



E2 INSIGHTS



TRADE UNIONS' RESPONSES TO IMMIGRATION AND MIGRANT WORKERS: THE PORTUGUESE CASE

Authors: Dr Rolle Alho, E2
Research (Finland) & Professor
João Peixoto, SOCIUS/ISEG,
University of Lisbon (Portugal)

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This article analyses Portuguese trade unions' responses to immigration and migrant workers. The article also contributes to broadening the understanding of union responses to migration by comparing the responses of unions representing a variety of labour market sectors. The results indicate that in order to understand union responses, we need to pay attention not only to the particular national context but also to how the differing logics of specific labour market sectors enable and constrain the unions' responses, including unions' possibilities and willingness to defend migrant workers. The Portuguese unions make an excellent case for studying this question as the country has lately experienced increased –and diversified– flows of immigration, which sets new challenges for the unions. The research material consists of interviews of union representatives, unions' public statements, and notes from union seminars and events.

Keywords: immigration, migrants, migrants' rights, trade unions, Portugal

Introduction

This article investigates how Portuguese trade unions have reacted to immigration and the subsequent increase of migrants in the labour markets. In the research literature, unions' responses have often been studied by comparing how unions in different countries have approached the aforementioned questions (see, e.g., Penninx & Roosblad 2000; Krings 2009; Marino et al. 2015). That approach considers trade unions as relatively homogenous national-level actors. The benefit of this kind of research design is that it provides a broad overview of how the trade union movement in the studied country has responded to immigration. However, what tends to emerge is a rather homogenous picture of union responses in a given country and intra-country variations among unions remain largely uncovered.

Nevertheless, a number of comparative studies on trade unions' approaches have analysed the variance of unions' approaches within countries (see, e.g., Milkman 2006; Neergaard 2015). These studies demonstrate that unions' responses can vary greatly from one union to another.

How unions respond to migrants is an important question since unions have the possibility to influence the position of migrants in the labour markets (Penninx & Roosblad 2000; Lillie & Sippola 2011; Marino et al. 2017). Unions can strive to defend and improve the situation of migrants in the labour markets, they may remain indifferent, or they may try to exclude migrants from the labour markets (Penninx & Roosblad 2000; Marino et al. 2017). In other words, while unions can strengthen the (often) asymmetrical power relations between migrants and the receiving state and society, the opposite is possible as well.

Immigration is an issue that has a bearing on the future of the unions; it is in their interest that migrants become union members and that employers do not undercut wages and working conditions by the use of migrant labour (e.g. Schierup et al. 2015; Guerin-Gonzales & Strikwerda 1993; Marino et al. 2017). For these reasons, it is crucial to investigate unions' responses to immigration and migrants in the labour markets, including whether the unions succeed or fail in their efforts.

The inclusion and representation of migrants -and other groups of workers that are often underrepresented as union members- has been identified as a strategy that could help reverse the decline in membership that unions in most countries have suffered during the last decades (e.g. Frege & Kelly 2004; Milkman et al. 2011).

Due to the growth in international migration, the salience of this question has only increased. A common challenge across countries is that migrants are more likely to work in precarious, low-paid jobs where unions have little or no influence (Holgate 2005; Lillie & Sippola 2011). Some studies, however, point to successful union efforts in recruiting migrants as union members and actors (e.g. Holgate 2005; Milkman 2011 et al.). Successful organising strategies have included union efforts to better communicate the role of unions and the advantages of union membership in various languages, and coalition building in migrant communities (Milkman et al. 2011; Lillie & Sippola 2011).

In addition, unions need to decide whether to pay attention to the special needs of migrants in the labour markets, and potential trade union members -or whether to embrace a universalistic approach to represent all migrants as “workers” instead of “migrant workers” with special needs (Penninx & Roosblad 2000; Alberti et al. 2013).

The Portuguese unions make an excellent case for investigation because Portugal has lately experienced increased and diversified flows of immigration from countries with which Portugal has no previous ties. This poses new challenges for the Portuguese unions. The main research questions are: 1) What are the selected trade unions' responses to immigration and migrant workers? 2) How can we explain their responses (or lack thereof) and the variance of responses?

By “responses” we refer to unions' policy documents, official statements (such as the information available on the unions' websites), and legislative preferences in terms of migration. Responses also refer to the concrete actions of the unions, such as campaigning and lobbying. More precisely, we are interested in the following responses: how do the unions react to immigration for example, related to residence permit questions and working conditions; have the unions adopted special measures vis-à-vis migrants? We also identify who are the people the unions refer to when they speak of “migrants”.

In addition, we investigate which stakeholders the unions co-operate with in migration-related matters (e.g., NGOs, including migrant organisations). Because NGOs play a role in defending migrants' rights in Portugal (see, Abrantes 2014), we also included in our study interviews of two representatives of relevant NGOs. This allowed us to contrast the role of unions and NGOs in the subject matter. The primary focus, however, is on the role of the unions. The rest of the article is organised as follows: first, we describe the Portuguese immigration and labour market context, including the position of migrant workers.

We then describe the research design. After that, we analyse Portuguese unions' responses to immigration and the subsequent presence of migrants in the labour market. The analysis is followed by the concluding section.

The Portuguese immigration context

The history of Portugal is intertwined with international migration. During the colonial era, i.e., from the 15th century until the beginning of the 1970s, Portugal's wealth was built, inter alia, on mobility and migration –including earlier forced migration in terms of the slave trade– within the Portuguese empire. Until recently, Portugal has mainly been a country of emigration. There has been significant economically induced emigration from Portugal mainly to Western European countries (Pires et al. 2010; Pires et al. 2020).

Before the mid-1970s, excluding emigrants' return, immigration was numerically a marginal phenomenon. However, there had been some migration from Cape Verde (at the time a Portuguese colony) to mainland Portugal already in the 1960s. The establishment of democracy in the mid-1970s led to a mass departure of people from the former colonies (Pires et al. 2010). The so-called “retornados” consisted mainly of “ethnic Portuguese” who had been born in the Portuguese mainland. Some groups with a non-Portuguese background also moved to the country at that time.

A major shift in the Portuguese migration patterns occurred in the 1980s, when immigration increased from former African colonies. Despite a strong increase in immigration, there was a continuity with the colonial past, since most immigrants knew the Portuguese language (Pires et al. 2010).

However, since the 1990s, Portugal has become a destination for immigrants from countries that have no historical ties to Portugal. These migrants originate from Eastern Europe, particularly from Ukraine, Romania and Moldova. The bulk of this migration occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s, following the economic growth after Portugal joined the European Union in 1986 (Pires et al. 2010). In addition, new migration patterns from Asian countries, particularly from China, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, have emerged lately (McGarrigle & Ascensão 2018).

These flows display a different characteristic from the earlier postcolonial migrations: they are clustered around ethnic networks, they are related to entrepreneurial initiatives, and they often respond to the demand of low-paid labour in agriculture (ibid.). Since the last decades of the 20th century, a sizeable group of Western and Northern Europeans have chosen Portugal as country of work or retirement.

The first attempts to draw a coherent immigration policy for Portugal date back to the 1980s (Peixoto et al. 2009). Since the late 1980s, when irregular migration gained national attention, a broad coalition of actors has supported regularisation of irregular migrants. The coalition includes political parties, immigrant associations and other NGOs, the Catholic Church and trade unions (ibid.). After the first general amnesty in 1992-1993, several others followed, carried out by both centre-left and centre-right governments.

Since 2007, extraordinary processes of regularisation have been substituted by an ongoing system of regularisation (ibid.). According to the 2007 law, immigrants can apply for regularisation if they can prove an “attachment to the country”. This legal provision was kept in subsequent immigration laws. Regularisation typically entails a lengthy bureaucratic process. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of immigrants have achieved legal residence under this procedure.

The Portuguese integration policy has included the creation of the High Commission for Immigration (ACM), a platform with a cross-cutting position in the government (linking Ministries of Home Affairs, Labour, Education, etc.), which connects the central and local government with institutions of the civil society. Trade unions have been included in the process. This integration policy, which has gained support from both centre-left and centre-right political parties, includes initiatives that have become benchmark, such as the creation of one-stop-shops to provide assistance to immigrants, increasing the role of cultural mediators, consistent support to the second generation, and a comparatively progressive nationality law.

The gathering of several stakeholders to defend the rights of immigrants, as well as the broad political consensus towards integration, explains how a set of stable and relatively progressive policies have been put in place since the 1990s. Therefore, according to several editions of MIPLEX, Portugal has consistently ranked as the second highest country, right after Sweden, in terms of integration policy (Huddleston et al. 2015). In contrast to many other countries, immigration has not become a subject of harsh political debate, which explains the continuity of the relatively progressive policies. These include the Portuguese government’s initiative to

temporarily grant all migrants the rights of citizens in order to mitigate health issues related to the COVID-19 crisis.

However, the well-intended policies have not always led to success in practice. The racialized and segmented nature of the labour market, the increasingly precarious working conditions, high income inequality, and the incidence of poverty have mainly affected immigrant groups, including women and descendants of black immigrants (Oliveira & Gomes 2019; Pereira & Esteves 2017). Immigrants –and their descendants– especially those originating from the former African colonies, are over-represented in precarious low-pay jobs and in the unemployment statistics, in poor suburbs, and in the prison population. Institutionalised racism is persistent and disproportionately affects black immigrants (and their descendants) (see, e.g. Araújo & Rodrigues 2018; ECRI 2018 report on Portugal). Cases of police violence against black youth in the suburbs of Lisbon have been well-documented. Although in a few cases police officers have been prosecuted and sentenced, NGOs and grassroots organisations point to many cases of impunity and lenient punishments.

Portuguese labour market context and the role of trade unions

A turning point for the Portuguese society was the revolution of 1974, which overthrew the authoritarian regime, ended the Portuguese colonial wars and paved way for modernisation and democracy. A modern labour relations system was created, and trade unions gained an important role (Stoleroff 2019). Despite several decades of modernisation, Portugal remains among low-wage EU-countries.

The Portuguese employment relations model is best included in the “Mediterranean one” which, according to Visser (2009), is characterized by a conflictual stance between employers and workers; a political divide among trade unions; a pivotal role of the state; and a focus on wage negotiations, rather than working conditions in general. I

The political divide among Portuguese trade unions is illustrated by the split in the workers movement: CGTP confederation (Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses) has traditionally been close to the Communist Party (PCP), whilst UGT confederation (União Geral de Trabalhadores) has been closer to the “middle-of-the road” Socialist Party (PS), which is often in Government.

wCGTP mainly represents working class members and has always adopted a more confrontational approach, whereas UGT, with its base in middle class professions, has been closer to government positions (Kovács et al. 2017; Stoleroff 2019). CGTP affiliated unions have, according to the latest OECD figures, 400.000 members, whereas UGT affiliated unions have 160.000 members (OECD/ICTWSS 2016). The unions, however, report membership numbers that are higher than those. Together, the unions affiliated with CGTP and UGT represent all unionised sectors of the Portuguese labour market. In recent years, some small, independent unions that are not affiliated with CGTP or UGT have been established. Their role, however, has remained marginal as 97% of the union members belong to either CGTP or UGT affiliated unions (ibid).

Union density (i.e. the percentage of the workforce that are union members) was at its peak in the late 1970s, attaining 61% in 1978 (OECD 2019). Since then, there has been a steady decline in union density, which according to the estimates has decreased to 15% (OECD, 2019). The highest density is in the public sector and large public firms while density is lower in the private sector, especially in small enterprises (MTSSS, 2016) – a tendency that runs opposite to the Portuguese economic fabric, dominated by small and medium firms.

Despite the decline in membership, unions still play a significant role and regularly voice their concerns in the public sphere. The unions face severe challenges which have accentuated in recent years, particularly during the financial bailout of 2011-2014. Nevertheless, the system of collective bargaining has remained solid, benefitting from the extension of collective agreements (Stoleroff 2019).

What, however, has emerged is a dual labour market where large numbers of workers have indefinite contracts, including solid protection against dismissal, whereas a part of the workforce has fixed-term contracts or is engaged in other non-standard form of employment (Centeno 2013). Only the workers in the protected segment possess full rights. The number of workers with fixed-term contracts has grown during the last decades. According to the Labour Force Survey, the percentage of employees with fixed-term contracts has risen from circa 11% in the mid-1990s to 21%, in 2019.

Many of the sectors where union density is high, belong to the “protected segmented”, such as public administration and publicly owned companies. The new entrants in the labour market –such as young workers and immigrants– tend to enter the less protected segment of the labour market where the presence of trade unions is weak.

As stated before, immigrants –as a category– have always been over-represented in low pay and unskilled jobs, temporary contracts, self-employment, informal arrangements, and as unemployed (Oliveira & Gomes 2019), which explains why the relationship between workers in precarious positions and trade unions has is rather weak (Kovács et al. 2017).

Research design

This study builds on the analysis of several types of research material: 1) semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with union representatives conducted between September and December 2018, 2) unions' written statements, which include, inter alia, the CGTP and UGT Migration Programmes, the documents of the congresses of GCTP and UGT (available online) and other relevant documents available in the unions' websites, 3) the official minutes of 19 meetings (between December 2014 and June 2019) of the High Commission for Migration (ACM) where both CGTP and UGT have a representative. Other stakeholders, such as migrant NGOs, the labour inspectorate, and the Portuguese Immigration and Borders Service (SEF) are represented in ACM.

The aim of including ACM meeting minutes was to assess what the union representatives bring to discussion regarding migration and how they react to the issues put forward in the meetings. The minutes include detailed accounts of what has been discussed. In addition, we analysed the public presentations of CGTP representatives in two migration seminars held in Lisbon in 2018 and 2019. We also observed several trade union demonstrations organised by CGTP and UGT in Lisbon in 2018; however, issues related to migration and/or migrant workers were not raised in the events.

This type of “methodological triangulation”, i.e. the use of several research methods (see Flick 2002), has the benefit of finding alternate perspectives to the studied phenomenon. The interviews gave us rich information on how the unions reflect and act as regards questions related to migration and migrant workers – an outcome we could not have reached by solely analysing the documents and policy papers. We also analysed research material that did not primarily concentrate on migration-related issues (e.g. CGTP and UGT's congress documents, including their websites and particular unions' websites) because this allowed us to assess how much relative importance the unions put on migration.

Some of the interviewees were not only employed by a particular union but also held positions of trust at the “federal level” within the unions' organisational structure.

Here, the “federal level” (“federação” in Portuguese) refers to conjunctures of unions representing similar sector unions within the confederation level. An example of a federal level organisation is FESAHT within the CGTP confederation, which brings together unions in the hospitality sector, the food industry and the tobacco industry. In addition, some of the interviewees held positions of trust at the confederation level (i.e. CGTP or UGT).

The in-depth semi-structured qualitative research interviews were conducted face-to-face in Portuguese by the first author of this article. The total number of interviewees was 16 and the mean duration of an interview was approximately one hour. The interviewees were mainly people who were employed by the unions. They included people from the top of the organisations but also people lower in the union hierarchy. In addition, we interviewed people who held positions of trust in the trade unions. They are not employed by the unions but are, nevertheless, officially involved in the unions’ operation in representing workers at the workplace level. In addition, they are active within various bodies in the unions’ structures and, therefore, have insight on unions’ operations at various levels.

All interviewees had a long experience of dealing with questions related to migration. In order to find relevant interviewees, we used a combination of “strategic sampling” and the “snowball method” (see Flick 2002). By strategic sampling, we refer to a strategy of sending interview requests to people who we knew had been involved in questions related to migration and migrant workers. They were people who we assessed would be those with the capacity to inform us about our research objective. This indeed turned out to be the case. “Snowball sampling” refers to a method where the participants of the study (in our case the interviewees) help identify and locate other suitable interviewees/participants (see Flick 2002).

We reached some of our interviewees by directly contacting union representatives by using their contact information available in the unions’ websites. Many of the potential interviewees we tried to contact this way did not respond to our interview requests. However, the people we did manage to interview were accommodating and had reserved enough time to answer our questions.

NGOs play a role in defending and representing migrants in Portugal (see, e.g. Sardinha 2009; Esteves 2017), and we therefore also interviewed two representatives of NGOs that offer counselling services to migrants facing problems. This allowed us to compare the role of the unions and the NGOs in dealing with migration related issues. We explained the interviewees that we would/will not mention their names in the forthcoming publications because the interviews cover potentially sensitive topics.

In addition to the aforementioned materials, we have analysed the information we have found in the unions' websites and unions' statements in mass media. Information related to the objective of our study was comparatively scarce in the unions' websites. While both confederations (GCTP and UGT) have migration-related documents and statements in their homepages, the unions belonging to the two confederations have only little material related to migration/migrant workers on their own websites (we familiarised ourselves with the websites of those CGTP and UGT affiliated unions that have a website).

We analysed the interview transcripts and the transcripts of the presentations from the aforementioned seminars via the method of "deductive thematic coding", which means that the theoretical framework guided the coding of the transcripts (for the method see, Rivas 2012). We used codes such as "sectoral variance in unions' responses", "migration policy", "residence permits", "migrants as union members and activists", "recruiting migrants as union members", "exploitation at work", "language issues", "racism", "gender", and "class" in order to identify relevant passages in the research material. This allowed us to see how the different topics were related to one other; for example, exploitation and residence permits were closely linked according to the unions. Exploitation at work was often linked to migrants who lack residence permits. The "sectoral variance" concept was linked to many of the codes we applied, which indicates the sectoral variance's importance in explaining the unions' responses.

In addition to this theory-driven approach to assessing the research material, we in addition analysed the research material inductively in order to find union responses that we could not necessarily have foreseen based on the previous research and our knowledge of unions' responses and migration. This helped us to see how the different topics that we looked for in the research material were related to each other. For example, we noted that "exploitation at work" was in the unions' experiences strongly linked to the slowness of Portuguese bureaucracy because undocumented migrants often must wait for extensive periods of time to formally regularise their residence. The long waiting periods, in their turn, made it difficult for migrant workers to improve their conditions at work due to their legally irregular position in Portugal.

We used Atlas.ti software for the coding of the interview transcripts, the GCTP and UGT confederations' Migration Programmes and the unions' congress documents. The interview quotes we have used in the article have been translated from Portuguese to English by us.

In the following, we first discuss the unions' framing of whom they perceive as immigrants and how they frame immigration because these framings are related to their responses.

We then analyse the unions' position towards immigration. After that, we analyse the measures the unions have taken as regards migrant workers and assess the consequences of the measures.

General attitudes and actions

In many cases, immigration has been an uneasy topic for trade unions because the unions have feared that immigration would be to the disadvantage of indigenous workers. Consequently, the unions have often demanded strict restrictions on work-based immigration (Penninx & Roosblad 2000, 4). The Portuguese case, however, is distinct from the developments in most other European countries as immigration so far has not become a highly problematised politicised topic. This corresponds to the Portuguese unions' stances towards immigration. The unions underline that the low wages and precarisation of the labour market is not a consequence of immigration but of political decisions, such as yielding to the employers' demand to keep wages low in order to make profit. There are no demands from the unions to curb immigration. The open stance towards immigration may be also explained by the fact that Portugal, by European standards, is a low-income country (Eurostat 2020), which has not been an attractive country for labour migrants from other EU-countries. In high income countries of the EU, fears of "social dumping" of wages and working conditions by the exploitation of migrant workers, is a concern for trade unions (see, e.g. Arnholtz & Lillie 2019).

In the discourse of the Portuguese unions, "immigrants" usually refer to people from the former colonies, Eastern European countries, and Southeast Asia whose migration to Portugal has been motivated by work. Irrespective of the sector they represent, the unions have adopted an open stance on immigration and have for many years advocated a regularisation of undocumented migrants who work in Portugal.

This portrays a universalistic stance that demands same legal and labour rights for all workers regardless of their nationality or origin. Here we find a parallel to Spain and Italy where unions have also been advocates of regularisation of undocumented workers (see Marino et al. 2017, 379). We interpret the stance as a sign of solidarity. The unions are also aware that working conditions may generally deteriorate if employers exploit the vulnerable situation of undocumented migrants. In other words, union's solidarity to undocumented migrant workers also aims at protecting the interests of workers in general as explained by the representative of CGTP:

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If migrants who arrive in Portugal live in an irregular situation, then that has a negative effect on the labour markets because they earn less [than documented workers], work more and experience worse working conditions. Therefore, employers prefer to recruit this type of workers [undocumented migrants]. We are talking about labour intensive sectors where formal qualifications are not needed.

The importance of the sectoral variance mentioned in the interview quote is a key factor for understanding the diverse situation of unions – not only in terms of undocumented migrants. According to the unions, middle-class jobs in the public sector do not display problems in terms of migrants' working conditions because the working conditions are well-regulated and protected by collective agreements. In addition, a command of the Portuguese language is a prerequisite for entering such middle-class occupations, and migrants entering these jobs have, by default, a good command of Portuguese, which makes them better equipped to understand and defend their rights.

The language requirements also limit the number of migrants entering such occupations. In these highly regulated sectors, unions have not brought immigration or migrant workers on their agenda. These well-regulated jobs are mainly represented by UGT and its affiliated unions, although CGTP also has an active presence in certain well-regulated sectors, such as nursing. The nursing sector is a typical sector where the strong regulation of the profession, including collective agreements, makes the overseeing of the working conditions a non-problematic issue for the unions. This is exemplified by a representative of CGTP's nursing union:

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At the very moment they [immigrant nurses] enter the labour market in the public sector [hospitals] they receive exactly the same wages as Portuguese nurses.

Due to the unproblematic entry (at least from the union's perspective) of migrant nurses to the sector, CGTP's nursing union has not adapted any particular strategies directed at migrant nurses, as exemplified by the following interview quote:

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We do not have a particular strategy to recruit migrant nurses as union members because they enter workplaces, with a trade union presence”

At the other extreme, a representative of CGTP's fishing union reported that Indonesian workers on fishing boats live and work under extremely poor conditions, which are related to their residence status:

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The employer keeps their [migrant workers'] passports...As a consequence they cannot go against the employer because in order to be allowed to stay here [in Portugal] they need to have a signed work contract.

According to the interviewee, the fishing union has not managed to connect with exploited migrant fishermen due to their extremely marginalised status. The irregular situation of the fishermen leaves, according to the union, no possibilities for union intervention. The problem is accentuated by a language barrier between union representatives and foreign fishermen. The sectoral variance in terms of regulation illustrated by the two earlier interview quotes, constitutes a key factor as regards unions' possibilities to improve migrants' working conditions.

Unions' ideological differences within countries have been shown to affect their attitudes towards immigration and migrants (e.g. Watts 2002). In the Portuguese case, the goals of the unions are similar whether they belong to the communist-oriented CGTP confederation or the “centrist” UGT confederation: an open stance towards immigration, which includes a demand for equal working conditions and labour rights for all workers regardless of their nationality or origin.

Our assessment is that the regulated nature of the public sector jobs explains why the UGT confederation and its affiliated unions remain passive regarding immigration and migrant workers. The presence of migrant workers in these sectors does not raise problematic issues from the perspective of UGT and its affiliated unions. In contrast, CGTP, which represents more migrant-dense sectors, is somewhat more active: it has translated some documents into the English and other common “migrant languages” and in the past years organised a number of seminars focusing on immigration. CGTP's more active stance is also visible in the minutes of the 19 High Commission for Migration (ACM) meetings between 2014 and 2019. Both confederations have a permanent representative in the ACM, and the minutes reveal that the CGTP representative is more active in taking part in the discussions than the UGT representative.

However, both CGTP and UGT remain passive in the meetings compared to NGOs defending migrants' rights.

Specific policies of CGTP, UGT, and NGOs

As mentioned, the Portuguese trade union movement is divided into CGTP and UGT confederations. According to our research material, the two confederations very rarely co-operate due to their political differences. The lack of co-operation is visible in all issues related to immigration, even though their views on immigration are based on the universalistic conception of workers' solidarity that underlines the same rights and conditions to workers irrespective of their national or ethnic background (see UGT 2020; CGTP 2019).

Unions around the world have increasingly come to realise that in order to protect their members' interests and challenge levels of exploitation, they need to draw migrant workers into union membership (e.g. Alho 2015; Marino et al. 2017; Ford 2019). In the Portuguese case, CGTP and its affiliated unions have been more active in reaching out to migrant workers than UGT and its affiliated unions due to the higher presence of migrant workers in construction, hospitality, agriculture, and other sectors that CGTP and its affiliated unions represent.

The unions have assisted undocumented migrant workers in the bureaucracy related to the regularisation of their residence status and translated some information material to foreign languages (mainly English). The more pro-active approach of CGTP is noticeable in the fact that CGTP (2019) has published a guidebook for its activists that outlines the confederation's basic principles in terms of migrant workers (i.e. equal treatment, defence of migrants' rights) and explains the common legal and other obstacles migrants encounter in the labour market. The manual also underlines the positive effects of immigration for Portugal's economy and demography and highlights the positive effects of "interculturality" and "cosmopolitanism". In addition, CGTP has organised a number of migration-related seminars. The union representatives we interviewed admitted that reaching out to most marginalised migrants presents a challenge due to their irregular status and lack of common language between union representatives and migrants. The language-related obstacles faced by the unions is a relatively new phenomenon that stems from recent immigration from non-Portuguese speaking countries.

Trade union representatives encounter difficulties communicating with non-Portuguese-speaking migrant workers especially in the agricultural sector –as expressed by many of our interviewees. The situation is even more difficult as migrant workers often live in housing organised by the employers, which creates a deeper dependency. According to the interviewees of a CGTP union, migrants fear airing their grievances and are reluctant to become involved in unions. According to a shop steward from a CGTP union, there has been some successful attempts to improve working conditions at local level in co-operation with the authorities, which has resulted in higher wages.

Portuguese unions have no data on the number of members who could be categorised as “migrants”. Many of our informants were unwilling to estimate the percentage of the migrant members in their unions. However, those who were willing to offer an estimate, without exception, assessed that migrants join unions to lesser degree than the indigenous population due to their precarious situation in the labour markets. There are few attempts by the unions to address migrants as a specific category. Rather, the unions have endorsed a universalistic policy, which addresses workers primarily as workers –and not as migrant workers. The Portuguese unions focus on the primacy of class in the practical struggles against exploitation rather than the nature of the particular intersections of ‘race’, class, or other possible forms of discrimination. This is illustrated by an interviewee from a CGTP union:

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I do not look at issues on the basis if someone is a migrant or not. I see people as workers.
(FESAHT)

Our assessment is that the preference for universalistic policies is related to an ideological class-based outlook of Portuguese unions (see Visser 2009). According to Stoleroff (2019), since the 1974 revolution, Portuguese unions have been attributed a “quasi-corporatist public status of the representatives of a class”. In this setting, the struggles between capital and labour overshadow other issues that are of relevance to workers.

On the other hand, the choice of strategy should also be interpreted as a lack of resources, such a language skills and social ties, that would be needed in reaching out to newly arrived migrants (the agricultural workers from Asian countries being a prime example). The universalistic approach is also visible in the reluctance of Portuguese unions to form any special bodies that would address questions that migrants encounter,

or to introduce quotas for migrants in the decision-making bodies of the unions –an approach which has been endorsed, for example, by some British trade unions to address the underrepresentation of migrants and/or racialised minorities in trade unions (see, e.g. Virdee 2000).

While our research material shows that there are individual union activists who have made efforts to build links to migrant communities, there are only a few systematic efforts to reach out to and mobilise migrants. There are, for example, no policies to employ organisers with migrant backgrounds who could build links to migrant communities –a strategy that has been utilised by unions in many other countries (e.g. Milkman et al. 2011; Holgate 2005). Efforts to translate union documents to foreign languages are very rare. The rather passive stance on bringing issues related to migrant workers to unions’ agenda can also be explained, according to our assessment, by the economic crises Portugal experienced during the 2000s and 2010s which hit the Portuguese workers and unions.

These major economic downturns impacted most sectors and workers, causing large-scale emigration (Pires et al. 2020). In these challenging times, it seems that immigration and the situation of migrant workers were overshadowed by issues that the unions considered more pressing. The comparatively low interest of Portuguese unions in immigration is, according to our interviewees, also explained by the fact that historically the majority of immigration has originated from Portuguese speaking countries (i.e. former colonies). Therefore, the typical questions of immigrants’ language acquisition and sufficient language skills have not been at the forefront.

This, however, has changed recently due to a diversification of immigration patterns. The comparatively low emphasis on immigration as a specific issue on the unions’ agenda is likely also explained by the virtual lack of “ethnified” grievances on the Portuguese labour market as immigrants are over-represented in the lowest segments of the labour market, in which trade union representation is historically weak. Therefore, unlike in many other countries, in Portugal immigration has not created tensions in the labour markets as immigrants are generally not seen as competitors by the “native” workers and their trade unions.

As Portugal has a wide array of NGOs working together with migrant communities (Sardinha 2009), we interviewed –in addition to the trade union representatives– one representative of Solidariedade Imigrante and one representative of Comunidade (two well-known NGOs that assist migrants).

According to our research material, these organisations have better linguistic competencies and stronger ties to migrant communities than the trade unions. Both interviewed NGOs provide information and legal support to migrant workers –who typically originate from poor non-European countries– in problems they encounter at work, such as questions related to residence permits. The views of the two NGOs are similar to those of the unions: migrants face particular problems in Portugal in terms of low wages, underpayment, late or non-payment of wages, problems with slow and bureaucratic regularisation processes, lack of access to social security, and poor housing conditions. Despite the shared views, there is no actual co-operation between the unions and NGOs in matters related to migrant workers.

Solidariedade Imigrante is –like the CGTP and UGT trade union confederations– represented in the High Commission for Migration (ACM). According to our analysis of the minutes of the ACM meetings, Solidariedade Imigrante is considerably more active in the meetings than the representatives of the trade unions in raising issues that migrant workers encounter. According to the NGOs, very few –if any– of the migrants contacting them are members of trade unions, which suggests a weak link between trade unions and migrants in marginalised positions. Many of the union representatives referred to migrants’ fears of negative employer reactions as a factor that impeded contacts with unions:

“

Immigrants normally do not want that we interfere, or that we represent them because they are afraid of being laid off from work and having to leave the country [if they bring up grievances]. They are afraid that those people who arranged them to work in Portugal would pressure them to leave Portugal. There were some cases when we managed to organise many [agricultural] workers who originated from Thailand. But the person who had arranged work for them in Portugal did not like that. So, things became a little bit complicated.

Unions’ discourse on racism

The perception of racism varied among the interviewed union representatives along a continuum of explicitly stating that “Portugal is not a racist country” to the acknowledgement of racism, which in turn varied along a continuum between individual racist actions and structural racism in the Portuguese society.

While the unions condemn racism in their declarations, they have not been particularly vocal

in the public sphere. Traditional struggles between labour and capital have been at the fore. Some of the union representatives assessed that unions' demands of equal wages and working conditions counteract racism, as equal working conditions prevent ethnic and "racial" tensions in the labour market.

There are, however, virtually no practical confederation or union-level attempts to combat racism. One exception is an appeal of the professional football players association's (Sindicato dos Jogadores Profissionais de Futebol) to interrupt football matches in cases of racist shouting from the spectators (Esquerda 18.2.2020). The football players' union was also a partner of the international campaign against racism in sport in 2020 (source: the union's website 26.6.2020).

A very different experience took place in one of the police unions (Associação Sindical de Profissionais de Polícia). The vice-president of the police union had to resign because he had raised the issue of racism within the police force, the existence of which was strongly refuted by a substantial number of the union members –despite, for example, the fact that in 2019, eight police officers were given prison sentences for aggressions and racist abuse against black youth in a suburb of Lisbon (see, RFI 22.1.2019). The pressure from the membership led to the vice-presidents' resignation (Diário de Notícias 27.5.2020). The case shows that while the union leadership may take an active position against racism, the attitudes of the rank-and-file members can function as a constraining factor. The case of the football players' union, in contrast, points to the rank-and-file of the union enabling a proactive stance against racism – because the membership of the footballers' union consists of players of many nationalities and ethnic groups.

As Penninx & Roosblad (2000) have demonstrated, the national social context, i.e. the attitudes towards immigrants, affect unions' willingness to defend migrants and to bring specific problems migrants face to the union agenda. In relation to the national context, we assess that the lack of measures to combat racism –and the lack of vocal condemnation of racism in the public sphere– may be related to the prevalent notion in the Portuguese society about racism not being a widespread and structural phenomenon, but rather a phenomenon attributed almost exclusively to the far-right, a notion that was also echoed in some of the interviews we conducted with union officials (for this type of belief, see, e.g, Araújo 2019; ECRI 2018 report, page 19, on Portugal). Comparing the cases of the aforementioned police and footballers' unions indicates that sectoral particularities matter –in addition to the national context– as the rank-and-file of the unions can function as a constraining or an enabling factor in bringing fight against racism to the union agenda.

Conclusion

On the general level, immigration is an issue of rather low salience for Portuguese unions. As the Portuguese society in general, they have not paid much attention to immigration as a specific issue in their public discourse nor in their actual policies. General concerns that workers in the Portuguese labour market encounter, such as low wages and unemployment, which have contributed to large-scale emigration, seem to leave few incentives for the unions to pay attention to immigration as a specific concern. While certain unions representing migrant-dense sectors in countries such as the U.S. and the U.K. have taken comprehensive measures such as building alliances with migrant communities and making use of migrant organisers that have in some cases paved way to successful inclusion of migrants as union members (see, e.g., Milkman 2000; 2010; Fitzgerald 2010), this is not the case in Portugal.

However, immigration is not a non-issue for the Portuguese unions as they have taken positions on it clearly demonstrating an open stance to immigration, including a demand for same rights for workers irrespective of their origin. This open stance to immigration corresponds to the stance adopted by the Portuguese political parties and the civil society (see, Carvalho & Duarte 2020).

In the unions' discourse, there is a distinction between immigrants from the former Portuguese colonies (who typically speak Portuguese) and "new" immigrant groups from countries that have no former ties to Portugal and who generally do not speak Portuguese upon arrival to Portugal. The diversification of immigration patterns poses challenges for unions representing manual jobs: the union representatives we interviewed reported that language issues and the lack of ties between unions and communities of newly arrived immigrants hinder the inclusion of migrant workers into unions. The detachment of newly arrived migrants from unions is accentuated by the over-representation of migrants in precarious, low-pay private sector jobs where the presence of trade unions is weak. These sectors are mainly represented by CGTP and its affiliated unions. UGT and its affiliated unions are present mainly in the comparatively well-regulated and overseen jobs in the public sector. The entry of workers into these sectors is more strictly regulated (e.g. in terms of language requirements and formal qualifications), which means that migrants who manage to enter these occupations are by default better equipped to defend their rights.

Despite a lack of comprehensive efforts to organise migrants as a distinct group, our interviews indicate some efforts by individual shop stewards and union activists to support

migrant workers in their challenges and to include them as union members. However, NGOs defending migrants' rights seem to be better equipped as organisations to serve and represent migrant workers in precarious situations due to their language skills and an attachment to migrant communities.

To some extent migrants living in Portugal have joined trade unions. There is no data on the figures but according to those union representatives that were willing to give an estimate, migrants join unions to a lesser degree than native Portuguese workers, due to their overrepresentation in precarious labour market situations, and due to their lack of knowledge of the role of the unions in Portugal, which is sometimes combined with a fear of the potentially negative employer reactions, should they join a union. We assess that in order to better include migrants in unions, Portuguese unions would need to develop their communication with migrants (especially those who are newly arrived). In this process, a comprehensive co-operation with migrant communities and NGOs representing migrants might be effective as has been the case in other countries (see, e.g. Milkman 2000; Milkman et al. 2011).

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