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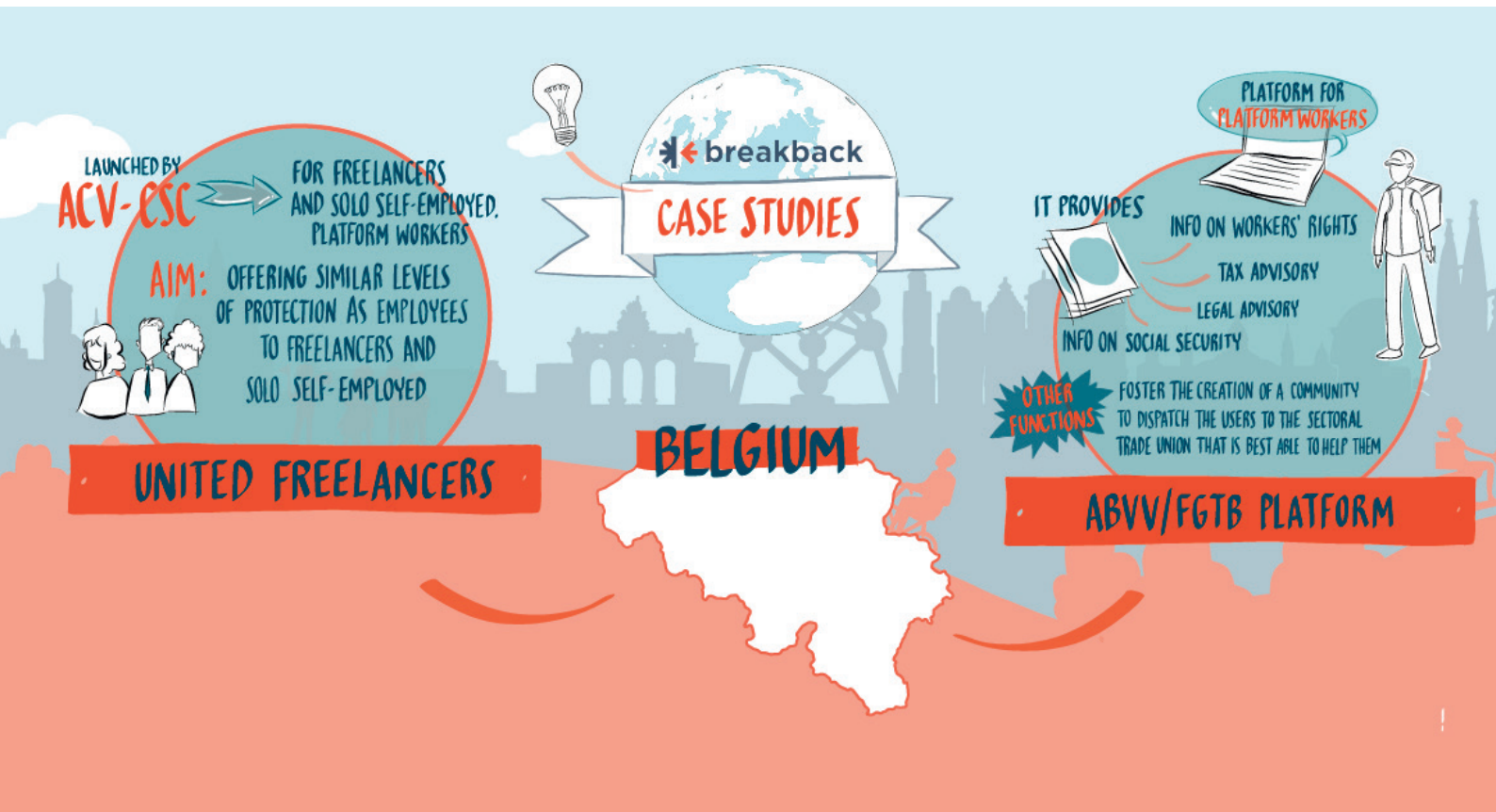


COUNTRY REPORT



BELGIUM

Diesis Coop





Break up to get back together

The impact of unionisation through innovative service provision on union membership and industrial relations

COUNTRY REPORT BELGIUM

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

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WE REFER TO:

EMPLOYEES IDENTIFIED AS "VULNERABLE"

FOCUS

breakback



A UNION STRATEGY THROUGH SERVICES PROVISION TO:

ENHANCE MEMBERSHIP

REVITALIZE ACTION

THE PURPOSE:

- HOW UNIONS RESPOND TO INDIVIDUALISATION
- EVALUATING IMPACT OF SERVICES ON MEMBERSHIP



RELAUNCH
AN INCLUSIVE
SOCIAL DIALOGUE

BREAK BACK HAS
3 MAIN
AIMS



GOALS

1. TO ASSESS WHICH
STRATEGIES TRADE
UNIONS ADOPT TO
OVERCOME WORKERS
DISAFFECTION

2. TO COLLECT
AND DESCRIBE
THE VARIETY OF SERVICES
PROVIDED IN 5 EU
MEMBER STATES

3. TO EVALUATE THE
EFFECTIVENESS OF
THESE MEMBERSHIP
REVITALIZATION
STRATEGIES

EVALUATE WHETHER
THE PROVISION OF SERVICES
LEADS TO A UNION
MEMBERSHIP INCREASE!

THE HYPOTHESIS:
TRADE UNIONS
ARE EXPERIMENTING
A "CUSTOMISATION"
OF THEIR ACTIVITIES



First part

The National Industrial Relations System

Baseline information

Main economic and labour market trends

Belgium is a small open economy located centrally in Europe. Belgium is one of the founding members of the European Union. In 2017, Belgium's GDP stood at 437.2 billion euros in 2017, which is 2.9% of total GDP of the European Union (FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy, 2019). In the same year, annual GDP growth in Belgium reached 1.7%, against 1.5% in 2016. The Belgian economy is highly dependent on foreign trade, with the share of Belgian exports in the EU exports to other Member States representing 8.2%.

Despite being a member of the Euro Area and having moderate inflation rates, consumer prices have increased much faster in Belgium than in the neighbouring countries in the past few years. Similar to other EU Member States, the Belgian economy has shifted from a manufacturing to a service-based economy. In 2017, the share of market services (incl. wholesale and retail, financial activities, insurance and energy) in the total gross value added represented 57.3%, while it was only 14.4% for industry and 5.2% for construction. The balance is distributed between non-market services (including healthcare) and agriculture.

The Belgian economy is characterised by a large share of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which constitute the vast majority of

the companies and represent a significant share of total employment. The Belgian workforce is highly educated. Coupled with the strong innovation performance in sectors such as the pharmaceutical and chemical industries and the large private capital accumulation, Belgium has one of the highest productivity levels in the EU (European Semester 2019 Country Report). However, according to the 2019 European Semester country report for Belgium, economic growth is expected to slow down from 1.4% in 2018 to 1.3% in 2019 and 1.2% in 2020, similar to the developments in other EU Member States.

Although economic growth in Belgium has remained below the EU average, this growth has been job-rich. In 2017, the employment rate increased by 0.8 percentage points compared to 2016, from 62.3% to 63.1%. The overall unemployment rate and the unemployment rate for young people under 25 years-old fell by 0.7 and 0.8 percentage points respectively, to attain 7.1% and 19.3%. The employment rate reached 65.0% in the third quarter of 2018 (1.6 percentage points higher compared to the same quarter of 2017). Since 2017, the employment growth has been slowing down due to increasing labour market mismatches and skill shortages. Nevertheless, labour market participation in Belgium is below the EU average (in 2017, the activity rate stood at 73.7% versus an EU average of 78%). It is particularly problematic in some



regions and among some groups (e.g. lower in Wallonia than in Flanders, lower among migrants than non-migrants, etc.).

Labour market regulation

The Belgian labour law of 16 March 1971 stipulates the rules and provisions for employers and employees.¹ Employers who employ employees on the Belgian territory must comply with working and employment conditions and the wage conditions laid down by legal provisions. This covers arrangements regarding working time and rest times (organisation of work in terms of normal working hours, overtime, Sunday work, night work, public holidays), the minimum wage (the amount of national minimum wage and the minimum wages laid down in collective agreements that have been declared universally applicable by royal decree), temporary agency work (rules on when this type of work can be used as well as the framework governing it), posting of workers, equal treatment, protection of young workers, safety, health and hygiene at work, protective measures for pregnant women, and the keeping of social documents (e.g. personnel register, wage fiches). The website of the Federal Public Service for Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue provides a detailed overview of these regulations, as well as the changes that were implemented over time. The employment regulation is based on consultation of the social partners. The concept of subordination is crucial in determining the difference between an employee and a self-employed in Belgium: employment law governs the relationship between an employer and an employee who works under his authority in return for remuneration.

With regard to labour market regulation, there are two fairly recent changes that warrant further

attention. A first measure is to move towards an **equal status for manual ‘blue collar’ workers and non-manual ‘white collar’ workers**. The Belgian labour law used to make a distinction between these two types of workers, but unified rules with regard to sickness and dismissal were introduced by the Act of 26 December 2013. These changes are in fact likely to affect the internal structures of the trade unions, which are often organised into separate bodies for manual and non-manual workers in the same industry.

A second major reform was the **law of 5 March 2017** (wet ‘werkbaar en wendbaar werk’ – ‘workable work’), which aims to tackle challenges of changing employment relationships and the demand for more flexibility. The law aims to support the improvement of working conditions throughout the career to extend working lives. This improvement is achieved through better management by the employee of their working time and an increase in their autonomy. The law also focuses on the sustainability of work by increasing flexibility to allow companies to be more competitive. The flexibility of working time, the simplification of part-time work and the system of employers’ groups, the possibility of concluding contracts of indefinite duration, and the extension of night work in the e-commerce sector are all part of this law.

Regulation of industrial relations

The collective bargaining system in Belgium is regulated by Act of 5 December 1968 on collective bargaining agreements and sectoral joint committees (1968-12-05/01) that recognises and protects the right to organise and to bargain collectively. Wage bargaining is structured in terms of three interlinked levels: the highest, **national level**, with centralised cross-sectoral agreements covering the entire economy; an important **intermediate level covering specific sectors**; and **company-level negotiations** as a complement or substitute for the sector-level

1. This law can be consulted at www.ejustice.fgov.be/cgi_loi/change_ig.pl?language=nl&la=N&table_nam=wet&cn=1971031602

bargaining. In principle, lower-level agreements can only improve (from the employees' perspective) what has been negotiated at a higher level; in other words, there is no derogation.

The National Labour Council and Central Economic Council are in close contact with consultative bodies that bring together representatives of employers and employees at regional and community levels. These include the *Conseil économique et social de la Région wallonne* (Wallonia), *Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen* and *Vlaams Economisch Sociaal Overlegcomité* (Flanders), *Economische en Sociale Raad van het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest* and *Brussels Economisch Sociaal Overlegcomité* (Brussels), and the *Wirtschafts- und Sozialrat der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens* (German-speaking community), among several other bodies (e.g. the *Sociaal-Economische Raad van de Regio* and *Regionaal Economisch Sociaal Overlegcomité*).

The governing bodies of the employers' and employees' organisations represented in the National Labour Council and the Central Economic Council are part of the so-called 'Group of Ten' (ETUI, 2016). The Group of Ten is composed of five representatives of the employers' organisations and five of trade unions². Since 2017, the president of the Group of Ten is Bernard Gilliot (VBO-FEB). The members are Monica De Jonghe (VBO-FEB), Pieter Timmermans (VBO-FEB), Danny Van Assche (UNIZO), Pierre-Frédéric Nyst (UCM), Sonja De Becker (Boerenbond), Marc Leemans (ACV-CSC), Marie-Hélène Ska (ACV-CSC), Miranda Ulens (ABVV-FGTB), Robert Verteneuil (ABVV-FGTB), and Mario Coppens (ACLVB-CGSLB). The Group of Ten plays a fundamental role in bipartite and

2. There are three trade unions (ACV-CSC, ABVV-FGTB, ACLVB-CGSLB) and four employers' organisations (VBO-FEB, UNIZO, UCM, Boerenbond).

tripartite social dialogue and their negotiations typically lay the foundations for later agreements.

Background information on the industrial relations systems

In Belgium, there are three main trade union confederations representing workers, which are embedded into longstanding political and philosophical traditions (ETUI, 2016): The *Confederation of Christian Trade Unions* (ACV-CSC), the *General Federation of Belgian Labour* (ABVV-FGTB) and the *Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium* (ACLVB-CGSLB). These confederations are in competition with each other. ACV-CSC is connected to the Christian worker movement, ABVV-FGTB is linked to the socialist worker movement, and ACLVB-CGSLB is related to the liberal movement. ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB are by far the largest unions in Belgium. These two trade unions each count over 1 million members. ACLVB-CGSLB has close to 300,000 members. Although the unions are competing for members, they cooperate closely. These trade unions have the status of 'representative' unions (see Act of 29 May 1952). These unions are allowed to sign agreements and present candidates in work council elections³. In order to be recognised as a representative association, there are a number of criteria that need to be met. Besides these unions, there is a body for supervisors and managers ('cadres') called NCK-CNC. This body has limited rights.

The main organisations representing employers in Belgium are the *Federation of Belgian Enterprises* (VBO-FEB), the *Union of Self-Employed*

3. Every four years, elections are organised for the establishment and renewal of the works councils and committees for prevention and protection at work. Only the three representative trade unions are allowed to put forward candidates (i.e. trade union delegates) in these elections. From 16 to 29 November 2020, social elections were held in over 6,000 enterprises. Everyone who worked in the company or organisation with an employment contract or apprenticeship contract for at least 3 months on a specific cut-off day in May 2020, can cast their vote (both trade union members and non-members). The list of candidates were finalised in March 2020. Further information about the 2020 elections is available at: <https://werk.belgie.be/sites/default/files/content/publications/NL/Brochure%20SV%202020.pdf>

Entrepreneurs (UNIZO) and the *Union des classes moyennes* (UCM). Besides these organisations, there are a number of organisations in the social profit sector and those representing farmers (Boerenbond in Flanders, Fédération Wallonne de l'Agriculture in Wallonia). VBO-FEB is the largest inter-professional employers' organisation that operates in all three regions of the country. VBO-FEB brings together over 50,000 companies (including 25,000 SMEs) and represents 75% of employment in the private sector (all industry and services sectors). VBO-FEB traditionally is seen as the representative organisation for larger companies. UNIZO and UCM are employers' organisations for smaller companies (SMEs), the self-employed and liberal professions. UNIZO operates in Flanders, while UCM is active in the French-speaking part of the country. Based on data from ETUI (2016), over 80% of employers are a member of an employers' association.

Collective bargaining

The national level of collective bargaining in Belgium encompasses two institutions: the *National Labour Council* (NL: Nationale Arbeidsraad – NAR; FR: Conseil National du Travail – CNT) and the *Central Economic Council* (NL: Centrale Raad voor het Bedrijfsleven - CRB; FR: Conseil Central de l'Économie - CCE). The **National Labour Council** advises on labour legislation and is also a decision-making body that discusses national collective bargaining agreements. The main topics it covers are working hours, contracts, payment forms and the minimum wage for the private sector. The **Central Economic Council**, on the other hand, supports sectoral collective bargaining, providing research and a platform for inter-sectoral discussions. It is also responsible for the bi-annual advisory report on the maximum margins for collectively agreed pay increases.

At the national level, pay negotiations in the private sector take place every two years outside

the official bipartite structure. These negotiations result in national cross-sectoral agreements (NL: Interprofessioneel Akkoord – IPA; FR: Accord Interprofessionnel - AIP), which cover all companies in the private sector and determine the **wage norm**, i.e. the upper limit for pay increases in the next two years. The wage norm pegs wage development in Belgium to expected productivity increases in the economies of the main trading partners (i.e. France, Germany and the Netherlands). This practice has existed since 1989, but the Law of 26 July 1996^{4,5} 'on the promotion of employment and the preventive protection of competitiveness' marks the beginning of an evolution towards centralisation of collective bargaining in Belgium. While at first the wage norm was in principle a non-binding agreement by the social partners in the informal '**Group of Ten**' committee to guide sectoral negotiations, it has become stricter. The revision of the law in March 2017 finalised this process. Due to this revision, the wage norm is now enforceable at the company level and requires a safety margin and compensation of a 'historical competitive' dating from before 1996, which needs to be restored whenever economic growth allows it. The margins for wage negotiations have become extremely tight as a result.

Belgium is one of the few European countries that still has **nearly universal automatic index-linking for setting wages**. This means that pay and social security benefits are linked to

4. This law can be consulted at: http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi_loi/loi_a1.pl?DETAIL=1996072632%2FN&caller=list&row_id=1&numero=3&rech=4&cn=1996072632&table_name=WET&nm=1996021236&la=N&chercher=t&dt=WET&language=nl&choix1=EN&choix2=EN&fromtab=wet_all&nl=n&sql=dt+contains+++%27WET%27+and+dd+%3D+date%271996-07-26%27and+actif+%3D+%27Y%27&ddda=1996&tri=dd+AS+RANK+&trier=afkondiging&dddj=26&dddm=07&imgcn.x=48&imgcn.y=9

5. This law was amended and adapted by the law of 19 March 2017, which can be consulted at: http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi_loi/loi_a1.pl?DETAIL=2017031904%2FN&caller=list&row_id=1&numero=1&rech=1&cn=2017031904&table_name=WET&nm=2017201784&la=N&pdda=2017&chercher=t&dt=WET&language=nl&choix1=EN&choix2=EN&pddj=29&fromtab=wet_all&nl=n&pddm=03&sql=dt+contains+++%27WET%27+and+pd+%3D+date%272017-03-29%27and+actif+%3D+%27Y%27&tri=dd+AS+RANK+&trier=afkondiging&imgcn.x=73&imgcn.y=4

a consumer price index. The link is intended to prevent the erosion of purchasing power by inflation. This system is not centrally organised, but rather a patchwork of sector level mechanisms agreed upon freely by the members of the joint committees. They differ by timing, indexation system, the calculation of the moving average of the index, rounding rules, target groups and other details. The only restriction imposed by the law (royal decree 1993-12-24/34; act 1994-03-30/31) is that sectors that index wages have to use the 'health index', which is the normal consumer price index excluding the prices of cigarettes, alcohol and fuel for motorised vehicles. This is always turned into a so called 'social index', by using a four month moving average of the health index. In general, two systems are applied: *Pivot index* (NL: spilindex; FR: indice-pivot fixé), when this health index reaches an increase of 2%, the wages are raised by 2% (sometimes with a delay of one month or more), and *coefficient*: this system looks at the reference index at a certain point in time and compares it with another point in time, the percentage difference will be applied to wages (can be done on a monthly basis, quarterly, every half year, yearly, etc.).

The 'Group of Ten', consists of **key representatives of the national social partners** recognised as such at the Central Economic Council and the National Labour Council. The agreements reached by the Group of Ten constitute political and moral commitments and need not be legally binding, although government may enforce this by transposing the agreement or parts of the agreement in law. For that reason, these agreements are considered highly influential. As stated above, since the mid-90s the two-yearly sector and company bargaining is coordinated through a legal wage norm. Non-wage elements are often implemented by national collective agreements settled in the National Labour Council.

At the sectoral level, collective agreements are concluded within joint committees and subcommittees by all the organisations that are represented by them. There are around 165 joint (sub)committees that make decisions on pay levels, classification schemes, working time arrangements, training and so on. The sectoral collective bargaining agreements apply to all the employers and employees covered by the joint committees or subcommittees concerned. When all parties sign the sectoral agreements, legal extension by royal decree is fairly easy and is therefore nearly always applied. On 1 January 2019, there were 5,252 mandates in the 165 joint committees and subcommittees. These mandates were filled by 2,893 people (2,019 men and 874 women). By virtue of the 1968 Act, all employers that are members of an employers' organisation that has concluded a collective agreement at national or sectoral level, or that have themselves concluded a collective agreement, are bound by such an agreement. As soon as an employer is bound by an agreement, it will apply to all of their employees. Hence trade unions not only represent their own members, but also non-members wherever the union is active. Furthermore, when these agreements are concluded at the national or sectoral level, they can be declared binding by Royal Decree. This 'extension' holds only for collective agreements that have been concluded in joint bodies. Once a collective agreement has been extended, its provisions become binding on all employers and the employees in their service, provided they fall within the territorial and professional scope of the agreement. An employer cannot avoid the application of normative provisions by disaffiliating from the signatory employers' organisation (Article 21 of 1968 Act). The collective agreement therefore remains applicable until the agreement itself comes to an end, or until its terms are so amended as to revoke the previous agreement.

In order to prevent conflicts between collective agreements concluded at different levels, but



covering the same industry, the legislator has established a **hierarchy of collective agreements**. Article 51 establishes a hierarchy between collective agreements concluded within the National Labour Council, a joint committee, a joint subcommittee and outside a joint body. According to this hierarchy, collective agreements concluded in a joint body, but not extended or declared generally binding by Royal Decree, rank below the individual agreement in writing. Article 26 of the 1968 Act stipulates, however, that normative issues related to the individual employment relationship (that is, wages, working time and so on) in a non-extended sectoral or national agreement are binding, if not stated otherwise in the individual employment contract. As a result, it is common practice in the Belgian system to ask for the collective agreement to be declared generally legally binding by Royal Decree, to avoid this kind of derogation. The social peace obligation requires parties to refrain from formulating any additional claims concerning matters regulated by the collective agreement during its period of validity.

Finally, with regard to **representation at the workplace**, there are a number of important bodies: the *works council* (NL: Ondernemingsraad – OR; FR: Conseil d'entreprise - CE) and the *health and safety committee* (NL: Comité Preventie en Bescherming – CPBW; FR: Comité pour la prévention et la protection au travail - CPPT). Both represent all employees, though only trade unions are able to nominate candidates to be elected in the bodies. Works councils have to be established in companies with at least 100 employees. The works council has information and consultation rights and limited decision-making power. It is composed of representatives of the employees (elected, accounting for the composition of the workforce in terms of the share of manual and non-manual workers and young versus older workers) and representatives of the employer. Health and safety committees have to

be set up in companies with at least 50 employees. In companies with 50-100 employees, some of the information and consultation rights that would be attributed to the works council in larger organisations are attributed to the health and safety committee. Another important body is the *trade union delegation*, which negotiates with the employer and deals with individual and collective conflicts. The number of delegates depends on the collective agreements concluded for the sector.

Trade unions

In Belgium, trade unions have been recognised by law since 1921. Representative trade unions have the right to collective bargaining, to take collective action and to represent their members' interests before the labour courts. The right to strike is not explicitly rooted in national law. It is indirectly recognised as a fundamental right, however. The Belgian trade union movement is rooted in the industrial revolution that took place in the second half of the 19th century. The poor working conditions at the time led workers to organise to improve their living and working conditions. The labour movement separated into a socialist and a catholic movement, which later developed into different trade unions: the ABVV-FGTB (socialist) and the ACV-CSC (Christian). The ACLVB-CGSLB dates back to the second half of the 19th century as well, to the liberal movements that existed at the time.

Note that some of the information on trade unions has already been presented above (e.g. political role and involvement in decision-making at various levels, from the national level focused on policy-making to the firm-level) and that there is only little information about some issues, for example quantitative data about presence at the workplace. There are quite a few commonalities between the trade unions. Especially ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB have a lot of similarities. Both have separate unions for non-manual workers and for workers in the public services. ACV-CSC

is more centralised than ABVV-FGTB. ACLVB-CGSLB does not have separate unions. With regard to the financing model, membership fees constitute the main income source of the Belgian trade unions. The membership fees charged depend on the union and other characteristics, such as the member's age or employment status. In addition to the membership fees, Belgian trade unions receive subsidies for specific activities (e.g. development aid, international cooperation, education), but there are hardly any data on the amounts given. Unions gather income from the investments they make. Trade unions further receive administrative and management fees for paying out unemployment benefits.

An example of membership fees for ACLVB-CGSLB is presented below (monthly fees in 2019):

- Employees € 16.60
- Young employees -25 years € 14.90
- Half-time (< or = 20 hours/36 hours) € 11,50
- Full time credit (max. 1 year) € 11,50
- Fully unemployed, unemployment with single payment (after 3 months) € 11,20
- Fully unemployed, heads of households (after 1 year) € 9.90
- Non-active / abstainers / pensioners (solidarity contribution) € 5.30
- Sick - Disabled (after 3 months) € 11,50
- Switch-on payments (max. 6 months) € 8.70

ACV-CSC

In 1886 the first Christian trade union was formed, which led to the establishment of the ACV-CSC in 1912. In 1914 the ACV-CSC had 120,000 members. After the big and successful strike of 1936, which mobilised over half a million strikers, more and more workers found their way to the ACV-CSC. After the Second World War, ACV-CSC was one of the founders of the post-war social and economic consultation model. Due to its growing membership and consultation, the ACV-CSC contributed to the further development

of social security. For example, it left its mark on the increase in benefits in the event of illness, unemployment or an accident and on the link to the index. In addition, end-of-year bonuses and salary increases were negotiated (1951) and the gradual introduction of the five-day week (1955). The inter-professional programming agreements (IPAs) were introduced in 1960. In exchange for an improvement in employees' wages and working conditions, the trade unions guaranteed social peace in the country. In 1975, the ACV-CSC surpassed the threshold of 1 million members. In the 1970s, Belgium was hit by an economic crisis, resulting in sky-high unemployment. In 1981, the ACV-CSC set up a jobseeker's association. With actions and demonstrations, the trade union fought for better and more employment, fair benefits and support for jobseekers. Although the government imposed far-reaching social savings and recovery plans and employers demanded more flexible employment, the ACV-CSC did everything it could to negotiate a protective status for the workers concerned. To this day, the ACV-CSC continues to defend the Belgian social system.

The **confederation or national secretariat** is responsible for the ACV-CSC's central appeals offices and their affiliates. The confederation is in charge of general coordination (administration and support), the conclusion of national collective agreements for all workers, and negotiations with employers and the government. Over 350 employees work for the confederation. The following support services are part of the confederation:

- *The company service*: supports the affiliates and promotes their work in terms of work organisation and consultation.
- *The training service*: coordinates the training of junior and highly experienced affiliates, as well as of the ACV staff.
- *The study and documentation department*: advises the directors and helps to formulate proposals.



The service also includes the legal service, which represents members in difficulty before the labour tribunals.

- *The press and communication service*: responsible for communicating with civilians, members and affiliates, as well as with staff.
- *The movement team*: organises trade union work across regions, companies and sectors. The department takes action on themes such as young people, gender, diversity, jobseekers and the labour market, taxation and income.
- *The international relations department*: responsible for international contacts with other unions and international institutions. It also supports trade union projects in developing countries.
- *Supporting services*: the IT service, financial service, quality, service, unemployment and FSO, personnel service, translation service and administrative services.

ACV-CSC comprises several **professional associations** ('centrales') and **provincial associations** ('verbonden'). The sector in which someone works determines what professional associations they are members of. ACV-CSC recognises the following professional federations:

- *ACVBIE (ACV construction - industry & energy)* defends the interests of employees working in construction, industry, the chemical industry and the energy sector. This includes workers in sheltered and social economy enterprises, the concrete industry, the construction sector, the cement industry, in the sectors of ceramics, chemistry, gas and electricity, glass industry, graphics, quarrying and lime, wholesale and distributors of medicines, wood industry, leather, paper, petroleum, brickworks, upholstery and woodworking. ACVBie counts 260,000 members and 13,000 affiliates.
- *ACV-CSC METEA* defends the interests of workers in the iron industry, non-ferrous and precious metals, garages, metal, machine and

electrical construction, electricians, bodywork, metal trade, the textile and clothing industry, laundries and related sectors such as jute, garment recovery, knitting, flax, dyeing, ... and of workers from large retailers and temporary workers in these sectors. ACV-CSC METEA has 10,000 affiliates and 220,000 members.

- *ACV-Transcom* defends the interests of personnel in the transport and communication sectors (SNCB, bpost, Proximus, The Brussels Airport Company and Belgocontrol, Thomas Cook and TUI Fly, VRT, FPS Mobility, pilotage, ports, goods transport, removals, taxis, inland navigation, ...), the cultural sector and the diamond sector. ACV-Transcom covers 80,000 members and about 6,000 affiliates.
- *ACV Food and Services* defends the interests of workers in many sectors: food industry and trade, cleaning and waste recovery, green sector (agriculture, horticulture, ...), but also free education. Employees (white-collar and blue-collar workers) in the hotel and catering industry, service vouchers, building security and management can also count on the support of ACV Food and Services.
- *ACV Public Services* defends the interests of the employees of the province, city and municipality, inter-municipal companies, CPASs, public hospitals, rest and care homes, parastatals, ministries (federal, Flemish, Brussels and other governments), scientific institutions, universities, urban and regional transport as well as bus and coach companies, public utilities (drinking water companies, port companies, etc.), police, prisons, courts and tribunals, the military, etc. It counts about 5,000 affiliates.
- *COC (Christian Education Central)* defends the interests of all staff in secondary education (ordinary and special) including part-time vocational secondary education, higher

education (outside the university), adult education, part-time art education, the centres for pupil guidance in all networks and the nursery and primary education (ordinary and special) of community education. COC has about 42,000 members and 250 affiliates.

- **COV** (Christian Education Union) defends the interests of the staff in the subsidised free and official kindergartens, primary and secondary schools (special and regular education), the pedagogical guidance services and the community inspectorate. COV has 40,000 members.
- **LBC-NVK** (Landelijke Bedienden Centrale - Nationaal Verbond voor Kaderpersoneel) defends the interests of white-collar workers, private sector executives and all employees from the non-profit sector.

ABVV-FGTB

ABVV-FGTB is the socialist trade union of Belgium. Similar to ACV-CSC, ABVV-FGTB has a long history that dates back to the second half of the 19th century. At that time, blue-collar workers experience an increasing need to organise. This results in the establishment of the Syndikale Kommissie in 1898, which was transformed into the Belgisch Vakverbond (BVV) in 1937. The Second World War and the resistance against the socialist movement have a strong impact on the union, which is embedded in this movement. In 1945, the Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond (ABVV-FGTB) is recognised as a representative union, allowed to negotiate at the company level, the sectoral level and the national level. From that point onwards, ABVV-FGTB plays an important role in the Belgian social dialogue system, during economic upturns and downturns.

The **Federal Secretariat** meets every week and manages the ABVV-FGTB and its departments (study services, communication, unemployment,

gender, international cooperation, IT, accounting). It is composed of the chairman of the ABVV-FGTB; the general secretary of the ABVV-FGTB; 2 federal secretaries of the ABVV-FGTB (of different language roles); 3 inter-regional secretaries (the top managers of the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels FGTB).

The ABVV-FGTB is organised into **six professional associations** (centrales):

- *Algemene Centrale* (AC) brings together employees from the construction industry, glass industry, mining, cement factories, chemistry, petroleum, wholesale and distribution of medicines, forestry companies, logging, forests, timber trade, sawmills, wood impregnation on behalf of third parties, tobacco industry, security companies, cleaning companies, upholstery and woodworking, concrete industry, fibre cement, paper transformation, paper recovery, hides and leather, gravel and sand quarries, brickworks, tile factories in the Kortrijk region, ordinary pottery, agriculture, technical agriculture and horticulture, court and horticulture, jute sack industry, furs and small skins, funeral homes, non-profit, paper production, haircuts and beauty care, film companies, quarries, ceramics, sheltered workshops, social workshops, graphic industry, etc. The AC brings together temporary workers, family and elderly helpers (Flemish Community), frontier workers in France and the Netherlands, and caretakers of apartment buildings, etc. Since 1 January 2014, ABVV Textiles, Clothing and Diamond has merged with the AC. The AC now also brings together employees from textiles, clothing, laundries, rags recovery, tailors, flax preparation, tannery, industrial and artisanal manufacture of fur, distribution companies for clothing and textiles, and the diamond industry.

- *Bond der Bedienden, Technici en Kaderleden van België* (BBTK) brings together all employees,



technicians and executives from the private sector, teachers and administrative staff from free education, employees (manual workers and white-collar workers) from the book sector, the graphics sector and the media sector.

- *ABVV-Metaal* groups employees from the metal industry, metal processing, electricity, non-ferrous metals, precious metals, the steel industry, garages, bodywork construction, metal dealers, assembly, etc.
- *Algemene Centrale der Openbare Diensten (ACOD)* brings together all categories of personnel of public enterprises and services, regardless of their status or contract. It concerns railway, postal, telecommunications, air transport, local and regional authorities (local, provincial, regional authorities), ministries, parastatals, public social housing companies, trams, buses and underground trains, the gas and electricity sectors, official and subsidised education and culture (theatres, operas, public radio and television - including those belonging to the Communities, etc.).
- *Belgische Transportbond (BTB)* brings together all employees from the transport sector, including road transport, ports, inland navigation, sea fishing, merchant shipping, etc.
- *Centrale van de Voeding – Horeca – Diensten (HORVAL)* joins all employees from industry and the food trade and employees from the Hospitality and Services sectors.

Challenges identified by ABVV-FGTB in the execution of the programme:

- *The crisis of political democracy:* The political environment in Belgium is undergoing a deep crisis. In addition, we are seeing a democratic deficit at European level. The electoral success of the extreme right indicates a deep gap between the citizens and the political power. This crisis

of confidence is exacerbated by the political scandals, the fraud circuits and the failure of the judicial system. All this is leading to a decline in people's faith in democratic institutions. The political environment is trying to give an answer by discussing a new political culture. This approach is not really satisfactory.

- *The erosion of social dialogue:* The erosion of social dialogue complicates one of the ABVV-FGTB's most important tasks, namely to influence economic and social policy. Social dialogue is based on the recognition of the trade unions as an interlocutor. However, the representativeness of the trade unions is increasingly being called into question. Inter-professional and sectoral consultations are diverted to the companies, thus weakening the trade union counter-power. The government is forcing the negotiations on wage and working conditions into a tight straitjacket. At the same time, the impact of the union movement is being reduced in numerous consultative bodies.

ACLVB-CGSLB

ACLVB-CGSLB, the liberal trade union, is the smallest of the three representative trade unions in Belgium. The trade union has about 295,000 members, 5,000 affiliates and 600 staff members. This confederation is not organised into separate unions. The ACLVB-CGSLB exists since 1891. This trade union was also founded in the late 19th century (when there were multiple smaller liberal organisations, linked to specific professions or sectors). After World War I, a liberal movement was set up in Brussels that strived for a national umbrella organisation of the liberal trade unions. In 1920, this led to the establishment of the “*National Central Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium*” (NCLVB). It had a national, inter-professional resistance fund. From 1930 onwards, there was also a national unemployment fund. All the liberal unions gradually joined the fund and were linked to it as local branches of the NCLVB. Bilingualism

was generalised in 1923 when the Soignies branch joined the Caisse des Strikes. In 1939, the name NCLVB changed to ACLVB (*Algemene Centrale der Liberale Vakbonden van België*). The structure of the ACLVB-CGSLB (with its registered office in Brussels) has not changed significantly since 1930 (except in 1989: the creation of ‘regionales’ with their own competences, as an adaptation to the political formation of the region). The inter-professional structure is characterised by the absence of cumbersome, inefficient intermediate levels (sub-regional or professional) between the local secretariats and business centres on the one hand and the national central office that coordinates the trade union action and offers a wide range of services to the members, militants and local leaders on the other.

Over the years, society has created a number of needs which are reflected in its trade union activities. Structurally, the choice has been made historically to bring the various sub-activities under the control of different non-profit organisations or institutions. This in order to be able to respond specifically to the social needs. Funding is based on solidarity.

The employees’ organisation is the central entity around which all operational activities of ACLVB-CGSLB are organised. On an operational level, the ACLVB-CGSLB distinguishes itself from the VSOA, which it does represent on an inter-professional level. It supports the sub-activities by financing any shortfalls or by making loans or operating resources available. For exceptional costs such as strike compensation or solidarity contributions, it can call on the Resistance Fund. For the financing of holiday accommodation, it can call (partly) on the Holiday Accommodation Fund. The income of the employees’ organisation is largely generated by the contributions of the members. In addition, it also receives funds from the sectoral funds for training, etc., which are used in the non-profit organisations set up for this purpose.

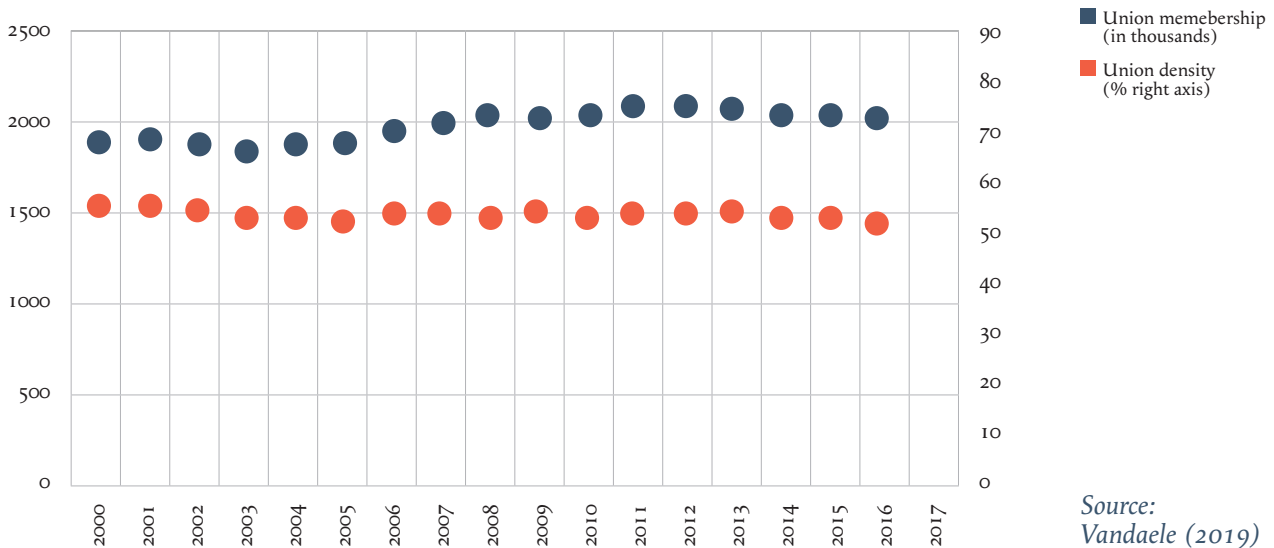
The Payment Agency is a legally organised body which is under the permanent control of the RVA (*Rijksdienst voor Arbeidsvoorziening*). The objective is to pay the unemployed. This activity requires a good organisation around the regulations for the unemployed, which in itself is very complex. Information technology is also trying to make its contribution to this. Incorrect payments are charged to the organisation. Thus, knowledge of the business is a necessity. The payment institution is largely financed by an administrative fee from the government. In recent years, the ACLVB-CGSLB has played an increasingly important role in guiding the unemployed and reintegrating this target group into the labour market. For Brussels and Flanders, there is partial financing by the regions. For Wallonia, regional funding is virtually non-existent. The solidarity principle within the organisation eliminates such inequalities. This funding has proved insufficient in recent years, but the employees’ organisation can easily make up for this shortfall. The trade union is organised into regional divisions, but not sectoral divisions.

Membership trends

Belgium is among the countries with the highest trade union density and collective bargaining coverage in the EU. According to Vandaele (2019), in Belgium the average union density equals 55% between 2000 and 2009 and at 54% between 2010 and 2016. The average collective bargaining coverage stood at 96% between 2000 and 2009 and has remained at this level between 2010 and 2016. Union membership and union density are shown in the figure below. What is notable about the Belgian case is that according to Eurofound research trade union membership is hardly fragmented, or in other words, workers from all sectors, occupations, and ages can be found among the members of the trade unions (Eurofound, 2010).

The high union density rate has been attributed to strong institutional embeddedness and the





Source:
Vandaele (2019)

existence of a so-called Ghent system. In this system, trade unions are closely involved in the payment of unemployment benefits, which may provide an incentive to workers to join a trade union. Belgium has a compulsory unemployment insurance, financed by social security contributions. In this respect, it is not a “pure” Ghent system (as in Scandinavia). In contrast to other countries with compulsory unemployment insurance, trade unions in Belgium did retain an important role in the payment of unemployment benefits. Although this system has recently come under pressure, but as yet with-out success.⁶

In addition to the number of members, it is interesting to consider the **number of seats won by each trade union in the four-yearly works council elections**. In 2016, ACV-CSC won 55,85% of the seats, ABVV-FGTB 33,94% of the seats and ACLVB-CGSLB 8,71% of the seats, as illustrated in the figures below. Similar results were obtained in the elections to the health and safety committees. The share of female representatives elected in the works council in

2016 ranges from 22,36% for NCK-CNC to 39,44% for ACV-CSC.

In this regard, it is important to note the regional differences in support for and membership of ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB. The former has a particularly strong base in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region and community in the north); the latter has a stronger base in Wallonia (the French-speaking region and community in the south of the country). Nevertheless, the results of the 2016 elections for the works councils and health and safety committees depicted below show that the ACV-CSC has more seats in all regions than the other trade union confederations.

Belgian trade unions do not only represent active members (those currently at work), but also count a large number of unemployed and inactive members (e.g. members who retain their trade union membership after they retire). For all three representative unions, the share of non-active members is between 30% and 35%. This can be attributed to the Ghent system, through which unemployment benefits are paid out by the trade unions. Belgian trade unions, moreover, have close links to other civil society organisations. The share of women among the members of the three trade union confederations is between 40%

6. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/7461/obf726f5a4032b3b8376eebf4028896a2392.pdf>

The share of members across the different unions according to the ICTWSS database is as follows:

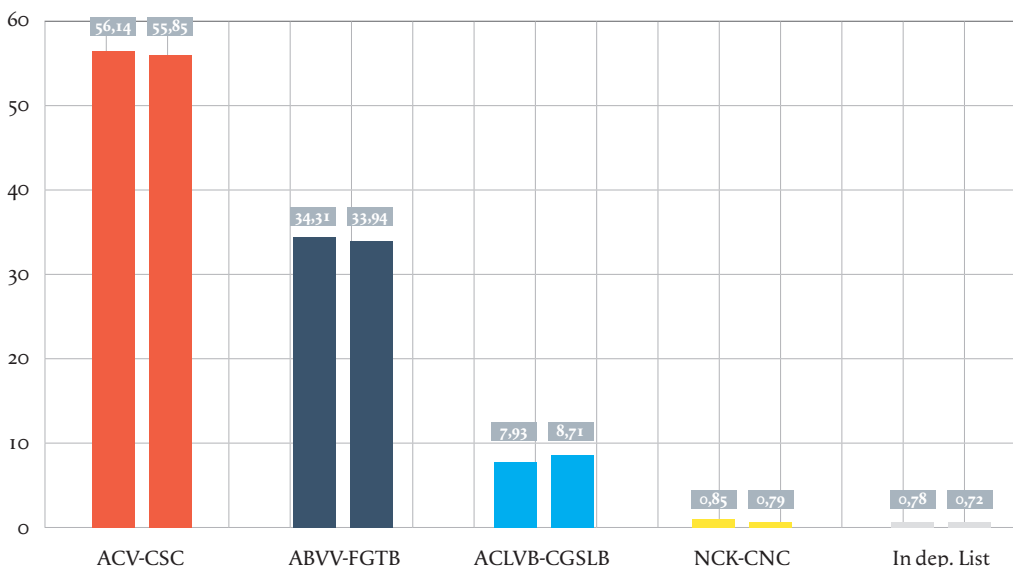
	ACV-CSC	ABVV-FGTB	ACLVB-CGSLB
2000	0,55	0,38	0,07
2001	0,54	0,39	0,07
2002	0,51	0,41	0,08
2003	0,50	0,42	0,08
2004	0,50	0,43	0,08
2005	0,50	0,43	0,08
2006	0,49	0,43	0,08
2007	0,49	0,43	0,08
2008	0,49	0,43	0,08
2009	0,49	0,43	0,08
2010	0,48	0,44	0,08
2011	0,48	0,44	0,08
2012	0,47	0,44	0,08
2013	0,47	0,44	0,08
2014	0,47	0,45	0,08
2015	0,46	0,44	0,08
2016	0,45	0,45	0,09

and 50%.⁷ In 2002, it stood at 39% for ACLVB-CGSLB, at 40.3% for ABVV-FGTB and at 47.6% at ACV-CSC. According to the ETUC's 2018 annual gender equality survey⁸, the share of women among the members of ACLVB-CGSLB

(130,648 female members) stood at 44.2%, for ABVV-FGTB (667,472 female members) at 44% and for ACV-CSC (727,166 female members) at 47%. The percentage of women among union affiliates is generally lower, depending also on the level within the organisation and the sector. With regard to the union leadership, 29% of the leadership team were women in ACLVB-CGSLB in 2018. For ABVV-FGTB and ACV-CSC the

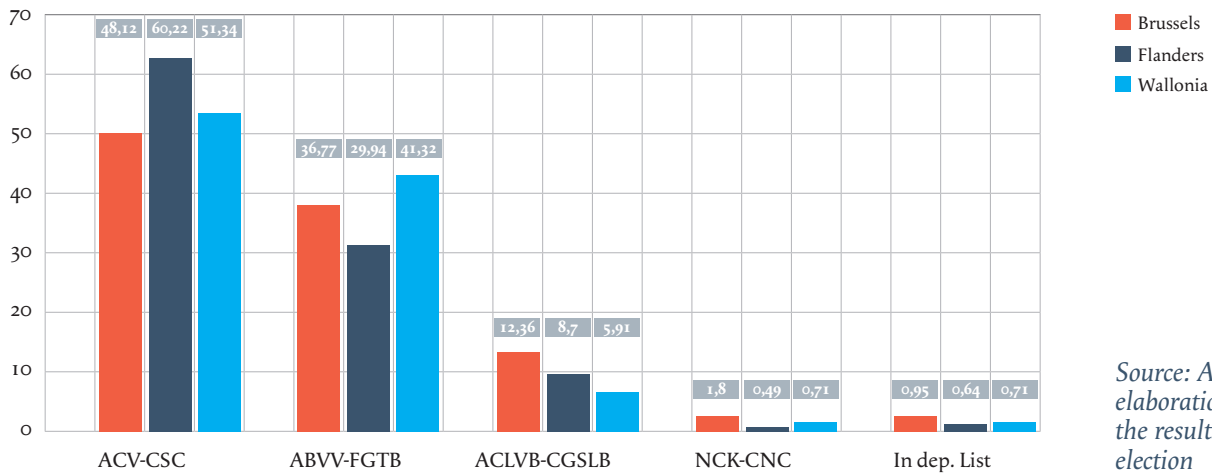
7. <https://www.rosavzw.be/pdf/factsheets/nr20.pdf>
 8. <https://www.etuc.org/system/files/circular/file/2018-06/ETUC%20Annual%20Gender%20Equality%20Survey%202018.pdf>

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



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the results of the 2012 and 2016 elections

% of seats in the works council in 2016, by region



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the results of the 2016 election

numbers are 50% and 50%. The ETUC survey also contains some data on age. In 2018, 29% of the members of ACLVB- CGSLB were below 35 years of age. For ACV-CSC this number was 25% (no data mentioned for ABVV-FGTB). The share of women among the young members was 50% for ABVV-FGTB, 46% for ACLVB- CGSLB and 49% for ACV-CSC.

Trade union membership data for Belgium suggest that union membership is relatively high and has declined less than in other EU Member States. Nevertheless, some decline in union membership has been noted. There are several potential explanations for the declining union membership in Belgium. These include a decline in the average company size, as SMEs typically

have a lower syndication rate, a shift away from manufacturing jobs to services jobs, outsourcing of jobs, decentralisation of social dialogue (from the company to the individual level). Another suggestion was raised by Prof. Scheltien (University of Antwerp); the decline in union members of ACV-CSC could be linked to discontentment with the role and performance of the CD&V in the previous federal and regional governments (the Christian-democratic party traditionally linked to ACV-CSC). This notion is in line with the data presented by Vandaele (2019)⁹, who documents declining union membership among ACV-CSC since 2011 and

⁹ <https://www.denktankminerva.be/opinie/2019/8/20/de-keuze-waar-de-belgische-vakbonden-voor-staan-besparen-of-investeren>

Share of female union members based on ETUC Annual Gender Equality Survey 2018:

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
ACLVB-CGSLB	42%	43%	43%	43%	43.4%	43.4%	43.5%	45.2%	44.9%	44.0%	44.0%
ACLVB-CGSLB	42%	42%	42%	43.2%	43.3%	43.5%	43.7%	43.7%	43.9%	44.1%	44.2%
ACV-CSC	43%	45%	45%	45%	45.6%	46.6%	45.6%	46.5%	46.5%	46.7%	47%

Number of female union members based on ETUC Annual Gender Equality Survey 2018:

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
ABVV-FGTB	574,140	616,847	625,452	696,89	652,627	658,611	668,293	698,142	695,633	674,724	667,472
ACLVB-CGSLB	111,300	111,300	111,300	114,480	118,775	125,715	126,595	126,595	128,957	129,772	130,648
ACV-CSC	694,942	741,030	736,011	746,185	756,134	775,352	790,354	770,744	770,246	732,278	727,166

An indication of the share of young members by trade union confederation is provided below:

	ACV-CSC in total (below 25)	ACV-CSC youth	ABVV- FTGB total	ABVV-FTGB youth (below 30)	ACLVB-CGSLB total	ACLVB-CGSLB youth (below 25)
2002	1536723	-	1286968	8741	232823	3492
2003	1563935	-	1311446	10429	233654	3505
2004	1587825	-	1347704	13733	237444	3562
2005	1601279	174166	1368821	15452	251512	3773
2006	1616146	-	1415403	20678	258756	3881
2007	1635579	-	1434527	24989	265309	3980
2008	1645068	174278	1455454	26760	266200	3993
2009	1658188	168758	1481614	28434	268455	4027
2010	1665217	167136	1503748	28285	274308	4115
2011	-	-	1517538	29889	-	-
2012	-	-	1536306	29707	-	-
Source	Faniel and Vandaele, 2012	ACV i/earbooks of 2006, 2009, 2010, 2012	ABW (2013)	ABW (2013)	Faniel and Vandaele (2012)	Faniel and Vandaele (2012)

Source: Pulignano & Doerflinger (2014)

ABVV-FGTB since 2014. He explains that in the case of ACV-CSC this may be due to administrative reasons (administrative database cleaning), the financial-economic crisis and the resulting changes in the unemployment insurance scheme.

The main challenge for Belgian trade unions, however, appears linked to the demographic changes in the labour market. The aging of the workforce and difficulties in recruiting new union members suggest that union membership is likely to decline in the future. This is already visible, for example, in the case of ACV-CSC, where most members are over 50 years old. Vandaele (2019) explains that many trade unions face difficulties in attracting young people. This finding also applies to the Belgian case. The average age of union members is on the rise and it has increased significantly between 2006 and 2016. Looking at period 2010-2017, Vandaele (2019) concludes that the recent decline in membership offsets the small growth in the early 2010s. He notes that Belgian trade unions are recruiting members among working-class employees, who may have a higher risk of unemployment or lower levels of educational attainment. That being said, the two largest trade unions in Belgium ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB have a longstanding tradition of focusing on youth

(Pulignano & Doerflinger, 2014). ACLVB-CGSLB, in contrast, only launched such an initiative in the early 2010s. All three confederations have a specific youth department or section. All three offer free membership or membership at reduced prices to youth (with the respective Enter (ACV-CSC), Magik (ABVV-FTGB) and FreeZbe (ACLVB-CGSLB) formulas) and provide a range of services specifically focused on youth (e.g. support in the school-to-work transition, support for platform workers of whom many are students, etc.). The trade unions are also experimenting with new ways of reaching out and organising young members, for example using social media.

Vandaele (2019)¹⁰ indicates that a decline in the number of members and in their resources implies that they need to attract new members or come up with other strategies (e.g. raise membership fees or reduce costs). He further argues that trade unions should focus on those economic sectors in which they currently have a weak position, e.g. the platform economy. ♦

10. <https://www.denktankminerva.be/opinie/2019/8/20/de-keuze-waar-de-belgische-vakbonden-voor-staan-besparen-of-investeren>

No. of members (total)	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
ACV-CSC	1488,0	1470,6	1395,4	1360,6	1374,6	1393,0	1409,4	1423,0	1431,2	1442,5	1446,1	1445,8	1437,0	1422,5	1431,6	1397,1	1336,3	1488,0	NA
ABVV-FGTB	1045,5	1045,7	1119,7	1141,0	1172,5	1190,9	1231,4	1248,0	1266,2	1289,0	1308,3	1320,3	1336,6	1343,8	1346,0	1344,1	1335,7	NA	NA
ACLVB-CGSLB	194,5	194,1	208,5	204,8	210,0	215,0	225,1	230,8	231,6	233,6	238,6	244,1	252,0	254,1	255,7	256,7	257,1	194,5	NA

Trends in union membership and workplace representation, by trade union
Data extracted from the ICTWSS database (in thousands of members)

OECD data for Belgium on trade union density and collective bargaining coverage (extracted from the website)

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
No. of union members (thousands)	1936	1939	1913	1874	1901	1927	1986	2039	2076	2068	2067	2128	2132	2120	2087	2092	NA	NA	NA
No. of employees (thousands)	3445	3440	3442	3460	3519	3588	3620	3729	3810	3766	3839	3861	3873	3844	3877	3858	3904	NA	NA
Trade union density (%)	56.2	56.4	55.6	54.2	54.0	53.7	54.9	54.7	54.5	54.9	53.8	55.1	55.0	55.1	53.8	54.2	NA	NA	NA
Collective bargaining coverage (%)	96	NA	96	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	96	NA	NA	NA	NA	96	NA	96	96	NA	NA

* Union density = the ratio of the number of employees who are members of trade unions ("active" members) to all the employees in a country
* Collective bargaining coverage = the percentage of employees with the right to bargain
NA = Data not available
Source: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TUD#>

General information

Second part

Strategies to attract new members, make them stable and tackle membership decline

Description and meaningful practices


Union membership trends

ACV-CSC

ACV-CSC, the ‘Confederation of Christian Trade Unions’, has long been the largest union in terms of membership in Belgium, counting about **1,6 million members** today. This trade union has strong institutional linkages with the Christian-democratic political party in Flanders and Wallonia, and with the Christian labour movement, which includes a wide range of civil society organisations. ACV-CSC is active in all Belgian regions, but holds stronger positions in some areas than others, depending on the structure of the local labour markets (see below). With regard to its sectoral coverage, ACV-CSC performs well in the construction, transportation, logistics food, services, and education sectors.

Since the union was established in 1912, ACV-CSC had seen a **continuous growth** of its membership until 2012. From then on, first the

membership of inactive members started to fall; later also the membership of active members started to drop with about 1-2% per year. These evolutions reflect **changes in the labour market more generally** (certainly among inactive members, e.g. in terms of the composition of this group and their preferences), but are also due to a **declining unionisation rate among the active population in all regions and in all sectors**.

For ACV-CSC, the decline in membership and the unionisation rate is most pronounced among the **young**. The union argues that many young people recognise the importance of unions in general but do not find it necessary to become a member themselves (collective vs. individual thinking – “what’s in it for me”). Another noticeable issue, according to ACV-CSS, is that unionisation has declined especially among **those holding better positions in the labour market (i.e. stronger labour market profiles)**. Research into the characteristics of former ACV-CSC- members, 

for example, shows that these workers tend to have higher wages, better options for career advancement, safer work, more training, etc. and may thus be less inclined to become or remain union members. Another group for which ACV-CSC has seen a large decline are the **unemployed**. In the past, ACV-CSC provided services to about 40% of the unemployed (e.g. paying out benefits), but this number decreased to 35%. This can be explained by the **changing composition of the group** of unemployed. ACV-CSC traditionally has a strong position among executives and white-collar workers, while those in unemployment (prior to the COVID-19 outbreak) are typically the groups that ACV-CSC struggles a bit more with.

ABVV-FGTB

ABVV-FGTB is the *General Federation of Belgian Labour*, one of the three representative unions that are active in Belgium. Historically, ABVV-FGTB is linked to the socialist worker movement and it had close connections with the socialist party. The trade union counts close to **1.5 million members** at the moment. This number has been **relatively stable** over the past decade. The number of members is even **slightly increasing over time**. The developments in the composition of ABVV-FGTB members reflect the developments in the economy and society at large. The number of women has increased, both among the members and the delegates. In terms of **age**, ABVV-FGTB has a growing number of young members, but this increase is lower than the increase in older and retired workers.

In line with the changing economic and societal realities, ABVV-FGTB noted a decline in the number of members working in **traditional industrial sectors**, and an increase in the number of members in the **services sectors**. There are also changes in the composition: in industry and construction, the number of members with a migration background, for example, has increased

substantially. ABVV-FGTB identified internal and external factors that influence membership: **changes in the legislation on unemployment** (those who were excluded are no longer trade union members), **changing labour market structures**, a **decline in the habit of joining a union** (de-pillarisation), **changes in the general political context** (rise of right-wing parties, media becoming more conservative, public opinion), and **increasing job mobility and new types of work** (e.g. voucher-based work). Coupled with this, the trade union notices a further individualisation of society, at the expense of collective thinking.

ACLVB-CGSLB

ACLVB-CGSLB is the 'Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions'. With about **297,000 members**, **5,000 delegates**, and **600 staff members**, it is the smallest of the three trade unions operating in Belgium (the others each count well over 1 million members). Historically, ACLVB-CGSLB has been linked to the liberal movement, as is reflected in the union's core values of freedom, solidarity, responsibility and tolerance. However, there is no formal link with the liberal political party.

Looking at union membership, ACLVB-CGSLB reports a **relatively stable** number of members in the past decade, however with a **steady growth**. Between 2011 and 2018, the number of members grew from 280,000 to 297,000 (and initial data for 2019 confirm this trend).¹ ACLVB-CGSLB's membership composition **mirrors the local situation** (e.g. more ethnically diverse and more unemployed workers in urban areas than in rural areas). The union is active in all regions of Belgium, but especially in **Brussels**, it registered strong growth in its membership. Looking at **sectors**, ALCVB-CGSLB represents slightly more

1. Note that students can join the union free of charge and are therefore not included in these numbers.

blue-collar workers than white-collar workers and has a good position in the following sectors: public transportation, chemistry, metal and steel and the financial sector. Nevertheless, the union mostly represents employees; it is not a union of executives/managers. ALCVB-CGSLB is less active in the non-profit and distribution sectors.

In general, the **membership developments of ACLVB-CGSLB are in line with changes in the Belgian economy and society**. For example, the textiles sector has disappeared almost entirely in Belgium, and this is reflected in the union's membership composition and evolution. ACLVB-CGSLB notices that while their experience in the field suggests that it is more difficult to stimulate **young workers** to join the union, this is not reflected in the age composition of their members. The trade union has more older members, but also the groups of members of ages 25-35 and 35-45 are quite substantial. This suggests that the population ageing does not affect the union's membership and that renewal is not really an issue according to ACLVB-CGSLB. About 30% of the ACLVB-CGSLB members are not active in the labour market (i.e. unemployed, retired, etc.). According to the union officials, one of the union's strengths is that about one-third of its members work at companies or organisations **without a trade union delegation**. As there is no support structure in those workplaces, the workers join to benefit from the services provided by the union.

Strategies and actions put in place to increase membership, including perceptions on the role of services

As discussed in the previous sections of this report, in Belgium, the social partners have a long history, dating back to the industrial revolution, and are strongly politically and institutionally embedded, with close links to civil society. This is reflected in the high union density rate and the high number of members that each of the trade unions report. All trade unions are active

in all regions and sectors, and their membership mirrors both the labour force (active members) and population (inactive members), though there are differences between the unions as some have stronger representations among some groups, sectors, regions, ... than others (e.g. due to historic reasons). Changes in the number and types of members reflect changes in the economy and society at large (e.g. changes in the occupational distribution in and between sectors driven by digitalisation, emergence of new non-standard forms of employment, changing perceptions of and attitudes towards trade unions and social dialogue, etc.). In the literature, however, it is pointed out that composition changes in the workforce only partially explain changes in union membership (see Vandaele & Leschke, 2010).

The issue of the renewal of trade union membership has been at the centre of the debate on industrial relations for many years already. Among the various possible strategies for revitalising collective action, the literature has mainly focused on organising. Less attention was dedicated to **servicing**. Servicing goes beyond the simple provision of individual goods as a form of selective incentive to join the trade union. Instead, it **represents a strategy based on the provision of services, which aims to attract workers who are the most distant from the trade union as well as those who find themselves in a precarious position or outside of the labour market**. Unlike organising, in which union membership renewal is pursued through the creation of new worker-activist communities, the rationale behind servicing is to **increase the perceived usefulness of union membership**. A key point in relation to servicing as approach to support trade union renewal is **who is using the services and how it impacts their union membership**: those who were members in the past (*retainment of members*), those who were not members before but join the union (*renewal*), those who were not members and do not join the

union but have a positive feeling (*legitimation*) or have a negative feeling (*de-legitimation*) about their experience.

In Belgium, the ‘organising’ approach is hardly used by trade unions as a strategy to retain or attract members (with some exceptions such as the unions’ efforts to organise platform workers – which are covered below). Instead, **the ‘servicing’ approach is the common standard.**

What services are provided?

From the beginning, unions have provided their members with a **range of services, of which some target the members as individuals while other services are collective.** Service provision is generally regarded as a core activity of the trade union, next to the traditional activities, and it can answer an individual or collective need, **in the workplace or beyond.**

In terms of the services offered, Belgian trade unions carry out a range of activities that are **typical for unions:** organising and representing workers, providing information to and consulting workers, negotiating with employers, etc. These activities remain at the heart of unions’ work today. Over time, however, the **types of services** offered by the trade unions have become broader. The unions are generally looking to provide a **well-integrated package of services that supports workers in all stages of life** (life-cycle approach, from the cradle to the grave). ABVV-FGTB, for example, offers training opportunities to low-skilled workers and the unemployed, helps workers to improve their CV and find a new job after being dismissed or displaced, etc. Traditionally, ACLVB-CGSLB offered a range of services, such as provision of information to individual workers and to groups of workers (e.g. monitoring and clarification of legislative changes; unemployment, labour and social law; support to apply for pensions; completing tax forms;

information and support in case of dismissal, etc.), and paying out unemployment benefits (Ghent system). Other examples of service provisions are the holiday homes that the union makes available at low rates and a ‘merits and benefits’ card. Most requests are related to dismissals, pensions and illness. Other common activities and topics covered by the Belgian unions include: pensions and end-of-career initiatives, social security, labour law and rights, leave systems, purchasing power, well-being at work, health and safety, diversity (ethnicity, gender, disability), temporary agency work and other types of contracts, taxation, education and training, among others. When needed, unions launch legal procedures to support their members.

About three years ago, ACLVB-CGSLB decided to **expand its existing provision of services with a dual aim:** to provide **additional services to their members**, and to **attract new members.** The trade union finds that over the years, the **complexity** has strongly increased (e.g. every year, it becomes more difficult to complete the tax form) and that more **aspects of work and life are interfering with each other** (e.g. how child benefits interact with a worker’s income). To help address this increasing complexity and interactions, ACLVB-CGSLB decided to reconsider its offer and expand service provision. More specifically, **10 domains** for expansion and improvement of the services were selected: taxation, cross-border work, the rental market, flexible work (*bijklustwet*), strengthening career guidance, mobility, subsidies (e.g. renovation, energy costs), digitalisation of society (e.g. support those without a computer), inheritance, etc. For ACLVB-CGSLB, this expansion and improvement was a major project, which proved challenges at times. For example, after the ten topics were decided upon, staff members still had to undergo training in order to be able to provide the services to the members. In addition, members have to be made aware that some of

these services exist. In some cases, this is more straightforward than others. As these changes were only introduced recently, it is too soon to assess whether they have had an impact on the satisfaction of current members or help attract new members.

Besides service provision, the trade unions **run campaigns to attract new members**. Examples from ABVV-FGTB include the campaign ‘fight for 14 euros’, a Facebook campaign targeting voucher-based work, the spread of brochures and other materials in different languages, etc.

How are services provided?

In addition to the types of services provided, the Belgian trade unions are also investing in the **format of service provision** to ensure this is in line with their members’ needs. All unions are working on the **digitalisation of their service provision** and investing in **modern communication tools**. ABVV-FGTB, for example, underlined the importance of using modern communication tools such as social media and videos to share information. The ABVV-FGTB website also has dedicated pages for their union delegates, which can be consulted to obtain accurate and up-to-date information. ACV-CSC, similarly, has devoted efforts to digitalisation. Examples are a range of improvements to the website, the possibility for members to upload documents instead of having to bring those to a service centre, possibility to set up an appointment online, etc. **The innovativeness in the service provision is thus not only linked to what services are provided and to what target groups, but also to how those services are made available**. Despite the importance of the digital service offer, the unions all underlined that **word-of-mouth communication** and **face-to-face interaction** with their members remains imperative, and that one has to be aware not all members have the digital skills or means required to access these digital services. Similarly, the

unions remarked that word-of-mouth advertising about the quality of the services provided is important.

To whom are services provided?

With regard to the **target groups**, the Belgian unions tend to reach out to workers in all occupations, sectors and regions, covering workers of all ages, education levels, etc. Several trade unions have self-employed workers among their members (notably employees who are self-employed as a secondary occupation), but may not have a dedicated programme for these workers.

While there is differentiation between member groups, the **basic services provided are typically identical for all members**. Differentiation by target group is usually linked to different needs and expectations in terms of the types of services provided and the format of this service provision. In the case of ACLVB-CGSLB, for example, the **different needs and expectations** that members of different age groups have are considered. Younger workers would like to be able to access information in a digital format (e.g. social media), whereas older workers appear to value personal contacts according to the union. ABVV-FGTB and ACV-CSC, similarly, have dedicated programmes for the young and old. ACLVB-CGSLB does not differentiate its offer according to the level of education of its members. It does tailor information based on the members’ sector, company, profession, etc. (as do the other unions). ACV-CSC has dedicated efforts targeting low-skilled workers (e.g. posted workers, platform workers active on food delivery platforms) and high-skilled workers (e.g. managers / executives).

In terms of **new target groups**, ABVV-FGTB has recently started to dedicate significant attention to workers who may not speak the national languages, by making available materials in multiple languages and recruiting members and



delegates within these groups. ABVV-FGTB has put a lot of effort in reaching out to hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups, for example workers in precarious situations, in undeclared work, etc. (e.g. truck drivers). One notable recent initiative relates to cross-border work. ABVV-FGTB is also involved in a project that aims to develop a 'fair mobility tool' to provide cross-border workers with key information about their working and employment conditions and their implications (e.g. impact of working as self-employed in a company across the border on social security, taxation, rights, etc.).

Changing trade unions in a changing world of work

In light of the changing context in which unions operate, the Belgian trade unions have taken steps to ensure that they stay relevant and are up-to-speed with the economic and societal developments. ACLVB-CGSLB, for example, noted that since the world of work is changing, trade unions have to change as well. According to ACLVB-CGSLB, the role of trade unions has changed. Whereas 30 years ago, unions were struggling to secure workers' rights, the focus has now shifted much more to ensure those rights can be enforced and improved.

For all three unions, these economic and societal developments have triggered **changes in their own internal organisation and in their ways of working**. In the case of ABVV-FGTB, for example, several associations have been merged. ACV-CSC recently launched an internal renewal process that centres on three areas: collective interest representation, individual interest representation, and policy influence.

Such internal changes and improvements often **lay the foundation for more targeted and advanced actions aiming to retain or attract members later on**. For example, since 2016 ACV-CSC launched close to 30 projects towards

this end, such as: the preparation of standard letters and e-mails (templates), the collection and updating of members' contact information, the set-up of procedures for recruiting members, a number of improvements in both the internal and external administrative procedures, a strategy to contact members who have fallen behind with paying their membership fees, introducing a strategy to follow-up with members who have left the trade union, initiatives to monitor the members' satisfaction with services provided, raising awareness among union delegates about the importance of recruiting new members, etc. It is still too soon to determine if these actions have been effective to retain or attract members, as many are still in their early stages. That being said, ACV-CSC has noted that the **decline in their membership has slowed down**, but it is difficult to say whether this will lead to an increase at this moment.

Service provision, membership, mobilisation/becoming active and fees

All three unions agree that **service provision is key to retain existing members and attract new members, but argue that this matters less for mobilisation or to encourage members to become active within the union, to participate in trade union life, or to become trade union delegates**. The extent to which service provision helps to attract to new members or to stimulate members to take up a more active role within and outside of the union is difficult to estimate. This strongly depends on how these individuals came to the trade union in the first place: the situation of an unemployed person who joined a union to draw unemployment benefits and receive support is very different from that of an employee who joined the trade union out of frustration with the situation at work. The latter is likely easier to become active by taking up a role as a trade union delegate, or to go out and aim to recruit other new members. The trade unions all agreed that service provision and membership go hand-in-hand.

However, sometimes the service is the trigger to become a member, sometimes members start using the services. Several examples of this were also provided in the case studies below.

All unions charge **membership fees**, which are relatively low in comparison to the fees in other countries. All unions differentiate the level of the fee charged depending on the member's profile (e.g. student, pensioner, unemployed). The highest fee charged by ACV-CSC, for example, stands at €18 per month. For ACLVB-CGSLB, for example, the highest fee amounts to €16 per month.

Membership fees cover all services provided by the trade union. For ACV-CSC, this is on the condition that one has been a member for at least six months already. Although these fees are a very important source of income for trade unions, they do not appear to be a factor on which the unions compete to attract members. The differentiation in the membership fees accounts for the members' personal circumstances. Reduced fees are in some cases used to attract new members, notably students or labour-market entrants. For example, ACV-CSC has explored different membership formulas such as GO (for young people) and ENTER (for students).

In sum, in light of key economic and societal changes that Belgium is facing, all three unions have recognised the need to keep up to speed in terms of their 'traditional' work of organising, representing and negotiating on behalf of workers, but also in terms of the provision of services to their current and potential members. The trade unions critically review their service offer, and have moved to update it and expand it along several dimensions (types of services provided, format of

service provision, target audiences). Finally, such dynamics also has an impact on unions' internal processes and organisation. Internal changes and improvements often lay the foundation for more targeted and advanced actions aiming to retain or attract members.

Overall evaluation

The Belgian trade unions have a long history of service provision, and see this as a core activity next to typical trade unions activities including the organisation and representation of workers, collective bargaining about wages and working conditions with employers, influencing policy, etc. The unions typically offer an extensive service package to their members, taking a life-cycle approach that aims to support workers at all stages of their lives. This service package can be tailored to specific groups in terms of what is offered and how these services are made available, but the specifics of the provision vary somewhat from one union to another. The unions however are emphasising the importance of being up to speed with the changes in the economy and society, taking initiatives to improve their internal ways of working, expanding the services provided as well as raising the quality of service provision, modernising communication tools and format of service provision, etc. Service provision is used as a tool to retain existing members and to attract new members. However, as the package of services provided is broad and the unions have a wide target audience, it is often very difficult to assess the effectiveness of a service. Service provision is less seen as an instrument for mobilisation or as a tool to activate union members to take up the role of trade union delegates. ♦

Third part

Services provided by trade unions (directly or through partnership) and connection with strategies of unionisation

Old and new union services in the country: an overview

Case-study selection

In a context where service provision has since long been regarded as a core activity of the trade unions, in which it is the key strategy to retain and attract members, and in which trade unions already provide a wide range of services targeting workers individually and collectively, it is not straightforward to identify services that are entirely innovative or target previously neglected groups.

In the Belgian case, one issue that emerged as a relatively new development are new forms of non-standard work, such as platform work, that have caught the attention of the trade unions. The unions have stated that although they do not necessarily support platform work, they do provide services and support to workers involved in platform work. ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB, however, have taken different approaches as to

how to do so. ABVV-FGTB has set up specific activities for platform workers and tries to organise and represent them. However, ABVV-FGTB considers all workers ‘workers’ and all forms of labour ‘labour’, and for that reason the service provision to platform workers does not differ much from that of other workers. ACV-CSC has taken a different approach and launched United Freelancers, aiming to offer similar services to freelancers and self-employed without personnel (including platform workers) as employees. ACLVB-CGSLB also aids their members who work as platform workers, but this appears less developed than with the other unions. For the case study, the services provided by ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB to platform workers are compared.

Both cases are **good illustrations of the service-oriented approach used by the Belgian trade unions**, and also shed some light on the potential of the organising approach to attract

Table 3.1. Basic features of the selected case studies

	Case 1 United Freelancers	Case 2 ABVV-FGTB platform for platform workers
Trade union	ACV-CSC	ABVV-FGTB
Single service, service package, or association	Service package	Single service, but links to other services provided by the union
Type(s) of service	Individual and collective support for freelancers	Information provision for platform workers
Target group	Freelancers / self-employed without personnel	Platform workers
Primary objective(s)	Provision of support to freelancers, similar to support provided to employees	Provision of support and information to platform workers
Membership renewal as an explicit/implicit objective	Yes	Yes

new members (which, as stated before, is a less common strategy). For these cases, examples of retainment, renewal and legitimization of the trade union membership were found. What is interesting about platform work is that it tends to attract young workers and workers with a migrant-background, who may be less familiar with trade unions. Ensuring that those workers have a positive first experience with a trade union raises the likelihood that they become trade union members themselves.

Case study 1 United Freelancers

Background

United Freelancers¹ is a service of trade union ACV-CSC that targets three groups of workers: freelancers (self-employed without any personnel), those who are self-employed in their secondary occupation, and platform workers. United Freelancers was launched as ACV-CSC noticed that an increasing number of workers in the Belgian labour market had the status of freelancer (e.g. journalists, IT consultants, delivery riders). ACV-CSC argues that even though these workers perform similar tasks and in similar conditions as regular employees, their status as freelancer does not give them the same level of protection (in terms of labour legislation and access to social protection). As a result, ACV-

CSC started to receive many questions from self-employed, e.g. in the transport sector, the services sector, etc., notably those working side-by-side with regular employees.

With United Freelancers, ACV-CSC aims to address this issue. ACV-CSC aspires to **represent all workers** active in the Belgian labour market, **regardless of their employment status**, and **assist with solving their problems**. ACV-CSC, however, finds that the needs of employees and the self-employed differ, which explains why a separate service was launched for the latter group. The self-employed originally were not among the target groups of ACV-CSC. The objectives of United Freelancers have become somewhat broader since it was first launched in June 2019. United Freelancers often receives questions related to non-standard work in general, which originally would be tackled by other section of the union. The initial promoters of United Freelancers were ACV-CSC confederations CNE, Puls and Transcom, with the support of the federation (national level). The federation only provides support to the work of the confederations (but does not absorb their members).

In terms of the services that United Freelancers provides, a distinction can be made between **individual and collective services**. Examples of individual services are checking contracts, providing legal advice, negotiating and bargaining with clients, fighting bogus self-employment, etc. Examples of collective services are different

1. <https://www.unitedfreelancers.be/home-nl>



campaigns, collective bargaining, etc. Recent examples of services provided by United Freelancers include a court case against Deliveroo (supporting members who want to join the class action), organising workshops for self-employed, and concluding a collective labour agreement in the taxi sector.

United Freelancers does not keep track in detail of the characteristics and number of users served. That being said, based on the experience of the interviewed union officials, it appears that this group is quite diverse in terms of their education level (from high-educated IT professionals asking questions about competition law, to the low-educated platform workers doing this work as a stepping stone into the labour market). The vast majority of the users are self-employed in their main or secondary occupation. In terms of gender, there is a balance between men and women overall, with the exception of platform work where the majority are men. Most users have the Belgian nationality, though United Freelancers has also provided support to users from other countries in and outside of the EU.


Although the initiative was launched in June 2019, United Freelancers tackled 500 dossiers (questions) in that year. In 2020, so far almost 1,000 questions were being addressed (some type of contact was established). It is difficult to assess how many members are concerned for administrative reasons: the individuals are coded as employees in the ACV-CSC user databases, rather than as self-employed, so this is difficult to track. United Freelancers thus sees a clear increase in the number of questions received, and more generally ACV-CSC sees an increase in the number of members who are self-employed. The number of questions went up significantly in the first COVID-19 wave, which is driven especially by questions of workers from the entertainment sector. During the first COVID-19 wave, there thus were changes in the user characteristics, but no other trends have been detected in this regard. From an organisational point of view, United

Freelancers counts on the direct involvement of four people (in FTEs). This group is quite diverse in terms of education level, age and career trajectory but all have experience within ACV-CSC, and some have worked as self-employed or freelancers themselves. Indirectly, however, a larger number of people is involved (e.g. secretariat of confederations). United Freelancers also counts on the support of externals, e.g. lawyers delivering seminars, etc.

Service assessment

The interviewed trade union officials indicate that United Freelancers has met the objectives set out at the beginning of their activity. They have indications that their users are satisfied with the services provided. United Freelancers finds that many of their users react positively to the fact that they can approach ACV-CSC with their questions, which is new and unexpected, and are grateful for the help and support they receive. Typically, self-employed workers would need to approach an employers' organisation for support, but several users of United Freelancer consider themselves workers rather than employers or self-employed. United Freelancers attracts a different profile. United Freelancers, moreover, works to **retain existing members** – who are satisfied they can stay members of the trade union despite becoming self-employed or ask questions about being self-employed as a secondary occupation – and to attract new members. United Freelancers notices that especially the interaction between different statuses raises questions among their users. With regard to **attracting new members**, United Freelancers has already managed to introduce the trade union to non-members, who have joined to be able to use the services provided (example of a group freelancers translators who recently joined the union after being in touch with United Freelancers). Especially the support United Freelancers provides with becoming self-employed (administrative registration), the review of contracts and follow-up of issues have

been effective to convince new members. This point was raised in each of the interviews with users of the services provided by United Freelancers. One interviewee, for example, stated that he was a member of ACV-CSC but left the trade union shortly after joining it more than 30 years ago. When he wanted to start his own business, his accountant referred him to the trade union for support. The interviewee then reached out to ACV-CSC and was referred to United Freelancers. After some time as a freelancer, this interviewee was faced with a client who refused to pay two invoices for work he had delivered, and United Freelancers offered support in receiving payment for his work. Based on this experience, the interviewee expressed his desire to remain a member of the trade union in the future, despite not being close to trade unions ideologically. A similar example emerged with another interviewee, who joined ACV-CSC to be able to use the services provided by United Freelancers. He plans on retaining his membership in the years to come. Another interviewee had been a member of ACV-CSC for almost 10 years already, when she ended up in a position that required her to become self-employed. When the organisation she was then working for refused to pay her last check, she reached out to ACV-CSC, and was referred to United Freelancers. The interviewee explained that after United Freelancers intervened, the last payment came in quickly. This interviewee was very satisfied with the support received and planned on remaining a union member in the future. In other words, the **users of United Freelancers either were already members of ACV-CSC or they join the union to be able to use the services provided**. The same membership fee is applied to these new members as to other members, in return for an equal membership in terms of services and support. United Freelancers is therefore currently developing a service package for freelancers that is similar to what already exists for employees. Concerning participation of users in the life of the union, it is too early to tell

according to United Freelancers' staff, as this is also still being developed in terms of activities. United Freelancers has reported a **stable growth over time**, with which the trade union is satisfied, and it is clear that the initiative has a lot of potential to grow. The aim is to keep working on getting out the word and to raise awareness about the initiative, e.g. through social media and by informing as many union delegates working in sectors and companies with a lot of freelancers as possible. This has become more complicated because of COVID-19, so a number of actions and activities will be held online instead of face-to-face. This, however, can also have the advantage that it lowers the barriers for the self-employed to reach out to a union, as this is more anonymous, and it requires less effort from potential members. In terms of **areas to improve**, United Freelancers noted that their knowledge and expertise about labour law is stronger than of corporate law, though the latter is more relevant for the self-employed in Belgium. For now, this is tackled by working with external experts for specific questions and training. From interviews with some of the users of the services, this point also emerged. One interviewee explained that the training offers available at employers' organisations for individuals who want to become self-employed is expensive and do not offer the support that is offered by United Freelancers (e.g. checking contracts). Another interviewee felt that in the interactions he - as a freelancer - had had with employers' organisations, there was pressure to buy-in into their (training) programmes, which are expensive. He liked that there was no such pressure when dealing with United Freelancers: the team was efficient in tackling the issue at stake, but did not push him to use other services. This interviewee also emphasised that there is some room to grow for United Freelancers in offering training and support, e.g. a meeting that one could have to discuss the benefits and disadvantages of becoming a freelancer, to understand how much one has to earn to be able to make a living, etc. 

All interviewed users were satisfied with the support they received from United Freelancers. All said that the service provision was very fast and efficient, that the communication was clear and in an easy-to-understand language, that the United Freelancers' team was easy to reach and available, and that the team did all efforts required to reach a good solution. One interviewee said that many freelancers lack a network of support and that United Freelancers serves as a network of support. None of the users had come into contact with other users of the service. This could be a point of attention to stimulate future growth.

Case study 2 ABVV-FGTB Platform for platform workers

Background

As described in the previous section, ABV-FGTB is one of the three representative trade unions in Belgium, which currently counts well over 1.5 million members. As a union, ABVV-FGTB has put forward the idea that any form of labour is labour, regardless of the employment status under which a worker operates. ABVV-FGTB aims to stand up for the rights of all workers. With this in mind, the trade union's approach to non-standard forms of work, e.g. platform work, is that such workers should have the same rights as workers in traditional employment relationships (employer-employee relationship) in their occupation or sector. In terms of service provision, ABVV-FGTB aims to provide the same services to all workers, without too much differentiation.

In line with their ambition to defend the rights of all workers, ABVV-FGTB has been focusing on platform work for several years already. Different confederations have taken initiatives to support those platform workers active in their sector. For example, the transport confederation BTB-ABVV jumped on the case of Deliveroo early on. BTB-ABVV started to provide information and support to the platform workers in the transport sector,

and moved on to organising them and negotiating on the behalf. Platform workers joined the trade union to make use of the services it offers. The interest in platform work in the transport sector was further fuelled by the rapid increase in the size of platforms such as Deliveroo and UberEats in Belgium, and by the notion that also other companies started to use the platform model (e.g. FlixBus forcing drivers into the self-employment; companies pooling workers on a platform to have a flexible staff available). Other ABVV-FGTB confederations faced with similar issues related to platform work. For example, the Algemene Centrale, the confederation covering sectors such as cleaning, construction, chemistry, security, etc., noticed the rise of platforms such as ListMinut, on which tasks are traded that are typically performed by workers (i.e. employees) in their sectors. It is particularly difficult to identify platform workers in these sectors, as they tend to work in clients' homes. ABVV-FGTB emphasised that one should not be against new forms of work, but ensure that these are performed in a context of good working conditions and social dialogue.

In order to protect and support all workers, regardless of their employment status, confederations have taken a number of initiatives in their own sectors and are joining forces to provide additional support. Algemene Centrale has launched a website – the **ABVV-FGTB platform for platform workers** (which is available at <https://www.abvvplatform.be/>) – with the aim to set up a platform that platform workers in any sector can consult when they have questions about their rights and through which workers are dispatched to the confederation that is best able to help them. The website features general information about workers' rights, a community page, and contact information (e-mail, Facebook, WhatsApp). Next to the website, actions targeting platform workers include a roadshow, handing out gadgets and leaflets, pop-ups, presence on social media, etc.

The platform for platform workers website was launched in February 2020. ABVV-FGTB received many questions from delivery riders so far (most questions come from this category of workers; in addition ABVV-FGTB has received questions from workers who want to combine employment with a secondary occupation or working on the side – *bijkluswet* (see above) and from workers who do not speak any of the national languages and are looking for work). ABVV-FGTB does not receive many questions about the legal framework governing platform work in Belgium. This is somewhat surprising, as this legal framework has been under much discussion and it has changed over the course of the year. ABVV-FGTB states that this is likely as platforms simply close down profiles from workers that exceed the maximum threshold and fall outside of the legal framework. Another concern is that in some cases an account is shared by multiple workers (e.g. workers who do not have a legal basis to stay in the country). Operationally, the services targeting platform workers are spread across the different confederations of the union. Considering that multiple confederations are involved, it is difficult to estimate how many people are directly or indirectly involved in this initiative (or activities about platform work more generally), and to describe their characteristics in detail. The representative working for BTB-ABVV noted that this topic is being discussed at all their meetings. An estimate of 10-15 people involved in the platform for platform workers was put forward during the interview, but both interviewees emphasised that in each confederation at least one person is overseeing the topic. This is important as platform work is expected to grow in the future.

Service assessment

It is very difficult to assess the services provided by ABVV-FGTB to platform workers at this stage for a number of reasons, and no data are available to see whether the services and the website helped to retain existing members or attract new

members. The platform for platform workers was launched only a few months ago, and – at the time of writing – there are no data available on the number of users or on the number of requests that come from the website directly. In addition, there were no explicit targets identified beforehand (e.g. in terms of the number of users to attract or to assist), except to provide support and information to platform workers. For ABVV-FGTB, the main objective was to get more grip on platform work. Attracting new members is only a secondary goal. Workers do not have to join the union to use the website, but they do in case they want to receive additional support. Based on their interactions with platform workers, ABVV-FGTB finds that these workers are satisfied with the help they receive. There are some examples of platform workers who have joined the union and became active as trade union delegates themselves. This is not easy, however, as not all platforms are favourable towards trade unions or social dialogue. Only a small number of platform workers has moved on to become delegates themselves and participate in soft and hard forms of union life.

A comparative analysis of the effectiveness of the case studies

Although United Freelancers launched by ACV-CSC and the ABVV-FGTB platform for platform workers appear to have some commonalities, for example in their target group, these two initiatives are difficult to compare. This is because of the differences in their scope and targets, and stage of development and implementation. While United Freelancers offers a range of services to the self-employed (primary or secondary occupation) and platform workers, the ABVV-FGTB platform for platform workers mainly is a gateway to other services.

Nevertheless, a first remarkable point is that with these initiatives ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB explicitly target individuals who are typically



distant from trade unions or not organised, nor represented by trade unions. It is, however, important to focus on these groups (freelancers and platform workers) as they are taking up an increasingly large role in the labour market. Another key strength is that with these initiatives, ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB reach a diverse group of users. Some of these users may have been trade union members in the past but for some reason cancelled their membership. Other users may be young or not so well aware of what a trade union could do for them. Reinstating or initiating contacts and ensuring that these people have positive experiences with unions may change their perspective. These groups are at the core of the public and policy debates currently ongoing in Belgium.

However, as both initiatives are still in the early stages and targets are difficult to set and measure, it proved difficult to assess the effectiveness in terms of membership consolidation and renewal, or in terms of the legitimisation of unions among social groups that traditionally are not familiar with trade unions or hold negative opinions about trade unions. This is a challenge that both initiatives face, in particular the ABVV-FGTB platform for platform workers: clear definitions of targets (e.g. in terms of number of users served, expansion of service package) and indicators to track to what extent these targets have been

reached, are largely missing. Especially for ABVV-FGTB, it proves to be very difficult to get good insight into how many people they end up offering services after establishing contact through the website. This also became clear in the survey: some of the individuals interested in participating in the survey did not recognise either of the two initiatives. This may for example be because users do not recognise the 'platform for platform workers' and think of it as a website ran by the trade union. In general, the target groups of these initiatives – especially platform workers – are difficult to identify and reach. In addition, both initiatives were fairly recent and under full development at the time of this analysis.

Notwithstanding these observations, both initiatives appear successful in retaining and attracting members, and in a few cases, have even encouraged users to become union representatives themselves. The number of users and requests launched is on the rise. Although attracting new members may only be the secondary goal of the ABVV-FGTB platform for platform workers, platform workers need to join the union to get further support. Membership fees are important for the financial stability of the unions. However, devoting efforts in this growing group of workers is likely to pay off over the long run. Overall, the link between the provision of services and mobilisation or participation in trade union life is unclear. ♦

Conclusions

A general reflection on the role of service supply as a strategy to increase union membership (policy advises and identification of possible good practices)

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

The case studies under investigation provide interesting examples on this point. Interviews with service users have uncovered examples of individuals who were already trade union members and are satisfied to receive support on their new endeavours, but also of individuals who were never union members or only for a short period of time and have now become members again. In both cases, the low thresholds to get support from the union and then become a union member appear relevant. Service users also pointed to the fast help and clear communication from the unions as key strengths. With these initiatives, trade unions have succeeded in reaching groups of workers that are difficult to reach. This is coupled with their growing online presence and the digitalisation of the service provision.

Although Belgium performs well in comparison with other EU Member States in terms of trade



union density, the latest data do suggest that some decline is to be expected. There are exceptions, in particular in sectors where trade unions have strongly invested in organising workers. This is

an important finding, as the Belgian trade unions traditionally opt for a servicing approach to trade union membership renewal. Combining such an approach with organising may be beneficial. ♦

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