**Anti-Union Discrimination in Hiring: a Field Experiment**

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Abstract:

Increasingly, the issue of discrimination is a major focus of public debate. Yet some discriminatory practices have received little attention from researchers. The aim of this article is to highlight and quantify a practice that rarely appears in the literature: anti-union discrimination in hiring. To do so, we use correspondence testing, which has repeatedly proven its worth in empirical studies. The results are used to measure the very detrimental effects of trade union activities and, to a lesser extent, volunteer activities, on hiring chances. They also identify the types of company where discriminatory practices are most prevalent against applicants with volunteer and union experiences on their resume.

Keywords: anti-union discrimination, unions, access to employment, correspondence testing, volunteer activities

 Researchers are aware of the urgent need to address the issue of discrimination and have conducted many studies on the subject. However, certain discriminatory practices have received less attention than others. Anti-union discrimination, for instance, is poorly documented (De Olivera et al., 2006; Breda, 2014), and anti-union discrimination during the recruitment process is all but absent from the literature. The rare French studies on the subject take a descriptive approach based on opinion surveys. As such, they neither provide evidence of the existence of such discrimination in organizational practices nor quantify its scale. These two observations form the starting point of this article. Its originality is to address this form of unequal treatment in hiring from a quantitative perspective in order to prove it exists and measure its scale. Its significance also lies in the use of a rigorous and proven method – correspondence testing.

Part I provides a review of the literature that informed our thinking and helped us formulate our research question and hypotheses. Part II presents our methodological approach. Part III details the results we obtained. Part IV provides our interpretation of the results. The conclusion reiterates our main finding: a job applicant who discloses trade union membership has 87.2 percent less chance of being invited to interview than a candidate who makes no mention of belonging to a union.

**Anti-union discrimination in hiring: a largely unrecognized practice**

Our topic is at the crossroads of four bodies of research: studies on the effect of membership in a nonprofit organization on hiring chances, on anti-union discrimination in employment, on anti-union discrimination in hiring, and on the positive impact of volunteer and trade union activities on skills.

The first three groups of studies suggest the hypothesis that mentioning union activity on a resume is disadvantageous for job applicants.

The first series of studies shows employers’ attitude towards volunteer activities during the recruitment process. This set of research is relevant to our topic since in the literature, nonprofit organizations – known as associations in France – are understood as a “group of people who associate for a specific purpose” (Dubost, 2010). Thus defined, a trade union is a nonprofit organization (Willemez, 2007; Dubost, 2010). This body of research (Bougard et al., 2011; Barbusse et al., 2011) concludes that mentioning experience in a nonprofit organization penalizes job applicants in the banking, accounting and IT sectors. According to the authors, some employers feel that applicants who declare such activities potentially have values at odds with the company, and may be less engaged in or available for their professional activities. The studies also highlight the fact that some recruiters consider the skills acquired through volunteer activities as “inappropriate” and not really transferable to business situations. According to the authors, reference to this type of experience on a resume has a particularly pronounced and detrimental impact when the skills required for the job are technical (Bougard et al., 2011), or when the volunteer experiences mentioned are insubstantial, not presented to best advantage by the applicant, and unrelated to the job vacancy (Barbusse et al., 2011). This research shows that mentioning volunteer activities in general is detrimental to hiring, but cannot tell us anything definitive about the effect of trade union activities in particular during the recruitment process.

A second series of studies focuses on the attitude of employers towards unionized employees. Anti-union discrimination is the second most common motive for referral to the French Defender of Rights[[3]](#footnote-3)\* related to employment discrimination, particularly concerning wages and careers. Indeed, union representatives with equal productivity and seniority are paid less than other employees (Breda, 2014; Chappe, 2013). It is interesting to note that this wage gap increases according to the militancy of the union as judged by the employer. For instance, union representatives from the CGT, perceived as more combative than their CFDT and FO counterparts, are significantly less well paid than other union representatives in the same company (Breda, 2014). Unionized employees are also promoted more slowly (Croisat et al., 1992; Chappe, 2013), and studies have shown that unionized employees feel they are being held back in their careers (Olivera et al., 2005). Finally, other research has revealed the pressure, bullying and threats of dismissal suffered by employees who belong to a union (Denis, 2009; Baert & Omey, 2014). These studies suggest that union membership results in unfavorable treatment in the workplace. It is therefore likely, though not certain, that right from the recruitment stage, employers prefer employees who are not seen to be pro-union.

A third series of studies, including opinion surveys and a correspondence test, directly addresses anti-union discrimination in hiring. This consists in excluding an applicant from a recruitment process because of his or her union membership or activities. Surveys conducted by the Defender of Rights indicate that union membership or sympathies are a motive for discrimination in hiring. To the question: “In general, when equally qualified, do you think being a union member is an advantage, a disadvantage, or neither one nor the other when applying for a job?” 53% of job seekers, 48% of private-sector employees and 37% of public-sector employees consider that belonging to union is a disadvantage for getting hired (Defender of Rights-IFOP poll published in January 2014). Moreover, 7% of job seekers report having been questioned on their union membership at least once during a job interview or competitive recruitment examination (IFOP-Defender, February 2015). While surveys such as these have been conducted, quantitative research on the phenomenon in real-world situations is virtually nonexistent. Econometric analyses have considered various forms of discrimination, based on gender or national origin for example, but have not addressed the union question, except for one correspondence test conducted in Flanders (Baert & Omey, 2014). This test yielded evidence of anti-union discrimination in hiring. However, as the Belgian and French contexts differ, including in levels of unionization (Van Rie et al., 2011; Baert & Omey, 2014), the study in Flanders does not provide any definitive information on anti-union discrimination in hiring in France. Furthermore, our study compared the effects of belonging to a nonprofit organization and of union membership.

These three bodies of research converge to suggest that union membership has a negative effect on access to employment.

In contrast, the last series of studies reveals the positive impact of volunteer and union activities on skills. Both nonprofit organizations and unions foster the production and transmission of knowledge and know-how (Dubost, 2010). Indeed, under validation of non-formal and informal learning schemes, a union member can have the knowledge acquired through her union experience recognized in order to gain admission to a taught master’s program (Willemez, 2007). These activities can also contribute to and be a sign of a person’s soft skills (Lazurech, 1999). During the recruitment process, reference to these activities tends to shed light on the applicant’s personality (Barbusse et al., 2011). As personality is generally the tiebreaker between similarly qualified candidates (Ghirardello, 2005), indicating involvement in such activities can be useful for recruiters, especially since members of nonprofit organizations “mainly correspond to personalities which are sought after by recruiters (involved, independent, dynamic, team players),” (Barbusse et al., 2001), especially for sales and marketing positions (Lazurech, 1999). Various empirical studies have highlighted the skills of union members who, thanks to their activities, generally have a more “enterprising” character and have developed leadership skills (De Croisat et al., 1992).

This series of studies concludes that, in theory, referring to volunteer or trade union activities can have a positive effect on access to employment because it indicates certain skills. However, it does not provide any evidence for this hypothesis in organizational practices.

The literary corpus presented above reflects two opposing trends: on the one hand, the negative impact and, on the other, the positive impact of union membership on access to employment. The current state of the literature allows no conclusions to be drawn as to whether union membership is detrimental for job applicants and therefore does not definitively prove that anti-union discrimination in recruitment exists. However, one observation can be made from the literature: employers are influenced in their decision by disclosure of union activity either because it reveals experience in a nonprofit organization or because this experience is in a union. As such, it seems worth seeking evidence of unequal treatment of pro-union applicants during the recruitment process by checking if employers penalize volunteer and trade union activities to the same extent.

The test objective is therefore to answer the following research question: to what extent does union membership impact the selection of candidates?

To answer this question, we test two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: membership in a nonprofit organization hinders the chances of being hired as a sales representative.

Hypothesis 2: trade union membership is a barrier to securing a sales representative job.

**Anti-union discrimination in hiring: measurable by correspondence testing**

We use correspondence testing – alternatively known as situation testing or, more rarely, discrimination testing – to confirm the hypotheses and answer the study’s research question. This method is applied in two completely distinct fields of research. In the social sciences, it serves as an instrument for measuring unequal treatment in hiring (Box 1). In legal research and litigation, it is a means of proving the existence of discriminatory behavior (Box 2). This article is based on correspondence testing for scientific purposes. When establishing the study protocol, we integrated several elements to ensure the validity and reliability of the test findings (Petit, 2004).

These elements guided the researchers in selecting the job vacancies to apply to and in developing the resumes.

 Correspondence testing as a tool to measure discrimination in hiring.

 Discriminatory practices in hiring have been the subject of much scientific research. While various approaches can be used to highlight such practices, studies converge in preferring correspondence testing as a method of proof in the social sciences.

This statistical tool was developed by social scientists before being taken on by international bodies, such as the International Labor Office,[[4]](#footnote-4)\* which are working to standardize its methodological approach. Several studies on discriminatory practices in hiring have employed this protocol in France (Riach & Rich, 2002; Petit, 2004) and abroad (Bratsberg et al., 1998).

The protocol is based on the empirical verification of unequal treatment in hiring by comparing the percentage of invitations to a job interview between two resumes.

It consists in artificially developing two fictitious applications that differ only by the characteristic being tested as a ground of discrimination (social origin, sex, age, union membership, etc.). One of the applicants mentions this characteristic and the other does not. The first candidate is therefore susceptible to discrimination because of this unlawful criterion while the other, called the “reference candidate,” has a profile unlikely to elicit discrimination. Both applications are sent to the same employers in response to the same job vacancies. The researcher then analyzes the difference in treatment in terms of invitations to interview. Assuming that the only difference is the single characteristic that distinguishes the two resumes, the researcher can conclude that the difference in treatment results from the test variable. This is the only approach that allows the ground of discrimination being studied (union activities, age, social origin, etc.) to be isolated while maintaining strict equivalence between all other variables. Indeed, unlike qualitative methods that expose the researcher to the risk of information retention or self-persuasion, correspondence testing provides an objective measure of discriminatory practices. Moreover, whereas conventional statistical and econometric approaches only offer an indirect approach to discrimination, correspondence testing is a direct measurement technique in a situation where all other factors are identical.

It is therefore a standardized, replicable, and reliable tool that has been proven in the literature and provides significant internal consistency of results (Duguet et al., 2009).

 Correspondence testing as a mode of proof in a legal context.

French legal doctrine has had to recognize issues arising from application of the principle of non-discrimination and equality, notably in the field of employment.

The existence of legal provisions reflects the lawmakers’ intention to intervene to ensure compliance with these principles. The criminal chamber of the French court of cassation has validated correspondence testing as a form of legal evidence in two instances: in a ruling to dismiss an appeal dated September 12, 2000, and in a ruling to allow an appeal on June 11, 2002 (Collet-Askrit, 2003). Subsequently, the Equal Opportunities Act of March 31, 2006 confirmed the validity of this test of unlawful discrimination. It states that discriminatory offenses are “constituted even if committed against a person or persons who have solicited one of the goods, acts, services, or contracts mentioned in Article 225-2 for the purpose of demonstrating the existence of discriminatory behavior.” This article therefore stipulates that an act of discrimination demonstrated as part of a correspondence test is punishable by law. However, as stated by the French Ministry of Justice in a circular dated June 26, 2006, no conviction can be pronounced “following an operation during which the person or persons who were rejected lied about their identity or status, or are purely fictional. (…) In such cases, there is in fact no crime, since the rejection concerns someone who does not exist, or is not really a victim.” Therefore, in correspondence testing for legal purposes, one of the two resumes sent must be based on the identity of a real person.

**1-The choice of occupation: field sales representative**

Our study concerns an entry-level sales representative position (permanent contract), a job characterized by a large volume of vacancies, a large number of applicants for each vacancy, a quick turnaround in filling vacancies, and a high response rate from employers (Hennequin, 2007). This choice of occupation allows us to apply to many vacancies, limit the likelihood of our applications being detected, and obtain a high rate of response. As positions and recruitment are highly centralized in the Paris region (Île-de-France) and in the food and agriculture industry, we selected this region and industry.

Of the various sales positions, we opted for field sales representative. These employees are literally the face of the company, representing the firm to customers in order to sell its products. This choice ensures the potential for applicants’ union membership to be taken into account, as one of the causes of anti-union discrimination in employment is that employers see an incompatibility between representing the company and its values on the one hand, and the union and its values on the other (Croisat et al., 1992). On the surface, union membership may also suggest less of an inclination for financial gain and working alone.

This choice of occupation also offers potential for volunteer activities in a nonprofit to be included in the assessment of candidates. Some studies (Bougard et al., 2011; Barbusse et al., 2011) suggest that hiring managers take into account and penalize candidates who mention volunteer activities to a greater extent when the job depends more on soft skills than technical knowledge, as is the case for field sales. In addition, studies have shown that the skills that can be “indicated” to employers by mentioning volunteer activities are similar to those required for field sales representatives (Lazurech, 1999). Moreover, no correspondence testing has been conducted on the subject for this type of job.

Finally, this choice of occupation ensures that the skills required for the post are consistent with those that may be acquired in a nonprofit organization or in a union. These include organizing meetings and project management (Lazurech, 1999).

**2-Development of resumes: from the reference candidate to the pro-union applicant**

After selecting the type of job to test, we developed three fictitious resumes for young graduates. While correspondence testing originally consisted in assessing two resumes in parallel, most studies that use this method compare several applications (Hennequin, 2007).

The reference resume mentions no volunteer experience and gives no indication of union sympathies or membership. It is designed to include no criteria likely to hinder the chances of being invited to interview. However, unlike the other resumes, it does not mention any particular aptitude for communication, meeting management, or project management.

The second application mentions volunteer activities, with the applicant specifying involvement in the NGO Amnesty International. The communication, meeting management, and project management skills developed through this experience are presented as substantial and transferable to business situations. We chose Amnesty International as it does not reveal any characteristics associated with discrimination and enjoys a positive image among the public and industry professionals. This resume will allow us first to define whether union activities are disadvantageous because they denote membership in a nonprofit organization and, second, to test hypothesis 1.

The third applicant mentions membership in the student wing of the SUD union and details the activities carried out within this organization. It highlights the communication, meeting management, and project management skills gained from this experience, which are presented as substantial and transferable to business situations. We chose this students’ union[[5]](#footnote-5)\* because its name explicitly denotes its status as a students’ union organization; in contrast to the FSE and UNEF, which are only for students, SUD is also a trade union. Moreover, it clearly lays claim to the title of students’ union rather than student representative organization, unlike other organizations. Finally, we selected this union for its highly militant stance. Given that anti-union discrimination is exacerbated by a union’s militancy (Breda, 2010), this choice allows for a potentially lower response rate for this candidate. Through this application we will be able both to measure employers’ aversion to unionized job applicants and to test hypothesis 2 of our study.

When developing the resumes, we satisfied the three conditions necessary for a rigorous test: the credibility of the applications, the suitability of the fictitious resumes for the type of post to be filled, and equivalence between all other factors guaranteed by the similarity of the resumes except for the variable of interest. (Bratsberg et al., 1998). Indeed, we ensured our applicants’ personal and employment characteristics were similar and therefore would not interfere in the recruiter’s decision. The candidates are of the same gender, family situation, and nationality. They were given similar qualifications, professional experience, language skills and IT skills, both qualitatively and quantitatively. We only differentiated the resumes by their presentation (typeface, font size, chronological order of experiences, headings, etc.).

After reviewing the literature (Duguet et al., 2009), we took additional measures to ensure the validity and reliability of our findings. We regularly switched the applications round to prevent the style and content of a resume from influencing the recruiter’s decision. We did not attach photographs or cover letters to the resumes in order to simplify the procedure and to avoid introducing a selection bias. Finally, our applications were developed using an existing resume database and were appraised by three recruitment officers.

In total, 750 resumes, or 250 resumes per fictitious applicant, were sent by email the same day, at intervals of several minutes in response to the same job vacancies, over a four-month period.

**Anti-union discrimination in hiring: a large-scale practice**

Now let us turn to the results.

An email address and phone number was assigned to each fictitious candidate in order to measure the rate of invitations to interview following the application for a job vacancy. For the statistical processing of results, a response is considered positive when the employer invites the applicant for an interview by telephone or email. A response is considered negative if the application is explicitly rejected, most often by email.

In the correspondence testing method, the existence of discriminatory practices can be proven and measured by analyzing positive responses, positive responses by matched pair, positive responses by company size, and negative responses (Hennequin, 2007).

**1-Positive responses**

In line with the literature on correspondence testing, unequal treatment during the recruitment process is measured by comparing the percentage of invitations to interview between the different candidates.

The results in Table 1 show the difference in treatment between applicants.

Figure 1: Distribution of percentage of positive responses by candidate

We can see that the positive responses received by applicants are unevenly distributed.

The reference resume obtained 47% or a total of 117 positive responses.

The candidate mentioning volunteer activities on his resume received 36% or a total of 90 positive replies.

The candidate belonging to a union, meanwhile, obtained 6% or a total of 15 positive responses.

The applicants from the most to least discriminated against are therefore the unionized candidate, the volunteer candidate and finally the reference candidate.

A considerable difference can be noted between the two extremes: the reference candidate and the applicant who mentions union membership on his resume.

As unequal treatment in hiring is measured by the analysis of positive responses, their significance must be ensured by a test. In line with the literature on correspondence testing, we use the statistical test of proportions (Petit, 2004; Hennequin, 2007) to prove the existence of anti-union discrimination in hiring. We compare the positive responses of the unionized applicant (6%) and of the reference applicant.

Table 1: Statistical test of proportions on the positive responses to the unionized and reference candidates

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Difference | 0.408 |
| z (Observed value) | 11.731 |
| z (Critical value) | 1.645 |
| p-value (unilateral) | < 0.0001 |
| alpha | 0.05 |
|  |  |

The statistical test of proportions shows that the differences observed between the positive responses received by the unionized candidate and by the reference candidate are statistically significant to 95% confidence.

The analysis of positive responses also includes the number of follow-up calls or messages from firms, the content of telephone messages left for candidates, and the response time.

Follow up is when companies, having had no response from candidates after having tried to contact them the first time, call again or send another email. Follow-up calls or emails underscore recruiters’ interest in a candidate and allow us, once again, to compare and rank the resumes. The reference candidate received a greater number of follow-up calls and emails (27) than the applicant who mentioned volunteer activities (6). The candidate from SUD-étudiant did not receive a single follow-up call or email.

Employers’ telephone messages inviting to interview also differed between the candidates. In the case of the reference candidate, unlike the others, some employers promoted the merits of the company and the position, or suggested the applicant get back to them urgently to secure a job interview.

Finally, the response time was faster for the reference candidate than for the other applicants. After ten days, the reference candidate had received half of the responses to job vacancies while the applicant belonging to a students’ union had only received a quarter.

**2-Positive responses by matched pair**

The analysis of responses by matched pair consists in evaluating the loss in chances of each applicant susceptible to discrimination compared to the reference candidate. This offers a clearer picture of the unequal treatment between the reference candidate and the applicants who mention one of the variables of interest. Figure 2 compares the positive responses obtained by the reference candidate with those of the other candidates.

Figure 2: Rate of positive responses by matched pair

Figure 2 shows that an candidate including volunteer activities on his resume obtains 23.4% fewer positive responses than the reference candidate. It also shows that a unionized candidate has 87.2% less chance of being invited to interview than the reference candidate.

**3-Positive responses by company size**

To identify the types of company in which discriminatory practices against pro-union applicants are the most prevalent, we analyzed the positive responses by company size. The figure below presents the differences in treatment by company size between the unionized candidate and the reference candidate.

Figure 3: Comparison of positive responses by candidate according to company size

Figure 3 shows that for the reference candidate, the rate of positive responses does not vary according to the size of the company. On the contrary, the applicant belonging to a union is treated differently according to company size. The bigger the company, the greater the discrimination against this applicant. He obtains 9% positive responses from microenterprises, 5% from SMEs, and 2% from large companies. French regulations define microenterprises as companies with fewer than 10 employees, SMEs (small and medium enterprises) as having 11 to 250 employees, and large enterprises as those with a workforce of over 5,000 employees. There were no companies of intermediate size, from 251 to 5,000 employees, in this study’s sample.

**4-Negative responses**

The study of negative responses usually confirms the results obtained by measuring the positive responses, and is often considered optional in studies based on correspondence testing. We thought it relevant because in the test for this article, negative responses, that is email rejections sent by the companies, yield evidence of unequal treatment based on membership in a union or nonprofit organization. We can see that the rate of negative responses ranks the resumes in the opposite order to the rate of positive responses.

Figure 4: Percentage of negative responses by matched pair

Examination of the negative responses reveals the same difference in treatment between applications. The applicant belonging to SUD-étudiant received a much higher rate of standardized and definitive negative responses than the reference candidate. In addition, the grounds for refusal were not provided. On the contrary, rejections of the reference application were more personalized and indicated that the company would retain the resume for future vacancies. Two different employers even rejected the application, but sent information on other current vacancies inviting him to apply for other positions.

**Anti-union discrimination in hiring: a practice with multiple causes**

In accordance with the literature, our test shows that disclosure of volunteer and union experiences has an influence on recruiters’ decisions. It concludes that the impact of such disclosure is detrimental to the applicant. The results provide clear evidence of the existence of discrimination in hiring based on union membership, since the applicant belonging to SUD-étudiant had 87.2% less chance of being granted an interview than the reference candidate. Union membership significantly impacts the selection of candidates and is a barrier to obtaining a sales representative job.

Furthermore, the test described in this article proves unequal treatment in hiring based on membership in a nonprofit organization, as the applicant who mentions experience in Amnesty International received 23.4% fewer positive responses than the reference candidate. It also refutes two hypotheses from the literature on the subject (Bougard et al., 2011; Barbusse et al., 2001), which posit that the skills developed through volunteer activities are disadvantageous when they are insubstantial, not presented to best advantage and not obviously transferable, and when they are assessed in the accounting, finance and IT sectors, where technical knowledge is required. Belonging to a nonprofit organization is indeed an impediment to securing a sales representative job.

These two results allowed us to answer the research question and confirm the hypotheses of this study.

Two groups of interpretations can be put forward to understand recruiters’ aversion to candidates who disclose volunteer experiences in general on the one hand, and union activities in particular on the other.

**1-** **Unfavorable treatment in hiring based on membership in a nonprofit organization**

The results suggest that volunteer and union activities diminish the chances of securing an interview. Several interpretations can be considered as to why these activities send a negative signal.

A recruiter’s aversion to a certain group may, according to the literature, be a matter of taste or of calculated interest (Garner-Moyer, 2007). In the first case, the employer is motivated to eliminate candidates who disclose volunteer or union activities by personal preference. In the second case, the unequal treatment results from the employer’s calculation, whether rational or not, that the candidate with such experiences will be less productive than the reference candidate.

On the one hand, employers may have a preference for the reference candidate because the mention of membership in a union or nonprofit can evoke negative stereotypes about the candidate, including about his or her personality (Gatignon, 2005) or values (Dubost, 2010). Employers may also, by risk aversion, prefer to hire someone with a conventional profile that they are accustomed to recruiting and seeing at work in the company (Ghirardello, 2005).

On the other hand, employers may consider that the productivity and future returns to be expected from applicants with volunteer or union experience are lower than for the reference candidate.

Recruiters may assume that candidates with union or volunteer activities have time-consuming non-professional activities, and that they will therefore assign less time to their work-related tasks. They may also wonder whether these candidates will be able to deal with variable or irregular work hours (Bougard et al., 2011).

Furthermore, because of their “unconventional” application, recruiters may question their ability to fit in to the company, adopt its values, and fully interact with their future colleagues (Bougard et al., 2011; Barbusse et al., 2011).

Finally, the results suggest that the skills developed through volunteer or union activities are not considered to be directly productive since, all else being equal, they reduce the chances of securing an interview. It is possible that the skills developed in a nonprofit organization or union are deemed insubstantial, not readily transferable to business situations and inconsistent with those required for the job (Barbusse et al., 2011). They therefore prove disadvantageous for the candidate because additional information deemed superficial, unnecessary, or conflicting with the profile sought for the position are generally unfavorable to a job applicant (Ghirardello, 2005).

Recruiters’ preference for the reference candidate in this study may also be explained by the type of vacancy. It is possible that the main characteristic expected of a sales representative is the drive for financial gain and to maximize turnover by any means possible. On the face of it, volunteer or union activities would suggest a lesser appetite for enrichment (Dubost, 2010). Furthermore, sales representative jobs rarely entail teamwork and require a faire degree of individualism. Nonprofit engagement and trade unionism suggest, on the contrary, altruism and a sense of community. It is likely that for other jobs, unequal treatment in hiring based on volunteer or union activities would be less pronounced.

**2-Unfavorable treatment in hiring based on union membership**

We will now focus on recruiters’ aversion to unionized candidates, as the most significant loss of chances observed was linked to membership in this type of organization. The candidates from Amnesty International and SUD-étudiant were not disadvantaged to the same extent.

First, recruiters’ aversion to hiring unionized employees may be due to the ideological aversion to unionism felt by some employers, and to the different cultural attitudes of employer organizations and trade unions (Baert & Omey, 2014). The difference in treatment between the reference candidate and the applicant belonging to SUD-étudiant may therefore be caused by union membership itself.

Second, this aversion may be due to equating unions with a force of opposition that poses a threat to the company. Studies have shown that representatives of the unions perceived by employers as the most militant are significantly less well paid than the other union representatives in the same company with equal qualifications and seniority (Breda, 2014). Similarly, in the correspondence test conducted by Stijn Baert and Eddy Omey, discrimination was significantly higher when the candidate was pro-FGTB, which has a militant image, that when a member of CSC, seen as more moderate. The considerable difference in our test between the reference candidate and the unionized candidate may be partly due to the union we selected, SUD, which employers may perceive as “anti-establishment.”

Third, this aversion may be due to the occupation chosen for this study. The position of field sales representative entails representing the company to customers, and therefore being committed to the company (Lazurech, 1999). However, the literature indicates that some employers see an incompatibility between representing the company and its values on one side, and the union and its values on the other (Croisat et al., 1992). It also highlights certain recruiters’ belief that a multiple commitment to a union, company, and career is difficult (Thacker, 1986). Multiple commitment means showing feelings of attachment, identification and/or loyalty to different focal points (Ghirardello, 2005). The difference in results between the Belgian test and the test in this article may be explained in part by the samples: 290 diverse vacancies in Flanders and 250 sales representative vacancies in the French sample.

Fourth, this form of unequal treatment is potentially facilitated by the fact that social judgment may be less severe towards discrimination when based on union activity, which is voluntary and not very visible as a basis for discrimination during the recruitment process.

Fifth, this aversion may be exacerbated when the rate of unionization in the company is already high. Indeed, our test indicated that anti-union discrimination in hiring increased with the size of the company, and the trade union movement has a much greater following in large companies than in small companies. Baert and Omey also noted that in Belgium, anti-union discrimination in hiring is strongest in firms with a higher level of unionization.

Finally, when the results of the test conducted by Baert and Omey are compared with our own, union membership seems to be stigmatized and repressed by employers to a greater extent in France than in Belgium (Van Rie et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, it is important to take into account the limitations of correspondence testing when interpreting the results.

First, the results provide a localized and partial measure of the impact of union membership on access to employment (data was collected only in Ile-de-France; a single occupation, sales representative, was tested). The information collected only indicates the extent of discrimination in hiring for a specific job and a particular geographic area. The results cannot be extrapolated beyond the field covered by the study (Duguet et al., 2009).

Second, the test measured the impact of a given characteristic on the probability of being invited to interview, and not on the entire recruitment process. Potentially, the interview phase may mitigate or, on the contrary, strengthen the effect of discrimination already at work in sorting the resumes. However, extending the test to the interview stage using actors would be inadvisable, as it would introduce a number of biases (Riach & Rich, 2002; Petit, 2004).

The test conducted for this article proved and measured the existence of unequal treatment in hiring based on union membership. According to our test, a candidate who discloses union activities has 87.2% fewer chances than the reference candidate of securing a sales representative job. The test also showed that employers penalize experience in a union more than experience in a nonprofit organization. According to the results, an applicant including volunteer activities on his resume gets 23.4% fewer positive responses than the reference candidate to whom he is compared.

These results have interesting implications for the individual, society, organizations and research. At the individual level, they demonstrate that disclosing membership in a union during the recruitment process is a bad idea, even if skills have been developed through this membership that may interest an employer. At the level of society, the results prove the existence of unequal treatment in hiring based on union membership. It seemed particularly worthwhile to bring to light the extent of this phenomenon given that the union issue is largely neglected by corporate diversity policy, research, and the public debate on discrimination. While social dialogue is sometimes presented as a way out of economic difficulties, the persistence of such unfavorable treatment could discourage people from joining a union. At the organizational level, this form of employment discrimination deprives companies of employees with new and diverse skills acquired outside the professional field. It is a particularly difficult practice to objectify, so by highlighting the relevance of correspondence testing, this study opens interesting perspectives for research on the subject.

Given the scarcity of research on anti-union discrimination in hiring, it would be interesting to extend this study. We recommend expanding the field covered by the test in this article. The aim would be to determine whether a correspondence test focused on another occupation, union, population, or geographic area would give results similar to our own findings. Further research could also investigate the motivations of recruiters and how their perceptions of unions are constructed.

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3. \* Independent authority established in 2008 to defend citizen’s rights, particularly on issues of discrimination. Similar to an ombudsman. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. \* The ILO is the secretariat of the International Labour Organization, responsible for bringing together different actors (state, professionals, researchers, etc.) to work jointly to promote labor rights. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. \* Similar to a student government in the United States. In France, students elect representatives from among their number to university governing bodies. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)