



Final report:

Covid-19 impact on industrial relations

Final results

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.

University of Amsterdam/AIAS-HSI

AIAS-HSI is an institute for multidisciplinary research and teaching at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), the largest university in the Netherlands. AIAS-HSI has as its objective the coordination, implementation and stimulation of interdisciplinary research into the practice of labour law and social security law. Therefore it combines insights from the social sciences, legal dogmas and legal theories in its research.

Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI)

Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI) is a non-profit research institute based in Bratislava, Slovakia. It fosters multidisciplinary research about the functioning of labour markets and institutions, work and organizations, business and society, and ethnicity and migration in the economic, social, and political life of modern societies. CELSI strives to make a contribution to the cutting-edge international scientific discourse.

Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies

Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies is a public university institute - with special autonomy - working in the field of applied sciences: Economics and Management, Law, Political Sciences, Agricultural Sciences and Plant Biotechnology, Medicine, and Industrial and Information Engineering. The School promotes the internationalization of didactics and research with innovative paths in the fields of university education, scientific research and advanced training.

WageIndicator Foundation

WageIndicator Foundation collects, compares and shares labour market information through online and offline surveys and research. Its national websites serve as always up-to-date online libraries featuring (living) wage information, labour law and career advice, for employees, employers and social partners. In this way, WageIndicator is a life changer for millions of people around the world.



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Bibliographical information

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Introduction

The explosion of the global pandemic in March 2020 has represented an exogenous shock to societies, production, world of commerce and politics. A massive new plan of investment and public funding to ensure the recovery and resilience of national economies (NextGenerationEU) has been adopted by the EU Commission, suggesting a potential rupture with previous mantra of austerity and fiscal consolidation. At the same time, unprecedented measures such of school closures, mobility restriction and suspension of activities have been introduced to face the most critical phases of virus diffusion. In this context, workers were called to engage in responsible actions, both keeping working if performing essential jobs, or staying at home and taking care of elderly and children.

Following up on the results of the quarterly reports (see References), this report¹ not only summarises the final results but also presents new results of the network and text analysis using the data of newsletters published by the selected stakeholders at the EU and national level. The goal of these quarterly reports is to address the first research question of the BARCOVID project: *“How have the Covid-19 crisis, the state-imposed measures and their consequences affected the industrial relations landscape in EU27 and 5 candidate countries?”* To be more particular, we aspire to address to following sub-questions: *How national social actors have reacted faced with such a shock? Which type of social discourse was developed during the pandemic and how did they address themselves to their constituencies?* Answering these questions is far from being obvious, both because of the complexity of the topics under analysis and because of the relatively scarce attention devoted to the dimension of narrative and ideational power resources of social actors.

To respond to the research questions, text data (text extractions) were collected from social partners' press releases and newsletters at the EU and national level and then further analysed. In total, **2,084 texts** were extracted from the newsletters of organizations, particularly WageIndicator²(15%), ETUI (12%), BusinessEurope (10%), UniEurope (8%), country-level newsletters letters (40%), and others (12%), between March 2020 and March 2022 based on the selected list of keywords (see Annex). As already explained in the First Quarterly Report, the methodology consists of the text mining techniques (using Python), supported by qualitative and quantitative text analysis of the newsletter outputs.³

1 The report will be presented in a form of the academic paper (with some changes and additional analyses) at the “8th Conference of the Regulating for Decent Work Network” on “Ensuring decent work in times of uncertainty” at the International Labour Office Geneva in July 2023.

2 The WageIndicator Foundations collects the news about collective bargaining and social dialogue in the EU Member countries and the Candidate countries. The newsletters include news about the collective bargaining on the national and EU level, relating also to policy measures that are being discussed in relation to the pandemic.

3 The sample of the text extractions is representative as for the country structure considering the portion of country's GDP in the GDP of the European Union and the portion of country's workforce in the workforce of the whole EU.

On the one hand, the analysis of the report focuses on absolute and relative frequency of the topics discussed during the different waves of the pandemic, revealing the introduction of new policy related topics and the changing priorities of social partners as the pandemic became endemic. On the other hand, a comparative analysis on the most frequent topics is performed to identify potential differences across EU countries concerning both the construction of the public discourse and the set of policy measures adopted during the health crisis, with specific reference to non-standard workers, remote working, income support schemes and child-care services. This allows to empirically assess the degree of heterogeneity in the public discourse and framing priorities among EU social partners.

Through the construction of an up-to-date database and the implementation of quantitative techniques, the report provides further evidence on the manifold channels through which the explosion of the pandemic has impacted industrial relations and how the latter have withstood this unexpected blow. Moreover, with novel and original evidence based on newsletters, it contributes to the growing literature on employment relations investigating the role of ideas and discursive power in the renewal process of trade unions.

The point of departure of this report is looking at the capability of social actors to clarify their position in the political debate, with the aim of increasing their legitimacy and influencing the political decisions. The empirical analysis is based on an extremely original data source represented by newsletters published during the pandemic by trade unions and employers' associations. The structure of the report proceeds as follows. First, we briefly describe the main theoretical and empirical evidence on Covid-19 pandemic and industrial relations, as emerged so far in the literature. Then, the theoretical background and research questions are presented. Data and results are illustrated in the methodological and empirical section, while the conclusions provide some very preliminary interpretations on the evidence collected.

Covid-19 pandemic and industrial relations: the evidence so far

The explosion of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a radical and unexpected shock to national economies at global level, deeply affecting the functioning of our societies. Indeed, several policy measures introduced during the pandemic – such as the limitation of production and service provision, the control of individual mobility and the massive closure of schools - had never been adopted during peacetime.

In this unforeseen scenario, the world of labour has been strongly hit. On the one hand, essential workers were asked to ensure their social reproductive task, despite being exposed to serious health risks at work. On the other hand, workers were “displaced” at home if remote working was possible (Cetrulo et al., 2020), or covered by employment retention schemes temporarily funded by states. Labour market statistics available for the period between 2020 and early 2022⁴ show that, rather than being a “leveller”, the pandemic has produced asymmetric effects

⁴ According to the World Health Organization, the global pandemic has started on the 11th March 2020 and ended on the 5th May 2023.

on different categories of workers, exacerbating socio-economic and health inequalities already stratified by gender, age, race and social classes (Cetrulo et al., 2022).

At the same time, an unprecedented possible space for confrontation between social actors emerged from the very beginning of the pandemic - albeit with strong national heterogeneities - given the need of policy makers to take quick and radical decisions, ensuring the greatest possible consensus and collective adherence to the declared state of emergency, even bypassing traditional democratic processes on several occasions.

One of the most relevant issues that all governments had to tackle concerned the necessity to ensure the adoption of strict and effective health and safety workplace protocols. Indeed, given the strategic relevance of regulating work during the pandemic, tripartite pacts among governments, employers and trade unions were adopted to define common and shared rules (Eurofound, 2021). Some of the topics acted as “federating issues” on which social actors were pushed to find an agreement in the name of the “common interest”, namely ensuring at the same time the population health and the proper functioning of the economy (ILO 2022a, p.13). ILO (2022b) identifies several possible channels through which collective bargaining and social dialogue have played a role in the context of the global pandemic. First, favoring the “absorption of the shock” both ensuring the responsiveness of collective agreements and the introduction of derogation clauses. Secondly, adopting “new agreements” concerning front-line workers and essential sectors (i.e., health and safety measures, quarantine leave allowances, vaccinations, extended hours of work). Thirdly, enhancing “adaptation” through i) the mitigation of the pandemic unequal impact (universal social protection measures, training programs for displaced workers), ii) bargaining on wage composition (i.e., conversion of productivity premia in funds to support temporary workers) and iii) advancing the bargaining agenda on those work practices emerged during the pandemic such as remote working (ILO, 2022b, p.140).

Indeed, if compared to previous crises, the pandemic recorded a large increase of peak-level social dialogue (ILO, 2022a), intended as the vast array of interactions between social actors that take place both through consultation within the workplace or more structured process of collective bargaining (national and sectoral agreements, bipartite and tripartite pacts, protocols).⁵ However, the diffusion of social dialogue has not been homogeneous across countries, but rather concentrated in those nations already showing a stronger tradition of industrial relations and collective bargaining, as in the case of Europe and Central Asia (ILO, 2022a).

Even within European countries, important heterogeneities emerge and need to be accounted for once we study in detail the intensity and quality of social dialogue during the pandemic. Through the combined analysis of social dialogue agreements, national policies, and social

⁵ As reported by ILO (2022b), between 1 February 2020 and 31 January 2021, 381 peak level social dialogue pacts were reached in 102 countries, of which 158 were related to adjustment measures, 90 to the recovery and 133 to the management of the emergency.

actors' perspective, Eurofound (2021) proposes a taxonomy of effective degree of involvement of social actors in the policy making. First, it emerges that their involvement was more pronounced on some specific topics, such as employment retention schemes and workers' health protection within the workplace, whereas their active participation was much more limited to topics such as the prevention of social hardship. Then, two main groups of countries are identified. Those, mainly Central-Eastern countries (Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia), where social partners show strong critics because of the very low level of direct involvement. And those countries – with more stable and well rooted employment relations - where social partners share a certain understanding of the exceptional situation, still having a controversial perception of their effective involvement. Social actors from northern countries such as Finland, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands declare to have been involved in an effective and stable way through specific bodies and institutions. A more composite set of national social actors (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, and Spain) declare only partial satisfaction, because of the scarce attention devoted to their own proposals and the delay in their involvement. A more critical perception is observed in Czechia, France, Italy, Germany, Latvia, and Lithuania: according to Eurofound findings, here consultation took place with short notice and with a limited amount of time devoted to discussion such that, despite a certain involvement, decisions were mainly taken unilaterally by governments.⁶

In countries where industrial relations were strong and well-rooted, social actors and in particular trade unions were able to, at least partially, shape the way employment retention schemes aimed at sustained employment were adopted, as in the case of short time schemes in Austria and Sweden (ILO, 2022a). In these cases, it was possible to expand the scope and intensity of social dialogue and collective bargaining. Social dialogue can therefore be interpreted as a tool that has reduced the degree of uncertainty, supporting not only the continuity of business activities but also fostering a certain degree of social cohesion, starting from the recognition of the active participation of workers (ILO, 2022a). However, in countries where these institutional tools were weaker and less frequently adopted, the pandemic worsened the quality of relations. In this case, even if social dialogue took place, the scope and effectiveness of social actors' participation were more limited both regarding topics of discussion and real confrontations.

As explained by Brandl (2021), in a context of unexpected shock and uncertainty, state actors can benefit from cooperation with social actors both because of the expertise social actors have of their constituencies and because they can strengthen political decisions' legitimacy, promoting stronger consensus on harsh decisions (Pizzorno, 1978). In turn, also social actors can increase their legitimacy once they are perceived as being able to influence political decisions on crucial topics such as employment protection. Nevertheless, the competencies and authorities of governments might be weakened by an excessive adoption of these tools of

⁶ At the same time, exceptions must be accounted for. In the case of Italy, for instance, trade unions were actively involved in the first wave of the pandemic to define protocols ensuring health security protocols within workplaces.

cooperation, while the risk for social actors is to be exploited to increase the legitimacy of specific policies despite their demands and competences are not accounted. Describing the increasing number of social tripartite agreements, Brandl (2021) interprets it as the evidence of a resurgence of “corporatism of crisis” (Hyman, 1988) since actors seem to have converged towards a more unitary position in the name of a common (and external) enemy. However, behind the diffusion of bipartite and tripartite pacts during the pandemic, both logics were on stage (namely both the political/expressive and instrumental one), even if with important differences across countries. For instance, cooperation and confrontation between state and social actors was somehow new in liberal economies, like UK and Ireland (as in the case of England Job Retention Furlough Scheme), and Poland where social actors were called to discuss policies then turned into laws.⁷

Given these complex channels of interaction, the academic debate on the impact of the pandemic on industrial relations is still controversial. Taking stock of the progressive decline and weakening of trade unions’ power observed in the last decades, Hunt and Connolly (2023) question whether the pandemic can be interpreted as an occasion which spurred trade unions’ renewal, given the necessity they faced to quickly adapt to extraordinary circumstances and exploit their power resources (Lévesque and Murray, 2010) and capabilities (Murray, 2017) to react properly without further losing their legitimacy. According to the authors, social actors were asked to develop “organizational learning” to react to the crisis (Hyman, 2007), and engage in a transition process strongly context dependent. Indeed, the authors consider several channels through which trade unions can be renewed: increasing membership, economic power and political influence, improving internal governance, strengthening member participation and self-confidence in engaging a renewal process. Through an online survey and in-depth interviews with several UK trade unionists, Hunt and Connolly (2023) found indeed evidence of several strategies of adaptation, also through a more intense use communication channel. In fact, several British trade unions confirmed to have developed new campaigns and lobbying activities to increase their advocacy and political influences (given also that picket lines were less feasible because of lockdown). Membership increased, while the interaction between trade unionists and members were ensured by on-line communication (i.e., video-call, emails), further pushing for an internal reorganization of trade unions.

A positive impact on unionization and labour activism is empirically found by Maffie (2022), that studies the willingness of 240 ride-hail drivers to support the establishment of a trade union during the pandemic, interpreting Covid-19 as “a union organising catalyst”. According to the author, two main mechanisms were at stage: the unveiling of strong power imbalances in the workplace and the growing awareness of workers to perceive their struggles not as individual but as collective ones.

Studying the model of German industrial relations, Behrens (2023) observe that workers represented by work councils were protected more than unrepresented workers in the context

⁷ It is important to underline that even the “expressive/symbolic” function of social dialogue can have great relevance, especially in those countries like liberal ones where these practices are rarely adopted (Brandl, 2021).

of the pandemic, suggesting that industrial relations can play a fundamental role in preventing “work commodification” during crises. According to a survey on German employees, collective bargaining seems to be positively associated with higher job stability and income security, whereas where work councils are present, workers have more probability of benefiting of remote working practice, skill development and training programs.

Exploiting US labor market data from the Current population Survey, Han (2022) studies the impact of Covid-19 distinguishing workers covered and not covered by trade unions. Both types of workers result to be negatively impacted by the pandemic in terms of unemployment, even if in an asymmetric way. While the magnitude of the overall negative effect results to be higher for non-union workers, the positive impact recorded during the recovery is larger for unionized workers, which also record greater opportunities in terms of health insurance, paid sick leave, work sharing arrangements with respect to non-covered workers.

Wright et al. (2021) explore the role played by trade unions in Australia and New Zealand over the last decades until Covid-19 through the theoretical lens of trade unions’ legitimacy. The authors find that during the pandemic, the Australian government accepted and welcomed some of the proposals coming from trade unions and employers, such as the wage subsidy. Moreover, it also renounced to a policy reform that would have severely weakened trade unions, suggesting the willingness to recognize Australian trade unions as “specialist insiders”, able to provide useful suggestion to face on-going issues (Wright et al., 2021, p. 354).

More generally, according to Crouch (2022), the pandemic has obliged to rediscover the importance of public goods as it has showed important elements of novelty with respect to previous crises, at least in the domains of public services, workers’ rights and collective action. Despite these positive findings, it is worth stressing that an increase in the adoption of pacts and a more active involvement of trade unions do not always imply the achievement of successful outputs, as their effectiveness strongly depends on contextual factors, power relations and new issues emerging in the political arena (Guardiancich and Molina, 2021).

For instance, looking at the case of France, Germany and Luxembourg, Thomas et al. (2022) shed light on unexpected difficulties encountered by trade unions as the pandemic evolved. At the beginning, unions were active and firm in calling for activities’ closures, socio economic support to workers and protective equipment for those still working. Later, with the second wave of the pandemic, their position became more complex since they had to declare their stance with respect to vaccines’ obligations and tests at the workplace, in a context of strong public polarization. New topics not directly related to the workplace, but to the political and public sphere were under discussion, confronting unions with the risk of failing to represent interests and positions of their members.

Meardi and Tassinari (2022) discuss the possibility of interpreting the pandemic crisis as an occasion for political elites to broaden their perspective integrating class interests (Katzenstein, 1985), allowing the construction of new social alliances among social actors. Focusing on the

case of Germany, Italy and France they look at the evolution of social dialogue to test whether this alignment of interest took place. They focus on the type of tools adopted, their function, the conditions under which they were activated, power relations and output. According to their analysis, the pandemic has not changed but only reinforced ongoing patterns grounded in national institutions and traditions.

Herman et al. (2021) interpret the Covid pandemic as a “catalyst” granting employers the possibility to adopt exit strategies to further increase the risk of labor commodification. Studying the case of care and art-related companies characterized by a presumed “good employer” in the weakly protected and highly deregulated UK context, the authors find that the explosion of the pandemic determined both intended and unintended worsening of labor conditions due to the specific strategies pursued by employers to reduce costs and cope with the emergency.

Indeed, as stressed by Natali (2022), crises cannot really represent an occasion of changes and improvement in presence of strong power unbalances both in the political and economic sphere (Dosi, 2022). Adopting a theoretical perspective that focuses on the relevance of ideas (or ideational debate) and political discourse, Natali (2022) discusses at which extent the pandemic has dismantled at least part of the neoliberalism agenda. Looking at the presence of any discontinuity with respect to austerity, privatization and marketization trends, he focuses in particular on the health sector, employment protection and pension systems. Despite the introduction of important novelties (OECD, 2020), concerning public funding of the health system, new forms of labour protections and temporary suspension of pension reforms (as in the case of France), it would be a mistake to interpret these events as clear-cut signals of paradigmatic change, given their temporary nature (Natali, 2022).

There is indeed a consensus around the exceptional conditions imposed by the pandemic and about its potentially disruptive nature with respect to models of organizations of society. New policy measures had to be introduced in a sudden and unexpected way, as with the imposition of lockdown, while at the same time new models of cooperation among social actors were enhanced. However, as briefly explained above, different interpretations are confronted today in the academic debate on the overall impact of Covid-19 impact on industrial relations. From the one hand, scholars interpret the pandemic as a turning point that strengthened the role of trade unions, increased their legitimacy even in hostile national contexts and allowed an advancement in the bargaining of new topics. On the other hand, more cautious scholars read the pandemic as a temporary shift from the on-going path of weakening industrial relations, lowering workers’ bargaining power (Baccaro and Howell, 2017) and erosion of social dialogue (Guardiancich and Molina, 2021), a shift that will not persist after a complete recovery from the Covid-19 crisis.

Theoretical Background

The variety of perspectives on the outcome of the pandemic on industrial relations confirms the need of pursuing further research on these topics, combining different sources of

information, and developing comparative perspectives. Institutional differences across countries are indeed fundamental to interpret different reactions to the Covid-19 (Dobbins et al., 2022). Among possible criteria of classification such as Varieties of capitalism approach, World system theory (Valizade et al., 2023), we adopt the classification based on welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Ferrera, 1996; Adascalitei, 2012). Given the focus on European countries, we believe it is the most adequate theoretical approach to allow a proper cluster of countries considering heterogeneities in terms of industrial relations, political institutions, and welfare systems, all strongly impacted by the pandemic.

As synthesized in the previous chapter, the explosion of pandemic has been accompanied by a rise in peak level national agreements worldwide and especially in Europe. If from the one hand, this has meant the public and political recognition of the relevance at national level of trade unions and employers' organization, on the other hand – especially for trade unions – led to the risk of appearing weak in accepting unfavorable conditions without being able to change the policy agenda, weakening their credibility. The development of this channel of dialogue and coordination does not have only an instrumental function in allowing the definition of an agreement on specific issues, but it also embodies a symbolic function as it can both increase and weaken the legitimacy of involved actors, depending on the type of output reached at the end of the process.

In a similar context, looking at the other channels through which social actors frame their interests vis-à-vis their constituencies and communicate their positions becomes crucial to better assess the role they played during the pandemic, the degree of novelty in social dialogue and the heterogeneities across different institutional settings. One of the tools through which trade unions can express their position and test their legitimacy is represented by mobilization and strikes (Culpepper and Regan, 2014). Indeed, several strikes were organized at the beginning of the pandemic by workers obliged to work under unsafe health conditions, and later, by essential workers asking for better working conditions and higher wages. However, the possibility to resort to this tool was severely restricted by the limitation of individual and collective mobility during lockdown periods, thereby depriving unions of one important tool for action and voice.

Another channel used by social actors to express their voice and be empowered is through their narrative resources (Lévesque and Murray, 2010), that can be deployed via direct communication with their members, publications, official press releases and newsletters. In this way, ideas and discourses can be presented and easily diffused to a broader audience. Our angle of analysis is therefore to look at how social actors engage in their renewal process (if any) and how they shape their social discourse on and during the Covid-19 pandemic. As recently stressed by the literature on employment relations (McLaughlin and Wright, 2018; Carstensen et al., 2022), we believe that looking at the process through which ideas are presented and then circulated is critical to assess the evolution of industrial relations and the effective distribution of power resources among social actors. The social discourse developed by trade unions, in particular, can be pivotal to ensure the attachment of members and

encourage the entrance of new ones, especially in a context of uncertainty and overall declining membership.

Research questions

The goals of our analysis can be presented as follows:

- i) Understand how national social partners across Europe have framed their interests vis-à-vis their core constituencies to strengthen their role and legitimacy.
- ii) Identify which new topics have emerged in the public discourse concerning social regulation and employment relations.
- iii) Assess whether socio-institutional differences across European countries are reflected in specific models of social dialogue during the pandemic.

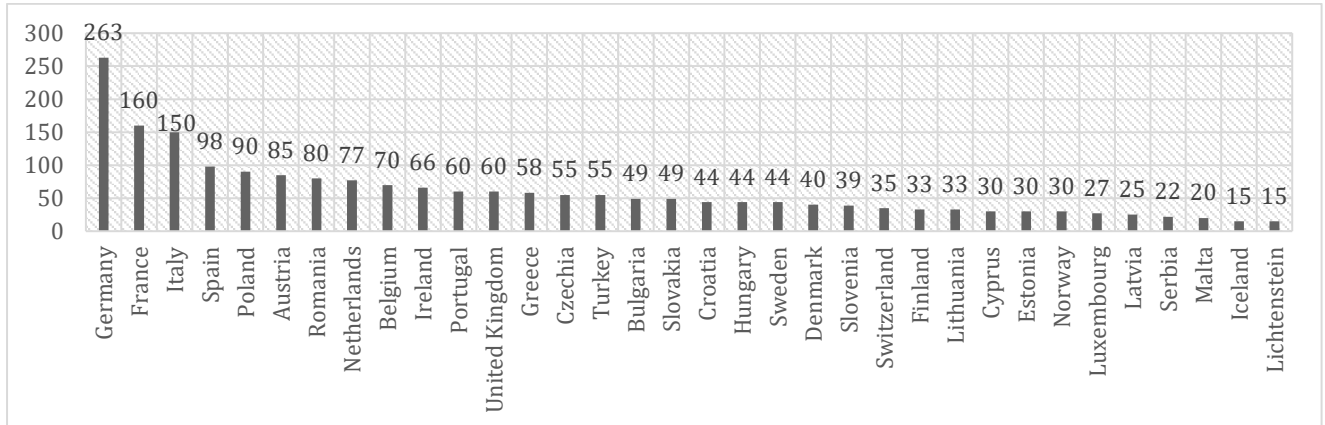
Data and methodology of analysis

The methodology is quite innovative since, for the first time in the literature, newsletters published by social actors at national and European level represent the main source.⁸ Main newsletters presented newsletters or news overviews published WageIndicator (15%), ETUI (12%), BusinessEurope (10%), UniEurope (8%), newsletters of the main national-level trade union organisations (40%), and others (12%) (see Table 6 in the Annex). In total, 2,084 text extractions were retrieved between March 2020 and March 2022.

As shown in Figure 1, the structure of the sample is not homogenous across countries since national datasets exhibit different size, going from 263 documents in the case of Germany to 15 documents in the case of Lichtenstein. The average number of texts extractions per country is 60, with relevant differences between the most represented countries (i.e., Germany, France, and Italy) and the least represented ones (Malta, Iceland, and Liechtenstein). However, the collection of sources has been informed by sampling criteria ensuring internal consistency given the specific nature of data, since the number of documents per countries is selected considering both the share of national GDP over the EU GDP and a share of the national workforce over the EU total workforce.

⁸ Nevertheless, an increasing attention to newsletters is devoted in the literature, as in the case of Eurofound (2022) where some data and information are collected through the AIAS newsletter on collective bargaining.

Figure 1: The country structure of the sample for 2020-2022 (N=2,084)



Source: Authors

Text items were extracted through the text mining technique. This methodology enables to identify patterns, frequencies of keywords in each text corpus and connections between keywords. A key-word search procedure was adopted to retrieve data according to a pre-defined list of keywords regarding two main domains: pandemic-related terms and policy measures, as reported in Table 1.

Table 1: List of keywords used for the text mining analysis

Category of keywords	Keywords
Covid-19	<i>pandemic, corona, COVID-19, COVID, vaccine, vaccine refusal, vaccination, virus, syndemic, patent waiver, green pass</i>
Policy responses mitigating exposure to the virus	<i>masks, sanitisers, closure, distance measures, protective clothes, protective equipment, disinfectant, antibacterial, thermometer, test, testing</i>
Policy measures (labour market)	<i>green pass, kurzarbeit, short-time work, remote work, telework, work from home, flexible work arrangements, online work, hybrid work, sick leave, ergonomic tools, training, liquidity loan(s), loan(s), stimulus package, income support, income maintenance, wage subsidies, subsidies, employment protection, job retention, occupational health, health and safety, childcare, grace period, tax break, tax exemption, tax deferral, helicopter money, emergency payment/one-off payment, self-isolation, corona check, 3G, QR code</i>
Impact of the pandemic	<i>bankruptcy, job losses, quarantine, understaffed, burnout/burned out</i>
Industrial relations	<i>trade unions, employers, employer's association, social partners, industrial relations, collective bargaining, wage bargaining, salary bargaining, tripartite, social dialogue, labour union, social impact</i>
Other	<i>self-employed, parents, sick workers, healthcare workers, essential workers, female workers, education, quarantine workers</i>

Source: Authors

First, the most prevalent themes in the corpus were identified based on the text analysis, allowing to identify the main topics in the spotlight of the social partners' discussion during the years of the global pandemic. More particularly, the policy-related terms were identified within the three stage process: (1) a list of policy measures was constructed based on the most frequent policies implemented at that time (using the Eurofound Policy Watch); (2) qualitative inquiry of 100 newsletters on collective bargaining to identify the most common words was conducted; (3) a text analysis method which recognized the most frequent keywords in the text corpus was implemented. Based on the selected list of keywords, the policy measures were identified and categorized for further analysis.

In the second stage, the network analysis was employed to explore and understand the structure of the systems, looking at the existence and relative intensity of linkages between concepts (Borgatti et al., 2009). The construction of a network results in the collection of interconnected nodes related to each other at a different intensity, useful to reveal the inner structure of the examined phenomena (Knoke and Yang, 2020).

Based on the network analysis, we identified the degree of connectedness between the most frequent concepts with a special emphasis on the key anti-pandemic policy measures. The connectedness between key concepts was based on their presence in a same text item, implying that the concepts were discussed in the same output. This goes together with the node analysis based on the centrality-related 'betweenness' when the pairs of nodes are positioned in the shortest path in the text (Freeman, 1977).

Thirdly, the distribution and frequency of policy measures identified in each country were tested against a classification of national institutional settings based on the theory of welfare regimes (see Table 2), following the theoretical contribution of Esping-Andersen (1990), Ferrera (1996) and Adascalitei (2012).

Table 2: The classification of welfare states (countries included in the sample)

Type of welfare regime	Countries
Conservative	Austria, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands
Liberal	Ireland and United Kingdom
Mediterranean	Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Cyprus
Social democratic	Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Iceland
Central and Eastern Europe	Czechia, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Esping-Andersen (1990), Ferrera (1996) and Adascalitei (2012).

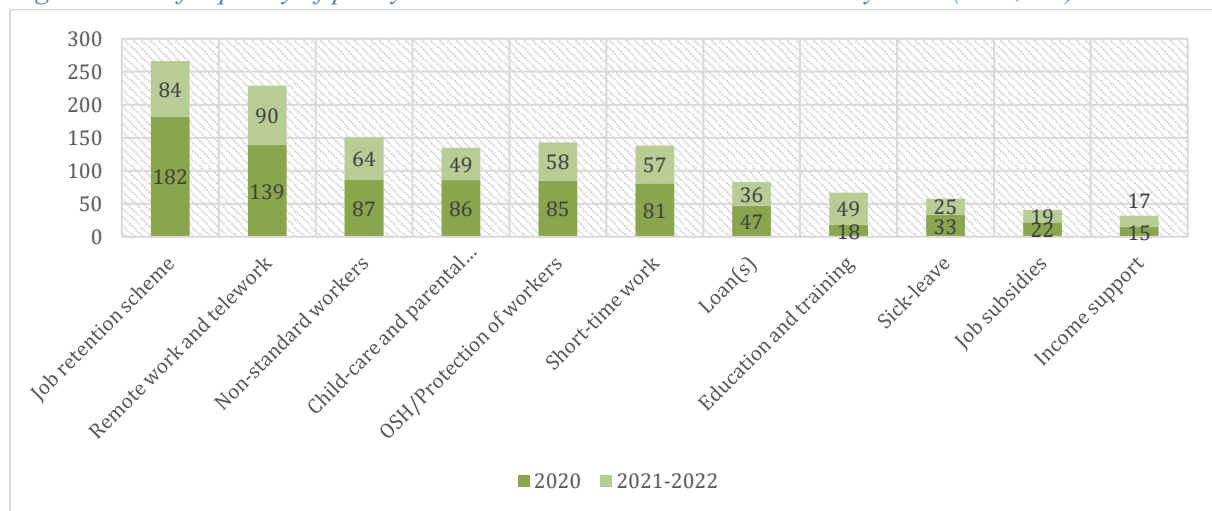
Results

Given the wide and rich amount of information contained in the newsletters, the empirical analysis will only present the main findings in terms of: i) frequency of policy measures

through time, ii) network analysis of policy measures for the entire database, iii) association between policy measures and welfare state clusters.⁹

As Figure 2 shows, **Job retention scheme** is the most frequent concept in 2020 - the first year of the pandemic – and the prevalence of the term remains very high also in the second year. Job retention scheme entails a range of policies to preserve jobs, including short-time work schemes, furlough schemes, and various income support or financial schemes covering the social security or health care contributions. **Remote work and telework** represent the second most frequent term present in the database. The cause of such prevalence is closely related to the adoption of this work practice to ensure social distance and decrease the likelihood of being exposed to the virus at the workplace. Policy measures designed specifically for **non-standard workers** represent the third most discussed topic in the sample of newsletters, including income support for self-employed, seasonal workers or workers with the temporary contracts. Within this set of workers, it is worth to mention that in the second year of the pandemic, platform workers appeared more intensely at the centre of the social partners' debate.

Figure 2: The frequency of policy measures between 2020 and 2021/early 2022 (N=2,084)



Source: Authors

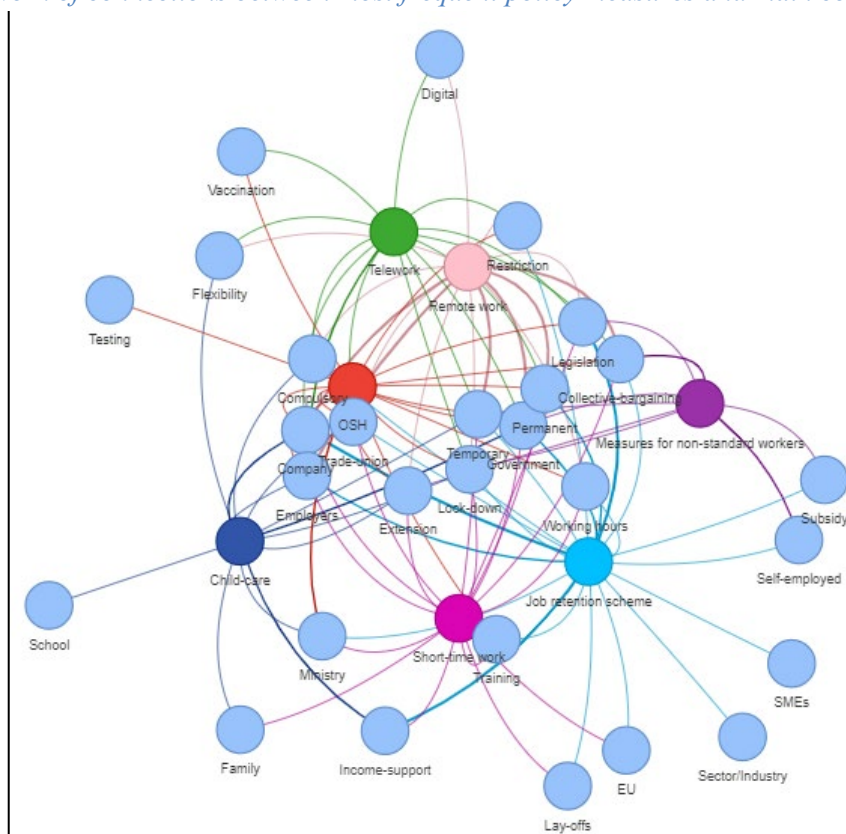
The analysis further shows that **child-care and parental support** were slightly more debated in the first year of the pandemic, probably because of more intense closures of the school facilities during the initial phase of the pandemic if compared to 2021 onward. These measures entail a plethora of measures, but they dominantly refer to childcare allowances, extra income support for low-income families, extensions of maternity and parental leave or general provisions and announcements concerning school closures. Within the policy category **occupational health and safety** (hereinafter OSH), and the overall **health protection of workers** different sub-themes were mentioned. These include OSH guidelines adjusted and updated for the COVID-19 specificities, recommendations on testing and vaccination

⁹ Further details on the database and empirical analyses can be found in a series of the BARCOVID reports (Kováčová, Cetrulo and Peuchen, 2022/2023).

procedures, recommendations on ventilation, distance policies at the workplace, as well as specific provisions for the protection of healthcare and other frontline workers. These two policy themes were slightly more discussed in the first year of the pandemic which, again, can be easily related to the adoption of immediate precautionary measures to mitigate the spread of the virus at the workplace. Besides the OSH measures, in both years the problem of sick leave resonated in the discourse of social partners both in terms of reducing the bureaucratic burden on sick leave provisions and the necessity to lengthen its duration or modifying eligibility criteria to include a larger number of infected workers.

Short-time work schemes (hereinafter STW), referring to the subsidised schemes introduced by some European governments appeared among the most discussed measures. Especially in CEE countries, short-time work schemes seem to be a leading topic, as they were introduced as a brand-new policy to preserve jobs. In the other countries, where the STWs had already been established, the social discourse was about changing the eligibility criteria, increasing the financial cap, and making other adjustments to the policy design.

Figure 3: Network of connections between most frequent policy measures and main concepts



Source: Authors. Note: The thicker edges present the stronger connection between the nodes.

Table 3: Policy measures and keywords (list of most and the least correlated items)

Three most correlated keywords	
Job retention schemes	government, company, lay-offs
Remote work	government, company, collective bargaining
Telework	employers, company, collective bargaining
Measures for non-standard workers	government, income support, extension
Child-care	government, company, income support, family
OSH/Protection of workers	collective bargaining, testing, employers, ministry
Short-time work	government, company, permanent, employers
Three least correlated keywords	
Job retention schemes	self-employed, SMEs, flexibility
Remote work	training, income support, self-employed
Telework	EU, income support,
Measures for non-standard workers	training, trade unions, flexibility
Child-care	collective bargaining, sector/industry, working hours
OSH/Protection of workers	digital, EU, lay-offs
Short-time work	flexibility, SMEs

Source: Authors.

Figure 3 and Table 3 (where we list the main connections top 3 and bottom 3 for each policy measure) present the results of the network analysis and reveal how the most frequent policy measures (job retention scheme, remote work, telework, measures for non-standard workers, child-care and parental support, OSH/protection of workers, short-time work) are related to the most frequent keywords. Several and distinct patterns emerge, as explained below. **Job retention schemes** are strongly connected to the keywords government, company, legislation, lay-offs, income support, permanent workers and employers. On the contrary, they are only mildly connected to self-employed and SMEs.

Remote work is highly associated with government, collective bargaining, company, legislation, and temporary, while connection with flexibility is rather low. Specific reference to telework is highly connected with employers, while the linkage between this term, trade union trade and legislation is rather weak. Measures for **non-standard workers** are strongly associated with government, income support, extension, and the self-employed, but weakly related to training, trade union, and flexibility. **Childcare and parental support** are strongly associated with government, company, and income support, and extension, while scarcely related to trade unions or collective bargaining.

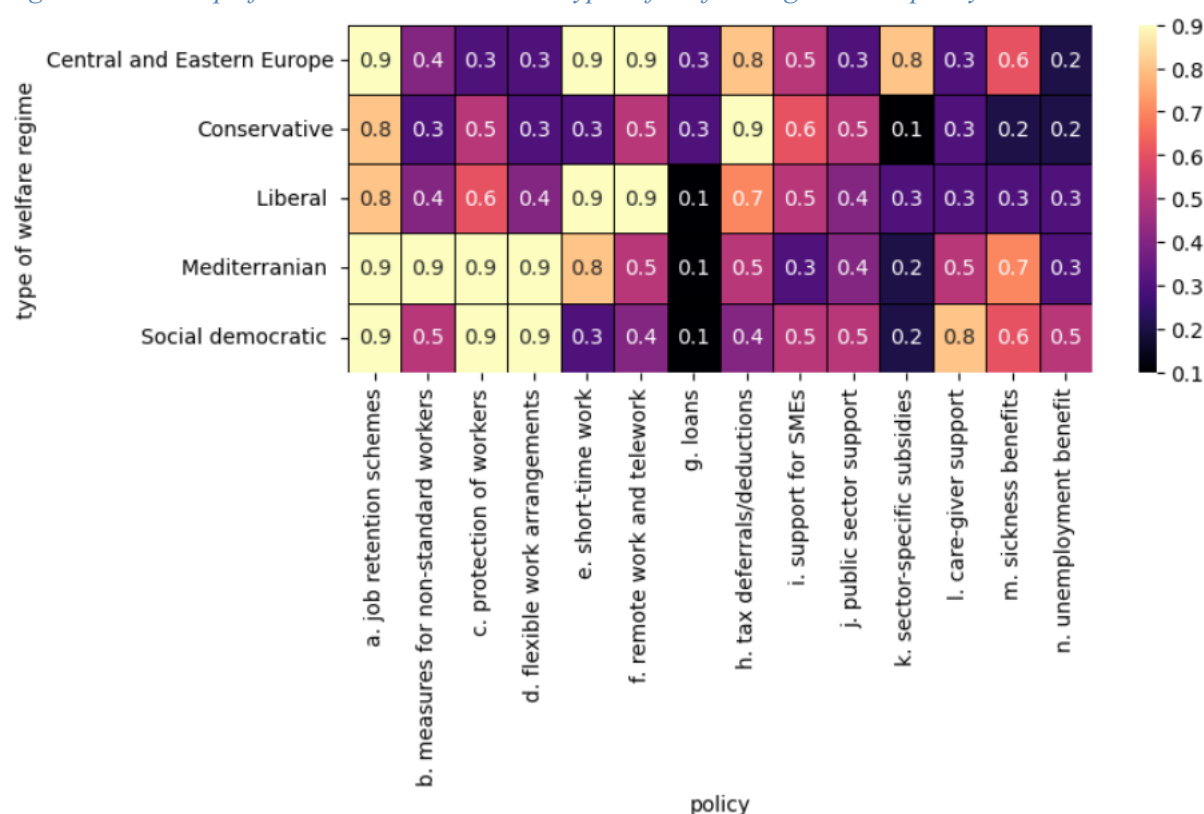
Protection of workers and OSH are highly discussed in association with collective bargaining, temporary testing, employers, and ministry. On the other hand, this term is negligibly discussed in the context of self-employed workers, flexibility, or SMEs. **Short-time work** is very frequently debated in association with government, company, permanent, and employers. At the same time, the concept is scarcely in association with flexibility or SMEs.

Table 4: The classification of the policy measures

Protection of jobs and workers	Advanced topics of bargaining	Supporting business: Firm-oriented policies	Supporting business: Sector-oriented policies	Social and care policies
a. Job retention schemes; b. Measures for non-standard workers; c. Health protection of workers	d. Flexible work arrangements; e. Short time schemes; f. Remote work and telework.	g. Loans; h. Tax deferral and deductions; i. Support for SMEs.	j. Public sector; k. Sector specific subsidies.	l. Care giver support; m. Sickness benefits; n. Unemployment benefits.

The most dominant policy measures are classified in five main categories, as illustrated in Table 4.

Figure 5: Heatmap of associations between the types of welfare regimes and policy measures



Source: Authors

Until now, the empirical analysis has been performed on the entire database, without making any distinction across countries. However, institutional heterogeneities both in terms of economic structures and industrial relations settings need to be accounted to better assess the

evolution of the discourse on pandemic, as it emerges – in this case - from newsletters. Once we investigate the connections between welfare regimes and the most frequent policy measures present in the text extractions, different patterns in terms of weakest and strongest linkages emerge, as shown in Fig. 5.

In the case of Central and Eastern Europe, the strongest relationship concerns job retention schemes, remote work and telework, sector-specific subsidies, and short-time work. On the contrary, the weakest association is found with respect to unemployment benefit, implying that this topic has been scarcely discussed.

Conservative regimes narrative on policy measures is highly concentrated both on job retention schemes and fiscal policies (tax deferrals and tax deductions). On the contrary, sector specific subsidies, sickness and unemployment benefits are very scarcely discussed in this group of countries. The political discourse developed in Liberal regimes countries is strongly linked to job retention schemes, remote work and telework, short time work scheme, while weakly associated with loans. Mediterranean countries show a more mixed and less polarized picture, since the social discourse is in this case strongly associated with multiple measures, particularly flexible work arrangements, job retention schemes, measures for non-standard workers, protection of workers, and short-time work. On the contrary, a weaker association is found with respect to loans and sector-specific subsidies, that are in general scarcely associated with all the five clusters.

Lastly, social democratic regimes represent the only set of countries positively and strongly linked with the policy domains of care-giver support, together with more frequently discussed policies concerning not only job retention schemes, but also flexible work arrangements, workers protection. Also in this case, the association with loans and sector specific subsidies is very low.

At the policy level, job retention schemes are positively associated with all the different types of welfare regimes which implies a dominance of this policy measures among measures mitigating the negative economic and health impact of the pandemic. Short-time work are also positively associated with three welfare regime types (Central and Eastern Europe, Mediterranean, and Liberal), but just mildly with Conservative and Social democratic countries. Sector-specific subsidies are prevalent in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, while for other clusters of countries, the association is weaker. The public sector support and the support of small and medium size enterprises (hereinafter SMEs) as anti-pandemic measures were associated with Conservative regimes, but their association was rather mild.

Overall, the results show a dominant position of job retention schemes across all the welfare regimes, confirming national convergence on specific “federating” topics. At the same time, the debate of social partners results to be characterised by important country/cluster specificities, especially for what concerns topics usually neglected such as care-giver support and flexible working arrangements. Fiscal policies and supply oriented measures such as tax

deferrals and deductions are concentrated in Liberal and Conservative regimes, with a certain frequency in CEE. What is more, firms specific measures oriented towards SME are much more discussed than sector support measure, with the only exception of CEE.

To further enlighten national differences in the way social discourse during the pandemic was framed by social actors, the empirical analysis will be further enriched by integrating data from anti-pandemic policy trackers such as the one built by the Oxford Policy Watch, ILO and Eurofound EU Policy Watch. The inclusion of the types and combination of policies adopted will allow a further investigation on how the relative frequency of specific policy measures relates to the national policy agenda implemented in the countries under study. This further study will possibly shed light on the gap between the priorities and interests of social actors versus the actual changes observed in the institutional set-up.

Conclusions

The overarching report presents the empirical results of (1) the context and frequency of new topics in social actors' agenda, such as care jobs, work-life balance, childcare services, protection of vulnerable workers, and income support schemes throughout time; (2) how heterogeneities in the social discourse emerge once we cluster countries adopting the welfare regime classification; (3) the associations among word items, qualifying the thematic context within which the policy measures were discussed.

Comparing the discussion between the first and the second pandemic year show, job retention schemes and telework became the more dominating topics as the pandemic progressed. On the other hand, childcare and parental support together with policies related to protection of workers were debated marginally more during the first year of the pandemic, since these were directly related to the initial measures adopted as a response to the pandemic. In this respect, two novel policies discussed among all social partners during the pandemic are the regulation of the remote working and teleworking and the institutionalization of more inclusive job retention schemes.

The analysis also shows both patterns of convergence and divergences across countries. From the one hand, topics such as short-time work schemes and measures for non-standard workers are dominant and frequently discussed in all the EU countries. On the other hand, the relative importance of issues related to work-life balance and care is highly different across welfare regimes.

Given the prominence that labour-related topics have gained during the pandemic and the renewed interest towards employment relations as a specific stream of research (Hodder and Martinez, 2021; Hodder et al., 2021), this report provides further evidence on the role of ideas and discourse in shaping social actors' identity and power resources.

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Annex

Table 5: The intensity of association between the keywords

	Training	Digital	EU	Government	Collective bargaining	Company	Legislation	Lay-offs	Trade unions	Lock-down	Income support	Subsidies	Sector/industry	Vaccination
Job retention schemes	0.5	0.1	0.7	0.9	0.7	0.9	0.8	0.9	0.6	0.5	0.9	0.6	0.5	0.1
Remote work	0.1	0.5	0.1	0.9	0.8	0.9	0.9	0.1	0.5	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Telework	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.3
Measures for non-standard	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.9	0.1	0.3	0.6	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.8	0.6	0.1	0.1
Child-care	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.8	0.1	0.8	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.3	0.8	0.1	0.1	0.1
OSH/Protection of workers	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.9	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.7	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.7
Short-time work	0.5	0.1	0.3	0.9	0.5	0.9	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.3	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.1

	Working hours	Self-employed	Extension	Flexibility	Compulsory	School	Restriction	Temporary	Permanent	Family	Testing	SMEs	Employers	Ministry
Job retention schemes	0.5	0.3	0.8	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.5	0.5	0.9	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.8	0.6
Remote work	0.3	0.1	0.5	0.3	0.4	0.1	0.2	0.9	0.9	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.9	0.1
Telework	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.8	0.1
Measures for non-standard	0.1	0.9	0.8	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Child-care	0.1	0.1	0.7	0.3	0.1	0.5	0.1	0.7	0.1	0.8	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.1
OSH/Protection of workers	0.6	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.5	0.8	0.3	0.1	0.9	0.1	0.9	0.8
Short-time work	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.5	0.8	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.9	0.3

Source: Authors

Figure 5: Distribution of the main measures by welfare state classification in 2020 and 2021/2022



Source: Authors.

Table 6: The list of sources (newsletters or news overview)

Country/EU	Language	Organisation	Type of organisation
EU	English	ETUI	Other
EU	English	BusinessEurope	EO
EU	English	UNI-EUROPA	TU
EU	English	SGI Europe (formerly known as CEEP)	EO
EU	English	WageIndicator	Other
EU	English	International Organisation of Employers (IOE) / World Employment Confederation (WEC)	EO
EU	English	IndustriALL	EO
Belgium	French	ABVV/FGTB	TU
Belgium	Dutch	ACV/CSC	TU
Belgium	Dutch	ACLVB/CGSLB	TU
Bulgaria	Bulgarian	KNSB/CITUB	TU
Bulgaria	Bulgarian	Podkrepa	TU
Croatia	Croatian	SSSH/UATUC	TU
Croatia	Croatian	URSH	TU
Cyprus	Greek/English	ΠΕΟ	TU
Cyprus	Greek	ΣΕΚ	TU
Czech Republic	Czech	ČMKOS	TU
Czech Republic	Czech	ASO ČR	TU
Denmark	Danish	FH	TU
Denmark	Danish	FOA	TU
Estonia	Estonian	EAKL	TU
Estonia	Estonian	TALO	TU
Finland	Finnish	Akava	TU
Finland	Finnish	SAK	TU
France	French	CGT	TU
France	French	CFDT	TU
Germany	German	ver.di	TU
Germany	German	IG Metall	TU
Germany	German	Hans-Böckler Stiftung	Other
Germany	German	DGB	TU
Greece	Greek	A.Δ.Ε.Δ.Υ.	TU
Greece	Greek	Γ.Σ.Ε.Ε.	TU
Hungary	Hungarian	MaSZSZ	TU
Hungary	Hungarian	ÉSZT	TU
Hungary	Hungarian	SZEF	TU
Hungary	Hungarian	MOSZ	TU

Ireland	English	SIPTU	TU
Ireland	English	Congress	TU
Ireland	English	Fórsa	TU
Italy	Italian	CGIL	TU
Italy	Italian	CISL	TU
Italy	Italian	UIL	TU
Latvia	Latvian	LBAS	TU
Lithuania	Lithuanian	LPSK	TU
Lithuania	Lithuanian	LPS "Solidarumas"	TU
Luxembourg	French	LCGB	TU
Luxembourg	French	OGBL	TU
Malta	English	GWU	TU
Netherlands	Dutch	FNV	TU
Netherlands	Dutch	CNV	TU
Netherlands	Dutch	CNV Vakmensen	TU
Netherlands	Dutch	CNV Connectief	TU
Poland	Polish	NSZZ Solidarność	TU
Poland	Polish	OPZZ	TU
Poland	Polish	FZZ	TU
Portugal	Portuguese	UGT	TU
Portugal	Portuguese	CGTP	TU
Romania	Romanian	CNSLR-Frăția	TU
Romania	Romanian	BNS	TU
Romania	Romanian	CNS Cartel Alfa	TU
Serbia	Serbian	SSSS	TU
Serbia	Serbian	UGS Nezavisnost	TU
Slovakia	Slovak	KOZ SR	TU
Slovakia	Slovak	OZ KOVO	TU
Slovenia	Slovenian	ZSSS	TU
Slovenia	Slovenian	KNSS - Neodvisnost	TU
Slovenia	Slovenian	KSS Pergam	TU
Spain	Spanish	UGT	TU
Spain	Spanish	CCOO	TU
Sweden	Swedish	LO	TU
Sweden	Swedish	TCO	TU
Turkey	Turkish	TÜRK- İŞ	TU
Turkey	Turkish	HAK-İŞ	TU
United Kingdom	English	UNISON	TU
United Kingdom	English	GMB	TU
United Kingdom	English	Unite	TU