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History of Labor Unions in Italy

The purpose of a labor union is to protect the rights of its members. These unions are formed in order to ensure that the interests of workers are served in terms of wages and working conditions. These organizations advocate for their members.

The early 1900s can be marked as the beginning of the labor movement in Italy. During this time period, Italy was mostly agricultural. There wasn't much work for citizens. Society was mostly based on local cultures and there was very much a local mentality. The ruling class were the elitists. Popular schools however were set up so that people could learn how to read and write since only about 4% of the population understood Italian.

Italy had also not yet experienced the Industrial Revolution as had various other countries. The labor advocacy and a move towards unionization began with the Catholic movement and the Socialist Movement. The Catholic group was known as "I bianchi" and the Socialist group was named "I Rossi." At this time, the economy was based on cooperatives, where groups of people helped out each other. There existed mostly local welfare and business was done locally in the towns.

Branching from the Catholic and Socialist movements, trade unions began to take form. The Confederazione Italiano di Lavoro (CIL) became the “white” group and the Confederazione Generale d’Italia (CGL) became the “red” trade union. The economy and means of labor went from more cooperative to utilizing trade unions.

During the early 1900s, there were three major political parties. Because each was out to help their own constituents, instability was created. Once the Fascists came to power in Italy in 1922, they closed down CIL and CGL. In 1926, the New Labor Law was implemented, known as the “Law on Syndicates” (Wright). One of the goals of this law was to organize all the main productive forces into cooperative organizations. Public trade unions were created in order to unite all workers or related industries.

In 1944, with the fall of Fascism after WWII, there was a period where all parties had somewhat come together. The General Confederation of Labor (CGIL) was formed in this year. It was a national trade union formed by agreement between the Socialists, Communists, and Christian Democrats (which were the 3 main parties at the time). The group was a mixture of whites and reds. It was considered a democratic union however it was similar to the union created under the Fascist regime. The larger group, however, was divided into different groups.

After three years, with help from the Soviet Union, the Communists formed a strong group within the CGIL. In the late 1940s, the Socialists and Democrats split. In 1948, the Christian Democrat leaders formed the Free Italian General

Confederation of Workers (LCGIL) (Neufield). In 1949, the Socialist leaders split off and formed the Italian Labor Federation (FIL). Then in 1950, “under amicable pressure from anti-Communist labor leaders in the United States” (Neufield), the FIL decided to join the LCGIL. The two groups combined formed the Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori (CISL).

Today there exists three main labor unions in Italy. As stated before, these include the CGIL, CISL, and finally the Unione Italiana del Lavoro (UIL). The two prior are those that are considered the most important in Italian labor.

The CGIL is the larger and oldest trade union of the three. About 5.5 million people belong to this labor union, including workers, retirees, and young people who are entering the work force.

CISL is the second largest trade union of Italy. It contains about 4.4 million members. According to Professor Fragliotti at FAI-CISL, the goal of CISL is to defend its workers. Two key aspects for the union are liberty and attention. For the union, the person is a person and not just a number or a problem. The union prides itself on their values. For this organization, collective bargaining is key and the method taken for action.

The UIL is the third largest union in Italy. It contains about 1.9 million members. This labor union plays more of a modest role in government whereas the other two are more strongly known.

According to Professor Gianpiero Bianchi, there are five crisis points that affect workers today. In order to put these crisis points in perspective, they will be considered in terms of CGIL and CISL since these are the two larger unions in

Italy and have had more significant impacts on the Italian labor movement. The two labor unions differ on where they stand in regards to each of the issues.

The first issue deals with collective bargaining. CGIL is for one national collective agreement for each industrial section (agriculture, textiles, etc.) CISL, on the other hand, is for local agreements where employers and workers work out issues more on a smaller scale. The second issue is on welfare. CGIL is for public welfare whereas CISL is for both public and private welfare. Both the industry and the union deal together. The third concern deals with the labor market. CGIL is for a public labor market and CISL is for agreements between management and the union. The two unions also differ on their ideas about economic politics. CGIL is for public politics whereas CISL is in favor of free agreements between the union and enterprise. Final, the two unions differ on their politics. CGIL is affiliated with the left party where CISL is more liberal.

The labor movement in Italy has been different than that of other countries. The main reason for this is the fact that the labor unions had strong political affiliations. The time periods and issues associated with various points in history had effects on the labor unions and their ideals. Changes have occurred throughout the years due to this. Previously, the labor unions had strong ties to various political parties however today this has changed. The labor unions are more similar and are not necessarily butting heads as much as they did previously.

Although the labor movement may have been different in Italy than from the United States, labor unions in both countries are similar. A labor union, no

matter where it is located, has similar purposes. They all are organizations that benefit the workers that belong to them. Through unions, the voices of workers could be heard. Their rights are protected and when something oppresses them, unions move into action and try to advocate for those rights to ensure that workers get what they are looking for. As in America, Italian unions protect wages, work hours, work conditions, etc. Although the processes and organization of the unions may vary, they ultimately all have the same goals.

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