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Trade unions and Facebook: the need to improve dialogue and expand networks

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Key points

- Facebook presents a significant opportunity for trade union revitalisation through outreach, advocacy and the strengthening of networks with other social movements.
 - Analysis of the official Facebook pages of five trade union confederations in Europe and Brazil show that they have a small number of followers given the potential population within the labour movement.
 - Despite the possibilities for interaction enabled by social media, trade union confederations maintain a 'one-way' model of online communication. The opportunity for horizontal dialogue between trade unions and their various stakeholders is not being effectively used.
 - The institutional networks of the selected trade union confederations are restricted to organisations within their immediate sphere of influence, indicating that trade union online activity could be falling into the 'echo chamber' trap.
- To improve engagement with non-traditional segments online, trade unions need to reach out to non-labour organisations and grassroots groups with a solid presence on social media in order to develop joint campaigns that make the link between their causes and the world of work.
- Moving beyond the traditional communication model requires buy-in from the leadership and capacity-building for relevant staff so that information flows are loosened, interactive content is developed, allies are identified and invited to join in the conversations, and a personable online presence is created.

Introduction

There is a general belief that the labour movement is going through a crisis of legitimacy due to both internal and external pressures. However, new forms of collective action that surfaced in the digital era can help organised labour to (re)engage meaningfully not only with its membership, but also with potential members and with society at large. For this to happen, a successful digital communications strategy for organised labour must take advantage of such increasing connectivity to widen the scope of trade union action and to forge alliances with other social movements (Costa 2015; Waterman 2012). Based on this idea, the aim of this policy brief is to assess the presence and the relationships brokered by trade union confederations through their online channels, in order to, first, find out who they are engaging with and, second, to consider whether these virtual connections have any implications for the wider discussion about union revitalisation. Based on an analysis of the Facebook pages of five confederations from Portugal, the United Kingdom (UK) and Brazil, the argument will be developed that unions are maintaining a 'one-way' model of online communication and keeping their networks restricted to

organisations within the labour movement, which in turn hinders their ability to engage meaningfully and to develop alliances with other people and organisations.

The opportunities and challenges of Web 2.0

As the most prominent part of the Internet, the World Wide Web – or simply, the web – presents a significant opportunity for union revitalisation as a platform for outreach, advocacy and the strengthening of networks. In its current form, also known

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as 'Web 2.0', some key characteristics include decentralisation, participation, the user as a producer of information, collective intelligence and big data, among others. The transformation of digital information technologies into interactive social networks, where communication is horizontal and participation is encouraged, have expanded the reach of communications tools to all aspects of social life. Nowadays, some of people's main online activities take place on digital social networks, be it through chats, posts, e-commerce, information sharing or activism. And because these networks connect the many dimensions of people's lives, the distinctions between online and offline realities are increasingly blurred. In fact, today's digital realms can be situated within the concept of 'third places': spaces that are 'neither the first place of home nor the second place of work, but at which people hang out, enjoy themselves, and feel accepted' (Belk 2013:486). While in the physical world these places could be the local pub, the community or religious spaces, similar opportunities for shared interest and mutual exchange now exist online.

While these new technologies are developing into new social practices and new forms of exchanging knowledge (Song 2010), one cannot overlook the challenges presented by the web as a broker of networks. A crucial issue that has been widely debated lately is that while the web exposes individuals to vast amounts of information, it also has 'the potential to limit exposure to attitude-challenging information' (Bakshy et al., 2015: 1131). This is because the flow of information depends both on how individuals are connected within their networks and to the algorithms created by service providers, such as private corporations like Facebook or Google, that 'prioritise' certain contents based on a person's online behaviour, often for commercial purposes (Bakshy et al., 2015; Rogers 2013). This can result in the creation of the now infamous 'echo chambers', where individuals are exposed only to information from like-minded profiles and pages, and 'filter bubbles', in which the content curated by the algorithms once again exposes users only to information in line with their own views. Since the outcomes of the UK's Brexit referendum, the presidential elections in the United States (US), and, most recently, the Cambridge Analytica scandal involving Facebook, discussions around privacy, data control, echo chambers and filter bubbles have reached a broader audience through political commentary and analysis on mainstream media.

Data and method

As the Internet offers an entirely different channel for understanding what people are saying and how they are connecting, new research methods have surfaced that propose moving beyond merely identifying how great a part of society is online and rather investigating cultural and social transformations that are happening via the Internet (Rogers, 2013). The Internet is no longer a virtual realm set apart from people's offline experiences; in fact, virtual interactions actually supplement, rather than substitute, the 'real'.

The research presented in this policy brief is based on a mixed-method comparative study of the online relationships developed by the main union confederations in three countries: Portugal, the UK and Brazil. These countries not only represent distinct social, economic and cultural contexts, but also different patterns

of industrial relations. Despite this diversity, they were selected in order to explore and assess any convergences. The trade union confederations analysed are: the Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses-Intersindical Nacional (CGTP-IN) and the União Geral de Trabalhadores (UGT) from Portugal; the Trade Union Congress (TUC) from the UK; and Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT) and Força Sindical (FS) from Brazil.

Table 1 Online presence of union confederations in Portugal, the UK and Brazil (2017)

	CGTP-IN	UGT	TUC	CUT	FS
Website	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Facebook	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Twitter	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
YouTube	✓	✓		✓	✓
Instagram		✓		✓	
Blog		✓	✓		
Flickr		✓			✓
LinkedIn		✓	✓		
Soundcloud				✓	

Source: own construction.

Although unions were generally slow to embrace new digital technologies, despite varying levels of professionalism, there is now a widespread use of them, including websites, online membership applications, social media pages, blogs, videos and petitions. In the case of our selected union confederations, an initial analysis of their online presence shows that the platforms used by these organisations vary significantly (Table 1). However, with regards to timing, they all went online at around the same time, launching websites between 1997 and 1998. This was also the case for the two predominant social media platforms: the five confederations joined Twitter in 2009 and created official Facebook pages in 2010.

Among the social media platforms, Facebook was selected for further analysis as it is the most consistently used by all organisations; while they are also all on Twitter, its use by some confederations is sporadic. Thus, in order to explore the presence and the connections developed by the union confederations on Facebook, their official pages were used as the subject of a content analysis of posts and a network mapping exercise.¹ Networks were constructed at the institutional level; they were restricted to links established between

¹ For the content analysis, an open source application called Netvizz (Rieder, 2013) was employed to extract content and metadata of all posts on the five Facebook pages during June 2017. For the network analysis, Netvizz was used to extract data for page 'likes', which was then exported to another open-source software, Gephi, in order to generate the network graphs. Data was retrieved on 30 June 2017. All data and metadata extracted is publicly available as the author did not have access to backend information such as the 'Page Insights' tool provided by Facebook only to page administrators.

pages, that is, when the pages of the five union confederations 'liked' other pages. It is important to clarify that Facebook distinguishes between 'profiles', which are personal accounts of individual people, and 'Pages', which are public profiles maintained by businesses, brands, organisations or public figures. Pages can be liked by both personal profiles and other pages. Generally, as institutions tend to be more strategic in their efforts to build an online presence, they may like other pages for several reasons, such as to show support; to make other organisations aware of theirs and increase their reach; to monitor and share content; and to show visitors what pages are aligned with their values or interests.

Lessons from Portugal, the UK and Brazil: low connectedness and interaction

Table 2, below, summarises the basic Facebook page metrics for the five union confederations on the date of data retrieval. It shows that the Brazilian confederations are visibly more active on Facebook than their European counterparts, not only because they are connected to more pages (pages 'liked') and have more followers ('likes' received), but also because their number of posts per hour is much higher: CUT and FS post on their pages several times a day, whereas the CGTP-IN, UGT and TUC show about half or lower than that level of activity.

While this could be related to the sheer size of Facebook in Brazil, which ranks fourth in the world with 130 million registered users², the Facebook penetration rates³ for each country tell a different story: 41% of social network users in Brazil have active Facebook accounts⁴, compared to 42% in Portugal⁵ and 78% in the UK⁶.

Nevertheless, considering that Brazil has 18.5 million unionised workers, the UK has just over 7 million members and Portugal has about 700,000 members (Visser, 2016), the first observation to be made about these figures is that all five organisations have a small number of followers, given the potential population within the labour movement in each country. For instance, while CUT's 168,000 followers may at first seem like a high figure, if this confederation represents 21 per cent of Brazil's unionised workers – that is, almost 3.9 million people – the number of 'likes' on its Facebook page would correspond to only 4.4 per cent of its membership, so not a particularly significant figure.

While a presence on social media is almost inescapable for any organisation that wishes to secure a level of visibility these days, if this presence is not successfully engaging with the intended audiences, it is easy to go unnoticed in the masses of information that make up Facebook. A review of posts for each of the confederation's pages reveals that they all focus their efforts on sharing their own

content. In fact, most of the time the five organisations either post links to articles or information from their own webpages, or share external links without any analysis, commentary, calls to action or encouragement of dialogue. As such, despite the possibilities for interaction enabled by the new communication and information technologies, union confederations seem to maintain an outdated 'one-way' model of online communication, hindering opportunities for a more horizontal dialogue between unions and their various stakeholders. In sum, they do not interact much, they just relay information.

Table 2 Official Facebook pages of union confederations in Portugal, the UK and Brazil, 2017

	Pages 'liked'	'Likes' received	Post activity*	'People talking about this' count**
CUT (BR)	106	168,094	0.25	31,799
FS (BR)	118	112,267	0.20	4,127
TUC (UK)	22	31,370	0.04	3,499
CGTP-IN (PT)	21	19,960	0.10	389
UGT (PT)	45	1,324	0.08	235

Source: own construction based on data retrieved.

Note: sorted by 'likes' received.

*Posts per hour, based on the last 50 posts. **Attention metric provided by Facebook.

Figures 1 to 5 present directed graphs, with Facebook pages as the nodes and the connections between nodes made when a page 'likes' another. The graphs for the page 'like' networks of the confederations reveal interesting insights about the level of engagement of these organisations with others on Facebook. As the union confederations are the central element in the networks, they are necessarily connected to all the other nodes. It is also possible to see where other pages follow one another. Five groups are evident: first, pages directly related to the union confederation itself, such as regional offices, sub-committees or campaigns; second, pages of unions, regardless of whether they are affiliated with that particular confederation; pages of civil society organisations; pages of media organisations, which encompass both mainstream and alternative media; and pages of government bodies.

2 statista.com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-of-facebook-users/

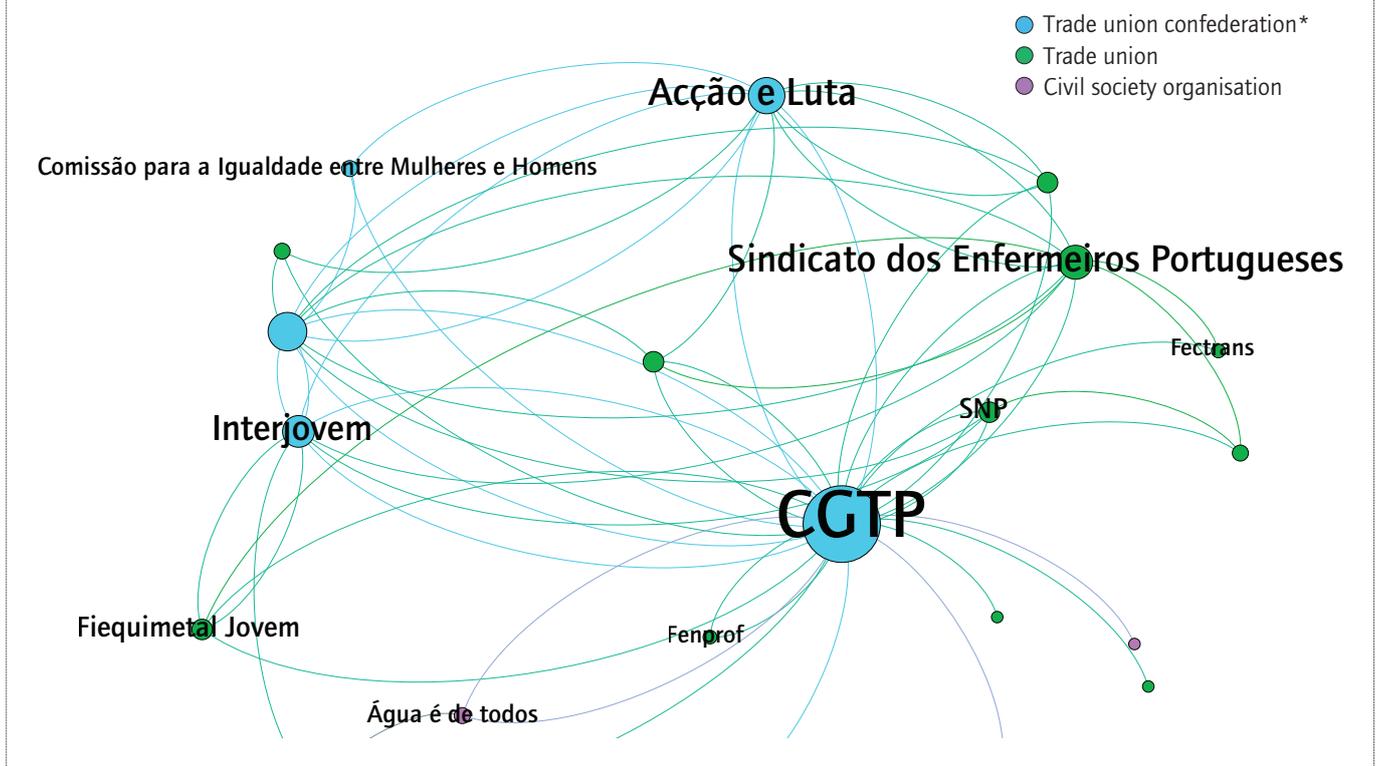
3 The Facebook penetration rate measures the share of a given population with active accounts.

4 statista.com/statistics/244934/facebook-penetration-in-brazil/

5 statista.com/statistics/567082/predicted-facebook-user-penetration-rate-portugal/

6 statista.com/statistics/284506/united-kingdom-social-network-penetration/

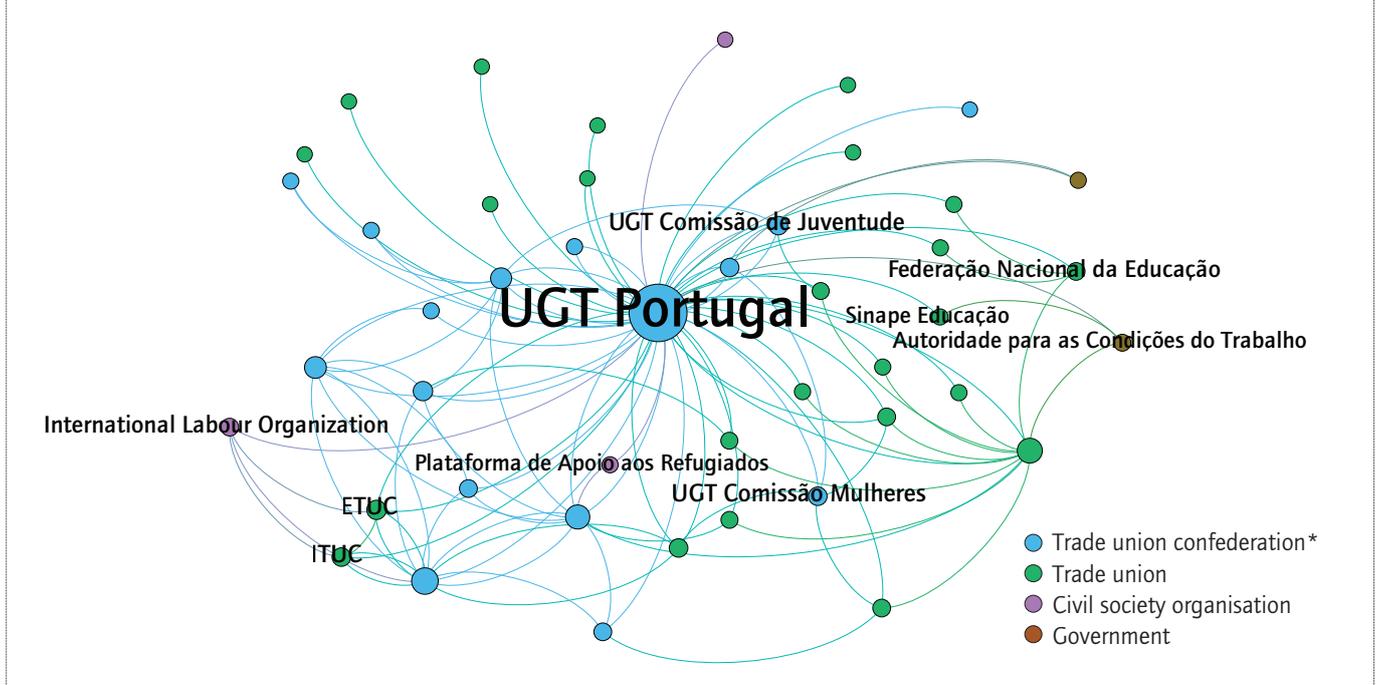
Figure 1 Visualisation of the Facebook page 'like' network for the CGTP (PT)



Source: own construction based on data retrieved.

*Pages directly related to the union confederation itself, such as regional offices, sub-committees or campaigns.

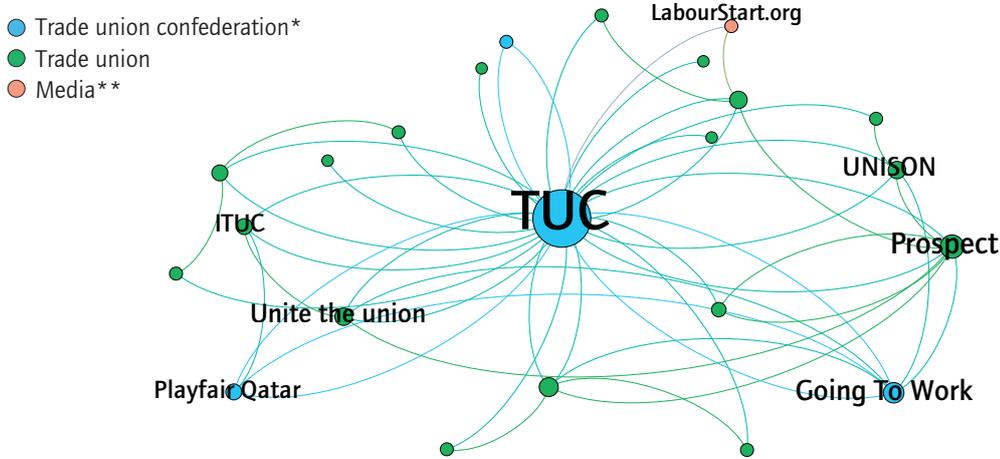
Figure 2 Visualisation of the Facebook page 'like' network for the UGT (PT)



Source: own construction based on data retrieved.

*Pages directly related to the union confederation itself, such as regional offices, sub-committees or campaigns.

Figure 3 Visualisation of the Facebook page 'like' network for the TUC (UK)

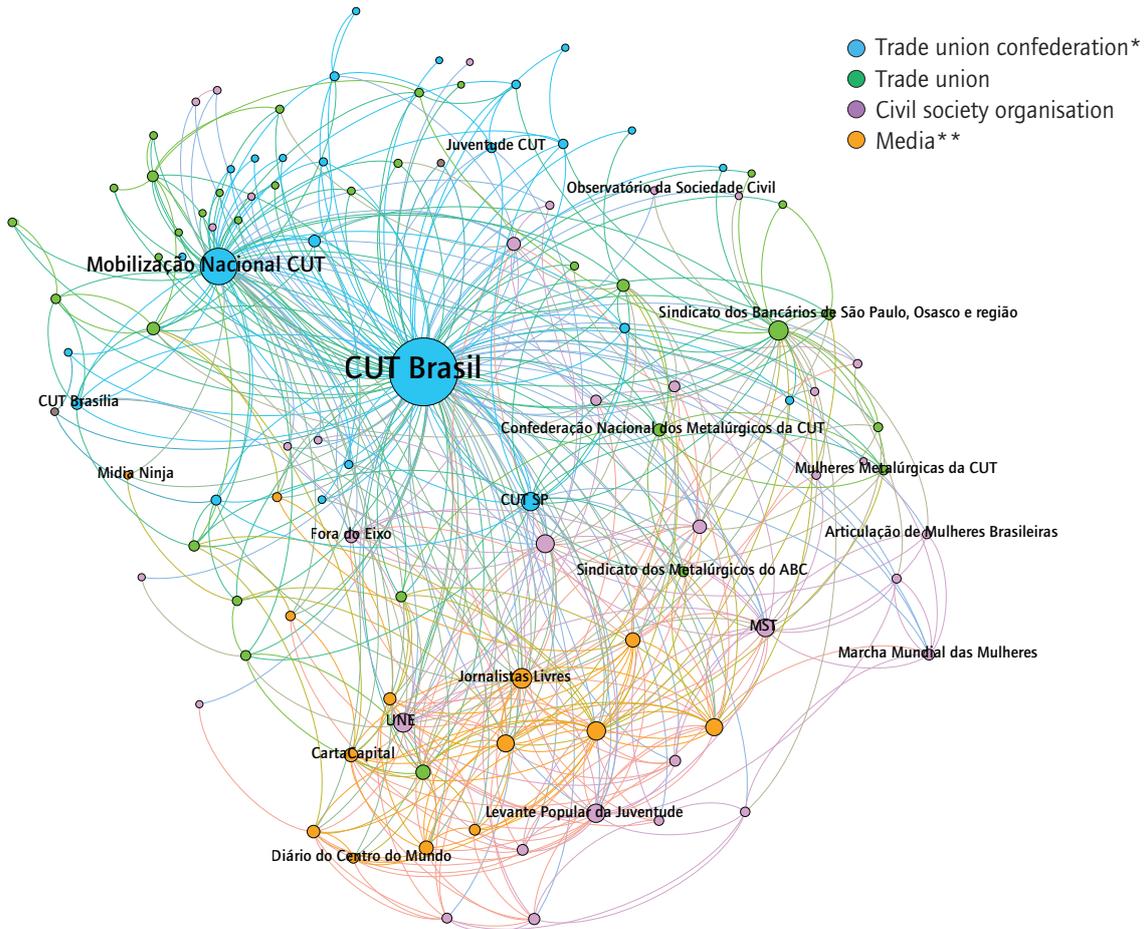


Source: own construction based on data retrieved.

*Pages directly related to the union confederation itself, such as regional offices, sub-committees or campaigns.

**Pages of media organisations, which encompass both mainstream and alternative media.

Figure 4 Visualisation of the Facebook page 'like' network for CUT (BR)

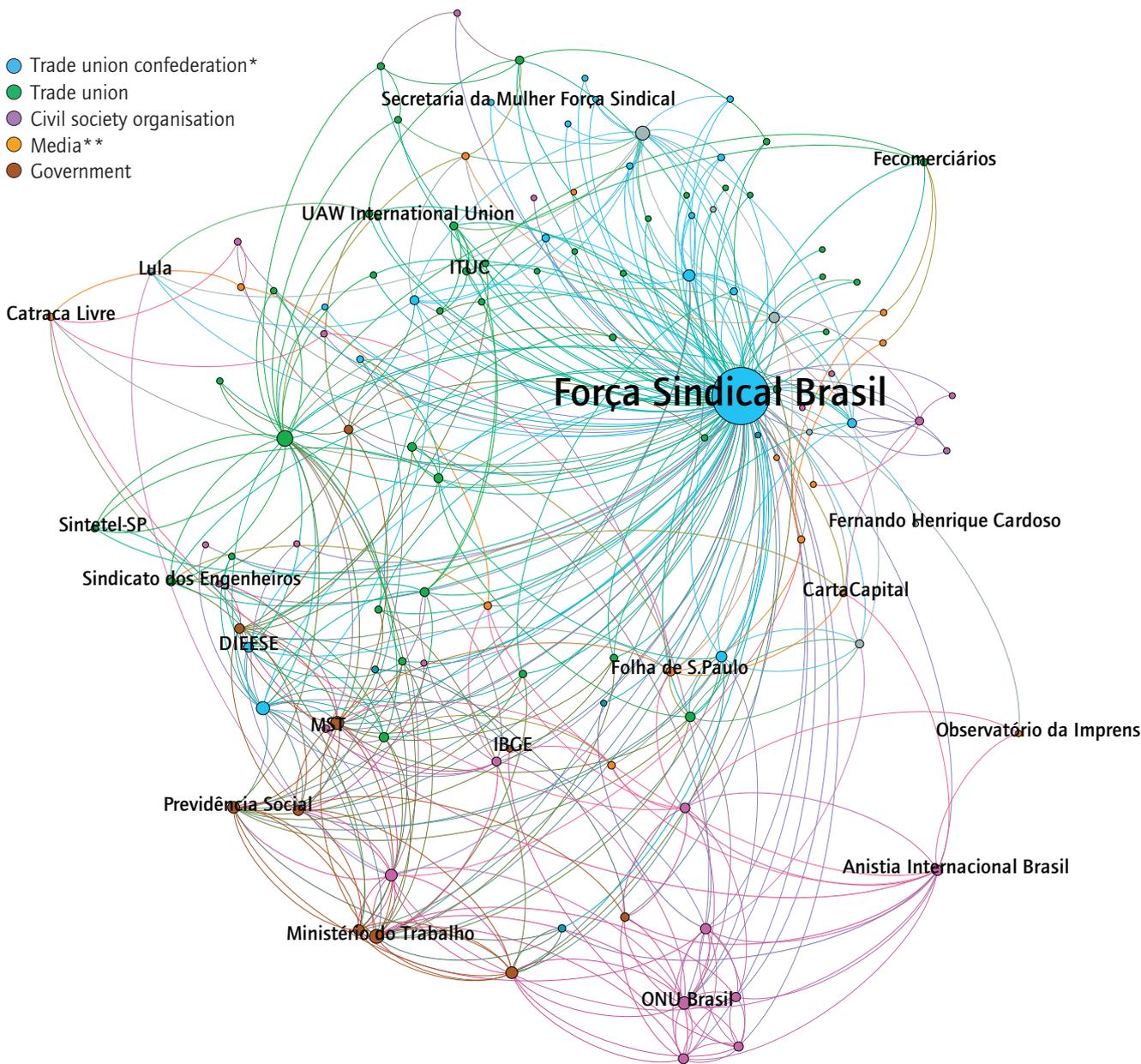


Source: own construction based on data retrieved.

*Pages directly related to the union confederation itself, such as regional offices, sub-committees or campaigns.

**Pages of media organisations, which encompass both mainstream and alternative media.

Figure 5 Visualisation of the Facebook page 'like' network for FS (BR)



Source: own construction based on data retrieved.

*Pages directly related to the union confederation itself, such as regional offices, sub-committees or campaigns.

**Pages of media organisations, which encompass both mainstream and alternative media.

The nodes were colour-coded according to the five groups and their sizes were ranked according to their degree of connectivity with other nodes. The connections between the nodes were coloured to match their node source.

What the green and blue clusters show is that the majority of pages 'liked' by the union confederations are related to the labour movement, be that unions or their own regional offices and campaigns. That is ostensibly the case for the European confederations: the TUC's network is almost 100 per cent endogenous, while in Portugal, 89 per cent of the UGT's likes are either unions or its own pages,

with the CGTP-IN slightly behind at 85 per cent. The two Brazilian confederations have less homogeneous networks but are still mostly concentrated around union organisations: blue and green nodes represent 53 per cent of CUT's likes, and 51 per cent of those of FS. As the Brazilian trade union movement is often referenced as one of the benchmarks for 'social movement unionism', in which trade unions widen the scope of trade union action to link labour causes to other social justice agendas (Costa 2015; Waterman 2012), the higher diversity found in the CUT and FS networks may reflect this identity and a more conscious effort to use Facebook as a platform for outreach.

Moreover, while CUT and FS like several mainstream and alternative media pages, the TUC is the only one from the three European confederations to like a media-related page, for the labour news source 'Labourstart.net'. Again, this could signal contrasting strategies, in that the Brazilian confederations are willing to like news outlets not necessarily because they share their views, but because it can be a way to get their attention and position the confederations as important voices for potential labour-related coverage.

Conclusion

If the findings in this policy brief present a key lesson to the labour movement as a whole, it is that union online activity could be falling into the 'echo chamber' and 'filter bubble' traps, as illustrated by the networks of the five union confederations that are mostly composed of organisations related to the labour movement itself. By keeping their institutional relationships restricted to their immediate sphere of influence, union confederations not only limit their exposure to like-minded perspectives, but also fail to reach out and advance a dialogue with divergent and new audiences.

Linking back to the discussions around union revitalisation, much of the focus has been on the potential for developing alliances with diverse social movements in order to defend a broader social justice agenda, connect labour issues with other causes, and organise hard-to-reach workers (Bernaciak et al. 2014; Costa 2015; Waterman 2012). Here we can see that, at least on social media, organised labour may be missing out on expanding their influence. No significant relationships with other groups were identified in the five union confederations analysed, even if new, social media-based movements have already proven to be successful at mobilising people, despite much lower levels of institutionalisation.

Unions could greatly benefit from reaching out to non-labour organisations and grassroots groups that already have a solid presence on social media and a track record of online mobilisation in order to develop joint campaigns that make the link between their causes and the world of work. An initial effort online could reap tangible offline results with regards to membership levels and succession strategies, as such alliances would not only demonstrate a willingness by organised labour to expand their agenda, but also open doors for engagement with segments of the population that represent a potential for organising, such as young people and minorities. In return, these potential allies would benefit from the well-established institutional structure of unions, their experience in negotiation and advocacy, and their capacity to mobilise their ranks.

In order to achieve this, trade unions need to first reflect on several questions regarding the strategic use of Facebook for outreach:

- Who are the followers of union Facebook pages? Are they mostly from within the labour movement or from a broader audience? Are they mostly individuals or other organisations? Which strategic segments are missing among followers?
- Is there a low representation of members because unionised workers are not active on social media, because members may not want to be recognised as unionists by their personal networks, or because union pages do not appeal to them?

- Could a low number of followers be due to insufficient commitment of union leadership to encourage the more horizontal engagement enabled by online interactions?
- Are unions employing the necessary resources required to effectively manage social networks as part of a broader communications strategy?

While the first two questions pertain to unions understanding their Facebook audiences and detecting gaps, the latter two signal the next steps in developing an effective social media presence: buy-in from the leadership and capacity-building for relevant staff in communications or communications-related roles.

Unions will only be able to move beyond the top-down communication model when they fully grasp the foundations of social media. This means loosening control of information flows; sharing content in a way that encourages interaction rather than simply relaying information; mapping out potential allies and reaching out to them with relevant content; and developing an accessible and personable online presence. To stand out in a virtual world saturated with information, the ability to be creative and to tell stories that foster connections is absolutely essential.

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