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8 Italy: The Costs and Benefits of Informality

Ida Regalia

8.1 Introduction: Historical Overview and Glossary

Clarity, unequivocality, and rationality are certainly not the main virtues of Italian political culture. This applies in particular to the industrial relations system. Turning to our topic, we have first to distinguish between different workplace-based representative institutions and to disentangle a puzzling knot of different names referring to the same realities and, vice versa, of identical labels attached to rather different entities.

A full historical review must go back as far as the very beginning of the twentieth century, when the earliest demands for permanent “internal commissions” of workforce representatives began to spread. In a period when union organization and the consolidation of the Socialist party were only beginning and the labor movement was deeply divided along craft boundaries (Gompers 1910, 162), the formation of ad hoc worker committees in the larger manufacturing establishments of Milan and Turin to coordinate industrial action and negotiate with management is a rather well-documented practice (Barbadoro 1973); similarly, it is well documented that attempts were soon made to transform the temporary commissions in permanent, and recognized, ones, entitled to give voice to workers’ grievances and control the implementation of the first contracts.

In a collective agreement signed at Pirelli in Milan as early as 1902, provision was made for the formation of a permanent worker representative committee of nine members to be elected by all workers. Four years later, at the Itala car manufacturing plant in Turin, this was followed by what is usually considered the first agreement on the introduction of a *commissione interna* (internal

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commission).¹ It was only during the First World War, however, that representative bodies elected by union members became a consolidated institution in major workplaces, supported by the government and recognized by employers in exchange for industrial peace and union commitment to the production goals of the war economy (Bezza 1978). After the war, in a period of social unrest during which the Socialist party and the General Confederation of Labor (CGDL) experienced a steady increase in their following, the organizational form of the internal commission, supported by the trade unions, was widely adopted.

Simultaneously, however, a new radical movement arose for the introduction of works councils consisting of shop delegates (*commissari di reparto*) elected by all workers. The main purpose of these councils, in which the internal commission was to play the role of an executive committee, was to give voice to the workforce as a whole. At the same time, as theorized by Antonio Gramsci, they were to form the first level of a "new order" based on workers' direct involvement in and assumption of responsibility for production. While they had a strong productivistic and—as one might say today—rather cooperative nature, they were looked upon with a mix of suspicion and hostility by union leaders, especially outside Turin,² who did not support them actively and who finally let them be swept away in 1920. In 1925, the union-controlled internal commissions were also abolished³ when the fascist corporations were given official recognition by the peak employers' association, and the CGDL was dismantled.

After the Second World War, the following historical forms of worker and union representation at the workplace must be distinguished:

1. The *commissione interna* was reintroduced in 1943 in a new form. This is the representative body which best fits the definition of a works council (Rogers and Streeck, chap. 1 in this volume): it is plant-based, different from the unions, and not entitled to enter into collective bargaining or call a strike, and its functions range from consultation with the employer to controlling the implementation of collective agreements signed by the external unions, in a perspective of cooperation within the social system of the enterprise. It is worth emphasizing that internal commissions were reintroduced as early as in 1943, through a national agreement between representatives of what soon

1. It is worth noting that this commission differed from that at Pirelli in that it consisted only of union members. The agreement was a success for the metalworking union (FIOM), which obtained the recognition of a closed shop. However, the agreement never went into effect (Antonioli and Bezza 1978).

2. CGDL leaders at the time supported a strategy of "workers' control," to be accomplished through the initiative and under the leadership of the union rather than the "spontaneous and irresponsible" efforts of the unorganized (Bezza 1978; Spriano 1971).

3. Nota bene, however, that recent historical research has shown that influential employers such as Agnelli at Fiat in Turin would have preferred to continue working with their *commissioni interne* to settle grievances (Bezza 1978). With the consolidation of the fascist regime, this did not happen. But the fact sheds light on the cooperative nature of the institution in those years.

afterward would become the national union and employers' organizations, in a period of worker unrest. As a result, at the fall of fascism the internal commissions came into existence before free unionism could be officially restored, which is why initially they were given bargaining rights at the plant level and broad powers of intervention as worker representatives as well as connecting institutions between the workforce and the external union (Vais 1958).

Subsequently, the rights and functions of the commissions were revised several times: in 1947, soon after the official reconstitution of the—initially unitary—general confederation of labor, the *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL), in 1953 after the division of the union movement along ideological lines and the formation of two other confederations, the *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori* (CISL) and the *Unione Italiana del Lavoro* (UIL), and finally, in 1966, in a period of decline of the institution. Each time the revision was instituted through a national agreement between the union confederations and the peak employers' association and never by law. Briefly, the process of normative readjustment can be described as a sequence of moves on the part of the external unions: as soon as they had recovered their strength (Craveri 1977), they sought, first, to gain full control of the commissions and, subsequently, after the consolidation of multiunionism, to reduce the prerogatives of the elected bodies and make space for direct union initiatives at the workplace.

Independent of their formal definition, however, up to the late 1960s the internal commissions, which continued to be supported by the CGIL as a general representative institution for all workers, in many workplaces represented and defended the workers vis-à-vis the employer. They did this in an environment of growing union weakness and rivalry, in which the unions remained substantially absent at the plant level despite repeated attempts since the mid-1950s to set up their own workplace union sections (Treu 1971).⁴

In quantitative terms, it has been estimated that by the mid-1960s about 3,000 internal commissions with about 15,000 representatives had been in office and active for nearly 20 years (Accomero 1976). Qualitatively, it is hard to assess their true relevance because their situation seems to have differed case by case, and a full historical account has not yet been produced. In any case, in the early 1970s the internal commissions were *de facto*⁵ and abruptly replaced by other representative institutions, in a period of grass-roots mobili-

4. It was left open at the time whether union sections, whose introduction was strongly supported especially by the CISL, should be more like German *Vertrauensleute* or union locals in the U.S. tradition. In any case, in the political debate of the 1960s it was a common view that the Italian labor movement was weak because of the absence of a formal and recognized union organization at the workplace.

5. The national agreement on the internal commission was never officially rescinded, so it might be considered still in force in spite of the major changes that occurred in the 1970s. In fact, in the late 1980s the reintroduction of internal commissions was demanded by the radical opposition to official trade unions in a few large plants such as Alfa Romeo in Milan.

zation and protest during which they were labeled as "old," "bureaucratic," and "ineffective."

2. The workplace union representations (*rappresentanze sindacali aziendali* [RSA]), which were legally introduced by the Workers' Statute of May 1970. Article 19 of the law allows workers from the "most representative" unions—a phrase left undefined⁶—to form workplace-based union representations. The law does not regulate their structure or operation, although it confers a number of rights on them and entitles them to organizational resources. As a consequence, the RSAs, which eventually replaced the older form of works council, the internal commission, took different forms and names in different workplaces.

3. The most widespread form of workplace union representation today may be referred to in English as a works council, although it has different names in Italian: *consiglio di fabbrica*, *consiglio dei delegati*, *consiglio d'azienda*, even *comitato di base* in the early 1970s, and also, in a broad sense, RSA. Councils of this kind arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s independent of and before the Workers' Statute, in a period of worker mobilization and social protest and as an unexpected outcome of union initiatives experimentally undertaken to gain control over the movement. Soon after the law was passed, the unions that had previously promoted the councils had to decide how to combine the legal mandate, vague as it was, with the rather different—and highly diversified—reality that had emerged from the protest.⁷ Very often, for organizational reasons and to get access to the benefits offered by the law, the new councils, or some of their members, were designated vis-à-vis the employer as union workplace representations, or RSAs, although they defined themselves as factory or works councils.⁸

The same term, then, RSA, can mean three different things: workplace-based union stewards, or union representatives, more similar to a union local than to the German *Vertrauensleute*,⁹ those works councillors who, after having been elected by all workers, are designated by the external unions as their representatives in the workplace; and the full works council as such. The reason for this confusion is the coincidence in the early 1970s of several factors:

6. In the 1970s the concept was generally understood to refer to the three main union confederations, the CGIL, CISL, and UIL. During the 1980s, however, this became less obvious, as various forms of sectional organizations (COBAS) or of "autonomous" unions not affiliated to the three confederations drew growing support from workers.

7. E.g., while the law provided for an equal and limited number of representatives to be assigned to each "most representative" union, factory councils were being set up as a heterogeneous aggregate of union members and unorganized workers, in most cases without any list of union candidates being presented (Romagnoli 1976; Regalia 1978).

8. In 1970 when the peak employers' association, Confindustria, conducted a study on the diffusion of works councils, it was unable to find out what was really going on because of the terminological confusion (Confindustria 1973).

9. In this case, no works council exists. This is the most common situation in some service industries, which were least affected by the collective protest movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

the success of a protest movement demanding militant, "direct" forms of worker involvement and participation rather than representation (Pizzorno 1978; Tarrow 1990) and thus the introduction of large, informal, participatory committees at the workplace; the passing of new legislation that conferred a number of rights on trade unions and their, not yet existent, organizations at the plant level; and the new activism of the previously weak trade unions trying to seize the opportunity of the moment and make use of the new law to grow stronger, in a perspective of organizational reunification.

The terminological ambiguity, then, was the result of a discrepancy between the law, which was intended to support union representation, and the social movement, which by its very nature looked with suspicion on any form of representation. But it also corresponded to an ambiguity in the character of the representative institution itself. In 1972, after an experimental period, the factory council was officially defined by the three union confederations as a workplace-based institution of *worker and union* representation¹⁰ (Regalia 1978). The Italian councils that were set up in the 1970s therefore fit the basic definition of a works council less well than the internal commissions that preceded them because they are considered, by the unions, the workers, and the law, to be union organizations *also*, allowing them to engage in collective bargaining, call strikes, and generally perform union functions.

While this twofold nature is also reflected in the electoral procedures and in the composition of councils, what should be emphasized in addition is the high informality of the system. When the unions opted in favor of the councils in 1972, they announced that they would soon issue a broad framework regulating the councils' operation. This they were never able to do, at least until recently. One might say that for a long time the unions were not really interested in proceeding further with the legitimation of the councils and the formalization of their rights and duties since this would have increased either the councils' autonomy or the unions' own involvement in the workplace. Put differently, the dual and ambiguous nature of the councils was tolerable as long as it was possible to avoid defining their functions and prerogatives clearly.

To sum up, as a representative institution at the workplace, Italian councils are ambiguously denominated, receive rights and resources from a law that was devised for another kind of representation, and were long considered by the unions as union organizations without, however, any formal regulation of their structures and functions. In spite of all this, the councils enjoyed unexpected vitality, are widely diffused, and played a major role in plant-level industrial relations not only in the 1970s, but also later during the 1980s, although then their appreciation by the unions started declining for a number of reasons.

10. This is analogous to a formal merger between the German *Betriebsräte* and *Vertrauensleute*.

8.2 Changing Functions of Works Councils in the 1970s and 1980s

Unions hoped the works councils that replaced the internal commissions in the early 1970s would offer a way of reconciling the different and conflicting needs of having the whole workforce as well as the external unions represented at the plant level, with both functions being performed by the same institution. The questions that were debated in the early 1970s were whether works councillors should respond first to the workers who had elected them or to the external union, or unions, and whether the works council should be considered more similar to the postwar *commissione interna*, given that representatives were elected by the entire workforce, or to a workforce union organization, in light of the fact that it was recognized by the unions as a RSA in the legal sense (Romagnoli 1976; Regalia 1978; Accornero 1992). For those in favor of dual-channel representation, the question was what kind of second channel was to be added, with different unions giving different interpretations of the existing situation. The problem was solved, or better *circumvented*, by postulating that councils should respond to both workers and unions and that they had both *commissione interna*-like and unionlike aspects.

Certainly, this was a compromise solution, one intended to be a temporary answer to workers' widespread demands for more union democracy and to the unions' diverging positions on how to deal with these demands. And it was a solution whose rationale cannot be fully understood without taking into account the widespread labor mobilization and union organizational weakness from which it originated—which implies that the particular formula cannot easily be transferred elsewhere.¹¹

When commenting on the consequences of the ambivalent, dual nature of Italian works councils, observers generally turn their attention to the incongruities that may derive from it, the unions' inability to fully control the councils, and the councils' precarious balance of forces and functions (see recently Accornero 1992, chap. 5). The unions themselves have repeatedly devoted much effort to devising regulations—and especially electoral rules, as we shall see—to institutionalize the councils more firmly, although with limited success because of their own divisions and rivalry. However, inadequate attention has been paid to the fact that this same ambivalence may prove—and in fact often did prove—to be an advantage and an unforeseen resource as well, in that it allows continuous adjustment to changing internal and external pres-

11. Even in Italy, as already mentioned, the councils had little success in industries where unions were already relatively strong at the workplace and workers had not joined the mobilization, e.g., banking and insurance or in the public service sector. Note that these are also the areas in which "autonomous" unionism had a longer tradition, which prevented the unions from reaching pacts like the one in 1972 that established the unitary federation of CGIL-CISL-UIL and at the same time gave legitimacy to the councils. The problem, however, is not one of manufacturing vs. services, as there are service areas (e.g., large department stores, fast-food chains, and the like) in which works councils have been successfully introduced (Regalia 1990).

tures. More specifically, precisely because of their less than unambiguously defined character the councils can preserve a certain amount of union control in periods of worker unrest and provide for a measure of uninterrupted union activities at the workplace in periods of recentralization of industrial relations and collective bargaining, or even of conflict between the confederations.

Seen this way, it is possible to reinterpret the recent evolution of works councils as a history of shifting equilibrium among the functions they perform.¹² According to existing research, we can broadly distinguish three periods:

1. The first period, up to the mid-1970s, was characterized by high levels of worker unrest within a context of economic expansion. The newly created councils succeeded in gaining massive support from the workers, who saw the councils as a stable and easily available reference channel for their participation in the labor movement and also as a way to counterbalance the employer's discretionary powers in the organization of work. At the same time, being recognized as union representatives, the councils enabled the external unions to enter workplaces and extend their influence there as never before. Moreover, as soon as they were de facto entitled to represent the workers vis-à-vis the employer, the councils became fundamentally important for the aggregation, selection, and redefinition of worker demands, thus making it easier for the unions to gain control of protest. As a result, a successful prolonged campaign of decentralized collective bargaining at the plant level was possible, which in turn reinforced the popularity of the representative bodies and more generally the following of the unions among the workers. This is a period in which union membership figures continued to rise as a by-product of the mobilization and of successful collective bargaining, reaching their highest point among active workers in 1977 when the three union confederations together organized 49 percent of the total labor force.

2. The second period, from about the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, was one of recentralization of collective bargaining and of macroeconomic concertation policies. It ended in 1984 in a dramatic break between the three confederations at the national level over the reform of the wage indexation system (*scala mobile*), under conditions of high unemployment and inflation. Usually this period is seen as one of deep crisis and of decline of the councils. Yet, in light of recent research, it seems more appropriate to speak of a period of pragmatic readjustment to a changing context. In line with the new situation, more emphasis was placed on the internal organization and the rights and obligations of the councils themselves, and more attention was paid to the individual needs and demands of the workers and the day-to-day activities of regulating working

12. Differences may also be found between industries or regions. Regalia (1984) records the more pragmatic approach of the councils in the chemical industry in comparison with councils in metalworking, or the more "optimistic" climate in the then more recent councils of the southern regions in comparison to the older councils in the North.

conditions; even some kind of collective bargaining continued to be carried on at the shop floor or plant level (Regalia 1984; Negrelli 1987).

The outcome was institutional change according to local needs and circumstances, often without much support from the external unions, and with differences in local cultures, in political traditions, and in the relations with individual employers playing an important role. In this way, a continuing union presence could be ensured at the workplace, in spite of heightened competition among the external unions,¹³ and conditions were created for the development of new patterns of industrial relations at the plant level.

3. The third period, which lasted from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, was characterized by increasing initiatives by employers at the workplace to gain worker consent and to mobilize commitment to productive goals, within a context of economic expansion but also of increased market competition and growing needs for more flexible use of work. In this situation, especially where they continued to command a large following among workers and sufficient support from external unions, the councils started performing the rather new task of collective representation vis-à-vis the employer, inside a more consensual pattern of labor relations at the shop floor. The wide diffusion of formal agreements and informal understandings at the plant level in recent years (Baglioni and Milani 1990) and the growing propensity of employers to involve council leaders directly in various aspects of the management of production (Regalia and Ronchi 1988–92) are indicators of a changing situation in which the councils are growing stronger.

In conclusion, we can summarize the functional evolution of Italian works councils in the two decades since the Workers' Statute by observing that from the beginning councils appear to have performed *representative functions*: first with strong support from the external unions, later because of their established presence and their support from the workers. *Consultative functions* were then increasingly added after the early 1980s. Moreover, in the ongoing Italian debate on works councils (for recent references, see Accornero 1992; Della Rocca 1989), observers have devoted much more attention to the councils' dualism of worker and union representation than to their relationship—and possibly even closeness—to employers. In the 1970s this might have been jus-

13. When in 1984 the unitary federation of the three main confederations broke apart because of differences on macroeconomic policy, the CISL and UIL tried to withdraw their recognition from some of the councils. There were different reasons for this: the prerequisite of unitary trade unionism on which the factory councils had been based had faded away; the CISL, and especially the UIL, stood to gain from a redistribution of the resources provided by law to the RSAs, and the councils tended to side with the CGIL rather than with the other organizations on macroeconomic policies and on the question of the *scala mobile*. For a period in 1984, a movement of autonomously convened councils, which received only tepid support from the CGIL, rose to protest against the national unions. Evidence shows, however, that at least in the northern industrialized regions, the actions of the CISL and UIL were not very effective, not only because of the CGIL's continuing support for the councils, but even more because of the workers' appreciation of the institution and the emerging need of employers to have a counterpart to deal with at the workplace.

tified by the often open antagonism between the social parties. However, since the early 1980s this omission can only be explained by cultural and political bias. One might even go so far as to say that in recent years, many councils were to a large extent sustained by a growing managerial need to find effective and not too expensive ways to obtain greater and more active worker consent. This fits well with the growth in councils' consultative functions that has been observed by many researchers.

8.3 Works Councils in Practice

8.3.1 Institutional Base

Italian councils developed as one of the possible forms, and indeed the most common form, of workplace union representation, or RSA, under the Workers' Statute. The statute applies to operating units, both plants and subsidiaries, of industrial and service firms with over 15 employees and of agricultural enterprises with over 5 employees.

Council formation is voluntary, in the sense that it is not statutorily prescribed. While it is legally supported, it requires a specific initiative, either by the "most representative" unions acting together or by employees in conjunction with the external unions. Very often in the 1970s, workers gathered in a plant meeting to form a council that afterward received official union legitimation. Later, in the 1980s, it sometimes happened that workers in nonunion workplaces such as fast-food outlets or private television studios organized a council and then called on the external unions to legitimate their initiative (Regalia 1990). Employers have no active role in the formation of councils, and insofar as councils are simultaneously RSAs, can be taken to court if they interfere with the process.¹⁴

There are no specific legal regulations to which unions must conform, and actual practice has changed many times since the early 1970s. This does not apply, however, to the implicit, unwritten, but highly effective rule that any decision concerning the formation of representative institutions at the workplace must be taken jointly by all "most representative" unions present.

Because of the informal and voluntary features of the system, there are no official statistics available. It is clear, however, that works council coverage is wide, except for areas where councils were never really introduced, such as agriculture, the public sector in general, and some of the private service industries.¹⁵ According to union data, in the early 1980s some five million employees

14. Of course, this does not mean that attempts at interference were not made. In the late 1970s, when the author was doing field research in a southern region, a shoe factory with some hundred employees was much talked about because the employer had up to then resisted the introduction of a council and had threatened to shut down the plant.

15. The reasons for this are to be found in the less militant and unitary tradition of the confederations there and in the deeply rooted presence of independent, "autonomous" unions. One might

were represented by over 32,000 councils consisting of 206,300 worker representatives. This means that, excluding agriculture and the public sector, about 50 percent of the workforce in manufacturing and private services was represented by councils. Since in Italy a high proportion of employees work in small firms where the introduction of a RSA either is not legally provided for or is particularly difficult, the percentage is even higher when restricted to those workers that can be organized.

Many believe that the councils nearly disappeared after the collapse of the unitary federation of CGIL-CISL-UIL in 1984, and union statistics have never been brought up to date. Recent empirical research, however, reveals a rather different picture. Data from a panel study by Federmeccanica, the employers' association of the metal industry, show that councils, referred to as "RSAs" or "factory councils," existed in all responding firms at the time of the first survey, and in 97 percent of firms in the second wave, with all firms without councils having fewer than 100 employees (Mortillaro 1984, 1986). According to research by the Centro di Studi Sociali e Sindicali (CESOS), the research institute of the CISL, which studied a national sample of workplaces in the manufacturing industries in 1988, unitary forms of worker representation were established in 81 percent of firms with 20 to 99 employees, and in 96 percent of firms with more than 100 employees (Squarzon 1989). Similarly, according to the annual Istituto di Ricerche Economiche e Sociale (IRES) Lombardia survey on industrial relations in the manufacturing sector in Lombardy, which has been carried out since 1987, works councils appear to exist almost without exception in all workplaces with more than 50 employees (Regalia and Ronchi 1988-92).

8.3.2 Structure

Only employees sit on the councils, which represent all workers, unionized or not. The law does not specify the mechanisms for the formation of a council (or, technically speaking, a union workplace representation), leaving them entirely to union decisions or negotiation. According to, rather unspecific, union regulations (Bergamaschi 1986) and to custom, councils are typically established by ballot, or sometimes by a show of hands, on the basis of "homogeneous groups" of workers from the same shop, department, or office, without formal presentation of competing lists of candidates. Traditionally, the density of representation is high, with about one representative for every 40 to 50 workers, which may give rise to very large bodies. In the 1980s, however, a trend toward a slight reduction in council size can be observed.

In principle, then, councils are categorically encompassing bodies that are internally structured in such a way as to represent the structure of the workforce. In practice, however, blue-collar workers are overrepresented. This is

add that in the public sector, there was also less managerial attention to productivity, efficient work organization, and worker involvement.

not, as many believe, primarily a consequence of electoral practices, but is the outcome of a lower propensity among white-collar workers to seek office: for fear of being set back in their careers because of lower identification with the unions, and as a result of a diffuse uneasiness with an office whose content is widely perceived as vague and undefined. Council seats that should be occupied by white-collar representatives therefore often remain vacant.

According to union regulations,¹⁶ council elections should be held every two or three years. As a matter of fact, in the 1980s, rivalry among the unions made it impossible in many plants (and especially in the historical strongholds of traditional working-class unionism, such as Fiat) to call elections for some time. Existing councils thus remained in office—sometimes with partial elections held to replace resigning council members—until new general elections could be held. Toward the late 1980s, however, the situation appears to have been less precarious. According to the CESOS survey of 1988, elections had been held in the two years before the survey in 48 percent of the small, 72 percent of the medium-sized, and 66 percent of the large plants in the sample. To these another 37 percent, 18 percent, and 30 percent, respectively, could be added where elections had taken place in the preceding two years, meaning that in about 90 percent of the cases there had been a general council election within a four-year period in the late 1980s.¹⁷

Elections are held on the employer's premises during working time. The Workers' Statute specifies a small minimum number of representatives that the "most representative" unions are entitled to appoint or to have elected. Generally, however, the councils are larger than the legal minimum. Unions therefore either negotiate better conditions with management, so as to have all their *delegati* recognized as statutory "union representatives," or designate some of the elected workers as their representatives. In the early 1970s especially, this allowed unions to exercise some kind of a posteriori control over the electoral results (Regalia 1978, 1984). An official list of elected and appointed councilors must be sent by the unions to the employers' association, which subsequently informs its member firm. In this way representatives acquire the legal status of RSAs and become entitled to the legal rights provided to union workplace representations under the legislation.

Candidates are not subject to any particular eligibility requirement, not even that of being union members. Unions have of course always exerted pressure in favor of their members and have urged elected nonmembers to join. While originally the unions abstained, at least officially, from direct intervention in the elections, with time they developed techniques—such as majority rules, limited or multiple voting, and the formation of informal lists of candidates

16. Unlike the postwar internal commissions, there is no formal regulation of election procedures by collective agreement, not to mention by legislation.

17. These results are consistent with those of the annual IRES Lombardia report (Regalia and Ronchi 1988–92).

(Regalia 1984)—to increase both the councils' representative capacity and union control over them. In the early 1980s the practice of organizing some kind of preselection of candidates had been widely adopted. Later, many of the unions affiliated with the three confederations jointly established detailed rules for council elections. From the extreme informality of its origins, the electoral process has thus become much more formalized, although this tendency is limited both by each organization's potential veto right and by the low propensity especially among white-collar workers to run for office.

The great majority of elected representatives are unionized. In the early 1980s, according to the results of a national survey of works councils, nonmembers were found in about 40 percent of the councils. In practice, however, this meant only that there were no more than two or three nonaffiliated council members on each council, generally among the white-collar representatives (Regalia 1984, 67). In the late 1980s, according to data from the IRES Lombardia survey on workplace industrial relations, nonmembers on the average never amounted to more than 8 or 9 percent of councillors, with a declining trend: in the 1990 survey, which focused on medium-sized and large firms with over 300 employees, to which the external unions traditionally pay particular attention, only 2.5 percent of all councillors were not union members (Regalia and Ronchi 1988–92).

In addition, it must be remembered that the unions from the beginning maintained their right to appoint a small number of council members directly if they considered this necessary for them to be sufficiently represented.¹⁸ This made the establishment of the council subject to internal negotiation, external pressure, and ad hoc readjustment, which is the price to be paid for competing unionism (Regalia 1978, 1984). The great majority of the councillors are, however, elected by the workforce. According to the IRES Lombardia survey, in 1988 only 1 percent of the council members in small firms, 6 percent of those in medium-sized firms, and 8 percent in large firms had been appointed by the external unions.

Councils are usually functionally comprehensive. Where joint permanent or ad hoc committees exist with management, their members are usually selected from among the councillors (Negrelli and Treu 1992). Depending on the size of the council, an executive committee with responsibility for negotiation and day-to-day activities is appointed—as a rule it includes the leaders of the different unions. Other council members may be assigned specific tasks, such as the representation of women and young workers or of high-skilled technicians, health and safety matters, technological innovation, and so forth.

In multiestablishment companies, a coordinating committee, whose members are selected from the councils of the individual plants, may be appointed.

18. Obviously, the possibility of appointing members to the council is exercised more often by the weaker or less militant unions. At least until recently, it was less common among the unions affiliated with the CGIL.

In practice it normally consists of the members of each plant's executive committee. While in the mid-1970s coordinating committees were widely established, many of them later fell into disuse, either because of the decline in collective bargaining at the plant level or, on the contrary, in reaction to what came to be considered excessive coordination of union negotiating strategies in a more and more diversified environment.

Works councillors are entitled to meet on the employer's premises during working time. There are no legal norms regulating the size and composition of councils or the frequency of meetings. The law does, however, assign union workplace representations a certain number of hours per year, depending on plant size, to devote to their activities. A council's yearly endowment in hours can be spent on internal meetings, meetings of the union branches, and conferences with local government institutions, but also on participation in union training programs. On the request of the council, full-time union officers as well as internal or external "experts" may participate in council meetings.

8.3.3 Relation to Unions

As has been pointed out, Italian councils represent both workers and unions. In the 1970s when the councils derived their legitimacy primarily from the workers—although the unions had helped establish them—unions strove to get full control of the councils. Subsequently, in the early 1980s, when the councils appeared to be unequivocally unionized even as their role seemed to be diminishing, unions lost interest in them. Recently, new attention is being paid to them insofar as employers are showing an increasing interest in involving worker representatives in some day-to-day decisions on the management of work.

Unions are represented on the councils both through elected union members, who make up the great majority of councillors, and additional, directly appointed activists not elected by the workers. The latter arrangement is the main organizational device through which multiunionism is accommodated. The form of external representation has been the subject of continuous bargaining among the three confederations, resulting sometimes in new rules but more frequently in ad hoc agreements—the most obvious option, changing the system, is unavailable because of worker support for the councils. In the late 1980s various proposals for electoral reform were made by the national unions in an effort to increase their shares among the representatives. The main proposal was a dual election system, with some councillors elected, as before, by all the workers while the others, equally divided between the three organizations, would be elected separately by each union's members, or directly appointed by the unions (Regalia 1992). This solution, however, which after some experimentation was adopted in 1989 as a formal reform proposal, was soon set aside as it met with widespread resistance.

Union officers may attend council meetings, and council leaders are normally elected by union congresses to union bodies. Union officers also partici-

pate in the councils' most important meetings with management, especially those in which information on company strategy is disclosed and discussed and collective bargaining is conducted. Data from the IRES Lombardia survey of large and medium-sized firms indicate that in 1989 union officers participated always or nearly always in negotiations with management on workplace issues in about two-thirds of the cases in which such negotiations were held (Regalia and Ronchi 1991).¹⁹

In the 1980s there was an increasing tendency even in the manufacturing sector toward establishment of separate workplace organizations for individual unions.²⁰ Up to now, however, these have maintained a very informal, voluntary status, avoiding direct competition with the councils, which generally have the same leaders. Also, according to the CESOS study, their diffusion appears to be still rather limited.²¹ External unions provide the councils with a number of services, such as legal advice and assistance and training programs; they may directly finance the councils after they have used up the yearly allowance of hours for their activity provided by the employer.

Cooperation between internal and external unions is by no means without friction. One source of conflict is the changing and blurring boundary between the respective spheres of activity, which reflects the poorly institutionalized structure of Italian industrial relations, as well as the unions' preference for informal, adjustable demarcation of their and the councils' relative competences. It must be remembered that Italian councils, unlike German *Betriebsräte*, have the right in their legal capacity as union workplace organizations to negotiate agreements at the plant level—which, however, they usually do only together with the external unions—and to call workers out on strike. Moreover, councils sometimes serve as channels for worker protest against the national unions' macroeconomic policies or prevent the implementation of unpopular agreements at the workplace.

19. Nonparticipation of unions in negotiations does not necessarily mean loss of union control over workplace activities. On the contrary, it may indicate high trust between the "internal" and "external" unions (Regalia 1984).

20. As already mentioned, this is common in service industries where RSAs are often formed as single-union organizations. Recently even the CGIL, the largest and most militant confederation, which most strongly resisted the introduction of formalized single-union organizations at the workplace in order not to weaken the councils and divide the representation of the workforce, has been setting up its own committees, mostly in the service industries or where the councils do not function properly because of the limited commitment of the other organizations.

21. Squarzon (1989, 165) found the following percentages of firms (by size) with single-union workplace organizations for the three confederations:

Confederation	Small	Medium-sized	Large	All
CGIL	6.4	10.3	28.3	13.1
CISL	6.5	14.3	39.1	17.0
UIL	3.2	6.2	24.1	12.1

In the late 1980s there was a trend toward decentralization of collective bargaining, resulting in thousands of agreements signed at the plant or company level. In Lombardia, for example, over 2,000 agreements were signed between 1987 and 1988, and about 8,000 in the whole country (Baglioni and Milani 1990). Not only did this not happen against the will of the unions, but on the contrary it was the result of an explicit union strategy to regain control over the shop floor, or at least to increase the unions' visibility after a period of centralized policies. It also met with widespread interest among employers in negotiating more flexible work rules and involving union representatives in the day-to-day management of the workplace. In most cases such agreements were signed at the plant level, very often with assistance from the unions, and generally without any formal presence of employers' associations (Baglioni and Milani 1990; Regalia and Ronchi 1988-92).

In the short term, Italian unions face the classical dilemma for a representative system between suppressing internal opposition and providing channels for it. In the long term, however, there is no doubt that the existence of the councils helped unions increase their membership in periods of worker unrest, and defend their position in periods of distress.

8.3.4 Relation to Employers

Italian councils consist of workers only. Sometimes, however, temporary joint committees are created with management for specific purposes, such as studying new systems of job classification in the 1970s or defining the criteria for performance-related wage increases in the 1980s. Permanent joint committees are still exceptional in Italian industrial relations. A few examples can be found, however, in publicly owned manufacturing and service companies (Negrelli and Treu 1992).

Whether councils are perceived as more adversarial or more cooperative than unions has changed over time. By and large, councils were perceived as more adversarial in the 1970s, while employers tend to see them as more cooperative in the 1980s, according to several case studies (e.g., Regini and Sabel 1989). In recent unpublished research directed by Marino Regini on managerial strategies of labor regulation, managements of large firms characterize relations at the workplace as consensual and cooperative. The issue here is not primarily whether a particular council can be considered more or less cooperative: in Italy especially, where the industrial relations system is only weakly institutionalized, the style of the interactions between the parties will vary a lot according to the balance of power.

Generally, where there are both a strong union presence and economic conditions that require high work flexibility and worker involvement, councils are more likely to be fully recognized by the employer and to be involved in some kind of cooperation. This is shown by data from the IRES Lombardia annual survey on the day-to-day management of work, which roughly measure the

Table 8.1 Council Involvement^a in Day-to-Day Management by Plant Size

Subject	Small	Medium	Large
Yearly calendar and vacations	84.0	94.8	97.3
Overtime	38.2	57.8	70.8
Internal mobility	20.8	50.3	70.4
Technological and organizational change	13.9	50.0	60.0
Training for blue-collar workers	16.5	41.2	63.1
Training for white-collar workers	11.7	14.4	45.0

Source: IRES Lombardia survey, 1989 (Regalia and Ronchi 1990).

^aMeasured as percentage of discussions in which council is involved.

**Table 8.2 Formal and Informal Workplace Agreements by Subject, 1989
(% of firms with such an agreement)**

Subject	Formal Agreement	Informal Understanding
Economic and labor market perspectives	56.2	13.8
Hiring	14.9	29.5
Redundancies	17.1	6.4
Remuneration	70.5	21.3
Working hours	82.9	73.4
Health and safety and environment	53.3	34.0
Job classification and occupational development	51.4	36.2
Work organization and internal mobility	38.1	38.3
Company welfare services	53.3	38.3

Source: IRES Lombardia survey, 1990 (Regalia and Ronchi 1991).

Notes: Figures are for firms with more than 250 employees. In 1989, formal agreements existed in 64.2 of the firms covered, and informal understandings in 57.2 percent.

extent of factual recognition of councils by employers (table 8.1). Information from the same source details the subjects that are jointly dealt with through formal or informal negotiation²² at the plant level (table 8.2).

In Italy, unlike in Germany or, more recently, in France, employers are not legally obligated to consult, negotiate, or take joint decisions with the union workplace organizations on any of the issues mentioned, except for some aspects of labor market regulation. Research findings can thus be interpreted as indicating a rather unexpected and perhaps unintended pattern of continuous interaction between the parties, which is equivalent in practice to a recognition of the importance of institutionalized workforce representation in the manage-

22. By "informal negotiation" we mean bargaining activity that leads, not to a formally signed agreement, but to a less official mutual understanding. In large and medium-sized firms at least, such practices, typically involving the council rather than the external unions, are not a substitute for formal negotiation but a supplement to it. Their function is similar to that of consultation (Negrelli and Treu 1992) insofar as they make possible experimentation with new solutions or help with the implementation of formal agreements.

ment of production, and which is in sharp contrast to the official positions of both the external unions and the employers' associations.

Drawing again on the IRES survey, this impression may be reinforced by data on the frequency and regularity of the formal contacts between managements and councils (table 8.3), revealing a scenario of widespread and increasingly formalized tight interaction. That this is not merely a peculiarity of the more developed northern regions such as Lombardy is indicated by similar findings from a national study of large state-owned companies (Negrelli and Treu 1992).

To sum up, there are reasons to believe that the role of the councils may be enhanced by employers' interest in using their consultative functions as way of increasing worker commitment and consent. This seems to hold especially in periods of change, such as technological innovation, reorganization of work, or introduction of total quality management. This, however, is by no means the general situation. Especially in workplaces where the unions were less strong in the 1980s, or were highly divided, employers often excluded councils and unions and attempted to build direct contacts with workers. Fiat was long the best and most important example of this. Recently, however, from about 1989, the strategy of the largest Italian private company appears to have changed, in connection with the announced introduction of a total quality management project. A collective agreement on new industrial relations in the workplace was signed, and collective bargaining at the establishment and company levels, involving the external unions together with the internal worker representatives, was resumed.

The effects of these recent trends on the influence and power of the external unions are presently under debate. Some unions, such as the metalworking union affiliated to the CGIL, have asked for co-determination rights to be formally recognized by employers, and much emphasis is being placed on the goal of industrial democracy. Generally, Italian unions, both inside and outside the workplace, appear less opposed to the challenge of innovation and high-

Table 8.3 Frequency and Regularity of Interaction between Management and Works Council in Medium-Sized and Large Firms, 1986 and 1988 (%)

Interaction	1986		1988	
	Medium	Large	Medium	Large
At least one formal meeting per month	48.3	72.0	39.5	77.3
Regular preestablished meetings	38.6	43.2	40.1	54.4
Agreements on joint verification	67.9	76.5	87.8	97.8
Regular information on				
Economic perspectives	74.0	77.8	72.9	84.6
Occupational perspectives	74.8	82.4	72.4	91.0

Source: IRES Lombardia survey, 1987 and 1989 (Regalia and Ronchi 1988, 1990).

quality, flexible production than unions in other countries. This is related to their ideological commitment, which has often made them emphasize long-term, "political" objectives rather than immediate practical targets. It also has to do with the limited time available in the 1970s to build up a full system of union-controlled work rules. A long productivistic cultural tradition, especially within the CGIL, also plays a role.

In any case, the powers of Italian councils vis-à-vis the employer are to a large extent linked to their unionlike nature. Because the council is also representative of the unions, it can be reliable in the long term, making it worthwhile for the employer to pay the costs of involving it in aspects of his decisions and of negotiating with it. Councils, for their part, need the support of the unions, not just to be recognized as union workplace representatives but also to be a valuable counterpart for the employer.

8.3.5 Relation to the State

We have already mentioned the great importance of the Workers' Statute in helping the councils emerge and consolidate in a situation that had previously been characterized by union weakness at the workplace. We have also pointed out that the law had been designed to strengthen the unions, so that its provisions required a certain amount of interpretation and adaptation. This incongruity, however, helped the unions maintain control over the councils by giving them the possibility of withdrawing recognition from them as union workplace representatives. While this did happen in the 1980s, it was less frequent than one might have expected, at least in the manufacturing sector.

Other legal provisions which indirectly support the councils are to be found in the special legislation on the Cassa Integrazione Guadagni—a wage guarantee fund during layoffs—or in laws on industrial restructuring, requiring employers to disclose information to workplace unions or external unions as a condition of access to public subsidies. At the regional or local level, there are many examples of meetings and consultations of council leaders with local authorities. In the 1970s contacts between local governments and councils were frequent because of the advantages, both practical and symbolic, that accrued from them to both parties (Regalia 1984, 1988).

Some of this seems to have continued into the 1980s. According to the 1990 IRES Lombardia industrial relations survey, councils in 36 percent of the large and medium-sized firms had contacts with local political institutions in the preceding year, dealing not just with traditional unemployment and labor market problems, but more often, in over 50 percent of cases, with health and safety and ecological issues (Regalia and Ronchi 1991).

In the mid-1970s projects for a territorial extension of the councils beyond the workplace were much debated. But they remained largely experimental. Even in the industrial districts of the "Third Italy" (Bagnasco 1977), where the unions had become particularly strong (Triglia 1986), councils appear to be well rooted only within the workplace (Perulli 1989; Trigilia 1989). At present,

the introduction of new forms of territorially rather than workplace-based council-like representative bodies, with specific competences on labor market issues, has been envisaged in some regional and national collective agreements signed by the unions and the employers' associations of the small industry and the artisanal sector. While their formation is still in a very early and experimental stage, they might well prove to be a good way of enhancing worker representation in small firms.

8.3.6 Relation to Workers on the Shop Floor

In the last 20 years works councils have gained strong support from the workers. This is illustrated by the high participation in council elections, even in periods of union rivalry and membership decline. Among blue-collar workers, voter turnout is regularly between 70 and 80 percent, at least in areas with a consolidated union tradition such as Lombardy (Regalia and Ronchi 1988–92). In moments of particular importance, such as the Fiat elections in 1988, it can be still higher.²³ The opportunity to establish their council seems to be highly appreciated even by young workers with no union experience.

Council elections are often the first step toward the unionization of a new plant. Usually, the council is seen by the workers as their close-at-hand union, where information and assistance can be easily obtained. Councils are legally entitled to convene worker meetings during working time; the Workers' Statute establishes a minimum of 10 paid hours per year per worker for this, an amount that may be increased through collective agreement.

Recently, worker involvement programs and employer strategies of direct communication with individual workers have become widespread. However, they do not necessarily affect the status and performance of the councils in a negative way. Research shows that the outcomes may vary considerably according to a number of factors; on the whole, however, neither party seems to view innovative personnel management as a challenge to the internal unions. Usually, the council is informed; sometimes works councillors even participate in the programs, although they are often keen to criticize their effectiveness.

Issues, targets, and addresses of the new managerial practices on the one hand and of collective action on the other tend to be at least partially differentiated, which accounts for a degree of "peaceful coexistence" between the two regulatory principles (Negrelli 1992; Turati 1992; Regalia and Ronchi 1988–92). In fact, changes in the organization of work, such as the introduction of semiautonomous work groups, decentralization of decision making, and increased job rotation, are likely to have positive effects even on the councils, at least where they are rooted in a consolidated tradition, since in periods of organizational change their importance as channels for worker voice and internal two-way communication is enhanced.

23. Exact data are not available because of the high degree of informality that is still characteristic of the system.

It is always possible for a council to be taken over by the dissatisfied, and this may sometimes lead to the emergence of radical organizations. This is an inevitable outcome of the Italian legal framework, under which the rights to strike and free association are vested in single individuals. On the whole, however, there can be no doubt that worker radicalism is more likely to be found where councils are absent—as in the public service sector where the COBAS developed in the 1980s (Bordogna 1992).

8.3.7 Efficiency Effects

While exact data are not available, the administrative costs of councils for employers are not low. The Workers' Statute provides for eight hours per month of paid release time for each council member, and better conditions are generally created by negotiation. Moreover, in plants with over 200 employees the council is entitled to a permanent room, which generally includes telephone facilities and other services. Apparently, however, this is not a topic of complaints, at least not openly. Although managements rarely ask for a council to be formed, they do not find it too costly once it has been introduced.

Some of the reasons for managerial acceptance of councils may be gleaned from research on other subjects. In a number of in-depth interviews with personnel managers, the following positive functions of councils were identified: they facilitate internal communication at lower cost than separate managerial channels and programs, they help settle individual and collective grievances, and they operate as a feedback mechanism on the operation of middle management, for example, with regard to promotions. One manager commented that, "if councils didn't already exist, one should invent them" (Interview with the author).

Case studies of industrial readjustment in the 1980s have shown that the existence of active and well-rooted councils made innovation and reorganization of production easier for firms while making the management of redundancies and changes in work practices less traumatic for employees (Regini and Sabel 1989). In recent discussions with the author, personnel managers of multiplant companies pointed out their preference for strong and even militant councils that are the undisputed leaders of the workers, as compared to representative bodies that are weak and poorly supported. In the former case, joint decision making, through consultation or collective bargaining, would lead to much more reliable and therefore in the end more efficient outcomes, while in the latter case, apparently more convenient results might easily turn into a bothersome waste of time.

8.4 Conclusions

It is not easy to draw clear conclusions from the Italian experience with works councils. Because of the dual nature of the councils as worker and union representative bodies, much depends on the perspective one takes. For the

councillors themselves, the system's indeterminacy with respect to rights and rules of behavior must make it appear very ambitious, a model that can never be fully realized, with a large and lasting gap between expectations and reality. A sign of this is the high level of dissatisfaction found in all interviews with works councillors since the early 1970s. From the perspective of the external unions, the system probably appears too much in flux, not sufficiently uniform and too difficult to control. Employers probably have the least doubts, as evidence shows that the councils are generally accepted by managements as a matter of fact, and as a somewhat informal but effective reality with which it is better to seek accommodation.

From a factual and functional point of view, however, it may be precisely because of their twofold nature and limited regulation that councils appear to be a successful—that is, flexible and adaptive—institution, one that is especially adequate in periods of changes in unions' and employers' strategies and behavior. First, being legally supported but not legally regulated, councils have been largely protected from employer retaliation (unlike the postwar internal commissions that depended much more on the employers' goodwill), while at the same time being able to function quasi-experimentally. Over time, this allowed them to adjust both to situations of collective movement and protest and to more stable conditions, as well as pragmatically to accommodate multi-unionism. Moreover, it is important that the model requires only a small initial organizational investment, allowing even a few workers to take the initiative to set up their representation by calling for general elections and asking the unions to legitimate the results.

Second, insofar as they represent both workers and unions, Italian councils are a borderline case, providing for something more than single-channel and something less than dual-channel representation. In other words, Italian councils give voice to all employees while enabling the unions to maintain ultimate control over workplace activities. This is why the councils never replaced the unions, and why they are generally perceived by the workers as the nearby "internal" union.²⁴ And this is also why the councils did not turn into company unions either. In fact, one unexpected consequence of Italian multiunionism might have been to prevent collusion between councils and employers at the expense of workers or unions.

Third, that councils' functions remained largely unspecified added flexibility and adaptability to the system. As a consequence, councils became, rather than a tool dedicated to specific and circumscribed purposes, a permanent opportunity to be used by the parties, continuously available for information disclosure, consultation, or negotiation as required by changing circumstances. In

24. But it is also true that, because of multiunionism, councils only rarely acted openly on behalf of the unions in recruiting members. Proselytism and membership campaigns are usually not organized by the councils, but by the unions working through their rank-and-file workplace leaders—who in most cases happen also to be elected councillors (Regalia 1984).

fact, the Italian experience is likely to show that, once councils have been legally introduced with a minimum of legitimation from workers and unions, their success depends on both sides seizing a few crucial issues to develop and work out, so that a learning process about the mutual advantages of continuous interaction between the parties may begin.

In conclusion, the Italian case may be seen as an extraordinary example of the possible virtues of informality and soft regulation in the field of workplace industrial relations. At the same time, however, the costs of the system must also be considered in terms of blurring boundaries between councils' and unions' respective powers and prerogatives, of procedural uncertainty, and of unpredictability in the parties' behavior. In fact, such costs have been growing in the last decade for all actors involved—most perhaps for the unions because of their increasing need to control their workplace organizations in a period characterized by new and “cooperative” decentralization of industrial relations, in an environment of renewed competition among union confederations.

A recent protocol agreement, signed in March 1991 by the three union confederations in a joint effort to reform workplace representation—the latest of many previously unsuccessful attempts—confirms this uneasiness. The project, while slightly changing the name of the councils to “unified union representations” (*rappresentanze sindacali unitarie* [RSUs]), preserves the dual nature of the representative bodies. However, while elections continue to be open to all workers, they are to be on the basis of lists of candidates presented by the union confederations or other groups as long as they are recognized as independent unions and can show the support of at least 5 percent of the workers eligible to vote; also, the council is to be considered a union institution. All council members are to be elected through secret ballot; however, while 67 percent of the seats will be assigned to the competing organizations in proportion to their obtained votes, the remaining 33 percent will be equally divided among the unions affiliated to the CGIL, CISL, and UIL, so as to guarantee minimum representation of each confederation. Moreover, for the first time an attempt has been made to define more clearly the powers, prerogatives, and functions of internal unions with respect to external unions. The agreement tries to consolidate the dual nature of workplace representation, offer a general solution to the question of how to accommodate a more fragmented and competitive multiunionism, and reduce the system's functional uncertainty.

Implementation of the agreement appears to have met with widespread resistance. Many observers are more and more persuaded that it is not possible to reform the Italian system of workplace representation without some kind of further, although preferably “soft,” legislative support reducing the range and complexity of voluntary decisions: support that might take the form either of a legislated minimal definition of the councils' structure and operation or of some kind of legal facilitation of industrial democracy.

8.5 Postscript

This presentation and discussion of the Italian experience was completed by the end of 1992. But, in a period of steady, continuous transformation such as the one Italian politics and society are facing in the early 1990s, a brief updating of the story already looks appropriate at the beginning of 1994.

In July 1993 a fundamental tripartite national agreement between the major union confederations, the employers' associations, and the government was signed, which explicitly and formally reorganized the general framework for wage determination and collective bargaining. The agreement is the outcome of two years' hot negotiation and was submitted to the workers' approval through a nationwide ballot campaign. On the one hand, it introduces a kind of soft income policy and, on the other, defines for the first time the competences, subjects, actors, and timing of a two-level collective bargaining system where a backbone of industrywide agreements is supplemented by the substance of company/plant-level negotiation on nationally specified issues.

Because of the latter feature, a better definition and organization of workplace-based representative institutions was required to give more certainty and reliability to collective bargaining at the plant or company level. A study committee of independent experts was therefore appointed by the Ministry of Labor and in October 1993 finally produced a draft legislative project on worker representation in workplaces and on union representativity in general.

The proposal is a legally based works councils system whose members are *all (and exclusively)* elected by the workers by secret ballot on the basis of lists of candidates presented by the union confederations or other groups that can show minimum support from workers eligible to vote, and whose *collective bargaining* as well as representative and consultative (and possibly co-determination) *functions* are to be recognized, although only *within the limits set by industry agreements* and in accordance with the external unions. It is also suggested that, at least during a transition period, collective bargaining be performed by a negotiating team, one-third of whose members are directly appointed by the unions, proportionately to their electoral share, to safeguard the voice and the role of the unions; the requirement of a large and qualified majority for the approval of company or plant agreements (without which a ballot is required) should help ensure decisions that can be effectively implemented.

Up to now the proposal, which has not yet been formally presented or discussed, has been informally greeted with concern by the interested organizations—especially by the employers' associations, which want a stronger role for the unions and seem to prefer softer arrangements that are not legally binding. As an indirect outcome, in December 1993 a national collective agreement on the whole matter was finally, and rather quickly, signed by the three union confederations and the major employers' associations, through which the

union protocol agreement of March 1991 on the introduction of the RSU (see above) received substantial legitimation by both parties.

Thus, after a 30-year period of informality since the last collective agreement on the *commissioni interne* in 1966, the workplace representation system is again regulated by collective agreement. On the one side, the devised solution conforms to the practice of recent decades, as the dual nature of the representative bodies has been preserved, as already discussed; but on the other hand, the system appears to be a little less informal and uncertain than in the recent past because of the employer contractual recognition of the representative system and of its functions.

However, this does not necessarily mean that the matter has been settled. On the contrary, new demands for a clearer and more universal arrangement, legally based, which may give better voice to all occupational categories are spreading. And it is very likely that the story will soon continue with a new chapter.

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