

DEVCובה

Developing Collective Bargaining in the Care Sector

WP3 Comparative Report

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1. Introduction

- This report analytically compares the results of the six WP3 national reports of the DEVCOPA project.
- The DEVCOPA project is a **six-country study** that aims to examine the **dynamics, mechanisms, and impacts of the development of collective bargaining and representation in the arena of the care sector**, focusing in particular on two care sub-sectors: the social and health services for elderly people (long-term care services – LTC hereinafter) and the socio-education services for children aged 0-6 (childcare – ECEC hereinafter). Specifically, it aims to provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and practices available across EU Member States to **ensure the extension of collective bargaining, the promotion of union and employers' associations' membership, and the use of social dialogue bilateral/trilateral bodies to design initiatives and policies to tackle the issues of skills and labour shortage**.
- **Countries:** 1) Denmark; 2) Germany; 3) Italy; 4) The Netherlands; 5) Slovakia; 6) Spain
- **Extending the application of collective bargaining institutions and coverage is deemed a necessary process to enhance working conditions and job quality in the two sub-sectors** (Cazes, Garnero, and Martin 2019; Hassel, 2023), as well as to strengthen the attractiveness and the retention capacity of a crucial segment of the tertiary sector, that is transnationally experiencing high turnover and severe labour and skill shortage (Vujicic and Zurn 2006). The European Commission's December 2022 Care Strategy reflects this urgency, stressing the key role of national and European collective bargaining and social dialogue bodies in improving working conditions, attracting more (especially male) workers to the care sector, and developing continuous training to tackle skill and labour shortages. **The WP3 of the DEVCOPA project aims to analyse a repertoire of actions and initiatives** promoted by the social partners, or in which the social partners play an active role, and aiming to **tackle three critical dimensions of work** in the LTC and ECEC sub-sectors: 1) the **extension of collective bargaining coverage**; 2) the **increase of social partners' membership and the strengthening of collective representation**; and 3) the **tackling of labour and skills shortages**.
- Drawing upon the six WP3 national reports, this comparative report provides a **critical overview of the repertoire of actions currently available to the social partners** to address these issues. The **first section** is devoted to the comparative analysis of case studies related to the extension and strengthening of collective bargaining, highlighting the driving role of bottom-up and collaborative initiatives. The **second section** looks at a variety of strategies devoted to tackling labour and skills shortages, dividing them between “high road” strategies, focusing on the improvement of working conditions and on the social recognition of care work, and “low road strategies”, focusing on the expansion of the labour supply. Finally, the **third section** analyses initiatives of traditional unions to expand their field of action and enact innovative representation strategies.
- **Case Study Selection and Data Collection:** Each team **selected 3 to 4 country case studies** targeting one or more of these critical dimensions. The cases respond to a *novelty*

criterion, being either first-time initiatives or initiatives whose strategy and logic present innovative elements compared to past ones. The qualitative case study analysis was conducted through the analysis of semi-structured interviews and of relevant administrative documents.

2. Extending and Strengthening Collective Bargaining

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the concern with the worsening of labour and skill shortages in both the ECEC and the LTC sub-sectors prompted efforts across the six countries to improve working conditions through collective bargaining (Bolelli & Mori, 2025c, 5). Several collective agreements have been renewed, even in the less coordinated industrial relations systems like Italy (Bolelli & Mori, 2025a, 18) and Spain (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025).

However, especially in these fragmented systems, structural and institutional weaknesses are still obstructing the extension of collective bargaining to marginalised components of the workforce and preventing the promotion of work in the two sub-subsectors (Bolelli & Mori, 2025c, 7). Fragmentation, competition, and lack of horizontal coordination interact with the general lack of resources, the territorial divides, the widespread informality, and the regulatory cleavages between the private and the public sector to limit the positive impact of NCA renewal rounds.

Six of the case studies analysed within the national WP3 reports attempt to break with these adverse mechanisms and extend and strengthen collective bargaining.

2.1 Extending Collective Bargaining: The establishment of new NCAs

Cases of extension of collective bargaining were recorded both in Germany and in Spain, where **new collective agreements** were signed at the local level and at the regional/provincial level. The German cases date back to the pre-pandemic decade and led to the establishment of two lasting social partnerships in the private and non-profit sectors. In 2007, an NCA was signed in Hamburg between ver.di and a private provider, covering recently externalised residential LTC services (Abramowski, 2025b, 9). In 2014, ver.di and the local Diakonie signed the 'Tarifvertrag Diakonie Niedersachsen TV DN' (collective agreement Diaconia Lower Saxony) covering all the employees of the Diakonie working in ECEC, LTC, and other services in Lower Saxony (Abramowski, 2025b, 5). The Spanish cases are more recent. A new regional NCA for public Home Care Workers was created in Andalusia in 2023, and, in the same year, another agreement covering the same services was signed in the Basque province of Bizkaia (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025).

All these agreements **challenge some of the core obstacles to the extension of collective bargaining in the respective industrial relations systems**. In **Germany**, private for-profit providers and non-profit Protestant and Catholic service providers have traditionally refused to organise themselves into representative bodies and engage in collective bargaining. This refusal results in the exclusion of their employees from the standards and protections granted to care workers in the public sector (Abramowski, 2025a, 10). While in the ECEC sub-sector the negative effect of this exclusion is partly mitigated by the limited size of the private sector and by an informal wage coordination mechanism that sees the non-profit organisations voluntarily adopting the public sector pay scales, in the LTC sub-sector these mechanisms are not in place (Abramowski, 2025a, 9). The **Spanish public sector**, on the other hand, has long been regulated by outdated provincial agreements and by insufficient national guidelines, resulting in regional differences in working conditions and service provision and a general inability to promote the care sector (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025).

In three out of the four cases analysed, the **initial push for the creation of the new agreements came from organised workers**. The only exception to this **bottom-up generative mechanism** is the case of the establishment of the Andalusian NCA, which was the outcome of a collaborative bargaining process between the social partners, supported by the mediation of regional authorities (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025). The intervention of the regional government and its decision to increase investment in the sector were fundamental to facilitating the agreement (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025), attesting to the top-down nature of the initiative. However, even this NCA originated within a wider national context of labour struggles. In particular, the unions were able to **leverage the success of other mobilisations** led by feminised activist groups across the country to get the attention and support of the public opinion and bargain for more favourable conditions (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025).

Considering the low levels of unionisation in the care sector, the ensuing of bottom-up initiatives is not a given, and **equally rare is the development of such strong and lasting bargaining processes or protests like the ones seen in these three cases**. In the case of the Lower Saxony NCA, the bargaining process lasted 4 years (Abramowski, 2025b, 6). In Hamburg, the workers engaged in a 48-day protest before obtaining the opening of the bargaining table (Abramowski, 2025b, 9), while in Bizkaia, an unprecedented wave of mobilization culminated in over 70 days of strikes and mass demonstrations (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025).

It is particularly relevant that **a bottom-up initiative supported the creation of a new NCA in a context like the German non-profit** care sector, where the self-exclusion of the catholic and protestant providers from the industrial relations system is paired with the low propensity of their employees to engage in collective organising because of their adherence to a shared value-framework (Abramowski, 2025a, 16). While in the case of the service externalisation in Hamburg, the willingness of the workers to engage in organising can be explained by the sudden worsening of employment conditions of employees previously covered by a collective agreement, in the case of the Lower Saxony Diakonie, building a bargaining platform required some employees to take the initiative to contact the union ver.di and start an intense awareness-raising campaign targeting the colleagues and explaining the benefit of participating in collective agreements (Abramowski, 2025b, 5). To date, the case remains a unique example of such an extensive and successful recruitment campaign in the context of Christian non-profit services (Abramowski, 2025b, 8).

Overall, the four cases are examples of **strategies that managed to overcome structural, institutional, and cultural obstacles to the extension of collective bargaining**. The German cases are an example of **“inclusion of the margins”** (the private sector), leading to the creation not just of a collective agreement but also of an established system of social dialogue to which the private providers decided to fully commit, recognising its advantages in terms of attractiveness and employees' satisfaction (Abramowski, 2025b, 10). This long-term positive commitment – which in the case of the Lower-Saxony Diakonie required a profound cultural shift and the creation of an employers' association (Abramowski, 2025b, 6) – allowed these results to be consolidated over time. Together with the case of the Spanish region of Bizkaia, these cases speak to the **fundamental role of workers' collective representation and action in affecting positive change** in the care sector. On the other hand, the Spanish cases attest to the **public and political salience of the matter of working conditions in the care sector**, which in the case of Andalusia was successfully channelled through institutional politics, while in the case of Bizkaia, through extended social mobilisation.

The potential and actual limitations of all these cases stand in their ability to extend beyond their field of action. On the one hand, while very successful on their own, the German cases have only rarely been replicated and have shown little evidence of generating wider spillover effects among other non-profit or private providers (Abramowski, 2025b, 8). It remains to be evaluated whether this depends on special contextual conditions that cannot be easily replicated, or on a lack of commitment or resources of the organisations involved. On the other hand, while it is too soon to make a long-term assessment of the impact of the Spanish collective agreements, their major limitation is that they do not address any of the other sources of segmentation of the Spanish system, in particular, flexibilization and the public-private divide (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025). This limits their structural impact on the root causes of fragmentation and exclusion, and consequently of downward competition.

2.2 Strengthening Collective Bargaining: Bilateral and Trilateral Observatories

Active workers' support was also fundamental in buttressing Asturian unions' efforts to influence the contents of the reform of the nursery school system in the Autonomous Community (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025). In this case, unions mobilised workers to back their efforts to preserve and improve working conditions in the switch from a municipal management system to a regional one. **The safeguarding (and upgrading) of collective agreements in times of transition is one of the key strategies for strengthening collective bargaining institutions.** The organising effort led to the inclusion of several additional clauses in the final version of the reform, including the establishment of a social dialogue table responsible for bargaining the stabilisation of temporary or ad-interim staff, the professional classification of the educators, and the integration of local employment pools into the new regional one (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025).

In the case of the Asturias, workers' support was fundamental because **it was the unions who had to impose their presence at the table** (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025). In fact, the mobilisation was so effective that it led to the resignation of the Regional Minister of Education, who had been responsible for sidelining the trade unions (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025). However, **strategies to strengthen collective bargaining can also be collaboratively bargained and enshrined within the NCAs.** Both in Italy and in Spain, similar efforts have been made to create permanent venues of dialogue and collaboration between the social partners.

The **Osservatorio Nazionale su Appalti e Accreditamenti** (National Observatory on Subcontracting and Accreditation) and its network of Regional Observatories were created within the latest renewal of the NCA for social cooperatives, which is the most relevant Italian private sector NCA in terms of coverage (Bolelli & Mori, 2025b, 5). Born in the context of an exceptional political effort to improve wages for workers employed by the social cooperatives, the Observatory (and its regional network) has the practical aim of monitoring public contracting practices and the political goal of creating a permanent venue of exchange and coordination between the cooperatives and the unions on globally shared propositions and goals (Bolelli & Mori, 2025b, 6). The social partners managed to **identify cost-cutting through unfair externalisation practices as a shared problem for workers and service providers alike.** The Observatories, therefore, should work as a system of monitoring and signaling of unfair practices in the writing and awarding of service contracts.

Created with the signing of the Andalusian Regional NCA of Home Care Workers, the Spanish observatory was born under different premises, as a collaboration between the social partners and the regional government (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025). The **Observatorio Andaluz del Servicio de Ayuda a Domicilio** (Andalusian Observatory of Home Help Services) is a trilateral body that should act “as a **permanent space for monitoring the evolution of the sector, collecting data on employment trends and skills, and proposing policy adaptations**” (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025). Among its mandates are also “the development of fair public contracting models, enforcement mechanisms against non-compliant providers, and strategies to attract and retain skilled care professionals” (Molina, Casanovas & Rodríguez-Soler, 2025).

While it is too soon to evaluate the effectiveness of these observatories, it is possible to imagine that the Andalusian one, strong of the direct involvement of the regional government, might have a broader **impact in terms of policy development and consolidation of the standards set by the NCA**. However, the Italian observatory could in turn work as an important **tool of political pressure** to challenge externalisation practices that favour downward competition. This will depend on the ability of the parties to the contract to maintain the collaboration despite the inevitable local frictions.

Table 1. Strategies to Extend and Strengthen Collective Bargaining

Report	Name of the Initiative	Actors	Brief Description
WP3DE	A functioning social partnership between local Protestant ECEC and LTC providers and ver.di in Lower Saxony	EO: 'Diakonischer Dienstgeberverband Niedersachsen e.V. DDN' (Diaconal Employers' Association of Lower Saxony) TU: ver.di	Creation of an NCA covering Protestant institutions in Lower Saxony, and subsequent establishment of a social partnership between local Protestant ECEC and LTC providers and ver.di. Established in 2014, the NCA covers 250 providers. A unique case of institutionalization of collective bargaining and social dialogue in the German non-profit sector, it required the establishment of a new employers' association.
WP3DE	A functioning social partnership between a private residential LTC provider and ver.di in Hamburg	Local residential LTC provider and the TU ver.di	Creation of a company-specific (in-house) collective agreement for a private residential LTC provider in Hamburg and establishment of a lasting social partnership between the provider and ver.di. Established after the externalization of the service in 2007 and the subsequent workers' organized protest. Rare case of a private employer in the German LTC sector committing to collective bargaining.

WP3ES	The First Collective Agreement for Home Care in Andalusia	EOs: Círculo Empresarial de Cuidados a Personas de Andalucía (CECUA); Asociación Estatal de Entidades de Servicios de Atención a Domicilio (ASADE); Federación Andaluza de Empresas Cooperativas de Trabajo (FAECTA). TUs: CCOO Andalucía; UGT Andalucía Mediator: Andalusian Industrial Relations Council	Signing of the First regional Collective Agreement for the Home Care Service (Servicio de Ayuda a Domicilio, SAD) in Andalusia. Five-year collective agreement (2023-2027), covering 40.000 workers. The agreement is already being described as one of the most innovative and advanced collective agreements in the Spanish care sector.
WP3ES	Collective Agreement for Home Care Workers in Bizkaia. An agreement forged in mobilisation.	EOs: Association of SAD Management Companies of Bizkaia and the Association of Public Sector Home Care Companies Tus: CCOO and UGT	Provincial collective agreement for public home care services in Bizkaia. Five-year NCA (2023-2027) covering approx. 1250 workers. Established after an unprecedented wave of mobilization culminating in mass demonstrations in over 70 days of strikes.
WP3ES	The bargaining of a comprehensive public management model of nursery schools in Asturias	TUs: <i>UGT Enseñanza</i> (Education), <i>FE-CCOO</i> (Education), <i>FSC-CCOO</i> (Local Administration), <i>FeSP-UGT</i> (Local Administration), <i>CSIF</i> (Civil Servants), <i>ANPE</i> (Education), and <i>SUATEA</i> (Regional union in Education)	Establishment of a social dialogue between the unions and the regional government of the Asturias in the context of a reform of the nursery school system in the region. Unions mobilised workers to support their bargaining efforts to preserve and improve working conditions in the switch from a municipal management system to a regional one.
WP3IT	The National Observatory and the Network of Regional Observatories on Subcontracting and Accreditation	TUs: FP CGIL, FP CISL, UIL FPL, FISASCAT CISL and UILTUCS EOs: AGCI Imprese Sociali, CONFCOOPERATIVE Federsolidarietà and LEGACOOP Sociali	Bilateral Observatories, created with the 2024 renewal of the Social Cooperatives' NCA. Goal: to monitor public tender procedures regarding the implementation of the NCA by the contracting companies, the procedures and contents of calls for tenders and public procurement, and the timely execution of payments by the public contractor.

3. Tackling Labour and Skills Shortages

The comparison of the national DEVCOPA WP2 reports highlights how, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the increase in labour and skills shortages put enough pressure on care systems to push the problem higher in national policy agendas (Bolelli & Mori, 2025c). Several governments (national or local) were incentivised to put forward initiatives to counteract this negative trend. Meanwhile, the intensification of competition provided an incentive to employers to look for collaborative solutions to solve their recruitment issues. Finally, there were multiple instances in which the negative impact of shortages on workloads pushed workers to collectively organise to demand the improvement of wages and working conditions.

In confirmation of these observations, **most of the cases analysed within the national WP3 reports are initiatives aimed at tackling labour and skills shortages.**

We classify these initiatives into two groups depending on their focus and on information on their development so far. The first group includes the **“high road” strategies**, which are those initiatives that are primarily focused on job quality improvement and on the promotion of care work. The **“low road” strategies**, on the other hand, are strategies to expand the labour supply based on deskilling and migration, with marginal or low emphasis on the improvement of job quality.

3.1 The “High Road” to Tackling Labour and Skill Shortages

The “High Road” initiatives can be divided between those that focus primarily on retaining workers that are already in the sector, those that focus on attracting new ones, and those initiatives that aim at both recruitment and retention. Amongst the latter are all initiatives focusing on formal parts of the employment relationship, such as wages and working time, that can work both as an incentive to stay and as a pull factor. Retention strategies focus, instead, primarily on increasing job satisfaction, mostly through workers’ involvement, training, and personal incentives. Finally, attraction strategies focus on promoting work in the care sector to young people in education or new groups of workers in the labour market.

3.1.1 Attraction and Retention: Wages and Working Time

The first of these cases is the 2024 **Danish tripartite agreement on a special ‘wage-lift’ for some public sector occupations** (including, *inter alia*, occupations in the ECEC and LTC sub-sectors) (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 4). Since the Covid-19 Pandemic, there have been several examples across the six countries of **interventions to push up wages** in the two sub-sectors, either at the initiative of the state, of social partners working together through collective bargaining, or thanks to the push of organised workers (Bolelli & Mori, 2025c, 5). The Danish case, however, stands out for the scale of the investment and for the unprecedented political dynamics that led to the increase. For the first time, in fact, the Danish government decided to intervene directly in the bargaining process to achieve its policy goals, which included an “increase in the number of qualified LTC workers” (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 5). The renewal of the NCA led to a substantial wage increase for all the sub-sectors covered and was welcomed as an extremely positive arrangement for the workers, despite some concessions on e.g., working time, pay flexibility, and conditions for senior employers. While it is too soon for effective impact-measurement, recent data show that unsuccessful recruitments have recently declined (Mailand, 2025, 29).

Denmark is also one of the countries, together with the Netherlands, where several efforts were devoted to the **regulated increase of working time**. Due to the feminisation of the care professions, in both countries, the incidence of part-time has traditionally been high, leading to lower occupational pensions and life-income perspectives in the two sub-sectors compared to other occupations. as well as to labour shortages. The **Danish project “A Future with full time”** (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 10) and the **Dutch projects ‘More hours works!’ and ‘Increasing part-time hours in childcare’** (Tros, 2025, 9) attempt to build incentives for an increase of working time, to guarantee a better service coverage while avoiding the uncontrolled increase of workloads. The social partners have been particularly active on this subject, both in Denmark, where they initiated and financed “A future with full time” (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 11), and in the Netherlands, where the bipartite organisation ‘Childcare works!’ (kinderovang-werkt!; KW) initiated the exploratory project ‘Increasing part-time hours in childcare’ and plays an important coordinating role for both initiatives (Tros, 2025, 9). These strategies were then received by national governments that incorporated them in their policy strategies for the care sector, either by financing them directly (as part of the tripartite agreement in the Danish case) or by subsidising new ones, like in the case of the program “More hours works!”. In Denmark, participation in these programs is incentivised by ensuring that extra working time does not automatically result in an increase in weekend shifts, and by giving workers the opportunity to influence their shift schedules, allowing them to hand in a desired shift plan and trying to accommodate it in the organisational process. Moreover, providers have been engaging in the effort to map the distribution of tasks throughout the day and trying to redistribute them more evenly (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 14). Preliminary evaluations on the Danish project show that workers do react to these initiatives but slowly (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 13-14). Qualitative evidence suggests that workers who decided to modify their working time within the guarantees set by the project were satisfied, and that the number of workers who work longer hours has increased.

However, quantitative evidence is insufficient to determine if this was a direct outcome of the initiative. Moreover, several factors are at play that disincentivise the workers to accept changes to their working time. Amongst these are “work intensification, gender roles, attempts to control one’s own working time (by working part-time and adding overtime hours), economic incentives (by adding overtime hours with higher pay to parttime positions), and the perception that working full-time will lead to fewer colleagues.” (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 14). Resistance to change can also be found on the employers’ side: “contributing factors include that time flexibility is often best met by having a large share of part-time employees. Another contributing factor is the economy/budget considerations, including that not all municipalities and workplaces believe they can afford increasing part-time to full-time employment.” (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 14).

3.1.2 Retention: Workers’ Involvement and Professionalisation

Some of the initiatives aiming at strengthening the retention capacity of the care sector are focusing on aspects of job satisfaction other than the formal elements of the employment relationship. These are projects **focusing on the professional promotion of care workers’ skills** and oriented towards increasing workers’ intrinsic motivation.

The first examples are the efforts of the social partners in the **Dutch LTC sub-sector** aiming at **promoting direct workers’ participation at the workplace level** (Tros, 2025, 13). During the latest NCA renewal round, the partners formally committed to the inclusion of workers in the governance of change in workplaces. Having a say in management decisions and being involved in

organisational change is seen as an important aspect of job quality that prevent workers to leave the LTC sub-sector. Meanwhile, the bilateral sectoral fund co-finances and co-directs an experimental program called “OverMorgen” that stimulates workers’ participation and exchange with management through attendance at dedicated theatre performances and the discussion that follows. The theatre project was met with high enthusiasm by employees and employers alike and seems to have stimulated positive change inside several organisations that declare that **participation in the program allowed them to change behavioural patterns and improve communication**, related to the high levels of work-related stress and persistent problems of workloads (Tros, 2025, 15). The programmatic commitment set in the NCA, on the other hand, seems to have had an indirect positive effect, influencing the adoption of more **horizontal management styles** (Tros, 2025, 15). The main limit to both projects is that the implementation of these direct consultation practices is left to the **voluntary initiative of the providers**, and that there is no clear rule or mechanism for the participation of unions or works councils in this implementation. Voluntarism and exclusion of representative bodies risk de-potentiating the effects of these initiatives.

Initiatives aimed at improving workers’ satisfaction and professional growth are also typical strategies for employers in the **Slovak LTC sector** competing for workers in an underfinanced system characterised by low wages and high workload (Brunnerová, Hanulová & Kahancová, 2025, 15). Employers tend to offer non-wage benefits like flexible working hours or extra paid leave, contributions to supplementary pension schemes, and support with transportation costs (especially for workers in rural areas). Despite the overall good response of individual workers to these strategies aiming at strengthening individual satisfaction, their main limitation remains that most of them are **paternalistic in nature and completely dependent on the finances and willingness of individual employers**, preventing systemic spillovers. This is a major issue, since professionalisation and personal satisfaction programs not only respond to a lack of personnel but also to the necessity to increase the quality of the service offered (Brunnerová, Hanulová & Kahancová, 2025, 17). While collective bargaining institutions have been, so far, unable to put forward coordinated plans, **some attempts at developing alternative solutions have come from the non-profit sector**. For example, the Academy of Education and Research in Social Services was created to provide good quality and standardised skills training to workers in the sector and compensate for the shortcomings of formal education (Brunnerová, Hanulová & Kahancová, 2025, 16). Even this organisation, despite its public reputation, must face major obstacles, first and foremost, the lack of financing and recognition from public authorities. The limited understanding of what constitutes professional competence in the care sector often results in the denial of student funding for those who apply to the training courses. However, the school represents an important attempt at professionalisation in a context of service under-development and under-financing.

3.1.3 Promoting the Profession and Including New Social Groups

There are two initiatives amongst those analysed within the national WP3 reports that stand out for being **“attraction projects” that are society-oriented, publicly promoting the profession, or attempting to include new groups of workers while also expanding service reach**. The Danish project “Inspiration positions” and the Slovak project “Omamas” both go beyond a simple aspiration to increase the labour supply and aim to affect a cultural change in the perception of care work within their respective contexts.

The **Danish project “Inspiration positions” which is a nationwide pilot project aiming to introduce young people to elder care and improve the social image of work in the care**

sector (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 19). Young people in school are encouraged to work a few hours a week in local care homes, taking on supplementary tasks like going for walks, playing games, and engaging in other social activities with the elderly. The project is modelled on a successful local initiative of the Horsens municipality and is organised jointly by the national association of municipalities in Denmark (KL) and the trade union for elder care workers (FOA). The working hours and the criteria and contents of the work performed are set jointly with the union, ensuring that these youth workers are not used improperly as substitutes for care workers or compensate for the shortages (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 23). According to the Horsens municipality, the impact of the project was extremely positive in terms of **increasing the interest of younger workers for a career in the sector and improving the public image of care work** (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 21). Since the beginning of the project, in 2018, the quantity and quality of the applicants for new positions have increased, and so has the number of male applicants, **signalling a cultural shift in the understanding of care work**. This success has sparked the interest of other municipalities around the country and led to the incorporation of the strategy into the 2024 NCA.

The second initiative, **the Slovak Project “Omama”**, is an **NGO-led project for the employability of Roma women and the expansion of early childhood education and care in Roma communities** (Brunnerová, Hanulová & Kahancová, 2025, 5). The project provides developmental support to Roma children by training women from the same communities to become ECEC professionals. The “Omamas” are trained to work with families in their homes, conducting tailored activities with the children and teaching their parents how to foster a child’s cognitive development. In this case, **the project’s ambitions are multifaceted and community-oriented, promoting women’s empowerment through work, children’s development, and the promotion of early childhood and education** within the community (Brunnerová, Hanulová & Kahancová, 2025, 5). Like in the case of “Inspiration Positions”, the “Omamas” project has received large praise and is considered a very successful initiative on all fronts (occupational, educational, and cultural), despite the chronic lack of resources of the Slovak welfare system, which is only partly compensated by other financing sources (Brunnerová, Hanulová & Kahancová, 2025, 7). This lack of resources does, however, affect the quality of the working conditions offered to the workers, who “do not receive the same formal protections and benefits as other recognised professions, leaving them vulnerable in terms of job security, rights, and social safeguards” (Brunnerová, Hanulová & Kahancová, 2025, 8). In the long run, this might affect the propensity of Roma women to participate in training. Despite these limitations, both cases provide an **example of the potential impact of projects challenging prevailing cultural understandings of care work**.

3.2 The “Low Road” to Tackling Labour and Skill Shortages: Deskilling and Migration

Next to improving job quality to increase the appeal of the care professions, **the other main road to solving labour shortages is increasing the labour supply without increasing the labour cost**. This expansion is normally achieved through de-professionalisation or by incentivising the migration of workers from countries that offer lower employment and earning opportunities (or through a combination of both strategies). Three of the strategies analysed within the national WP3 reports can be classified within this group.

In two of the cases, the actors involved decided to **open hirings to less qualified personnel** in order to cover service needs. The first of these cases is the **reorganisation of ECEC service**

provision within the “**Offenburger Kita Modell**” (Abramowski, 2025b, 12), a model used for the first time in the German municipality of Offenburg and later adopted by other municipalities throughout the country. Within this model, the city offers seven hours of formal high-quality education complemented by two hours of optional supplementary care. This supplementary care is provided by an external non-profit provider employing unskilled, non-pedagogical staff. By **creating this organisational separation between educational and care work**, the municipality overcame the major difficulties that it had been encountering to meet the requests for full-day care in the context of increasing staff shortages and high turnover (Abramowski, 2025b, 12). This move has had a positive impact on the satisfaction of the pedagogical staff: thanks to the possibility to focus only on pedagogical tasks and reduced working hours, these workers feel less overworked, and turnover has diminished (Abramowski, 2025b, 12). However, the move has, in practice, **created a pocket of low-paid, undervalued work**, offering no credible plan for the professionalization and upgrading of workers employed in the afternoon services. The creation of this sort of ‘**hierarchy of skills**’ between “education” and “care” **denies the value of professional care work in the sector and underplays the skills necessary to perform it**. While this “pragmatic reorganising” has offered a short-term solution that has allowed the service to continue, in the long run, this move might undermine efforts to promote the sector and even affect care service quality.

The second case of de-professionalisation is the **Dutch project “The Development Path to Childcare”** (Tros, 2025, 6). Within this project, people with greater support needs are encouraged to work within the ECEC sector as “group assistants”, which is an entry-level position with no educational prerequisite, entailing the performance of non-pedagogical tasks. In the context of the project, people with greater support needs are defined as “people with a (psychological) disability, early school leavers, students from a lower secondary education status” (Tros, 2025, 6), and lately also Ukrainian refugees. The project, promoted by the government and by employers’ associations, has the declared aims of promoting inclusion by introducing new workers into a career in ECEC and reducing workloads for pedagogical staff (Tros, 2025, 6). Like in the German case, however, labour shortages are circumvented by creating a **hierarchy of tasks and skills between “educational” and “care” ones**, relieving existing staff from some non-pedagogical tasks. While the program does have the positive effect of introducing marginalised people to paid labour, so far it fails to create credible upskilling perspectives and does not offer job guarantees (Tros, 2025, 8). Therefore, it incurs the same risk of care-work devaluation as does the Offenburger Kita Modell.

The third case study that focuses on the extension of labour offer is the **“Zefiro” project of the Italian non-profit catholic employers’ association UNEBA** (Bolelli & Mori, 2025b, 12). Starting from the initiative of the local Veneto branch, the project aims to create a platform for the coordinated recruitment of migrant workers for the local LTC labour market. The project, which started in 2025, coordinates the recruitment and training of healthcare assistants selected through a global network of catholic institutions. Its ambition is to **gradually replace bilateral agreements between individual employers and foreign institutions and standardise hiring processes**, as well as the evaluation of training requirements and skills (Bolelli & Mori, 2025b, 14). In many ways, the project aims to make up for the lack of intervention and coordination of the Italian State, which has traditionally governed labour shortages through formal and informal migration policies while avoiding developing a coherent policy strategy. The coordination provided by UNEBA might, in fact, have positive outcomes both for the employers and for the migrant workers, who will receive formal support in the bureaucratic migration process and will not need

to go through informal employment stretches or through for-profit employment agencies. However, this pragmatic response to existing conditions **still operates within a context of underinvestment and relies, in practice, on the lower earnings expectations of these migrant workers**, postponing the need to promote care work in the LTC sub-sector (Bolelli & Mori, 2025b, 16).

For these reasons, these strategies can be considered a “low road” path to addressing labour shortages. While they all promise to have some contextual positive outcomes and offer pragmatic responses to urgent needs, they **lack a long-term perspective on the promotion of care work** and even **risk confirming some negative cultural understandings of the sector**. Part of these limitations may stem from the fact that, **in none of the three cases, workers’ representatives played a role in the design or coordination of the projects**. As a result, the strategies failed to incorporate potentially constructive and beneficial inputs derived from workers’ perspectives and direct experience.

Table 2. Strategies to Tackle Labour and Skills Shortages

Report	Name of the Initiative	Actors	Brief Description
WP3DK	Tripartite agreement on a special ‘wage-lift’ for some public sector occupations.	Initiator: Danish Government EOs: Ministry of Finance (employers in the state sectors); Danish Regions (regional employers) and Local Government Denmark (municipal employers). TUs: Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (FH); Danish Confederation of Professional Associations (AC).	2023 tripartite negotiation over a wage lift for some public sector occupations, including employees in LTC and ECEC in municipalities. The Government intervened directly into the bilateral collective bargaining system, breaking with the tradition of social partner self-governance in wage setting in Denmark.
WP3DK	A Future with Fulltime – increasing working time in care and other sectors.	Steering committee: LGDK and Forhandlingsfællesskabet; Participating municipalities; Main Cooperation Council (‘Hoved-MED’, including trade union representatives and the HR-management), Occupation Cooperation Councils (‘Fag-MED’)	A Full-time Future is a social partner-initiated project aimed at increasing the share of employees in the public sector working full time and at increasing working time in the sector. Established with the 2018 collective bargaining round, started in September 2020. The initiative consists of two similar projects, one focusing on the regions and one on the municipalities.
WP3NL	Enlargement of part-time contracts in ECEC. [Projects (1) ‘Increasing part-time hours in childcare’ and (2) ‘More hours works!’]	(1, 2) Bipartite organisation ‘childcare works! (<i>kinderovang-werkt!</i> ; KW) (1, 2) The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment	(1) ‘Increasing part-time hours in childcare’ is an exploratory research into the propensity of part-time workers to work more hours and analysis of the barriers in ECEC organisations.

		(1) NGO <i>Het Potentiel Pakken</i> (HPP) (2) University of Utrecht	(2) 'More hours works!' is a government-led initiative to increase working time in the ECEC sector. Goals: promoting a feminised profession by increasing earnings prospects and improving service coverage.
WP3NL	Promoting employees' voices in LTC workplaces. [(1) Regulation ' <i>mee-spraak van medewerkers bij voorgenomen veranderingen in de organisatie</i> ' and (2) Project ' <i>OverMorgen</i> ']	(1) TUs: FNV, CNV, Nu'91, FZB and EO: ActiZ, zorghuisnl (2) Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) and the LTC bilateral Sectoral Fund	(1) Regulation included in the latest sectoral LTC NCA. It includes a recommendation to facilitate conversations between managers and workers in the workplace. Goal: increasing retention through employees' involvement. (2) The theatre project in the ' <i>OverMorgen</i> ' programme is an innovative experiment to promote dialogue among employees and between managers and workers about transitions and demands in the field of work and care delivery in LTC. Targeted to all LTC workers and LTC providers in all regions in the Netherlands. Each performance involves groups of around 150 people, followed by a joint discussion that should be continued within each organisation.
WP3SK	Tackling labour shortage via a paternalistic employer approach outside of the domain of established industrial relations actors [(1) Individualised benefits (2) Academy of Education and Research in Social Services]]	(1) Employers in the LTC sector (2) NGO Academy of Education and Research in Social Services	(1) non-wage benefits used to attract and keep staff (flexible working hours, extra paid leave, contributions to supplementary pension schemes or support with transportation costs, professional development opportunities) (2) The academy began with quality management training and now offers accredited programs for various roles, all approved by the Ministry of Labour. Goals: Increasing standardisation and quality of training, and workforce attraction and stabilization.
WP3DK	Youth workers in inspiration positions in Danish elder care – Horsens municipality and beyond	EO: national association of municipalities in Denmark (KL) and TU: trade union for elder care workers (FOA)	Program "inspiration positions", created to inspire local youth to work within elder care. Youth workers work a few hours a week in residential homes, performing supplementary tasks. Originally a small project of the municipality

			of Horsens, later extended to other parts of the country. Goals: introducing young people to care work and creating a more positive image of work within eldercare.
WP3SK	Omama – Provision of ECEC in marginalized Roma communities in Slovakia	Initiator: NGO Cesta Von	Program designed to support child development in marginalised Roma communities and empower Roma women through employment. Within the programme, these workers, known as “omamas,” regularly visit hundreds of families in their own communities, teaching both children and family members how to foster age-appropriate development.
WP3DE	Solving labour shortage through de-professionalisation. The ‘Offenburger Kita-Modell’	Initiator: Municipality of Offenburg followed by other German municipalities	Reorganisation of ECEC service provision within the “Offenburger Kita Modell”: seven hours of formal high-quality education + two hours of optional supplementary care provided by an external non-profit provider employing unskilled, non-pedagogical staff. Used first in the German municipality of Offenburg and later adopted by other municipalities throughout the country. Strategy: opening hirings to less qualified personnel to face increasing staff shortages and high turnover.
WP3NL	Development path and new group assistants in ECEC	Initiators: The Dutch Government and employers’ associations in ECEC	Project “The Development Path to Childcare”. Integrating people with greater support needs within the ECEC sector. Creation of “group assistants”, an entry-level position with no educational prerequisite, entailing the performance of non-pedagogical tasks. Goals: facing labour shortages and promoting inclusion by introducing new workers into a career in ECEC.
WP3IT	The “Zefiro” project	Initiator: Italian non-profit catholic employers’ association UNEBA (local Veneto branch)	Program for the recruitment and training of migrant healthcare assistants selected through a global network of catholic institutions. Goal: gradually replace bilateral agreements between individual employers and foreign institutions,

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		standardising hiring processes and the evaluation of training requirements and skills.
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4. Strengthening Collective Representation and Increasing Membership

While the shared preoccupation with the increase of labour shortages has been fundamental for the implementation of strategies centred around the improvement of working conditions, the comparative analysis of the DEVCOBA national WP2 Reports shows that **unions and workers' engagement continue to be essential to ensure that job quality remains a top priority for other social partners** (Bolelli & Mori, 2025c, 11). Significant improvements in wages and working conditions have occurred where workers and their unions were strong enough to drive reform (Bolelli & Mori, 2025c, 11). Workers' participation in the two sub-subsectors continues, however, to be sparse. Union density in the two sub-sectors is lower than in other sectors, and multiple obstacles intervene to disincentivize workers from joining a union or engaging in other forms of collective organizing and protest (Bolelli & Mori, 2025c, 12). Even in places where unions or other collective representation exist, many workers are hesitant to take part in protests that disrupt service delivery (such as strikes) because they feel a deep sense of duty to keep providing care to those who depend on them. Meanwhile, **traditional unions continue to struggle with adjusting their strategies to meet the specific needs of the care sector and its workforce.**

Three of the initiatives analysed within the national WP3 reports attempt to address this struggle: the three cases are an example of attempts of traditional unions in Denmark, Slovakia, and Italy to expand their field of action and enact innovative representation strategies.

The **Danish case** is an **example of an established and large trade union expanding its field of action to include workers at the margins of the system**. Since 2023, a regional branch of the Danish Union of Early Childhood and Youth Educators (BULP) has been implementing a pilot project to organize staff in small private daycare institutions in the region of Eastern Jutland (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 16). While in the region most of the service provision is still public, over the past years, some smaller rural schools have been closing and are partly being replaced by small private institutions (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 16). Workers in these institutions are, normally, not unionized nor covered by collective bargaining agreements. The BULP set up and financed a tailored program to reach out to these workers and set up a strong network of shop stewards who could later support the initiation of a collective bargaining process (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 16). The union hired a dedicated consultant for the project who systematically mapped the private institutions and examined possible pathways to reach the workers within the organizations (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 16-17). The consultant was also responsible for **promoting the initiative within the union itself**, showing the benefits of targeting that specific constituency and guaranteeing ongoing internal support (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 17). The program has been evaluated as a success by BULP, which managed to increase the number of shop stewards and increase collective bargaining coverage in private institutions (Krogh & Mailand, 2025, 17-18).

The **Slovak case** can also be seen as a case of organizing at the margins, although within a largely unfavourable context for the development of industrial relations. In this case, the unions did not focus on expanding representation but rather on **implementing new strategies for representing unionized workers in peripheral areas**. In 2025, the Slovak Trade Union Federation of Healthcare and Social Work (SOZZaSS) implemented a campaign for the improvement of working conditions and wages in care homes in one of the least developed areas in the country, the city of Rožňava in Eastern Slovakia (Brunnerová, Hanulová & Kahancová, 2025,

10-11). The union resorted to a combination of traditional organising strategies, public protests, and media appearances to raise awareness about working conditions in the Care Homes and gain public support for the mobilization (Brunnerová, Hanulová & Kahancová, 2025, 11-12). The campaign managed to increase workers' engagement, build organisational capacity, and created a long-term network for collective bargaining and future mobilisation (Brunnerová, Hanulová & Kahancová, 2025, 13). However, there was no visible effort to expand this operation to non-organised workplaces, suggesting that the union strategy is reinforcing the insider-outsider divide in peripheral regions (Brunnerová, Hanulová & Kahancová, 2025, 14). While there are examples of autonomous organising in peripheral regions, like in the case of a care home in Javorina (Brunnerová, Hanulová & Kahancová, 2025, 12), the exclusion of peripheral workers threatens efforts to improve working conditions across the sub-sector.

Finally, the Italian case is an example of tailoring organisational strategies to the needs and characteristics of the care workforce. The “Safe Professions” Project (Professioni Sicure) is a broad outreach campaign for workers in the private care sector promoted by the FP CGIL in the city of Modena, Italy (Bolelli & Mori, 2025b, 18). If the private profit and non-profit care sector in Italy cannot be defined as “marginal”, its expansion largely escaped the control of the unions, which struggled to keep up with the pace of externalisations. Workers employed in the private sector tend to see the unions as service providers at best and resort to them only in this capacity or to solve individual grievances and issues once the contract is terminated. The FP CGIL Modena is pragmatically using these individual contact points to develop a campaign focused on targeting workloads and the consequences of their intensification. The “Safe Professions” project was created as a response to the growing number of support requests stemming from the onset of health conditions that impair workers' ability to perform job tasks. The main ambition of the project is “to use individual protection requests as a lever to challenge those employers' organisational strategies that contribute to worsening working conditions”. By systematically challenging terminations and suspensions, the union aims to put pressure on employers to negotiate improved workforce management practices that respect work-life balance and the health of workers. The primary objective is to establish regular working schedules and ensure sufficient rest time between shifts (Bolelli & Mori, 2025b, 22). Meanwhile, the union hopes to incentivise affiliation through the strengthening of counselling services and foster a more conscious and engaged form of participation, moving away from a service-oriented membership model (Bolelli & Mori, 2025b, 23). While it is too soon to evaluate longer-term goals, some results have already been achieved in terms of membership and outreach (Bolelli & Mori, 2025b, 24). Most importantly, **just like in the Danish case, the project had an impact on the organisation itself**, as the project managed to change the unions' approach to individual dispute resolution in the sector (Bolelli & Mori, 2025b, 25).

Efforts to promote organising in the care sector *within* representative bodies and the adaptation of organising strategies to the needs and characteristics of the care workforce emerge as fundamental stepping stones in the development of collective representation in the two sub-sectors.

Table 3. Strengthening Collective Representation and Increasing Membership

Report	Name of the Initiative	Actors	Brief Description
WP3DK	Organizing staff in private childcare institutions in Eastern Jutland	Danish Union of Early Childhood and Youth Educators (BUPL)	Pilot project to organize staff in small private daycare institutions. The union hired a dedicated consultant for the project who systematically mapped private institutions and reached out to the workers. It also set up a strong network of shop stewards who later supported the initiation of a collective bargaining process in most of these institutions.
WP3SK	Campaign for higher wages and individual responses in social care homes in the least developed parts of Slovakia - the Jasárima Social Care Home in the city of Rožňava, Eastern Slovakia.	Sectoral trade union SOZZaSS	Campaign for the improvement of working conditions and wages in care homes in one of the least developed areas in the country, the city of Rožňava in Eastern Slovakia. The campaign used a combination of traditional organising strategies, public protests, and media appearances.
WP3IT	The “Safe Professions” Project (Professioni Sicure)	TU: FP CGIL Modena	Tailored outreach campaign for workers in the private care sector, focusing on health and safety conditions in the context of intensified workloads. Goal: improving working conditions in workplaces and increasing membership and participation levels.

5. Conclusions

- This comparative report analyses a repertoire of actions that tackle the **three critical dimensions of work in the LTC and ECEC sub-sectors**: 1) the extension of collective bargaining coverage; 2) the tackling of labour and skills shortages; and 3) the increase of social partners' membership and the strengthening of collective representation.
- Within the WP3 reports, **four cases of extension of collective bargaining** have been reported (p. 4), which **challenge some of the core obstacles to the extension of collective bargaining of the respective industrial relations system**. The cases speak to the **fundamental role of workers' collective representation and action in affecting positive change**. On the other hand, they attest to the **public and political salience of the matter of working conditions in the care sector**.
- The safeguarding (and upgrading) of collective agreements in times of transition (p. 6) is one of the key strategies for **strengthening collective bargaining institutions**. Also on this front, **organising efforts are proven to be fundamental**. However, strategies to strengthen collective bargaining are also being collectively bargained and enshrined within the NCAs (p. 7), testifying to the **growing commitment of employers' associations to the promotion of the sector and the overcoming of downward competitive pressures**.
- **Most of the cases analysed within the national WP3 reports are initiatives aimed at tackling labour and skills shortages**. The strategies adopted to pursue this common goal, then, can be divided between the “high road” strategies, which include those initiatives that are primarily focused on job quality improvement and on the promotion of care work, and the “low road” strategies, which refer to those strategies that are primarily focused on expanding the labour supply through deskilling and migration, with marginal or low emphasis on the improvement of job quality.
- Five of the cases reviewed within the reports are “high road” strategies aiming to **increase attraction and retention** by focusing on **improving formal elements of the employment relationship** (p. 9), such as wages and working time, and increasing **job satisfaction** (p. 10), mostly through workers’ involvement, training, and personal incentives. There are also two examples of attraction strategies that are society-oriented, **publicly promoting the profession or attempting to include new groups of workers while also expanding service reach** (p. 11). The latter are the ones who have been evaluated more positively in terms of outcomes and provide an important **example of the potential impact of projects challenging prevailing cultural understandings of care work**.
- Three of the cases analysed can instead be classified as low road strategies because of their use of deskilling or migration to tackle labour shortages (p. 12). While these initiatives all promise to have some contextual positive outcomes and offer pragmatic responses to urgent needs, they **lack a long-term perspective on the promotion of care work and even risk confirming some negative cultural understandings of the sector**. Part of these limitations may stem from the fact that workers’ representatives did not play a role in the design or coordination of the projects, **failing to incorporate potentially constructive and beneficial inputs derived from workers’ perspectives and direct experience**.

- **Unions and workers' engagement continue to be essential to ensure that job quality remains a top priority for other social partners.** Workers' participation in the two sub-subsectors continues, however, to be sparse, as traditional unions continue to struggle with adjusting their strategies to meet the specific needs of the care sector and its workforce. Three of the initiatives analysed within the national WP3 reports attempt to address this struggle: the three cases are an **example of attempts of traditional unions to expand their field of action** and enact innovative representation strategies (p. 14). In all three cases, efforts to **promote organising in the care sector *within* representative bodies** and the **adaptation of organising strategies to the needs and characteristics of the care workforce** emerge as **fundamental stepping stones** in the development of collective representation in the two sub-sectors.

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