

Can Trade Unions Afford to Act Sustainably?

In many European towns, people's livelihoods come from factories – yet those same factories pollute the air and water.

My job feeds my family, but the pollution from our factory is killing fish in the local river! Who can represent my broader interests?

Trade unions are independent of the enterprise, primarily focused on representing workers' interests and bound by democratic internal processes.



Trade unions find themselves in a complex position where they must not only ensure short-term socio-economic security for their members but also call for long-term systemic reforms.



There are many other constraints on trade unions, such as the conflicting interests of trade-union members, ranging from narrow private interests to broader social and environmental concerns.



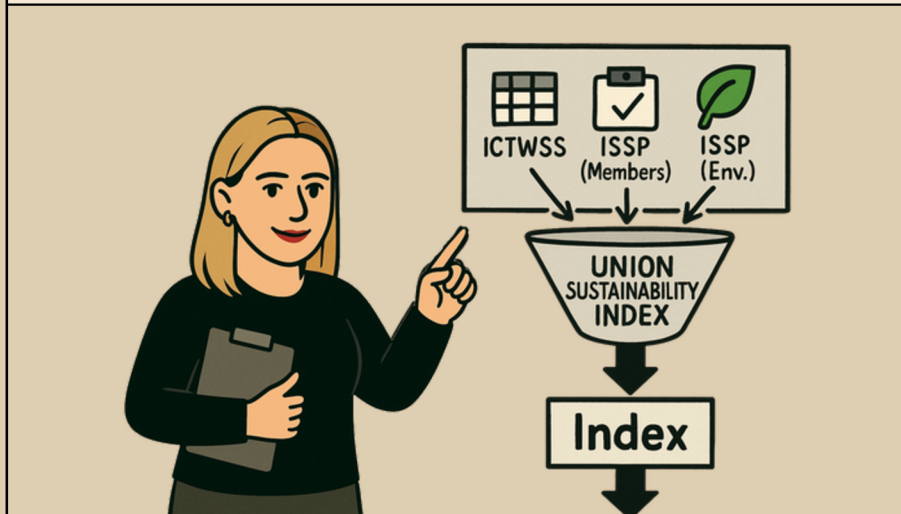
Sciomic
by scientist

Trade union strategies often focus on incremental changes, such as green growth and job retraining, yet fail to address deeper structural issues like inequalities and power dynamics. Such limitations risk reinforcing the capitalist system, prioritizing capital accumulation over environmental and social well-being.



Therefore, this article develops an index of trade union sustainability affordances to capture the possibilities to act sustainably.

ICTWSS is a Europe-wide database that measures how strong unions are – things like how many workers are covered by collective agreements, the presence of works councils and overall bargaining power.



ISSP asks thousands of people about who they are (age, gender, job) and what they think – like how much they care about protecting the environment.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY



Ecological Responsibility

Social Equity

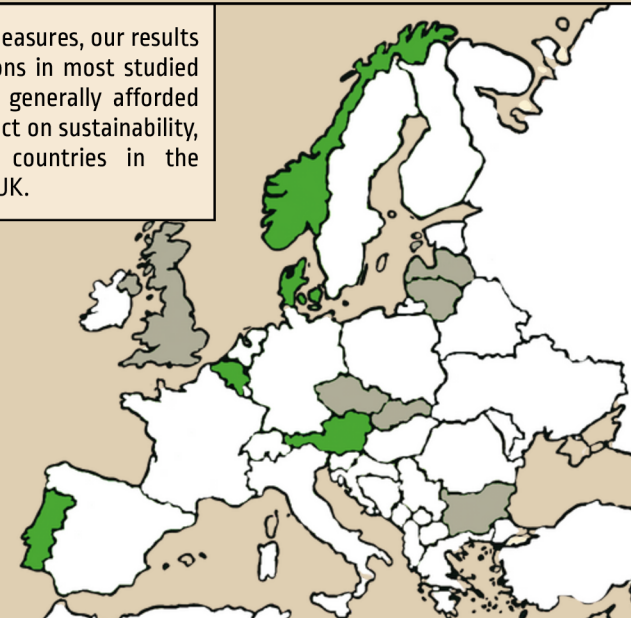
Institutional Power

We combined ICTWSS data with ISSP member demographics and environmental attitudes into a composite trade union sustainability affordance index covering 20 EU countries.

The Affordance Index is constructed from three distinct dimensions of sustainability: ecological responsibility, social equity and institutional power.

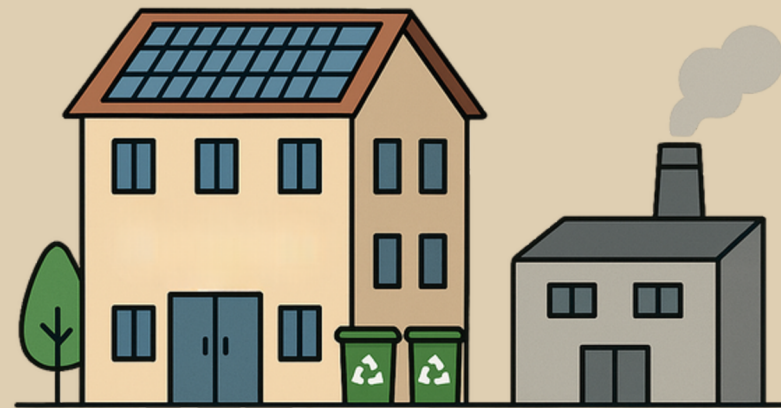
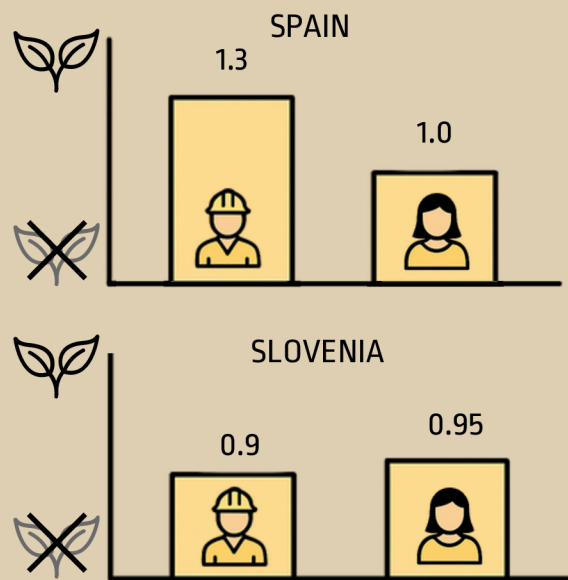
Sciomic
by scientist®

Based on the selected measures, our results indicate that trade unions in most studied European countries are generally afforded enough possibilities to act on sustainability, the exceptions being countries in the Eastern Europe and the UK.

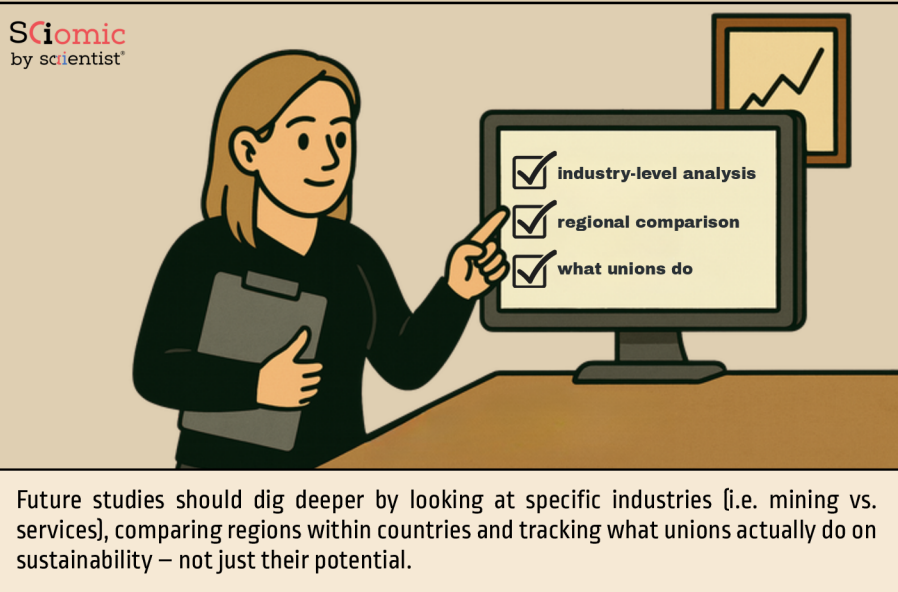
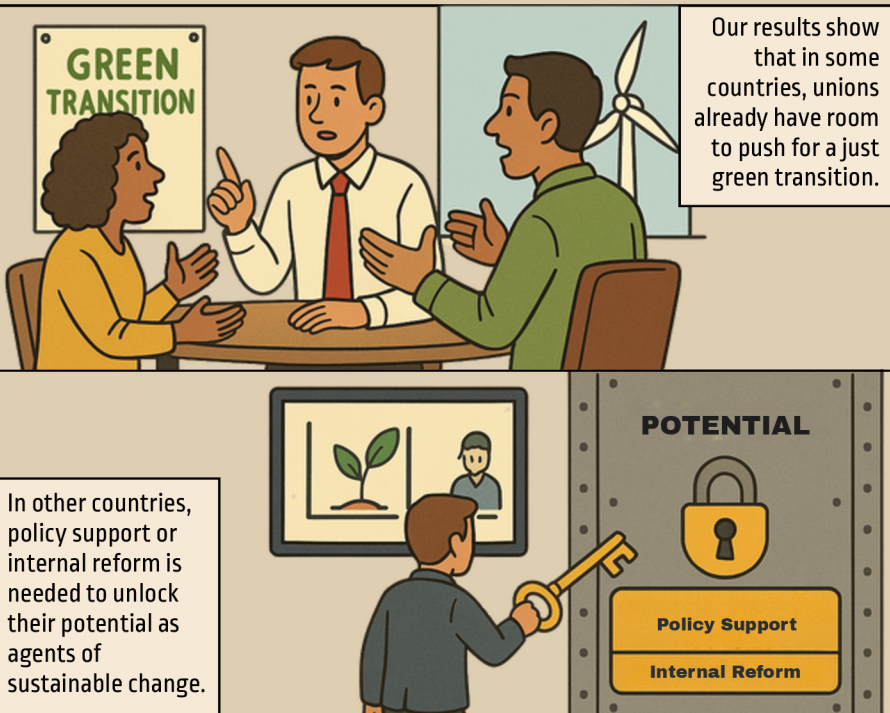


Unions in Belgium, Austria, Denmark, Portugal and Norway score highest on sustainability affordances, whereas many post-communist countries lag far behind.

For example, in Spain, union members show higher environmental awareness than non-members, but in Slovenia, rates are almost the same.



Other studies also report that larger, publicly-owned companies tend to have higher unionization rates, which may provide labor organizations with greater opportunities to engage in sustainability initiatives. Conversely, smaller or privately owned companies are more likely to stress short-term economic goals, which may further limit the ability of unions to prioritize environmental agendas.



Primc, K., Zabavnik, D., Slabe-Erker, R., Bembič, B., & Golob, U. (2025). Can trade unions in Europe afford to act sustainably? Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy, 21(1), 2506199.