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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Break up to get back together

The impact of unionisation through innovative service provision on union membership and industrial relations

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BreakBack – Break up to get back together.
The impact of unionisation through innovative service provision on union membership and industrial relations

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A UNION STRATEGY THROUGH SERVICES PROVISION TO:

ENHANCE MEMBERSHIP

REVITALIZE ACTION

THE PURPOSE:

- HOW UNIONS RESPOND TO INDIVIDUALISATION
- EVALUATING IMPACT OF SERVICES ON MEMBERSHIP



FOCUS

 breakback

RELAUNCH
AN INCLUSIVE
SOCIAL DIALOGUE

BREAK BACK HAS
3 MAIN
AIMS



GOALS

1. TO ASSESS WHICH
STRATEGIES TRADE
UNIONS ADOPT TO
OVERCOME WORKERS
DISAFFECTION

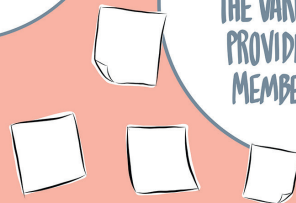
2. TO COLLECT
AND DESCRIBE
THE VARIETY OF SERVICES
PROVIDED IN 5 EU
MEMBER STATES

3. TO EVALUATE THE
EFFECTIVENESS OF
THESE MEMBERSHIP
REVITALIZATION
STRATEGIES

EVALUATE WHETHER
THE PROVISION OF SERVICES
LEADS TO A UNION
MEMBERSHIP INCREASE!



THE HYPOTHESIS:
TRADE UNIONS
ARE EXPERIMENTING
A "CUSTOMISATION"
OF THEIR ACTIVITIES






EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Project aims and research methods

The BreakBack project focuses on **servicing** as a strategy through which trade unions aim to retain and enhance their membership by reaching groups and individuals often excluded from protection. We refer to workers commonly identified as “vulnerable”, such as self-employed, platform, non-standard workers or unemployed persons.

BreakBack has three main aims. The first aim is to assess union strategies to attract new members or retain to old ones. The second aim is to gather a repertoire of practices – namely, union services – provided in five countries (Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Lithuania, and Spain). The third difficult aim is to evaluate the impact of these practices on union membership. In other words, we intend to

evaluate whether the provision of services leads to an increase in union membership and/or to the growth of workers’ involvement in union activities.

Since March 2019, the five national teams undertook a two-stage research agenda. In the first phase, researchers interviewed 4-5 peak-level key informants per country. The goal was to investigate whether confederal trade unions have developed a revitalisation strategy and whether this strategy implies innovative services. The second phase was based on a case study approach. Researchers conducted 14 in-depth studies on servicing actions by interviewing trade unionists that organised service provision and by collecting opinions of service users. In the latter case, focus groups, one-to-one interviews, and a survey were used. 

2. Industrial relations systems, union strategies, and servicing

The use of services is differently widespread in the BreakBack countries. In some cases, servicing represents a long-standing and highly institutionalised tradition (e.g., Belgium, Denmark, Italy and Spain). In other places, it is (relatively) poorly developed (e.g., Lithuania). In Denmark, for instance, to counter the membership loss and attract new members, trade unions have expanded their membership packages to include various services ranging from different types of insurances to renting summer houses. Also in Belgium, the provision of services is a core activity of trade unions, which dates back to their early days and is linked to the Ghent system. In Italy, since a long time, the main trade union has provided its members and citizens with support and services in several fields, such as social insurance, fiscal assistance, and consumer protection. Similarly, the two biggest Spanish confederations offer free legal counselling on labour issues and other issues like mortgages; and they promote discounts on a wide range of goods and services or reduced prices for hotels and resorts. On the contrary, in the Lithuanian case, the provision of services for workers is a common phenomenon among trade unions. There are no legal or tax assistance nor other consultancy services for freelancers.

Service provision is widely considered a strategic field to deal with more individualised relationships between members and unions and a highly fragmented labour force. Interviews with peak level trade unionists showed different degrees of awareness on servicing.

On the one hand, in some countries, services are at the core of trade unions' change strategies. This is the case for Belgium. Belgian trade unions have undertaken several initiatives to offer new types of services to their existing members – to retain members – and offer traditional or new services to groups typically outside their scope – primarily self-employed and platform workers.

In the Danish case, trade unions have adopted several strategies and actions that fall into different categories of services, where some reflect examples of innovative services. In contrast, others resemble more traditional union services such as legal assistance and advice on further training and job search, but with a novel twist. In Italy, too, the enlargement of services is a strategic aspect common to the three confederations, although the emphasis on these activities and their role in relation to membership trends are perceived differently. The general orientation is to strengthen existing tools and branches through more differentiation, developing bilateral tools, and providing innovative solutions for specific sections of the labour market through special initiatives.

On the other hand, Spain and Lithuania industrial relations systems are less keen on introducing service-based renewal strategies. Rather than providing new services to members, Spanish trade unions have focused on enhancing their representation and institutional capacity. For this reason, there is very little, not to say any, change in relation to services provided by trade unions. The primary mechanism used to attract new members and retain them is a passive one, as it consists in differentiating membership fees for different groups (unemployed, retirees, young workers, etc.). Likewise, the adoption of servicing by unions as a strategy for attracting or retaining new members is not common in Lithuania. Together with the lack of tradition in service provision, the reason for the poor use of servicing might be that only a few trade unions have the necessary human, financial, or organisational resources to organise services of an adequate scale.

3. Practices of servicing across Europe

The target of the service activity can be used to classify the 14 case studies performed by the BreakBack researchers. We look at the services addressed to self-employed, platform and precarious workers, or unemployed persons¹. Servicing towards self-employed is the most frequent type of servicing. Italy has three examples. **Vivace** (CISL) is a national association for freelancers and self-employed workers affiliated with Felsa, the CISL Federation for self-employed and atypical workers. Vivace was born as an online community, but territorial offices are going to be opened. Vivace aims to offer services (tax/legal advisory), develop a collective culture and identity, and represent the self-employed workers in national discussions. **Partita Viva Vicenza** (CISL) represents the self-employed (so-called *Partite IVA*) and provides them with services. Furthermore, it has opened a co-working space in the heart of the trade union headquarters. While maintaining its specific characteristics, recently, Partita Viva Vicenza joined Vivace. **Nidil CGIL Firenze** provides services addressed to self-employed and atypical workers, with attention to turning individual issues into collective issues. In fact, it promotes territorial agreements outside the perimeter of traditional trade union protection, for example, in the case of tour guides.

In Denmark, there is one case of services dedicated to self-employed professionals. The **HK freelance bureau** aims to regulate freelance work and assist freelancers with various services related to the freelance business, such as collective agreement coverage, assistance with invoicing, tax returns, insurance, work contracts, etc. The HK freelance bureau is open to union and non-union members – but with some restrictions.

The Lithuanian cases are related to professional

workers and to self-employed workers. The **Lithuanian Nurses' Organisation (LSSO)** is a branch of the Lithuanian Trade Union Confederation, organising and providing services for nurses. LSSO organises professional development services for nurses – it provides training and issues certificates necessary for accreditation of nurses in Lithuania. It was established to meet the need for reformation of the profession due to poor working conditions and heavy workloads, as well as the need to represent the interest of the profession at the national and international level. Among the main aims of the LSSO were improving nursing-related legislation, establishing decent professional standards and improving the education of nurses. The **Trade Union 'Solidarumas' of Guides and tour guides - GKVPS** is a branch of the Lithuanian Trade Union 'Solidarumas', which organises and provides services for self-employed guides. GKVPS provides some training, represents the interests of tour guides in state institutions, organises various actions and inspections against illegally working guides and unfair tourism agencies. The reasons for its establishment were the poor working conditions of tour guides, such as fewer social guarantees and possibilities to negotiate, a high share of illegally working guides, unfair competition, low income, and inappropriate and unclear legal regulation. Finally, the Belgian **United Freelancers**, launched by ACV-CSC, targets three groups of workers: freelancers (the self-employed without personnel), those who are self-employed in their secondary occupation, and platform workers. Even though these workers perform similar tasks in similar conditions as regular employees, their employment status does not give them the same rights or level of protection. ACV-CSC aspires to represent all workers active in the Belgian labour market, regardless of their employment status, and assist with solving their problems. Among the BreakBack cases, there is room for three services tailored to platform workers. The

1. More in-depth information about the cases can be found in the 5 national reports.



Platform for platform workers is an initiative of the Belgian ABVV-FGTB. The platform is for platform workers in any sector having questions about their rights and through which workers are dispatched to the department that is best able to help them. Its main objective is to get more grip on platform work. Attracting new members is only a secondary goal. The Spanish **UGT-TuRespuestaSindicalYa.com** (TRSY!) is a top-down initiative for platform workers created with the inter-sectoral coordination of the union. The service aims to tackle issues, problems, and demands of platform workers. This service also functions as a digital union section. Within the service, a MailBox is provided to answer questions on (bogus) self-employed rights. Another aim of the service is the collective coordination of hard-to-unionise profiles and the bargaining coverage of out-of-employment-relation profiles. Even though the service was intended for platform workers, many people from Spanish rural areas use it as their only way to contact the trade union. The Danish **Hilfr agreement** is an innovative collective agreement negotiated between the cleaning platform Hilfr and the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F). It is a combined collective agreement for both self-employed/freelancers and traditional employees (i.e., on zero-hour contracts) and novel conflict resolution mediation. 3F aimed to lift workers with different employment status' wages and working conditions and attract new members within a digital labour market they rarely organise. Finally, three service activities regard precarious or unemployed workers. **Flexwerker** is a Danish grassroots initiative to create a platform and raise awareness of non-standard work and its associated risks among humanities and social

science academics. In the beginning, there were no ties to the trade union, but later DM (Danish Association of Master's and PhDs) financially supported it and has integrated Flexwerker as part of their union services. Flexwerker organises thematic workshops, network activities and publishes news articles on non-standard work, and it is open to union and non-union members. The aims of the **CCOO Catalunya-El WhatsApp de la precariedad** are to bridge the gap between the organisation and non-unionised members, influence the collective bargaining at the company level, and become a tool of participation and interaction between people suffering the same precarious conditions. The service provides legal information and advice via phone and a free instant messaging app. In doing this, it focuses not only on labour-related issues but also on social vulnerability issues. As such, it is a response to the fragmentation of labour realities. Finally, the Italian **Sportello Lavoro** (CISL Firenze-Prato) is a front-office service for unemployed workers that provides information, skills analysis, job search support and targeted training. During the pandemic, the front-office service has become a virtual service in synergy with some trade union federations. The last case can hardly be homologated to others presented so far. It is **Quadrifor**, the Italian national level joint body administered by a committee of employers and trade unions representatives. Its aim is to provide training for "middle managers" in the service sector. This is an example of direct engagement of social actors in the training and empowerment of managers and high-level professionals, for which some sectoral trade union organisations have promoted ad hoc associations. ♦

4. Varieties of servicing

Servicing varies considerably from case to case. From an **organisational point of view**, the differences concern four dimensions. First, in some cases, are the result of a national strategic choice (Vivace - IT, United Freelancers - BE, Platform for platform workers - BE and TRSY! - ES), whereas other services are the results of local political entrepreneurship (GKVPS - LT, Sportello Lavoro - IT, Partita Viva - IT, Nidil-Firenze - IT). Second, servicing can be promoted by a 'gateway' or a service-oriented organisation. In the former case, those who promote services are no more than a contact point that sorts incoming workers' demands to appropriate trade union units (e.g., Platform for platform worker -BE, Precariousness WhatsApp -ES). In the latter, trade union operators take care of the incoming issues providing legal and fiscal assistance, guidance, information to workers (e.g., Sportello Lavoro – IT, TRSY! – ES, Freelance Bureau - DK). Moreover, they try to establish a strong relationship with the workers and build a cohesive community of similar workers. A third core difference between the cases rests on the kind of services the trade unions offer. In traditional servicing, organisations such as Quadrifor - IT or LSSO - LT, the ratio is to supply individual incentives to retain or increase members. In other words, the service is tailored to specific individual needs, but the organisations lack an orientation towards community-building. On the contrary, strategic servicing responds to specific individual needs but have either an explicit or latent collectivising function (e.g., Partita Viva - IT, Vivace - IT, Nidil-CGIL Firenze - IT, Platform for platform workers - BE, TRSY! - ES, 3F - DK, United Freelance - BE, GKVPS - LT). The fourth organisational dimension regards the degree of institutionalisation among the trade union. In the cases of LSSO - LT and Quadrifor - IT, significant financial and human resources are assured for the provision of services because those organisations are born as service providers instead of having workers representation as the primary

goal. Other cases share an experimental nature. Some results from institutional entrepreneurship (e.g., Flexwerker - DK, Sportello Lavoro CISL - IT, Partita Viva - IT, Nidil-Firenze - IT, GKVPS - LT). However, the lack of institutionalisation leads to the risk of personalisation. Networks, relationships, and information risk becoming the property of the trade unionist who started the initiative and being dispersed if he/she has a professional discontinuity.

Concerning the outcome of servicing, assessing the impact on membership is not easy. Most of the services under analysis are ongoing experimentations trying to reach hard-to-unionise workers (self-employed and platform workers, unemployed, high-skilled workers). In most cases, research results point to a positive impact on membership (LSSO - LT, TRSY! - ES, the Italian and Belgian cases), even if it is difficult to measure the impact in terms of new members properly. In general, there are no data available on members arriving from individual services, as unions often do not keep track of them or cannot disentangle them from other collected data. In some cases, union membership is a prerequisite for accessing the service, while others are primarily designed to reach non-union members. Especially for traditional servicing, membership coming from service provision tends to be utilitarian and therefore fluctuating, with a high number of disaffiliations once people have solved the problem for which they contacted the union. In the case of strategic servicing, where the services provided try to be collectivising, an issue pertains to the effective capacity of moving from "simple" membership to "active" participation. Although, for example, many cases targeting platform work have succeeded in establishing a trade union delegate in some companies, there is little evidence that this practice is extended to many platform workers supported by the services. This is more so in the case of freelance workers. Nevertheless, even in cases where a community has been promoted, freelance workers consider



themselves more as a professional community intended to solve business problems or increase business opportunities rather than a traditional community oriented to collective action. However, it must be stressed that the effectiveness of servicing should not be measured merely in terms of new union membership, albeit positive, but by looking at the many dimensions of the relationship between workers and trade unions. Servicing has an additional and complementary function beyond the promotion of membership renewal: the beginning of a process of union legitimisation among social groups that traditionally did not know the union or had an unfavourable opinion of it. The same can be said of those services addressing unemployed workers, as Sportello Lavoro - IT. The primary function here is to perpetuate the union's relations with workers traditionally close to the trade union who are switching from one job to another. Therefore, the impact of these innovative services on trade unions would be more appropriately assessed if they were considered an (initial or advanced) step in a long-term strategy of relationship building with defined occupational groups. Here the legitimisation process is twofold. On the one hand, it concerns the perception of the union's role by hard-to-unionise workers; on the other hand, it concerns the attention that unions pay to peripheral occupational groups and the acknowledgement of the role they can play in unions. Precarious workers hold some degree of legitimacy within the unions, especially in Italy and Spain, where specific unions section already exist (e.g. (UPTA - ES, FELSA and NIDIL - IT).

However, cases such as TRSY! - ES, Flexwerker - DK, Nidil-Firenze - IT, Freelance Service Bureau - DK, Partita Viva - IT, United Freelancers - BE, GKVPS - LT show that by narrowing the scope of the target group to which the trade unions address their service – from precarious workers to tour guides, freelance, platform workers or precarious workers in academia – means to supply a much more tailored assistance, whose final result is to increase the legitimisation of trade unions among those groups.

The case studies also revealed that, when servicing is strategic, it can lead to collective action. A first example occurs in those cases where services focus on social networks and other communication tools. In the case of TRSY! – ES, the use of social media allowed platform workers to meet and self-organise. Other examples regard the support of a class action in a court case against Deliveroo (United Freelancers - BE), the promotion of a picket in front of a 'tour operator' main building by GKVPS - LT or, lastly, the development of worker representation at the company level (Platform for platform workers - BE, 3F - DK). Much more inspired by the organising model is the case of Nidil-Firenze - IT. Here, the service was instrumentally provided to get in touch with tour guides. Through legal service and training, the local trade union became aware that most of them were working without a contract. Gathering workers around this issue, they addressed the local administration to set up a 'quality standard' for tour operators and successfully negotiated a first collective agreement on working conditions for tour guides with a tour operator. ♦

5. Some concluding remarks on servicing and trade unions

In the context of rapid and profound changes in the labour market, the problem of “free-riding”, connected with the perceived necessity of maintaining the traditional social base of trade unions, is compounded by the problem of “organising the unorganised”. Traditionally, this issue is addressed by adopting the “organising” approach, inspired by a model of participatory trade unionism embodied in activities carried out at the local level and aimed at recruiting unorganised workers to create consensus around traditional union activities, such as collective bargaining and mobilisation. This model has developed in the Anglo-Saxon countries, starting from the United States, as part of the broader debate on the revitalisation of union action. The “servicing” approach differs significantly from organising, especially in its traditional version. Inspired by the model of a trade union as a supplier of individual goods, it is instead oriented towards the provision of services aimed at supporting workers outside the workplace. To this end, trade unions have dedicated bureaucratic structures of full-time employees with specialist skills who operate through a network of offices. As such, they compete with market services provided by external professionals, such as lawyers, accountants, and labour consultants. In the case of organising, those who decide to join a trade union do so in the light of collective identity and a sense of belonging. In this sense, the union assumes the configuration of a “community”. In the case of traditional servicing, the act of joining a union is primarily aimed at enjoying the advantages deriving from “selective incentives” (e.g., to have free or discounted services). Still, the link with the organisation often remains weak and rarely translates into participation. Here, the union is configured as a “service company”, and the workers play the role of “consumers”. On closer inspection, these are two ideal-typical models, which tend to present themselves in

different combinations. BreakBack shows that, between traditional servicing and organising, we have intermediate approaches, which we could define as strategic servicing since they rely on supplying individual and “collectivising” services. These services are aimed at social groups often characterised by a poor sense of collective identity and legitimacy (both outside and inside trade union organisations). Collectivising services, therefore, respond to specific individual needs but have an explicit or latent collective function. In other words, they aim to ‘build’ a collective, paving the way for possible future actions and dimensions of shared representation.

In conclusion, the case-study research identified new areas of trade union representation created, not without difficulty, in new kinds of jobs (e.g., platform workers), traditionally fragmented professions (e.g., freelancers) or long-abandoned targets such as the unemployed. These areas can hardly be reached without the strategic use of services which, by their very nature, are bridges towards an enlarged and individualised conception of the world of work and its representation. However, BreakBack shows that, across Europe, new forms of trade unionism are emerging. They are addressed to hard-to-unionise workers and is commonly based on service provision. This new kind of activity is far from the traditional servicing. It tries to create a new community of workers as the first step to identity creation and collective action. Results in terms of new membership, although positive, are not the primary outcome of this new approach. The main result is the creation of new trust in trade unions among non-standard workers, who now represent a growing and strategic core of workers. In other words, trade unions are now experimenting with new languages, practices, and strategies for adapting to a world of work that is entirely different from the one in which they consolidated their organisations and, furthermore, must consider the multifaceted effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. ◆

