

Working Paper:

**Revitalization for the common good?**  
**Alternative union organizing in the field of live-in care in Austria**

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**Abstract**

*Unions are grappling with issues of legitimacy and a decline in membership. This paper examines how trade unions can use technology as part of their revitalization strategy, using the example of a common good-oriented platform in the Austrian live-in care sector. Based on a single case research design, the study highlights core activities such as community building, stakeholder management, and business model development that were part of the union's revitalization strategy. These activities were employed to mobilizing different power resources. The study demonstrates how improvisation and experimentation bolstered associational power, while media campaigns and collaborations strengthened societal and institutional power. The study shows how technology can sustain union influence, provides insights for unions globally to adapt to contemporary challenges and thus contributes to the union revitalization discourse.*

**1. Introduction**

The average age of Austria's population is steadily increasing, which leads to a heightened demand for continuous and comprehensive care services (Statistik Austria, 2020). Due to the demographic shift, live-in care has emerged as a central pillar of care provision. However, despite its importance, the live-in care sector is plagued by precarious working conditions. Care workers often face low wages, long hours, and limited job security (Buchan et al., 2017). These adverse conditions not only impact the quality of care provided but also cause challenges to attracting and retaining staff.

Usually, it would be up to labour unions to help the care workers. But unions are grappling with issues of legitimacy and a decline in membership (Vandaele, 2019a;b). The conventional methods of union organizing and advocacy appear increasingly insufficient in addressing the complex dynamics of the modern labor market (Hyman, 2018). As a result, unions are exploring alternative organizing approaches to stay relevant as societal actors and effectively champion the cause of live-in care workers.

One promising avenue is the adoption of alternative organizing approaches such as common-good-oriented digital platforms (Benassi & Vlandas, 2016; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013). These platforms represent innovative organizing models that leverage technology to enhance union outreach, member engagement, and collective action (Bauwens et al., 2020). By focusing on the common good, such platforms aim to align the interests of care workers, care recipients, and the broader society, fostering a more sustainable and equitable care system (Heery & Adler, 2004; Lévesque & Murray, 2010).

However, unions are typically not market actors. Usually, unions rely on organizing mechanisms such as collective agreements or strikes. By entering the field of care provision as a market actor, a union took would take an unconventional step that goes beyond organizing logic – a step likely to cause internal and external friction.

Even though extant research on union revitalization has already thoroughly investigated the different union strategies and approaches to renew the organization and keep it an influential counterpower to capital (Murray et al., 2020; Trif et al., 2023), Geelan (2021) still sees need for research on *how unions use the internet and other technological advancements as part of their revitalization strategy*. This study sheds light on this question by investigating the establishment of a union-driven common-good oriented digital platform in the live-in care sector in Austria. The union's approach of pro-actively engaging in entrepreneurial activity to alter working conditions is a unique case which promises to hold valuable insight into the interaction of use of technology and union revitalization. The unique single case study and the rich data set allow me to core activities the union engages as part of their alternative organizing approaches from a processual perspective. With this, I contribute to the ongoing union revitalization discourse.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

This chapter introduces union revitalization and alternative organizing strategies, drawing on existing research and the current academic discourse. Additionally it introduces the power resource approach as an analytical lens that provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the effectiveness of these strategies.

### **2.1. Union Revitalization**

Since the Second Industrial Revolution, unions have established themselves as key social partners, organizing workers, representing their interests, and advocating for better working conditions (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018). In Europe, this has led to the development of an industrial relations system where unions play a central role, acting as a counterbalance to

employer power (Kilhoffer et al., 2017). This system, characterized by tripartite relationships between unions, employer associations, and the state, is firmly embedded in the European social model and its social dialogue frameworks (European Commission, 2015a; European Commission, 2015b).

Unions traditionally navigate the tension between membership logic and influence logic (Schmitter & Streeck, 1999). They must recruit new members and retain existing ones (membership logic) while addressing conflicting demands from their environment, which can lead to internal conflicts that must be managed through union action programs (Holst et al., 2008). The increasing diversity of members and their evolving interests, driven by structural economic changes, pose significant challenges for unions (Silver, 2005). Simultaneously, unions must effectively represent their members' interests in social dialogue with employer associations and the state (influence logic). This dual system of representation is legally established by the Works Constitution Act and the Collective Agreements Act (Müller-Jentsch, 1986). Success or failure at the political level affects workplace representation (Holst et al., 2008). The evolving labor market, driven by digitalization and globalization, presents new challenges for unions and revives or intensifies existing conflicts (Lenaerts et al., 2018). Since the late 20th century, unions have faced crises such as significant membership declines (Ebbinghaus, 2002; Visser, 2015) and reduced political influence (Holst et al., 2008). The rise of atypical employment fundamentally challenges union organizing and representation strategies (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011). Studies on union responses to atypical employment reveal two main approaches (Benassi & Vlandas, 2016). Some unions remain resistant to atypical workers (Palier & Thelen, 2010), while others see change as an opportunity, opening up to new groups to strengthen their capacity through increased membership (Heery & Adler, 2004). This strategy aligns with the evolutionary perspective on the labor movement, suggesting that unions can creatively renew themselves in response to environmental changes (Voss & Sherman, 2000; Dörre, 2008). Thus, current labor market changes can be seen not only as a threat but also as a catalyst for union modernization and realignment, potentially resulting in a sustainable union model for atypical workers and platform laborers.

The strategy of opening up, experimenting and testing atypical organizing mechanisms as an adaptation to current developments supports the evolutionary perspective on the trade union movement (Klöpffer, 2010) and is referred to as 'union revitalization' in the scholarly debate (Trif et al., 2023). According to this perspective, transformation processes of trade unions are triggered by a change in the environment (Voss & Sherman, 2000), whereby trade unions have

a strategic choice in their response to adapt and renew their organizing modes through creative action (Dörre, 2008).

## **2.2. Alternative organizing**

Alternative organizing represents a crucial approach to union revitalization, addressing the pressing need for labor unions to adapt to the shifting landscape of work in the 21st century. Traditional union practices such as collective bargaining and strikes, while historically significant, often fall short in reaching workers in atypical or precarious employment situations (Frege, 2000). These workers, who are increasingly prevalent due to globalization, digitalization, and the gig economy, require innovative forms of representation and support (Heery, 2009).

One of the primary strengths of alternative organizing lies in its flexibility and inclusivity. By leveraging digital platforms, unions can reach a broader and more diverse group of workers, facilitating communication and coordination in ways that traditional methods cannot (Schmalstieg, 2010). These platforms can host forums, provide resources, and organize virtual meetings, creating a sense of community among dispersed and isolated workers (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

Community-based advocacy is another key component of alternative organizing. By embedding themselves within local communities, unions can address the specific needs and concerns of workers in those areas. This localized approach enables unions to build trust and solidarity, fostering a stronger and more committed membership base (Fine, 2006). Moreover, it allows unions to tailor their strategies to the unique challenges faced by workers in different regions and industries (Tattersall, 2010).

Coalition-building with social movements and non-governmental organizations further enhances the effectiveness of alternative organizing. By aligning with groups that share common goals, unions can amplify their voice and influence (Milkman & Voss, 2004). These alliances can help to advocate for broader social and economic reforms that benefit all workers, not just union members. For example, partnerships with environmental groups can lead to campaigns for green jobs and sustainable working conditions, while alliances with civil rights organizations can advance efforts for greater workplace equality and anti-discrimination policies (Fine & Tichenor, 2009).

Alternative organizing also emphasizes the importance of demographic characteristics in its strategies. By focusing on the specific needs of diverse worker groups, such as women, immigrants, and young workers, unions can develop targeted initiatives that address the unique

barriers these groups face (Schmalstieg, 2010). This demographic focus helps to create more inclusive unions that better reflect the composition of the modern workforce (Bensusán & Cook, 2003).

In addition to these tactical advantages, alternative organizing plays a critical role in renewing the political and social relevance of unions. As unions engage in innovative practices and expand their reach, they can position themselves as forward-thinking and adaptive institutions capable of addressing contemporary labor issues (Turner & Hurd, 2001). This renewed relevance can attract new members and re-engage existing ones, thereby strengthening the union's overall power and influence (Frege & Kelly, 2003).

In conclusion, alternative organizing offers a dynamic and multifaceted approach to union revitalization. By embracing digital tools, community advocacy, coalition-building, and demographic focus, unions can effectively respond to the challenges of modern work environments. This approach not only enhances the ability of unions to represent and support workers but also ensures their continued relevance and influence in a rapidly changing world. As unions continue to innovate and adapt, alternative organizing will be an essential component of their strategies for growth and empowerment.

### **2.3. Power resource approach as analytical lens**

The ability of actors to successfully assert their own interests or represent the interests of others is closely tied to questions of power and its exercise. Despite being extensively discussed in the social sciences, power remains poorly defined due to its complexity and the constant emergence of new facets in academic discourse (Morriss, 2002). Max Weber (1985, p. 28) defines power as “the chance to impose one's will within a social relationship, even against resistance,” while Talcott Parsons sees power as the mobilization of resources for effective collective action (Clegg et al., 2006; Parsons, 1963). Weber views power as a zero-sum game, where the exercise of power strengthens one's position while weakening the other's (Göhler, 2009). In contrast, Parsons believes power can enhance the positions of both sides equally (Göhler, 2009). The power resources approach, used as a research heuristic in this work, builds on Weber's relational concept of power, visible in social relationships (Ludwig et al., 2018).

Its main goal is to identify action spaces for workers and unions in specific contexts, suggesting that employees can reduce asymmetries in employer relationships through collective resource mobilization (Ludwig et al., 2018; Schmalz & Dörre, 2014). Here, workers' power is seen primarily as the power to act (power to), rather than the power to set rules (power over) (Lévesque & Murray, 2010). Emerging within the Labour Revitalization Studies, the power

resources approach moves beyond traditional perspectives that view unions as victims of societal structural changes. Instead, it focuses on available strategies and power resources that can be used for the strategic reorientation of unions to address new conditions (Schmalz & Dörre, 2014). The rise of digital platform work necessitates such reorientation and the establishment of effective representation structures for platform workers.

The core elements of the power resources approach, developed by Erik Wright (2000) and Beverly Silver (2005), are structural power and associational power. These have been supplemented by institutional and societal power in academic discourse (Dörre et al., 2009; Dörre & Schmalz, 2014; Urban, 2013). It is crucial to understand that these power resources do not determine actors' actions. Instead, they must be strategically harnessed by unions and workers, which requires the union's learning ability (Nachtwey & Wolf, 2013). Moreover, power resources are interdependent and influence each other (Ludwig et al., 2018). *Figure 1* gives an overview of the power resources and their interdependent relation.

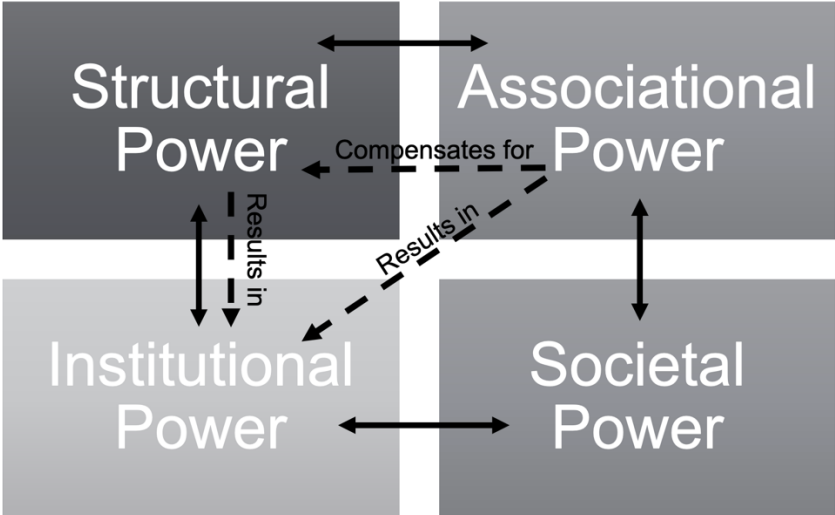


Figure 1: Overview Power Ressources (based on Ludwig et al., 2018 & Schmalz and Dörre, 2014)

**Structural power**, arising from workers' positions within the economic system, is the primary power resource available independently of collective representation (Silver, 2005; Wright, 2000). It is based on disruptive power (Piven, 2006) and includes production power and market power. Production power depends on workers' positions in the production process and their ability to disrupt it, mobilized through strikes and work stoppages (Brinkmann et al., 2008). Market power results from possessing rare skills demanded by employers, especially in tight labor markets where labor supply is low (Silver, 2005). The second power resource, **associational power**, derived from collective political or union organizations, can partially compensate for low structural power but cannot fully replace it (Brinkmann & Nachtwey,

2010). This power results from organization processes that create capable strategic actors who exert influence at production, exchange, and political levels (Silver, 2005).

***Institutional power***, a secondary form of power, emerges from past conflicts involving structural and associational power (Brinkmann & Nachtwey, 2010). It solidifies in legal rules, norms, and practices at various levels (Johnston & Pernicka, 2020). Unlike other power forms, institutional power is relatively stable over time, unaffected by short-term changes (Schmalz & Dörre, 2014). ***Societal power***, the fourth power resource, operates within the broader social context where workers and unions interact. It arises from cooperative relationships and third-party support, creating action spaces for unions (Schmalz & Dörre, 2014). Societal power comprises *cooperative* and *discursive power*, which reinforce each other. Cooperative power mobilizes resources from other social actors to strengthen associational power (Schmalz & Dörre, 2014). Effective cooperation requires lasting relationships and individuals bridging union and non-union contexts (Brecher & Costello, 1990). Discursive power involves intervening in societal discourse, offering credible solutions, and demonstrating problem-solving competence to gain public support (Schmalz & Dörre, 2014).

The power resource approach offers a valuable analytical lens for assessing the success of union revitalization strategies by focusing on the various forms of power that unions can mobilize to enhance their influence and effectiveness. This approach categorizes union power into associational, societal, organizational, and institutional resources, providing a comprehensive framework to evaluate how unions adapt and thrive in changing labor landscapes. By examining how unions leverage these power resources, the power resource approach helps to illuminate the multifaceted strategies unions employ, from grassroots community building to strategic alliances with political actors. This perspective not only captures the dynamic and context-specific nature of union activities but also underscores the importance of innovation and adaptability in union strategies. As unions face contemporary challenges such as globalization, digitalization, and the rise of precarious employment, the power resource approach allows for a nuanced analysis of their efforts to maintain relevance and efficacy in advocating for workers' rights.

### **3. Methods**

The empirical context in which the case study is embedded is illustrated in the following. Apart from that, this section introduces the research design, the case study and the data collection as well as the data analysis in detail.

### 3.1. Empirical Context

*Live-in care in Austria.* The provision of 24-hour care, predominantly facilitated through commuter migration, constitutes a centrally endorsed element of the Austrian care system (Aulenbacher et al., 2021; Weicht & Österle, 2016). The precarious nature of the live-in caregivers' working conditions, employment terms, and social security is a shared characteristic across Europe.

The workers, predominantly women, embark on two to four-week rotations from their countries of origin, such as Romania, Czech Republic, and Slovakia, to provide assistance to their clients in fulfilling daily requirements (Weicht & Österle, 2016). The responsibilities of these 24-hour caregivers encompass basic support for household and lifestyle tasks. Depending on the care recipient's health status, particularly in care levels 3 to 5, the caregivers may also undertake more complex duties like personal hygiene and medication administration (BMASGK, 2019, p. 7 ff.). Notably, personal care is generally perceived as a non-specialized profession, with no specific training prerequisites. The escalating demand for professional and institutional care for the elderly, driven by global demographic and socio-economic shifts and the scarcity of skilled workers in the healthcare sector, has led to the emergence of new care markets over the last decades.

In Austria, the model of recruiting 24-hour care workers through placement agencies is on the rise, despite its controversy (Steiner et al., 2019). These agencies predominantly recruit women from Central and Eastern European countries for care and domestic roles in private households (Bachinger, 2016; Chau et al., 2018; Steiner et al., 2019). As of the end of 2021, approximately 59,488 caregivers were actively registered in Austria, alongside 917 registered placement agencies (WKO, 2021). Recruitment agencies serve as intermediaries between the supply and demand sides. Within the public discourse, these agencies face allegations of engaging in unfair and/or exploitative business practices, including non-compliance with the market minimum wage, disregard for labor and employment laws, and potential human rights violations (Steiner et al., 2019). Furthermore, caregivers and families find themselves heavily reliant on placement agencies due to opaque pricing structures and the prevalence of illicit contracts, such as gagging agreements.

The legal framework established in 2007, facilitating the legalization of 24-hour care, allows predominantly migrant workers to be legally categorized as solo self-employed rather than traditional employees. Despite lacking autonomy in determining their schedules and the utilization of their labor (Sagmeister & Matei, 2021), and with agencies setting the fees, caregivers are designated as self-employed or ostensibly self-employed. In this inadequately



regulated domain, these individuals are excluded from the provisions of labor laws and social security, encompassing aspects such as minimum wage, working hours, family allowances, and leave (Chau et al., 2018; Geissler, 2018, p. 787; Marchetti, 2015). This exemption also results in their exclusion from the purview of trade unions (Maier, 2022; Sagmeister & Matei, 2021), thereby diminishing their protection against potential exploitation by recruitment agencies.

### **3.2. Empirical Case**

In December 2022, an Austrian trade union initiative launched a digital platform in Austria to match live-in caregivers with individuals and families in need. By entering pro-actively into the field of care provision as market actor, the union took an unconventional step and left their usual terrain and organizing logic.

The core objective of the trade union initiative is to improve the working conditions of caregivers and to increase transparency and safety for both caregivers and families. Since the union initiative is usually not engaging in entrepreneurial activity, the union representatives involved in the set-up of the platform made sure to first understand the problems and needs of the caregivers and collaborated in a comprehensive field study with the University of Vienna to gain a thorough understanding of the current situation in Austria (cf. Schaffhauser-Linzatti et al., 2022) before setting up the platform. The study consisted of a quantitative survey where more than 2,300 caregivers were interrogated with regard to current grievances and requests for improvement as well as qualitative focus group studies to complement the quantitative findings. Based on the results of the study, the union initiative designed the platform and incorporated features such as a video call tool to give the caregivers and those in need for care the opportunity to get to know each other before entering the contractual relationship. Once both parties agree on being a match, the platform provides sample contracts in German as well as in the caregiver's respective native language, in which minimum rates per day are set, depending on the care level of the person being cared for. This is an attempt to combat the often precarious payment of caregivers that is common on the market. Thus, the ultimate goal is to proactively intervene in the market in the long term (e.g. by setting minimum standards for remuneration), while at the same time aiming at generally improving working conditions in the 24-hour care market (e.g. by setting a standard and forcing competitors to follow suit).

Other than usual in the care market, the contract is concluded directly between the care receivers and the caregivers – making the platform not an agency but a match maker in the literal sense. The business model is self-sustaining but not profit oriented, with the care receivers paying a one-time registration fee to access the platform's services. Even though formally the platform

is an independent legal entity, it is still tightly connected to the union with the headquarters being located in the same office, former union representatives being in the role of platform operators, and different union departments collaborating closely with the platform. For instance, the trade union initiative that is responsible for organizing the self-employed acts as impartial mediators in the event of a conflict between the caregiver and the person or family being cared for.

Since the platform has been launched, community and quality management are the central pillars to ensure a community driven development of the platform. The caregivers, as well as the care receivers have a point of contact and get a chance to get their voices heard. Their needs are continuously collected by the platform's community managers and passed on to the platform operator so that they can adapt the platform interface and the matching process accordingly. Community and quality managers as two institutionalized contact points allow continuous flow of feedback from both parties to the platform operator, who significantly incorporates the wishes and needs in the further development.

Apart from that the platform operator not only made sure to develop the platform itself further in the year that the platform has been running, but also sought to build and nurture strategic alliances with different stakeholders such as government organizations on a communal as well as state level, welfare organizations that are also traditionally active in the care sector, and non-government organizations such as the chamber of labor.

### **3.3. Data Set**

The union-initiated platform is a unique case in Europe. It represents an alternative form of organization for the common good, as it attempts to establish an alternative to profit-driven platforms and agencies in the market. Particularly interesting in this case is the fact that this happens outside of established organization mechanisms (such as collective agreements or strikes) and thus represents a novelty for the union as a public welfare-oriented actor itself.

In order to answer the research question of how the platform is used as part of the union's revitalization strategy, I draw on an extensive data set from a single case study design (Yin, 2017) consisting of observational data, interview data as well as data from the platform backend as well as social media data as secondary data source to triangulate the observations and interviews.

*Participant observation.* Over the course of a year, from December 2022 to November 2023 I collected observational data. In this period, I took part in internal meetings (e.g. regular jour fixes) as well as external meetings with stakeholders, whereby I was able to observe both

the concrete work processes of the platform and the interaction with the trade union and political stakeholders. To be able to neatly reconstruct the platform’s developments as well as their interaction with stakeholders in retrospect, I documented all observations in a research diary.

*Interviews.* The interview data collection phase starts in April 2024 and the platform operator, community and quality manager, as well as union representatives, field experts, competitors and caregivers have already agreed to be interviewed. Next to the participant observations, interview data serves as my primary data source. To guide my interviews and get an in-depth understanding of the field and incorporate the worker perspective, I did a quantitative online survey in summer 2023 (July – September), where I surveyed over 2000 live-in care workers from eight nationalities on their current situation, needs and wishes.

*Archival data.* As secondary data source and to triangulate the processual perspective, I draw on data from the platform, as well as to their community management forum – where I have been granted access in the role of a moderator and thus can see the clicks, vies, response rates and user numbers over time. *Table 1* gives an overview of the data base.

*Table 1: Data Base Overview*

<i>Primary Sources</i>		<i>Secondary Sources</i>	
<b>Participant Observation</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Archival Data</b>	<b>Quantitative Survey</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Field observation in form a research diary from <b>December 2022 to November 2023</b></li> <li>- Regular <b>jour fixes</b> and other <b>internal meetings</b> to observe concrete work &amp; decision-making processes of the platform</li> <li>- <b>External meetings</b> (e.g. with political stakeholders)</li> </ul>	Currently <b>6 interviews</b> each an hour long with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1x Platform operator</li> <li>- 2x Community-/ quality managers</li> <li>- 2x Union representatives</li> <li>- 1x Field expert</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Media articles</b> (systematically collected since 2018)</li> <li>- <b>Internal documents</b></li> <li>- <b>Press releases</b></li> <li>- <b>Community forum</b> (access in the role of a moderator)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>July – September 2023</b></li> <li>- <b>n = 2.021</b> live-in care workers from <b>8 countries</b> working in Austria</li> </ul>

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried out in several steps to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the union's engagement and power resource mobilization process over time. This was achieved through inductive coding, following the Gioia framework. The Gioia method (Gioia et al., 2013) allowed for the systematic categorization of raw data into meaningful units, highlighting recurring themes and patterns in the union’s activities. First, I identified key, distinct activities

in which the union engaged throughout the process. By iteratively coding the data, I was able



to extract significant activities that illustrate the union's strategies and actions. *Figure 1* provides a visual representation of the inductive coding. Secondly, as distinct phases emerged during the data analysis where the focus of the union's activities shifted, I engaged in time bracketing. This approach helped to segment the data into specific periods, providing a more nuanced understanding of how the union mobilizes power resources in each phase. Time bracketing allowed for the identification of temporal patterns and the sequencing of events, highlighting how the union's strategies evolved over time and how their focus adapted to changing circumstances.

*Figure 2: Overview of the Coding Structure*

In the *first phase*, the union launched the initiative, which focused on establishing community management for live-in carers. During this phase, the union conducted its first quantitative survey and organized focus groups to understand the wishes and needs of its members. These activities were crucial in laying the groundwork for future strategies by identifying key issues and building a community. The *second phase* was marked by the launch of the platform. Efforts were concentrated on improving the technological interface and customer care, as well as recruiting new platform staff. Additionally, the union engaged in stakeholder management and conducted a second survey. These activities aimed to enhance the platform's functionality and broaden its user base, ensuring better service delivery and stakeholder alignment. In the *third phase*, the union began collaborating with various state governments to introduce a new business model for government agencies. This phase focused on expanding the union's influence and integrating its initiatives within government frameworks. The collaboration with state governments aimed to institutionalize the union's efforts, making them more sustainable and impactful. *Figure 3* gives an overview of the three phases.

## Analytical Phases

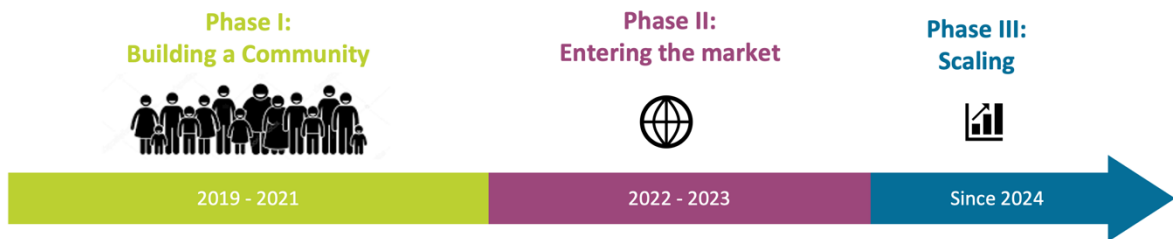


Figure 3: Overview over Analytical Phases

In the final step, I deductively allocated each identified practice to one of the power resources within the three distinct phases. This involved mapping the activities identified in the inductive coding stage to the framework of power resources, ensuring that each practice was categorized according to its role in mobilizing structural, associational, institutional, or societal power. Doing so allowed me to systematically analyze the union's use of power resources across different phases, providing a structured view of how these resources were leveraged to achieve their objectives.

This multi-step analysis provided a detailed and dynamic picture of the union's strategies, revealing how they adapted their activities and mobilized various power resources, utilizing the platform as a tool for mobilization.

### 4. (Preliminary) findings

During the data analysis, three distinct phases emerged that are characterized by distinct activities that the union and/or the platform operator (depending on the phase) engaged in. The first part of the findings is structured along the three phases and aims at illustrating the distinct activities. The subsequent part of the findings will discuss how those activities contributed to the mobilization of the power resources.

#### 4.1. Phase#1: Community building

The first phase spans over a time period of three years, from 2019 until 2021, and encompasses several pivotal milestones for the development of the platform (see *Figure 4* for an overview).

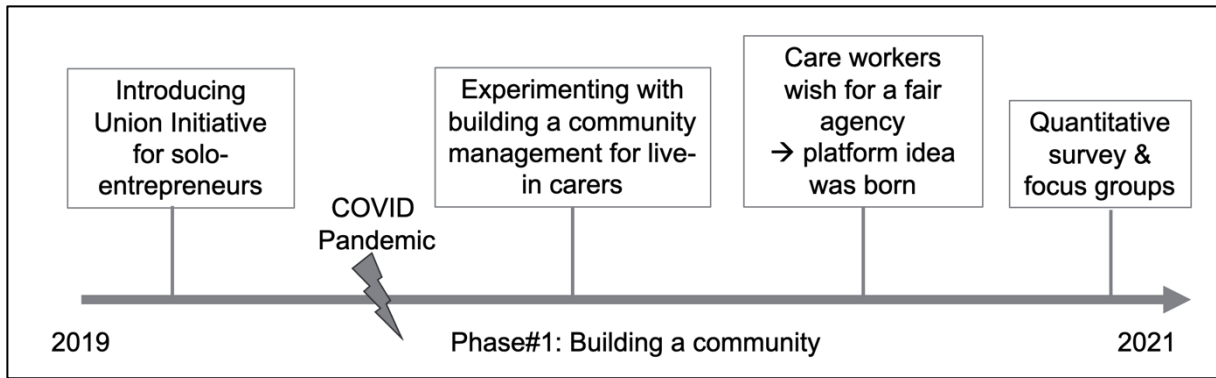


Figure 4: Milestones during the first phase

The aim during the first phase is to build a community. The characterizing activities that the union engages in during that time are firstly (1) experimentation and, secondly, (2) improvisation.

The starting point of the whole alternative organizing efforts by the Austrian union dates back to 2019, when the union decided to enter into the realms of atypical employment by setting up a union initiative that targeted solo-entrepreneurs, initially in the logistics sector. The union initiative is a separate legal entity and one of the interviewed union representatives remembers that the “goal was to build a union initiative improves the working conditions and thus the economic situation of its members”. In 2020, approximately a year after launching the union initiative, the union became aware of the care workers precarious situation through the exchange with other actors in the social partnership realm, namely the chamber of labour and the chamber of commerce. A union representative recalls that their initial efforts to enter the field of care work was rather unsuccessful:

*In this phase, when we knew we weren't going to get anywhere, we just happened to have a connection to a placement agency, with which we had a personal network in Upper Austria [...] and they had an employee who actually originally worked for them and got to know us through this agency and she came to us at some point and said two things that were very interesting: first of all, she told us that ‘what you're doing is totally important, but the way you're doing it is complete nonsense.’ You have to say that feedback is always a gift now, but if you've already invested a year and a half, then of course you really need it.*

Against the background of the union’s failed first attempt, that direct feedback was a wake-up call for the union and fostered their willingness to experiment, remembers the union representative:

*And then she also said, first of all as a trade union, you have to take much more care of the foreigners in Austria. Because the people who were born in Austria, they don't need you. They know where to go anyway. That was the first interesting piece of information. And the second thing she explained to me was her method, what we now call community management. And she explained to me in abstract terms how she would do it. And I thought to myself, ‘that's pretty much the biggest nonsense*

*I've ever heard', but what we've done so far was even more stupidly obvious. And now I said to her 'if you do this for three months, what do you want for it?' Then she told me a number I don't even remember, it wasn't really something that would have pushed us into economic disaster. And I thought 'ok, let's just try it. Because it doesn't matter. There's nothing there yet, so it can only become something'. And that's what we did.*

During that time, the covid crisis hit the world. That external shock opened the window of opportunity for the union to experiment and improvise. The worldwide pandemic resulted in the need to find new, digital ways to engage in organizing activities. Thus, during that time period, the willingness to adapt to new affordances, experiment and improvise was higher on the side of the union, but also on its members' side. One union representative remembers:

*Customer acceptance, whether it's members or customers, for digital service provision was actually only made possible by corona. If you had offered a webinar before the pandemic, nobody would have known what to do with it. [...] And then we experimented with Microsoft Team Events the first few times and tried automatic subtitling - at the time nobody believed that it would work [...] In that phase when there was no other option, something that was unusual, at least by Austrian standards, is that we as a union initiative actually went in with 80% quality, which you wouldn't normally dare to do. Of course, with these automatic subtitles and translations, 15% or 20% of the grammar and words were wrong. Everyone understood that it was better than the alternative, so they accepted this lack of quality. As a result, we were able to improve the digital services.*

The former employee of the temporary placement agency, who had previously recruited workers from Croatia for the agency and built a community via social media for interested Croatians, remembers that also for her trajectory, the covid pandemic was a decisive factor. The care workers' precarious situation during the pandemic motivated her to agree to take part in the experiment and take on the role of the community manager:

*Because of COVID, I was on short-time work and sat at home not really doing anything and then the 24-hour care workers somehow crystalized themselves out of the whole community and these were really ladies who really didn't have anyone, neither from Austria nor from home, they really didn't have anyone...and then I thought to myself, I'll take a closer look at the ladies in 24-hour care. Then I actually worked with the ladies for three months and then suddenly there were so many of them and I couldn't cope any more... I said, guys, I'm one person and this needs to be organized somehow. And then I googled and then I somehow discovered the union initiative and then I said, asking does not cost anything and then I called them. But they thought I was dreaming when I told him I could get 600 new members for the initiative straight away. They didn't believe me. Then I actually got there with 600 people, they all registered and then the system there collapsed.*

One of the union representatives remembers that, especially during that phase, the union's learning curve was steep. Particularly, the union initiative could expand their knowledge on

how to reach workers, like the care workers, that are usually hard to reach with traditional union organizing mechanisms:

*It was an extremely interesting learning experience. How do you organize such groups? Because these care workers hardly ever dock anywhere. Not entirely unlike workers in the logistics sector - they never see each other either. [...] For us, it was the organization of care workers via social media, the self-organization of the exchange of opinions and experiences, but also the fact that a community manager is managing this exchange with a fairly iron hand. Not only was it completely self-organized like a crowd without leadership, but we also had a community manager who shared the information, so it was also a process controlled from above.*

That learning experience even had a spillover effect, as the union now tries to use their newly acquired knowledge from the organization of live-in care workers and transfer it to other atypically employed like courier drivers. One of the union representatives elaborates: “We have already tried to duplicate this model of community management in the street with a colleague in the initial phases. Naturally, it's not quite the same. The situation is not quite the same, but we are trying”.

After six months of building the community that encompassed collecting and distributing relevant information especially regarding COVID, experimenting with new community formats such as webinars, but also information on legal requirements, the care workers approached the community manager with the wish to go a step further: “The platform was actually our idea. It was an idea from within our community: We wanted to have a fair care agency, and we started communicating that with the union initiative”.

Over the course of the community building, the union representatives developed the idea of a digital platform. Since the union usually does not enter markets as a pro-active participant, it was a crucial first step to understand the needs and wishes of the care givers as well as the care recipients and their families. Also against the background of the platform being a financial risk for the union, the union representatives made sure that they had a thorough understanding of the field they were entering: “The second reason was that it's a financial risk, we don't know our way around. It's not our market segment, which is an absolutely valid point.”. The union did so by conducting a quantitative study of the current situation of the live-in caregivers in collaboration with researchers from the University of Vienna. Additionally, they also investigated the care recipients needs via focus groups. The intention was to build the platform according to the users' needs and wishes. The now platform operator states:

*The caregivers' right to be heard and to have a say is crucial for us as a platform. We are probably the only providers in Europe who conducted a 360° analysis, which means in reality we have taken into account the wishes and needs of the relatives of those being cared for as well as the caregivers, and tried to implement them as much as possible.*



The community manager remembers that this participative, bottom up approach was a challenge as well as an opportunity: “we told ourselves right from the start that it was important that the caregivers not only had a say, but that their needs and wishes were really the focus. That was a big challenge, but also an opportunity”.

As the interview data underscores, the initial phase of the project was characterized by two primary activities: experimentation and improvisation. The union experienced a steep learning curve during this period, significantly influenced by the COVID-19 crisis, which acted as a powerful catalyst. This phase was crucial for the union as it laid the groundwork for acquiring new knowledge and developing new capabilities in community building. Importantly, this first phase established the foundation for the platform project, setting the stage for subsequent phases and enabling the union to effectively address emerging challenges. The necessity to adapt quickly and effectively to unprecedented challenges underscored the importance of flexibility and openness in navigating the early stages of the initiative.

#### **4.2. Phase#2: Entering the market**

The second phase begins with the launch of the platform in 2022 and is characterized by two main activities: firstly, stakeholder management (internally as well as externally), and, secondly, professionalization.

Especially in the beginning, internal stakeholder management vis a vis the Austrian trade union federation (ÖGB) was crucial, as they were rather critical of the platform project. The platform operator recalls:

*Of course there was resistance within the organization, for two reasons. The first issue revolved around the question of why we as a trade union had to do this. There are the traditional welfare organizations in the field and I cannibalized them [...] The second reason was that the ÖGB does not actually provide for this 24-hour care in the self-employed sector, but the ÖGB is of the opinion, for the most part, that the care workers should all be employed - so that is a discrepancy between what we wanted and what the ÖGB wanted. What we have now done, however, is to say that many roads lead to Rome, that we have to take intermediate steps before we get to employment and not immediately make a maximum demand that they all have to become employees, which is extremely difficult to achieve because, firstly, it costs the government a lot of money and, secondly, it is also a huge issue, as we have seen in the study, that around two thirds of care workers do not actually want to be employees for personal reasons.*

With the study results legitimizing the platform approach, the union initiative managed to convince the Austrian trade union federation as well as critical voices within their own organization. Apart from the study supporting the union initiative’s approach, they also convinced internal critics by showing them that the platform could also serve their interests.

One union representative says: “Our motivation as a union is very clear: we are trying to achieve member retention for our pensioners but also for my generation, for people, 40 years plus, who are now becoming affected with their parents, and to offer them a very attractive offer.”

After having overcome the first internal challenges, the platform was now confronted with the usual challenges that come along with entering a new market, the platform operator recalls: “A big part of the challenge was to establish the platform in a very fragmented market where there are many players, some of whom were against our initiative because they saw their market share at risk.”. However, the union-driven platform took on that challenge and also viewed it as an opportunity, as one of the union representative states: “It doesn't hurt the employees of a trade union to act entrepreneurially, with all the pain that entails. Of course, it's new territory for many and that's a challenge.”

Against this backdrop, external stakeholder management became increasingly important in the second phase. The building of strategic partnerships and alliances with other players in the field was crucial to successfully navigate the market-entry challenges. The platform operator's approach was to make use of the union's political network on various levels: “We want to go down a path in which we form partnerships with countries, municipalities, cities and interest groups.” The reason for the strong focus on building alliances and partnerships is also the fact that the common-good oriented platform does not have access to the same amount of financial resources and needed to compensate for that. One union representative explains:

*There have already been a number of venture capital-financed platforms. All of them no longer exist, or many of them. Of course, money isn't everything, of course, because basically power is network x capital x attention. With our union-backed platform approach, we are probably superior to venture capitalist driven competitors in two out of three areas, but it still takes time for it all to take effect.*

Even though this approach takes time to unfold its impact for the platform itself, one of the side effects that the union almost immediately profits from is that, through the intense exchange on all political levels, the union gains influence and legitimacy through the platform: “Thanks to this project, we are suddenly in very intensive contact with the municipalities and state governments, which, of course has given us as a trade union a level of influence that we would not have had without the project and that is now certainly sustainable beyond the project”.

The second characterizing activity in the market-entry phase is professionalizing the platform operations. As it is usual in the initial phase of establishing a new venture, the processes of professionalization follows a trial-and-error logic that requires a willingness to recognize errors and learn from them. One of the biggest challenges the platform faced during their professionalization attempts was the fact that they underestimated the complexity and the

temporal resources that the platform's governance requires: "We underestimated how incredibly difficult administration is. It's our biggest Achilles tendon. Administration is a huge challenge for us. It's becoming more and more complex. That's why we need money to invest in administration and governance". The second issue refers to the potential of digitizing the process. Initially, the platform operator believed that the matching process between care givers and those in need of care can be handled completely digitally. However, during the first months as active market participant, the platform operator realized: "What we have learned is that we thought that you can do a lot more steps of the process digitally. This is feasible for the registration process etc., but a lot of personal contact is needed before a contract to be actually concluded: 60% is done in person and not digitally". As a result of these insights, the union tried to counter these challenges by recruiting new platform staff: a second community manager as well as additional staff for the quality control staff, who also serves as contact point for the care receivers and their families.

Despite all the challenges the platform operator and the union initiative encountered during the market entry phase, there have been developments in the field that motivate them to keep going.

The platform operator explains:

*Six months after the platform entered the market, the big players in the field adjusted the remuneration according to the payment scheme we offer via the platform in order to stay competitive. They were fearing that in the future they would not be able to successfully recruit care workers anymore because we offer better working conditions via the platform. I consider that a small win, which is very much in line with the union's goals of improving working conditions in the sector.*

In the second phase, the project focused on two key activities: stakeholder management and professionalization. Initially, effective internal stakeholder management within the union and its federation was essential to secure their support. Following this, the emphasis shifted to building alliances and partnerships with external stakeholders, including political actors at both the municipal and state levels. This strategic approach to stakeholder management was crucial in compensating for a lack of financial resources.

Simultaneously, the project undertook a process of professionalization through an iterative trial-and-error approach. This involved using bootstrapping strategies to manage limited resources and recruiting new staff to build capacity. The effort to professionalize operations is ongoing and has extended into the third phase of the project, highlighting a continuous evolution and refinement of practices to enhance operational efficiency and effectiveness.

### 4.3. Phase#3: Scaling

The third phase begins in 2024 and is currently unfolding. The major milestone that marks the beginning of this phase is the official collaboration with the government in Austria's eastmost state. The key activities that characterize this last phase is partnership building and business model development.

During the second phase of the platform project, the platform operator had learned that their biggest struggle is scarce temporal and human resource. Based on this insight, the platform operator changed his market penetration strategy from trying to establish the platform on the municipal level all over Austria with mayors as their supporters. Instead, the platform operator decided to focus on one bigger collaboration at the state level. The choice of federal state as partner was not random: the geographical closeness to Eastern Europe as well as the fact that its Austria's smallest state were good prerequisites that conveniently open up room for experimentation. The "good political and personal relationship" union representatives had built over the past, was an additional driver of the collaboration. The platform operator explains the strategic importance of the first collaboration:

*We are now concentrating on the State of Burgenland and I think we are well on the way to really becoming a brand in Burgenland. the social service follows up directly, and they recommend us, not only us but also others, as a project funded by the state, which means it is perceived positively. [...] We support the state over the course of the projects, which means that we have really anchored ourselves there. I would say that everyone, from the state health counselor to the governor, from the state administration to the hospital directors, is currently aware of this project. We are growing into the institutions, into the system. And that is also something that is important in the long term, something that is sustainable. [...] Additionally, because we offer all of this, we can strengthen our position as a legitimate partner. We can show that we are a partner who knows the game and its problems and that we can offer solutions.*

Apart from the strategic importance of the collaboration in the long term, the collaboration also triggered the further development of the business model. Next to the matching via the platform, the union initiative and the state government have agreed to also offer training and education opportunities, states the platform representative: "We are also taking a further step towards the next level of training and with the ultimate goal that in a few years' time the state government of Burgenland will say 'you can only offer 24-hour care if you have the training'". This agreement opens up the possibility for the care workers to switch from self-employment to standard employment in one of the state funded welfare organizations.

The platform wants to use the collaboration as a proof-of-concept to facilitate future scaling attempts: "With the practical example of the collaboration Burgenland, I can show that our

model works. I can approach other states and say: Look, it works there. Let's try it in your federal state too. We can also do things differently, adapt the model to the regional structures". The hope for the model to scale throughout the country is shared by the care givers and their community manager: "In the future, I want the politicians to see how valuable and good we are. And then maybe the other federal states can adopt this model." The hope for recognition that the care givers connect with the collaboration is unsurprising, as the quantitative survey me and my colleagues (Thäter & Reichmann, *forthcoming*) has clearly shown that lack of recognition and appreciation is one of the two main factors driving the care givers current discontent. The study revealed that even though almost 50% of respondents feel appreciated by the people they care for and their relatives, a quarter feels recognized by the Austrian population. However, only 4% of the respondents feel that political decision-makers value their work.

The collaboration also fueled future, complementary ideas, that should ensure an impact beyond the platform and their partners, but that actually raises the standards in the whole live in care sector via an impartial quality certification process. One of the union representatives explains :

*It would be worth considering that it's not just the common-good live in-care platform. In my view, it would make sense to go beyond actively intervening in the labor market and back those efforts up with a certification model like Kununu, only more sophisticated. [...] That would allow you to establish certain standards that I can't get through with the means of a collective agreement, because I fear that these collective agreements will lose importance in the future due to the situation on the labor market.*

The third phase was marked by significant partnership building and the development of a new business model. The partnership formed during this phase was of strategic importance, serving as proof of concept for the alternative approach and legitimizing the union as an expert and relevant actor in the field. The collaboration also fostered the advancement of the business model, which now offers two pathways: self-employment via the platform and traditional employment through the state government. This dual approach not only provides flexibility for care workers but also enhances the union's credibility and influence. Beyond the implemented developments, the collaboration has spurred innovative ideas for future enhancements, such as a certification process for agencies that offer fair working conditions, aligning with the union's traditional mission. Additionally, these collaborations have given care workers hope for greater recognition and support from political actors, further reinforcing the union's role as an advocate for fair labor practices.

#### **4.4. Mobilizing power resources over time**

In the following, the effects of the alternative organizing approach by means of the union-driven common good platform on the union's different power resources are analyzed. The platform

has no effect on the structural power of platform workers, as this primary power resource is dependent on the position of workers in the economic system (Silver, 2005; Wright, 2000) and this cannot be influenced by the platform approach.

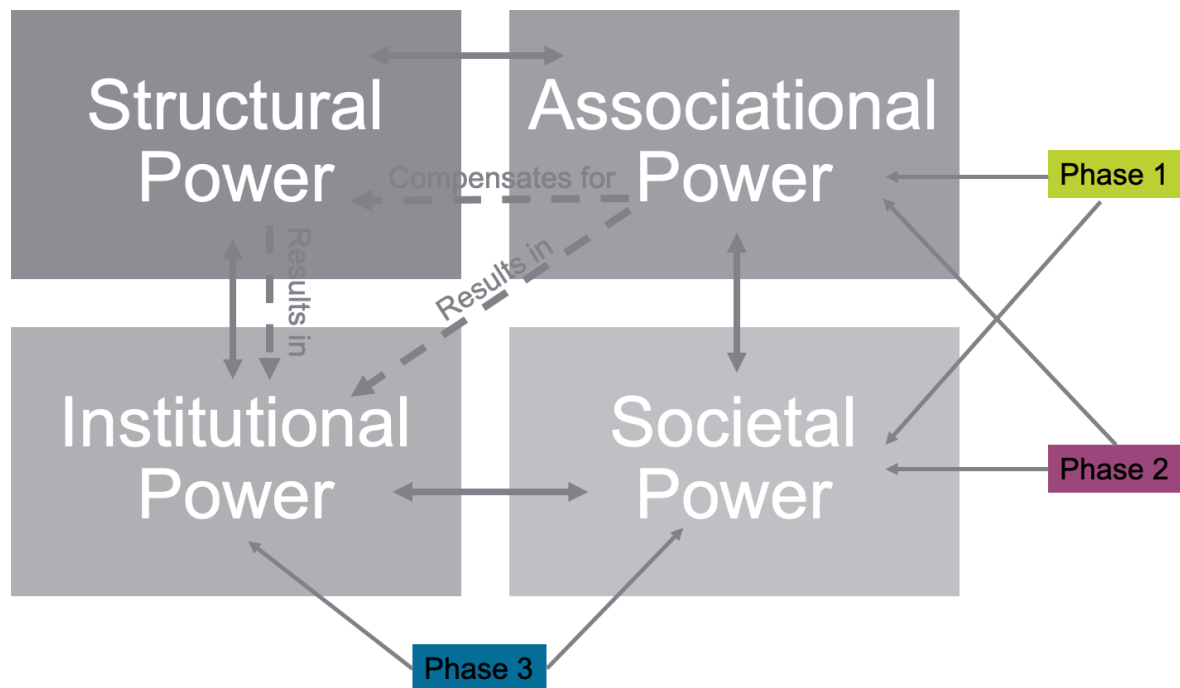
The initial focus on community building during the first phase significantly strengthened the union's *associational power*. Through extensive experimentation and improvisation, especially catalyzed by the COVID-19 crisis, the union acquired new knowledge and capabilities in community organizing. This foundation was crucial in fostering a robust network of care workers and enhancing their collective strength.

The introduction of model contracts with higher pay rates aimed to augment the union's *organizational power* within the market context. This initiative not only set new standards for fair wages but also showcased the union's ability to negotiate and implement beneficial terms for its members. The ongoing professionalization efforts, including recruitment of new staff and iterative trial-and-error processes, further solidified the union's organizational capabilities. The project also amplified the union's societal power. By strategically utilizing media to release survey results and launch the platform as a viable alternative, the union effectively raised public awareness about precarious working conditions. This enhanced the union's discursive power, which, together with cooperative power, comprises the societal power resource. The positioning as a prominent voice in the public discourse surrounding labor rights and working conditions strengthened the union's societal power. Furthermore, the exchange with political actors and raising awareness through media campaigns during the second phase underscored the union's relevance and influence in societal debates. By building a coalition with the state government, the union demonstrated its cooperative power, ultimately contributing to mobilizing the union's societal power.

Lastly, the alternative organizing approach has the potential to strengthen the union's *institutional power* resources. The development of a new business model, which includes a legislative framework for employing caregivers through the state, exemplifies this. Although it remains uncertain whether this potential will extend beyond the current collaboration, this initiative represents a significant step towards embedding union influence within institutional structures.

The platform project has substantially fortified the union's power resources. It has enhanced associational power through community building, amplified societal power by raising public awareness and establishing discursive influence, increased organizational power through the introduction of higher pay rates and model contracts, and potentially accessed institutional power through legislative frameworks and government partnerships. Although significant

advancements have been made in mobilizing various power resources, the long-term realization of institutional power remains to be fully ascertained. *Figure 5* visualizes how the platform project impacted the union's power resources over the course of the time.



*Figure 5: The Platform Project's Impact on Power Resources*

## 5. Discussion

This paper set out to investigate how trade unions use technology as part of their revitalization strategy. With that, it answered a recent call for research, urging investigation of the so far under researched connection between technology use and union revitalization (Geelan, 2021) By examining a common good-oriented platform in the Austrian live-in care sector, the analysis revealed that the union was able to mobilize various power resources throughout the platform project. This mobilization occurred through activities such as improvisation, experimentation, stakeholder management, professionalization, partnership building, and the further development of the platform's business model. As the data analysis shows,, the union's associational and societal power was notably strengthened over the course of four years.

One of the key findings was that the union's associational power was significantly enhanced through community-building efforts. The initial phases of improvisation and experimentation laid a strong foundation for the union to establish itself as a central figure within the care worker community. By fostering a sense of solidarity, the union bolstered its associational power, enabling it to effectively mobilize and organize care workers. Simultaneously, the union's societal power saw substantial growth. The platform project successfully raised public awareness about the precarious working conditions faced by care workers. This was achieved

through strategic media campaigns and public engagement efforts, which positioned the union as a credible and relevant actor in the field. The ability to influence public discourse not only amplified the union's societal power but also helped establish industry standards through collaborations and partnerships. Moreover, the platform project enhanced the union's political standing. By developing and demonstrating a viable, alternative solution to the challenges in the care sector, the union showcased its capacity for innovation and effective problem-solving. The proof-of-concept that emerged from the close partnership with the state government served as a critical endorsement, opening doors for the union into the political arena. This collaboration underscored the union's resourcefulness and solidified its reputation as a competent and influential actor within both the industry and the broader political landscape.

### **5.1. Beyond power resources: Alternative organizing as learning opportunity**

The digital platform in itself is certainly not the only solution to the union's revitalization struggles, but it opens up room for experimentation and urges the actors to think outside the box, learn new organizing approaches and take risks in their quest to remain a credible actor. If and in how far the union can sustain the mobilization of power resources beyond the project itself remains to be seen. However, when looking at what the literature says about successful long-term successful union revitalization approaches, it becomes apparent that the union's ability to learn is central. In order to successfully tap into these power resources and use them for a strategic realignment, the union's ability to learn is a prerequisite (Nachtwey & Wolf, 2013; Klöpfer, 2010). The fact that the union is generally capable of learning has already been proven by how crises, such as the COVID pandemic was handled. The switch to online mobilizing and information formats is only one example that illustrates the union's ability to learn. However, to strategically realign union strategies as a whole and effectively harness the newly mobilized power resources, the union has to institutionalize processes that allow learning and knowledge building (Klöpfer, 2010).

To successfully navigate the learning process and implement necessary changes in light of the current trend towards more atypical employment, the union must first gather extensive knowledge to fully comprehend this evolving phenomenon (ibid.). The interview data reveal that the union has not only built substantial knowledge about community organizing but has also developed a deep understanding of the desires and needs of care workers, which is one of the necessary prerequisites to long-term change. The common-good platform further facilitates the union's ability to experiment with new structures for interest representation, grounded in the knowledge previously generated. The analysis of the interview data shows that the ongoing



interaction between platform operators, care workers, families, and the union throughout the platform project fosters numerous learning opportunities. The continuous exchange provides a robust framework for the union to adapt and refine its strategies, ultimately enhancing its ability to respond to the needs of its members and the broader community. If the union successfully realizes the potential for sustainable change at the organizational levels in the long term, however, can only be evaluated in retrospect.

## **5.2. Limitations and avenues for future research**

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the phenomenon of union revitalization through technology is still unfolding. The dynamic nature of this process means that the long-term impacts and sustainability of the strategies observed in this case study are not yet fully understood. Future research will be necessary to assess the enduring effectiveness of these approaches. Second, this research is based on a single case study of the Austrian live-in care sector. While this provides in-depth insights, it also limits the generalizability of the findings. The specific characteristics and outcomes observed here may not be applicable to other sectors or regions without further validation. Additionally, the institutional context plays a crucial role in shaping the strategies and success of union revitalization efforts. Factors such as regulatory frameworks, labor market conditions, and political environments vary significantly across different settings. These contextual differences mean that the strategies effective in the Austrian context may not translate directly to other countries or industries. Future research should explore several avenues to build on the findings of this study. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact and sustainability of the union revitalization strategies identified here. Comparative case studies across different sectors and countries would provide valuable insights into how varying institutional contexts influence the effectiveness of these approaches. Additionally, further studies should also examine the role of political actors in greater detail, identifying best practices for fostering strategic alliances and integrating political support into union activities. By addressing these areas, future research can deepen our understanding of the potential and limitations of technology-driven union revitalization efforts.

Despite its limitations, this study provides valuable insights by identifying core activities that drive union revitalization. It contributes to the academic discourse on alternative organizing by demonstrating how community building, strategic alliance fostering, and the incorporation of political actors are pivotal for successful alternative organizing approaches. These findings highlight the potential for unions to adapt and thrive in contemporary labor landscapes through

innovative strategies and technological integration. The implications extend beyond the specific case of the Austrian live-in care sector, offering insights that can be applied to union revitalization efforts globally.

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