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Shaping industrial relations in a digitalising services industry – Workshop 3: company strategies and work organisation

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1 Introduction

The UNI Europa project „Shaping Industrial Relations in a Digitalising Services Industry - Challenges and Opportunities for Social Partners“, in cooperation with “ZSI – Zentrum für Soziale Innovation” and promoted by the European Commission, aims to identify and analyse change factors and explore new approaches for social partners on the challenges of maintaining effective industrial relations systems in a digitalising services industry. The project strives to provide policy advice for trade unions, social partners and policymakers on necessary adaptations of institutional frameworks for industrial relations, collective bargaining, social dialogue and capacity building for social partners. Challenges and opportunities are identified and analysed in particular with regard to workers’ representation at company level and collective bargaining as well as the work and organisation of trade unions in general.

Across the project, we are dividing the investigation into three aspects of services that are clearly interrelated.

- Under the heading of “**Service markets**” we look at changes in service production and delivery through digitalisation (for example, online services and self-service) and also on the impact of these changes on customers and society at large. It is one of the dimensions where rapid changes, disruptive innovations (for example platforms) need to be addressed. Here, we also address the status of services in “industrial” or economic policy in the context of your respective sector and country.
- “**Service labour markets**” addresses the development of service jobs, their quality and quantity. We focus on jobs with intermediate skill levels, and will also address atypical and precarious employment (including self-employment) in your sector/country, the development of skills and re-skilling and policies of addressing them.
- “**Company strategies and work organisation**” looks at the company level and your union’s information and experience with companies in your sector/country: We will address transnationalisation of service companies at large, outsourcing and offshoring, working conditions and ways of influencing them, interest representation and participation.

Each aspect of services was the subject of a workshop organised by UNI Europa for national trade unionists involved with the subject.

Service markets were addressed on October 19th at UNI Europa’s offices in Brussels;

Service labour markets on December 11, 2017 at ver.di’s headquarters in Berlin;

and **company strategies and work organisation** on February 27, 2018 at Unionen’s headquarters in Stockholm.

Workshops consisted of two presentations by social scientists involved in the field and discussion of participants first in three smaller groups that addressed specific issues in each subject, then in the plenary. Outcomes are documented in the present report. The working groups’ and plenaries’ conclusions feed into the 10point action plan that UNI Europa is developing for the project’s final conference on May 15 and 16, 2018 in Brussels.

Presentations and factsheets for each workshop and also the reports of the entire project are available here: <https://unieuropaprojects.org/shaping-industrial-relations/> .

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2 Factsheet: Company Strategies and Work Organisation in Europe (Ursula Holtgrewe)

2.1 *Company strategies, work organisation and digitalisation*

Company strategies of transnationalisation and restructuring of value chains are closely related to work organisation and job quality. They also shape the impact of digitalisation since digital technologies do not determine work organisation directly. There is wide agreement that digital technologies can be implemented in alternative ways:

- enabling “responsible autonomy” and “discretionary learning”, worker empowerment and collaboration
- or favouring tight regimentation and control, de-skilling and fragmentation (Hirsch-Kreinsen, 2014; Lorenz, 2015).

To assess and influence impacts of digitalisation, trade unions do well to explore the possibilities of shaping digitalisation in favourable ways. Nevertheless, they must be aware of the context and the constraints of company strategies that extend beyond the individual firm, along value chains and networks of production and service delivery. This can increase the tensions between representing core and more peripheral workforces. As dominant companies in a sector or value chain realise higher shares of profit and further improve their position (Autor et al., 2017), they may still be able and willing to invest into exemplary practices of work organisation, but transferring such models to other parts of the economy may become more difficult and requires dedicated efforts by social partners and policy.

2.2 *Outsourcing and transnationalisation*

Outsourcing and transnationalisation of service functions have taken place in several waves and directions (Figure 1): the transnationalisation of space-independent services in ICT and various generic administration or knowledge-intensive functions by offshore outsourcing or the use of owned subsidiaries offshore, and the domestic outsourcing of space-dependent services. Indeed, the outsourcing of services to generic providers is one part of the expansion of service sectors across Europe in the last decades (Holtgrewe et al., 2015). Digitalisation is mostly considered an enabler of outsourcing and restructuring as it allows to deliver increasing parts of services remotely or to manage even space-dependent services in this way. In a “platform economy”, companies may be able to compose large parts of their value creation out of an array of cloud- and platform-based generic services. However, platform-based strategies that focus on intermediation, branding and strategic control of customer relations may put companies that use platforms at risk of being disrupted themselves.

In the ICT sector, a recent study commissioned by UNI finds that offshoring and outsourcing has become more “systemic”. Dominant companies retain strategic control over governance and integration and relocate even former “core” functions such as R&D, software architecture and sophisticated development (Holtgrewe & Schörpf, 2017). Generic, space-independent functions are currently consolidated into large shared service centres or, in telecommunications, network operations centres. From 2000 onwards Central and Eastern Europe (Hardy & Hollinshead, 2016), and after the crisis of 2007ff. South European countries such as Portugal or Greece have emerged as nearshoring destinations.

In outsourced services, clients have considerable influence on work organisation and working conditions – presenting challenges for works councils’ rights and their possibilities of co-determination or participation. For example, a transnational provider of call and service centre services investigated by Daum et al. (Daum et al., 2018) lets its clients decide on workers’ discretion over wording and actual problem-solving, and also on incentives. Other service providers rely on generally standardised

processes and tight controls. In either case, clients in the sector tend to favour tighter regimentation and control and retain the more empowered modes of customer contact inhouse.

Both nationally and transnationally, the option (or threat) of relocating work puts pressure on work and workers (Autor et al., 2015; Doellgast et al., 2016). In the European destinations of outsourcing, workers and unions may consider their working conditions not bad compared to working for national or local companies, but are frustrated by a sense of being locked into low and stagnating wages and a lack of perspectives.

2.3 *Work organisation*

Although digital technology does not determine work organisation, there are recognisably convergent patterns of digitised work organisation across sectors and skill levels. Ursula Huws describes this as “logged labor”: “labor is logged: logged in the sense of being chopped up into standardized units; logged in the sense of being connected online, and logged in the sense of being recorded for future analysis. ... This is not just a substitution of one kind of communication for another. It is an outward symptom of a major restructuring of work: the manifestation of an underlying pattern whereby tasks are standardized, enabling them to be coordinated and monitored systematically. Each unit of production is nested into a larger hierarchy of electronically-managed coordination. And each of these units, under pressure to keep costs as low as possible, seeks to minimize them by externalizing as much labor as possible to its users, or the next level down in the hierarchy” (Huws, 2016).

Realising the empowering possibilities of digitalisation thus takes dedicated efforts. Nordic and Continental trade unions, building on long workplace design and innovation traditions, emphasise the possibilities of empowered “smart” working and flexibility in the interest of workers as well as companies. There are some impressive examples of discretionary learning and participatory work organisation, for example in Deutsche Telekom (Suriano, 2017) or other companies in the German “Crowd and Cloud” project¹. However, in national and sectoral contexts that are characterised by marketisation and cost-based competition, the transfer of such pioneering models may become increasingly difficult (Daum et al., 2018; Greer & Doellgast, 2017).

Even autonomous and empowered forms of work in the digital economy are pressurised by increasing demands, extended needs to collaborate space-independently and across time-zones, and the possibilities of mobile communications (Messenger et al., 2017). Again, these can be used in ways that enable worker-oriented flexibility, discretion and improve work-life balance (Wajcman, 2015; Menz, 2017) but this requires overall favourable conditions. The strains of “boundaryless working” and all-around availability are not just a matter of the highly-skilled and well-paid. They are also found among worker groups with limited power and discretion, such as cleaners and their frontline managers who need to compensate low-staffing levels with ad-hoc flexibility organised through mobile phones (Sardadvar & Holtgrewe, 2017).

Recent company agreements, for example in Germany and France² aim to regulate availability of workers and to establish a “right to switch off” electronic devices. They oblige both management and co-workers to respect these rights, for example send messages later. Technical enforcement of such

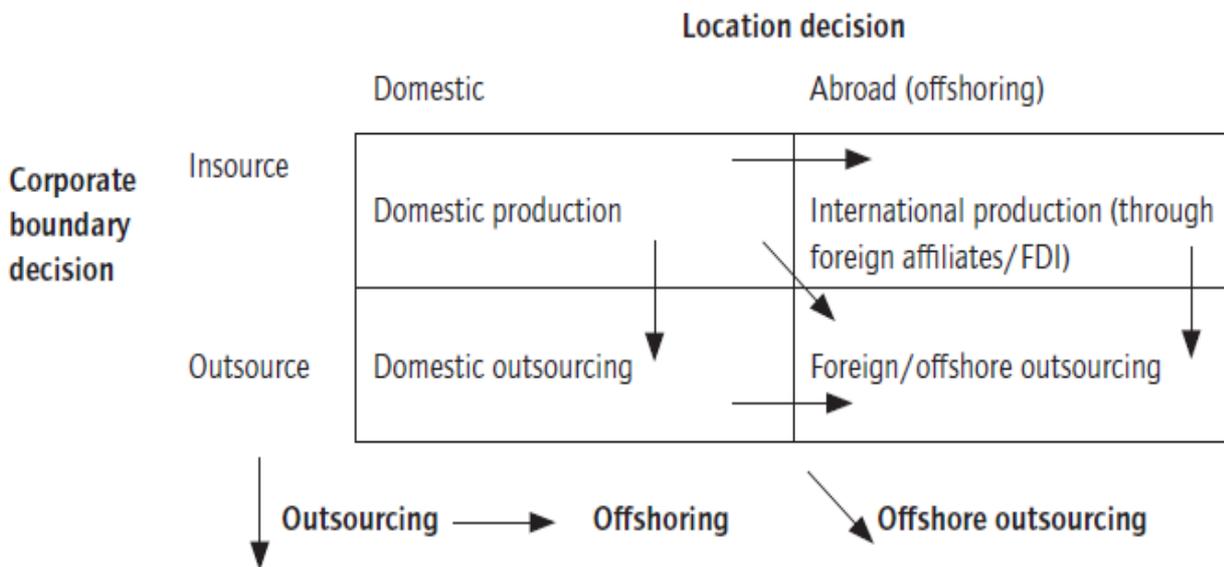
¹ <http://cloud-und-crowd.de/>

² <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/articles/france-first-company-level-agreement-on-digital-transformation-signed-at-orange>

measures through pop-up windows admonishing senders of evening e-mails is considered. Such initiatives need to be aware of the complex interactions of company policies and the flexible and diverse work habits of workers in diverse life situations – and they may not easily adapt to the more pressurised and customer-driven segments of the service sector.

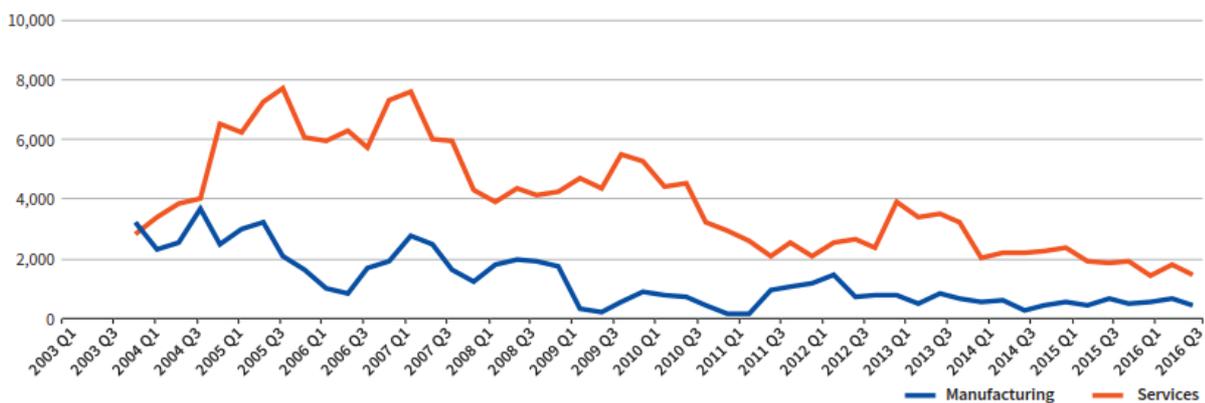
2.4 Annex

Figure1: Outsourcing and offshoring – the terminology



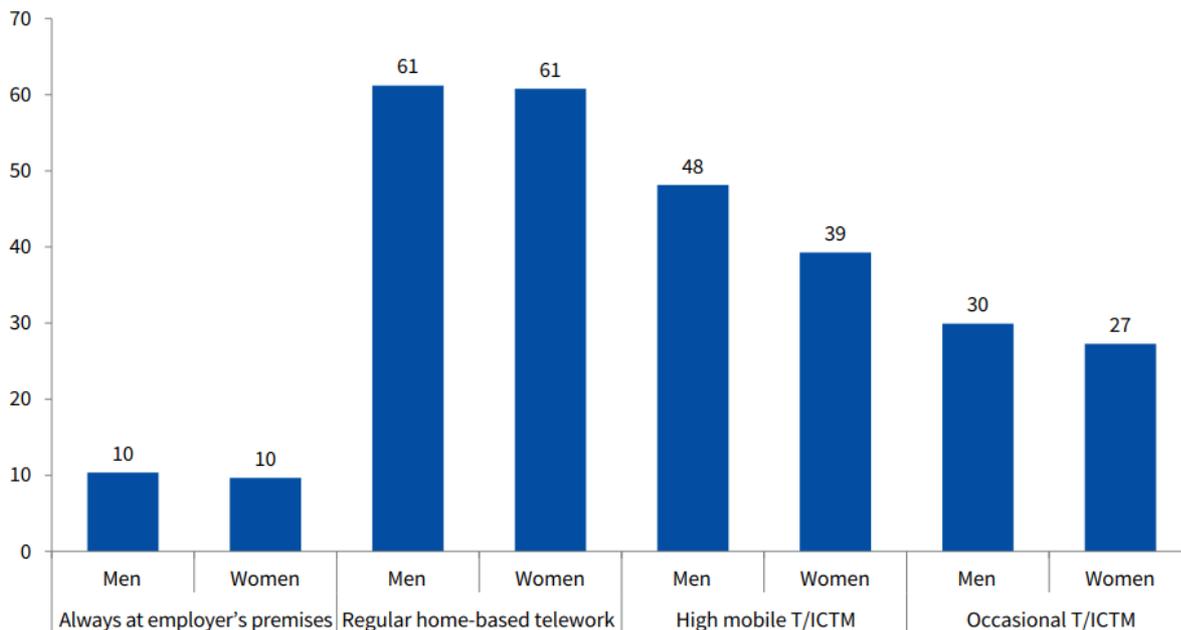
Source: (Drahokoupil, 2015), p. 11

Figure2: Announced job loss through offshoring in manufacturing and services 2003 - 2016



Source: European Restructuring Monitor, Hurley et al. 2016, p. 28

Figure 3: Employees working in their free time to meet work demands daily or several times a week by type of remote/telework and gender in the EU-28 in %



Source: Messenger et al. 2017, p. 31 based on European Working Conditions Survey 2015

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3 Presentation 1: Prof. Jane Hardy, University of Hertfordshire, London: Global political economy

Jane Hardy presented recent evidence on outsourced and offshored services in Central and Eastern Europe, based on her own work (Hardy, 2017; J. Hardy & Hollinshead, 2016) and on a recent study by the Association of Polish Business Service Leaders (Górecki, 2017). CEE and Poland in particular have emerged as lower-cost offshoring destination for business services, IT and also logistics.

Hardy first introduced the concept of Global Value Chains that looks at links between different companies, countries and groups of workers as products and services are increasingly produced transnationally. Outsourcing then means the subcontracting of a task to a different company, offshoring means the relocation of business to another country and offshore outsourcing means subcontracting to a different company in another country. These modes of restructuring are increasingly differentiated as management identify new options, more work can be done remotely and divisions of labour can go deeper. Offshoring of services affects the immaterial functions of for example call and service centres, IT, wider business support functions and also medical services or publishing. In the destination countries, wages are often above the national average. For trade unions, job losses in countries of origin and intensified competition are challenges as offshoring may engage countries in a “race to the bottom” and even companies that are well-organised at home may avoid unions in their offshore destinations.

CEE countries emerged as offshoring destinations for business services mostly after 2000, with governments providing financial incentives. From 2014 onwards, large players such as Amazon and Uber have also started investing there. Currently, Poland has some 198,000 jobs in offshored services (doubled in between 2013 and 2017), concentrating in Krakow, Warsaw and Wroclaw with other cities expanding as well. The Slovak Republic has some 30,000 jobs in and around Bratislava, Brno, and Kosice, the Czech Republic some 75,000. Hungary has some 40,000 jobs in business services in Budapest (and a longer history in software development). Bulgaria and Romania are also developing as destination, whereas numbers in the West European destinations of for example Spain or Ireland are declining.

In Poland, some 30% of offshored services originate in the US, followed by Germany with 19% and other Nordic and EU countries, but also subsidiaries of Indian outsourcing specialists Wipro or Infosys. Sectors cover IT, finance and accountancy, back office and customer support, and one third of business centres offer services in 10 or more languages. Employees are mostly college graduates, on average 31 years old and 54% are women – who, however, remain underrepresented in management positions. Notably, 10% of workers are foreigners, 40% from Ukraine, followed by Spanish and Italian workers. Earnings in customer service are at 760-950 EUR in junior positions. In IT, juniors make in between 959 and 1450 EUR. Some 25% of offshore service companies reported an annual turnover of 16-20%.

For the respective country, offshoring thus creates jobs. Companies also provide training and development opportunities that may spill over to local firms. Some companies manage to upgrade their services to higher value-added functions. On the other hand, the outsourced services sector may not connect well to local economies, may diminish their supply of skilled labour, and is often limited to the capital cities. Often, the well-educated workers may get stuck in low-skilled and tightly regimented jobs. As investments are cost-driven and companies gain experience in offshoring, jobs may be vulnerable to further relocation.

For trade unions, the situation is clearly challenging: The threat of relocations weakens their bargaining position in originating countries. In many Central and Eastern European destination countries, unions tend to be somewhat weak, in particular in private-sector services. However, there are recent initiatives in the offshored services, and partly new unions and organising efforts emerge. Hence, good practice examples can be found.

Hardy specifically discussed the example of Amazon in Poland. The company opened the first three of now five warehouses in the country to service the German and European market. Workers are paid some 3 EUR per hour, with monthly wages around 480 EUR (plus bonuses). Temporary workers are half or at peak times even 65% of the workforce. Two of the warehouses are represented by Solidarnosc, one is organised by grassroots trade union IP (= Inicjatywa Pracownicza) with a new type of younger activists. While Solidarnosc has links with German ver.di through UNIGlobal, IP connects with grassroots activists from 3 German warehouses and managed to organise a slowdown action when German Amazon workers went on strike.

Hardy suggested strategies that also develop customer pressure, in particular where consumer services are involved. She concluded that globally extended value chains and the possibilities of global communication require unions to “think outside the box”, form new alliances and develop solidarity on multiple levels, internationally, institutionally and locally.

4 Presentation 2: Dr Ursula Holtgrewe, ZSI – Centre for Social innovation, Vienna: Shaping industrial relations in a digitalising services industry – challenges and opportunities for social partners. The research part

Ursula Holtgrewe provided an overview of the research part of the project and then an overview on the subjects of company strategies and work organisation in relation to digitalisation. These subjects are clearly interrelated: Digitalisation enables and enhances possibilities to restructure work, coordinate and manage it independently of space, and hence may drive outsourcing and transnationalisation. Trade unionists mostly expect ongoing concentration and global competition. Business functions may be consolidated or transferred across sectors (for example, from retail to logistics, from manufacturing to business services), and in extreme cases, companies may be able to compose large parts of their value creation out of an array of cloud- and platform-based generic services. As workers in extended value chains still need to collaborate and coordinate their work, we cannot be sure about the interplay of full automation and restructuring: disruption across sectors, modularisation or the emergence of new intermediaries are all possible.

Transnationalisation and value chain restructuring have impacts on work organisation: when services are outsourced, the client generally gets a considerable say over work organisation and also job quality (Holtgrewe 2018). On the one hand, for most outsourced services clients favour more regimented work and tight control. On the other, powerful clients shift risk and flexibility requirements onto their service providers. Digitally enhanced outsourcing and transnationalisation thus increases options and opportunities for managers further and presents the familiar challenges for works councils and trade unions: outsourcing to less organised sectors and regions, “new” and hard-to-reach workforces, spatial distribution, influence of client and market demands.

Although digital technology does not determine work organisation, there are recognisably convergent patterns of digitised work organisation across sectors and skill levels. Ursula Huws describes this as “logged labor”: “Each unit of production is nested into a larger hierarchy of electronically-managed coordination. And each of these units, under pressure to keep costs as low as possible, seeks to minimize them by externalizing as much labor as possible to its users, or the next level down in the hierarchy” (Huws, 2016). In spite of these wide-spread features, it makes sense to distinguish the “high road “ of high quality work organisation and the “low road” of tight regimentation (increasingly by digital systems), cost-cutting and pressure. Amazon presents a notorious example in this vein. Still, new digital technologies also offer possibilities for high-quality, collaborative and self-determined modes of working that provide learning opportunities and worker empowerment. Such engagement by workers

may well be essential to the development of innovative services to persons and businesses. Yet shaping digitalisation in this direction requires conscious, deliberate efforts by social partners and the state – and with digitally enhanced transnationalisation these efforts need to extend beyond national innovation regimes. Left to companies' own discretion, work organisation improvements may concentrate even more in those companies that manage to capture higher shares of value-added AND have strong union representation.

Digitalised work organisation raises diverse questions:

- Whereas life-long learning and skill upgrading are obvious responses to digitalisation, work organisation determines to what extent workers can actually use their new and old skills, and whether they have space to develop and improve their jobs.
- Increasing use of ever-larger amounts of data and artificial intelligence technologies raises questions of data protection and privacy: how to retain civil rights and co-determination, how to adapt rules and standards to more open-ended and cloud-based uses of data?
- When more work becomes space-independent and can be conducted from home, on the road, or on clients' sites: how can the benefits of such flexibility be realised for workers? Choices over the place of work and a "right to switch off" are being debated, but work overload and working cultures of "boundaryless" work limit the positive impact of such initiatives.
- Considering the role of clients in services and of value chains that extend across companies, all of this amounts to the question how to retain and adapt standards of "good work" along such chains.

5 Working groups

5.1 *Working group 1: companies operating transnationally*

This group addressed platforms and other transnationally operating companies and concluded that independent or union-run platforms may be useful to address platform-based work:

- The problem with platforms such as Airbnb, foodora etc. is that they are not temp agencies that operate as employers with an HR department but take care to present themselves as mere intermediaries. Workers on a platform have no way of communicating among themselves< so an independent platform should be created for them to communicate, discuss their problems, exchange views and information and to organise.
- It is necessary to strengthen trade union cooperation transnationally. An example is ver.di's fight for a collective agreement with Amazon. There, stronger cooperation with unions in other countries is needed and has been supportive. Union platforms to share best practices and collective actions should be explored.
- Unions must be creative to find new services for young people, especially the self-employed. It appears that unions are not yet offering good services for them, they have to find new ways to engage with them.

5.2 *Working group 2: new forms of work organisation*

In the second working group, different approaches to changing work organization and new forms of workers representation were discussed, based on experiences from **France** and **Belgium** (due to the composition of the group). At the beginning, the discussion focused on changes in the regular work force occurring due to digitalisation. Experiences from media, postal service and other areas were shared, introducing different scenarios for the development of employment. The overall number of

employees is expected to go down in areas like administration and **back office services** where support functions are being digitalised and automated. At the same time work is created in other areas, and job descriptions are changing rather than disappearing. New forms of work may also require **new sets of skills** that are often not well developed in the labour force, especially where older workers are concerned. Therefore, unions must strengthen their efforts in identifying areas for further training measures and actively support their members in their training activities.

French TV and postal services are discussing outsourcing and **externalisation of work**. This brings various threats to labour and workers' rights as workers who are outsourced to an external service provider may end up with a different status from their original situation. Unions need to be aware of this process and ensure that this does not lead to deterioration of working conditions. Fewer and fewer permanent employees work for companies, instead jobs are outsourced or offshored, also to increase companies' flexibility. When workers themselves are outsourced to work as freelancers or self-employed, they lose parts of their protection and social security. They may become more vulnerable to company strategies especially when they are dependent on one client.

Union strategies must be responsive to this situation and use a targeted and sound communication strategy to include workers in a dialogue on challenges of up-skilling and rights protection in newly developing areas. Arguably, this is connected to acquiring the necessary information that is needed to bargain suitable collective agreements for different workers groups. Closing knowledge gaps existing in unions is crucial to be able to deliver broadly accepted results through the bargaining process.

An important trend in the labour force is the tendency to increasingly work from home or in a mobile way. This is a new way of working that is very popular with certain groups, for example people with care obligations in their homes. From a union perspective, **mobile work** is sometimes viewed very critically, even though it is assessed positively by the workers themselves. Arguably, it brings about questions concerning work-life balance, health and safety, and insurance protections. While no common standpoint has been figured out from a union perspective, the representation of the mobile work issues in collective agreements needs closer attention. Only certain professions have regulated their approach to mobile work in collective agreements. This leaves other professions open to unbalanced agreements between workers and employers in favour of the latter. Unions need to be aware of this situation and the needs of their members and treat mobile work accordingly. Furthermore, issues may arise regarding the jurisdiction of mobile work. For example, in border regions or among very mobile workforces a worker might be working from home and from a different country, in which case it is necessary to determine which jurisdiction applies.

In terms of changing work contents, it is important to ensure a social safety net for those who do not fall under collective agreements. Arguably, union membership will decline in these new work areas and atypical employment situations. Investments in skilled training thus are crucial both for union members and unions themselves. The organisation of unions itself must adapt to the increased number of people who work outside or at the margins of traditional employment structures to be more inclusive towards them. This includes changes regarding contracts, as open-ended contracts are getting less common and temporary contracts become wider spread. While this may create additional employment, many temporary jobs are not of high quality and are clearly less protected than regular open-ended contracts. Unions must ensure proper representation of workers involved in this form of contract relations. The same applies to freelance work, a pressing issue especially in the French media sector. While these freelancers have collective agreements and are protected by law, e.g. with the right to a certain salary, a legal structure around these collective agreements is needed that defines their exact legal status.

Another issue that was discussed was the importance of crowd- and platform-based working. This encompasses both workers with lower skills engaging in repetitive tasks like click work and those with higher or professional skills – who sometimes have their own company. Both may offer their skills on platforms or organize their work as crowd based as examples from the gaming industry show. While crowd-work is considered a rather limited phenomenon in both France and Belgium, a specific example from the French postal service was shared in the discussion: the French postal service bought a delivery company that runs a digital platform to directly contact the cyclists working as couriers and making deliveries. So, the question for unions is how to represent these couriers adequately without compromising their obligation to serve the interests of their incumbent constituency of postal workers. Arguably, it is necessary to represent them on an equitable level and at the same time offer innovative services and processes to the customers of post service. To do this, it is useless to create a distinct status should be created for crowd workers, but they should simply be classified as workers and included in the existing legislation.

Regarding the representation of workers at company level and the future role of collective bargaining the discussants picked up a point made in the presentation by Jane Hardy regarding representation along value chains. Creating a labour law that includes both companies and all the employees active in a value chain could be an interesting option to adapt to new developments in the service industry. Collective agreements should not only focus on one company or sector but could be targeting multiple companies/sectors depending on the specific nature of the value chains in question. The orientation towards value chains makes it possible to include everyone participating in the creation of value. Unions would be able to hold companies accountable for disregarding workers' rights through complex processes of outsourcing, offshoring or creation of new contractual relationships. As traditional structures of value creation have changed and companies engage in multiple ways of creating value (e.g. through diversification of their product lines), unions need to do the same. Arguably, communication and alignment issues between unions which arise through this diversification of company activities could be mitigated through the extension of representation alongside value chains.

For unions to be able to address these challenges in an adequate manner, transformations are necessary. A new framework needs to be established that includes technology as a core means to organisation and communication. New strategies need to be created which are context-sensitive as digitalisation is not the same in different sectors. This includes the aim to pro-actively engage with digitalisation in the legislative process and make unions an integral part of the legislation process on work-related digitalisation issues all over Europe. Trends towards individualization of contract negotiations that negatively affect work quality must be countered by approaches that look for collective solutions and that secure collective rights without disregarding individual needs. This is an issue for the social partnership at large: employer organisations need to be included in the discussion at a certain point to define common strategies.

Summarising the discussion, three main areas were identified by the participants that deserve special attention from a union perspective:

- Identifying disappearing, changing and newly developing professions would facilitate the work of unions, supporting their negotiations with companies over new training initiatives on the company and industry level.
- Extended social rights across the entire value chain: unions need to provide added value for all types of employees and look at flexible employment modes (be it crowdwork, freelance etc), also develop methodologies to assess developments along value chains, possibly together with the employer side.

- Rethinking union organisation in ways that transcend contract based boundaries – adapting the organisation of unions to the new digitalised work environment is crucial to be able to find adequate collective solutions for new challenges in the service industry.

5.3 Working group 3: global supply chains

The group picked up on Jane Hardy's suggestion to look for alliances with customers in influencing globalised value chains. Service quality has been shown to be compromised by outsourcing parts of the service to the cheapest bidder. This may in particular "bite back" in services for which trust is essential such as finance. In deciding to outsource or offshore, companies may also underestimate the cost and overestimate savings, disregarding the effort to manage and monitor the service provider. In public procurement, there are some examples of agreements on fair trade goods (mostly with regard to manufacturing). In services this could entail criteria for "comparably good pay" and other standards that would need to be developed.

Considering relocation to CEE, there is frequently not much point in arguing that offshored jobs are "bad" when salaries in the outsourced services are above those paid by companies operating in the national economy. Arguments then should focus on making jobs resilient and adaptable, to counter companies' ongoing search for ever lower-cost options.

Aiming for more resilient work and employment applies to service labour markets in general and appears to be easier with regard to both highly-skilled and low-skilled segments. Ensuring this resilience of jobs for the medium-skilled in sectors mostly affected by both offshoring and digitalisation appears to be the larger challenge (for example in insurance and banking), especially as these employee groups form the traditional core constituency of trade unions.

Other arguments address the productivity of services in Western and Eastern Europe respectively – but differences will be difficult to track.

Transnationalisation and outsourcing may also pose new risks to data protection (of both workers and customers), as HR functions, back office and admin functions are outsourced or offshored, or operated via cloud computing. There is a "protectionist element" in this line of thought, but violations have been known to occur, especially, as value chains lengthen and outsourcing relations multiply.

Digitalisation also affects trade unions' and works councillors' ways of communicating with their actual and potential members. Companies may be able to hinder communication among workers and their organisations or provide their own ways of "mind control" and targeting messages, enabling "union busting on a new scale". Unions thus need cutting edge skills in communication on all levels, both to pursue their own strategies and "know the enemy", and unions and workers need safe spaces for communication. The question is to what extent own tools³ and "people's technologies" should be developed and how they tie in with people's social media use otherwise.

New and emergent actors that compete with trade unions are also an issue, in particular in the sphere of freelance and (potentially) platform work. SMART (= Société Mutuelle pour Artistes), a cooperative service provider for freelancers⁴ acts as a virtual employer for the self-employed in Belgium and

³ A range of European projects under the heading of „digital social innovation“ have been building tools for organising, public debate and policy creation in recent years, see for example Bria & Primorsig, 2015.

⁴ www.smart-eu.org

provides administrative support, offers some insurances and also advocacy for freelance creative work and the sharing economy. The cooperative has expanded rapidly and currently employs some 170 people itself in Belgium. Belgian trade unions have tried to collaborate with them but found it generally difficult. There is clearly an element of competition even though the initiative addresses a somewhat different constituency, but several trade unions also aim to provide advice and some services to freelance members or potential members. Also, SMART in the European policy context appears to enjoy a bonus of newness in terms of social innovation or new forms of work. Trade unions, however, need to navigate between the interests and aspirations of their “old” and (potential) “new” members and are concerned about a devaluation of their stakes in previous achievements of social security, social protection and skill development. Nevertheless, they recognise the challenge of gaining ground and legitimising their claims in new labour markets, and there are ideas about democratised platforms run or approved by trade unions or virtual hiring halls.

“Conventional” outsourcing poses various challenges. Cases in which an already organised unit is holistically outsourced to another company (for example in telecommunications) are the easy part for unions. Instances where there is competition between unions, a union’s sector departments or member groups are more difficult to handle. The issue often is not to get the same conditions in the outsourcing destination as the origin company but fair ones. However, “you can’t defend a job in Sweden that can be done cheaper somewhere else” – although a previous study for UNI shows how views on more protectionist or retraining approaches vary among European unions (Holtgrewe & Schörpf, 2017). There are sectoral or national funds for retraining workers affected by job relocation or automation in some countries, but further initiatives towards transnationalised companies would need to address taxation and social security systems (pay taxes where the work is being done, and what about increased profits through outsourcing?)

Recreating industrial relations systems that take over functions from national ones does not appear realistic currently. The fundamental question of transnationalisation is how to strengthen unions in those contexts where they are weak without undermining the standards, achievements and positions of power in the stronger segments. With a slightly different emphasis, this raises the question of trade unions’ focus on core labour forces and constituencies versus the emerging “special cases” of platform employees, bogus self-employed etc. It appears that unions cannot really ignore them but are confronted with information asymmetries, as neither platforms nor their “employees” ,may have much interest in unions.

Unions’ knowledge base and awareness of “what is happening” is another question. Apart from the spectacular changes there are the more incremental processes of jobs being relocated slowly. Such “drifting away” of jobs is almost impossible to monitor. Indeed, this opacity is not just the problem of unions. If for instance IBM reduces the horizon of its “long-term” planning from five to three years, apparently all actors are operating under conditions of uncertainty – *but this does not render them equal as some actors (such as IBM) have greater powers of creating facts and conditions for others and thus may well pass on the risks of that uncertainty to employees, subcontractors and clients.*

In addressing this array of changes, both over- and underestimating disruptive forces appears risky as they overlap in somewhat unpredictable ways with more incremental, creeping changes and some continuities that may be more reliable than expected. Ideas of basic common sense of trade unionism on the one hand, robust regulation on the other, came to the group’s mind: “Co-workers deciding together what is good for them”, the idea of collective and democratic organisation can and should give persistent orientation. Regulation, for example “all European data processed by Google must stay in Europe” may, however, be difficult to enforce as information spaces become cloud-based.

6 Plenary

Working groups and their rapporteurs were asked to provide conclusions in the shape of bullet points to feed into the 10point action plan that UNI Europa is developing.

Group 1 (“Transnationalisation”) concluded

- As platform workers are generally isolated and have no way of communicating among themselves, a platform should be created for workers to discuss their problems and to organise and chat.
- Enhancing unions’ co-operation transnationally. Ver.di’s struggle for a collective agreement with Amazon has increased membership in Amazon’s fulfilment centres and has fostered collaboration with unions in Poland, France and the UK. Stronger collaboration is still needed as conducting such a struggle nationally would prove ineffective. Union platforms for information and exchange could help to share and extend good and successful practices.
- Unions must be creative to find new services and offers for the young and new ways to engage them.

Group 2 (“new forms of work organisation”) emphasised

- Ways to identify professions that are disappearing, transforming or emerging, to prevent job losses and encourage self-directed changes. New training and skill enhancement opportunities on the company and industry level need to be negotiated with employer organisations.
- Unions should shift their mindset towards value chains and look at flexible employment modes that are in play (be it crowd/work, freelance etc.) along the value chain. Identification of stakeholders in the value chain requires a methodology, possibly to be developed in collaboration with the employers.
- Unions need to have the courage to change their own organisational structure. As borders are falling apart through globalisation and digitalisation, they have to start considering how they organise themselves in ways that transcend contract-based boundaries. Define new concepts of work such as crowd work, self-employment etc.). Who is buying the services that are being offered? We need some sort of a platform where we can exchange practices and we could all benefit from lessons already learnt. Review legislation to avoid cartels.

Group 3 (“global supply chains”) suggested to

- Explore value chains, clearly define value and supply chains and find methodologies also to decide which ones to address.
- Offshoring is not considered a problem per se, but the question bridging countries of origin and receiving countries is how to render jobs more resilient.
- Improve the information exchange on best practices among unions on organising, better cooperation and improved efficiency. Web-based tools should be explored for this. This could include answers to the questions of “old” and “new” constituencies, also collaboration with “third” partners involving civil society, consumer associations, or new initiatives addressing new forms of work.

7 Final discussion

Unions’ constituencies

On the one hand, the question how unions maintain their hold on the middle core of the work force? How do we stabilise our membership and how do we make it more resilient? On the other hand, how to address platform workers? Where do unions direct their priorities? This is also a question of competition: unions need to keep an eye on other organisations that are addressing work and social security issues for new types of workers or self-employed.

One approach may be a decidedly universalistic reliance on “traditional” but persisting issues: work together to identify the needs of workers, focus on social protection for everybody who works. Not get confused or distracted by technology and “newness” of employment types.

Unions’ cooperation, information and mutual learning:

Unions find they need to improve their cooperation, exchange of information, good practices etc., possibly through concrete action plans. Experiences should be shared across sectors, not expecting universal solutions, but learning from different sectors and companies is possible.

Information exchanges have slowly been started at the EU level, there seems to be room for improvement also with regard to informal exchange. Instruments are needed to ensure communication flow, perhaps through UNI. Possibly, we need to create tools for information exchange that may also include support for informal contacts. A suggestion is a website presenting different examples from our countries, as a complementary action to our meetings.

For people working in entertainment an own network was suggested, sometimes this group of workers does not know where to turn to for information and support. Reaching out through different channels and social media (e.g. Facebook), but provide own, protected and confidential spaces.

Outsourcing and offshoring

Notably, unions’ transnationalisation and extension across value chains should not be considered as selfless “development aid”: as workforces are set to compete across countries, labour market segments and sectors, such activities are very self-interested and are essential to prevent or limit races to the bottom or an indirect erosion of standards.

In addition to the established representation and co-determination structures, in addressing value chains grassroots and bottom-up approaches are needed to support workers in organizing themselves, even if they are not in one place.

When services are outsourced, trade unions must have the right to talk to one responsible contact partner in the outsourced company. Unions need to know how the company is operating (transparency).

Customers of all kinds play a part in how work is organized, especially in outsourced services. If the customer is a company, how can unions attach themselves to the role of customers? For example: raising public awareness of working conditions (such as clean clothes campaigns in manufacturing), incorporating “fair” standards in public procurement; getting in touch and cooperating with consumer organisations and civil society. As ranking and rating systems become more important – unions should make use of them (following the example of Turkopticon).

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