

CHAPTER 2: WHY DOES LABOUR ORGANISE?: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

UNIT 3: SOLIDARITY, STRUGGLE AND ORGANISATION: ITALY'S FEDERTERRA

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KEY READING:

TRADE UNIONISM IN THE ITALIAN COUNTRYSIDE AND RURAL/URBAN SOLIDARITIES

The mass unionization of agricultural workers in Italy was unique in Europe. Organizing began in the late nineteenth century, leading to the founding of the Federazione Nazionale fra i Lavoratori della Terra (National Federation of Agricultural Workers, Federterra) in 1901 – five years before the founding of the national union confederation CGdL.

There is no comparable organization in other western countries in terms of number of members, organizational continuity or the variety of interests represented. In the UK, after the wage earners' struggles of the 1930s, the agricultural trade union dissolved; in France, rural trade unionism remained confined to certain regions and represented only limited categories of workers; in Germany, agricultural workers' struggles flared up during social crises but quickly faded away.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Italy was predominantly an agricultural country and would remain so until the 1960s. However, there were significant differences between the north and the south.

In the north, commercial agriculture was practiced on a large scale, turning rural workers into agricultural proletarians. The cultivation of rice, of which Italy is Europe's largest producer, attracted many workers, mainly women, from the southern regions for the "monda" (weeding),



transplanting and harvesting seasons. In central Italy, on the other hand, sharecropping was widespread; sharecroppers worked the landowners' land in exchange for a share of the harvest. In the south, the latifundium (large estate) predominated. Land ownership was highly concentrated, and the majority of the agricultural population worked as labourers or sharecroppers on these large estates.

Notwithstanding the regional differences, rural workers were everywhere poor, living in unhealthy, damp, vermin-infested dwellings with dirt floors lacking the most elementary services. Employment contracts often contained onerous charges to be paid by the workers and derisory remuneration, differentiated according to season, gender and age, with great variations at regional and local level for laborious work which often exposed them to malaria and other diseases, as in of rice paddies and land reclamation

The agricultural labour market was characterized by a permanent imbalance between labour supply and demand due to many factors: the seasonality of many tasks, the mobility of poorer workers, which created internal competition and lowered wages, and the modest pace of Italian industrial expansion, which could not absorb the surplus labour in the agricultural sector.

The organization of agricultural workers (and Italian trade unionism in general) was strongly influenced by the socialist ideas which were spreading in those years and which contended with the Catholic Church for cultural and political influence among the workers. Socialism, with its vision of a society of equals achieved through the socialization of land, found fertile ground among impoverished rural workers. Federterra fought for increased wages, improved working conditions, social security and labour market power through union control over job placement.

The Italian trade unions were organized on a class and solidarity basis, uniting workers both sectorally through the trade federations and locally through the Camere del Lavoro (Labour Chambers), which represented the workers of a designated territory without distinction of trade, sector or job.

It is precisely this universal class- and solidarity-based vocation of the Labour Chamber that allowed it to include and to represent the interests of all workers - the skilled as well as the unskilled and the unemployed, thus overcoming the traditional trade union division of labour in



the Anglo-Saxon world and encompassing within it the diverse worlds of agricultural workers and women's labour.

The Labour Chambers were initially set up to control job placement, removing it from exploitative private labour brokers, and were supported financially by the municipal governments. Within a few years, they became a place of education - they had libraries - and political aggregation. They were run by socialist or trade union leaders to build class solidarity and support for the struggles of different categories of workers. They intervened in disputes between workers and employers. They hosted the trade (sectoral) leagues and then the trade federations.

The Labour Chamber was a site for experimenting with and constructing class solidarity between the urban and rural movements. The affiliation of the land worker organizations to the initially reluctant Labour Chambers came about gradually, driven by the insistent class outlook of the rural unions which crystallized in the birth of the Federterra.

The first mobilisations and the birth of the Federterra

The first mobilization of a trade union nature developed spontaneously between 1884 and 1885 and is remembered by the dialect name la Boje (to boil). Strikes, agitation and sabotage actions broke out in the provinces of Mantua and Cremona (Northern Italy) involving different categories of workers - farm labourers, day labourers, tenant farmers, sharecroppers - struggling for higher wages and against employer abuses and, for the first time, explicitly demanding control of the labour market, which would be a central element of the agricultural workers' movement until the mid-21st century.

Labour recruitment was managed by the landowners who often used gangmasters who decided who to work for, for how long and at what rate. They could also recruit labour from neighbouring areas in order to lower wages.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Sicily was also the scene of great protests organised by the 'Sicilian Federations', which were union-like organisations that united rural workers and sulphur miners against the landowners and against the state that openly supported the wealthy class. The beginning of the 20th century coincided with a new wave of strikes and agitation that

between 1901 and 1902 mainly swept through the Po Valley. The need for a trade union structure arose precisely from the need to coordinate a rural workers movement that was already rich in history, demands, territorial structures and political leaders.

The National Federation of Land Workers (Federterra) was formed in 1901 in Bologna thanks to the spread of socialist ideas. It represented all agricultural workers whatever the contract that bound them to the land, with the aim of improving workers' conditions, gaining health and unemployment insurance and managing labour placement by removing it from the power of the landowners. The founding congress was attended by 700 delegates representing 818 leagues. The 152,000 members grew to 240 000 by 1902. Prominent Italian socialists Filippo Turati and Andrea Costa were present. In those same years, most of the sectoral federations were being created (e.g., the building trades in 1896, in 1901 the metalworkers, textiles and chemicals etc.). Federterra articulated a wide range of aspirations. Its propaganda was striking in its references to the 'human dignity of the worker'. The stereotype of the greedy, envious, impulsive and violent agricultural worker was replaced by that of the class conscious worker who demanded improvements and took an interest in politics.

From the moment of its formation, the basic structure of the Federterra was the territorial league, which included all types of workers in a given area, bringing together different interests and demands according to the local rural structure and specificity of employment. Another characteristic of the leagues was their strongly political and class-based character and the use of the strike as an instrument not only to defend wages but to also fight for broad reforms.

The territorial league, voicing the demands of the different categories of local workers, was the central support point for unionizing rural workers. The structure of the local federation was flexible enough to allow for different local solutions according to the characteristics of the workers in the area. In some places, the leagues were formed on the basis of a predominant occupational activity; this was the case with the leagues in the provinces of Mantova, Ferrara, Piacenza and in the rice-growing area of Piedmont. These leagues demanded full employment, shorter working hours and higher daily wages. The leagues in the sharecropping areas (central Italy), after a long internal debate, ended up demanding contractual improvements that in no way undermined the feudal nature of the relationship between owner and worker. In other

areas, however, mixed leagues were formed: this was the case on farms in Lombardy, where there were different categories of workers (permanent employees, sharecroppers, occasional workers), making it difficult to identify a core of generalised demands on which to build the union platform.

In the agricultural areas around Cremona, Brescia and Bergamo, the socialist trade union encountered difficulties due to the variety of workers' demands and because it claimed to lead the rural masses from the city but did little to meet their needs. These strategic failures, however, did not lead to a lack of unionisation, but to the formation of Catholic trade unions in the post-WWII period.

The landworkers league was also a centre of public life, beyond the typical trade union representation: it strengthened solidarity between workers, carried out cultural and recreational initiatives such as training courses, conferences, the creation of libraries and the distribution of newspapers. It also organised financial support for sick workers, donated dues collected from wage increases to strikers and guaranteed hospitality to their children. Much of the union's activity overlapped with the spread of cooperation: the landworker leagues promoted consumer cooperatives, "savings sections", which provided workers with essential goods and protected them from usury, and workers' cooperatives which guaranteed members a minimum level of employment and income. In 1908, a few years after the creation of Federterra, the National Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives was also founded in Bologna. It was the result of a network of relationships between the socialist cooperatives and the trade union efforts to control the labour market.

The territorial league also became an instrument of self-government and proletarian power, going so far as to campaign for the socialists and win some municipal administrations, as happened in Roccabianca (Parma) in 1912 - following the introduction of universal male suffrage - when the municipality was won by the socialists with the support of the workers belonging to the leagues. The mixture of socialism and trade unionism meant that the first socialist deputies to the Italian parliament came from rural areas and not from the more developed cities.



The landworker league therefore proved to be a factor in overcoming the narrow occupational corporatism that had inspired the socialist movement in its early days.

From the very beginning there were a significant number of women's leagues: women were in fact very present in agriculture, especially, but not exclusively, as mondine (rice weeders). The vigor of the agricultural workers' demands was symbolically recognised in 1906 with the election of a woman, Argentina Altobelli, as national secretary of the Federterra. Italy's largest trade union was headed by a woman in a country where women did not have the right to vote, were subject to the legal authority of their husbands, and in law were in fact treated like minors.

Argentina Altobelli was a socialist and headed the Federterra from 1906 until its dissolution under fascism in 1925. Under her leadership, the rural working class movement gained new impetus. It was urgent not only to guarantee as many days as possible for everyone, but also to avoid competition within the class itself, where workers from the provinces and neighbouring areas competed with each other in the search for employment. Federterra worked to manage the placement and deployment of labour through the job placement exercised through the Labour Chamber and the establishment of the *imponibile di manodopera*, which mandated employers to employ a minimum number of workers depending on the crop and the size of the cultivated land and gave hiring precedence to locals over outsiders.

To encourage unionization of workers who were for the most part illiterate, Altobelli wrote plays that depicted class conflict and worker solidarity. Mussolini tried to convince Altobelli to collaborate with the fascist union, but failed.

The Achievements

A unique part of this story is the struggles of the “mondine”, almost all women, who performed one of the hardest jobs in agriculture: transplanting the new seedlings and weeding in the rice-growing marshes. They worked for ten or twelve hours a day between May and June without interruption. Although they worked together for a limited period, about 40 days a year, they nonetheless managed to acquire solidarity, class consciousness and the political ability to win the country's first eight-hour working day.

In 1906, the mondine in Vercelli went on strike for the eight-hour day. The mondine protest merged with that of urban workers in the area, including metalworkers, bakers who demanded the abolition of night work, and textile workers who demanded a shorter day and a raise. After months of turmoil, a historic agreement was reached for the entire workers' movement: on 1 June 1906, the rice-workers won the 8-hour working day, with the possibility of going up to 9 hours on a voluntary basis, and their hourly pay was increased. The achievement of the Vercelli mondine became a benchmark for the entire Italian rural and urban workers' movement and for the legal regulation of working time throughout the country in 1919.

In southern Italy where exploitation was extremely high, the middlemen took 10% of the wages of each worker recruited, extorted part of the daily earnings, lent money at usurious interest and often robbed the workers of their food. Union management of job placement was first introduced in the hamlet of San Rocco di Quistello (Mantua) in the early 1890s. The league agreed with the bosses on working days, hours and rates and each week paid an advance to the workers. As an expression of solidarity, those in special need received more working days.

The last major strike wave before the First World War took place between 1912 and 1915. The war context accelerated certain union achievements: in many areas, local agreements were signed on the terms and conditions of employment, since the wartime labour shortage strengthened union bargaining power.

Federterra also continued to take root among the poorest agricultural workers in southern Italy. By the end of the First World War, Federterra had 800,000 members and had achieved many of the goals for which it had fought: in 1919 and 1920, local agreements were signed which expressly stipulated that employers could only hire with the agreement of the union.

The fall of fascism and the second post-war period

This history of victorious struggles was interrupted by the rise of Fascism: the Federterra, like all autonomous worker organisations, was dissolved in 1925. The landworker leagues were among the first victims of fascist violence. Only after the fall of Benito Mussolini (1943) did the

union reorganise the network of leagues that had been wiped out during the twenty years of fascist rule.

The Federbraccianti (called Confederterra for a time) was reborn in March 1944 - the national confederation would be reconstituted as the CGIL in June of the same year - when Italy was still divided in two: in the south the Allied armies, in the centre-north the German occupation.

The relationship between workers, tenant farmers, mondine and partisans was very close. The agricultural workers' struggles were intertwined with the formation of partisan groups and the strikes organised by the National Liberation Committee, focused on the gradual recovery of the rights won before fascism, including union control of hiring and the *imponibile*.

In central Italy, sharecroppers for the first time became a strong presence in the liberation struggle and were the main source of sustenance for the partisans in the winters of 1943 and 1944.

In October 1946, the first congress of the Confederterra confederation was attended by 400 delegates representing just under 1,200,000 workers. The CGIL had just over 2 million members at the time, so rural workers were the overwhelming majority. Throughout the 1940s, the struggles of the agricultural workers of the Po Valley, in particular, focused on the demand for more work to provide livelihoods for the mass of unemployed workers who had been reduced to a subsistence level. Worker occupation of state land along the Po, with the aim of establishing a cooperative, was a step in this direction.

The Federbraccianti denounced the illegal hiring of women workers during the rice harvest in violation of the law on hiring, the so-called 'piazza placement' through intermediaries paying workers almost a third less than union rates and not paying social security contributions. The labour recruiters often hired workers from outside the region, in violation of the agreement linking the employment of migrants to the exhaustion of local labour lists supplied by the union. The first massive strike took place in northern Italy in September 1947. The strike brought agricultural production to a halt for ten days and strengthened the perception in the popular imagination of the rural workers as a powerful organized force. But it was the 37 consecutive days of national strike in the summer of 1949 that went down in history as the greatest demonstration of labour struggle in Italian history in terms of intensity, duration and number of



participants. Despite arrests, violence and intimidation by employers and the police, the workers won, among other gains, a two-year collective agreement, unemployment benefits and the provision of pharmaceuticals like quinine for malaria to family members.

Many rural workers were killed in the course of the post-war strikes: in the course of the national strike in the summer of 1949, the farmhand Pasqualino Lombardi and the rice worker Maria Margotti were killed by police, along with Breda worker Luigi Gayot, on strike in solidarity with the farmworkers. They would become "martyrs of the rural workers movement".

The farmers' response to the wave of strikes and demonstrations was to use the levers of power that only the landowners had at their disposal. In 1954, they concluded a separate contract with the Cisl. (In 1948, the Catholic section of the CGIL had split from the confederation in the context of the Cold War to found the Libera CGIL, which later became the CISL.)

In the first decade after the war, the Federbraccianti was based above all on the strong solidarity and commitment of its members. Dues were collected individually through union and league representatives at the workplaces, and the union continually organized education and agitation to strengthen resistance to the employers and the Catholic "liberini". During the monda season, the leagues' Comitati di assistenza alle mondine (Rice Workers' Assistance Committees) inspected housing conditions, distributed medicine, glasses, food and newspapers, and organized recreational activities, preparing workers for the struggle.

In 1960, the Federbraccianti was still the largest trade union in the national confederation CGIL, with over 629,000 members, and its struggles were supported by the entire labour movement. Rural/urban worker solidarity remained active. This included the dispatch of numerous union activists and leaders from the city in support of farm labour struggles, fundraising in factories to support workers in the countryside, and the hospitality accorded to hundreds of farmers' children during longer strikes. Farm workers reciprocated by sending food parcels in support of the workers affected by the massive post-war industrial restructuring with its attendant unemployment, as in for example the 20-day strike at Motta in Milan in 1948.

The cycle of successes inaugurated in the first years of post-war reconstruction came to a halt with the State Employment Act of 1949, which took hiring control away from the unions and left it to the discretion of the employers, and with the abolition of the *imponibile*, which was declared

unconstitutional because it infringed on the freedom of initiative of the farmers. In the space of a decade, therefore, the traditional instruments of control and direction of the agricultural labour market, on which the trade union movement had based its policy and action, came to an end and a new phase began, characterised by drastic state intervention and a new interdependence between agriculture and industry.

The post-war transformation and mechanization of agriculture brought a dramatic reduction in the agricultural workforce and the disappearance of the traditional rural world. Machinery replaced the manual work of threshing, reaping, harvesting and rice weeding in the irrigated areas of the North. The increasingly close intermingling of agriculture and industry led to a reorganizing of union structures. The Federbraccianti disbanded in January 1988 to merge with the food workers in the Federation of Agroindustrial Workers (Flai).

But the struggles and achievements of agricultural workers remain an important chapter in the history of the Italian labour movement. Their songs of labour and struggle have become part of the union and cultural tradition. Particularly famous are the choruses sung by the women's leagues and mondine to demand eight hours and higher wages.