



# POLICY BRIEF

Draft - November 2021



*Break up to get back together.* L'impatto dei servizi innovativi sulla *membership* sindacale e le relazioni industriali  
Progetto finanziato dalla DG Occupazione, Affari Sociali & Inclusione della CE, Grant Agreement N. VS/2019/0079

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

**Project funding:** European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion – Budget Heading 04.03.01.08, Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue

**Agreement Number:** VP/2015/004/0121

**Coordinating institution:** Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori, CISL (Italy)

**Project coordinator:** Francesco Lauria

**Partner institutions:** Diesis Coop (Belgium), Kobenhavns Universitet (Denmark), Università degli Studi di Firenze (Italy), Lietuvos Socialinių Tyrimų Centras (Lithuania), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain)

**Affiliated organization:** Fondazione Ezio Tarantelli (Italy)

**Associated organization:** European Trade Union Confederation (Etuc)

**Members of the research group:** Melinda Kelemen, Karolien Lenaerts, Luca Pastorelli (Diesis Coop), Anna Ilsøe, Trine Pernille Larsen, Emma Steffensen Bach (Kobenhavns Universitet), Ilaria Carlino, Francesco Lauria, Nicoletta Merlo (CISL), Marco Betti, Stefano Dal Pra Caputo (Fondazione Tarantelli), Franca Alacevich, Andrea Bellini, Vincenzo Marasco (Università degli Studi di Firenze), Alberto Gherardini (Università degli Studi di Torino), Inga Blažienė, Boguslavas Gruževskis, Rasa Zabarauskaitė Miežienė (Lietuvos Socialinių Tyrimų Centras), Alejandro Godino, Óscar Molina Romo (Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona).

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## Executive Summary

### 1. Project aims

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.

### 2. From research results to policy implications

In the context of rapid and profound changes in the labour market, 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. BreakBack shows that, across Europe, 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.

Policy implications vary from country to countries depending on national institutional settings.

The main issue in the **Spanish case** the low trade union density (12.5% in 2019). The main reason of low membership are:

- institutional causes (erga omnes principle that guarantees the legal extension of the coverage of collective agreements),
- high levels of membership turnover due to the difficulties in retaining new members
- trade unions budget is low and still mainly based on stable membership

Innovative services promoted in Spain not only face difficulties in reaching groups of workers who are difficult to mobilize, but also and above all, in turning this extension of trade union service provision into an effective strategy to increase membership. As the two cases show, these services may not be sufficient to solve the problems of membership in Spain.

In **Belgium**, the provision of collective as well as individual services by trade unions to their members is a core activity of Belgian trade unions, which dates back to their early days and is linked to the Ghent system that is currently in place. Belgian trade unions provide a wide array of individual services, and serve members who are active as well as inactive in the labour market. In recent years, the Belgian trade unions have undertaken several initiatives to offer new types of services to their existing members – with a view to retaining members – but also to offer traditional or new services to groups that were typically outside of their scope. Especially the self-employed and platform workers, who are often classified as self-employed by default or have a more ambiguous employment status, have received much attention. From that perspective, service provision can also serve as a lever to retain or attract new members.

The case studies under investigation provide interesting findings:

- the low thresholds to get support from the union and then become a union member appear relevant;
- service users also pointed to the fast help and clear communication from the unions as key strengths;

With these initiatives, trade unions have succeeded in reaching groups of workers that are difficult to reach. This is coupled with their growing online presence and the digitalisation of the service provision.

In **Lithuania**, poorly funded trade union activities are mainly focused on support for their current members and trade union strategies aimed at attracting new members are focused on the increase in awareness and visibility of unions.

Nevertheless, national trade union confederations expressed a great interest on union practices in service provision as well as willingness to receive information and to learn from the experiences of other European countries.

However, they raised a number of concerns related to the:

- funding of trade union services,
- legal environment including possibility to delegate some state functions for trade unions in service provision,
- efficiency of union services in terms of attracting new members.

In order to begin to experiment servicing trade unions should:

- design easily managed and efficient union services for some particular groups of workers (such as migrants).
- use some EU funds for piloting some union services.

In the case of **Italy**, the offer of individual services is an activity with ancient roots, which characterises the organisational action of trade unions. From case study research a dialectic emerges between the territorial and national levels. What emerges describes how some peripheral union initiatives are beginning to perceive the strategic value of individual services, thus extending the principles of servicing. These initiatives are appreciated by the workers and contribute to the consolidation and renewal of union membership.

It should be noted that:

- the effectiveness of this type of initiative should not be measured only in the harsh terms of new union members but rather take as a reference the many nuances that characterise the relationship between worker and trade union.
- these experiences have in common is organisational fragility. The poor institutionalisation of the initiatives produces a concentration of resources which risks becoming the property of the community organiser or, worse still, dispersing in the community in the case the reference person has a professional discontinuity.

Therefore, structuring some local initiatives in consolidated experiences is a good omen, which could theoretically reduce the innovative scope of bottom-up experiences.

Moreover, the cases analysed have identified new spaces for trade union representation, which are created, not without difficulty, in little-travelled areas – such as self-employment – or long abandoned – such as unemployment. These spaces can hardly be reached without strategic use of services, which by their nature are bridges towards an enlarged and “personalised” conception of the world of work and its representation.

**Danish unions** have initiated a series of initiatives to reverse their recent membership loss. In this context, 3F, HK and DM are examples of Danish unions that have been at the fore and developed a series of novel measures to attract and retain members.

The common features across these three union services are:

- all resemble as grass-root initiative;
- the initial strategy for developing innovative services were primarily to raise wage and working conditions among non-standard workers
- increasing the union density were thus not the main aim, but the three unions hoped that these efforts would with time have positive knock-on effects on the union density.
- these novel initiatives have in different ways inspired new innovative service development in their respective unions.

However, this initiative has also triggered a series new challenges: by blurring the traditional employer-employee divide that may have future implications for the very foundation of Danish Industrial Relations model.

However, these initiatives together with other and often related union activities seem to have led to greater awareness of non-standard work and the associated risks among, not only the Danish trade unions, but also among different groups of non-standard workers.

In this context, these three initiatives appear to have sparked new debates and discussions within the individual unions when it comes to how to approach and develop services targeting employees in non-standard employment. In fact, they seem in different ways to have inspired new innovative service development in their respective unions.