



Trade Union Participation and Influence at Norwegian Workplaces During the Pandemic¹

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ABSTRACT

A central feature of the Nordic model of labor relations, namely, the collaboration between social parties at the workplace, has proven to be particularly effective during crises. This is the backdrop for our study of the experiences from Trade Union Representatives (TU-reps) during the corona pandemic. With a survey aimed at TU-reps from the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), which represents just under half of the total unionized employees, we asked how the pandemic affected their participation and influence at the workplaces. Referring to the pandemic as a game changer, we discuss signs of change in TU-reps' possibilities for participation and influence under such difficult circumstances.

According to the TU-reps, interaction between the social parties intensified during the pandemic. Formal participation between the parties stands out to be crucial for enabling dialog and can therefore be labeled as the backbone of the Nordic model in times of crisis.

KEYWORDS

Covid pandemic / TU-reps / participation / influence / workplace cooperation

Introduction

The Nordic labor market model has received considerable attention for its ability to combine high economic performance, high living standards, and a democratic working life. Built upon coordinated multilevel collective bargaining, and strong cooperation between employers and workers at various levels (Rasmussen & Høgedahl 2021), the model is considered adept in dealing with crises (OECD 2019).

Nevertheless, the consequences of the corona pandemic in 2020–2021 were severe for the Nordic countries too. The ensuing economic downturn, with high numbers of laid-off and unemployed workers, is evidence that the pandemic is the largest shock that the Nordic countries have been exposed to in the post-war era (NOU 2021:16). The impact on the OECD labor market was, in 2020, on average 10 times larger than the

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impact observed in the first months of the global financial crisis in 2008, considering both the drop in employment and the reduction in hours worked among the employed.¹ For others, especially workers in hospitals and health care, the workload increased heavily. Further, those who could were working from home.² And, finally, thousands of workplaces suddenly had to cope with a totally different everyday work life due to infection and quarantine measures.

In this paper, we focus on TU-reps' participation and notion of influence at workplace level during the first year of the pandemic. The cooperation between management and TU-reps at the workplaces is in Norway embedded within the framework established by parties at the central level. Put simply, this opens for local negotiations (under peace clauses) on wages, layoffs, downsizing, working time, and other issues that are laid down in collective agreements. Hence, a collective agreement entails an obligation for the management to meet the TU-reps on a regular basis. This obligation is categorical in the sense that it is uniquely determined by the presence of a collective agreement at the workplace, and it is not relieved by workplace characteristics such as number of employees. TU-reps' participation at the workplace is also emphasized in The Basic Agreement between the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO) and the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO). The agreement states that the parties are supposed to discuss:

matters relating to the financial position of the enterprise, its production, and its development, matters immediately related to the workplace and everyday operations, and general wage and working conditions at the enterprise. Unless otherwise agreed, discussions shall be held as early as possible and at least once a month, and otherwise whenever requested by TU-reps (Basic agreement, LO-NHO Section 9–3).

Similar regulations are found in other collective agreements in Norway. However, management and TU-reps have a substantial freedom to find local solutions (Barth & Nergaard 2015).

The question is whether, and eventually how, this complex framework that entails both obligation and flexibility was practiced during the pandemic. This question is particularly interesting when we consider the pandemic as a critical juncture. Collier and Collier (1991) define a critical juncture as a 'period of significant change which typically occurs in distinct ways in different units of analysis, and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies' (1991, p. 33–34). During a critical juncture, institutional structures may be under pressure or in flux, and can represent a window of opportunity, as it may give actors with interests and power a leeway to choose a different path than before. It may, however, also reinforce existing structures or practices (Cappocia & Kelemen 2007). A topic of interest is if the pandemic can be regarded as a game-changer when it comes to the TU-reps' possibilities for participation and influence at the workplace level.

One obvious challenge is that it has only been a short time since the pandemic ravaged the worst. It may therefore be difficult to determine whether the pandemic contributes to further cement existing common practice or to modify it. However, the time window of our study enables us to investigate whether common practice is challenged by the parties' immediate and short-term responses. For example, employers may have used the window of opportunity to take shortcuts by not including TU-reps in decision-making processes at the workplace level. Further, previous data enable us to

compare our findings regarding TU-reps participation and perceived influence with pre-covid findings from 2017.

Based on a survey conducted among local trade union representatives (TU-reps) in The Norwegian Trade Union Confederation (LO) during the winter of 2021, we answer the following questions: i) How do local TU-reps assess participation and influence during the first year of the pandemic? ii) Are there any signs of change in TU-reps' ability to participate and exert influence on matters that were important for their members?

A resilient Nordic labor market model

Common features in the Nordic countries are high rates of organization among workers and employers, centralized bargaining coordination, a strong tier of negotiations and participation, low wage dispersion, and a culture of trust and cooperation among social partners (Andersen et al. 2014; Stokke et al. 2013; Traxler et al. 2001). This model was particularly effective during the financial crisis in 2008 and 2009. The crisis hit several Nordic countries hard. In 2014, however, the countries seemed on the way out of crisis, with higher employment levels, less joblessness, greater equality, and sounder public finances than most other European countries (Dølvik et al. 2014a).

At the local level, one lesson learned from earlier crisis is that the strategy of collaborating with management is particularly widespread in companies that are highly affected by the crisis (Larsen & Navrbjerg 2015). This confirms analysis of management–employee relations during distinct economic cycles in earlier decades (Pilemalm et al. 2001; Rychley 2009, in Larsen & Navrbjerg 2015). Larsen and Navrbjerg (2015, p. 350) show that even though TU-reps engage in ‘unpopular’ decisions like layoffs, wage freezes, and wage reductions, these do not jeopardize the support from union members, and the authors stated that ‘This is indeed good news if one considers the Danish model of industrial relations worthwhile to keep’.

Another token of the resilience of the model was a survey conducted among Danish workers, TU-reps, safety delegates, and managers in 2010. Eight out of 10 respondents said that the relationship between the parties was characterized by mutual trust, which had not weakened despite the negative impact of the financial crisis on the labor market in 2008–2009 compared to 1998 (Larsen et al. 2010). Guyet et al. (2012) referred to the Swedish industrial relations as ‘the best example of stable and prevailing pragmatism as a way of handling the financial crises’. However, the picture is mixed. The social parties in Finland considered that the atmosphere between the parties worsened, and that the trust deteriorated due to the economic slowdown after 2008–2009 (Jokivuori 2013).

Compared to the other Nordic countries, Norway was less affected by the financial crisis. The economy is, however, more sensitive to oil-price fluctuations, and the collapse of oil-price in 2014 had a negative impact on the Norwegian economy. It resulted in a recession, which lasted until 2016, weakening of the Norwegian krone, rising unemployment, and a slowdown of growth in the mainland economy (NOU 2021:2).

Despite several crisis during the last decades, Nordic researchers concluded in 2014 that the model has remained intact but identified signs of erosion (Dølvik et al. 2014b). A weakening of the trade union movement and cooperation between the social parties



could not only destabilize wage formation and the working-life pillar in the model but may also reduce the social parties' ability to adapt, create wealth, and distribute gains across individual workplaces and society as a whole. This makes the question of participation at the workplaces during the corona pandemic more topical.

Trade union density and coverage of collective agreements in Norway

The decline in trade union density, seen in many European countries (c.f. Kjellberg 2021), can also be observed in the Nordic countries, except in Iceland (Nergaard 2020, p. 40).

In Norway, the trade union density has been stable for the last decades, but there are major differences between and within sectors. In the public sector, the union density is 80%, compared to 38% on average in private sector. In manufacturing, it is 49%, and in private service sector 34% (Nergaard 2020, p.13). The level of unionization is also highest in the largest companies. Employees covered by a collective agreement are around 65%. While this goes for all employees in the public sector, the share covered in private sector is 52% (Nergaard 2020, p. 25).

The collective agreement is usually based on a union having members at the workplace or in the company; hence, there is a close connection between the collective agreement and TU-reps. When a company in the private sector enters into a collective agreement, this triggers a right to choose TU-reps. The TU-reps' rights and duties appear in the Basic Agreement. There are however some exceptions. In small workplaces in public sector, there will sometimes only be one contact person without the same rights, but the TU-rep will be located at a higher level in the organization.³ On average, 73% of the employees report that they have a TU-rep at enterprise level. In public sector, where all are covered by a collective agreement, the share is 93%. The corresponding share in private sector is 62%. Among workers in the private sector covered by a collective agreement, 78% report that they have a TU rep (Living Conditions Survey, LCS, 2019).

The Basic Agreement regulates co-determination, cooperation, and participation. Previous studies (prior to the pandemic) have documented sector differences when it comes to TU-reps' assessment of participation and influence. In the private sector, the main difference is between TU-reps in manufacturing and private service sector. Alsos and Trygstad (2019, 2022) have identified a representation and participation gap. A representation gap is a gap between bodies of representative participation regulated in laws and agreements and what actually exists. A participation gap describes a situation where TU reps fail to make use of co-determination arrangements at the local level. According to Alsos and Trygstad 2019, 16% of the TU-reps in manufacturing did not participate formal or informal. The corresponding number in private service sector was 42%. TU-reps powerbase, notably the number of union members at the workplace, also affects the size of the gap (Alsos & Trygstad 2019, p. 246). Further, findings indicate a rather strong correlation between formal and informal participation and assessed influence upon wages and working conditions as well as employment strategies, such as layoffs (Alsos & Trygstad 2022).

Dølvik *et al.* (2018) emphasize that weaker institutional arrangements in private service sector, such as cleaning, retail, and hotel and restaurant, reduce the TU-reps'

possibilities to exert pressure and achieve influence compared to manufacturing. But also in manufacturing, business strategies, such as outsourcing or new employment strategies, may weaken the TU-reps' powerbase because it can reduce the number of members in the trade union.

In public sector, the TU-reps in central governmental have reported that their possibilities for participation and influence are poorer than before (Hagen et al. 2020). This might be related to organizational changes, which makes it more difficult for TU-reps to i) identify their counterparty, and ii) get access to arenas where decisions of importance for their members are discussed due to unclear decision-making structures. According to the TU-reps, their participation is appreciated if and when it appears effective from a management perspective (Hagen et al. 2020; Kuldova et al. 2020). Similar findings are reported in Denmark (c.f. Hvid & Falkum 2019).

Analytical framework

As described above, lessons from previous crisis have shown that the social parties are willing to cooperate if needed, both at central and local level. We believe that the way participation unfolds locally is related to how it is justified. Why and how workers should participate in decisions of importance, are questions that continue to be debated (Dachler & Wilpert 1978; Haipeter 2019; Pries 2019).

When it comes to 'why', a variety of arguments rooted in political liberalism and embedded in Western political systems have been developed in different areas of the social sciences (De Spiegelaere et al. 2019). We divide them into two: i) Because it is fair. Central concepts are freedom, justice, and equality, and representative participation is considered central being able to meet the management with expertise and authority, enabling the workers to act as a counterpart to management and owners when needed. ii) Because it is effective. From a corporate profit perspective, it can facilitate problem solving and making workers thrive. Participation is primarily regarded as a strategic management tool, which, when properly applied, will contribute to efficient and innovative enterprises.

To discuss the question of 'how' we use the 'The diamond of democracy at work' as a starting point (De Spiegelaere et al. 2019, p. 71), De Spiegelaere and colleagues operate with six axes. We concentrate on two of them: i) Form: How is the democratic process organized and what is the degree of formalization of these processes? Is it formal or exclusively informal? The form of participation may affect the TU-reps' power to set an agenda and exert influence on decisions of importance for their members. This is in line with Haipeter (2019) who argue that the influence flowing from participation is dependent on institutional foundations that underpin formal structures rather than informal and ad-hoc forms based on volatile management notions (p. 162). ii) Topic: What is the content of the democratic process? Are the issues related to the welfare of the workers, job or task-related (operational), do they concern working time arrangements (tactical) or the financial situation, downsizing/lay-offs or issues like outsourcing (strategical)? The form of participation and the topic and scope of influence will vary across sectors and workplaces.

In a Nordic context, formal and informal participation tend to overlap. Although the formal dimension emphasized in the basic agreements is important, Alsos and



Trygstad (2022) argue that it is the *combination* of formal and informal participation that has the strongest impact on TU-reps influence. At the same time, a substantial literature engages with the question of whether management styles embedded in different management concepts challenge the mix of formal and informal participation. If so, this would indicate a shift toward more management-driven participation (e.g., Busck et al. 2010; Bungum et al. 2015).

At the same time, and as underlined by historical institutionalists, institutional arrangements are considered persistent and difficult to change. If choices made in the past limit present and future choices, for example, because it may be considered too resource consuming to choose another path or direction, then path dependency will occur. Ilsøe et al. (2018) argue along these lines when they illustrate how the Danish institutional agreement-based framework reinforces interactions between management and TU-reps at the workplace. This path encourages the development of informal problem-solving interactions between the negotiators, and it appears rather stable over time (ibid.). Andersen et al. (2014) argue that local cooperation is beneficiary for both parties: workers gain influence at the workplace and a share in the profit, while the employers achieve industrial peace, the right to manage, access to a competent workforce, predictability, and cooperation on promoting productivity and competitiveness. In this tradition, critical junctures such as a war or economic crisis have been regarded as a key driver for change (Ikenberry 1998; Pierson 2004; Selznick 1957). Critical junctures are characterized by a situation in which structural influences on political actions are significantly relaxed for a limited period. Suddenly, powerful actors are faced with a variety of different choices, which may change institutional structures, norms, and ways of action. In our case, the pandemic may have created a window of opportunity for the employers to shortcut the tradition to involve TU-reps in decisions of importance for their members.

Other leading scholars apply another take when they argue that incremental change rather than stability characterizes institutional arrangements. In their seminal work, Streeck and Thelen (2005) and Mahoney and Thelen (2010) argue that critical juncture, such as the corona-pandemic, may reinforce or weaken existing trends. The argument is that actors always look for opportunities to act in accordance with their interests. During a critical juncture, they may find opportunities that bring them closer to their goal at a faster rate.

The earlier discussion leads to two different assumptions. The first one is that the pandemic has had a negative impact in sectors known to have more fragile tradition for TU-reps participation. In other words, the pandemic has reinforced an existing negative trend. We will then expect to find that the TU-reps in the private service sector participated less in formal cooperation where tactical and strategical topics are discussed and perceive their participation as poorer than other TU-reps. Since we assume that participation affects influence, we would also expect that TU-reps in this sector will consider their influence as lower than TU-reps in manufacturing and public sector, although TU-reps in the central government report difficulties concerning influence as well.

An opposite assumption could be that the pandemic has vitalized the model at local level. If so, we will observe a higher level of participation and influence for the TU-reps, especially in troubled sectors, such as private service sector and central governmental sector.

Data and Method

This paper is based on a survey among TU-reps' in the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO). LO consists of 25 independent unions, which represent a whole range of industries and professions. LO is the largest confederation in Norway, both in the private and the public sector, and represents 47% of the unionized workers (Nergaard 2022, p. 12).

The data was collected through a web-based survey among a panel of TU-reps in LO in February 2021. This panel has been operated since 2012 and consists of approximately 2900 TU-reps in 2021–2022, mainly at the workplace-level, from all the unions in LO. They have agreed to participate in surveys two to three times a year. They are recruited from the unions through access to their e-mail addresses. The composition of the panel reflects the relative sizes of the unions. In total, 2417 TU-representatives answered this questionnaire. In two cases, we compared the results from the panel in 2021 with results from 2017. The questions are not directly comparable, but the results from 2017 put the results in 2021 into a wider context. In 2017, there were 2769 TU-reps' in the panel and 1705 answers.

Although the survey is designed to be representative for the different unions in LO, there can still be biases we cannot control for. It may, for instance, be that active TU-representatives are more willing to answer the questionnaire than others.

In the analyses, we will present the response distribution for the questions separately, followed up with a linear regression model to explain variation in the answers. The purpose of the regression is to analyze whether a set of independent variables impact the dependent variable and what direction the impact is, negative or positive.

Dependent variables in the analysis

As discussed, the form of participation may make a difference. In the survey, we mapped both formal and informal contact between the TU-reps' and employers in the preceding month. They could answer both questions on the same scale: daily, several times a week, weekly, once last month, no participation in last months. In the analysis, we have combined the two variables into one variable with four outcomes, both formal and informal participation, only formal, only informal, and no participation last month. Since formal participation is what is regulated in the basic agreement, we have constructed an indicator variable that equals 1 for those who have had both formal and informal participation and those who only had formal participation, and it equals 0 otherwise. We asked the same questions in 2017, but on a different scale, from weekly or more often to less than every six months.⁴ The two questions in 2017 are recoded to match the question in 2021.

To measure the TU-reps' influence, we asked how they assessed their influence on strategic and tactical topics: financial priorities related to the crisis, restructuring, layoffs, or downsizing (strategic), and changes to working time arrangements (tactical).

The TU-reps could answer on a 5-point scale that varied from very good to very poor, plus 'not relevant'. Those who answered not relevant are excluded from the analysis. In the regression model, the answers from the TU-reps are recoded to dummy variables. Very good and fairly good are coded as 1; neither good nor poor, fairly poor, and very poor are coded as 0.⁵



The last two dependent variables are on a more general level. First, we asked the TU-reps if they all in all would you say that they have had influence over decisions that are important to their members in connection with the corona crisis. They could answer on a 5-point scale that varied from very good to very poor influence. In the regression analysis, the variable is recoded to an indicator variable. Very and fairly good influence are coded as 1. Neither good nor poor influence, fairly poor, very poor influence, and not sure are coded as 0.

Lastly, we asked the TU-reps if they thought the cooperation between TU-reps and employers helped to reduce the negative effects of the corona crisis. Again, a 5-point scale was used, from totally agree to totally disagree and the variable is recoded to an indicator variable in the regression. Totally and partially agree are coded as 1. Neither agree nor disagree, partly and totally disagree, and not sure are coded as 0.

Independent variables in the analysis

The dependent variables will be analyzed using a set of independent variables in a regression model.⁶

The Norwegian working life is gender segregated, and the gender of TU-reps may therefore indicate differences in the degree of participation and influence between male-dominated and female-dominated workplaces. To capture variation in TU-reps' experience, we include age in the model. Gender is an indicator variable, coded 0 for women and 1 for men, whereas age is a continuous variable. In our sample, 48% of the TU-reps is females (Annex 1) and the average age is 50 years.

The model also includes the number of union members at the workplace. How much power the TU-reps have behind their claims will vary, and the member size at the workplace could be one relevant variable. In the regression models, we have coded number of members as indicator variables: nine members or less, 10–25, 26–50, and 51 or more members. Nine members or less is in the constant (see Annex 1).

We have divided the private sector into private manufacturing and private service sector. Public sector is divided into public hospitals, governmental sector, municipal sector, and other sectors (see Annex 1 for the distribution of TU-reps by sector). The different sectors are coded as dummy variables, and private manufacturing is in the constant (i.e., private manufacturing is the reference category).

In addition, we use membership in an employer organization as a control variable, even though this is not a main question in our analysis. Such membership can indicate a stronger commitment to cooperation between the parties from the employer's side. TU-reps were asked if their employer is organized. Membership is coded as 1, non-membership as 0.

The pandemic affected businesses in many ways. Some had to implement layoffs or downsizing due to restrictions imposed by the authorities or market failure, while others had an increased workload. We asked the TU-reps' if their workplace had had layoffs, downsizing, or had increased recruitment of temporary employees during the pandemic. Twenty-four percent had experienced layoffs, 12% downsizing, and 17% more temporary employees. All three alternatives can play a role in how the TU-reps' assess their influence vis-à-vis the employer. They are included in the regression models as indicator variables.

One important measure during the pandemic was that everyone with the opportunity to work from home was required to do so. Sixty-six percent of the TU-reps worked

in businesses where the employer had asked all that could work from home to do so. The TU-reps were asked about the proportion of employees that worked from home after the corona measures were implemented. The variable is coded as an indicator variable where 25% or more is coded as 1, whereas less than 25% is coded as 0.

The structures of TU-reps' at Norwegian workplaces vary. There are, however, some common features. In large workplaces, there is a hierarchy in the organization, with chief TU-reps (hovedtillitsvalgte) on the top, followed by lower hierarchy TU-reps in different departments. The chief TU-reps will in most cases have a better overview on company-large issues and be more likely to have access to formal participation where overall plans are discussed, and decisions are taken. On the other hand, TU-reps on lower levels are likely to have a better overview of member-related issues. When we refer to TU-reps at the two levels, we use the terms chief TU-reps and TU-reps. In the regression models, they have been coded as an indicator variable: TU-reps are coded as 0, and the chief TU-reps are coded as 1.

Formal and informal participation will be used as a variable in the regression models when we analyze how TU-reps assess their influence. The variable is coded into four categorical variables: no formal participation, informal only, formal only, formal and informal participation. No formal participation is the reference category, which is represented by the constant in the regression.

Findings

We start out by examining TU-reps' participation. Then, we turn on TU-reps' perceived influence on strategic and tactical topics considered to be of importance for their members. Strategic topics include financial priorities related to the crisis, restructuring, layoffs, or downsizing. Tactical topic is changes in working time arrangements. Lastly, we examine TU-reps' notion of influence on a more general level.

Participation

Our first question is to address the form of participation, that is, to what extent TU-reps have had formal and informal participation during the last month. The answers show (see Table 1) the scope of contact at the workplaces, both formally and informally.

Table 1 Formal and informal participation last month: Percent

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Formal & Informal 64% | Only formal 9% |
| Only informal 14% | No participation 13% |

Two out of three TU-reps' participated both formally and informally during the last month, 9% only formally and 14% only informally. Thirteen percent report no participation at all. TU-reps in the private service sector participated to a lesser degree than TU-reps in other sectors. TU-reps in governmental sector participated more often than in other sectors.

In 2017, 45% of the TU-reps participated both formally and informally during the last month or more often. Seven percent participated only formally. Although the



questions are not directly comparable, it nevertheless indicates that the TU-reps' participation has increased quite substantially during the pandemic. If we compare the 2017 survey with 2021 across sector, the same pattern occurs. However, the increase in participation is highest in private service sector, where 40% participated in 2017 and 66% in 2021.

We use a regression model to explain variation in TU-reps' participation in Table 2.

Table 2 Formal and informal participation last month

| | B | Beta | Std. Error |
|---------------------------------|----------|-------------|-------------------|
| (Constant) | .253 | | .053 |
| Man | .042* | .048 | .019 |
| Age | .002* | .046 | .001 |
| 10–25 members | .166** | .169 | .025 |
| 26–50 members | .21** | .179 | .028 |
| 51 or more members | .263** | .281 | .025 |
| Member of employer organization | .088** | .084 | .022 |
| Layoffs | .069** | .067 | .024 |
| Downsizing | .042 | .031 | .028 |
| More temporary employees | .016 | .014 | .023 |
| 25% or more at home office | .096** | .099 | .02 |
| Chief TU-reps | .083** | .087 | .019 |
| Private service sector | −0.056* | −0.053 | .026 |
| Public hospitals | .114* | .049 | .049 |
| Governmental sector | .153** | .089 | .042 |
| Municipal sector | .127** | .134 | .026 |
| Other sectors | −0.011 | −0.008 | .031 |
| Adjusted R ² | .121 | | |

Constant: Woman, nine members or less, not member of employer organization, no layoffs during pandemic, no downsizing during pandemic, no more temporary employees during pandemic, less than 25% working at home office, TU-representatives, private manufacturing.

Linear regression model. (n = 2408).

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

The standardized coefficient (Beta) shows that the number of members is the strongest predictor in the model, and that the strength of this effect increases with higher number of members. On the other hand, private service sector has a negative effect on participation, despite the relative increase from 2017 to 2021 on participation, both formally and informally. This is not surprising, since we know that the private service sector traditionally has the largest representation gap (Alsos & Trygstad 2019). Public sector, regardless of which part, has a positive effect on participation. The same goes for membership in an employers' organization. Being a chief TU-rep increases the probability of participating. As mentioned above, this is partly because chief TU-reps'

in general have better access to arenas where overall plans are discussed with representatives from the employer side.

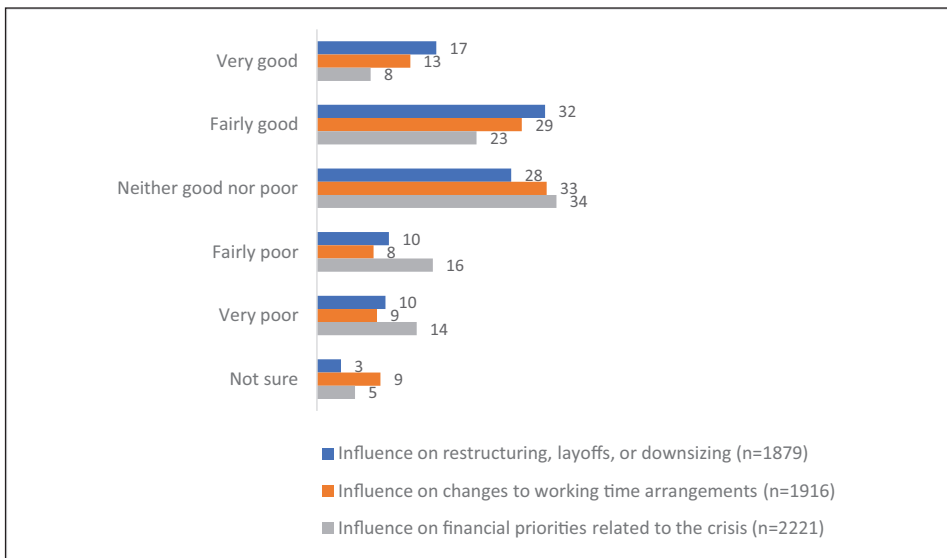
Influence and topics

As mentioned above, the pandemic affected the workplaces differently. Two major areas were temporary layoffs, especially in the private service sectors, and that large parts of the workforce in both private and public sector were forced to work from home. There is no legal obligation for employers to discuss temporary layoffs with TU-reps, but in most cases, this is regulated in the collective agreements, and according to the Basic Agreement, this is a question that should be discussed.

The regression shows that the occurrence of temporary layoffs at the workplace during the pandemic increased the probability of TU-reps' participation. Use of home office is not widely regulated either by law or by collective agreements. In those cases where the extent of home office was part of an agreement, it was primarily to provide the employee with some flexibility in shorter periods. We do find that in workplaces where 25% or more of the employees were working from home, there was an increased probability of participation from the TU-reps.

Participation, formally or informally, does not necessary mean that the TU-reps have an influence on areas that are important to their members. We therefore followed up with questions where we asked the TU-reps to assess their influence on strategic and tactical topics. They were asked about their influence on financial priorities related to the crisis, restructuring, layoffs, or downsizing (strategical), and changes to working time arrangements (tactical) (Figure 1).

Figure 1 TU-reps' influence on financial priorities related to the crisis, on restructuring, layoffs, or downsizing and changes to working time arrangements. Percent



Forty-nine percent answered that they had very good or fairly good influence on restructuring, layoffs, or downsizing, 42% on changes to working time arrangements, and 30% on financial priorities related to the crisis. The fact that almost half of the TU-reps find their influence on restructuring, layoffs, and downsizing very or fairly good is interesting. This is a strategic topic, where it is usually more difficult for TU-reps to have influence (Trygstad *et al.* 2021) compared to tactical topics as changes in working time arrangements, which is traditionally an area where workers' representatives, either TU-reps or safety delegates, can conduct their influence.⁷

In Table 3, relying on a regression analysis, we look in more detail at what influences the answers to the three questions.

Table 3 TU-reps' influence on financial priorities related to the crisis, on restructuring, layoffs, or downsizing and changes to working time arrangements: Linear regression

| | TU-reps' influence on financial priorities related to the crisis (n = 2212) | | | TU-reps' influence on restructuring, layoffs, or downsizing (n = 1874) | | | TU-reps' influence on changes to working time arrangements (n = 1909) | | |
|---------------------------------|---|--------|------------|--|--------|------------|---|--------|------------|
| | B | Std. B | Std. error | B | Std. B | Std. error | B | Std. B | Std. error |
| (Constant) | .142 | | .062 | .079 | | .07 | .13 | | .071 |
| Man | −.007 | −.007 | .021 | −.022 | −.022 | .025 | .002 | .002 | .024 |
| Age | .002 | .04 | .001 | .004 | .073 | .001 | .002 | .034 | .001 |
| 10–25 members | −.013 | −.012 | .029 | .023 | .02 | .034 | .004 | .004 | .033 |
| 26–50 members | −.031 | −.025 | .032 | .001 | .001 | .038 | .046 | .035 | .037 |
| 51 or more members | −.061* | −.063 | .029 | .037** | .036 | .034 | .107** | .105 | .033 |
| Member of employer organization | −.005 | −.004 | .025 | .016 | .013 | .03 | .032 | .027 | .029 |
| Layoffs | −.084** | −.08 | .026 | – | – | – | −.056 | −.049 | .03 |
| Downsizing | −.045 | −.032 | .031 | – | – | – | −.023 | −.016 | .034 |
| More temporary employees | −.016 | −.013 | .026 | – | – | – | −.051 | −.04 | .029 |
| 25% or more at home office | .031 | .031 | .022 | .019 | .018 | .026 | −.031 | −.029 | .025 |
| ChiefTU-reps | .015 | .016 | .021 | .085 | .08 | .025 | .012 | .012 | .024 |
| Private service sector | −.038 | −.035 | .029 | −.05 | −.043 | .032 | −.028 | −.024 | .033 |
| Public hospitals | −.099 | −.04 | .056 | −.1 | −.036 | .065 | −.094 | −.037 | .061 |
| Governmental sector | −.082 | −.046 | .047 | −.145 | −.067 | .057 | −.048 | −.026 | .053 |
| Municipal sector | −.09* | −.091 | .03 | −.076* | −.069 | .033 | −.084* | −.079 | .034 |
| Other sector | .007 | .005 | .035 | −.05 | −.033 | .039 | −.03 | −.02 | .04 |
| Informal participation only | .06 | .043 | .038 | .11* | .075 | .043 | .1* | .067 | .043 |

| | TU-reps' influence on financial priorities related to the crisis (n = 2212) | | | TU-reps' influence on restructuring, layoffs, or downsizing (n = 1874) | | | TU-reps' influence on changes to working time arrangements (n = 1909) | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|--------|------------|--|--------|------------|---|--------|------------|
| | B | Std. B | Std. error | B | Std. B | Std. error | B | Std. B | Std. error |
| Formal participation only | .012 | .008 | .042 | .09 | .05 | .05 | .047 | .028 | .047 |
| Formal and informal participation | .243** | .252 | .031 | .325** | .309 | .036 | .299** | .289 | .035 |
| Adjusted R ² | .055 | | | .090 | | | .083 | | |

Constant: Woman, nine members or less, not member of employer organization, no layoffs during pandemic, no downsizing during pandemic, not more temporary employees during pandemic, less than 25% working at home office, TU-representatives, private manufacturing, no formal or informal participation.

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

The model shows that the combination of formal and informal participation increases influence on all three topics. These findings are in line with previous findings (cf. Alsos & Trygstad 2022). The standardized coefficient also indicates that the combination of formal and informal participation has the strongest effect on the three dependent variables in the model.

TU-reps' influence is also related to how large their member base is at the workplace. However, number of members does not have the same effect on all three questions. We find that a large member base (more than 50 members) has a negative effect on influence on financial priorities. This is likely to reflect that large union bases are mostly found in large companies and organizations, where financial decisions are predominantly a matter for, that is, the board. Interestingly, we neither find a significant positive effect of being a chief TU-rep, a position we expect to be closer to or part of these decisions.

When it comes to influence on restructuring, layoffs, or downsizing and influence on changes to working time arrangements, a large member base has a positive effect.

These matters also have regulations in law, in collective agreements or both, that require management to consult TU-reps. On several areas regarding working time arrangements, it is, for example, necessary to have an agreement with a trade union to be able to deviate from working time regulations in the Working Environment Act. When an agreement with a trade union is necessary, it will of course also strengthen the possibility for the TU-reps to exert influence.

Sector has a minor impact, but we find that TU-reps in the municipal sector have less influence on all three questions, compared to TU-reps in private manufacturing. This is also an interesting result since being a TU-rep in municipal sector has a positive effect on participation. This means that the participation is higher, but their notion of influence is lower.

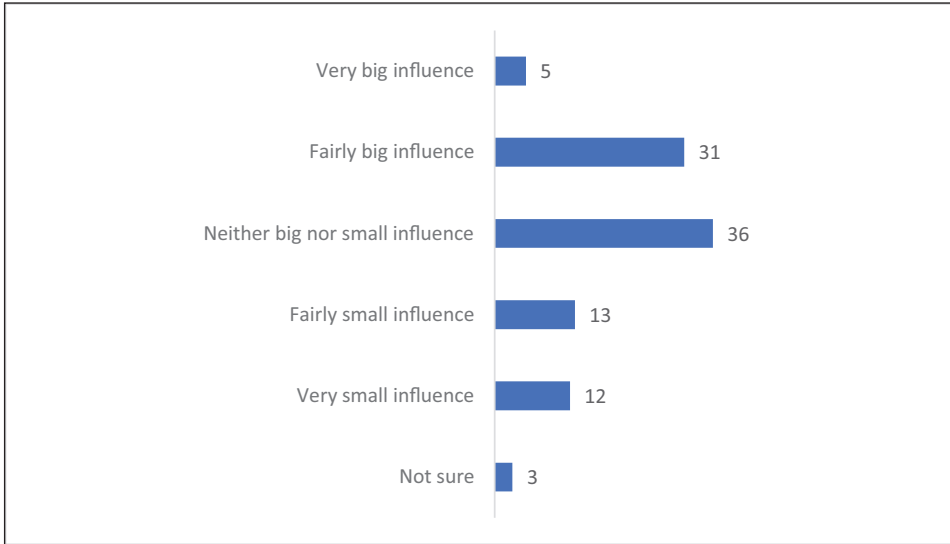
If the company or organization has had layoffs, this has a negative effect for influence on financial priorities related to the pandemic. Layoffs due to the pandemic were largely used in hotels and restaurants, part of the merchandise trade, and in the tourist industry. These sectors were totally or partly closed either by governmental regulation



or due to substantially market declines for relatively long periods. Under such circumstances, it is therefore not surprising that the TU-reps' do not regard their influence to be very large on the financial matters.

In addition, we asked TU-reps' if they all in all, would say that they had influence over decisions that were important to their members during the crisis (Figure 2).

Figure 2 TU-reps' influence on decisions that are important to their members during the corona crisis? Percent (n = 2417)



In total, we found that 36% of the TU-reps described their influence as big (very or fairly). In 2017, the assessment of influence was formulated as a general question. Forty-seven percent of the TU-reps' stated in 2017 that they had a high influence. This implies that the general influence regarding the corona situation is lower than the general influence under normal circumstances. This is not surprising since many of the decisions during the pandemic were taken by the state and local governments with limited extent for being influenced by the social partners. In such a light, it is perhaps more surprising that a quite large share of the TU-reps' state that they had high influence over matters that were important to their members. We look in more detail at what can explain how they assesses their influence in Table 4.

Both formal and informal participation, separately and especially in combination, have the strongest effects in the model. We do also find that to be a TU-rep in public hospitals, governmental sector and municipal sector have a negative effect, which support findings reported in previous research (cf. Kuldova *et al.* 2020; Hagen *et al.* 2020; Hvid & Falkum 2019).

If the TU-rep had experienced layoffs due to the pandemic, this has a negative effect on their assessment of influence. In contrast, to be chief TU-reps' have a positive effect. This might partly be because chief TU-reps are closer to overall questions and decisions

Table 4 TU-reps' influence on decisions that are important to their members during the corona crisis. Linear regression (n = 2338)

| | B | Beta | Std. Error |
|-----------------------------------|----------|-------------|-------------------|
| (Constant) | .023 | | .063 |
| Man | -.037 | -.039 | .021 |
| Age | .003** | .054 | .001 |
| 10–25 members | -.006 | -.006 | .028 |
| 26–50 members | -.018 | -.014 | .032 |
| 51 or more members | .03 | .029 | .029 |
| Member of employer organization | -.005 | -.004 | .025 |
| Layoffs | -.037 | -.032 | .027 |
| Downsizing | -.017 | -.011 | .031 |
| More temporary employees | -.009 | -.007 | .026 |
| 25% or more at home office | .025 | .024 | .022 |
| ChiefTU-reps | .045* | .044 | .022 |
| Private service sector | -.019 | -.017 | .029 |
| Public hospitals | -.147** | -.058 | .055 |
| Governmental sector | -.145** | -.078 | .047 |
| Municipal sector | -.061* | -.059 | .03 |
| Other sector | .001 | .001 | .035 |
| Informal participation only | .159** | .112 | .038 |
| Formal participation only | .117** | .07 | .043 |
| Formal and informal participation | .363** | .358 | .031 |
| Adjusted R ² | .092 | | |

Constant: Woman, nine members or less, not member of employer organization, no layoffs during pandemic, no downsizing during pandemic, not more temporary employees during pandemic, less than 25% working at home office, TU-representatives, private manufacturing, no formal or informal participation the last month.

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

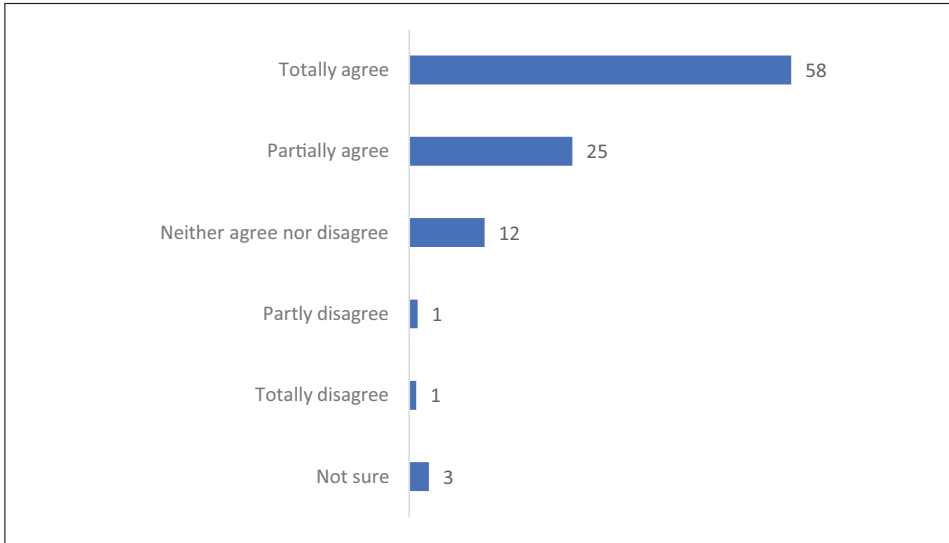
that influenced the workplaces during the pandemic. Being in companies or organizations that are members of employer organizations also has a positive effect on TU-reps' assessment of influence in matters important to their members.

Lastly, the TU-reps' were asked if they thought that cooperation between TU-reps' and employers helped to reduce the negative effect of the crisis (Figure 3).

A majority of 83% agreed (totally or partially) with the statement that cooperation between TU-reps and employees helped to reduce the negative effect of the crisis. In other words, there is very little variation in the answers to this question. This is also reflected in the regression analysis (not showed here), where we find little explained variance, adjusted R² = .032. There are a few significant effects, and they are in line with the findings from the previous regression models: formal and informal participation and membership in employer organization have a positive effect. If the workplace has had layoffs during the pandemic, this has a negative effect.



Figure 3 Cooperation between TU-reps' and employers helps to reduce the negative effects of the crisis. Percent (n = 2417)



Discussion

Our main question in this paper is whether the corona pandemic has affected TU-reps' opportunities for participation and their notion of influence on questions that are vital for their members. We argue that the Nordic labor market model is characterized by a mix of formal and informal participation. However, the mix or balance between the two will unfold differently at the local level, due to power-base and TU-hierarchy.

Even before the pandemic, development trends actualized the question of TU-reps' participation and influence at workplace level, linked among other things to decline in trade union density and huge sectoral differences. Moreover, studies indicate that new forms of employment strategies related to management and staffing policies in public and private sector can exclude TU-reps from important decision-makings (Hagen et al. 2020; Trygstad et al. 2021).

At the same time, as presented in the Introduction, the Nordic labor market model has during the last decades showed considerable ability to deal with different kinds of crisis. The model consists of tools and solutions that the social parties can use to reduce negative consequences. How and when TU-reps shall participate in decision-making arenas or be consulted in important questions at workplace level is a part of the toolbox.

The point is, however, that the tools must be in place before a crisis occurs and be maintained in periods between challenging periods, such as the financial crisis 2008–2009 and reduction in oil prices 2014.

However, the pandemic was by far much more dramatic than former crisis in the post-war period. The social parties had to deal with topics related to 'life or death', both literally but, in most cases related to the economic situation, employment, and the

organization of work. This called for very fast and dramatic decisions, such as layoffs and close downs, under a high degree of uncertainty.

During a critical juncture, as we define the pandemic to be, institutional structures can be set under pressure and be in flux. This may open a window of opportunity for actors with interests in changes because changes are substantially much easier to achieve (Capoccia & Kelemen 2007). In our context, one possible outcome could have been that employers excluded TU-reps from arenas where important discussions and decisions were made, because it was too time-consuming to follow routines for participation and cooperation during a crisis. Other outcomes could however be stability or even increased participation from the TU-reps' side, on the basis that 'we are all together in this'.

Lower participation may have a negative impact on the labor model. First, it can reduce TU-reps' ability to influence decisions of importance for their members, which can in turn affect the support from existing members and the unions' ability to recruit new ones. Second, lower participation could have a negative effect on implementation of regulations that rely on local cooperation between unions and employers. Third, lower participation can have a negative effect on employers' access to important information from the organizational floor, and possibly reduce effectiveness. Lastly, lower participation could deprive workers of an important channel for voice and make working life less democratic.

If the pandemic has reinforced existing negative trends and widened the 'participation-gap' and 'representation-gap' at the organizational level, we would expect to find sector differences and less participation in private service sector in 2021 compared to findings from 2017. Pre-Covid findings indicate that TU-reps in public sector report lower participation and assessment of influence (Hagen et al. 2020). At the outbreak of the corona pandemic, our findings do, however, indicate that most of the TU-reps had employers who actively invited them to cooperate, and that the TU-reps were prepared to participate in important discussions and decisions at the workplace level. Well-known tools were activated quickly, and familiar paths were followed to overcome the crisis. We find a considerable participation during the first year of the pandemic and we find no signs of reinforcement of negative trends, quite the contrary. In 2021, almost two out of three TU-reps' cooperated, both formally and informally, with the employer during the last month. The corresponding number in 2017 was 45%, and the increase is highest in private service sector. However, private service still has lower formal participation compared to other sectors in 2021. Our assumptions about increasing participation due to the power base (number of members) and hierarchy (chief TU-reps) are confirmed. Membership in employer organizations and seniority among the TU-reps also promote participation. Our analysis shows that the participation gap between the sectors decreases during the pandemic, but it does not disappear. Moreover, public sector, regardless of which part, has an independent and positive effect on participation. Hence, there is no support for the assumption of reinforced negative trends in public and private service sector.

Participation is not synonymous with influence, but it is considered to be a prerequisite for influence. In our analysis, we have studied to what extent the TU-reps had influence on decisions of importance for their members during the pandemic. Two of them are strategic: i) financial priorities related to the crisis, ii) restructuring, layoffs, or downsizing and one is tactical: iii) changes in working time arrangements. Almost half of the TU-reps who had experienced changes in employment arrangements



(e.g., restructuring, layoffs, etc.) answered that they had very good influence or fairly good influence on these decisions. When it comes to changes in working time arrangements, four out of 10 TU-reps answered that they had very or fairly good influence, while three out of 10 assess their influence over financial priorities as very or fairly good. An immediate reaction is that these numbers are surprisingly high, compared to pre-Covid findings. In 2019, a study directed to TU-reps in the whole Norwegian labor market (i.e., including TU-reps from other confederations than the LO) were asked about to what extent the management took input from employee representatives on employment and working time arrangements into consideration (Trygstad *et al.* 2021). Those who answered, 'to a great extent' and 'to a certain extent' on layoffs and temporary layoffs comprised around 20% of the respondents, while the corresponding share for working time arrangement was 34% (Trygstad *et al.* 2021, p. 84–85). Although the numbers are not directly comparable, they do indicate that the TU-reps' influence on topics with great importance for their members have not deteriorated during the pandemic.

Not surprisingly, those who participated both formally and informally assess their influence as best. This is in line with earlier findings in Norway (Alsos & Trygstad 2022). Our assumptions that TU-reps' power base, that is, members behind, makes a difference, is present but is not straightforward when it comes to influence. The size of member-stock has a negative effect on influence on financial priorities, but positive on changes in working time arrangements. One explanation may be that financial priorities in big companies are decided outside the workplace, moved away from arenas where TU-reps are represented.

The TU-reps were also asked to assess their overall influence on decisions of importance for their members. Four out of 10 TU-reps answered that they to a great or certain extent have had influence. Formal and informal participation, along with a solid member base and higher rank of the TU-reps, are again factors that increase their perceived degree of influence. When it comes to sector, TU-reps in public sector assess their influence as lower compared to others at the same time as these TU-reps have participated more. We lack good explanations, but it might be that public sector, highly affected by the pandemic, had to cope with circumstances out of control for both TU-reps and management. Decisions were taken on higher levels and often outside the organizations (e.g., infection measures). At the same time, these findings do correspond with pre-Covid ones that have observed a more challenging situation when it comes to influence in public sector (Hagen *et al.* 2020; Kuldova *et al.* 2020).

Participation and influence at the workplaces are central elements of the labor model. A deterioration of this important part of the model may reduce the level of trust between the local parties (Hernes 2006). From the trade union side, a sense of being heard will probably enhance the level of trust to the employer. From the members' point of view, TU-reps who have a say in a restructuring process, compared to the ones who are excluded, may lead to increased trust and support at the workplace. This is in line with findings from Larsen and Navreberg (2015): TU-reps can take part in controversial and unpopular decisions and still have a strong standing among their members. In our study, more than eight out of 10 TU-reps agree in the statement that 'Cooperation between TU-reps' and employers helps to reduce the negative effects of the crisis'. TU-reps who have participated both formally and informally do agree most.

To sum up, the dramatic consequences of the Covid-19-pandemic have, so far, not altered the overall relationship in TU-reps' participation and assessment of their influence at the workplaces. Our findings do however underline the importance of the

combination of formal and informal participation when it comes to influence. Also, the number of the members standing behind the TU-reps matters both when it comes to participation and influence. A further decrease of the trade union density will therefore probably have a negative impact on the one leg of the model.

Our study has limitation. We must bear in mind that we know little about the long-term effects of the Covid pandemic. Pressure on working conditions in health care over a long time may, for example, result in a kind of ‘corona-fatigue’ at the workplaces. We must also emphasize that our study was directed to the organized part of the labor market, conducted among TU-reps, and tells us nothing about the situation in the unorganized part.

Conclusion: The importance of formal institutions

During the pandemic, many employers and TU-reps have had their most extreme work-life experiences ever. One outcome could have been a decline in TU-reps participation and influence at the workplaces level. However, there are no signs of a reinforced negative trend in parts of the labor market, due to this critical juncture. One overall conclusion is that the pandemic was not a game changer when it comes to TU-reps participation. On the contrary, we observe a tendency toward revitalization when we compare findings from 2021 with 2017, and the TU-reps’ influence on strategic and tactical topics is sustained.

Private service sector is often labeled as problematic when it comes to unionization of workers, lack of formal institutions for participation, and weak TU-reps. We expected therefore to find sector differences, especially between manufacturing and private service sector. Our analysis has revealed differences, but they are less straightforward than expected. Participation seems to have been vitalized in parts of private service sector during the pandemic, but the level of participation is still relatively low in these sectors. This finding does however indicate that the lack of institutional arrangements such as a collective agreement and TU-representatives at the local level probably constitute the most important division between private service sector and manufacturing. When the arrangements are established, they are easily activated in hard times. Seen from the employers’ side, it can be risky to involve TU-reps when the stakes are high, and the schedules are tight. However, it can also be risky *not* to involve the TU-reps under uncertain conditions and in matters that might have serious effects for the workplace, the product and/ or the users. The TU-reps can bring vital information on the table, often important for the decisions that are going to be made under unpredictable conditions. To involve TU-reps could be considered as path dependency. The employer used a strategy for ‘risk-sharing’, which might explain the relatively high degree of influence TU-reps have on restructuring, layoffs, or downsizing. This strategy depends, however, on TU-reps that are willing to participate and take responsibility.

When it comes to public sector, we find that the TU-reps have a slightly different experience. Our study does to a certain degree confirm previous findings. TU-reps assess their influence on ‘decisions that are important to their members during the corona crisis’ as lower than in other sectors. It is, however, too early to conclude that the pandemic has further exacerbated a negative trend.

Previous research has shown that good cooperation at the workplaces depends on formal organizations, that is, trade unions and employer organizations. This study

underlines these findings. The combination of formal and informal participation stands out as the major factor and as such the backbone of the Norwegian labor market model at the workplaces level in times of crisis, and our results are in line with studies from earlier crisis in Norway. Stable and predictable relations, combined with frequent dialogue, maintain the system.

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Notes

¹ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/1686c758-en/1/3/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/1686c758-en&csp=fc80786ea6a3a7b4628d3f05b1e2e5d7&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book>

² https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef22042en.pdf

³ The tasks TU-reps have in wage setting is determined in the collective agreements and not in the Basic Agreement. In some places, it is negotiated locally, in others at a higher level in the company/organization.

⁴ The full scale was weekly or more often, every other week, monthly, every other month, every six months, less often.

⁵ A small number of the respondents (from 7% to 3%) answered 'Not sure' on the question. They are all coded to 0.

⁶ The regression models are tested for possible multicollinearity by calculating a variance inflation factor (VIF). There is no VIF in the models above three. The highest VIF is 2.346, thus multicollinearity should not be a cause for concern.

⁷ The Working Environment Act has statutory regulation on safety inspectors at the workplaces with 10 or more employees. At workplaces with less than 10 employees, the parties may agree in writing upon a different arrangement (WEA section 6–1 (1)).

Annex I

Table 1 Trade union representative in LO by gender. Percent

| | |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| Woman | 48 |
| Man | 52 |
| Total (n) | 100 (n = 2409) |

Figure 1 Trade union representatives in LO, age-distribution. Percent

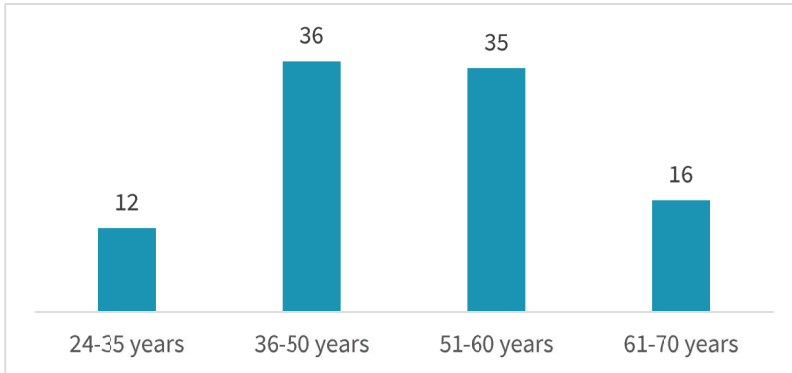


Table 2 Trade union representative in LO by National trade union

| National trade unions | |
|--|-----------------------|
| Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees | 34 |
| The United Federation of Trade Unions | 16 |
| The Norwegian Union of Commerce and Office Employees | 8 |
| Industri Energi | 8 |
| The Norwegian Civil Service Union (NTL) | 7 |
| The Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers | 7 |
| The Norwegian Workers' Union | 6 |
| Norwegian Electricians and IT Workers Union | 5 |
| The Norwegian Food and Allied Workers Union | 4 |
| Other | 5 |
| Total (n) | 100 (n = 2417) |

Table 3 Trade union representative in LO by sector. Percent

| Sector | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Private manufacturing | 22 |
| Private service | 23 |
| Public hospitals | 4 |
| Governmental sector | 7 |
| Municipal sector | 32 |
| Other | 12 |
| Total | 100 (n = 2417) |

Table 4 Trade union representative in LO by number of employees at their workplace. Percent

| Number of employees | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Less than 10 | 7 |
| 10–25 | 21 |
| 26–50 | 19 |
| 51 or more | 53 |
| Total | 100 (n = 2417) |

Table 5 Number of members at the workplace

| Number of members | |
|--------------------------|------------|
| Less than 9 | 20 |
| 10–25 | 28 |
| 26–50 | 17 |
| 51 or more | 35 |
| Total | 100 |

Table 6 TU-reps and ChiefTU-reps at the workplace

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| ChiefTU-reps | 31 |
| TU-reps | 69 |
| Total | 100 |