

Elizabeth Ferlazzo

Prof. Brandon Essary

Essay # 1

July 16, 2008

Italian Labor Unions:

From the past to the present

The history of Italy is closely connected with the history of labor unions in Italy,

as the labor unions were directly influenced by many events that helped to shape Italian

history from 1900 until the present. Professor Bianchi of the labor union FAI CISL

thoroughly explained over a span of two days many ways in which the Italian labor

unions were affected by different points in history as well as their development into

what they are today. Prior to my experience in Programma Ponte I knew little to

nothing about the labor structures in Italy, and Professor Bianchi's enthusiasm for the

subject made the transition from an outsider an informed non-participant an interesting

one. In addition to Professor Bianchi's two days of lectures, there are several articles

that illustrate the causes and effects of the ups and downs of the labor unions, as well as

their influence on Italy's workers today.

In 1900, Italy was an impoverished country in many respects. The country's

"industry" was solely agriculture, and people would only eat what they had produced.

The cuisine was centered around simple foods, and there was a great deal of local

culture as opposed to national culture. During this time in Italy there were two

movements, one by the Catholics and one by the socialists. They had each set up

cooperatives to help people with their harvests so that they would all have enough for themselves and their families to eat. A welfare institution was built through these

movements. During WWI Italy was divided and very small trade unions began to

develop. The Catholic and Socialist groups did not interact with one another. The

Catholic group came to be known as CIL and the socialists were CGL. After the rise of

fascism in Italy in 1922 both CIL and CGL were shut down. Under the fascist regime

there was both a public trade union and a system of public welfare.

Before the end of WWII CIL and CGL came together to form one united trade

union, and called themselves CGIL. There was a huge divide within this seemingly

united trade union that was much like the divide in the fascist union. After WWII Italy's

government became a republic, and in 1948 held its first democratic election. The party

which remained in almost-constant power from 1948-1992 was the Christian Democrat

party. Also in 1948, there was a strike against the government which lasted only one

day, but killed many people. In 1949, a small group called FIL formed. They were

neither socialist nor communist, and in 1950 the labor union CISL was formed. CISL was

not a political group, but solely a trade union. At around the same time the GDP in Italy

rose 7%, and in 1963, Italy had reached full employment. Millions of people had moved

from agriculture jobs to industrial jobs, as well as moved from the south to the north.

The rise in employment can be partially attributed to the labor unions and their

attempts at providing jobs for the citizens of Italy.

In 1956, before Italy reached full employment, the labor unions were experiencing a crisis that was not unlike the crises of the past. The three main labor

unions of the time, CGIL, CISL, and UIL, were experiencing "grave financial difficulties"

(Neufeld 75). These difficulties were an effect of a great divide among them because of

personal beliefs and political loyalties. Members of the unions were not satisfied with

the efforts of the labor unions, and because of that, the amount of people who joined

these unions began to greatly decrease. The Italian economy was doing very poorly at

the time, which also added to the financial troubles that plagued each labor union. As a

result of this unrest within and amongst these labor unions, smaller, independent

unions began to develop. According to Neufeld, "The reason for this very limited

success (of the labor unions) lies at the heart of an essential weakness of the Italian

labor movement: its top heavy administrative structure" (78).

The Italian labor unions had to overcome much adversity and many crises in

order to boast successful labor organizations. The first Italian miracle lasted from 1951

to 1973, with a few snags along the way, as demonstrated through the examination of

the 1956 labor movement. This miracle was more focused on big industry and was seen

mostly in large cities like Milan. There was another crisis in 1983, according to Professor

Bianchi, which caused the labor unions to strike. There were both social and industrial

problems as a result of this, and there was a 22% inflation rate. After this crisis came

another period of an economic miracle, this time taking place in 1984 and centering

around small industry. This miracle lasted until 1992, when Italy faced yet another

financial crisis. The Italian labor industry, as well as the nation itself, has faced many ups

and downs, but the miraculous periods have seemingly lasted longer than the periods of

turmoil.

After the most recent financial crisis that plagued Italy post 1992, the euro

currency was introduced, and Italy began to again prosper. This change in currency has

helped to elevate Italy in its economic successes, but there are still five serious crisis

points in Italy today. Today, CGL, CSIL, and UIL are the three main labor unions, and

each handles the points of crisis differently. Professor Bianchi explained the differences

between CGL's actions and CSIL's actions when dealing with these specific crises. In

regards to *collective bargaining*, CGIL believes that each side should have one

agreement for each. CSIL, on the other hand, believes that there should be a local

agreement. When discussing who should handle *welfare*, CGIL believes that it should be

state-run (public) where CSIL believes that it should be both public and privately run.

CGIL believes that the *labor market* should be publicly run, while CSIL believes that there

should be an agreement between the management and the laborers. CGIL thinks that

there should be public *politics and economy*, and CSIL believes that there should be a

free agreement. The CGIL are in the *political left*, and CSIL is not classified as a political

organization, so they are politically free.

Today, these are not the only problems that plague Italian labor workers. In a

conference held by Union of Italian Workers in 2006, one of the main points discussed

was a growing need for labor market reform. The union delegates felt that they were

unhappy with the level of employment flexibility. The union believes that flexible labor

should cost more than inflexible labor, and should only be used if it is genuinely

unavoidable. They also discussed the problem of insufficient pensions for union

workers because they believe that retired workers will soon find themselves to be living

well below the poverty line. They believe that the union should not necessarily make

more reforms, but should nullify clauses that are already stated on pensions. In addition

to the problems that Italian labor workers are faced with that were discussed during the

UIL conference, Professor Bianchi had stated that many Italians who are not members of

trade unions are able to reap the benefits, such as a specific salary and hourly wages,

without the need to pay for their membership or to show support for the various labor

unions.

The labor movement in Italy has lasted over 100 years, and will probably

continue to last throughout this century. The movement has been intertwined with

various social and political issues throughout the 1900s, and these problems and

successes have influenced the labor movement both negatively and positively. While

the labor movement in Italy can be categorized as one of many ups and downs, the

successes that the Italians have seen during the past century may certainly outweigh the

periods of crises.

Works Cited

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