

Collective Bargaining in Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic. Evidence from a Negotiator Survey

Country Report

June 2023

BARCOVID

The BARCOVID project aims to improve knowledge about the content of collective agreements in Europe and to undertake research activities to enhance the collection of comparative information on collective bargaining outcomes. The project takes in account the Covid-19 impact on industrial relations in Europe, which is approached from different angles, such as government measures and occupational health and safety. Lead partner is the University of Amsterdam/AIAS. The Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI), Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies and WageIndicator Foundation are the project's key actors.

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Funding

BARCOVID (VS/2021/0190) is funded by the European Commission through its Social Dialogue Program.

Bibliographical information

Cetrulo, A. (2023). *Collective Bargaining in Italy during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Evidence from a Negotiator Survey*. University of Amsterdam, Central European Labour Studies Institute, Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, WageIndicator Foundation.

Contact

Armanda Cetrulo armanda.cetrulo@santannapisa.it

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Introduction

The goal of this report is to present the main results of the Barcovid Negotiator Survey with a focus on Italian social actors and their perception of the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on industrial relations at the national and sectoral level. The survey has been developed within the BARCOVID project to assess the point of view of national social actors on collective bargaining and industrial relations during the pandemic, looking – among other things - at the possible changes in the process of renewal of CBAs expired just before or at the beginning of the pandemic. As illustrated in Jansen et al. (2023), the survey was conducted among employers and trade unions that were negotiators and signatories of expired collective bargaining agreements in 5 countries (Austria, The Netherlands, Italy, Spain and France). The online questionnaire was created using Qualtrics and the fieldwork was conducted between January and March 2023.

Data collection and methodology

Among the Italian sectoral collective agreements collected by Wage Indicator in previous European projects, we identified 64 agreements expired just before the pandemic or at its very beginning. For each expired and potential renewed agreement, the contacts of signatories were collected through desk research. In most cases, it was not possible to get direct contact with those persons who signed the agreements, mainly because of change of roles and personal appointments over time. However, the survey was sent to the institutional mail addresses of those organizations that signed the agreement. The e-mails of 349 signatories (respectively 132 employers' associations and 217 trade unions) were collected. When the same organisation resulted to be a signatory part of several agreements, a single e-mail was sent asking to compile the questionnaire separately for each

agreement. Out of a sample of 349 potential respondents, almost 10% of the signatories successfully answered the entire survey, with a final set of 31 respondents.

The overall impact of the pandemic on negotiations

In the following section, the main results of the survey will be illustrated distinguishing four main domains of analysis: 1) Perceived impact of Covid; 2) Process of agreements renewal and negotiations; 3) Industrial relations and 4) Topics of bargaining.

Perceived impact of Covid

Before entering the details of the report on renewal strategies, we exploit other relevant information contained in the survey on the overall socio-economic impact of the pandemic, as perceived by social actors. As depicted in **Figure 1**, according to the respondents, the impact of the pandemic has been stronger in terms of revenues and employment decrease, but much less significant in terms of wage payment interruption.

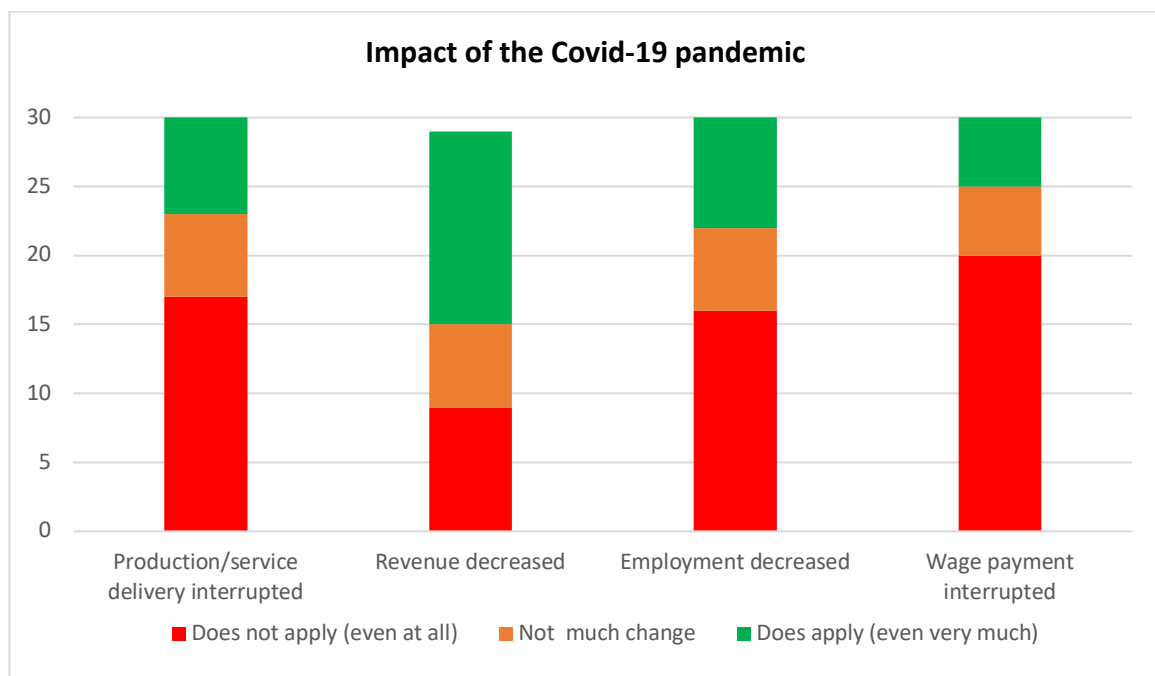


Figure 1 Impact of the Covid on production, revenues, employment, and wages (number of answers)

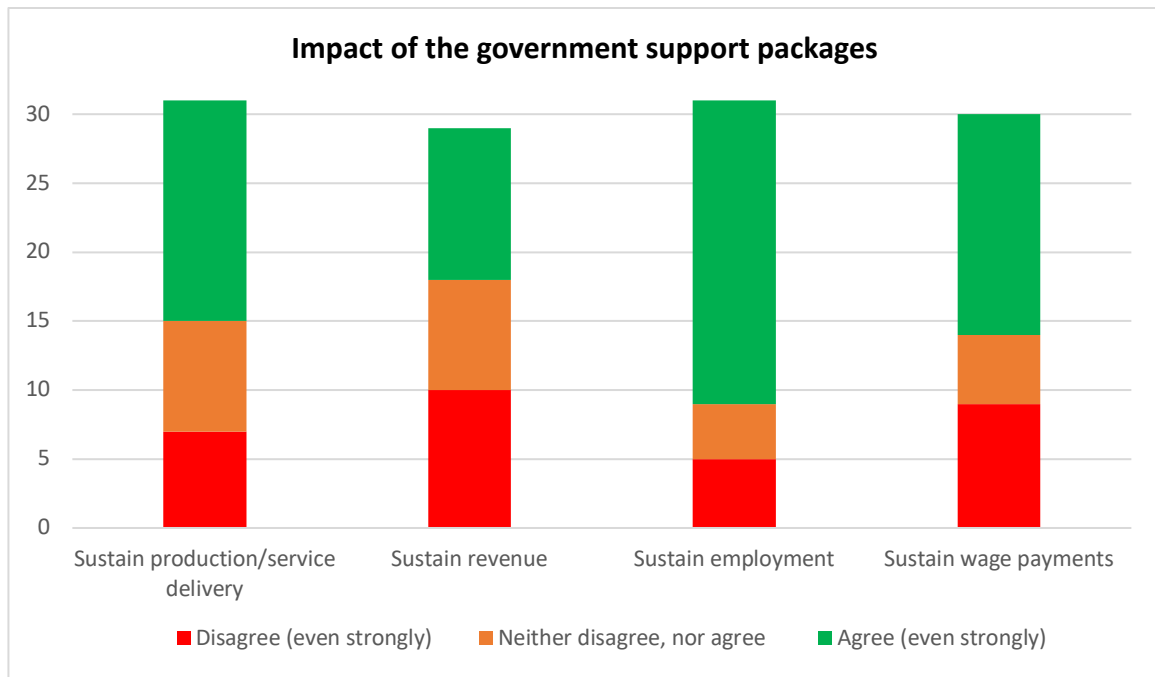


Figure 2 Impact of government support packages (number of answers)

Looking at the perceived impact of government support package measures (**Figure 2**), respondents identify the role of government as essential in the sustainment of employment, which is quite consistent with the policy initiatives taken during the first year of the pandemic. Moreover, respondents also recognize the role of government in sustaining wage payments (i.e., redundancy funds paid by the State) and supporting the production and service delivery. The impact of policy packages on revenues is less relevant. Indeed, most respondents report lower profits if compared to the pre-Covid period together with increasing prices. Nevertheless, not big changes in terms of investment plans are recorded (**Figure 3**).

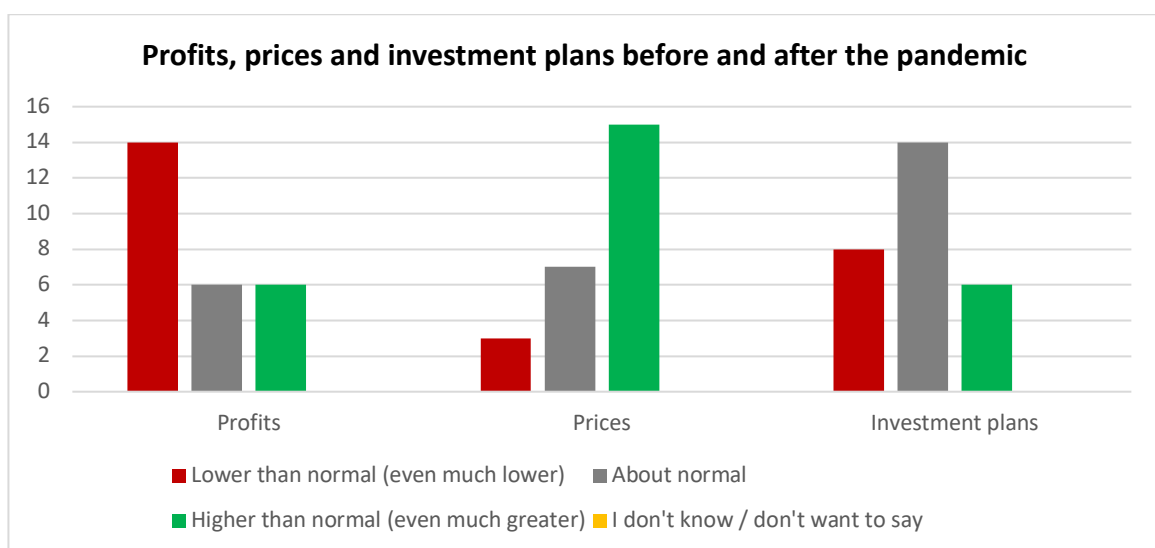


Figure 3 Impact of the pandemic on profits, prices and investment plans (number of answers)

Agreements' renewal process and negotiations

According to the answers provided by social actors, out of the 31 agreements taken into analysis, 14 agreements were renewed after May 2020, whereas 17 were not renewed.

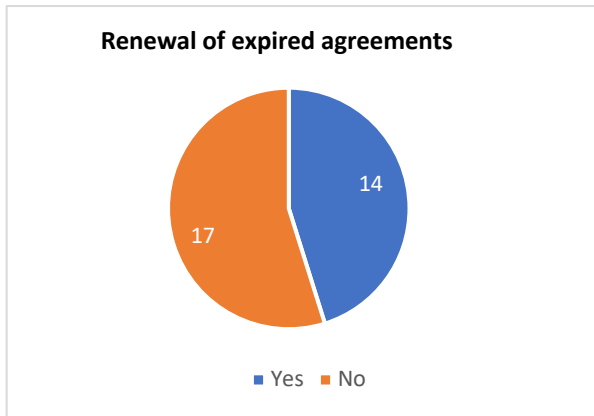


Figure 4 Renewal of collective agreements (number of CBAs)

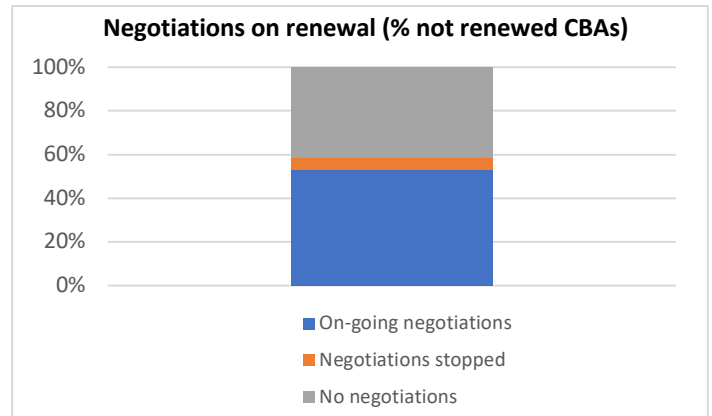


Figure 5 Negotiations on new collective agreements (%)

Among the 17 expired and not renewed agreements, we observe different processes of negotiation (**Figure 5**). In fact, in nine cases negotiations are still on-going at the time of the survey; in seven cases negotiations never started; one negotiation started but then stopped during the first months of the pandemic.

When social actors were asked the main reasons why the agreements were neither renewed yet nor under discussion despite being expired, different answers were provided. In two cases, the explosion of the pandemic was identified as the main reason. In other two agreements, social actors referred to the increasing costs of energy due to the Ukrainian war. In one case, the delay was related to the need of having a clear overview over the labour regulation on specific types of job-contracts. In another agreement, it was because of the unavailability of the counterpart, while in one case the negotiations just started.

Despite the pandemic is not identified as the main cause of delay in renewal, most respondents affirmed – as shown in **Figure 6** - that it made the negotiation more difficult (7) and even much more difficult (9), while the other half of respondents did not observe any significant change (15).

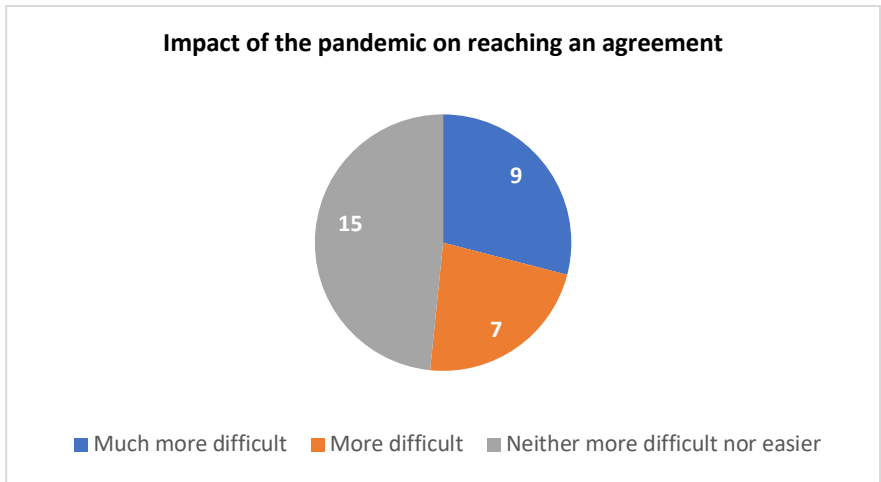


Figure 6 Impact of the pandemic on reaching an agreement on renewals (number of answers)

However, when the impact of the pandemic on agreements’ renewal is compared to other obstacles to the bargaining process, interesting results emerge. Only in a minority of cases, the pandemic is identified as the most important issue affecting the negotiation process. In most cases, other reasons are considered more relevant. Some respondents do not consider the pandemic a relevant factor at all (Figure 7).

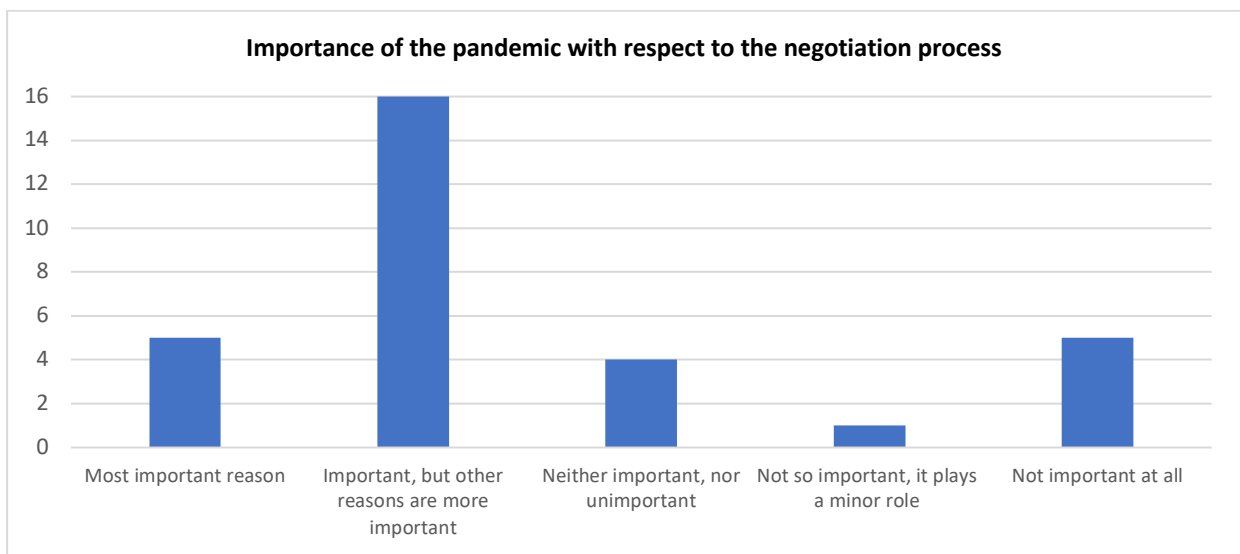


Figure 7 Importance of the pandemic with respect to negotiation (number of answers)

Indeed, when respondents are asked whether they are confident with respect to the possibility of getting renewals one year from the moment of the survey, only 1 respondent out of 10 provides a fully positive answer, while 2 show no confidence at all and 7 declare to have some confidence about the possibility of renewal (Figure 8).

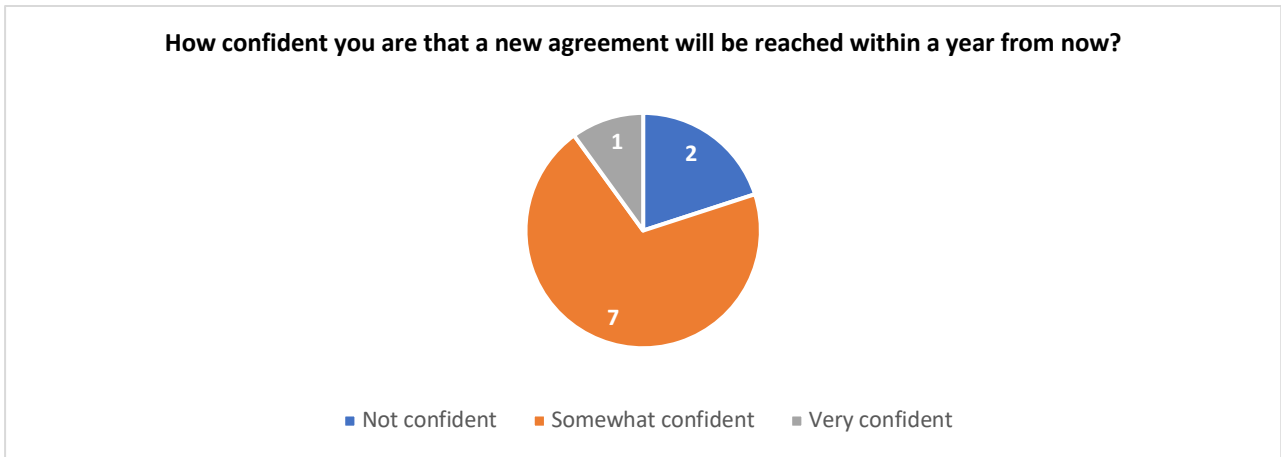


Figure 8 Confidence on agreements' renewals (number of answers)

One of the most unexpected outcomes of the pandemic has been the massive adoption of remote working, extensively used even in occupations and sectors that had never adopted it before. This is also the case of social actors, who faced the necessity to ensure the unfolding of negotiations and bargaining with ICT devices during periods of lock-down. This aspect emerges from the section of the survey on the changes observed in the way negotiations took place during the pandemic.

Concerning the frequency of negotiations during the pandemic, most respondents report to have done monthly meetings (**Figure 9**). They do not record significant changes with respect to pre-pandemic times, while fewer respondents report both an increase and decrease in the frequency of negotiations (**Figure 10**).

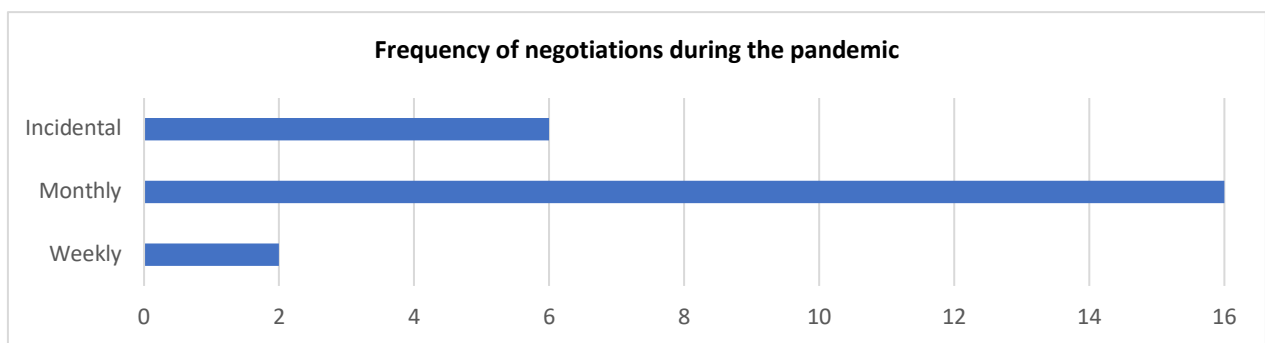


Figure 9 Frequency of negotiations during the pandemic (number of answers)

While in the case of frequency we observe some heterogeneity, concerning the modality through which negotiations took place, respondents confirm that meetings were fully or mostly online in the majority of cases (**Figure 11**). What is more, quarantine measures seem to have played a role with respect to negotiators' availability in a relatively significant number of cases (**Figure 12**).

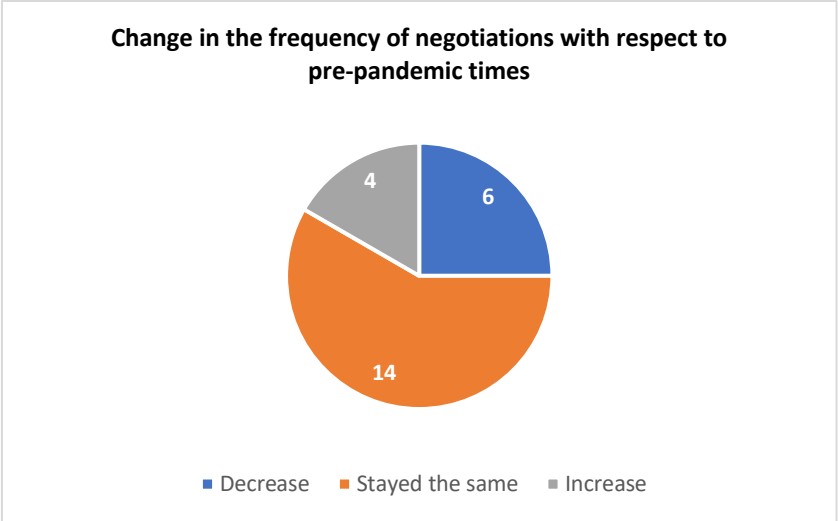


Figure 10 Change in the frequency of negotiations (number of answers)

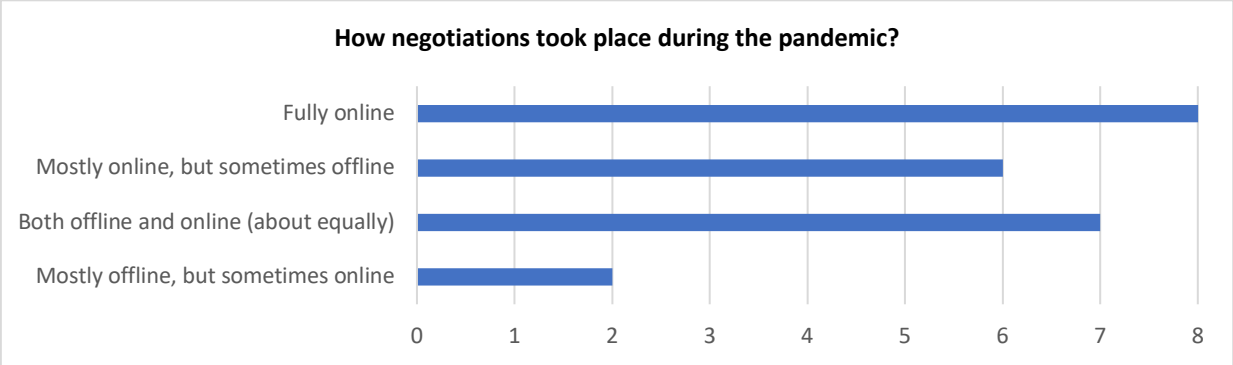


Figure 11 Negotiations' modality during the pandemic (number of answers)

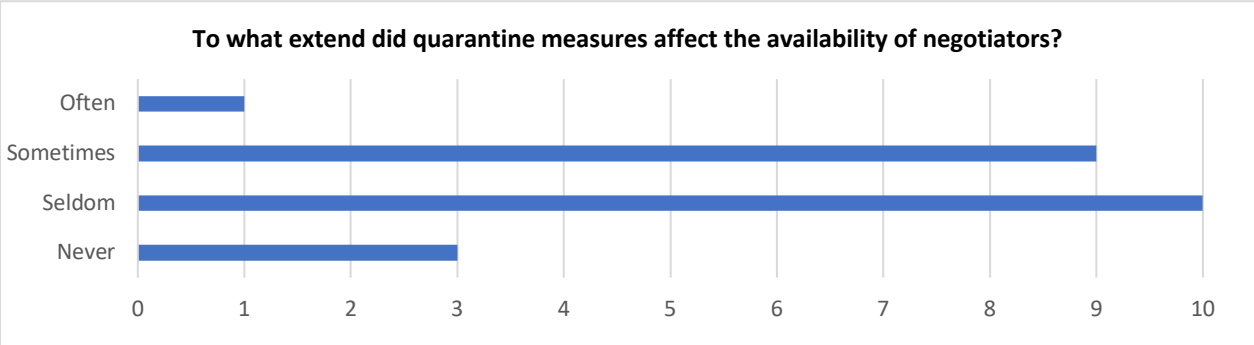


Figure 12 Impact of quarantine measures on negotiators availability (number of answers)

Looking more precisely at the potential role played by the explosion of the pandemic in the renewal process, opinions of respondents are quite contrasting, as shown in **Figure 13**. On the one hand, the global pandemic seems to have reduced only slightly the distance among social actors, making easier for them to accept each other's terms. On the other hand, it turned to have somehow forced them to see the common interest. Moreover, according to the respondents, the pandemic has neither weakened, nor increased the bargaining power of employers, while some respondents recognize this undermining risk for trade unions.

Interestingly, a very small minority of respondents see the pandemic as an occasion through which the role of the government in tripartite negotiations has been strengthened, despite the relatively unusual promotion of tripartite agreements on health and security protocols and remote working observed in the first wave of the pandemic.

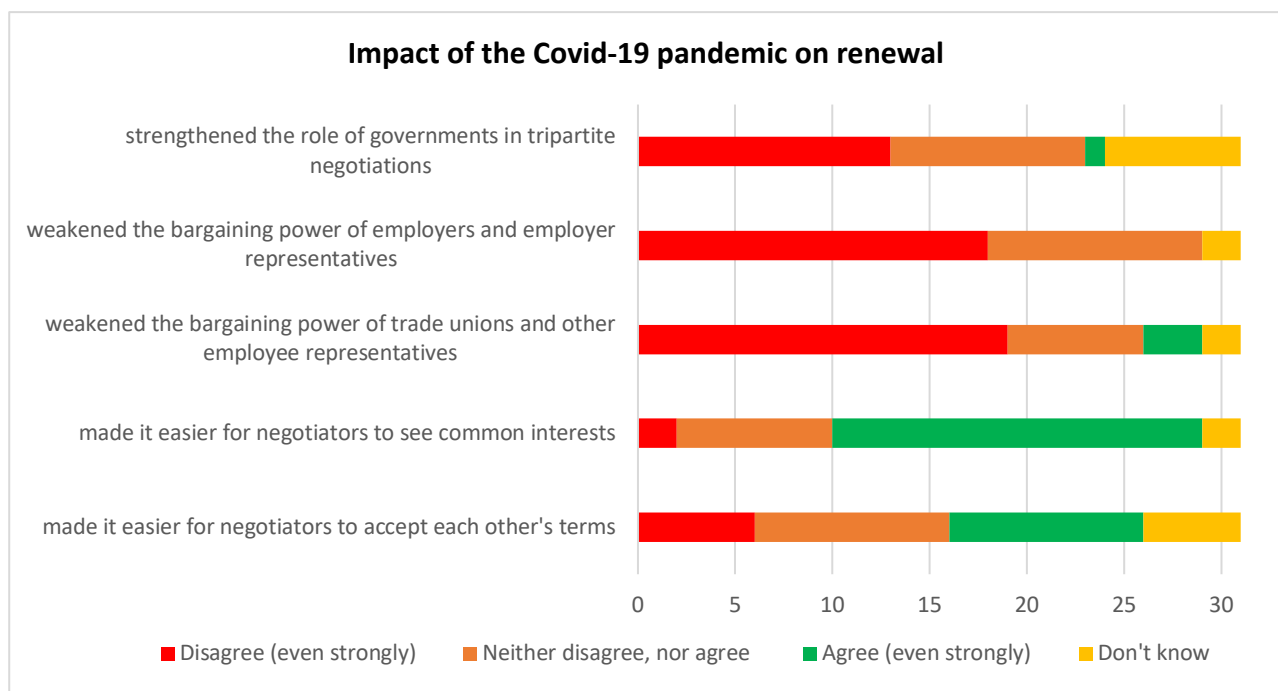


Figure 13 Impact of the pandemic on the renewal process (number of answers)

Industrial relations

Concerning the quality of social actors' relations, results are mixed: respondents declare to have good relations, or neither good nor bad relations with their counterparts (**Figure 14**). No specific worsening impact of the pandemic on the quality of relations between social actors is reported, while some improvement is recorded, as shown in **Figure 15**.

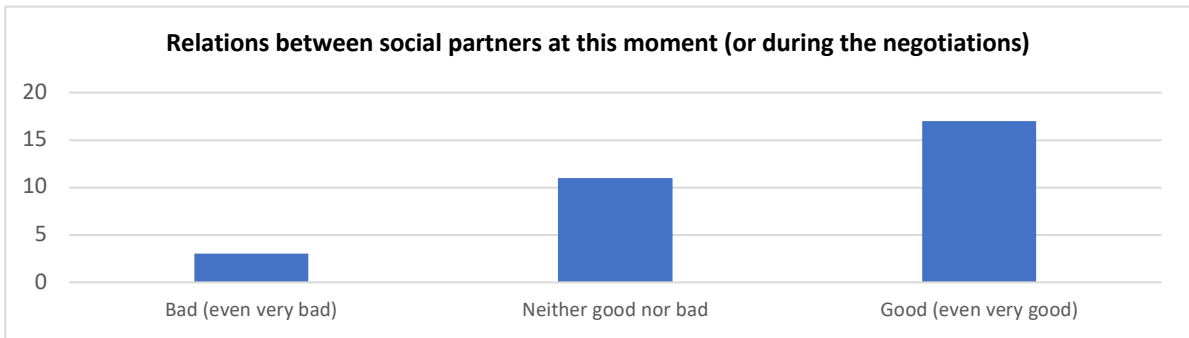


Figure 14 Relations between social partners (number of answers)

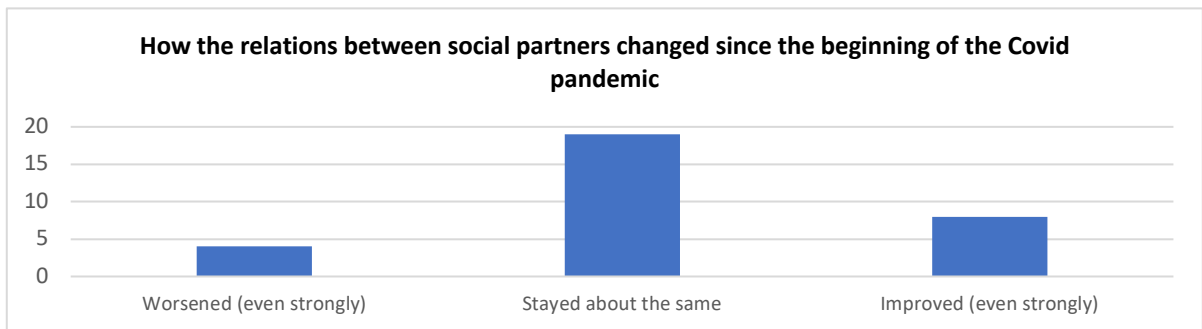


Figure 15 Change in the relations between social partners because of the pandemic ((number of answers)

Asking about the emergence of strikes or other forms of industrial actions during the negotiations, we find only scarce evidence of strikes (15% of the set of respondents, see **Figure 16**). Moreover, only one out of the three strikes reported was directly linked to the pandemic (and more precisely to the diminishing purchasing power of workers).

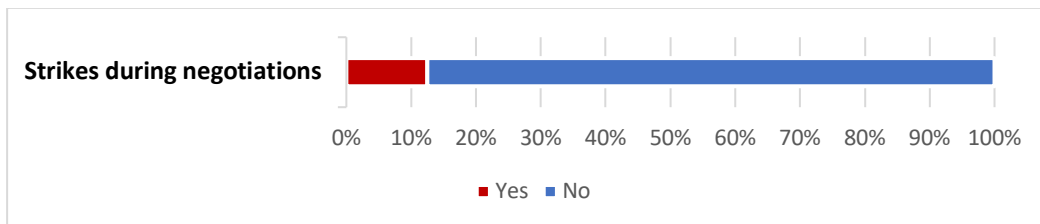


Figure 16 Number of strikes or industrial actions recorded during the negotiations (%)

Interestingly, when asked if social actors expect future instances of strikes or other forms of industrial action, most respondents recognize this possibility (**Figure 17**). This suggests a worsening trend in the quality of their relations with counterparts, also because of the emergence of new issues related to rising inflation and high energy costs.

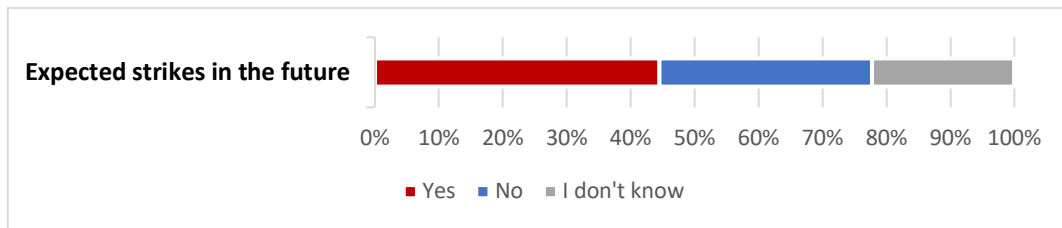


Figure 17 Expectation on strikes or other industrial actions in the future (%)

Topics of bargaining

An entire section of the survey is devoted to the identification of the most important topics that, according to the social partners, have been at the center of the discussion or should be discussed and regulated through collective agreements. As shown in **Figure 18**, the four most important topics are: *i) wages; ii) working hours; iii) job security, iv) work-life balance arrangements.*

Apart from their relative importance, respondents were also asked to identify those topics on which social partners have encountered more common interest or more disagreement (**Figure 19**). While wages and working hours are not only the most important topics for social actors, but also the most contended and conflictual ones, job security and work life balance are the other two most important topics on which social actors seem to have instead found a common interest.

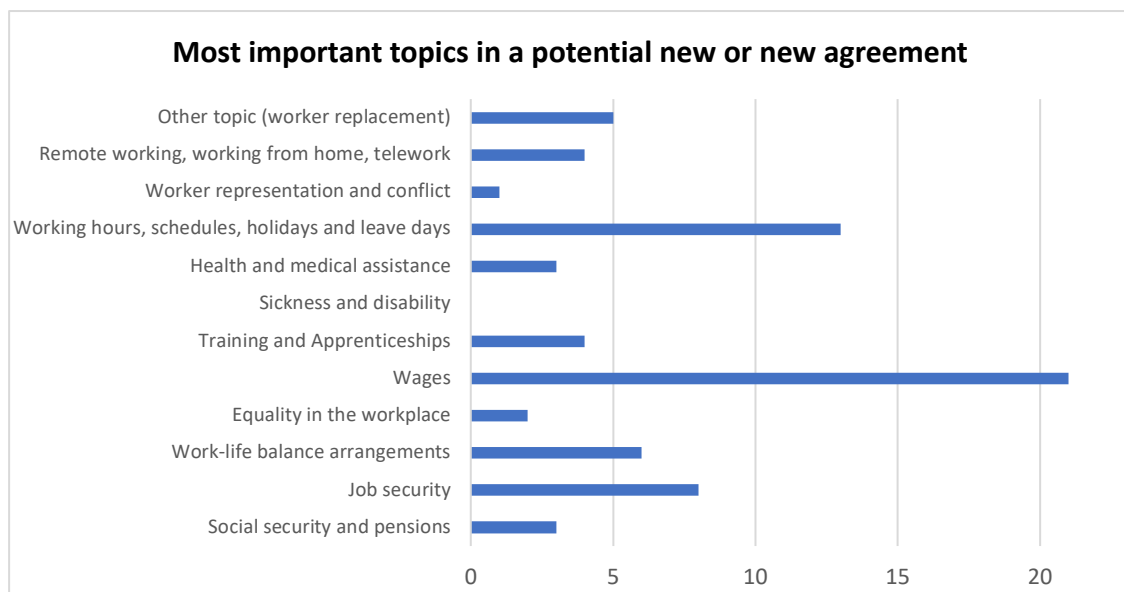


Figure 18 Importance of topics included in collective agreements (number of answers)

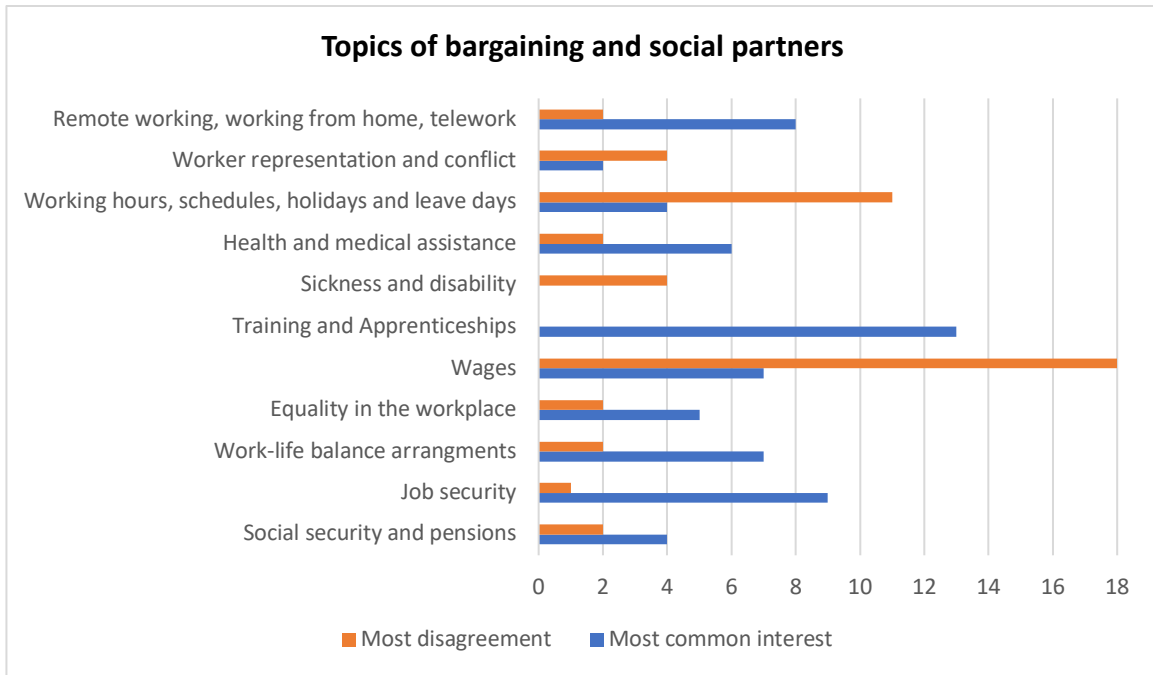


Figure 19 Topics of collective bargaining and position of social actors (number of answers)

Furthermore, looking at renewed or future agreements, most social partners expect wages to increase or at least to remain stable. Concerning signatories, respondents do not expect any significant change, while they expect that the coverage rate (number of employees covered by new agreements) could partially increase.

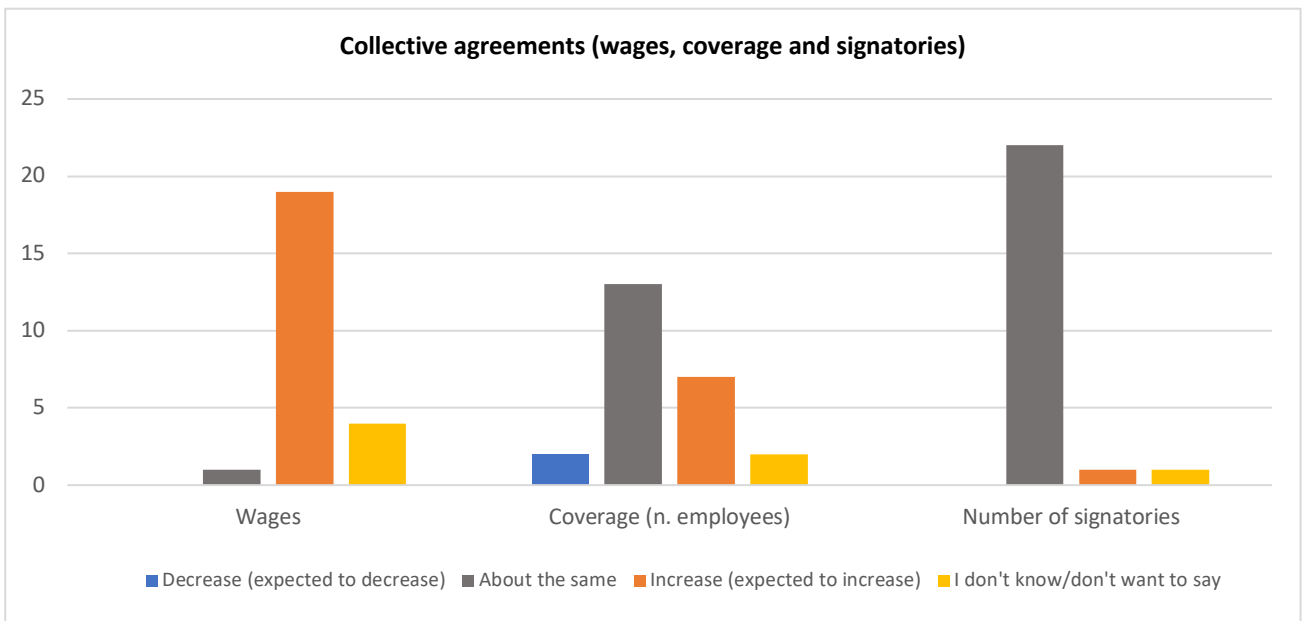


Figure 20 Expected changes in wage level, coverage and signatories (number of answers)

Conclusions

As widely described by Cetrulo and Kováčová (2023), in the last two years social actors were at the centre of the political and social debate given the radical impact of the pandemic on the world of labour. Assessing, however, their direct perception of these radical changes is quite difficult given the necessity of collecting a rich and diversified amount of information and national specific data. One of the goals of the Barcovid survey was to add a new piece of evidence to better understand the overall impact of the pandemic on national industrial relations.

Summarizing the main results of the Italian survey with respect to the four main domains identified at the beginning of the report, we can state the following. First, social actors share a positive perception of the role played by the national government in supporting employment and production, but not in favoring social dialogue. Second, the main change observed in the process of collective bargaining agreement renewal did not pertain the frequency of the negotiations, but their modality. In fact, most of negotiations took place online and, in some cases, quarantine measures prevented signatories to join meetings. Third, the main topics of bargaining during the pandemic correspond to the usual pivotal topics of discussion and eventual disagreement among social actors (wages and working hours), together with less traditional and less conflictual topics related to job security and work life balance. These findings on Italian social actors cannot, nevertheless, be considered conclusive given the very limited set of respondents involved in the survey. Furthermore, the apparently contradictory picture they deliver with respect to some topics would require further investigation through, for instance, direct interviews of social actors.

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