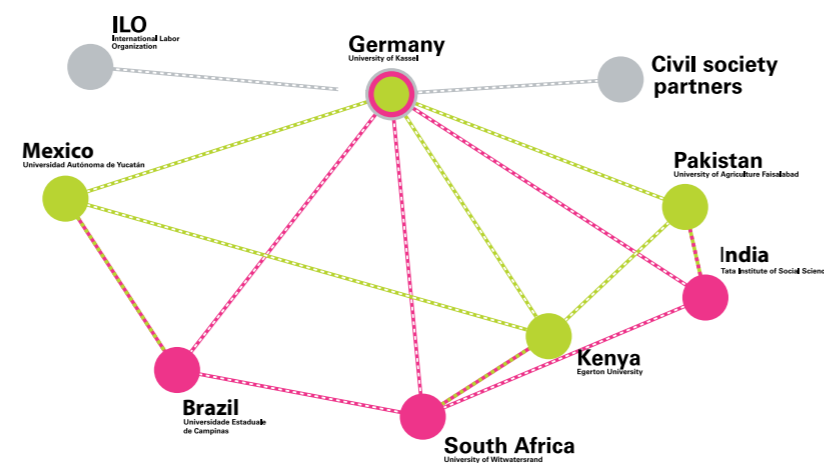


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**Together? On the not-so-easy
relationship between Italian labour organisations
and migrant domestic workers' groups**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between migrant leaders and labour rights activists starting with the acknowledgment that this is often a source of frustration for all subjects involved. The collaboration between organisations of migrants and those of workers is not always smooth and truly collaborative, yet foreign workers have an increasing importance in the negotiation of better labour rights in Europe. The topic is discussed by taking the case of migrant domestic labour in Italy and the experience of Italian and Filipino organisation leaders who campaign for better rights in this sector. The discussion will be developed by bringing together the perspectives of three key actors in the field: trade unions, Christian labour organisations, and Filipino women's groups. Through the analysis of in-depth interviews with women representatives of these organisations, impediments in the collaborations among them will be discussed, including difficulties in identifying an egalitarian method for pursuing common goals *together*, lack of 'trust' in the good-will of labour organisations from the side of migrants, and finally, the limits of what will be called 'bridge-persons', i.e. trade unionists with migrant backgrounds who are expected to facilitate the connection between the two groups.

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1. Overview

On the first of March 2010, in several Italian cities, many migrant workers decided not to work. They took to the streets and staged peaceful demonstrations demanding better labour rights (Vespo, 2010). For this first “migrants' strike”, as the newspapers called it, a variety of social actors joined forces to advocate the rights of foreign people to equal treatment at the workplace, to protest against racism and xenophobia. Above all, with the slogan “24 hours without us”, the purpose of this symbolic strike was to point to Western societies' fundamental need of migrant labour. Without their presence not only factories, restaurants and shops, but also families with children, hospitals and nursing homes would lose their essential day-by-day work-force, as it had already happened in the United States on the first of May 2006 when many migrants, mostly Latinos, stopped working and joined the rallies (Archibold, 2006).

This day also marked a significant step in the on-going relationship between workers' and migrants' organisations as an important opportunity of collaboration between the two. However, after the initial enthusiasm, several problems arose in this joint collaboration. At the end of weeks, if not months, of preparation marked by disagreements and misunderstandings, Italian trade unions decided not to 'officially' support the initiative, to the disappointment of many individual migrant workers (Battistini, 2010; Gubbini, 2010).

The difficulties encountered on the occasion of this first of March confirmed a general incapacity of these groups to work well together and to coordinate common actions, especially regarding labour issues. Thus the “24 hours without us” campaign is just an example which demonstrates the need for further investigation into the relationship which exists between labour organisations and migrants' groups. What are its features, its weak and strong points? It became clear that a greater understanding was needed not only of the representations of their counterparts circulating among people belonging to these two kinds of organisations but also of the way these affect possible collaborations.

This paper looks at what are the impediments obstructing a truly constructive and collaborative relationship between the migrants' movement and workers' organisations. In so doing, it contends that these obstacles are mainly concerned with: difficulties in identifying an egalitarian method for pursuing *together*

common goals; lack of 'trust' of the good-will of labour organisations from the side of migrants; and, finally, the limits of what I call 'bridge-persons', i.e. trade unionists of a migrant background who are expected to facilitate the connection between the two groups. In consequence, the paper emphasises migrant workers' agency as members of their host country's civil society. Their relationship with labour organisations is seen as embedded in the variety of interventions which foreigners have made in Europe towards the improvement of their social and political rights (Pojmann, 2008).

The paper focuses on the issue of migrant domestic work and in particular of Filipino women employed in this sector in Italy. This is so for a number of reasons. First of all, paid domestic work represents one of the sectors where foreigners, men and women, have predominantly found employment in the country. Migrants today represent 78.3% of the people regularly employed in the whole domestic work sector (Caritas/Migrantes, 2011). Secondly, the informality of the employment, its high levels of exploitation and precarious working conditions, together with the highly gendered and ethicized features of its fundamental tasks (Marchetti & Scrinzi, 2011), have given rise to a very interesting socio-political dynamism which sees paid domestic labour at the centre of the activity of several migrant groups (Schwenken, 2003). Moreover, domestic work is traditionally a sector that has been very relevant to women's political mobilisation in the Italian context (Andall, 2000; Repetto, 2004). Italian women first and migrants later have claimed better rights for their cleaning and caring jobs through the emphasis, in many cases, on the essential role of women inside the household and society.

In looking at this issue, this paper combines the perspectives of three different actors, in an attempt to construct a fictive dialogue among them. On one side there are the Christian labour organisations for domestic workers ACLI-COLF¹ and FEDERCOLF. These were among the first groups in Italy to acknowledge the need for new policies concerning not only gender but also ethnic equality among workers (Andall, 2000). They were thus among the first to directly enter in relation with migrants' groups. Secondly, there are two Filipino women's organisations,

¹ ACLI (Associazioni Cristiane Lavoratori Italiani) can be defined as an umbrella association for Christian workers' groups. Founded in 1944, the aim of ACLI was to contrast the increasing predominance of Communist organisations, such as CGIL, in labour issues. For the same reason, the "colf" (acronym for "family collaborator") section was founded soon after, in 1945.

Pinoy Women's Association (PWA) and *Filipino Women Workers United (FWWU)*, which have been chosen for their relevance in the history of community building among Filipino women in Italy. Finally, this paper will also take into account the perspective of the two major Italian trade unions *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL)*, historically affiliated to the Italian communist party, and *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati e Lavoratori (CISL)* which is the catholic workers' union.²

After the illustration of the different strategies of Italian labour organisations concerning migration and the outline of the Filipino groups' general activities, a discussion is started based on interview material. This material was collected during fieldwork conducted in Rome in the spring of 2010 within an international research project coordinated by the International Centre for Development and Decent Work of the University of Kassel. During this fieldwork, I had the opportunity to interview in-depth seven women belonging to all the above mentioned Italian and migrant groups and to conduct participant observation in the Filipino migrant community of Rome, a community to which I am still strongly connected.

² All names of interviewees are pseudonyms. The names of the two Filipino organisations are also fictional.

2. Labour organisations and migration

In the last decade, a lively academic debate has centred around the issue of migration and labour organisations (Penninx & Roosblad, 2000; Wets, 2000). This has been shown to be very important: as Miguel Martínez Lucio and Robert Perret (2009) argue, migration puts under threat the very identity of these organisations, asking them to redefine their purposes to include foreign workers' issues. This issue also requires them to formulate specific anti-discrimination policies – just as the issue of gender had done some time before (Martens & Mitter, 1994; Colgan & Ledwith, 2002) – which are needed not only to advocate an equal opportunity of employment in the labour market (Watts, 2002; Verbeek & Penninx, 2009), but also to overcome an often lamented colour-blindness within the labour organisations themselves (Lucio & Perret, 2009). In all these matters, scholars agree that it is extremely important to consider the regional differences concerning, simultaneously, the characteristics of the predominant migrant population, the cultural context in which they arrive and the tradition of the organisations there established (Penninx & Roosblad, 2000, p. 200).

With the purpose of an intra-European comparison, Rinus Penninx and Judith Roosblad have organised this complex research topic into three main questions (2000, pp. 4-11). These correspond, in their view, to the 'dilemmas' that trade unions have historically faced in relation to foreign labour forces. In this paragraph I briefly illustrate the most significant examples of how Italian trade unions and Christian labour organisations have faced these dilemmas in recent times, with particular reference to the domestic work sector.

The first dilemma points to the backbone of the relation between labour organisations and migration by asking if labour organisations have to accept, or even encourage, the employment of foreigner workers. It is true indeed that the arrival of cheap labour from outside might endanger the position of national workers and lower the level of working rights in the country. In Italy, as early as in the 1970s, some upper-class families started to employ women from the Philippines, Cape Verde, and Eritrea, for service jobs that, until a few years before, women from poorer Italian regions coming to big cities of the centre-north used to take (Grasso, 1997; Andall, 2000; Marchetti, 2011). At that time, for GCIL, CISL, ACLI-COLF and FEDERCOLF it did not seem to have been an issue whether to accept this change or not.

Yet, although in a different form, this question is today newly relevant as labour organisations have to position themselves regarding governments' policies on labour migration. Under Italian migration law, for example, there has always been a rigid connection between the possession of a labour contract and the entitlement to a residence permit. CGIL has a significantly different position from the other labour organisations in this respect, in particular in relation to the use of *quotas* and on-call labour contracts. This system has been harshly criticised by CGIL for limiting migrants' freedom of movement and for making it more difficult for them to enter and stay in Italy in a regular way. Other organisations instead welcomed the new requirements as a useful instrument to achieve a more orderly organisation of migrants' arrivals (Università di Venezia, 2003).

Once migrant workers are actually employed in the national labour market, a second dilemma arises: what kind of membership can migrant workers have in the national labour organisations? Are they going to be homogenised with national workers, or should instead separate organisations be established only for their interests? In this respect, strong similarities exist between CGIL, CISL, ACLI-COLF and FEDERCOLF. All of them put great emphasis on increasing the number of migrants among their members and, at the same time, among their operators. While I will more extensively discuss the issue of migrant-unionists in the fourth paragraph, let me here dedicate a few words to the strategies used by these organisations in reaching out to migrant workers as new members.

This has been mainly done through welfare agencies (*patronati*) run by the labour organisations themselves, such as INCA-CGIL, INAS-CISL and Mondo-COLF (run by ACLI-COLF) which offer various services for the migrant population. Given the difficulty in handling the bureaucratic procedures associated with things like on-call recruitment contracts or the application for a residence permit, these welfare agencies have become essential reference points for migrant domestic workers encouraged to become new members.

For what concerns the inclusion of migrants in the organisation structure, Italian labour organisations have adopted different strategies. CGIL, for example, has opened Immigration Offices in every of its 134 Chambers of Labour and a national coordination board for migrant operators (*Coordinamento Immigrati*), in the attempt to distinguish the activities for migrants from those for Italians, and nevertheless keep them together within the same trade union. ACLI-COLF,

instead, tries to avoid the differentiation between Italian and migrant service receivers. It actually emphasises the connection between the two, by saying that the amelioration of migrant domestic workers' conditions will improve the situation of Italians as well, a connection which is manifest in the case of the members of those households where migrant domestic workers are employed. CISL on the other hand, in 1991, decided to create a separate trade union called *Associazione Nazionale Oltre le Frontiere* (ANOLF) which is specifically dedicated to protect the rights of migrant workers.

Finally, we come to the third dilemma: once migrants are included in the strategies of the labour organisations, how should they be treated? In other words, should the organisations stand on the side of the foreigner workers, demanding a different treatment for them at the workplace? This has been called the 'equal-versus-different-dilemma' and is considered the most insidious one. In order to circumvent this problem, in the more recent national agreements CGIL went in the direction of granting foreign workers their social, cultural and religious rights, understanding them however not as individual rights but rather as pre-conditions for the possibility to carry out one's job.

In conclusion, following on the existing scholarly debate, I have provided a quick overview of the different ways in which migration is relevant to Italian labour organisations. However this debate, in my view, fails to question how labour organisations relate not simply to individual workers but to the more or less informal groups which organise the social and political activities of these same workers. It is this question that this paper will try to answer in the following pages, after having first briefly described the characteristics of some members of these migrant groups.

3. Filipino migrant domestic workers and activist groups

Filipino migrants have occupied a special and highly visible role in the Italian domestic sector from the very beginning. As early as the 1970s indeed, thanks to the intermediation of Roman Catholic missions, the first Filipinas started to arrive in Italy to work in rich households (Grasso, 1997). They are today one of the oldest³ and biggest foreign communities in Italy, numbering 134,154 presences (Caritas/Migrantes, 2011). Seventy-nine percent of them are employed in household services, covering 10.9% of the regular workers, Italians as well as migrants, of the whole sector (ibid.). This over-representation of Filipinas in the sector is probably due to the strong feminisation and dynamism of this national group of which 72% are women with a very high level of labour participation (87%) (ISTAT, 2009a).

Filipino women's community life in Italy and particularly in the city of Rome has been at the centre of an international academic debate in recent years (Anderson, 2000; Parreñas, 2001; Magat, 2003). These scholars have carried out important work in trying to analyse how the migratory condition and the specific labour experience of domestic work affect the social life of Filipino migrants, at the individual and collective level. Rachel Parreñas, for example, has looked at the Filipino community in Rome, demonstrating the relevance of the circulation, within this group, of certain images and representations of the role of Filipinas in the Italian society. Parreñas interprets a number of them (e.g. 'rhetoric of the family' and 'contradictory class mobility') as important tools for those 'tactics' which allow them to negotiate relatively better positions in the relationship with employers and the host society as a whole. In some of my previous work, I have explored the relationship between Filipina domestic workers and their Italian female employers. There I pointed out how the scarcity of citizenship rights afforded to migrant domestic workers explains their display of emotions as 'sacrificing mothers' and their dependent attitude towards their female employers. This is also the consequence of a strong physical and psychological distress to which Filipino migrant domestic workers expose themselves in order

³ The Italian Statistical Institute (ISTAT) estimates that 56% of the Filipinos/as in Italy have resided there for more than 10 years (ISTAT, 2009b).

to provide emotional and financial support to their family back home. It is in this light that I thus demonstrated the importance of the struggle for better rights which Filipino organisations carry on in Italy and other European countries (Marchetti, 2006).

The Filipino groups *Pinoy Women's Association* (PWA) and *Filipino Women Workers United* (FWWU) are among the protagonists of the social life of Filipino migrants. These groups are representative of the history of the Filipino community in Italy and, considering the overlap between the category of 'migrant' and that of 'worker' in the Italian migratory system, also of the struggle for better rights of Filipino migrant workers.

PWA and FWWU were founded in the 1990s by some Filipino women who wanted to support their co-nationals employed by Italian households. They were among the first to organise themselves against the psychological and social distress that often accompanies their migratory experience. Thus, labour rights have become, *de facto*, a priority for both groups since most of their members have come to Italy as domestic workers. These Filipino migrants' groups have had a fundamental role, in the last decades, in sustaining domestic workers in their process of empowerment and in acquiring the skills to claim the protection of labour rights.

Both groups strive for the most comprehensive possible approach to their co-nationals' experience in Italy, and therefore try to keep together different levels of action. These go from the defence of the rights of families and children to the prevention of abuse at the workplace. PWA organises various activities with domestic workers, such as group awareness-raising discussions, financial literacy and language courses. All its activities focus on the psycho-social well-being of their members and their cultural and economic integration into Italian society. In recent years, FWWU has given more attention to the difficulties of the second generation of Filipinos/as in Italy, children of domestic workers who often continue with their parents' profession. In the view of both groups, the search for a (good) job and the resolution of work-related problems constitute an important part of the overall well-being of migrant workers. For this reason both organisations are occupied with intermediation for the first employment and counselling in case of troubles with Italian employers.

FWWU and PWA are good examples of the many migrants' grass-root organisations which are present in Italy today. They form part of a kaleidoscopic universe of small and big groups, variously organised and often with very different purposes, whose number increases year by year (Amato, 2008). The question is, however, how easy is it for migrant groups to get along with the Italian non-profit sector? In the case of the relationship with Italian women's groups, several difficulties have emerged in the past years (Pojmann, 2006, 2007). These troubles were principally linked to the colour-blindness of the Italian feminist movement which, while stressing the importance of gender equality, was unlikely to acknowledge ethnicity and 'race' based discriminations taking place not only in society at large, but also within the women's movement itself. However, in the last years a general improvement has taken place. Wendy Pojmann sees the UN World Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995 as the event which triggered women's groups in Italy to work in a more collaborative and egalitarian manner towards migrants. The experimentations which followed have seen the foundation of some 'mixed' groups, made up of Italian and migrant women together and, in general, a bigger enthusiasm for pursuing alliances among women's groups of different kinds, as in the case of groups which have maintained their 'mono-ethnic' character such as FWWU and PWA (Andall, 2000; Merrill, 2006). In general, although these experiences have not always been successful, one can definitively say that since the end of the 1990s a new emphasis has been given to issues of ethnicity and migration by most women's initiatives in major Italian cities. It is interesting thus to see if the relationship between migrants' and labourers' organisations fared as well.

4. “Doing something together”

I was struck by the fact that all interviewees - from migrant groups, trade unions and Christian organisations - told me they wished “to do something together, one day”. As I will show, with this expression they referred to their hope to organise events, campaigns and actions *equally* promoted by migrant and non-migrant groups, sharing not only the organisational tasks but also the strategy and the political horizons in which the action is contextualised. This expression also refers to the frustration felt in not having been able in the past to establish common strategies in pursuing what they had thought to be common goals, such as campaigning for labour rights. Until now, all these organisations seem to have carried out their struggles and campaigns along parallel lines, watching each other closely but without actually going any further, despite some sort of desire for collaboration. Let us see now some concrete example of these difficulties.

On the side of labour organisations, the problem is usually ascribed to the difficulty in achieving the complete involvement of migrant groups' in the activities of their organisations. An example of this perspective is offered by Rosanna De Maria, from the head office of FEDERCOLF in Rome. During the interview I conducted with her she strongly complained that Filipinas, in particular, are very reluctant to join the socio-cultural activities that FEDERCOLF offers. She said:

They never come. They are not interested in what we do. Maybe they come to sing mass... once in a while. But they don't really take part in our activities. They have their own things. They are busy with their own stuff.

De Maria made use here of a very common representation of Filipino domestic workers. They are generally portrayed as an autonomous group with a strong internal cohesion. This image is often used in a negative sense, as if this attitude of Filipino migrants is a reason for isolation and distance from other migrant and non-migrant organisations.

The same representation was even used by the Filipino Leyla Gonzalo, a woman working for ACLI-COLF in a northern Italian town. With reference to the same idea that her co-nationals prefer to 'stay among themselves', she complained about the difficulty to involve them in the activities offered by ACLI-COLF at the local level. She lamented that it is generally very hard to approach Filipino domestic workers because they would immediately reply that they do not have enough

spare time to get involved in other activities. It seems indeed that they prefer to spend their limited amount of free time among their co-nationals who often gather for church related activities.

A different perspective was offered by Laura Catanzaro from the head office of CGIL in Rome. In her view, there are a number of instances in which migrants' groups actively seek the collaboration of trade unions, giving rise to interesting forms of collaboration. One example from our conversation:

SM: How often do migrant women's groups enter in contact with you wanting to do things together?

LC: Often. Not really at the national level, but at the local one, yes. For example our office in the South of Rome regularly organises events together with local groups of migrant women. For example they have worked on the issue of health and reproduction. [...] Which is not actually a labour issue... but it is also important. Or the issue of care. Which, I mean, concerns everyone.

Catanzaro further explained that issues such as care and reproductive health create an important connection between migrant domestic workers and the women members of the households they are working in. This is due, in her understanding, to the fact that if Italian women could better combine their jobs with the care for their families, this would improve the conditions of migrant domestic workers as well. She sees a possible alliance among the different groups based on the struggle against the powerless position of women in Italian society and the surviving inequalities in the gendered division of care and domestic tasks, as far as these have had repercussions on the representation of migrant domestic workers as well.

However, in Laura Catanzaro's words one can also read the fact that collaboration between trade unions and migrants' groups is not really happening at the level of labour issues in a strict sense. In fact, all of the instances of collaboration she talked about during the interview present two main limitations: first, they are mainly relegated to the local level of the city or the province; second, they do not address issues such as workers' rights, which are at the core of both groups' goals, but are rather concerned with other issues such as health, reproductive rights, care, etc.

It is important to underline that the frustration most interviewees expressed about the difficulty of "doing something together" does not forcefully imply that they do not eventually meet and collaborate on some occasions. It rather expresses their wish to find a way to work together on *labour* issues, in a way in

which all groups are equally engaging. It would be important that they all consider this collaboration as an essential part of their mission and of their political perspective. In other words, “doing something together” requires each subject to enter in a relation of reciprocity with the others and to develop a truly common terrain of analysis, action and policy making.

Some of the interviewees also expressed the wish that this new perspective should descend from a consistent decision of the labour organisations themselves instead of being only based on the good will of some individual operators as it is presently the case. More often than not, these are operators of a migrant background who are prone to take the role of bridge-person between the different actors in this arena. Yet, this role carries some limitations, which will be discussed in the next paragraph.

5. Migrant operators as 'bridge-persons'

"I was the bridge": that is the way in which Mercedes Flores, working at the head office of CISL, answers my question about the past relationships between her trade union and migrants' groups. If we go back in time, she says, then *she*, as the first migrant woman employed at CISL, was the actual connection between these two worlds. Her role was truly pioneering and she had thus to juggle her double-presence, inside CISL and inside her Latino-American community. Flores was indeed, and still is, an active member in various migrant women's groups in the city of Rome.

Today, in the major labour organisations, migrants are employed at all levels, from the local offices to the management. As Maurizio Ambrosini (2000) demonstrated, a significant number of these migrant operators are people who arrived during the 1980s or 1990s from Latin-America and East Africa and, thanks to their education and previous professional experience, found employment in Italian trade unions. These persons, however, did not belong to the groups which were predominant at that time in Italy in terms of quantitative presence. Only more recently have some women from Eastern Europe or the Philippines been employed by labour organisations, especially at the help-desks for the domestic sector, where these two groups are over-represented.

However, it is important to notice that migrant operators tend to resist easy representations which would have them in charge of speaking on behalf of migrant workers within their labour organisation. For instance, during an internal training for CGIL migrant operators, one of them said:

We are here to train ourselves not as representatives of migrants, but as CGIL trade unionists. (IRES, 2006, p.49).

Here is clearly expressed the desire that migrant operators be judged by the same standards as other operators, putting emphasis on the fact that they represent the interests of *all* the workers, migrants or not, in Italy.

What makes the issue more complicated is the fact that the 'bridging' role of these operators is not always successful. As an example one can think of the difficulty I previously cited of Leyla Gonzalo in bringing people from her own community into her ACLI-COLF club. One can understand this to be a reason of frustration for women like her and other operators of a migrant background.

While they made the effort to integrate themselves in traditionally Italian organisations, they still see their co-nationals as reluctant to do the same, actually preferring 'mono-ethnic' type of activities.

Moreover, migrant activists do not always seem to view the function of these people in a good light. In the opinion of the Filipino activists I interviewed, only on rare occasions were migrant operators really able to 'connect' their organisations with migrant communities. Myrna Corrados from PWA, for example, says:

[Trade unions] also have migrants in their staff... But are these migrants in their staff in contact with their community? This is my question! [...] I don't receive any information from them! [...] 'Cause I'm not part of them... it's a closed circle.

Corrados' statement echoes a widespread view of migrant operators as token-persons that labour organisations include in their staff only to project a more 'ethnically inclusive' image. They are thus not seen as *really* representative of migrants' voices. What happens, in the view of Corrados and others, is actually the opposite: labour organisations become even more distant from migrants' communities, precisely in the moment in which they publicly pretend to open up towards them.

Considered as representative of migrants within their labour organisation, but often actually 'abandoned' by their co-nationals, the position of migrant operators is thus not an easy one. However, one needs to ask what actually is the meaning of 'representation' that interviewees talk about. In general, migrant activists would say that it is important that migrant operators are able to speak on behalf of 'their community', i.e. the ensemble of their co-nationals, more or less formally organised. In other words, migrant activists promote the idea that they, as community leaders, are those who better represent the interests of a national group.

In my opinion the problem is that such a view holds a possible reason for misunderstanding between labour organisations and migrant activists. Labour organisations do apparently not share the idea that 'communities', i.e. migrant organisations, are the best candidates to speak on behalf of a national group. To illustrate this, I just refer to an interesting quote from the interview with Renata Marino, from the coordination office of ACLI-COLF. During the interview, she said:

You cannot know if these leaders are 'really' representatives of their communities. In my experience they are usually first generation migrants who, once they got a certain status, decided to fund an organisation of which they became automatically the head representatives. They are kind of self-proclaimed.

This statement contains a strong scepticism of the *procedure* which allows certain migrants to be considered as representative of a national group. It reflects a *widespread* diffidence towards the acquisition of more representative power for migrant activists among labour organisations. Issues of diffidence and distrust, from both sides of the relationship, are further discussed in the next paragraph.

6. A matter of trust

In the view of most interviewees, the difficulties and obstacles pertaining to the relationship between labour and migrant organisations fundamentally revolve around a question of 'trust'. Migrants and labour organisations seem to not confide enough in their counterparts as valid, loyal, competent subjects. This sentiment is further reinforced by a certain degree of suspicion which typically characterises inter-cultural encounters (Pratt, 1992). Some representations associated with this sentiment are briefly analysed in this concluding part of the paper.

During the interview with Laura Catanzaro from CGIL, the question of the lack of trust from the side of migrants came to the fore. She ascribed the problem to the negative image of trade unions that migrants have from their home countries and which they bring with them to Italy. She explained:

You also have to consider that often these workers come from countries in which trade unions are not workers' unions. [...] In those countries where there is not real democracy, trade unions are pro-government organisations... They [migrants] need to get to know trade unions. In some cases, they might think that it's like in their country, then they have feelings of mistrust. Because of their experience back home. Trade unions need to be able to 'win' their trust. They need to show interest, act, achieve results.

From her professional experience at the international level, Catanzaro gained the impression of trade unions in other parts of the world as having more the purpose of *controlling* workers than defending their rights. This would explain, in her view, why migrant workers are reluctant to join the activities of labour organisations in Italy as well. This quotes thus shows an interesting crossing-over of a set of representations which come from a reciprocal non-acknowledgement of the others' capability to work well together and support each other. It is indeed true that, as Catanzaro said, trade unions have to make great efforts in convincing migrant workers of their reliability, but from the point of view of migrant activists this lack of trust is explained by other reasons.

First of all, Italian labour organisations are seen as unable to fully protect workers' rights, especially in the case of migrants. Doris Loya from FWWU links this belief to the tendency to justify the worsening of labour conditions for domestic workers and the increasing unemployment among them by "taking the excuse of the general economic crisis", which seems to be widespread among operators in her view. The idea that these operators are actually not able to provide any concrete

answer to the workers' problems is also shared by the other Filipino activist I interviewed. Myrna Corrados (PWA) said that Italian labour organisations are often more interested in “acting at the political level”, than in defending migrant workers' in their everyday problems. She said, for instance:

If you do this job, you need to have the combination of both technical and political [expertise]. My distrust [in them] is because they are so political... rather than technical! You see them at rallies, on television... They are very good at promoting their work..

To this very public openness towards migrants' problems corresponds, in her view, a scarce availability in case of *real* need. Empathising with a possible domestic worker searching for support, she said:

Migrants cannot have access to their information. If you go on the website of CGIL it is so unfriendly. If I'm a domestic helper... what is that?! It took me ten minutes to find the section about 'immigration' and then I phoned them and no one picked up the phone!

Examples such as this add to the bad reputation of Italian labour organisations as those who actually just want to “exploit” migrants, “earning” from their membership without giving much in exchange. They are said not to take specific actions for the protection of migrants' rights, at the general level and in individual cases.

People like Laura Catanzaro (CGIL) would say that such a portrait of trade unions comes, once again, from a false image which migrants often have of labour organisations. She said:

Often people tend to 'simplify' what trade unions are. The trade union can negotiate about some things, but it is not The Solver! [...] Of course migrants have to tell the unions what their needs are, but often there is an exaggerated expectation that all the problems will be solved.

What is interesting here is that the disappointment of migrants' expectations sparks a chain of bad representations which are created and circulated among the migrant group. For instance, the Filipino activists I interviewed reported the existence of very bad rumours about lawyers and operators working for the Italian labour organisations. They are said to not really care about defending migrant domestic workers and to be, ultimately, always on the side of Italian employers, asking domestic workers to accept very disadvantageous compromises. Various images which relate to this belief reinforce the idea that

Italians are always ready to form alliances among themselves, not really caring about the rights of foreigners.

Of course this image of Italians – also of those who proclaim to defend migrant workers – as only able to 'exploit' and 'cheat' foreigners corresponds to a discourse which is widespread in migrant circles. The bad image derives from the configuration of Italian migration law that connects the residence permit to the possession of a labour contract. When one loses her job, there is no possibility to remain in the country. Also for people who have worked several years in Italy, as is the case for many domestic workers, it is very difficult to gain the right to a stable permit and to citizenship status. This has also some financial repercussions, since, in the view of many of the Filipinos I spoke with, very little of the taxes and pension contributions to the Italian state that migrants pay every month returns to them. Instead they feel compelled to go back to their countries as soon as they can no longer work, rather than settle down and be “rewarded for their years of work”, as they say. In the case of domestic workers, this feeling is reinforced by the general impression that the tasks they accomplish in Italian households go largely unacknowledged; notwithstanding the precious contribution they bring to the host society by taking on such an important, yet disregarded social function.

7. Conclusion

The paper has outlined a number of reasons, especially at the level of the production of representations, which explain the concrete difficulties encountered when labour and migrant organisations attempt to work together. After a first illustration of the main features of Italian labour organisations and Filipino women's migrant groups, three major interrelated impediments from getting along together have been pointed out.

The first seems to be their difficulties in elaborating a method for working together on common goals, through a practice based on equal roles and reciprocal appreciation. From this derives the fact that, although both kinds of organisations are working towards the goal of labour rights for migrants, a good strategy for pursuing them *together* is still to be found. Furthermore although some groups have jointly organised some socio-cultural events, past occasions of collaboration seem to have been relegated to some relatively marginal issues. In fact, they usually took place at the local level and only thanks to the good will of some individual operators who made the connection between the two worlds possible.

It is exactly around these operators, often of migrant origin themselves that the second series of problems revolves. Although these people are certainly key actors in this process, I demonstrated how their role needs to be reconsidered in the light of the difficulties existing in their relationship with migrant groups. I indicated that from the side of migrant groups and that of labour organisations their potentialities have been overestimated without considering the fact that their function might actually be counterproductive. Their relationships with migrant activists, on the one hand, and with labour organisations on the other appears to be negatively determined by the fact that they are, in some sense, outcast in one group as in the other.

The issue of (lack of) 'trust' is the third and last piece of this scenario. I discussed the need for building a sentiment of 'trust', respect and reciprocity, among migrant domestic workers and the Italian organisations which should defend their labour rights. Once again, cultural and historical reasons appear to be crucial in the encounter between migrant workers and labour organisations. I illustrated how the distrust in labour organisations is sustained by a series of representations

which reflect migrants' feelings of frustration regarding the limits of their socio-economic integration in Italian society as a whole.

It is hoped that this analysis, largely based on original qualitative data, produces some contribution to the debate on labour organisations and migration. The impact of cultural constructions and the creation of shared ideas and representations seem to be most important for the development of concrete alliances between the social actors intervening in the same field. Taking into account the agency dimension of each of them, disagreements, contradictions and paradoxes exist which cannot remain unacknowledged. New studies on this topic would be welcomed, from the perspective of inaugurating new practices and research experiences for a yet to be explored matter of social enquiry in the Italian context.

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