

A mixed-methods study on the factors influencing Belgian trade unions' positioning towards a Universal Basic Income

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Abstract

This article focuses on trade unions' positioning towards the introduction of a Universal Basic Income (UBI), which is an understudied topic in research on the political feasibility of a UBI. Unions are often considered the 'guardians' of welfare states, as they have long fought to establish, protect, and preserve workers' social rights throughout the history of Western societies. They are key socio-economic actors who represent the interests and needs of their members in political negotiations, with the aim of strengthening their social protection. Yet, unions have been particularly either opposed or unclear about their opinion of a UBI. Research on this topic remains scarce and shows inconsistent results with respect to the opinions of union members and officials. This article aims to fill this gap by investigating the reasons why Belgian union officials and their members oppose or support the implementation of a UBI. We will apply a mixed-methods approach that consists of a quantitative part using data from a novel vignette experiment to determine which features of a UBI elicit the most support or opposition among members. The qualitative section will examine how union officials perceive UBI proposals and how they react to their members' preferences. In this way, this article will contribute to the literature by unravelling the complexity of Belgian trade union positioning towards the introduction of a UBI.

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Introduction

Since the twentieth century, and especially in the post-war period, trade unions have been pillar actors of the construction of European welfare states. Trade unions (TU) are essential stakeholders of the welfare system and have long been shaping the development of social policies (Hyman, 2001). “Unions are continuous associations with the purpose of maintaining or improving employment conditions of wage earners” (Webb and Webb, 1894: 1, cited in Ibsen & Tapia, 2022: 2). Their “*raison d’être*”, namely their commitment to promote the interest of workers, has guided their action for decades, through collective bargaining or institutional participation, especially in corporatist welfare states.

However, TU have faced criticism from some actors of the political world: some consider them to be obsolete organizations, unable to account for an increasing part of the population. This presumed downward spiral (...). According to some observers, unions have lost ground among the “outsiders” of the labour market, resorting to the narrow protection of core workforce segments to guarantee their own survival (Durazzi et al., 2018; Ebbinghaus, 2007). External constraints, and institutional participation in some cases, have led them to be increasingly structured and professionalized (Fraussen et al., 2017) to be able to better defend their members’ interests but also to maintain their organizational influence (Faniel, 2018). The realization of labour market in post-industrial society (Rueda, 2014) would also have led TU to strongly focus on insiders (e.g. typically, male workers with long-term and stable employment) and leaving out outsiders. Some observers contend that, although labour unions try to integrate new profiles of workers (and non-workers) in their discourses and activities, their decision-making process and leadership positions are still organized around these core constituencies (Faniel, 2018). In addition, TU are facing a decline in standard forms of employment (Ibsen & Tapsia, 2017). This evolution implies a rising difficulty of reaching and protecting some labour positions such as self-employed or precarious workers. Unions also have trouble attracting young people to become members and being active within the organization (Pulignano & Doerflinger, 2014), which might threaten their long-term viability.

At the same time, structural changes have also impacted the context in which their action takes place, and has led several authors or leaders to question the role of these mass organizations. The economic recession of the 1980s led to major societal transformations, challenging the certainties on which pre-industrial welfare states were built. Among other things, the emergence of “new social risks” such as precarious work or mass unemployment questions the ability of the system to protect large categories of the population (Carbonnier et Palier, 2022). Groups such as the youth, women or monoparental families but also migrant people, far from the post-war welfare recipients, thus face new needs (Taylor-Gooby, 2004). Moreover, the development of austerity policies in several European countries aimed at minimizing social spending has increased the pressure to retrench the welfare state. These new elements shaping the socio-political reality, along with labour market evolutions have led to a “disadjustment of the welfare state” (Carbonnier et Palier, 2022). In this line, reforms are proposed in order to make welfare states more adapted to current societal evolutions and context.

Among these, the concept of a universal basic income (UBI) has been discussed in academia and the political arena for decades. UBI, under its canonical form, can be described as a certain

amount of money, granted to every member of a political community without counterpart obligation, and regardless of the person's personal and financial situation. Three characteristics define UBI: its individuality (a cash income granted to an individual rather than a household), its unconditionality (no obligations of employment) and its universality (all major people of a community are entitled to receive it) (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017; Dumont, 2022). However, the concept of UBI is multidimensional (Laenen et al, 2022). UBI proposals can vary along different axes and there is no predefined form or design of UBI.

According to some, UBI is considered as a part of a larger retrenchment strategy meant to dismantle the welfare state which would lead to a loss of hardly acquired social rights (Rincon, 2021). UBI is a policy proposal that has gained traction in recent years, especially among various activist groups and prominent political figures. It is often presented as a potential solution to address growing social inequalities by allocating a fixed amount to everyone without conditions (Van Parijs, 2000). The proponents of UBI argue that this proposal would improve the current welfare system, weakened by, *inter alia*, an aging population and technological developments (Dermont & Weisstanner, 2020). A number of short-term experiments have also been conducted to assess the impact of the introduction of a UBI on, for example, poverty or unemployment. These experiments remain very localized and are also subject to important limitations, making the generalization of the finding difficult (see Gibson, Hearty & Craig, 2018). To others, it has the potential of reforming and improving welfare states by answering modern challenges (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017). One might thus wonder how do trade unions react to such UBI proposals? Would trade unions constitute "veto players" (Tsebelis, 2000) against a potential implementation of UBI? What would their reasons be and which logics would inform their positions as organizations?

Those are questions we intend to investigate in this paper. To do so, Belgium will offer the ground of our empirical study. It is highly insightful to explore the positioning of Belgian TU towards UBI for several reasons. First, as mentioned, they are institutional welfare 'gatekeepers', as 'social partners' negotiating for sane working conditions and rights, but also as members of numerous advisory boards, committees or councils, providing expert insights. Then, Belgian trade unions are socially important organizations: their membership base is still stable (contrarily to other countries), but also as leaders in social movements (Faniel, 2018).

To conduct this investigation, we adopt the "reform from below" perspective (Ebbinghaus & Naumann, 2018) stating that union organizations are decisive partners in advancing or opposing a new reform. This is especially the case in a Bismarckian welfare state such as Belgium where they would be assumed to defend the status quo. In the context of this paper, the UBI is thus conceptualized as "the reform" towards which TU are positioning themselves. Although it has not yet been introduced in Belgium (or anywhere else in the world, in fact), it is still interesting to explore how TU perceive this proposal as public interest has been growing in recent years, as well as academic and political discussions on the topic. The aim of this paper is to explore the factors influencing the positioning of Belgian TU towards a UBI through a mixed-method study. More specifically, we intend to empirically inform the reasons behind Belgian TU's positioning on UBI, by the means of a grey literature review and semi-structured

interviews with unions' leaders, and to explore the link between the unions' head and members' attitudes by the means of a quantitative vignette experiment.

This paper will contribute to the literature by refining the analysis of the policy positioning of trade unions towards universal basic income. First, basing itself on a broad theoretical framework about welfare reform, it will provide empirical evidence that increases the theoretical understanding of this framework's explanatory power. The paper will explore to what extent the framework allows us to understand the positioning towards a "non-existing policy", or reform proposal. Second, mixed-method studies about attitudes towards welfare reforms where both public attitudes and the organizational positioning are investigated are very scarce. Besides, the vignette experiment allows us to precisely measure the support for individual policy design dimensions of UBI, which provides a fine-grained approach towards the theme.

Theory

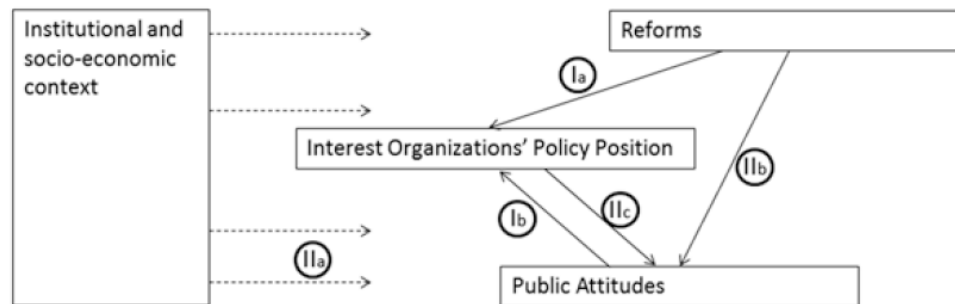
Theoretical framework of TU positioning towards a welfare reform

This paper departs from Ebbinghaus & Naumann's (2018) analytical framework about the policy positioning of interest organizations. This framework distinguishes three factors that influence interest organizations' position towards a specific reform: the institutional and socio-economic context, the reform itself and public attitudes. It also considers the direction (indicated by the arrows, see table below) in which the different factors are interrelated. For example, two arrows depart from the reform to the interest organizations' policy positioning and public attitudes, suggesting that the reform will have an impact on these two factors (Ebbinghaus & Naumann, 2018). Furthermore, the framework identifies arrows in two directions between public attitudes and the position of interest organizations that indicate a reciprocal relationship between how the public thinks and the organizations' position.

Ebbinghaus & Naumann (2018) explain that this reciprocity between public attitudes and policy positioning is shaped by a complex interplay between a "logic of influence" and a "logic of membership". The former pertains to the long-term interest of TU organizations seeking to safeguard their hardly acquired position as "social partners" by actively participating in the development of social policy (Hyman, 2001). Within this strategic position, they will inform and mobilize their members - their constituencies - to advance their political agenda. For instance, this rationale manifests itself in strike actions or other forms of resistance in response to political decisions deemed to be unfavourable to them. On the other hand, the notion of "logic of membership" refers to their constituencies' short-term (self-)interests that might differ from the greater purpose towards which TU are striving. In this regard, Ibsen and Tapia (2017) point to the "dilemma of unions" which refers to the tension TU experience to advocate for the interests of their "old" constituencies while also attracting a new clientele as "they have realized that the very same constituencies are no longer 'enough' to secure a broad-based union movement and effective union action" (p.182). This distinction is mainly theoretical, as the two considerations are complementary rather than opposed, but it is nevertheless relevant because

it highlights the ambiguity that can arise when operating as an intermediary organization between the political realm of policy making and public opinion (Ebbinghaus & Naumann, 2018: 4).

Figure 1: Interest organization's policy positioning from Ebbinghaus & Naumann (2018)



In research on the politics of welfare reform, we see two strands of literature: one that investigates public attitudes (Brooks & Manza, 2008) towards a reform and another that studies the position of organized interests or political parties on the issue (Häusermann, 2010). However, very few studies (see Ebbinghaus & Naumann, 2018) have attempted to explore the positioning of TU towards a potential welfare reform such as UBI by bringing these two strands of evidence together. This paper will draw on the analytical framework presented above to consider to what extent the positioning on UBI is influenced by the institutional context, the reform itself and the public attitudes of TU constituencies.

Unionism in Belgium

Unions are major actors on the institutional and Belgian political scene. The trade union density has remained high for the last decades (about one out of two employees is unionized, OECD Stats, 2022). The rate was just above 50% in 2019, acknowledging only a small decline along the years (it was 56% in 2000). In comparison, the estimated OECD average reached only 15% in 2019 (OECD, 2022). Labour unions are also highly visible in social movements and within civil society (Faniel, 2018).

In Belgium, 'social partners' (trade unions and employers' organizations) are institutionally designated to lead social negotiations, representing the interests of their members. From originally being dual, this model has progressively turned to a tripartite scheme by including the state in the negotiations. Federal authorities have the final say and the power to enforce a decision in case of non-agreement between social partners. This neocorporatist model organizes the decision-making process between the state and interest groups (Schmitter, 1974) and makes TU institutionally strong actors. TU have historically succeeded in securing their institutional power to influence wage bargaining and other welfare-related policies. Belgium is a Bismarckian (Esping-Andersen, 1990), or contributory welfare state. This means that social policies are historically based on workers' and employers' contributions and trade unions have had a strong institutional involvement (Pulignano & Doerflinger, 2014). However, assistance mechanisms have also been integrated progressively. Some social allowances are now funded

by public contributions (state subsidies, VAT receipts) to help people in need, regardless of their work contribution (Dumont 2022).

In the Ghent system, unions are responsible for managing unemployment insurance that allows them to "recruit and retain union members within all occupational groups and retain unemployed workers" (Ibsen & Tapsia, 2017). Belgium has been described as a *de facto* or partial Ghent system (Van Rie et al., 2011): trade unions administer payment bodies of unemployment insurance, financed by social contributions. However, it is not a 'pure form' of the Ghent system because unemployment insurance is compulsory and there is a 'neutral' insurance fund, not linked to any unions (Van Rie et al., 2011).

Besides, Belgian trade unions are integrated in a 'pillarized' society. The pillarization refers to historic division of the socio-political context and the existence of three main pillars in the Belgian context: the Christian, the socialist and the liberal. They are defined as networks of organizations, including a political party, gathered around an ideological base (CRiSP, 2021). There are thus three main confederations in Belgium.

The socialist trade union, the ABVV-FGTB was historically part of the POB (the communist party, funded in 1893) as its unionist commission (funded it 1898). Then, the *Confederation Générale du Travail de Belgique (CGTB) – Belgisch vakerbond (BVV)*, the ancestor of the current trade union, was established in 1937 and became the FGTB-ABVV in 1945 after merging with sectoral and smaller labour unions. This trade union is especially influential in Wallonia, and its membership base amounts for no less than 1,535,000 members (FGTB, 2022).

The Christian union, the ACV-CSC, is the biggest union in Belgium, with 1,6 million members (CSC, 2022) and is the strongest in Flanders. The first Christian union was born in 1886 and became in 1904 the basis of what would later become the instituted union. It was officially established as the CSC-ACV in 1912.

Finally, the liberal trade union, the CGSLB-ACLVB, finds its roots in craft unions born in Ghent in 1857 (basis of the so-called 'Ghent system'). They inspired the first strictly liberal trade union established in 1893 in opposition to the socialist and Christian nature of other unions (Faniel, 2018). However, liberal unionism remained weak and marginal until the first war. In 1920, the *nationale centrale der liberale vakbonden* emerged in Flanders then spread to Wallonia. The CNSLB-NCLVB became truly interprofessional and national in 1927 and finally turned to be the CGSLB-ACLVB in 1939. It had 307.805 members in 2020 (CGSLB, 2022).

It is interesting to note that these confederations, unlike almost all political actors on the Belgian scene such as political parties or interest groups, are still national and have centralized decision-making bodies. One of the reasons behind that is that their core interests concern competences that are still prerogatives of the federal level. However, the day-to-day organization is divided between linguistic sections and are influenced by different socio-political contexts from one side of the language frontier to the other.

The internal structure of trade unions is schematically divided between the confederation, 'head' of the trade union, coordinating the actions of 'federated' levels, the finance, and the

orientation of the whole movement. It is also the instance in charge of negotiations with the federal government and employers. Then, regional sections oversee the people-services, determined according to territorial divisions. Interregional committees, in line with the three Belgian regions (Brussels, Wallonia, Flanders) are in charge of dossiers linked to the regional prerogatives and sit on some concertation councils. Then, professional '*centrales*' are gathered around activity sectors and are engaged in defending workers' rights in specific sectors.

Unionism and UBI

Limited research has been done so far to investigate the positioning of TU attitudes towards a UBI. To date, only Cigna (2020; 2021) empirically investigated the attitudes of TU towards a UBI. He identifies four explanatory factors influencing the positions of unions in developed countries on UBI: the national level of economic insecurity, the unions' attachment to work and social insurance principles, the degree of unions' institutionalization and the generosity of the welfare state. He argues that less institutionalized unions in weaker welfare systems facing economic precarity might be keener to support UBI than their international counterparts, as they see the proposal as a potential improvement of the feeble welfare system. In regards to more institutionalized unions, thriving in protective welfare systems, the researcher shows that the opposition to this potential welfare reform stand on two streams of justification. It is idealistic, as unions fundamentally reject the idea of a universal and unconditional benefit, contravening their work ethic, and practical, as they perceive UBI as a threat to their institutional power and unfavourable for workers (Cigna, 2020). This 'labourist philosophy' (De Wispelaere and Noguera, 2012) thus goes hand in hand with the perception of UBI as a threat to the general welfare system (Offe, 2009). Van Parijs & Vanderborght (2017) state that UBI could lower the general wage level, considering that individuals would receive this additional income outside the work sphere. UBI will also be paid directly by the government, which would leave unions out of the wage negotiation process. This would significantly affect their bargaining power as the representatives of workers' interests and would in turn reduce their organizational power, because workers would be less incentivized to join their collectivity.

However, a UBI could be a topic of interest from the perspective of TU constituencies. Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017) by instance show that there are examples of union leaders or some sectoral labour unions putting forward the idea of UBI. Several authors point to its potential to increase the individual power of workers which could transform the nature of "labour relations" (Cigna, 2021; Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). For instance, a UBI could provide resources for collective actions such as strike funds, workers would get the "power to say no" and refuse poorly paid jobs or detrimental work conditions (Widerquist, 2013). This individual power could provide an exit option out of precarious work (Vanderborght, 2006). Nonetheless, research on the attitudes of TU constituencies is quite scarce and highly inconsistent. Indeed, existing quantitative research suggests that being a union member is *negatively* correlated with support for a UBI (Parolin & Siöland, 2020), whereas others put forward that an important part of union members could support UBI, on the European scene (Vlandas, 2019). However, these relationships and data are not significant in their study, and the results vary a great deal from one country to the other. This being said, our dataset seems

to indicate a majority of union members supporting different types of UBI (see descriptive results below).

Methods

This paper combines both qualitative and quantitative data to explore TU positioning towards UBI. The quantitative side is used to identify the preferences of TU constituencies for the UBI design dimensions amount, conditionality and universality. The data originates from the BABEL dataset which is a large-scale opinion survey conducted in spring 2021, to assess the extent to which support for the introduction of a UBI in Belgium is influenced by its policy design and outcomes (Laenen, Mulayi, Francisco & Van Lancker, 2021). This survey implemented a unique vignette experiment in which characteristics of UBI design and outcome dimensions varied randomly¹. For example, the dimensions ‘amount’ and ‘universality’ respectively varied between “500€” “1000€” or “1500€” and “including newcomers”, “residency requirement” or “nationality requirements”. The BABEL survey sampled a large number of union members, allowing us to thoroughly analyse their attitudes towards various UBI design dimensions. First, we present statistics on the social structure of Belgian union members: age, gender, socio-economic status (e.g. occupational status) and level of education. Second, we explore union members' attitudes towards a UBI by showing the estimated means of the level of support for the different design dimensions. These results will be compared with respondents who have never been affiliated to a TU to assess the extent to which their attitudes towards a UBI differ, as this may have implications for the “dilemma of unions” we discussed earlier.

The qualitative side consists of semi-structured interviews with three TU representatives from each linguistic group of the three Belgian TU confederations and an in-depth and systematic review of the grey literature (internal or public documents and press interviews related to the UBI theme). Our aim was to reach top leaders of Belgian trade unions. We contacted them by email and favoured face-to-face interviews. We aim to interview a member of each linguistic section of the 3 Belgian trade unions, with a total of 6 interviews. The semi-structured interviews offer a double advantage: being minimally formalized, pre-designed questions enable us to grasp information on main interrogations of our research, but at the same time this guideline can be emancipated from, in order to react to the interviewee’s answers with follow-up questions (Coman et al., 2016). The interviews are structured along two main axes: first, the official position of the trade union on UBI, the reasons behind it and its link to the current

¹ The exact wording of the vignette experiment is: Suppose that the Belgian government wants to introduce a basic income. This basic income would have the following characteristics: The Belgian government pays a monthly fee of €500/€1000/€1500; That amount goes to all adult residents of Belgium, *including newcomers, provided they have been in Belgium for a number of years, provided they have Belgian citizenship*; People who work get the money they earn themselves on top of the basic income; *People who are not working are not required to seek paid employment/ required to volunteer work or take on care responsibilities*; Basic income replaces *all existing social benefits/some existing social benefits such as child and sickness benefits/some existing social benefits but gives a supplement to people with additional needs or costs (e.g., those with children or with disabilities)/no existing social benefits*; The basic income will be paid for by taxes and social contributions, which will remain as they are now. Any additional costs will be covered by *a new climate tax on CO2 emissions/ by a new tax on capital and wealth/ by a tax increase in the future*.

system are explored. Second, the internal logic and relation between the head of the organization's and the membership's attitudes are investigated. To this end, we presented their members' levels of support towards different UBI design features based on the BABEL survey. We decided to present the percentages instead of the mean levels of support as this is easier to interpret for anyone without a statistical background. We therefore calculated the proportion of respondents who are above the midpoint of the response scale (which is in our case 51) for each confederation. For example, we look at the share of ABVV-members who place themselves above the midpoint (51 or higher) when presented with a UBI of 500€. For the purposes of this study, we have chosen to distinguish between the positions of Dutch-speaking and French-speaking unionists in order to take into account regional ideological differences that may arise around attitudes towards UBI. The interview grid and the percentages of the level of support per confederation can be found in the appendix section. The content of these primary qualitative data will be analysed through a narrative analysis and content examination (Lejeune, 2019).

Results

Quantitative analysis

First, we present the social structure of the unionized BABEL respondents by means of some demographic statistics, namely gender, educational level, occupational status and age. This information will give us a brief picture of the social structure of the sample. Table one shows the (relative) frequencies of the variable, noting, first of all, that the sample is very balanced in terms of gender (51,9% men vs. 48,1% women). The highest degree obtained by 60.3% of the respondents is a secondary education degree, 25% have a non-university degree and 11.1% report having obtained a university degree. Regarding the occupational status of the active population in the sample, we note that more than half of the sample (53,7%) is a white-collar worker, 24,3% is a civil servant and 19,8% a blue-collar worker. The age brackets point to an over-representation of people aged between 39 and 59 (50.5%), followed by those aged between 18 and 38 (34.4%) and those between 60 and 79 years (15,1%).

Second, we look at the estimated means of the level of support for the dimensions of UBI design, universality, conditionality and amount for unionized and non-unionized respondents (with roughly the same demographic characteristics). These estimates are obtained by averaging the indicated support level on a scale of 0 to 100 for a specific UBI characteristic in each sample. For example, among unionized respondents we note that an unconditional UBI receives largely more support (59,96) than an unconditional UBI (52,68). There is also a clear preference for the most generous UBI of €1500 (61,57) compared to that of €500 (52,08) or €1000 (55,46) among this sample. As for the universality dimension, the results are very close, which may indicate that there is no clear preference about *who* should receive a UBI. The same pattern can generally be seen for non-union members, although the estimated averages seem to be slightly systematically lower than for union members.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the unionized respondents (N=1054)

Categorical variable	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	548	51,9%
	Female	507	48,1%
Educational level	None or primary education	26	2,5%
	Secondary education	638	60,3%
	Non-university education	268	25,4%
	University education	117	11,1%
	Other	6	0,6%
Occupational status (active population*)	White-collar worker	421	53,7%
	Civil servant	191	24,3%
	Blue-collar worker	155	19,8%
	Other	17	2,2%
Age	18-38	362	34,4%
	39-59	532	50,5%
	60-79	160	15,1%

**25,5% of the unionized sampled indicated not having a paid occupation (i.e., being retired, unemployed, housewife/man, pursuing full-time education, on sick leave or disabled or other)*

Table 2: Estimated means of level of support for design dimensions universality, conditionality and amount for unionized vs. non-unionized respondents.

	<i>Unionized (N=1038)</i>	<i>Non-Unionized (N=1127)</i>
<i>UBI design dimensions</i>		
Amount		
€500	52,08	51,78
€1000	55,46	52,59
€1500	61,57	53,01
Conditionality		
Unconditional	59,96	55,28
Conditional	52,68	49,16
Universality		
Including Newcomers	57,20	49,93
Residency requirements	55,02	55,28
Nationality requirements	56,01	52,35

Qualitative analysis

The first round of grey literature analysis indicates that official positions of trade unions in Belgium are against any proposal of UBI. The socialist trade union's President at the time of writing, Thierry Bodson, mentioned that the FGVB-ABVV was opposed to the idea because it would impede any rise in wages and create further dualization between workers (Angot, *RTBF*, 2021). The CSC-ACV presents itself as ready to discuss the idea (Ska, *RTBF*, 2017) but some of its influential members are publicly opposed to it (see for example Palsterman, 2018). Finally, the liberal trade union considers it as a misleading idea risking creating an "imbalanced society" (CGSLB, 2017).

So far, we have conducted three interviews with French-speaking leaders of the three union confederations. We met Thierry Bodson, President of the socialist union (ABVV-FGVB) on the 29th of November. Then we had an interview with Olivier Valentin, National Secretary of the liberal union (ACLB-CGSLB) on the 30th of November. Finally, we had the opportunity to discuss with both Marie-Hélène Ska, General Secretary and Simon Petre, Political Secretary of the Christian Union (ACV-CSC) on the 14th of December. All the interviews lasted between

1h10 and 1h15, were held in French and were recorded. They all took place at the unions' respective headquarters in Brussels.

Following our expectations, the insights from the academic literature and our review of grey literature, the three Belgian union confederations are indeed opposed to a potential implementation of UBI in Belgium. Only the Christian Union has been more nuanced and “has not made UBI an object of positioning in itself”² as a simple for/against position is a “silly question” (Ska, 2022). However, as we will see, they are still reluctant towards UBI in practice. From the interviews, three main categories of arguments appear to inform Belgian trade unions' opposition towards UBI.

First, reasons that we qualify as *pragmatic*. These arguments, based on the trade unions' field expertise, point at concrete obstacles that leaders imagine the UBI would face. Among them, the financing of UBI is put forward. According to all unions' leaders we interviewed, a UBI could not be reasonably financed without cutting back on too many other social benefits or without being less redistributive than today (Ska, 2022), an argument also present in the scientific literature (see Martinelli, 2017). “With a neutral budget, the granted amount would be below the poverty line, below what one needs to live” (Bodson, 2022). Then, the organizations' leaders outline the fact that a UBI would not succeed in answering social needs, especially of the most precarious of society. “From a theoretical standpoint, [UBI] can appear as attractive, but from a standpoint considering the reality of people involved, it does not work” (Valentin, 2022). The President of the socialist union also insists on the fact that UBI would create “two categories of people”, “one that would have an important professional revenue, well integrated within society, and with a UBI as additional amount, and the others that would only have small incomes in addition to the UBI” (Bodson, 2022). This realization might for example lead to important pension gaps between these groups, according to him. The Secretary of the Christian Union outlines another element: “There is a strong feeling that it is a Mathew effect (...): we give more to those who already have a lot” (Ska, 2022). Thus, it appears that, as “co-manager of social security since 1944” (Valentin, 2022) and having a direct contact with people in need, Belgian unions do not reckon that a UBI could be concretely feasible nor that it would protect people that most need social help or insurance, echoing what Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017) exposed in their book.

The second type of objections raised against UBI are of *principle*. Trade unions are no ‘neutral’ or technocratic organizations, as mentioned earlier, they originate from the pilarization of Belgian society. They thus endorse several main values, and broad ideological directions. Their opposition to UBI is also explained by the fact that they do not consider UBI as matching their philosophico-political line. Some of these values are shared by the confederations, such as the principles of solidarity and of social cohesion, and are key in their argumentation. UBI's universal characteristic is deemed to contradict this principle of solidarity because everybody receives the same amount regardless of their specific needs. Then, specific values relating to their philosophical tendency appear. For the liberal union, freedom is also a central value, and when confronted with the idea of participation income, the leader answered that a conditioned allowance would infringe it, and be “antinomic” (Valentin, 2022). According to the socialist

² The quotes were in French, the translation is ours.

union, UBI would “break the link between capital’s participation and social security contributions (...). It would widen the gap between rich and poor people (...) and thus be in favour of the capital” (Bodson, 2022). Ska mentions, “UBI considers two dimensions, that are the individual freedom, and the monetary dimension. These are incomplete to provoke change”. According to the Christian Union: “Collectively, we have the conviction that, of course, monetary aspects are important (...) but it is not the decisive character” (Ska, 2022). Hence, in addition to the respective values of each union, we witness here the importance of a solidaristic system and targeted schemes to best help those in need, as Vanderborgh (2006) had already outlined.

Unsurprisingly maybe, we theorize the third category as *strategic*. It relates to the attachment to the current system and to unions’ institutional position. Here, we acknowledge the relevance of the insiders-outsiders distinction and of strategic thinking as organization, elements already outlined in different pieces of literature (Cigna, 2020; Vanderborgh, 2006; Vlandas, 2019 or Van Rie et al., 2017). First, the three unions insist on their commitment to the Belgian social protection system: “We have an incredible social security system!” (Valentin, 2022), “There is an attachment to social security and to the link to work” (Bodson, 2022). Within this system, the insurance principle is strongly defended by unions’ leaders. “The principle of social security is to make each one contribute according to his means and receive according to his needs. (...) We still believe that the benefits have to be part of social security because we still believe that a social allowance, whatever it is, creates rights and integrates people in the system.” (Ska, 2022). Second, the importance of their constituencies’ interests is noticeable in two interviews: “Our core activity is to defend the rights of workers and social beneficiaries” (Valentin, 2022), being for example less concerned with self-employed people. Bodson mentions that “our conviction is to defend people when they are at work, full- or part-time, when they are in public or private sector, when they are jobless, when they are sick or retired. It is the workers as a whole that we have to defend (...) to maintain unity within the working world” (Bodson, 2022). However, he recognizes that unionized people are better accompanied and fall less through the gaps of the social net. Thirdly, the socialist leader emphasizes the importance of collective negotiation, and of the power relationship between labour and capital. In his view, the implementation of UBI would be detrimental to the global balance of power of workers, making it lean towards the “capital side”. More specifically, unions would have more difficulties in their bargaining “progressively, the wage will decrease, and it will be difficult to pressure employers when they can already do minus 700€. It is already difficult to have workers in strike movements...” (Bodson, 2022). We thus find the conscience here that their organizations’ interests might be diminished.

Finally, from the perspective of the constituencies - head relation, there seems to be a clear top-down process, from the leadership of the union to the members base. We thus miss the arrow identified by Ebbinghaus and Naumann (2018) going from the constituencies to the organization’s positioning. Even if unions have “representative bodies” (Valentin, 2022) and that “the delegates have to be reelected” (Bodson, 2022), there seems to be no influence of the potential members’ support towards UBI upon the organizational position. “We might try to see what’s going on [with the UBI topic], but change our mind, I don’t think so” (Bodson, 2022). The perspective here is that the organization knows better, and that the members, either

do not know the implications or should be better informed, according to their leaders. “We have to put that again in the formation programme to explain our position to the affiliates” (Bodson, 2022), “There is no “feeding up” in relation to this kind of debates, because it is not part of the discussions” (Valentin, 2022). The argument is somewhat different for the Christian Union. They do not feel that it is a request from their members. The UBI topic “does not live” (Ska, 2022), “I have never heard at a congress, [where] we invite 500 workers working in sections, I have never seen a section coming up with a mention to UBI” (Petre, 2022).

In conclusion, the interviews seem to confirm what many pieces of research have already theorized. However, some elements have to be nuanced. First, the presumed “labourist philosophy” or strong work ethic seems to be less pronounced in interviews than what the literature assumed. This is not to say that unions do not emphasize the importance of work. However, we find in our analysis that it is less prominent than other arguments in the UBI debate. For example, if the Christian union’s Secretary did mention that “the connection to work remains important”, she differentiated work, or activity, from employment in our discussion. Then, if strategic considerations of union institutional and bargaining powers are present, they do not inform all arguments of the TU. Finally, we observe interesting differences between the three confederations. The liberal union is the only one insisting on the principle of *freedom* and *individual* defence of social rights. The socialist union strongly insisted on the labour-capital power relation whereas this lexicon was absent from the others’ argumentation. Finally, the Christian union leaders insist way more on the importance of “an integrative” and just society, and were the only mentioning the importance of non-monetary services in their advocacy, such as free public transports in Wallonia (Petre, 2022).

Conclusion

[Work in progress]

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Appendix

Interview grid

Basic Income and Social Protection

- 1) How would you define a basic income?
- 2) What is the official position of the trade union on the UBI proposal in Belgium?
- 3) What is your personal opinion?
- 4) What are the main arguments informing your union's position, and yours, if it differs from it?
- 5) What do you identify as problems or failings of the current social protection system? What solutions or measures would you recommend to address them? Do you think that UBI can provide at least a partial solution?
- 6) How would you define the role of your trade union in society today? And in tomorrow's society? What role do you think the trade union could have in a society where a UBI is implemented?

Internal dynamics and basic income

- 7) Is there an internal debate within the union on this issue, and does it generate disagreements?
- 8) Are there any differences between the French- and Dutch- speaking sections of the union on this issue?
- 9) Do you think that your members, or some of them, could have an interest in the implementation of a UBI proposal? What would be their type of profile? Do you think there is a difference of interest or opinion between union members and non-members?
- 10) How do you think your members position themselves in relation to basic income? And do you take it into account in the official position? (Showing figures comparing non-union members' with their union members' attitudes towards UBI).

Conclusions

- 11) Is there any internal documentation on the subject that you could send me?
- 12) To conclude, do you consider the concept of UBI to be on the Belgian political agenda today? Do you think that some UBI proposal could generate relative consensus within the trade union and/or political world? Under what conditions?