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The long goodbye: the relationship between leftist parties and the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) after the end of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) (1992-2017)

O longo adeus: a relação entre partidos de esquerda e a
Confederação Geral Italiana do Trabalho (CGIL) após o fim do
Partido Comunista Italiano (PCI) (1992-2017)

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Abstract: This article explores the effects of the growth of the “cartel parties” within the Italian system and the new relations between the unions and leftist parties, going beyond the models and experiences of the twentieth century. One of the consequences concerns the stronger interdependence of the parties and the state, and their need for more public resources. Another aspect relates to the relationship of the party with society and other

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socially representative organisations and stakeholders. In the case of Italy, the Democratic Party, set up in 2007, embodies the weak-minded party version, progressively dismantling the relationship with the trade union movement and, in particular, with the CGIL. The Italian situation confirms that underlying these evolutions there are not only external factors, such as globalisation and changes in the work world, but also internal factors, such as the logic of actions, drawn up and put aggressively into practice by the “cartel parties”.

Keywords: work world; union-party relationship; leftist parties; italian case.

Resumo: Este artigo tem como objetivo explorar os efeitos do crescimento de “partidos cartel” no sistema italiano e as novas relações entre os sindicatos e os partidos de esquerda que vão além de modelos e experiências do século XX. Uma das consequências diz respeito à maior interdependência dos partidos com o Estado e à necessidade de mais recursos públicos. Outro aspecto diz respeito ao relacionamento dos partidos com a sociedade, as organizações representativas e as partes interessadas. No caso italiano, o Partido Democrata, criado em 2007, encarna essa versão frágil de partido, dismantling progressively o relacionamento com o movimento sindical e, em particular, com a CGIL. A situação italiana confirma que, subjacente a essas evoluções, existem não apenas fatores externos, como globalização e mudanças no mundo do trabalho, mas também fatores internos, como a lógica de ações elaboradas e postas em prática de forma agressiva pelos “partidos cartel”.

Palavras-chave: mundo do trabalho; relação sindical; partidos de esquerda; caso italiano.

Introduction

This article aims to explore the effects of the growth of the ‘cartel parties’ within the Italian system and the new relations between the unions and leftist parties, going beyond the models and experiences of the twentieth century.

As Katz suggests (KATZ; MAIR, 2009), the consolidation of the cartel party changed the structural ties of the actors, the parties and the unions originating from the labour movement, and their links with society.

One of the main effects of cartelisation “[...] was substantially to undermine the stakes of traditional electoral competition, by undermi-

ning the perceived importance of the left-right ideological divide that lay at the heart of most Western party systems” (KATZ; MAIR, 2009).

One of the consequences concerns the stronger interdependence of the parties with the state, and their need for more public resources. Another aspect, that we will try to explore here, regards the relationship of the party with society and the socially representative organisations and the stakeholders.

An important aspect, from the moment that these cartel parties move towards becoming self-referential and technocratic. Indeed, “[...] increasingly, parties were seen, and saw themselves, as brokers among social groups and between social groups and the state, rather than as the political arms of specific groups” (KATZ; MAIR, 2009).

Therefore, the key question concerns the characters and the implications that emerge from the “[...] dissolution of the party-ness of society” (KATZ, 1986).

The problem and related questions are relevant to the trajectories of all the major European countries (see the comparative study in the recent book of Haugsgjerd Allern and Tim Bale (eds.), 2017).

In the Italian case, the Democratic Party, set up in 2007, embodies the weak-minded party version, progressively dismantling the relationship with the trade union movement and, in particular, with the CGIL (the most important union and also traditionally of the left). This process clearly developed under the leadership of Matteo Renzi, party leader from 2013-2017, and Prime Minister from 2014 to 2016 (see MATTINA; CARRIERI, 2017). However, since the early nineties there have been profound changes after the disappearance of the great left-wing parties, such as the Socialist Party, heavily hit by the scandals linked to political corruption (‘Tangentopoli’, 1991-93) and, above all, the Communist Party whose organisational history ended in 1991, when its heir, the PDS (Democratic Party of the Left), and the Communist Refoundation (neo-Communist Party), arose from its ashes.

In 1997, the Democratic Left (DS) emerged from the PDS, and later in 2007, with the contribution of the left-wing Catholics, the Democratic Party was founded. At the time, the relationship between

the main left-wing groups and unions had been characterised by the persistence of ties but also by an increase in conflicts and differences that had not been previously present. The ties between the party and trade unions persisted, despite being downsized by the formal representative bodies of politicians and trade unionists, through the behaviour and the proximity of collective identities. However, at the same time, areas of dissent and differences in positions increased. Even in the past, in the era that had been defined as the ‘transmission belt’, CGIL had not always automatically accepted the Communist Party’s directives. However, the differences had become deeper and revealed the difficulty in redesigning the respective roles of the party and the union, now radically different to their original ones and where their shared certainty of the past had diminished. Despite the new developments, in the period from 1991-2013, these divisions, even where strategic issues were concerned, did not question common visions.

In the new, post-2013 cycle, these ties were presented by the party leadership as no longer being a resource, but as a problem. A problem that the party faced with the intention of cutting the umbilical cord that had persisted for such a long time. The obvious intention was to reposition itself at the centre of the political system, seeking electoral consensus from all social and political groups.

With this new orientation, a point of view can be perceived, coinciding with a practical translation of the ‘cartel parties’ and involving the affirmation of a party designated by strong social referents. This was the choice of the new leader, Renzi, who had no political and cultural background in the history of the workers’ movement. This implies, therefore, a political design intending to go well beyond the traditional left-wing electorate and moving towards cutting traditional class ties.

The waning trend

The relationship between the left-wing parties and the unions in the Italian case can be described as following a waning trend (*parabola discendente*).

For a long period, this relationship was the guiding star, both from an interpretive, ideological, and practical point of view. Looking at the post-war period, after the return of democracy, the ties between the two had been remarkably close during the decades which have been generally defined as the “first republic” (up to 1993).

These ties were strong for all unions, which sprang to life again after the fall of the dictatorship and followed the desire to establish an explicit pact among the anti-Fascist parties. However, these ties were even stronger in the case of the Communist Party (PCI) and the CGIL union.

Indeed, it would appear appropriate here to use the interpretive categories proposed by Mattina (2011).

For the first decades, we can talk about, ‘dominion’, the supremacy of the guiding-party over the union. This is the classic period of the, ‘transmission belt’.

When the unions become stronger and independent, the tie remained strong, but changed in nature. In this case, we can talk of, ‘equal symbiosis’, from the moment that the previous hierarchical order, based on the primacy of the party, begins to decline (without, however, entirely disappearing).

In the more recent period (post-1993), this relationship has become less close and more variable. The ties have remained but become more, ‘occasional and pragmatic’. The balance of power has been subject to the weight of the unions, and the same CGIL has clearly demonstrated a shift towards ‘independence’ (according to Sabattini, former Secretary of the metal workers’ union) and true, ‘self-sufficiency’, to a large extent disregarding the party. These trends became the basis for an unsuccessful attempt to take over the party, as occurred at the beginning of the new century (Cofferati, CGIL Secretary from 1994 to 2002).

Over the last years, those linked to Renzi’s leadership in the Democratic Party (the heir to the Left’s long history), have witnessed a progressive weakening of these ties. The new chosen course of action prides itself on being able to cut the ties, in order to mark

the shift towards innovation and change and to gain advantages by winning over new consensus groups.

Obviously, this apparent weakening, though not resulting in this, ‘special relationship’ entirely disappearing, is showing itself to be a trend that garners resistance and is more challenged than it would appear.

This is because many informal relations between the two remain, nationally, within the legislative process and also because, locally, the party organisation, when it works, has kept alive some of the former ties. Furthermore, the disappearance of the party as a reference point and as a partner has not weakened the unions’ intention to enter the political arena. The choice made almost 50 years ago, to take on a more general and political role (LANGE; ROSS, 1982), still holds for all the confederal unions, but, it has led to paths and developments quite different to those of the past.

We can observe two trends. The first is that the party is, in all seasons, the most important driver of changing roles. The second is that the union, on the organisational side, has many more members when compared to the declining trend in membership of the party.

The Nineties: A New Dialectics

If, at the end of the seventies, ties between the union and the party had been very close and, ‘symbiotic’ (MATTINA, 2011), from the beginning of the eighties of the last century we can witness these ties weakening. At the same time, however, another evolution in their relationship began to take place.

We should not imagine, though, that, in those years, this old partnership declined rapidly and painfully to finally disappear completely. This is because, firstly, widespread practices and a common feeling existed which conferred on the party a guiding role in relation to important decisions, and secondly, because, in that period, the party was undergoing a reorganisation and trying to relaunch its image and influence. This attempt was mainly the work of the Secretary, Massimo D’Alema (1994-98, and later Prime Minister from 1998 to

2000). With the end of the upheavals of the *Tangentopoli*,² the parties returned to the stage and the Secretary of the PDS (Democratic Party of the Left) attempted to make his party's political alliances more dynamic and its actions more incisive in Italian society. The party was relaunched and reorganised and adopted a new name, the DS (Democrats of the Left, 1997), which systematically encompassed all the reformist traditions of the Italian Left. This effort towards change, in part a renewal and in part a recovery of an old organisational fabric, could not ignore its relationship with CGIL (even as the DS now sought to broaden its horizons with the other union confederations). At the beginning this feeling appeared to grow, and there was a synergy between the two management groups, who found common ground on certain positions – in fighting the right and promoting some economic reforms – even though a real link no longer existed between them. Informality and common roots clearly prevailed in this spontaneous convergence of directions.

However, in the years following the 1997 DS Congress, the situation changed, and the party tried to perform a turnaround in union policies and shifted towards fully regaining its previous leading role. The resistance encountered and then the failure of this move highlighted its impracticability. During his congress speech, D'Alema clearly urged CGIL to adopt a more open position regarding the need for labour market flexibility that had been demanded by companies, and to allow for a softer introduction of policies protecting younger workers. It was a way to clearly address – based on, 'generalist' and, 'catch-all' ideas – other parts of society, different from the traditional employee ranks, and including the entrepreneurs themselves. It was also an attempt to establish a more revisionist and unbiased line of social and economic modernisation, compared to the traditional union one, by which to gain CGIL's support, which had been publicly criticised for its resistance. D'Alema's thinking was that excessive contractual inflexibility had the opposite effect,

2 *Tangentopoli* (Bribesville) regards a series of legal investigations into political corruption occurring in the early nineties which led to the decapitation and then dissolution of the two main government parties of the previous era, the Christian Democrats and the Socialist Party.

as it did not result in guaranteeing the new non-standard workers any type of protection.

This attempt aimed to recover a closer relationship, but based on party primacy, and it was doomed to failure from the outset.

From the seventies, by mutual agreement, this had been a typically union issue and had not been a part of any party programmes. Furthermore, a place for shared decision-making to resolve conflicting positions was also missing. So, lacking in any specific tools – a strong current in the union or a recognised decision-making hierarchy – D'Alema's request for change carried overtones of a challenge and a political call, of dubious effectiveness, and it became a sort of appeal, or ethical and political warning.

Times were so changed that not only did CGIL remain firm in its position, but it also removed itself from any attempt to be conditioned, and finally adopted the personalisation of politics which had taken off in the Italian party system. Indeed, its leader, Cofferati, managed to strengthen his unanimous 'internal' hold on the party (1998 Congress), without experiencing any damage from the party's demands and without alienating the handful of supporters for his position. Moreover, in the following years, Cofferati tried to overturn the tables, shifting the strong legitimacy he enjoyed within the union towards the 'external'.

So, not only did the era of dependence end without any type of recourse, but the option of equal interdependence, previously based on an effective and balanced dialogue between the two players, which had taken shape after the union dissociation, became an abstract element.

Instead, during the following key period (2000-2001), the conflict in positions and personalities between the political leader and the CGIL leader, was shifted by the latter into the arena of the competition 'internal to' the party. Cofferati, encouraged by a growing social and media popularity, embarked on a venture that, in the past, could never have been imagined by any CGIL Secretary.³ The objective

3 On Berlinguer's death (1984), in a very different situation and where a union takeover of the party had not been involved, Lama, General Secretary of CGIL from

was to focus and use their own strength, and that of CGIL, to conquer the party, by gaining a congress majority – an actual union takeover of the party. Still involved in the CGIL secretariat, Cofferati could not run as a candidate. However, he offered up his personal charisma, which he believed still held, and the organisational weight of the union, which he thought to be transferable, to support an alternative candidate (Giovanni Berlinguer, the brother of the late Communist Party leader) to the one supported by D'Alema (Piero Fassino). But, despite the relative success gained during the congress (Pesaro Congress, 2001), more than 60% of the votes went to Fassino, who was the winning candidate voted in by the out-going party majority.

The attempts made by the party to keep the union in line did not work, as it no longer possessed the strength or the means. The spectacular party takeover, to move it away from the union, did not work either – as transferring union cards into party votes is not, as one might assume, something that can be taken for granted or as automatically feasible. The collective vote 'inside' the party based on the English Labour model was one thing,⁴ but the individual vote, where many CGIL members and managers secretly distanced themselves from the position supported by Cofferati, was quite another.

If policies based on a reciprocal siege were destined to fail, then (as had been hoped) a path leading to truly constructive relations between the party and the union, relations based on some updated interpretation of virtuous 'interdependence' also failed to materialise.

In short, the main leftist party continued along a road towards an updated, 'party form', far removed from its original role promoting social integration. It is worthwhile observing the clash between D'Alema and Cofferati, the two leaders of the party and CGIL respectively, which, from 1997 to 2002, was tantamount to a conflict between two different visions of social representation for

1970 to 1985, had been offered by some sectors of the Communist management group to take the position. But Lama – who probably would not have had enough consensus – had declined anyway.

4 If in the UK, the collective vote of the unions in the party's polls was possible, in Italy, the individual vote also favours this, a lot of unionists (or unions members) did not support Cofferati's attempt.

a world which was, with difficulty and without any well-defined future, leaving behind the tradition of the ‘workers’ movement’. The option proposed by the political leader was to go beyond the idea of a, ‘social block’, focussed only on the lower socio-economic groups, and also to go beyond focusing only on workers who were already in secure jobs and who were well-organised. He also wanted to tap into the working and professional middle-income groups, including business-people, with the aim of more successfully tackling the challenges resulting from the country’s feeble efforts at economic development. CGIL, on the other hand, leaned towards the classic organisational core of the workers’ movement, made up of stable and often middle-aged workers (the ‘median’ member for the unions: Boeri; Brugiadini; Calmfors, 2001), relegating a response to the demands of outsiders and other groups to second place and revealing an increasing scepticism towards any likelihood of cooperating with Italian entrepreneurs.

Thus, we can consider this passage as a further evolution in the Party of the Left towards an updated model of the, ‘catch-all party’, placing into perspective the role of the stable employed worker, which it saw as only one of its various fields of reference, rather than the main pivot of its political actions. This Italian version of the ‘catch-all’ logic seems different to German and northern Social Democratic thinking. In the latter case, the development of a ‘mass’ party was the issue, in which it expanded its social inclusivity, but maintained a strong basis in the ranks of stable workers. In Italy, a similar step produced a further leap, removing, not without some embarrassment, the link of social ties with the world of work, as if it had in some way become structurally less important.

The two strategies which took shape in this period both appear quite lame. The party one took it for granted that the Left, or rather the Centre-left, had permanently acquired the majority consensus of the salaried workers (or, at least, their vast support in numbers and loyalty over time). This illusion was abruptly shattered in 1994, when the head of the new centre-right, Berlusconi, won the elections thanks to winning the votes of the employed worker majority, including blue-collar workers. The Right would go on to demonstrate its

ability by winning the elections in both 2001 and 2008, thanks once again to employed workers. As for the Centre-left, its traditional deep-rooted majority continued to be confirmed, though with fluctuating numbers. Support was still strong, but declining, among public sector employees. The party's social strategy, which lacked a clear electoral base regarding other social groups, appeared fragile for at least two reasons. Firstly, it miscalculated that elections could be won only if one of the two political coalitions was able to reach a majority consensus among employed workers and secondly, it had, over time, lost the ability to consistently represent broader sectors of workers, such as the weaker and lesser educated (MANNHEIMER, 2003; see also CARRIERI; DAMIANO, 2011).

As for the unions, distancing themselves from any close relations with the parties did not conclusively resolve the problem of accessing the political system and sphere of influence, strategically crucial for some public policies. This factor seemed to have been dealt with and finally dismissed after the end of the, 'Republic of the parties' (SCOPPOLA's definition, 1991⁵). The unions had become a partner forced to accept public decisions on many issues and above all, on wage and social policies. The tripartite use of concertation with the government and entrepreneurs, which had come up against many obstacles in the previous decades, had become consolidated and taken on a huge importance, both symbolically and in practice. It seemed that it provided a stable source of power for the unions, which had finally found a way to assert their weight in the political arena, without having to account to the parties, from whom they had finally broken free (thanks also to the weakness of the latter).

However, this calculation, concerning the players' ability to make forecasts at this point, revealed itself to be short-term. This was due to a variety of factors that had been underestimated and which came to light over the following years.

The first reason was that the tripartite social pacts, which had functioned as a guiding star during a difficult phase (1993-98), were being questioned by the various players, opposed by some political

5 Scoppola, of Catholic background, was an important Italian historian.

forces, and then finally abandoned by the employer associations. The agreements resulting from the concertation were later set aside or used sporadically, and the last important concertation agreement was proposed only in 2007 (under Prodi's new centre-left government).

The second reason involved the failure of one of the fundamental assumptions underlying their recognition as political players. That is, a strong sense of unity among the confederations, which was the implicit pillar of the close coordination between the large organised interests. This united drive, that had positively marked the nineties, cracked when the new centre-right coalition led by Berlusconi (2001) took office, which resulted in some important episodes of 'disunity'.

The third reason gradually became clearer in that period (after Berlusconi's return to government). The final shift away from party dependence seemed to have resolved the contradictions which had come to light in 1984, when the divisions 'among' the confederations had mirrored the divisions 'among' the parties. However, the removal of the parties did not completely eliminate the reasons for potential differences and rifts in relations between the unions and politics, as had been wrongly believed in periods when the political system had been much more open. Berlusconi's return to government in 2001 was based on a dual programme – the questioning of concertation in the name of a vaguer 'social dialogue', which did not involve the participation of social partners in decision-making, and the spread of broader and more deregulated job flexibility, which was seen as a modern injection and as a driver for new forms of employment in the labour market.

This programme did not meet with the immediate agreement of all the unions, but certainly gave rise to a considerable opposition to CGIL, mainly for reasons of principle. We should not, however, forget the reasons for this confederation's hostility, related mainly to the political situation. The outgoing Secretary, Cofferati, decided to throw CGIL into the party debate to influence their strategies, and the leadership proposed and strengthened a position of intransigent aversion (excluding any kind of mediation) towards the government's

proposals. So, while CISL and UIL⁶ tried to negotiate with Berlusconi with the intention of wresting some advantages and concessions, CGIL took another path – to become the head of a broad political and social opposition, which was taking aim at the government's measures and direction. In short, new fractures and dividing lines emerged in the relations between the unions and the political sphere.

The unions continued to need resources of various types, and not only economic, originating from the political arena (for the reasoning on this need and the complex problems in relations with the government see Feltrin, 2007). Access to these resources was no longer guaranteed by the parties, but by the government. With the alternating counter positions between the coalitions, each government fixed its own conditions. In general, CISL and UIL observed the conditions in each case and how to bend them as much as possible to their own advantage. CGIL, however, were initially hostile towards every logic of exchange with the right-wing governments. This stemmed from the arrival of an unexpected new element that resulted from the decline of the parties and the political struggle of the left and which actively involved CGIL as an important player.

In simple terms, the lack, or the weakening, of the referent party provided CGIL with the opportunity to occupy the space left free by the party, and became the point for drawing together not only the social opposition, but also the politics against the right. So, it becomes plausible to believe that being positioned (in political and identity terms) on the fringe of bringing together all the social opposition resulted in CGIL taking up positions, throughout the follow decade, which would make convergence with the other confederations more difficult. The difference from the past was that the reasons for the split among the unions, particularly those motivated by CGIL, even if based on 'political' considerations, did not derive from choices related to the, 'friendly' party, but from options established exclusively 'from inside' the union and which almost completely ignored party interests.

6 The three most important confederal unions in Italy are CGIL (leftist), CISL (early Catholic) and UIL (secular-socialist). They founded an important alliance (Federazione Unitaria) from 1972 to 1984. Despite their recent fluctuating divisions, these unions count together more than 12 million members.

The conflicts of almost twenty years previously were a transitional period and should be considered qualitatively different to the present challenges. We could evaluate these conflicts as an extreme attempt to update the old mass political model built up around the central role of the party. The attempt involved moving beyond the traditional mass party, but with the party maintaining its key role in relations with the different social groups with which it dialogued and with the organisations which represented them.

Consequently, and quite differently to what is happening now, there is not a distancing from organised politics, but a redesigning. Based on this, the party's intention was to return to being the guiding star. A party with a strong vocation to govern and, whilst still socially rooted, going well beyond the Communist tradition. The union was viewed as carrying out a specific job (in industrial relations) and, therefore, with only a 'partial' role in the political arena. This is obviously also the reason why CGIL, like the other unions, could not accept a scenario where from being first level 'political subjects' they found themselves becoming 'second' level players.

The new century: the era of misalignment?

As we have seen, smooth relations between the unions and the relevant parties have not been a 'given' over the years and have become more complicated, as much in how they occur as in the outcomes, at least when concerning the more important experiences of the Western world and other developed countries.

Within European countries with a stronger tradition of 'interdependence' between the party and the union – Germany, Great Britain and Sweden, to cite the more paradigmatic 'social democrat' cases – these relations have slowly become more negotiated, less taken for granted and less founded on a natural behaviour to mutually divide the tasks of social representativeness and policy making.

On the other hand, we should consider that this increased complexity could be ascribed not only to the fact that the parties of the left have become less sensitive to 'labourist' input and pressure, but also they have become, over time, 'less labourist'.

This can certainly be evidenced in the decline in the number of party enrolments seen in practically all countries, and also and principally in electoral trends. In the elections that have taken place in the new century, these parties have actually only experienced a decreasing, and sometimes significantly decreasing, share of the vote of employed workers, particularly blue-collar workers and employees with more responsible but economically weaker professional positions. This trend is particularly visible in countries (and socialist parties) such as France, Netherlands, Austria and to some extent the Nordic countries and Great Britain.

It appears that these parties have become less receptive to the demands for protection and reassurances coming from the more fragile social and cultural strata of the work force, compared to the representation highlighted by the new competitors, such as the populist right movements, or of a left less focused on the 'fractures' in work and more attentive to the new reasons for discontent. In other respects, the social destructuring of the classic parties has gone ahead, with the pursuit of the 'cartels', becoming all-encompassing, generalising and with no specific social identity.

There are various reasons to be found underlying these tendencies. One of the main explanations lies in the excessive dependence on the market and the liberalist paradigm, which emerged as a characteristic of the 'third way' launched by Blair and theorised by Gibbons, and then accepted, with some modifications, by the 'reformist' left of almost all countries. This orientation resulted in more attention being focussed, at an organisational level, on the new middle classes, with mixed results from a consensus, but on the whole weak, point of view. It was accompanied by a mistaken idea that the decline in numbers of the traditional worker class (less established and palpable in Germany and Italy) was automatically accompanied by the disappearance of more general and manual work. Not only did large numbers in this type of less skilled work move into the tertiary work, but significant segments of 'knowledge' workers were regulated through unstable and marginalised working relations, with the effect of weakening, in all cases, the role of permanent workers in their various guises. So, an error in interpreting the social changes

underway rendered the socialist parties, of all shades, more removed from the heterogeneous types of workers.

The situation of 15 years ago produced relations between the party (DS – Democrats of the left) and the union (CGIL) that were full of tension and mutual suspicion, but nevertheless leant toward some form of collaboration. Lacking an alternative, both subjects were forced to keep their reciprocal relations alive, even if they were more intermittent and ‘pragmatic’. (MATTINA, 2011).

Once the era of the great shared identification had come to an end, the relationship between these two players remained in adjoining political spheres. This was because, despite their growing differences, they belonged to the same cultural and political family.

Today, we find ourselves facing a different scenario. The taking on, by Renzi, a leader without any strong ties – either generational or political – with the historical left, of the leadership of the PD (Democratic Party from 2013 until today) and then of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (2014 until 2016), has resulted in a marked break from the past. So much so that leaders of the previous generation would not have been able to enter the field even if they had wanted to – the bonds of their ‘inbreeding’ had become too binding and limiting.

In fact, what occurred was exactly what an astute political scientist (IGNAZI, 2013) had pointed out – the clash between D’Alema and Cofferati was an in-family fight, however, the present confrontation between Renzi and Camusso (CGIL General Secretary from 2010) concerns two subjects who are not from the same family, they do not feel related in any way by any deeper and older ties.

It would be worthwhile looking at each step that occurred, focusing on the turning points that led to the counter-positions which have marked the last few months, and which could bring to an end the era of ‘pragmatic collaboration’.

We begin with the formation of a new party in 2007, the Democratic Party (PD), which encompasses all the centre-left, its aim being to go even further and include different social bases. At this stage

the genetic code and the fundamental policies both count. While the parties it originated from, and in particular the DS, had labour representation as a basic element of their DNA, the Democratic Party came about with the primary intention of regenerating the political left (or rather the centre-left). This occurred without being strongly rooted in the emancipatory aspirations of labour, which were at the heart of the traditional left, and in the social groups (the workers) who were a more direct expression of that vision.

This passage also marks the full acceptance of an idea of a party closely related to the “cartel parties” model (as proposed by Katz and Mair, 1995). A party that not only acts across all fields, but which has clearly freed itself from the burden of relations with society and which can, therefore, calmly disregard its membership.

In the more engaging speeches of the first PD Secretary and candidate for Premier, Walter Veltroni, as also those of Lingotto (VELTRONI, 2007), the issue of labour was a recurring theme, but given no more prominence than other issues and as a mainly rhetorical and token homage. References prevailed to a vast political pantheon, both heterogeneous and ‘humanist’ (Mandela, Gandhi, Luther King, etc.), but quite foreign and marginal to the history and cultural traditions of the workers’ movement.

There did not appear to be any attempt to merge those traditional roots with the new proposals, but rather to go beyond them.

A clearly multi-class-oriented party emerged, unemployment appearing as only one of the many issues to be dealt with in a scenario of multi-faceted and unclear social representation.

A clear signal of this orientation can be found in the composition of the lists for the 2008 political elections. The candidates were selected based on an eclectic representation of the entire social spectrum – unionists and employer association representatives, intellectuals, businesspeople, entertainment personalities, etc. A variety of figures that confirmed not only the desire to gain a socially transverse consensus, but also showing how the workers’ constituency was viewed by the new party, as just like the many other opinions

and interested groups it was turning to and, therefore, lacking any strategically ruling or central role.

Consequently, with a further widening of the gap between the party and the union, we find the newly-founded Democratic Party's real aspiration reduced to some extent by the following leadership of Bersani (2011-13) – to sever all, or most of the umbilical cord to the traditional history of the workers' movement.⁷

In its ambition to broaden its appeal, the Democratic Party maintained relations not only with CGIL, but also with the other main union confederations.

It must also be taken into consideration that there were two fundamental difficulties facing its efforts to maintain these relations, at least during the periods when Franceschini and then Bersani were Secretaries (2010-13). The first involved finding and creating a shared synthesis with the union movement which itself had become increasingly divided over the previous forty years. The second was the continuous decline in the party's authority over the union organisations. The latter not only didn't want to be guided or influenced by the party, but preferred direct access to the political system through unmediated relations – with the government in office.

This is the phase of collaboration we have defined (from Mattina's view, 2011, see also Mattina and Carrieri, 2017) as, 'pragmatic'.

A collaboration which is no longer based on any love between these two players, but on their mutual needs. A 'hit and run' relationship, more sporadic and unstable and strongly linked to the personal feelings of the leaders involved but with no common and shared strategy.

The party needed the union and vice versa. The party needed the union for reasons concerning maintaining and strengthening electo-

7 This story, beyond its different forms and emphases, has remained the point of reference for marking the difference between the left and the right, as Norberto Bobbio showed in his celebrated classic (BOBBIO, 1994). So much so that that split can be recalled when questioning Renzi in the introduction to the book's new edition: see Bobbio, 2015 (see in the text following).

ral consensus. The union needed the party to access public resources and the general sphere of political power.

However, if we look at the electoral orientation of the union members, you can see, at least before the advent of Renzi (FELTRIN, 2007), that while the CGIL members mainly voted for the PD, the CISL and UIL vote for the party was significant but more constrained – equally distributed in relation to the support towards the different political divisions. In reality, the CGIL and the PD, as successors of the traditional left, belong to the same political family.

Indeed, the relationship between these two subjects, in part because of the great numbers involved, continues to dominate.

But what has changed, or what is changing, between these two players after Renzi became the PD leader in the autumn of 2013?

The most obvious change is that the new leader has shifted the game outside the old rules and, therefore, away from the mutual recognition found within the family. The Renzi-Camusso clash is no longer an, ‘internal family affair’, but a conflict between quite distinct and distant subjects, mutually accusing each other of having few points in common (IGNAZI, 2013). This aspect can now be seen clearly. The question is how could it have happened and why?

The first new element is the new political leadership’s attempt to gain consensus from spheres different to the past, in other political and social areas, using a formula to try to break through to other more moderate electorates. This included the members of the other two main unions. So, in certain respects, it has become more important for the PD to pursue the vote of CISL and UIL members, which have no relations with the CGIL member base, and which continued to vote for the PD even in the years when the management group of that confederation had been cooler towards the party (which counted very few of the top CGIL managers among its members, a significant break from the past).⁸

8 Obviously, the thesis that the vote of the CISL and UIL members is more important, is reported here overall to underline a paradox. In reality, Renzi seemed more interested in cultivating other moderate and rightist political areas (which could overlap with

The second aspect to consider is that the government, even in its centre-left version (or pivoted, as it is now, toward the centre-left), has learned to no longer rely on union consensus. The electoral influence of the unions is in decline in many countries, and the governments have realised this and avoided any close links with them. This has made it difficult, even in the more proven contexts, to reproduce the traditional dialectics between the unions and the ‘pro-labour’ governments. We can add a further element to more recent events in Italy. Not only did the Renzi government seize the opportunity to embark on the road of, ‘relative immunisation’ from union conditioning, there had already been signs of this some years before (CARRIERI; DONOLO, 1983), but it worked on the reasoning that the relationship with the union, and particularly with CGIL, was actually counter-productive to enlarging its electoral consensus. Hence, embarking on a collision course with the unions (and with the other associations) served to attract the support and votes of other social and political constituencies, fully opening up the opportunity to capture the moderate and the right electorate (as clearly shown by Diamanti, 2014).

The third driver on which the new structure nurtured by Renzi is built, is the adoption of the ideology of, ‘disintermediation’.⁹ A rather obscure and elusive expression with the objective of doing away with the so-called intermediary bodies, moving towards a more ‘immediate’, streamlined and effective decision-making process. Somewhat disturbingly, this (quite confusing) ideology had already found support across wide sections of European society. Coming to terms with its past success indicates that Renzi had a certain capacity to move (even when there is the risk of becoming entrapped). The leverage needed to regain the decision making dominance by this political wing can be viewed as a signal that, to a certain extent, it is necessary and positive. However, it also carries strong elements of risk when significant achie-

these members). More generally, his orientation was to avoid courting the union vote, at least regarding the collective vote of those organisations.

9 This ideology is often used politically, with many unaware that it's more orthodox and consequent translation also involves the uselessness of those parties (a surprise when you consider how enthusiastically it is spoken of, for example by the PD Vice-Secretary: Guerini, 2014).

vable ability and social impact are called for. This is especially so if there is the necessity to do it without the laborious operation of ‘intermediating’ between the many different groups, involving demands and interests which are the specific product of collective associations. (SCHMITTER; STREECK, 1985).

All these factors confirm how the steps taken by Renzi relate to, ‘repositioning’ of the PD. A repositioning which means the party’s orbit does not overlap with the union’s. The ending of the ‘friend’ party model (and the government), has also ended the era of the, ‘good neighbour’ which had taken shape over the last decade. The two players now operate in quite distant and distinct fields, crossing each other’s paths rarely and with difficulty.

Renzi’s approach has also involved going further than the ‘cartelisation’ of the parties (KATZ; MAIR, 1995). His two moves – 80 euros for the lower income groups and his solo decisions on the Jobs Act – have drawn the line between the party and the union (and between the other organised social players), showing that he can do without them, as the space and arena of politics has reached a point where the unions (and employer associations) no longer possess the access keys. **We are facing an entirely new situation concerning the relations with the unions (and all the social partners). To the traditional opposite positions of ‘pro-union’ or ‘anti-union’ of the past, we can now add a variant, an off-spring of cartelisation, – an ‘a-union’ style.**

However, this shift and the consequent repositioning has resulted from the party and its choices and not because of CGIL, which has remained closer to the direction that emerged during the Cofferati years, when, once the illusory power ‘to dominate the party’ had waned, foresaw maintaining ‘useful’ and good neighbourly relations. Positions which are projected towards the political arena, and which attach great importance to politics, the party and the government, to the extent that it is difficult to imagine a different future situation.

In fact, Renzi maintains that, “he doesn’t have to ask permission”, that “the laws are not drawn up with the unions but with parliament” and certainly “not at the negotiating table”, making

use of the widespread impatience with mediation (which has always been slow and complicated).

CGIL has called its meeting with the government, “surreal” (CAMUSSO, 2013), and observed that, “the government does not intend to agree with the social partners, let alone try to deal with them”.

Two logical plans, which remain quite separate, are involved here. That of CGIL recalls the importance of the triangular concertation, or an equivalent, seen as a tool suitable not only for making more socially fair decisions, but also appropriate for mobilising a wide consensus of ‘producers’ within them.¹⁰ CGIL’s claim is surely aimed at a model of agreeing on decisions and social participation which has produced positive results for the country (and not only for the interested organisations) – evidenced by its ability to support the restructuring promoted by the concertation agreement with the Ciampi-Giugni government in 1993.¹¹

Among the three confederations, CGIL is the one which, due to its vocational history, has continued to gamble more on politics delivering, despite the decline in certainty regarding the party, if not the possibility of a brother then at least of a friend. Even before the 2013 political elections, the strategic proposal of the Working Plan presented by CGIL contained, along with innovative aspects (strongly establishing at a local level the idea of job creation), a clear call for a political milestone which should have been the backbone to this ambitious objective. A backbone which never materialised following the electoral failure (or ‘non-success’) of Bersani’s PD in the 2013 general elections, and which could perhaps have fulfilled this expectation. Therefore, the CGIL connections needed a political interlocutor, as the objectives it intended to achieve were in the broad sense, ‘political’ (i.e. general and public).

The disappearance of this ‘political’ aspect, which had been real for a long time and then become imaginary, having been repositioned

10 In line, moreover, with a wide range of literature which in the 1970s and 1980s supported the superiority of the regulatory frameworks based on social ‘concertation’.

11 This agreement, called the Wage Policy (1993), was a sort of fundamental pact for the game rules of industrial relations in Italy.

elsewhere, displaced and made CGIL more of an orphan compared to its political opponents.

If we take the most symbolic texts of this new course of the PD, we find confirmation of this repositioning.

In the letter, *Ecco la mia sinistra* (Here is my left!) to the “La Repubblica” newspaper (22 November 2014), Renzi reaffirmed, “we cannot remain stuck in the glorious past, we must give it new life every day”. The key adopted here – clearly polemic towards CGIL – lies in stressing that, “the best way to defend workers’ rights is to extend them to those who still do not have any”. From this arises the thesis that, “there is no reform more left than the Job’s Act”. The Jobs Act was a reform promoted by the Renzi government to push for job creation and the transition to flexicurity (with uncertain outcomes).

In short, discontinuity has been emphasised as a fundamental trait of the new PD line (and the government). The ability to do what the union is not able, or does not want, to do is vindicated – the extending of rights and protection to the less protected.

However, this line had been expected to appear a few months earlier, with some aspirations for a theoretical (or if you prefer fundamental) programme, of this repositioned left.

It is an observation that even if the PD moves in a wide political field, which could be best defined as “centre-left”, in reality Renzi only writes about the ‘left’ and claims to be the modern version of the ‘left’, beginning with the innovation of having brought the PD into the sphere of the Socialist International.

Now we come to the paper written as a new introduction to Bobbio’s classic text on the ‘right and the left’ (RENZI, 2015). Here the intention to go beyond the traditional programme of Social Democracy is declared, even as a Blairian version of the ‘third way’, based on the idea that the traditional aim of extending welfare and social rights has been largely achieved (and therefore, become less crucial).¹² Consequently, the fight for equality (but not egalitaria-

12 Obviously, the thesis of extending rights to a wider sector of under-protected workers, as mentioned before, greatly contradicts this reassuring interpretation.

nism) remains important, but no longer fundamental and exclusive. Indeed, all Renzi's reasoning hinges on the need to replace the opposing equality-inequality couple with other more important ones – “ahead-behind”, “innovation-preservation”, “closed-open”.

In short, what is set out is the pathway to a new grammar and rhetoric of the left, created using the key word, ‘innovation’. This is the measuring stick of the new left (including the more rudimentary but explicit version, ‘demolition’), and not that of creating more fairness.

We not only find ourselves facing a lexical change, even though the intolerable rhetoric of change should be a cause for thought. Instead, we are facing an exit from the classic founding nucleus of the left, which not even Blair and Giddens had ever imagined or proposed, and notwithstanding the formal homage to Bobbio's perspective. Equality is no longer the underlying principle of the left and therefore, neither is work, which had been one of the main foundation stones – not the only one, but quite decisive nonetheless – in the fight to reduce inequality.

Conclusions: Reinventing the relationship

The union-party relationship has become increasingly less important in many countries. If we compare the Italian trends with those in France, Germany, and Great Britain we can see similar phenomena to those that have taken shape, perhaps more spectacularly, in Italy.

This weakening, to various degrees, of the close relationship between the left-wing party and the unions can be linked to the progressive shift away from the original ideological thinking of the workers' movement, and to the changes that have occurred in the centre-left parties. This shift towards party cartelisation is very evident in the Italian situation.

An initial reason lies in the marked ideological distancing the Democratic Party has adopted, especially more recently, compared to the traditional Labour genetic matrix of the past. The second reason involves not only the weakening of these traditional ties, but

also, more generally, the social ties which had characterised the strength of the Italian parties for such a long time. The disappearance of, ‘party government’ (MAIR, 2013) corresponds to a large extent to the party becoming increasingly less active in the social sphere. A third reason is that the present Democratic Party leadership has wanted to emphasise its break from the past, moving away from everything that characterised its former political thinking. The, ‘special relationship’ between the party and the unions had been one of the foundation stones, for good or evil, of the left tradition (both Socialist and Communist). The need to sever this tie has produced a perverse effect in that it has also reduced the party social networks.

As we have already mentioned the disappearance and decline of these historical ties has not deterred the unions from wishing to enter the political arena, with the aim of obtaining advantages for themselves and for their representatives.

Many of the new tensions that have marked the last years (for example, the Jobs Act) actually concern the relationship between the unions and the government, or at least some of the public players.

Therefore, the analytical and political questions to be raised involve understanding what the new attitudes are and what changes will come about in this sphere. Although the relation between the trade unions and the overall political arena is undergoing a big change, the Italian context remains remarkable.

The process that we have described has not been a linear development and contains corrections or partial returns to the past.

The adjustments have not finished and, therefore, we must ask ourselves whether what we have defined as ‘misalignment’ will be the eventual scenario after this phase.

The evolutions underway are to be almost always viewed as resulting from adjustments in the party position (PD), after which then follows the adaptations of the union (CGIL).

In this sense, you can see how, in 2016, the party, and the PD government was seen to be taking a step back from the project of disintermediation (the elimination of all relations with the social

partners) seen in the previous years. Probably for instrumental reasons, and to enlarge the social consensus in view of the constitutional referendum of December 2016, promoted by Prime Minister Renzi,¹³ both the party and the government re-established some relations with the unions.

Consequently, we can assume that the ‘cartelisation’ of the party is aimed at avoiding too close and structured social ties, when compared to those typical of the past workers’ movement and the idea of class. However, it does not exclude ‘good neighbour’ relations with the purpose of maintaining and enlarging the consensus or resolving common problems.

In this light we can consider that the disintermediation project advanced by Renzi in the early period of his leadership has become a substantial stumbling block, because of the difficulty in effectively producing important results and a greater consensus. In brief, the underlying idea that inspired him resulted in extreme repercussions for the ‘cartelisation’ system and went also further. This is because the leadership of the PD thought it could do without any relations with the organised interests at stake and thus operated on this thinking. Instead, during the last year of Renzi’s premiership we saw the demise of this idea. It became clear that relationship with the unions were necessary if an intervention of social and work policies was needed, even if on a different basis to that of the past and without any preferential ties with CGIL. The PD’s lack of electoral success, and the inability to capture consensus in wider and different spheres to the left voters following the results of the European elections of 2014 (40.8%) also pushed them in this direction.

In this phase, the unions were consulted to define a new package of rules for the pension system (September 2016) and they signed an Agreement Framework for the renewal of public employee contracts

13 The referendum concerned some important changes in the constitution, including the elimination of the Senate. These changes had already been approved by an ordinary law, but to be put into effect they required a confirmatory referendum. Instead, on 4 December 2016, 60% of voters rejected these proposals to modify the constitution.

(30 november 2016), which had been frozen since 2010 due to public spending cuts.

However, this rapprochement did not mean a return to the formal and solemn concertation between the government and the social partners which had been practised and greatly emphasised in the 1990's. The unions had contributed to the decisions of public institutions, prepared by ongoing meetings, but joint decision-making was avoided. In the case of pensions, a convergence was ensured through an agreed-on protocol, which was not considered as a triangular-type agreement. However, the abandoning of the past ways did not exclude the possibility of breathing life into the 'almost agreements' of 'implied concertation' such as those which had taken shape during 2016.

Currently, there is no clear compass indicating the way forward for majority element of the PD on this issue. Despite the clear and important defeat of the constitutional referendum (December 2016), Renzi was reconfirmed as PD Secretary for the primaries (April 2017). There is also no well-defined position after the end – still not openly declared – of disintermediation regarding social and work policies, and relations with the unions. The only picture that has seemed to emerge is that the PD intends to avoid any open clash with CGIL and the unions. Recently, the government, under pressure from the PD, abolished the regulation on 'vouchers'¹⁴ with the purpose of avoiding an upcoming CGIL referendum regarding its repeal. In short, the PD majority does not appear to be presently interested in promoting any form of collaboration with the unions, but has restricted itself, after the tensions of the last years, to taking a defensive position, aimed at avoiding the damage of an open conflict with CGIL.

The PD has found itself embroiled in uncertainties and new problems, including the repercussions of the split in the left (January 2017), which gave rise to a neo-labourist inspired group, called the

14 The voucher represents a more flexible working option, allowing for the payment, without added costs, of short-term or occasional work. However, the lack of any regulation for the use of these vouchers resulted in a boom in the number issued as well as their growing illegal use.

MDP (*Movimento democratico e progressista*), to which two ex-PD General Secretaries, Bersani and Epifani defected.

However, the renewed problems of the PD do not automatically lead to resolving the dilemma of the unions.

In fact, the increasing difficulty of positive relations with the parties has strengthened the decisions that all three union confederations have taken over the last fifteen years. This line of action has involved concentrating on direct, pragmatic relations with the political system and government, bypassing any mediation through the parties.

This preference by the confederations, even if it was in certain respects necessary, also contained two critical areas.

The first arising from the fact that the relations with the institutions (legislative processes, ministries) could become, often informally, an act of lobbying and exerting pressure. If the government, did not accept the option of concertation, as had happened with Renzi in 2013-15, this could then result in a path being imposed, despite it having some disadvantages. One disadvantage is that these practices highlight the ambiguity in the relations of the unions with the institutions, which have been spoken of as a, 'curse' (McGUMBRELL; HYMAN, 2013). The rapport is inevitable, but often it makes it more difficult to represent the social demands and the social side of employment.

The second is that the possibility of doing away with the parties fuels the recurrent temptation towards 'pan-unionism'.

This is a driver that has grown over the last twenty years. The reasons can be attributed to the loosening of the relations between all unions and the parties, but also due to the fact that the unions with their millions of members have remained the only organised and mass subjects in the field, and have organisational resources decidedly more effective and efficient than those of the parties, which have become markedly reduced. This relationship of unbalanced forces has already led to some political ventures, to the advantage of the unions. In 2001, the CGIL Secretary, Cofferati, tried to become the

leader, as we have already mentioned, of the then dominant party of the left, the DS (Democrats of the Left), but without success. However, an even more ambitious venture, in the guise of ‘pan-unionism’, also in 2001, was that of the ex-Secretary General of CISL, Sergio D’Antoni, to attempt to found a new Catholic party, European Democracy, as a clear emanation of that particular union element. This political adventure was also not successful, as the party was not able to meet the 4% threshold necessary to enter parliament.

This pan-union temptation has also more recently been re-proposed in different forms, such as the outcome of the split between the PD and CGIL regarding Renzi’s Jobs Act (2015) and on the rules relevant to the voucher system.

During 2016, CGIL had promised referenda¹⁵ on rescinding the new labour laws – the Jobs Act, which had eliminated the reintegration of unfairly dismissed workers, and introduced the vouchers which had been so abused, leading to increased job insecurity and instability and was considered to have been very negative. PD had been the party that promised the Jobs Act and had submitted to the over-use of the vouchers. All the union organisations had criticised these measures, but CGIL went even further. The referendum was a way to not only criticise the policies and choices of the PD, but also to present itself as a substitute to the politics and the parties regarding labour choices. It was, in short, a confirmation of the pan-unionist calling, where the unions, and especially CGIL, could be urged to set aside their good relations with the parties and, at the same time, their poor relations with the government.¹⁶

Conflict over the labour issues was only one of the reasons for the split which ultimately resulted from aspects that mostly originated in the history of the post-communist left. In fact, the MDP, which we have already mentioned, also decided to stand behind Art.1 of the

15 The Italian Constitution provides for the possibility of a referendum revoking the rules in force, which may take place if a petition is signed by more than 500,000 citizens.

16 The referenda were not held, as one (Jobs Act) was not accepted by the Constitutional Court and the other (voucher system) was avoided by a governmental decree eliminating this measure.

Italian Constitution, which recalls its labourist inspiration, stating that the Italian Republic is founded on work.

Therefore, the break with the PD over this element occurred, shifting more towards the CGIL position, and the criticisms it had raised over Renzi's platform on labour issues.

It is still not clear what weight this new political player will bring to bear. However, all the groups that criticise the PD from the left find themselves operating in the orbit of CGIL and, therefore, try to establish a preferential rapport with this union.

Does this mean a return to the old ties between the largest Italian union and the grouping positioned to the left of the PD?

Actually, while this grouping (not only the MDP, but also other smaller groups) is forced to occupy the space of the laborist and pro-CGIL party, this does not necessarily mean that is in fact parallel to CGIL.

Indeed, the interest in this, as of the other confederations, lies in maintaining a broader political dialogue and being recognised as being eventually able to have direct access to the public decision-making process.

Thus, it appears to be plausible that, in the future, the outdatedness of the old 'strong' ties between the parties and the unions – which have been experimented with over recent years – will be confirmed. There are many thinking about a leftist party that expresses the CGIL position, and which is founded or supported by the union.

This possibility could take shape, but it is quite difficult to imagine an official commitment from CGIL in this direction (while it is likely that some of the union managers will support it on a personal level).

Both CGIL and other confederations appear to prefer self-sufficiency in the public arena, trying to strengthen their political influence, and to a large extent ignoring preferential relations with the parties. It remains to be seen if this self-sufficiency will assume,

as has happened periodically, ambitious and ‘pan-unionist’ aspects or if it will pursue more modest and realistic objectives.

In conclusion, we feel that some underlying themes have emerged.

On the one hand, a loosening of relations between parties and unions compared to the stronger ties of the past.

On the other, the resilience of some less structured, but more contingent and pragmatic links and their qualitative evolutions.

The Italian situation confirms that underlying these evolutions there are not only ‘external’ factors, such as globalisation and social changes in the work world, but also, and quite often, there are first of all, as the main intervening variable, ‘internal’ factors, such as the logic of actions, drawn up and put aggressively into practice by the ‘cartel parties’. (KATZ; MAIR, 1995).

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