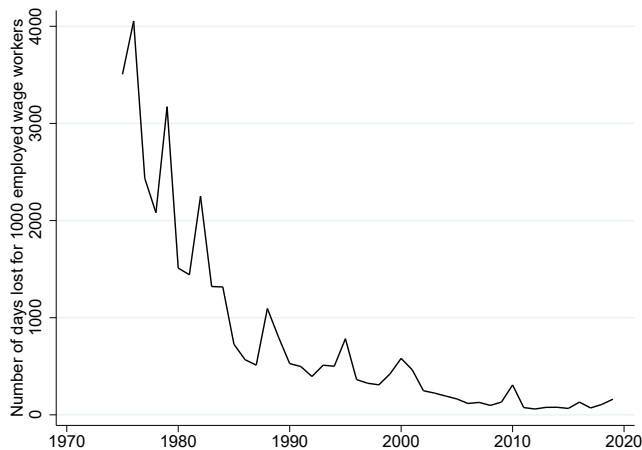
Figure 4: Individual days not worked due to strike action

Reconstructing a historical series of the level of unionization

Explaining the differences between survey estimates and those of DARES

Our sources identify, in addition to union membership at the time of the survey, the name of the union to which the worker belongs. This allows us to compare our estimates of CGT and CFDT union membership with those estimated by Bevort (1995) and those obtained from membership figures reported by the unions themselves, and also compiled by Bevort (1995) for the two main unions: CGT and CFDT (Figure 5).

The surveys give a significantly higher rate of CGT unionization than Bevort (1995). To find a series consistent with our observations — a "CGT+CFDT" unionization rate of 18-20% — we would have to assume an average annual number of stamps between 6 and 7, as opposed to the 8 or 9 used by Labbé (1995) and Bevort (1995). We therefore have good reason to believe that Bevort (1995) and Labbé (1995) overestimate the average number of stamps paid each year in the 1970s. Moreover, our estimates are slightly higher than those calculated from the membership figures reported by the CGT itself, which indicates that the unions were probably not over-reporting their membership. The discrepancy with the declarations of the unions themselves can be explained by an indeterminacy inherent in the very definition of "union member": a former member who has not regained union membership in a new job, or a member who only pays dues very irregularly, may consider themselves to be union members and declare this in the surveys, without being considered
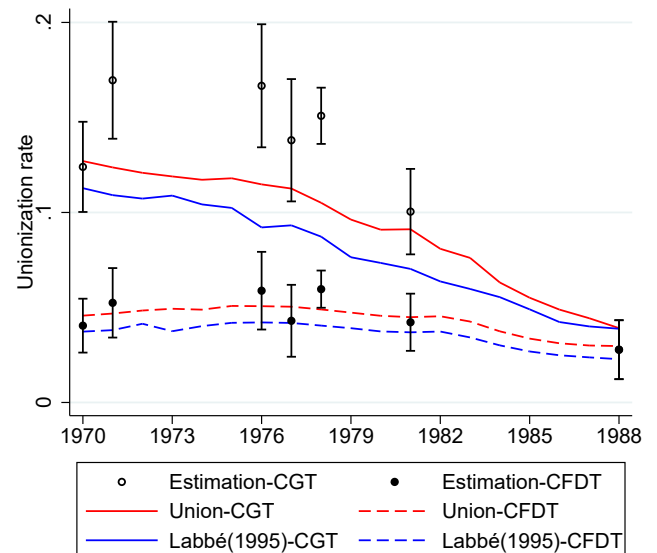

Figure 5: Comparison of CGT and CFDT membership estimates by Labbé (1995), from union data and from survey data

as such either by the method of Bevort (1995) or by their union.

This upward revision of about one-third for the combined CGT and CFDT membership in the 1970s is not sufficient to explain all of the discrepancy between our estimate of the unionization level and the official estimates at that time. To do this, we must also take into account the second stage in the construction of the official series, i.e. the transition from the CGT and CFDT figures to the total unionization rate thanks to the results of workplace elections. As we have already explained, we believe that the extrapolation of Labbé (1995) may lead to an underestimation of the importance of the smallest unions, especially those not participating in workplace elections.

A new historical series of unionization levels

We propose a new historical series of employee unionization levels since 1970 (Figure 6). It is calculated by taking a five-year rolling average of all estimates from survey and polling data. However, we do not use the EPCV survey, which may underestimate the unionization rate because of the wording of the question.

We supplement this estimate with two proposals for estimating changes in the level of unionization between 1949 and 1968. Since this exercise requires a number of as-

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Box 2 : Unionization between 1949 and 1969

Since we do not have reliable survey data before 1970,[a] we cannot estimate a unionization level prior to that date. Nevertheless, we believe that our methodological criticisms of the DARES and ICTWSS series are equally valid for this period. In particular, Bevort (1995) himself cites a ratio between the number of membership cards and the number of stamps sold annually by the CGT from 1945 to 1957 that oscillates between 7 and 8.5, which contradicts the assumption of 9 stamps. In order to construct a new historical series, in the absence of more reliable data, we propose to base it on the number of active members declared by the CGT itself.[b] Indeed, the 1970s polls allowed us to rule out, for this period, the suspicion of overestimation by the union. Our hypothesis consists in transposing this result to earlier decades.

It then remains to move from this estimate to the level of unionization. To do this, we propose two methods (Figure 6). The first, which allows us to go back to 1949, consists of adopting the method used by Labbé (1995) based on the results of workplace elections: Total unionization$_t$ = CGT$_t/c_t$, where c_t is the share of the CGT in the results of workplace elections in year t. Indeed, we have shown that this method led to an underestimation of total membership in the 1970s, but we have attributed this effect to the specific institutional and political context of the years after May 1968. We note that this series is very close to the one proposed by Andolfatto and Labbé (2021), based on the hypothesis of 8 stamps.

The other series we propose assumes, on the contrary, that the negative bias of Labbé (1995) would have already been present before 1968: we replace the coefficient c_t for earlier years by 40%, the share of the CGT in the total workforce estimated from polls in 1970. Since the relative weight of the CGT has changed over the decades, this hypothesis can only be considered plausible in the 1960s, and we therefore restrict this second series to that period.

The first series based on Labbé's method can therefore be considered as a conservative estimate, and the second as a high estimate.

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[a]There is a survey in 1958 and one in 1962 with a question on unionization, but their results are contradictory to each other.

[b]Before 1960, the CGT does not distinguish between active and retired members. For the period 1949-1959, we subtract a fixed share of 10% corresponding to the share of retirees in 1960.

sumptions, which we detail in Box 2, we recommend that the reader exercise some caution in using the proposed figures. The main lesson we wish to emphasize is that we obtain higher estimates than those of DARES before 1970, as we do after 1970 and even under conservative assumptions.
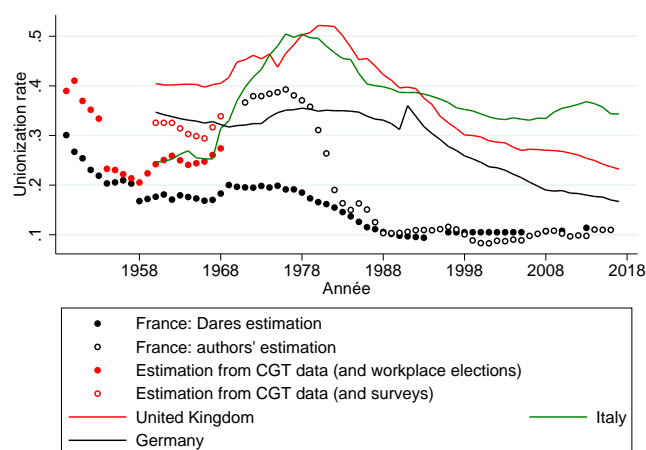

Figure 6: Re-estimation of the evolution of the level of unionization in France between 1949 and 2018

Sources: DARES, ICTWSS and authors' calculations.
Note: The graph compares the evolution of the five-year rolling average of survey estimates in France with the Dares time series, as well as the series for the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy.
Interpretation: In 1968, the level of union membership among employees is estimated at 32% if the relative importance of the CGT is assessed on the basis of survey declarations, and 28% if it is based on the results of workplace elections.
Coverage: All French employees.

Conclusion

The first contribution of this policy brief is methodological: we confirm that the use of surveys is preferable to more indirect extrapolation methods. As recently shown by Farber et al. (2021) in the United States, the combination of opinion surveys, political polls and international surveys allows for a robust historical estimate of unionization. At the same time, our estimates of union membership in the CGT and CFDT are close to what the unions themselves report. This attests to the quality of the figures released by the unions during this period. The declarations of the unions are therefore not necessarily to be discarded and can, on the contrary, constitute a valuable source of information.

The second contribution is factual. On the comparative level, we question the idea of exceptionally low unionization in the early 1970s in France: in our view, the level of unionization in France in the 1970s was higher than in West Germany and close to that of Italy and the United Kingdom.

This changes the story that follows in the 1980s. Historically, the official series suggested a brutal deunionization in France, comparable in scale but more rapid than in other countries. In the United Kingdom, it took about 30 years, from 1980 to 2010, to halve the unionization level, compared with only about 10 years in France, from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, according to the existing series. According to our revised series, the fall was even more precipitous, with unionization dropping to less than a third of its original level in this period. This is consistent with the social, economic and institutional history that makes the 1980s a pivotal decade. Indeed, these

years of brutal deunionization were those of the collapse of strike activity, as we have noted above, but they also witnessed, for example, the decline of the labor share in value added (Cette, Koehl, and Philippon, 2019), and the rise in the share of total income for the richest 10% (Garbinti, Goupille-Lebret, and Piketty, 2018).

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The arguments developed here are taken from the following article: Batut, Cyprien, Ulysse Lojkine and Paolo Santini (2021). "Which side are you on? A historical perspective on union membership composition in four European countries", *PSE Working Papers* n°2021-16.