

Collective bargaining in the age of demographic transition: Regulating an ageing workforce in Italy and the Netherlands

European Journal of

Industrial Relations

2026, Vol. 0(0) 1–22

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DOI: 10.1177/09596801261464277

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Abstract

This article explores how collective bargaining addresses workforce ageing by comparing sectoral agreements in Italy and the Netherlands. The study investigates whether workers aged 55 and over are effectively represented in sectoral bargaining and what regulatory logics underpin age-sensitive provisions. Through a systematic content analysis of the most representative sectoral agreements in both countries, complemented by interviews with unions and employers' associations, the paper identifies five bargaining logics – defensive, transformative, symbolic, adaptive, and exit-oriented – and maps how they emerge across institutional contexts. The findings reveal that Dutch agreements contain a high number of age-related provisions primarily guided by an adaptive logic aimed at sustaining employability through organisational adjustments, while Italian agreements include fewer clauses, most of which are symbolic. The paper explains differences by considering the interaction among three causal packages based on the Varieties of Capitalism literature, the Power Resource Approach, and Ideational Institutionalism. The analysis shows that strong coordination and shared ideas about senior workers as valuable resources enable more proactive bargaining, whereas fragmented systems and a perception of senior workers as close to retirement limit regulatory innovation. The article concludes by highlighting the need for more substantive strategies to address demographic change through collective bargaining.

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