



RESTRUCTURING PROCESSES IN THE SERVICES SECTORS & TRADE UNION RESPONSES

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I. INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, waves of restructuring have profoundly transformed the services sectors via an ever-deeper incorporation of digital technologies. These changes have shaken the boundaries of services sectors, leading to a situation characterised by blurred borders and inhabited by new kinds of workers who are not always covered by traditional frameworks of collective bargaining. Sectoral borders seem to be constantly disrupted by the entrance of new companies which are characterised by full integration of the most recent technologies.

If on the one hand digitalisation of services affords numerous opportunities, on the other, its impact is influenced not only by technological development but also by economic, social and institutional factors. Therefore, an employee-centred perspective on restructuring processes will be essential in supporting trade unions to shape a just transition, as well as to enhance the quality of jobs and thus the provision of services.

The aim of this research has been to understand the impacts of restructuring processes in the workplace and to develop union and wider collective bargaining strategies.

The research at hand combined a survey with a series of interviews (Oct 2019 – Feb 2020) with 50 trade unionists who have had direct experience of restructuring processes in their respective services company or sector. The research findings from the interviews and surveys were presented at an EU-financed meeting in Dublin, Ireland in February 2020. At this meeting, the project steering committee as well as trade unionists provided feedback and further input into this research in following manner: Firstly, UNI Europa prepared ten theses on restructuring and trade union action. Secondly, trade unionists engaged in group work and scenario-building exercises based on real-life examples. Thirdly, they offered feedback on an initial version of this research paper in oral as well as written form. The results presented in this paper are based on the considerations that were shared by trade unionists concerning the impacts of digitalisation on workers' well-being, its effects on sectoral boundaries, the consequent challenges for unions and the most promising strategies for the future. One of the most significant results to have emerged from this research is that trade unionists are aware that, independent of the health of a company, restructuring processes are 'continuous', leading to what Mark Bergfeld, UNI Europa's Director of Property Services and UNICARE has called a 'permanent state of restructuring', in which companies' business models are constantly evolving, both technologically and organisationally. Confronting this continuous process aimed at maximising profits and market share requires an even more proactive approach on behalf of local and national trade unions. Hereby UNI Europa can assume the following roles: provide expertise concerning multinational companies; coordinate trade union efforts to anticipate change and to ensure that workers' rights are upheld and extended.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the deepest economic crisis since World War II, a proactive approach from unions towards restructuring processes seems even more urgent. The pace of restructuring, which was already noted to be in constant acceleration, has increased enormously. Specifically, hygiene measures and physical distancing rules to counteract the spread of Covid-19 have driven companies to restructure their business activities. Digital technologies such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams have replaced in-person meetings and business travel in and outside of organisations. Workers' rights have not often been a priority in this sudden, partially involuntary, transformation of our societies. In this respect, companies can take advantage of this emergency shift to digitalisation by potentially making some of the changes to work activities permanent. Nevertheless, the pandemic has opened a window of opportunity for trade unions, as public attention is significantly more alert

to the effects of service restructuring on health, social sustainability and inequality. Public opinion has demonstrated an awareness that the virus has no borders and that negative effects on workers could affect everyone. Trade unions must therefore proactively shape restructuring processes to ensure that no one is left behind.

2. CONTEXT ANALYSIS OF SERVICES SECTOR RESTRUCTURING

Restructuring is a pervasive characteristic of today's global market, which, from a business standpoint, reflects the trend towards huge transformations of organisational practices, strategies and operational tools that has been in process up to this point (Eurofound, 2018). Restructuring is not necessarily associated with organisational decline and failure. Instead, it is driven by the need to increase profits and shareholder value in times of slow economic growth and even economic decline. The services sectors are surely the most exposed to such changes, as has been confirmed by an OECD study on the intensity of digitalisation processes, which ranks the majority of services subsectors at the head of the economic activities most affected by this process (Calvino et al., 2018).

Due to the dominance of shareholder value, restructuring very often leads to a reduction in the number of employees, including in companies with high profitability (Reynolds et al., 2000; Froud, Johal et al. 2006; Datta et al, 2010; Lapavitsas 2012; Mazzucato 2018). In its first phase, digitalisation made positive contributions to the services sector with regard to professionalism and the need for new skills (Spitz-Oener, 2006). While technology is able to replace routine manual and cognitive tasks, it cannot replace the non-routine manual tasks such as office cleaning or legal writing. However, this does not mean that digitalisation processes do not impact on these non-routine manual tasks; in fact, they can have direct consequences for employment levels, wages and required skills. Most obviously, digital restructuring processes lead to a labour market polarisation contributing to a decline in jobs involving mid-skilled routine tasks and routine cognitive tasks (Levy & Murnane, 2005; Goos & Manning, 2007, European Commission 2019).

At the end of the 1990s, the shift from a 'static concept', linked to crisis management, to a 'dynamic concept' of restructuring was recognised as contributing to defining restructuring processes as 'a set of discrete decisive measures taken to increase the competitiveness of the enterprise and thereby to enhance its value' (Crum & Goldberg, 1998: 340). Such restructuring processes aimed to improve a business's operational and financial structure as well as to capture higher value-added activities or to ensure survival in highly competitive markets (Vyas, 1997). Thus, one should note that restructuring processes may be carried out in various organisational areas of a company, from the financial to the operational levels.

According to the Eurofound dataset on restructurings in Europe, restructuring processes began later in the services sector than in the manufacturing sector. The manufacturing sector itself tends to shift increasingly towards services-related activities, both as an input and as an activity within companies, or, equally, as an output sold bundled with goods (National Board of Trade, 2016; Miroudot, 2017). The shift from traditional manufacturing to 'hybrid' manufacturing (e.g., encompassing the consumer credit that serves car manufacturers) leads to a blurring of the traditional divisions across sectors. Consequently, services companies and sectors have long caught up. Hereby, three elements are particularly important to consider:

- The intensity of restructuring processes in the services sector is exceptionally high. In the period between 2007 and 2012, more than 35% of restructuring processes in Europe concerned the services sector. This figure rose to 47% between 2013 and 2018. Table 1 shows that in the past several years restructuring processes in the services sector have increased both in absolute terms and relative to other sectors that match the manufacturing sector.

- If we use a simple indicator such as the Job Restructuring Ratio (JRR), capable of measuring the number of jobs lost per job gained as a result of company restructuring, the only JRR less than 1 – and, thus, with a positive balance between hiring and firing – relates to the services sector in the period 2013-2018
- From a jobs perspective, restructuring processes in different segments of the services sectors are heterogenous in their impact, in terms of both intensity and output (Table 2).

Table I – Company Restructurings by sector and Job Restructuring Ratio (JRR)

Sector	2007 - 2012		2013 - 2018		2007 - 2012		2013 - 2018	
	CASES	%	CASES	%	BALANCE	JRR	BALANCE	JRR
PA, defence & education	376	4,30%	219	2,71%	-471.281	10,48	-14.063	1,19
Agriculture	28	0,32%	31	0,38%	-8.986	7,24	-902	1,44
Manufacturing, Mining & Quarrying, Construction	5.092	58,18%	3.870	47,80%	-589.790	2,04	-164.965	1,35
Utilities	153	1,75%	172	2,12%	-10.073	1,26	-51.804	2,9
Services	3.103	35,45%	3.804	46,99%	-327.561	1,45	23.219	0,97

SOURCE: Processing of data from EUROFOUND by ISRF LAB

Table 2 – Restructuring processes: Services Sector

Sub Sector	2007 - 2012			2013 - 2018		
	CASI	SALDO	JRR	CASI	SALDO	JRR
Administrative services	249	20.664	0,69	442	31.458	0,6
Arts / entertainment	41	3.432	0,58	38	852	0,82
Financial services	588	-237.696	4,44	584	-243.930	6,44
Health / social work	117	-28.604	3,38	122	-4.765	1,24
Hotel / restaurants	113	67.524	0,11	181	59.462	0,14
Information / communication	702	-92.716	1,92	1.012	79.738	0,59
Other services	17	-1.351	2,21	16	-938	2
Professional services	215	43.508	0,26	271	45.844	0,31
Real estate	35	12.163	0,21	16	5.347	0,06
Retail	709	61.459	0,76	902	61.590	0,78
Transportation / storage	566	-155.280	2,27	662	20.019	0,89

SOURCE: Processing of data from EUROFOUND by ISRF LAB

At the macro level, restructuring processes in services are driven mainly by macroeconomic and market factors related to the development of Global Value Chains in the services sector. At the meso level, financialisation of services companies and the dominance of shareholder value have contributed to the 'permanent state of restructuring'. At the micro level, restructuring is driven by new digital technologies and tools that can maximise the efficiency of workers and employees. As a consequence, we can observe higher levels of work-related stress and an increased need for educational and vocational training. This last phenomenon has come to be known as the digital transformation and engenders the pervasive adoption of digital technologies and data in all production segments of businesses, from marketing to B2B, from supply chains to product design, from human resources to finance and accounting.

These processes often lead to a blurring of boundaries across sectors. As is clearly demonstrated in the case of e-commerce, the digital transformation has evolved an unprecedented speed, driving companies to integrate certain technologies into their production process, allowing the instant exchange of data among organisations that were, traditionally, distant and belonging to different sectors. Through satellite and telecommunication networks, modern services can now be grouped and divided into value chains, just like goods, and can be delivered electronically worldwide (Ghani et al., 2011). At the same time, some Big Tech companies, for example, have embraced high value-added services such as cloud computing or offering credit – a seemingly non-core activity yet one with high profit margins and lucrative government contracts. Consequently, work organisation as well as the competitive dynamics between companies and across different sectors can be observed, resulting in a kind of cross-sectoral hybridisation.

A prime example of this is the emergence of so-called 'platform companies' across a host of different services sectors. The so-called 'platformisation' phenomenon refers to three processes of change: new platform companies enter a sector; the business model of traditional businesses adapts to the platform model; the platform model eventually blurs existing sectoral boundaries, undermining sectoral standards across a host of different services sectors. In broader terms, we can define the platform economy as a set of economic and social activities facilitated by platforms: such platforms are typically online matchmakers or technology frameworks developed either by small hi-tech start-ups or by Big Tech giants such as Amazon, Uber, Foodora and Airbnb. All of these companies are characterised by the fact that they undermine existing collective agreements or misclassify workers as 'independent contractors'. Such 'platform work' is an employment form in which organisations or individuals use an online platform to access other organisations or individuals to solve specific problems or to provide specific services in exchange for payment (Eurwork, 2018).

Evidence suggests that such platform work does not facilitate job creation in quantitative terms nor does it create jobs with dignity. Existing crowdwork platforms for remote professional services and micro-tasks are used to a limited extent in Europe, currently generating 0.4% of GDP in Belgium and 1-1.4% of GDP in Spain (Holtgrewe et al., 2018). At the same time, exploitation and self-exploitation disguised as opportunities seem to be the hallmarks of this new form of work organisation, particularly in the low-skilled sectors (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung: 2016).

Beyond the companies themselves, the emergence of such platforms produces problems related to human resources management, bringing negative impacts for workers' health and for corporate organisational efficiency.

Negative effects on the workforce constitute a range of problems: from an increase in sickness-related absence (Bourbonnais et al, 2005; Kivimäki et al, 2000), to cardiovascular diseases, musculoskeletal diseases or conditions linked to the sleep-wake cycle (Vahtera et al, 2004; Moore et al, 2004; Campbell-Jamison et al, 2001; Greubel & Kecklund, 2011). As shown in a study on restructuring, undertaken at the University of East Anglia and based upon 30 empirical studies, adverse effects of restructuring processes on the welfare of employees occur regardless of whether job losses are incurred (De Jong et al., 2016).

Further to this, companies themselves may experience negative effects from restructuring processes. Restructuring processes do not always deliver the expected benefits in respect of company business performance. A 2012 study by the Boston Consulting Group highlighted that while more than 90% of the companies studied in the previous 5 years changed their organisational structure, over 50% of the 1600 executives involved in the research evaluated the output of the process as negative both in terms of quantitative data cross-analysis of performance and in terms of subsequent positioning in the market of reference (BCG, 2012).

Beyond strategic mistakes made by the management, the lack of active involvement of workers in the decision-making process is recognised as a major reason for failure in restructuring processes (Gandolfi and Hansson, 2015; Cascio, 1993; Appelbaum et al., 1997). This final point not only provides a warning about the possibility of company negligence with regard to human resources and worker participation, but also highlights the importance of understanding processes of transformation in the services sectors from a union perspective, to the end that both workers' rights and social sustainability may be ensured within restructuring processes. In the next section, the above outlined restructuring processes will be investigated from a union perspective.

3. RESTRUCTURING PROCESSES FROM A UNION PERSPECTIVE

Empirical data has been collected by means of an online survey and interviews taking place between October 2019 and February 2020. The research involved a total of 50 European trade unionists. Interview respondents were chosen on the basis that they had a direct experience of restructuring processes in their company or in the services sector in which they represent workers. While it is impossible for the research to deal with the entirety of the services sector, this research is able to examine the points of views of trade unionists who participate in European Works Councils, trade union representatives, collective bargaining specialists and those who regularly participate in UNI Europa's activities in different sectors. These 'change agents' were able to discuss the possible scope of trade union action and how unions ought to address and even confront the main challenges associated with restructuring processes in the services sectors.

3.1 Forms of Digital Restructuring

The main forms of digital restructuring processes described by respondents as relevant to their experience were:

- The centralisation of Information Systems
- Smart Working
- Automation, Robotisation, Chatbots
- Internal Communication Platforms
- Customer Service and Peer-to-Peer Platforms

According to trade unionists, company management argued that the introduction of the above ways of working were necessary to adapt to the dominance of digital processes occurring through new entrants exerting pressure in the market as well as through wider technological trends in society. One interviewee, for example, stated: 'Most of the time investments are made and justified because the whole technological environment is changing: competitors, client companies, service users. It seems that even the smallest technological investments into the company are made to adapt to big technological, economical, and social changes which already are too far ahead.'

Management used changing customer behaviour as the main explanation to restructure the business. According to one interviewee, restructuring processes were sold to employees as 'a part of a bigger trend, a part of a big machine that is already restructured, as change is already occurring around the company and recovering the delay is urgently needed'. On the other hand, management explained that internal restructuring processes were required due to external shocks. One such shock was the was the entry of disruptive digital companies which upset the dominant business model in a given services sector. In such cases, companies introduced restructuring measures with the aim of staying competitive in a new market environment. This trend is accelerating due to Big Tech's disproportionate network power, which can have a disruptive impact in traditional services sectors such as healthcare, insurance and banking, logistics and many others.

In the interviews, trade unionists acknowledged the potential of technologies to reduce repetitive work, to assist in physical tasks, to improve internal communication and to supplement resources in support of customers' needs. However, trade unionists and worker representatives also argued that restructuring processes – especially those

undertaken based on adapting to market evolution – frequently increase employee stress and increase workloads. This is a matter of concern; especially as restructuring processes have become a common occurrence in the services sectors. Thus, restructuring processes pose a risk for working conditions as well as health and safety. Based on the findings of the study, the G4S European Works Council advised by UNI Europa was able to raise these possible risks in a letter to shareholders¹ in the context of a possible hostile takeover by a Private Equity Group.

The Introduction of Centralised Information Systems

This form of restructuring began in the 1990s and has continued up until today. First and foremost, this involves reducing the costs of back office activities (going 'paperless', avoiding physical archives etc.), standardisation of procedures and centralisation of administrative functions. Beyond this, such restructuring in the services sector also engenders workforce relocation and offshoring since centralised information systems permit, on the one hand, the relocation of a part of operations to lower-cost areas in the world and, on the other hand, the monitoring and benchmarking of workers and single units, enabling a constant adjustment of global governance strategies.

Interviewed trade unionists described as 'continuous' the introduction of the latest technological innovation (for example, recent machine learning devices) are unavoidable in the highly competitive market environment in the services sectors. According to worker representatives and trade unionists, workers have been most impacted through the constant monitoring of performance, which has undermined work morale.

Trade unionists have come to understand that management's promised benefits of new procedures are never immediate, meaning that the implementation phase of restructuring is much more stressful than either expected or described by management. This is especially the case when companies have undertaken a reduction of the workforce that related to the planned efficiencies of investment in digital technology. Moreover, such restructuring processes increase customer-facing workers' stress levels as well as those of management in relation to staff, effectively leading to a deterioration of the organisational climate.

Smart Working

Owing to the widespread growth of internet technologies, restructuring processes have in many instances involved proposals for moving a proportion of the workforce to working from home. More recently, restructuring processes have created new jobs in which the online dimension (from home or via mobile devices) is preponderant or all-encompassing. Interviewed trade unionists recognised the obvious opportunities for companies regarding the reduction of office-related costs (particularly in areas where rents are becoming more and more expensive). For workers, there are also some benefits, as smart working reduces transport costs and can potentially improve work-life balance. At the societal level, the end of long commutes can reduce CO2 emissions. Nonetheless, trade unionists described how work has invaded their free time and private lives. This is particularly the case when management sits somewhere else in the world, as this creates an implicit demand on the employee to be available for 24 hours a day. In the survey, workers have also complained about the increase in work expenses related to their home office. At the Dublin workshop, one trade unionist commented 'workers don't pay for transport costs, but instead for heating and organising a workstation' A negative externality of smart working is a deterioration of collegial relations in the office. The growing degree of individualisation in work environments makes organisational stress less visible, and management has tended to frame this as a private issue for the worker. Indeed, mobile

¹ G4S EWC Opinion: <https://www.ft.com/content/8faecc73-403f-4ea2-9436-b79eba12d66d>

working is only the most obvious example, as, according to unionists, work in digitally restructured offices has also become more individualised. For unions, it is extremely important, then, to be able to access all of the new work contexts, including those new digital companies that have 'depicted themselves as a kind of paradise for digital natives, that could reveal itself to be hell or far worse for social rights'. It is undeniable that access to new companies is required to solve declining union power. Yet, 'smart working' renders it more difficult as one is isolated, or left to communicate with chatbots and internal platforms that are governed by standardised solutions. Isolation from colleagues can, as a consequence, enhance workers' anxiety, stress and uncertainty about the future.

Automation, Robotisation & Chatbots

Following its intensive implementation in manufacturing, automation has also been employed in services for the purpose of reducing repetitive manual and mental operations. The extensive integration of automated work processes in e-commerce must be noted. Across different services sectors, chatbots and machine learning are still not used intensely, but these seem to constitute the next wave of restructuring, particularly in sectors like finance and insurance. Assuming that machine learning constitutes the next wave of restructuring does not mean that human labour will be made redundant. It is rather the case that it is rendered less visible and even less socially regulated than the forms of work that it will replace. Trade unionists recognise the opportunities with regard to relief from risky and physically challenging tasks. This is especially well understood in homecare, where automation is not a substitution but a support for the worker, contributing to making this kind of work more attractive to new workers. Nonetheless, this form of restructuring often has a profound impact in terms of reducing the workforce, especially in the private security sector. In this sector, the use of digital cameras, CCTV, and access cards implies a move away from the human interface. This is also observed in the financial sector, where ATMs and Online Banking have replaced customer-facing banking services.

Internal Communication Platforms

Companies first started to make use of Internal Communication Platforms around the mid-2000s. They enabled internal discussions communication among workers who did not work at the same site or were not based at the same workplace. As new procedures were always seen by workers as more challenging, less user-friendly and less effective than they expected, workers had the need to communicate regarding day-to-day problems. Moreover, mobile workers often used their personal devices to find solutions to problems for new digital procedures. Workers turned to each other to develop and exchange bottom-up solutions, which quickly began to constitute a vital part of their learning on the job. Thus, companies expanded these internal communication platforms to offer forum assistance and FAQ. Most recently, chatbots were introduced as a way for management to standardise work processes and regulate employees' problem-solving difficulties.

In this context, trade unionists remarked that new workers who enter more individualised work environments and thus predominantly rely on automatised, ready-made problem-solving solutions provided by companies or their consultants receive a very poor level of support for their on-the-job learning. This has negative consequences for companies as well as trade unions. For unions, automation and internal platforms increase workers' difficulties in communicating effectively. In this context, unions' and workers' representatives role as service providers is amplified. Moreover, new workers' isolation vis-a-vis problem-solving often leads to competition and undermines cooperation between employees. This is accelerated through the gamification of work tasks. Eventually, the end user or customer ends up with lower quality service provision. One interviewee thus stated: 'The myth of young

digital natives shouldn't be a way for management to raise what they expect of new workers. They need to give them the appropriate support, and cannot just leave them to cope with the stress of restructuring alone'.

Customer Service and Peer-to-Peer Platforms

In the case of automatised solutions for customer service platforms, standardisation of procedures paved the way for monitoring the performance of operators. According to some interviewees, the process of a digital automatised relationship with customers opens the possibility of instant monitoring of customer satisfaction. At the same time, however, it 'hides' the data from workers, allowing for a manipulation of the data and thus enabling management to further restructure these operations based on their interpretation of customer satisfaction.

This assumes its starkest forms in so-called platform companies, which have had a disruptive impact in sectors such as tourism (e.g., Airbnb), logistics and commerce (with delivery services like Glovo, Foodora, Uber etc.) and become increasingly common in homecare. Their technological framework involves monitoring systems and incentives that can easily lead workers to self-exploitation.

3.2 Impacts of Restructuring on Sectoral Boundaries

In this section, the impact of restructuring on sectoral boundaries will be investigated. After all, 20th century industrial relations was based on vertically integrated sectors with clearly defined economic activity and employers' and industry organisations and trade unions that represented the occupational groups in a given sector. However, so-called 'globalisation', digitalisation and the dominance of shareholder value contributed to the weakening of these industrial relations structures and has ultimately led to a process in which 'companies and the world itself is more integrated, while unions are still fragmented in sectors', as one interviewee pointed out.

This imbalance in the sectors is most pronounced in the commerce sector. In this sector, new actors are not traditionally associated with commerce but rather with logistics, call centres or IT companies. New digital companies do not always come from the United States, as evidenced by European companies such as Bol.Com. Offering around 15 million products, it has become the leading webstore for books, toys and electronics in the Netherlands. –. In the tourism sector, unionists face a similar challenge as the sectoral boundaries have become more fluent. The question is whether employees at platforms such as Booking.com are workers in the ICTS sector or in the tourism sector. The disruptive power of digitalisation in this sector has also been associated with the entrance of 'digital-born companies' such as Airbnb, which does not own any hotels or apartments.

Despite these difficulties, unions seek to organise, represent and service workers in such new companies. Unionists highlighted how these new jobs are emerging in the interstices of sectors and are often characterised by atypical contracts and self-employment, making coordination among sectors even more difficult. The jobs that emerge in these grey zones risk growing and developing outside of regulation, mostly because regulatory frameworks develop slower than technology, and learning processes within profit-driven businesses are quicker than those in trade unions due to unions' democratic character and their nature as membership organisations. Consequently, unions encounter difficulties in organising, representing and servicing workers in these grey areas. However, workshop participants, survey respondents and interviewees all shared the ambition to develop organisational approaches and strategic capacities that can meet these challenges. In the following section, unions' approaches to meeting these challenges will be addressed in more detail.

4. UNION APPROACHES TO RESTRUCTURING

The principal challenge described by all unionists is that restructuring has become a continuous and increasingly speedy process, or what UNI Europa Director Mark Bergfeld has called a 'permanent state of restructuring'. The uncertainty concerning future restructuring processes profoundly affects trade unions' current membership – the so-called 'Boomers' who still have approximately 15 years until retirement – in a disproportionate manner. Unionists express their difficulty in providing answers concerning the future, especially as unions' strategic capacity for action seems to be one of defence and reaction in the face of increasingly predefined restructuring processes in which 'information and consultation rights' are held to a minimum due to shareholder confidentiality. One interviewee remarks:

At the moment unions seem to be sleeping. Moving slowly after employers and companies have already decided and defined their strategy, the technological investments and their impact on performances, work, customers etc. They already have a vision and a strategy. And communicate only what is more convenient to them and in the way that is most convenient.

Yet, the empirical data suggests that trade unionists are relatively satisfied with the strategies which they have previously used to shape the processes of restructuring. This does not however mean that there is no need to develop new and innovative strategies that can enhance unions' strategic capacities at the workplace and sectoral level.

In past waves of restructuring, workforce reduction has been addressed in terms of assisted retirement. Hereby, social funds have proven to be particularly effective. Skills and training agendas for the remaining workforce were touchstones for unions to shape restructuring processes in an equitable manner. However, it needs to be acknowledged that these did not challenge the premise of why companies were being restructured to begin with. The need to challenge restructuring processes in a more fundamental fashion becomes apparent in the case of the Belgian telephone communications company Proximus, where the company rehired workers on new terms. While the union was able to negotiate a plan to cover re-orientation training, the case evidences that restructuring processes further tilt the balance of power within a sector or a company toward the employer.

Ultimately, the parameters of action for workers and unions are narrowed with each wave of restructuring. Communication with members is now perceived as increasingly difficult due to changes relating to work activities and a context in which workers are not necessarily physically present in the same workspace and may be interacting online. Many unionists consider it an important priority to increase the capacity of company-level worker representatives to stay in touch with their workforce to allow trade unions to succeed in positively influencing a fair transition in the services sector. Yet, even more importantly, trade unionists observed that they need to improve their strategic capacity to anticipate upcoming restructuring processes and, beyond this, to shape these processes, to influence the values of the restructuring and achieve equity between different employees and management.

A variety of internal and external factors are mentioned by respondents to explain the involuntary reactivity that results in the feeling of 'arriving when it's too late'. However, most trade unionists highlighted the attack on traditional union rights and freedoms in the wake of the last financial crisis, across many EU member states, as one of the main explanatory factors leading to the reduction of union influence in restructuring processes. The

attack contributed to the limited capacity of unions to respond proactively, such that priority has first been given to mitigating negative impacts of restructuring processes (such as negotiating upskilling, reskilling opportunities, and early retirement for traditional workers). Consequently, few resources can be channelled into mapping new emerging conditions, researching future transformation, and working to shape these processes in an equitable fashion, let alone use them to strengthen unions' bargaining positions. In this context, trade unions have been relegated to 'helpdesks for restructuring', servicing their members and the workforce without being able to actively influence company-internal restructuring processes. This further underlines the interplay between the de-institutionalisation of the industrial relations system and how co-determination and information, and consultation rights are enacted in the processes of restructuring. One interviewee stated, aptly:

Precairisation of work comes with the increasing precarisation of unions. Company management uses the conservative political climate to consider and treat unions as an unnecessary luxury for the company. Everything that was normal for unions is now considered difficult and costly. Companies and management are hiding behind the difficult economic conditions for the company, the political crisis, the economic difficulties for the whole of society.

Yet this defensive position that unions find themselves in should not remain the status quo. According to unionists, a more proactive approach is needed to find effective ways to anticipate the transformation of work, expand the scope of existing collective agreements and ensure that digitalisation leaves no one behind. Such a proactive approach necessitates that trade unions and employee representatives be involved in the design and development of restructuring processes long before final decisions are made. Collective bargaining is, therefore, considered key to shaping the digital transformation, to ensure equitable outcomes for workers. Furthermore, an alliance between workers' representatives and employers' representatives is required to have effective industrial relations, since the use of technologies depends on the balance of forces/power and on unions' ability to shape industrial relations through collective agreements.

Of course, unionists recognise that while their traditional members are expressing concern about future restructuring, workers with atypical contracts in the interstices of sectoral boundaries also require union representation. The attack on traditional union rights and freedoms is even more visible outside of unions' traditional sectors and strongholds. These greenfield companies and sectors are concomitantly legislative grey areas that unions find it challenging to enter because the workforce operates in a climate of intimidation, making it hard to interact directly with workers and to gain a direct understanding of their working conditions. Thus, it becomes difficult to organise new workers as well as to represent current members. This dual challenge will be addressed in more detail by investigating how unions have developed innovative collective bargaining strategies.

4.1 Collective Bargaining

Regarding winning a fairer transition to a digitalising services industry, unionists are certain that collective bargaining is fundamental to developing the necessarily proactive approach. This section will illuminate how trade unions have used collective bargaining to address restructuring processes and achieve equitable outcomes for workers.

The research found that trade unions have been addressing the above-mentioned digital restructuring processes by developing and addressing workers' everyday questions through collective agreements. For example, they have placed the regulation of the use of work phones, including the 'right to disconnect' on to their collective bargaining

agendas in recent years. Where such agreements exist, they have been successful in protecting workers from the worst excesses of the digital transformation of the services sectors, restoring a semblance of work-life balance.

Beyond that, trade unionists have been campaigning, organising and negotiating to be involved in restructuring processes from their earliest stage all the way to when final decisions are being made. One interesting example that our research has come across is 'joint monitoring rooms in collective agreements on company and sectoral level'. According to one interviewee: 'Unions can play an important role in understanding the effects of change and this role should be understood and valued because through this unions can make sure that managers understand the issues raised from the workers' perspective.'

These 'joint monitoring rooms' exist at a company level in Germany. Here, ver.di services union and EuroGate established an automation commission and 'Tarifvertrag Zukunft' (Collective agreement Future). In a similar vein, ver.di has also established a collective agreement on 'Belastungsschutz' (stress protection) with Deutsche Telekom. In the Deutsche Post Group, ver.di's 'OnTrack'-agreement sets a high bar against worker surveillance.

In Italy, unions have even been able to move beyond company-level approaches to monitor restructuring processes at the sectoral level. In this context, the 'Cabina di regia per la ristrutturazione digitale' appears to be a landmark agreement in the finance sector. In Denmark, unions' Fintech Agency has been able to create the conditions to anticipate and monitor where new jobs will appear up- and downstream in the value chain, thus ensuring that unions are in close contact with new workers, including those with atypical contracts.

Unions have also been using their institutional access and, where permitted, favourable political situations to regulate the whole economy. In Finland, unions obtained recognition of atypical work in the country's new Working Hours Act that entered into force in January 2020. A flexible working time arrangement (joustotyöaika) is a new concept, to which the employer and employee can agree in cases where the employee can independently schedule and determine the location of at least half of their working hours. This is particularly well suited for specialist work, where the employer sets goals and general schedules instead of strictly defining the time and place for the performance of the work activity. In this type of work, hours can be assigned more freely than in flexitime. Within agreed limits, employees can independently decide on the time and day when they will perform their work.

Such proactive approaches are important developments since companies are currently experiencing difficulties in terms of both economic performance. 'Companies and managers look at technological change from the business side and know the expected effects. But both the perspectives of workers and business should be present,' says one interviewee. The onset of working from home twinned with an economic crisis and rising levels of unemployment could potentially lead to further restructuring processes which undermine workers' rights and ability to bargain effectively in the coming years. For this reason, collective bargaining strategies need to involve organising workers. This will allow unions to strengthen their bargaining position and be effective in the wake of management attacks on existing terms and conditions.

4.2 Organising Along the Services Chain

Most trade unionists remark that within a more proactive approach to digitalisation, social dialogue always needs to be complemented by an enhancement of trade unions' strategic capacity. This can be achieved by better understanding how restructuring concretely impacts working conditions, in addition to understanding workers' needs and what motivates workers to join unions.

Even in the countries that have strong institutional frameworks of collective bargaining and social dialogue, it cannot suffice to remain wedded to using the institutional set-up without building collective power. As one interviewee stated:

Talking, negotiations take too much time instead of organising workers. From 0 to 10, it is a 5 in usefulness. It must work together with organising. Organising workers, even enforcing unions' borders, is the priority; in this phase, workers are fragmented and unions are fragmented.

To achieve effectiveness in this regard, unionists recognise that unions should, develop their organisational capacities with a view to coordinating between sectors. This is necessary because a growing number of workers find themselves in the interstices or 'grey areas' of different services sectors and services companies no longer necessarily remain within a given sector. Instead, they move into the market where opportunities to realise profits are the largest. Interviewed trade unionists argue that it is crucial to dedicate sufficient financial and human resources to organising workers up- and downstream in the services chain. This will involve scouting and experimenting with new ways of communicating with workers who do not have union traditions or have self-organised over other issues such as discrimination, the company's climate change policy or its contracts with the military.

The blurred boundaries of commerce, the case of organising workers along the services chain in Bol.com seems of particular interest. In this case an inspirational principle – 'finding the main contractor' – came from the United States: from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in Chicago. In the Illinois capital, in order to achieve power of regulation over the standards of working conditions for the contracted services of subcontractors (in this case for the maintenance of the buildings: janitors, cleaning companies etc.), the SEIU negotiates with the building owners (in this case the main contractor), such as the Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA).

The campaign around Bol.com experimented with various incentives for union activity across borders – beyond their classification in sectors – putting together teams of organisers and officials from a variety of sectors involved with global companies. In this case, defining a common request was also important:

A list of standards is: a minimum wage of €14 per hour; a maximum of 35 hours per week; a maximum of 8 extra shifts on night and weekends; enough people to do the job; steady contracts; the right to talk at the workplace and organise; the accessibility of workers on site for representatives (usually the employers' alibi to prevent this right is to hide behind the customer).

According to many trade unionists, unions' improvements in mapping new workers' needs shouldn't be limited to agreements but should always be supported by the organisational activity of constant research-intervention 'in the field', where workers are. Such activity would help in regard to social regulation of the new platform-based forms of work. In this context, for unionists, getting proactive is connected to developing new internal organisational formulas that permit unions to go beyond sectoral boundaries and to invest resources in scouting and campaigning in new organisations (Bol.com in Netherlands and the case of game workers in the Irish finance sector have been mentioned as interesting experiences in this direction). The principle of 'finding the main contractor', developed by SEIU, is seen as another promising approach to organising along the services chain.

Unionists are aware that younger workers often end up working in these newly created jobs in the services supply chain without any access to union representation and/or collective bargaining rights. In the following section, attention will be paid to how unions are seeking to bridge the generational divide.

4.3 Bridging the Generational Divide

It is important to recognise that old and young workers can both have an interest in ensuring the fair transition to continuous digital restructuring in services. At the current moment, the core of union affiliates is composed of so-called 'boomers'. Unionists report that much of the uncertainty that these workers experience is related to the definition of age and the criteria by which a worker is considered adequate to actively participate in digitally restructured processes. Yet the uncertainty of these older workers extends beyond the boundaries of their working organisation and is also related to the general sustainability of their family life in the coming years, when they will retire, when most of the services they will use will be digitalised and when their children may have less rights at work. Interestingly, some unionists observed that 'more than being a matter of generations, it's a matter of working conditions'. We may also note that a consistent proportion of workers expelled from traditional conditions have re-entered the market through atypical contracts or self-employment.

None of this is to deny that some regions of the world – including Europe to a greater extent than elsewhere – are characterised by an aging population. The demographic dimension changes societies and, consequently, the labour market. In public opinion, continuous digital restructuring processes are generally perceived as more sustainable by digital natives and less so by older workers with traditional contracts and stable working routines. Trade unionists observe that the generational divide of the present scenario needs to be addressed in order to guarantee a fair transition where no one is left behind, noting that it is important to avoid the instrumentalisation of the demographical issue as a means to deepen divisions among the work force. One interviewee says:

They put it in a way in which it seems that everything that is stressful for older workers can even be fun for young workers. So that in future restructurings, once the old generation is replaced, all problems will be solved.

Whilst it is true that older workers have experienced certain difficulties during restructuring processes, chief among them what management labels a 'temporary confusion' in adapting to new technologies, the idea that this has limited the success of restructuring implementation is an example of how divisions may be exacerbated. On the other hand, so-called 'digital natives' have been depicted, in large part, as ideal workers for digitalisation and continuous restructuring, owing in particular to their presumed natural ease with change. This has meant that new digital companies have tried to portray themselves as organisational paradises for digital natives, as if social and organisational conditions and the needs of this new breed of workers were automatically matched and there would be no need for workers' representatives. One interviewee stated:

More than being a reality, it is a request: young workers are expected to be fit for new digital solutions and enthusiastic to continuously meet new challenges and change. In a way, it's a moral request, like saying that if they aren't losers, then they should be happy and rise to the challenge.

Because unionists and workers are increasingly aware of the continuous nature of restructuring, the former were able to highlight how the myths concerning old and young workers should be reconsidered. Above all, the definition of active ageing workers in a digitalised organisation is at stake, because it is still not clear when and at what age a worker becomes or is considered as less able to be mentally productive in a digitally restructured work environment.

At the same time, unionists seem increasingly aware that so-called 'digital natives' are not immune from the risks of permanent restructuring. This is becoming clearer in traditional work contexts that are easier to access for unions. However, it is also becoming evident in the case of new digital companies and platforms, such that trade unions feel an urgency to increase their capacity to reach these new work environments and conditions. In either case, the prevalence of the idea – or myth – that digital natives are naturally fit for the digital age should never be a rationale that deters unions from mapping the risks and forms of exploitation that face these young workers, nor that prevents public debate on these matters.

Developing a more proactive approach also means undertaking greater research into the present and future of work for older and younger generations in a continuously digitally restructuring world, both inside and outside of traditional organisations and contracts. One of the approaches that unions adopt to strengthen their bargaining position in this new environment is 'organising the unorganised'.

4.4 Organising Young and Unorganised Workers

In the development of a proactive approach, the empowerment of the workforce is seen to be essential in the present context, where digitalisation increases both the individualisation of work and the proportion of new jobs with atypical contracts. While unionists have a clear awareness that restructuring processes are changing the boundaries of the labour market, the new boundaries are still not themselves clear regarding new workers' possibility of professional and career advancement, as well as who should be "organised" or represented.

Reaching this growing proportion unorganised workers, which includes those in sectors not permanently covered by one union, nor by a sectoral collective agreement, is perceived by unionists as both highly challenging and essential to ensuring equitable and sustainable industrial relations. The impetus for revisiting the scope of union action is also grounded in following thinking:

Unions are not just getting weaker from outside. They are also getting weaker from the inside. They are not growing, they are losing their power base, passing through a decline. At the moment, unions are composed of the 40-50s and above: boomers! Are we able to talk about the future? Are we, then, able to detect emerging needs, future needs in time? Can we imagine and put forward a vision about the work of tomorrow?' reflects one interviewee.

According to the same unionist, workers at new digital companies are difficult to reach due to both a lack of regulation and the power of generalised intimidation that prevents workers from getting in touch with unions. One interviewee remarks:

Theoretically in finance there are many new actors, but central banks have no control over fintechs. There are no lists with contacts and addresses. If they are not regulated, we have to admit that is very difficult to get in touch with their workers, especially if one considers that they often work remotely.

The problems facing unions may thus be perceived as both external and internal: according to unionists, the challenges in communicating with new workers also relate to the complexity of union organisation and its language; these may appear adequate in relation to older work structures but seem less so to younger workers who feel individually immersed in constant digital transformation. One interviewee stated:

[from a young workers' perspective] Unions look like complex, big, vertical organisations, with language and internal procedures that talk about internal levels, roles, hierarchy, an inner bureaucracy

One result of this is that unions' ability to map new working conditions tends to be underrated in particular by younger workers in new forms of employment (including those who are self-employed or freelancers without employees themselves). Nonetheless, these forms of employment are not limited to young workers, as some older workers who have been expelled through restructuring processes often try to re-enter the market through self-employment. It is therefore vital that unions are always present as a point of reference in the eyes of these workers as they seek empowerment and improvement of their working conditions.

Possible Inroads: From Training to Public Debate

One possible solution could be to alter union communications in a way that improves unions' strategic capacity to organise these new workers. However, unions face obstacles in integrating these strategies. The evidence suggested that training in digital and innovative methods of campaigning did not feature high on unions' agendas despite most of the interviewees seeing it as crucial to improving communication with younger generations.

Other respondents mention difficulties relating to the different set of values that characterises the 'individualistic' and flexible approach of young workers. At the same time, union representatives admit to finding it difficult to influence the training values transmitted to new workers, which are oriented largely on increasing performance rather than on issues like the importance of working rights and responsibility among workers.

From a different perspective, other interviewees observe that if young workers do not have a sufficient appreciation of unions as a reference point for the defence of their working rights and conditions, it might also be because younger generations weren't helped to learn about their working rights during their school education and haven't been able to find out through the media about union activity in relation to new digital companies and atypical contracts, nor how one might get in contact with them in case of need.

In the present period, some trade unions are active in making the unions' role more visible to students. A Finnish trade unionist describes part of the rationale for such an initiative:

Secondary schools and universities organise numerous so-called 'career days' where basically companies and employers promote themselves, but most of the time little or no space is organised to equip the students with skills and knowledge regarding their rights in their career. This why we went to schools to talk to students.

Raising general awareness in such a way, when combined with improving union visibility in the media concerning achievements relating to digital companies and platforms, would seem to be particularly important in facilitating communication with young workers.

Further to this, unionists consider that another important way to make new and unorganised workers more aware both of their rights and of the possibility of empowering their working conditions is to improve the visibility of unions' role in the development of public and institutional debates concerning the impacts of digitalisation. Examples of this are to be found in the cases of Ireland, as concerns smart working, and Finland, in respect of flexible work (as explained below).

Example from UNI Europa: Irish Game Workers

Unions have already moved in the direction of intercepting new kinds of workers, understanding their working conditions and organising them. Experiences of particular interest can be found in home care, where it was necessary to intercept and organise emerging new groups of workers in a sector that was not formalised and that is currently undergoing restructuring relating to platforms and automation. Or in commerce, the experience of unions in Bol.Com in the Netherlands could be a source of inspiration:

Organising workers means finding leaders, talking directly with them. We have to be good at scouting emerging needs; people who intend or tend to become engaged with greater rights at work. And from giving solutions and realistic chances to them, being able – through them – to get more people, because they also weren't able to make their words heard alone.

However, in the financial sector, the organising drive around game workers in Ireland was described at length by one interviewee. Beginning with two people, the campaign recruited hundreds in less than a year; a gain that came through organising based on an understanding of the needs of these specific workers, which are very unusual when compared with traditional finance workers.

We had the initial involvement of two people; in nine months they managed to reach 100 people through talking to colleagues. The process can be faster than one might think. To achieve this we had to listen, understand the main problems and issues that were being raised and queried, like low remuneration, no standards for wages, lack of job security, they wanted more permanent jobs. No different from many kinds of new workers in non-traditional companies.

Then, of course, the next step was to create an advice centre. It was nothing particularly advanced in technology as we basically used free phone numbers. In general, the sense is that with new young workers the usual union circulars, newsletters and magazines don't work. These kinds of young workers expect – and are more inclined to – digital, individualised solidarity in a peer-to-peer approach.

The next step was a more structured survey in the sector. Of course, this didn't only have an informative aim. Yes, it's important to know the numbers and to see a more precise map of the workers, but, of course, the research is most of all a way to get in touch with more workers, to find things out directly from them and get their points of view, and interact with them proposing ways of organising, getting feedback et cetera. And then of course when you have this knowledge and social base, you gain some bargaining power

This example underlines that it is possible to organise unorganised workers.

4.5 Advancing Workers' Rights at the European Level

While unionists understand that effectiveness at the national level is essential, they are also extremely aware that it is insufficient for the task of dealing current restructuring processes and that both of these things depend, in reality, upon strong coordination at the European level.

As automation and robotisation spread in the services sector, the new jobs emerging up- and downstream in the services supply chain – often with worse conditions and lower pay – are frequently being outsourced to other employers or to another country. Meanwhile, centralised information systems make it easier for management to

govern and monitor global companies and make decisions for organisational restructuring along the supply chain and across national borders. These global companies have invested intensively in integrating the above-mentioned technologies into their organisational model. As company networks have become increasingly complex, altering the business ecosystem and industrial relations landscape in the process, it has therefore become increasingly difficult for unionists to, first, understand where restructuring strategies begin and, then, to map the relevant areas of leverage. Union coordination, it is clear, needs itself to undergo a qualitative leap.

At the same time, according to the claims of unionists, existing international regulatory frameworks remain inadequate and the abuse of laws and standards to relocate work to where it is cheaper necessitates the joining together of union forces at a supranational level. The unionists that we consulted shared the idea that 'globalisation can only be governed by transnational union action'. Advancing workers' rights at the supranational level thus requires integrated action over the bargaining of supranational agreements and the organising of workers in the field. In another regard, unionists insist that it is crucially important to contact and organise workers in global companies to be able to monitor the actual application of laws and rights and the recognition of union actions, since difficulties in accessing workplaces and workers were noted by all the unions.

Respondents Relay Promising Practices

In commercial services, UNI Global Union's Amazon section, having pursued years of individual battles against the company's oft-criticised employment practices, brought together more than 50 Amazon worker representatives from 15 countries (from outside Europe – notably, Egypt, Brazil and Pakistan – and from within Europe, including Italy, Germany Poland and France) for a conference in Berlin to coordinate their strategy, with the joint aim of comparing notes on working conditions in Amazon's logistics centres around the world and of sharing information about the different rules and regulations that they might use in negotiations. Many Amazon workers used the social media hashtag #wearenotrobots.

As one interviewee said, 'The use of the hashtag is important in order to make people feel that there is a thread linking the many local actions.' The promotion of visibility for low-wage workers and anti-trust legislation is considered crucial to the success of this campaign.

Teleperformance Group, world leader in the provision of contact centre services, is present in 65 countries, with 311 contact centres and over 190,000 employees. It provides front-line customer services over the phone, through social media, live chat, email, SMS or WhatsApp for some of the world's biggest brands such as Apple, Google, and Orange. Through 147,000 workstations across the globe, it manages over 1,000 customers, a third of which are international "blue chip" companies, present within the main industries.

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) showed that four of the company's biggest labour markets (India, the Philippines, Mexico and Colombia) have 'no guarantee' for the implementation of fundamental labour rights. Teleperformance Global Alliance (TGA), a coalition of trade unions representing Teleperformance workers from 11 countries is fighting to achieve global minimum standards and global rights to organise.

A particularity of the case is that since Teleperformance is a large French company, under national law it must use certain mechanisms and procedures to prevent human rights violations and adverse environmental impacts throughout the chain of production, including in the subsidiaries and companies under its control. These mechanisms must be reported each year as part of a 'vigilance plan.' Thus, part of TGA's campaign consists of

monitoring and denouncing Teleperformance's failure to meet its legal requirements and, through this, raising the alarm to investors and clients. One interviewee stated:

An important part is to show that unaware companies or customers are directly or indirectly using exploited labour. The more people and public opinion understand what it means to be exploited in this global empire of back-office services, the better.

In Ireland, in the postal and delivery sector, since UPS purchased Nightline, one of its main local competitors, unions have managed to get the pay of members in Nightline matched with union members in UPS, which has led to pay rises of up to 15%. Meanwhile, in finance, agreements made by unions with BNP Paribas and Credit Agricole have set uniform global standards.

Stronger International Alliances

As part of the development of a proactive approach, unionists observe that stronger trade union alliances at the European level would be essential to advancing an employee-centred perspective within the EU approach to a digitalised Europe. Such alliances, bridging countries, sectors and supply chains, would enable the improvement of the Europe 2020 flagship initiative 'Digital Agenda for Europe', which up to now has been weak on the employment-related effects of digitalisation. Within the EU approach, according to the views of many respondents, the issue of social sustainability has seemed to be left behind, in particular with the approval of European directive 2006/123/CE, which left grey areas open for exploitation in the lowering of social rights. Some unionists assert that this both led workers to withdraw their attention and expectations from networking at the European level and means that workers' trust in this regard now requires reinforcement.

In this vein, the job of achieving common standards for workers' rights is noted by all unions to have the highest importance and it also requires the involvement other European actors such as ETUC. Balancing inequalities among European countries would be an important achievement and, according to unionists, it would also be a noteworthy signal in a process of addressing the even greater challenge of global disparities. The latter relates to UN Sustainable Development Goal number 8: 'inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all'.

Many unionists speak of observing a rising awareness that common standards, more so than wages, should focus on a minimum framework of rights that can be easily communicated and understood by all segments of society and can thus make forceful entrance into public debate in all countries. This framework of rights and protections should be recognised independently of the subjective contractual condition and could also deal with issues of work-life balance and maternity/paternity leave. If, in addition, such a framework were to support social regulation of new, platform-based forms of work, it would be particularly important to achieve an expanded definition of employees and an expanded definition of companies. It should also be noted here that a further benefit of union networking at the European level would be the opportunity to collaborate in obtaining legislation that favours the European dimension of unions on the political, organisational and above all on contractual levels.

Finally, stronger union alliances at European level would permit the opportunity to increase pressure on WTO and other supranational global institutions to make global companies more responsible in terms of workers' rights. One interviewee comments that 'On this level, it seems like we are still at the beginning; we are not organised like lobbies around the European Commission'. In such a manner, steps should be taken to develop a European Working

Citizenship, which is urgently needed in order to give a signal to non-European unions concerning the goal of global working citizenship (as suggested by sustainable development goal number 8 of United Nations Agenda 2030).

The European Work Councils and UNI Europa: Key to Cross-border Coordination

Among multiple forms of transnational employee representation and participation, European Work Councils (EWCs) are considered by respondents to be key in building the conditions for reinforcing cooperation between employee representatives across borders and for reaching a more proactive approach in restructuring processes.

In these EWCs, unionists are coordinating in order to increase employee involvement in the decision-making mechanisms of companies. For instance, the EWC at Axa is mentioned as seeming promising in regard to anticipating change and having a full view of the impacts of company strategy throughout the national and international insurance chain. One important approach in networking at this level is to reinforce regulation, as a strong European alliance among unions is required in order to reach effectiveness in counterbalancing the employers' influence in EWCs and thus avoid the instrumentalisation of EWCs by businesses in a unidirectional fashion. One interviewee says:

There are small sanctions for employers who are not giving enough info or not giving it fast enough. The most difficult task for European Work Councils is to get information fast enough from management in order to inform the workers properly. There's still not enough power to exert pressure on employers.

Within EWCs, unionists are seeking every way to ensure that employee rights to information and consultation are properly respected at all times, across companies and sectors. The approach of exerting pressure on employers to improve their contributions to the EWCs is not simply a matter of quantity of information but also one of quality. One interviewee says:

They [the employers] are artists in answering without giving the answers: they don't let you see their cards. They come along with slides and their strategy seems designed to give you an overload of information, of numbers. So that nobody can accuse them of avoiding communication. So, they communicate a lot; lots of technical things; they want to leave you without words, make you feel embarrassed, ask to stop and have something explained better. You see so much but at the end of the day you ask yourself, 'What did I see today?'

In respect of highlighting when employers are withholding the necessary information, strong and effective coordination of unions in pre-meetings and de-briefings is considered crucial by unionists. Indeed, taking part in these moments of coordination is felt to be very important by union delegates, in terms of both effectiveness and professional knowledge. Reinforcing coordination at this level is thus seen to be a vital opportunity, as it permits national unions to exchange information and gain, firstly, a more complete map of employers' explicit and implicit strategies and, as a result of this, to define more effective areas of leverage for union action.

These supranational connections must extend to action, note unionists, and to this end there is a need to create the conditions for a general increase in unions' engagement. On this question, union delegates participating in our research in some cases expressed their own relative isolation within their unions, with the understanding that networking at a supranational would require substantially greater resources and communication in order to raise sufficient awareness within unions concerning such coordination. One interviewee says:

Union coordination at the European level and Uni Europa itself need more publicity within unions. People don't know what it is, workers don't know! Even colleagues were surprised to know that there is organised cooperation of unions at European level.

In reinforcing the European level of coordination and developing a supranational perspective for unions, UNI Europa's role is considered by respondents to be extremely important in empowering EWCs to anticipate changes and to proactively provide alternative solutions to management. Its most distinctive value is seen to reside in its link with the European framework of laws. In specific regard to increasing the power of unions in the global companies, UNI Europa is said to be a strategic partner that can help unions both to stay within European Law and to be more aware of the differences in legislation and in industrial relations among the different nations, sustaining unions as truthful and trustworthy actors.

On a practical level, UNI Europa's role in reinforcing the coordination of unions in EWCs is, despite the above-mentioned constraints, highly appreciated. The quality and effectiveness of pre-meetings, meetings and de-briefing are said to be greatly improved with the support of UNI Europa. Important agreements are consequently achieved.

The role of UNI Europa is recognised to further support coordination through its design of frameworks and principles such as the Top Ten Principles of Workers' Data Rights and Ten Principles for Ethical AI, which to bring its influence to bear upon both collective bargaining and global framework agreements. UNI Europa's role is, in fact, considered essential to the conditions that provide a stable basis for transnational trade union campaigns and negotiations for global framework agreements.

There is a recognition among unionists that UNI Europa's efforts in supporting unions can produce a framework of analytical tools that fits the complexity of networks and power relationships in which continuous restructuring processes occur (frequently, within financialised and digitalised companies), permitting the mapping of implicit strategies and identification on a coordinated basis of the potential points of leverage for union action. This coordination of unions in strategic corporate research could have the potential to allow campaigns to proceed beyond defensive actions and to be able to coordinate effectively at local and supranational levels of action. Rather than being seen as a specialist tool to be used only occasionally, strategic research and comprehensive intervention would need to become, as far as possible, a day-to-day practice if a more proactive approach to continuous restructuring is to be achieved. In this regard, according to respondents, more coordinated action among unions is needed in respect of training.

4.6 Training for Union Leaders and Workers' Representatives

On the question of enhancing union action at the European and national levels, unionists often noted training and education on these matters to be important. The most frequently mentioned areas for training related to:

- Understanding of the technicalities of investment plans;
- Union delegates to EWCs consider it important to receive training in filtering information and interpreting data. This would appear fundamental in achieving the skills to 'ask the right questions' of companies.
- Critical knowledge of technological options and their impacts on working conditions and society in general;
- International regulatory frameworks;

With regard to the reinforcement of links between the national and supranational levels, union delegates at these levels find it important that support be provided in the form of specific training, particularly on reading and interpreting investment plans, on understanding the options for technological innovation and its social and organisational impact, and on the supranational level of networking (the strategic corporate research-intervention methodologies that need to be coordinated around different national frameworks).

According to union delegates at the European level, all unions need to be more aware of and brought up to date concerning supranational achievements and their importance for working conditions. The broader proactive approach, to be built at European level, should provide the benefits of training to worker representatives, as an example of how it might be possible to interact among sectors and unions in order to discover effective areas of leverage within the growing complexity of company restructuring.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this research was to understand the impact of digitalisation at the workplace and sectoral level and understand how unions are developing proactive responses. The research used a mixed methods approach by combining survey and interview data from a total of 50 trade unionists who all had direct experience of restructuring processes in their company or sector. The conclusions are based on trade unionists' considerations in regard to the impacts of digitalisation on workers and on sectoral boundaries.

Although digitalisation might engender numerous opportunities, its impact is influenced not only by technological development but also by economic, social and institutional factors. Developing proactive union responses to restructuring processes can help to shape a just transition, strengthen unions' bargaining position and ultimately ensure equitable outcomes for workers.

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the pace of restructuring. The social distancing measures necessary to counter the spread of the virus have pushed a large number of companies, and their workers, to rapidly restructure work processes through the use digital technologies. Trade unions must therefore proactively shape this transition to ensure that workers' rights are protected and that no one is left behind.

From the research it becomes obvious that trade unions are not just bystanders but can proactively shape restructuring processes and turn these into a 'just transition' for workers. The challenges associated with the 'permanent state of restructuring' require unions to coordinate at the European level.

While unionists acknowledge the potential of digital technologies to reduce employees' administrative and physical workload, allowing them more time and resources to help and support customers, there is a growing awareness among union representatives that restructuring processes seem to increase workers' stress and feelings of overload (not just for older workers but also for so-called 'digital natives'), with consequent risks to health and safety. Meanwhile, smart working in the form of home office or mobile working has not necessarily contributed to the improvement of work-life balance, and workers have experienced an 'invasion' of work into their free time and into their personal spaces and relations.

The set-up of internal platforms has often focused more on worker surveillance and monitoring of worker performance than on the simplification of workers' tasks and jobs. Further to this, digitally accelerated restructuring and the worldwide relocation of work have been able to create new forms of low-paid and precarious work, increasing fragmentation in the workforce.

Workers are increasingly aware that within the restructuring process digital technologies are not necessarily fulfilling the expectations of increased productivity and user-friendliness, and that their implementation within such a process can even result in a worsening of the quality of service provision.

A further impact of restructuring upon the workforce concerns workers' perceptions of the process itself: unionists repeatedly mentioned that their members seem worried about future restructuring processes due to the increased rapidity and occurrence of such restructuring processes.

The research has also evidenced that trade unionists, especially in sectors such as commerce and tourism, find that innovation often causes traditional sectoral boundaries to dissolve and new interactions to emerge. Consequently, traditional occupational categories and sectoral boundaries are diluted, and new jobs emerge up- and downstream in the services supply chain, often with worse conditions and lower pay. This can include the outsourcing of work to other employers or even to another country. Unionists are increasingly aware that these disruptive processes may entail some groups of workers, especially new workers, not receiving the contractual protections that have previously characterised this type of work. The fluidity of new productive processes thus seems to clash with the rigidity of sectorial classifications, rendering it necessary to develop strategies and use unions' resources to develop effectiveness in action outside of their traditional remit. In the medium- to long-term, this will strengthen unions' associational, positional, and institutional power. In other words, organising workers up and down the services supply chain will strengthen unions' bargaining position and disincentivise companies from engaging in permanent restructuring.

The elements cited above were described by the trade unionists participating in our research as pieces in a mosaic of action that must be joined together in order to achieve a more proactive approach to digitalisation and restructuring processes.

For respondents, the urgency of building a proactive approach is based on a perception of acceleration in the rhythm of transformation processes. Since the end of the research, this rhythm has further accelerated due to the impact of social distancing measures and the consequent expansion of the use of digital technologies in work processes. An even larger share of workers, customers and society in general has been involved in the resulting intensified digitalisation of services. A proactive approach based on an employee-centred perspective is thus even more important to fostering a just transition to a digitalised services industry and to enhancing the quality of services and working conditions across boundaries.

It is necessary to strengthen unions' crucial role as we see the approach of a new, post-Covid scenario where public attention is more inclined to reflect on the social impact of restructuring processes and to consider that protecting working conditions and workers' rights is also a way of preserving public health and of fostering social sustainability.

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