

## THE CONTENTIOUS FIELD OF PRECARIOUS WORK IN ITALY: POLITICAL ACTORS, STRATEGIES AND COALITIONS<sup>1</sup>

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*This article aims to present an empirically grounded analysis of the field of actors mobilized against precarious work in Italy. Based on extensive fieldwork including interviews and document analysis, we discuss and compare four types of social and political actors and their organizing patterns: traditional trade unions, radical trade unions, groups of self-organized precarious workers, and grassroots activist groups. The underlying questions focus on patterns of organization and coalition building. By analyzing how precarious workers organize, which goals they have, which kinds of collective actions they engage in, and how they connect to other actors, we found that distinctive strategies lead to diverse degrees of agency and subjectivity that precarious workers develop, ranging from almost nonexistent to high degrees of subjectivity.*

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Recent transformations in the Italian labor market toward more flexible forms of employment lead to a broader diffusion of precarious work, especially among younger generations, women, and migrants. Despite the existence of many studies about labor market flexibility and precarity in Italy, there is only a small amount of publications dealing with the organization of precarious workers struggling to improve their working and living conditions.<sup>2</sup> Among these publications, empirically grounded analyses that compare different actors organizing precarious workers are seldom. Drawing on different strands of literature, such as social movement studies and labor and industrial relation studies, we adopt a comparative perspective on the contentious field related to precarious work.

The results we present in this article are based on extensive fieldwork revolving around three sets of data sources: forty-one semistructured interviews<sup>3</sup>; official documents like public declarations and collective agreements; documents produced during protest events and campaigns like call for actions and leaflets. We analyzed and compared the data constructed during the fieldwork according to a qualitative analysis strategy focusing on four dimensions linked to collective action that we introduce below.

This article develops as follows. The first subsection presents a critical literature review about the concept of precarious work and precarity that also serves to introduce a working definition for our understanding of precarious

work. We also included relevant Italian studies and give a brief statistical overview of the forms and scope of precarious work in Italy. The second subsection introduces the four actors we focus on: traditional trade unions, radical trade unions, groups of self-organized precarious workers, and grassroots activist groups. This article does not intend to impart the whole range of social and political actors engaged in mobilizations related to precarity. What we do, instead, is to introduce some specific case studies, able to illustrate the main characteristics of the four above-mentioned categories of social and political actors. This is how the third subsection is structured. Starting from specific case studies, we discuss four analytical dimensions of social and political actors engaged in the field of contention in point: goals of collective action, strategies of collective actions, organizational patterns, and outcomes of collective action for each of the four actors. We also present a pattern of coalition building among the four types of actors. In the conclusion, we sum up the main findings presented in this article and discuss them looking at the levels of subjectivity and agency that precarious workers have when engaged in collective action.

### **Precarious Work and Precarity**

Before analyzing the field of social and political actors involved in contentious politics and collective actions regarding precarious work, we propose a short critical overview of the broader context in which these struggles are embedded. Far from imparting a complete literature review,<sup>4</sup> we intend to evoke and suggest some lines of interpretation in the broader conceptual map related to the realm of precarious work.

Precarious work emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s in many industrialized countries as a result of deindustrialization, labor market transformation, and the flexibilization of work (Castel 1995; Cordova 1986; Vosko 2000).<sup>5</sup> But following national contexts, the process of precarization, its manifestation, and framework differed. In many European countries the expansion of precarious work had its origin in the course of neoliberal deregulation due to massive unemployment and the structural economic crisis (Doerre 2005; Esping-Andersen and Regini 2000; Regalia 2006) with the state as the main force, whereas in Anglo-Saxon countries and the U.S. the driving force behind the spread of contingent work were changing patterns of the employment relationship, the decline of organized labor, and the rise of the nonunion service sector (Appelbaum and Batt 1994; Barker and Christensen 1998; Carré et al. 2001; Craver 1993; Fudge and Owens 2006; Kalleberg 2000; Moody 1988).<sup>6</sup> Across national differences, the process of precarization meant both the transformation of open-end, full-time standard work forms to flexible, temporary working arrangements and the emergence of new, insecure forms of work. As Hannif and Lamm (2005) argue, “those in precarious employment often earn significantly less, work less desirable hours, face greater job insecurity and have access to fewer entitlements than their counterparts in more secure positions” (325). According to Barbier (2008), the concept of precarity and precarious work

appears in the academic discussion because of French sociology in the early 1980s as a qualitative description of seasonal or temporary employment (Bourdieu and Accardo 1993; Castel 1995) and then diffused in other national academic fields, like the Italian one.<sup>7</sup> In the 1990s, flexible work arrangements or “atypical” or “nonstandard” forms of employment represented a central element in the broader debate about the future of work (Bosch 2004; Gladstone and Wheeler 1992; Kalleberg 2000; Regalia 2006; Rodgers and Rodgers 1989).<sup>8</sup> In this article, we define precarious work as all those forms of atypical employment characterized by short-term contracts and lacking social protection. We also take into consideration those people who raise their voices against precarity although they cannot be defined as precarious workers because self-perception of precarity is another important aspect when considering and defining precarious workers.

### *Precarious Workers in Italy*

The process of precarization began in Italy in the 1980s at the legislative level, with decrees and laws ostensibly intended to deregulate the labor market ensuring flexibility, especially with regard to market entry (Fumagalli 2006, 131–4). According to Gallino (2007, 63–71), four main legislative measures were responsible for increasing work precarity in Italy: the “Ciampi Protocol” in 1993; the “*Pacchetto Treu*” in 1997; the Legislative Decree of September 6, 2001, no. 368; and probably the most significant of all, the *Legge 30* and the *Decreto Legislativo 276* (Countouris 2007; Lazzari 2006). The deregulation of employment was introduced as a means to lower the high unemployment rate in Italy, especially among young people and women in the South of Italy (Barbieri and Scherer 2009). Today the Italian labor market is one of the most flexible in Europe with some forty fixed-term contract options available to employers (Fumagalli 2006, 28). Obviously, this renders difficulties to make a statement about the quantitative scope of precarious work. Some authors claim that perceived precarity in Italy is higher than actual precarity (Accornero 2006). Other authors instead argue that precarious workers are more than those usually measured through official statistics (Gallino 2007). Bologna estimates for 2007 that there are about 3.7 million precarious workers in Italy (Bologna 2007). The *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL) research institute *Istituto di Ricerche Economiche e Sociali* (IRES) talks about the same number, 3–4 million people who do not have secured employment and are therefore in the “zone of instability” (Altieri, Dota, and Piersanti 2008; IRES 2007). The report about employment in Europe by the European Commission (2006) states that Italy more or less matches the EU15 average (Table 1).

Table 1, however, also shows that self-employment in Italy is much higher than the EU15 average. Italy has always had a high rate of self-employment; Coletto (2009) indicates that since the 1980s, the number oscillated between 4 and 5 million self-employed workers, or 20–25 percent of the total workforce. In 2007, self-employment accounted for about 26.1 percent of the total employment. Among self-employed there are new forms of single self-employment that

**Table 1.** Atypical Work in Italy (in % of Total Employment)

	Italy 2000	EU15 average 2000	Italy 2005	EU15 average 2005
Fixed-term work	10.1	13.7	12.3	14.3
Part-time	8.4	16.2	12.8	18.4
Self-employed	26.4	14.8	24.5	14.7

Source: EU Commission, Employment Annex 2006.

evolved and grew quickly in the 1990s because of the labor market reforms mentioned above. These new self-employed workers have to be distinguished in two categories: independent freelancers<sup>9</sup> and precarious semidependent workers (*Parasubordinati*). Both groups are legally independent and therefore excluded from labor law protection, but some in fact work highly dependent for only one employer. The main contractual forms for self-employment are the so-called coordinated and continuing collaboration (co.co.co.), project work (co.co.pro.), and independent contracts for self-employed with a value-added tax number called *Partita Imposta sul Valore Aggiunto*.<sup>10</sup> It is quite complicated to estimate the numbers of those self-employed workers because the statistical coverage does not distinguish between different forms. The research institute IRES estimates for 2007 a number of 1,566,978 self-employed (91,867 more than 2005).<sup>11</sup> More than half of them (836.49 or 56 percent) have no other source of income.<sup>12</sup>

Another considerable group of precarious workers are temp agency workers.<sup>13</sup> In Italy, temp agency work (TAW) was mostly prohibited until in 1997 *Pacchetto Treu* permitted the use of TAW (Carpo and Reyneri 1997).<sup>14</sup> In 2003, *Legge 30* abolished the remaining regulations and permitted the unlimited use of TAW without any obligation for any industry and every type of work. The number of temp agency workers reached 600,000 in 2008 (Leonardi 2008; Muratore 2008). In principle, temp agency workers in Italy have the same wages or salaries, rights, including union rights, and working conditions as full-time workers in the user firm. But the reality shows tremendous insecurities: employment in a user firm usually lasts no longer than forty-four paid days; the average monthly wage lies between 1,000 and 1,500 Euro.<sup>15</sup> A 2006 survey by the research institute IRES shows that 57 percent of all temp agency workers are male and among them, the rate of migrant workers is 67 percent (IRES 2007).<sup>16</sup>

### **Social and Political Actors in the Contentious Field of Precarious Work**

Besides the fact that precarious workers have to deal with inferior wages, no or weak employment security, and bad working conditions, another problem is that precarious workers in Italy lack a representation of their interests and bargaining power at the private, public, and political level (Rizza 2005, 60). In the past decade some social and political actors attempted to represent precarious workers' interests and to organize them collectively.<sup>17</sup> We took into particular consideration four types of actors: traditional trade unions, radical trade unions, groups of self-organized precarious workers, and grassroots activists.

### *Traditional Trade Unions*

Due to the substantial growth of atypical work in the 1990s, all three Italian union federations<sup>18</sup> created special unions for atypical workers in 1998: the biggest union federations CGIL created *Nuove Identità del Lavoro* (NIDIL), which is the focus in this article (Choi 2003, 2004, 2010).<sup>19</sup> The creation of NIDIL was the product of two opposing movements, strategic decisions by the CGIL, but also self-organized dynamics by precarious workers (Choi 2004). The CGIL leadership enforced the establishment of a separate organization for precarious workers inside the CGIL in the mid-1990s, and self-organized networks of freelancers, most notably the association “*Collaboratori e Consulenti Associati*” (CCA), started to join the CGIL (Paparella 1998; Trentini 1998).<sup>20</sup> Reflecting the existing conflicts, the new organization was not necessarily welcomed by the other categories.<sup>21</sup> To lessen further conflicts and animosities, the CGIL created a structure that integrated most of its categories into the organizational constitution of NIDIL.<sup>22</sup> All unions were to acknowledge the new organization and to support it whenever necessary (CGIL-NIDIL 2006). But the resistance remained and the emergence of NIDIL somewhat resembled that of an unwanted stepchild.

Nevertheless, since its inception NIDIL constantly increased its membership and organized 36,026 members in 2008 (from 1,524 in 1998).<sup>23</sup> NIDIL is now present in more than eighty territories, offering a wide range of services and consultation, which we will focus on in the next paragraph. In 2002 NIDIL officially became the status of a full-fledged category inside the CGIL. To improve the relationship to other CGIL categories, the CGIL passed an internal resolution in 2006 for cooperation (*Copromozione*) that mandated the member unions to support NIDIL financially and established new rules for cooperation.<sup>24</sup>

### *Radical Trade Unions*

Autonomous and radical trade unions first appeared during the 1970s because of the “‘tertiarisation’ of industrial conflict” which saw the spreading of strikes also among workers employed in the service sector, such as teachers and employees (Bedani 1995, 279). They are usually rooted in the tradition of workers’ council, dismissed by traditional trade unions during the 1970s. One of the most important radical trade unions, the Confederazione dei Comitati di Base (COBAS), is actually a confederation of local union committees that are inspired to the tradition of workers’ councils and that were born late in the 1980s involving at first high-school teachers. There is, then, the Rappresentanze Sindacali di Base (RdB), which is a confederation of rank-and-file local unions born in 1987. Subsequently, in 1992, the RdB participated to the constitution of the united national confederation CUB, frequently named RdB-Confederazione Unitaria di Base (CUB).<sup>25</sup> Another radical trade union is the Sdl Intercategoriale, born in 2007 from the union of Sindacato Intercategoriale dei Comitati di Base (SinCobas), Sindacato Unitario dei Lavoratori dei Trasporti (SULT), and

Sindacato Autonomo Lavoratori Aviazione Civile (SALC).<sup>26</sup> Generally speaking, radical trade unions refuse the mode of social concertation and are organized in a more horizontal way than traditional trade unions. Finally, they put emphasis on direct action, participative democracy, and “class identity” (della Porta and Mosca 2007, 6). In this vein, a large group of workers who did not feel included in traditional trade unions founded the CUB in 1992.

### *Groups of Self-Organized Precarious Workers*

Groups of self-organized precarious workers, at least originally, organize independently from both traditional and radical trade unions. They are frequently born as a response to specific threatening in workplaces, have no formal membership because they are based on active participation of workers, and aim at representing workers’ interest in a more direct manner than traditional and radical trade unions. That is to say, that the implicit model of political representation is based on direct commitment and action instead of that on political mediation and delegation.<sup>27</sup> Without any willingness of generalization, there seems to be at least three types of self-organized precarious workers’ groups.

The first one is rooted at the local level and generally involves a small number of precarious workers who decide to claim short-term changes for their own working and living conditions. A good example here is the Precari Atesia Collective, established by a group of call-center operators employed in the Atesia call center, based in Rome and one of the biggest call centers in Europe. The second type is generally rooted at the national level, although its backbones are local nodes of precarious workers, and is related to one labor market sector or profession rather than to a specific workplace. An example here is the national network of precarious researchers (RNRP), born in 2004 during mobilizations against the public university reform and then active also in the next years. The third one can be rooted both at the local and national levels, although it is not linked to any defined workplace: precarious workers who gather in the same group, in fact, have different jobs but are similar in that they are all precarious workers. A good example of this type of group is the Chainworkers Crew, based in Milan and born in 1999, in order to promote “. . . media and mall activism for awareness-building and the unionization of precarious workers” (Chainworkers Crew n.d.).<sup>28</sup>

### *Grassroots Activist Groups*

As we already stated above, precarious and insecure employment is not new in Italian society and has earlier incarnations in the social movement mobilization of the 1970s (Grispini 2006), although the term precarity was seldom used.<sup>29</sup> Because of the lack of literature about this specific topic, it is difficult to reconstruct the trajectories that brought grassroots activists<sup>30</sup> in the contentious field of precarious work. Many grassroots activist groups mobilizing about precarious work in Italy seem to be rooted in the multiple and varied experiences of the

so-called social centers, *centri sociali* in Italian.<sup>31</sup> Some grassroots activist groups linked to the (post)-autonomous tradition already began to take into consideration this issue before the cycle of protest against counter-summit. At the end of the 1990s, for instance, grassroots activist groups linked to the informal network of the *White Overalls* named themselves “The Invisibles” and began to claim for a basic income in order to fight precarity, as it happened the 20th of June when they contested the traditional trade union *Confederazione Italiana dei Sindacati Lavoratori* (CISL) in Rome during a national demonstration. More visible struggle of grassroots activist groups occurred from 2001 to 2006, when the effects of *Pachetto Treu* and the subsequent *Legge 30* and *Decreto Legislativo 276* began to be perceived and experienced in Italian societies. We will address some of them below. At the dawn of the new century, informal networks of social centers extensively participated to transnational counter-summit, in Italy and Europe, being part of the so-called alter-globalization movement or global justice movement. One of the interviewees stressed that to participate in this cycle of protests was important for people in his group but not enough: they realized that imposed flexibility without any social protection was changing their daily lives and decided to organize national (and later on transnational) mobilizations against precarity.

### Organizing Collective Actions of Precarious Workers

The four types of actors mobilized about precarious employment and precarity might be positioned in a continuum that goes from established and institutional political actors to nonconventional political actors. What follows is a preliminary typology presenting some emblematic cases, able to explain the main trends in organizing precarious workers.<sup>32</sup> The cases are arranged in four analytical categories to organize the empirical data in a comparative way: goals of collective action, strategies of collective action, organizational patterns, and outcomes.

#### *Organizing Strategies by Traditional Unions*

*Goals of Collective Action.* NIDIL describes itself as a union that gives voice and representation to atypical workers, who work without social protection.<sup>33</sup> NIDIL claims to pursue two main goals: (1) raising awareness for the issue of precarious work as well as for the problems and realities of precarious workers, and (2) improving working conditions for precarious workers through re-regulation and organizing, on multiple levels: inside the union federation, in society, and at the workplace (CGIL-NIDIL 2006).

Raising awareness and acceptance for the phenomenon of precarious work was a fairly progressive and difficult task in the late 1990s, when the prevailing discourse by unions, not only in Italy but in all of Europe, was that precarious work has to be abolished and precarious workers ought not to be organized and represented (Bleses and Vetterlein 2002). Raising awareness in society meant to

publicize the meaning and effects of precarious work and the new services by NIDIL in both workplaces and societies at large. This goal proved to be easier to achieve at the level of public discourse, especially when, in 2001, another round of deregulations supported the drastic expansion of precarious work and NIDIL and the CGIL publicly opposed it (Pedersini 2001).<sup>34</sup> Raising awareness at the workplace level was a long-term goal aimed at two directions: precarious workers were the first target to reach so as to understand their situation and present them the union as a possibility to improve their conditions; full-time workers and union members were the second target to inform so as to reduce discrimination and mobilize solidarity and mutual understanding. A lot of full-time workers and union members perceived their colleagues who were temp agency workers or working under other fixed-term contracts as a possible threat to their own job. Sometimes the CGIL category, representing the full-time workers, even supported these kinds of sentiments. Therefore the atmosphere at the workplace level between full-time and precarious workers could be very tense (Fullin 2002).

*Strategies of Collective Action.* NIDIL has three main strategies: (1) re-regulation through collective bargaining, (2) political and legal action, and (3) organizing and shop-floor representation (Choi 2010). Attempts to re-regulate formerly deregulated conditions and areas through collective bargaining and political and legal measures play an important role in the activities of NIDIL. This allows the union to affect conditions for individualized, precarious workers on two collective levels, the national/sectoral and the enterprise level (Regalia and Regini 2004). But in the beginning, collective bargaining did not have a high priority because the prevailing opinion was that it was too difficult to frame collective interests for precarious workers. A member of the NIDIL executive board admits “There are not that many clear rules, when you are representing atypical workers. You have to reinvent the rules of negotiating, every time.”<sup>35</sup> Another important pillar of NIDIL’s strategies attempt to pass and enforce political and legal reforms to improve the conditions for precarious workers. In the first years, NIDIL had the very ambitious goal to pass a reform of the whole welfare system that would redefine the terms of dependent and independent labor and add the category of “dependent independent” to it (*Legge Smuraglia*) (Ballarino 2002, 2006). With the right wing Berlusconi government in place, it was obvious that these hopes would not be fulfilled. From 2001 on the CGIL and NIDIL went into total opposition to the government, a move that paralyzed the cooperation with the other two union federations, the CISL and the *Unione Italiana del Lavoro* (UIL), who continued to participate in tripartite negotiations. Even though there has been a rapprochement in the relationships ever since, many inside the CGIL still blame the CISL and the UIL for agreeing to the *Legge 30* because a major part of the political work of all the unions consists now of attempts to undo and correct the deregulations that were passed in the years before. Union building and mobilizing at the shop-floor level did not seem to enjoy a high priority among NIDIL strategies for a long time, and neither did organizing.



Most of NIDIL's members come through the connection with other CGIL categories, which identify precarious workers either among their membership or in their jurisdiction and refer them to local NIDIL representatives. In a long and difficult process these representatives then try to get in touch with precarious workers to recruit them (Barkan 2000). NIDIL did not have any distinctive organizing strategies until 2008, when the union decided to focus stronger on organizing. Now there are several projects under way to increase density in areas and companies with a few members and to initiate new organizing campaigns in completely unorganized companies. Also, the participation of NIDIL representatives in organs of shop-floor representation like "unified union representation" (*Rappresentanze Sindacali Unitarie* [RSU]) is increasing and being fortified.<sup>36</sup> Because NIDIL represents many precarious workers who work in companies and industries where national or sectoral agreements are virtually impossible to achieve for them, engagement in RSUs and negotiating enterprise-level agreements have become crucial strategies in the recent past. As to be expected, there are conflicts between NIDIL and CGIL members. NIDIL plans to focus more on activating members to engage at the company level, also to boost organizing.

*Patterns of Organization: Top-Down versus Bottom-Up.*<sup>37</sup> As the strategies of NIDIL already suggest, the organizational pattern of NIDIL is largely top-down. This is especially due to the peculiar history of NIDIL's origins that just briefly included a moment of bottom-up, rank-and-file movement, when the freelancers joined the union. After they left, the CGIL made the conscious decision to create a structure that would represent and assist precarious workers in a more paternalistic way. Consequently, all activities are staff driven, decisions are made on a central level, and the organizational structure is vertical. Even though formally, the union statute claims that the main organizational principle is union democracy, all essential decisions are made by NIDIL leadership, who consists of representatives of other CGIL categories and NIDIL representatives (CGIL-NIDIL 2006). This representational model of democracy does not require active participation by members as long as they formally comply. In fact, member mobilization is neither specifically supported nor needed. As noted above, NIDIL relies heavily on the CGIL's power to pursue collective agreements and other goals—not on its own organizational power. Thus, NIDIL never carried out remarkable workplace actions or strikes because it never had to, but also because it would not be able to. A NIDIL representative recalls: "We never managed to organize collective fighting experiences in NIDIL. We tried a couple of times, but we could never organize masses of atypical workers, even though there are plenty of them. Everybody goes their ways."<sup>38</sup> He confirms that there is almost no identification with the union by its members and continues by predicting that NIDIL might even have fulfilled its purpose, which is pointing out the problem of precarity, and therefore can dissolve itself. "NIDIL is going to end, not because it failed, but because it has performed its task perfectly. The categories

will start to take care of the precarious workers.” In addition to that, a union researcher states that most NIDIL members would probably not even notice if NIDIL would dissolve itself and be absorbed back in the CGIL.<sup>39</sup>

*Outcomes.* At the micro level NIDIL’s collective actions can be divided into individual and collective outcomes. Creating highly needed and demanded individual services for precarious workers who cannot rely on collective support or an institutional network is probably the most significant outcome. NIDIL offers a wide range of individual services, among which are legal services, consultation, and support, access to low-priced social insurances, and access to credit and financial support. The services are highly sought after and a major incentive for nonmembers to join the union (Choi 2004).<sup>40</sup>

The emphasis on providing individual services lead to criticism that these strategies would not benefit the creation of collectivity and solidarity among precarious workers. NIDIL would act like a service agency and not a union, and precarious workers would only join NIDIL to enjoy the services but not to be actually part of a union (Bologna 2007). Collective outcomes at the micro level are the representation of precarious workers in RSU and subsequently the possibility to negotiate collective bargaining agreements at the company level. Especially for self-employed workers who are not formally employed but hired as independent contractors, this has become a useful tool at the micro and macro levels because NIDIL can negotiate certain conditions for contracting out services. By the end of 2008 NIDIL had negotiated more than one hundred collective agreements, especially for self-employed workers. A member of the NIDIL executive board admits, though, that some of the agreements are modest to say the least.<sup>41</sup> The agreements cover more than half a million workers. The biggest achievement is the national agreement on TAW, signed in 1998, that covers about 500,000 temp agency workers (90 percent of the market) (Paparella 1998). The agreement that was since renewed twice negotiated substantial improvements in wages and employment security and furthermore created so-called bilateral bodies (*ente bilaterale*) for temp agency workers, which are financed by the employers and provide an extensive range of services (Leonardi 2008). However, it is important to note that none of the agreements were reached through strikes or other workplace actions, indeed not even collective mobilizations. As mentioned earlier, NIDIL has no organizational power in terms of a strong membership and therefore no bargaining power.

### *Organizing Strategies by Radical Trade Unions*

*Goals of Collective Action.* Radical trade unions link the issue of precarious work with broader social problems in the Italian societies. They recognize the existence of insecure employment in its purest form, that is to say, short-term workers lacking basic working rights and social protection. At the same time, however, they consider precarity as a working and existential condition that actually affects open-end, full-time workers. Among the unionists we inter-

viewed, for instance, many link recent delocalization tendencies in Italian firms as a restructuring of the employer–employees relationship in a negative sense for the latter. This is yet another form of precarity according to radical unionists who hence focus their efforts in this direction as well. Another important goal for the radical trade union RdB-CUB was the attempt to reduce high cost of life due to the increase of inflation and the lack of parallel readjustments of salaries. Rather obviously, this social problem affects more precarious workers than open-end, full-time workers. The latter, however, are not excluded from radical trade unions' struggles because high cost of life is an even more general problem than precarity. Struggles against delocalization and struggles against high cost of life rest on a broad conception of precarity able to include also open-ended workers. This mechanism of “frame extension,” according to which frames are extended to attract and include other potential participants to the original struggle (Benford and Snow 2000, 625), is in line with what a radical unionist of the SinCobas explained: “the typical reference worker in every unionist association was and still largely is the open-end, full-time worker employed in a medium-big firm.” It is therefore clear that the social construction of precarity as a condition also affecting open-end, full-time workers matches with the traditional target of radical trade unions.

While with this respect radical trade unions can appear very similar to traditional trade unions, it is also true that the former also engaged in mobilization strictly related to precarious workers. The RdB-CUB is probably an emblematic example of a double direction according to which the goals of collective action developed. On the one side, radical trade unions ask for the application of open-end contracts in those workplaces where the use of short-term contracts is clearly illegal. An example is the campaign “*Assunti Davvero*” (“Really Hired”) that we introduce below. On the other side, radical trade unions also support the introduction of a “granted minimum income” so as to create a new type of social protection for precarious workers. In this sense, radical trade unions connect with the struggles of many grassroots activists groups and self-organize precarious workers.

Due to the particular power relationships between traditional and radical trade unions in workplaces, another goal of collective action is to obtain the fulfillment of union rights, protected by the law but not put into practice. To organize precarious workers in those workplaces where traditional trade unions are less present and weaker therefore is also a means to reclaim the representative power of radical trade unions and hence to ask for full recognition as a union.

*Strategies of Collective Action.* Radical trade unions support disruptive strategies of collective action, both inside and outside workplaces. An important strategic means of collective action is in fact to organize local and national demonstrations of precarious workers in order to render them visible and, at the same time, to render radical trade unions visible as well. In this spirit, radical trade unions organized a national demonstration in Rome against high cost of life and

precarity on November 6th, 2004. These demonstrations are “important moment of representation,” as a radical unionist of the RdB-CUB said, that cannot replace other forms of communication and organization. Another important strategy of collective action is the slow and reticular construction of networks among different social and political actors. These small-scale strategies intend to increase the power of precarious workers in their workplaces and to construct more stable relationships among groups of dispersed individuals and organizations.

It is important to notice, however, that radical trade unionists can also adopt another strategy with regard to the organization of precarious workers. Instead of directly organizing precarious workers, they often act as a support for those willing to autonomously organize in order to improve their working (and living) conditions. A radical unionist of the RdB-CUB suggests that “the traditional model of union delegates does not work anymore, especially for precarious workers.” This does not mean a complete absence of radical unions from workplaces: another radical unionist we interviewed told, for instance, that one of the strategies its local radical union branch adopted was the distribution of informative leaflets outside workplaces in order to increase the awareness of precarious workers about their own situation. There are also cases in which radical trade unions struggle from within the workplace. What the radical unionists of the RdB-CUB suggests above, however, is the existence of a strategy of cooptation of precarious workers’ mobilization rather than a strategy of direct organization of precarious workers. According to a radical unionist based in Milan and active in the RdB-CUB, moreover, the support to precarious workers was also connected to a sort of fracture between (precarious) workers and traditional trade unions: “[F]rom the point of view of radical trade union, not only for the CUB, in several cases these workers had to ask for support to radical trade unions because the other unions were those who signed [the agreement] for the externalization or were going to draft these laws [increasing precarity]. So, these traditional trade unions were not interested in promoting a mass protest.” The intervention of radical trade unions therefore seemed necessary to give precarious workers a reference point in the workplace and to support them also against traditional trade unions.

*Patterns of Organization: Top-Down versus Bottom-Up.* Radical trade unions aim at acting as a support for those precarious workers who decide to autonomously organize at the collective level. From this point of view, radical trade unions such as the RdB-CUB adopt a bottom-up approach in the organization of precarious workers’ struggles, as it happened recently with the protest of eleven call-center operators near Milan, whose contract in the public hospital was not renewed. Even though the workers’ protest failed, the bottom-up pattern of organization was brought to a coalition with radical trade unions, particularly the RdB-CUB, which organized a new call center about and for precarious workers named “precarious phone.” There, together with lawyers and unionists, the eleven call-center operators answered to the call phones of precarious workers to

provide them information, support, and legal advices.<sup>42</sup> This is an emblematic example of bottom-up organizational pattern: local precarious workers' protest connected with radical trade unions and, from this coalition, a national service based in Lombardy born, which see the active collaboration of the same precarious workers. As it happened in many other situations, moreover, this is a good example of protest creating new resources for precarious workers (Mattoni 2009).

A different organizational pattern occurred, instead, at the national level, where RdB-CUB organized a campaign to promote a law proposal about precarious workers in the public administration sector to promote the application of open-end contracts. The campaign, significantly named "Really Hired" (*Assunti Davvero*), was managed through a more top-down approach: the radical trade union initiated the campaign, spread the related information through different channels including the union website, looked for signatures of precarious workers supporting the law proposal, and organized the first national demonstration of precarious workers employed in the public administration sector on October 4, 2006.

In brief, radical trade unions engaged in both top-down and bottom-up organizational patterns. When adopting the latter type of organizational pattern, moreover, it seems that radical trade unions also engaged in larger processes of coalition building with other social and political actors involved in the field of contention related to precarious work.

*Outcomes.* The outcomes of radical trade unions seem to go in two main directions. At the micro and meso levels, radical trade unions sustained the creation of physical and virtual places in which precarious workers can find both material and informational resources to activate themselves and find the needed help to do so. Letting apart the quite obvious creation of websites devoted to precarity, the interesting example here is the attempt to open the network of front offices where precarious workers can go, inform themselves, and become more aware of their contentious opportunities. A case is the network of the "Invisible Front Offices" established in 2004 and based in different Northern-East cities in Italy and offering support for issues related to migrants, precarious workers, and housing. These services were born from the collaboration of Associazione Difesa dei Lavoratori (ADL) COBAS, the associations *Razzismo Stop* and M21, and a network of grassroots activist groups named the *Disobbedienti*.

At the meso and macro levels, instead, there is a clear attempt to promote changes at the legal level and to act in the political arena through both conventional and unconventional forms of collective actions. The main outcomes are law proposal about specific problems related to precarious work, such as the one connected to the campaign "Really Hired" introduced above. Obviously, the national law proposal was only the first step in the production of concrete changes at the legislative level. The same happened at the regional level in Lombardy, where a coalition of several social and political actors promoted a regional law proposal aiming at introducing the "minimum income" for

precarious workers, at the regional level. Both the national and regional law proposals were not eventually transformed into actual state laws. Therefore, the real outcome would be more at the level of coalition building among different social and political actors and at the level of promotion and diffusion of discourses related to a different welfare state system (in the case of the regional law) in which income would be disconnected from work.

### *Organizing Strategies by Self-Organized Precarious Workers*

*Goals of Collective Action.* Because of the different types of groups of self-organized workers it is difficult to establish common features related to organizational patterns of collective action. As already stated above, there are groups of self-organized workers, like the RNRP, that organize on a national basis and operate within a national professional sector, in this case the one of public university system. In other cases, instead, different types of precarious workers come together in a mixed group that works on the issue of precarious work at a more general level and, as it happened with the case of the Chainworkers Crew, can occasionally get in contact with other precarious workers willing to organize themselves in order to improve their working and living conditions. There are, finally, those groups of self-organized workers that are strongly rooted in the workplace where they first begin to organize. An important, although not at all isolated, example is the Precari Atesia collective, self-organized precarious workers employed in a call center, Atesia, that we take as an illustrative case in this subsection. Atesia call center employs thousands of precarious workers and is based in Rome.<sup>43</sup>

The Precari Atesia Collective was established in 2005 by a group of call-center operators who wanted to improve their working conditions and fight against the unjust application of short-term contracts. The CGIL already maintained a presence within this workplace, although precarious workers who established the Precari Atesia Collective did not consider it to be representative of their situation and interests. To some extent, the target of mobilization was not only the management of the Atesia call center but also the traditional trade unions, considered as allies of the employer rather than a resource for precarious workers. This case study symbolizes the gap between precarious workers and traditional trade unions in mobilizations against precarity in Italy (Ballarino 2005, 178).

Especially at the beginning of mobilizations, the Precari Atesia Collective requests were (1) open-ended contracts for both full-time and part-time workers instead of short-term contracts; (2) an increase in salaries; and (3) the application of the law concerning industrial safety. After some contentious collective actions, four workers were fired: from that moment onward, the goal was not only the general struggle against short-term contracts but also the reinstatement of the four sacked workers.

*Strategies of Collective Action.* Lacking any institutional political representation, this activist group opted for nonconventional political actions. They auto-

mously organized assemblies, strikes, and demonstrations in order to raise the issues mentioned above, and they printed a periodical internal journal to contact other call-center operators employed by Atesia. Precarious worker Andrea explained that the collective was born in a contentious situation, when the firm management decided to decrease the due amount of money for each telephone call received without consulting the workers. After a spontaneous assembly of about one hundred call-center operators, the decision was to establish a collective of precarious workers as a reference point in the call-center, also because these workers do not recognize themselves in traditional trade unions.

On June 1, 2005, there was a twenty-four-hour strike accompanied by a picket in front of the workplace in order to contact as many precarious workers as possible because operators work in shifts and have difficulties in meeting all together. On July 22, 2005, a spontaneous assembly took place after the announcement that 800 precarious workers were to be dismissed. Because of this assembly, four activists involved in the Precari Atesia Collective were immediately fired: they were blamed for obstructing colleagues' working activities and for organizing an unauthorized assembly. The reaction to this sudden firing was the organization of another picket to the bitter end and numerous protest actions supported by the radical trade union COBAS. On September 10, 2005, there was another strike by the Precari Atesia collective, also supported by COBAS and other precarious workers' groups from the COS group—the new owner of the Atesia (nowadays named Almaviva) call-center company.

Parallel to these contentious actions, the Precari Atesia Collective engaged in a legal action against the call-center management: they pushed an enquiry of the competent governmental body, the Labor Inspectorate, in order to state the unjust application of short-term contract and to force the management to hire works on an open-end basis. This came after the Precari Atesia Collective engaged in an autonomous learning process about the Law 30 so as to grasp their situation at the legal level as well. The result was the creation of a dossier distributed among precarious call-center operators. The enquiry of the Labor Inspectorate actually assessed the illegal and unjust application of short-term contract in the call-center in August 2006 (Ispettorato del Lavoro 2006).

*Patterns of Organization: Top-Down versus Bottom-Up.* The organizational pattern of the Precari Atesia Collective was completely bottom-up and horizontal. It was bottom-up in the sense that the beginning of mobilization and the related contentious collective actions were autonomously organized by precarious call-center operators, who succeeded in involving more and more workers in their assemblies, pickets, and strikes without the initial support of any formal representative political and social actor. As we already stated above, this was in line with one of the reasons leading to the creation of the collective: many precarious call-center operators considered traditional trade unions, and in particular the CGIL representatives, as opposed to the real interests of precarious workers. It was horizontal because the processes of decision making with regard to the forms and contents of mobilizations were collectively decided during assemblies.

As precarious worker Giorgio explained, “decisions were taken during assemblies. Everyone could propose a potential initiative and then, on the basis of different opinions, we made a synthesis and we choose the one that more convinced everyone.” This decision-making process revolved around discussion and consensus among all the people participating in assemblies. It did not include any mechanism of delegation and was strongly based on direct participation of precarious workers.

*Outcomes.* As already mentioned above, the Precari Atesia Collective was created after a spontaneous assembly outside the call center in May 2005 when the company decided to decrease the workers’ pay per call without any prior discussion with employees. In this case, a spontaneous mobilization created a moment for collective discussions about working condition that led to the creation of the Precari Atesia collective. This activist group, made up by precarious workers with no or little political experience, had very low levels of social-organizational and material resources. They were a small group of workers, they were isolated, and they had not the support of those material infrastructure usually provided by traditional trade unions. However, they began to mobilize and, after their first strike in 2005, were able to gain the support of external activist groups such as the *Assemblea Coordinata e Continuativa Contro la Precarietà* and the Cobas, the attention of the radical left newspaper *Il Manifesto*, and the curiosity of an important Italian playwright, Ascanio Celestini, who eventually created a theatrical performance and a documentary about the Precari Atesia strikes.<sup>44</sup> In this case, the collective action about precarity itself created new resources that the activist group immediately used in order to continue their actions. At both the micro and meso levels of mobilization, this was an important outcome for precarious workers, who hence increased their own resources, visibility, and ability to mobilize other precarious workers in the call center. At the macro legal level, instead, the investigation of the Labor Inspectorate and its following assessment of the illegal, massive use of co.co.co and co.co.pro forms of contract in the Atesia call center represented an important precedent for the whole call-center sector.

### *Organizing Strategies by Grassroots Activist Groups*

*Goals of Collective Action.* One of the goals of many mobilizations was to represent precarious workers struggling against precarity as both new social subjects and political actors, albeit unconventional and developing their struggles outside the institutional political arena.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the primary goal of collective action was a “struggle for recognition” in the sense that grassroots activist groups look for a public and political recognition and, in doing so, “engaged in a conflict over the institutionalized hierarchy of values that govern which social groups, on the basis of their status and their esteem, have legitimate claim to a particular amount of material goods” (Honneth 2001, 54). The recognition of precarity as a social problem and precarious workers as a social subject inter-



twined, in fact, with more material claims addressed to institutional political actors and governmental bodies. Analyzing grassroots activist groups documents, three main claims emerged that went beyond the search for symbolic recognition and were instead linked to material changes: the introduction of basic working rights (such as maternity leave and sick leave), the introduction of new social rights (among which the right to have a home and the right to have access to cultural goods), and the introduction of basic income. Many grassroots activist groups therefore were not (only) focusing on changes in the labor market but also asked for social policies of redistribution among precarious workers.

*Strategies of Collective Action.* Going public in a contentious and disruptive way seemed to be the overall strategy of collective action that grassroots activist groups employed in mobilizations against precarity. Without going into detail, in many cases of mobilization involving grassroots activist groups, the strategies of collective action all converged toward the same pattern of “grassroots mobilization” (della Porta and Diani 2006) in which participation played a crucial role. This was certainly linked to the political and contentious background of such activist groups, which saw direct participation and visible protesting as a crucial means to have a voice in the public level and to create alternative spaces of expression for those usually at the margins of the political field.<sup>46</sup>

The case of the Euro Mayday Parade (EMP) is probably emblematic. The EMP is not a traditional demonstration but a parade: a sort of carnival where various floats equipped with sound systems play different genres of music, from reggae to techno, followed by people dancing and parading at the same time. The choice to have a parade, evoking a carnival, a feast, and a rave at the same time, was novel with respect to traditional First of May demonstrations in Italy. Traditional trade unions usually organized two public events to speak about workers’ rights: one big national demonstration in an Italian city that changed each year alongside a number of smaller demonstrations all over Italy and a massive free concert held at the San Giovanni square in Rome and broadcasted live by national public television.

The activist groups that first set up the parade decided this format exactly because they wanted to be perceived as different from traditional trade unions, as Michele explained: “[W]hen we thought about this we said to ourselves that we wanted to construct a public moment in which one says yes, I am precarious, but there are a lot of us and . . . it is not that we are jinxed. We are precarious, there are a lot of us, we want to overcome this condition, to organize ourselves. We are able to represent ourselves without any mediation and with energy and potency, not in a way that only expresses the fact that we are overwhelmed by rotten lack every day.” In brief, the parade was intended to construct a positive image of precarious workers and to show their ability to represent their own situation without the political mediation of traditional trade unions. As Michele underlined, moreover, it was also a matter of attaching positive emotions to the parade that might be expressed through the bodies of protestors: this was a way for precarious workers, whose working and living conditions usually differ a lot, to bond.

Many grassroots activist groups were daily based in local physical spaces where they also used to mobilize against precarity in a less visible but certainly important manner. We already mentioned, for instance, the creation of the “*sportelli degli Invisibili*” in some North-Eastern regions of the county. Another important means of struggle was the organization of self-investigations related to precarity in order to understand what precarious work was and which types of measures would have helped precarious workers. Some examples are the online survey of precarious researchers and the investigation of the Rebellia Social center based in Tuscany, Pisa (Aa.Vv n.d.).

*Patterns of Organization: Top-Down versus Bottom-Up.* Organized networks of grassroots activist groups were the fluid and temporary backbones of mobilizations against precarity. For instance, on the 25th of October 2005, an informal network of student collectives from different Italian cities organized the national demonstration against the Ddl Moratti. A broader informal network of activist groups organized the two *Reddito per Tutt\** direct actions within the context of a national demonstration to support income launched by radical trade unions occurred on the 6th of November 2004. In both the cases, there was more than one protest promoter: initially either one or a few activist groups launched the protest event, but the response to the call for action was the quick creation of an informal network of activist groups that either organized the protest event (the demonstration against the Ddl Moratti) or contributed to the day of mobilization with additional protest events (*Reddito per Tutt\** direct actions).

Protest promoters formed national networks in which all activist groups held a certain degree of legitimacy because of their previous participation in local protest events on the same contentious issue. Prior political experience, like the organization of contentious and nonconventional political actions, seems to be important in maintaining these types of informal national networks, as is a light level of coordination among the activist groups involved in them.

The EMP was, and still is at the moment of writing, a transnational protest campaign that was originally, from 2001 to 2003, a national protest event based in Milan. From 2003 the original protest promoters linked themselves on a more stable basis with other activist groups from a number of Italian cities. Despite national preparatory meetings and the organizational process passing through a national mailing list named Precog, the autonomy granted to each activist group in the national network was an important characteristic of the EMP at the domestic level. Goffredo clarified the logic behind this network dynamic:

Usually the assumption was: there is no single subject acting as a promoter and so there are no subjects which adhere, but everyone may act as a promoter of the Mayday, without any differentiation between who arrived later [in the network of activist groups]. [. . .].

We discussed the best ways to arrive [at the day of the Mayday]. In some cases there was complete freedom, in the sense that each single territory, decided their own personal way of arriving. In other cases there was an attempt at

coordination through national collective appointments. In other cases there were collective national campaigns, but delocalized in the territories.

The fact that each activist group willing to participate in the EMP became, in an almost automatic way, a protest promoter granted the development of a horizontal network of activist groups that coordinated its efforts in the common goal of organizing the parade.

*Outcomes.* At the more general level, grassroots activist groups were able to construct and render visible an alternative system of meaning about precarious work according to which precarious work was both an opportunity to explore and a challenge to face. For this reason, in fact, several grassroots activist groups asked for deep changes in the welfare state system in order to maintain the positive outcomes of having a short-term contract while neutralizing the negative outcomes of being a precarious worker. Because of the difficulties grassroots activist groups have in being considered valuable political actors, the creation of an alternative system of meaning about precarious work did not translated into actual changes at the policy level, which will be probably seen on a more long-term basis. That said, it is also true that grassroots activist groups participated in broader networks of social and political actors who pushed changes at the regional legal level and that, in the case of Lazio, had a recent positive outcome since a regional law about the experimentation of basic income recently passed.

Apart from the creation of coalition with other types of social and political actors, at the micro level, the organization of mobilization against precarious work may be already considered an outcome of grassroots activist groups. For instance, during the *Reddito per Tutti\** direct actions, precarious workers were constructed as producers rather than consumers. In line with this, they gained access to goods during two direct actions and redistributed them to others attending the protest event. To some extent, they put into practice a symbolic representation of the solution they had elaborated in order to face precarity: income redistribution.

In this way, moreover, they also evoked the claim around which the protest event revolved—as its name suggested: a “basic income” for everyone, distributed in the forms of both money and services, such as free public transport and low-rent homes for precarious workers. This is an instance of “prefigurative politics” in which collective action renders the solution protestors are fighting for possible (Epstein 1991; Polletta 2002). Grassroots activist groups experienced, on a temporary basis, how their lives would be if their protests succeeded.

### **Pattern of Building Coalitions**

As happens in other fields of contention, in the case of precarious work boundaries among social and political actors also blur. This is partially due to “multiple belongings” (della Porta 2005) of individual activists engaged in

mobilization against precarity, who can be engaged in a radical trade union and a grassroots activist group at the same time. There is yet another, probably more important factor that contributes to the construction of fuzzy boundaries in the field of contentions related to precarity: the construction of coalition among different types of social and political actors, some of which we already introduced above. With this regard, it is possible to look at patterns of coalition building from the point of view of each actor involved in the contentious field of precarity.

If we take into consideration traditional and radical trade unions, there is an extensive literature in union revitalization studies addressing patterns of coalition building between unions and various coalition partners (Brecher and Costello 1990; Brinkmann et al. 2008; Nissen 2004; Nissen and Russo 2006; Turner and Cornfield 2007). In this vein, Frege, Heery, and Turner (2004) identify three types of relationships trade unions and their coalition partners can build: vanguard coalitions, in which the union is leading the coalition and the partners have to subordinate under the unions' goals; common cause coalitions, in which both parties benefit from the coalition and integrated coalitions, in which the union adopts the partner's cause (Frege, Heery, and Turner 2004, 142–4).<sup>47</sup>

Taking into account the rather adversarial relationship between traditional unions and the other actors presented in this article, coalitions among these actors are very unlikely. But that is not the case for NIDIL that maintains numerous vanguard coalitions and common cause coalitions at the national and local levels with a variety of coalition partners. The most significant common cause coalition, at the national as well as at the local level, is the one with the other unions for atypical workers by the other two union federations, CISL *Associazione Lavoratori Atipici e Interinali* (ALAD) and UIL *Comitati per l'Occupazione* (CPO), because they negotiate and sign most of the collective bargaining agreement as a trinity. But the partnership is also important at the local level, where the relationships are often more cordial than at the national level. A local representative puts it like this: “We don't have a competitive relationship on the local level, because we all have to start from scratch. A colleague of mine has a rather rough saying, which is, ‘if you are sitting in a mess, you better shovel your way out together’.”<sup>48</sup>

Coalitions at the local level depend on the local NIDIL representation, their activities, and the conditions of the region. There are examples of vivid coalitions at the local level with sports clubs to push for labor-friendly procurement policies or with women organizations to push women-friendly labor legislation or with youth and cultural organizations like *Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana* (ARCI) to influence educational policies. A pivotal point for coalition building is the annual week of events called “week of fight against precarity” (*settimana di lotta alla precarietà*), in which all NIDIL locals in the country organize a week of ongoing events under one common political theme or political demand in coalition with local actors. The events likely include discussions, workshops, concerts, movie festivals, parties, protests, and other public events.

Changing the perspective on patterns of coalition building, it is possible to consider groups of self-organized workers and grassroots activist groups as initiators and precursors of struggles that then involved also traditional and radical trade unions. In this case, traditional and radical trade unions follow already existing struggles promoted by other social and political actors. The analysis shows that when groups of self-organized precarious workers and, in particular, grassroots activist groups had the role of initiators, radical and traditional trade unions had to change and adapt forms of collective action to the new context of struggle. This was clear, for instance, in the case of the EMP.

In 2001, two protest promoters organized the parade for the first time in Milan: the Chainworkers Crew and the social center Deposito Bulk. They decided to involve the regional section of the CUB, a national radical trade union, in order to secure logistic and economic support in the parade, as Michele told:

At that time we opened up to the CUB, saying to them: we have the right idea to face the problem of precarity, we need a . . . let's say a "basista," a solid logistic base, if you trust us you will see that you will gain something from this.

Obviously, there are no conditions, in the sense that if you trust us, then you trust us and provide your logistic organizational structure to bring the result home. But it is not possible to attach any conditions to this [the parade]. At that time, we had to be honest, they decided to trust us.

The involvement of the radical trade union for its logistic and economic support did not change the original idea of having a parade instead of a more traditional demonstration. When both radical trade unions and, from 2004 onwards, Federazione Impiegati Operai Metallurgici-CGIL (FIOM-CGIL) joined the parade they had to accept this protest format and to prepare their own floats as well. What happened was a fusion of contentious performances that remind "cross-fertilization processes" occurring in other Italian mobilizations (see della Porta and Piazza 2008, 9).

One radical unionist from the SinCobas said that before the parade a group of their members in Milan met to prepare the float for the parade. Among them, there was also one precarious shop assistant who "since she worked in a little shop, she had not change of engaging in union activities there, so that moments [the float construction] became a way which one could give a contribution without always being hidden in the workplace. The May Day Parade gave a lot of space to this, because as a precarious worker it is really difficult to express yourself on the workplace: each 3 or 6 months you are institutionally fired or re-hired, so you tend to remain silent [. . .], so that channels, floats full of music, become a manner to express yourself." This quote suggests that the fusion of contentious performances was also functional to a more active inclusion of precarious workers in the radical trade union in point.<sup>49</sup>

Another interesting example is the Precari Atesia Collective mobilization. With regard to coalition building, when the Precari Atesia Collective organized strikes and assemblies, it got in contact with other political actors: the radical trade union COBAS and the *Assemblea Coordinata e Continuativa Contro la*

*Precarietà*.<sup>50</sup> In the Precari Atesia strikes the protest promoters with little previous political experience maintained control over the organization of mobilizations precisely because both its opponents and its supporters had high levels of political experience. Consequently, the small group of protest promoters was the place where decisions were taken concerning protest event organization, where framing activities took place, and where contentious performances were selected. Once protest promoters took decisions related to these issues, protest supporters had little room to contest or change them.

## Conclusions

In the late 1990s, when precarious work in Italy, but also in many other industrialized countries in the world, evolved, strategic responses of trade unions and other actors were marginal to say the least. Precarious workers were confronted not only with challenging working and living conditions but also with little to no support (self-) representation and protection. In not more than a decade, a vivid and active field of social and political actors engaged in various forms of mobilization against precarity has emerged in Italy. Traditional trade unions, radical trade unions, groups of self-organized precarious workers, and grassroots activist groups employ different sets of collective actions and strategies within or even beyond their own frameworks. In this article, drawing on empirical data, we analyzed how precarious workers organize, which strategies they develop, how they relate to other actors, and what outcomes their efforts lead to.

An important feature that emerged from the analysis was the need for new forms of representation and collective action. A number of our interviewees, belonging to the four social and political actors we investigated, stressed this point, and the case of the Precari Atesia Collective was rather representative of this problem. Strikes and pickets at the entrance of the Atesia call center were two contentious forms of collective action that workers have traditionally used to address employers (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). These actions were traditional familiar means, recognizable and well-known performances within the repertoire of contention usually used by older social movements, namely labor movements, youth movements, and student movements.

That said, it is also true that activist groups carried out each contentious performance according to the broad social, political, and cultural context in which the protest event was embedded. The very experience of being a precarious worker, for instance, rendered these contentious collective actions less traditional than they may first appear. This was particularly evident in the case of the Precari Atesia collective. As already mentioned above, after a first spontaneous assembly of precarious workers outside the Atesia call center, from which also originated the collective of precarious workers, a strike took place. This is a quite common contentious collective action that workers adopt to improve their working conditions.

Precarious workers from the Atesia call center, however, were not traditional workers. Their contracts were *co.co.co* and *co.co.pro*, according to which they were supposed to manage their working hours and days autonomously. Their employer, however, did not respect this contract and forced precarious workers to act as regular employees with strict allocations of working hours. According to the contract, then, the precarious workers were not on strike: they were simply not working the hours that the employers had illegally allocated to them. Ironically, what the Precari Atesia called a strike was in fact the strict application of their duties as established in the contract they had signed when hired. There was, then, the use of a familiar contentious collective action, namely the strike, in a working context different from the past, when most of employees held open-ended contracts and were full-time workers.

Precarious workers employed at the Atesia call center, on the contrary, had the duties of such workers without their rights. The adoption of a traditional way of struggling, namely being on strike, by a category of workers for whom being on strike had a completely different meaning that in the past highlighted the contradictions linked to the illegal situation of the precarious call-center operators.<sup>51</sup> The same form of *sciopero pignolo*, namely a form of work-to-rule strike (also occurred in recent mobilizations against economic cuts in Italian universities, also linked to struggles against precarity in Italy: precarious researchers had refused to hold lessons and exams, which were not the tasks to be performed according to their contract, although, *de facto*, precarious researchers were and still are massively employed to perform these tasks, basically for free, in Italian universities.<sup>52</sup>

From a comparative point of view, the goals of these four actors show more convergence than to be expected. On a macro level, all actors claim to strive for a higher awareness, visibility, or recognition of precarious work and precarious workers to overcome isolation or to engage in a public debate. The practical goals either point toward the improvement of existing conditions and range in a fairly limited scope from social reforms, changes in the legal system, or collective agreements, or reach for higher goals like a guaranteed basic income. On the micro level the cleavages between these actors are more significant. To some actors self-representation and ownership are more important than to others, most notably the traditional trade unions. Actors who only engage in a limited setting, like the self-organized workers of the Precaria Atesi Collective, are necessarily more oriented on short-term changes in their immediate sphere of action.

A look at the strategies show the embedding and path dependencies of each actor in their respective field. Institutional actors like traditional trade unions have a fairly predetermined, corporatist set of collective actions, whereas self-organized workers or nonconventional social movement actors tend to carry out more radical, disruptive strategies or grassroots mobilizations inside and outside of workplaces. The circumstance that traditional trade unions possess far more resources, political clout, and bargaining power than other actors opens them a greater realm of possibilities to provide local presences, services, and collective

bargaining, which not only explains the greater variety of strategies, but also the variety in the outcomes. The outcomes range from national collective agreements, over law proposals at the local level to effects on a smaller scale. The goal that these diverse actors had in common, raising awareness and creating visibility for precarious workers, is also the outcome that they share, in the sense that the term “precarity” and the problem of precarious work is no more unknown in Italian public discourse.

Despite some similarities, comparison of organizational patterns highlights the existence of different attitudes toward the role of precarious works in struggles against precarity. It seems to us that the main cleavages develop around the axe of agency of precarious workers with respect to the structural context in which they are inserted.<sup>53</sup> This, in turn, is strictly linked to the type of organizational pattern that the social and political actor in point adopts. Those actors who usually organize according to a top-down approach, like traditional trade unions, seem to assign a few degrees of agency to precarious workers.

The contrary is also true because those actors who usually develop a bottom-up approach, like grassroots activist groups, seem to assign a great degree of agency to precarious workers. In an ideal continuum, therefore, traditional trade unions consider agency and the related construction of subjectivity as something that can be brought to precarious workers through the organization of collective action from a top-down approach. On the other hand, self-organized precarious workers and grassroots activist groups consider agency not only as possible but also as the only means through which precarious workers can make a difference at the public and political levels. They do not want to be represented by other social and political actors that speak on their behalf, but they directly engage precarious workers in mobilization with a low level of delegation and a high degree of individual and collective agency directed toward the change of micro, meso, and macro structures that render labor market flexibility a challenging risk rather than an opportunity to be explored.

In a nutshell, despite the goals and outcomes of collective actions might appear similar at a first sight, a more in-depth examination of organizational patterns and strategies of collective action shows that strong differences do exist in the field of contentions related to precarity. The presence and absence of recognition at the institutional level seems to be a particularly relevant factor in determining the degree of agency and subjectivity granted to precarious workers: the more an actor is recognized at the public and political levels, the more it adopts a top-down approach and the less it assigns agency and subjectivity to precarious workers. There are yet two other factors, however, that seem to have an influence on the degree of agency and subjectivity, namely the political cultural background and the position in the political arena of the social actor in point: the more critical toward established political representation and the more marginal in the political arena, the more focused on active participation of precarious workers.



Obviously, these are only preliminary hypotheses that should be addressed on a broader basis, including a higher number of cases to further develop a comparative cross-actor approach to the study of labor conflicts and movements in contemporary Italy.

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## Notes

1. The authors collectively discussed and analyzed the data presented in this article. Hae-Lin Choi collected data related to traditional trade unions; Alice Mattoni collected the data related to radical trade unions, groups of self-organized precarious workers, and grassroots activist groups. Although the two authors are jointly responsible for the article, Hae-Lin Choi wrote the section devoted to traditional trade unions and Alice Mattoni wrote the sections devoted to radical trade unions, self-organized precarious workers, and grassroots activist groups. All the other sections were written jointly by the two authors. The authors would like to thank all interviewees for their participation.
2. Some exceptions are Brancaccio et al. (2005) and Roggero (2005, 2009) who employed a postoperaistic theoretical framework and a coresearch empirical approach in order to understand different struggles linked to precarious work.
3. We collected interviews with sixteen people engaged in grassroots activist groups, eight people engaged in groups of self-organized precarious workers, three people engaged in radical trade unions, and fourteen people engaged in traditional trade unions. Further demographical details about the interviewee sample are available under request.

4. See Tucker (2002) for a preliminary review of the Anglo-American literature with a focus on New Zealand.
5. As Kalleberg (2009) and others rightfully note, there have always been precarious forms of work. "(.) it has existed since the launch of paid employment as a primary source of sustenance" (Kalleberg 2009, 2). In fact, globally, precarious work was and is still the rule. The new aspect of the debate about precarious work is "the return of social insecurity" (Castel 2008)—the fact that the process of precarization has reached the urban middle classes in the industrialized countries, who used to rely on long-term, full-time jobs.
6. It should be noted, though, that the standard of employment security in the U.S., with most employment arrangements being "at will," has always been lower compared with most European countries.
7. We only partially agree with this analysis because it considers the academic field as isolated from other places of knowledge production in societies, among which civil society actors. In Italy, for instance, the cycle of mobilization of the 1970s already introduced the term "precarious workers," and many activists we interviewed stated that they began to discuss and speak about precarious work already in the 1980s.
8. See also the special issue on "Flexible Work—Atypical Work—Precarious Work?" of the *Management Revue* 2005, vol. 16(3), or the Special Issue on Changing Contours of Employment and New Modes of Labor Regulation of the *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 2004, vol. 42(4).
9. Bologna (1997) famously called these workers "second generation self-employed workers" (*Lavoro Autonomo di Seconda Generazione*).
10. There are more forms of independent contracting, which we would not discuss further.
11. Bologna talks about 6 million self-employed workers because the national statistical institute Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT) accounts for 6 million one-person-companies or companies with an average of 2.7 employees (Bologna 2007).
12. Their contracts typically last about seven months and their average annual income is about 8,000 Euro, which is significantly low. As to be expected, women are stronger affected, they represent the majority in that group (57 percent), and their average annual income is about 6,800 Euro (Di Nicola et al. 2007).
13. TAW is a triangular form of employment between a temp agency worker, a temp agency firm, which employs the worker, and a user company, where the worker actually works (Freeman and Gonos 2005).
14. The Ciampi Protocol from 1993 already permitted the limited, seasonal use of unskilled labor through a temp agency for certain industries like tourism. *Pacchetto Treu* prohibits TAW (1) for unskilled work; (2) in times of labor disputes and strikes; (3) when the company had laid off workers in the last twelve months; and (4) for dangerous work. The use of TAW had to be permitted for one of the following reasons: (1) to substitute absent workers (e.g., maternal leave, illness, etc.); (2) for special types of work that are usually not done by the company; and (3) under certain provisions in the collective bargaining agreement (e.g., overproduction). A temp agency contract could be extended three times at most for up to a total period of twenty-four months. If a user company infringes upon any rule mentioned above, the temp agency workers have to be permanently hired on an open-end contract (Muratore 2004).
15. There is a significant gender gap; 70 percent of all women workers earn 1,000 Euro per month.
16. The total rate of migrant workers is 23 percent and has been rising significantly. A majority of the temp agency workers work in the industrial manufacturing sector (52 percent), 15.6 percent work in retail, and 10.9 percent work in IT or other industrial services. Thirty-six percent work in midsize enterprises with 250 employees or more (IRES 2007, 64). The average age is quite young, thirty-one years. Women tend to be slightly older and more qualified than their male colleagues, and they work more in the service sector (Altieri, Dota, and Piersanti 2008).
17. Some scholars underline that there is the trend, among specific categories of precarious workers, of organizing in specific informal "professional communities," which render stable the "occupational culture" in which they are embedded (see, for instance, Rizza 2005). An example is the informal professional community of Italian archivists (Bertolini 2005). Although interesting, we do not take these forms of organization and coordination into account because they do not lead to forms of (public) collective action in the strict sense.
18. In Italy there are three ideologically defined union federations: the largest federation is the former leftist CGIL, organizing 5.7 million members in 2009, the catholic CISL, with about 4.5 million members the second largest federation, and the social democratic UIL with roughly 2.1 million members. In numbers, the Italian unions have the most members in Europe; union density is comparatively high with 33 percent (Leonardi 2008).

19. The CISL formed ALAI and UIL, respectively, CPO. Italian for NIDIL is Italian for “New Identities of Work,” ALAI means “Association of atypical workers and temporary workers,” and CPO means “Committee for employment.”
20. It has to be mentioned that soon after NIDIL was created, most of the former CCA members left because of conflicts they had with union officials. “This changed the mission of the organization, which no longer sought to represent professionals and restricted its activity to workers of so-called ‘quasi-subordinate’ status, mainly pseudo-self-employed freelancers and temporary agency workers” (Ballarino 2006, 132).
21. Affiliates to the union federation, like the metal workers union or the service sector union, are called “categories” in Italy because they usually represent a certain industry.
22. Half of the executive board of NIDIL consisted of union officials from CGIL categories, appointed by the CGIL, and the other half was elected by NIDIL members.
23. Fifty-nine percent of them are semidependent self-employed workers, 25 percent are temporary agency workers, 12 percent are self-employed, and 4 percent have other atypical types of employment (Leonardi 2008). Most of them are between thirty-one and fifty years old (61 percent); 29 percent are under thirty-one and 10 percent are between fifty-one and sixty-five years old (Cevoli 2002).
24. NIDIL was never self-sustainable and therefore was and is still subsidized by the CGIL unions.
25. Nowadays the RdB-CUB has about 700,000 members in a number of labor market sectors (source RdB-CUB website at <http://www.rdbcub.it> accessed on the 18th of August 2009).
26. Sdl Intercategoriale organizes about 60,000 workers in different sectors, among which the public administration, transportation, commercial chains, local public services, tourism, and cleaning services (source [sdlintercategoriale.it](http://sdlintercategoriale.it) accessed on 18th of August 2009).
27. Also for these reasons, such social and political actors are difficult to map and count. At the same time, it is also difficult to establish the number of workers involved in them. The same occurs in the case of grassroots activist groups involved in mobilization against precarity and addressed below. Only an intensive and long-lasting fieldwork would impart a detailed but always provisional map of the number of activists involved in them and the types of actions in which they are engaged. This is in fact out of the scope of this article. For this reason, we do not give any information about how many activists were involved in such groups and how much collective action related to precarity they were involved in.
28. For a more detailed history of the CW and its approach to political struggles against economic precarity see Chainworkers Crew (2001).
29. For instance, the presence of irregular, occasional, and underpaid jobs were already experienced by young people and also mentioned as a source of difficult material situations in current analysis of class composition developed by those journals such as *Quaderni Piacentini*. These people were currently named the “nongarantiti,” an expression that literally means “not granted” and single out a collective social actor that is not the same as traditional factory workers. In an article published by A and Traverso, another independent, radical journal of the 1970s, the student movement and the “proletariato giovanile,” the younger proletariat defined their collective identity as follows: “we are unemployed, we are forced to occasional work, to misery.”
30. When we speak of grassroots activists we refer to those groups of activists that are not supported by any institutional political actors and that frequently have a broader scope than mobilizations against precarity.
31. These centers are usually abandoned buildings, frequently owned by the state or local public administrations, occupied by groups of people in order to have a space to promote underground cultures, and offer self-organized services to the neighborhood, in which they are located. In some cases, social centers are also spaces in which activists live.
32. This means that throughout the article we will ignore geographical and labor market sector variations in the organization of precarious workers. Although important dimensions, a more systematic survey of collective actions related to precarious work is necessary in order to grasp and explain the impact of such dimensions in the organization of precarious workers.
33. From the NIDIL website: [http://www.nidil.cgil.it/chi\\_siamo.php](http://www.nidil.cgil.it/chi_siamo.php), accessed August 5, 2009.
34. The CGIL left the tripartite negotiations with the government and the employers over negotiations to abolish basic labor rights in the workers’ statute. The CGIL called for general strikes and mass mobilizations, which led in the spring of 2002 to one of the biggest demonstrations in the history of Italy and in

- April 2002 to the biggest general strike in more than twenty years (Molina and Rhodes 2007; Paparella and Rinolfi 2002).
35. Interview with Dario Serano, member of CGIL-NIDIL executive board, October 27, 2008.
  36. In 1991 the three union federations signed a pact for the introduction of a “unified union representation” (RSU), a body for the shop-floor representation of workers and their respective unions that was confirmed in the 1991 Ciampi Protocol. Regalia and Regini (2004) note, though, that the general spread of RSU is still insufficient, especially in the private sector. RSUs function like works councils with extended rights, even to negotiate collective bargaining agreements. RSUs can be elected in every company with more than fifteen employees by all employees (Pedersini 2001; Russo 2001).
  37. In a simplified analysis of organizational patterns, we classify under either bottom-up or top-down approaches. A bottom-up approach rank-and-file and member participation, democratic decision making, and horizontal organization structures. The top-down approach suggests staff-driven activity, centralized decision making, and vertical organization structures (Markowitz 1998; Panda 2007; Voss and Sherman 2000).
  38. Giovanni Bonomi.
  39. Interview with Mariella Baffoni, researcher, July 13, 2009.
  40. A full list with detailed descriptions can be found on the NIDIL website. All services are free to members; some services can be purchased by nonmembers.
  41. The NIDIL website lists collective bargaining agreements for self-employed workers. Lazzari (2006) gives a commented overview (footnote 83, p. 68).
  42. The call center has a website at <http://www.telefonoprecario.it>.
  43. Atesia belongs to the company Almaviva, which specializes in customer care activities, among which is the management of call centers for a variety of firms and companies.
  44. The theatrical performance was named “Appunti per un film sulla lotta di classe” (notes for a film about class struggle) and was first staged in 2006. The documentary was named “Parole Sante” (Saint Words) and was first presented in 2007.
  45. This aspect was obviously also present in the mobilization of self-organized precarious workers, although in the case presented above the Precari Atesia Collective was first struggling to obtain material changes in the workplace.
  46. On the same premises rested transnational demonstrations against economic and political international gatherings, like the G8 and WTO summit, to which many Italian grassroots activist groups then struggling against precarity also participated.
  47. Furthermore, the coalitions can either be *coalitions of influence*, in which unions and their coalition partners try to push their respective political agendas, or *coalitions of protest*, in which the coalition partners try to put pressure on the government or the state.
  48. Interview with Salvatore Colento, NIDIL regional coordinator, July 16, 2009.
  49. At the same time, moreover, the quote evokes the difficulties that precarious workers have in mobilizing in their own workplaces, especially when they are atomized and isolated one from another.
  50. This was a coalition of individual activists and activist groups based in Rome and born in 2000. Among its aims there was the production and diffusion of information about precarity and the organization of struggles and campaign against precarity. Source: <http://www.claronet.it/giornale/a1n03pag8.pdf>.
  51. In this vein, Brancaccio et al. (2005) also address and assess that precarious workers need to find a new way of protesting.
  52. These are the mobilizations, at their peak occurred in Autumn 2008, against the Gelmini-Tremonti financial cuts in the public university system. Gelmini was the Minister of Education and University, while Tremonti was the Minister of Economy.
  53. The debate about agency and subjectivity of precarious workers has been widely addressed both in the academic field (DiMaggio 1988; Zanetti 2005) and in the social movement milieu. In this article, we consider agency as the capability of being an active subject of social change at the micro, meso, and macro levels of societies. Related to this, we refer to subjectivity as linked to agency, in that it is one of its outcomes: the more an individual and social actor has agency, the more it is able to construct and shape its own subjectivity with regard to a specific aspect of societal life.

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