

# TRADE UNIONS, MIGRANT WORKERS, AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN ITALY IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC CRISIS

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## ABSTRACT

### Trade Unions, Migrant Workers, and Racial Discrimination in Italy in Times of Economic Crisis

Trade unions have a crucial role in the social integration processes of migrants. Nevertheless, some aspects of this relationship are still relatively unexplored, particularly that of the relationship between trade unions and racism and that of the trade unions' fight against racial discrimination. This paper aims to investigate the still partially unexplored link between Italian trade unions and racial discrimination within the framework of the 2008 economic crisis. Through the narratives of stakeholders, trade unions, and migrant workers, the author provides an in-depth look at the efforts of Italian trade unions to fight discrimination and examines the main barriers that prevent migrants from being involved in unions.

**KEYWORDS:** migrant workers, trade union, racism, discrimination, economic crisis

## IZVLEČEK

### Sindikati, delavci migranti in rasna diskriminacija v Italiji v času ekonomske krize

V procesih družbene integracije migrantov imajo ključno vlogo sindikati. Kljub temu so nekateri vidiki tega odnosa še vedno relativno neraziskani, še zlasti odnos sindikatov do rasizma in njihov boj proti rasni diskriminaciji. Avtor v članku obravnava še vedno slabo raziskano povezavo med italijanskimi sindikati in rasno diskriminacijo v času ekonomske krize leta 2008. Na podlagi pričevanj deležnikov, sindikatov in delavcev migrantov ponuja poglobljen vpogled v prizadevanja italijanskih sindikatov za odpravo diskriminacije, hkrati pa analizira pogloblitve ovire, ki delavcem migrantom preprečujejo vstop v sindikate.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** delavci migranti, sindikati, rasizem, diskriminacija, ekonomska kriza

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## INTRODUCTION

Trade union organizations have played a crucial role in as well as had a direct impact on the processes of social cohesion and integration in Italy.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, a few aspects of this relationship are still relatively unexplored (Ambrosini, Frangi 2015). The first publications on this topic date to the 1990s and early 2000s. Namely, the reports of the Institute for Economic and Social Research (Ires) (Bernardotti, Mottura 2003; Leonardi, Mottura 2002; Pugliese 2000), which outline certain general trends based on mainly quantitative analyses; and the pioneering works of some scholars (Caccavo 2000), which delve into the contribution of trade unions in the struggle for recognition carried out by migrants in Italy. We can recall some pioneering contributions that first shed light on the early contacts between trade unions and migrants (CSER, 1986; Treves 1989) and observed the increasing presence of migrants in Italy as an occasion to reflect upon the new action domains that labor transformations offered to workers' organizations (Mottura *et al.* 2010). Subsequently, a new branch of studies developed (Carrera, Galossi 2014), aimed at deepening the exchanges and mutual contributions which had started, ever more intensely, to occur between trade unions and migrants in Italy (Sospiro 2003; Fiom-Cgil 2008; Galossi 2012).

The raging 2008 crisis led several scholars to delve into its repercussions on the socio-material conditions of migrants (Kanduč, Bučar Ručman 2016). A large number of sociological studies have thus revealed how, in Italy, the consequences of the problematic structural economic situation have affected and are particularly affecting migrant workers (Coletto, Guglielmi 2013; Fullin, Reyneri 2013; Reyneri 2010). At the same time, authors focusing on the relationship between trade unions and migration have also observed a link with the 2008 global economic crisis and analyzed the answers of trade unions against their consequences on migrant workers (Carrera, Galossi 2014) and their union membership (Caruso 2011). According to some authors, with the economic crisis, a worsening of racist and discriminatory (Basso 2010) practices could be observed, thus aggravating the already tenuous working

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1 The three main trade unions in Italy are the so-called "confederal unions": Cgil, Cisl, and Uil. Cgil (Italian General Confederation of Labor) is the oldest Italian union. Historically close to socialist thought, two strong internal components, a communist one and a socialist one, characterize it. It is the largest organization on the Italian trade union scene and the most conflictual one, even if, over the years, it has lost this latter characteristic. Cisl (Italian Confederation of Workers' Unions) was born from the split of some Christian components of the Cgil, on the American push to create a moderate and pro-governmental union, in opposition to Cgil. With its strong social-democratic and reformist character, the birth of Uil (Italian Labor Union) took place in stages and is the result of both the splits generated by the unitary Cgil and the political shuffling within Italian political parties in the first republican post-war period, particularly in the socialist area. Over the years, several independent unions (e.g., SiCobas, ADLCobas, Cub, Usb, Usi-Ait ...) have sprung up alongside the mainstream unions, sometimes referring to the bodies established within the workers and student movements in the 1970s. Over time, despite their small size, they have been characterized by a particular conflictual and heterogeneous form of struggle, intercepting many workers who are disappointed by the excessive tendency towards moderation in the mainstream trade unions.

(Ferrero, Perocco 2011) and social conditions of migrants. According to other scholars (Mometti, Ricciardi 2011), though, in front of such a context, the major trade unions have taken on an ambiguous approach, reducing their action, at most, to generic service centers for equally generic users.

A few authors have focused explicitly on the relationship between migrant labor and trade unions. Giovanni Mottura has authored and co-authored (Mottura, Pinto 1996; Mottura *et al.* 2010) several essays that highlight the trends and relevance of migrants within Cgil members as well as co-authored several Ires reports (Bernardotti, Mottura 2003; Leonardi, Mottura 2002). Pietro Basso (2006) – analyzing the three main trade unions, especially Cgil and Cisl – highlights the increasing participation of migrants and describes the quantitative change between the 1990s and the 2000s in terms of the number of members, leading the trade unions to become the first and foremost “multi-racial” and multinational organizations in Italy (Basso 2004). A qualitative change also took place, as initially, migrants only approached trade unions with welfare-related demands. With the consolidation of their presence in the workplace and the increase in their awareness, they started to participate actively in trade union life and, often, took up a representative role for natives as well. At the same time, the Author highlights the under-representation of migrants in governing bodies, their almost complete absence in secretariats, and the lack of a structured action to counter discriminations in the workplace. Indeed, more recently, trade unions have not only reduced the involvement of migrant workers within their structures but have also lowered the protection of their rights to the extent that more or less explicit discrimination events are emerging within their ranks.

While the relationship between trade unions and migration is still a barely analyzed issue in Italy, even less analyzed are the relationship between trade unions and racism and the countering of ethnic and racial discrimination by trade unions. This contribution, thus, aims at examining the still unexplored link between trade unions and racial discrimination in Italy during the economic crisis. By delving into the scope and effectiveness of the efforts of Italian trade unions in countering discrimination since 2008, it endeavors to assess to what extent migrants are represented within trade unions structures and to analyze which structures prevent migrant workers from accessing the support of trade unions and getting more involved in that context.

## **Methods**

This article is the result of a more extensive research project entitled “Trade Unions, Economic Change and Active Inclusion of Migrant Workers” (Team), funded by the European Commission and conducted within a comparative approach in six European Union countries: Italy, Spain, Poland, Belgium, United Kingdom, Austria.

Forty-five in-depth interviews were conducted: ten with key informants; fifteen with trade unionists; twenty with unionized migrant workers. The interviews were

collected, recorded, and transcribed in Italian and translated into English for this article by the author, who holds the archives.

The fieldwork has been carried out in several Italian cities, especially in northern ones (Bologna, Brescia, La Spezia, Milan, Padua, Venice, Verona, Vicenza), but also in the center (Florence, Rome) and the south (Naples).

## AMBIGUITY AND FRAGMENTATION

Analyzing the key informants' statements shows that trade unions rarely tackle the topic of racial discrimination. Likewise, even the very same workers' organizations are not immune to discrimination; such practices and attitudes are so widespread and rooted in the Italian society that they have "contaminated" trade unions. The intensification of institutional racism in Italy in recent years (Basso 2010) has entailed a sort of "reflected *inertia*", a penetration of racism even within trade unions.

We also notice the severe lack of an organic trade union policy to counter discrimination. Countering actions, when present, are described as the result of the inclinations, willingness, and commitment of single operators and officials in the different local branches. Often, the most dedicated actors are those in charge of migration desks who, voluntarily, go beyond the bureaucratic execution of administrative procedures, thus becoming the line of contrast against the discrimination within each trade union branch. Such a scenario has not only jeopardized countering actions and led to a highly varied awareness, but has also implicitly delegated the topic of discrimination to the officials "dealing with migrants".

The representatives of migrant associations underline the lack of policies against discrimination. In contrast, other stakeholders underline a specific commitment by trade unions – though limited to the local level and with differences among trade unions and categories. Moreover, trade unions seem to counter discrimination mainly with labor law; anti-discrimination norms and tools, which would be a useful instrument (Cillo, Della Puppa 2011), are little known and barely used. Furthermore, as local administrations usually entrust the administrative paperwork (residence permits, family reunification, etc.) to trade unions through conventions, trade unions are influenced by such institutional bodies – from which they obtain funds – and their political views. The ambiguity of trade unions increases when they must adopt actions to counter discrimination practices carried out by the local administrations that outsource such services (Cillo, Perocco 2014): "Trade unions always have plenty of conventions, if they were to report discrimination by the Municipality, they could be blackmailed: 'We'll cancel the convention', trade unions manage all migration offices through conventions with the Municipality." (Key informants; migrant association representative)

Without an organic policy against discrimination, the heterogeneity marking the stances and practices of trade unions on racial discrimination can be connected

to the importance of single operators who – with different sensitivities and tools – empirically create their anti-discrimination policy and to the conflict of interests between union organizations and political and economic institutions in different local contexts.

Such limitations can be related to the insufficient presence of migrants in the governing bodies of union organizations. On this topic, the interviewees confirm the literature data on the under-representation of migrants in intermediate and upper levels (Basso 2004). In shedding light on the trade unions' delay in the awareness of racial discrimination, the interviewees underline that migrant unionists – when there are any – are mostly in the lower levels of representation. Indeed, this positions them at the margins of the debate on the organization's policy lines and does not allow them to have an impact on concrete actions. Furthermore, the inclusion process of migrants within representation bodies sometimes seems aimed at recruiting new members of foreign origin or at expressing an "instrumental multicultural" stance. Thus, migrant unionists are considered as the representatives of migrant workers, that is, as the interlocutors for their fellow nationals and not for the interests of workers in general. On the one hand, migrant unionists are considered more "symbolic" than substantial, and, on the other hand, they are seen as a way to attract others, given their migrant status, their roles as charismatic "community leaders", or as leaders of mono-national associations working on the territory. A function incorporated in somatic traits, as some interviewees hint at: "One limitation is that foreigners shall represent foreigners, as if it were a vested interest. They say: 'There are migrants, someone shall represent them, Italians don't do it well, so it is better if a foreigner represents them.'" (Key informants; third sector representative)

The fragmentation marking the anti-discrimination action of trade unions prevents the perception of an overall dimension and, also, makes it harder to identify differences between the various organizations. Yet, it is possible to identify a less critical and hostile attitude by Cisl and Uil than by Cgil, which is more active (especially in some sectors, historically more determined to fight and with a more substantial presence of migrant members, such as metalworkers or construction workers). At the same time, independent unions are quite active in placing migrants as sector representatives. Moreover, the stances of the different unions seem to differ also in the political choices on migration at the national level: some organizations have taken a critical stance on governmental choices; others either did not comment or even supported the most restrictive measures, enabling the government to proceed without obstacles, clashing with the trade unions that had opposed those measures (Cillo, Perocco 2014). In general, though, with the economic crisis, such stances have receded in terms of contents, forms of struggle applied, and ways to involve workers (Mometti, Ricciardi 2011). Specifically, migration policies were worsened by the first so-called "Security package"<sup>2</sup> (Ferrero 2010) which has further highlighted the

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2 Law 94/09.

differences among trade unions and the overall retreat in their stances. Indeed, on such provisions, Cisl and Uil have supported the government of the time, enabling a “lowering in the threshold of rights, justifying this choice with the economic crisis leading to an increase in unemployment and to the closure of factories” (Unionist, Cgil, Rome). Just like the independent trade unions, Cgil presented critical stances that were either confined to the public and political debate without ever transforming into a “strategy to raise the awareness of the bottom layers of the trade unions to revive the defense of migrant workers’ rights as a defense of the rights of all workers” (Cillo, Perocco 2014: 370) or downsized to recreational or merely symbolic actions. A central element to explain, in part, the poor determination of trade unions in countering racial discrimination lies in their alignment with – or at least in the lack of willingness to struggle against – governmental policies, in the name of a generic “national interest” which has become a priority over what their charters say.

Similar to the actions countering discrimination practices, discontinuity and heterogeneity mark the collaborations with agencies and bodies fighting discrimination<sup>3</sup>. Some local branches regularly collaborate with governmental bodies and participate in joint actions against discrimination carried out by non-institutional actors. In contrast, others prefer not to collaborate with governmental bodies, as it would mean admitting their defeat in defending workers.

Nevertheless, there are not many services to advise, support, and assist workers affected by racial discrimination. Some interviewees even underline how trade unions run the risk of mirroring inequalities at the national level: “Redundancy always affects foreigners first. [...] It happens like this, I mean, for redundancy it is not the employer deciding alone, sometimes they actually agree with trade unions.” (Key informants; migrant association representative)

The actions to counter racial discrimination show the contradictions of trade unions. Despite the limitations and heterogeneity of their commitment, migrant workers express a high level of trust towards them and great expectations for change, as they are identified as a collective actor able to offer a certain degree of protection and as the main structure which, in the context of migration, has always kept the doors open (Basso 2004). On the other hand, though, they seem to attach priority to national interests, and, on migration, they run the risk of being reduced to a mere supplier of tax and administration services. Yet, a large share of migrant workers continues to become members, as trade unions are still a place for socialization and solidarity among workers, and such membership can only bring about new momentum towards change within the trade union itself.

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3 Such as the National Office against Racial Discrimination.

## ISSUES AND DEMANDS FOR CHANGE

Unionists' descriptions confirm the unions' lack of attention towards the topic of racial discrimination, and their permeability to racism, which keeps on growing in Italy (Basso 2010; Basso, Perocco 2003; Ferrero, Perocco 2011; Raimondi, Ricciardi 2004). Besides mirroring the escalation of racism in the country, the presence of discrimination within trade unions is also a consequence of the insecurity felt by all workers because of the economic crisis, systematically channeled towards migrants with press campaigns, legislation provisions, political and popular mobilizations:

Recently, during an assembly, I was talking about migrant workers, but a colleague from another trade union asked me something unexpected: "Why do we care about migrants?" In Italy, the situation has been swinging due to media campaigns and punitive institutional norms against migrants. Of course, the economic crisis also led to a general fall in employment. This induced Italians to see migrants as competitors rather than as colleagues. The economic crisis has had an influence, but of course, also the propaganda of certain political parties has worsened racism. (Unionist)

Trade union representatives belonging to independent organizations highlight some issues and contradictions in the actions of mainstream trade unions against discrimination and the conflicts between local and migrant workers, identifying the fear of losing Italian members as the leading cause for the limitations of such struggle: "Mainstream trade unions do not fully engage for migrants as they fear their Italian members. [...] Many activists of the xenophobic Lega Nord [Northern League] party are members of the Cgil, so for mainstream trade unions, it is better not to tackle the issue of migration as they are afraid to face their members, or to lose them." (Unionist)

In general, all the interviewed unionists believe the struggle against racial discrimination is a central issue in workers' organizations. Yet, in practice, the strategies and policies implemented to that end are, again, quite fragmented, superficial, often left to individual initiatives. Activities that counter discrimination focus primarily on two aspects: the workplace (Ferrero, Perocco 2011) and life outside the workplace (housing, health services, welfare) (Ambrosini 2013; Manconi, Resta 2010). As for the first aspect, trade unions typically resort to labor law, while the knowledge of anti-discrimination norms and tools is largely connected to each operator's sensitivity, interest, and personal initiative, as previously indicated by key informants. This contributes to the reproduction and strengthening of heterogeneity and the fragmentation of actions countering racial discrimination. Alongside situations in which trade unions consider themselves powerless to tackle discrimination and manage conflicts between workers, in some situations, they implement effective anti-discrimination strategies to reunite workers. Some interviewees report – though cautiously – the determination of trade unions in countering the

discrimination within the economic crisis, especially in terms of dismissals (mainly aimed at migrants) and getting unemployment benefits (from which migrants are sometimes excluded) (Coletto, Guglielmi 2013; Fullin, Reyneri 2013; Reyneri 2010). As for the second aspect, the situation is again fragmented, yet several examples of good practices emerge, especially in terms of housing and local welfare: "In Brescia, we have opposed 23 municipal resolutions by Municipalities with Lega Nord [Northern League] administrations in which they have canceled aid to migrants in this period of crisis. We are the only trade union that sued, and we won all the cases." (Unionist)

Moreover, the interviewees – especially representatives at the national level – are aware of the need by trade unions to make a quantum leap in tackling discrimination. In particular, some believe that trade unions shall play a leading role in protecting the social needs of migrants within the so-called "social bargaining". At the same time, they report the practical difficulties that trade unions encounter daily in defending migrants' rights concerning housing, education, welfare, and services, highlighting that such issues often constitute "the main subject of trade with local institutions and, thus, we are the first to be expelled from the negotiating table" (Unionist).

Let us underline some differences between the mainstream and independent trade unions. While the first prefer legal and institutional tools to tackle discrimination, the latter frame the issue of racial discrimination within the general social conflict, including it in the collective momentum of street demonstrations. Similarly, there are differences between mainstream and independent trade unions regarding internal structure and representation. The former still have an under-representation of migrants in their governing bodies, though at different levels from town to town. The latter see a higher involvement of migrants and a greater inclination to create synergies with migrant associations. Unionists confirm that, in mainstream unions, migrant unionists are mainly considered as representatives of migrant workers and interlocutors for their fellow nationals, rather than for all workers. On this matter, there is a clear awareness of the need to change union policies on the presence of migrant representatives at the intermediate and upper levels but, at the same time, the perception is that there is already an evolution in progress to this end, though a very slow one:

We need to have trainings and let our members understand that a migrant representative does not deal only with residence permits, but shall be a fully-fledged unionist. Here in Brescia, we have over six migrant representatives who are thorough union leaders. We are slowly inserting representatives who are not only factory delegates because we need representatives belonging to the governing board of their organization. This does not mean we have done enough, but we are working on it and will get there. Not only in the Chambers of Labor, but also in the sectors' secretariats. (Unionist)



Such awareness is related to the significant increase in the number of migrants, which has imposed a review of the composition of governing bodies:

Within the trade unions, we have seen the growth in the awareness of the presence of migrants and their growth in numbers within the labor world. Almost 20% of new employees are migrants, and in the trade union, whether they like it or not, they have realized that. Let's keep in mind that the trade union has an interest in doing so: if the number of migrants increases, the union has an interest in giving them space, even from a "selfish" point of view. (Unionist)

The interviewees confirm what has repeatedly been indicated in literature (Basso 2010; Basso, Perocco 2003; Ferrero, Perocco 2011; Raimondi, Ricciardi 2004) on the institutionalization of racial discrimination by the national legislation, creating an iron bond between the residence permit and the work contract, making the conditions of stay and social rights dependent on their manufacturing capacity and employment.<sup>4</sup> They also confirm the fact that migrant workers are liable to be blackmailed and that such conditions shall be spread, reaching all components of work, irrespective of their national origin:

A migrant needs work to renew their residence permit; thus, they are willing to do anything to keep their job. In this moment of economic crisis, migrant workers are obviously afraid to lose their jobs. Thus, many things are preventing migrant workers in reporting abuse, and the rights acquired by Italian workers in recent decades will not last, because if the Italian workers do not accept such conditions, the company will take the migrant. [...] These discriminating laws are weakening not only migrant workers, but also the whole labor world. (Unionist)

Trade unions are thus willing to start a path of workers' organization aimed at building a unity going beyond nationalities, residence conditions, or citizenship status.

## THE WORDS OF MIGRANT WORKERS

Migrant workers strongly denounce the number of areas affected by racism and discrimination: labor organization and distribution of tasks, life outside the workplace, the situation within the trade union. As for the latter, forms of discrimination are rarely *within* trade unions, though it is interesting to see that an interviewee reports that, in the local branch he belongs to, there are attitudes which fragment the members:

<sup>4</sup> These aspects are the basis of migration politics in Italy and were introduced with the Turco-Napolitano Law (Law 40/98) and consolidated by the Bossi-Fini Law (Law 189/02), still in force (Basso 2006; 2010).

The trade union itself sometimes creates a hierarchy; often, you notice that you, as a migrant, are treated as if you were less worthy. Because they think you understand less, you know less, or that as soon as you make some money, you'll leave. Perhaps this is not the general policy, but some unionists bear this message. The trade union, like all organizations, is made of people, with their own thoughts, and other people who experience these things personally. After many years I'm still told I don't understand things, and they believe it is because I'm a foreigner. This creates discontent, competition, mistrust. I believe they do it on purpose, because if all delegates are united, if there is solidarity and collaboration among them, especially if they belong to the same trade union, perhaps one day they could go against one representative or one secretary. In this way, instead, some delegates support them, and others don't. In part, this could be considered a form of discrimination; it's something subtle, non-transparent. Perhaps the representative sees the unity of Italian and foreign delegates and works to this end, but, so to say, they also work for this unity not to be too deep. As if there had to be unity, but only to a certain extent. (Migrant worker)

As for workplaces, the interviewees underline that migrants usually experience discriminatory treatments, especially in terms of organization of work and skills:

In general, I'm convinced that in the workplace, the most menial tasks and work are carried out by migrant workers, it's true. [...] You clearly see they rarely have managing or leading roles. Migrants always work under someone else; you are always told what you have to do. Even though I don't experience this situation in my job, at my workplace, there's an interesting melting pot: there are 13 different nationalities, and the tasks are well distributed, i.e., "easier" tasks – which require less effort – are interchangeable between migrants and Italian workers. (Migrant worker)

Racial discrimination is particularly widespread among cooperative workers (Sacchetto, Semenzin 2016). For them, the assignment of tasks and the possibilities to grow professionally are differentiated along ethnic and racial lines: "Unfortunately, most of the loading/unloading work is carried out by foreigners because it's the heaviest task, it causes several problems to the spine, to discs, hernias, etc. So, it's always us foreigners loading and unloading goods." (Migrant worker)

Some highlight, among the consequences of the economic crisis, mitigation in the diversification of tasks between migrants and natives, due to the downsizing of expectations and opportunities of local workers. The crisis has led to a general worsening of working conditions and possibilities, pushing locals to accept tasks, contract levels and wages which, during economic growth, were reserved for migrants, thus subverting a "racialized" social order, experienced by the migrants as "normal":

Where I work, in the turkey slaughtering department, especially in the "live turkey hanging" area, where live turkeys arrive, there used to be 13 of us, all foreigners.

Because it's the dirtiest job in the company, and the heaviest too, as each turkey weighs from 15 to 25 kg. You have to take it by the legs and place it on the chain. At first, we were all migrants, only the person in charge was Italian – but he did not work to hang them – because it's a very dirty job and when an Italian got there, usually they wouldn't last very long, because it was too heavy and too dirty, so they hired people like us, migrants. But now things have changed a bit, because with the crisis there isn't much work and everybody needs a job, Italians don't find much either. (Migrant worker)

Racism, thus, is consciously perceived as a mechanism segmenting the labor market, preventing its organization and resistance:

There is no specific division of skills, yet – and I can say it for sure – when they give jobs, they give them first to Italians and Albanians because they do not take part in strikes [...]. When we strike, Italians, Albanians, and Peruvians do not participate. During the last strike, the Peruvians went to work, while before they used to strike. They no longer help us to keep our jobs and convince the new employer. So, they say it's the Moroccans who organize strikes and who do not want to work. But we struggle and what we obtain is an advantage for them as well, who, instead, have kept good relations with the employer. Unfortunately, the repercussions of the latest strikes only affected us, as we were left home with no work, it's harder for us, there's more unemployment. This is because the Italians were not with us. (Migrant worker)

The division of labor based on nationalities and the stigmatization of migrants – or the most determined and demanding ones – is fed by the above-mentioned rise of racism in Italy. The interviewees underline an escalation of institutional racism and the consolidation of a largely discriminatory environment, whose aims are clear:

Discrimination episodes have become, for many years, something perceived as “normal”. In the last few years, there has also been a government feeding such discrimination. People usually need a government pointing towards a direction, but if the government is the first to discriminate, you can guess what people will do [...]. The government has instilled its policy in people's heads “beware of these people, they're dangerous, they're this and that”. [...] It's not that they don't want migrants, they want plenty of migrants, they would like to have Italy full of migrants, but illegal migrants! Liable to be blackmailed. To make them work 24/7. And so, you can make them work even for two euros per hour. (Migrant worker)

Despite the escalation of racism, there is consensus on the positive description of the relations between workers of different nationalities and, when migrants have reached a certain level of contract stability, they develop positive relations with their native colleagues. Yet, these relations mainly take place in the workplace and

rarely exist in other areas of social life. Sometimes, though, the workplace is not completely immune:

There are some strange people here ... A bit racist. They barely talk to us migrants, and when the topic of migration comes out, they start talking to each other, with their friends, saying: "These migrants are so and so ..." But there are good people among Italians, who get along with everyone. They're not all like that. In my department, there are around 15 or 20 like that. [...] Let me tell you that these people are like that not only with migrants, but also with Italians from the South. Sometimes they're more racist with them than with foreigners. [...] Almost everyone is a member of trade unions, even those with such ideas. On these things, the trade union does not and cannot do anything. The trade union can't or doesn't do. They talk about how you should behave in the workplace with your colleagues, but they won't talk about racism. (Migrant worker)

Workers who are members of a mainstream union report that, too often, these organizations do not carry out fully their anti-racist action. Those who are members of independent unions highlight that, especially in the context of cooperatives, the arrival of trade unions in the workplaces where they were not present before has always entailed a marked improvement of the conditions, also as concerns discrimination. In telling their experiences and in describing the stances of trade unions towards episodes of racism, the interviewees present a wide array of positions. Some, referring mainly to mainstream unions, clearly express their dissatisfaction with their poor determination:

The trade union knows migrants carry out the hardest and worse tasks! They know. They know, but don't do anything. They say: "Unfortunately, there is not much work, if we send a letter to the employer, they'll fire you, it's better for you to keep going without saying anything." So, you have to accept it. [...] Every month, I pay part of my wage to the trade union, and if I have a problem, *they* have to defend me. Instead, they say: "No, we can't. Because afterward, they'll fire you ..." But if I have rights, if I want to defend them, it's the trade union that should do it! "It's you, trade unions, who should go forward and not backward" [...] The trade union did nothing in cases of racism; and did not even give me the right information on the documents I needed for my residence permit and my son's citizenship. (Migrant worker)

The inadequacy of union action is included, even by workers, in the wider framework of discrimination underlying the whole society in the time of the global economic crisis. In such a context of "widespread racism" and recession, workers – especially migrants – are in a condition of further vulnerability while trade unions, which they still trust, are mainly described as "powerless". They run the risk of aggravating the already difficult situation of their migrant members:

The trade union can react to this, but with the current environment, with the crisis, companies and employers are taking advantage of it and telling migrants: "This is what there is, if you like it, you take it, if you don't want it, go somewhere else", so I try to tell trade unions about this situation which I don't like, but there's this situation and [...] the trade union tries to do something, but the owners of the company take advantage of the crisis. This part of the labor world, for companies, shall only be a "foreign" world, made of foreign workers which shall have no relations with Italian workers and, thus, if unionists support these demands they run the risk of damaging their members, because for them the only way to have a job is working like that. If they don't accept those conditions they won't work there. (Migrant worker)

One further difficulty for trade unions to act against racism is connected to the organization of labor concerning cooperative workers employed by external companies (Cillo, Perocco 2015; Sacchetto, Semenzin 2016). In the "subcontracting chain" it would be particularly hard for trade unions to assign responsibilities for a task distribution based on "racial" categories:

I don't think trade unions do much with episodes of racism, perhaps because they've never been called into question. Perhaps because even if they are called, there's not much they can do, because of racism and discrimination ... I mean, the whole society is racist, because the ones on top are racist! So, trade unions can't do much. Furthermore, trade unions cannot even enter the hotel where I clean, because they are connected with the cooperative, the Cub [an independent trade union] knows the hotel has nothing to do, or at least they pretend they have nothing to do with it, so the cooperative can say: "It's not our fault, it's the hotel that doesn't want them", but the trade union can't go to the hotel because they have nothing to do with them, it's also hard to prove that it was actually racism and not something else. (Migrant worker)

This last bit of interview also raises the question of the responsibilities of the State in the production and reproduction of racist rhetoric. As for institutional racism, both at the local and national levels, the actions and efforts of trade unions (mainly acknowledged for organizing street demonstrations) are considered inadequate and ineffective:

[Referring to discriminatory municipal provisions on the access to housing services] Trade unions have taken a stance and talked, but they only do that. What could they do? The house is not theirs. What matters is that you are a member, pay the fee, and that's it. But after all, many Africans were members. When I worked at De Longhi,<sup>5</sup> I was a member of Cisl and a union representative. The majority of Africans working there were members, but what can you do? The State, the Province, or maybe the

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5 An Italian home appliance company.

Municipality could stand up to something like that. [...] The trade union pressured them. They organized demonstrations for housing, Cgil, Cisl, Uil, all together. But nothing came of it. The Africans then said: "We'd better find out solutions together to help each other." So, when we knew someone had no place to stay, those who could host them at their place would do it. (Migrant worker)

The uneven commitment, diversified according to the different local contexts, adds up to, on the one hand, the disagreements between mainstream and independent unions and, on the other hand, the detachment between the bottom and the top of the union, even concerning the actions countering discriminatory policies carried out by local and national governments:

I remember I participated in a demonstration against the Security package organized by the independent trade union and not supported by Cgil. But on the streets, I found members of Fiom-Cgil and other Fiom delegates. One told me: "Even though it is not promoted by the federated union I belong to, I want to be here because I support this struggle." [...] There is a great difference between the bottom layers and the top of the union. (Migrant worker)

## CONCLUSIONS

The escalation of racism – in the context of the economic crisis (Kanduč, Bučar Ručman 2016) – strongly marks the Italian society (Basso 2010; Ferrero, Perocco 2011), it orients the public and political debate and has affected trade unions as well. Workers' organizations, on the one hand, seem unprepared to face and counter racist attitudes and discriminatory practices, and, on the other hand, they are not immune to the penetration of discrimination on racial grounds within their organizations.

The first aspect depends on the lack of an organic and consistent union policy at the national level on countering discrimination and fragmented union strategies; on the absence of training and poor or absent knowledge of anti-discrimination legislation tools (Cillo, Della Puppa 2011; Ferrero, Perocco 2011). Such limitations mainly emerge from the discourse of unionists and union leaders, but also from those who collaborate with trade unions without being members (migrant associations, third-sector parties, etc.); these actors have a complete overview of the situation and talking to them brings out the perception of the inner heterogeneity of trade unions at category and local level, as well as the detachment between the bottom and the top of the organization. The stakeholders highlight a further contradiction of trade unions, which curbs its anti-discrimination drive, and which is a further central issue on their timid actions. This is the conflict of interests within which trade unions often have to work to report and counter institutional discrimination – discriminatory

practices and provisions carried out by local or national actors with whom the very same trade union has to work with on the administrative side.

The second aspect is directly linked to the widespread hostility toward migrants, which – especially within the crisis – defines the public debate, media campaigns, and the whole Italian society, including trade unions. This is mainly reported by migrant workers or, at least, their most advanced and determined component: people experiencing personally more or less overt racism and discrimination, in the workplace, trade unions, daily social life. The crisis has had a remarkable impact on the relations between migrant workers and trade unions and on the relations between migrant and local workers within trade unions, letting a few contradictions emerge. On the one hand, trade unions, especially mainstream ones, have had to tackle a dramatic increase in unemployment, with the explicit request by governments and employers' associations to give priority to "national" workers. On the other hand, they have to consider migrants' expectations, as they are an increasingly structural component of their members who, with the worsening of the crisis, have come closer to trade unions, often enlarging the distance between the top and bottom layers. Such an approach has taken place both due to a request for support in times of need by many migrants, and because, after all, trade unions have shown a welcoming approach towards them, as the sole open door in a country with escalating racism.

At the same time, the social and work needs created by the crisis have led mainstream unions to overlook the importance of discrimination events and racist behavior, often lacking actions to counter them in the training of their members and leaders. This aspect, together with the perception by many migrant workers of a general retreat from their stances by trade unions, has pushed many of them to leave mainstream unions to join independent ones. This shift happened mainly in sectors with a considerable presence of migrants, where subcontracting and cooperatives are intensely used (Cillo, Perocco 2015; Sacchetto, Semenzin 2016) – a remarkable example is the logistics sector (Cuppini *et al.* 2015). The research shows that these unions meet the expectations of their migrant members, due to their lean structure and for their ability to include migrant members in their governing bodies, for the significant improvement in conditions they manage to obtain in workplaces where trade unions were absent, for their ability to enter manufacturing sectors where contract and working conditions are structurally flexible, with their interventions and bottom-up approach, but also thanks to the attention they attach to discrimination – including institutional racism. Of course, the results are proportional to the small numbers they are dealing with and in the context of small workplaces in which such unions are present.

The element shared by the different trade unions, on which all interviewees agree, is the reflection on the need for a quantum leap by trade unions in countering racial discrimination and the awareness of the fundamental role that migrant members have within the union structures. In trade unions, too, migration is a "mirror"

(Sayad, 1999), pushing workers' organizations to observe how they are lagging behind a swiftly changing labor market and an increasingly heterogeneous composition of the workforce, to refresh their strategies and sensitivity.

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## POVZETEK

### SINDIKATI, DELAVCI MIGRANTI IN RASNA DISKRIMINACIJA V ITALIJI V ČASU EKONOMSKE KRIZE

Francesco DELLA PUPPA

Avtor v članku proučuje samo delno raziskano povezavo med sindikati in rasno diskriminacijo v Italiji v času ekonomske krize. Na primerjavi pričevanj intervjuvancev iz vrst deležnikov, sindikatov in v sindikate včlanjenih delavcev migrantov raziskuje učinkovitost prizadevanj italijanskih sindikatov v boju proti diskriminaciji od leta 2008 naprej. Študija je pokazala, da so delavske organizacije po eni strani nepripravljene na soočenje in boj proti rasnim predsodkom in diskriminatornim praksam, po drugi strani pa niso imune niti na pojav rasne diskriminacije v lastnih vrstah. Hkrati pa so največji sindikati zaradi družbenih in gospodarskih težav, ki jih je sprožila kriza, spregledali pomen pojavljanja diskriminacije in rasističnega vedenja. Pogosto so zamujali tako z zoperstavljanjem tovrstnim pojavom kot tudi z navodili svojim članom in vodjem, kako jih obravnavati. Prav ta odnos in opažanje številnih delavcev migrantov, da jih uradni sindikati v tem pogledu ne podpirajo, sta številne delavce prisilila, da so se pridružili neodvisnim sindikatom. Slednji so namreč bolj pripravljeni prisluhniti pričakovanjem svojih članov tudi zato, ker rasni diskriminaciji posvečajo večjo pozornost.

Vsi intervjuvanci so se strinjali, da morajo sindikati narediti kvantni preskok v obravnavanju pojava rasne diskriminacije, kakor tudi, da morajo končno prepoznati pomen članstva delavcev migrantov v svojih vrstah.