

Servicing as a Strategy for Renovating Union Action: Empirical Evidence and Theoretical Implications

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The theme of the revitalization or renewal of union action has been at the centre of the industrial relations debate for many years (see Moore 2010; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013; Schnabel 2013; Baccaro and Howell 2017; Vandaele 2018). Among the possible strategies for this purpose (Frege and Kelly 2004), the literature has mainly focused on organizing (Clawson 2003; Hurd et al. 2003; Simms et al. 2013). Less attention has been paid to servicing (Jarkey and Fiorito 1990; Boxall and Haynes 1997; Williams 1997). The latter goes beyond the simple supply of individual goods for union members. Instead, it represents a service-based strategy that aims to bring both unorganized and marginal workers closer to trade unions. In addition, unlike organizing, in which the strengthening of union membership is pursued by creating new communities of workers-activists, the rationale of servicing is to increase the perceived usefulness of joining a union.

In this context, the paper presents the preliminary findings of the BreakBack Project –funded by the DG Employment and Social Affairs of the European Commission –focusing on the Italian case. This research project has a twofold objective: first, to detect the presence of concrete servicing practices as translations of strategic choices aimed at renovating union action; second, to understand the effects of these practices to strengthen union membership.

In Italy, the supply of personal services is now an activity that characterizes the organizational action of trade unions (Feltrin 2018). In fact, trade unions provide individual assistance, tax compliance, labour matching, and several other services regularly. These are mainly traditional services, aiming to offer workers “selective incentives” to join trade unions. Furthermore, they generate a large share of their budget. Recently, however, trade unions have been experimenting with services characterized by a different rationale, more in line with the very idea of servicing.

To identify these activities and assess their impact on union membership and active participation, the research was divided into two phases. In the first phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the representatives of the three main Italian trade unions, CGIL, CISL, and UIL. The aim, here, was to understand how much servicing was present in the underlying rhetoric of union strategies at the national level. In the second phase, five case studies focused on concrete practices of union services linked to union renewal strategies.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, the five case studies –carried out in the Autumn of 2020 –sought to cover a wide range of workers and territories. These are:

- Vivace - CISL (services for professionals and freelancers);
- Partita Viva - CISL Vicenza (services for professionals and freelancers);
- Sportello Lavoro - CISL Firenze-Prato (guidance and training services);
- Nidil - CGIL Firenze (services for self-employed workers);
- Quadrifor (a joint body that provides training for managers and supervisors).

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Preliminary findings indicate a moderate presence of servicing within union strategies. That said, this scarce attention at the confederal level is somehow counterbalanced by local experimentation, which seems to be “a bottom-up process” of union renewal. What is more, the case studies reveal that differentiated strategies are at work. In fact, the subjects offering these services are positioned along a continuum from traditional services –for which workers are “users” –to servicing activities in a strict sense, up to forms of hybridization between servicing and organizing.

The research sheds new light on a little-explored dimension, stressing the role of local contexts –with their sets of both hindering and enabling constraints that influence union action –and the existing tensions between the objective and subjective dimensions of the interests at stake, with a view to extending union membership to difficult-to-organize workers.

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