

# Collectivising services: a path to trade union renewal in Europe

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## Summary

This article presents the findings of a comparative research study across five European countries on the role of servicing in the process of trade union renewal. The main aim is to transcend the dichotomy between servicing and organising with a view to revealing new renewal strategies. The study explores diverse forms of servicing based on the integration of various types of goods provided and logics of action. Specifically, it focuses on ‘strategic’ servicing, an approach that combines short-term responses to individual needs and long-term goals of collectivisation. The article introduces the notion of ‘collectivising’ services, targeting fragmented groups of workers to nurture a sense of community and establish channels of representation. It also offers a fresh perspective on trade union renewal, shedding light on the potential for trade unions to gain a more profound understanding of their repertoires of action and the impact of servicing on the construction of a collective dimension.

## Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d’une étude comparative, portant sur cinq pays européens, sur le rôle des services dans le processus de renouveau syndical. Son principal objectif est de dépasser la dichotomie entre prestation de services et syndicalisation afin de mettre en évidence de nouvelles stratégies de renouvellement. L’étude examine diverses formes de services fondées sur l’intégration de différents types de biens fournis et de logiques d’action. Elle se concentre

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plus particulièrement sur les services “stratégiques”, une approche qui conjugue réponses à court terme aux besoins individuels et objectifs à long terme posés en termes collectifs. L'article introduit la notion de services “collectivisés”, qui ciblent des groupes fragmentés de travailleurs afin de développer un sentiment d'appartenance à la communauté et d'établir des canaux de représentation. Il offre également une autre perspective sur le renouveau syndical, en soulignant la possibilité offerte aux syndicats de mieux comprendre leurs répertoires d'action et l'impact de la prestation de services sur la construction d'une dimension collective.

### **Zusammenfassung**

Der vorliegende Artikel präsentiert die Ergebnisse einer vergleichenden Studie, die in fünf europäischen Ländern der Frage nachgeht, welche Rolle das Angebot von Serviceleistungen für den Prozess der Erneuerung der Gewerkschaften hat. Das Hauptziel ist dabei die Überwindung der Dichotomie zwischen der Erbringung von Dienstleistungen für die Mitglieder einerseits und andererseits der Gewinnung neuer Mitglieder mit der Perspektive, neue Strategien für die gewerkschaftliche Erneuerung aufzuzeigen. Die Studie untersucht unterschiedliche Formen von Serviceleistungen auf der Basis der Integration verschiedener Arten von Gütern und Handlungslogiken. Dabei befasst sie sich insbesondere mit der „strategischen“ Erbringung von Serviceleistungen – ein Konzept, das kurzfristige Reaktionen auf individuelle Bedürfnisse und langfristige gemeinschaftliche Ziele miteinander verbindet. Der Artikel führt den Begriff der „Kollektivierung“ von Serviceleistungen ein, die auf fragmentierte Gruppen von Beschäftigten zielen, um ein Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl zu fördern und Vertretungskanäle zu etablieren. Er bietet ebenfalls eine neue Sicht auf die gewerkschaftliche Erneuerung und beleuchtet das Potenzial für die Gewerkschaften, ein tieferes Verständnis ihres Handlungsrepertoires und der Auswirkungen von Serviceleistungen auf die Konstruktion einer kollektiven Dimension zu gewinnen.

### **Keywords**

Representation, trade union renewal, union membership, strategic choice, servicing, collective identity, mobilisation, collective action

### **Introduction**

The primary objective of this article is to present novel perspectives on trade union renewal. Based on a cross-national research study encompassing five European countries – Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Italy and Lithuania – this work offers fresh insights into the role of servicing within the renewal process.<sup>1</sup> Despite significant differences between these countries' industrial relations systems, our findings suggest that trade unions have converged in utilising servicing to expand their

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1 This article is one of the outcomes of a research project funded by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. The project, entitled 'Break up to get back together. The impact of unionisation through innovative service provision on union membership and industrial relations' (BreakBack), was coordinated by Italian trade union CISL. Five partner institutions participated in the research activities: the University of Copenhagen (Denmark), Diesis Coop (Belgium), the University of Florence (Italy), the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain) and the Lithuanian Social Research Centre (Lithuania).

membership to include historically under-represented groups of workers. This outcome prompts a re-evaluation of the relationship between servicing and membership renewal. We commence by examining the limited attention devoted to servicing in the literature, which tends to prioritise organising. Subsequently, transcending the servicing/organising dichotomy, we introduce the emergence of non-traditional strategies for membership renewal. Our focus on servicing facilitates our understanding of how these innovative strategies integrate diverse logics of action. This allows us to formulate a new typology of union services. This typology enhances conceptual precision in relation to union services and sheds light on the strategic potential of servicing. In empirical terms, it enables trade unions to improve their knowledge of their action repertoires and their effects on recruitment and the construction of collective identities.

## **Beyond the servicing/organising dichotomy**

Trade union membership in Europe has been declining for decades, affecting all countries (Vandaele, 2019; Visser, 2019a). Longitudinally, in advanced economies trade unions have experienced a loss of 20 million members in the manufacturing sector alone. Around one-third of this fall can be attributed to disappearing jobs, while the remaining two-thirds are accounted for by declining membership in remaining positions (Visser, 2019a).

According to power resource theory, union membership is only one dimension through which workers can assert their interests (Silver, 2003). Nevertheless, membership remains critical for trade unions' organisational power and independence from political or other associative organisations. It is therefore imperative that trade unions introduce new renewal strategies or strengthen existing ones (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013; Ibsen and Tapia, 2017; Moore, 2010). Otherwise, trade unions may experience gradual marginalisation, a decline in the effectiveness of regulation compared with other forms of social action (for example, the law or employers' unilateral initiatives), or confinement to well-unionised niche sectors (Visser, 2019b).

Renewal strategies usually aim to retain membership in traditionally unionised industries (such as manufacturing or the public sector) and enlarge unions' associative scope. New targets emerge as a result of labour market transformations or the desire to go beyond the representation of existing members. In the former case, strategic actions have been introduced to address precarious workers, migrant workers and service sector employees, both low- and high-skilled. In the latter case, the main targets are self-employed workers, platform workers, the unemployed and pensioners. Finally, a special effort is being made to attract young workers, who are culturally less inclined to join trade unions.

Trade unions have adopted a whole range of strategies to renew their membership. In their notable contribution to the topic, Frege and Kelly (2003) identified six approaches: organisational restructuring or reorganisation, coalition-building with social movements, partnership with employers and government, political action, transnational unionism and organising.

Research has focused largely on organising and coalition-building between trade unions and social movements (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017; Murray, 2017). Organising has become the most discussed topic in industrial relations literature, however, primarily as a result of successful practices in Anglophone countries and their spread to countries where industrial relations systems are still institutionalised (Bronfenbrenner et al., 1998; Clawson, 2005; Crosby, 2005; Dörre et al., 2009; Heery and Adler, 2004; Hurd, 2004; Milkman, 2013; Mundlak, 2020; Simms et al., 2013).

The aim of organising is to strengthen trade union organisational power by recruiting new members, sometimes using unconventional bottom-up tactics. Salaried functionaries or professional organisers try to empower unorganised workers with campaigns based primarily on social justice. These campaigns, which mainly start at the local level but aim to reach a wider audience, are

complemented by efforts to build alliances with local associations, movements or parties. The rationale is that a broader coalition can increase the ability to handle conflicts.

Conversely, the literature on union renewal has largely overlooked servicing, possibly because of its historical origins. The notion finds its roots in the initial 'service ethos' of trade unions, tied to their mutualistic traditions (Webb and Webb, 1897). This conception reflects a time when trade unions were small and weak, employing mutual insurance to 'serve' their members' needs. However, the modern idea of servicing emerged in US industrial relations after the Second World War, when trade unions gained strength (Hurd, 1998). It was conceived as 'a reactive top-down model of unionism in which full-time-officials rely on legislative and employer procedures to regulate an inert membership within the employment relationship' (de Turberville, 2004: 777). In other words, servicing re-emerged as an organisational model that provided individual goods to workers outside the workplace. Moreover, this 'traditional' service model implies a division of union activities, with some dedicated to collective bargaining and contract enforcement, while a bureaucracy is tasked with service provision (Hurd, 1998). These developments occurred during a phase of relatively strong union power, which meant that the adoption of new strategies for renewing membership was less pressing. Service provision was therefore used as a form of selective incentive. This aligned with the logic of associative social action, as defined by Schmitter and Streeck (1981), which emphasises service provision as a way of helping union members effectively.

A corollary of the traditional servicing approach is the purported risk that it may foster an instrumental form of trade union commitment among workers (Tapia, 2013; see also the pioneering work of Alinsky, 1971). This may diminish new members' inclination to actively engage in union activities (Fullagar et al., 1997; Sverke and Sjöberg, 1997). Furthermore, member mobilisation becomes more challenging within a 'service-driven culture' than in the 'relational culture' of organising, which is characterised by cultivating relationships and fostering high levels of trust and loyalty between the organisation and its members (Tapia, 2013).

From the end of the 1970s, the sharp decline in union membership led American trade unions to prefer the organising approach (Heery et al., 1999), whose logic of social action differs from that of servicing. It relates to goal formation, representation of new members and increasing external influence (Schmitter and Streeck, 1981). This change, framed in terms of the strategic choice perspective (Child, 1972), provoked an intense internal debate between those more keen on serving existing members and those who wanted to attract new ones (Hurd, 1998; Russo and Banks, 1996).

The servicing/organising dichotomy has influenced the development of the notion of servicing in scholarly discourse (de Turberville, 2004; Tapia, 2013). First, this conceptual dualism conceals the possibility of multiple functions and logics of action within a single organisation, as highlighted by Schmitter and Streeck (1981). Boxall and Haynes (1997) argue that this perspective is overly simplistic. On the one hand, trade unions provide services independently of their organising efforts. On the other hand, they may adopt a variety of organising approaches, which in certain cases could incorporate a servicing strategy. Second, the above dichotomy also obstructs the exploration of innovative forms of servicing, which have been subject to extensive experimentation since the 1980s and are now gaining prominence across Europe, as we will investigate in this article. Indeed, research on service provision beyond the traditional membership in the United States (Heckscher and Carré, 2006; Jarley and Fiorito, 1990) or the United Kingdom (Waddington and Kerr, 2000; Williams, 1997) has demonstrated instances of servicing that *hybridise* the logic of effectiveness towards members with the logic of increasing representation among non-members.

Jarley and Fiorito (1990) evaluated the case of the Union Privilege Benefit Program, an American union-based corporation that extended associate membership to workers unable to participate in negotiations and attain full union membership. The Program aimed to expand membership by providing an intermediate step to fully fledged status. The target groups

included former union members, union supporters from failed representation campaigns, but also free riders. The associate membership programme utilised workers' consumer interests by offering discounted rates for credit cards, health care, auto and life insurance, legal assistance and travel services.

Waddington and Kerr (2000: 250) demonstrated a comparable strategy at UNISON, one of the largest UK unions, representing workers primarily in public services. In 1995, they implemented a National Recruitment Plan that aligned with the logic of organising and concurrently delivered tailored individual services to meet the needs of UNISON members. Likewise, in the context of Civictown, a prominent local authority in the north-east of England, the supply of services cultivated a sense of identification with the union and generated stronger affinity among members, thereby instilling feelings of exclusivity and collective belonging (Williams, 1997). More recently, Alberti et al. (2013) described a proper organising strategy with a similar hybridisation of servicing and organising. Unite, formerly the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), targeted migrant workers and propelled their campaign by providing essential services such as translation and interpreting, as well as advice on employment rights and welfare.

In this article, drawing upon an analysis of the literature on trade unionism, which includes the above-mentioned examples, and integrating original empirical evidence, we advance a new typology of union services. This comprehensive classification presents two notable advantages. First, it effectively transcends the conventional dichotomy between servicing and organising. Second, it sheds light on a broad range of approaches to servicing, encompassing both individualising and collectivising perspectives.

## **The role of servicing in five European countries**

### *Research design and methods*

The analysis presented here is based on previous research investigating the impact of servicing on union membership in five European countries: Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Italy and Lithuania (see note 1). The study focused on 'innovative' services, namely, new or rebranded services targeting hard-to-unionise persons, including vulnerable workers, people out of work, and high-skilled workers, with goals ranging from community building to collective mobilisation.

To adhere to this definition, the study employed a strategic sampling approach and selected 13 case studies for examination. This method ensured the relevance of the chosen cases to the research question and theoretical assumptions. While not encompassing the entire landscape of union services, this procedure allowed us to draw a vivid picture of a complex system.

A two-stage research agenda was pursued. The initial phase involved conducting semi-structured interviews with four or five key informants per country to examine whether peak-level trade union organisations had established a renewal strategy incorporating innovative services. The subsequent phase adopted a case-study approach, involving semi-structured interviews with persons responsible for service provision (one or two persons per case). Additionally, focus groups (one per case) were used to gather service users' viewpoints. In cases where planning focus groups faced obstacles because of the reticence of trade unions or service users, individual interviews were conducted (a minimum of five per case). Interviews with trade unionists were conducted in the first half of 2020, while focus groups and interviews with service users were conducted from late 2020 through the first half of 2021.<sup>2</sup>

Building upon the research findings, this article aims to develop a novel typology that accounts for the diversity of union services and sheds light on the strategic potential of servicing, thereby facilitating theoretical advancement in the realm of trade union renewal. To achieve this, the article

provides an overview of the case studies and introduces the analytical dimensions used to construct the typology.

## Case studies

### Overview

The selected cases cover a variety of target groups, including self-employed workers, platform workers, atypical workers, unemployed persons and middle managers. They encompass different organisational settings, such as trade union organisations, affiliate associations, service facilities and joint bodies, at both national and local levels (Table 1). Importantly, these cases are embedded in distinct institutional contexts characterised by specific configurations of industrial relations and varying power resources available to trade unions. These factors may influence the role of servicing in different countries and trade unions.

In Belgium, *United Freelancers* was established in 2019 by ACV-CSC (Confederation of Christian Trade Unions) to organise three groups of workers: solo self-employed, self-employed as a secondary activity and platform workers. The primary objective of this organisation is to provide an extensive package of services, encompassing legal assistance, business services (such as contract verification), workshops and more traditional forms of representation. Despite being managed by a small group, *United Freelancers* benefits from the indirect engagement of confederal staff and the support of external experts (Kelemen and Lenaerts, 2022). In 2020, ABVV-FGTB (General Labour Federation of Belgium) initiated the *Platform for Platform Workers*, a website dedicated to platform workers across sectors, delivering information on workers' rights and support through digital media. This endeavour involves people from different sectoral unions (Kelemen and Lenaerts, 2022). While distinct, these bodies share the common goal of recruiting new members in response to declining membership, influenced by significant demographic shifts and inter-union competition. The unions offer selective incentives by reserving access to services for their members (Kelemen and Lenaerts, 2022).

In Denmark, the *Freelance Service Bureau* and *Flexwerker* represent indirect manifestations of trade unionism. Established in 2018 by HK (Union of Commercial and Clerical Employees in Denmark), the *Freelance Service Bureau* is a non-profit company serving as an employer and employee representative. It hires freelancers directly, enabling them to benefit from collective bargaining, and provides business services such as tax assistance, legal advice on work contracts, invoicing, sick pay and accident insurance. Registration is open to both union and non-union members, with fees applicable for new assignments. Part-time union employees ensure its proper functioning (Larsen et al., 2022). Launched in 2017 as a grass-roots initiative, later backed by DM (Danish Association of Masters and PhDs), *Flexwerker* has evolved into an employee-owned cooperative overseen by a team of five. Its mission is to raise awareness regarding non-standard work and associated risks among humanities and social science academics and within the trade union movement. To achieve this, it arranges workshops, publishes a magazine, podcasts and digital media content, and facilitates network activities, often in collaboration with DM. Notably, workshops are accessible to all, irrespective of union membership (Larsen et al., 2022). Both cases aim for membership renewal in the context of high but declining union density (Larsen et al., 2022).

In Spain, *Tu Respuesta Sindical Ya* and *El WhatsApp de la Precariedad* are digital media services established by trade unions. Launched in 2017 by UGT (General Union of Workers),

2 For comprehensive information on case selection, methodological tools and a comparative analysis of research results, see Bellini et al. (2022b). For in-depth findings in individual countries, see Bellini et al. (2022a), Blažienė et al. (2022), Kelemen and Lenaerts (2022), Larsen et al. (2022), and Molina and Godino (2022). Additional information is available here: <https://www.breakback.cisl.it>.

**Table 1.** Case studies: a synopsis.

Case	Country	Trade union	Target group(s)	Service(s) offered
<i>Platform for Platform Workers</i>	BE	ABVV-FGTB	Platform workers	Information and support services
<i>United Freelancers</i>	BE	ACV-CSC	Solo self-employed, self-employed as a secondary activity and platform workers	Legal assistance, business services (for example, contract verification) and workshops
<i>Flexwerker</i>	DK	Cooperative supported by DM	Precarious academics and freelancers	Workshops, a magazine, various digital media and network activities
<i>Freelance Service Bureau</i>	DK	Non-profit company led by HK	Freelancers	Business services (such as tax assistance, work contracts, invoicing and insurance)
<i>El WhatsApp de la Precariedad</i>	ES	CCOO	Atypical workers	Information and legal advice through telephone and instant messaging
<i>Tu Respuesta Sindical Ya</i>	ES	UGT	Platform workers	A mailbox to address inquiries related to the rights of (bogus) self-employed workers
<i>NIDIL Firenze</i>	IT	CGIL	Atypical workers, freelancers and unemployed persons	Legal, tax and social security assistance, as well as income support, welfare and training
<i>Partita Viva</i>	IT	CISL	Self-employed and freelancers	Legal, tax and social security assistance, training and a co-working space
<i>Quadrifor</i>	IT	CGIL, CISL, UIL (joint body)	Middle managers	Training
<i>Sportello Lavoro</i>	IT	CISL	Unemployed persons	Information, skills assessment, job search assistance and training
<i>Vivace</i>	IT	CISL	Self-employed and freelancers	Legal, tax and social security assistance, as well as welfare, training and online support
<i>GKVPS</i>	LT	LPS Solidarumas	Guides and tour leaders	Training
<i>LSSO</i>	LT	LPSK	Nurses, paramedics, midwives and other health-care workers	Training and skills certification

*Tu Respuesta Sindical Ya* consists of a dedicated website for platform workers, encompassing riders and other individuals engaged in low-skilled occupations. It also incorporates a mailbox for addressing inquiries related to the rights of (bogus) self-employed workers. Users are required to register on the website, regardless of their union membership status. Through this service, UGT's primary objective is to establish communication with workers and support their collective organisation at the corporate level (Molina and Godino, 2022). Introduced in 2018 by CCOO (Confederation of Workers' Commissions), *El WhatsApp de la Precariedad* provides information and legal advice through telephone and instant messaging to vulnerable workers, aiding them in navigating workplace-, market- and life-related risks. To this end, the service receives organisational backing from a dedicated department, enabling effective management of a significant

volume of queries. The service is accessible to both members and non-members, and CCOO refrains from offering selective incentives for individuals to join the union. Nevertheless, the union strives to connect with unorganised workers and showcases the advantages of union representation on an individual basis (Molina and Godino, 2022). In the broader context of enduring associational frailty, these trade unions orient their strategies towards enhancing their representation role rather than focusing on renewing membership (Molina and Godino, 2022).

In Italy, *Vivace* and *Partita Viva* share a common inspiration despite their distinct histories. Founded in 2015 under the auspices of CISL (Italian Confederation of Trade Unions), both entities engaged with the self-employed sector. *Vivace*, however, is a national association initiated by an official of FELSA (Federation of Agency, Autonomous, and Atypical Workers), while *Partita Viva* is a grass-roots initiative formed by a group of self-employed workers in Vicenza, in northeastern Italy. Initially conceived as a virtual community, *Vivace* later underwent institutionalisation, coinciding with the establishment of physical branches in various regions. The pivotal step in this progression was the creation of a network of services, encompassing legal, tax and social security assistance, welfare, training and online support, capitalising on the confederal services system. Subsequent efforts focused on utilising these services as instruments to engage members. To facilitate this process, *Vivace* has formally joined FELSA while maintaining its autonomous identity (Bellini et al., 2022a). Conversely, *Partita Viva* was established to represent the self-employed at the local level, providing a package of services, including a co-working space, fundamental for community building. To address the organisational weakness that became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and to take advantage of acquired expertise, *Partita Viva* has been amalgamated into *Vivace* (Bellini et al., 2022a).

Remaining in Italy, we encounter the case of *NIDIL Firenze*. Founded in 1998 by CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour), NIDIL (New Work Identities) is a trade union dedicated to advocating for atypical workers. Among its array of services, it provides a comprehensive package tailored for the self-employed, including legal, tax and social security assistance, as well as income support, welfare and training. As a local branch, *NIDIL Firenze* represents a cohort of more than 200 self-employed workers. The case under examination embodies an instance of collective action involving local tour guides, many lacking a contract. The union gathered information through the legal services it offers to a broader group (self-employed workers) and organised a training course to try to bring workers together on this issue. Following this, it persuaded the local government to set quality standards and ultimately reached a collective agreement with a tour operator (Bellini et al., 2022a).

In Italy, two other cases stand apart from those mentioned above. *Sportello Lavoro* is a front-line service established by CISL in 2018, serving the cities of Florence and Prato. It provides information, skills assessment, job search assistance and training to persons out of work. The primary focus is on the long-term unemployed, aimed at enhancing their employability and assisting them in job placement. The union's intention is not explicitly to increase membership but rather to maintain a connection with workers during their job transitions (Bellini et al., 2022a). *Quadrifor* by contrast exemplifies the Italian 'bilateral' system. Set up in 1995 through an industry-wide agreement, *Quadrifor* is managed jointly by an employers' association (Confcommercio) and the main trade unions in trade and services (FILCAMS-CGIL, FISASCAT-CISL and UILTUCS-UIL). Its central activity is service provision, particularly training for middle managers, supported by substantial financial and human resources from the relevant social partners. Although it addresses individual needs, *Quadrifor*'s origins ensure its collective character because of its sectoral coverage (approximately 68,000 individuals and 14,000 companies). Its services are accessible to members, who pay an annual fee, of which employers pay two-thirds and employees one-third (Bellini et al., 2022a).



These five Italian cases exist within a context characterised by fluctuating but not collapsing union membership, set against a background of competitive pluralism. The trade unions use the expansion of service provision as a predominant strategy to increase membership. Nevertheless, the various confederations perceive the role of servicing in distinct ways and take different approaches to this strategic option, encompassing both traditional and innovative solutions (Bellini et al., 2022a).

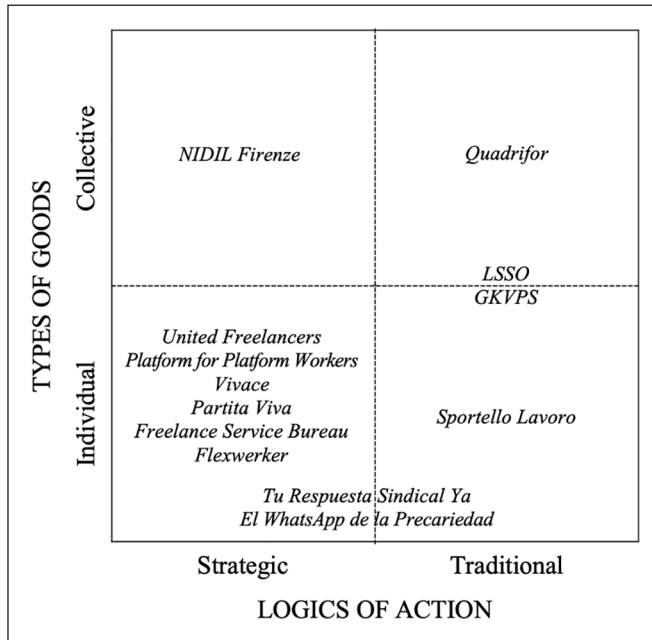
Turning to Lithuania, *LSSO* (Lithuanian Nurses' Organisation) was founded in 1992 to represent nurses and health-care workers. In 2005, it became part of *LPSK* (Lithuanian Trade Union Confederation). *LSSO* actively contributes to the formulation of legal regulations, professional standards and educational programmes. It also provides professional development services, including training and skills certification. These offerings extend to both members and non-members, with selective incentives (such as cost-free training funded through membership fees) designed to encourage workers to join the union (Blažienė et al., 2022). *GKVPS* (Trade Union of Guides and Tour Leaders) was established in 2009 by *LPS Solidarumas* (Lithuanian Trade Union Solidarity). Its main aim is to improve working conditions for guides and tour leaders by countering illegal tour guiding and unfair employer practices, while also providing training (Blažienė et al., 2022). Despite shared goals, the two cases exhibit significant differences. *LSSO*, representing approximately 6000 people, is a structured organisation with regional departments responsible for service provision. In contrast, *GKVPS* is a small organisation, representing about 70 people, with limited financial and human resources (Blažienė et al., 2022). In the context of low and declining membership, increasing membership is a major objective for trade unions, which nevertheless use more traditional strategies and actions to achieve this goal (Blažienė et al., 2022).

### *Types of goods provided and logics of action*

The case studies demonstrate significant variations in the types of 'goods'<sup>3</sup> provided. In most instances, the services and delivery methods exhibit similarities. All these services provide individual goods to meet individual needs, although some also incorporate or aim for a collective dimension (Figure 1). The distinction between individual and collective goods is significant. This article draws upon it to illustrate how collective action can be promoted even through the provision of goods tailored to individuals rather than specific groups. Nevertheless, what sets the cases apart is the extent to which services are framed within a strategic dimension. The strategic aspect of servicing pertains to the unions' efforts to develop a collective dimension, which involves nurturing a sense of community among service users and establishing channels for representation or even mobilising groups of workers to support union action.

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3 Please note that the term 'good' is used here in the sense of the new institutionalist literature, referring to 'resources' that community members cannot produce independently but are made available through various institutions. Our approach was inspired by Schmitter and Streeck (1981), who presented a typology of competing logics of associative action, focusing on business interest organisation. The authors identified four types of activities (participation, representation, services and control), each linked to a corresponding type of modal good (solidaristic, public, selective and authoritative). Within this framework, selective goods are produced exclusively for members through services, with market alternatives also available. Furthermore, they argued that an association focused primarily on providing selective goods to members efficiently could be likened to a business firm. This argument gained traction, particularly among trade unionists, who believe that emphasising service provision deviates from the trade union ethos and renders them similar to private agencies. In our study, we focused on the 'selective goods' quadrant of Schmitter and Streeck's schema, while challenging the aforementioned argument by identifying different types of goods associated with service provision.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of case studies across the two dimensions.

In the domain of the traditional logic of action, certain services provide goods for individual purposes (Figure 1). This category of services lacks adequate coverage within the scope of the examined cases, selected for their focus on under-represented groups of workers. Here, *Sportello Lavoro* constitutes a unique case within the complex network of union services in Italy. It targets a highly specific segment of the broader audience of service users, the unemployed, offering services aimed at enhancing their agency, a role typically assumed by public services. As such, it ensures continuous support for workers during periods of joblessness and fills a gap in trade union representation.

In other cases, individual goods are produced collectively. For example, *Quadrifor*, set up through an industry-wide agreement, provides individual services (specifically, training) for middle managers employed in enterprises covered by the same agreement. In this instance, because of this organisation's bilateral and inter-union structure, the services cannot be overtly utilised to recruit union members, which restricts their impact on union membership. Its dual aim is to enhance workers' empowerment while reinforcing the competitiveness of businesses in the trade and services sector.

On the strategic side, some services by virtue of their very nature provide collective goods. This is exemplified by the case of *NIDIL Firenze*, where delivering an individual service (such as a training course for local tour guides) supports the production of a collective good (a collective agreement with a tour operator) applicable to all local workers in the sector. In this instance, services are used instrumentally to advance traditional union activities. This form of action involves targeting well-defined groups of workers with distinct profiles and identities, a factor that facilitates mobilisation (as observed with tour guides). It also entails political entrepreneurship in the sense of a capacity to harness available resources efficiently to seize opportunities and fulfil valuable interests. This strategy emerges as an effective approach to fostering grass-roots trade union power, although the potential for membership growth is restricted because of the limited scope of such initiatives.

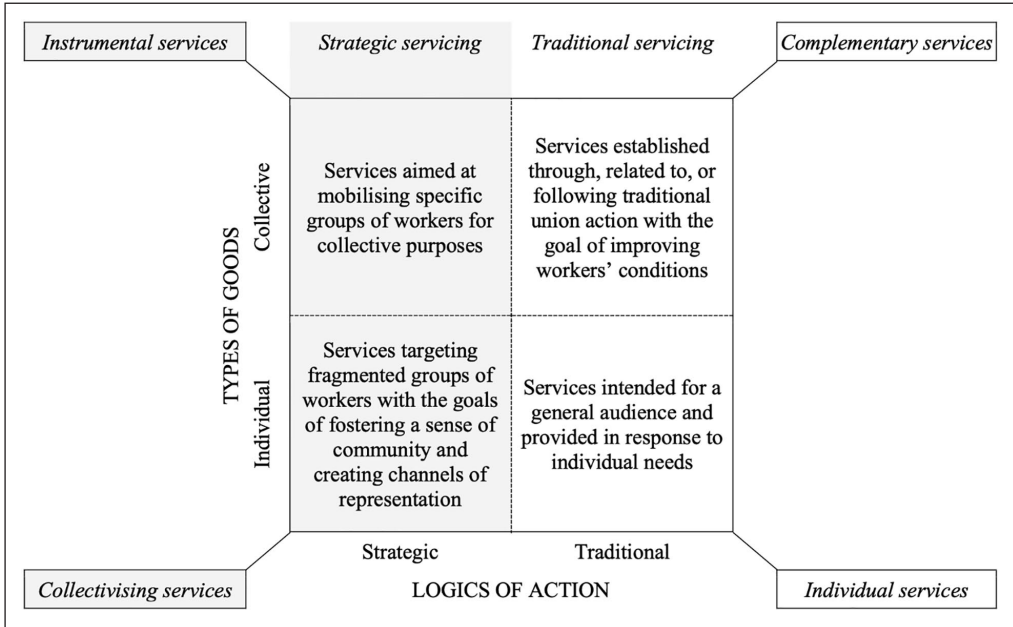
A distinct case concerns services providing individual goods while concurrently developing a collective dimension. This category is predominant among the selected cases, covering extensive and dispersed groups of workers lying beyond the sphere of influence of trade unions, including the self-employed (*United Freelancers*, *Flexwerker*, the *Freelance Service Bureau*, *Vivace* and *Partita Viva*) and platform workers (the *Platform for Platform Workers*). In such instances, trade unions strive to unite workers through services that nurture a sense of community. The entities responsible for service provision endeavour to formulate a strategy for representing unorganised workers and legitimising their demands within the union. This scenario also constitutes fertile ground for experimentation. All the considered cases are, in some way, experimental, originating either from the top (*United Freelancers*, the *Freelance Service Bureau*, the *Platform for Platform Workers* and *Vivace*) or from the grass-roots (*Flexwerker* and *Partita Viva*). They are relatively recent and most suffer from organisational weaknesses, which in certain instances have prompted the pursuit of paths towards institutionalisation. Furthermore, membership renewal is an explicit goal, albeit pursued with varying intensity, influenced by diverse membership trends and degrees of inter-union competition. In this context, the role of selective incentives does not appear to be pivotal.

Four cases have intermediate status, making their classification trickier. Specifically, the Lithuanian cases (*LSSO* and *GKVPS*) provide individual services (such as training) within the framework of collective representation strategies executed through traditional forms of action, including social dialogue and lobbying. These strategies are oriented towards improving workers' conditions, albeit with an emphasis on achieving substantial membership growth. Consequently, these services traditionally operate to offer selective incentives for union enrolment. Furthermore, the Spanish cases (*Tu Respuesta Sindical Ya* and *El WhatsApp de la Precariedad*) address a broad spectrum of subjects with a predominantly traditional approach. Indeed, they primarily deliver individual services (namely, information and support services through digital media). These services assume explicit collective purposes and manifest as attempts at mobilisation only in specific cases, such as riders. Their primary objective revolves around enhancing the unions' representation role. Therefore, selective incentives are less useful.

## Strategic versus traditional servicing: a typology

Figure 2 presents a typology of union services based on different types of goods provided and logics of action, further expanding upon the case studies. It identifies four types of *services* related to two types of *servicing*. This typology is a theoretical construct, and the identified types are ideal types, possibly not existing in reality. Thus, not all examined services can be assigned categorically to the four types. Indeed, dashed lines in the figure indicate porous boundaries. Nevertheless, this typology is a valuable tool in interpreting a complex social reality.

The bottom-right quarter of the diagram encompasses a wide range of services – labelled *individual services* – that provide individual goods and follow a traditional logic of action. These services are intended for a broad range of people, including wage- and salary-earners in employment, as well as unemployed and retired workers. They encompass standard legal, tax and social security assistance, guidance, training, job matching and income support. The provision of such services responds to individual needs without any explicit intention to involve service users in union activities. Since the end of the Second World War individual services have been key in attracting members and raising funds. They include tax and social security assistance in Italy and unemployment insurance in countries following the Ghent system (Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Sweden). In the former case, trade unions deliver the services through dedicated bureaucratic facilities, partly funded by the government in a non-monopolistic market, offering selective



**Figure 2.** A typology of union services and servicing approaches.

incentives such as free or discounted services for members. In general, these services function as ‘gateways’ to the union. In the latter case, trade unions are directly responsible for paying unemployment benefits, often regulated or subsidised by the government. This system has traditionally ensured a strong relationship between the service and union membership, although this relationship has weakened in recent years (Lind, 2009).

The top-right quarter includes services that provide individual goods produced collectively but following a traditional logic of action. We call them *complementary services*, because supposedly they are ancillary to interest representation. These services may be established through or related to collective bargaining, as seen in the case of Italian joint bodies and funds (the ‘bilateral’ system). These institutions, set up at the sectoral and territorial levels and managed jointly by employers’ associations and trade unions, offer occupational welfare services (such as training, health and safety at the workplace, certification of compliance with the payment of pension contributions, and supplementary social or health insurance), along with income support schemes and solidarity funds. In some cases, service provision follows engagement in traditional activities, such as collective bargaining or lobbying, which remain the core business of trade unions. In these instances, services are provided in response to worker demand or as a union initiative, both in and out of work.

The top-left quarter contains services that provide collective goods and follow a strategic logic of action. These are *instrumental services* aimed at mobilising specific groups of workers for collective purposes. These services are often targeted towards small groups in specific contexts. They are designed to inform workers of their shared rights and build a collective (for example, through a training course) as a foundation for union action (such as campaigning, picketing, striking or even initiating negotiations). In this case, servicing follows organising logic, resulting in hybrid strategic approaches.

The bottom-left quarter identifies what we refer to as *collectivising services*. These are services that provide individual goods but follow a strategic logic of action. This type of service has

significant implications both theoretically and empirically. It covers a broad spectrum of services that target fragmented groups of workers (for example, the self-employed and platform workers) who lack collective identity and representation within trade union organisations. These services respond to individual needs with a more or less explicit ‘collectivising’ function, such as constructing ‘union categories’ and developing spaces of shared representation, potentially as a precursor to union action. In this sense, ‘collectivisation’ is primarily an internal process by which emerging or latent demands for representation acquire legitimacy. One way to proceed is to provide individual services in an effort to understand workers’ needs and nurture a sense of community among service users. That said, the development of collective identity, a necessary condition for mobilisation, does not happen automatically; rather it is a long-term process. In this context, servicing differs from organising, as trade unions’ primary objective is to increase their influence among unorganised workers and establish specific channels for representation.

Together, the quarters on the right of the diagram represent *traditional servicing*. According to this approach, services are tailored to meet individual needs and aim to improve workers’ conditions. Like any form of representation, this type of servicing is also a system of exclusion. Indeed, traditional servicing has focused on core workers and other figures closely related to salaried employment, such as unemployed and retired workers. Even in this case, the supply of services is *not* an end in itself. Trade unions offer selective incentives to attract members and raise funds. In the countries where servicing has deep roots, this approach has allowed them to retain, at least partly, their membership base and curb the overall trend of declining union power. On the other hand, trade unions have lost their capacity to represent the world of work as a whole, leaving large portions of the changing workforce unprotected.

The quarters on the left identify an emerging approach called *strategic servicing*, through which trade unions explicitly address representation problems. This approach involves offering innovative services, targeting hard-to-unionise workers and pursuing multiple goals. In strategic servicing, meeting individual needs represents a short-term objective that is secondary to building a collective dimension. In some cases, the services are more instrumental in nature, as servicing is combined with organising. Indeed, our research has revealed that servicing and organising can work together: servicing offers an incentive to join a union and organising helps to develop a sense of belonging.

The main problem with servicing is that union membership derived from services is volatile, and there is little participation (Fullagar et al., 1997; Sverke and Sjoberg, 1997; Tapia, 2013). In the case of traditional servicing, joining a union is directed towards enjoying the benefits of selective incentives. The link with the organisation remains weak and rarely translates into participation. In the case of strategic servicing, with services understood as collectivising services, one issue is whether there is adequate capacity to move from simple to active participation.

## **Conclusion: trade union renewal at the crossroads**

Over the past four decades, an academic debate has arisen regarding the need to replenish union membership and implement organisational innovations to counter the decline in trade union power. This discourse originated in the United States but has significantly influenced the European debate, emphasising the role of organising while neglecting the potential of servicing as a renewal strategy. Consequently, in the European context, union services are perceived within a traditional logic of action as individual services addressing the needs of both members and non-members and offering selective incentives to encourage union membership.

This article aims to rectify this misconception. It highlights that a new form of servicing is gaining traction across different industrial relations systems, referred to as ‘strategic servicing’. In this

case, the services are intended to build a collective, thereby paving the way for future collective action. This holds significant importance in the current context, in which considerable portions of the workforce lack proper representation.

The research findings also suggest a need to overcome the servicing/organising dichotomy. The first type of strategic servicing mentioned, which offers instrumental services, shares similarities with organising, indicating that servicing and organising are not mutually exclusive. By contrast, the second type of strategic servicing, which offers collectivising services, represents a new form of strategic action with little resemblance to organising. This interesting logic of membership renewal combines an effective short-run response to individual needs and a long-run collectivisation strategy.

These results have important theoretical implications, drawing elements from the theories of collective action (Olson, 1965), mobilisation (Kelly, 1998) and strategic choice (as applied by Boxall and Haynes, 1997). The strategic logic of servicing goes beyond the mechanism of selective incentives and offers a mix of selective and affective goods. Trade unions may act strategically to develop new spaces of representation as a first step towards collectivisation, even if, in the short run, the (economic) costs may outweigh the benefits (in terms of membership increase and workers' involvement). Additionally, this particular approach to servicing may contribute to the construction of collective narratives as systems of legitimisation and cognitive frames for developing collective identity.

There are unresolved questions that further research could illuminate, however.

First, conducting additional research is imperative to assess the long-term effects of strategic servicing, both in terms of achieving a sustained increase in membership and building new collective identities. Attention should be directed towards understanding how the social profile of various groups of workers influences the strategic approach and effectiveness of union action.

Second, it is important to note that strategic servicing, even if it does not lead to the formation of new collective identities, could still yield indirect outcomes, such as establishing trust in trade unions among traditionally sceptical groups and legitimising new forms of work with trade union endorsements.

Further reflections could focus on the organisational difficulties of implementing strategic servicing. For strategic servicing to have its intended effects, trade union culture must be renewed. Traditional union culture perpetuates the separation between organisational actions focused on member administration and initiatives for renewing membership. Strategic servicing may facilitate a reconciliation of these aspects. To overcome the institutional constraints imposed by historical union cultures (Causarano and Cella, 2012; Hyman, 2003) strategic servicing must be protected from exposure to the homogenising mechanisms typical of complex organisations. One possibility could be to strengthen the synergies between the consolidated repertoires of union action (for example, legal and fiscal assistance) and the strategic logic behind collectivising services. This poses a potentially significant challenge: to renew the offering of individual services with the recognition that each service could present an opportunity to enhance trade unions in the future, in terms of both membership and legitimacy among labour market outsiders (namely, vulnerable, unprotected workers and the unemployed). In this sense, transforming traditional services into collectivising services could make it easier to foster an inclusive labour community.

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