

# **TRADE UNIONS IN NEO-LIBERAL TIMES: DISCOURSE VARIATIONS ON EMERGING IDENTITIES**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on how trade unions are redefining their organisational identity in response to the neoliberal changes that have affected the labour market, mainly as a result of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. Such changes brought about a profound crisis of representation among workers in various sectors. Trade unions have had to redesign their identities to meet new demands from workers. Based on 30 interviews with unionists from one of Italy's major unions, the study identifies four discursive variations and as many potential evolutions in the identity of trade unions. The respective positionings generated by these four discourses for the union and its members are examined. The study also highlights certain contradictions in these discursive variations, which may either encourage a redefinition of the union's strategic objectives or, on the contrary, act as regulating mechanism that hampers change.

## **Key words**

Discourse analysis, organizational identity, neoliberalism, trade unions, qualitative research

## **Introduction**

In the present era trade unions can be considered a special type of organisation with special characteristics and challenges. The values of social participation and interest representation which have marked trade unions' historical identity and social action have long come under pressure from the now consolidated order of neo-liberalism (Meardi, 2018; Lévesque and Murray, 2013).

The way trade unions have reacted to such pressure over time has depended on the differences in history, culture, organisational structure, and leadership that have influenced the various trade union organisations (Arnholtz and Andersen, 2018; Bronfenbrenner and Hickey, 2004). At the same time, such pressure has led to an identity crisis that is closely connected with the present crisis of democracy (and representative democracy in particular) and with the crisis affecting the relationship between individuals, society and work (Bauman and Mauro, 2017). As they try to reorganise themselves to address this new historical context, trade unions are re-building their identity, above all by re-interpreting some key notions, such as democratic representation and their relationship with the employer and the State (Colombo and Regalia, 2016).

In this article a case study is presented with the intent to describe the discursive variations used by the research participants when discussing the identity changes occurring in an Italian union. Such variations show that there are several ways to understand and interpret the principles of democratic representation and work as an opportunity for social exchange and value generation (Hyman, 2001a, 2001b).

### **Identity, democracy and agency in trade union organisations: a discursive approach**

The organisational identity of trade unions has been frequently addressed in scientific debates in recent years. Hyman (2001a) postulates that union identity is a multi-faceted construction, whose main core consists of the values and beliefs of the union relative to social role and positioning, the interests it intends to represent and the power that provides it with influence and action capacity. The 'true' nature of Unionism itself (Hyman, 2001a) is historically determined and might be contested - for example, trade unions may concentrate on wage protection, or instead, promote innovative and supportive services (for example child care support) for workers as a way to strengthen their presence in the fabric of society (Hodder and Edwards,

2015). Elaborating Hyman's theory, Hodder and Edwards (2015) emphasize that union identity lies at the basis of its purposes, ideology and strategies. To investigate the identity of a certain trade union organization one must analyse its inspiring ideologies, as well as its purposes and strategies at a given time in history. Hodder and Edwards (2015) also highlight that the relationship between identity and ideology/purpose/strategy is influenced by and contributes to the way in which internal participation mechanisms are regulated (democracy) and the relationship with external stakeholders, typically employers and the State (agency). The first aspect, democracy, has to do with the union's regulation mechanisms and expresses the degree of influence that the members of a union can exert on strategic processes and organising actions; agency refers to the type of influence that the union intends to exert in the bargaining processes with employers and the State (Thomas, 2017; Hodder and Edwards, 2015). At different times in history and in different contexts, both regulation of participation mechanisms and external agency generate different organisational designs, which in turn determine different identity positionings (Chan et al., 2017). In the present article organizational identity is not understood as ontologically given, but rather as a discursively constructed site of power, discipline, normalization, marginalization and resistance (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Cunliffe, 2014; Ripamonti and Galuppo, 2014; Serrano, 2014). This perspective recognizes how knowledge, institutional structures, language and talk shape realities and regulate what is seen as 'normal' (Taylor And Fairchild, 2020). In terms of organisational identity, this means examining how talk, written texts, artefacts, and broader social, historical, economic and ideological forces shape its purpose and strategies. From this perspective union identity can be regarded as the combination of discourses and discursive practices used by certain subjects or groups to express and legitimise certain ideologies, purposes, strategies and outcomes, with repercussions on the processes of democracy and agency of the union itself.

These discourses reflect a set of values, beliefs, shared understanding, stories and ideologies that aggregate subjects and interests within the union and that influence the actions of union members and the reasons underpinning them (Lévesque and Murray, 2013). We agree with Voss (1996) that the sources of such

narrative resources for trade union organisations include some specific ‘fortifying myths’. These are well-rooted assumptions on society, the market and the relationship between market and labour.

### **Neo-liberalism: Government, workers, employers and trade unions**

Neo-liberalism has emerged strongly in western countries since the 1980’s (Peters, 2001; Rose, 1999; Fotaki and Prasad, 2015) contributing to the creation of a new world order (Dardot and Laval, 2010), characterised by a reduced role of Government, strict fiscal discipline, liberalisation of trade, the elimination of customs barriers, privatization, deregulation and free-movement of capitals (Kazepov and Carbone, 2007; Scacchi et al. 2017). The new world order of neo-liberal globalisation has modified the relations between three main actors – Government, the market and individuals – as well as the way social life, in a broad sense, is regulated (Bansel, 2007). Among these three actors, the market (including that of labour) has assumed a dominant role in all aspects of economic and social life: health, employment, education, and welfare.

As far as the labour market is concerned, the ‘neo-liberal-led global capitalism’ (Neilson, 2015) has laid the basis for increased employment instability and, consequently, lower predictability in professional identity. By challenging job security and job predictability, globalisation has weakened workers’ loyalty to trade unions (Duman, 2014; Sofritti et al., 2019). In many European nations (Lehndorff et al., 2017; Serrano, 2014; Soulsby, Hollinshead, Steger, 2017), including Italy, trade unions have had to face all the challenges connected with the neo-liberal globalization and the ensuing financialization of the economy, such as a profound deindustrialization, job instability, the spread of new forms of individualism and decreasing representation of collective (or social) interests in the representation of social interests (Leonardi, 2017).

These processes have weakened both the workers and trade unions power, while they have strengthened employers: neo-liberalism is associated with reduced protection for workers in the form of Government actions to regulate and modify market outcomes; thus there is a reduced ability for workers to act collectively in defense of their interests (Gall, Hurd and Wilkinson, 2011). In this context, Gall et al. (2011) identified four possible strategies for trade unions to respond to neo-liberalism: 1) agreement and support.

Neo-liberalism and globalization are considered positive developments and thus trade unions and their members can benefit from this scenario, as industries and companies become more competitive; 2) qualified and conditional support – trade unions call for the Government to play a strategic role and provide support and protection (for workers, but also employers and trade unions); 3) social democratic opposition – ‘... where unions believe in the policy and practice of opposition to corporate globalisation and advocate social democracy as an alternative in order to socialise, not to abolish, the capitalist economy (Gall et al., 2011: 9); 4) socialist resistance – in which trade unions believe in and try to organise opposition and resistance to capitalist globalization.

### **Our case study: an Italian union**

The Italian trade union ~~center~~ organization that took part in this study is one of Italy’s largest unions, and among the first to have started a process to restructure and redesign its social role and identity. Since 2010 the union has introduced a series of reforms, including the aggregation of its local branches. This restructuring process was established by the national management with directives given to the local branches.

The need to respond to the new economic and social reality and to the above-mentioned crisis of trade unionism led to an urgent ‘strategic reorganisation’, in which the union was streamlined, and local branches merged. The union decided to rationalize management structures and - following these changes, two local branches in two large cities in Northern Italy were merged in 2013, thus forming an entity with over 130 thousand members, and one of the largest local unions in the country at the time of our study.

In the context described above, the objective of our study was to explore and investigate the discursive strategies that shape organisational changes and union identity. Special attention was devoted to the role of discourse/neo-liberal ideology and the issues of internal democracy and agency with employers and the State.

### **Data collection and analysis**

This case study was both theory driven and data driven. It was theory driven because during the analysis the transcriptions were ‘interviewed’ in relation to particular questions connected to a specific theoretical

framework (the concept of trade union identity and also neoliberal discourses). In reading and analyzing data, the research group was interested in how neoliberal discourses were shaping trade union identity. At the same time the process of reading and analysing data was data driven because the members of the research group were very sensitive to language, which they used to associate some sections of the text an emerging conceptual category.

This study is based on a total of 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with various members of a local trade union branch. There has been a long collaboration between the trade union and the University to which some of the authors of this paper belong to. Over time, various training courses have been organized for union managers and significant relationships have developed with regional management of the union. Within these continuous professional exchanges, the request of intervention was made to university researchers to monitor the integration process of the two local branches who merged in 2013. The request was raised by a regional executive committee concerned about the potentially problematic outcome of the merger. A research group was therefore set up consisting of three senior researchers and two junior researchers who took on the task of monitoring on how the integration process proceeded and its impact on the two local organizations realities.

The participants were chosen according to age, their position in the union and in relation to their attitude towards the merger. The union's regional leaders selected people of different position and all participants were contacted by the regional directorate and proposed to participate in the research.

We chose to interview 10 union delegates (workers elected as representatives from various trade union industries), 10 experts (union employees with administrative positions or working in services offered to citizens) and 10 retired members. The second criterion adopted in recruiting the participants was age. 20 participants were recruited among senior members and 10 among junior workers.

Five people were identified within each group (delegates, employees, retired members) who were well disposed towards the integration process and five people hostile to the merger.

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted by one of the authors of the paper; they were audio-recorded and then anonymised and transcribed verbatim. The study was approved by the

local trade union managers, and it was conducted according to local ethical regulations. All participants gave their written informed consent. The questions to the interviewees concerned the evolution of the union's identity over the past few years. The semi-structured interviews consisted of a series of open questions, organised in five main sections: The nature of unionism today; ongoing changes; resources; and criticalities associated to such changes; and possible suggestions to tackle them. The pretext was the merger process between the two territorial realities, but then the questions focused on the potential development of the union organization. Many questions concerned the future of the union and how it should evolve over time. Some examples of queries are:

"What objectives can support the development of the trade union organization in the next three years?"

"who represents the union today? who are its customers?"

"What major problems does the union organization face today?"

The data was analysed through discourse analysis (DA) (Willig, 2008; Parker 2013) 'which is concerned with how language functions to both constitute individuals and the social domain, and to reproduce or change social practice' (Dick and Cassell, 2004: 59).

Du Gay (1996) defines the discourse "a group of statements that provide a language for talking about a topic and a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge about a topic." (p.43) The text of a discourse represents the ideas that identify a specific group of people and express their cultural anchorage. Discourses also indicate the horizon towards which a group moves and are the premises for defining the collective actions to follow: Discourses "have an ideational function in that they help to construct a certain form of ... social identity and a relational function in terms of how they contribute to social relations between different actors."(Ainsworth and Hardy, C. 2006, p.236.) Discourses are always the premise for constructing specific group identities (Van Dijck, 1997) and shaping relationships with other groups. Discourse change over time and are always embedded in a particular social context. Relatedly DA "focuses on the use of language and how that language use is itself framed in/by the regulatory power of discourses operating at the macro, sociopolitical level" (Pizzorno et al., 2015, p. 198).

The analysis proceeded as follows. A selection of transcripts was open coded by three authors of the papers. Key themes were identified through repeated close readings and review of open codes analysis. This allowed us to produce a coding framework, that we used to conduct (and was updated throughout) the analysis of the remaining transcripts.

DA revealed how discursive objects were constructed during the interviews. As regards the objective of the study, the discursive objects to be identified were the various ways in which the participants expressed and described the identity of the union during a process of organisational change. We examined and compared these utterances with each other and with discourses from the wider neo-liberal repertoire.

After identifying the constructions of the discursive objects, such as views on organizational change and identity, we concentrated on how these discourses positioned the participant involved in the process of change: the workers, the employers and the unions themselves.

The language whether written or spoken, through which discourses are expressed evokes other meanings and other languages (present or past). Parker (2005) argues that, by focusing on these aspects, the analysis can show that language is related with other discourses, which act at an ideological level and convey power hierarchies, thus defining what/who has legitimization, or appropriate behaviours. or, as in our case, what is considered the legitimate union and a justifiable relationship between the enterprise and the union.

## **Results**

In the present section, a selection of examples from the most significant interviews is used to present the four following discourses.

1<sup>st</sup> discourse - The Partnership- allying with management;

2<sup>nd</sup> Discourse – ‘Strategic renewal’ - the union becomes a service company;

3<sup>rd</sup> Discourse – The Opposition - Protecting workers’ jobs;

4<sup>th</sup> Discourse – Looking for new values.

1<sup>st</sup> discourse - The Partnership- allying with management

This discourse epitomizes a relationship between the union and the management that is based on partnership. The assumption is that in today's new market conditions the relationship between trade unions and management (and between the union and the employer) needs to be redefined, as well as the idea of representation. New market and working conditions led trade unions to believe that such rethinking was as indispensable as inevitable. In this discourse, the identity of the union is no longer defined by the classical Italian unionism stereotype of the sixties and seventies in which the employer was regarded as the 'opposite party'. Instead, trade unions are regarded as a powerful balancing tool in the relations between management and workers. Their primary goal is the survival of the enterprise. Consequently, they can act to mobilize all the necessary resources that can contribute to help the enterprise to stay on the market. The participants' narrative revolves around the contrast between the past and the present and embraces the rhetoric of change (and renewal), for which fresh resources are needed. The words used by the participants in this discourse are 'delocalizing', 'economic and financial crisis', 'instability/uncertainty', 'survival of the company', 'partnership with the organisation'. The use of the word 'partner/ship' seems to be especially relevant to our analysis.

'The old notion of the employer merely seen as the "opposite party" must change. We must learn to work as partners with companies and bring our contribution. We must tell our workers that the era of conflict has gone! Employers must perceive us as potential partners in the common struggle against this increasingly profound crisis'.

The use of this term marks a new way to describe relations between workers and management. A partner is someone with whom one builds a relationship, which is based on interconnection and interdependence, but at the same time the word evokes a shared business, shared economic interests. A partnership is built around an economic discourse. The basic idea is that the union can survive if it is able to support the management in the difficult task of facing an increasingly competitive market. The discourse of the partnership with management is a function of the survival not only of the company but also, and above all, of the union itself, or rather, as is the logic of all partnerships, it is a function of the survival of both players: 'we must overcome difficulties together'.

This discourse marks a departure from the traditional, historical mission of trade unions of standing for workers' rights. The positioning of the union as a partner of management 'for the good of the workers' overturns the stigmatized image of an obsolete force that hampers the development of organisational processes, offering, instead, that of an ally committed to help the management in managing corporate processes and pursuing the common goal of surviving market turbulence. This positioning is in contrast with the image of trade unions represented as a drag on the freedom of the entrepreneur. What legitimizes the actions and the identity of trade unions is no longer their fight to protect workers' rights. Their force, power and legitimacy lie, instead, in their ability to support the company's productivity in a strong alliance with corporate management. Therefore, the traditional representation by craft or occupation ('category') with a trade union representative for each specialisation or qualification in any given organisational context is fading away; this model has become unsustainable.

In the discourse of the partnership, the union's knowledge of the workers and their needs becomes a resource for the Human Resources Department. The latter can, at least in part, rely on the union to help them send hard messages to the workers. The union puts certain skills at the company's disposal, acting very much like an external company to which work is outsourced by the company. In extreme cases, the union can even work as a partner of management in redundancy processes, softening up the workers and passing the message that organisational downsizing is a necessary evil if the entire organisation is to survive. This is an extreme position, in sharp contrast with the one expressed in the other discourses presented here.

2<sup>nd</sup> Discourse – 'Strategic renewal' - the union becomes a service company

The second positioning, 'strategic renewal', is exemplified by the union local management as well as in the internal strategy documents and strongly supported by many research participants - where neoliberalism is never questioned. This positioning was evoked by the participants using some of the key terms of the neo-liberal rhetoric, such as: 'responsibility', 'flexibility', 'efficiency', 'independence', 'enterprise', 'client', in such a way, as to imply that the union acted like a commercial company offering its services for sale on the

marketplace (Sacchi et. al., 2017). These terms are used as powerful landmarks in the narrative on trade union action and to justify investments in its new organising model.

Market pressures, the ongoing decline in trade union membership and the risk of a budgetary crisis are some of the elements used to justify the application of neo-liberal logics to the workings of the union. The words and expressions emerging out of this discourse are typically used to describe corporations. Here, instead, they are used to revitalize the union and emphasise its willingness to change, possibly by acting increasingly like a commercial enterprise. The following paragraphs contain a few extracts from the study interviews.

‘We are like a real enterprise. We must offer effective services, have a lean structure, keep up-to-date, be able to keep costs under control and have clear organisational charts, which show what we are and what each of us must do. I’ll give you an example. We’ve worked with a group of young unionists, who’ve been specially trained to support the union in organising matters and in the development of new services, and we managed to set up a cooking school for young job-seekers with disabilities. You see, trade unions today can do much more than protecting jobs: they can create new, value-added jobs, thanks to local services! For the first time, our clients are not only factory workers or state employees, they are people who choose us, our services and skills!’

In this discourse, the union redefines the areas in which it has gained experience (such as services, litigation and mediating between workers and employers) in a neo-liberal perspective, regarding them as potential market segments in which it can offer competitive services and products. While in the past they simply integrated the activity of the union, today these services become a key area of investment, because they provide a source of income: they are paid by the market, they are profitable.

The main assumption is that the union needs to find attractive products that it can sell to the market if it wants to survive in times of crisis. The union must sell its products (or services) according to market rules, like any commercial enterprise; and such products must be ‘effective’, ‘economically advantageous for the customer’, ‘profitable for the seller’, ‘visible on the market’ and ‘competitive’. Above all, the neo-liberal rhetoric emerges strongly in the positioning of union members as ‘client’, who can choose among various

suppliers and whom the union, competing like any other enterprise in a market economy, has to try to win and satisfy. In this discourse, the legitimisation of union action spurs mainly from the ability to meet the needs of individual workers, while the collective interests of workers from the same craft, trade or industry become less important. In so doing, it also redefines its organising model to make it more consistent with neo-liberal ones: it should be flexible, integrated, lean, open, effective and efficient.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Discourse – The Opposition - Protecting workers' jobs

The third discourse is in strong contrast with the previous two. Participants maintained that the legitimacy of the union must come from reaffirming its historical role, that is job and wage protection, which were perceived as even more urgent in times of economic and financial crisis. The discursive practices of this group of unionists tended to reinforce the idea of a union that does not give up its struggle and continues to oppose the management of the factory, or the organisation, in general (Ripamonti and Scaratti, 2015).

‘The union’s task is to protect jobs, for goodness’ sake... They use the excuse of the crisis to cut jobs.... We must stick together and get ready to fight a hard battle... We believe that it is important to go back to offering our services and protection in the shopfloor (...) I’ll give you an example. This was an industrial dispute in electricity (...) The company was a crown jewel in the industry, but it was a family business. After it was passed on to the next generation, the children decided to sell it to a French multinational. Their industrial plan started off full of job cuts. They presented a hideous plan, supposedly to recover competitiveness, and likely to be no more than a bloodbath. Hell, no, you don't do this to us. It’s the same old story, they say they want the good of the company, in the end they screw the workers, that’s what they do.’

The main idea in these quotations is the fundamental necessity to protect the union and the workers from new threats arising from the company management at a time of economic crisis, when the management is even more hostile to the workers and more inclined to reduce workers’ rights and cut jobs. One of the arguments supported by the participants from this discourse was the role of ‘trades’, or occupational categories in mediating between the workers and the employers:

The union is kept alive by the support of single workers who join the organisation based on their belonging to a certain ‘trade’ or occupational category. The union is therefore recognised as such and legitimised in its action first and foremost by its members, as it represents a certain trade or occupational category of workers. The concept of representation proposed in this discourse is rooted in trade union history and tradition and built on a principle of identity/likeness between delegated trade union members and delegating workers. Trade union members in a certain trade are entrusted by the workers of that same trade to represent and protect those workers’ interests and jobs in collective bargaining, as the former have deep knowledge of the interests and needs of such trade/occupational category, to which both the former and the latter belong. This is a basic principle for the union, as is the principle of independence of trades from the Confederation.

From the point of view of the organizational structure, one of the implications of this discourse is the central role of trades and their delegates in trade union confederations. What provides the union with its force and legitimacy is namely its long-lasting relationship with its members.

In this third discourse the unionists explicitly criticise the discourses of partnership and ‘enterprisation’ which they perceive as contrary to the founding spirit of trade unions. The participants from this group rely on an opposition discourse to build an identity centred on the metaphor of their role as ‘guardians’ of traditional values.

In the third discourse the identity of the union is built around opposition to the neo-liberal threat and its pursuit of profit in contrast with protection and potentially leading to a loss of responsibility towards the most disadvantaged workers in the name of supposed greater freedom (‘we know that being a unionist means more freedom, but also great responsibility’).

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Discourse – Looking for new values

This discourse seems to mark a shift from the all previous discussions and proposes a different solution. Here the participants expressed concern for declining memberships and for the survival of the unions. However, such concerns failed to be turned into operational proposals to offer possible solutions. The

participants' reaction to union falling memberships and loss of attractiveness was an inward-looking analysis, in an attempt to re-think the *raison d'être* of trade unions, starting from the question of representation and asking what motivations and values would connect citizens to trade unions today. How can ties and sociality be recreated in this deeply changed social and organising environment?

The issues concerning the power and recognition of trade unions, its efficiency and effectiveness are of secondary importance. Before setting itself the task of becoming a profitable organisation, the union must ask itself how it can change the way it represents the workers in society today.

Unlike the previous three discourses this last discourse revolves around the essence of union identity, leaving the issue open, while it suggests a participatory methodology to tackle change.

Before discussing job protection or workers' rights, the unionists in this discourse describe the union as an organisation based on the values of work and representation. These values, they maintain, must now be re-contextualised and re-signified. Thus, re-starting from these values, the participants seem to propose a methodological option that would allow them not to betray such values: a participatory process that would allow union members to have a say on the union itself and to join their efforts to build a new identity for the union.

Rather than obeying the imperative 'not to yield' within the company and on the market the participants in this discourse emphasise the importance of having the time to create new ties, listen to a plethora of voices and finally find new value configurations, starting not from operational solutions, but from an uncertain and undefined pathway.

'We must find ways to have our members' voices heard, collect their opinions on the reasons why trade unions should exist, but also ask our stakeholders. Our information services receive a growing number of confused questions from workers, on a vast range of topics, and more and more related to the specific situation of the asker. So, who should we take care of? We must think of ourselves as the sailors of a ship that no longer has a charted course. We must use a sextant and look at the stars which are our values, and ask ourselves which course we should sail, without betraying our values'.

By fundamentally questioning the neo-liberal individualization of the organisations (Foucault, 2008), this fourth discourse enables the speakers to advance alternative metrics of valuation to construct the unionists outside the economic worthiness (Hall and Wilton, 2011) and to reaffirm a collective responsibility for the construction of a new identity.

## **Discussion**

In this article we have tried to analyse how discursive strategies are used by an Italian trade union Confederation to redefine its identity anchors. We have identified four different discourses that exemplify the union positioning in facing current challenges.

In the following paragraphs we shall try to analyse these four discourses on union identity in the light of the concepts of ‘democracy’ and ‘agency’ and comparing them with neo-liberal discourse.

In the discourse of the partnership the unionists maintain that they should ally themselves with the management in a partnership, thus embracing a pragmatic approach based on efficiency, where the protection of the company comes first, and that the workers follows suit, as a direct consequence of this. In this discourse union members are seen as workers, a specific population from a specific organisation community. The union addresses their needs on a local scale, on the basis of what it perceives as their demands within a specific organisation at a given historical moment, with the aim of liaising between the company management and the workers. The main values and concerns are ‘efficiency’ and the ‘survival’ of the company. Workers must contribute to safeguarding the production process and protect the company from the impact of the crisis to prevent the business from closing down. The union imagination seems to have collapsed, as it revolves purely around the goal of the survival of the company, with which an invisible deal is struck. In the words of one of the interviewees: ‘we, the unionists, put our skills at your disposal and become your invisible partner without demanding anything in return except for your own survival’.

Following the principle of ‘efficiency’ and ‘survival’, the union social structure becomes more centralised. This is how ‘democracy’ and ‘agency’ emerge in this scenario, while there seems to be little room for investment in the union’s rank and file. The partnership operation is carried out by union leaders, who must take care of both the needs of the workers and company productivity at the same time. The more traditional

figure of the 'union representative' representing a certain trade is replaced by a 'single representative' for each given company, acting to liaise with all the workers and to interface in a flexible manner with the employer.

As can be seen, this position seems to weaken trade-union traditional bargaining power in their relations with employers. In the long run the union may no longer be perceived as a player that is capable of offering some form of resistance to the 'dominant social order' (Foucault, 1980; Clegg, 1989). Moreover, the issue of workers' representation is not clearly defined in this discourse.

In the second discourse the union moves 'outside' the company and acts at a local level, offering welfare services to citizens at large. Trade union action is extremely proactive, and it involves a wide range of activities with the goal of offering innovative services. Trade union 'members' are perceived as current or potential 'clients', whose needs the union must try to identify and satisfy. Union membership is potentially increased and there is a strong focus on the needs of single workers, regardless of the industry, trade, or company they belong to. The basic idea is to create as large as possible a pool of services by aggregating emerging needs. As regards the union internal structure, this discourse emphasises decentralization and local action.

In this discourse the 'agency' expands to include a larger and more varied group of stakeholders and is presented as an attempt at 'engagement' based on the identification of needs and the co-production of services. The idea that the union should meet the needs of the workers in a given area by offering increasingly specialised services leaves little room for the 'key' subject of 'agency', that is - how to change the clients into actors who would be ready to promote trade union values and to work with the union to develop a long-lasting sense of belonging.

In the third discourse the union is anchored to its strong values of job and wage protection and its essence as a Federation of 'trade' associations, each defending a specific trade. The 'influencing' action is achieved both at a local and central level by opposing the corporate and political forces that threaten workers' safeguards in the name of the crisis.

The organising principle of the social structure of the union is the ‘trade’ (an occupational category), in which the members of a union are gathered based on the productive sector to which they belong. The union concentrates on representing and protecting the various trades, adopting a fundamentally defensive approach. The autonomy of the trades and their ability to influence the management of the union (which represent stronger ‘trades’) are encouraged. In this discourse the union does not tackle the crises of representation and economic and political agency trade unions are facing today. In the current changing organising and social context, the union democratic base gets smaller and smaller and union memberships keep falling every day.

The last discourse is built around a very ambitious goal: launching a far-reaching influencing action at a social level, while trying to find new ways to play a balancing role among the various stakeholders on the labour market. Without taking sides with either the company or the workers, and without necessarily identifying with either one or the other, the participants in this discourse position the union as one in search of a new identity and propose a participatory method, based on dialogue and interaction among all the parties involved: union members, union managers, employers, political forces, the new workers and the citizens.

This positioning reflects the idea that only a truly participatory democracy can allow new ideas at all levels to revitalise today’s obsolete-looking trade unions. These are perceived as unable to tackle the real problems of the workers, busy as they are in trying to win the immediate favor of their management or offering welfare services to the market.

As they try to define union identity and describe different forms of democracy and agency, these four discourses, in our opinion, seem to legitimize different positions also in relation to the neo-liberal discourse. In the first discourse the union appears to be unable to free itself from the neo-liberal rhetoric. Indeed, it seems to fully accept and share the corporate values of efficiency and competitiveness for the sake of survival, as if it reacted to its own identity crisis by triggering a process of total identification with corporate models. In this respect, this position appears to be consistent with what Gall, Hurd and Wilkinson (2011) described as ‘agreement and support’. Interestingly, this positioning marks a shift in how the employer is

perceived: from counterparty in a dialectic relationship (with trade unions committed to protecting workers' rights), to one of a possible ally or even the only possible ally. It should also be noticed that this first positioning focuses only on the people within the Company, thus failing to address the new forms of employment that are emerging on the labour market. The traditional values that trade unions have built in their history, the protection of working conditions and wages, and any other claim can be sacrificed for efficiency and for the survival of the Company. This theme seems to be closely related with the words of the neo-liberal discourse: precariousness, survival, delocalization are highly emotional 'unthinkable' words.

The second discourse does not differ much from the first. The fears and concerns spurred by neo-liberal rhetoric push the union to react strongly and to take on a stance of total identification with the needs and survival problems of a market player: 'the union, too, is an organisation and has the same survival problems as the company, we are no different from a service provider'. In this discourse the image of an ossified and bureaucratic union must be replaced with that of a lean and flexible structure, which is perceived as being meaningful and useful in the short term.

In the third discourse the identity of trade unions is presented as a fact, directly inherited from the traditional legacy of unionism, clearly opposed to the counterparty, the employers, stigmatised in trade-union collective imagination as the most cynical incarnation of neo-liberal values. This position reflects what Gall, Hurd and Wilkinson (2011) termed 'social democratic opposition'. Today even more than in the past, workers are subject to the highest possible level of exploitation, which is made easier by new types of contracts and greater mobility on the labour market. Thus, according to this discourse, there's the need for a strong bastion to hold out against the drift of profit maximization. In this discourse the neo-liberal values are perceived as the 'strong enemy', to fight which union identity is legitimised and strengthened. In so doing, however, instead of proposing an alternative order, the third discourse paradoxically legitimises the neo-liberal discourse. In considering neo-liberalism the number one threat and recognising its strength, this discourse fails to put up any real resistance to it and gets tangled up in its logic.

In the fourth discourse, finally, union identity appears to be seriously challenged. The main idea in this discourse is that the union should embark on a new path with the aim of understanding how the founding values of trade unionism can be used for the benefit of the workers, to solve the problems they face on today's labour market. The dialogue with other stakeholders and within the union is considered a useful tool to suggest alternative ideas and perceptions and to chart out a common map, which should reflect the interests of all the parties involved. Trade unions should work out new ways to redefine union identity and they should do using a participatory approach, rather than offering final solutions. This discourse, too, is sometimes undefined, uncertain and erratic. It offers no guarantees as to whether trade unions will emerge strengthened and legitimised by their identity research, although at least a road map has been drawn: new strategies of democratic representation and social influence must be legitimised by participatory processes and open dialogue on union identity and values.

In conclusion, this study has identified four discourses and discursive practices through which the new identities of an Italian trade union is being shaped. These discourses, which are linked to the current political, economic and institutional situation, also influence the ideas of democracy and agency proposed by trade unions today. The analysis of these discourses offers some suggestions on how to further advance knowledge on union identity - perhaps a research agenda - to better understand the activity systems and organising practices of trade unions and enhance knowledge on ongoing changes. Further studies should aim to cover the activity systems of individual unions and the specific transformation activated by them.

In conclusion we need to recognize the limitation of this study related to trade union association to which we refer. In 2019 the Associates of the trade union we are referring to, were 4,079,490 and belonged to 13 confederations. Therefore, we do not consider the four discourses of our study representative of other trade union organizations, thus other research in this field is needed to understand if other discourses in addition to those identified are circulating both in this trade union organization or in other.

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