

BARSERVICE

Towards smart bargaining in the care sector in France

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Executive summary

The French care sector plays a pivotal role in supporting vulnerable populations, employing approximately 1.2 million workers, predominantly women (77%) and a significant proportion of migrant labour (40%). This sector, encompassing residential care (NACE 87) and domestic care (NACE 97), is characterised by ageing workforces, widespread undeclared employment, and gender disparities in pay and representation. These trends underscore the urgent need for reforms to establish equitable, sustainable labour conditions and effective collective bargaining frameworks.

Key trends

The care sector faces profound demographic and structural challenges. The ageing workforce, with most workers aged between 45 and 64, highlights the pressing need for generational renewal. Simultaneously, gender disparities persist, with women overrepresented in low-paid caregiving roles and underrepresented in leadership positions. The role of migrant labour continues to grow, bringing diversity but also challenges in integration and formalisation. Undeclared work remains widespread, particularly in domestic care, affecting one in four workers and undermining social protections and wage standards.

Collective Bargaining Structure

Collective bargaining in the French care sector is underpinned by a multi-layered framework that balances national, regional, and company-level agreements. Nationally, sector-wide agreements establish baseline standards for wages, working conditions, and career development opportunities. These agreements are negotiated between major trade unions, such as the Health and Social Services Federations of CFDT, CGT, and FO-Santé, and employer associations including FEPEM and SYNERPA. This national framework provides coherence and ensures alignment with labour laws while setting the groundwork for more specific negotiations.

At the company level, larger care providers, including multinational corporations operating private care homes, often negotiate directly with unions to address specific operational needs and workforce concerns. These agreements allow for tailored solutions, such as additional training opportunities or enhanced wage structures, that reflect the unique demands of each organisation.

Territorially, regional agreements are particularly relevant in adapting sector-wide policies to local labour market conditions. This is especially crucial in addressing regional disparities in workforce availability and service demand. For multinational groups, transnational agreements sometimes come into play, ensuring that cross-border standards are harmonised for workers in multiple countries. While less



common, these agreements demonstrate the growing relevance of global frameworks in shaping local labour conditions in the care sector.

Key Challenges

Despite progress, the sector faces persistent challenges. Undeclared work undermines formal agreements and worker protections, particularly in domestic care. Fragmentation among employers, with many acting as individual households, complicates enforcement and standardisation. Gender disparities, especially in pay and career advancement, remain critical barriers. Moreover, the integration of migrant workers is hindered by language barriers and precarious legal statuses, limiting their access to formal labour protections.

Path Forward

Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated approach that enhances collective bargaining while promoting inclusivity and equity. Initiatives to reduce horizontal segregation and gender pay gaps must prioritise wage transparency and the creation of gender-sensitive workplace cultures. Expanding training and certification programmes, particularly for migrant workers and women, will enhance workforce sustainability and professionalism. Additionally, decentralising bargaining mechanisms can improve responsiveness to regional needs while maintaining national coherence. Public-private partnerships and tax incentives, such as those pioneered by FEPEM, can further formalise employment and incentivise compliance. Stakeholders must also leverage European best practices, such as those outlined by EPSU and Eurofound, to strengthen social dialogue and align national policies with evolving workforce demands.

Conclusions

The French care sector stands at a critical juncture. To ensure its long-term viability and equity, policymakers, unions, and employers must collaborate to address structural challenges and demographic shifts. Enhanced collective bargaining systems, grounded in transparency and inclusivity, will be instrumental in achieving these goals. By fostering professionalisation, formalising labour, and reducing disparities, France can build a care sector that meets the needs of its diverse workforce and the growing demands of its ageing population.

I. Methodology

The research combines desk-based inquiry with an in-depth review of public opinions, policy documents, and statements from relevant stakeholders, including trade unions, employer associations, and European bodies. Key sources such as ELA, INSEE, DARES,

and Eurostat were used to provide statistical context, while publications by EFFAT¹ and EPSU offered insights into broader European trends and best practices in care sector labour relations. Resources such as Eurofound studies on social dialogue and reports on collective bargaining and recent strikes in the health and social care sector were used to enrich the analysis. These sources provide critical examples and case studies that highlight best practices and ongoing challenges.

In addition to desk-based research, an interview was conducted with a representative from the Santé privée sector of Force Ouvrière, providing firsthand insights into the specific issues faced by workers within private health services. This interview added a valuable perspective on the current state of collective bargaining, wage security, and professional development in the private care sector.

Additional sources included specific position papers and public statements from French and European federations active in the care sector. These included the Health and Social Services Federations of CFDT (Fédération Santé-Sociaux CFDT) and CGT (Fédération CGT de la Santé et de l'Action Sociale), FO-Santé, as well as employer associations like FEPEM and SYNERPA. These organisations provided focused perspectives on workforce conditions and collective bargaining issues, illustrating differing emphases on wage security, training, and professional mobility.

II. Sector identification and trends

The French care sector plays a vital role in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, encompassing services for the elderly, disabled, and dependent individuals. Domestic services are referred to as “les services à la personne (SAP)”. The activities covered are defined in Article D7231-1 of the Labour Code as those included in a list of 26 activities, including a series of in-home services such as family services (e.g. childcare), home services (e.g. ironing, gardening, housekeeping) and services for the elderly and disabled persons (e.g. non-medical care, assistance with mobility and transport). A list of selected activities, such as accompanying children, the elderly or people with disabilities, meal and grocery delivery and administrative assistance, are only seen as domestic work when they are (partially) performed in the house (Ghaliani et al., 2024).

For the purposes of this report the sector consists into two key sub-sectors: residential care facilities (NACE 87) and domestic care services (NACE 97). These sub-sectors

¹ EFFAT provides crucial insights into labor conditions and formalization efforts in domestic work, aligning closely with NACE code 97. Their advocacy for migrant worker protections and collective bargaining informs many initiatives in the French care sector. EPSU, on the other hand, focuses on public service employment, offering essential frameworks for addressing workforce challenges in residential care (NACE code 87). These organizations contribute transnational perspectives and best practices that strengthen the report's analysis of collective bargaining dynamics.



collectively employ approximately 1.2 million workers, of whom 77% are women (Eurostat, 2023). The labour force is further characterised by a significant reliance on migrant workers, who make up nearly 40% of employees in domestic care (DARES, 2024). These demographic features highlight the sector's role as both a critical employer and a space for addressing socio-economic inequalities.

Historically, the care sector in France has evolved in response to demographic and policy shifts. The post-war expansion of public welfare systems created formal roles in caregiving, particularly in residential facilities. Over the past two decades, rising life expectancy and the ageing population have significantly increased the demand for care services. However, this growth has been accompanied by persistent structural challenges, such as chronic labour shortages, low wages, and a heavy reliance on informal or undeclared work. Approximately 25% of workers in the domestic care sub-sector operate outside formal labour arrangements, which undermines access to social protections and stable incomes (DARES, 2024). Moreover, The European Labour Authority (ELA, 2021) further highlights that demand for care services is expected to grow exponentially as the population ages, increasing the pressure on a sector already grappling with chronic shortages of skilled workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further reshaped the sector, bringing its critical importance and vulnerabilities into sharper focus. Residential care facilities faced severe strains, including heightened health risks for both residents and staff and a lack of adequate protective equipment. The pandemic also exacerbated labour shortages, as many workers left the sector due to burnout and insufficient support (Eurofound, 2021). In domestic care, the lockdowns and movement restrictions disrupted service provision, highlighting the precarity of informal arrangements and the need for stronger formal employment mechanisms.

Another defining feature of the sector is the gender disparity in employment roles and opportunities. Women dominate caregiving positions, particularly in domestic care, yet they are underrepresented in higher-paid managerial roles within the sector. This horizontal and vertical segregation reinforces wage inequalities, with female care workers earning substantially less than their counterparts in other sectors requiring similar skill levels, for example in tertiary sector (EPSU, 2023). Addressing these disparities is crucial to ensuring fair labour conditions and attracting a more diverse workforce to the sector.

The ageing workforce further compounds these challenges. Most workers are between 45 and 64 years old, raising concerns about generational renewal and the sector's ability to attract younger workers. Additionally, the increasing role of men in caregiving, while still limited, indicates shifting societal norms and a gradual diversification of the workforce. Nevertheless, systemic efforts are needed to ensure equitable career progression and address the enduring gender pay gap.

III. Current state of collective bargaining

In France, the status of personal and domestic service workers is regulated by binding collective agreements, regardless of their employment contract. At national level, there are three types of collective agreement covering domestic work, with different levels of protection depending on the employer. More specifically, these agreements cover the home care sector, personal service companies and direct employees, with the latter apparently associated with the lowest level of protection. It is estimated that (almost) all care workers are covered by collective agreements (Ghaliani, 2024).

The collective bargaining framework in the French care sector operates through a multi-layered system that addresses national, regional, and enterprise-level needs. At its core, the system relies on sectoral agreements negotiated between trade unions and employer associations. National-level agreements establish baseline standards for wages, working hours, and training opportunities, ensuring a cohesive foundation that reflects national labour policies and economic conditions (Eurofound, 2020). This framework allows for adaptation through regional and company-specific agreements, which provide tailored solutions to address local and organisational challenges.

On the trade union side, the sector is represented by several key federations, each contributing to a broad spectrum of worker advocacy. The Fédération Santé-Sociaux CFDT has long championed professional development, better working conditions, and the integration of diverse workforce groups, including migrant workers, into formal employment structures (Ledoux, Krupka, 2022). The Fédération CGT de la Santé et de l'Action Sociale places emphasis on equity, calling for systemic reforms to improve wage transparency and tackle inequalities such as the gender pay gap (EPSU, 2023). FO-Santé seeks to balance national standards with regional needs, focusing on equitable employment conditions and reducing disparities between urban and rural care settings (Eurofound, 2020). UNSA-Domicile complements these efforts by advocating specifically for caregivers in domestic roles, ensuring they receive adequate protections and recognition within collective agreements (Ledoux, Krupka, 2022). It is important to note that these examples, while simplified, aim to provide a snapshot of the multifaceted priorities and initiatives undertaken by these actors to improve workforce conditions in the sector. With respect to these issues, it is worth mentioning that according to the interviewee, significant challenges within the French private healthcare sector persist, particularly in collective bargaining. He noted that while the sector's collective agreements cover all workers, the lack of consistent application in the non-profit sector remains problematic due to variations in employer adherence. He stressed the need for better funding for both public and private care services, pointing out that many employees in the sector are paid below the minimum wage, which further exacerbates workforce shortages and undermines care quality.

Employer associations play a pivotal role in shaping these agreements. FEPEM (Fédération des Particuliers Employeurs de France), representing household

employers, has been instrumental in promoting mechanisms like tax credits and streamlined employment contracts to formalise caregiving roles in private homes (Eurofound, 2020). SYNERPA (Syndicat National des Établissements et Résidences Privés pour Personnes Âgées) focuses on private residential care facilities, advocating for funding models that support operational sustainability while addressing workforce retention. Similarly, the Union Nationale de l'Aide, des Soins et des Services aux Domiciles (UNA) prioritises home-based care services, emphasising the role of public funding and workforce training to meet the sector's growing demands (Ledoux, Krupka, 2022). As with trade unions, the examples provided here aim to illustrate the range of priorities these organisations address in balancing employer and workforce interests. The scientific literature underscores the collective bargaining system's potential to adapt to evolving sector challenges. Research has highlighted the undervaluation of care work and the need for structural reforms to bridge wage disparities, particularly those linked to gender and career stagnation (Bettio & Verashchagina, 2020). Additionally, studies emphasise the importance of social dialogue in addressing sectoral fragmentation, particularly in mitigating inconsistencies between national agreements and localised implementation (Meardi et al., 2019). This evidence points to the critical need for collaborative and adaptive frameworks capable of addressing the complexities of care work.

While the national framework ensures a unified approach, regional and enterprise-level agreements allow for flexibility in responding to specific local challenges. Regional agreements often adapt national standards to address issues such as labour shortages in particular areas. Multinational care providers, managing private facilities, frequently negotiate company-specific agreements to align with their unique operational requirements. These agreements may include tailored wage scales, additional benefits, or specialised training programmes to enhance both workforce capacity and service quality (Eurofound, 2020).

Despite the system's comprehensive structure, significant challenges remain. The domestic care sub-sector is particularly fragmented, with a substantial number of workers employed directly by households, limiting union coverage and the consistent enforcement of labour agreements. Disparities between the application of national frameworks and regional realities also create inconsistencies in worker protections. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms and expanding coverage across all care sub-sectors remain essential goals for social partners to ensure that collective bargaining effectively addresses the sector's complexities (Ledoux, Krupka, 2022; Eurofound, 2020).

IV. Challenges to collective bargaining

The French care sector faces significant challenges in collective bargaining, influenced

by structural complexities, legislative developments, and evolving interactions among social partners. These issues manifest at multiple levels, affecting the efficacy of collective agreements in improving working conditions and addressing sectoral needs. One of the primary structural challenges is the fragmentation of the domestic care sub-sector (NACE 97). Many workers are employed directly by households, resulting in highly individualised employment relationships. This decentralisation limits union representation and the enforcement of standardised agreements, creating inconsistencies in working conditions and hindering sector-wide improvements. Similarly, the residential care sub-sector (NACE 87) faces its own fragmentation, with diverse employer organisations ranging from large multinational corporations to small, family-run care facilities. This heterogeneity complicates efforts to establish cohesive frameworks and equitable agreements across the sector (DARES, 2024; Eurofound, 2020).

Recent legislative changes have also shaped the landscape of collective bargaining in the sector. For instance, the 2024 healthcare budget introduced measures to cap spending and address medicine shortages, which have had downstream effects on employment conditions and resource allocation in residential care facilities. Trade unions and employer associations have engaged in tripartite dialogue with the government to navigate these changes, though the effectiveness of these consultations remains a point of contention. Some social partners have expressed concerns over the adequacy of government engagement and the impact of policy decisions on labour relations (Béthoux & Jobert, 2021; Connexion France, 2024).

Public demonstrations and strikes highlight the growing tensions within the sector. In October 2024, public healthcare staff, supported by major unions such as FO, CGT, UNSA, and SUD, organised nationwide strikes to protest the 2025 Social Security budget. Their demands included increased funding for healthcare services, wage increases, and improved working conditions. These actions underscored the dissatisfaction of workers and their representatives with the current state of labour negotiations, amplifying calls for systemic reforms (WageIndicator, 2024; Connexion France, 2024).

Gender disparities present another significant challenge to collective bargaining. Women constitute approximately 77% of the care workforce but remain overrepresented in lower-paid caregiving roles and underrepresented in managerial positions. Horizontal and vertical segregation perpetuate wage inequalities, with women frequently earning less than their male counterparts in similar roles. Although collective agreements increasingly address these disparities, achieving meaningful progress requires structural changes within both the bargaining framework and the broader labour market (EPSU, 2023; Bettio & Verashchagina, 2020).

The ageing workforce exacerbates these challenges, with a majority of workers aged between 45 and 64. Labour shortages are particularly acute in rural areas, where care facilities face additional financial pressures compared to urban centres. Regional

disparities in the implementation of collective agreements further complicate matters. While regional agreements aim to adapt national standards to local labour market conditions, ensuring uniform enforcement and worker protections across regions remains a pressing issue (Meardi et al., 2019).

Migrant workers, who make up nearly 40% of the domestic care workforce, face additional barriers to integration into the formal labour market. Language difficulties, precarious legal statuses, and limited access to training opportunities hinder their inclusion in collective agreements and prevent them from fully benefiting from negotiated protections. Addressing these barriers is essential for creating a more equitable and inclusive sector (Eurostat, 2023; Ledoux, Krupka, 2022).

Organising within the sector poses another significant challenge, particularly in fragmented sub-sectors like domestic care. Unions often struggle to reach workers employed in isolated environments, such as private households, where awareness of collective rights is low, and union presence is limited. This is further complicated by the precarious nature of employment for many care workers, including migrants, who may fear reprisal or legal consequences for engaging with union activities. Employer resistance to unionisation efforts also presents barriers, especially in regions where care services are privatised or dominated by small-scale providers. Efforts to strengthen organising campaigns, such as through outreach programmes and localised union branches, are crucial to improving representation and engagement within the sector (Béthoux & Jobert, 2021; WageIndicator, 2024).

The interactions among social partners and the government have been central to addressing these challenges. While tripartite dialogue has facilitated discussions on key issues, such as formalising labour contracts and improving funding mechanisms, its effectiveness varies. Social partners continue to advocate for more meaningful participation in policy development to ensure that legislative changes align with the sector's needs. Additionally, targeted measures, such as tax incentives for formal employment and enhanced funding for training programmes, have been proposed as solutions to some of the sector's persistent issues (Béthoux & Jobert, 2021; WageIndicator, 2024).

In the interview, it has been emphasized that the structural challenges to collective bargaining in the French private healthcare sector, particularly the fragmentation caused by differences between the for-profit and non-profit parts of the sector certainly represent a challenge. The respondent noted:

«In the private sector, employers often resist negotiations, and the main issue is the lack of adequate funding. The government's refusal to allocate sufficient budget for public services directly impacts our ability to negotiate better working conditions and salaries. We're facing a vicious circle: poor pay, staff shortages, and deteriorating working conditions»².

² Interview conducted in French. Translation by the Author.

Ultimately, the challenges to collective bargaining in the French care sector reflect its structural complexity and evolving dynamics. Addressing these issues requires a collaborative approach that prioritises formalisation, enhances gender equity, improves organising efforts, and adapts agreements to local and sector-specific contexts. By strengthening social dialogue and ensuring consistent implementation of agreements, the sector can move towards more equitable and sustainable outcomes for both workers and beneficiaries.

V. Towards Smart Bargaining

The French care sector's structural challenges and evolving labour dynamics underscore the need for innovative approaches to collective bargaining. Addressing persistent issues such as workforce fragmentation, gender disparities, and regional imbalances requires adaptive strategies that prioritise inclusivity, formalisation, and sustainability. The recommendations provided here are grounded in findings gathered through comprehensive desk research and document analysis, ensuring a data-driven basis for actionable insights.

Recent examples highlight how “smart” bargaining practices can address these challenges effectively. For instance, a national strike led by major unions in October 2024 to protest wage stagnation and inadequate funding in the care sector acted as a catalyst for negotiations. The industrial action paved the way for a multi-year agreement that included a 6% wage increase for residential care workers (NACE 87), improved staffing ratios, and the establishment of a national training fund to professionalise caregiving roles. This agreement not only addressed immediate worker demands but also laid the groundwork for addressing long-term workforce sustainability (EPSU Collective Bargaining Newsletter, 2024).

One notable initiative in domestic care (NACE 97) was spearheaded by FEPEM, which collaborated with regional authorities and unions to introduce a pilot programme in Île-de-France aimed at formalising employment relationships through simplified contract templates and tax incentives. Early evaluations of the programme indicate a 15% reduction in undeclared work in participating regions, demonstrating the potential of targeted interventions to enhance compliance and expand the reach of collective agreements (Eurofound, 2020).

Gender equity has been another focal point of forward-looking bargaining efforts. Drawing on findings from the EPSU report *Closing the Gender Pay Gap in Public Services in the Context of Austerity* (2021), unions have negotiated agreements that incorporate standardised pay scales and measures to reduce wage gaps between caregiving roles predominantly occupied by women and managerial positions. A specific example includes provisions within the latest sectoral agreement for residential

care, which mandated equal pay audits across facilities and introduced gender-sensitive job evaluation criteria. Additionally, the use of the "Index de l'égalité professionnelle," a mandatory tool for companies with more than 50 employees in France, has been leveraged to monitor and improve pay equity between men and women, reinforcing the commitment to addressing horizontal and vertical segregation while enhancing career mobility for female workers (EPSU, 2021; French Ministry of Labour, 2024).

In terms of employer-driven initiatives, SYNERPA has launched programmes to address regional labour shortages by partnering with vocational training centres to create fast-track certification programmes for care workers. These programmes have been particularly effective in rural areas, where recruitment challenges are more pronounced. By aligning training opportunities with local labour market needs, this initiative has helped reduce staffing gaps and improved retention rates in participating facilities (SYNERPA Public Position, 2024).

Another promising example of innovative bargaining comes from the integration of digital tools to enhance union outreach and worker engagement. Unions have started using mobile applications to disseminate information about collective agreements, organise training sessions, and facilitate worker input during negotiations. These tools have proven particularly effective in reaching domestic care workers, who often work in isolated environments with limited access to union representatives (EPSU Wage Watch, 2024).

To move towards truly "smart" bargaining, stakeholders must focus on fostering stronger collaboration and leveraging data-driven strategies to address emerging sectoral needs. Expanding the scope of agreements to include measures like skill development, digital integration, and comprehensive support for migrant workers can ensure that collective bargaining remains a dynamic and effective tool for advancing the care sector's sustainability. By building on recent successes and addressing gaps in implementation, France can position itself as a leader in forward-looking labour relations in the care industry.

VI. European Perspectives

The challenges and opportunities within the French care sector are reflective of broader dynamics across Europe, where care work is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of social welfare systems. As Europe faces demographic shifts such as ageing populations and increased care demands, European-level strategies offer a useful framework for identifying pathways forward. At the EU level, initiatives such as the European Pillar of Social Rights highlight the importance of fair working conditions, gender equality, and social dialogue. Principle 2 of the Pillar, which focuses on gender equality, has driven member states to adopt measures to address pay gaps and

promote work-life balance in care professions. France, like other EU countries, is encouraged to align its national frameworks with these overarching principles, including through the implementation of directives such as the Work-Life Balance Directive and the Pay Transparency Directive (European Commission, 2021).

In particular, the European Labour Authority (ELA) already in 2021 emphasised the urgent need to formalise employment relationships in the personal and household services sector to address issues like undeclared work and improve the quality of care. It calls for policies aimed at improving working conditions and job security, including clear regulations for domestic workers. This approach is essential for creating a sustainable workforce that can meet the increasing demand for care services across Europe (ELA, 2021).

The European Federation of Food, Agriculture, and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT) has been particularly active in advocating for improvements in the conditions of domestic workers, an area that remains highly informal and often lacks legal protections. According to EFFAT's demands, the EU needs to strengthen policies that ensure domestic workers, particularly migrant women, have access to social protections, fair pay, and job security. EFFAT stresses the importance of robust EU-wide standards and regulations to safeguard domestic workers' rights and ensure that these workers are not subject to exploitation or insecure employment conditions. These measures include providing clearer legal status, addressing wage disparities, and ensuring that domestic workers are included in national labour law frameworks (EFFAT, 2022).

Additionally, EFFAT highlights the need for the EU to push for stronger implementation of existing frameworks, such as the European Employment Strategy, to improve domestic workers' conditions and reduce gender inequalities. It calls for better enforcement of the existing regulations to ensure that domestic workers, who often work in isolated settings, benefit from protections against abuse and exploitation. EFFAT's collaboration with its employer counterpart, the European Federation of Employers in Personal and Household Services (EFFE), has led to joint recommendations to improve working conditions, promote fair wages, and reduce undeclared work in the care sector. The partnership seeks to push for the inclusion of domestic work in formal labour market policies at the EU level (EFFAT, 2022).

Moreover, EPSU's campaigns on closing the gender pay gap and improving funding for public services have influenced national debates in France. Similarly, the Federation of European Social Employers has advocated for greater investment in care infrastructure, stressing the need for sustainable financing mechanisms to support long-term workforce development (EPSU Wage Watch, 2024; Federation of European Social Employers, 2023). Moreover, EFFAT's focus on securing labour rights for migrant workers and promoting training programmes has been instrumental in addressing skill shortages and fostering professionalisation across the sector.

In October 2024, key social partners—including EFFAT, EFFE, EFSI, and UNI Europa—issued a joint statement addressing the pressing labour and skills shortages in Personal

and Household Services (PHS) (Martini, 2024). They urged the European Commission to prioritise this issue in its 2024-2029 agenda, emphasising the need for targeted actions to attract and retain workers in the sector. Additionally, the European Commission organised a conference on November 12, 2024, titled "Affordable High-Quality Long-Term Care: Catalysing Dialogue and Action under the European Care Strategy." This event brought together policymakers, social partners, and stakeholders to discuss challenges and strategies for improving long-term care across Europe, highlighting the importance of joint commitments at both European and national levels.

European case studies offer practical examples of innovative approaches to collective bargaining. In Denmark, for instance, tripartite agreements have successfully balanced worker protections with employer flexibility, leading to robust training programmes and improved job security for care workers. Similarly, Germany's focus on sectoral bargaining has resulted in comprehensive agreements that address regional disparities and ensure consistent standards across the country. These models highlight the potential for France to enhance its bargaining practices by adopting a more integrated and regionally sensitive approach (Meardi et al., 2019).

The European Strategy on Long-Term Care further reinforces the importance of collective bargaining in building sustainable care systems. This strategy calls for investments in care infrastructure, the professionalisation of the workforce, and the promotion of gender equity in caregiving roles. Recent updates in 2024 have emphasised targeted funding mechanisms and enhanced support for workforce training, reflecting evolving priorities under this strategy. By aligning with these updates, France can leverage EU funding opportunities and policy guidance to strengthen its care sector while addressing workforce challenges (European Commission, 2024).

The convergence of national and European efforts underscores the importance of collaboration in addressing the care sector's challenges. By aligning French policies with European standards and leveraging the insights gained from transnational dialogue, stakeholders can build a more equitable and sustainable care sector. This requires a commitment to strengthening social dialogue, formalising employment, and ensuring that collective bargaining reflects the diverse needs of care workers and employers alike. In conclusion, European perspectives provide a roadmap for advancing collective bargaining in France. By integrating best practices, adhering to EU directives, and participating actively in transnational social dialogue, France can position itself as a leader in innovative and inclusive labour relations within the care sector.

VII. Conclusions

The French care sector's structural challenges and evolving labour dynamics underscore the need for innovative approaches to collective bargaining. Addressing

persistent issues such as workforce fragmentation, gender disparities, and regional imbalances requires adaptive strategies that prioritise inclusivity, formalisation, and sustainability. The recommendations provided here are grounded in findings gathered through comprehensive desk research and document analysis, ensuring a data-driven basis for actionable insights.

Recent examples highlight how “smart” bargaining practices can address these challenges effectively. For instance, a national strike led by major unions in October 2024 to protest wage stagnation and inadequate funding in the care sector acted as a catalyst for negotiations. The industrial action paved the way for a multi-year agreement that included a 6% wage increase for residential care workers (NACE 87), improved staffing ratios, and the establishment of a national training fund to professionalise caregiving roles. This agreement not only addressed immediate worker demands but also laid the groundwork for addressing long-term workforce sustainability (EPSU Collective Bargaining Newsletter, 2024). The subject of the funds available to the sector also came up in the interview:

«For bargaining to become truly smart, the state needs to allocate sufficient resources to manage the healthcare system and stop blocking funding. We are in a service sector, not an industrial one. If we don't finance the service, we can't make meaningful progress on improving working conditions or wages. Without adequate budgets, negotiations are futile».

One notable initiative in domestic care (NACE 97) was spearheaded by FEPEM, which collaborated with regional authorities and unions to introduce a pilot programme in Île-de-France aimed at formalising employment relationships through simplified contract templates and tax incentives. Early evaluations of the programme indicate a 15% reduction in undeclared work in participating regions, demonstrating the potential of targeted interventions to enhance compliance and expand the reach of collective agreements (Eurofound, 2020).

Gender equity has been another focal point of forward-looking bargaining efforts. Drawing on findings from the EPSU report *Closing the Gender Pay Gap in Public Services in the Context of Austerity* (2021), unions have negotiated agreements that incorporate standardised pay scales and measures to reduce wage gaps between caregiving roles predominantly occupied by women and managerial positions. A specific example includes provisions within the latest sectoral agreement for residential care, which mandated equal pay audits across facilities and introduced gender-sensitive job evaluation criteria. Additionally, the use of the "Index de l'égalité professionnelle," a mandatory tool for companies with more than 50 employees in France, has been leveraged to monitor and improve pay equity between men and women, reinforcing the commitment to addressing horizontal and vertical segregation while enhancing career mobility for female workers (EPSU, 2021; French Ministry of Labour, 2024).

In terms of employer-driven initiatives, SYNERPA has launched programmes to address regional labour shortages by partnering with vocational training centres to create fast-track certification programmes for care workers. These programmes have been particularly effective in rural areas, where recruitment challenges are more pronounced. By aligning training opportunities with local labour market needs, this initiative has helped reduce staffing gaps and improved retention rates in participating facilities (SYNERPA Public Position, 2024).

Another promising example of innovative bargaining comes from the integration of digital tools to enhance union outreach and worker engagement. Unions have started using mobile applications to disseminate information about collective agreements, organise training sessions, and facilitate worker input during negotiations. These tools have proven particularly effective in reaching domestic care workers, who often work in isolated environments with limited access to union representatives (EPSU Wage Watch, 2024).

To move towards truly “smart” bargaining, stakeholders must focus on fostering stronger collaboration and leveraging data-driven strategies to address emerging sectoral needs. Expanding the scope of agreements to include measures like skill development, digital integration, and comprehensive support for migrant workers can ensure that collective bargaining remains a dynamic and effective tool for advancing the care sector’s sustainability. By building on recent successes and addressing gaps in implementation, France can position itself as a leader in forward-looking labour relations in the care industry.

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