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Remaking the labour movement in Italy: the revival of strikes at Fiat-Chrysler Automobiles in 2015–17

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Abstract

After the Fiat–Chrysler merger in 2009, CEO Sergio Marchionne imposed a drastic reorganization of labour relations in Italy's plants, precipitating a profound crisis of the system of industrial relations in the country. But between 2015 and 2017 a significant section of workers at the Melfi and Termoli plants went on strike against compulsory overtime and labour intensification, establishing links with grassroots unions that successfully organized in logistics. The metalworkers' union FIOM-CGIL, however, delegitimized the union representatives who resisted Marchionne's plans. In this article we trace the context and development of these still little-known strikes. Because of their growing institutionalization, we argue, the confederal unions (CGIL, CISL, UIL) have both failed to mobilize workers and repressed workers' attempts to resist the deterioration of their conditions. The strikes at FCA and in logistics, however, show that new forms of radical unionism are emerging, pointing to new possibilities for working class organizing.

Keywords: Fiat-Chrysler Automobiles, industrial relations, Italy, labour movement, trade unions

1. Introduction

Anti-austerity protests in Italy have been fragmented and weak in comparison to the mobilizations in the 1990s and early 2000s, or to anti-austerity struggles in Greece and Spain (Della Porta et al., 2017). In the mobilizations that did take place against austerity, as well as on environmental and feminist issues ("No-Tav", "Non una di meno" movements), the working class was not the main or an independent actor. Workers participated individually or as members of political organizations, without seeing themselves as members of the working class (Andretta, 2017; Della Porta, 2015). As the 2018 general and regional elections confirmed, widespread social discontent has led to support for anti-establishment parties, like the Five-star Movement, and growing abstentionism. Newly formed left-wing parties such as "Liberi e Uguali" (Free and Equal) and "Potere al Popolo" (Power to the People) were unable to gather the widespread discontent that had fuelled participation in the December 2016 referendum on constitutional reform, precipitating the fall of the Renzi government.

Between 2015 and 2016 the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) collected 3.3 million signatures for a referendum on voucherⁱ abolition and reintroduction of protection for unfair dismissal aimed at countering the effects of Renzi's labour reform, the so-called Jobs Act (2014–15). In terms of protest organization, however, Italy's main trade unions (CGIL, CISL – Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions, and UIL – Italian Labour Union) have done very little to oppose austerity policies, or even contributed to promoting them, as in the case of the reform of the system of industrial relations. We witness in Italy the culmination of a process of weakening and institutionalization of the main unions, which has led to their prioritizing service provision over the conflictual representation of workers' interests (Cillo and Pradella, 2018). As in other countries, in the wake of the crisis the main unions have increasingly subordinated the defence of workers' rights under the goal of economic recovery (Bailey, Clua-Losada, Huke, Rimer Almandoz, & Rogers, 2016). Although in Italy established unions did play some role in anti-austerity protests, their mobilization declined under the Monti and subsequent governments, while grassroots trade unions such as Cobas (Confederation of the Base Committees) and USB (Unione Sindacale di Baseⁱⁱ) have

become more prominent (Andretta, 2017, p. 213).

This dynamic is best exemplified by the wave of strikes in the logistics sector, mainly organized by independent unions (SiCobas, Adl-Cobas, USB) (Cillo and Pradella, 2018), as well as by the still little known strikes at Fiat-Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) plants in Southern Italy that we discuss in this article. Largely overlooked in industrial relations and social movements literature, the more recent struggles at FCA have been debated among militants, trade unionists and engaged researchers in Italy. Drawing on these debates and on participatory observation, in this article we discuss the new possibilities for working class organizing in Italy in the post-2007/8 context of accelerated deindustrialization, austerity and crisis of the post-war system of industrial relations. Although these processes have exacerbated the crisis of social-democratic unionism, in the next section we argue that new forms of working class organizing and “radical political unionism” are emerging. We then look at the inter-relationship between workers’ declining bargaining power at labour market and company levels, and changes in work organisation at FCA (Sections 4 and 5). Capital’s dominant position, we argue, has led to a sharp deterioration in workers’ rights and working conditions at FCA, profoundly influencing industrial relations at national level. Despite the threat of losing their jobs and the lack of support from the main unions, however, FCA workers started to oppose the new system of work organisation leveraging on the vulnerabilities of Just-In-Time (JIT) production (Section 5). The interplay between struggles at FCA and in logistics, we conclude, is creating new possibilities for working class organizing.

2. Trade unions in the crisis: what prospects for the labour movement?

The global economic crisis has accelerated the already ongoing process of deindustrialization in Italy: a process that needs to be contextualised within a persisting crisis of profitability, global dynamics of production restructuring and shifts in the international division of labour (Author B; Simonazzi, Ginzburg, & Nocella, 2013). Despite some recent positive signals, industrial production is still 18.9 points below pre-crisis level (from 100 in Q3 2007 to 75.4 in Q3 2014 and 81.1 in Q3 2017) (Eurostat). Production outsourcing and Italy’s strategic position between Europe, Asia and North Africa have led to a concomitant growth in the logistics sector. The loss of the most protected and unionized jobs in manufacturing and construction, however, has reinforced the process of de-standardization of employment relations, which has been also one of the main goals of austerity policies. Italy’s employment system is going through a process of downgrading, with growth in atypical, low-paid and casual employment, and declining top-paid jobs (Eurofound, 2015a, 2015b). Along with undeclared work, short-term contracts and new forms of employment such as job sharing, casual and voucher-based work have proliferated.ⁱⁱⁱ

Fiat/FCA is the only automotive multinational corporation of Italian origin.^{iv} In 2014 the total assets of FCA amounted to 104,343 billion euros and it employed 234,499 workers globally (FCA, 2016). From 2003 Sergio Marchionne, Fiat and then FCA CEO,^v imposed a drastic reorganization of Fiat by moving production to Serbia and Poland, securing major investments in Brazil and strategic alliances in China, reducing production at Mirafiori in Turin and closing the Termini Imerese plant in Sicily. At the beginning of 2009 Marchionne forged a strategic alliance with Chrysler through which FCA became the world’s sixth largest car manufacturer (Germano, 2012, pp. 78-79). In the same year the Agnelli family founded Exor, which became one of the leading European investment companies (based in Amsterdam) controlling FCA, Ferrari, *The Economist* etc. This further process of internationalization and financialization led to an increase in the workforce FCA employs globally (from about 174,000 employees in 2003 to 225,000 in 2015), while almost halving the workforce employed in Italy (from about 45,000 to 23,000 employees) (Brusini, 2015). FCA thus further increased its bargaining power in Italy, making greater precarity of employment and intensification of labour two conditions for investment in its Italian plants. In 2010 referendums at the Pomigliano plant near Naples and Mirafiori ratified a new industrial plan that included work

contracts imposing more exploitative and authoritarian working relations.

As we discuss in the next section, the relationship between workers and management at Fiat/FCA has had a major impact on broader industrial relations in Italy (Bradanini, 2014; Meardi, 2014; Nuti, 2011). This has been the case throughout the 20th century, from the occupation of the factories in the “Red Biennium” (1919–20) to the opposition to fascism, the struggles in the 1960s and 1970s, and the neoliberal offensive since the 1980s (Damiano, & Pessa, 2003). The more recent restructuring at FCA, for Bartocci and Borioni (2011, p. 6), provides “a very significant example of change in industrial relations” not just at Italian but at European levels, which is “bound to introduce profound changes in the existing models of collective bargaining and the way itself of conceiving the relationship between social partners”. Indeed, the 2010 referendums opened the way to a series of national reforms that reinforced company-level rather than national-level collective bargaining, and limited industrial democracy (Nuti, 2011). Both national- and company-level bargaining have become less and less democratic (Bradanini, 2014; Leonardi, 2015).

The main unions have played a crucial but ambivalent role in these reforms. The literature on new social movements in Italy highlights the increasing distance between workers and the main unions (Zamponi, 2012), whose “efforts to seek consensual solutions [to the crisis] through social dialogue” means accepting “tacitly or explicitly, the dictates of national ‘competitiveness’, becoming ‘responsible co-designers of austerity’” (Hyman, 2015, p. 102). As Della Porta and Andretta argue, protesters mistrust political parties and representative institutions (2013, p. 28). Both left-wing political parties and the main unions have thus been unable “to produce the strong social and political coalitions that emerged in the anti-neoliberal mobilization phase”, and anti-austerity protests have not had any significant institutional impact. Subsequent governments continued to adopt the neoliberal policies required by the EU establishment, international institutions, national and international capital (Andretta, 2017, p. 201).

Social movements scholars like Andretta and Della Porta confirm that we are witnessing also in Italy a deepening of the crisis of social-democratic unionism that Upchurch, Taylor, and Mathers (2009) identified in the cases of the UK, Germany and France. This literature, however, has not paid enough attention to the role of workers that is central to Upchurch et al.’s analysis of the “radical political unionism” emerging from this crisis. First, it is implicitly assumed that the position of the three largest Italian unions also reflects that of the workers, who would have accepted the new kind of industrial relations introduced by recent reforms and company-level agreements. Secondly, the crisis of social democratic unionism and the absence of the working class as a political subject in anti-austerity mobilizations is taken to signify the definitive crisis of the labour movement. This helps explain why so little attention has been paid in the academic literature to the wave of strikes in Italy’s logistics sector and to the strikes started in 2015 at the FCA plants in Melfi, Termoli, and Cassino and at the Sevel plant in Atesa.^{vi}

This kind of approach ignores however the contradictory dynamics generated by the global economic crisis, and the centrality of workers’ autonomous initiatives. The struggles in logistics and at FCA, we argue in this article, confirm Beverly Silver’s (2014) reflections on the contradictory dynamic of workers’ bargaining power at labour market and workplace levels. As she argues, the technological and organizational transformations associated to JIT production and the growth of global supply chains do not only generate new vulnerabilities but also new sources of structural power for workers. Since tightly integrated global supply chains depend on the smooth operations of all their parts, in fact, they are highly vulnerable to disruption. This increases the bargaining power of workers at workplace level, even if their bargaining power at labour market level declines as a result of global production restructuring and industrial relations reforms (Silver 2014, 54).

While the main Italian unions have not leveraged on these new sources of structural power, independent unions have started to fill in the void. The wave of strikes in logistics has been organized mainly through the support of SiCobas and, to a lesser extent, AdlCobas and USB. By

blocking the flows of commodities, in some cases for several months, logistics workers managed to achieve better working conditions in the subcontracting system of the most important Italian and multinational companies like Bennett, Coop, Granarolo, Esselunga, IKEA, Yoox, GLS, FedEx, DHL, Bartolini, SDA and TNT (Cillo and Pradella, 2018).^{vii} Similarly, the strikes at FCA precipitated a crisis of the once combative FIOM-CGIL (Federation of Metallurgical Employees and Workers), pushing many shop stewards to join independent unions. As we shall discuss, these strikes achieved some concrete improvements and inaugurated a new period of conflict between workers and management at FCA. Given the central historical role that Fiat/FCA has played on industrial relations in Italy, the importance of this conflict should not be underestimated.

3. Workers' rights under attack

Over the last ten years the interplay between national and international capital, national governments and EU institutions managed to achieve reforms to the system of industrial relations in Italy that during the previous decade had been stopped by mass mobilisations. While the main trade unions, CGIL in particular, played a crucial role in organising such mobilizations in the past, they have now accepted or even contributed to these reforms^{viii} (Simoni, 2014). While the 1993 tripartite agreement subordinated decentralised bargaining to sectoral-level national collective agreements, recent reforms have accelerated the process of decentralisation of collective bargaining^{ix}, allowing employers to derogate from national collective agreements and weakening workers' bargaining power at labour-market and company levels (Bradani, 2014). Trade union democracy and the right to strike have been restricted. The 2009 tripartite agreement – signed by Confindustria, CISL and UIL, but not CGIL – extended the length of contracts from two to three years, linked wage increases to the European Harmonized Index of Consumer Prices, and allowed second-tier bargaining to derogate from national bargaining. It also allowed bilateral bodies to negotiate supplementary welfare services, thus linking welfare provisions to employment, and permitting wage increases to be replaced by private pension and health insurance benefits. Although CGIL opposed this agreement, all CGIL-affiliated sectoral unions (except FIOM-CGIL) signed similar agreements in order “to maintain union unity at the local level and avoid disruption of the bargaining system” (Bradani, 2014, p. 179).

The new contracts signed in 2010 at FCA Pomigliano and Mirafiori played a crucial role in the reform of the system of industrial relations in Italy. To evade the national metalworking contract, FCA created two new companies in Pomigliano and Mirafiori not belonging to the Confederation of Italian Industry (Confindustria), and later cancelled its own membership of the employers' association. FIM-CISL and UILM signed the new contracts, which FIOM and independent unions strongly opposed. Marchionne then threatened to move production abroad and demanded workers to validate the new contracts through a referendum. Despite these threats, Fiat failed to achieve an overwhelming majority: 63 percent of voters at Pomigliano and 54 percent at Mirafiori supported the Specific Collective Employment Contract (Contratto Collettivo Specifico di Lavoro, CCSL) (Gruppo Lavoro del CRS, 2011; Monaco, 2015; Nuti, 2011). These included upping the number of shifts from 10 to 18, intensifying the pace of work, increasing compulsory overtime and surveillance, and reducing breaks (Bradani, 2014; Caputo, Campennì, Della Corte, 2012; Simoni, 2014). The RSU representation system was abolished, leaving only the RSA system.^x FIOM and independent unions were excluded from company representation and bargaining because they did not sign the contract. FCA, moreover, imposed a clause linking the possibility of exercising trade union rights to compliance with the contract.

Marchionne's strategy created a profound crisis in the system of sectoral agreements adopted in Italy since 1948, whereby sectoral agreements were used as reference for setting the constitutional rights to fair wage and working time (Meardi, 2014, p. 318). In June 2011, Confindustria, CGIL, CISL and UIL signed a new Multi-Sectoral Agreement stating that national collective agreements

can be negotiated only by unions representing more than 5 percent of the workforce, and company agreements are binding when approved by the majority of RSU or RSA representatives. Company agreements can derogate from national ones in the field of working conditions, working time and work organisation only in the case of a company's crisis or its reorganisation. The 2011 Multi-Sectoral Agreement also introduced the possibility of strike restrictions in company-level contracts. But these restrictions were compulsory only for signatory trade unions and affiliated workers' representatives, not for all workers, who could organise strikes without union support or with non-signatory unions. Differently from the FCA contracts, therefore, social partners here "expressly rejected the thesis that the right to strike is a collective, and not an individual, right" (Borelli, 2012, p. 99).

This agreement, however, lasted less than two months. On 5 August 2011, the European Central Bank sent a letter to the then PM Silvio Berlusconi asking for austerity measures including "further reform of the collective wage bargaining system allowing firm-level agreements to tailor wages and working conditions to firms' specific needs and increasing their relevance with respect to other layers of negotiations" and "a thorough review of the rules regulating the hiring and dismissal of employees" (Draghi & Trichet, 2011). Eight days later, without consulting social partners and Parliament, the Italian government reformed the collective bargaining system allowing local and company agreements to deviate from both national collective agreements and existing legislation (including on dismissal procedures) (Law Decree no. 138/2011). This reform was made retroactive so as to legalise the FCA position (Bradani, 2014; Meardi, 2014). Trade unions tried to obstruct the derogation of dismissal laws by signing a new agreement with Confindustria in September that excluded dismissals from the prerogatives of second level bargaining. In response, FCA left Confindustria from 1 January 2012.

On 31 May 2013 Confindustria, CGIL, CISL and UIL signed the Protocol on representativeness ("Protocollo sulla rappresentanza"), according to which national collective agreements can be negotiated only by the trade unions adhering to the Protocol and are binding for all adhering unions, if supported by organisations representing 50 percent plus 1 of the workforce employed in the sector. The Protocol confirmed the strike restrictions of the 2011 Multi-Sectoral Agreement. The provisions of this agreement and the Protocol were confirmed and supplemented by the Single Text on Representativeness, signed by Confindustria, CGIL, CISL and UIL on 10 January 2014. Later, this Text was signed also by other employers' organisations and also several independent unions, except CUB, SiCobas, USI and CAT (CUB, 2016). The culmination of this process of labour market reform was Renzi's Jobs Act, which introduced an open-ended contract with graduated protection, lowered overall protection levels, and further liberalized temporary employment. The Jobs Act led to an initial increase in open-ended contracts, but this was mainly due to state incentives: once they stopped, temporary contracts started to grow again.^{xi} The diffusion of open-ended contracts with graduated protection has led to a drastic increase in disciplinary layoffs, from 55,831 in 2014 to 74,627 in 2016 (INPS, 2017).

These labour reforms reinforced an anti-labour orientation in collective negotiations, as exemplified by the renewals of the chemical and metalworking national agreements in 2015 and 2016. The former was the first case of national concession bargaining in Italy. It determined a wage deduction of 79 euros on the increases negotiated in 2013, converted some fixed parts of the salary into variable parts negotiated at company level, expanded corporate welfare services and extended "cooling off" measures to prevent strikes to all companies (CUB, 2015). In preparation of the 2016 negotiations for the national metalworking agreement, the Federation of the Italian Metalworking Industry (Federmeccanica) published a manifesto demanding greater flexibility on wages, working time and organisation, decentralization of negotiations, and an increasingly individualized wage-system. "The relationship with the individual worker should be the norm not the exception, so that a normalized and inclusive industrial relations system can be built, starting from the base" (Federmeccanica, 2014). Although workers in the sector went on strike several times, the national

agreement signed in November 2016 was similar to the chemical one. Significantly, this time also FIOM signed it: a sign that even this once more militant union is progressively accepting the new system of industrial relations (Di Mario, 2016).^{xii}

4. Mr Marchionne's class war at work

The new FCA contracts extended to all plants the organisation of work based on World Class Manufacturing (WCM). WCM develops the main pillars of the Toyota Production System (TPS) adopted at Fiat since the 1990s: JIT, total quality management, continuous improvement, and workers' commitment to eliminating waste, reducing processing times and achieving quality at first stroke.^{xiii} Production units ("domains") are smaller than in the TPS, and workers' tasks and responsibilities increase (Fortunato, 2009). The main goal of WCM is to enhance plant utilization and reduce costs through flexible, 'high performance work practices' focused on active engagement and team work (Leonardi, 2015). FCA has combined the reduction of rest breaks with a new work metrics, Ergo-UAS,^{xiv} to obtain a 94–99 percent saturation of working time by eliminating all non-value-added activities such as walking, waiting, turning, and picking (FIOM-CGIL Basilicata, 2010). This led to a ten-minute reduction of daily rest periods (from 40 to 30 minutes) on the assembly line of the future Panda: this increase

equals 8.3 incremental operations per turn, which workers do in 600 seconds. They become more than 25 cars in the day. In a year those ten minutes had become 6,650 cars (Griseri, 2010).

Production targets are achieved by introducing a new working time scheme based on 20 shifts per week, postponing the lunch break to the end of shift, and systematically imposing overtime, including during night shifts (Di Florio, 2015; FIOM-CGIL, 2016b; Franchi, 2015b; Sial-Cobas, 2016). This extreme intensification of labour has been detected by a research on WCM's effects on workers' health. Commissioned by FIM-CISL, this research involved 5,000 blue and white-collar employees in 31 FCA plants:

The negative perception of a less porous working time is indicated in the factory language with the word 'stress'. First, it originates in the fight against waste and the reduction of non-value-added activities, such as going to look for the piece to be assembled, activities that workers often perceived as a moment of distraction and leisure [sic]. In general, this can be explained: work today is made of less difficult labour movements, but it does not present any more distraction and always requires a lot of attention (Pero, 2015, p. 108-109).

Although workers' participation in company processes and progress is considered a central element of WCM work organization, relations within teams and between workers and management are hierarchical and authoritarian. Delays due to assembly-line failures are often offset by forcing employees to work during rest periods, refusing permission to use the toilets, and not stopping the assembly line in case of accidents (Di Fazio, 2017; Mortimer, 2017; Giannico, 2017a, 2017b). In many cases workers go to work even if they are ill because of stricter rules in case of sickness and threats of dismissal, as happened to 20 workers employed at the Sevel plant (Franchi, 2015a). In 2015, for example, the rate of illness-related absences at the Pomigliano plant declined to just 1.7 percent of working time (Vergine, 2016). Management uses redundancy funds and transfers workers between plants or to "confinement" departments as punitive measures for less productive workers or for members of conflictual unions (Il Centro, 2017; Leogrande, 2014). In 2015, moreover, FCA introduced a "social peace" clause into the new CCSLs banning collective conflicts during the duration of the contract (FCA-CNH, 2015).

These repressive measures, the CCSLs' social peace clause, and the attempt to oust the most militant unions signal that "management is aware of the conflicting insights that the new pace of

work might arouse amongst workers” (Leonardi, 2015, p. 139). Fiat’s failure to achieve an overwhelming majority at the 2010 referendums at Pomigliano and Mirafiori manifested that, despite the risk of losing their jobs, a significant section of the workforce did not accept the new contracts and the new system of work organization. Management is also aware that WCM is exposed to the same vulnerabilities as JIT production. Depending on the smooth operation of “domains” and workers’ commitment, WCM actually increases workers’ potential for disruption. As Beverly Silver noted about JIT production, “a strike that stops production in one key parts factory can bring assembly operations throughout the corporation to a halt within a matter of days or less” (2014, p. 53). In 2004, for example, a 21-day strike at the Fiat plant in Melfi was successful and obtained the equalization of wages with other plants and the abolition of performing the same shift for two consecutive weeks (Cersosimo, 2014). If Fiat has introduced WCM principles as an attempt to prevent workers’ resistance, therefore, these have also generated new vulnerabilities that workers soon started to exploit.

5. Workers’ resistance at FCA

In 2015 workers at FCA started to go on strike against these very exploitative and authoritarian working conditions. Having refused to sign the new contract, FIOM and independent unions were excluded from the RSA system, and could not run for the 2015 election in the 43 FCA-CNH plants.^{xv} But FIOM took part in the elections of Workers’ Safety Representatives:^{xvi} with 35.8 percent of votes, it became the main union in 27 plants, including Termoli and Atesa (CGIL Abruzzo, 2015; FIOM-CGIL, 2016a; Primonumero, 2015). Despite CCSL’s peace clause, from January 2015 FIOM delegates in Melfi, Termoli, and Cassino and Atesa organised strikes against compulsory overtime and labour intensification. They pleaded for the “support of the entire world of work, all FCA group delegates, FIOM national secretary, all independent unions, social movements and political forces” (Il sindacato è un’altra cosa, 2015b). Strikes at Sevel plant demanded new hirings and opposed compulsory overtime and workload increases due to non-replacement of precarious and retired workers (Abruzzo24ore, 2015). At the end of April, a group of workers, union representatives and union officials belonging to “Il sindacato è un’altra cosa” (a tendency within FIOM) and independent trade unions (including USB, FLMU-CUB and SLAI-COBAS) created the “Coordinamento lavoratrici e lavoratori FCA del Centro-Sud” (Centre-South FCA Workers’s Coordination). They aimed at leveraging on “the unity and the central role of all workers” and “sharing initiatives of struggle and conflict in order more effectively to oppose the persistent authoritarian drift in FCA plants due to the introduction of the CCSL and the new Ergo-UAS metrics” (Bracone, 2015).

Between May 2015 and April 2016 workers’ participation in the strikes at Termoli against compulsory overtime and the Ergo-UAS metric system increased from 1 to 60 percent (Antonini, 2016). The majority of FIOM delegates thus called a strike on 21 November 2015. But the day before, the Molise Region FIOM secretary and three delegates dissociated themselves from the strike. The remaining sixteen delegates, however, did not call the strike off and contested “the lack of respect for a decision made by the majority of RSA” (Il sindacato è un’altra cosa, 2015a). The strikers received support from many left-wing organisations and independent unions, and criticised FIOM Molise for exposing RSA delegates to retaliation. Indeed, FCA could apply disciplinary sanctions against the strikers, whose absence from work was now deemed unjustified (Forum diritti lavoro, 2016; Tarantino & Brancato, 2016). A few months later CGIL’s National Statutory College declared the position of sixteen RSA “incompatible” with their role of CGIL delegates: the Coordinamento, it was said, was promoting “organized actions that break the unity of CGIL as a contractual subject in the face of the union’s counterparts” (Bellavita, 2016). FIOM national committee supported this decision. According to FIOM national secretary Maurizio Landini:

No one denies that Fiat before the arrival of Sergio Marchionne was at risk of bankruptcy and today is not. And no one wants to deny the manager's financial qualities. Of all this, we are happy (Marro, 2016).

Sergio Bellavita, member of FIOM national secretariat and of “Il sindacato è un'altra cosa”, supported the “incompatibles” and was therefore dismissed from his role. The sixteen FIOM delegates did not distance themselves from the strikes either, pointing to their substantial achievements. The strikes, in fact, forced the Termoli plant management, to hire 50 new workers, to transfer 60 workers from other plants and to rearrange shifts (Antonini, 2016). On July 2016, the “incompatibles” left FIOM and some joined the independent union USB. At first FCA management revoked their right to conduct union activities, but was condemned for anti-union behaviour and forced to recognise their appointment (USB, 2016). Since then, independent unions have continued to organise strikes at FCA plants. Starting in January 2017, workers at Pomigliano FCA plant have been holding strikes against the transfer of 500 workers to Cassino after the relocation of production of the Panda to Tichy, in Poland (Bellavita, 2017). In October 2017 a group of workers of the Termoli plant founded the SOA (“Sindacato Operai Autorganizzati” – Self-organized Workers Union), which organized some local strikes together with FLMU-CUB (Federazione Lavoratori Metalmeccanici Uniti – Union of United Metalworkers of the independent Union CUB).^{xvii} On 23 March 2018 SiCobas, USB and SOA organized a national strike against FCA management, which announced weeks of shut-downs for most Italian factories in the second semester of 2018, which involved mainly the Cassino, Melfi, Pomigliano and Termoli plants (IAWC, 2018; SiCobas, 2018)

Despite CGIL's attempts at obstructing them, therefore, the strikes at FCA managed to reduce the workload in the Termoli plant, and they showed that it is possible to resist FCA management and unify struggles in different plants. The strikes also created some incipient but significant links in three different directions: across borders, but within the same company, as in the case of solidarity to workers on strike at the FCA plant in Serbia; across industries, by establishing connections with workers in Italy's logistics sector; and, finally, beyond the workplace, by intervening in political issues.

Between June and July, the Coordinamento called a two-hour solidarity strike with the 2,000 FCA workers in Kragujevac (Serbia), who went on a four-week strike against new dismissals and the overwork due to previous 900 dismissals, and for better working conditions, wage increases (from 38,000 to 45,000 dinars, about £320) and the payment of overtime. FIOM sent two delegates in support. According to USB representatives,

This situation is certainly not different than in FCA factories in Italy: exhausting workloads, backbreaking shifts, wages below the average, lack of respect for workers. USB representatives at Melfi FCA plant believe that the fight carried on in these hours by our Serbian colleagues is an example and encouragement for all other employees of the company (USB, 2017).

The Coordinamento also gave solidarity to logistics struggles, and in some cases organized strikes and pickets to support them. On their part, in 2015 SiCobas representatives and logistics workers from Northern Italy joined the pickets at the FCA plants in Melfi and Termoli. On 27 October FCA workers of Termoli, Mirafiori, Cassino, Melfi and Pomigliano joined the general strike of the logistics and transport sectors called by independent unions. SiCobas also gave support to the protests of dismissed workers at Pomigliano FCA by organizing a resistance fund through the “Comitato di lotta cassintegrati e licenziati Fiat”, which achieved their reintegration at work in 2017. In September 2017, moreover, USB representatives at the Melfi FCA plant called a strike denouncing the attack by a group of strike-breakers to the picket of SDA porters in Carpiano. On 26 October, FCA USB shop stewards joined the general strike called by independent unions of the logistics and transport sectors in protest against parliamentary attempts further to restrict the right to strike (La voce delle lotte, 2017).

We also witnessed some embryonic but significant attempts to intervene at the political level. On 18 March 2016, for example, Cassino FCA workers took part in the general strike against wars, racism and exploitation organised by SiCobas. In September 2016, when the Democratic Party created an association at the Pomigliano plant campaigning for a yes vote in the referendum on constitutional reform, the Coordinamento created a “FCA Workers Committee for a NO vote.” They denounced the restrictions to workers’ freedom of expression and self-organisation entailed in the proposed reform (Il pungolo rosso, 2016). On 8 March 2017 two women workers at Pomigliano FCA joined the International Women’s Strike – when management changed their shifts in retaliation the Coordinamento organized some strikes against “gender and anti-union repression”, receiving support from left-wing and feminist organizations. In April 2017, moreover, USB representatives at Termoli FCA called a strike against the introduction of corporate welfare (Primonumero, 2017).

6. Conclusion

Italy has not witnessed strong anti-austerity protests and workers’ mobilizations in the wake of the global economic crisis, but this does not mean that the labour movement is experiencing a definitive crisis. What we are witnessing is rather an exacerbated crisis of social-democratic unionism. Indeed, deindustrialisation and austerity policies have profoundly transformed the system of industrial relations, determining a sharp deterioration of workers’ bargaining power at labour market level. Embracing the goals of economic recovery and national competitiveness, Italy’s main trade unions (CGIL, CISL and UIL) have not opposed, but in certain cases even supported industrial relations reforms. New agreements between trade unions and employers’ organizations have restricted the right to strike, limited democracy and workers’ participation within the unions, and excluded non-signatory unions from bargaining. The growing weight of second level bargaining and the attempts to individualize labour relations aim at increasing competition and divisions between workers so as to hinder their collective organization.

The reorganization of labour relations imposed by Marchionne at Fiat after its merger with Chrysler has certainly been the most radical attack on workers’ rights in Italy in the wake of the crisis. But a significant section of the FCA workforce has not passively accepted the new organization of work and soon started to take part in strikes, establishing links with grassroots unions. FIOM’s decision to delegitimize the group of union representatives that resisted Marchionne’s plan was a real turning point in the history of Italian trade unionism. Along with the participation to the negotiations for the renewal of the metalworking national contract in 2016, the repression of the “incompatibles” was a sign that even FIOM has accepted the new industrial relations model, mainly for fear of being excluded from national- and company-level negotiations. This provides further evidence that the process of co-optation of social-democratic unions has accelerated in the wake of the crisis.

The strikes organized in several FCA plants in southern Italy since 2015 show that, as in other countries, the crisis of social-democratic unionism has opened the door to new experiences of workers’ organization and “radical political unionism”. Despite FIOM’s attempt at repressing the “incompatibles”, FCA workers have continued to strike against Marchionne’s plans, receiving solidarity from left-wing organisations and grassroots unions. Largely overlooked in social movements and industrial relations literature, these strikes show that even if Italy’s new system of industrial relations seeks to prevent workers from organizing through established and independent unions, new spaces for a re-making of the labour movement are emerging, however incipient and embryonic these might be.

The strikes exposed the vulnerabilities of WCM production methods, achieving a reduction of the workload in some plants (Termoli). More importantly, FCA workers have shown that it is possible to resist global capital despite the threat of job losses and various forms of repression. Even if past levels of conflict have not been reached yet, these strikes have made a difference from previous years,

when the precarity due to work reduction and layoffs made it “increasingly difficult for workers to think about the organisation of forms of conflict within the factory” (D’Aloisio, 2015, p. 96). FCA workers have also sought to forge links with FCA workers abroad and with workers in other sectors, like logistics, and have intervened on political issues. Given the vulnerabilities of JIT production and the centrality of logistics in capital’s global restructuring, these incipient links have the potential to pose new challenges to capital’s attempt to blackmail workers and put them in competition with each other by diverting investment abroad. Realistic alternatives to austerity and globalized capitalism need to build on these new sources of structural power.

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ⁱ The system of ‘vouchers for casual labour’ (managed by Italy’s National Institute for Social Insurance) was used to pay for casual work services. Vouchers conferred workers no ability to bargain collectively, earn sick, maternity or holiday pay, or earn unemployment benefits. Between 2011 and 2016 the use of voucher-based work increased by 461 per cent (from 23,813,978 voucher-cheques in 2012 to 133,826,001 in 2016) (INPS, 2017; UIL, 2016). This extensive use of vouchers was abolished by the Gentiloni government in 2017 in order to avoid actually holding the referendum. The referendum on unfair dismissal was ruled out as inadmissible by the Constitutional Court.

ⁱⁱ The name is hard to translate in English. It means literally Trade Union of the Base.

ⁱⁱⁱ The inclusion of young people in the labour market has become more precarious because regular jobs have been replaced by internships (Cillo, 2017).

^{iv} FCA is an US-Italian company registered under Dutch Law since 2014.

^v Sergio Marchionne (1952–2018) was elected as an independent member of the Board of Directors of Fiat S.p.A. in May 2003, and then appointed CEO in 2004. In June 2009, when Fiat received a 20 percent stake in Chrysler Group LLC, Marchionne was appointed CEO. The last version of this article was written in May 2018, two months before Marchionne’s death.

^{vi} Sevel is a joint venture between Fiat Group Automobiles and PCA, which owns Peugeot, Citroën, DS, Opel and Vauxhall Motors. It produces light commercial vehicles with the brands Fiat Ducato, Peugeot and Citroën.

^{vii} A prominent practice in logistics is the outsourcing of labour-intensive activities to cooperatives employing low-paid immigrant workers (Massarelli, 2014).

^{viii} In 2003 CGIL organized a three-million-strong demonstration against Berlusconi’s proposed reform of dismissal procedures (Meardi, 2014).

^{ix} Second level bargaining is not compulsory and covers 55 percent of the workforce and 20 percent of enterprises (Leonardi, 2016).

^x RSU are unified workers’ organisations representing all workers employed in a workplace. Until 2013, one third of RSU delegates were designated or elected by the trade unions that signed the national collective agreement and the remaining two thirds were elected by all workers; other trade unions had to collect the signatures of the 5 per cent of employees to stand in RSU elections. RSA representatives, on the contrary, “can be formed on the initiative of workers in each production unit within trade unions that have signed collective labour contracts applied to the production unit”.

^{xi} In the first ten months of 2017, the balance between new hires and terminations of contracts in the private sector amounted to +729,314. This is due to the growth of fixed-term contracts (+925,108), apprenticeship contracts (+114,122) and seasonal contracts (+12,207), which offset the decline in open-ended contracts (-322,123) (INPS, 2017).

^{xii} The previous national collective agreement (2013–15) was only signed by FIM-CISL and UILM.

^{xiii} In 1993 the Melfi plant was opened in a “greenfield” location (Danford, Richardson, Pulignano, & Stewart, 2008).

^{xiv} Uas (Universal Analysis System) is a metric system associated to a check-list for the analysis of ergonomic risk factors, called Ergo.

^{xv} Case New Holland Industrial (CNH) is controlled by Exor, which belongs to the Agnelli family. It produces agricultural machines, trucks, commercial vehicles, buses and special vehicles.

^{xvi} The election of Workers’ Safety Representatives is regulated by labour legislation, so neither the CCSLs nor the national agreements between employers’ organisations and trade unions can impede the participation of all unions. In July 2013, the Constitutional Court recognised the right to exercise trade union activities also to organisations that did not sign the CCSLs. In September FCA allowed FIOM to appoint RSA representatives (Rossi, 2013; FCA, 2013).

^{xvii} <https://www.facebook.com/soaoperaiautorganizzati/>