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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Women, Workers, Immigrants: Situated Representations of Trade Union Mobilizations in Italy within the Logistics Sector

Silvia Bertoldi
Independent researcher

Francesco Della Puppa
Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Francesco Pontarelli
Ca' Foscari University of Venice

ABSTRACT: In recent years, logistics workers (who are mostly immigrants) have engaged in various important labour mobilizations. Although it is a male dominated sector, women workers, when present, have played an incredibly active role. This was the case in the mobilizations in Bologna's interport at the sorting, packaging and shipping warehouses of Yoox Net-A-Porter, a luxury e-commerce giant in the fashion industry, and at Italpizza's production plant for the rolling out and topping of frozen pizzas, near Modena, both in Italy.
This article will report on a qualitative research aimed at analyzing the working conditions of the immigrant women who took part in the mobilisations and recording their representations of the repercussions and implications that these struggles had on their lives and on the socio-territorial contexts in which they took place. The research revealed that these labour conflicts involving immigrant women extended beyond the workplace, actively involving various groups within their socio-territorial context (associations, collectives, social centers, etc.), encompassing diverse struggles and going beyond purely union-related demands. Furthermore, these collective and self-organized experiences generated spaces for mutual care, the recognition of their agency, and personal and collective empowerment with broad transformative potential. In doing so, they created a sort of "community of struggle," a consequence of the action of "Indie Unions" and the emergence of "Community

KEYWORDS: Trade Unions, Female immigrant workforce, Mobilization,Italpizza Logistics, Yoox Net-A-Porter.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S): francesco.dellapuppa@unive.it

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, logistics has become one of the most strategically important sectors in the production system, acquiring a fundamental role as one of the main forms of contemporary global capitalism (Tsing, 2009). In Italy, too, there have been various attempts at "corporate innovation" in this field, often relying on a system of (sub)contracting and cooperatives to lower the cost of labour, maintain the demand for flexibility, increase competitiveness, and secure an ever larger share of the market. This has led to a reduction in wages and a worsening of working conditions in the sector, which has a high proportion of immigrants in its workforce.

In recent years, logistics workers have engaged in various important political mobilisations and labour disputes, often taking advantage of the dynamics and peculiarities of the way work is organised in the sector. Although it is a male dominated sector, analysis of the numerous struggles in logistics over the past two decades reveals that women workers, when present, have played an incredibly active role. This was the case in the mobilisations in Bologna's interport at the sorting, packaging and shipping warehouses of Yoox Net-A-Porter, a luxury e-commerce giant in the fashion industry (in the two two-year periods 2014-2015 and 2020-2021), and at Italpizza's production plant for the rolling out and topping of frozen pizzas near Modena (2018-2019).

This article will report on an ethnography conducted in the second half of 2021 aimed at describing the working conditions of the immigrant women who took part in the mobilisations and recording their representations of the repercussions and implications that these struggles had on their lives and on the socio-territorial contexts in which they took place.

Therefore, focusing on the two mobilizations of immigrant women workers in Emilia Romagna. and taking into account the usefulness of the concept of "frame" for analysis of social movement (Benford and Snow, 2000; Kelly, 1998; Montagna, 2012), it will seek to understand: 1) if labour-capital conflict is still central for collective action; 2) what are the social position of the women involved in the mobilizations, their motivations and the content of their demands? 3) What are the repercussions of the experiences of mobilization on the lives of women, on their families and on gendered social relations and on the socio-territorial context? 4) Are these workers, organized around "Indie Unions", creating a kind of "community of struggle" (Però, 2020)? 5) May be the concepts of "Community-Based Unionism" (Martín-Díaz and Roca, 2021; McBride and Greenwood, 2009; Warren, 2005) and that of "Social Movement Unionism"(Alcalde-González et al., 2024; Moody, 1997; Scopes, 1992) be mobilised?

The rest of the article unfolds as follows. First, we outline the main theoretical frameworks and bibliographical sources relating to immigrant populations into the labour market, as well as to the trade union mobilisations in which immigrant labour has played a leading role and the analysis of social movements. In this section we also outline the analytical perspectives adopted. In the second section we will analyse the main characteristics of the logistics sector in Emilia Romagna, the region in which the two case studies are located, and examine the way in which work is organised in Yoox-Net-A-Porter and Italpizza. A section on fieldwork methods with the description of the two case studies then follows. Finally, three main sections present our empirical findings: we will look more deeply at the social position of the women involved in order to understand their journeys towards political mobilisation, their motivations, and the practices they used, as well as the content of their demands (fifth section); the analysis of the implications and repercussions of the two experiences, both for the women workers, as well as their intimate, personal, and family life (sixth section) and for the socio-territorial contexts in which the mobilisations took place (seventh section). The conclusion highlights the paper's most significant and original findings, evaluates their theoretical implications, answer to the research questions posed, and suggests avenues for future research.

2. Collective Activism and Labour Mobilization of Immigrants in Italy: Trade Unions, and Gender Perspectives

There has been a recent increase in interest in the collective agency of immigrant people and their ability to enter the public and media debate. These studies often frame and reconstruct the object of analysis through theories of active and substantive citizenship (Isin, 2009; Isin and Nielsen, 2008; Chimienti and Solomos, 2011) or through recovering the category of "class" (Montagna, 2013, 2017; Lotto, 2015; Olivieri, 2012; Però, 2014; Però and Solomos, 2010).

Till a decade ago, when analysing the self-activation and mobilisation of the immigrant labour force in Italy, the scientific literature has mainly focused on the relationship between immigrants and trade unions, especially the largest and institutional unions (Atzeni and Sacchetto, 2023; Basso, 2004, 2006; Como, 2014; Carrera and Galossi, 2014; Della Puppa, 2018; Mottura, 2000; Mottura and Cozzi 2010).

At the same time, a line of empirical research has developed that has taken on "actors-centered" perspectives (Alberti and Però, 2018), independent trade unions (Della Puppa, 2018; Però and Downey, 2022) and especially "Indie Unions", that is emerging grassroots unions co-led by precarious immigrant workers (Però, 2020), and other grassroots forms of organizing in several European and American countries (Alberti, 2016; Atzeni and Grigera, 2019; Atzeni, 2021; Cioce et al., 2022; Grady and Simms, 2019; Martínez Lucio et al. 2017; Però, 2014; 2022). This debate has focused a lot on the logistics sector (Borraccino, 2021; Caruso, Chesta and Cini, 2019; Cillo and Pradella, 2016; Cuppini et al., 2013), that is a sector in which the activism of some examples of "Indie Unions" can be found (Però, 2020).

By identifying the category of "Indie Unions", as mentioned, in grassroots unions co-managed by precarious immigrant workers – of which, in Italy, two emblematic examples are, precisely, SìCobas and AdlCbas (Cillo and Pradella, 2016) – Davide Però (2020), for example, shows how workers, who are typically considered unorganizable by traditional trade unions, can build lasting solidarity and collective power, securing both material and non-material rewards within a context of precarity, limited economic resources, and a hostile environment. He argues that organizing workers into "communities of struggle" focused on mobilization facilitates their empowerment, effectiveness, and social integration. In doing so, Però redefines the concept of organizing in more inclusive terms, ensuring that the collective industrial agency of precarious and immigrant workers, who organize outside of traditional unions, is properly acknowledged and accounted for. Another example of an actor-centred framework for studying the mobilization and bargaining practices of immigrant workers has been provided by Gabriella Alberti and Davide Però (2018). This approach is applied to examine two cases of labour organizing by low-paid Latin American workers in London, showing how immigrant workers can develop innovative collective initiatives positioned at the intersection of class and ethnicity (Alberti et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989), which can be both effective and rewarding in material and non-material terms. In particular, the authors demonstrate that while there is growing interest from traditional trade unions in representing immigrant workers, their bargaining and mobilization strategies appear inadequate to support the bottom-up initiatives of such workers, who, as a result, have started to independently articulate these initiatives. Recently, Marino, Connolly, and Martinez Lucio (2024), in contrast, trace the historical development of the relationship between trade unions and immigrant workers, emphasizing that although migration has posed significant challenges for unions – challenges that are quite similar across time and countries and often leading to exclusionary practices and outcomes in various contexts – unions have nonetheless adopted a range of strategies to represent the rights of immigrant workers, gradually adapting to different national contexts. Additionally, the authors critically examine the ambiguities and complexities surrounding the way the term "inclusion" is understood and used in the debate on union engagement with immigrant workers.

If the recent debate has brought the category of "Indie Unions" to the forefront (Però, 2020), other authors have highlighted the importance of "Community Unionism" and "Community-Based Unionism" (Warren, 2005), arguing that the future of the labour movement and industrial relations lies with the community and local labour markets (McBride and Greenwood, 2009). Emma Martín-Díaz and Beltrán Roca (2021), for example, explore the recent developments in community unionism and solidarity networks among immigrant workers in a post-Fordist context characterized by transnationalism and global supply chains. In general, there has been a rise in solidarity initiatives and bricolage in situations where conventional union organization fails to succeed. The transformation of work, the rise of global supply chains, and the intensification of international migration are at the heart of new forms of intervention that intersect union and non-union actions, expanding the base of militants to include a broader social participation beyond that of the "mere" workers directly involved.

Another example of struggle – and empirical categorization – can be found in "Social Movement Unionism"(Moody, 1997; Scopes, 1992), a term used by some authors (e.g., Alcalde-González et al., 2024) to refer to a union strategy that adopts social change goals that go beyond membership representation and collective bargaining and often requires alliances with community organizations to achieve these objectives. As a term, however, social movement unionism is often described in opposition to the organizational functions of unions, such as membership representation (Engeman, 2015).

Furthermore, alongside academic research, some of the leading figures in the farm labourers' struggles have also written books on the subject in the last decade and there have been a number of contributions from social movements and activist groups that have collected accounts of struggles and other experiences of mobilisation and self-organisation by immigrant labourers in recent years (Mometti and Ricciardi, 2011; Massarelli, 2014; Caruso, 2015; SiCobas, 2017).

Finally, apart from research focused on the domestic and care sector (Marchetti and Venturini, 2014), the sociological debate on the trade union and workplace mobilisations of the immigrant labour force give less attention to both a gender perspective and the active presence of women workers. However, there is no lack of theoretical and analytical tools for observing and understanding the starting point of vulnerability and oppression that immigrant women experience in the labour market and in different aspects of their private and social life due to the intertwining of different axes of identity. Think, for example, of the concept of "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1989), of *feminist standpoint theory* (Collins, 1997), the perspective of the *outsider within* (Collins, 1986), and the idea of the *place of speech* (Ribeiro, 2020) found in analyses developed by Black Feminism, and, in Italy, the theories and analytical tools elaborated by the so-called Marxist feminism of rupture (Federici, 2015, 2020; Dalla Costa, 2021).

However, despite the scarcity of contributions that take these perspectives and directions, mention should be made of the works of Alberti, Holgate, and Tapia (2013), who analyse precarious work from the perspective of trade union practices on equality and diversity, exploring how unions organise and recruit vulnerable and low-paid immigrant workers. The Authors develop a theoretical approach to understanding the particular vulnerability and diversity of immigrant workers in the labour market that involves applying the intersectional perspective to the study of employment, industrial relations and human resource management practices. Specifically, based on four British case studies they observe that unions tend to view immigrants primarily as workers, rather than as immigrant workers with particular and overlapping forms of oppression. As a result, unions tend to construct a dichotomy between workplace and migration issues, preventing the effective involvement of diverse and marginalised workers in unions (Della Puppa, 2018). Tapia and Alberti (2019) further develop this perspective, bringing together debates on migration and intersectionality in employment relations, and highlighting the problems arising from the conflict between different experiences of immigrants under a homogeneous vision of the "immigrant worker" and suggest instead to take into account "migrant

intersectionalities" – including the category of migration status alongside other categorical differences in the workforce, and to do so at micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the recent work of Borello (2025) who, through empirical fieldwork in three sectors, starting from the premise that collective mobilization begins with shared feelings of injustice, and taking up exactly Tapia and Alberti's multi-level approach to intersectionality (2019), offer new evidence on immigrants' experiences of injustice in contexts of intersectional precarity. Using a conceptual framework that distinguishes between restorative and retributive forms of justice, the Author shows that although immigrants are subject to distinct structural injustices, they rarely attribute retributive, class-based struggles for justice as a cause for mobilization. Instead, immigrant workers primarily express feelings of injustice through disrespect and misrecognition, resembling a restorative justice logic.

For our analysis, here, we believe it is particularly useful the adoption of the intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989), thats is little developed in this area of study and helps to grasp the problems that immigrant women face in the workplace (Alberti et al., 2013).

3. The logistics "system", its Itallian declination and its nerve centre

3.1 The logistic "system"

Capitalist production is not limited to industrial production in the strict sense. Industrial capital transcends strictly material production, with distribution, circulation, exchange, and consumption all being part of its unified process. Indeed, the way goods are produced, transported, stored, and distributed has a direct impact on the *creation*, or rather, the *preservation* of added value. It is in this sense that "logistics" has become a central factor in the planning of the production process, and business "redesign" itself has increasingly taken on a logistical character in recent decades: "logistics is everywhere," and even business "redesign" has become logistical and no longer strategic (Cuppini et al., 2013). In fact, logistics is not solely concerned with the transportation and distribution of goods; it is a system with interdependent sub-functions that encompass the entire process of production and value creation for consumer goods. This includes: *supply logistics*, which relates to the procurement of raw materials and effective means for transformation work; *production logistics*, which deals with the transformation of materials into finished products through live labour and prepares them for *distribution logistics*, which ensures that the finished product reaches the customer and includes all operations related to preparation and packaging, storage, warehousing of goods, and transportation to final consumption sites. Production time is thus made up of both production proper *and* circulation. Hence, the more the commodity's circulation time is reduced – i.e. the more ideal the conditions for capital's circulation – the greater will be the productivity of the labour used for its production and the greater the profit and surplus value generated. Therefore, even if logistics workers do not play a primary role in the creation of surplus value by production, they do have a role in the creation – or "*conservation*"– of surplus value due to the reduction in circulation time (Antunes, 2020; Della Puppa, 2021). Hence, the more efficient the logistics chain is, the more profit is produced (or preserved) and the more drastic the cuts in the costs of production and in the transport and storage of goods, the greater margin there will be for the extraction of surplus value. This mechanism creates new opportunities for the exploitation of resources and labour throughout the supply chain (Cuppini et al., 2013; Cillo and Pradella, 2016). Outsourced and contracted out logistics planning has therefore become essential to the production system: it allows costs to be lowered and is highly competitive as a result of its flexibility, efficiency, punctuality, reliability and, last but not least, cost-effectiveness. Therefore, although "logistics" is a key sector of the capitalist system since its inception, it is particularly from the second half of

the 20th century that, following the crisis of the Fordist accumulation phase, the increasing globalization and deregulation of the market, the international integration of production, technological evolution, and the boom of e-commerce, the logistics chain has been renewed and has acquired a fundamental role, becoming one of the primary forms of contemporary global capitalism in recent decades (Tsing, 2009). Nevertheless, workers employed throughout the logistics chain have also renewed their modes of struggle and strengthened their power of action by leveraging the weaknesses present in the dynamics and core principles of speed, efficiency, and cost elimination in storage that underpin labour organization within the logistics chain (Cillo and Pradella, 2016).

3.2 The Italian declination of the logistic system

Focusing on the Italian context, it is no coincidence that Italy's geographical position also serves as a strategic location for trade routes at both the national and European levels. Ports and interports are fundamental hubs for the provision of a wide range of integrated logistics services, encompassing functions such as storage, sorting, handling, transportation, and distribution of goods circulating by sea, road, and rail across Italian and European territory. Specifically, regions such as Emilia Romagna, Veneto, and Lombardy represent the main areas of the Italian logistics system, with Emilia-Romagna – particularly the site of the two disputes examined in this article – considered a nerve center, as it is well connected both to the rest of the country and to the Trans-European Transport Network through three of the nine international corridors (Scandinavian-Mediterranean; Baltic-Adriatic; Mediterranean). According to the Mobility and Transport, Infrastructure, Commerce, and Tourism Department of the Emilia-Romagna region, 21% of the national freight railway traffic involves an origin or destination in Emilia-Romagna (Direzione Generale Cura del Territorio e dell'Ambiente, Regione Emilia Romagna, 2020).

The undeniable importance of the logistics sector within the context of the Italian economy is evidenced by data from recent years: according to Istat data published in September 2020 and referring to the years 2018 and 2019 – reference years for the two disputes addressed here – the Transport and Logistics sector generated approximately €91.8 billion, accounting for 5.7% of the added value of the Italian economy as a whole (€1,602.2 billion). Furthermore, the trends observed during the five-year period from 2015 to 2019 demonstrate that this sector is experiencing a phase of significant dynamism: during this period, the added value of the logistics sector grew by 8.2%, compared to 4.2% for the total economy.

However, what are the characteristics and modes of employment of the workforce within the logistics system that sustain these figures?

As previously outlined, logistics is among those sectors with high labour intensity that require cost reductions and are unable to relocate, relying on renewed practices of systemic exploitation. This sector is characterized by frenetic rhythms, high hourly turnover, under-classifications, contractual precarity, flexible working hours, informal employment, and fragmentation of the workforce. Additionally, it is a sector that is highly deprofessionalized and racialized, often associated with the so-called "three D's": Dirty, Dangerous, Demanding (Pugliese, 2002, p. 69). Indeed, the transport and warehousing sectors also fall into these high-risk categories (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, 2020).

It is within this context that characteristics such as sex, social class, race, and legal status are harnessed and utilized for the maximization of profit and the reduction of costs associated with live labour through strategies such as the fragmentation and labour segregation of the workforce along the axes of gender, origin, and type of residence permit. These strategies also include the outsourcing of entire segments of labour (subcontracting), the coercion of contract renewals that often hinge on the residence permit, the regulation of the workforce, and

the obstruction of union participation. In this sense, inequalities and differences play a constant role within power structures, as disparities in treatment, stratification, and fragmentation occur precisely along the existing differences among workers. As Anna Tsing asserts, analyzing the logistics system is essential for understanding the dilemmas of contemporary human conditions (Tsing, 2009), revealing how these phenomena of "super-exploitation" play a key role in favor of supply chain capitalism (ibidem). These dynamics are well supported by the Italian legislative framework, and beyond, which aims to create legal and social inferiority for immigrant individuals, contributing to the construction of a reserve labour force with zero – or minimal – costs and zero – or limited – rights within a context of general devaluation and erosion of labour rights (Basso, 2010).

An important element that contributes to the "smooth" functioning of the Italian logistics sector is the system of the cooperatives. Those "spurious" production-labour cooperatives to which large companies sometimes contract out segments of production and logistics services have radically departed from their original principles based on ideals of mutualism and democratic control (Cuppini et al., 2013) and their strategic strength has become the flexibility and low-cost of their labour force (Sacchetto and Semenzin, 2014). The cooperatives are able to answer the demand for flexibility that market trends require due to their advantageous fiscal and legal status, the ease with which they can be sub-contracted (SiCobas, 2017), and their adaptability to a cost-effective model for the organisation and management of the workforce, which has a pyramidal and hierarchical structure with the company at the head, the numerous cooperatives in the middle and workers at the base (Cuppini et al., 2013; Cillo and Pradella, 2016).

Moreover, as will be elaborated in the next paragraph, the historical presence of cooperatives in Italy – particularly in the case-study region of Emilia-Romagna – demonstrates how this fragmentation and extreme precariousness are further maintained through a system of contracts, subcontracting, outsourcing various segments of the supply chain, and the strategic tool of "contract change," which is also employed to hinder advancements and union gains.

3.3 The nerve center of Emilia Romagna

For SiCobas (2017), one of the largest and most active unions in the logistics sector in Italy and the trade union representing the female workers in the two case studies discussed here, Emilia Romagna represents the heart of the Italian logistics system, with some of its main cities acting as hubs for the transit of goods nationally and internationally, through the Trans-European Transport Network – also due to its geographic location and the demographic characteristics briefly described above. Furthermore, this is the Italian region with the highest proportion of foreigners in its total resident population (12.5% as opposed to the Italian average of 8.8%), the majority of whom are female (52.9%), and the foreign labour force that is well above the national average (12.8% in a national average of 10.7%). Women make up 47.4% of the total number of foreigners regularly employed in the region and are subject to widespread demotion and job segregation – being pushed to perform unskilled tasks (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, 2020).

Historically, the logistics sector – which employs approximately 100,000 workers in the Emilia-Romagna region – has been predominantly male, particularly in roles related to vehicle operation, warehousing, and goods handling. According to industry associations such as *Confetra* and *Assologistica*, men account for approximately 70-75% of the logistics workforce in the region, a trend that mirrors the national context in Italy. Women are primarily employed in administrative functions, managerial roles, and support operations. However, their participation in more physically demanding or transport-related tasks is gradually increasing. Despite this shift, women still represent only about 25-30% of the total workforce in the sector, and remain

under-represented in operational and manual positions. The sector also relies heavily on immigrant labour, particularly for manual and labour-intensive activities such as loading and unloading goods, warehouse management, and transport services. Immigrant workers are estimated to comprise 30–40% of the logistics workforce, with a significant proportion originating from Romania, Albania, Ukraine, Morocco, and Bangladesh.

In this context, the instrument of "sub-contracting" should not be underestimated: by outsourcing various logistical tasks, the company breaks the direct relationship with workers, thereby absolving itself of responsibility regarding the rights of those who effectively work on its behalf. Moreover, a pattern has been observed and denounced by various disputes led by the grassroots union SiCobas (2017): the "contract change" scheme stipulates that approximately every two years, the contract is revoked or terminated, triggering a series of deficiencies and irregularities related to workers' wages, contractual continuity with the new cooperative taking over, and a rollback of hard-won union gains.

4. Methodological note and case studies

As anticipated, this article focuses on the struggles of immigrant women workers in two logistics production companies in Emiglia Romagna: The Yoox-Net-A-Porter group (YNAP), based in the interport of Bologna, and Italpizza in San Donnino, in Modena (see also Frosecchi and Orlandini, 2021).

The Yoox-Net-A-Porter group, which has Anglo-Italian roots, born from the merger of Yoox and Net-A-Porter in 2015. It is located within the interport of Bologna, one of the most important logistics hubs in Italy and Europe, which hosts approximately 120 other companies. In the last years The Yoox-Net-A-Porter group has established itself as a world leader in luxury and fashion internet retail, boasting record net revenues of more than two billion euros in 2017.[1] In 2020, the YNAP group in Bologna had 530 direct employees and 1437 people employed by the two contracting companies to which the company had outsourced certain jobs. Among the latter, 70 per cent were female workers, of whom about 450 were mothers, and more than 50 per cent of the total were foreign nationals.

The second case study is the production plant of Italpizza in San Donnino (Modena), the leading brand in the "Made in Italy" frozen pizza sector both in Italy and abroad. Founded in 1991, it had a turnover of 170 million euros in 2020 and exports to 54 different countries[2]. In the period in which there was an increase in worker mobilisations – the two-year period 2018-2019 – about one thousand people were employed in the San Donnino factory (see also Frosecchi and Orlandini, 2021). Only about one hundred of these were employed directly by the company, and they were mostly office workers. The remainder of the approximately 900 workers were employed at the plant through two contracted out cooperatives: about 250 workers were employed in internal logistics; almost 600 people in food production (e.g. rolling out and topping pizzas) and about 40 in the cleaning and unpacking of the raw materials[3].

Workers at both production sites have staged walkouts, picketing outside the factories, and demonstrating to denounce excessive workloads, flexible working hours, and night and holiday calls; to oppose bathroom

1 Yoox Net-A-Porter Group, Comunicati Stampa, Ricavi netti preliminari 2017: https://www.ynap.com/it/document/dati-preliminari-2017/

2 Confindustria Emilia Area Centro, (8 aprile 2021): "Italpizza, Minibond da 20 milioni di euro sottoscritto da UniCredit": https://www.confindustriaemilia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/95267

3 CGIL Modena, (31 luglio 2019): "Italpizza, i lavoratori approvano l'accordo sindacale – un ottimo risultato, ma è solo la prima tappa": http://www.cgilmodena.it/italpizza-lavoratori-approvano-accordo-sindacale-ottimo-risultatoprima-tappa/

timers; to demand safety devices for dangerous jobs; and, above all, to demand the direct hiring of subcontracted workers.

The empirical basis for this contribution is made up of 20 in-depth interviews, collected in 2021 and 2022. These include 16 interviews with female immigrant workers employed in the warehouses and factories of Yoox-Net-A-Porter (eight) and Italpizza (eight), respectively and active in mobilisations with the SiCobas rank-and-file trade union, and with key-informants (four): trade unionists active in the grassroots unions who organized these struggles and mobilisations. The interviewees were aged between 29 and 53 at the time of the interviews. They were all mothers with a variable number between one and three of dependent children; they were all married or living with their partner, except two. One of these two lived alone in Italy since her entire family, including children, remained in their country of origin. The countries of origin of the workers interviewed are: Morocco, Tunisia, Philippines, Ukraine, Moldova. None of them have the Italian citizenship, although some have reported they have started the long application process.

The interviewees were initially contacted through the intermediation of the SiCobas trade union and, subsequently, the Migrant Coordination of Bologna (Coordinamento Migranti di Bologna) and the Women's Assembly of Bologna Migrant Coordination (Assemblea delle Donne del Coordinamento Migranti di Bologna).

We should make clear that none of the female workers interviewed were directly employed by the parent companies (Yoox-Net-A-Porter and Italpizza respectively), instead having short-term contracts with cooperatives or minor contracting companies that changed over time. Their nationalities of origin were Moroccan, Tunisian, Ukrainian, Moldavian, and Filipino.

After a complete transcription of the collected material, we proceeded to analyze it, starting with a full reading of the interviews one by one, followed by coding the various thematic segments and comparing them horizontally across the interviews. The comparison of the thematic segments then led to the identification of interpretative categories through which we conducted the final analysis.

The names given at the bottom of each interview are fictitious.

5. Storytelling at work and in mobilization

Although having different workplaces, the two groups of women workers shared some of the same working conditions as well as experiences in their working and non-working lives. This is unsurprising given the common social position they occupy and the axes of identity – such as gender, nationality, ethnicity/race, legal status, class, family role, etc. – that many of them share which are at the basis of situational and systemic vulnerabilities. This embodies the intertwining of multiple axes of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989) and shows how reducing immigrants to the sole dimension of work prevents us from grasping the complexity of these multiple vulnerabilities (Alberti *et al.*, 2013).

In fact, the interviews reveal evidence of unequal treatment between the direct employees of the parent companies and those employed by the contracting companies, resulting in a downgrading of their contracts and a reduction in wages. As Fatima, an employee in Italpizza, recounts:

> Some have a food-workers contract and get more than us, and we have a cleaning and multiservice contract and that's totally wrong! If we do the same job, in the same place, we all have to have the same! [Fatima, Contract worker at Italpizza].

Fatima's complaint about contractual inequality shows how female workers perceive an injustice that is not only economic but also symbolic, attributable to what Borello (2025) describes as dynamics of misrecognition rather than class struggle in the traditional sense.

In addition, unfair practices were revealed relating to: missing payments or the non-payment of certain financial entitlements; high levels of contractual precariousness, especially for the most unionised workers; and extreme flexibility in working hours, which heavily interferes with leisure time through impacting on the stability, security, and organisation of the private, family, and social sphere. All of this is blamed on the mismanagement of the cooperatives, the "contract system", and the widespread practice of "contract switching". These practices are an expression of the fragmentation process typical of logistics chains (Cillo and Pradella, 2016), where the multiplication of contracts becomes a tool for disciplining and weakening collective solidarity. The two accounts by female workers reported below outline the material repercussions of this system, showing how these dynamics compromise not only their economic, labour, and social rights, but also create a lack of prerequisites that hinders access to independent personal security, making it difficult to achieve self-determination even in decisions related to basic needs:

> We were in two cooperatives that the company had subcontracted [...] It worked like this: when there was a drop in work, they chose how and who they wanted to leave at home. Usually they left someone the boss didn't like at home, or someone who fought a bit for justice, or someone who didn't do many pieces, that is, who wasn't fast [...] They acted as if we had an on-call contract when in fact it was permanent. [Kateryna, Contract worker at YNAP].

> The cooperative I joined lasted only a few months, just so you understand, I can't remember in total how many cooperatives have changed there. [...] I'll give you an example of what that means: if you want to buy a car, of course you can't, you have to ask for a loan. If you go and ask for the loan, what do they look at? They look at your severance pay, the stability of your contract, those things that always start again from scratch with the cooperatives. [...] I bring all my pay slips, for all these years that I've been working at Italpizza, but you know... I always start again from scratch with the cooperatives. [Olga, Contract worker at Italpizza].

In both case studies, albeit with different levels of awareness, the workers identified their socio-legal status as immigrants as a structural cause of their vulnerability and precariousness, arguing that this means feeling and being subordinate to a legal system that often only protects your rights if you have a formal employment contract, as can be seen from Naima's story:

> If you don't have a job, you can't renew your residence permit, and that is very important for us. It's not fair that a child who was born here also has to change their residence permit and their parents have to work. If their parents lose their jobs they have to go back. I met a colleague of mine who now works at shop T., she didn't switch to the new cooperative and she told me: "Look, I couldn't cope with the new shifts, I quit right away". We can't. Maybe with citizenship later... But now I can't, I have to keep this job and think about my documents. [Naima, Contract worker at YNAP].

As Però (2020) notes, forms of legal subordination constrain mobilization pathways, creating a dependency on residence permits that hinders collective activation. This falls within the framework of migrant intersectionalities (Della Puppa, 2018; Tapia and Alberti, 2019), where legal status intertwines with gender and class to produce precariousness.

In addition to what has been discussed so far, the workers' reflections pointed to their perception of having suffered discrimination and humiliation as women and as mothers. Almost all spent time recounting their difficulties in relation to their childcare needs, whether they were single mothers or had partners. The main cause was seen as the high degree of flexibility to which they were subjected, the uncertainty of the organisation of work shifts, the lack of observance of the rights of those with small children (for example, rights around breastfeeding), and the perceived desire on the part of some managers to discourage new mothers from staying in the job, telling them they had greater needs now and would be subject to unforeseen events linked to family life. This worker recounted some of the difficulties she found in her experiences, and in those of her colleagues:

> In the company we got together with some mothers and said: "Girls, as far as we can tell many of us have this problem with children". Some tried to leave them with their husbands or their partners, some with babysitters, but after a year working in these conditions it was revealed from talking to each other that some had problems with their children; that they were doing badly at school because it's usually the mother that helps more with homework; there were children who cried and said: "I never see you". Some other, like in my case as a single mother, I couldn't find a babysitter to come here to the house at 4 o'clock in the morning because I'm supposed to start work at 5.30 and it's impossible to find someone to come here to the house at 4.30... You find desperate people but those desperate people leave you if they get a better job offer. [Kateryna, Contract worker at YNAP].

From the working conditions briefly described here and the descriptions made by the female workers interviewed, it is clear that, organised and managed in this way, their work life polluted the private and family space, affecting the emotional and psycho-physical state of the workers and the people close to them. Significantly, the tasks of care and social reproduction within the family, both contingent tasks and those dictated by the socially delegated role of the maternal figure – which cannot really be called into question and redistributed since their spouse is also often subject to similar work dynamics – are thus compromised by the in(de)finite working hours and blurred boundaries between work and life. As Angelica recounts:

> I started with them and worked two days and then the next week they made me work the night with a 7-month-old baby. I couldn't say no.... I had just got in and I was still on probation. And to tell you the truth, I found it a bit difficult with the baby, sometimes I would leave him with my neighbours, then I had to call my sister-in-law who came from our *country of origin* to look after him, and she helped me a bit. Especially [because] my husband also works days... [...] I worked, they even made me work double shifts, calling me in at the last-minute: starting 5am and coming home at 5pm. I also worked on Sundays and Saturdays. I accepted it because I had to. [Angelica, contract worker at Italpizza].

The difficulty in reconciling unpredictable schedules and care-giving duties shows how both paid and reproductive work are grounds for exploitation (Federici, 2015; 2020). Indeed, testimonies show how capital "infiltrates" the private sphere (Dalla Costa, 2021), redefining the maternal role as a constraint of exclusion.

These women told us of struggles arising from personal and family needs that translate into mobilisations to limit the multiplication of the material and symbolic boundaries that affect not only the lives of immigrant women, but all those with "multiple burdens" (Crenshaw, 1989).

How they frame their situation in terms of issues but also in terms of vulnerabilities leads them to see themselves as a collective actor.

The way these workers intertwine wage demands and social recognition recalls the practices of Indie Unions (Però, 2020) and community unionism (Warren, 2005), where the struggle is rooted both in the workplace and in the sphere of social reproduction. In this sense, their mobilization can be read as an example of social movement unionism (Moody, 1997), which transcends the confines of bargaining to impact broader issues of social justice.

These unionised women workers developed interconnected and cross-cutting demands: they called for wage increases and an upgrading of their contracts and respect for trade union rights; they denounced racist and discriminatory attitudes; and they criticised the "shadowy" system put in place by some cooperatives, the so-called practice of "contract switching" and the increasingly widespread processes of outsourcing to large contracting companies that contribute to the impoverishment, fragmentation, and devaluation of the entire working class.

6. The personal, intimate, and family dimension

The immigrant women's labour conditions and their claims, described above, emerged as possible spaces for individual transformation and, at the same time, as occasions for the development of collective strategies that create changes which impact on the social, personal, family, and intimate dynamics of those involved, on their living conditions, on the meanings and ways of "being political" (Isin, 2002), and on the socio-territorial contexts in which the disputes took shape. Indeed, migrant women's struggles, despite their precarious legal and social positions, redefine citizenship in a substantial and performative sense. These transformations also represent examples of what Però (2020) calls "communities of struggle", where subjects considered "non-organizable" produce collective agency.

At the individual level, the workers identified changes in the material, affective-relational, and symbolic sphere. The material sphere includes the gains achieved in terms of wages and contracts; respect for the rights provided for by the national collective agreement and the relevant legislation – such as leave for breastfeeding, entitlement to full and regular holidays and complete recognition of overtime – and better planning of time and working hours. These changes, which have improved their work life, have also positively impacted on their non-working life in terms of their stability, security, and serenity in personal and family planning and access to economic and social goods and rights. The latter have also led to processes for the recognition of their integrity and dignity as workers and as people. It also underlines how material improvements are intertwined with the recovery of dignity and respect, showing how the two levels are inseparable (Borello, 2025), but make also clearly emerge the contractual fragmentation of the logistics sector (Cillo and Pradella, 2016). In the words of the workers:

> it means being able to say no, it means being able to choose [...], because they have started to give us our rights. [Kateryna, contract worker at YNAP].

The changes on an affective and relational level also affect interpersonal dynamics in the workplace, in the space of struggle, and in the family. The women told us how, during their active participation in trade union

life, in processes of collective self-organisation, in meetings about disputes, and in public mobilisations, they established and deepened acquaintances and/or significant relationships with colleagues and with people directly involved in social and political movements, such as trade union coordinators, activists, and political groups outside the workplace. In this way, they expanded their social network of friends and acquaintances in the context in which they live and work. Here, it is useful to recall "community unionism" (Warren, 2005; Martín-Díaz and Roca, 2021) and the emphasis on the role of extra-work relationships in creating solidarity and new forms of organization that go beyond the perimeter of the workplace.

The workers also identify a "before" and an "after" in the relational and communicative dynamics with managers and employers who proved to be more inclined to a communicative relationship with those who took part in the struggles following the union agreements. This created a relationship of recognition that also allowed women workers to approach these hierarchically superior figures with greater self-awareness (Tapia and Alberti, 2019). Fatima's story provides a good example of this:

> Now I have more courage to say no: when I didn't want to do something, I was a bit forced to say yes because I was afraid [...]. I used to accept things a priori, I used to say I was free on Saturdays and Sundays, even if I didn't want to because I have a baby and I have a private life! Instead now I have the courage to say no and to speak my mind and I know that I'm not going against the rules. I have the courage to speak! [Fatima, Contract worker at Italpizza].

Even within the family nucleus, interpersonal relations were called into question: in some cases the striking worker claimed her need to struggle despite the concerns and qualms of her family members, even involving her children in her activism. The fact that women normally performed care work and social reproductive labour was questioned, at least at times of more intense union activity. Therefore, the struggles not only demand labour rights but also question the sexual division of labour and the socially imposed role of wife/mother, showing how wage and reproductive conflicts are intertwined (Dalla Costa, 2021; Federici, 2015; 2020;). In the words of a trade union coordinator of SiCobas:

> I believe that the family and personal relationships of the workers, but above all of the women workers involved in a very hard struggle for nine months have changed: mothers facing the police, fathers supporting the struggle at home with their children, [women workers] speaking in front of a camera or through a megaphone, speaking in public, learning how to negotiate with the boss and the police, discovering a strength and solidarity within you and around you that they always told you didn't exist... these are all things that necessarily change people. Union victory or not, without a doubt any workers' struggle produces that and in my opinion it is worth it for that alone. Standing in front of the gates people change, I too have changed a lot over the years, and these are changes I like. [Franco, trade unionist SiCobas, Modena].

The struggles can thus be seen as "bridging spaces" (Del Valle, 2001): spaces of action and relationships which include processes of learning, of the transformation of social capital, and of new socialisation that are capable of transforming the biographies of the participants and their position in the society in which they reside.

Here, the struggles become moments of political and social transformation beyond bargaining (Moody, 1997). These bridging spaces resemble what Alberti and Però (2018) describe as innovative collective

initiatives that unite class and ethnicity. Furthermore, struggle can offer a space of existence and action through which the individual becomes a subject, identifies themselves, and recognises themselves and is recognised on an individual, social, and political level. They can become an active participant in the society in which they live, acting in relation to various issues, themes, and goals, and in that way have their individual and collective interests officially recognised (Kilomba, 2021: 69).

A further transformative process, which has both a concrete and symbolic impact, concerns the expert knowledge developed and learned by working women during their trade union activism. The knowledge produced by marginalized subjects becomes epistemologically valuable (Collin, 1997). These women, in fact, acquire a public voice based on their own embodied experience (Ribeiro, 2020). This acquisition of specialist knowledge has allowed for a re-signification of their capacities both on a personal and on a family and social level. Some of them have begun to play a newly recognised role within their family or social group as a competent, informed point of reference with access to know-how suitable for dealing with difficult situations, for interfacing with different actors, including institutional ones, and for making contacts within the renewed social network.

However, in addition to these positive transformations, there were also some negative repercussions, including: the fatigue and tiredness of managing union activity, work, and family; the breaking of emotional and friendship ties inside and outside the workplace, for example with those who did not understand and accept their decision to struggle; and, in both case studies, the huge amount of stress and malaise as a result of anti-union pressure and attempts at repression, also directly related to economic and legal concerns, such as wage reductions for participating in strikes, fear of losing one's job, and worries about criminal charges that could make it more difficult to obtain Italian citizenship. On the other hand, the legal precariousness of female workers makes the acts of citizenship (Isin and Nielsen, 2008) even more significant because they are implemented by "legally compromised subjects".

Another challenge these women set themselves was to build spaces for struggle, confrontation, activism, and personal and collective growth starting from their awareness and recognition of their position as working mothers to whom the classical male model of political militancy was not suited. This meant creating modalities of struggle that would respond to their needs, as well as to their complex intersectional aspirations to actively participate in a social and political sense and to construct their own forms of substantive citizenship as subjects carrying "multiple burdens" (Crenshaw, 1989). Therefore, struggles are rooted in daily needs (care, life times, multiple discriminations) and reinvent trade unionism itself in inclusive forms (Martinez Lucio *et al*., 2017; McBride and Greenwood, 2009).

A final consequence of these struggles was the socialisation of the social movements with the radical political groups present in the area, both for the women themselves and for their various family members. It is interesting to note that none of the female workers interviewed had previously participated in either trade union or socio-political activism, either in Italy or in their country of origin, and so this trade union experience was a first for all of them. Naima's case is a good example:

> Yes! [My daughter] used to come with me! She was always with me in the struggle, she also got to know other organisations like the Non Una Di Meno women. [...] She was always with us! She brought the newspaper to school and they had a day where the teacher let her talk about labour rights, what her mum does, what happens at her mum's workplace... [...]. She was in Grade 5 [9-10 years old]. […] It's a beautiful and important thing because afterwards they also grow up with principles and maybe they will grow up better than us. [Naima, Contract worker at YNAP].

Thus, the struggles go beyond the factory gates and become educational and civic processes, building citizenship from below (Isin & Nielsen, 2008; Martinez Lucio *et al*., 2017; McBride and Greenwood, 2009). This socialisation within both grassroots political practices and institutional politics has reinforced their perception of having individual and collective agency and the idea that this can help to change the state of affairs, even challenging the formal, dominant, and closed definition of "citizen" by demonstrating alternatives of how to become active subjects of citizenship (Isin, 2008). Considering citizenship in its substantive and practical character by recognising the "acts of citizenship"(Isin and Nielsen, 2008) enacted by legally compromised subjects means enabling the latter to bring their autonomy, skills, and abilities to processes for the transformation and construction of society and citizenship.

7. The collective and socio-territorial dimension

The effects of these struggles on the socio-territorial contexts in which they occurred can be organised into three main points.

The first is the revitalisation of social networks and political movements and the opening up of new possibilities for the contamination and intersection of struggles: this has led to greater confrontation between different political, trade union and social groups, more cohesion in communities and the construction of new spaces, such as the "Assemblea delle donne del coordinamento migranti" (women's assembly of migrant coordination) in Bologna and the "Consiglio popolare" (people's council) in Modena, two new spaces that deal with issues of common interest to the local population that go beyond trade union disputes (the issues include, amongst others, privatisation and the outsourcing of nurseries; demands for justice for people who died in the Sant'Anna prison during the 2020 lockdown; and widespread gender-based violence in society). Thus, in addition to demands within the workplace, the mobilisations have included groups and demands on issues of racism and sexism, the exploitation of natural and environmental resources, welfare cuts and the privatisation of public services, and the shattering of social relations inside and outside the space and time of work. These migrant workers act as substantial citizens, imposing their voice in the public space even in the absence of full formal citizenship (Isin, 2008), noting that here, instead, immigrants themselves become guarantors of legality and justice.

The second implication is the participation of unionised workers in garrison of justice and equity on the territory, spreading awareness, upholding legality, calling on the institutions and various social actors to honour their responsibilities, and also drawing the general public's awareness to contractual forms of work in the logistics sector and thus hindering the replication of certain damaging practices in other workplaces and regions. The emergence of spaces such as the Assembly of Women of the Migrant Coordination reflects dynamics typical of community unionism (Warren, 2005), where union demands and social battles intertwine, producing new forms of transversal solidarity.

The last point is the class recomposition found in collective, self-organised, solidarity-building processes arising from specific needs and creating common goals (Magazzini and Desille, 2023). In Naima's words:

> Look, we talked, we struggled, we did everything for everyone. If we pick a fruit, it will be for everyone, not just for the foreigners, just for those who were out fighting... no! It's a struggle that is always for everyone. Now if we win something at the next hearing it will be for everyone! For all women, Italian, Moroccan, Chinese, Bangladeshi, from all countries! We hope we will [win], the important thing is that we did it, that you do it. And it is done for our generation, maybe one day another Italian woman who has seen our

> struggle will do it too! Because now they also call us to talk to us also from other places and they tell us: "Look, we have to work on a Saturday, we also do nine hour days, and we get 800 euros". And I say: "Look, we've been there, I've been there! So have courage! Come on, it can be done! Come on, let's keep going!" [Naima, Contract worker at YNAP].

On the one hand, a complex and inclusive intersectional class consciousness (Tapia and Alberti, 2019; Borello, 2025) emerges (Olivieri, 2012): class recomposition is not purely economic but brings together gender, legal status, ethnicity and family conditions; on the other hand, experiences of self-organization are consolidating, giving voice to precarious workers and immigrants "considered unorganizable" (Però, 2020). Furthermore the experiences of these female immigrant workers become a point of reference for other groups, including native ones, that is encouraging the creation of "communities of struggle" (Però, 2020).

In the current context characterised by the general devaluation of labour, the progressive impoverishment of the working class, and a tendency towards isolation and the breaking up of social and community ties, these subaltern subjects have taken up the tools of political and trade union self-organisation and, starting from the awareness of their social position and from their own workplaces, have recognised their collective needs and common interests and through making wide-reaching and interlocking demands have contributed to the recomposition of a complex, intersectional and inclusive class consciousness (Oliveri, 2012), partially overlapping the "class recomposition" and "community dimension" frames.

8. Conclusions

Especially in specific labour sectors such as that of so-called "supply chain capitalism", personal differences and non-economic factors – such as legal status, gender, family role, age, and so on – are often recuperated and exploited in dynamics of labour-force hierarchization. Anna Tsing (2009) defines these tendencies as "phenomena of super-exploitation" that can be identified by taking into account the "social locus" of individual subjects, including the vulnerabilities and systemic discriminations of the various intertwined axes of their positioning, and by desingularizing the conditions that characterise their existence and experiences inside and outside of the workplace.

It was thus essential to start from an in-depth reflection on the social position of the women workers participating in the research, from the words they used and the narrated experiences, representations, and constructions of meaning reported and elaborated in the interviews.

The analysis of the research revealed that these immigrant women workers – almost all of them mothers – had common living and working conditions despite the fact that they were in different towns and workplaces. It also emerged that they had common responses to the specific difficulties of their labour exploitation. The workers themselves grasped the commonality of the conditions they experienced as immigrant women workers, redefining them in their structural and systemic character. Collectivising these vulnerabilities and difficulties, they identified – perhaps also due to a lack of real alternatives – a possible solution in the construction of two trade union disputes.

The resulting trade union disputes went beyond the workplace to involve the active participation of various groups present in their socio-territorial context (associations, collectives, social centres, and so on), traversing different struggles and going beyond purely trade union demands.

The ethnography and the analysis of these two processes of mobilisation reveal that these collective and self-organised experiences generated spaces of mutual care, the recognition of the agency of social groups that are often inferiorised, such as immigrant labour, and personal and collective empowerment and emancipation

with a broad transformative potential. Although unstable and precarious, these experiences were concrete examples of individual and collective reinforcement and empowerment. In fact, there has been a collective and individual transformative process on the grounds of which women starting from their struggle in warehouses were able to transform their role in family and social life.

Through their active participation in trade union disputes, the interviewees contributed to a process of class recomposition to become a class *per sè*, building tools for their association, new spaces of confrontation and action, multi-situated claims, new forms of production and social reproduction, "new citizens", and, especially, they built a "community of struggle" (Però, 2020), with form of "contentious solidarity": a shrinking civic space and its contestation by civil society, in solidarity with the struggles of immigrants (Della Porta and Steinhilper, 2022). Actually, it is worth noting the increased (or emerging) participation of unionized workers in promoting justice and equity in the local community, raising awareness, defending legality, calling on institutions and various social actors to assume their responsibilities, and also raising public awareness of employment contracts in the logistics sector, thus preventing the replication of certain harmful practices in other workplaces and regions.

In conclusion, the empirical findings related to our research questions indicate that the mobilizations of workers at Yoox Net-A-Porter and Italpizza cannot be framed within the analytical model of "new" social movements, which conceptualizes them as cultural movements. On the contrary, industrial production – though no longer concentrated in the Fordist factory but reorganized through a more "lean" model – remains the central space of social production (Montagna, 2012). Consequently, even the actors who organized the struggles are not the "traditional" confederal/institutional(ized) union structures, but they can be defined in terms of "Indie Unions". Therefore, the conflict between capital and labour continues to serve as one of the primary drivers of collective action. Moreover, in the two mobilizations analyzed, there emerged, albeit partially, the development of a frame capable of uniting others by intersecting diverse instances, aggregating coalitions of different actors and identities united by a commonality of converging interests (ibidem) – workers, both native and immigrant, women and men, belonging to various social groups within the socio-territorial context. In doing so, they created a kind of "community of struggle" (Però, 2020), as a consequence of the action and the emergence of a "Community-Based Unionism" (Martín-Díaz and Roca, 2021; McBride and Greenwood, 2009; Warren, 2005; also Alcalde-González et al., 2024; Moody, 1997; Scopes, 1992).

Questions that should be explored in future research in light of these results include the following: differences between female migrant workers modalities of struggle and the mostly male-dominated struggles; weaknesses of the logistic supply chain workers leveraged to get gains; the master frame (injustice?) that different social movements shared to shape a collective actor at the local level; the impact of the described experiences of activism and struggle on the biographical and work trajectories of these women in the long term; the effect of these disputes on gender relations and relations between generations within the nuclear family; and the impact of socialisation within political and trade union practices on the extended family and friendship networks of the interviewees, including the members of these networks living in their countries of origin.

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