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Labour, Gender and Deindustrialisation: Women Workers at Fiat (Italy, 1970s–1980s)

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Abstract

The article presents an in-depth analysis of the struggle for gender equality in hiring, as well as campaigns for parental leave and demands for improved work conditions, by female workers in manufacturing industry in 1970s–80s Italy. The case study is focused on Fiat in Turin, a highly significant site given its economic role in Italy and Europe, and its history of social conflict and radical workforce. Against the backdrop of dramatic changes in gender relations since the 1960s, ongoing industrial unrest since 1968 and the introduction of new gender-equality legislation, fatefully coinciding with the onset of deindustrialisation and the rise of unemployment in manufacturing, trade union feminism presented an original and, viewed in hindsight, highly significant agenda. The events in Fiat demonstrate the extent to which new demands and ideas regarding the value of women's work became acceptable in the workers' movement and in society at large, but also reveal the obstacles which the feminist politics of work encountered, and the persistence of gender-based prejudice in understandings of the value of work in all its forms. The analysis is based on archive material, press and original interviews.

Introduction

In 1978 the Fiat plants Mirafiori and Rivalta in Turin, employing over 60,000 workers of whom only around 8 per cent were women,¹ became the unlikely sites of a women-led campaign on gender equality in hiring. The action was successful in that 180 of 250 new jobs were filled by women, leading the car manufacturer to employ around 15,000 women, at various grades including unskilled manual labourers and administrative workers, over the next two years. Given Fiat's economic significance as Italy's main industrial employer and one of Europe's largest, as well as its emblematic status as a site of workers' militancy since the 1940s and more strongly so since the 1960s – a radical culture which, however, was predominantly male defined – the ripples of the campaign at Mirafiori were myriad. It set a national precedent regarding the application of equality legislation, specifically the 'Anselmi Law' (Law 903: 'Equal treatment of men and women in employment'), passed in 1977. It also created new forms of collective identity among women workers, posed a fundamental challenge to the male-centred identity and agenda of the workers' movement and transformed Italian feminism. However, as the Fiat case study sharply evokes, the impact of equality legislation and campaigning on women's industrial employment was framed and negatively affected by the economic downturn and the rise of unemployment from the mid-1970s. Sex-based competition over jobs was once again exacerbated in that context, revealing the contradictory outcomes of equality-in-work legislation in those contexts where it historically, and fatally, coincided with the onset of deindustrialisation, closures and rising unemployment. A mere two years later all eyes were on Fiat once again, as a major crisis engulfed the automobile sector, leading to around 23,000 redundancies between 1980 and 1987. One third of these affected women, including, ironically but unsurprisingly, most women hired

¹ Marco Revelli, *Lavorare in Fiat* (Milan: Garzanti, 1989), 27.

since 1978. The Fiat case study, thus, serves as a vantage point from which to consider the ways in which the value of waged labour – in the eyes of workers themselves, trade unions, employers and other actors – is framed by perceptions of gender, and this amidst complex circumstances marked by ongoing industrial conflict, the rise of feminist discourse, gender-equality legislation, the expansion and then contraction of the industrial labour market and the rise of unemployment.

This article builds on and develops scholarship on the workplace and transformative discourses of ‘work’ as sites of mobilisation among women workers, based on their dual, intersecting and conflicting collective identities in terms of gender and class. A rich theoretical and empirical body of work exists which has explored both the perseverance of male-dominated politics and culture in the labour movement, as well as the contexts and impacts of working-class women’s mobilisation.² More specifically, the analysis presented here aims to contribute to understandings of the fateful historical conjuncture between the introduction of gender equal regulations in employment on the one hand and deindustrialisation on the other, and the ways in which both sets of developments impacted on women’s lives. It forms part of the burgeoning research on gender and deindustrialisation, a theme which started in the 1980s to gain attention from sociologists and historians, interested in the first instance in the effects of deindustrialisation on masculinity. Scholarship of the past decade has witnessed a new interest in and proposed fresh approaches to the impact of deindustrialisation on women, with a strong interest in women workers’ militancy for the United Kingdom, France and Italy.³ The Italian case is significant and specific, given the lower historical levels of female waged employment compared to the two other countries mentioned, and in the fact that laws regulating gender equality in hiring were introduced somewhat later than in North Western Europe,⁴ thus coinciding with major increases in (male and female) unemployment. Such a historical juncture provoked complex political responses, notably in the Italian labour movement, caught at this point between its male-centred traditions and a grassroots renewal which involved elements of feminisation. Thus, while many gaps remain in the historiography of the social and gendered impacts of deindustrialisation on Italian workers, this article cannot claim to offer any encompassing interpretation. It does, however, aspire to ask fresh questions

² On the former see Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change*. London (London: Pluto Press, 1991); Ava Baron, ‘Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historian’s Gaze’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 69, 1 (2006), 143–60. On the latter see Roderick Martin and Judith Wallace, *Working Women in Recession* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Ann Curthoys, ‘Towards a Feminist Labour History’, *Labour History*, 29, 1 (1979), 88–98; Margaret M Fonow, ‘Protest Engendered: The Participation of Women Steelworkers in the Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel Strike of 1985’, *Gender and Society*, 12, 6 (1998), 710–28; Ingrid Hayes, *Radio Lorraine cœur d’acier: Les voix de la crise* (Paris: Presses Science Po, 2018); Andy Clark, ‘“And the Next Thing the Chairs Barricaded the Door”: The Lee Jeans Factory Occupation, Trade Unionism and Gender in Scotland in the 1980s’, *Scottish Labour History*, 48, 1 (2013), 116–34; Sunduir Anitha and Ruth Pearson, *Striking Women: Struggles and Strategies of South Asian Women Workers from Grunwick to Gate Gourmet* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2018). Recent studies on women’s workplace activism in Italy include Anna Frisone, ‘Dévoiler le genre dans la lutte de classes. Le féminisme syndicaliste en Italie dans les années 1970’, in Fanny Gallot, et al., eds., *Le genre de l’engagement dans les années 1968* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2016); Anna Frisone and Marica Tolomelli, ‘Gender and Class in the Italian Women’s Liberation Movement’, in Kristina Schulz, ed., *The Women’s Liberation Movement: Impacts and Outcomes* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017); Eloisa Betti, ‘Unexpected Alliances: Italian Women’s Struggles for Equal Pay, 1940s–1960s’, in Eileen Boris, Dorothea Hoehtker and Susan Zimmermann, eds., *Women’s ILO: Transnational Networks, Global Labour Standards and Gender Equity, 1919 to the Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 276–99. General historiographic comments in Xavier Vigna and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, ‘Intersections entre histoire du genre et histoire ouvrière’, *Clio*, 38, 2 (2013), 181–208.

³ Steven High, ‘“The Wounds of Class”: A Historiographical Reflection on the Study of Deindustrialization, 1973–2013’, *History Compass* (2013); Eloisa Betti, ‘Gender and Precarious Labor in a Historical Perspective: Italian Women and Precarious Work Between Fordism and Post-Fordism’, in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 89, 2 (2016), 62–83; Jackie Clarke, ‘Closing Moulinex: Thoughts on the Visibility and Invisibility of Industrial Labour in Contemporary France’, *Modern and Contemporary France*, 19, 4 (2011), 443–58; Jackie Clarke, ‘The récit de filiation ouvrière and the unfinished business of Fordism in twenty-first-century France’, *Modern and Contemporary France*, 26, 3 (2018), 261–73.

⁴ Major pieces of legislation in the United Kingdom include the Equal Pay Act (1970), Sex Discrimination Act (1975); in France the 22 December 1972 Act (‘Equal Pay for Equal Work’), Roudy Act (1983).

with regard to the ways in which feminist politics was shaped during its heyday of the 1970s and 1980s not only by processes of workers' radicalisation but also by rising unemployment, leading to accentuated gender competition on the labour market.

The article aims to draw attention to working-class women's activism, hereby contributing to a reframing of the historiography of second-wave feminism which for too long has foregrounded highly-educated, middle-class women. Largely neglected in historiography until the early 2000s, in recent years scholars of Italian feminism have started to refocus attention on working-class women, highlighting the original and significant re-articulations of feminist politics they brought forward, from self-managed reproductive health clinics and homes' occupations to campaigns for equal opportunities in work. Trade union feminism, involving the Turin-based women-only trade union *Intercategoriale donne* (ICD), the protagonist of this article, formed an influential part of the wider feminist movement in 1970s Italy. At the time, however, trade union feminism was considered in sectors of the Italian feminist movement as 'not properly feminist', or to be fighting rear-guard fights – despite the fact that its actions impacted on the lives of thousands of women. Specifically, and crucially, the ICD, supported by unionised working-class women, rethought the very definition of work and the relation between production and social reproduction, thus articulating a unique feminist agenda. This article contributes to such a recentring of our historical understandings of 1970s and 1980s feminism, opening up the range of actors we might consider to have shaped the feminist agenda, and ultimately destabilising the contours of 'second-wave' feminism as commonly understood.

Social conflict was in 1960s–70s Italy more intense, widespread and politically destabilising than in any other West European democracy. Workplace radicalism and disruption culminated in the 'Hot Autumn' of 1969, and for a decade to come sectors of the workforce remained unpacified – not least in heavy industry in Milan, Turin and Genoa. After 1976 industrial conflict was infused with new concerns resulting from the onset of deindustrialisation and growing job insecurity. Italy's ongoing social crisis entered into a new stage, as the established left seemed ill-equipped to respond to end of the 'Fordist life-cycle' that had characterised the lives of the bulk of male workers.⁵ Throughout the rebellious 1970s feminism challenged the new workplace radicalism, and the left more broadly, by drawing attention to unpaid care work in the family sphere, by destabilising definitions of work and productivity and by critiquing the culture of the labour movement which continued to be rooted in the male breadwinner model. One of the key organisations working in this area was the *Intercategoriale donne*, which can be translated as 'Inter-category union of women delegates', uniquely working within and across the ideologically divided and sectorially structured labour movement. The organisation was formed in 1975 as *Intercategoriale delegate* and renamed *Intercategoriale donne* in 1977. Active until 1986, it brought together not only female union delegates and workers, but also students, unemployed women and housewives – thus operating at the boundaries of what it meant to be a 'worker'. The ICD adopted an agenda centred on three key aims: to articulate the interests of female workers, specifically by challenging the traditions of male privilege in access to work and pay; to reveal the connections between women's disadvantages in the labour market and social reproduction in the private sphere, a nexus long neglected by the labour movement; and to transform the workers' movement from the grassroots up, by articulating a perspective which was not only feminist but also radical-democratic and anti-hierarchical.⁶

⁵ Marc Lazar, 'La gauche et le défi des changements dans les années 70–80. Les cas français et italien', *Journal of Modern European History*, 9, 2 (2011), 241–62.

⁶ There are a few semi-academic works on the *Intercategoriale donne*, often written by participants and including original sources: *Il sindacato di Eva : l'attività dell'intercategoriale donne CGIL-CISL-UIL e dei coordinamenti donne di diverse categorie : documenti 1978–81* (Turin: Centrostampa FLM Piemonte, 1981); Florea Bocchio and Antonia Torchi, *L'acqua in gabbia: Voci di donne dentro il sindacato* (Milan: La Salamandra, 1979); Ada Cinato, Cristina Cavagna, et al., *La spina all'occhiello: L'esperienza dell'Intercategoriale donne CGIL-CISL-UIL attraverso i documenti, 1975–78* (Turin: Musolini Editore, 1989); Nicoletta Giorda, *Fare la differenza: L'esperienza della Intercategoriale Donne di Torino 1975–1986* (Turin: A. Manzoni, 2007).

Analysing the ICD's multi-faceted agenda, including also its attempt to introduce parental leave for women and men, the article focuses in particular on the ICD's campaign to get women fairly into employment at Fiat. It traces the impact of their actions by investigating immediate responses by employers, trade unions and left-wing parties. The analysis is based on Turinese and national trade union archives and publications, unpublished and published material produced by feminist groups, press and interviews, both published and newly conducted by the author. Three original interviews, conducted by the author in 2013, were used for this article, as part of a broader study on Italian feminism and a larger exercise in gathering oral testimony. The interviewees – Nicoletta Giorda, Laura Scagliotti and Laura Cuminato – all played an influential role in trade union feminism in Turin and nationally. The use of oral history is well-established in histories of feminism and of 'long sixties' radicalisation,⁷ but most of these rely fully on either oral history or written sources. I have opted to combine oral testimony with written sources, using the former to establish the subjective meaning of either particular events such as mass meetings, or statistical data such as female trade union adherence. There are specific reasons why oral history is necessary for the study of second-wave feminism: it allows the historian to grasp the fundamental significance of the destabilisation and reinvention of language that characterised these movements and their discourse in Italy and elsewhere. Similarly, the fields of labour history and working-class history have been transformed by the adoption of such subjective and testimony-based approaches focused on sense of self and collective identity, language and meaning.⁸ It is only by reading the written sources such as activist pamphlets in conjunction with oral testimony, that the ways in which the meanings of key terms such as 'work' and 'housewife' shifted in this period among the protagonists of our story, become apparent. In analysing and using oral testimony, my starting point is that the study of social and political mobilisation – in this case, feminism as well as trade unionism – requires a deep understanding of the shifting sense of self and of collective identity that underpin social action. The historian, however, only has access to this 'historical self' through the prism of subsequent testimony and memory. As is well-established in oral history theory, oral history narrative must therefore be read through the individual's present circumstances and overall life story.⁹ Nearly all trade union feminists I interviewed spoke from a position of positive evaluation of their politics at the time. This can be understood as resulting from the need to construct life story coherence. All trade union feminists I interviewed pursued feminist and/or union activism during subsequent decades and up to the present, and, therefore, they tended to remember the events I asked them about as having been highly significant and meaningful. They did so in spite of dominant societal memory in Italy today, which tends to highlight the defeat rather than the victories of second-wave feminism, and is rife with narratives of the decline of the workers' movement following, precisely, the events at Fiat in 1981. During the interviews they tended to articulate a group-based collective memory of the episode: indeed, the interviewees tended to find very important the ways in which their former fellow activists recounted the events.¹⁰

⁷ Among many works that might illustrate this, Luisa Passerini's works have particular importance, especially: Luisa Passerini, *Autoritratto di gruppo* (Florence: Giunti Editore, 1998).

⁸ Rick Halpern, 'Oral History and Labor History: A Historiographic Assessment after Twenty-Five Years', *The Journal of American History*, 85, 2 (1998), 596–610.

⁹ Among others: Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

¹⁰ A similar point in Rebecca Clifford, 'Emotion and Gender in Oral History: Narrating Italy's 1968', *Modern Italy*, 17, 2 (2012), 209–21. On memories of 1970s feminism in relation to wider societal discourse, see: Erica Capussotti, 'Memoria e oblio del movimento femminista nelle donne della Pantera a Torino', PhD Thesis, Università degli Studi di Torino, 1993; Andrea Hajek, "'We are not Heiresses': Generational Memory, Heritage and Inheritance in Contemporary Italian Feminism', in Mark Ayyash and Ratiba Hadj-Moussa, eds., *Generations and Protests: Legacies, Emergences in the MENA region and the Mediterranean* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 224–44; Andrea Hajek, 'Feminist Impact: Exploring the Cultural Memory of Second-Wave Feminism in Contemporary Italy', in Andrea Hajek, Christine Lohmeier and Christian Pentzold, eds., *Memory in a Mediated World. Remembrance and Reconstruction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 129–41.

The case study reveals the structural and cultural barriers that prevented women from taking up jobs that were reserved for them under the Anselmi Law, and the gender-based prejudices against them among company management, (sectors of) the trade unions and (sectors of) the predominantly male workforce. At the same time, it reveals a real questioning by trade unionists of long-standing gender biases within their own ranks – including the devaluing of women’s skills and discrimination in access to jobs notably in heavy industry. It illustrates the beginnings of a feminisation of the labour movement from the grassroots up – a process which, I suggest, was in the second instance, from around 1980, hampered by the unions’ responses to deindustrialisation and the perceived need to save male jobs. Finally, the acute conflict at Fiat over mass redundancies in the winter of 1980–1, taken here as a coda to the case study, allows us to challenge the male-centred historical memory of not only this emblematic crisis but of deindustrialisation at large.

Women, Feminism and the ‘Hot Autumn’

The eruption of major unrest at educational institutions around 1966 marked the start in Italy of a long decade of acute political and socio-economic conflict. Apart from mass-based youth rebellion and the emergence of one of the largest feminist movements in Europe at the time, it involved grassroots mobilisation in factories and other workplaces, culminating in the ‘Hot Autumn’ of 1969.¹¹ 1969 saw the country’s largest, most radical wave of worker protest since the 1920s, with over 300 hours of work lost to strike action. Radicalised blue- as well as white-collar workers demanded not only higher wages but also a different experience of work, with for instance more control over conveyor-belt speed, safety regulations in the workplace and a greater say for unions and other workers’ organisations in decisions of work organisation and even production. New grassroots structures, such as factory councils and the Unitary Base Committees (*Comitati unitari di base*; CUB), typically rejected what they saw as the established unions’ moderate policies and hierarchical structures. In the early years they mostly operated outside of the latter’s control, although in many workplaces they were incorporated into the major unions from the early 1970s.¹² Remarkable was the extent of women’s participation in these new factory councils compared to the traditionally low numbers of female representatives in established unions.¹³ The latter consisted of three major confederations: *Confederazione generale italiana del lavoro* (CGIL), linked to the communist party; *Confederazione italiana sindacati lavoratori* (CISL), ideologically aligned with the Christian Democrat Party; and the smaller, social-democratic *Unione italiana dei lavoratori* (UIL). The factory councils and the CUB emerged at the grassroots level of factory protest and disruption, with a discourse and set of practices centred on workers’ self-management and autonomy – and this vis-à-vis capitalist labour relations as well as the established unions. CGIL and CISL were clearly transformed as a result of the Hot Autumn and the radical challenges posed to them. Moreover, they were in the 1970s presented with a unique socio-political opportunity: the crisis of political representation of 1968 had revealed the relative weakness of political parties and their inability to capture the concerns of new social agents, and trade unions eagerly filled the void. In Italy more than elsewhere in Western Europe, they did this with a significant degree of success, and between 1970 and 1980 the major trade unions saw their membership figures rise. They were able to carve out a greater role for themselves in industrial bargaining and law-making, and saw

¹¹ Among the works on social and cultural protest in Italy, 1968–1969, see: Aldo Agosti, Luisa Passerini and Nicola Tranfaglia, eds. *I luoghi e le culture del '68* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1991); Gino Bedani, *Politics and Ideology in the Italian Workers’ Movement* (Oxford: Berg, 1995); Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (London: Verso 1990). On the Hot Autumn in Turin, see Nicola Tranfaglia, Brunello Mantelli, ‘Apogeo e collasso della ‘citta’-fabbrica’: Torino dall’autunno caldo alla sconfitta operaia del 1980’, in Nicola Tranfaglia, ed., *Storia di Torino, Vol. IX: Gli anni della Repubblica* (Milan: Einaudi, 1999), 827–59.

¹² Lumley, *States of Emergency*, 167–270.

¹³ Guido Romagnoli, *Consigli di fabbrica e democrazia sindacale* (Milan: Mazzotta Editore, 1978), 172.

their socio-cultural influence grow, notably in major educational projects.¹⁴ Trade union feminists rode this wave of union power, exploiting the latter's ambitions to operate beyond questions of work narrowly defined.

In Turin, the student movements and extra-parliamentary left celebrated the factory revolt of 1969 not only as a return to the city's historical radicalism, but also as signalling the end of what was perceived as the Turinese working class's obedience to the traditional left parties and unions.¹⁵ Rejecting the latter, they exalted the spontaneous radicalism of the Hot Autumn, using an image of the unskilled worker which was strongly romanticised, sometimes linked to the imagined innate radicalism of southern migrants and always gendered as male. Over the course of the past a specific 'ideology of labour' had developed in Turin, based on work, skill and organised struggle, and leading to a political climate in which any social conflict came to be articulated in terms of class and the centrality of the factory.¹⁶ It was reinvented during the Hot Autumn: the earlier positive association with work as a source of collective identity was now infused with a new rebelliousness and a rejection of work. However, Luisa Passerini has gendered such an analysis, arguing that while before 1969 in Turin's ideology of labour 'the worker' was by default male, it was now women who identified more positively and collectively with their work and skills.¹⁷ Trade union feminist culture was indeed infused with a positive identification between the (female) self and her work, playing a key role in not only critiquing but also renewing the city's ideology of labour. At the same time, and despite the dramatic changes in the composition of the working class, northern men maintained a privileged position in the labour movement and the left and its very definition of the working class.¹⁸

While historiography and public memory most often narrate the Hot Autumn of 1969 as a moment of male radicalism, it was also a catalyst for the radicalisation of women workers and their adoption of gendered notions of conflict and struggle, encompassing not only work but also social reproduction and the sexual division of labour in the private sphere. Amidst the industrial revolt women workers created a new language through which to draw connections between inequality and oppression in the distinct but related areas of their lives: they angrily evoked the double burden (*la doppia giornata*) of working women; the lack of adequate public childcare; ubiquitous gender inequality in hiring, wages and job security and gender roles in the family and society at large. Their critiques were directed not only at employers but also at male-led unions, male workmates, fathers, husbands and boyfriends. At the 'National Consultation of Female Workers', organised by the Women's Commission of the CGIL in Rome in January 1969, a rabid anger was expressed especially by young women and lower-rank female union officers. 'Laura', a textile union member from Emilia-Romagna, denounced her lower wage when compared to men performing the same work and related this to gender roles more broadly. 'My work never ends: after being shouted at by my boss, I go home, do the housework and find that my boss is once again a man'.¹⁹ The taboo on the private sphere was broached: unusually for someone shaped by the cultures of the Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*; PCI) and its long-standing unwillingness to transform the private sphere, Nives Gessi, the Commission's head, stated that 'the division of care duties in the family [is] a problem'.²⁰ At the CGIL's National Congress

¹⁴ Trade union density among employees between 1969 and 1980 rose from 33 per cent to 48 per cent. This was a sharper rise than elsewhere in Europe. See www.stats.oecd.org (last visited 28 Jan. 2019). On the political role of trade unions in 1970s Italy see Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, *L'orda d'oro 1968-1977: La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997).

¹⁵ Lumley, *States of Emergency*, 209-14.

¹⁶ Aris Accornero, *Il lavoro come ideologia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1980).

¹⁷ Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 50-1. On gendered attachments to work among women in the French context, see: Jackie Clarke, 'Closing Time: Deindustrialization and Nostalgia in Contemporary France', *History Workshop Journal*, 79, 1 (2015), 107-25.

¹⁸ Nicola Pizzolato, 'Gli operai, gli immigrati, la rivoluzione. Detroit e Torino: Un'ipotesi comparativa (1967-73)', *Meridiana*, 56 (2006), 47-69.

¹⁹ Conference report: 'Consultazione nazionale lavoratrici, Roma 28/01/1969', in Archivio Storico CGIL (Rome), Archivio confederale, 'Convengi, conferenze, seminari', 1B 34, Vol. 82, 1/16.

²⁰ 'Consultazione nazionale lavoratrici, Roma 28/01/1969', Vol. 82, 1/7.

the same year she attacked the CGIL by opening up a debate on a long-neglected issue: ‘we still understand full employment as full employment for men, not women’.²¹ Indeed, female unemployment and the unions’ continued adherence to the male breadwinner model was to become trade union feminism’s pivotal theme, as further discussed below.

While much of the historiography has neglected women’s workplace radicalisation around 1969, the emergence of a new feminist discourse and agenda in the wake of the student rebellion is better understood.²² Initially mainly in the major cities, women – many of whom, though not all, were students – started to meet in small groups and often in private homes, driven by a need to explore a shared sense of alienation and oppression in a variety of contexts – family, sexual relationships, education, work. To the women who took part in what soon came to be called consciousness-raising collectives, it was clear that none of the available social critiques adequately expressed women’s social oppression and existential malaise. Italian feminists politicised their bodies and sexual practices, the pressures of motherhood and family life, the absence of reproductive choice and their unwaged and invisible housework, herein deeply influenced by the new, transnationally travelling discourses and practices of the women’s liberation movement in France, the United Kingdom, the United States and elsewhere.²³ Specifically Italian, however, was the rapidity with which an initial handful of small, privately meeting feminist collectives had transformed, by the mid-1970s, into a mass-based and diversified social movement. It involved a spectrum of campaigns and methods, including sexual health clinics, women’s bookshops, street protests and women-only trade union organising. Beyond this range of themes, feminist groups all adopted a set of core practices, among which the principles of ‘the personal is political’ and ‘starting from oneself’. Meant by the latter was that rather than the supposedly universal but in effect male-centred social analyses as proposed by the left, women needed a social critique that was rooted in immediate everyday experience and would serve to undermine the separation of private and public spheres and of formal and informal economies; it was exactly the overcoming of such separations that was considered revolutionary. Another core and shared principle, sex-based separatism or women-only organising, emerged as a reaction against the discrepancy between the left’s discourses on liberation and equality on the one hand, and, on the other, the disenchanting reality of actual gender relations, both in society at large and within left milieux. Trade union feminism adopted the ‘starting from oneself’ method as well as separatism; while the former was often met with puzzlement in trade union circles, it was the latter which provoked more hostility than any other aspect of its workings. Finally, the feminist movement posited women’s autonomy vis-à-vis established socio-political organisations as a core principle – more tenaciously so in Italy than elsewhere in Europe. Trade union feminism was influenced by but did not fully adhere to this principle, as its status within the labour left was always ambiguous. It placed itself within the union movement, using its resources and asking for recognition, while as at the same time demanding to be autonomous in its agenda setting and practices.

Trade union feminism aided Italian feminism’s transformation from a string of small collectives to a mass-based, socially diverse movement. Women-only union structures were formed across the country with significant activity in Genoa, where ‘women’s coordinating groups’ were set up within the *Federazione lavoratori metalmeccanici* (FLM), the metalworkers’ union which operated across the

²¹ *La CGIL dal VII all’VIII Congresso: Atti e documenti CGIL e documenti unitari* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1973), 395.

²² On Italian feminism of the long 1970s see, among others: Teresa Bertilotti and Anna Scattigno, eds., *Il femminismo degli anni settanta* (Rome: Viella, 2005); Fiamma Lussana, *Il movimento femminista in Italia: esperienze, storie, memorie* (Rome: Carocci, 2012); Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, eds., *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Maud Anne Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy 1968–1983* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Yasmine Ergas, *Nelle maglie della politica: Femminismo, istituzioni e politiche sociali nell’Italia degli anni settanta* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1986); Judith Adler Hellman, *Journeys among women: Feminism in five Italian cities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987). On feminism in Turin: Liliana Ellena, ‘Spazi e culture politiche del femminismo torinese: Un processo tra memoria e ricerca storica,’ in Bertilotti, Scattigno, *Il femminismo*, 225–43; Piera Zumaglino, *Femminismi a Torino. Contributi di Angela Miglietti e Agnese Piccirillo* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1996).

²³ On the transnational contexts of Italian 1970s feminism see the above-mentioned Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention*.

CGIL-CISL-UIL divide. From there, a women's metalworker union was created nationally in 1976, which, as discussed further below, helps to explain why the otherwise male-dominated metalworkers' union was more strongly influenced by the new feminist agenda than other sections of the labour movement were.²⁴ In Turin trade union feminism resonated in particular ways with the radical momentum in local political cultures. The paths of three types of activists converged to form the ICD in 1975: women formerly militating in the extra-parliamentary left groups such as *Lotta continua*, *Avanguardia operaia* and *Potere operaio*, disenchanted by the culture of male heroism and authoritarianism that characterised these organisations; women active in the feminist collectives and seeking to relate their feminism to issues of social inequality and female trade union militants radicalised by the workplace struggles of the late 1960s. All leading figures of the *Intercategoriale* were first politicised during the Hot Autumn. Many were former members of the CUB and factory councils, including Tina Fronte, one of few white-collar Mirafiori workers to go on strike without union backing in 1969; Carla Quaglino, who joined the CGIL in 1969 as part of *Avanguardia operaia's* policy of entryism;²⁵ and Giovanna Cuminatto, who joined the CGIL metalworkers' federation *Federazione italiana di operai metalmeccanici* (FIOM) in 1969. She soon abandoned the factory council, disgruntled by the fact that as the only female member she was expected to act as its secretary.²⁶ Laura Scagliotti, another *Intercategoriale* leader, had since 1969 militated for the CISL and the CUB at women-dominated Facis textile factory in Turin. Interviewed, she recalls the cultural and political transformation taking place: '1969 was a year in which many people came to understand all sorts of things. In which the factory worker, the secretary and the housewife understood how power works. And they discovered the force of refusal.'²⁷

As reflected in Scagliotti's words, a new language connecting private and public economies, and opening up the possibility of rebellion in *both* contexts, was created here. I suggest that encounters between working-class militant women and feminist students was crucial in shaping it. This is so because the exploration of different social conditions – for instance, taking on waged work as an economic necessity for the working-class women rather than a matter of choice as it was for some of the more economically privileged student activists – sharply revealed the ways in which seemingly personal life choices were shaped and constrained by socio-economic conditions and cultural expectations – and were, therefore, *political*. In 1970s Turin plenty of sites existed facilitating such encounters, not least the women's health clinics (*consultori autogestiti*) in working-class districts such as San Salvario and Falchera.²⁸ However, it was in the context of the '150 hours courses' – a new union-run adult education programme – that such cross-class encounters gave shape to a more acutely articulated social critique of social reproduction and inequality in work. The '150 hours courses', or the 'right to study' (*diritto allo studio*) resulted from an agreement reached between metalworkers' unions and employers in 1973 and in subsequent years expanded to most other sectors, stipulating that all large-firm employees were allowed to take 150 hours of paid leave for further education.²⁹ This prompted unions to set up such courses around the country, soon amounting to a mass phenomenon from which tens of thousands of workers benefited. CGIL and CISL women grasped the opportunity to organise a women-only course. Hosted by the University of Turin and run by some of its female lecturers, these were made available to working women, housewives, the unemployed and students. Feminists elsewhere soon followed suit, including in Rome, Milan, Bologna and smaller towns in 'red'

²⁴ On trade union feminism in Genoa see Laura Varlese, Anna Frisone and Giovanna Cereseto, *Non è un gioco da ragazze – Femminismo e sindacato: i Coordinamenti donne FLM* (Rome: Ediesse, 2010).

²⁵ Author's interview with Nicoletta Giorda, Turin, 5 Nov. 2013 (henceforth NG). (All interview citations translated from Italian by the author).

²⁶ Author's interview with Giovanna Cuminatto, Turin, 30 Aug. 2013 (henceforth GC).

²⁷ Author's interview with Laura Scagliotti, Turin, 29 Aug. 2013 (henceforth LS).

²⁸ Maud Anne Bracke, 'Building a "Counter-Community of Emotions": Feminist Encounters and Socio-Cultural Difference in 1970s Turin', *Modern Italy*, 17, 2 (2012), 223–36.

²⁹ Law 330 (20 May 1970): *Norme sulla tutela della libertà e dignità dei lavoratori, della libertà sindacale e dell'attività sindacale nei luoghi di lavoro e norme sul collocamento*.

Emilia-Romagna.³⁰ It was from this initiative that the Turinese ICD grew, as a small group of women involved in the first course felt inhibited by the union-controlled curriculum and setup, and wished to explore issues such as family life and sexuality rather than the more academic approaches to women's work or women's history. Fronte, Cuminatto and others in April 1975 started meeting at the CISL headquarters in Via Barbaroux, and as the group grew exponentially it was soon decided to hold women-only meetings of 'union delegates' (involving, in fact, union women, far-left activists and feminist activists) in all major working-class neighbourhoods (Nizza-Mirafiori, Borgo San Paolo, Barriera di Milano). Within a few weeks the ICD grew into a network of a few hundred women, engaging thousands of women in its courses over the next years.³¹ The organisation instigated the formation of women-only workplace councils, collectives of unemployed women, and housewives' collectives, on which more below.

However, the ICD's framework was contested in the wider feminist movement, specifically in two areas. Firstly, influential groups such as the *Libreria delle donne* in Milan and the *Centro Culturale Virginia Woolf* in Rome critiqued trade union feminism for not breaking its ties to the traditional left. While a key feminist group such as *Rivolta femminile* had already parted with Marxism in 1969, stating that the left had 'sold [women] to hypothetical revolution',³² other feminist collectives did maintain informal links with the extra-parliamentary and new left (rather than the traditional unions or the PCI), but always from a sharply critical stance and an organisationally independent position. These radical collectives saw the ICD as incapable of deeply critiquing the unions as it continued to place itself within that movement. The ICD was further denounced for not outright rejecting the notion – considered now by many feminists a Marxist fallacy – that waged work would result in women's emancipation. 'Emancipation' and 'equality' were by many feminist groups rejected as the old, tired principles of a politics of equality that was 'wounded' (as put by Anna Bravo)³³ by its willing subordination to the Marxist left. They replaced it with the paradigm of liberation centred not on a politics of equality but on the exploration of women's difference, starting from the sexed body. Furthermore, the ICD found itself in a difficult position regarding the status of unwaged care work in the home. The political framing of unwaged care work in the family was a moot point in the feminist movement at large. Rendering it visible economically and politically was one of the ICD's key aims, and the theme provided the ICD with a crucial bridge between the analysis of formal work and the critique of private gendered roles. Although it valued housework as economically productive, the ICD often referred to it as a qualitatively 'different' type of work compared to waged labour – without ever fully exploring how or why. As many other sectors of the feminist movement at the time, it stopped well before supporting calls for the waging of housework, proposed in Italy, as part of a transnationally connected movement, by the group *Lotta femminista*.³⁴ While the ICD's arguments against the waging of housework were carefully considered and rightly pointed at the risk of tying women even more strongly to the domestic sphere by remunerating housework, the ambivalence with regard to housework remained a weak point in trade union feminism's analyses and actions. Not only was its routine conflating of 'housewives' and 'unemployed women' problematic in that it rendered invisible the reasons why women might not want to be in waged labour, by not thinking through the issue more rigorously the ICD missed an opportunity to dismantle the mythologies of motherhood in Italian culture, and to more consistently work towards the transformation of the family and the gendered

³⁰ Anna Frisone, *Quando le lavoratrici si ripresero la cultura: femminismo sindacale e corsi 150 ore delle donne a Reggio Emilia* (Bologna: Edizioni Socialmente, 2014); Maria Luisa Mirabile, 'La donna nelle 150 ore', *Rassegna sindacale*, 16 Mar. 1978, 37–8.

³¹ The group's initial stated aims: 'Proposte del gruppo Intercategoriale Delegate CGIL-CISL-UIL alle OOSS e a tutte le lavoratrici sulla problematica femminile,' in Cinato, Cavagna, *La spina all'occhiello*, 13–4 and 71–5.

³² *Rivolta Femminile*, 'Manifesto (1970)', in Bono, Kemp, *Italian Feminist Thought*, 39.

³³ Anna Bravo, *A Colpi di Cuore: Storie del Sessantotto* (Bari: Laterza, 2008), 68.

³⁴ On these debates see Maud Anne Bracke, 'Between the Transnational and the Local: Mapping the Trajectories and Contexts of the Wages for Housework Campaign in 1970s Italian Feminism', *Women's History Review*, 22, 4 (2013), 625–42.

division of labour within it – despite mounting campaigns in that area such as one for the parental leave discussed below.

Such tensions were revealed as the ICD prioritised female unemployment as a theme from 1977. While its campaigns in this area were high profile and often successful in sensitising the labour movement to the issue, the ICD never fully clarified whether all women not in waged labour ought to be politically and economically considered unemployed, often conflating the latter category with that of ‘housewives’, thereby provoking critiques from the wider feminist movement. At the same time, the issue of female unemployment fitted the ICD’s agenda perfectly, as it offered an opportunity to bring into focus not only inequality in the labour market but also question to what degree it was caused by the division of labour in the family. Female unemployment was by no means a new issue, although it did take on a new significance after 1975, both in terms of actual numbers and in how it was debated politically. Italy presents an anomaly in Western Europe in that the post-war growth of women’s participation in the labour market was much less pronounced. In 1950 about a third of Italian adult women were officially ‘economically active’ – a figure that by and large remained unchanged until 1970. While the number of women employed in services and industry rose somewhat during these years, women’s jobs in agriculture declined.³⁵ Instead of causing a watershed in female employment as was the case in some West European countries, Italy’s ‘economic miracle’ of the late 1950s-early and 1960s perpetuated existing forms of vulnerability for female workers and created new ones: easy dismissals upon marriage and childbirth (despite legal reform in this area), unemployment hidden behind the statistical category of ‘housewifery’ and unstable work in home-based manufacturing.³⁶ From the mid-1970s, then, work precariousness for women was further aggravated as both female as well as male unemployment figures started to rise (despite the growth of the service sector which did relatively benefit women), and women’s jobs continued to be lower skilled than men’s. Between 1963 and 1977 the proportion of women registered as unemployed as part of the female adult population rose from 5.7 per cent to 12.6 per cent, against the male figures of 3.1 per cent to 4.6 per cent over the same time-period.³⁷ However, female unemployment figures do not map neatly onto employment figures, creating after 1975 a situation in which *both* were on the rise. This was due to the abolishment of the statistical category of ‘housewife’ and a cultural shift whereby growing numbers of women defined themselves as unemployed rather than housewives. Taken together, unemployment and employment figures present a picture of persistent inequality in the quantity and quality of jobs available to women. In Turin province more specifically, the absolute number of women in waged work grew gradually between 1977 and 1980, while the number of men in work declined slightly. However, the number of unemployed women in the province more than doubled during this period (by a 105 per cent increase, well above the national figure), while combined male and female unemployed rose by about 80 per cent.³⁸ Again, the significant rise in female unemployment was due partly to growing numbers of women choosing to define themselves as such – and the ICD played a role herein. But it resulted also from actual job losses, as deindustrialisation started to hit the region and a number of small businesses employing mainly female manual workers were forced to close or downscale.³⁹

The ICD focused its campaigns against female unemployment on the question of equality at the point of hiring – an obvious strategy in the wake of the adoption of antidiscrimination legislation

³⁵ Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth-Century Italy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), 118. As is well known, for this period figures on female employment ought to be interpreted cautiously; they underestimate female employment by not including various forms of labour in the informal economy.

³⁶ Eloisa Betti, ‘Women’s Working Conditions and Job Precariousness in Historical Perspective: The Case of Italian Industry during the Economic Boom (1958–1963)’, in Izabella Agárdi, Berteke Waaldijk, Carla Salvaterra, eds., *Making Sense, Crafting History: Practices of Producing Historical Meaning* (Pisa: Plus, 2010), 175–205.

³⁷ Paul Ginsborg, *Storia dell’Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi* (Milan: Einaudi, 2006), 601.

³⁸ CGIL-CISL-UIL Piemonte, 10–11 March 1981: ‘Primo convegno regionale delle donne: Qualche dato sull’occupazione femminile’, Archivio Istituto Piemontese Gramsci (Turin), Fondo CCdL/TO, 1981.

³⁹ These included sewing machine producer Singer and chocolate producer Venchi. Giorda, *Fare la differenza*, 206.

in 1977 ('Equal treatment of men and women in employment': Law 903/1977). Commonly referred to as the *Legge Anselmi* after Christian Democrat parliamentary deputy Tina Anselmi, Law 903 banned gender discrimination with regard to hiring, training, career progress and wages, and maternity leave provisions were expanded for both mothers and fathers.⁴⁰ It allowed individuals to denounce cases of discrimination, but not collective bodies such as unions. The three major union confederations showed little enthusiasm for the law, which resulted from the latter stipulation, although the reaction also revealed their lack of interest in gender equality and implicit adherence to the male breadwinner model. The ICD's initial response was muted too: it was highly sceptical of the law's effectiveness, given Italian businesses' record of non-application of non-discrimination legislation since 1945.⁴¹ Indeed, the constitution of 1948 banned any form of discrimination on the basis of sex (among other characteristics), and a number of pieces of labour legislation had since passed – none of which had had much impact. By contrast, the Anselmi Law was to have major consequences for women's positions on the labour market, and this was a direct result of the ICD's 1978 campaign for legal compliance at Mirafiori.

The Campaign at Fiat and Immediate Responses

In January 1978 Fiat announced that it would hire 250 unskilled workers at the Mirafiori and Rivalta factories. As elsewhere in Italy, the lists of registered unemployed were held by the city-based unemployment office (*Ufficio di collocamento*), an institution which administered the allocation of jobs and made decisions regarding precedence. As was customary, Turin's *Ufficio di collocamento* held not one but two lists for unskilled workers: one for men, one for women. It was a practice that had long facilitated the non-consideration of women for certain jobs. Fiat required 250 workers without skill or experience, but it did indicate it wanted men. When asked for an explanation as the events made the national news, management claimed that women had never performed such jobs – which as far as Fiat was concerned was correct. It argued that women were 'physically unsuited' to do the work, much of which was welding and sanding.⁴² The ICD rightly understood this as a breach of legislation and rolled out a multi-level campaign, which included lobbying of the *Ufficio di collocamento*, petitions and letters to city councillors, press statements, meeting with union officials and mass leafleting in an attempt to sensitise public opinion.

Most of these activities were conducted jointly with Mirafiori's factory council, which did count a number of female representatives amidst its ranks. Very vocal throughout the 1978 campaign, they formed part of a typical phenomenon of white- and blue-collar women workers in the metal industry, who while in a minority in their workplaces had become strongly radicalised since 1969.⁴³ The ICD also worked with the League of Unemployed, a recently set up group of unemployed industrial workers, men and women, in the Mirafiori neighbourhood, forming part of a wider phenomenon of such groups emerging across the country. As the ICD created a local Council of Unemployed Women, a collective identity emerged among stay-at-home women now defining themselves 'unemployed housewives' – a category which thus acquired a political, rebellious quality. Trade union feminists came to understand unemployment as something *specifically* affecting women, for reasons to do not only with educational inequality and employer bias, but also gender roles in the family and neglect of the problematic of women's work by the unions.⁴⁴ However, many other feminist groups objected to the ICD's apparent conflating of housewives and unemployed women, detecting an unwillingness to apply the

⁴⁰ Its passing resulted partly from the need to comply with EEC norms. Marina Calloni, 'Femocrats and the Reframing of Gender Equality Policy in Italy', in Ulrike Liebert, ed., *Gendering Europeanisation* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2003), 117–48.

⁴¹ FLM donne, 'Le leggi e le donne', 1980, in Archivio storico del movimento femminista (Turin), Fondo Mecozzi, II, 2, fasc. 1980. See also: Bianca Beccalli, 'Le politiche del lavoro femminile: Donne, sindacati e Stato tra il 1974 e il 1984', *Stato e Mercato*, 15, 3 (1985), 423–59.

⁴² 'La polemica sulle nuove assunzioni,' *La Stampa*, 10 Jan. 1978.

⁴³ Romagnoli, *Consigli di fabbrica*, 76–82.

⁴⁴ See various testimonies in Bocchio, Torchi, *L'acqua in gabbia*, 145–89.

principle of women's autonomy to the choice to not take on waged work.⁴⁵ Most local and national newspapers now wrote in favour of women's employment equality and against discrimination, at least as far as the Mirafiori case was concerned.⁴⁶ Responding to such pressure, Turin's Unemployment Office was the first in Italy to abolish sex-based lists.⁴⁷ However, company management initially resisted hiring women for the jobs, demanding that they undergo extraordinary medical exams in addition to the regular tests required of all new employees – which was immediately outlawed by labour tribunals. As waiting time was now the only legal criterion for hiring, 180 of the 250 jobs went to women. Moreover, between 1978 and 1980 about 15,000 more women were employed by Fiat, leading to around 30,000 or 15 per cent of the overall workforce in 1980 being female (the share was significantly higher among white-collar workers).⁴⁸ The events marked a wider breakthrough: for instance, a similar ICD-led campaign in 1979 contributed to the hiring of around 150 unskilled women workers at the car plant Lancia in Chivasso (Piedmont).⁴⁹ In its public responses to the feminist campaign at Fiat, management revealed a culture of prejudice against women in manufacturing. From a purely profit-driven perspective, there might have been an incentive to employ women if they were cheaper or if they could be put on less secure contracts. However, as the media and parliament followed Fiat's handling of the conflict closely, the company could not offer sub-standard contracts. Trade union responses to the campaign at Mirafiori were mixed, suggesting conflicting priorities. While the unions were compelled to support implementation of the law, their immediate concern was evidently to take control of a campaign which had originated entirely out-with their initiative. Furthermore, the Turinese branches of CGIL, CISL and UIL feared separate action on women's access to work, amidst a situation now marked by rising male unemployment. Repeatedly, the three main unions asked the ICD to 'urgently consider coordinating our joint struggle for jobs'.⁵⁰

Both CGIL and CISL had responded negatively when the ICD first came into existence. In the CGIL, separatist practice was met with particular hostility as in communist political traditions any informal, small-group organising tended to be distrusted – although CGIL never actively disrupted the ICD's work. At the same time there are indications that sections of the union grassroots were more receptive to the new feminist agenda. For instance, at a national CGIL conference on 'Italian Women in Work and Society' held in Rome in November 1975, one official attacking the feminist movement with the routine claim that it did not 'connect to the working class' was met with a storm of protest from male and female delegates alike.⁵¹ In the CISL, two sets of attitudes prevailed, reflecting the cultural and ideological tension within the organisation at this time: conservative currents were openly hostile, while more progressive members and leaders – that is to say, those influenced by Left-Catholicism and the 'cultures of 1968' – showed openness, and more so than in the CGIL. There was less nervousness around women-only meetings here, as in Catholic political culture the notion of women's separateness had older roots.⁵² This, however, also meant that here separatism was less challenging and could relatively easily be naturalised into traditional narratives of women's essential 'otherness'. At both the CGIL and CISL national congresses in 1977 the ICD was allowed to read a programmatic statement, which implied a recognition of the group's existence with distinct modes of operating. However, among the union feminists themselves a sense of being tolerated but not

⁴⁵ Such a critique, for instance, can be found in Libreria delle donne di Milano, 'Piu' donne che uomini', *Sottosopra*, Jan. 1983.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, 'Sei donna? Niente assunzione,' *La Stampa*, 11 Jan. 1978.

⁴⁷ 'E' discriminazione escludere donne da reparto presse?' *La Stampa*, 12 Jan. 1978.

⁴⁸ Giorda, *Fare la differenza*, 290.

⁴⁹ Revelli, *Lavorare in Fiat*, 87.

⁵⁰ Leaflet: 'CGIL-CISL-UIL Provinciale di Torino: Tutti i disoccupati uguali di fronte alle assunzioni', Turin, 07/01/1978, in Giorda, *Fare la differenza*, 205–6.

⁵¹ Report in Archivio Storico della CGIL nazionale (Rome), Archivio confederale, 'Convengi, conferenze, seminari', 1975, 'La donna nella fabbrica e nella societa', 43–55.

⁵² LS.

taken seriously prevailed.⁵³ Indeed, at the CGIL Congress, General Secretary Luciano Lama called upon delegates to ‘de-dramatise’ gender problems.⁵⁴ In 1986, in radically altered circumstances, marked by the weakening of the labour movement as well as a societal backlash against feminism, it was the CISL leadership which ordered the dismantling of the ICD.⁵⁵

At the same time, Turinese union branches appeared more receptive to the feminist agenda than national leaderships. This was the case especially for the local branch of the metalworkers’ union FLM – which also in Genoa and smaller cities formed a focal point for feminist activism. Traditionally male-dominated and therefore an unexpected ally of trade union feminism, the FLM embodied, more so than any other union, the new anti-authoritarian wind that blew through the workers’ movement after 1968. Having become a laboratory of left-wing syndicalism, it attracted thousands of radicalised and often young workers and activists, many of whom were active in factory councils, extra-parliamentary left parties or social movements. Here, women were a vocal minority, denouncing more openly than elsewhere the traditionally macho culture of the union while at the same time benefiting from its recent grassroots-driven renewal. FLM-Turin attempted to convince the industrial workforce to accept what was now presented as the unstoppable, full entry of women in industrial manufacturing. The title of a pamphlet by FLM-Turin for shop stewards and members, widely distributed in early 1978, is worth citing in full: ‘Note for the Delegates: Women’s entry into the factories reveals new problems, old contradictions, and the desire to change our work and life’.⁵⁶ Remarkable here were the tone of urgency and the perception of epochal change. While, of course, women had been employed in manufacturing industry since the mid-nineteenth century, the sense of acuteness reflected the specific environment at Fiat with its traditionally low numbers of female workers. It was here, at the symbolic heart of the Italian union movement and working-class radicalism, that something came undone: the centrality of male experiences in defining work, productivity and militancy.⁵⁷

The language adopted in this and other FLM publications was to a remarkable degree influenced by feminism and surprisingly frank, featuring a discussion of ‘men’s oppression of women’ and of the unions’ own ‘inadequate models and mechanisms’ as causes behind persistent female unemployment. This went well beyond the standard generic reference to ‘capitalist patriarchy’ in discussions of women’s inequality. A key reason why trade union feminism’s agenda resonated with the FLM’s post-1968 radical culture was that the former aimed to move beyond women’s needs, more widely rethinking the quality of work conditions (conveyor belt speed, health issues), self-determination and decision-making in the workplace, and what today we call the work-life balance. The FLM appreciated the feminist focus on health in the workplace – traditionally an area of neglect in the Italian labour movement, although it had emerged among the radical demands of 1969. Adopting an ICD campaign, FLM-Turin now called for rigorous workplace health checks, acknowledging the feminist origins of such demands and arguing that ‘women are less willing [than men] to accept the commodification of health risks’.⁵⁸ Despite what the gender-essentialist tone of the latter statement might suggest, the FLM’s changing language demonstrated a willingness to rethink gender identities in the family and in society. The pamphlet denounced ‘the expectation... also among male workers... that women carry the bulk of the housework’, and called for a rethinking of family relationships. ‘Women’s entry into the factories’ was now adopted by both ICD and FLM-Turin as nothing less than a transformative, revolutionary discourse, creating the possibility to improve conditions and change power relations in the workplace. As put in an ICD pamphlet: ‘starting from our difference

⁵³ LS; GC.

⁵⁴ CGIL, ed., *IXo congresso della CGIL: Documenti* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1977), 10:63 and 10:205–7.

⁵⁵ Giorda, *Fare la differenza*, 329–34.

⁵⁶ CGIL-CISL-UIL, ‘Nota per i delegati: con le donne entrano in fabbrica nuovi problemi, vecchie contraddizioni, e la voglia di cambiare il modo di lavorare e di vivere’, Torino, 1980; Archivio storico del movimento femminista (Turin), Fondo Mecozzi, II, 1.

⁵⁷ Mecozzi’s testimony: ‘AM, anni 38’ [1980–81], Fondo Alessandra Mecozzi, Archivio storico del movimento femminista (Turin), 1983: Chronologia II.3.

⁵⁸ CGIL-CISL-UIL, ‘Nota per i delegati’.

as women, we want to discuss new organisations of work, better adapted to the needs of both women and men'.⁵⁹

However, among feminism's interlocutors, FLM-Turin was one of precious few actors to understand connections between the gender roles in the economy and in the private sphere. The workers' movement's unwillingness to address gender relations in production *and* social reproduction soon resurfaced. The ICD was unsuccessful in its other major campaign of the late 1970s: the battle for forty hours of paid leave per year for child sickness, to be taken up by the mother or father of a child up to five years old. While existing legislation allowed mothers to take up yearly a number of hours of unpaid care leave, the ICD argued that women were often reluctant to take this up, either because living costs had risen or because it weakened their workplace position vis-à-vis male colleagues.⁶⁰ Amidst a cultural context of deeply entrenched familial roles, the explicitly gender neutral focus on parenthood in the ICD's proposal was no less than ground-breaking. The ICD and the FLM Women's Commission campaigned for the forty hours to be included in the platform text for national contract negotiations put forward by FLM in July 1979. Although it was included, most local FLM branches, including Turin, dropped it in the final hour of difficult negotiations with employers, considering it a lesser priority. Tina Fronte, who headed this campaign as an ICD leader and an FLM delegate, recalls the moment she reported back to the workers of her department: 'I told them that the new agreement with employers was a victory, despite the non-inclusion of parental leave. I said other things I didn't believe. Those moments determined my future choices.' Indeed, she resigned from FLM the following month.⁶¹ Her actions may be held representative of a much wider trend, as during the 1980s female union membership in Italy declined more sharply than male membership – an anomaly in Western Europe.⁶²

Aftermath and Conclusion

Women's equality in hiring was once again relegated to a lower priority, as unemployment started to rise sharply: male unemployment grew from 4.8 per cent in 1980 to 7.0 per cent in 1985; female unemployment from 13.1 per cent to 17.3 per cent over the same period.⁶³ Amidst economic recession and the scramble for jobs in traditional manufacturing, employers and the workers' movement now re-proposed older narratives which represented female workers as less productive and the gender-mixed factory floor as a problem. While the unions and the parties of the left had in the 1970s started talking about 'the changing nature of the working class', acknowledging diverse experiences of class exploitation based on gender, cultural background and age, such changes now tended to be presented as a *problem* to left-wing politics and in the context of what appeared as the erosion of class identity. A retreat vis-à-vis the recent openness towards the feminist agenda was evident. For instance, at a major PCI-organised conference on the automobile industry held in Turin in 1980, it was noted that there were deep differences in the approaches to work between the unskilled workers who had entered the Fiat factories in the 1960s, mostly southern young men, and the 'new wave' of workers entering the factories in the late 1970s, mostly women. The former, it was argued, lived lives to which their jobs were central and had quickly developed a solid class identity and militancy. By contrast, the latter were thought of as considering 'their non-work time as subjectively more important than their work time', while their wages only had 'secondary or tertiary' importance to the family wage. As a result, the recently hired women workers allegedly entertained a 'more instrumental' relationship with factory life.⁶⁴ The description of the 'typical' newly-hired female worker of the late 1970s was

⁵⁹ 'Considerazioni sul senso di una battaglia delle donne per l'occupazione', in Giorda, *Fare la differenza*, 210–1.

⁶⁰ Giorda, *Fare la differenza*, 261.

⁶¹ Tina Fronte, interviewed in Giorda, *Fare la differenza*, 265.

⁶² Bernard Ebbinghaus and Jelle Visser, *ILO, OECD, National Statistical Yearbooks, Labour Force Surveys and Union Data* (Geneva: ILO Geneva, 2000).

⁶³ Ginsborg, *Storia d'Italia*, 601.

⁶⁴ PCI, 'Conferenza nazionale dei comunisti sulla Fiat: Documento preparatorio' (Turingraf, 1980), 14–5.

faulty in at least two ways: firstly, in male-dominated workplaces such as Fiat women were over-represented on factory councils, and secondly, the statement that women's wages were non-essential to the family income was based on long-standing perceptions rather than evidence. The old prejudice of women lacking class consciousness once again reared its head in the statement, now widely heard, that women workers were willing to accept undervalued wages and conditions.⁶⁵ There continued, nonetheless, to be traces of awareness around gender inequality in culture of the workers' movement: as Luciano Lama, CGIL general secretary, in 1981 admitted at a national conference that 'men in the unions have an ancestral sense of superiority, which is difficult to overcome'.⁶⁶

Once again Fiat gained an emblematic status in national developments. In 1980 the Italian car industry was hit by a decline in demand, due mainly to international competition. A crisis over lay-offs led to a month-long strike and occupation by workers, supported by the trade unions and the PCI. The winter 1980–1 crisis at Fiat became a cause célèbre, interpreted both at the time and since as marking the advent of deindustrialisation as well as a historical defeat for the workers' movement. Fiat announced in August 1980 that it needed to reduce production and therefore place 24,000 workers from across departments temporarily on redundancy. They were to be placed on the *Cassa Integrazione* scheme for fifteen months, against a percentage of their wage and with half of them guaranteed rehire. Without consultation, management then announced the immediate redundancy of around 14,500 workers, proceeding with ten lay-offs per day. Treating this as a national crisis, the government invited management and the four main unions (CGIL, CISL, UIL and FLM) to negotiations – which soon stalled. This prompted FLM to call for a general close down of the factory through picketing and occupations; it was widely adhered to. Negotiations came to a conclusion as CGIL, CISL, UIL and FLM accepted Fiat's proposal to make around 23,000 workers redundant with guaranteed re-employment by 1983. The actual endgame, however, was rather different. While no rehiring occurred by 1983, during 1983–7 around 11,000 workers were re-employed, 16,000 were laid off permanently and 4,000 accepted early retirement.⁶⁷ In the memory of the Italian left this is a tale of attacks on working-class militancy. Indeed, of the 23,000 workers to be made redundant many had been active in unions and far-left groups, suggesting political motives behind the choice as to who to lay off in at least some cases. However, forgotten is that another group of workers were particularly affected: women. Of the 23,000, 30 per cent (ca. 7,500) were women, against 15 per cent of the overall workforce being female.⁶⁸ Many had a number of 'unjustified' absences against their name, as invoked by management.⁶⁹ At the same time, it emerged that Fiat had failed to implement legally the guaranteed maternity regulations; therefore, women had on occasion had to resort to unsanctioned absence.⁷⁰

The union-feminist agenda aimed to rethink the relationship between production and social reproduction and reassert its urgency in the context of changes in gender relations on the one hand and economic change on the other. Trade union feminism in Turin and Italy, as a partly successful, broadly-based but in some respects eccentric part of the wider feminist movement, proposed a new language, new thinking and new activist practices around this much older issue. The case study presents some surprises: the momentarily enthusiastic embracing of a more gender-mixed workplace at the heart of Italy's male-centred workerist culture (the metalworkers' federation), and the recognition that women workers have something distinct *but universally important* to offer to the labour movement beyond 'women's issues' (including, for instance, health in the workplace). However, the analysis

⁶⁵ PCI, 'Conferenza nazionale dei comunisti sulla Fiat', 33.

⁶⁶ Simona Lunadei, Lucia Motti, Maria Luisa Righi, eds., *E' brava ma... Donne nella CGIL, 1944–1962* (Rome: Ediesse, 1999), 83.

⁶⁷ A fuller discussion of the crisis is in Gabriele Polo, Claudio Sabattini, *Restaurazione italiana: Fiat, la sconfitta operaia dell'autunno 1980* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2000).

⁶⁸ Silvia Belforte, Martino Ciatti, *Il fondo del barile: Riorganizzazione del ciclo produttivo e composizione operaia alla Fiat dopo le nuove assunzioni* (Milan: La Salamandra, 1980), 108.

⁶⁹ Federazione CGIL-CISL-UIL Piemonte, 'Fiat: Storia di una lotta', *Bollettino mensile di documentazione*, 36 (Turin, 1980).

⁷⁰ *La Stampa*, 2 July 1980.

also foregrounds how deeply challenging feminist demands were and has highlighted two areas in which its impact was ultimately limited. Firstly, it was its systematic connecting of equality in waged work to gender roles in the private sphere, and the quintessentially feminist rethinking of care and family relationships, that proved most disruptive to the strategies and cultures of the labour movement and the left. This is revealed in the eventual non-inclusion of gender neutral parental leave in the agenda of FIOM in the late 1970s, contrasting with the ICD's much more successful campaigns for the application of formal gender equality in hiring. Secondly, trade union feminism's impact was increasingly limited as deindustrialisation started to hit Italy's manufacturing sector. As the latter had always been a focal point for trade union feminists, rising unemployment in this area for both men and women meant that, implicitly or explicitly, the labour movement from around 1980 reprioritised male jobs in this sector. This impacted negatively not only on women's equal access to jobs and equal treatment in lay-offs, but also nipped in the bud the earlier signs of feminisation of the labour movement in Italy – a process very strongly emanating from the grassroots up and, momentarily, involving growing female involvement and membership as well as a shift in union discourse and priorities. On the surface, the episode demonstrates the continued devaluing, by union officials as well as employers, of women as workers in times of crisis and job scarcity. It reveals the stubborn persistence of the male breadwinner model and of the gendered division of labour both in the workplace (i.e., the prioritisation of male jobs in industry) and at home (i.e., the labour movement's reluctance to reflect on care work in the family as framing the gendered dimensions of waged labour). However, the 1970s–80s events at Fiat also illustrate deep subjective and collective shifts among women workers. This was epitomised in the double radicalism of the women-only union structures, involving claims regarding gender equality in hiring and conditions, as well as a vision for the improvement of the quality of work for women and men alike, rooted in the radical-democratic cultures of 1968–9. Thus, while on the short term the Fiat crisis suggests a missed opportunity for employers and unions to reassess the value of women's work, the longer-term effects of the late-twentieth Century shifts in women's subjective relationship with waged work remain to be traced and explored in future research.