

CHAPTER 2: WHY DOES LABOUR ORGANISE?: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

UNIT 4: SOLIDARITY, STRUGGLE AND ORGANISATION: ITALY'S FEDERTERRA

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SCRIPT OF THE VIDEO LECTURE

The mass unionization of agricultural workers in Italy was unique in Europe. Organizing began in the late nineteenth century, leading to the founding of the Federazione Nazionale fra i Lavoratori della Terra (National Federation of Agricultural Workers, Federterra) in 1901 – five years before the founding of the national union confederation CGdL.

There is no comparable organization in other western countries in terms of number of members, organizational continuity or the variety of interests represented: in England, after the wage-earners' struggles of the 1930s, the agricultural trade union dissolved; in France, the agricultural trade union remained confined to certain regions and represented only limited categories of workers; in Germany, the struggles of agricultural workers flared up during social crises but quickly faded away.

At the end of the 1800s, Italy was predominantly an agricultural country, and would remain one into the 1960s. However, there were significant differences between the North and South.

In the North, commercial agriculture was practiced on a large scale, turning working people in the countryside into agricultural proletarians. For the cultivation of rice of which Italy is Europe's largest producer, many laborers, mainly women, travelled from the southern regions for the "monda" (weeding), transplanting and harvesting season.



In central Italy, on the other hand, sharecropping was widespread; sharecroppers worked the landowners' land in exchange for part of the harvest. The latifundium dominated in the South. In this system the land was owned by a few landowners, while the majority of the agricultural population worked as labourers or sharecroppers on these large estates. Rural workers were generally poor and their conditions backward.

The organization of agricultural workers (and Italian trade unionism in general) was strongly influenced by the socialist ideas, which were spreading in those years and which contended with the Catholic Church for cultural influence among the workers. Socialism, with its vision of a society of equals achieved through the socialization of land, found fertile ground among impoverished rural workers. Federterra fought for increased wages, improved working conditions, social security and labour market power through union control over job placement. During the struggles, rural workers had to face the constant violence organized by the growers and the state.

The Italian trade unions were organized on a class and solidarity basis, uniting workers both sectorally through the trade federations and locally through the Camere del Lavoro (Labor Chambers). The Labor Chambers represented the workers of a territory without divisions by trade, sector or job. They emerged in the late 19th century to mediate disputes and manage job placement. Their role expanded, becoming a key point for worker solidarity across sectors. The Chambers offered support in disputes and represented workers to local institutions.

One of the distinctive traits of the Italian agricultural movement was its ability to unite a variety of needs and demands through the joint action of the Labor Chambers with the agricultural union's territorial league that included all types of workers (wage earners, mondine, sharecroppers, day laborers) in a given territory. It was a powerful network of solidarity. In concert with the local Chambers of Labor, for example, the mondine, the women rice weeders in the north who, despite working only about forty days a year, often played a catalysing role in militant actions.



In 1906 their strike for shorter hours spread throughout the region, sparking mass strikes and protests by urban workers. Through a general strike in Vercelli, the mondine won the 8-hour day; bakers, the long-standing demand for the abolition of night work; textile and metal workers, improved pay and shorter hours.

A substantial number of territorial women's leagues were formed, reflecting women's important presence in agriculture. The vigorous claims of women agricultural workers were symbolically recognized in 1906 with the election of a woman, Argentina Altobelli, as national secretary of the Federterra.

During Word War I, union struggles continued and led to additional gains for agricultural workers. Under fascism, the Federterra was dissolved along with other autonomous labour organizations. It was only after the fall of Mussolini (1943) that the agricultural union re-emerged clandestinely and actively participated in the Resistance.

Union struggles immediately resumed after the war, and the Federterrera, reborn in 1944 as the Federbraccianti, continued the fight for rights and improved working conditions for farm workers. Struggles intensified in the 1950s and 1960s, leading to greater union and political gains for rural workers.

In 1960, the Federbraccianti was still the largest trade union in the national confederation CGIL, with over 629,000 members, and its struggles were supported by the entire labour movement. Rural/urban worker solidarity remained active. This included the dispatch of numerous union activists and leaders from the city in support of farm labor struggles, fundraising in factories to support workers in the countryside, and the hospitality accorded to hundreds of farmers' children during longer strikes. Field workers reciprocated by sending food parcels in support of the workers affected by the industrial demobilization, which involved manpower reduction and divestment of certain types of industrial production. This is the case of the 20-day strike at Motta in Milan in 1948.

Many rural workers were killed in the course of the post-war strikes: in the thirty-seven consecutive days of the national strike in the summer of 1949, the Breda worker Luigi



Gayot, the farmhand Pasqualino Lombardi and the rice worker Maria Margotti were killed by police. They would become "martyrs of the peasant movement".

The post-war transformation and mechanization of agriculture brought a dramatic reduction in the agricultural workforce and the disappearance of the traditional rural world. Machinery replaced the manual work of threshing, reaping, harvesting and rice weeding in the irrigated areas of the North. The increasingly close intermingling of agriculture and industry led to a reorganizing of union structures. The Federbraccianti disbanded in January 1988 to merge with the food workers in the Federation of Agroindustrial Workers (Flai).

But the struggles and achievements of agricultural workers remain an important chapter in the history of the Italian labour movement. Their songs of labour and struggle have become part of the union and cultural tradition. Particularly famous are the choruses sung by the women's leagues and mondine to demand eight hours and higher wages.