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SPECIAL FEATURE

Evolving or Disappearing? Italian Trade Unions in the 2010s

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Introduction

"The worker has his own personality, his own self-respect, his own ideas, his own political opinion, his own religious beliefs, and he wants these rights to be respected by everyone, especially by the employer,"[1] said the first leader of the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL) Giuseppe Di Vittorio in 1952. Yet between this statement in the 1950s and today many things have changed: not only what the worker is and has become, but also how trade unions have represented workers. This article, focusing on the introduction of the first minimum-income scheme in Italian history, explores how the role of trade unions in representing workers and promoting welfare expansion changed in the country in the 2010s.

The industrial worker, trade unions' core member, has been disappearing together with postwar industrial development.[2] In the postwar Fordist period, unions played a fundamental role in expanding workers' protection, which culminated in the Workers' Statute introduced by the Italian Parliament in 1970. Yet from the 1970s, structural changes in capitalist production, including transformations in the labor market and in the welfare state, gradually led to the transformation of society and of the subjects of work. In the 1970s, Italy witnessed rising unemployment that soon became structural. In 1978, the secretary of CGIL, Luciano Lama, in a famous interview to the newspaper *La Repubblica*, illustrated the reaction of trade unions to this situation: "the union is proposing a policy of sacrifices to workers. Sacrifices that are not marginal, but substantial. . . . If we are to be consistent with the goal of decreasing unemployment, it is clear that improving conditions for employed workers must take second place."[3] Yet, unemployment constantly increased and, at the same time, the conditions of workers deteriorated. While the industrial worker has been disappearing, a multitude of precarious, heterogeneous subjects of work emerged. The 1990s' first wave of labor marketization precarization had been accepted by trade unions, which defended the rights of their core constituency, the so-called "insiders," against the rights of the so-called "outsiders," under-represented in the labor market and under-protected in the welfare sphere.[4] In doing so, unions ended up supporting labor markets' flexibilization reforms, sustained by employers' associations and neoliberal governments, which resulted in a compression of wages, as well as limited access to social security, for emerging categories of workers in the country.[5] The result

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at a societal level, was increased levels of poverty, especially for those groups at the margins—women, migrants, and young people, which are a large and increasing component of the Italian labor market.[6]

As for trade unions, they have not been able to represent the categories emerging from capitalist changes, while at the same time their constituency has been shrinking. The last twenty years of increasing inequality should then be studied looking also at the profound crisis of trade unions, in terms of both their political and institutional roles.[7] The article focuses on what happened to unions in the aftermath of the debt and financial crisis, in a context of wide discontent towards parliamentary politics in the country, during which the emergent party 5-Stars Movement was aggregating many of the "outsiders" and demanding forms of minimum income support.[8] It was during this period that the lack of institutional legitimacy of trade unions in Italy was certified,[9] and it was at this point that something unexpected happened. Italian confederal trade unions entered into the Alliance Against Poverty—together with faith-based and third-sector organizations, as well as academics—to propose the first minimum-income scheme in Italian history, which was then implemented by the government in 2017. Unions were not dead, as many commentators argued.[10] On the contrary, they acted "rationally" and opened up to a minimum-income policy as they aimed to regain the political and institutional legitimacy lost during the crisis.[11] Yet the decision to support a monetary transfer—tied to a social and work reactivation program—may indicate the next step in the trade unions' shift (and not only in Italy): moving from promoters of a collective vision of emancipation, based on social justice and alternative to market capitalism, to a workfarist vision of individual emancipation within market boundaries.

This article is a rearranged extract from a broader project.[12] Through interviews with trade union representatives, as well as with academics and representatives of faith-based organizations and grassroots movements, the article reconstructs the genealogy of the minimum-income proposal from the point of view of trade unions: their historical role, their crisis in front of changing socio-economic conditions (in the next section), and their strategies for regaining political and institutional legitimacy (third section). It then concludes with a reflection on what it meant—in Italy—to introduce a minimum-income scheme in the midst of an economic and welfare crisis.

Trade Unions and the Explosion of Spaces

The three Italian confederal unions—CGIL, Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori (CISL) and Unione Italiana del Lavoro (UIL)—which have historically had among the highest density in Europe, with a strong institutional legitimacy to participate in policy-making, have contributed to a welfare system built "upon the assumption that (quasi-) universal coverage could be achieved through work-based social insurance schemes in a condition of high economic growth and full-employment."[13]

During the Fordist industrial boom, in factories, as well as in urban peripheries—where most working families lived—public spaces became the place of collective representation: marginalization and poverty could find public recognition and visibility

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through organizational instruments such as the party or the union. As industrialization proceeded to bring large numbers of workers together, mass unionism emerged and a certain social dialectic workers-employer solidified. As a result, the issue of poverty never disappeared or declined in the public debate, but it was rarely discussed as a separate social problem from other social inequalities (housing problems, unemployment, access to health care).[14]

The double movement of globalization—deindustrialization and the rise of the service and digital economy—which led to structurally high levels of unemployment and labor market dualization, has undermined the main pillars of workerist trade unions' legitimacy.

Globalization can be defined as a "general explosion of spaces"[15] that led to the progressive deconstruction of the territorial principles on which modernity based authority and rights[16]: it is no longer obvious that larger forms should contain smaller ones. Such an explosion has led to new assemblages of radically different spaces that develop irregular or interactive logics with one another.[17] In this process, trade unions in Western states have been affected by the deterritorialization of their environment and constituency: deindustrialization and a shrinking industrial workforce led to lower union density and lower mobilization power. Yet the crisis of trade unionism in advanced democracies is only partially explained by deindustrialization. It is also important to account for the "positive" product of globalization in Western democracies: the rise of the service and the digital sectors, as well as automation inside factories. These innovation trajectories have not yet been reterritorialized within a social dialectic in which trade unions have a legitimate role. These two movements of globalization led to a double, intertwined, trade union crisis: lack of political recognition from the emerging precarious working class and lack of institutional legitimacy as their core constituency was shrinking.[18] It is in this context that debates over the direction of labor market and welfare intervention developed in institutions and academia, but also within trade unions: How is it possible to give power back into the hands of workers and rebuild a new social contract in the era of globalization?

Faced with such a situation, for some, trade unions' response should have been linear: "what could be more obvious than to have the trade unions themselves give priority to consciously assuming responsibility for representing those groups of wage-dependent individuals who have dropped out of the labor market, whether for objective or subjective reasons, whether temporarily or permanently?"[19] Yet, this is precisely what did not happen. The institutional legitimacy of Italian confederal trade unions declined together with their capacity to aggregate political and social interests. After the financial crisis, and in the midst of the debt crisis, some academics talked about the end of trade union representation and the death of social pacts.[20] One of the CGIL interviewees (Interview 1) contextualized this shift:

> We are used to a union that grew up on the Fordist model, the factory, assembly line and everything else, connected to big industrial complexes. It was enough for us to have the big factories to make a union. If you were talking in a factory forecourt, you were talking to 10,000 people. The union representative not only talked about working conditions in the strict sense of the word, but he also took

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> care of the workers outside: health care, transport, housing. Now, fragmented work, of course, goes beyond the logic of the classic rules of the workers' statute, and brings with it a different reasoning regarding the union. The union has not been ready to read and see the transformations that have taken place in the labour market.

First, it was political legitimacy that suffered from the explosion of spaces. With globalization, collective structures were challenged as "the spatial location and social organization of work, residence, consumption and sociability have become highly differentiated."[21] As a result of this, the capacity to find a collective significance in emerging, precarious, and atomized jobs, as well as the capacity to build identities, depended on the ability of trade unions to represent those workers. Yet this did not happen in time, as trade unionists recognize,

> that there is a weakening of trade unions and unionisation, and not only in Italy, this is true; that there has been the disintegration of the labour market is true; that the union left has arrived a little late, it is true. (Interview 2)
> When I think of my organisation [CGIL] the reading of the changes in the world of labour and a reaction happened with a few years of delay. (Interview 3)

Di Vittorio concluded the speech reported above saying, "if there is democracy in the factory, there is democracy in the country, and if democracy is killed in the factory, it cannot exist in the country."[22] Yet what Di Vittorio could not predict was that while automation reduced industrial democracy, the main challenge to a democratic representation of workers and citizens came from the lack of democracy in emerging labor market sectors in the highly financialized digital economy. There—in food delivery, in logistics and transport sectors, as well as in accommodation and food service activities and in arts and entertainments sectors—trade unions were late. The first important consequence of trade unions' lateness was that a new conceptualization of poverty based on purchasing power on the market and disconnected from a broader and collective plan of social justice emerged.[23]

The second consequence was that, as trade unions' political legitimacy was crumbling, its institutional legitimacy was also called into question. In particular, two main reforms in the 2010s highlighted trade unions' low institutional legitimacy: first, the 2011's *Salva Italia* law decree,[24] passed by the government led by Mario Monti, and including an ambitious pension reform explicitly targeting a core constituent of unions' membership. The three divided unions were able to unite and call for a public-sector strike against the reform, but nothing changed in the structure of the latter and no apparent harm was done to the government. Then, in 2014, the center-left coalition government guided by Matteo Renzi began its labor market reform, the so-called *Jobs Act*,[25] a broad program of flexibilization of the job market, also involving the abrogation of Art. 18, which protected employees in the event of unlawful, unfair, and discriminatory firing. Despite strikes and protests, the government did not pull back, with Renzi saying "I respect the union, but it will not stop us."[26] Union representatives blame both right- and left-wing neoliberal governments that discredited their role,

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> It is undeniable that a piece of distrust transferred to the new generations is dictated by the political dialectic that has swept the problems under the carpet, blaming, for example, the failure of the country and politics itself on the union. (Interview 1)

In parallel to this, and in a certain sense, as a response to this, the national political sphere was influenced by the growth of the 5-Stars Movement, which, trying to represent that part of the electorate affected by increasing poverty and inequality, proposed a minimum-income scheme, called *Reddito di Cittadinanza*, among its top priorities. On the one hand, this increased the pressure on trade unions to do something, with the leader of the 5-Stars Movement attacking them, saying, "they represent old structures."[27] On the other hand, the rise of the 5-Stars Movement contributed to the increased visibility of minimum-income schemes as policy tools that could be supported in this phase.[28] It was, thus, in this condition of legitimacy and political crisis that new perspectives emerged within trade unions.

Trade Unions and Minimum-income Schemes

> There has always been a specific work culture linked to the Communist Party, [so that] not many aspects of employment have been recognised. This concerns all political forces, because a political consensus was built on work and still works this way. Italy has chosen the defense of the full-time employed worker. It is a cultural approach that Italy chose during the years of workers' struggles, with a strong workerist imprinting, while in European countries there was a strong social-democratic component, emphasising the role of the state as regulator in the capital-labour conflict; in Italy, the state has not been present in this sense. Poverty has always been neglected from the point of view of political action. (Interview 4)

This statement puts forward the main historical elements that should have prevented trade unions from supporting minimum-income schemes: the legacy of the Communist Party and the role of a work-centered conception of citizenship in welfare policy.

Indeed, none of the three confederal unions—and in particular the CGIL, the most affluent and closest to the Communist Party—have historically shown any adherence to the idea of a basic or even minimum-income scheme.[29] As Western liberal economies underwent a process of labor market dualization from the 1990s, for many authors, trade unions became the representative of labor market insiders at the expense of labor market outsiders.[30] In Italy, many authors highlight how the seeds of dualization were already present in the first wave of welfare expansion in the 1960s.[31] Industrial and public sector workers constituted the core of trade unions' constituencies and enjoyed the benefits that derived from the strong institutional position of their representatives; outsiders, especially women carrying out reproductive labor activities, could not count on job stability and institutionalized political representation, but relied on informal family networks and faith-based organizations' assistance. When Ferrera introduced the Southern model of a welfare state, he argued

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that this was constituted of a polarization between "hyper-protected beneficiaries" and a large number of "under-protected workers and citizens."[32] According to him, this was the result of the influence of Catholicism, but also of "the presence of strong and deeply rooted socialist/communist subcultures [that] made significant contributions towards shaping Latin social policies."[33] From Ferrera's description onward, the division between insiders and outsiders in Italy constantly enlarged.[34] As insiders are the ones benefiting from a work-centered idea of citizenship, and as trade unions side with them, then authors have expected trade unions to oppose a minimum-income policy.[35]

Yet deindustrialization and dualization are not static phenomena, but rather are self- reinforcing processes. Transformations in the labor market empty the core constituency of trade unions. In particular, after the financial crisis, it became clear that poverty and the working poor were structural elements of the Italian economy.

> After the 2008 economic crisis, poverty increased to a level that made it become a relevant issue for national, rather than territorial, politics. . . . Our action has not been motivated by this idea [the insider-outsider dilemma], but it has eventually proved those who say that we only take care of insiders wrong. (Interview 5)

The result, as the interviewee argues, is that unions took action against this situation.[36] This is in line with the idea that when unions want to maintain their institutional legitimacy as the main representative of the workforce, they are committed to strategy reconfiguration.[37] The question is then how the ideological shift happened and what were the intersecting lines that led to the reconfiguration of trade unions priorities.

The first element is the role of academics influencing trade unions. This line of change could be called *policy transfer*.[38] As one of the interviewees explained,

> The role of trade unions is not only focused on the labour market anymore, because of deindustrialization, financialisation, and austerity that have led to a connection between the labour market and other sectors. (Interview 5)

Trade unions have learnt that the factory is no longer the only element producing a labor market, that there are emerging labor markets, and that all of these are connected to the broader process of the financialization of the world economy.

Yet to understand how to operate in these new sectors, the role of academics is crucial. Since the beginning of the 2000s, academics interested in public policy have highlighted the lack of a safety net for people that were not protected by national contracts signed by confederal unions.[39] In particular, Cristiano Gori, academic and first promoter of the Alliance Against Poverty (Interview 6), explains that while he has "always worked with associations on these issues and I have drafted policy proposals before", for what concerns unions,

> Joining the Alliance is part of a positive reflection to broaden their gaze to overcome a crisis of legitimacy. Protecting their insiders is increasingly partial, so they try to look outside.

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The role of academics in such a shift has been recognized by trade unions themselves; as argued by trade unionists in an interview,

> The people covered by REI are not the same as those you have to cover with contractual action, because the bulk of people in absolute poverty are people who are often not in a position to work. . . . To help these people we turned to the academic world, to Professor Cristiano Gori. It was a social coalition experience (Interview 2).

Academics like Gori have been able to interact with trade unions thanks to the second element, which can be called cross-class *alliances*.[40] Following Korpi, a cross-class mobilization of workers and potential allies is crucial for solidaristic public policy outcomes, as social actors that are "based in socio-economic categories relatively disadvantaged in terms of economic resources . . . are expected to be protagonists in welfare state development."[41] The move of trade unions toward a minimum-income policy has been spurred by third sector organizations, and in particular the faith-based organization Caritas. As explained by a representative of Caritas (Interview 7),

> The Catholic world has represented an external constraint to the development of the welfare system. Subsidiarity meant avoiding any intervention by the state in social affairs, suffice it to say that the first Ministry for Social Affairs dates back to just 1987. Caritas Italiana was born in 1971 and represented a non-traditional voice in the choir of ecclesiastic organizations. . . . Its capacity for pressure was very limited, above all by the presence of the Christian Democratic party [DC], which held conservative positions on these issues.

Then, after the 1992's *Mani Pulite* scandal, the fall of the DC and the end of the First Republic, Caritas emerged as one of the most prominent organizations supporting poor people, initially in a humanitarian sense, then increasingly participating in politics. Yet for a long time, the Caritas remained a unique institutional voice supporting a minimum-income scheme in Italy.

> Throughout the years, there has been a "manoeuvre" of social positions, union-political positions that has left Caritas in a minoritarian position. (Interview 7)

Then, after the financial and debt crisis, with the steep rise of people in absolute and relative poverty in Italy, it became clear to all actors sustaining workers, the poor, and families that a minimum-income scheme was necessary for helping those that remained out of traditional forms of protection. It is within this context of policy transfer and cross-class alliances that the creation of the Alliance Against Poverty is situated. For Catholic groups, this meant that

> The awareness, therefore, for those working in the sector was that if we wanted to have a measure to combat poverty, it was necessary to create a broader alliance of groups dealing with poverty (not only the ecclesial ones) with a platform shared also with trade unions. (Interview 7)

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For confederal unions, the creation of the alliance meant the recognition that "today we cannot solve all the problems with work" (Interview 2), and that an interaction with other organizations and experts already involved in the field was necessary,

> The country was in a deep crisis, since 2009 there has also been a further impoverishment, and it was due to several reasons: the crisis, but also widespread precariousness, a lot of poor work. . . . There was a very important discussion within the union, because an instrument of this kind was not in the tradition of our union. Many of us who were involved in welfare, and worked in a context of collaboration with associations other than ourselves (even from the Catholic world), faced this problem with a certain sense of urgency, and so we built an association with the alliance, to try to work out the proposal. And the proposal took a little piece of everyone, it was not the proposal that the CGIL would have made on its own. (Interview 2)

Yet a third element, although less acknowledged by the literature,[42] was important in pressuring trade unions toward the development of a minimum-income policy. This is *bottom-up pressures*, including civil society actors, such as the Basic Income Network initiative, and social movement unionism (*sindacalismo di base*).[43] This tradition comes from the Italian autonomous movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Both in its civil society part and its union part, this grassroots, nonhomogeneous movement has historically challenged confederal unions and their workerist approach, criticizing the amount of hours worked and work itself. It is in this context that, after the financial and debt crisis, civil society movements and social movement unions put the demand of a universal and unconditional basic income at the top of their demands, which eventually shaped the nationwide debate.[44]

Given the demand for a universal and unconditional basic income, these actors criticized the shape of the minimum-income proposal of the Alliance Against Poverty, accused of being a limited monetary intervention. In addition, two other main critiques were moved to the proposal. First, "the work activation part is extremely vexatious" (Interview 4), meaning that the social and work activation component of the proposal made it more similar to a workfare proposal typical of neoliberal reforms of welfare than to a solidaristic policy. Second, they added, "in many European countries, in addition to the minimum income, there are also forms of indirect income (free nurseries, rents' agreements, etc.), which do not exist in Italy" (Interview 4). These two criticisms are discussed in the last section.

Minimum-income Schemes in Late Neoliberalism: A Perspective

What would be the impact of a minimum income on society? What CGIL representatives argue is that

> We proposed a system of intervention against poverty, meaning not only a monetary transfer, but a structural instrument that would bring people out of poverty, so that we put together components of reactivation of work but also a lot of welfare. (Interview 2)

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Yet the picture appears to be more complex than this. A minimum income is a fundamental safety net for many people that cannot enter other forms of protection. Yet tying it to a work reactivation program has been criticized by different grassroots groups, as well as academics.[45] Indeed, such a policy does not challenge the neoliberal paradigm of job precariousness and in-work poverty. On the contrary, tying the minimum income to a work reactivation program is in line with the historical "workerist" approach of Italian trade unions. The issue is then the evolution of the role of trade unions within the structure of capitalism, in the labor market and in the welfare sphere: Italian trade unions do not seem to directly challenge the structure of the neoliberal labor market, but rather to sustain it. In fact, requiring a social and work activation program to have access to the monetary transfer without creating adequate jobs and introducing a minimum wage policy—still missing in Italy—will lead to forms of labor exploitation or job precarity, in what has been called the workfare paradigm.[46]

Connected to this, there is another element that grassroots groups criticized. How can a monetary transfer be enough in a welfare state where indirect income—or in-kind welfare —has historically been very limited? A monetary sum is not enough if a person is expected to sustain the majority of her life—and maybe that of her family—only through it. This is in line with existing criticisms of direct income policies as forms of neoliberal reproduction rather than the overcoming of the system itself.[47] The idea behind these criticisms is that a direct income policy does not challenge how value is produced in the economy, but only increases the purchasing power of the individual in the neoliberal market economy, whose existence is not put into question.

These two types of criticism—minimum income as a form of workfare and minimum income as an instrument of neoliberalism—are particularly poignant for trade unions. As it was explained in the first section, in the postwar period, trade unions have put a collective vision of emancipation based on social justice at the center of their struggles. From the 1970s, a shift began, as was illustrated in the introduction, and their participation in the minimum-income policy detailed in this paper—although important for the Italian welfare system—may signal a move toward a vision of individual emancipation that reframes what social justice means, assigning more power to the market.

List of Interviews

Interview 1 Local secretary of the CGIL - Milan, 15 January 2020

Interview 2 Member of the national secretary board of the CGIL - Rome, 10 January 2020

Interview 3 National Secretary for Union and Industrial Relations at CGIL - Naples, 12 January 2020

Interview 4 President of Basic Income Network Italia - Milan, 20 September 2019

Interview 5 Representative of the Department of Social Policy, Health and Public Administration Reform at CISL - Rome, 23 September 2020

Interview 6 Professor at the University of Trento and Founder of the Alliance Against Poverty - Milan, 3 September 2019

Interview 7 National Area Manager of Caritas Italiana - Rome, 10 October 2019

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