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## Sociology of Collective Action

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Differences in trade unions repertoire of actions

The case of Cgil and SiCobas

*Research report*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In their article about general theory on strategic action fields, Fligstein and McAdam (2011) insert the concept of repertoire of actions in writing about the interpretation that actors give to people moves, that comes from their perspective in the field.

*“Their reactions to those actions will be drawn from the repertoire of behaviors that they can mobilize under the rules in reaction to others given their position in the field” - (ibidem, p. 4)*

The authors consider the repertoire of actions as having limitations, rules, that are linked to the position of actors in the field. However, these rules should not be conceptualized as static and untouchable: the interpretation of a situation as well as the reactions to it may involve a repertoire of alternative models. Clemens (1993) looked at social movement from the lenses of institutional fields' change, considering the possibility of the development of multiple organizational models. The author read the differentiation of organized fields of action not as a disruptive change, but instead as arising from strategic actions and the construction of collective identities.

Considering the heterogeneous form of the repertoire of actions that can occur in the same field, in this context we analyze social movements in Italy, and in particular trade unions. Going more into details, the focus will be on the repertoire of actions of two different trade unions, Cgil and SiCobas. We define these as “different” for two reasons: first, because from an institutional point of view, they are recognized as two different unions under the same trade unions field. Second, because of the quite accentuated diversity of many of their characteristics, starting from the fact that Cgil is a confederate trade union, with more than five million members and eighty years of history, while SiCobas is an inter categorical relatively newborn trade union, with fewer members.

Even if part of the same field, we look at the repertoire of action of the two trade unions adopting the perspective of the possibility of finding differences between them. In order to search for these distinctions, we conducted a protest event analysis: this allows for the mapping of the occurrences and characteristics of protests across geographical areas, across issues/movements, and over time (Hutter, 2014). In this context, the research question regards the repertoire of actions of Cgil and SiCobas, specifically asking if and what are the relevant differences in occurrences and characteristics of their protests.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Trade unions have always played and still have a key role in management of work in companies, in negotiation for workers' rights, and as mediator between workers and employers (Freeman & Medoff, 1984).

As long as the research question takes into consideration the repertoire of actions of two specific trade unions in Italy, some clarifications about the selection of the objects of study should be provided. As well described by Concetta Ambra and Pulignano (2018), the two trade unions comparison is particularly relevant given their differences: SiCobas is characterized by a direct and informal relationship with workers; they are almost all immigrants, employed in the heaviest and most poorly paid warehousing activities. They are workers willing to mobilize more in order to improve their working conditions, implementing (also with the support of political activists and external volunteers) a more radical approach towards the employer counterpart, which can lead to the blocking of activities, the slowing down of the shipping process and consequent economic damage, forcing the company to renegotiate new and more favorable conditions. All the resources of SiCobas come from the members themselves, who join the trade unions and participate in the protests. This organization leads to a light structure that determines a faster decision-making and to a radical approach to the protest, aiming to an interruption of the economic activities of the companies, generating economic damage and forcing them to negotiate.

In contrast, Cgil, like other confederal unions, shows a large bureaucratic structure. In Cgil, the relationship with workers is more complex compared to SiCobas, mediated and characterized by a greater heterogeneity of members. They are workers who occupy a wider range of professional positions: middle managers, supervisors, employees directly employed by the company, but also warehouse workers, employees as worker-members in cooperatives,

Italians and foreigners The decision-making process is slower and constrained by the existence of a series of well-established relations not only with the workers but also with the other confederal trade union federations, with employer representative organizations, and with the state. Since the economic resources available to Cgil do not derive exclusively from its members but also from other channels, such as from the state for the provision of individual services to workers and from the bilateral bodies co-managed with companies in the sector, the approach to the protest of Cgil will be less hostile towards institutions, for not losing state sponsorship and the good relationship with the employees.

These structural differences assume particular importance in terms of the logic adopted in organization of trade unions. The two main approaches that trade unions can adopt are the logic of membership and the logic of influence (Schmitter & Streeck, 1999): the first focuses on garnering the widest possible participation, providing incentives for workers in taking part in the union, so as to strengthen the number of members and the resources derived from them; on the other hand, in the logic of influence trade unions should aim to have an effective interaction with the public authority, so as to obtain resources from it. Applying these categorizations to the research question, while Cgil adopts the logic of influence, SiCobas implement the one of membership: this is due to the difference of status between the two. Being a confederal trade union means being recognized by the employer counterpart, thus having access to public resources provided by the state (as with the implementation of the exceptional redundancy fund). As long as SiCobas is an independent trade union, the economic resources come only from contributions by its members or from the mobilization of workers in collective and radical protest actions: the latter's purposes is the disruption of normal economic activities, in order to cause financial damage to companies, thus compelling them to negotiate (Concetta Ambra & Pulignano, 2018).

After having adopted an external perspective, we consider trade unions also from a closer and internal point of view. Cini and Goldmann (2021) focus on the concept of worker capability approach in order to identify the active role of workers in organizing collective action, considering also workers in hostile environments thanks to resources and capacities derived from both inside and outside the workplaces. The concept can be applied to the logistic sector, as long as it involves the development of innovative and radical struggle tactics. The presence of the latter is in part due to the absence of two conditions at the time of the creation of the logistics workers sector (Cini & Tassinari, 2018): there was no framework of rights that could guarantee and regulate forms of collective action and strikes, as well as no confederal unions. In this context it's important to cite the fact that the absence of confederal unions has favored the emergence of intervention of grassroots unions that are traditionally more inclined to antagonistic struggle practices. Cini and Tassianari (2018) cited among the others, the case of warehouse porters in the city of Bologna in order to exemplify the dynamics at play in the new logistics mobilisations: this support the selection of the sample in the qualitative analysis of this paper (Section 3.2), as long as it consider the two trade unions in the logistic sector in the city of Bologna.

The different approaches of the two trade unions can lead to several scenarios in different company contexts. Generally, SiCobas and Cgil have conflictual attitudes toward each other because of competition for resources, especially related to the acquisition of new members. However, in certain contexts the two trade unions' different approaches can assume elements of complementarity and trigger indirect collaboration in order to achieve a common purpose.

## **2.1 Hypothesis**

To build up our hypothesis we considered the differences between the two train unions regarding their characteristics illustrated so far; on the basis of these assumptions, we hypothesize that SiCobas trade union will show more radical actions towards institutions compared to Cgil trade union.

In order to test this hypothesis, we conducted an analysis that will be illustrated in the next section. We adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods, considering two distinct samples; for this reason the following section on data analysis will be splitted in two subsections, in order to present samples and methodologies one by one.



### 3. DATA ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 Quantitative analysis

The dataset (Pilati et al., 2024) we used includes small-scale labor related collective actions, collected from local editions of “La Repubblica”, one of the main Italian newspapers. These local editions are about the cities of Bari, Bologna, Florence, Genoa, Milan, Naples, Palermo, Parma, Rome and Turin. The articles were considered if published during the month of January in three consecutive years, that are 2008, 2009 and 2010.

The actions recorded came from many different groups and associations; we selected the data of the two trade unions we were interested in: Cgil and SiCobas. Then we recode the variable “Type of actions”, dividing it in two main categories: “Conventional action” and “Radical action” (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Categorization of actions

Institutional actions	Disruptive actions
Start of negotiation	Chained
Rejection of consultation	Damage
Revocations	Squatting
Legal action	Traffic block
States of agitation	Hunger/thirst strike
Interruption of negotiation	Goods/port/airport/railway
Free admission	Station block
Concert in square	Boycott
Beach/park cleaning	Barricade

We obtained a final sample of N=544 actions performed by the two trade unions. There was a relevant difference in the sample size, with a strong predominance of actions by Cgil (Table 2). Even if the actual number of radical actions performed by Cgil (n=152) is higher than the one performed by SiCobas (n=36), from a descriptive analysis the proportions seems to show what we hypothesized: the radical actions represent the 31.21% of the actions of Cgil while for SiCobas they are the 63.16% of the total number of actions.

**Table 2.** Distribution of the actions for Cgil and SiCobas (in %)

	Conventional	Radical	Total (freq)
Cgil	68.79	31.21	487
SiCobas	36.84	63.16	57
			544

This difference can also be found by calculating the odds for taking part in radical protest instead of conventional one for both Cgil and SiCobas (Table 3). For Cgil we obtain an odd of 0.45: that means that Cgil has less than half the chance of taking part in a radical protest instead of a conventional one; on the other hand the odd for SiCobas is 1.71: SiCobas is 1.71 times more likely to participate in radical action than a conventional one.

**Table 3.** Odds for taking part in radical actions instead of conventional actions for Cgil and SiCobas

	Odd
Cgil	0.45
SiCobas	1.71

To test our hypothesis we run a logistic regression (Table 4), using Cgil as reference category (Cgil=0) to see if we can find a difference in performing radical actions in the two trade unions. We obtained a statistically significant odds ratio of 3.78: SiCobas shows a 3.78 higher chance of performing radical actions instead of conventional actions compared to Cgil.

**Table 4.** Logistic regression for taking part in radical protest actions (Cgil=0, SiCobas=1; N=544)

	Odds ratio	Std. err.
sin	3.778195**	1.10127
_cons	.4537313	.044373

\* p-value < 0.05; \*\* p-value < 0.01

This result seems to confirm our hypothesis, since there exists a difference in the form of actions performed by the two trade unions considered.

### 3.2 Qualitative analysis

Differently from the previous sample, the one we analyzed using a qualitative method doesn't cover the actions performed on a national level; instead, it considers the actions of the two trade unions in a specific work sector in a particular city in Italy, that is the logistic sector in Bologna.

The dataset (2023) includes thirty eight semi-structured interviews conducted between June 2022 and February 2023 with union officers and shop stewards, specifically members of RSA (Rappresentanza sindacale aziendale) or promoters of collective actions. The study focused on the city of Bologna considering the two trade unions, SiCobas and Cgil. Differentiation of case-study firms on the grounds of size as defined by the number of

employees, workforce gender composition, and prevailing union among the workforce. From this dataset we codified twenty interviews, specifically ten with SiCobas members and the other ten with Cgil.

Analyzing the interviews, Cgil's repertoire of actions shows a pretty clear moderate approach. The following excerpt is part of an interview with an official that reported the absence of certain types of actions carried out in his experience as a member of Cgil.

*"We have never had strikes, we have never even started states of unrest, we have never threatened strikes."* - NaturaSi Cgil official

Reading the interviews with Cgil members, what is interesting is the importance of the dialogue with companies, which seems an essential pattern that precedes the decision to implement institutional actions against them.

*"Cgil, which has always been perceived, not only by this company but also in the Bologna area, as a union that moves more softly, that prefers union negotiations without having to resort to extreme means, or at least resort to them in the most convulsive phases and with no way out when a dispute arises."* - Ecor Cgil official

The interviewee reported a characteristic of the trade union: it's clear that, in order to avoid uncomfortable or extreme situations, Cgil prefers to have a direct dialogue with the company. Thus, negotiation is the most implemented strategy in order to comply with workers' requests "without having to resort to extreme means".

On the other hand, SiCobas has a completely different relation with companies: not only the priority is to deal with negotiations and actions, but also to define the latter in terms of struggle. Here below, a SiCobas delegate reported one of the reasons that led him to join the SiCobas trade union, a reason linked to the conceptualization of the struggle.

*"When we build up this SiCobas union in 2012, if I remember correctly, our life and work improved, we made many struggles, we gained the fruit of the struggle."* - SiCobas delegate 2

The SiCobas delegate reports his experience as a member of the trade union since its creation, describing the successes achieved in terms of “the fruit of the struggle”: not only the terms struggle represents the actions that have been carried out during the years, but it is also considered as a tool that has brought benefits for workers.

The use of the concept of struggle is also linked to the collaboration of actors that are not workers. In the excerpt reported below, another SiCobas delegate answers the question as to whether or not SiCobas involve in their actions other non-union actors.

*“Yes. The University of Bologna, the students are fighting, they are very good, they also know about exploitation, (...) even there struggles are presents, there are volunteers and good people.” - SiCobas delegate 1*

In this case the term struggle is linked to the one of “exploitation” that leads SiCobas to collaborate with actors that are not even in the field of trade unions; there is the recognition of both a common situation, that is the exploitation, and the use of the same response, that is the struggle, in order to cope with this.

The interviews reported in the previous excerpt continue as follows:

*“Q. And you are still in contact, do things, have you been demonstrating together lately? I. Always.” - SiCobas delegate 1*

The repertoire of actions of the SiCobas also includes the collaboration with people that interprets their actions as struggle, and therefore acts accordingly. Thus, the difference between the extracts of interviews presented so far with members of the two trade unions delineate different kind of response and dialogue with the companies: while Cgil is more propense to a dialogue with the company in order to avoid the organization of any kind of protests, SiCobas not only use the organization of protests as a common response, but also consider this answer as the only one that is and have been successful through the years.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

In order to draw the conclusions, we combine the discussion formulated in both the analyses presented. The first one confirms the assumption of a more institutional repertoire of actions for Cgil trade union and a more radical one for SiCobas. A statistically significant effect seems to exist, and SiCobas, even with much less total actions, has a big majority of radical ones compared to Cgil. This claim is more than evident by analyzing the interviews: not only Cgil members define moderation in a positive way, considering it a characteristic of their repertoire of actions, but also criticizes the radicalizations of SiCobas actions.

*“SiCobas have a policy that I don’t agree with (...) because there was also the question that perhaps they were going to damage the machine, we have reached these levels here (...) in my opinion we are a little outside of legal trade union activity, from my point of view” - Cgil’s Company union representative*

The member of Cgil disagrees with SiCobas’s way of acting and making trade unions, and also shows contempt for their way of acting. Taking into account the differences in the repertoire of actions presented so far and the fact that more than one Cgil’s member reported similar criticisms about SiCobas, it can be stated that radicalization is **not contemplated** in Cgil’s conceptualization of making trade union, as long as Cgil labels radical actions in negative terms: thus, Cgil use the dialogue with companies as a means of solving problems in order to avoid an “escalation” in protest.

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods we find a “double confirm” of the initial hypothesis, from both an internal and an external perspective: differences in internal points of view captured through interviews are confirmed by the analysis of articles of an Italian journal that write and report the actions of the trade unions as an external actor.

Even if Cgil and SiCobas are part of the same field, that is the one of trade unions, the text presented so far illustrate relevant differences in their responses to other actors inside and outside the field. What accentuates even more these differences is the confirmation and validation of past and current actions, affirming security in defining choices made in the present and past as best to reassure members' benefit.

#### **4.1 Limitations**

In this last section are reported some limitations regarding the analysis presented so far. First of all, for what concern the quantitative analysis the numerosity of the data from journal articles counts 544 actions that are not equally representative of the two trade unions, since more than a half of them regard Cgil's actions. Furthermore, the effect of trade union on the type of action was not controlled for any other variable of possible interest, leaving room for possible further analysis involving other trade unions, or more generally groups of people manifesting. The second major limitation regards the interviews: they were not conducted by us and because of this we had to skim the parts of interest for our research question, moreover, the sample focus on repertoire of actions in a particular work sector (the logistic) and city (Bologna); a consideration of a wider repertoire of actions as in the other sample would have give a parallel analysis from a national perspective. A possible further research could enrich the analysis by comparing more than two trade unions, as well as extending the time frame.

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