

Chapter 16

Trade unions in Italy: Pluralism and resilience

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The Italian system of industrial relations is characterized by a number of original traits, viewed in a comparative perspective. One such trait is the high degree of voluntarism and abstention of law – in the private sector, at least – on all the main pillars of the system: social partners' representativeness, the effects of collective agreements, minimum wages, the right to strike and employee participation. Over the post-war decades, trade unions moved from complete marginalization in the 1950s to the longest and most intense cycle of class struggles in the West, after the 1969 watershed (Crouch and Pizzorno 1977) and until the mid-1980s, when their institutional recognition finally attained the level of the most mature national systems (Bertucelli et al. 2008). Since then, union power and density have declined, but more slowly than in many other countries, stabilizing around a relatively high 35–36 per cent (see Table 16.1). The three historical union confederations established in the first post-war decade – the General Italian Confederation of Labour (CGIL, *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*), the Italian Confederation of the Workers' Trade Unions (CISL, *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati dei Lavoratori*) and the Italian Union of Labour (UIL, *Unione Italiana del Lavoro*) – remain the most representative labour organizations, dealing with a dozen peak employer associations. Their associative power resources are quite solid, with almost 12 million members, including pensioners, and so are their organizational structures and finances. CGIL, CISL and UIL remain committed to European Union (EU) integration, and their members offer some limited support to right-wing nationalists and populists, but less than in the past (Leonardi and Carrieri 2020). They often cooperate with other social movement organizations, especially in support of the social and economic integration of

immigrants and refugees and for a fair transition to a green and decarbonized economy (Rugiero 2019).

The two-tier collective bargaining structure – with the national industry level prevailing over company bargaining – can still be considered centrally organized (Leonardi and Pedersini 2018) (see Table 16.1). Bargaining coverage is high and very stable at over 80 per cent, as is the ratio between minimum and median wages, which is one of the highest among the most industrialized countries (Garnero 2017). Although their political and societal power appears to be weakening, the unions are very active. They constantly press the government for social concertation, and promote campaigns, actions and mass rallies as they lobby for tax, welfare and labour law reforms. Important and sometimes successful battles focus on advocacy for over-exploited migrant workers, for instance in agriculture, aimed at obtaining more severe norms and penalties for unscrupulous employers, or on the recognition of employee status, with all the attendant rights, for platform workers in food delivery and logistics. They also support the introduction of conditional constraints on delocalization.

Table 16.1 Principal characteristics of trade unionism in Italy

	1980s	2000	2019
Total trade union membership (active members)	6,349,000	5,262,000	5,865,000
Women as a share of total membership	35.0 %	38.3 %	45.0 %
Gross union density	62.8 %	72.7 %	61.1 %
Net union density	43.8 %	34.8 %	32.5 %
Number of confederations	5*	7*	8**
Number of affiliated unions (federations)	82	52	47
Number of independent unions (confederations)	2	4	5
Collective bargaining coverage	80 %	80 %	80 %
Principal level of collective bargaining	Industry		
Days not worked because of industrial action per 1,000 workers	1,135	59	n.a.

Note: * Visser (2019); ** number of confederations regarded as representative in the public administration (ARAN 2019).

Source: Appendix A1.

The challenges of representing and organizing the new world of work, which often involves young people and precarious workers, is shown by the slow downward trend in membership, coupled with the increase in members' average age, and the differences in unionization by type of contract and level of education (Carrieri and Feltrin 2016; Leonardi 2018). Nowadays, a growing number of small workplaces, especially in private services, are short of representation, while the bogus self-employed are excluded from full legal and social protections. At the same time, the collective bargaining system, though still strong, is threatened by an unprecedented proliferation of industry-wide agreements signed by new actors of uncertain or nil representativeness (CNEL 2019). Industrial conflict is limited mainly to specific industries, in which minor unions compete intensively to gain visibility and public recognition. Unions' reputation in society appears, at least according to media surveys and polls, to have become tarnished. The old and once strong linkages with political parties have vanished almost completely, with broad sectors of the working class left without political representation. The intensive period of tripartite social pacts in the 1990s faded into weaker social dialogue, comprising mainly bilateral consultations, if not fully replaced by government unilateralism. Timid but important signs of a reversing trend emerged in 2020, however, when unions played a key role in managing the social and economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, both in tripartite concertation and in collective bargaining at all levels (CNEL 2021). Their involvement in the definition of the National Recovery Plan was disappointing, however, with trade unions now demanding to be taken much more seriously in consideration during the implementation phases.

Historical background and principal features of the industrial relations system

Although the birth of the first confederation dates back to 1906, it is in the years immediately following the end of the fascist dictatorship and of the Second World War that the national union landscape was defined (Turone 1988). In June 1944, with half of Italy still occupied by the Nazis, three union leaders, acting on behalf of socialists, communists and Christian Democrats, signed the 'Pact of Rome'. This was the re-foundation act of the new CGIL, internally united and pluralist, with the communist Giuseppe Di Vittorio as General Secretary. In the climate of the mounting Cold War, that unity did not last too long. A harsh dispute

about the introduction of political strikes in the new confederation statute led the Catholic component to leave when, in 1948, a wave of strikes racked the country in response to a failed attack on the life of Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti. This saw the birth of the second confederation, the CISL. Two years later, the Social Democrats – who in 1947 had split from the Socialist Party (PSI) to protest against the electoral alliance with the Communists – left the CGIL, which remained attached to the socialist-communist tradition only. In this way, the Social Democrats, with the supporters of the small Republican party, founded the third confederation, the UIL. This threefold articulation is still the core of the Italian union landscape, although it does not include it all, as several minor craft and independent unions have emerged over recent decades.

In terms of values and identity, CGIL, CISL and UIL have long reflected the main political divides of the post-war decades, but they have also expressed specific union ideologies and cultures (Accornero 1992; Cella 2008). CGIL has long represented a model of unionism rooted in the principles of Marxist classism, aimed at a general representation of labour, rejecting the former notion of acting as a ‘transmission belt’ with a view to conferring on the union the full dignity of a ‘political subject’, and refusing corporatist particularism, including when it assumes radical features (Pepe et al. 2003). These features translated into an inclusive idea of union democracy, which is not confined to ‘members first’, and includes centralization of collective bargaining and strike organization, and the search for structural reforms through political exchange under pro-labour governments. The CISL embodies a pluralist idea of union action, borrowed from Anglo-Saxon models, based on defence of collective autonomy from state interference, an historical vocation for decentralized bargaining, employees’ participation and, today, for occupational welfare, a concept of union democracy as based on the primacy of members’ voices (Baglioni 2011). Compared with the former two, the UIL originally had a less pronounced ideological stance (Turone 1990). In the post-1969 years, when CGIL and CISL rejected the German code-termination model, which was stigmatized as a form of subaltern participation, the UIL alone promoted its emulation. In the 1990s, it forged an original idea of a ‘citizen’s unionism’ to represent people in the plurality of their social needs, beyond mere occupational status.

Despite divisions and even conflicts, which were fairly violent until the mid-1960s, cooperation and unity of action between the three confederations have usually prevailed, culminating in a Federative Pact between CGIL, CISL and UIL, which remained in place between 1972

and 1984. Since then, relations have been fluctuating and today are fairly cooperative again. A proposed merger to form a single confederation once the old political divides have been overcome, now and then returns to the agenda. The main hurdle seems to be the predictable impact of the possible merger on the three organizational structures.

As regards industrial relations, collective bargaining has undergone a series of different phases over recent decades. The initial strong centralization at the cross-industry level of the first two post-war decades was followed by a shift towards the primacy of the industry-wide agreement, with the first openings to the firm level in the early 1960s. With the 'hot autumn' of 1969, the hierarchy was reversed, with the achievements of decentralized bargaining being transposed to the industrial level, without any respect for top-down coordination or peace clauses. In the 1980s, the bargaining system moved in the opposite direction, with the attempted centralization of incomes policy negotiations to contain inflation, on one hand, and the decentralized micro-concentration of reorganization processes, on the other (Regini 1991). In the early 1990s, the current two-tier coordinated bargaining system was institutionalized. The watershed was the tripartite agreement of July 1993, still considered as a sort of 'Basic Agreement' of Italian industrial relations. Slightly amended over the years, it set out some fundamental pillars: the income policy framework for horizontal coordination (which remained in place until 2009), the two-tier vertically coordinated collective bargaining structure, and renewed workplace representation structures, as a key component of that vertical coordination.

Italy belongs to the small group of Member States of the EU in which there is no legal minimum wage. Pay floors are set by collective agreements at the national and industry level, according to job classification scales. Moreover, there is no administrative extension mechanism, although established jurisprudence fills this twofold gap, which only Denmark and Sweden share with Italy in the EU. Article 36 of Italy's Constitution lays down that remuneration must always be 'proportionate' to the work performed and, in any case, 'sufficient' to guarantee workers and their families a dignified existence. Judges and social security institutions have established the practice that industry-wide agreements signed by comparatively the most representative social partners satisfy such constitutional requirements. If a worker complains that they are unfairly paid, the yardstick is the remuneration set in the corresponding industrial agreement. Despite this indirect enforcement mechanism, the number of workplaces failing to apply collectively agreed wages and norms is growing, and so is the number of working poor, probably because of the lack of workers'

representatives, job casualization and adequate public inspections. In some industries and territories, levels of avoidance of minimum wage rates can reach 20 and even 30 per cent, with an average of just over 20 per cent (Garnero 2017).

Finally, two other pillars of a mature industrial relations system are of importance: workers' participation and the right to strike. Both are recognized and framed by the Constitution (Articles 46 and 40, respectively), while evoking legal regulation of both. Because of the long reciprocal veto of the social partners, the envisaged possibility to introduce legislation in these domains has remained largely ignored and has been left, once again, to self-regulation through collective agreements. Under the influence of EU provisions, information and consultation rights eventually received legal backing, while no board-level employee representation exists, including in state-owned companies. Turning to the right to strike, it is considered a fundamental individual worker's right to be exercised collectively and lawful for all reasons, including political ones. Peace clauses are set in cross-industry protocols on collective bargaining and usually further defined by industry-wide agreements, while strict mandatory rules on the exercise of the right to strike are established by law for 'essential public services'.

Structure of trade unions and union democracy

Italian unions are fairly complex organizations, combining both the confederal horizontal/territorial criterion and the vertical/industrial one. In the three major confederations, union aggregation follows similar lines. The three main territorial levels are the local/provincial, the regional and the national, while since the 1990s traditional industrial demarcations have been affected by various processes, which led to reorganization and a number of mergers. The underlying driving forces include the liberalization and privatization of public utilities, the reconfiguration of the media and publishing industries following the digital revolution, labour-market deregulation and spreading non-standard employment. Other, subsequent mergers were intended to streamline representation and negotiations in broad industries, such as chemicals, energy, textiles and fashion, or simply to make better use of organizational resources. Table 16.2 shows the timeline of the establishment of the current union federations affiliated to the three major confederations and the date of subsequent mergers.

Table 16.2 Union federations in 2021: date of establishment and mergers

Union	Confederation	Sectors	Established	Number of previous organizations
Fiom	CGIL	Metalworking	1901	–
SPI	CGIL	Pensioners	1946	–
Fillea	CGIL	Construction, wood, cement, extraction	1948	–
Flai	CISL	Electricity	1949	–
Fim	CISL	Metalworking	1950	2
Uilm	UIL	Metalworking	1950	–
Uilposte	UIL	Postal services	1950	–
Uiltucs	UIL	Commerce, hotels, services	1950	–
Fnp	CISL	Pensioners	1952	–
Filca	CISL	Construction, wood, cement, extraction	1955	3
Feneal	UIL	Construction, wood, cement, extraction	1958	2
Filcams	CGIL	Commerce, hotels, services	1960	2
Fir (FSUR)	CISL	Research	1972	–
Cisl Università (FSUR)	CISL	University	1972	–
Fisascat (Fist)	CISL	Commerce, hotels, catering, services	1973	4
Filt	CGIL	Transport	1980	6
FP	CGIL	Public administration	1980	–
Cisl Medici	CISL	Medical doctors	1982	–
Fisac	CGIL	Banking and insurance	1983	2
Fit	CISL	Transport	1985	6
Flai	CGIL	Agriculture and food industry	1988	2
Slp	CISL	Postal services	1993	–
Uila	UIL	Agriculture and food industry	1994	2
SLC	CGIL	Communication	1996	2
Fai	CISL	Agriculture and food industry	1997	2
FP	CISL	Public administration	1997	4

(Continued)

Table 16.2 Continued

Union	Confederation	Sectors	Established	Number of previous organizations
Cisl Scuola (FSUR)	CISL	Primary and secondary education and vocational training	1997	2
Nidil	CGIL	Atypical workers	1998	–
Uilca	UIL	Banking and insurance	1998	3
Femca	CISL	Chemicals, textiles, clothes and fashion, energy, public utilities,	2001	2
Fic	CGIL	Education and research	2004	2
Fistel (Cisl Reti)	CISL	Media, entertainment, communication	2005	2
Filtem	CGIL	Chemicals, textiles, clothes and fashion, energy, public utilities,	2006	3
Felsea (Fist)	CISL	Atypical workers	2009	2
Fns	CISL	Firefighters, prison guards, forestry guards	2009	3
Uiltec	UIL	Chemicals, textiles, clothes and fashion, energy, public utilities	2013	2
Uilcom	UIL	Media, entertainment, communication	2013	–
First	CISL	Banking and insurance	2015	2

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Since 1946, one of the peculiar features of Italian unionism has been the presence of a separate union federation for retired workers, with significant weight within the confederations. Each confederation today has a separate pensioners' union, which invariably constitutes the largest of the affiliated organizations. The Italian Pensioners' Union (SPI, *Sindacato Pensionati Italiani*) alone, affiliated to CGIL, has some 2.5 million members. Together, the three confederal pensioners' unions amount to 42 per cent of total union membership (see Table 16.3). Such a wide membership among pensioners is linked to the various services that unions provide, starting with administrative assistance at the time of retirement

and then complemented with help in submitting annual tax declarations and relations with the public administration, for instance to obtain access to welfare benefits and care services. Moreover, pensioners' unions are active at local level in negotiating welfare benefits and social assistance schemes with municipalities and organizing different social and cultural initiatives. In order to maintain the predominance of active members within confederation governance, the weight of pensioners' federations in decision-making bodies, starting from the congress, is not proportionate to the total number of their affiliates.

A second peculiarity is the presence of specific non-standard workers' unions. These unions were established in the second half of the 1990s, when non-standard employment received a boost from labour-market reforms. They currently represent temporary agency workers and, notably, 'semi-autonomous' freelance workers, who are formally regarded as self-employed, although they are often economically and organizationally dependent. Fixed-term workers are not covered by these organizations, but by industrial unions. Temporary agency workers have their own national collective agreement, whereas freelancers benefit from service activities, legal advocacy and campaigns, as in the case of demands for the recognition of legal subordination and employee status. Last in order of time, they have contributed to the mobilization of food delivery workers, alongside the sectoral transport and logistics federations and, notably, independent grassroots unions.

The national confederation level is the most important, as it performs the essential roles of political guidance and operational coordination across federations and territorial structures. Clearly, confederations do not operate in a top-down manner but gather and process inputs from industries and territories. Industry federations, in particular, enjoy significant independence, namely in the fields of organizing and recruiting, collective bargaining and internal organization. Major federations can play a fairly significant role in confederations, through their voice in congresses and their presence in confederal bodies.

In the major confederations, the territorial structures, at both local and national levels, serve the dual purpose of promoting internal horizontal coordination across industrial federations and negotiating with the corresponding peak employer organizations, as well as engaging in dialogue with the government authorities. Conversely, the industrial federations at national level are responsible for negotiating industry-wide collective agreements, while at local level they are concerned mainly with

vertical coordination of the implementation and administration of agreements by assisting workplace union structures, including in decentralized negotiations.

The territorial and industrial organizational levels do not complete the articulation of Italian unions. The company level complements the reach of industrial organizations, with an essential link with workers and workplaces. Furthermore, besides affiliated union federations, the major confederations include other types of affiliates and associations or subsidiary organizations, which cater to specific interests or perform special activities. Among the affiliates, as mentioned above, the two non-industrial federations characteristic of Italy's trade union scene are the federations of pensioners and the federation of 'a-typical' workers.

The principles of gender balance and the inclusion of young people and immigrants in governance bodies have been adopted in the articles of association of the major union confederations and federations. Women committees are very common at all levels (national, sectoral, territorial), whereas the formal establishment of youth and immigrant committees varies between confederations and federations and sometimes reflects the importance of young and immigrant workers among the workforce. At national level, all confederations organize either a specific association or a committee to represent the interests of migrant workers, especially with a view to influencing public policies and providing services and assistance. Internally, representation quotas and targets are meant to ensure and enhance inclusiveness in decision-making and better reflect members' diversity.

Besides workers' representation, the confederations provide a broad range of services, which are increasingly taking advantage of new digital technologies and address issues related to work and employment, but also cater to other needs that people may have through their life course. Individual services include employment services and counselling, assistance in retirement and welfare benefits procedures, legal advice and assistance in individual labour disputes, and fiscal services. Pension, welfare and tax services are provided by the so-called *patronati* and Tax Assistance Centres (CAF, *Centri Assistenza Fiscale*), which can be established by unions, as well as by other types of organization and association. These are particularly important and represent a fundamental link with all workers. These services are administered according to legislation and are provided to both members and non-members, with lower fees for the former, as an incentive to join a union. They entail a close relationship between the unions and the relevant public administration,

so that they could be regarded as an Italian version of the Ghent system, which helps to preserve membership levels. Their contribution to recruiting and retaining members is probably one explanatory factor of the resilience of Italian unions' density and levels of affiliation (Frangi and Barisione 2015). Every year, the 'services system' helps to maintain membership levels and recruit hundreds of thousands of new members, who compensate for those who terminate their affiliation. Although this can be regarded as 'instrumental membership', short of ideal and value-based motivation, it seems to be a key approach to accommodating the growing individualization at work and in society, by giving the unions a semi-public role, in line with the logic of functional differentiation and social democracy.

The confederations perform other important activities through their research and training centres, their archival resources on the history of the labour movement, and their participation in a number of public bodies and institutes in an advisory capacity.

Although union confederations are peak organizations, they are not second-level organizations. Workers, pensioners and citizens, in particular matters, may directly join the confederations and exercise their membership rights in various ways. Basically, a worker may join a confederation through the union federation responsible for the industry in which they are employed. The confederations' basic organizational structures are set up in workplaces or at territorial level for pensioners, and other categories (depending on the confederation, for instance for non-standard workers and workers employed in agriculture or artisanal firms).

Italian unionism is characterized by pluralism, which extends beyond the three major union confederations. Besides – and in competition with – the three largest and historical confederations mentioned above, there are a multitude of independent or minor unions. Some are structured into umbrella confederations and represent the main independent unions in Italy, with a more or less pronounced political profile, from the traditional right-wing General Labour Union (UGL, *Unione Generale del Lavoro*) to the left-wing and grassroots unions (USB, *Unione Sindacale di Base*; COBAS, *Comitati di base*), which are now quite strong among migrant workers in the logistics sector. Independent unions also include two 'non-political' and 'autonomous' Workers' Confederations (CONFSAL and CISAL),¹ organizing and quite active in trade, tourism

¹ See full names in the list of abbreviations.

and some manufacturing branches, respectively, and considered to be representative for participation in some tripartite institutions. Others are strong industrial or professional organizations, particularly in industries such as air traffic control, banks, public administration, schools and hospitals, and they often have an occupational character.

Article 39 of the Italian Constitution envisages the registration of unions and includes the requirement that their internal organization be democratic. Public registration was never actually introduced for unions, however, because they wanted to preserve their autonomy from any state interference. But certainly unions are large and participatory democratic organizations.

The bodies of the confederations can be distinguished according to different roles: deliberative, executive, control and jurisdiction. The most important deliberative body, for all three confederations, is the confederal *Congresso*, which takes place every four years. They set out action programmes and elect and appoint all organizational positions. The run-up to each congress starts with members' assemblies in the workplaces and local structures, which discuss the congress documents as laid down in a consultation process organized by the national governing bodies in connection with industrial and territorial structures. Members' assemblies elect representatives to the higher congress levels (territorial and industrial). The congress assemblies taking place at lower organizational levels, such as territorial structures or industrial federations, also elect the relevant governing bodies, including the secretary general and the secretariat. The process always takes several months before the final general congress at national level. Each confederation has its own rules and features, but this general framework applies in all cases. By means of this complex exercise, the confederations define their programmatic lines for the next four years and the leadership that will develop and implement them.

Unionization

Data on union membership is provided by union confederations, except in the case of the public administration, for which a system for assessing representativeness was introduced in 1997. The system involves the collection and certification of data on both membership and votes cast in the elections for workplace representation structures in the public administration. These rules provided the basic reference for the representativeness criteria and assessment procedures introduced by the

inter-confederal joint text on representation of January 2014, signed by Confindustria, CGIL, CISL and UIL, and, at different times, by other employer associations and unions. These rules have yet to be implemented in full, however.

The latest membership data for the three major confederations show a total membership of 11.7 million in 2019, with some 6.5 million active workers and around 5 million retired members, or 42 per cent of total membership (Table 16.4). This section focuses on membership among active workers, although some reference to retired members is included, when relevant.

Considering the self-reported data on active workers from the three largest confederations, net union density was 32.5 per cent in 2019. In fact, total membership has been increasing over the past five years and this seems to confirm the relative resilience of Italian unions. Compared to the peaks achieved during the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, there has been an erosion of membership and density. Union density reached 50.5 per cent in 1976, in a period of widespread mobilization, and membership continued to increase in the following years, topping at almost 7.2 million workers in 1980. After that, union density and membership progressively declined until the end of the 1990s. The lowest membership was recorded in 1998, at some 5.1 million workers. After that, it rebounded, although density continued to decrease until reaching 33.1 per cent in 2006. Despite the temporary erosion that followed the economic and sovereign debt crisis in the early 2010s, both indicators started to rise again, especially thanks to an increase in membership in the private services sector, where employment creation concentrated, with growing demands for representation.

Today, total membership among active workers is almost 6.5 million, an increase of over 1 million members compared with the late 1990s, while density has remained steadily over one-third of employees in the past two decades, showing the unions' capacity to cope with the substantial increase in employment that took place in this period (3.1 million more employees since 1998). Although the drivers of this resilience are still to be thoroughly investigated, scattered evidence indicates a combination of organizing and servicing as a likely explanation. On one hand, despite the difficulties, unions seem to have gained a significant hold in some of the most difficult areas to organize: non-standard work and small enterprises. The federations organizing non-standard workers had almost 240,000 members in 2019, or 3.6 per cent of the overall membership,

which represents a considerable success (Bordogna 2021). As for small and medium-sized enterprises, the extension since the 2009 crisis to this key segment of the Italian economy of the wage guarantee fund – which requires the conclusion of a collective agreement – has enabled unions to establish closer contacts with very small firms. More generally, membership has expanded considerably in the private services sector, thereby adapting to the changing composition of overall employment. Besides active workers, membership among pensioners is another remarkable feature of Italian unionism, as mentioned above. On the other hand, the wide range of services provided by local union structures, from legal advice to tax services, has consolidated workers' and citizens' confidence in and reliance on trade unions and represents a significant source of membership expansion.

The overall weight of independent unions, in terms of active members, is very uncertain and controversial, too. It is likely to be around 1 million, as certified members in the public administration alone number some 430,000, although their incidence in the private sector is thought to be much lower. This implies that the official data on Italian membership, usually calculated for the three historical confederations only, are underestimated. If we take these 1 million further union members into account, then union density in Italy could be close to 40 per cent of all employees.

Membership composition among active workers has changed markedly in recent decades. According to ICTWSS data (2019), in 1980 agriculture still represented 16 per cent of union membership (1.1 million), while industry accounted for 47 per cent (3.4 million) and services 36 per cent (2.7 million). After two decades, in 2000, agriculture was down to 8 per cent (0.45 million), services represented more than half of all members (51 per cent, 2.65 million) and industry covered 41 per cent (2.1 million). According to the latest data available for 2019 (Table 16.3), manufacturing and construction currently account for slightly over 37 per cent of membership (2.3 million). Private services, including non-standard workers, cover 35 per cent of members and the public administration includes almost one-quarter of all members of the three major confederations (altogether 3.5 million). It should be noted, however, that the federations covering school and health services, for instance, represent workers in the private sector, too, so that the share of public services is to some extent overestimated, and the actual weight of private services is certainly higher. This is in fact a general problem, as representation

and collective bargaining do not usually follow the demarcation lines between industries set by official or formal definitions. This means that the correspondence between unions, membership and economic activities presented in Table 16.3 should be regarded as a general indication.

Certification of membership in the public sector allows further analysis. According to the latest assessment of union representativeness in the public administration for 2019–2021 (ARAN 2019), some 1,200,000 workers were union members among non-management staff, putting union density in the public sector at 50.3 per cent, well above the level in the private sector (Bordogna and Pedersini 2019). It is worth noting that representation in the public sector is very fragmented. This is because of the widespread presence in the public sector of special interest organizations, which base their representation on professional and even single administration-based identities. In this, they can often rely on their capacity to control administrative processes and on their key position and ability to disrupt service provision. Moreover, public employers are often more sensitive to workers' demands and there is no economic compatibility to preserve, although public budget constraints can become hard, for example, during periods of austerity (Bach and Bordogna 2016). The total number of registered unions in the whole public administration for non-management staff is 523 organizations. Only twenty-nine trade unions – around 6 per cent – were regarded as representative in the latest assessment, and can therefore sit at the bargaining table. Indeed, the introduction of a representativeness check does not seem to have substantially reduced the proliferation of independent unions, probably because of the role they can nevertheless play in local informal relations and negotiations. Overall, most members of the public administration are affiliated to CGIL (23.3 per cent), CISL (24.9 per cent) and UIL (16.3 per cent), reaching almost two-thirds of total membership. Independent unions, that is organizations which are not affiliated to the three major confederations, had some 430,000 members, which corresponded to around 36 per cent of the total.

Based on still unofficial data on 2020, membership does not seem to have suffered much from the pandemic. The ban on lay-offs introduced by the government from March 2020 to June 2021, and the massive use of short-time working schemes have limited the occupational impact of the crisis, at least for the time being.

Table 16.3 Union membership of major confederations by industry and affiliated federations, 2019

Industries, sectors or groups	CGIL	2019	CISL	2019	UIL	2019	Total	%
<i>Metallworking</i>	FIOM	309,127	FIM	205,320	UILM	99,605	614,052	9.5
<i>Chemicals, textiles, energy</i>	FILCTEM	187,917	FEMCA	106,411	UILTEC	117,607	426,381	6.6
			FLAEI	14,446				
<i>Construction and wood</i>	FILLEA	266,592	FILCA	228,865	FENEAL	158,511	653,968	10.1
<i>Manufacturing and construction</i>		763,636		555,042			1,694,401	26.1
<i>Agro-industry</i>	FLAI	259,643	FAI	204,532	UIILA	229,508	719,238	11.1
			UGC	25,555				
<i>Agro-industry</i>		259,643		230,087			719,238	11.1
<i>Commerce and services</i>	FILCAMS	615,197	FISASCAT*	400,319	UILTUCS	139,911	1,171,616	18.1
			Sicurezza	16,189				
<i>Transport</i>	FILT	159,904	FIT	127,801	UILTRASPORTI	131,657	419,362	6.5
<i>Communication</i>	SLC	87,892	FISTel	44,795	UILCOM	38,503	265,608	4.1
			SLP	66,294	UILPOSTE	28,124		
<i>Banking and insurance</i>	FISAC	79,209	FIRST	90,466	UILCA	45,351	215,026	
	Private services	942,202		745,864		383,546	2,071,612	31.9

Industries, sectors or groups	CGIL	2019	CISL	2019	UIL	2019	Total	%
<i>Public administration, health and education</i>	Funzione pubblica	379,397	Funzione pubblica	254,628	UILPA	55,608		
			Medici	6,924	UIL FPL	205,301		
					OCC.	532		
					UILSCUOLA	84,673	558,935	8.6
					UILRUA	9,649		
Public sector		587,119		518,443		355,763	1,461,325	22.5
<i>Temporary and non-standard</i>	NIDIL	122,993	FELSA*	43,945	UILTEMP	69,711	236,649	3.6
	Unemployed	4,678						
	Mixed	14,028	Various	286,490	Second affiliation	306,743**		
Non-standard and others		141,699		330,435		376,454	848,588	13.1
<i>Active workers</i>		2,694,299		2,379,871		1,414,251	6,488,421	100.0
<i>Pensioners</i>	SPI	2,652,272	FNP	1,699,619	UILPENSIONATI	560,361	4,912,252	42.0
	TOTAL	5,346,571		4,079,490		2,281,355	11,707,416	

Note: * FELSA and FISASCAT merged and jointly established the federation of tertiary unions (FIST) in 2014 but maintained their autonomy and independence.

** Second affiliation members: they are excluded from calculations of the number of active workers (which includes members of UILTEMP only), but added to the total membership of UIL.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on trade union confederation data.

Table 16.4 Membership by gender, nationality and age, Italy, 2019

Member characteristics		CGIL (%)	CISL (%)	UIL (%)
Gender	Men	51.4	51.4	55.0
	Women	48.6	48.6	45.0
Place of birth	Italy	89.6	85.1	91.7
	Abroad	10.4	14.9	8.3
Age	Up to 35 years	8.9	15.6	n.a.
	35–50 years	20.9	–	n.a.
	35–55 years	–	58.1	n.a.
	51–65	27.7	–	n.a.
	Over 55 years	–	26.3	n.a.
	Over 65 years	42.4	–	n.a.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from trade union confederations.

Union resources and expenditure

Confederations are large organizations with millions of members and thousands of officials. Their main financial resources are membership fees, which generally amount to 1 per cent of members' gross annual minimum collective wage rates. Revenues from membership fees are distributed between the various union levels, according to decisions taken by the top confederal statutory bodies and partly by federations, for their respective shares. For instance, within CGIL, the larger part of union fees remains at the territorial level of the union federation to which the members belong, while the rest is distributed across the various industrial and confederal levels. The various organizational levels of the union federation receive 76 per cent of membership dues, while the confederation obtains 24 per cent. The other major confederations probably follow a similar pattern, as their organizational structure is very similar.

A rough estimate of the union fees paid by active workers only would put the total amount at around 1.2 billion euros (Carrieri and Feltrin 2016), excluding retired members' fees, which are calculated at a reduced rate, and the revenues obtained through public contributions and user fees for services provided. Overall, estimates indicate total revenues for the three major confederations of around 2 billion euros. A comprehensive analysis of the resources and expenditures of the confederations is not possible, however, because union structures have separate financial reports and no consolidation is available.

If only the financial reports of the national level of confederations are considered, a partial examination comprising less than 5 per cent of the total estimate is possible. The volume of available resources at the national confederal level depends on the ways in which each confederation organizes the distribution of revenues across the various horizontal and vertical structures. Between 60 and 70 per cent of all revenues of the national confederations derive from membership fees.

Table 16.5 Distribution of membership fees: the case of CGIL

Union level	Union structure	Percentage
Federation	Territorial level	61
	Regional level	8
	National level	7
Confederation	Territorial level	20
	Regional level	4

Source: Dipartimento Politiche Organizzative. CGIL Lombardia, Struttura, sistema di finanziamento e sfide per il Sindacato in Italia.

Analysis of confederation expenditures at the national level is also heavily influenced by their internal organization, and data are not easily comparable.

Following the severe restrictions on movement and attendance of events in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, union confederations have made significant financial savings, although the massive use of short-time working schemes and social shock-absorbers have reduced workers' fees because of their lower wages.

The pension and welfare benefit services of *patronati* are provided essentially free of charge, with possible exceptions stipulated by law, and they involve a public contribution. Tax services by *CAFs* are generally provided for a fee, which is lower for union members, but they also receive a fixed sum for each tax declaration they process. These services represent a non-trivial source of revenues. According to the available estimations, the composition of overall revenues shows that membership fees represent 64 per cent of the total, tax services 17 per cent, including public compensation, the reimbursements *patronati* obtain for their public interest services total 12 per cent, while legal advice covers the remaining 7 per cent.

Collective bargaining and unions at the workplace

In Italy, collective bargaining is an essential expression of the constitutional principle of trade union freedom. The provisions concerning unions' ability to stipulate binding industry-wide agreements, under the condition of registration, in accordance with Article 39 of the Constitution, have never been implemented. The bargaining system has developed along very different lines than those envisaged by the Constitution, essentially, the free and mutual recognition of the parties, according to the principles of civil law. The *de facto* extension mechanism, guaranteed by established judicial practice of applying the constitutional principles of proportionality and adequate pay (Article 36) with reference to collectively agreed wages as the benchmark, ensures that all wage-earners tend to be covered, albeit indirectly, by a national industry-wide agreement. Figures and statistics all agree on coverage of 80 per cent (OECD 2019; Pedersini 2019) and even over 90 per cent (Birindelli 2016; CNEL-ISTAT 2016).

Regarding collective bargaining levels and coordination, the 1993 Protocol established a two-tier system, hierarchically coordinated: one national industry-wide agreement, *de facto* almost mandatory, and a decentralized and optional level, at the company or, alternatively, territorial levels. The signatory parties independently define the scope of the industrial bargaining unit, meticulously listing all the types of industries and jobs covered by the agreement. The industry-wide agreement establishes the basic rules that regulate the individual employment relationship: working time and pay in all their essential components, as well as the collective rights and duties of the signatory parties in the field of industrial relations. The industrial agreement defines the respective specialization of the two levels of bargaining; grants and specifies information and consultation rights; provides further trade union rights at workplace level above those guaranteed by law; and establishes and regulates national bilateral bodies and self-financed funds to manage occupational welfare, such as supplementary pension schemes and health care insurance.

An industry-wide agreement is normally a 'book' of around 250 articles and a dozen annexes. Its renewal takes place on a three-year basis, according to predefined procedures, which include peace clauses. The national agreement has the key function of safeguarding purchasing power, now based on the expected inflation rate, as forecasted by

the National Institute of Statistics. Minimum wages are differentiated between industries and by professional qualifications at an average ratio of 100/200 within the same agreement. The average wage rate across the many industrial minima is estimated at around 9 euros gross (Birindelli 2018), but with strong differences between high- and low-paid industries.

As of June 2021, the national register of industry-wide agreements kept by the CNEL records 985 texts, compared with only 350 in 2008. Of these, barely one-third are signed by the federations affiliated to the three major confederations. Despite this multiplication of collective agreements signed by non-affiliated unions, only a minority are applied extensively, and all are signed by the most representative federations. Some 350 industry-wide agreements covered approximately 98 per cent of all employees at the end of 2019, while 60 per cent of all registered agreements are not even mentioned in the monthly social security declarations (INPS 2020).

Faced with the boom in agreements signed by minor organizations, the social partners' representativeness is now a hotly debated issue. So-called 'pirate agreements' are a concern and there are widespread demands to prevent them from putting downward pressure on genuine collective bargaining and wage setting. Experts and political parties, such as the Five Star Movement, are pushing for the adoption of a statutory minimum wage, and bills on *salario minimo* are under discussion in Parliament. After criticism from the social partners, wage setting prerogatives should be preserved and collectively agreed wages would continue to be the benchmark. The statutory minimum wage should be viewed as a safety net to prevent pay from falling below the legal wage floor. With a view to strengthening the enforcement of collective agreements, unions are currently more open to accepting a law on representativeness that would adopt the criteria established in the cross-industry framework agreements of 2011–2014, based on the national average between overall union membership and the percentage of votes received in the union workplace elections (see Chapter 27 on Spain). The threshold for admission to the bargaining table would be 5 per cent, while, according to the majority principle, 50 per cent plus one would be required for industrial agreements to be valid and binding.

Decentralized bargaining is carried out at group or company level, or alternatively at territorial level. The coverage of decentralized bargaining is estimated at around 20 per cent of enterprises and 35 per cent of workers, concentrated in the medium-large unionized enterprises of the

centre-north (Birindelli 2016). It is worth underlining the weight and importance of territorial bargaining, which ensures second-level negotiations for industries structurally characterized by a discontinuous workforce or very small enterprises, or both (such as construction, agriculture, artisanal firms and tourism). The most important topic of decentralized bargaining is probably ‘variable pay’, but the range of subjects covered is very wide and embraces working time, restructuring, well-being at work and social benefits (CNEL 2020). The two levels – national and decentralized – are coordinated hierarchically, according to specialization and not duplication. Exit or derogation clauses are usually delimited by the national industry agreements.

To stimulate and expand decentralized bargaining, various reforms during the past decade have attempted to reduce the weight of national agreements and increase the room for manoeuvre at the firm and territorial levels. Some of these reforms were adopted autonomously by the social partners through cross-industry agreements (in 2009, 2011–2014 and 2018–2019). Others were introduced by government initiatives and laws (2011 and 2015), following the recommendations of supranational institutions, as in the case of the letter from the European Central Bank in summer 2011, or the country-specific recommendations, during the European Semester. Moreover, budget laws supported the expansion of firm-level bargaining through fiscal incentives for performance-related bonuses. These reforms have significantly promoted bargaining decentralization by introducing possibilities for exit clauses and derogations. Nevertheless, these possibilities do not seem to have had a major impact because of the main unions’ reluctance. Moreover, flexibility in workforce management is already quite broad, and SMEs and artisanal enterprises resist opening up to firm-level bargaining. For all these reasons, although weakened, the system can still be labelled a case of coordinated decentralization (Leonardi and Pedersini 2018).

At the company or workplace level, the actor entitled to negotiate and sign agreements on the workers’ and the union side is the Unitary Union Representation (RSU, *Rappresentanza Sindacale Unitaria*). It is a single-channel union structure elected by all employees, with no distinction between union members and non-members, and it is endowed with both bargaining and consultative rights. The 1970 Workers’ Statute established fifteen employees as the threshold for setting up a union enterprise structure, with the possibility of freely carrying out union activities in the workplace. The election of RSUs takes place every three years on

competing lists, presented by the unions that signed the industry agreement in force in the workplace, or otherwise with the collection of a minimum number of signatures. It has been estimated that about 80 per cent of the elected delegates belong to the industrial federations CGIL, CISL and UIL, but surveys are not very up to date. Minor unions have accumulated significant support in some industries, such as banks, schools, hospital, and transport and logistics.

The link between workplace representation and firm-level bargaining is very strong, as evidenced by the almost perfect overlap between their respective coverage rates of around 12 per cent of companies with more than ten employees (Pedersini 2019). The role and prerogatives of the workers' health and safety representative are established in detail by law. Joint committees are very common for addressing ad hoc issues, such as work organization, equal opportunities or training.

Industrial conflict

The collection of data on industrial conflicts in Italy was discontinued in 2010 and it has never resumed. This came after at least two decades of progressive reduction in strike activity, marked by a transition to 'tertiary' conflict, that is, a progressive shift of conflicts from manufacturing to services, thereby involving a 'third party' (the user), who bears most of the consequences of stoppages. This happens notably in public services, such as transport (Bordogna and Pedersini 2019). Such a transition involves a clear transformation of the nature of conflict, in terms of both indicators and of impacts. For instance, small groups of workers can provoke significant service disruptions, so that participation rates are not always relevant. Sometimes, even calling a strike and revoking it at the last minute can be as disruptive as an actual strike (this is known as the 'announcement effect'). Moreover, work stoppages do not necessarily produce losses for the employer. In some cases, they can even, paradoxically, improve the bottom line: think of subsidized public transport structurally operating at a loss. Saving on labour costs may effectively reduce the loss. Indeed, the burden of strikes is often shifted to users, who are prevented from using the service and therefore incur costs and inconvenience.

With a view to avoiding these consequences, Law No. 146/1990, later amended by Law No. 83/2000, was introduced to regulate the exercise of the right to strike in 'essential public services', which are defined in terms of activity and not ownership. They involve all services where

the exercise of the right to strike may affect other citizens' fundamental rights, as recognized and protected by the Constitution, because the latter have to be equally preserved and protected. Examples include transport, public utilities, health and tribunals. Regulation is left to the social partners in the relevant industries, which establish the rules to balance conflicting rights. These essentially consist of mandatory self-regulation protocols, which include procedures to inform people about strikes and limitations to ensure minimum levels of service provision. The Guarantee Commission on the implementation of the law on strikes in essential public services (*Commissione di garanzia dell'attuazione della legge sullo sciopero nei servizi pubblici essenziali*) oversees the whole process and sanctions possible violations.

Despite this twofold change, a general decrease in strike levels and a shift to services, conflict remains an important tool for unions, which is regularly used when disputes arise. At the industrial level, conflicts usually mark agreement renewals, often for a few hours involving large numbers of workers. Harsher conflicts can arise in local disputes on company restructuring; they involve more stoppages, with lower participation rates, but longer duration. Mass mobilization seldom takes place. When it happens it usually concerns specific policies and is directed against government initiatives. This might represent a second shift: from the employment relation to the political arena, with a view to influencing policymaking. The lack of data, however, does not allow a proper analysis.

Focusing on the data on strikes in essential public services reveals an increase in the number of both called strikes and actual stoppages. The rate of cancelled strikes remained around 30–40 per cent of called strikes in the 2000s. The number of called strikes grew almost by one-third between 2004 and 2019, while actual strikes rose by 22 per cent (2,345 and 1,462, respectively, in 2019). Such trends show that conflict is far from a thing of the past in employment relations. Indeed, quite recently, new areas of mobilization emerged, especially in industries in which unionism is relatively weak, because they concern new activities (such as platform delivery workers; see Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017, 2020) or industries in which the fragmentation of the economic activity between many operators is high and non-standard jobs and work cooperatives prevail (such as warehousing in logistics).

Besides strikes, trade unions have a broad repertoire of activities to influence the quality and content of employment relations. The

pandemic has affected the viability of some of them. There was increased attention to health and safety issues, however, with a wave of strikes in March 2020 to demand safe working conditions (De Sario et al. 2021). Similarly, in 2021, there was mobilization to support measures to protect employment and to demand extension of the ban on dismissals, which eventually ended on 30 June 2021. Union mobilization led to a union–employer joint opinion, which was endorsed by the government and included the commitment by enterprises to use all available shock-absorbers, and notably Covid-19 short-time working, before resorting to dismissals.

Hearings before the relevant parliamentary committees represent a traditional channel that social partners use to influence law-making, which has recently gained centrality because of the parallel weakening of tripartite social concertation. This is a formal and institutionalized way of voicing criticisms and bringing data and arguments to support the social partners' positions. It can be coupled with campaigns and mobilization, although it usually takes place following more technical and evidence-based approaches, which prevail in such contexts. Indeed, the social partners are not alone in these hearings, which usually involve public institutes and authorities, such as the National Institute of Statistics or the National Institute of Social Security, as well as civil society organizations and individual experts, depending on the issues at stake. This development highlights a new tendency, introducing a significant change in the relationships between interest organizations and the political arena: that is, the relative retreat of the government is bringing the parliament centre-stage and seemingly includes elements of a shift from neo-corporatism to a sort of competitive pluralism.

Political relations

The place and role of the confederations and their affiliates in the political arena can differ, and vary through time. As the confederations progressively acquired an independent and autonomous mobilization capacity in the 1960s and the central union thrust shifted from the national confederal level to the industrial and increasingly company levels, open links with political parties started to be regarded as problematic. Separation of confederations and parties became a priority and the incompatibility between union and party positions was introduced in the articles of association of the confederations at the end of the 1960s. This

formal step was introduced to mark trade union autonomy and possibly turn them into independent political actors. Clearly, the ties between unions and parties were not terminated abruptly and remained significant in the following two decades.

Another relevant, rather symbolic step in the direction of weakening relations between unions and the party system was the termination of the internal political components of CGIL (the communist and socialist factions) in the early 1990s. A crucial contribution had come from the transformation of the Communist Party (PCI) into the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), between 1989 and 1991. At the same time, the sudden overhaul of the traditional party system after the 1992 scandals, with the dissolution of the Christian Democrats (DC) and the Socialist Party (PSI) in 1994, and the further multiple reconfigurations of the political scene in Italy in the following decades have certainly pushed further the separation between unions and political parties, although a certain proximity remains with the centre-left of the political spectrum.

The progressive autonomy gained by unions vis-à-vis political parties has built into an independent political stance and role. During the 1990s, the relative political weakness of several governments confronted with dire economic situations, such as the currency and financial crisis of summer 1992, or challenging reforms, starting from the pension system and the labour market, was the catalyst of a series of social pacts in which unions gained a prominent position. Later, the second Berlusconi government, which took office in 2001, inaugurated a new unilateral stance, which significantly reduced the room for social concertation. In this new political climate, CGIL and sometimes its metalworking federation FIOM often took the lead in advancing critical positions and tried to oppose the government's initiatives. CISL and UIL, although critical, believed that it was necessary to maintain a dialogue with the government. Neither position proved particularly fruitful, although it could be maintained that the proposal for the most radical reform of the regulation of individual dismissals was stopped, as CGIL organized a mass mobilization reportedly gathering 3 million people on a Saturday in March 2002 and the three confederations called an eight-hour general strike on 16 April 2002, with extensive participation. Indeed, social concertation has progressively waned since the late 1990s, as most governments have maintained a mostly unilateral approach to economic and employment reforms. The most important reforms of the current decade have been introduced unilaterally, with little more than an

announcement: collective bargaining and pensions (2011), labour market (2012 and 2015), the temporary anticipation of retirement and the introduction of the citizenship income (2019).

If this is the general trajectory of tripartite social concertation, relations between union members and political parties, as evident from political voting, are now fairly complex and the traditional support for parties belonging to the labour movement, broadly speaking, cannot be taken for granted. In the 2013 general elections, 40.9 per cent of employees opted for the centre-left, 20 per cent for M5S and 15 per cent for the right. In 2018, the situation changed significantly: the centre-left lost more than 10 percentage points, which were gained almost entirely by M5S, a cross-cutting and anti-establishment movement, which was the party receiving the most votes, both overall and among union members (29.5 per cent). Right-wing parties saw their support among employees increase, too, from 15.1 to 22.7 per cent. The right-wing populist *Lega* alone tripled its votes, from 4.8 to 12.9 per cent (Mattina 2019). In the European elections of 2019, M5S halved its votes, both in total and among union members (17 per cent). The Democratic Party (PD), which in total received 22.7 per cent of the votes cast, rose to 31 per cent among union members. Nearly 55 per cent of CGIL members voted for parties of the centre-left. *Lega* took a great leap forward (34.3 per cent), also among union members but, significantly, recorded eight points fewer than among non-members. The two political blocks totalled around 37 per cent each.

The intransigent policy and rhetoric on immigration from the ex-Minister of the Interior, *Lega*'s leader Matteo Salvini, certainly played a key role in pushing his impressive growth in votes and popularity in 2019, but his support for reducing the retirement age and for the tax autonomy of regional administrations attracted wide support among the working class in Northern Italy. M5S has somehow limited the rightward shift of workers and union members, but it also reduced the political space for an expansion of the left and centre-left parties, for example, in its fight for a citizens' income and now for a statutory minimum wage of 9 euros. Despite these challenges, union membership still matters, and influences voting choices, as a result of the political and cultural socialization that organizations establish with their members (Leonardi and Carrieri 2020). At the time of writing, both *Lega* and M5S are declining in the polls of voters' preferences, while a new 'star' is rising in Italy's

political sky, the far-right 'Fratelli d'Italia' (*Brothers of Italy*, whose name comes from the first line of the national anthem).

Societal power

Union political action is often tightly connected with civil society organizations, especially when it intersects with mobilization in favour of civil rights. This is the case of discrimination in the workplace, based, for instance, on gender, sexual orientation or national origin. Trade unions and civil rights movements join together in events such as marches, pride parades, sit-ins and flash mobs. In recent years, public discourse has been pervaded by references to immigrants and public order. In European surveys, Italians were often at the top of the list for migrant-related fears (IPSOS 2017). Surveys in metropolitan suburbs and industrial districts record widespread resentment and anger against migrants and Roma, also among former leftist voters and union activists. In 2013, 64 per cent of union members said they were in favour of accepting migrants from poorer countries. Today, 55 per cent say that Italy already accepts too many immigrants (Mattina 2019).

For trade unions, these developments represent a major concern and require new capacities to respond to the anxieties and expectations of their native constituency, safeguarding traditional values and attitudes in favour of hospitality, integration and social justice. It may be true that, historically, Italian unions have been less sensitive than other European unions in giving voice and representation to outsiders (Meardi 2012), but this position has changed over time. In their moral and political concept of solidarity (Morgan and Pulignano 2020), Italian unions are probably among those in Europe expressing stronger conviction when it comes to establishing the inclusion of migrants as one of the main objectives in their organizational and political agenda. 'Avoid war among the poor' is the union mantra. Their diagnosis is that 'the national anti-European, xenophobic and racist populisms that have grown up across the EU have sprung directly from the interplay between anarchic globalization and a short-sighted, cowardly European policy that, in the past decade, has clashed with the needs, expectations and hopes of wider areas of the population' (CISL 2019: 2–3). They are attempting, therefore, to produce narratives and policies that are distant both from the neutrality of the technocratic elites and the stigmatizing demagoguery of right-wing populism.

Significant initiatives have been launched to support the regularization of migrant workers and there is a continuing mobilization against racism, which finds an organizational pillar in the special services and assistance provided by unions to migrant workers (De Sario and Galossi 2021). Taking a ‘social movement unionism’ approach, Italian unions are fighting for unconditional rescue at sea; abrogation of the strict *Security Decrees*; respect for asylum seekers’ constitutional rights; abolition of the crime of ‘illegal immigration’; closure of overcrowded detention centres; and recognition of *jus soli* for granting Italian citizenship to the children of migrants born in Italy.

Trade union policies towards the EU

European integration has become a central and very divisive theme in Italian politics around which nationalist and populist parties have built a decisive part of their broad consensus. Until the U-turn of 2020, the collective memory of the painful reforms suggested by the European Central Bank in August 2011, the strong constraints on national budgetary policies and Italy’s isolation as it was left to cope with migrant landings on its own coasts represented effective references with which to stir up public anger against the EU. One of the most longstanding pro-EU Member States, Italy has seen a rapid and striking growth in ‘Eurosceptic’ dissatisfaction.

The unions, throughout the past ten years, have harshly criticized the neoliberal ideology of the new economic governance. The rigid constraints of the Stability Pact imposed fiscal austerity and compromised the possibility of using public expenditure to support economic recovery, thereby depressing wages and public investments, and hence domestic demand (Prosser 2019). With other Southern European unions, Italians were at the vanguard of attempts to organize actions and protests against austerity and in favour of a major change in EU policies.

Despite the great disillusionment of the past decade, the unions have never abandoned their trust in the European project. ‘It’s not the idea of Europe that has failed’, according to former CISL General Secretary Annamaria Furlan, ‘but the deviation from the ethical and political vision of its founding fathers. The answer to the problems cannot be that of national populism. It would be a regressive and reactionary choice to want to reverse an outdated historical phase. [CISL wishes to] relaunch the European dream of the United States of Europe’. A similar

message has also come from the other two major confederations. Susanna Camusso, former CGIL General Secretary, says that: 'if we do not defend Europe, we will not reform it' and 'the need for Europe has not disappeared...'. 'Europe is needed.' UIL has the same stance, illustrated by the position of the current General Secretary of the ETUC, Luca Visentini, who reiterated this commitment at the last Congress of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) in 2019.

On the eve of the European elections, in 2019, the three confederations intensified their pro-European commitment, signing an 'Appeal for Europe' with the largest employers' confederation Confindustria. It stated, among other things, that the European project 'must be relaunched clearly and strongly in its full significance for civilization'. For the Italian social partners: 'those who aim to call the European Project into question want to return to the isolation of nation states, trade barriers, fiscal dumping and currency wars, reviving the disturbing spectres of the twentieth century'. Criticism of the populist nationalists could not be clearer or more direct.

The steadfast support of the Italian unions for the European project was and remains far from uncritical of the policies adopted in recent years, expressly regarded as one of the main causes of the nationalist regression of large parts of European societies. According to the unions, the EU must be capable of redeeming its social and democratic profile in the eyes of the citizens. Unions recommend a new sustainable model of integration, to be achieved by strengthening the democratic legitimacy of the European institutions and placing the European Parliament at the centre of the decision-making process. European economic governance must be radically reconsidered, with the full and effective implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, fostering upward convergence through strengthening collective bargaining and coverage, reducing social and fiscal dumping and legal regime shopping.

Particularly strong is the concern about the insufficient development of wages and industry-wide bargaining in CEE. Although reluctant in relation to an unprecedented statutory minimum wage at domestic level – in defence of wages set by collective agreements – CGIL, CISL and UIL look favourably on the EC initiative for a Directive on adequate minimum wages, for example, because of the way it is conceived, respectful of national systems and focusing very much on achieving a high level of collective bargaining (no less than 80 per cent) in all Member States. The proposal is in fact considered a stepping-stone

for reducing current EU wage gaps, not to mention social dumping. Moreover, Italian unions believe that wider and better use of international mobilization is needed: transnational company agreements are considered among the few positive innovations of recent years, while international mobilizations and campaigns, such as those at Ryanair or Amazon, have to be extended. Italy was the first country in which, after a wave of strikes and initiatives, Amazon was forced to negotiate with the unions and recognize them at the workplace level. This was a fairly successful example of organizing and union renewal. Compared with some other national organizations, Italian unions appear more open to greater transfer of decision-making sovereignty to supranational levels, such as the ETUC and the Global Union Federations, as an inescapable step towards a real internationalization of union action and effectiveness (Leonardi and Carrieri 2020).

Conclusions

Trade unions remain fairly important social actors in the Italian economic and political landscape. Despite some weakening of their public image as generally representative, which is mirrored in the difficulties they have encountered in playing a prominent role in policymaking in recent years, their presence is pervasive and they continue to enjoy significant institutional support. As Jelle Visser recently pointed out (Visser 2019: 59–71), the fate of trade unions today appears to include distinct parallel trajectories, which represent different viewpoints – and interpretations – of the challenges they face and their responses. As key social actors affected by economic, societal and political changes, they are constantly in danger of seeing their role downplayed and gradually sliding into marginalization. The erosion of membership and collective bargaining coverage are considered the main indicators of such a trajectory. As illustrated above, the signs in this direction are still limited, although an ageing membership and the double challenge of growing precarization and increased professionalism in certain industries and occupations represent critical factors. Dualization and revitalization can be considered the two faces of the underlying tensions which are putting trade unions under pressure in Italy, as elsewhere. On one hand, traditional strongholds and forms of representation are shrinking and losing effectiveness; on the other, unions are constantly striving to extend areas of representation and experimenting with new ways of voicing workers' demands.

The relative stability of membership and successes in extending membership to the private service sector in general, and to new occupations and workplaces – including temporary agency work, SMEs and some platform jobs – testify to the initiatives Italian trade unions have launched to address the risk of dualization through revitalization efforts.

Finally, the role of the unions does not seem to have been radically challenged by the emergence of new social actors. The multiplication of new actors in the field of industrial relations seems to indicate that the potential of labour representation is far from being exhausted. Rather, the trade unions' capacity to respond to the changing environment and to new challenges relies partly on developing forms of cooperation with civil society actors and on integrating emerging collective responses into their repertoires and even their own organizational structures. Trade unions are proactive and responsive collective actors. They represent a lively component of the Italian economic and political fabric, which is set to play a significant role in the coming decades and to support labour through the epochal changes that we are facing, above all digitization and sustainability. Even in the terrible pandemic crisis of the past two years, unions have been able to play a key role and avoid substantial erosion of membership. In fact, they have been able to strengthen their role by addressing health and safety issues in workplaces and defending the twofold measures of extended Covid short-time working and the ban on dismissals for over a year – a fairly unique case. All these elements ultimately encourage us to invest some timid hope in the future of trade unions in Italy.

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Abbreviations

ARAN	Agenzia per la Rappresentanza Negoziabile delle Pubbliche Amministrazioni (Agency for the representation of public administrations in collective bargaining)
CAF	Centro Assistenza Fiscale (Tax advice centre)
CGdL	Confederazione Generale del Lavoro (General confederation of labour)
CGIL	Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (Italian general confederation of labour)
CISAL	Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Autonomi Lavoratori (Italian confederation of independent workers' unions)
CISL	Confederazione Italiana Sindacati dei Lavoratori (Italian confederation of workers' unions)
CNEL	Consiglio Nazionale Economia e Lavoro (National council for the economy and labour)

CONFSAL	Confederazione Generale dei Sindacati Autonomi dei Lavoratori (General confederation of independent workers' unions)
DC	Democrazia Cristiana (Christian democracy)
INPS	Istituto Nazionale per la Protezione Sociale (National social security institute)
ISTAT	Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (National institute of statistics)
M5S	Movimento 5 Stelle (Five-star movement)
PCI	Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian communist party)
PDS	Partito Democratico della Sinistra (Democratic party of the left)
PSI	Partito Socialista Italiano (Italian socialist party)
RLS	Rappresentante Lavoratori per la Sicurezza (Health and safety workers' representative)
RSU	Rappresentanza Sindacale Unitaria (Joint trade union representation structure)
UIL	Unione Italiana del Lavoro (Italian labour union)
UGL	Unione Generale del Lavoro (General labour union)
USB	Unione Sindacale di Base (Rank-and-file workers' union)