

**KU LEUVEN**

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RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR  
WORK AND SOCIETY

# BreakBack Project Meeting

## Country case: Belgium

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# A quick recap on the Belgian industrial relations system and actors

# Belgian industrial relations and collective bargaining system

- Act on collective bargaining agreements and sectoral joint committees (1968-12-05/01) that recognises and protects the right to organise and bargain collectively
- Wage bargaining takes place at three interlinked levels:
  - **National-level**, cross-sectoral agreements for entire economy
  - **Sectoral-level**, by joint committees and subcommittees (~165)
  - **Company-level**, complement/substitute sector-level bargaining
  - No derogation: lower-level agreements can only improve what has been negotiated at a higher level

# Belgian industrial relations and collective bargaining system

- **National-level:** 2 key bodies (joint bodies)
  - National Labour Council
  - Central Economic Council
- **Sectoral-level: joint (sub)committees**
  - All employers that are members of an employers' organisation that has concluded a CBA at national or sectoral level, are bound by it → Applies to all their employees
- **Company-level:**
  - Works council (> 100 employees)
  - Health and safety committee (> 50 employees)
  - Trade union delegation

# Trade unions

## Three main trade union confederations

- **ACV-CSC**, **ABVV-FGTB** and **ACLVB-CGSLB** → recognised as representative trade unions (Act 29 May 1952):
  - Allowed to sign agreements, participate in work council elections
  - ‘Monopoly’ of negotiation and representation
- ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB both have **~1.3 million members**; ACLVB-CGSLB has **~300.000 members**
- Embedded in longstanding political and philosophical traditions:
  - ‘Pillarisation’ of society and close connections with political parties and civil society organisation (‘from the cradle to the grave’)
  - Roots of trade union movements date back to the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century; recognised by law in 1921
- Competition but also collaboration between the trade unions
- Membership fees, subsidies for activities, investments, administrative and management fees w.r.t. paying out unemployment insurance

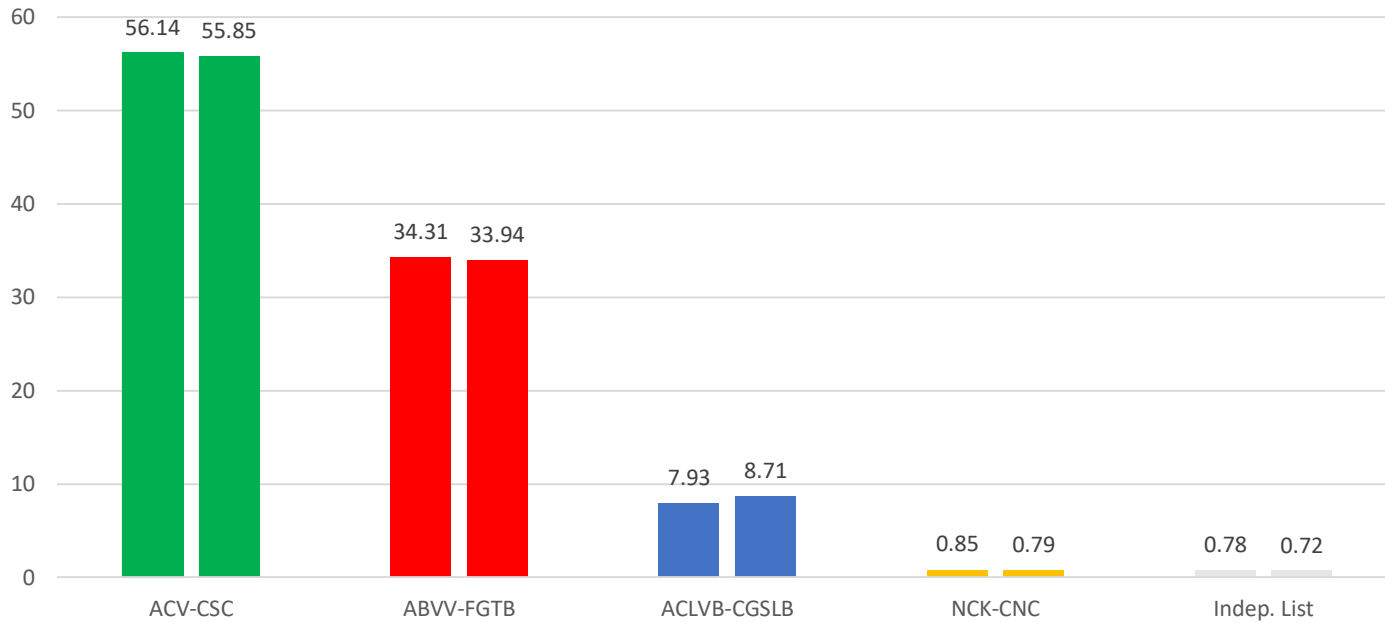
# Union membership and collective bargaining coverage: high!

- **Belgium is among the EU MS with the highest trade union density and collective bargaining coverage:**
  - Bargaining coverage around 96% and stable over time
  - Trade union density around 54% and stable over time
  - Limited fragmentation in trade union membership: all sectors, all occupations, all workers, all regions
- **Potential explanations:**
  - Strong institutional embeddedness and traditions
  - Ghent system → Unions pay out unemployment insurance
  - Decline in membership? Possible explanations:
    - Declining importance of pillarisation, financial crisis, rise in SMEs, rise in NSFW, administrative issues, ...

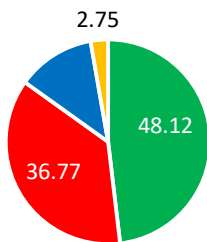
# Number of members (in thousands)

Year	ACV-CSC	ABVV-FGTB	ACLVB-CGSLB
2005	1393	1191	252
2006	1409	1231	259
2007	1423	1248	265
2008	1431	1266	266
2009	1442	1289	268
2010	1446	1308	274
2011	1446	1320	281
2012	1437	1337	289
2013	1423	1344	292
2014	1432	1346	294
2015	1397	1344	294
2016	1336	1336	296

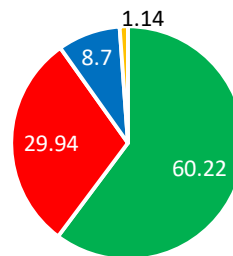
% of seats in the works council  
(2012 left bar, 2016 right bar)



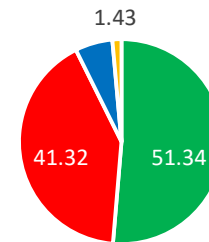
Brussels



Flanders



Wallonia



■ ACV-CSC ■ ABVV-FGTB ■ ACLVB-CGSLB ■ Other

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# Who are the union members?

## Data for the three trade unions

- **Active vs. inactive members:**
  - share of non-active members is between 30% and 35%
- **Men vs. women:**
  - share of women is between 40% and 50%
- **Young vs. old:**
  - share of below 35 is between 25% and 30%

# Lessons from the interviews with trade unions

Interview conducted with ABVV-FGTB & ACLVB-CGSLB

# Progress so far

- **Two interviews have been conducted:**
  - 1 interview with ABVV-FGTB (2 interviewees)
  - 1 interview with ACLVB-CGSLB (2 interviewees)
  - Very busy time for unions due to upcoming social elections
  - Political/national level / membership & services covered so far
- **To do:**
  - Follow-up with ACV-CSC ongoing; interview to be arranged
  - Interviews to be scheduled with sector representatives
  - Further elaboration and desk research

# Membership trends in the past ten years

## ABVV-FGTB

- 1,5 million members, stable and still growing
- Union mirrors society: gender, age, migration background, region, contracts, education
- Traditional industrial sectors become less relevant
- Rise in hard-to-reach groups: those in precarious situation, cross-border work

## ACLVB-CGSLB

- 300,000 members
- Steady and continuous growth
- Equal distribution across age categories → Young ok!
- Union mirrors society: gender, age, migration background, region, contracts, education
- Changes in economic sectoral composition also somewhat visible in membership
- Steady movement overall

# Membership trends in the past ten years

- **Key drivers of change:**

- Change in the unemployment legislation
- Changes in labour market structures
- Reduction in the habit of becoming a member (de-pillarisation)
- General political context with growth of right-wing parties and media
- Workers are increasingly mobile
- Individualisation

- **Focus on low- and high-skilled in particular:**

- No in case of ACLVB-CGSLB
- Yes in case of ABVV-FGTB: fight for 14, equal pay for equal work, communication in multiple languages, whistler blowers
- No particular attention for executives

# Membership trends in the past ten years

- Despite the gradual changes and the growth in membership, both trade unions are aware of the societal changes that are happening
- This implies that unions need to adjust as well:
  - In the area of mobilisation and trade unions' core activities, this presents key challenges (e.g. mobilising the young, rise of new forms of work that unions are against in principal but still provide help to workers involved)
  - For services, this is linked not necessarily to who is approached or what type of service is provided, but format of provision + initiatives for new groups
  - Internal training is important; train-the-trainer
  - New challenges: non-standard work, language barriers for cross-border work and labour migrants, increasing complexity
    - No specific services necessarily for new forms of work

# Types of services provided

## ABVV-FGTB

- Global and individual services
- **Traditional services:** gender pay gap, resignation, wages, social security, UI, pension calculations discrimination
- **New / reinforced services:** climate and environment, cross-border work, Europe

## ACLVB-CGSLB

- Global and individual services
- **Traditional services:** work as trade union, informing about legislation, legal support, UI, pension calculations
- **New / reinforced services:** taxation, cross-border work, rental market, flexible forms of work, career guidance, mobility, subsidies, digitalisation of society, inheritance taxation

# Types of services provided

- **Unions invest in:**

- Modern means of communication: website, social media
- Specific pages for union delegates with up-to-date information
- Videos to illustrate things
- Digitalisation of service provision
- Collaborations with unions outside of Belgium and EU-level
- Word-of-mouth recommendations remain crucial!
  - Quality of service provision is essential



# Does service provision matter for membership and mobilisation?

## For membership? Yes!

- Good contacts and word-of-mouth recommendations are crucial for trade unions
- Increasing complexity in the labour market and beyond
- But, as society is changing, unions need to change too:
  - A tailored approach for target groups vs. one approach for all
  - Raising awareness about what unions can do (services!)

## For mobilisation? No!

- Other factors come into play
- A lot depends on the specific person and circumstances
  - Why did they become members in the first place?

# New services for new groups?



- Growing attention for platform workers in Belgium by ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB
- Approached at the policy level and in the field
- Provision of information and support, help when needed
- Attempts towards dialogue and negotiations with the platform and government
- Strikes, protests, actions
- Court cases
- Also: digitalisation of services, social media use

# United Freelancers

## Initiative of ACV-CSC



- **Motivation:**

- Rise in non-standard forms of work and self-employment as a secondary profession → No social protection, commercial law
- Regarded as employer under social dialogue logic
- Trade unions defend the employment and working conditions of everyone who obtains income through labour → collectivisation of requirements and problems

- **Approach:**

- Individual services: checking contracts, dealing with unpaid invoices, termination of relationship, qualifying status
- Collective services: collective negotiating of contracts, labour conditions, social pact

THANK YOU