

# **The long haul of the self-employed workers unionisation. European trends 2002-2018 in the service sector and the case of a good Italian organisational innovation**

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The knotty problem of self-employment representation is one of the most current challenges for industrial relations and a litmus test of the inclusive capacity of Western democratic capitalisms towards the disruptive labour market transformations.

European trade unions have been dealing with the increase in self-employment in both skilled and unskilled sectors. Unions have chosen different strategies to respond to the needs of self-employment. In some cases, with the creation of labour unions they engaged exclusively in the representation of the self-employment, regardless of the economic sector, and gathering a great heterogeneity of workers; in other cases, by extending union membership to self-employed workers in the same sector; or by setting up ad hoc organisations for self-employment, but relative to their production sector.

This variability and fragmentation is the hallmark of trade union actions towards self-employed workers. It is also the mirror of the different trajectories of self-employment, which in national contexts show a different concentration in some sectors rather than others. This variability is the result of a complex network of complementarities between different institutional arenas: growth, labour process and occupational regimes.

This article discusses the processes of convergence and divergence in unionisation between high-skilled self-employed workers in the tertiary sector within countries belonging to different models of European capitalism. Historically self-employed workers have many individual values so do not have much interest in unionisation. The data drawn from the European Social Survey (rounds 1, 6 and 9) show different trends, which can be well explained with the path dependence theory. Following the principles of mixed methods, a qualitative analysis was conducted (interviews and focus groups, September-November 2020) for the Italian case, taking into account the creative workers. The research has shown how the approach to the trade union has been driven by the crisis in the sector caused by the pandemic, and how through innovative union practices (CGIL the case investigated) it has been possible to combine individualistic pressures with new collective impulses among workers. This plurality of actions is explained using Crozier's scheme (1974, 1976), according to which the workers alternate their logic in a strategic and non-oppositional way, to improve their condition.

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