



## **The Italian labour movement** *'giving voice to new realities'*

BRUNO TRENTIN, General Secretary of the General Confederation of Italian Labour (CGIL) talks to KARL VON HOLDT about the growing diversity of the working class, new ways to build unity, the importance of plant-level bargaining and the political crisis in Italy.

**You spoke a number of times at the meeting of CGIL, CUT (Brazil) and COSATU in September (see SA Labour Bulletin Vol 17 No 5), about a new form of trade unionism and new challenges facing trade unionism. Could you elaborate on this?**

**Trentin:** We are facing a crisis of solidarity among the working class. This has objective and subjective causes. There is a growing differentiation, not only in incomes, but also in status, in skills, in ethnic and sexual composition of the working class. This is changing very rapidly in every country. At the same time, we are facing what I call the crisis of millennial ideologies, such as communism, which were a very strong weapon of unity. The prospect of a new society, to be won through struggle, was an instrument of cohesion, even when on an objective level the differences were growing. This kind of cohesion has collapsed in many countries. At the same time, chiefly among young people, but also in older generations of workers, there is a growing desire to realise now and here some concrete results – not only on economic questions, but also on political and moral ones.

The question is – around what goals can we now build a solidarity between workers, and avoid the contradictions that exist within the working class developing themselves into a sort of war among poor people? We have many examples, even in our country, of this danger. The answers are difficult.

For example, when we talk about the reduction of working hours, we are no longer able to unify the working class. The differences are so great. One person is trying to find a job or trying to defend his/her job at any cost, another will fight for reduction of his/her working hours as a way to improve working conditions, another one in the hope of maintaining his/her employment. There are many diversities, even when you find people interested in one goal.

There is no sense in a country like Italy to say we'll fight for a general increase of 10% in wages. The realities are so different. For

one, 10% is good, for another one the question is not 10% but to have more power over decision-making in the factory. You can no longer unify the working class on those traditional lines.

The working class is also divided by legislation, by corruption, clientilism and so on. We have very different status and rights among the working class, which creates enormous inequalities, much greater than the difference in income. For instance, when facing unemployment, people in the big factories are often able to obtain early pensions, if they are fired when they are 40-45 years old.

In other factories, workers who lose their jobs are entitled by law to 80% of their wages for three years. In the little factories, you get nothing. Among the state employers there are different systems of pensions again.

Women's rights are very different in different sectors. For disabled people, there is confused legislation which allows a lot of abuses. We have millions of people getting disability pensions when they don't need it, while the people with real disabilities face enormous difficulties in finding work and have very little income. So we have to eliminate abused privilege, and to enforce the rights of specific groups. That's what we call solidarity on rights, which means a very articulated action of the trade unions, on incomes, working hours and working conditions.

But, to meet the new challenges, you have to change the union organisation. First of all, you have to give voice inside the union, to the different realities that exist in the society. We know that in Italy there are now a million-and-a-half immigrants from the South of the world, but very few are members of the trade unions. Women are 40% of the labour force, but in the unions there are few. Technicians are a small minority in the unions, but they are growing in their importance, not only quantitative but qualitative, in industry and society.

We try to give voice inside the union to those new realities of the working class movement, and respecting the real weight



they have now inside the union. Because, if we insist on one man, one vote, those different groups would just be marginalised. They would also consider the union as an enemy, or at least as a stranger.

That is why we are trying not only to organise but to give the immigrant workers the possibility of having committees at local and national level, to have a quota in the executive structures.

We have, in all locals, committees for people with disabilities, who elect a national committee and have a national leader. The women have their organisation and have the right to have a quota.

We try to organise in different ways unemployed young people. We organise the pensioners. We no longer organise all these different groups through a union structure, because they are not in the first instance a metalworker or a miner. The main problems they face are different, not as metalworkers or miners, but as unemployed, as immigrants, as disabled people. This involves the question of identity, so we organise them on a confederal basis.

We have a national union – but it is incorrect to call it that – it is a National Confederation of pensioners. We call them the ‘grey panters’. They discover a new youth, they are strongly organised. They are organising a sit-in of 200 000 pensioners in front of parliament to modify the law on pensions. We have two million pensioners organised in this confederation.

The question is, how can a union try to represent this very complex reality which is the working class now, and at the same time recognise the identity and sometimes the value that there is in certain diversities, without changing its organisational structure?

We are perhaps guided by the fact that we inherited from our past the peculiar local structure which we call the ‘chamber of labour’. The first body of our trade union movement was the local ‘chamber of labour’, where all kinds of workers from all industries were able to meet and organise generally, even organise strikes together.

Later we built national industrial unions at the beginning of this century. Now we reinforce this local structure, which is able to organise and co-ordinate the different unions – as well as the people who are not union members – and it is affiliated to the confederation as a local. That is the reason why the structure of our confederation is composed 50/50 by the local organisations and by the unions. The congress delegates are elected 50% by the congress of the ‘local chambers of labour’ and 50% by the national unions.

***This question of the local structure and the weight it has in the federation, is very interesting. What is the benefit of that kind of structure on union and labour activity?***

**Trentin:** Well, first of all there is a question of economy of resources. The unions in one local are very different. You can have very few textile people, a lot of metal workers and some farm workers. At the local level, different unions are unable to give the same services, legal assistance, assistance with tax, health and safety cases, etc. The local ‘chamber of labour’ centralises these services, which it gives to all workers affiliated to CGIL.

Secondly, there are issues of increasing importance at a local level that need to be negotiated, and supported also by action – the policies of the regional administration, municipal issues, health services and so on. This is a job for what we call a ‘horizontal organisation’, because the questions are the same for all workers in all unions, and should be taken up by a structure which is not a single union.

And then you have the necessity of co-ordinating in relation to the national goals that the confederation adopts. There is a danger at the local level, and also at the national level, of a fragmentation in strategy. So the ‘chamber of labour’, which has in its executive all the leaders of the different unions locally, has the function of co-ordinating action of the different unions at local level, and of ensuring respect for the general rules that the congress has



established. That is why, for instance, we have a very strong demand from the delegates of the 'chambers of labour' and the CGIL regional structures, for the CGIL National Committee to discuss the resolutions for the congresses of the various national unions.

They say, we want to discuss what the national union of the chemical industry, or the metal workers, is going to put in their resolutions, because we want coherence. For instance, there is now the opportunity for unions to bargain for supplementary pensions. This could weaken the national system of pensions and divide the poor from



the richest workers. The national unions do not feel very strongly there is danger, because each one has its own reality. But at a local level this is a central question. They insist that, if we have a strategy on supplementary pensions, all unions must

have the same strategy! They are against sectoral solutions. We want a national or regional solution, not a war between unions.

***What is very interesting is the necessity of trying to cater for the diversity and the fragmentation within the working class, and the necessity of developing a common platform or programme.***

**Trentin:** Yes – on new goals. The old ones, which were very important, have been overtaken by reality. The priorities in the people's heads have changed.

***What is the significance of the newly-won right to bargain at plant level?***

**Trentin:** In July last year, agreement was reached between the three main labour confederations, all the employers'

associations, and the government.

The agreement was very important because it recognised negotiations at the plant level and at company level, after a struggle of more than 30 years. At every renewal of agreements, employers try to destroy the plant or company level bargaining, because they find it more useful to centralise bargaining, and to have all the power in the place where things really change – in the workplace.

Restructuring happens in Italian factories every two or three years. The big battle really is this: the employer wants to be free to decide on technological innovation, on changing organisation of work, on employment, and be free to fire the workers when he wants. He doesn't want to have any kind of negotiation on these issues. For the employer, it is even more important than money, it is a question of principle, or a question of power. The employer is even prepared to pay for not having this kind of interference.

The importance of this agreement is that plant-level bargaining – which was roughly imposed through struggles in most industries in the past – has now been generalised – in the public administration, in agriculture, in commerce. We have won the right to have, every two years, a national contract to cover all shops, or all companies in the same sector, or to cover each different administration in the state (for example, the employees of the ministries, in the health service and in the local authorities). But, at the same time, between the two years of the contract, we have the right to negotiate the working conditions in the single municipality, in the single ministry, in the single shop, and in the single factory. The fact that this is generalised is completely new, because, at the same time, it established complete equality of rights between people in the public sector and people in the private sector.

This is how we try to face restructuring and its consequences. That is to say, acting at a national level, to give some guidelines to the industrial policy of the government. And, at the plant level, looking after working



conditions and the level of employment at the same time. The difficult thing is protecting jobs. Our experience is that always when we tried to just resist retrenchments, we had wonderful strikes at the beginning, but very rapidly we had to face very strong division among workers.

When a worker begins to understand that he or she will not be fired, he will, for solidarity, strike for some days, weeks or months for the man who is supposed to be fired. But at a certain point he just gives up. Sometimes a worker will act against the union struggle because his or her job begins to be in danger. We have to unite always for the defence of employment, but not rigidly. We say, "the fight for work, and not for the job". You have to combine this kind of action over jobs with action to improve the working conditions of the people who remain in the plant and who live with the transformation. So we demand new shifts, reductions of the number of hours, control of pace of production, discussion even of the organisation of work when we are able to do it. We also try to fight for team work.

You can only negotiate these issues at plant or company level, with the people elected from the shopfloor – naturally with the assistance, in the most important cases, of the national union, and on many occasions the local structures too. Why? Because the national union has to defend the national line in any single negotiation, and at the same time it is necessary to socialise the best experiences that we have. And that is often the role of the local structures.

For instance, Fiat is a very important company. When we negotiate an important issue at Fiat, we have the committee elected by the workers who represent the three unions affiliated to the three different national confederations. In addition to the workers' committee we have the national unions, and sometimes even the local 'chamber of labour', all discussing with the management.

***I understand that the workplace committee is elected by the entire workforce, irrespective of which union***

***they belong to, or even whether they belong to a union. If this is so, what is the relation of the unions to those representatives?***

**Trentin:** The representatives are elected by the general constituency, on lists presented by different forces: by the different unions affiliated to the three major confederations (CGIL, CSIL, UIL), by independent unions or a 'yellow union', or a group of workers in the plant can form a list without belonging to a union. The plant committee or company committee is then composed of the names from the different lists on the basis of proportional representation, according to the number of votes each list wins. This committee has the right to bargain. It is assisted by the national unions, but the final decision is made by the committee.

***So that means that the representatives on the committee do not represent a particular departmental constituency?***

**Trentin:** No, they are elected by the general membership. When the committee reaches any kind of agreement with management, it is obliged to hold a ballot of the entire workforce for the approval of the agreement. This is important, because we have a history of separate agreements with the different unions. In some cases, the fight against CGIL was very strong among the employers, and they reached agreements with minority unions just to smash CGIL.

Now this is impossible, because you have the support of the majority of workers through a ballot. The committee may be divided because you have different unions there. It is possible a majority says, well I am ready to have an agreement with the employer and if you don't agree you are the minority. A minority can do the same. But, in either case, they have to ballot the entire workforce for approval.

***Turning now to the political and constitutional crisis in Italy. According to what we read, there's been a profound crisis of legitimacy politically, and it seems there's a kind of split in the electorate – the centre***





*Building international linkages: Trentin at the CUT (Brazil) – COSATU – CGIL seminar, September 1993*

**has disintegrated, and there is a growing strength on the left, but also on the right. What is your assessment of this crisis and the role that the labour movement is playing?**

**Trentin:** Everything exploded when the first cases of big corruption were identified by the judges.

I would say that the whole system of parties is collapsing, but the unions may be able to survive this crisis if they radically change their approach to social questions. I mean that, even if the unions were not involved generally in the system of the government and in corruption cases, they have been involved in a particular form of government. The unions managed pension funds, they participated in the management of the health services, in the committees for employment at a local level. We are present even in the administration councils of theatres – in everything! This creates a value system mentally which is extremely dangerous for the union. Many times the union has to defend the interests of the

managers of the pension fund against the people who have to receive a pension!

That is why it is important for the unions, if they want to save themselves from this little revolution which is destroying the credibility of parties, to change, really to decide to get out from all this kind of participation. The pension fund, for example, must have good managers, but we as unions should be outside the management and we should monitor and fight to obtain certain results, even in management. In the hospitals, the unions should take part in discussion about changing the way of working and fight to change the way of working, rather than being in the hospital administration.

The probability is that this change in the political geography of Italy will produce a polarisation of forces. The new Right is growing in the northern part of Italy, but also in other parts. The Right movement in the north says, we are the richer part of the country, we do not want to be involved with this corruption, this corruption is only to give



something to the poor region of the south. The poor region, the south, is identified with corruption and craziness.

This movement is growing, before as a separatist movement, now with the objective to obtain decentralisation of decisions and at the same time organise workers and employers into a corporatist structure – that is to say employers and workers unite against the bureaucratic state, against unionism, against political parties. This is a real danger, because we find a cultural influence of this new Right even among our rank and file.

The big question is how to realise the constitutional changes. We need to have a change in the functioning of parliament. We



need to have laws approved in six months, and not in four years as it is now. We need to have a reform of public administration. More than a constitutional change towards federalism, we need to give substance to the decentralisation of the regions.

The regions

already have parliaments and little governments, but they have no real power because the fiscal and tax system is centralised. And we need what I call an institutional reform of civil society – new rules in the government of the welfare state, decentralisation, a system of control, the right of appeal against administrative decision, the right to know. We have obtained a very little law but it is the first conquest: a citizen has the right, after two days without response, to enter the office of the administration and to find his file and look why his request was refused. This is the right to see, to make transparent the decision-making in the public administration.

We are trying to contribute to the constitutional reform by putting proposals to the parliamentary commissions, by meetings, marches and discussions with the political parties. We always have discussion with all parties except the fascists. Naturally, agreement is easier to find with the parties of the Left, but we want to maintain the position of independence, so we meet with the different parties. We explain our position, ask for answers, try to form a 'transparency lobby'.

With the polarisation to Left and Right, the possibility that the Democratic Party of the Left, which is the son of the Communist Party, will be the majority party is a real one. We will have the national elections in April, at the same time as your country.

We will present programmes at a local and national level. We will ask all the parties, except the Right, to respond. We say we are ready to support any candidate who is bound to the trade union programme.

There is a danger that, in the social consciousness, there will be a split between the different realities of the country, that the national unity will transform itself into national division. Many times, when workers strike to maintain their jobs in one factory in the south, people in the north, even our people, say we do not want to give any more of our assistance or our money, we do not want to pay taxes, because we know that this money will be utilised in corruption. They say the people of the south have to manage with their own problems, that's not our problem.

You cannot avoid this danger by defending the old state which tried to resolve the southern question with corruption at the end of it. So we have to make a proposal to change the state, but to show very concretely what the change means. And to recreate a national consciousness in the working class. That's a big challenge. The danger of racism is very strong now with this new Right. We have to build some important reserves on this front, with a very strong movement for immigrants' rights. ☆