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## Italian trade unions: Still shifting between consolidated organizations and social movements?

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Ida Regalia\*

## **Italian Trade Unions: Still Shifting between Consolidated Organizations and Social Movements?\***

This article discusses the current characteristics of trade unionism in Italy. First, however, attention is paid to the initial imprinting of the model, which stemmed from the circumstances in which the trade unions were reconstituted at the end of WWII, and whose far-reaching consequences are still apparent today. In fact, because of original divisions along ideological lines, and within a context of enduring voluntarism and low institutionalisation, the Italian trade unions, which acquired large followings and strong organizational capacity and influence over time, still tend to oscillate between behaving as either organizations or social movements according to convenience and to pressures applied by the rank and file.

**Key words: trade unions, social movements, political processes, Italy**  
(JEL: D72, J50, J51)

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## Introduction

Comparative analyses of unionization and industrial relations systems sometimes liken the Italian case to a more or less well-defined southern European (Ebbinghaus, 2003) or Mediterranean model, which combines an ideologically-based division among the peak organizations, organizational fragmentation and weakness, low levels of membership, limited recognition by the counterparties, an adversarial logic of action, and a low (or at any rate unstable and unpredictable) ability to influence regulation of the economy. Because of one or more of these features, Italy is often grouped together with Spain, Portugal, Greece, and also France.

But to what extent is this characterization appropriate?

It is indubitable, in fact, that since their reconstruction in 1944, the Italian trade unions have been divided along ideological lines; that unlike trade unions in the Nordic countries, they have not reached particularly high levels of membership; that differently from trade unions in many corporatist systems (Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999; Schmitt & Mitukiewicz, 2012), they have not received formal recognition from governments and employers; that they have generally resorted to conflict much more frequently than unions in the other developed countries (Franzosi, 1995; Bordogna, 2010); and that they have been often viewed as organizationally weak, in that they for long relied on political backing and lacked the organizational infrastructure necessary for decentralized collective bargaining (Lange et al., 1982; Baccaro & Pulignano, 2010). Yet empirical analyses show that the outcomes of effective action by the Italian trade unions, as regards their capacity both to acquire followings and to influence the decisions of their public and private counterparts, have proved very different from those that one would have expected simply on the basis of their general characteristics.

A certain difficulty in categorizing these trade unions has characterized much of the comparative literature on the topic. Already twenty years ago, such well-informed authors as Anthony Ferner and Richard Hyman, in the first edition of their book on industrial relations in Europe (1992), argued that Italian industrial relations constituted an enigma, and that they were particularly difficult to interpret mainly because of the unpredictable behaviour and influence capacity of the trade unions.

The aim of this article is to put forward an interpretation of Italian trade unionism which sees its distinctive feature in the persistence, more than elsewhere, of a continuing tension between the logic of the organization and the logic of the movement (Pizzorno, 1978; Regalia, 1988; Cella, 1999). At theoretical level, this requires rejection of interpretations substantially based on mere analysis of the forms and structure of institutions (on this see Baccaro & Howell, 2011), but also the simple use of quantitative indicators (membership, figures on strikes, bargaining coverage), whose meanings vary greatly according to the circumstances (Franzosi, 1995), in favour of an actor-centred approach (Scharpf, 1997).

This will be done by discussing the strategy and organization of trade-union action, and its outcomes, as they have evolved through the following main phases: that of largely unexpected development (1950s to the end of the 1970s); that of adjustment

made to the logic of action (1980s to the end of the 1990s); and that of the search for new solutions amid the difficulties of the political context and the economic crisis (2000s). First, however, brief description is required of the initial imprinting of the model, which stemmed from the ways in which the trade unions were reconstituted after WWII and whose far-reaching consequences are still apparent today.

### **The original features**

Usually stressed in regard to Italian trade unionism is its traditionally close relationship with (if not dependence on) the political parties. In fact, the picture is more complicated than this. Four points should be emphasized in explaining the original characteristics of the model.

A first point to stress is that trade unionism in Italy was revived in 1944 through the joint efforts of all the anti-fascist political parties in the form of a single organization, the Cgil (*Confederazione generale italiana del lavoro* – Italian General Confederation of Labour), to represent all workers in the overall economy, with no distinction between members and non-members. This was a project which sprang from a period of extraordinary unity of action among the parties during the years of resistance against the Nazis, and then the drafting of the Republican Constitution, amid great social effervescence and labour mobilization. It corresponded to a wider endeavour to re-establish democracy, in which the unions were to perform an important modernizing role. Articles 39 and 40 of the Republican Constitution of 1947 explicitly recognized the rights to organize trade unions and to strike, leaving implementation of those rights to subsequent legislation. Soon, however, with the electoral defeat of left parties in 1948, the beginning of the Cold War, and pressures applied by the Western allies for abatement of the influence of communists and socialists in the labour movement, the unitary endeavour broke down. Created between 1948 and 1950 were the Cisl (*Confederazione italiana sindacati dei lavoratori* – Italian Confederation of Workers' Unions) and the Uil (*Unione italiana del lavoro* – Italian Union of Labour), following the withdrawal from the Cgil of, respectively, the faction linked to the Christian Democrats and those connected with the small lay parties – the Republicans, the Social Democrats and the reformist wing of the Socialists. The Communist and Socialist factions remained in the Cgil, which continued to be the largest organization.

Over time, union ties with the political parties fluctuated, slackening greatly in periods of greatest union power. These beginnings, however, explain why Italian union pluralism is essentially based on ideological cleavages, and not as elsewhere on distinctions of trade or occupation.

A second point is that trade unionism was revived in a socio-economic context highly unfavourable to organized labour. At that time Italy was one of the most industrially backward members of the original EEC. The country's economic structure was characterized (and in many respects still is) by severe geographical disparities and by a marked bipolarism between a significant group of large firms and a very extensive number of small establishments. Self-employment was, and would remain, exceptionally high. To this should be added the existence of a large underground economy. Unemployment was very high and unevenly distributed; and it long fuelled large migratory flows, or internal migrations to Italy's more developed regions (Reyneri, 1989).

The evolution of Italian union pluralism thus began in a political context characterized by the defeat of the left and its exclusion from government, but in which the leftist unions were and continued to be numerically the largest in size, and in an economic context in which high unemployment, scant industrial development, and marked structural disparities greatly weakened and impeded the unions' claimant power. Not surprisingly, therefore, articles 39 and 40 of the Constitution, which left it to subsequent legislation to establish criteria and rules on trade union representation, collective bargaining and exercise of the right to strike, were never implemented (except to a very limited extent, and only in the 1990s, as regards strikes in essential public services and the public-sector trade unions). It seemed neither opportune (given the risk of granting formal recognition to the leftist unions) nor necessary (given the unions' economic weakness) to do so.

Consequently, a third feature of Italy's trade union system, and more generally of its industrial relations system, was its low level of institutionalization (Cella, 1989). Unions and employers' associations remained free voluntary organizations regulated by private law, and relations between them were largely determined by power relations, rather than by stable recognition of their role in regulating distributive conflict (Streeck, 1993). This had many consequences. In organizational terms, the arena of representation continued to be relatively open to newcomers: this helped the rank and file to challenge the strategies of the larger organizations, as exemplified by the growth of 'autonomous' unions – especially active in the particularistic representation of occupational and other small groups in services (Bordogna, 1994) – and by the recurrent emergence of militant opposition to the main trade unions, which hampered the development of stable forms of cooperation. As regards action, in the absence of clear definition of mutually accepted procedures, recourse to conflict was encouraged as a way to test power relationships; and bargaining repeatedly shifted from the centralized to the decentralized level and back again, according to circumstances, while issues overlapped at various levels according to the claimant and market power of specific groups or categories of workers.

On the other hand, a fourth feature to be stressed is a tendency (long covert) for the public administration to involve the industrial relations actors, and primarily the unions, in aspects of the implementation of social policies and the regulation of public-sector employment through their incorporation in a vast range of tri-multi-partite committees (Cammelli, 1980). The reasons for this widespread involvement were apparently a certain weakness of the public institutions and their low level of legitimation, so that they found contact with, and the support of, the interest organizations beneficial. The most evident effect of this institutional involvement was the growth of a strong trade unionism in the public sector, together with peculiar ways of regulating employment relationships in this sector. Another, less evident but more pervasive, effect was the opportunities thus provided for extra resources to be introduced into the interplay of 'voluntary' relations among the parties, thereby modifying the results of market pressures.

Organizationally, since their reconstitution, the three main peak organizations had been structured at all levels along the 'horizontal', or geographical-territorial, and the 'vertical', or industrial, dimensions. Currently, the organization of each confederation

consists of the co-presence of both the horizontal and the vertical structures at the national, regional and territorial levels. To this matrix-type structuring of the unions should be added the presence of workplace representation structures, whose organizational form has been repeatedly revised, but which have led to the further consolidation of the trade-unions' potential to exert influence (Regalia, 1995). This complex organizational structure not only allowed trade union initiative to switch rapidly between the centre and the periphery, and between more general and more sectoral strategies, thereby favouring change, but it also made it possible to pursue different courses of action simultaneously. This last property was of particular importance in an informal context of ideologically-based competitive unionism, since it allowed the experimental, pragmatic, and quasi-covert development in the periphery of strategies different from those 'officially' enjoined by the organizations at the centre, thus increasing the flexibility and adaptability of union action.

To conclude, as an effect of the combination of these different and partly contradictory original features, Italian trade unionism developed in a manner characterized by a dual tension (Regalia & Regini, 1998): that between the official (often intransigent) positions of the public discourse of the actors at the centre of the system and the actions (often more pragmatic and adaptive) undertaken in the periphery; and that between voluntarism and scant formalization of relations between the labour-market organizations and their high institutional involvement in the administration of social policies.

### **The period of trade-union development**

Since their reconstitution, the evolution of the Italian trade unions' role and power appears to have been largely connected to the trend of the economy, whilst, unlike in other countries, it does not seem to have correlated with the traditional indicators of trade-union strength, primarily that of unionization.

From the 1940s onwards, as the Italian economy gathered strength on international markets, so the unions increased their bargaining power. After an initial period of strongly centralized action characterized by dependence on the political system by organizations with little influence in the labour market (1950s), there ensued a period of limited decentralization of collective bargaining and greater autonomy from the parties (early 1960s), and then another one of marked decentralization of collective bargaining, pronounced autonomy from the political system, and strong revival of union unity in the period of extraordinary collective mobilization of the years around the so-called 'Hot Autumn' (late 1960s and early 1970s). The period of economic crisis due to the oil shocks of the 1970s was characterized by a phase of bargaining recentralization by unions now become highly influential and *de facto* recognized by their private and public counterparts, and willing to moderate their demands in exchange for actions for economic and social modernization (late 1970s-early 1980s) (Regalia & Regini, 1998). This led to the first attempts – which soon failed, however – at macro-concertation (Regini, 1995). But it marked the onset of a new phase.

During this evolution and the repeated shift between centralized and decentralized initiative, there arose in quite disordered manner a bipolar system of collective bargaining centred on industry-wide agreements, but which actually foresaw supple-

mentary negotiations at plant level. This pattern received explicit formalization in the tripartite agreement of July 1993. But of principal interest here is the fact that, because of these bargaining practices, supported by the decisions of the labour courts, bargaining coverage stabilized at around 80 percent of the labour force, notwithstanding the absence of explicit mechanisms for the extension of contracts.

The entire process was largely driven by confrontation and conflict between the two sides of industry, the levels of which were and continued to be particularly high, although they diminished after the peak of the 1970s (see Table 1), and were only partly reflected in union memberships.

**Table 1: Days lost through industrial action per 1,000 employees, in various countries, 1950-2008 (annual averages)**

	1950-1959	1960-1969	1970-1979	1980-1989	1990-1999	2000-2008
Denmark	5.7	13.6	39.6	40.0	39.3	24.4*
France**	83.1	118.5	86.6	20.9	14.5	n-a.
Germany	6.0	3.1	7.6	5.2	6.6	3.3
Italy	117.9	175.9	456.9	320.2	90.7	67.8
Sweden	2.0	1.3	5.1	28.6	7.3	2.9
Netherlands	3.6	4.1	5.9	4.1	4.7	4.2
UK	27.8	55.7	65.2	42.3	7.7	14.8
USA	35.8	25.2	26.7	5.8	2.2	1.0

\* 2000-07.

\*\*Data for 1968 not included.

Source: Bordogna (2010)

Differently from many European countries, where the evolution of unionization in the post-war period was characterized by relatively linear increases in union memberships until the economic crisis triggered by the 1973 oil shock, after which they tended to diminish, or at most remained unchanged (La Valle, 1994), the unionization pattern in Italy was characterized by two peaks and two downturns (Checchi & Corneo, 2000).

The first peak was recorded during the period of social mobilization in the immediate post-war years prior to the split of 1948, when membership of the unitary Cgil was estimated at 5.7 million (Turone, 1973: 159). From 1950 onwards there was a constant decline in memberships, which continued, even during the expansionary period of the 'economic miracle', until the end of the 1960s, when they fell to their lowest levels. Memberships then revived substantially throughout the 1970s (even during the initial phases of the economic crisis) until the late 1970s, when the second peak in memberships occurred and the unionization rate reached its apogee at around 50 per cent – an especially significant percentage for a productive system characterized by the predominance of small and micro firms (see Table 2). However the 1980s would see a new phase of decline similar to the one recorded in most other countries, as discussed below.

**Table 2: Union memberships (000s) and union density (%), 1950-1979**

Year	CGIL	CISL	UIL	Total union membership	Union density*
1950	4,641	1,190	n.a.	5,830	50.8
1951	4,491	1,338	n.a.	5,829	50.9
1952	4,342	1,322	n.a.	5,664	48.8
1953	4,075	1,305	n.a.	5,380	45.6
1954	4,134	1,327	n.a.	5,461	44.6
1955	4,194	1,342	n.a.	5,536	43.9
1956	3,666	1,707	n.a.	5,374	42.0
1957	3,138	1,262	n.a.	4,400	34.2
1958	2,596	1,654	n.a.	4,250	32.7
1959	2,601	1,284	n.a.	3,885	29.7
1960	2,583	1,324	550	4,457	28.5
1961	2,531	1,399	560	4,490	28.2
1962	2,611	1,435	590	4,636	28.2
1963	2,625	1,504	600	4,729	28.6
1964	2,712	1,515	640	4,867	29.7
1965	2,543	1,468	615	4,626	28.5
1966	2,458	1,491	620	4,569	28.0
1967	2,424	1,523	625	4,572	27.7
1968	2,461	1,627	648	4,736	28.7
1969	2,626	1,641	714	4,981	29.4
1970	2,943	1,808	780	5,530	38.5
1971	3,138	1,973	825	5,937	41.1
1972	3,215	2,184	843	6,242	43.2
1973	3,436	2,214	902	6,553	44.6
1974	3,827	2,473	965	7,264	47.2
1975	4,081	2,594	1,033	7,708	48.5
1976	4,313	2,824	1,105	8,242	48.7
1977	4,475	2,810	1,160	8,445	49.0
1978	4,528	2,869	1,285	8,682	48.9
1979	4,584	2,906	1,327	8,817	48.4

\* Density refers to the active, dependent and employed members (excluding retired, unemployed and self-employed members).

Source: Romagnoli and Della Rocca (1989)

Even from this brief outline it is evident that trade-union membership in Italy was only weakly correlated with economic trends. Declining membership between 1950 and circa 1970 was instead connected with 'political' reasons: divisions in the unions and repression of the rank and file in the workplace especially during the 1950s (Della Rocca, 1976). And it was the result of two distinct tendencies: the marked decline of the Cgil after the 1948 split, which lost two million members in just over fifteen years, and a relatively modest increase in the Cisl, which gained around half a million members, followed by a similar trend by the Uil. Symmetrically, the subsequent revival in



membership during the 1970s, until the point of greatest growth in 1978, was closely connected with the period of extraordinary collective mobilization in the late 1960s and early 1970s, during which the trade-union confederations regained strong unity of action, their relationships with workers were radically redefined, and, for both members and non-members, novel spaces were opened up for participation and control from below through the spread of assemblies and the creation of new workplace representation structures (factory councils) (Regalia 1995). In this context, membership of the trade-union confederations ensued 'spontaneously' from the solidarity and the new collective identities brought into being by the mobilization, while traditional oppositions along party-ideological lines greatly attenuated. At organizational level, after the strong opposition raised by the parties had dashed widespread hopes of reunification among the three trade-union confederations, 1972 saw creation of the Unitary Federation of Cgil, Cisl and Uil, which for some years permitted unitary recruitment, so that a worker could join the union without having to select a confederation.

Econometric analyses (Checchi & Corneo, 2000) have indeed shown that, in Italy, the variable with which the aggregate membership trends appear to be most closely correlated is participation in strikes. After a brief time lag, the membership curve tends to follow that of strike action. In a situation of voluntary trade unionism, where closed shops were never possible, nor were strike funds ever available, and in which the unions had no active role in labour market management, this finding highlights the extent to which unionization can be based on identity and social incentives not necessarily connected with traditional party affiliation.

### **Attempts to adjusting the logic of action: trade unions between 1984 and 2001**

With the 1980s there began a new phase characterized at productive level by processes of industrial adjustment and reorganization, and emblematically inaugurated for the unions by their 'defeat' in the Fiat company dispute of 1980 (Golden, 1997).

After the modest results, and finally the failure in 1984, of the first attempts at macro-level concertation, the Unitary Federation came to an end and competition resumed among the confederations at national level. On the periphery of the system, however, there began a new period of decentralized unitary trade-union initiative – termed 'sheltered microconcertation' by Marino Regini (1995) – in which the workplace representative structures and the local trade-union organizations cooperated with management on joint management of the post-Fordist restructuring and transformation of the production system (second half of the 1980s). During the subsequent period of economic crisis and the accelerating process of European integration and construction of the EMU, in a domestic context characterized by the 'Tangentopoli' (Bribesville) scandals and the collapse of the traditional party system, there began a new phase of re-centralized trade-union action and social pacts whereby the trade unions successfully contributed with the government and employers to defining incomes policies and reforms of the pensions system and the labour market, and in which the bipolar structure of collective bargaining was formalized for the first time (1990s) (Regini & Regalia, 1997).

In regard to relationships with workers, whilst until the end of the 1970s unionization had developed ‘spontaneously’, in this new phase the trend went into reverse, and the trade unions, albeit with a certain delay, began to actively re-think their practices and strategies of representation. It is these new developments that are now examined.

### *Membership trends*

1980 represented, as said, a second turning point in union membership. And it did so from two points of view.

**Table 3: Net and total union membership (000s) and union density (%), 1980-2005**

Year	Net union membership*	Union density	Total union membership			
			Cgil	Cisl	Uil	Total
1980	7.189,0	49,6	4.599,1	3.059,8	1.346,9	9.005,8
1981	6.961,8	48,0	4.595,0	2.988,8	1.357,3	8.941,1
1982	6.756,8	46,7	4.576,0	2.976,9	1.358,0	8.910,9
1983	6.536,0	45,5	4.556,1	2.953,4	1.351,5	8.861,0
1984	6.458,1	45,3	4.546,3	3.097,2	1.344,5	8.988,0
1985	6.125,5	42,5	4.592,0	2.953,1	1.306,3	8.851,4
1986	5.838,5	40,4	4.647,0	2.975,5	1.305,7	8.928,2
1987	5.789,4	40,0	4.743,0	3.080,0	1.343,7	9.166,7
1988	5.851,1	39,8	4.867,4	3.288,3	1.398,0	9.553,7
1989	5.815,4	39,4	5.026,9	3.379,0	1.439,2	9.845,1
1990	5.872,4	38,8	5.150,4	3.508,4	1.485,8	10.144,6
1991	5.913,3	38,7	5.221,8	3.657,1	1.524,1	10.403,0
1992	5.906,1	38,9	5.231,3	3.796,2	1.571,8	10.599,3
1993	5.661,0	39,2	5.236,6	3.769,2	1.588,4	10.594,2
1994	5.489,5	38,7	5.247,2	3.752,4	1.594,1	10.593,7
1995	5.341,2	38,1	5.235,4	3.772,9	1.579,1	10.587,4
1996	5.266,4	37,4	5.209,3	3.837,1	1.593,6	10.640,0
1997	5.142,3	36,2	5.215,3	3.856,3	1.588,3	10.659,9
1998	5.123,0	35,7	5.249,0	3.909,8	1.603,9	10.762,7
1999	5.177,1	35,4	5.287,0	4.000,5	1.621,8	10.909,3
2000	5.194,5	34,8	5.354,5	4.084,0	1.628,6	11.067,1
2001	5.232,7	34,2	5.402,4	4.117,5	1.628,7	11.148,6
2002	5.281,8	33,8	5.461,2	4.153,1	1.651,7	11.266,1
2003	5.324,8	33,7	5.515,5	4.183,8	1.697,2	11.396,5
2004	5.405,4	34,1	5.587,3	4.260,9	1.740,9	11.589,2
2005	5.468,1	33,6	5.617,8	4.287,6	1.756,3	11.661,7
2006	5.539,7	33,2	5.650,9	4.347,0	1.766,5	11.764,4
2007	5.664,7	33,5	5.697,8	4.427,0	1.810,9	11.935,7
2008	5.749,7	33,4	5.734,9	4.507,3	1.811,6	12.053,8
2009	5.908,1	34,7	5.746,2	4.531,1	1.862,5	12.139,8
2010	5.920,9	35,1	5.750,0	4.542,4	1.872,2	12.164,5

\* Net union membership = total membership minus union members outside the active and employed labour force (i.e. retired, unemployed and self-employed members).  
Source: ICTWSS database (Visser, 2011).

Firstly, enrolments with Cgil, Cisl and Uil among active workers again began to decline (see Table 3). Between 1980 and 2010, the loss amounted to an 18 per cent decrease. In the same period the unionization rate fell by 15 percentage points, from about 50 to 35 per cent. The decline was not uniform, however, being much more accentuated between 1980 and 1990. Over the next ten years, the decline relented. Thereafter, memberships – as well as unionization rate – tended to stabilize, and there were even modest increases.

Secondly, matters were however different if we consider the aggregate data on memberships: that is, those which include pensioners and, to a much lesser extent, unemployed and other non-dependent workers as well. In this case, enrolments continued to grow steadily, as discussed below.

The decrease, stabilization, and then slight increase in memberships among active workers after 1980 resulted from various processes. The Cgil lost the most members, with an overall decline of 28 per cent between 1980 and 2005. The fall was especially marked in the 1980s and then less severe in the 1990s, while there was a 7 per cent revival thereafter. The overall loss by Cisl was a 20 per cent decrease, somewhat more marked in the 1980s, with a 12 per cent revival between 2000 and 2005. The smallest confederation, Uil, achieved the best performance, in that its membership remained substantially unchanged throughout the period considered.

As a consequence of these differing trends, there was an erosion in the dominant position of the Cgil (whose weight in the total diminished from 47 per cent in 1980 to 43.5 per cent in 2005); substantial stability between 1980 and 2000 in the Cisl's position (settling at around 35 per cent) and a slight improvement thereafter (36 per cent in 2005); and a progressive increase in the Uil's share (from 17 per cent in 1980 to 20.5 per cent in 2005).

Corresponding to this closer balance among the confederations was increasing uniformity in the sectoral distribution of their members. Between 1981 and 2004 all three organizations greatly increased their presence in the services sector, while the percentages of their members in industry and agriculture diminished. The change was particularly marked in the case of the Cgil, although it was still the union with the largest membership in industry. By 2004, the proportion of Cgil's members working in private services had exceeded 25 per cent, reaching the Cisl level; while in 2002, an event unprecedented in the history of the Cgil, the public sector union became the country's largest union for active workers in terms of membership, overtaking the glorious metalworkers' union.

The trends illustrated by Table 4, which shows unionization rates by sector, also aid understanding of change dynamics at aggregate level. It is the marked decline of members in the highly unionized branches of industry (a decline largely linked to drastic job losses in the large industrial companies during the 1980s and 1990s) not sufficiently off-set by growth in services, particularly private ones, that explains the differing dynamics of the decrease in unionization. Vice versa, it has been the shift of trade union presence to the services sector that signals a reversal of tendency, or at least a halt in the decline in recent years. However, if one considers that, according to the 2003 national accounting data, 4 per cent of dependent employees worked in agricul-

ture, 20 per cent in industry, and 76 per cent in services (Vaona, 2006), it is evident that trade union followings continue to be quantitatively imbalanced towards the traditional sectors.

**Table 4: Union density by sector, 1981, 1990, 1997**

	1981	1990	1997
Agriculture	100.0	84.5	86.7
Industry	48.8	41.7	40.4
Marketable services	27.1	24.1	20.3
Non-marketable services	51.4	48.2	44.8
Total wage earners	46.6	39.3	35.8

Source: Baccaro et al. (2003)

### *The case of the pensioners*

As said, the unionization of pensioners has instead been in constant expansion, and apparently without particular organizational investments. This growth has not only off-set the loss of members among active workers, but it has also considerably increased overall memberships (see Table 3): which means that enrolments with the pensioners' unions have gradually approached, and then slightly exceeded, those with the unions for active workers.

Various factors account for this distinctively Italian feature. One is that, in Italy, the trade-union organization of pensioners does not take place within the unions to which they belonged during their working lives (as generally elsewhere), but within dedicated organizations representing all pensioners regardless of provenance. These are organizations affiliated to the confederations, but with distinct organizational features: union dues are lower; the number of members, which is obviously not included in calculation of unionization and representativeness rates, has less weight in determining equilibriums internally to the confederations. A second and fundamental factor is the institutional involvement of the union benefit advice centres (the *patronati*) in the administration of pensions and other welfare programs. In a situation where the public offices are quite inefficient, these advice centres are of great importance for workers when they retire. One may say that this is a kind of equivalent of the Ghent system mechanism for the unionization of active members in the Nordic countries (Ebbinghaus et al., 2011). Also to be mentioned is the autonomous capacity of these unions to organize cultural, recreational and voluntary activities which are greatly appreciated by retired workers.

The expansion of pensioner unionism has had two contradictory consequences for the confederations. On the one hand, this growth made less evident and worrying the progressive decrease in membership by active workers and was an autonomous source of funding for the unions on a solidaristic basis. On the other hand, the increased importance of this category influenced the general strategies of the confederations by keeping their attention focused on pensions and welfare, and making reform more complex.

### ***Readjustments in representation strategies***

The difficulties encountered by the confederal unions in building adequate representation among active workers in sectors undergoing the greatest expansion have been due not only to changes in the productive structure, but also to changes – partly but not completely connected with the former – in supply on the labour market.

The most significant phenomena in this regard have been an extraordinary increase first in the female labour supply, and second in young workers much better educated than previous generations, and often employed in the services sectors: both of which are categories comprising workers on the margins of the representation strategies traditionally pursued by the unions. Since the 1990s there has also been unprecedented growth in the presence of non-EU immigrant workers, and a sizeable increase in workers on temporary and flexible contracts.

The need to find more suitable ways to represent women and young people figured in union debate after the congresses of 1981. For example, Cgil started introducing councils and committees which at various levels, sometimes in linkage with feminist and other social movements, sought to renew relations with female and young workers. Experimentation also began with quota systems for the representation of women on union steering committees (Beccalli & Meardi, 2002). The 1991 Cgil Statute stipulated that at least 40 percent of representatives must be female. The election in 2010 of Susanna Camusso as the first ever female general secretary of the Cgil – and the first in the history of the three Italian confederations – is the clearest latest outcome of the new trend.

Since the 1990s the principal concerns of the unions have been the new problems raised by the growing numbers of immigrant workers and of workers on non-standard contracts.

The increase in immigration is unprecedented in the history of a country which long used to be one of emigration, and which never enacted clear legislation to regulate inflows or policies for the integration of immigrants. In this under-regulated context, the unions initially furnished assistance and social protection, seeking to make up for institutional shortcomings. Consequently, the unions' local structures opened offices providing immigrants with information on access to the labour market or to welfare programs, assisting them with bureaucratic procedures, or helping them to find accommodation. In so doing, the unions were able to draw on the long experience in dealing with the local institutions developed by their service centres (benefit advice bureaus, legal offices, tax assistance centres, trade-union and vocational training centres, tenants' associations, recreational services) established at their horizontal local branches. More recently, there has emerged a greater endeavour to organize immigrants on more properly union terrain (Marino, 2012). This has come about in various ways: by putting issues of concern to immigrants on the bargaining agendas of the sectoral unions; by including demands regarding immigrant employment and social integration in negotiations for local development (as in the territorial pact of Eastern Veneto) (Bertolotti & Giaccone, 2006); and by assisting immigrants in individual labour disputes. As a result, trade-union enrolments by immigrant workers have been increasing. In the early 2000s, an estimated 45 per cent of regular immigrant workers were

members of the confederal unions, a figure above the average for native workers. To be noted, moreover, is the increasing number of immigrants working as trade-union officials.

While attempts by the unions to improve their organization of women, immigrants and, to a lesser extent, better-educated young people have led mainly to the creation of locally-based offices or specialized work groups given the task of renewing representation strategies, in the case of workers with atypical or non-standard contracts, the organizational solution has been to create new specialized unions affiliated to the confederations (Cella, 2012). The process has come about by degrees. In the mid-1990s self-help associations of various kinds were set up by groups of freelancers, especially in Milan. Drawing on these experiences, in 1997 a union representing atypical workers (NIdiL) affiliated to Cgil was set up (Ballarino, 2006). Similar organizations were then created by Cisl (Alai, now Felsa) and Uil (Cpo, now UILtemp). All these are unions of an entirely new kind, given that the basis of their representation is not common membership of a sector, trade or occupation but a specific form of employment contract. In other words, these are crosswise unions whose explicit objective is to increase the protection afforded to self-employed and temporary workers, and whose development has been made possible by the horizontal organizational logic of Italian trade unionism. Only a small minority of the potential members are affiliated to these new unions. However, this has not prevented the development of remarkable bargaining activity at both the national and local levels (D'Andrea et al, 2004; Ballarino, 2006; Pedersini, 2005), particularly for agency workers, in favour of whom specific forms of welfare provision and employment protection have been introduced. A still unresolved problem, though, is the relationship between representation of typical and atypical workers, which, as in the case of immigrant workers, has raised new dilemmas for union action (Regalia, 2006).

### ***Organizational changes***

Organizational changes have also been promoted at more general level, and with regard to the more traditional areas of representation.

On the one hand, as in other countries (Streeck & Visser, 1997; Ebbinghaus 2004), the period considered has seen a slow but steady tendency to rationalize and simplify the organizational structure by merging categories together. At present, taking also the new unions for atypical workers into account, Cgil comprises 12 sectoral unions for active workers, Cisl has 18, and Uil 17. They were respectively 20, 31 and 28 in 1980 (Visser, 2011).

More important, however, are the changes and adjustments in the unions' relationships with their members. A first new development is the introduction of the secret ballot referendum in order to consult the rank and file, whether union members or otherwise. This method was first used in 1986 on the occasion of renewal of the metalworkers' industry-wide collective agreement, in a period of steep decline in union memberships, and in which cleavages once again opened up among the confederal unions, as signalled by the break-up of the unitary Cgil-Cisl-Uil Federation in 1984. It thereafter became relatively common practice in the case of important agreement renewals, or on which there were major disagreements among the unions. On a larger

scale, the referendum method was sometimes used during the 1990s – as well as again in 2007 – on the occasion of social pacts reached between the government and the social partners on critical social policy decisions (Regini, 1997; Baccaro et al, 2003). However, this method never became routine practice, both because of its high organizational costs and because (as pointed out by Cisl in particular) its excessive use might de-legitimize the decision-making capacity of the union executives.

A second aspect to be emphasized concerns the issue of in-company representation. In the early 1980s, a broad network of the works councils introduced during the period of collective mobilization continued to operate in the private sector of the economy. These were unitary representative bodies elected by all workers and which also represented the trade-unions in that the latter recognized them as their grass-root organizations. However, in keeping with the voluntaristic nature of Italian industrial relations, they were characterized by the marked informality of their functioning. This had for long facilitated their capacity to adapt to the circumstances, so that with time they had often become means to give voice to, and liaise collectively between, personnel and management in firms seeking flexible alternatives to rigid work organization methods. The persistence of these bodies helps explain why cleavages among the unions were rarely matched by a breakdown of unity in workplaces (Regalia 1995). With time, however, the drawbacks to the marked informality of this form of representation became evident – in particular their uneven development largely determined by power relationships and the unpredictability of their behaviour. Finally, in 1993 a new single form of workplace representation to cover the overall economy was introduced with the July social pact on incomes policy and the reorganization of the collective bargaining system.

The new structure was named *Rappresentanza sindacale unitaria* (Rsu –Unitary union representation) to stress the unions' formal commitment to endowing themselves with a unitary body in workplaces. In reality, the representational model was not very different from that of the 'old' councils. But unlike the latter, the constitution of the Rsu was expressly envisaged by a national-level agreement, the first to regulate such matters after thirty years of informal arrangements, signed in December 1993 between the employers' associations and the union confederations. Not approved instead was the Ministry of Labour's proposal that the Rsu should be defined by legislation (as in fact subsequently happened in 1997, but only for the public sector). This is one reason for the enduring systemic weakness, demonstrated by figures on the still unsatisfactory diffusion of Rsu (CESOS, 2000), and recently by specific cases of opting-out by employers (as in the case of Fiat cited below). In 1994 and 1995, however, under the impetus of general satisfaction with the agreement, the workplace representative bodies were renewed to an extent unknown since the early 1980s; and thus relationships with workers were revived as well. The outcome was striking: according to official data, more than 70 per cent of those entitled to do so turned out to vote; and wherever elections were held, confederal unionism obtained large majorities of votes and of representatives (95 per cent and 96 per cent respectively) (Carrieri, 1995). This also led to a broad turnover of workplace representatives that was interpreted as a strong signal of democratic renewal.

A further attempt to strengthen the unions' presence in workplaces was the project to introduce territorial-based delegates in order to give representation to workers in small artisanal firms, which represent an extremely important component of the Italian economy. A nationwide agreement on the matter had been reached between the trade unions and the artisanal associations at the end of the 1980s. Although data on the implementation of the system are not available, it seems that it has achieved only limited success; and more specifically that, to date, it has been used in the most unionized areas of the country, above all to designate territorial delegates tasked with monitoring workplace health and safety issues. It is likely, moreover, that in the case of small firms it is difficult to find workers willing to accept representation duties, especially if they are on uncertain territorial bases, i.e. extending beyond their own firms. These are tasks that might be more properly undertaken by external officials in linkage with the local branches of the trade unions. Recently – and this brings us to events of the past few years – new initiatives which may prove more successful are those to organize the employees of small service firms agglomerated on specific sites, as in the case of factory outlet centres (Gasparri 2011).

### **The new difficulties at the political level and the impact of the economic crisis**

The international financial and economic crisis which began in 2007 and has affected Italy mainly since the end of 2008, erupted in a context initially characterized, from the economic point of view, by an economy already in crisis, and from the industrial relations' point of view, by the persistence, indeed the exacerbation, of unresolved problems, but also by prospects of renewal in the near future.

#### ***Trade unions and industrial relations before the financial crisis***

For the unions in the early 2000s, the unsolved problems concerned not so much relationships with workers (in favour of whom attempts had been made to renew representation strategies for some time, and among whom, as said, trade-union enrolments had slightly increased), as relationships with the government in a context characterized in general by a progressive loss of competitiveness by the manufacturing sector and the economy whose gravity was for long denied by the political leaders (De Novellis & Vaciago, 2011).

In 2001 the elections were won by a centre-right coalition which governed the country, with a brief interlude in 2006-8, until 2011, and which immediately announced its intention to switch from the concertation of economic and social policies with the unions, which had largely characterized the 1990s, to a less binding 'social dialogue' with 'those who are available'. Simultaneously, a change took place at the top of the largest employers' association (Confindustria) with the election as president of a small businessman with little interest in smooth relations with the unions. In this new climate, proposals for reform (in regard to dismissals, the labour market, and thereafter revision of the bargaining structure and reorganization of public-sector employment) had the effect of fostering a recurrent polarization at national level between the Cgil, which tended to oppose the government, and the Cisl and the Uil, which sought dialogue with it.



Within this context, the early 2000s were marked by a resumption of industrial conflict driven both by strictly economic factors – in particular, the greater difficulty compared with the previous period of renewing collective agreements without resorting to strike action – and by general strikes and demonstrations, sometimes organized by the Cgil alone (as in 2002), against the government's economic and social policies.

In some cases, separate agreements were reached. However, this did not prevent substantially unitary trade-union action from continuing in workplaces and the development of experimental schemes, also at local level, for specific groups of workers, as said. Nor did it prevent the reaching of innovative collective agreements in many sectors – such as telecommunications, banking and chemicals – and in the broad branch of crafts businesses. Indeed, it was in this period that original forms of employment security for the agency workers were negotiated unitarily; and there spread the new phenomenon of the social negotiation of local welfare between the pensioners' trade unions, often flanked by the local-level structures of the confederations, and the local administrations (Colombo & Regalia 2011).

Since 2004 in particular, there have been increasing signs of another possible reversal of tendency. Among the most significant are the following: the election of a new president of Confindustria, who declared his intention to re-launch dialogue with the unions and give renewed impetus to concertation; the government's resumption of the practice of consulting the unions before drafting the budget law; the convening of a unitary national assembly of Cgil, Cisl and Uil delegates (the first for many years); the signing by the three union confederations and thirteen employers' associations of a joint document, submitted to the government, setting out proposals to revitalize the economy of the *Mezzogiorno*. In 2007, during the brief interlude of a centre-left government, a new social pact – on welfare – was reached and which, as in the 1990s, was submitted to approval by workers through referendum. Simultaneously, contacts intensified among the confederations around the two most controversial issues in the debate on industrial relations – the revision of the bargaining system as defined by the social pact of 1993 and the introduction of criteria to measure the various unions' representativeness – on which a joint position was reached in 2008.

### ***The impact of the crisis***

However, the same year was marked by the eruption of the financial and economic crisis and the re-election of a centre-right government, so that a series of contradictory tendencies re-emerged.

At the level of initiatives to deal with the crisis and rising unemployment, cohesion consolidated among the trade unions and with the employers. Initially, in 2009, the social partners were involved in definition with the government of measures to support workers hit by the crisis (mainly through the extension of forms of social shock absorbers). Thereafter, in early 2010, unions and employers began to meet to draw up a reform plan to be submitted to the government on seven critical topics: research and innovation, social emergency, simplification of public administration, the South, public spending, tax and productivity (Rinolfi, 2010). However, the agreement – reached on all the issues except the last one – did not lead to concrete results in a political context characterized by the government's increasing inadequacy in facing the

crisis. Nor did it directly influence the economic and social strategies of the Monti technocrat government installed in November 2011.

At the level of industrial relations more in general – i.e. to do with long-standing issues not necessarily or directly connected with the crisis – tensions and divisions resumed among the trade unions on certain events with a strong media impact. One was the controversial reform of the collective bargaining system in 2009 – an agreement on the rules – achieved with an interconfederal agreement strongly backed by the government but not signed by the Cgil, which regarded it as excessively detrimental to the position reached unitarily among the trade unions the year before. Contested above all was the loosely defined possibility for company-level agreements to derogate from the national one. The second event consisted of the controversial episodes that occurred in 2010-1 at the Italian Fiat plants of Pomigliano (near Naples in the South) and Mirafiori (at Turin in the North) following the imposition by the management of a radical reorganization of work as its condition not to move production abroad (Pedersini, 2011). In both cases, the proposal was not signed by the metalworkers' trade union of the Cgil, within a context of severe tensions and social conflict which dragged on for a long time and led to a profound change in the company's industrial relations practices, to Fiat's withdrawal from the national collective agreement and from the agreement on the in-company worker representation bodies (Rsu), and finally to its exit from the employers' association.

On the other hand, however, there ensued other (and much more numerous) events of entirely the opposite sign. In fact, to be considered is that, besides the media clamour that initially surrounded the split among the confederations – often described as marking the beginning of a new era characterized by the decline of the Cgil and by more cooperative and modern industrial relations – it was not at all clear what might be the consequences of a trial of strength with the largest trade union in a context still characterized by a low level of institutionalization. As a consequence, the employers' representatives soon sought to establish informal contacts with the Cgil.

Already from the autumn of 2009 onwards, soon after another important agreement was reached without the metalworkers' union affiliated to Cgil, a period of unitary agreements (at both the sector and company level) in fact began, in which ironically all parties claimed to implement the rules that each considered the proper ones. In reality, this was a case of the system's ability to adapt pragmatically to the situation.

There was also an intensification of unitary agreements and experiments at other levels, especially in order to cope with the consequences of the economic crisis. These included bipartite cross-sectoral agreements at regional/territorial level among the social partners to boost the economy, defend employment, promote forms of local welfare programmes (an example being the pact signed at Treviso in Veneto in 2011); innovative agreements at company level (even in the metalworking sector) on restructuring and/or employment stability and negotiated forms of company welfare; and finally, widespread negotiation with the local authorities on anti-crisis support measures, life-work conciliation, welfare and other social issues, in which the trade unions act not only as representatives in the labour market but also as representatives of citizens more generally. Also reinforced was the joint management of training programmes, and of social and mutualistic welfare schemes, in bilateral bodies jointly with the em-

ployers' organizations, especially for temporary agency workers and the artisanal sector.

Moreover, also in regard to the rules, a unitary interconfederal agreement on trade-union representativeness and collective bargaining was reached in June 2011. This agreement has great potential and could heal the split of 2009. It may provide the basis for a more balanced and solid reconfiguration of relations among the parties.

However, the agreement still requires further specifications before it can be implemented. The most recent development (21 November 2012) has instead been the signing – on request by the technical Monti government – of a new agreement on productivity among all the social partners except the Cgil. The agreement (widely criticised as nebulous and inadequate) foresees a downscaling of the egalitarian effects of national collective bargaining and an expansion of issues negotiated at company-level in order to better respond to the productive needs of firms (Lucifora & Origo, 2012). In the meantime, it seems that the Cgil is preparing a proposal on the same issue, but with the ambitious aim of overcoming the dualism in protection between insiders and outsiders, according to its traditional inclusive stance (Mascini, 2012).

It is therefore evident that relations among the parties continue to be controversial and unstable.

## Conclusions

From many points of view, after the period of centralization and social pacts of the 1990s, but also the more turbulent recent period of renewed conflict with the government and employers and of divisions among trade unions, the confederations seem to be stronger (or less weak) and better organized than they were towards the end of the 1980s.

The decline in union membership among active workers has apparently halted: indeed, there are signs, albeit weak, of a revival; the organizational structure of the sectoral unions has been streamlined; 'autonomous' trade unionism has declined; definition has been given (although in still unsatisfactory manner) to a system of workplace union representation which operates throughout the economy; experimental schemes have been launched and new solutions adopted for the organization of workers, such as immigrants and non-standard workers, who do not belong to the traditional core of union representation.

As regards action, the unions today operate in many ways and at many levels, and they perform numerous functions. Besides their traditional activities of collective bargaining at industry-wide and company levels, political initiatives *vis-à-vis* governments, and the provision of benefit advice and assistance to members and workers in general, we have seen that their range of action now extends into other levels and in other directions. Notable are the activities undertaken by the unions in the form of local-level agreements or pacts with employers and/or administrations on issues such as local development and the defence of employment, but also social and welfare schemes for the local population. Besides the traditional distributive and productive functions of the unions, therefore, one may now also speak of their social functions.

In effect, with the demise of the great mass parties in early 1990s, the unions are today the largest and most ubiquitous organizations in civil society. They are present with structures, both general and specific, at the central, regional and local levels, and in workplaces. They operate according to different logics and in numerous arenas, and their organizational strength and influence are greater than their memberships (nevertheless substantial) would lead one to believe.

This has been the outcome of the unions' considerable capacity for adaptation, facilitated both by their original horizontal-vertical organization and by the largely informal normative context in which they continue to operate. But it has also been the outcome of a shift to more inclusive action, whereby, with different nuances and emphases, representation is not simply understood as protection of members in the strict sense, but accommodates a further extension of the unions' range of action. Illuminating in this regard is the endeavour by the confederations to shed their traditional industrialist image by describing themselves as the union of 'citizens' (in the case of the Uil), the union 'of rights' (in the case of the Cgil) or the union 'of autonomy' (in the case of the Cisl).

In light of what has been said, not only is it misleading to attribute the weak features of a Mediterranean or southern European model to Italian trade unionism, it seems also quite inappropriate to frame discussion of the Italian case within the current debate on union 'revitalization' (Wallerstein et al., 1997; Wever, 1998; Turner et al., 2001; Frege & Kelly, 2004). The main issues are other than how trade unionism can be 'revitalized'.

Setting aside the problems and dilemmas common to all unions, the first of these issues is how to give greater stability to a system which, despite recent progress (the interconfederal agreement of June 2011), is still characterized – at least at the time of writing, in December 2012 – by the lack of a minimum of shared procedural rules. In a context of competitive pluralism, this enduring indeterminacy as regards the measurement of representativeness and the criteria for decision-making continues to favour the unions' oscillation between behaving as organizations or social movements according to convenience and to pressures applied by the rank and file.

It should also be added, however, that it is probably due to these characteristics of Italian trade unionism that social protest – as in the case of the recent demonstrations against austerity measures to cope with the economic crisis – finds less expression than elsewhere in uncontrolled and sometimes violent movements, or in sensational acts of individual protest.

A second unresolved issue, connected to the first, concerns relationships among the unions. The ideological cleavages among the three confederations, not to mention their differences with the autonomous unions, have always impeded relations among them, as well as with their rank and files. Today the original ideological distinctions, which paralleled those among the old political parties, are obsolete and largely incomprehensible especially to young people. On the other hand, the identity incentives deriving from connection with the different visions on how to change and improve society, have constituted, and to some extent still do, an important resource for development of the militancy that the unions need, and more generally for their resilience and

reproduction over time. The point in this case is finding ways to preserve the fundamental values of each organization without prejudicing cooperation among them, and with a view to their eventual reunification.

A third issue is how to set order on initiatives which are sometimes redundant and show a poor ability to learn from past experience. This is largely due to the low level of institutionalization: indeed, the scant structuring and formalization of action gives rise to wearisome repetitions and to a constant need to start again from scratch. But it also favours positive experimentation and innovation. The point is therefore how to find ways to build, with greater awareness and without excessive waste, on the wealth of past experience without prejudicing the capacity to innovate. This highlights the need to introduce assessment and monitoring into the system.

A final, and fundamental issue is how to devise strategies to represent what is by now a highly diversified labour force. The broader the range of specific interests represented (based on gender, age, type of employment relationship, provenance, job grade, or skill level), the more difficult it becomes simply to add a new protection or a new provision to those that already exist. It is instead necessary to establish priorities or to retrench, or better reconfigure, the previous set of protections. The point – we may say – is extending ‘light’ protection to cover all workers, rather than providing ‘heavy’ protection for only some of them. But moving decisively in this direction may also entail a radical reorganization of the unions’ structure and logic of action.

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