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DOI:

[10.1057/s41295-016-0073-7](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-016-0073-7)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Cillo, R., & Pradella, L. (2018). New immigrant struggles in Italy's logistics industry. *Comparative European Politics*, 16(1), 67-84. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-016-0073-7>

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## **New immigrant struggles in Italy's logistics industry**

Rossana Cillo, Lucia Pradella

The wave of strikes in the logistics sector since 2008 is by far the most important struggle that has developed in Italy in the wake of the global economic crisis. In this article we reflect on its potential for the renewal of the labour movement. We ground our discussion in an analysis of global production transformations, and of migration as a factor of working class re-composition. We show that in Italy the crisis is determining an acute process of deindustrialisation, while austerity and harshening immigration restrictions are reinforcing the deregulation and racialisation of employment relation. Deindustrialisation, however, is matched by the growth of the logistics sector and its reorganisation along the lines of Just-in-Time production, which actually strengthens workers' bargaining power at the point of production. After describing working conditions in the sector, we present the main characteristics of logistics struggles. The mainly immigrant logistics workers have been able to exercise their power through blockades and strikes, obtaining improved agreements with some of the main logistics companies. In a context of increasingly generalised precarity, these struggles can inspire workers in other sectors and promote a process of international class re-composition.

### **Introduction**

The global economic crisis erupted at a moment of decline for the 'alter-globalisation movement', but laid the foundations for the emergence of a potentially stronger movement and re-opened a space for discussing substantive alternatives to neoliberalism. This article grounds the discussion of alternatives in an international political economy (IPE) analysis of the crisis and the struggles that emerged in response to it. Despite an increasing awareness among IPE scholars of the limits of finance-led narratives and the need to analyse the multiple societal aspects of the crisis, limited research has been done so far on contestation movements and alternative strategies. This lacuna depends on a still prevailing reified conceptualisation of social classes and on a view of labour as a passive factor of production.

Any reflection on alternatives, in our view, needs to start from the centrality of production and labour relations, and of workers as subjects. In this light, processes of international production restructuring and immigration appear to be relevant not only in diagnosing the roots of the crisis, but also in reflecting on alternatives to it. If a rich literature exists on the negative consequences of these processes on the wage share,

labour conditions and trade-union structural and associational power, less research has so far been done on their potential for the renewal of the labour movement. Processes of international production restructuring, however, have led to a formidable growth of the class of wage labourers and increased its potential power at the point of production. In this context, international migration represents a link between processes of class re-composition in the global South and in the North.

The logistics sector exemplifies the contradictory dynamics of global production restructuring and working class re-composition. In this article we discuss the link between global production restructuring, the growth of logistics and workers' power. We then focus on Italy, where the global economic crisis is determining an unprecedented process of deindustrialisation, and austerity and harshening immigration restrictions have reinforced the deregulation and racialisation of employment relations, further weakening organised labour. Deindustrialisation, however, is matched by the growth of the logistics sector. This growth, which reflects Italy's importance in international transport routes, is leading to the reorganisation of logistics along the lines of Just-in-Time (JIT) production. After presenting working conditions in the sector, we analyse the wave of strikes in logistics since 2008, by far the most important struggles in Italy in the wake of the crisis. Finally, we reflect on challenges for the renewal of the labour movement in Italy and beyond.

### **Grounding alternatives in production relations**

Recent publications in IPE show an increasing awareness of the limits of finance-led narratives of the crisis. For Alan Cafruny (2015) the crisis points to the need to embrace political economy in the classical sense of the term: as the study of production and power relations broadly conceived. Drawing on literature on production transformations in Europe within a global context (e.g., Simonazzi *et al.*, 2013), Gambarotto and Solari (2014) seek to overcome the invisibility of the real industrial and social damage provoked by the crisis. An increasing number of scholars, moreover, pay attention to the 'everyday political economy' of the crisis and its consequences on marginalised social groups (see Green and Hay, 2015).

As Huke *et al.* (2015) recently argued, however, even critical IPE scholars mainly focus on mechanisms of domination rather than on contestation movements and alternative strategies. This lacuna, in our view, depends on an "ever-present temptation to suppose that class is a thing, and to portray labour as a mere factor in global production, and workers as passive and adaptive" (Amoore, 2006: 23). These a-relational conceptions of social classes and passive representations of workers cause serious shortcomings in our understanding of "the multiple societal inter-connections within the political economy of the crisis" (Green and Hay, 2015, 334), and close down strategic reflections on alternatives.

Exploring alternatives, in fact, requires understanding that production is not a technical process, but a terrain of struggle, where essentially political questions of power, time and distribution are contested. Our article starts from the centrality of production and labour relations, which necessarily implies adopting an international perspective. The crisis, in our view, highlights both a persisting crisis of profitability and the uneven effects of the neoliberal processes of international production restructuring on the EU15 economies. Production relocation to low wage countries led to a worldwide but uneven development of a cheap labour economy: a trend that is becoming even more pronounced in the wake of the crisis. In the EU, this process is taking place unevenly among sectors and member states, reflecting the polarisation and international specialisation of the EU productive structure (Pradella, 2015; Simonazzi *et al.*, 2013).

Workers, however, are not mere factors of production that passively adapt to economic “imperatives”; they are political subjects who can shape the global system itself. While these transformations certainly unleashed a downward spiral in workers’ power and welfare in Western Europe, they also swelled the global class of wage labourers (which is now composed of 3.1 billion workers globally, see Foster *et al.*, 2011) and led to the growth of labour militancy worldwide. This growth preceded the crisis, and was reinforced by it: since 2010, widespread labour unrest in countries like China, Bangladesh, India and South Africa has been accompanied by anti-austerity movements in Europe and the US, while revolutionary movements shook the Arab world overthrowing military dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia (see Pradella and Marois, 2014).

International migration, moreover, has led to the emergence of what Saskia Sassen calls a “global class of disadvantaged workers”, a class that is “more global and hence indicative of the future, rather than of a backward past, than is usually assumed” (2007, 189). This “global class” is composed of both immigrant and native-born workers facing increasing precarity as a consequence of international political economy dynamics (Basso, 2014, 93). Immigrant workers thus represent a link between South and North, between the struggles of new working classes in the making and old working classes being unmade. They are not passive victims, but central actors in the new kind of collective subjectivity that is needed to offer an alternative to the crisis.

The logistics sector is a good example of the contradictory dynamics of global production restructuring and working class re-composition. This explains why, since the 2000s, a growing body of literature has looked at the logistics sector as a site of power and struggle<sup>1</sup>. While numerous studies have analysed the evolution of the sector in Italy, and the relationship between intermodal transport, containerisation and work organisation (e.g., Appetecchia 2014; Bologna, 2010; Mariotti, 2015), the literature on logistics struggles in Italy is still underdeveloped. Mainly self-organised by immigrant workers from North Africa and Asia and organised by the independent union Si-Cobas, struggles that developed in Italy’s logistics sector from 2008 onwards have been the most important against the crisis so far, and attacked key neoliberal practices such as multinational corporations (MNCs) outsourcing work to cooperatives employing low-

paid immigrant workers. After 2011, these struggles drew inspiration from the uprisings in the Arab world and North Africa.

While some scholars have denounced the extremely exploitative working conditions in Italy's logistics sector (Benvegnù, 2015; Ghezzi, 2010), moreover, little research has contextualised these conditions within political economy dynamics nationally and internationally. This lack of analysis, in our view, limits our understanding of the potential of these struggles in terms of alternative strategies. Anna Curcio (2014, 389), for example, envisages the potential for a common struggle between logistics, precarious workers and youth. A similar perspective is advanced by Cuppini *et al.*'s (2015) bio-political analysis of processes of antagonistic subjectivation in the logistics sector. In this article we show that the logistics workers who have mobilised in recent years in Italy are organising as workers, not just as precarious workers, and are promoting a process of class re-composition at both national and international levels. In order to argue this, we draw on participatory observation and recent enquiries into logistics struggles in Italy published in academic journals, the Italian press and trade union websites.

### **Globalisation, logistics, and workers' power**

Since the end of the 1950s and over the last twenty years in particular, a "logistics revolution" has taken place (Allen, 1997). With the international integration of the production, circulation and final consumption of commodities, the logistics sector has acquired an increasing centrality. As transport has gained importance in the overall production process, the speed of circulation has become vital to capital accumulation (Cowen, 2014b, 101). The logistics revolution is closely linked to the rise of neoliberalism and JIT production. While trade deregulation and production relocation led to the emergence of global supply chains (Cowen, 2014b; Mariotti, 2015), with the spread of the Toyota Production System these chains have been reorganised along JIT and "zero inventories" principles.

In order to respond to fluctuating markets, the Toyota Production System seeks to reduce waste (of time, space and materials) with the ultimate goal of maximising labour intensity (Basso 2003: 39; Ohno, 1988, 58). Transport is part and parcel of JIT global supply chains; its organisation aims at guaranteeing "the right delivery times, the integrity of loads, and prompt information on the shipment's condition" (Mariotti, 2015, 3). JIT production changed qualitatively after the rise of Wal-Martism and the shift in dominance from manufacturers to retailers. Wal-Martism realised one of Toyotaism's main principles: the shift from producers seeking to shape their markets to retailers increasingly directing production (Ashton, 2006). This had deep effects on production processes, and the overall relationship between capital and labour. The acceleration of capital circulation, in fact, created new possibilities for labour exploitation<sup>ii</sup>.

Wal-Mart has forced its suppliers to cut costs, made it more difficult for companies to compete on any terms other than price, and made it close to

impossible for manufacturers and service providers to pass on the cost of improvements in products and services to consumers in the form of price increases (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008, 7).

The logistics revolution is based on a series of technological innovations accelerating commodity flows and reducing transport costs. The use of satellite, communication and information technologies and shipping containers played a central role. As Deborah Cowen (2014a; 2014b) highlights, all these technologies were developed within the military and then adopted in the corporate world of management in the wake of the Second World War. Containers allowed for a significant reduction of “the time required to load and unload ships, reducing port labour costs and enabling tremendous savings for manufacturers” (Cowen, 2014b, 41; see Mariotti, 2015, 2). This explains why containerisation is generally considered the single most important technological innovation underpinning the globalisation of trade and production.

The increasing use of information technologies since the 1990s has been essential to coordinate accelerating global processes of production, circulation and the distribution of commodities. Wal-Mart was the leading corporation in this field. By forcing its suppliers to use bar codes to collect data from retailers at the point of sale, Wal-Mart was able to manage supplies from manufacturers more efficiently and reduce inventory costs along the supply chain. Since the early 1980s, moreover, Wal-Mart has used its own satellite system to govern the flow of goods in its own fleet of trucks, and pioneered the cross docking-system. In the 2000s it forced its suppliers to replace bar codes with radio-frequency identification technologies, in order to track commodity flows still more accurately (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008, 6–12). Crucially, these innovations allowed Wal-Mart to monitor the movements and actions of more than a million employees. Wal-Mart has thus

achieved among the highest rates of productivity growth for the entire service economy, while keeping the wages of its “associates” at or barely above the poverty level and while also relying on the taxpayer to keep the children of Wal-Mart employees out of poverty (Head, 2014, 35).

The logistics revolution, however, has not just intensified labour exploitation and weakened organised labour; it has also created vulnerabilities both in individual workplaces and throughout the network that strengthen workers’ mobilisations. Crucially, JIT production increases the potential for disruption. “With the elimination of the buffer supply of parts, 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” (Silver, 2014: 53). The logistics industry exemplifies how the organisational and technological changes associated with globalisation actually strengthen workers at the point of production. Since tightly integrated supply chains depend on the smooth operation of their parts, they are highly vulnerable to disruption. The length of the chain, the role of transport and storage nodes within it, the seasonality of certain logistics-dependent sectors, the unbalanced but mutually dependent relationship between firms and subcontractors: all these factors increase the impact of workers’

mobilisations far beyond individual workplaces, companies and the logistics sector itself (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008).

Logistics workers have realised that they hold a strategic position in global supply chains (Neilson, 2012). They have thus understood that the internationalisation of the working class resulting from neoliberal globalisation creates new vulnerabilities for the sector. Indeed, “the system of global production and international distribution brings workers together in an unprecedented manner, by linking them to the same industry and supply chain [...] [and] joining them in a potential commonality that could be used to put intense pressure on that firm from multiple angles” (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008, 47). While production restructuring and neoliberal labour market reforms have weakened workers’ bargaining power at the labour market level, therefore, globalisation increases the workplace bargaining power of those who still have a job, forming the conditions for their common organisation. For Beverly Silver (2014: 54), “understanding the combined impact of these two countervailing trends on workers’ power is a key for understanding the future of the working-class in twenty-first century global capitalism”.

### **Crisis, austerity and production restructuring in Italy**

These two countervailing trends are also visible in Italy. As is well-known, the global economic crisis has decelerated the dynamism of the global economy but accelerated the global shift of production towards the Global South (Timmer *et al.*, 2014, 109, 106; Eurofound, 2014). Between 2007 and 2012, the share of world manufacturing output value of the EU declined from 27 to 19 per cent, while China’s manufacturing share increased by about 10 percentage points (up to 22 per cent). Between 2008 and 2014 Italy’s manufacturing output declined by about 24 per cent and Italy lost 13 per cent of its industrial capacity (EC, 2014, 20). Such a contraction is unparalleled in all the main manufacturing producer countries, and helps explain the still relatively high levels of unemployment in the country (11.4 per cent in March 2016, Eurostat). Job losses in the manufacturing sector have reduced the numbers of the most protected and unionised jobs, contributing to the erosion of union density and collective bargaining coverage (Eurofound, 2014).

Erosion along these lines was also one of the main objectives of the austerity policies and structural reforms in Italy. Since 2011, different labour reforms enhanced the erosion of the system of collective bargaining and the implementation of supply side labour market policies, culminating in the Jobs Act (2014/15). The latter generalised precarious employment relations by introducing open-ended contracts with graduated protection, and further liberalised temporary employment. Adjustments in Italy also included a radical pension reform, reductions in public sector employment, tax increases and decreases in social protection expenditure that were more pronounced than the EU15 average (Pavolini *et al.*, 2015: 60). In addition, harshening immigration policies have intensified the racialisation of the Italian labour market (Pradella and Cillo, 2015).

The linking of residence permits with an employment contract and the criminalisation of undocumented immigrants (which began with the 2002 “Bossi-Fini Law”) leave immigrant workers vulnerable to blackmail (Basso, 2015).

These political economy factors have significantly weakened workers’ bargaining power at the labour market level. The main trade unions in Italy have done very little to oppose these reforms. In the 2000s the main union confederations (CGIL, CISL and UIL) launched initiatives for the active recruitment of young, precarious and immigrant workers, and created specific departments, categories and services; especially in the case of CGIL, these initiatives were also accompanied by forms of cooperation with social movements. These initiatives, however, co-existed with a process of institutionalisation, which led to the unions prioritising service provision rather than the conflictual representation of workers’ interests. In the wake of the crisis, as in other countries (see Bailey *et al.*, 2016), the main unions increasingly subordinated bargaining to the interests of economic “recovery” and competitiveness. They thus moved backwards in terms of involvement and representation of immigrant workers (Cillo and Pradella, 2015). Even the traditionally more militant union, FIOM (the metalworkers’ union within CGIL), has adapted to this new landscape of industrial relations. In the Spring of 2016 its leadership disciplined shop-stewards who organised independent strikes against compulsory overtime and labour intensification at the FIAT-FCA plants in Melfi and Termoli (in Southern Italy). In April, Sergio Bellavita, the spokesperson of the internal opposition current “Il sindacato è un’altra cosa” (“The union is something else”) which supported the strikes at FIAT, was removed from office (Sciotto, 2016).

In this context, the logistics sector is swimming against the stream both in economic terms, and, as we shall see in the next section, in terms of mobilisation. Despite a decline in commodity circulation and a collapse in manufacturing production in 2009, between 2007 and 2013 the transportation and storage sector (TSS) registered a significant increase in production value (+5.6 per cent): an upward trend that is even more pronounced in comparison to 2005 (Eurostat, 2015). Within this sector, contract logistics increased still more prominently: between 2009 and 2012 the total registered value increased from 71.2 to 77.3 billion euros (a 1.2 per cent increase in real terms). In 2015 the total registered value reached 81 billion euros – a real term increase of 2 per cent if compared to 2013 (OCL, 2014, 9, 10, 15, 83). Italy has thus become the fourth country in the EU for TSS production value, following France, Germany and the UK (Eurostat, 2015).

This growth depends in the main on increased outsourcing of circulation activities (from the supply of materials to final distribution) linked to production outsourcing or contract logistics (Mariotti, 2014; OCL, 2014, 12). This growth is taking place despite the weaknesses of the Italian logistics model due to inadequate institutional planning and the strategies of Italian firms<sup>iii</sup>. These weaknesses are clearly visible in container trade in ports. Despite their strategic position on the route between the Far East and Europe, Italian ports are not competitive with northern European ports because they lack



adequate infrastructure for cargo ships with capacities exceeding 10,000 TEUs, and fail to offer competitive logistics services to smaller ships. Intermodal transport services connecting the Far East-Europe route with Italy's neighbouring countries are still underdeveloped (Bologna, 2013a, 2013b; Bologna and Stevanato, 2013).

Moreover, logistics companies in Italy are highly fragmented. Almost 90 per cent of companies have less than 10 employees; only 30 have more than 1,000 employees. Micro-enterprises employ more than 27 per cent of employees in the transportation and logistics sector, while about half (53.3 per cent) of the one million employees work in SMEs (Forte and Miotti, 2015, 3). In 2012, contract logistics included 103,751 companies: almost 79 per cent consisted of self-employed drivers, while about 15 per cent were "drivers organised in capital companies" (OCL, 2014, 9, 83). The latter include some of the major multinational third-party logistics providers, such as TNT, FedEx, DHL, Maersk, MSC etc. Within contract logistics there are 660 express couriers, 1,047 logistics operators providing integrated logistics services, 2,439 international shipping companies and 5,760 "warehousing" companies (OCL, 2014, 11). The latter include many of the cooperatives to which big Italian and foreign companies (in manufacturing, retail and logistics) have outsourced the management of logistics activities. In 2013 within the TSS there were 4,185 cooperatives and 155 cooperative consortia, with a production value of 7,725.8 million euros and a total of 190,715 employees (Euricse, 2015, 41, 44).

### **Labour conditions in logistics**

The cooperative system in Italy has changed profoundly since its beginnings: the organisation of work, internal structures and production objectives have fully adopted capitalist principles (Sacchetto and Semenzin, 2014, 44). In order to be hired as cooperative "associate workers", labourers pay association fees ranging from 2,000 to 15,000 euros, which contribute to investment or liability funds. Cooperatives thus shift business risks onto workers, and further lower their indirect wages through systematic tax evasion (Benvegnù, 2015; Massarelli, 2014; SiCobas, Adl and Cobas, 2013). Workers are also pushed to lengthen and intensify their working day for the sake of profit sharing.

Working hours and wages in subcontracted logistics cooperatives are often unregulated, and workers are forced to put their own time at the full disposal of JIT production. As revealed by Massarelli (2014) and Si-Cobas (SiCobas, Adl and Cobas, 2013), it is common practice to let dozens of workers wait for hours in the store's locker room, using (and paying) them only when they are needed. This practice creates a reserve of on-call labour in the workplace. Alternatively, employees are forced to work up to 12–14 hours a day by threats of being moved to other locations or having their wages reduced. Although most workers are on permanent contracts, their conditions are precarious: in many cases the opening or closing of cooperatives is planned in such a

way as to allow the continuous wiping out of workers' accumulated seniority, the avoidance of paying salaries and arrears, and the sacking workers who are unionised and/or mobilise against the companies (Massarelli, 2014; SiCobas, Adl and Cobas, 2013).

There have also been reports of frequent irregularities with regard to payrolls, non-compliance with national collective agreements, failure to provide payments for holidays, illness, seniority and meal tickets (Ghezzi, 2010). In the warehouses where struggles developed, these forms of wage compression were so prevalent that cooperatives were taking an average of 15,000 euros per year from each employee, paying monthly wages of about 700 euros. Although there are no unitary data for the whole sector, some enquires (e.g., Massarelli, 2014; Curcio, 2014; Cuppini *et al.*, 2013) and statistical studies (Bologna, 2013b; Euricse, 2014, 2015) show that immigrant workers are concentrated in the lowest qualified tasks<sup>iv</sup>. Workers from different nationalities are continuously replaced according to their propensity to engage in collective action.

Cooperatives impose these extremely exploitative working conditions both by threatening dismissals and through systematic intimidation and psychological and physical violence by supervisors, often of Italian nationality. Supervisors

[controlled] the possibility of urinating by denying or delaying access to toilets [...] They regulated the rhythm of the working day to the sound of curses and insults [...] [without calling] workers by name, but whistling or using nicknames linked to their countries of origin (Massarelli, 2014, 13).

In some cases, supervisors physically assaulted workers who claimed their rights or were less submissive (Massarelli, 2014; SiCobas Adl and Cobas, 2013). By outsourcing to cooperatives, therefore, companies are able to meet JIT production imperatives, impose extremely precarious working conditions and reduce so-called labour costs. This is how Italian logistics can be competitive despite its technological and infrastructural weaknesses (Bologna, 2013b).

In many cooperatives workers have tried to protect their interests by asking the main trade union confederations to intervene in company level bargaining. The main unions, however, did not mobilise workers and often signed local agreements entailing worse conditions than the porters' national contract, in some cases without any authorisation by the workers. The main regions in which logistics activities are concentrated – Lombardy, Veneto and Emilia-Romagna – have a strong tradition of unionisation. In the cooperative model, however, the unions link cooperatives and business, and play an important role in managing the workforce (Cuppini *et al.*, 2013). Many cooperatives are directed by unionists formerly active in the confederations (Sacchetto and Semenzin, 2014) and by local or regional Democratic Party leaders. In the Emilia Romagna region, for example, most cooperatives are part of the umbrella organisation Lega Coop, whose former national president was the current Labour Minister Giuliano Poletti (Massarelli, 2014). This helps to explain why the main union confederations aided cooperatives to

meet the subcontracting companies' constant demands for lower labour costs (Massarelli, 2014).

Italy's logistics sector, however, is a good example of the contradictory dynamics highlighted by Beverly Silver where the labour market bargaining power of workers declines and the workplace bargaining power of those who are employed increases. The cooperative system of labour exploitation depends both on the weakening of workers' labour market bargaining power, and on the main unions' increasing institutionalisation and willingness to make concessions to employers (Tomassetti, 2014). Yet logistics workers in Italy are increasingly aware of their strategic position in global supply chains and of their potential for disruption. This awareness, together with the support of small rank-and-file unions known together as Cobas (an abbreviation for 'Comitati di Base', 'Base Committees') and left-wing militants, gave them the confidence to improve their conditions. These factors help explain the success of the struggles that developed in Italy from 2008, beginning from one logistics centre of the Bennet supermarket chain in Origgio (Milan), spreading to the Centre-North of Italy and continuing today.

### **Struggles in logistics**

The first logistics struggle was organised in 2008 by about 160 workers, employees of the Coop Leonardo cooperative at Bennet Origgio. Workers contacted the independent union Slai-Cobas (now SiCobas<sup>v</sup>), asking for its support in achieving better working conditions and the right to unionise. The struggle at Origgio was radical from the very beginning: along with strike actions, pickets were organised over eight to nine months, blocking commodity flows from the warehouse to supermarkets in northern Italy. These pickets won the support of left-wing activists and social centres from Milan (Massarelli, 2014; AngryWorkersWorld, 2015).

Building on this successful experience, Si-Cobas organised a large and growing number of workers in the logistics sector, reaching 10,000 members in 2014. Through a long struggle, Si-Cobas and Adl Cobas<sup>vi</sup> managed to achieve better working conditions in the cooperatives of the main logistics hubs in northern Italy (Milan, Piacenza, Bologna, Brescia, Padua, and Verona), as well as Rome and Naples. The most important Italian and multinational companies subcontract their storage activities to cooperatives at these hubs: Bennett, Coop, Gigante, Granarolo and Esselunga in the fields of food industry and distribution, IKEA in retail, Yoox in online trade; GLS (the Italian subsidiary of Royal Mail), FedEx, DHL, Bartolini, SDA (the subsidiary of Italian Mail) and TNT in the logistics and shipping sectors.

As Aldo Milani, the national coordinator of Si-Cobas, has pointed out, the struggles at Bennet Origgio prefigured what later became the essential characteristics of logistics struggles in Italy (Massarelli, 2014, 93–108). The first is the combination of workers' self-organisation and independent trade union organisation. Workers, and immigrant workers in particular, have been the driving force behind these struggles. With this often being workers' first experience of struggle, they were supported by trade unionists and

left-wing militants who had in many cases been active in the 1960s and 1970s, when the labour movement in Italy was at its peak. Similarly to other countries (see Bailey *et al.*, 2016), this allowed the sharing of organisational and political experiences between workers and political militants. Workers' self-organisation was also enabled by the awareness that fear was the "real deterrent of the struggle, the best tactics to divide and enslave the people"; it was necessary to "fight united" to defeat the blackmail based on individual and collective fear (Si-Cobas delegate, in Massarelli, 2014, 42)<sup>vii</sup>. Workers reclaimed their "dignity", not just economic dignity, but also human dignity and respect.

The second main characteristic of the logistics struggles is a high level of radicalism and solidarity. "When a warehouse called for solidarity, workers [from other warehouses] rushed to help and together picketed the company". Pickets also received active support from left wing militants and organisations (Aldo Milani, in Massarelli, 2014, 96). Si-Cobas set up a resistance fund based on donations and a monthly fee from its members to support workers; in some cases, it also organised broader boycotts. Si-Cobas and Adl Cobas organised the first national strike of the logistics sector on March 22 2013, which blocked the sector in the north of Italy, Rome and Naples. Workers mobilised in their thousands, not only on their individual claims, but for a platform of demands addressed both to cooperatives and the main subcontracting companies (Si-Cobas, Adl-Cobas, 2013). They thus held both to their responsibilities.

Local or national blockades have enormous disruptive potential. A one-day blockade at the IKEA store in Piacenza, for example,

means that goods are not loaded onto trucks. These do not arrive on time for the ships, producing a delay in deliveries at destinations in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. A one-day blockade blows up the organization of the entire process. [...] This means a big economic damage [...]. In a warehouse where fresh food is stored, a four-hour blockade means €2–300,000 lost" (Aldo Milani, in Curcio, 2014, 376).

After the first national strike, two more national strikes led to a national agreement in February 2015 with some of the largest logistics operators in Italy (GLS, TNT, BRT and SDA). This agreement represented a significant improvement on the national logistics contract in terms of contract and wage conditions, including the obligation to hire workers already employed in warehouses in the case of contractual changes, the repeal of the status of "associate worker" and the obligation for companies to employ workers directly.

The third main characteristic of the logistics struggles in Italy is the high levels of repression by both companies and the state. The most active immigrant workers were often threatened with expulsion. Besides facing repeated police interventions, arrests, legal charges and trials, several trade unionists were beaten and subjected to Mafia intimidation by cooperatives financed by organised crime (Scandalliato, 2013). Laws from the fascist era have been applied: during the strikes at the IKEA distribution centre, for example, Piacenza's police headquarters issued "expulsion orders" for Aldo

Milani and two other Si-Cobas unionists. In the case of Granarolo, anti-strike measures originally aimed at ensuring essential public services were extended to logistics, mainly to ensure the transport of perishable goods. These levels of repression can only be explained by the fact that the strikes blocked a sector central to capital accumulation, and achieved tangible improvements in working conditions at a time of deep labour market restructuring and lack of significant trade union response. The success of logistics struggles may thus set a dangerous example for workers in other sectors. This explains why even CGIL local branches condemned these struggles in some cases (see, for example, Arci, CGIL and Libera, 2014).

The fourth characteristic concerns political prospects. Organised by a “multinational” workforce, these struggles expressed the need to move beyond the logistics industry, the trade union level and national borders. Logistics workers have participated in and organised mobilisations related to political issues, such as the repeal of the “Bossi-Fini” Law. The important role played by immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East in the strikes also dealt a blow to institutional racism and Islamophobia in the country. In addition, logistics workers promoted a broader struggle involving workers in other sectors, seeking to unite their struggle with both unprotected workers in hotels and other services (SiCobas, 2015a), and with relatively better protected workers in other sectors, starting with the metalworking sector. SiCobas has supported strikes in this sector since the second semester of 2014, taking part in initiatives organised by FIOM and attempting to set up a common coordination (SiCobas, 2015b). A number of SiCobas representatives and workers from Northern Italy joined the pickets during the successful strikes against compulsory overtime and the intensification of labour exploitation at the FIAT-FCA plants in Melfi and Termoli.

SiCobas is also part of the “Réseau Européen des Syndicats Alternatifs et de Base”, which includes some of the most important independent unions in Europe, such as the Union Syndicale Solidaire in France and Spain’s Confederación General del Trabajo, and has links to the Central Sindical and Popular Conlutas in Brazil. SiCobas has also given solidarity and support to logistics struggles in other countries, including the struggles of Amazon warehouse workers in Germany. Since 2011, moreover, logistics workers have explicitly referred to the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, understanding their own struggles as part of a larger movement transcending national borders.

After the January 25 Revolution, at TNT [Piacenza] we would always say: “this is Tahrir Square too”. Ours, in fact, has been a minor revolution. No one would have bet on it a few years ago. We have shown that united we win. So, I have just one message for workers struggling in my country [Egypt]: you are the union. You don’t need to follow anyone, just yourselves and your needs. You have to take your future into your hands, never looking at your personal, immediate interests. It’s all of your interests taken together that must guide you, as it’s only with unity and solidarity that you can win (Mohammed Arafat, in Zerbino, 2013).

## Conclusion

This article grounds its discussion of alternatives to austerity in an analysis of global production transformations, and migration as a factor of working class re-composition. We start by questioning top-down IPE approaches, which rest on an a-relational conceptualisation of capital (and labour). This kind of approach leaves the links between the crisis in Europe, global dynamics of production restructuring, and workers' structural power un-theorised. The struggles and social movements that emerged in response to the crisis are largely overlooked, as is the potential of immigration for the renewal of the labour movement in Europe.

Our analysis of the effects of the crisis in Italy points to a contradictory dynamic. Pronounced deindustrialisation, austerity and structural reforms are reducing workers' bargaining power at labour market level. But the growth of the logistics sector and its organisation along JIT principles increases workers' power at the point of production. While institutional trade union confederations have increasingly failed to organise workers in the logistics sector and to oppose the worsening of labour conditions through concerted bargaining, the combination of self-organisation and organisation by independent unions allowed logistics workers to exercise their power through blockades and strikes. This has empowered highly precarious and exploited workers, many of whom are immigrants.

These workers overcame the fears linked to their precarious legal statuses and working conditions. Although only some thousands of workers mobilised – a minority within the TSS and logistics cooperatives –, these struggles involved the more important companies in logistics, a key sector for capital accumulation in Italy today. The consequences of blockades, strikes and mobilisations have been felt well beyond the individual companies and the logistics sector itself; they have affected entire supply chains. Logistics workers were thus able to hold both the cooperatives and the main subcontracting companies to their responsibilities, force the retraction of political layoffs and other repressive measures, and obtain improved agreements with some of the main logistics companies. Building on these achievements, SiCobas is now (June 2016) seeking to get its demands introduced in the new national contract of employment. This would lead to improvements in the entire logistics sector, not only in companies unionised by Si-Cobas, and could set an example for other sectors.

Logistics struggles thus entail a clear potential for the labour movement. They show that it is possible successfully to organise a collective response to the worsening of working and living conditions in the age of austerity. Their example of self-organisation and trade union organisation offers an alternative to resignation and passivity. In a context of increasingly generalised precarity, these struggles can inspire and strengthen broader sectors of the working class, as seen in the coordination between Si-Cobas and FIOM shop stewards in the strikes at the FIAT plants in Melfi and Termoli. In order to prevent this coordination, the FIOM leadership removed the representative of the internal

opposition “Il sindacato un'altra cosa” from office. Several members of this current are now discussing whether they should leave FIOM in order to re-launch a conflictual trade unionism able to mobilise the working class both within and beyond workplaces.

Although we cannot predict the outcome of these developments, they show that this is a turning point in the history of the workers' movement in Italy. Workers, and their unions, are facing both major challenges and opportunities. The crisis and resulting austerity policies are making the conditions of workers in different sectors and with different contractual statuses more similar. In this context, the struggles in the logistics sector show that combining self-organisation and trade-union organisation is crucial for workers to overcome fear and divisions, build solidarity and exercise their collective power at the point of production. Si-Cobas's international links and the immigration status of most of its members, moreover, are a sign of the international projection of mobilisations in logistics. Because of logistics workers' central position in global processes of capital accumulation, the very logic of their struggles promotes a process of national and international class re-composition. There are many obstacles to this process, both at trade union and political levels. A lesson that we can draw, however, is that in order for this successful experience to be extended to other sectors and grow into a broader movement against austerity, workers need a political programme capable of breaking with the imperatives of national competitiveness and addressing the international roots of the crisis.

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<sup>i</sup> Cowen (2010), Holmes (2011), Harney and Moten (2013), Martin (2012) and Neilson (2012).

<sup>ii</sup> Ashton (2006), Bonacich and Wilson (2008, 123–30), Cowen (2014a, 191; 2014b, 100–13), Mariotti (2015).

<sup>iii</sup> Appotecchia (2014), Forte and Miotti (2015), Ministero delle infrastrutture e dei trasporti (2012).

<sup>iv</sup> In some warehouses immigrant workers form 90 per cent of the workforce (Massarelli, 2014). In 2012, in Padua province, about 5,774 workers were employed in the transportation and storage sector. About half of them (2,379 workers) held foreign citizenship: they were mainly employed as unskilled workers (1,617 foreign citizens out of 2,702 unskilled workers) and as semi-skilled workers (605 foreign citizens out of 1,881 semi-skilled workers) (Bologna, 2013b, 11).

<sup>v</sup> Slai-Cobas is a union present mainly in the metalworking sector; following an internal split, Si-Cobas emerged as a new independent union able to channel the aims of logistics workers.

<sup>vi</sup> Adl Cobas is another independent union mainly present in the logistics industry in the Veneto region.

<sup>vii</sup> “In the warehouse fear was at home: if the bosses knew that a worker had family they had it in for him. The more common forms of intimidation were the blackmail on hours, the threat of dismissing you or not making you work for days” (Si-Cobas delegate, Massarelli, 2014, 42).

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