



Challenges for Organising and Collective Bargaining
in Care, Administration and Waste collection sectors
in Central Eastern European Countries

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NEWSLETTER

No. 1



Unlocking Collective Bargaining Power in Three Sectors: A Call to Action

The **CEE CAW** project is a groundbreaking initiative aimed at transforming the future of collective bargaining in three critical sectors (**care services, public administration, and waste management**) across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Serbia. This initiative aims to **empower trade unions and elevate sectoral engagement** in line with the EU's Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages.

The project aims to support trade unions at both sectoral and national levels in implementing the goals indicated in Article 4 of the Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages in the EU. Namely, the establishment and implementation of national action plans to develop collective bargaining in member states where collective bargaining coverage is currently less than 80%.

In the first phase of the project partners and experts conducted fieldwork in all CEE countries that focused on the analysis of the state of social dialogue and collective bargaining in the indicated sectors and an analysis of the expectations and needs of national trade unions concerning the implementation of Article 4 (CB development) in CEE countries. The diagnostic phase was concluded with a fieldwork seminar that took place in Belgrade, Serbia on 3-4 September 2024.

Fieldwork Seminar Highlights: Belgrade – A Space for Progress

The CEE CAW fieldwork seminar in Belgrade allowed for a lively discussion of the situation in the three sectors and the general state of collective bargaining in CEE. Discussed were the challenges faced by trade unions in organising workers, with a recurring theme in the speeches being the issue of labour shortages (in the care and waste sectors) and the attempt to answer the question of what it means.

Participants pointed out the need to collect and highlight good practices in comparative reports, hoping to inspire social partners' activities.

The Belgrade seminar was the space to record short statements that will make it possible to create films on collective bargaining and the general challenges in the three sectors targeted by the project.

At this stage of the project, a preliminary summary of the material collected so far can be made.



State of Collective Bargaining in CEE: Key Insights

Let us shed light on the state of collective bargaining in Central and Eastern European countries. Initially, it must be highlighted that the level of collective bargaining coverage is the lowest in CEE countries compared to Western European countries and remains below the EU average (except for Slovenia, where the level slightly exceeds the EU average). Poland is at the bottom of the list with levels of 10-15% of collective bargaining coverage. As Sławomir Adamczyk, CEE CAW project expert, of NSZZ "Solidarność" points out: the overall picture of the state of collective bargaining in CEE countries is rather worrying. The weakening of the position of trade unions in the countries of the region over several years (despite their accession to the EU) has been accompanied by a marked decline in collective bargaining coverage. However, the situation does occasionally improve - in Lithuania, there has recently been a visible increase in coverage, driven by increased collective bargaining coverage in the public sector (a cross-sectoral collective agreement with the government as the intermediate employer).

The legal framework for collective bargaining is in place, although trade unions tend to rely more on legislation enacted by public authorities than on the results of collective bargaining when it comes to regulating working environment issues. Too often collective agreements simply copy the existing legal framework. There are no examples of the impact of new challenges in the world of work, such as climate change, technological change or the impact of labour migration, being taken into account in the list of issues to be negotiated.



The problem of sectoral bargaining is evident across the whole CEE region. Some successes in the public sector (mainly since in some cases the public authorities, which simply means, the government, decide to sign such agreements) cannot hide the fact that in the private sector employers generally do not give their organisations a mandate to negotiate and conclude sectoral agreements. The situation regarding the implementation of Article 4 of the Adequate Minimum Wage Directive is still unclear. For example, in the case of Hungary, the message from the government is that in principle the country does not need to make any specific legal adjustments as the objectives of the Directive are ensured by the current legislation. In Poland, there is a government proposal for a new law on collective agreements, but it seems that the biggest legal achievement in implementing the directive will be the creation of a reliable and up-to-date register of collective agreements.

It is worrying that social partners seem willing to wait for the government to propose an action plan to promote collective agreements. Independent trade union action to demonstrate to the public the importance and relevance of the directive is basically non-existent.

At this point, let us turn to preliminary remarks on the three sectors to which the project is dedicated.

Sector-Specific Challenges: Time for Strategic Action

Care Sector: Prioritising Workers' Welfare

Maciej Pańków, the Institute of Public Affairs, points out that the care sector throughout the CEE region faces many problems, mainly due to insufficient funding, which hurts both working conditions and wages. The jobs are simply unattractive compared to other sectors and lead to significant staff shortages, with some workers resigning and moving to sectors where workers are better paid (e.g. health care). Additionally, there is a shortage of young candidates, with a significant ageing of the workforce. All of this leads to overwork and exacerbates the disadvantages that workers experience due to the nature of work in the sector. These include the burdensome and exhausting nature of the tasks, emotional work, exposure to violations of various labour rights, the threat of aggression from customers and bullying from supervisors, the risk of infection at work, or the lack of social respect and recognition. The situation of workers is exacerbated by the high degree of feminisation of the sector: women feel less confident in the labour market and are less likely to make demands to improve working conditions, as they feel they are at greater risk of retaliation by employers than men. The shortage of workers in the sector is not effectively filled by workers from third countries: they are simply not interested in working in the sector. Problems and challenges arising from the events of recent years and current trends in societies and policies concerning the organisation of the care sector were rarely mentioned and are usually not highlighted. For example, the concept of deinstitutionalisation was reacted to in some countries, sometimes

emphasising its importance, but also criticising the approach (this may be due to the undoubted over-representation of representatives of the public sector and 'traditional', formal care institutions among trade unionists).

Disruptive factors in some countries include for example, fragmentation of the sector (different sub-sectors under different ministries or levels of local and national government) and a lack of coordination or endless attempts at reform.

The extent to which social dialogue mechanisms address some of the above issues in the care sector varies considerably between countries. There are countries where collective bargaining coverage is high or relatively high - e.g. Slovenia and Bulgaria, but there are also some countries where collective agreements are practically non-existent, such as Poland. In some countries, collective disputes or industrial action, considered by some respondents to be more effective than collective bargaining, are the means of putting pressure on the employer. Even where collective agreements are in place, their impact on working conditions and pay is not always satisfactory for workers. Sometimes agreements are not respected because of financial constraints imposed by the government or local authorities. This in turn is one of the factors that undermines interest in joining trade unions. In some countries, however, good practices in organising workers have been identified: unions have gained recognition and some interest through their determination and active efforts to improve workers' welfare. Overall, however, the sector is in many cases overshadowed by the healthcare sector, both in terms of the structure of social partner organisations and the proportion of sector-related issues present on the social dialogue agenda. In some countries there is even lack of separate trade union structures, hence care workers may be the members of unions for healthcare or, in the case of ECEC, education trade unions structures. The social dialogue agenda is often dominated with issues specific to healthcare, where trade unionists often have a stronger bargaining position and can negotiate better working conditions than representatives of the care sector.



Central Public Administration: Addressing the Poly-Crisis Impact

Commenting on the public administration sector Dr. Jan Czarzasty, the Institute of Public Affairs and SGH Warsaw School of Economics, points out that work intensity seems to have increased in recent years. This could be attributed to a number of reasons, among which the ongoing poly-crisis plays a major role. The poly-crisis comprises various specific crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, the war in Ukraine, the economic crisis/stagnation, inflation and its impact on real wages, the political crisis (democracy under pressure), the energy crisis, the environmental/climate crisis, the migration crisis or the demographic crisis, to name only the most obvious. The specific crises tend to intertwine, diffuse and merge. The state has to deal with the poly-crisis, which means an ever-increasing burden on the shoulders of its servants, first and foremost those people in CPA. Unfortunately, more work is too often neither properly remunerated nor carried out under proper working conditions. Neo-liberal tendencies, although weaker than in previous decades, are still present in public policy and translate into pressure to reduce public spending, leading to austerity measures that seriously affect public administration. The stagnation of nominal wage growth, combined with the inflation of recent years, is leading to a real fall in real wages and the impoverishment of workers. As a result, the interest of young people in choosing this career path is declining. Ultimately, the labour shortage is growing. CPA in Central and Eastern Europe also must deal with some structural issues, such as hierarchical management models that limit the space for articulating workers' interests and, more recently, the challenge of the digitalisation of public services. Finally, in many countries, there are certain legal restrictions on collective bargaining, strikes or trade union membership.



Waste Management: Seizing Opportunities in Green Jobs

Barbara Surdykowska, the Institute of Public Affairs, draws attention to the short paper by Wouter Zwysen (Green transformation and job quality: risks for worker representation, ETUI Technical Brief, February 2002). Zwysen points out that the results show that jobs in more polluting sectors tend to be characterised by relatively good conditions, in the sense that they are more likely than average to be covered by a collective agreement and have above-average union density and access to worker representation. The number of these brown jobs is declining as a result of the policies stemming from the European Green Deal. The ETUI researcher stresses that a decline in these brown jobs, without an increase in collective bargaining coverage elsewhere, would therefore lead to a decline in collective bargaining overall. This would be particularly problematic in some Central and Eastern European countries, which generally have lower collective bargaining coverage as compared to Western Europe. In other words, trade unions must pay particular attention to organising workers in the sectors where 'green jobs' are being created. Some of the simplest examples of 'green jobs' are those related to recycling, the processing of raw materials and waste, and the implementation of elements of a circular economy.

Unfortunately, none of the national reports show any trade union activity aimed at organising recycling workers. The level of unionisation of classic waste workers, i.e. waste collectors (i.e. people who collect waste), is also low (and there are no attempts, according to the national reports, to change this state of affairs).



Consequently (and this is also due to the general decline of collective bargaining in Central and Eastern Europe, with very few exceptions), the number of collective agreements in the waste sector is negligible. We have not been able to identify any agreement provisions that address the specific needs of these workers. Nor is there any increase in training. This calls into question the hypothesis that, in the context of the European Green Deal and the development of the circular economy, the skill profiles of waste management workers need to be strengthened and that they need to be trained more intensively.

The second issue that needs to be tentatively highlighted is that, according to the literature, all Central and Eastern European countries (with the exception of Slovenia) will have definite problems in achieving the indicators envisaged in the individual steps of building a circular economy. However, the scale of the challenges may be such that other pieces of the puzzle than the working conditions and skills of the waste management workforce are attracting the attention of public authorities.

Next Steps: Shaping the Future Together

All 12 national reports are planned to be published in Autumn 2024 – stay tuned!

Based on the national inputs, four comparative analytical reports will be drafted by the experts of the Institute of Public Affairs – each referring to the sectors under scrutiny and one report elaborating on the developments related to the collective bargaining systems and implementation of Art. 4 of the Adequate Minimum Wage Directive.

The conclusion of the comparative analysis will be presented and discussed during four online scientific seminars, which are planned to take place in the first half of 2025.

In order to increase the capacity of trade unions in the three sectors to engage in collective bargaining, five National Collective Bargaining Boost Workshops will be conducted in Poland, Slovakia, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Serbia. These CB Boost Workshops will also allow European Federation of Public Service Unions to increase their visibility and representativeness in the CEE countries.

The conclusions of the CB Boost Workshops will be reported in the second newsletter.

Under the project, policy papers will be developed that can serve as a basis for further work and discussion for social partners in CEE countries and inspire public authorities.

The project will culminate in a Roundtable in Brussels, which will allow for a broad stakeholder debate.



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Stay tuned for our next newsletter, which will provide further updates and new developments.

