

INSTITUTIONALIZING THE FIGHT AGAINST PRECARIETY: ITALIAN CASE

Abstract: The article discusses different types of Italian institutions and organizations, a major part of which activities is addressed to the issues of precarious employment and growing precariat.

INTRODUCTION

There are many varieties of civil society and public sector's initiatives that address a specific social, economical, political, ecological or any other kind of problem or issue. Some of these initiatives later become more stable and sustainable attaining a form of an institution of various types, e.g. non-governmental organization, political or social movement, research center, etc. The type of the specific body also is highly interconnected with the agenda it possesses, the functions it bears, scope of the activities it might implement, as well as certain groups of people it aims to reach and kind of the relationship it might establish with them.

Same is applicable to such matter as fight against precarity: the idea per se is indeed quite broad. Depending on the reasons that lay in the foundation of a specific body that is being active in this field, several most common types may be identified accordingly, namely, trade unions, grassroots and non-governmental organizations, social or political movements, groups of self-organized workers. The main differences among them are structural and hierarchical. The types of the organizations are listed according to their nature: from the top-down to the bottom-up ones.

This article is dedicated to the presentation and analysis of these types of the “anti-precarious” organizations located in Italy, a country broadly known for its profound tradition of fight for the labour rights and decent employment.

ITALY: 20 YEARS OF STRUGGLE

Italy, which may be called a homeland of European anti-precarity and anti-austerity movement with its first Mayday organized already in 2001 and which was later spread all around Europe and transformed into the Euro Mayday parades initiative, is a perfect study case of the civil society initiatives addressing the problems of precarity and institutionalizing such initiatives.

According to Mattoni and Vogiatzoglou¹, some of the first precarious workers' actions took place already in late 1990s, while the peak of the workers' fight came to the period, which lasted from 2004 and 2006, which was also characterized by emergence of various grassroots associations and organizations.

The beginning of the anti-precarity struggle can be seen as the response for the labour contract reforms (so called “Pacchetto Treu”) done by the government in 1997. The reforms led to “the segmentation of labor [...] with the introduction of highly precarious forms of labor (temp agencies, ever more liberalized and flexible short-term contracts, and the voucher system of payment for casual work)” and “the dismantling of the protections that had been in place for workers on permanent contracts”². Here it is also important to mention that the 1997 reforms were part of the continuous legislative changes, started already in 1993, that were aiming at deregulation of employment and labour market³. It was believed that such deregulation might help to decrease the high unemployment rates; as a result, it led to increasing precariatization.

As it was mentioned before, although already in 1990s there were players, such as political parties (mostly belonging to the far left spectrum), as well as trade unions, which might have led and united the growing struggle of the precarious workers, only in 2000s they, trade unions, became sound members of this movement, while at the same time the radical trade unions (e.g., those ones organized in more horizontal manner and rooted in the tradition of the workers' councils) were more active in support for precarious workers than the traditional confederate ones. However, missing the beginning of the precarious workers mobilization and organization later cost trade unions, and especially traditional confederate ones, reputation among the very precarious workers. As Zamponi and Vogiatzoglou state, “the credibility of trade

¹ Mattoni, A. & Vogiatzoglou, M. (2014). “*Today, We are Precarious. Tomorrow, We Will be Unbeatable*”: Early Struggles of Precarious Workers in Italy and Greece. In: Chabanet, D. & Royall, F., (eds.). From Silence to Protest: International Perspectives on Weakly Resourced Groups. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, p. 67.

² Broder, D. *This Isn't Work, It's Exploitation. An interview with Marta Fana*. 27.12.2017. Available on: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/12/italy-workers-precarious-unions-m5s-democratic-party> [Accessed 12.02.2018].

³ Choi, H.-L. & Mattoni, A. (2010). *The contentious field of precarious work in Italy: political actors, strategies and coalitions*. In: WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labour and Society, Volume 13, p. 215.

union confederations has been heavily undermined by delays in tackling the issue of precarity, as well as by their timid opposition to austerity policies⁴.

An interesting example of the dynamics of trade unions involvement in mobilization of the precarious workers is described in the article by Mattoni and Vogiatzoglou⁵. There they present an initiative of the Italian General Confederation of Labor (CGIL) taken place already in 1990s, which was about establishment of a branch within its structure that was focused specifically on precarious workers – “New Labor Identities” (NIDIL-CGIL), which initially was highly marginalized even within the very structure of the Confederation. In the upcoming years, due to the attempts of the young trade unionists, NIDIL experienced quite a dramatic shift in its agenda, and went from “focusing solely on local struggles in specific workplaces”⁶ to a wide communication and informational campaign about precarity. As of 2008, NIDIL was active in more than eighty territories in Italy and had more than 36 thousands members (59 % – semi-independent self-employed workers, 25 % – temporary agency workers, 12 % – self-employed workers, 4 % – other atypical forms of employment)⁷.

It is also interesting to note that the change happened in NIDIL was generally quite a typical feature of the campaigns and grassroots organizations and social movements that led these campaigns in 2000s: they attempted to create a collective identity of precarious workers, instead of separation and division of them territorially (geographically) and professionally (by the specific occupation or a workplace). However, despite it, as Zamponi and Vogiatzoglou write⁸, exactly the occupation-specific forces took an especially active stance in precarious workers mobilization in the middle of 2000s, particularly, they address to the example of call-centers employees and precarious university researchers.

Depending on the particular occupation of the precarious workers, support from the trade unions differed a lot. In those professions, where permanent workers were traditionally protected

⁴ Zamponi, L. & Vogiatzoglou, M. (2017). *Contentious labour in Italy and Greece. Movements and trade unions in times of precarity and austerity*. In: Wennerhag, M., Fröhlich, C., & Piotrowski, G. (eds.). *Radical Left Movements in Europe*. Ashgate. Available on: <https://books.google.si/books?id=1JouDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=ru#v=onepage&q&f=false> [Accessed 02.02.2018].

⁵ Mattoni, A. & Vogiatzoglou, M. (2014). “*Today, We are Precarious. Tomorrow, We Will be Unbeatable*”: *Early Struggles of Precarious Workers in Italy and Greece*. In: Chabanet, D. & Royall, F., (eds.). *From Silence to Protest: International Perspectives on Weakly Resourced Groups*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, p. 80.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Choi, H.-L. & Mattoni, A. (2010). *The contentious field of precarious work in Italy: political actors, strategies and coalitions*. In: *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labour and Society*, Volume 13, pp. 217 and 239.

⁸ Zamponi, L. & Vogiatzoglou, M. (2017). *Contentious labour in Italy and Greece. Movements and trade unions in times of precarity and austerity*. In: Wennerhag, M., Fröhlich, C., & Piotrowski, G. (eds.). *Radical Left Movements in Europe*. Ashgate. Available on: <https://books.google.si/books?id=1JouDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=ru#v=onepage&q&f=false> [Accessed 02.02.2018].

by the trade unions and later witnessed emergence and growth of precarious workforce, trade unions, particularly, traditional ones, were especially active. These confederate trade unions aimed at establishment of fruitful and sustainable connection to the grassroots associations, for example, as Matoni and Vogiatzoglou present, “networks of precarious university researchers have worked with the teachers’ union FLC-CGIL⁹, and committees of precarious journalists have cooperated with the journalists’ union FNSI^{10,11}. On the contrary, occupations, which had been generally not well covered by the trade unions even before, when the number of precarious workers involved in such professions started to grow, lacking support of the existing trade unions and, to some extent, also, from political movements, began to search for other ways of institutionalization. Mostly, it applies to people involved in freelance work in such spheres as art, culture, and communication. This type of precarious workers started to unite in “professional associations” (ACTA for independent workers in education, information, and consulting, ANA for archaeologists, etc.) and movement networks (Quinto Stato, a political and cultural network of freelance workers reflecting and mobilizing on their conditions across sectors)¹². Apart from these types of organizations, radical trade unions were also presented in this niche. Generally, radical trade unions were more prone to connect to the new forms of precarity than the confederate and traditional trade unions, as Choi and Mattoni outline, “radical trade unions aim at acting as a support for those precarious workers who decide to autonomously organize at the collective level¹³). Another form of institutionalization also existed, for instance, the Chambers of Precarious and Autonomous Labour (Italian: CLAP, Camere di Lavoro Autonomo e Precario), an association that initially was a grassroots initiative, but combined the trade unions’ methods of organization.

As it was mentioned trade unions were not the most sound members of the mobilization of the precarious workers. Such players, in terms of organizing the collective demand of precarious workers, were and are grassroots organizations, informal groups, and social movements, in some cases organized by precarious workers themselves. One of the reason behind it is a difference in the existing agenda: while trade unions were still aiming at reaching the workers who would possess a “classical” employment contract of indefinite duration, the

⁹ The Federation of Knowledge Workers of the Italian General Confederation of Labour (Italian: Federazione Lavoratori della Conoscenza).

¹⁰ Italian National Press Federation (Italian: Federazione Nazionale Stampa Italiana).

¹¹ Zamponi, L. & Vogiatzoglou, M. (2017). *Contentious labour in Italy and Greece. Movements and trade unions in times of precarity and austerity*. In: Wennerhag, M., Fröhlich, C., & Piotrowski, G. (eds.). *Radical Left Movements in Europe*. Ashgate. Available on: <https://books.google.si/books?id=1JouDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=ru#v=onepage&q&f=false> [Accessed 02.02.2018].

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Choi, H.-L. & Mattoni, A. (2010). *The contentious field of precarious work in Italy: political actors, strategies and coalitions*. In: *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labour and Society*, Volume 13, p. 224.

other members of civil society and other types of institutions were, from one perspective, more willing to intake precarious workers as their members, and from another, more structurally suitable for their self-organization initiative.

In terms of the organizations of precarious workers, according to Choi and Mattoni, it is possible to distinguish three types: emerged at local level and involving a small number of workers, emerged at national level and rooted in the specific occupation (for instance, already mentioned struggles of the call center workers), and emerged both at local and national level, but not limited to the specific occupation¹⁴. Interestingly that in some cases, organizations of precarious workers were not only opposing their employers, but also the traditional unions, which were already present at their workplaces and which were regarded (by the workers) as not efficient and representative enough, and even opposing the precarious workers. Grassroots together with non-governmental organizations, in some way, may be called an intermediate phase between groups of self-organized workers and trade unions: they didn't have the same level of institutionalization, as trade unions did, but they were more representative and structural than disperse movement of workers. Due to it and more flexible internal structure, such organizations, which were aiming at collective action, were the most active and sound players exactly in mobilization of the precarious workers particularly in the mid-2000s, even though they stay on the same level now. The aforementioned May Day was exactly an initiative of the grassroots organizations. Apart from it, they managed to organize various protests and demonstrations, on the base of which several national and regional activist networks were created.

In terms of the exact actions of the organizations depend on how well are organizations represented institutionally: trade unions are more engaged in conventional political actions, while grassroots organizations, social movement and groups of self-organized precarious workers are searching for more “interactive” on-site methods, like strikes, protests, campaigns, etc.

In the end it is also vital to outline that despite the structural differences between various types of the organizations of the precarious workers discussed above, they all share the same aspirations: a) public and political recognition of the precarious workers, b) protection and representation of precarious workers, c) claims for the legislative changes that would lead to increase in salaries, re-introduction of open-ended contracts, assurance of work safety regulations, d) introduction of labour and social rights for the precarious workers. Some types of

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 218.

the organizations, like radical trade unions and grassroots organizations include such aspect as introduction of basic income in their agenda.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The recent developments in Italian labour and social politics resemble the similar ones in other EU countries. Introduction of the Jobs Act, which can be perceived as part of overall labour market liberalization and deindustrialization process¹⁵, resulted in rapid flexibilization of labour, which in case of Italy was not softened and backed up by the social benefits system in the same scope, as for example, in Germany. Unemployed people suffer the most: they have become more vulnerable than they have been before, they are the ones who are exploited the most while entering the labour market, they are “forced to accept ever more degrading forms of work, both in terms of wages and in terms of working conditions”¹⁶. While business is being put in the center of the government’s attention, Italy is experiencing an increase of part-time workers, self-employed people, unemployed youth, and people who are forced to take unpaid jobs, labour market is witnessing the emergence of the various precarious forms of employment, and people, especially youth, are living the country in pursuit for better, securer, and more stable employment and workplaces. As of 2015, self-employed people constitute 24.4 % of all-Italian working workforce (though, self-employment historically was spread in Italy more than in other EU countries), 11.9 % of workforce were unemployed, while the respective rate among age group 15-24 was up to 40.3 %, 6.9% were long-term unemployed¹⁷. Moreover, according to the statistical report, in 2016, 30 % of people residing in Italy were at risk of poverty or social exclusion¹⁸. According to Choi and Mattoni, “today the Italian labour market is one of the most flexible in Europe with some forty fixed-term contract options available to employers”¹⁹.

At the same time, Italy can be served as a solid example of the long tradition of mobilization and organization of precarious workers. As was discussed in the article, several types of actors are being presented there: trade unions, non-governmental and grassroots organizations, social movements and group of self-organized workers. Despite the structural,

¹⁵ According to Cillo and Pradella, since 2007 Italy has lost at least 13 percent of its industrial power (Jacobin Magazine 2017).

¹⁶ Broder, D. *This Isn't Work, It's Exploitation. An interview with Marta Fana*. 27.12.2017. Available on: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/12/italy-workers-precarious-unions-m5s-democratic-party> [Accessed 12.02.2018].

¹⁷ Italy in figures. 2016. Available on: http://www.istat.it/en/files/2017/06/Italy_in_figures_16.pdf [Accessed 13.02.2018].

¹⁸ Income, living conditions and fiscal burden of households. 06.12.2017. Available on: <http://www.istat.it/en/archive/207036> [Accessed 13.02.2018].

¹⁹ Choi, H.-L. & Mattoni, A. (2010). *The contentious field of precarious work in Italy: political actors, strategies and coalitions*. In: WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labour and Society, Volume 13, p. 215.

hierarchical and operational differences, they all share similar goals and fight for the similar ideas. Their ways of organizing the workers differ as well, but they all (though, to different extent) participate, from one perspective, in campaigns, protests, rallies, and demonstrations, and from the other, demand for the legislation changes. However, even though, there are indeed a lot of protests and struggles organized by social movements, grassroots organizations, trade unions, and workers themselves²⁰, the matter that is being missed is bringing all these protests and struggles together in order to unify them in a single initiative on a country-wide level. That was the issue in the early attempts of mobilization and organization of workers, and it stays topical until nowadays. The ways to unify the precarious workers as one force and create a shared identity are still to be explored.

²⁰ Take as an example, for instance, recent strikes in November and December at Amazon's main distribution center in Italy for better pay and working conditions that brought together around 500 workers each (The Local 2017).

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