



Trade Unions in Italy

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- Italy's three largest union federations, CGIL, CISL and UIL, together account for 12.5 million members, but almost half of these are pensioners. The average union density is about 30 percent. The unions are strongest in the service sector, which employs 70 percent of the total workforce.
- The conditions under which the unions operate are made more difficult by the traditionally high proportion of small businesses and the multitude of atypical employment relationships that currently account for up to 80 percent of private-sector hirings.
- Collective bargaining takes place at two levels: sector and workplace (and sometimes also local industrial district). The trilateral agreement of 2009, which the CGIL refused to sign, permitted workplace and in-house agreements to undercut sectoral collective agreements.
- Under Berlusconi the social dialogue between employers' organisations, unions and the government continued without CGIL. After Monti's election as prime minister, CGIL leader Susanna Camusso returned to the talks on pension and labour market reform. But when the government announced a new round of cuts in July 2012 all three federations threatened a general strike.
- The trade unions profit from Italians' continuing disenchantment with politics. As a measure of their acceptance in society, the trust in the unions has reached the record level of 34 percent.



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1. The Trade Union Landscape

The Italian trade union landscape is characterised by the existence of three major politically aligned federations: CGIL (*Confederazione Italiana Generale del Lavoro*), CISL (*Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori*) and UIL (*Unione Italiana del Lavoro*). Until the early 1990s each was closely associated with one of the political parties: CGIL with the communist party, CISL with the left wing of the Christian democrats and UIL with the smaller secular parties (socialists, social democrats, republicans). While direct ties dissolved over the past two decades as the old party system collapsed, the unions have by and large maintained their political orientations. CGIL largely aligns with the social democratic *Partito Democratico*, with a critical minority looking to the communist party's more left-wing successors; CISL's current leader supports the project of reuniting the Christian democrats, who are presently dispersed among various parties, to form a new political movement; UIL continues to stress its secular republican tradition.

The three largest federations currently have 12.5 million members.¹ While this comparatively high figure partly reflects a large proportion of retired members (almost 50 percent), CGIL and UIL were able to record real membership growth in 2011. All three federations are most strongly represented in the public sector. CGIL is historically the strongest of the three in industry, but membership has fallen due to the retrenchment of manufacturing.

1.1 Four Major Turning Points

While the three federations failed to achieve their goal of unification in the 1960s and 1970s they did reach other important objectives: increasing membership by 80 percent and union density to more than 50 percent; increasing wages automatically to keep pace with inflation (*scala mobile*); and the passage in 1970 of the *Statuto dei Lavoratori* (charter of workers' rights), which remains to this day the central legal basis for workers' rights.

1980 marked a watershed in Italian industrial relations when the metalworkers' unions lost an important test of strength with the Fiat corporation, to this day Italy's largest private-sector employer, after professional and

supervisory staff (engineers, masters, foremen) withdrew their support. The consequence was a generalised loss of union strength in the 1980s. This occurred at the same time as companies began introducing decentralisation measures, dividing larger workplaces up into smaller units (often as suppliers), and in the process subverting the union protections that the *Statuto dei Lavoratori* provides for workplaces with 16 or more employees.

A further turning point was the 1993 agreement between unions, employers and government, which in essence represented the first concerted action. Its consequences included the abolition of the *scala mobile*, the introduction of a new workplace representation system, the RSU (*Rappresentanza Sindacale Unitaria*), and the possibility to conclude workplace agreements.

Another agreement in 2009 reformed the entire collective bargaining system to allow sectoral agreements to be modified at company level. The agreement was signed by CISL, UIL and the right-leaning UGL, but not by CGIL. The Berlusconi government had achieved its declared goal of dividing the unions, at least at the centre.

Since the 1990s new competing organisations have emerged in the private and public service sectors: spontaneously operating rank-and-file unions and associations of the precariously employed, who feel unrepresented by the unions and their traditional strategy of concentrating on wage conflicts.

1.2 Three Main Federations

According to the ICTWSS Database, union density is about 35 percent today (excluding pensioners).

Other organisations of a significant size are CISAL and CONFASAL (both federations of autonomous unions), COBAS (federation of local rank-and-file committees) and UGL (linked to the right-wing *Alleanza Nazionale*, formerly CISNAL). Apart from COBAS, which supplies no concrete figures, each of these organisations claims to have almost 2 million members. These claims are widely regarded as improbable, and charges of exaggeration are commonplace, especially concerning the UGL. Even within the major unions not all members who are classified as working (as opposed to unemployed) are actually employed. Instead, the economic crisis creates a con-

1. Data supplied by the organisations.



Table 1: The Main Union Organisations

	Political orientation	Membership 2011 (self-reported)	Change 2010/2011	Leader
CGIL (with 11 sectoral unions and a pensioners' organisation)	former Communist Party and Socialist Party	5.8 million (of which 3 million in the pensioners' organisation SPI)	+ 27,700	Susanna Camusso
CISL (with 18 sectoral unions and a pensioners' organisation)	former Christian Democratic Party	4.5 million (of which 2.2 million in the pensioners' organisation FNP)	- 56,971	Raffaele Bonanni
UIL (with 14 sectoral unions and a pensioners' organisation)	former Republican Party and Liberal Party	2.2 million (of which 0.6 million pensioners)	+ 11,531	Luigi Angeletti

tinuously growing pool of workers and union members who are paid through the Wage Guarantee Fund (CIG, or *Cassa Integrazione Guagagni*) and thus classified as employed when they are in fact without work.

The unions are most strongly represented in the energy sector, in metalworking/engineering, and in the public sector. The energy sector, especially, still includes large, formerly state-owned corporations like ENEL and ENI where trade union structures are deeply rooted.² In the engineering sector, car giant Fiat's exit from the employers organisation, its subsequent abrogation of the current sectoral agreement and the illegal sacking of members of CGIL-FIOM at its Pomigliano plant have created a difficult and conflict-laden situation. In the public sector union structures have become increasingly fragmented. According to the public sector bargaining agency ARAN, 80 percent of union members in the public sector belong to the three major federations, with the rest distributed among at least 700 different organisations.

COBAS is especially strong in administration, schools and hospitals. In general, unions operating in the service sector (where 70 percent all employees work) possess the most members.

1.3 Membership Structure

The membership structure of the two largest federations and their constituent unions has changed during recent years, with an increase in the proportion of women. In 2011 the figure was 48 percent for both CGIL and CISL.

2. CGIL recently merged its chemicals, energy and textiles unions to create FILCTEM.

Fifty percent of CGIL leadership positions are filled by women, while CISL operates a quota of 30 percent. The clearest indication of change is that for the first time ever an Italian trade union has a woman as its national leader, with Susanna Camusso heading CGIL. In all three federations less than one quarter of active members are aged under 35. In 2010 the proportion of immigrants (in relation to total membership including pensioners) was 8.4 percent in CGIL, 6.6 percent in CISL and 9.5 percent in UIL.

At 35 percent, union density among immigrants is higher than among Italian workers. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, immigrants' working and living conditions are considerably worse, and as a rule they are not eligible for public-sector jobs. Secondly, an estimated 500,000 immigrants work illegally and are thus absent from all statistics. Thousands work in a day labour system in the tomato harvest in the South for wages amounting to little more than €30/day, of which the supervisors withhold about one third. One great success for the unions in 2011 was the passing of a law prohibiting the *caporalato*.

1.4 Problems of Union Organisation

One of the main problems for trade union work is the fragmented economic structure. In the first place this means the size of companies, with almost 90 percent employing fewer than 16 workers and thus exempt from the provisions of the *Statuto dei Lavoratori*. But the north/south divide also demands differentiated and flexible strategies. Despite growing precarious employment there is still a strong workplace union tradition in the industrial North, whereas political objectives like fighting youth unemployment and combating the mafia

are more important in the structurally weak South. In recent years several union activists have been murdered by the mafia in southern Italy.

Italy has no labour code comparable for example to the French *code du travail*, and no proper industrial relations law. The issues are governed by an unfathomable complex of collective agreements, pacts, workplace agreements, and laws, decrees and regulations. The most important law is the *Statuto dei Lavoratori*, which guarantees trade union rights and security of employment. Article 18, which governs protection against dismissal, has been a bone of contention for years. Prime Minister Mario Monti modified it in 2012 to make it easier to dismiss employees. The laws on collective bargaining have been reformed several times in recent years through agreements between the unions and employers' organisations. These are of great practical importance in Italy, playing a role comparable to Germany's Law on Collective Agreements or Industrial Relations Law.

2. Core Trade Union Tasks

2.1 Collective Bargaining

The agreement of 2009, which succumbed to pressure from the employers' organisation to allow company deals to undercut national and regional agreements, resulted from one of the worst crises of Italian trade union unity, which had otherwise generally held at least at the level of negotiations. CGIL refused to join CISL and UIL in recognising the new flexibilised negotiating system, criticising the new decentralised collective bargaining arrangements for undermining sectoral agreements and increasing productivity at the expense of real wages.³ When it was put to a vote, 3.4 of 3.6 million participating CGIL members rejected the agreement. Despite their criticism of the 2009 agreement, CGIL's member unions generally subsequently joined with their CISL and UIL counterparts in signing most of the new collective agreements negotiated in their sectors.

Collective bargaining takes place at two levels in Italy: sector and workplace (and sometimes also local industrial districts grouping together smaller companies). Sectoral

negotiations concern wage rises and keeping up with expected price inflation, as well as questions of working hours, work organisation and consultation. The trilateral agreement of 2009 provides for future wage increases to be orientated on the EU's harmonised index of consumer prices for Italy rather than on forecast inflation.

There are no official statistics for collective bargaining coverage. According to estimates by the European Industrial Relations Observatory (EIRO) it was over 80 percent in 2009. However, it must be remembered that such figures exclude many businesses too small to pay either taxes or social security contributions.

Workplace-level negotiations are conducted by the RSU organs, which are essentially union bodies even if they are generally elected by the workforce as a whole. The RSUs have a right of information and consultation in matters such as working conditions, dismissals and redundancies. But in Italy company agreements tend to be the exception, affecting only 30 to 40 percent of Italian workers according to union estimates. The workplace-level wage negotiations introduced in 2009 are supposed to take into account workplace specifics such as productivity increases or threatened redundancies. These new company agreements can override sectoral agreements or parts thereof.

For the latest agreement of 28 June 2011, which passed into law as Article 8 of Decree 138/2011, the three main federations managed to agree a joint position, and succeeded in negotiating new arrangements with the employers' organisation *Confindustria*. Although not undoing the 2009 agreement's provisions on decentralisation of collective bargaining, these do grant the unions stronger control over workplace agreements:

The central points of the 2011 agreement are:

- *Opening of national/regional agreements:* In crisis situations RSUs may agree special arrangements with the employer that depart from sectoral agreements. But any deviations require the approval of a higher trade union body, in order to prevent the establishment of management-controlled unions.
- *Legal scope of company agreements:* These are in future binding even on minority unions that opposed them, unless half the workforce votes against the

3. The Italian average gross wage is already very low: according to Eurostat about 23,400 euro per annum in 2009, compared to 41,100 euro in Germany.

agreement. Agreements concluded by RSUs apply, like German works council agreements, to all employees at a company or site.

- *Bargaining rights*: A union acquires bargaining rights if it organises at least 5 percent of workers in a sector. Official data is collected by public agencies. Only unions with bargaining rights are entitled to stand candidates for the RSU and conclude company agreements.

2.2 Social Dialogue and Labour Market Reform

The Italian social dialogue has always functioned as a political trade-off. One of its most important symbols is the partly state-funded Wage Guarantee Fund (CIG), which intervenes where companies are in financial difficulties. It guarantees social stability for the state, flexible deployment of labour for the employers, and a larger reservoir of potential members for the unions. To date the Fund has functioned as a substitute for a general unemployment benefit. It provides a social safety net, but only for those in businesses employing more than fifteen workers. Certain one-off agreements, such as the trilateral anti-crisis agreement of 1993 under the technical government of Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, also reflect a functioning social dialogue pursuing policies of concerted action.

Under Berlusconi dialogue gave way to open conflict with the CGIL, with Labour Minister Maurizio Sacconi excluding the country's largest trade union from most bilateral talks. By contrast, CISL Secretary-General Raffaele Bonanni remained in favour of concerted action with the government – with or without CGIL. The government strategy of divide and rule culminated in the agreement of 2009 that weakened the bargaining position of the unions. But the conflict strengthened CGIL's position as a political force. In 2002 three million workers followed Secretary-General Sergio Cofferati's call to demonstrate against the anti-social policies of the Berlusconi government and a planned relaxation of protection against dismissal. That demonstration is today regarded as one of the most significant protests in Italian post-war history.

On taking office, the Monti government indicated a willingness to pursue dialogue with all three federations. But the talks over reforming pensions and the labour

market turned out to be tough and slow. In the end the cabinet made unilateral decisions on both matters without reaching consensus with the social partners. Both the unions and *Confindustria* criticised some of the measures. After passage of the pension reform, which raises the retirement age for men and women to 67 by 2018, Labour and Social Affairs Minister Elsa Fornero admitted that an arithmetical error meant that 130,000 workers (according to the government; the social insurance agency INPS reports 390,000) will be left in limbo without the right to either a job or a pension. Fornero responded by presenting a proposal that resolves the problem for only some of those affected, and only for the first two years.

The three main unions held back on protests against the pension reform for the sake of dialogue on labour market reform. Here they were in fact able to prevent a provision that would have compelled illegally dismissed workers to accept financial compensation in place of reinstatement. At the same time it was decided that the Wage Guarantee Fund would be phased out and replaced with a general unemployment benefit. However, given that this only applies in the event of job loss, young people looking for their first job and the precariously employed still remain without social security benefits.

The abolition of the Wage Guarantee Fund, which has prevented unmitigated mass unemployment at the expense of keeping industrial employment artificially high, symbolises the demise of a tacit agreement between the social partners. Accordingly, CGIL's criticism is directed not primarily against the abolition of the instrument, which had in fact created a division between older »job owners« and younger unemployed, but the lack of an equal or better socially acceptable replacement.

Speaking to the Italian Banking Association in July 2012, Prime Minister Mario Monti called concerted action »the root of the evil we are fighting today«, to which all the union federations took exception. On the other hand, a new accord appears to be emerging between the unions and the new leader of the employers' organisation, Giorgio Squinzi. At a meeting with CGIL leader Susanna Camusso in March 2012 the president of *Confindustria* announced that he was for more concerted action and less conflict and warned against »swinging cuts«.

Monti also decided to reduce the size of the National Council for Economic Affairs and Labour (CNEL), a classical instrument of concerted action. Retaining its existing proportionality, the body will in future have ten economic, social and legal experts, 22 labour representatives (instead of 44), nine representatives of the self-employed (instead of 18) and 17 employers' representatives (instead of 37).

3. Political Influence

3.1 Challenges

The biggest political challenge for the Italian unions currently lies in the neo-liberal crisis policies of the Monti government, whose declared goal is to save the state budget from bankruptcy and keep Italy in the euro. To that end, all its policies are focused on reassuring the financial markets – meaning above all cuts in social spending. Even though the situation has worsened steadily, the government has yet to publish an investment plan for growth. Industrial production has fallen by 25 percent since 2008 and the unemployment rate for under-25s hit 36.2 percent in May 2012 (50 to 60 percent in certain regions of the South). According to the latest data from the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), 11 percent of Italian households live in relative poverty and another 5.2 percent in absolute poverty. On top of that, traditional structural problems have not gone away: the north/south divide, inadequate infrastructure, bureaucracy, corruption, the black economy and tax fraud. Weak business innovation capacity is a major structural problem, with companies receiving virtually no credit from the banks. Moreover, Italy invests only around 1 percent of GDP in research and development against an EU average of 3 percent.

The main criticism of the three major union federations is directed above all towards the lack of investment in growth policies. Instead, they say, the Monti government only institutes cuts that threaten social peace. In July, after the pension and labour market reform, the government announced a revised state budget including further cuts of up to 9 billion euro in health, public services and the justice system. This time the more moderate leaderships of CISL and UIL, which are more strongly represented in the public sector than in manufacturing industry, joined CGIL in responding with the threat of a general strike.

3.2 Strategies

Such united stands have grown rare in recent years, with the political initiatives and strategies of the three federations diverging strongly. Only CGIL possesses the required strength for mass mobilisations, and is usually able to count on additional support on demonstrations from the ranks of the moderate left *Partito Democratico* and the smaller left-wing parties. This strength has been applied successfully in recent years to protest against Berlusconi and to apply pressure against the cuts put forward by the Monti government. According to CGIL leader Susanna Camusso it was above all the massive protests that caused the government to give ground on protection against dismissals. The reform adopted on 27 June 2012 now stipulates that workers whose redundancy is overturned by the labour court may return their jobs rather than – as in the first draft of the bill – having to accept just a compensation payment. However, the changes to protection against dismissal were not even CGIL's prime criticism of the reform,⁴ which focused much more on the inadequacy of its measures against precarious employment and the lack of initiatives addressing the structural problems in the Italian economy.

Despite criticism from the left wing of her federation and the metalworkers' union FIOM, Camusso initially signalled willingness to cooperate with the transitional government. But after Prime Minister Monti announced that his government would consult the social partners but not necessarily reflect their views in its decision the atmosphere cooled noticeably. CGIL is calling on the government to introduce a wealth tax and crack down on tax evasion instead of making cuts in benefits and services. Stefano Fassina, economic and social affairs spokesperson for the *Partito Democratico*, also calls for a wealth tax, but encounters resistance from the right wing of his party.

Raffaele Bonanni, leader of CISL, is a convinced proponent of round table politics who believes that »a good agreement counts for more than protests on the piazza«. During the Berlusconi era he was criticised by his own membership for his close relationship to Labour Minister Sacconi. While his stance towards Monti is more critical, he rejects CGIL's demand for further modifications of the labour market reform. Bonanni makes no secret of his

4. The Italian protection against dismissal now corresponds roughly to the German legislation and has been extended to cover all workplaces, including those with fewer than 16 workers.

desire for a new Christian democratic unity movement to challenge the two-party system maintained by Berlusconi's right-populist *Partito della Libertà* and the social democratic *Partito Democratico*. Bonanni also tried to recruit UIL leader Luigi Angeletti for this project, but UIL's secular liberal tradition makes it an unlikely partner for a Christian democrat revival. Angeletti, for his part, calls on the government on his part to reduce the high level of social security contributions in order to stimulate economic growth. He too has spoken against reopening discussions on the labour market reform in order to avoid endangering the compromise reached thus far.

With respect to their public acceptance, the unions clearly profit from the ongoing general disenchantment with Italian party politics, as well as from the numerous political protests of recent years that have demonstrated a strong mobilisation potential and earned them a greater media presence. As a survey by market research institute IPR in May 2012 demonstrates, the unions are currently a good deal more popular than the political parties: 34 percent of Italians trust the unions, and only 8 percent the parties. Until ten years ago it was the other way round.

The Italian unions are well connected at the international and especially European level. As convinced Europeans they are pushing for a European collective bargaining system. The three main federations and their constituent unions are members of the International Trade Union confederation and of all union institutions at EU level. Here too, much has changed in the past ten years. Whereas in the past there tended to be little interest in bodies and issues not directly connected with national wage politics, Italian trade unionists are today among the most active at European level. This is also reflected in the leadership of the new European industrial union *IndustriALL – European Trade Union*, formed by merger of the European Metalworkers' Federation (EMF), the European Mine, Chemical and Energy Workers' Federation (EMCEF) and the European Trade Union Federation Textiles, Clothing and Leather (ETUF:TCL). Vice-president is the Italian Valeria Fedeli from *CGIL Filctem*, which is similarly a merger of several sectoral unions.

At workplace level too there is today greater interest in Europe, with currently 69 European works councils at Italian companies. They are generally not among the most advanced, but a number of them – such as those at Ferrero and Pirelli – are among the most stable.

4. Perspectives for the Coming Years

4.1 The Growing Army of Precarious Workers

In Italy, as in all OECD countries, the future of the unions will depend on how they integrate the new realities of work, in the sense of precarious and atypical employment, into their organisations. Currently 70 to 80 percent of private-sector hirings are atypical employment relationships, without even taking into account other forms such as bogus self-employment or undeclared work. ISTAT estimates that there are currently about four million workers in precarious employment, or 17.2 percent of all employed. Most of them are under 35.

But this group is almost absent from the big unions, whose traditional strategy concentrated on wage negotiations for members rather than mobilising new groups. In the meantime all three federations have established sectoral organisations for atypical workers, although recruitment has been sluggish.

CGIL in particular has worked to recruit new groups, and is one of just a handful of European unions to offer a specific transgender sub-organisation. For about ten years already Rome-based *CGIL-Nidil* has been responsible for »new work identities«. Fifteen full-time *Nidil* officials look after 53,000 precarious workers, mostly from health and education sectors. But these represent less than 2 percent of the active membership of CGIL.

CISL has established ALAI as a similar structure for atypical and agency workers, advertising above all with the quality of services such as advice and price discounts. *UIL temp* has 43,000 precarious members, above all in health and education, representing a large proportion than at CGIL. By organising demonstrations and strikes *UIL temp* has already achieved a string of victories, above all concerning sick pay, holiday pay and contract changes.

Experience shows that recruiting these new groups is difficult, as they possess little confidence in unions. Also, they have founded new networks of their own in recent years. A group of young people calling themselves the *Milan Chain Workers*, who organised political protests like the *May Day Parade* on 1 May, has given rise to the San Precario network. Groups now exist in all Italian cities, organising protests and providing free legal advice. The members of *San Precario*, named after a fictitious patron

saint in the outfit of a courier, include interns, salespeople, airport ground staff, and staff of discount supermarkets, call centres and universities. The strength of the network lies in its communication through guerrilla marketing and its fast and flexible organisation of protests. While *San Precario* does not see itself as a union, it has de facto become a form of representation for workers in whom the traditional unions have to date shown too little interest.

4.2 New Forms of Participation

The reform allowing company agreements to undercut sectoral collective bargaining has unleashed a discussion about new models of participation at company level. Whereas CISL has long argued for participation based on the German co-determination system,⁵ the traditionally more militant CGIL has thus far rejected that concept. With Susanna Camusso as secretary-general the topic is no longer taboo. The experience of many Italian trade unionists in European works councils of companies with supervisory boards (e. g. Banca Unicredit, Pirelli) is another contributing factor. At the seminar on »Germany, Italy, Europe: Answers to the Crisis« organised in 2010 by CGIL's research institute IRES, Bologna University and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Valeria Fedeli, deputy leader of *CGIL Filctem* and vice-president of the new European union *IndustriAll*, said: »Fiat boss Sergio Marchionne is using the crisis to force workers to accept new contracts and production models. If we are going to answer such an attack with concepts of our own, or even to preempt it, we need to have more information from the company, and we need it faster. That's where German co-determination model could offer greater influence on management decisions.«

Despite the grave economic crisis, Italian unions have succeeded in concluding a number of groundbreaking agreements at company level. An agreement with eyewear manufacturer Luxottica flexibilises production without altering the collective agreement, in return for which workers' representatives were given a say in the company's social benefits. This makes Luxottica one of the few Italian companies to make a connection between the quality of the product and the quality of production in the sense of working conditions.⁶

Fashion brand Gucci, which produces its leather goods exclusively in Tuscany, is even more innovative in this respect. Gucci insists that all its suppliers observe social standards – including collective agreements – in the interest of maintaining consistent quality in its top-end products. So its entire supply chain is covered by collective agreements with the unions.⁷ These have also had the effect of improving social standards at other local suppliers. This model, which affects not just one company but an entire industrial district, shows the way forward not only for the Italian unions, but more generally too. In the age of globalisation local concentrations of small-scale producers are one model challenging the old large-scale production complexes that were bastions of union representation. Gucci represents an important example, because if Italy is to preserve its industry it must concentrate above all on the high-quality know-how of medium-sized manufacturing – for which the unions must develop new negotiating models.

5. See various publications by Guido Baglioni of CISL.

6. *Die Mitbestimmung* 1+2/2012.

7. *brandeins* 6/2011.



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