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Social Dialogue: An Essential Element of European Cohesion and Competitiveness

Gianfranco Brusaporci and Riccardo Fazioli *

Abstract. Globalisation and recent crises - including the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation, geopolitical conflicts, and rising raw material costs - have placed European competitiveness under severe pressure. This uncertainty disproportionately affects workers, as evidenced by the growing number of working poor across the European Union. In response, the European Commission is developing new strategies following the Mario Draghi report, while political debate on economic competitiveness intensifies. This paper argues that strengthening the social dimension of the European economic model is essential to address these challenges. Social dialogue and collective bargaining are not only mechanisms for improving wages, working conditions, and workers' rights but also strategic tools for enhancing the competitiveness of European companies. The European Pillar of Social Rights identifies social dialogue as a cornerstone of EU policy, reaffirmed by the Val Duchesse Tripartite Declaration of January 2024, which emphasizes its role in fostering social cohesion and democratic resilience. By analysing the central role of social partners at both European and national levels, this study highlights how coordinated actions, negotiations, and agreements can mitigate socio-economic risks and support sustainable growth. Particular attention is given to European Sectoral Social Dialogue, which enables tailored solutions for specific industries through joint initiatives and agreements. These sectoral mechanisms are critical for developing a competitive model that combines economic performance with social equity, ensuring that

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Europe remains globally competitive while safeguarding its social fabric and demonstrating that effective social dialogue is indispensable for reconciling economic objectives with social justice in the European Union. This article then advances the debate by highlighting the strategic role of sectoral social dialogue in fostering sustainable European competitiveness.

Keywords: *European sectoral social dialogue; Collective bargaining; European economic competitiveness; Participation; European cohesion; Social rights.*

1. Introduction

The current public debate is focused on European Competitiveness. The so-called Draghi Report which was presented in September 2024 starts with this statement: “Europe has the foundations in place to be a highly competitive economy. The European model combines an open economy, a high degree of market competition and a strong legal framework and active policies to fight poverty and redistribute wealth. This model has allowed the EU to marry high levels of economic integration and human development with low levels of inequality. Europe has built a Single Market of 440 million consumers and 23 million companies, accounting for around 17% of global GDP”¹. Unfortunately, today, EU is asking itself how to keep and improve these conditions. The last years and recent events have highlighted the weaknesses of European competitiveness. Between 2000 and 2014 the EU lost 8% of the worldwide value added in manufacturing value chains² and at the same time working poors are increasing year by year passing from 8% up to 10% in 2017³. In 2022 around 95.3 million people, 22% of the population, were indeed at risk of poverty or social exclusion⁴. Thus, economic growth together with social inclusion, which has been representing an essential part of contemporary European history, is under attack. This study seeks to enrich our understanding of the current situation of European competitiveness and in particular the sectoral competitiveness link to the specific role of the European social dialogue as a key element to tackle emergencies and new challenges, such as the recent pandemic, the Russian Ukrainian War, the inflation, the increasing manufacturing and economic role of other international players, the demographic, green and digital transition, etc.

¹ See The future of European competitiveness - Part A, European Commission, 2024;

² See JRC, Technical Report on European Competitiveness, European Commission, 2021;

³ Eurofound, European workers at risk of poverty, 2017;

⁴ Eurostat, People at risk of poverty or social exclusion, 2023;

This article is trying to contribute to the current public debate on European competitiveness by answering this research question: "Why European Sectoral Social Dialogue can influence the European Competitiveness?". It presents a new study of European competitiveness using the literature of European social dialogue and sectoral collective bargaining trying to explain that a higher level of employee-participation will permit higher sectoral performance and resilience. The research frames its analysis around the concept of social dialogue which can improve the following aspects: a) better management towards changes; b) better management of conflicts; c) improvement of social inclusion processes and reduction of inequalities. The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on European competitiveness pointing out the relevance of the economic sectoral dimension and the social dimension at the European and national level. In particular section 2.4 illustrates the theoretical innovation of adding a complementary framework to European competitiveness, assessing the concept of European Sectoral Competitiveness which links the sectoral economic dimension to the social one. In Section 3 the article demonstrates the theoretical framework analysing the current situation and its limits, providing empirical examples developed by the cross-sectoral European social dialogue and the national sectoral collective bargaining. Reinforcing European sectoral social dialogue, then, able to include both social dimension and sectoral dimension, the EU could rise its competitiveness. Our final section is devoted to a summary and discussion.

2. European Competitiveness and The Key Role of Social Dialogue

2.1. European Competitiveness: The Essence of The Economic and Sectoral Dimension

The recent pandemic of Covid-19, the new global scenario and the new challenges that the EU is facing have put under the spotlight the economic horizon of Europe. To be competitive the EU needs to value its social aspect and at the same time it should develop new sectoral policies to meet its ambitions.

Competitiveness is a multifaceted concept that gains clarity when analyzed through a sectoral lens. Indeed, each sector has different peculiarities,

such as cost structure, technologies, and market dynamics⁵; each sector is involved in various global value chains and interconnected through the exchange of intermediate goods⁶; each sector can play a specific role in economic growth and job creation⁷. Thus, analyzing competitiveness at the sectoral level helps identify key sectors for economic development. Mario Draghi's report – "EU competitiveness. Looking ahead" (2024) - in particular in its detailed analysis of Part-B, pointed out that there is a need to focus on specific economic sectors which have tailored needs⁸. Draghi states, therefore, that European competitiveness is based on an essential sectoral dimension. Indeed, the sectoral dimension is crucial because it highlights the strengths and weaknesses of different industries, which aggregate to influence overall economic performance. Indeed, the sectoral dimension of the concept of competitiveness has been discussed also by various scholars such as Krugman, Porter and others. Paul Krugman's "Competitiveness: A Dangerous Obsession" (1994) critiques the overemphasis on national competitiveness, arguing that it can lead to misguided policies. Krugman suggests that focusing on sectoral competitiveness provides a more accurate and actionable understanding of economic performance, as it avoids the pitfalls of treating nations like corporations competing in zero-sum games⁹. Porter's "The Competitive Advantage of Nations" (1990) introduces the so-called "diamond model", which identifies four key attributes that determine national competitive advantage: factor conditions, demand conditions, related and supporting industries, and firm strategy, structure, and rivalry. Porter underscores that competitive advantage is often rooted in specific sectors where these attributes are most favorable¹⁰. Similarly, Enn Listra's "The Concept of Competition and the Objectives of Competitors" (2019)¹¹ discusses how competition and competitiveness are context-dependent, varying across different sectors and levels of analysis. Listra's framework helps to understand how sector-specific factors, such as market structure and

⁵ Kancs A. and Kielyte J., *Analysing Sectoral Competitiveness: A Framework of Strategic Management*, 2001;

⁶ Marczak M. and Beissinger T., *Competitiveness at The Country Sector Level: New Measures Based On Global Value Chains*, 2018;

⁷ Ketels C., *Structural Transformation: A competitiveness-based view*, 2017;

⁸ See *The future of European competitiveness - Part B*, European Commission, 2024;

⁹ Krugman P., *Competitiveness: A Dangerous Obsession*, *Foreign Affairs*, 73(2), 28-44, 1994;

¹⁰ Porter M., *The Competitive Advantage of Nations*, 1990;

¹¹ Listra E., *The Concept of Competition and the Objectives of Competitors*, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 213, 25-30, 2019;

competitive strategies, shape the competitive landscape¹². Finally, it is important to mention also the Key Findings of the Global Competitiveness Index 2017–2018 developed by the World Economic Forum which further supports the sectoral dimension by identifying 12 pillars of competitiveness, such as infrastructure, macroeconomic stability, and innovation capability. These pillars vary significantly across different sectors, influencing their competitive dynamics and potential for growth¹³. With regard to this assumption, which indicates that the sectoral dimension is primary for improving economic competitiveness, we can say that European social dialogue represents a key element which can positively contribute to European competitiveness. It highlights then the importance of tailored solutions that address the unique challenges and opportunities within specific industries, ultimately contributing to a more robust, inclusive and sustainable competitive advantage for the broader economy.

2.2. Competitiveness: The Essence of The European Social Dimension

This section emphasizes the critical role of the social dialogue in the broader context of enhancing European economic competitiveness. The ongoing debate on this topic underscores that achieving higher competitiveness in Europe is not solely a matter of economic policies but also requires a strong foundation of European social dialogue. The involvement of social partners, such as trade unions, employers' associations, and other relevant entities, is essential for maintaining the stability and resilience of the European social model, which in turn supports economic growth and competitiveness. Grimshaw, Koukiadaki, and Tavora (2017)¹⁴ assess, indeed, the importance of social dialogue for economic performance, emphasizing its benefits for businesses. Social dialogue fosters cooperation and trust between employers and employees, leading to more innovative and productive workplaces. Moreover, the document “Strengthening social dialogue in the European Union. In “An

¹² Listra E., op.cit., pp. 25-30;

¹³ World Economic Forum, Key Findings of the Global Competitiveness Index 2017-2018, 2017;

¹⁴ Grimshaw D., Koukiadaki A. and Tavora I., Social Dialogue and Economic Performance: What Matters for Business - A Review, International Labour Organization, 2017;

Economy that Works for People”¹⁵ highlights the necessity of robust social dialogue mechanisms to manage fair transitions in the labor market and to strengthen collective bargaining at both the EU and national levels. This approach ensures that economic advancements do not come at the expense of social equity and workers’ rights, thereby fostering a more inclusive and sustainable economic environment. In addition, the Porto Social Agenda¹⁶ reaffirms the commitment to the European Pillar of Social Rights, emphasizing the importance of social cohesion and the active involvement of social partners in the recovery process. This agenda outlines specific actions to promote fair working conditions, social protection, and equal opportunities, which are crucial for a balanced and competitive European economy. At the Val Duchesse Summit (2024) EU leaders and social partners renewed their commitment to addressing economic and labor challenges through strengthened social dialogue¹⁷. This summit underscored the importance of collaborative efforts to tackle issues such as unemployment, skills mismatches, and the digital and green transitions, which are pivotal for enhancing Europe’s competitive edge. Mario Draghi’s report (2024) discusses the need for sustainable competitiveness, highlighting that economic resilience and innovation are deeply intertwined with effective social dialogue¹⁸. Draghi argues that fostering a resilient economic environment requires not only sound economic policies but also strong social frameworks that support innovation and adaptability in the workforce. Similarly, Enrico Letta’s “Report on the Future of the Single Market” (2024) stresses the importance of a robust Single Market supported by effective social policies. Letta emphasizes that economic integration and competitiveness are significantly enhanced when social policies are aligned with market dynamics, ensuring that the benefits of economic growth are widely shared and contribute to social stability¹⁹.

Thus, following the perspectives of these analysis and institutional documents we can state that a real integration of social dialogue into the economic framework is indispensable for increasing the level and the resilience of European competitiveness. By ensuring that workforce and social partners are actively involved in shaping economic policies, Europe

¹⁵ European Parliament, Strengthening social dialogue in the European Union. In “An Economy that Works for People”, 20 settembre 2024;

¹⁶ European Council, Porto Social Agenda, 7 maggio 2021;

¹⁷ Val Duchesse Tripartite Declaration, firmata dai partner sociali europei, dalla Commissione UE e dalla Presidenza belga del Consiglio dell’Unione Europea, 2024;

¹⁸ See The future of European competitiveness - Part A, op.cit.;

¹⁹ Letta E., Report on the Future of the Single Market, European Commission, 2024;

can achieve a more balanced and sustainable growth trajectory that benefits all its citizens. In particular, to enhance its competitiveness the EU should relaunch the various European sectoral social dialogues.

2.3. Competitiveness: The Essence of the National Social Dimension

With regard to the value of the social dimension at national level, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of sectoral collective bargaining, where social partners help to effectively manage changes, conflicts, emergencies, and adopt an inclusive approach while maintaining the social cohesion of a territory. According to Traxler and Brandl (2012), indeed, sectoral collective bargaining structures significantly influence macroeconomic performance by balancing productivity differences across sectors²⁰. This balancing act is essential in ensuring that sectors exposed to international competition remain competitive while protecting those that are more sheltered. Brandl and Traxler (2010) highlight that economic and institutional determinants play a crucial role in labor conflicts, which can be mitigated through effective collective bargaining²¹. By addressing these conflicts proactively, collective bargaining helps maintain industrial peace and stability, which are vital for economic growth and competitiveness. Moreover, Traxler (2003) discusses how the centralization or decentralization of bargaining impacts macroeconomic performance and control over employment relationships²². Specifically, centralized bargaining can lead to more uniform wage structures and working conditions, which can reduce inequality and improve overall economic performance. Braakmann and Brandl (2016) find that hybrid collective bargaining systems - which combine elements of both centralized and decentralized bargaining – can positively impact company performance in Europe²³. These systems allow for flexibility and adaptability, enabling

²⁰ Traxler F. and Brandl B., Collective Bargaining, Inter-Sectoral Heterogeneity and Competitiveness: A Cross-National Comparison of Macroeconomic Performance, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 50(1), 73-98, 2012;

²¹ Brandl B. and Traxler F., Labour Conflicts: A Cross-national Analysis of Economic and Institutional Determinants, 1971–2002, *European Sociological Review*, 26(5), 519-540, 2010;

²² Traxler F., Bargaining (De)Centralization, Macroeconomic Performance and Control over the Employment Relationship, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 41(1), 1-27, 2003;

²³ Braakmann N. and Brandl B., The Efficacy of Hybrid Collective Bargaining Systems: An Analysis of the Impact of Collective Bargaining on Company Performance in Europe, MPRA Paper No.70025, 2016;

companies to respond more effectively to economic changes and challenges. Brandl and Bechter (2016) analyze how the economic crisis has transformed collective bargaining systems in the EU, leading to more hybrid and multi-layered structures²⁴. These transformations have made collective bargaining more resilient and capable of addressing complex economic challenges. Similarly, Pernicka (2021) uses a social field perspective to explain the forces of reproduction and change in collective bargaining²⁵. This perspective highlights the dynamic nature of collective bargaining, which evolves in response to social and economic pressures and challenges. Finally, Garnero (2021) provides evidence that collective bargaining can reduce unemployment and wage inequality, highlighting the benefits of coordinated bargaining systems²⁶. By ensuring fair wages and working conditions, collective bargaining contributes to social cohesion and economic stability.

Sectoral collective bargaining, therefore, is an essential element for enhancing European competitiveness. It not only helps manage economic and social changes but also promotes a more flexible, inclusive and equitable labor market.

2.4. A New Framework for Assessing “European Sectoral Competitiveness”

As we have discussed above, the relevance of the social dimension in European economics is underscored by various academic studies and official documents from European institutions. The social dialogue represents a practice which not only addresses immediate labor market issues but also contributes to the broader goal of sustainable economic growth²⁷. Moreover, we have seen the importance of the sectoral dimension when we evaluate the competitiveness of an economic system. By combining these two aspects, we can therefore say that European Sectoral Social Dialogue should be strengthened to achieve higher competitiveness for European industries and economy. It will support fair

²⁴ Brandl B. and B., The Hybridization of National Collective Bargaining Systems: The Impact of the Economic Crisis on the Transformation of Collective Bargaining in the European Union, *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 37(1), 9-28, 2016;

²⁵ Pernicka S., Forces of Reproduction and Change in Collective Bargaining: A Social Field Perspective, 2021;

²⁶ Garnero A., The impact of collective bargaining on employment and wage inequality: Evidence from a new taxonomy of bargaining systems, *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 27(2), 185-202, 2021;

²⁷ European Commission, Sustainable economic growth and social dialogue, 2023;

transitions in the face of global challenges, ensuring that the European workforce is resilient and adaptable. Figure 1 below represents the central role of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue.

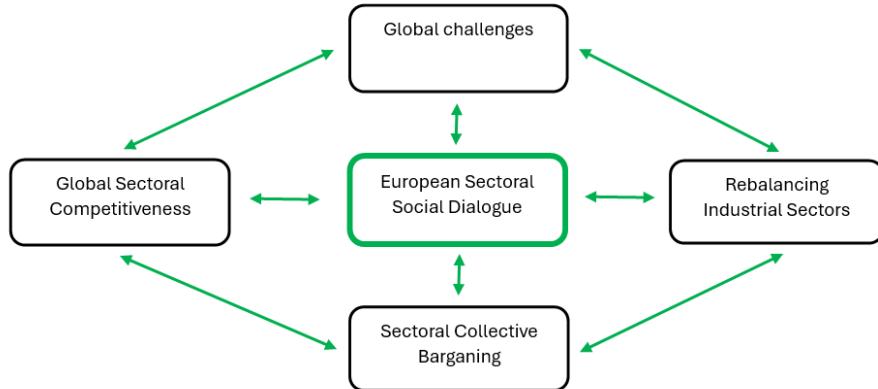


Figure 1 (Own elaboration)

In the face of global challenges, such as the recent pandemic, economic fluctuations, technological advancements, and environmental concerns, the need for robust and adaptive strategies to maintain and enhance global sectoral competitiveness has never been more critical (see Figure n.1). One of the pivotal mechanisms that can substantially address these challenges is the European Sectoral Social Dialogue. It serves as a cornerstone for fostering cooperation between employers and workers - with responsibility, vision and commitment - ensuring that both parties can navigate the complexities of the modern industrial and economic landscape.

A consolidated European Sectoral Social Dialogue, capable of defining and framing the priorities of the main European economic sectors, can indeed play a crucial role in rebalancing these sectors by promoting fair and equitable working conditions, which in turn enhances productivity and innovation. This dialogue should be increasingly instrumental in shaping solutions that are responsive to the needs of various sectors, thereby ensuring that European industries remain competitive on a global scale.

A key component of this dialogue is also the national sectoral collective bargaining. European Social dialogue and collective bargaining are more and more intertwined. They contribute to the improvement of working conditions, and various employment terms at the sectoral level, ensuring that agreements are tailored to the specific needs and challenges of each industry. By fostering a culture of negotiation and compromise, sectoral social dialogue and collective bargaining help to create a stable and

predictable industrial environment, which is essential for long-term competitiveness. This concept is also mentioned in the new Directive of the EU on the adequate minimum wages in the European Union (2022). Thus, an effective European Sectoral Social Dialogue is an indispensable tool for enhancing global sectoral competitiveness. It ensures that European industries can meet global challenges head-on, fostering a competitive, innovative, and socially responsible industrial landscape. In figure 2 below we show our thesis referring to the conceptual framework of Goertz (2006)²⁸. This new framework is explained in light of the current political and economic situation of Europe. Our thesis can be explained by distinguishing three different levels of concepts. The first level identifies the main phenomenon of the study, the second represents the definition or the specification of the first level, while the third one is the operationalization of each attribute specified on the second level. The concepts are delineated with a scale down, from the more abstract to the more concrete. Under these conditions, our main contribution can be presented as follows:

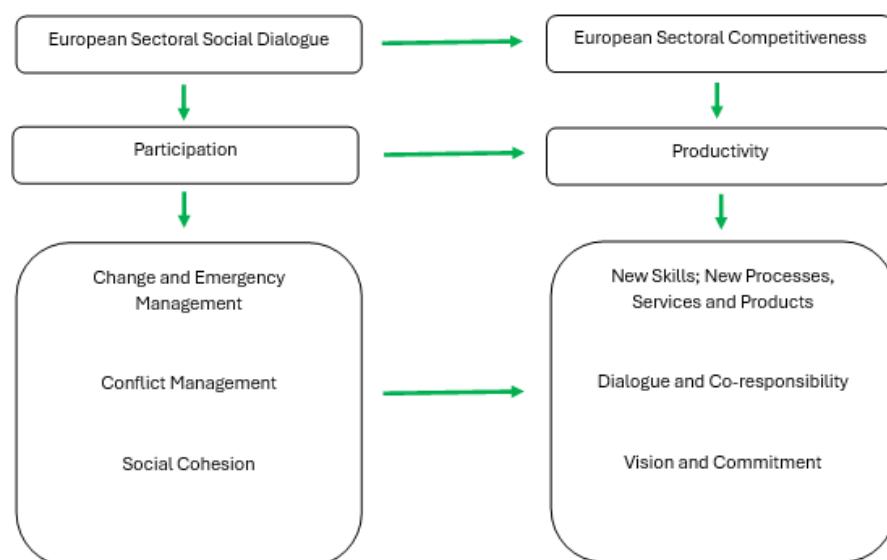


Figure 2 (Own elaboration)

Our conceptual framework, therefore, aims to demonstrate that there is a compelling correlation between a strong European sectoral social dialogue and effective European sectoral competitiveness. This is because we consider social dialogue as an essential aspect of employee participation

²⁸ Goertz G., Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide, Princeton University Press, 2006;

which fosters productivity. In 1990, Biagi underlined that participation and social dialogue represent key elements in addressing technological innovations. He also stressed the relevance of a cultural transformation in society to embrace changes in the labor market²⁹. Krekel, Ward and De Neve (2019) studied the correlation between employee well-being and firm performance³⁰. In their study, the meta-analysis of 339 independent cases demonstrated that employee well-being is deeply correlated with customer satisfaction and reduced turnover, both of which positively influence productivity. Galeazzo, Furlan and Vinelli (2021) explored the role of employee participation and managerial authority in the context of continuous improvement initiatives³¹. Employee participation was identified as a key factor for the success of continuous improvement initiatives, which in turn improve productivity. Moreover, a statistic developed by Gallup (2013) revealed that companies with higher employee engagement experienced a 21% boost in productivity compared to those with lower engagement levels³². The famous theory of Total Quality Management (TQM) also highlights the relevance of the engagement of the employees. Edwards Deming is the author who has most emphasized the crucial role of workers in TQM³³. He stressed that quality cannot be achieved without the active involvement of all members of the organization. Deming promoted the idea that workers must be trained, motivated, and involved in decision-making processes to continuously improve quality. In particular he defined the so-called “Deming Cycle” or PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act), which encourages a systematic and collaborative approach to continuous improvement. This cycle requires the contribution and participation of all employees to identify and solve quality problems³⁴.

Finally, analysing the last level of the model, we can state that positive employee participation represents a higher level of change and emergency

²⁹ Biagi M., *La nuova disciplina del lavoro a termine*, Ipsos, p.49, 2002;

³⁰ Krekel C., Ward G. and De Neve J., *Employee Well-being, Productivity, and Firm Performance*, Saïd Business School Working Paper 2019-04, 2019;

³¹ Galeazzo A., Furlan A. and Vinelli A., *The role of employees' participation and managers' authority on continuous improvement and performance*, *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, 41(13), 34-64, 2021;

³² Gallup, *Employee engagement and productivity statistics. State of the Global Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for Business Leaders Worldwide*, Gallup Press, 2013;

³³ See Deming E. W., *Out of the Crisis*, Center for Advanced Engineering Study, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1982 and *The New Economics for Industry, Government, Education*, MIT Press, 1993;

³⁴ Deming E. W., *The New Economics for Industry*, op.cit.;

management. This translates into new skills and competences among workers of the sector which can foster major innovations within the specific industry. In addition, participation means a higher level of conflict management and better social cohesion which can lead effective co-responsibility between employers and employees, increasing commitment, improving the quality of work and reducing turnover³⁵.

3. Examining the Current Context and New Proposed Framework

3.1. *The European Cross-Sectoral Social Dialogue: A Solid Instrument to Match Only Broad Needs*

The so-called cross-sectoral European social dialogue - involving on the side of the European trade unions ETUC and on the side of the employers in the EU, Business Europe (private sector), UEAPME (SMEs) and CEEP (public employers) - is able to come up with concrete initiatives, analysing issues that are deemed to be of interest to all parties³⁶. It has a positive perspective to impact all industries and the entire employed population in Europe, but it has the limitation of not being able to address the specificities of single sectors and therefore improve their competitiveness.

The importance of social dialogue as a democratic instrument capable of regulating relations between workers and employers, meeting the needs of both, finds one of its highest expressions when it has a cross-sectoral focus. In this case, the decisions that are the result of the confrontations between the parties transversally involve all economic sectors, laying the regulatory foundations on different and diverse aspects of working life.

The cross-sectoral European social dialogue plays an essential role in responding to the general social, environmental, economic and technological changes that arise, and in moving forward in the essential process that is European integration. It has produced important results, but it is not able to tailor specific solutions to the sectoral value chains. Social partners and their involvement in the cross-sectoral European social dialogue have evolved positively, producing important outcomes over time such as: frameworks of action, autonomous framework agreements and work programmes linked to the negotiating relationships. Among the main framework agreements resulting from the European

³⁵ Cheryl M.T., Your Guide to Employee Participation: What It Is and How To Increase It, AIHHR, 2024;

³⁶ See ETUC, Business Europe, UEAPME, & CEEP. (2022, 2023, 2024). Cross-sectoral European social dialogue agreements;

social dialogue, mention must be made of the Framework Agreement on stress in the workplace (2004), the one on Harassment and Violence at Work (2007), the one on Teleworking (2020), the one on Active Ageing (2017) and finally the one on Inclusive Labour Markets (2010). Here it should be recalled that these agreements between the European social partners could have, but did not, become a source of European legislation, in fact through the transposition of the agreement into a European directive, since the Treaties fully legitimise the fruit of the European social dialogue as a productive source of law (the agreements mentioned above remained agreements between the parties, but were implemented at the national level, by the national organisations belonging to the signatory parties)³⁷. It should be noted that among the framework agreements transposed into European directives, there is the agreement on parental leave³⁸, the agreement on part-time work³⁹ and also the agreement on fixed-term employment contracts⁴⁰.

In addition, a number of so-called action frameworks were negotiated, which have less binding potential than framework agreements. The topics covered by these agreements are various: youth employment, vocational skills and the issue of gender equality. With respect to the latter agreements, it must be emphasized that their potential lies in outlining guidelines of political priorities for action that are monitored. Finally, again at the level of the European social partners, so-called 'work programmes' have been concluded, which have had a positive impact, broadening the scope compared to the above-mentioned agreements and dealing with subjects such as digitalization, the topic of company restructuring, and also the involvement of the social partners in the European Semester.

The issues addressed between the European social partners have, as we have listed, produced tangible results, but it remains decisive to remember that the legitimacy of these democratic subjects has been consolidated over the years and must be reaffirmed by strengthening trade union and employers' action to produce real changes by implementing the agreements concluded. The cross-sectoral European social dialogue is well

³⁷ See Lapeyre J., *The European Social Dialogue, The history of social innovation (1985-2003)*, European Trade Union Institute, 2018;

³⁸ Directive 2010/18/EU. Implementation of the framework agreement on parental leave concluded by UNICE, CEEP, and ETUC;

³⁹ Directive 1997/81/EC. Implementation of the framework agreement on part-time work concluded by UNICE, CEEP, and ETUC;

⁴⁰ Directive 1999/70/EC. Implementation of the framework agreement on fixed-term work concluded by UNICE, CEEP, and ETUC;

structured and can really respond to issues that cut across many sectors, but the challenges for the future of Europe, which put European competitiveness at the centre, cannot afford the specific issues of interest of an increasingly specialised economy and sectoral value chains that are increasingly integrated at a global level. As we mentioned above, the European sectoral social dialogue can therefore be a key to responding to the lack of coordination that exists in Europe with respect to sectoral needs and new challenges, bringing to the attention of the European institutions the solutions that are deemed suitable to contribute to the growth of a given sector.

3.2. The Italian “CCNLs”: A Solid Instrument to Tailor Sectoral Needs but Only at the National Level

In accordance to our conceptual framework, national sectoral collective bargaining can afford the specific needs of a sector facilitating the innovation and the adaptability of the companies, improving their productivity and standardizing the working conditions, but it has the geographical limitation of being valid in a single country, which is not sufficient to address global challenges. If we look at the sectors that drive Europe we see different levels of collective bargaining in individual countries. In Italy we have an excellent coverage which is over 90% with multiple contracts covering all economic sectors. In particular, in Italy we see a strong collective bargaining, capable of guaranteeing workers' rights, which also enters into the organisation of work and which, albeit with differences that depend on the sector's performance, provides a response in times of crisis by trying to keep employment levels intact, and provides a response in times of expansion of the sector by trying to redistribute economic and welfare resources where possible.

Here below we analyze a few examples of Italian CCNLs or sectoral collective bargaining agreements which have recently innovated and adapted the sectors to the needs and the changes of the market. The National Collective Labour Agreements (the so-called CCNLs) give precise answers to the sector at national level, for both employers and employees. A CCNL can regulate, for example, new professional figures, wages, working hours, and at the same time define new elements that must meet the needs of companies such as the application of new technologies, the needs of training or retraining, development of new tasks and new work organisational models.

CCNLs look at the innovative aspects that can make a sector grow, therefore, as we said, responding to the needs of the parties: on the trade

union side to protect and renew rights; on the employer side to provide answers related to the organisation of work, enabling the companies in the sector to grow. For example, it is worth mentioning a recent renewal of the CCNL in the dubbing sector (2023), where an important article was included that refers to artificial intelligence and provided an important principle of legitimacy with respect to the issue of artificial intelligence⁴¹. With this article, trade unions and employers state that technological innovations are bringing about major technical changes in the dubbing industry. It is reaffirmed that it is necessary to safeguard the creative aspects, also with respect to copyright, and the working conditions of workers. The parties agreed on the need to create rules with respect to the transfer of copyright, in compliance with national and European legislation. A fundamental principle is also made explicit, according to which the use of the voice actor's voice is only lawful with reference to the audiovisual product for which it was created, and the use, modification, or reworking of the voice to develop or train artificial intelligence algorithms is prohibited. This agreement was followed by campaigns and debates in the sector at the Italian national level, aimed at protecting the artistic and professional heritage of workers in the dubbing sector. Public debates were promoted by social partners, but there were also meetings at the Parliamentary Commission for Culture, Science, and Education. An important concrete initiative was the one that led to the Mollicone Resolution⁴²; this resolution focuses on the use of artificial intelligence and new technologies in the dubbing sector - recognized as an area of Italian artistic excellence - with a commitment to implement all necessary measures to protect workers' rights, with particular reference to copyright and related rights. This new provisions of the CCNL in the dubbing sector have been cited as a positive example in Brussels during the debate on European social dialogue in the audiovisual sector in June 2025.

Another concrete example that can be cited comes from the paper industry. In fact, in 2021 the renewal of the Paper and Paper Converting Collective Labour Agreement in Italy, saw the inclusion of the concepts of 'polyfunctionality' and 'polyvalence', referring to those workers who, thanks to their professionalism and in response to company needs, can concretely perform diversified activities not contemplated in the

⁴¹ See National Collective Labour Agreements Dubbing Sector (2023);

⁴² Mollicone Resolution, resolution number 7-00290 on the protection of copyright with particular reference to the use of new technologies - Chamber of Deputies, VII Commission - April 2025;

contractual declaratory of the level and also perform activities conceptually different from those normally performed and envisaged by the professional profile⁴³. Thanks to the implementation of these concepts, on the one hand workers have obtained higher salaries, thanks to the recognition of specific task allowances, while companies have obtained greater flexibility in the use of human resources within the work organisation. In this CCNL, an important element related to the issue of productivity in the sector, which varies over time with peaks and troughs due to the normal evolution and seasonality of the market, is the element of flexibility of workers on work shifts. Here we see how the trade unions, in order to meet company needs, came up with the conception of a different organisational structure of shift work (specifically four shifts per day, for six hours per employee, over six days per week). This contractual element has the potential to increase employment - often with fixed-term contracts with the possibility of creating pools of manpower useful to companies in the sector - increase productivity by allowing maximum utilisation of production facilities, and increase wages (in fact considering a decrease in the number of hours worked for the same wage). These innovative changes introduced by the CCNL were welcomed, and several companies have implemented them. One concrete example is the one of Cartiere del Guarcino, a major company in the sector, which has adopted flexible staffing models to better adapt to its production needs, resulting in improved productivity and increased professionalism among the workers involved.

Furthermore, we can mention some of the innovative elements regulated in the last renewal of the so-called CCNL Confcommercio on Tertiary activities, Distribution and Services (2024), which has also tailored the new market needs. Indeed, it introduced new professional profiles to meet the emerging needs of the European labor market standard related to the ICT sector⁴⁴. In particular, the new ICT classifications represent a significant evolution compared to the previous system. While the old classifications were based on generic levels (from 1st to 7th) and traditional roles such as technical employee, programmer, or system administrator, the new ones are founded on the European e-CF framework and recognize specialized roles such as Prompt Engineer, AI Engineer, DevOps, Cloud Architect, and Cybersecurity Specialist. The

⁴³ National Collective Labour Agreements Paper and Paper Converting Industry (2021);

⁴⁴ National Collective Labour Agreements Tertiary Activities, Distribution, and Services (2024);

criteria for classification are no longer seniority or role, but competence, responsibility, and technological impact. Companies such as Retelit, ADP Italia, Tinexta Cyber, Var Group, and WSP Italia have adopted these changes, often in contexts of merger, or contract renewal. Various internal documents and company collective bargaining agreements highlight the intention to harmonize ICT classifications and annually monitor the correspondence between role and classification. Among the different new regulated elements of CCNL Confcommercio there are also the flexible clauses for part-time work which have been modified to offer greater flexibility. These new clauses include: The possibility to increase working hours (with additional pay for the extra hours); the ability to change the working hours following a notice; and the right of the employee to report the agreement in specific cases, such as unilateral changes to working conditions without adequate notice.

3.3. European Sectoral Social Dialogue: A Key Instrument to Be Reinforced

European economics, and in particular some of its sectors, such as automotive, metallurgical and telecommunication industries, due to their internal fragmentation, suffer from global competition and the new technological and environmental challenges. Although the political trajectory seems clear thanks to EU policies, there is no adequate economic and social response. A rapid change in key European economic sectors is needed to respond to the new global system. Thus, the Digital Markets Act⁴⁵, the Digital Services Act⁴⁶, the AI Act⁴⁷, the European Packaging Regulation⁴⁸, the Green Homes Directive⁴⁹ and the Automotive Action Plan⁵⁰, which aims at reducing CO2 emissions in road transport, are part of a series of regulations designed to create a fairer and more competitive European market. However, these regulations also impose significant economic and social costs which each European industry

⁴⁵ Regulation Act on Digital Markets (EU 2022/1925), Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council related to the digital markets;

⁴⁶ Regulation Act on Digital Services (EU 2022/2065), Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council related to the digital services;

⁴⁷ Regulation Act on AI (2024/1689), Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council related to artificial intelligence;

⁴⁸ Regulation European Packaging (EU 2023/852), Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council related to packaging rules;

⁴⁹ Directive 2024/1275, Green Homes Directive;

⁵⁰ European Commission (2025), Automotive Action Plan, focused on the reduction of CO2 emissions;

should face. These regulations, indeed, deeply affect European sectoral policies, involving labour organisations in the transformations and processes that these rules will produce. It is clear, therefore, that Europe – in all its various economic sectors - must move forward very quickly if it wants to compete with the rest of the world; otherwise, the real risk in the EU is slow deindustrialisation of the Continent. Mario Draghi was clear in his contribution: we should work on key sectors for European competitiveness, invest in people through training and education in order to have quality jobs, focusing on the growth of Europe and the maintenance of its social fabric. Hence, neither the cross-sectoral European social dialogue, nor the national collective bargaining would be suitable to support and relaunch the European sectoral competitiveness considering the limits analyzed in the two paragraphs above. Only the European sectoral social dialogue would have the capacity to adapt and influence positively the evolution of each single industry with concrete solutions, as they are in a better position to understand what skills people need to work in a given sector. European sectoral social partners would have the task of driving changes and reforms necessary for the European Union to prosper.

As mentioned in our theoretical paragraph, our thesis is that if sectoral social partners work together fruitfully, with participation and co-responsibility, in the medium and long term, they are able to create tangible benefits contributing to European competitiveness. Thus, the results of the European sectoral social dialogue can be extremely rich and can include specific positive results between the European social partners. A strengthened European sectoral social dialogue can play a ‘strategic stewardship’ role for relaunching European competitiveness by acting as a unique guide and defining a new common European method focusing on the relevance of the single industry needs and overcoming the national geographical limits. One relevant good example of effective sectoral social dialogue is the joint recommendation signed in 2019 by IndustriAll Europe (Trade Union representing workers in various industries) and ECEG (European Chemical Employers Group) on the topic of technological innovations and how the sector positions itself in the global market to remain competitive. To reiterate the importance of discussion and dialogue, the document states that “It is essential to keeping our industries competitive and, hence, to offer quality employment. ECEG and IndustriAll Europe are convinced that this future face of the industry

can and should be shaped together”⁵¹. According to the same chemical sector, with respect to the issue of sustainability, which certainly sees the chemical sector as one of those most impacted by European green policies, it is worth mentioning a joint statement of 2020 that addresses the issue of sustainability in the sector, with reference to chemical products, reaffirming and affirming the need that “Any strategy for sustainability should therefore equally address the ecological, social and economic aspect” and that “A balanced approach to these three dimensions is the basis for innovation and competitiveness”⁵².

In the recent years, a central role of the dialogue between the social partners was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, in dealing with a very delicate issue that is health and safety in the workplace. In particular, on the European side in the chemical sector, reference can be made, among many others, to a joint recommendation (2020) on the subject of COVID-19 virus infection, signed between IndustriAll and ECEG, which emphasised the need for workers to participate in the implementation of measures to combat contagion in the workplace, specifying that “These recommendations are meant to support employers and protect workers in the world of work and to encourage that workers and their relevant committees or representative bodies are involved in general risk assessment, design and implementation of measures”. Referring to the same emergency and the pandemic of COVID-19, European social partners in food industry also developed in April 2020 a relevant joint protocol entitled: EU Social Partners EFFAT and Food Drink Europe - Guidelines to protect the health and safety of workers in food business during the COVID-19 pandemic⁵³. The document signed was intended to protect the health and safety of workers in the food industry and ensure safe working conditions by implementing measures such as: Enhanced hygiene practices; Social distancing; Personal protective equipment; Health monitoring; Communication and training. These measures were designed to safeguard workers’ health while maintaining the continuity of food production and supply. They were also used and applied in other countries such as in Spain where the national social partners UGT Fica, CCOO Industria - trade unions - and FIAB – employer association – signed a similar document a few weeks after: Protocolo y Guía de Buenas

⁵¹ IndustriAll Europe & ECEG (2020), Joint statement on sustainability in the chemical sector;

⁵² IndustriAll Europe & ECEG (2020), Joint statement on sustainability in the chemical sector;

⁵³ EFFAT & FoodDrinkEurope (2020), Guidelines to protect the health and safety of workers in food businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic;

Prácticas de Protección y Prevención Laboral de las Personas Trabajadoras en el sector de Alimentación y Bebidas durante la Crisis Sanitaria Provocada por el COVID-19⁵⁴. Another good example of a joint protocol developed during the pandemic was signed between EFFAT, EFFE, FEIS, and UNI-Europa in personal and household services (PHS) to address the challenges faced by workers in this sector during the emergency⁵⁵. The involved European social partners highlighted the following key points: Health and Safety; Recognition and Support; Vaccination Priority; Social Dialogue. These measures aimed to safeguard the health and well-being of PHS workers guaranteeing at the same time the continuity of essential services during the pandemic.

Changing sector, but always linked to the issue of health in the workplace, we can mention the European sectoral social dialogue and the joint statement signed by ETNO (employer side) and UNI Europa ITCS to stop all kinds of violence and discrimination in the workplace⁵⁶. This document aims to prevent and mitigate all kinds of violence and harassment in the telecommunications Sector.

As can be seen from these several examples, the topics are diverse and the agreements are many, the contribution that these make from the trade union-political point of view is high. In this context it is important to reiterate that the 'strength' of an agreement at European level is measured, on the one hand, by the legitimacy of the parties signing it and, on the other hand, by its concrete implementation. If you like, the first can be fostered through a negotiating mandate that is sanctioned by joining an organization, certainly by identifying the subjects and issues to be addressed, together with the instruments that can be used that are capable of producing obligations for the signatory parties and their adherents. The second is fostered through the will to improve conditions and implement decisions, considering tangible the level of European sectoral social dialogue, which can be translated into more or less stringent agreements (indeed the words which define the agreements are important and change depending on the commitment that the social partners want to make) addressing changes and problems that affect the same sectors in all Member States and are dealt with differently by each individual country.

⁵⁴ See FIAB, CCOO-Industria, UGT-FICA (2020), Protocolo y Guía de Buenas Prácticas de Protección y Prevención Laboral de las Personas Trabajadoras en el sector de Alimentación y Bebidas durante la Crisis Sanitaria Provocada por el COVID-19;

⁵⁵ EFFAT, EFFE, FEIS, UNI-Europa (2020), Joint protocol on Personal and Household Services (PHS) during COVID-19 pandemic;

⁵⁶ ETNO and UNI Europa ITCS (2022, 2023, 2024), Joint statement to stop all kinds of violence and discrimination in the workplace;

Following trends and needs of a specific economic sector, the strength of a European sectoral agreement is that, within the prerogatives of the parties and the 'limits' of the negotiating mandates, it deals specifically with a subject that touches the sector itself, laying the foundations of a level that sets the bar for rights, duties and in general the objectives to be pursued at a 'high' level, below which European agreements and regulations and the national regulations of the individual Member States should not go. This is the challenge we face, in all sectors and especially in those that are strategic for the European Union.

In addition, the sectoral social dialogue actions on so-called 'transversal' topics can certainly be coordinated with the European relevant policies, deriving from the cross-sectoral dialogue, through specification and adaptation of trade union policy choices to the sectors they belong to. From this point of view, the sectoral social dialogue can interact with and complement the cross-sectoral dialogue and have a concrete perspective by implementing the choices within single sectoral agreements.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article we offered a new perspective on the relevance of European Sectoral Social Dialogue as a key instrument to facilitate European competitiveness, shaping a dialogue based on the changes and peculiarities of a single sector or industry. Social partners working together could better respond to the various challenges that the global economy poses to our future economic and social prosperity. We have argued that an effective European sectoral social dialogue can play a guiding role for both EU policies and EU social partners in developing and harmonizing real European competitive sectors.

In particular, following the introduction chapter, we have analyzed in chapter N. 2: The importance of sectoral dimension linked to the concept of economic competitiveness in paragraph 2.1; then, in paragraph 2.2 and 2.3, we have illustrated the social dimension at the European and national level pointing out the geographical limits according to the new global challenges; Finally, in paragraph 2.4, we have defined our conceptual framework contributing to evaluating European competitiveness from a new perspective and assessing the relevance of the "European Sectoral Competitiveness". In chapter N. 3, therefore, we have examined assets and limits and demonstrated the current contextual situation by reporting various agreements and activities developed by social partners. We have therefore analysed: the value of the cross-sectoral European social dialogue, in paragraph 3.1; The national collective bargaining - focusing

on the example of the Italian CCNLs - in paragraph 3.2; The activities and gains of the European sectoral social dialogue in paragraph 3.3.

Acting on the European sectoral social dialogue and focusing on specific topics, would make it possible to increase the competitiveness of the European sectors and also to recompose the fragmentation of European social policies. Indeed, the World Economic Forum in its 2021/2022 edition has strongly emphasised the importance of the protection of the social dimension as one of the key factors in a country's competitiveness index, including labour market equity as one of the key indicators for defining a country's competitiveness. Central to this are social protection linked to the labour force, active labour policies, access to social services and also benefits linked to old age and disability. In this context, it is clear how social partners, through social dialogue and collective bargaining, can intervene to improve these indicators, increasing competitiveness, improving social cohesion and reducing inequalities. Social dialogue must be recognised among the determinants of Europe's competitiveness, considering it a 'transversal' factor, which does not only touch, for example, the labour market and the employment rate, but also touches all the other factors that are usually taken into account to define or measure competitiveness (i.e. economic factors, factors related to governance and factors related to infrastructure). According to this new perspective, other future research could delve deeper into the topic of how to measure the level and the effectiveness of European sectoral social dialogue. Others could also analyze better the multiple instruments and type of agreements used for European sectoral social dialogue focusing on and comparing some particular cases or practices.

We argue that recognising at the European sectoral level, a social, economic and industrial negotiating capacity is necessary and urgent to support Europe's integration process and its social and economic progress. Sectoral social dialogue at the European level can provide specific industrial policy guidelines to address the specific social needs of a sector, starting from making European political priorities its own. National sectoral bargaining could thus be coordinated by the European social dialogue on key issues, though it would perhaps be necessary to give more strength and authority to this participatory process. Thus, bargaining remains indispensable to reconcile the interests of the enterprise with those of the workers. Regulatory intervention alone, without the participation of the social partners, could not be effective because the complexity of interests that collective bargaining satisfies necessarily requires confrontation between the actors that form, act and

contribute to the growth and development in any economic and industrial sector.

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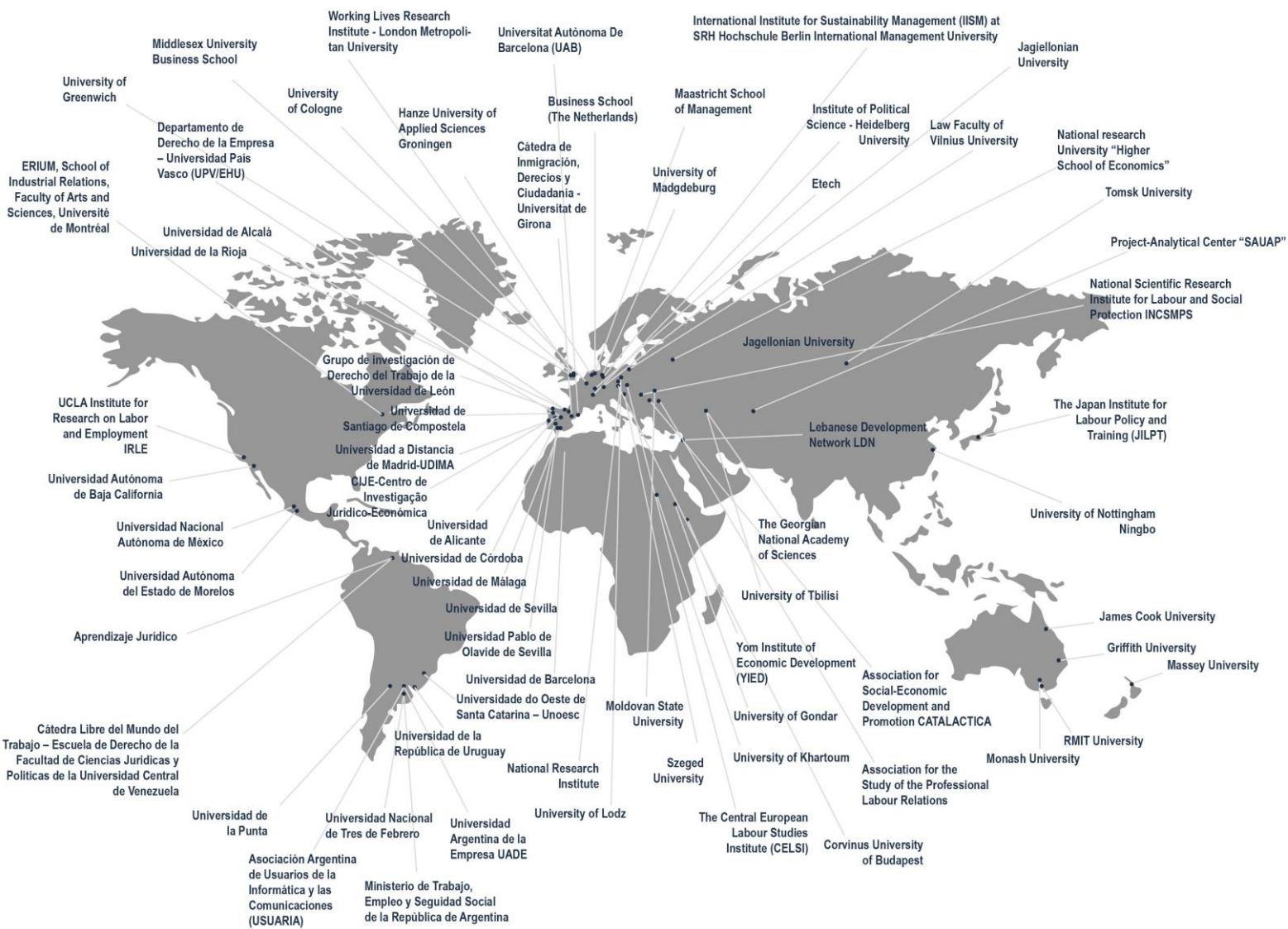
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