

Futures in the History of Deindustrialisation

edited by

Liliosa Azara, Eloisa Betti, Stefan Moitra,
Francesca Sanna, Christian Wicke



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Industrial Sunset, Ecological Sunrise. The Italian Workers' Movement Between Deindustrialisation and Environmentalism

Gilda Zazzara

A Double Challenge to the Future of Labour

The projection towards a new and better future is the backbone of the modern world¹. Embraced by the workers' movement, it became a foundational axis of the revolutionary utopias of a liberated humanity. According to Enzo Traverso, this projection disintegrated in an epochal transition that began in the late 1970s and culminated in the end of real socialism, leaving behind "a world without a visible, thinkable, or imaginable future"².

On a different scale, the fate of millions of workers in the capitalist West during this transition was a much more prosaic disintegration of their own "horizons of expectation". Deindustrialisation was, in the materiality of lived experience, the end of the idea of a future built by the workers in mines and factories, represented by their mass organisations as the class repository of power and knowledge capable of transforming society and dominating nature. In a short time, masses of people were transformed from messianic and Promethean subjects into "redundancies", social and health costs, and victims of ineluctable progress. In this sense, the resistance against industrial restructuring and closures was also a struggle defending an idea of a "future past".

The triggering of the crisis of Fordist society – of which the 1973 oil crisis is often seen as the symbolic inauguration date – coincided with, and was inter-

¹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 1985 (original edition in German 1979).

² Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia. Marxism, History, and Memory*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2016, p. XIV.

twined with, the emergence of another questioning of the future, as a new and better time than the present. I refer to the environmental issue as the problem of the limits to growth, the disruption of ecosystems and the very survival of humanity, which was simultaneously taking shape both in elite economic-scientific circles and in social protest movements from below³. In the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, a catastrophic vision of modern industrialism came to the fore.

The link between deindustrialisation and ecological crisis, more precisely between the social perception of these distinct but in fact intertwined phenomena, has not yet been fully explored by historical studies. In this article, I will try to address the impact that the two scenarios – which I would metaphorically describe as the sunset of Fordist industrialism and the sunrise of ecologism – had on the labour movement in a country late to the industrial revolution but “early to deindustrialisation”, namely Italy⁴.

My research question concerns how Italian workers and trade unions participated in the formation of an awareness of environmental issues in late modernity, not only through struggles to defend health in the workplace but also by responding to the dual challenge of deindustrialisation and the systemic critique of ecological thinking. These two challenges produced a disorientating rupture – to put it in Koselleck’s terms – in the link between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” that had forged the culture of the labour movement, in which the past of limitless development of the productive forces – questioned by both the industrial and environmental crises – projected into the future the possibility of new social relations.

The bewilderment generated by the rapidity of this change in the “thinkable future” is well captured in the words of Vittorio Foa, one of the most brilliant and cultured trade unionists of the Italian labour movement. In 1997, he went to visit the vast steelworks in the Bagnoli neighbourhood of Naples, which had been closed for some time. Said steelworks, established in 1904 as part of the

³ For an overview, see Gary Haq, Alistair Paul, *Environmentalism since 1945*, London, Routledge, 2011. For the Italian case, Mario Diani, *Green Networks. A Structural Analysis of the Italian Environmental Movement*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1995; Luigi Piccioni, *Forty Years Later. The Reception of the Limits to Growth in Italy, 1971-1974*, Brescia, Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, 2012.

⁴ Aris Accornero, *Ancora il lavoro, conversazione con Patrizio Di Nicola*, Roma, Ediesse, 1995, p. 115. On the features of Italian deindustrialisation, see Roberta Garruccio, *Deindustrialization, the Restructuring of Political Space, and Voting Behaviors in Italy at the Turn of the Century*, in Marc Lazar (ed.), *Left. Crisis and Perspectives in Contemporary Ages*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2024, pp. 279-296.

very first “extraordinary plan” for the industrialisation of Southern Italy, expanded enormously during the years immediately following the Second World War. By the end of the 1970s the plant employed some 8,000 people, yet soon its inexorable decline began. Seeing that “relic of industrial archaeology”, Foa wrote the following:

Those new large-scale factories had made a significant impact on me: they represented the future. The full cycle of production [of steel] symbolised a new industrialised Italy. I was convinced that this was to be the model for Italian modernity for at least three hundred years thereafter. And yet now, after only thirty or forty years, it represents the past. The silence shrouding the Bagnoli works shows me the timeline of modern history in a very different light⁵.

This quotation offers a very good idea of the dismay felt by the trade union movement as it observed the breakup of the factories of heavy industry, until then the very core of the workers’ movement. It highlights the link between the process of deindustrialisation and the sense of loss of the future. Continuing his argument, however, Foa pinned his hopes on the dawn of a different future, one in which “Naples returns to the dignity of nature”, thanks to a grand reclamation and renewal project promoted by the Communist Party mayor⁶. This new future, which would compensate for the loss of a burnt-out one, has not materialised: the pollutant ruins of the factory are still there and the city is the epitome of poor, precarious and sick work.

Trade Unions and the Environment

Feminism and environmentalism are two “new” social movements that have challenged the form and content of the “traditional” workers’ movement from the 1970s onwards. However, while “trade union feminism” has become a subject of historical enquiry, the same cannot be said of “trade union environmen-

⁵ Vittorio Foa, *Passaggi*, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, pp. 147-148.

⁶ Ibid.

talism⁷. It was only recently that the history of the battle for health and safety in the workplace, which for some time has been the subject of analysis by labour and industrial relations scholars, was in fact framed as contributing to the broader environmental struggle⁸.

Nevertheless, the directions taken by “labour environmentalism” or – in the words of Giorgio Nebbia, Italy’s foremost ecologist – the “ecology of workers” within the stormy context of deindustrialisation, have yet to be explored to any significant degree⁹. The hypothesis that the trade union organisations (that is, the three largest national union confederations – the Cgil, the Cisl and the Uil), when faced with what may be termed “job blackmail”, completely forsook any concern for environmental matters and blindly adopted productivist positions completely subordinate to the interests of capitalism, is not at all persuasive. Firstly, it fails to convince for the simple reason that it is based on a monolithic view of the trade unions, which on the contrary are pluralistic, complex and layered organisations. With regard to environmental issues, the positions of the unions’ leaders have not always been in line with those of the rank and file. Local unions have not always seen eye-to-eye with national organisations, as well as industrial federations (e.g. chemical and metalworkers unions) themselves characterised by a variety of different positions on environmental matters. Again, industrial federations were more concerned with protecting jobs, their view of environmental issues more closely linked to the workplace than the union’s territorial structures. If one then considers the question of shop-floor militancy, there have been cases where the unions’ delegates have defended harmful and obsolete production, while in other cases they have strongly voiced their hopes

⁷ Fiamma Lussana, *Il femminismo sindacale degli anni Settanta*, in “Studi Storici”, 2012, n. 1, pp. 75-117; Giovanna Cereseto, Anna Frisone, Laura Varlese, *Non è un gioco da ragazze. Femminismo e sindacato: i Coordinamenti donne Flm*, Roma, Ediesse, 2009.

⁸ Giorgio Nebbia, *Limiti alla crescita e lotte per l’ambiente*, in Luca Baldissara (ed.), *Le radici della crisi. L’Italia tra gli anni Sessanta e Settanta*, Roma, Carocci, 2001, pp. 261-283; Stefania Barca, *Bread and Poison. The Story of Labor Environmentalism in Italy, 1968-1998*, in Christopher Sellers, Joseph Melling (eds.), *Dangerous Trade. Histories of Industrial Hazards across a Globalizing World*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2012, pp. 126-139. The centrality of the health issue for Labour History is noticeable in Stefano Gallo, Fabrizio Loreto, *Storia del lavoro nell’Italia contemporanea*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2023.

⁹ Giorgio Nebbia, *Breve storia della contestazione ecologica*, in “Quaderni di Storia Ecologica”, 1994, n. 4, now in Id., *Scritti di storia dell’ambiente e dell’ambientalismo 1970-2013*, ed. by Luigi Piccioni, Brescia, Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, 2014, pp. 188-227. An exception is the recent essay by Valerio Caruso, *I caschi gialli di Bagnoli e l’ambiente, fra dissonanze e convergenze*, in “Altronovecento”, 2024, n. 49, <https://altronovecento.fondazionemicheletti.eu/i-caschi-gialli-di-bagnoli-e-lambiente-fra-dissonanze-e-convergenze/> (27-05-2026).

for a “just transition”¹⁰. The role that women – both as workers and as “working-class women” – have had in leading environmental justice protests, without this dividing them from unionised workers, also needs to be more fully investigated¹¹.

Nevertheless, one must constantly bear in mind the fact that the trade unions find themselves in a different position from other players fighting to protect the natural environment. Groups and committees formed by political activists and citizens may set a series of non-negotiable aims designed to safeguard human communities and eco-systems against economic exploitation. Trade unions, on the other hand, representing those who have to work for a living, cannot embrace such aims without considering them part of the problem of the production of goods and services, of the distribution of wealth and risks, and of the quality of employment and of growth.

Undoubtedly, one effect that the 1970s economic crisis has had on the unions has been that of strengthening, in the words of the political ecologist Joan Martínez-Alier, an “eco-efficientist” or “ecological modernisation” perspective, to the detriment of more radical, systemic views. The same scholar, however, has highlighted how the diverse currents of environmentalism have many things in common, suggesting that any rigid, unyielding views should be avoided¹². Labour’s eco-modernism could be seen as an initial response to an unforeseen and unprecedented range of problems, and a step on the road to a broader consciousness of “labour as a key dimension of the material and cultural interchange between human and non-human nature”¹³.

Since the outbreak of the crisis in the mid-1970s, women and men active in the labour movement have been forced to combine the priority demand to se-

¹⁰ It is worth recalling that the concept of Just Transition was formulated by the US trade unions: Tony Mazzocchi, *A Superfund for Workers*, in “Earth Island Journal”, 1993-94, n. 1, pp. 40-41; Jim Young, *Just Transition: A New Approach to Jobs v. Environment*, in “WorkingUSA”, 1998, n. 2, pp. 42-48; Dimitris Stevis, Romain Felli, *Global Labour Unions and Just Transition to a Green Economy*, in “International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics”, 2015, n. 1, pp. 29-43.

¹¹ I am thinking for example of the role of women in the case of the Genoa steel industry (see Donatella Alfonso, Patrizia Avagnina, *Romanza popolare. Cornigliano, una storia corale*, Genova, De Ferrari, 2006) and the Manfredonia petrochemical (see Giulia Malavasi, *Manfredonia. Storia di una catastrofe continuata*, Milano, Jaca Book, 2018).

¹² Joan Martínez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation*, Cheltenham, UK-Northampton, MA, Edward Elgar, 2002.

¹³ Stefania Barca, *Ecologies of Labour. An Environmental Humanities Approach*, in Silvio Cristiano (ed.), *Through the Working Class. Ecology and Society Investigated Through the Lens of Labour*, Venezia, Edizioni Ca’ Foscari, 2018, p. 26.

cure their jobs for the future with new constraints arising from the relationship between industrial work and environmental commons. It was not an easy road, but it is worth recognising that since then trade union proposals have begun to take account of the wider environmental impacts of development. In terms of general policies, this endeavour was pursued in three main ways.

The first was the call for a regional economic rebalancing of Northern and Southern Italy: this was not merely a question of prioritising employment in the poorer South, but also of relieving pressure on the more industrialised areas of the North, where urban and environmental degradation were by then clearly visible. The second approach was that of trying to ensure the continuity of demands regarding health and the environment through the adoption of new bargaining tools. The so-called “right to information” regarding corporate policy was designed to offer some form of control not only over company reorganisation plans, but also over the environmental implications of investments, and over the outsourcing procedures whereby companies tried to rid themselves of the more harmful forms of production by entrusting such to non-unionised subcontractors. The third direction was that of economic planning policies targeting a “new development model”¹⁴. While it is true that since the late 1970s, trade union demands focused on the preservation of existing jobs and the creation of new ones, it is equally true to say that they could not avoid expressing their views on how to produce in order to guarantee a future for work, in a new context of not only global competition, but also environmental compatibility. The unions proposed that the more polluting industries be reconverted to the production of goods having a reduced environmental impact. Examples include the reversion of basic chemical plants to the production of more refined chemicals, of hot-working to cold-working steel facilities, of aluminium refining to aluminium recasting, and of fossil fuels to nuclear power. Today, those proposals appear clearly insufficient if the ecological crisis is to be averted, although at that time they revealed an awareness of problems previously largely unnoticed.

None of the aforesaid “alternative futures to deindustrialisation” seem to have been achieved in today’s Italy. Southern regions are among the poorest in Europe, where the decline of large-scale industry has left enormous toxic ruins. The Taranto steelworks, which despite having been radically downsized, still

¹⁴ Luigi Mariucci, *Sindacato e lotte operaie nella crisi economica: dal piano del lavoro al nuovo modello di sviluppo*, in “Politica del diritto”, 1975, n. 4, pp. 457-516.

To Whom Does the Future Belong? Deindustrialisation, Vocational Retraining and Social Difference in the Ruhr Area, 1960s-1970s

Jan Kellershohn

Introduction: Deindustrialisation and Qualification

In May 1972, European specialists in adult education – scientists, trade unionists, politicians and teachers – gathered at the European Centre in Kirchberg, Luxembourg. At this conference on the “vocational training and the professional advancements of adults”, Jean Capelle, President of the European Commission on Culture and Education, gave the opening speech. He focussed on the relationship between technological, social and economic change and vocational training and qualifications of adults:

Without recapitulating the study of these requirements, we can quickly remind ourselves that they consist of a radical change of attitude towards knowledge in this period of vocational training. Actually, this is about substituting a more or less blocked situation with a situation in evolution; we want to develop curiosity, creativity, a mood for initiatives and a feeling of responsibility and solidarity. We accept a calculated incompleteness, so that curiosity and the consciousness of incompleteness raise necessary motivations for the pursuit of effort beyond the normal consecration of studies and developing interest in autodidactic self-education¹.

¹ Jean Capelle, La formation et le perfectionnement professionnels des adultes dans une politique de formation continue. Opening Speech on the European Conference on Adult Vocational Training in Luxembourg, 15-19 May 1972, in Archives Nationales du Monde du Travail, Roubaix, 2007 038 037, pp. 6-7. All translations by the author.

continues to threaten the health of the local population and the surrounding environment, is a powerful symbol of “noxious deindustrialization”¹⁵. Workplaces are less harmful to workers’ health in terms of their exposure to hazardous substances, but nevertheless Italy holds the unenviable record of being the leading European nation in terms of workplace fatalities, which affect above all the nation’s smaller enterprises. Industrial pollution has been reduced as a result of the dismantling of major industries; nevertheless, it continues in a more insidious, uncontrolled manner in smaller companies and at those vast, former industrial sites still to be decontaminated¹⁶. As was observed many years ago, “productive decentralisation has been one of the strongest factors underlying environmental pollution and the abandonment of all protection of workers’ physical well-being”¹⁷. Italy is one of the least active nations when it comes to countering the climate crisis through investing in renewable energies, waste recycling and sustaining environmental research.

Workers’ environmentalism has reached the point of recognising human beings as part of the ecosystems, but not fully their dependence upon those systems; and no eco-unionism model has been established that recognises people’s lives and labour as being equally dependent on the protection of the biosphere. Nevertheless, the rights that an ecologically-minded trade union in tune with the twenty-first century should fight for – the “right to participate in decision making related to environmental conditions in the workplace”, the “right to environmental information”, the “right to refuse to perform dangerous or environmentally hazardous tasks” – are certainly not something new to Italian trade unionism, but part and parcel of its history¹⁸.

An assessment of the present outcomes of trade union environmental policies is beyond the scope of this paper, which aims rather to begin to examine the political and cultural contexts that have shaped those proposals. This reflection demands enquiry as to how the processes of deindustrialisation have

¹⁵ Lorenzo Feltrin, Alice Mah, David Brown, *Noxious Deindustrialization: Experiences of Precarity and Pollution in Scotland’s Petrochemical Capital*, in “Politics and Space”, 2022, n. 4, pp. 950-969.

¹⁶ As argued in Pier Paolo Poggio, Marino Ruzzenenti, *Primavera ecologica mon amour. Industria e ambiente cinquant’anni dopo*, Milano, Jaca Book, 2020.

¹⁷ Sergio Bologna, *Emarginazione e ambientalismo*, in “Primo Maggio”, 1987-1988, n. 27-28, pp. 36-45: 44.

¹⁸ Begonia María-Tomé Gil, Agustín González, *Moving Towards Eco-unionism. Reflecting the Spanish Experience*, in Nora Räthzel, David Uzzell (eds.), *Trade Unions in the Green Economy: Working for the Environment*, London, Routledge, 2012, pp. 64-77.

undermined the hope of a leading role for labour in the construction of a world that is not only more just but also less polluted.

A “Miracle” of Natures

Labour historians have given ample coverage to one of the key factors in “the Italian economic miracle” witnessed during the years following the end of the Second World War, that is the availability of cheap labour, mainly consisting of workers from Southern Italy who had migrated to the cities of the North in search of work. What they have relatively neglected is the value of reproductive labour and of the extra-human work done by rivers, seas, the land and other “cheap natures”¹⁹. This led to an underestimation of how the capitalist exploitation of workers’ labour was inextricably linked to the exploitation of natural resources and the non-industrial communities that depended on them. In a country without significant mineral resources, it was the governance of water, both as a source of energy and as a dumping ground, that first revealed the deep connection between environmental violence and class violence²⁰.

The Vajont disaster of 1963 is probably the first event in which the destructive consequences of forcing natural limits to meet the demands of “industrial development” were manifested in the full extent of socio-environmental injustice²¹. The landslide caused by the hydroelectric power station, which cost the lives of some 2,000 people, not only killed workers – as had previously happened in a litany of mining disasters – but obliterated an entire local community. It constituted a “genocide of the poor”, in the contemporary words of a lawyer who was one of the first to question the idea that the Vajont disaster had been a “natural” catastrophe²². The fears of local residents and of those workers employed by the construction companies concerned initially went unheeded,

¹⁹ Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life. Ecology and Accumulation of the Capital*, London and New York, Verso, 2015.

²⁰ Giacomo Bonan, *Le acque agitate della patria. L’industrializzazione del Piave (1882-1966)*, Roma, Viella, 2020; Stefania Barca, *A “Natural” Capitalism. Water and the Making of the Italian Industrial Landscape*, in Marco Armiero, Marcus Hall (eds.), *Nature and History in Modern Italy*, foreword by Donald Worster, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2010, pp. 215-230; Piero Bevilacqua, *La terra è finita. Breve storia dell’ambiente*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2009.

²¹ Marco Armiero, *Vajont: The Political Ecology of an Unnatural Disaster*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2026.

²² Sandro Canestrini, *Vajont: genocidio di poveri*, Verona, Cierre, 2003 [1st ed. 1969].

and were then opposed using all means available²³. In 1963, Italy was too preoccupied with the pursuit of material well-being to be concerned with the plight of a mountain community, and the people of Vajont were “compensated” for their losses with the construction of a new industrial zone.

Nonetheless, it was in those very years that the foundations were laid for that “workers’ model of occupational safety and health” which in the political struggles of 1968-69 was to become one of the strongest instruments employed in the fight against the capitalistic organisation of labour and for a new quality of it. The contribution of students and of the country’s “new left” groups was to prove decisive; however, it was within specific trade union centres – Turin’s *Centro per la lotta contro la nocività del lavoro* (Centre for the struggle against the harmfulness of labour) and Rome’s *Centro ricerche e documentazione sui rischi e danni da lavoro* (Archives and Research Centre on labour risks and damages) – that a model of radical action to counter the “monetisation” of workers’ health was established²⁴. Extensive, broad battles resulted in a series of extraordinary contractual and legislative advances, driven significantly by the cooperation of works council delegates and militant-experts in the fields of medicine and epidemiology. That model of political struggle and wage bargaining did not stop at the workplace: protests at industrial toxicity extended to the questions of pollution in working-class districts, public health in general, and the quality of life in towns and cities. Accompanied by the slogan “from the factory to the local area”, expressing the pursuit of social-democratic reforms by Italy’s workers’ organisations, the trade unions began to lay the foundations for their own environmental policies.

Those years were characterised by the extensive circulation of new knowledge regarding the connection between industry, the environment and people’s health. As early as 1963, the Milan-based publisher Feltrinelli translated what some consider the “bible” of environmentalism, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*²⁵. It was in the 1970s, however, that Italy witnessed the introduction of political

²³ Tina Merlin, *Sulla pelle viva. Come si costruisce una catastrofe. Il caso del Vajont*, Verona, Cierre, 1997 [1st ed. 1983]; Lucia Vastano, *Vajont, l’onda lunga*, Milano, Sinbad Press, 2003; Piero Ruzzante, Antonio Martini, *L’acqua non ha memoria. Storia salvata del disastro del Vajont*, Milano, UTET, 2023.

²⁴ Francesco Carnevale, Alberto Baldasseroni, *A History of Union Struggles for Control of the Work Environment in Italy*, in “International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health”, 2005, n. 11, pp. 6-11; Michael R. Reich, Rose H. Goldman, *Italian Occupational Health: Concepts, Conflicts, Implications*, in “American Journal of Public Health”, 1984, n. 9, pp. 1031-1041.

²⁵ Rachel Carson, *Primavera silenziosa*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1963.

ecology, through the work of, among others, Giulio Alfredo Maccacaro, editor of the journal “Sapere” and of the book series *Medicina e potere* (Medicine and Power) published, once again, by Feltrinelli²⁶. The American Marxist biologist Barry Commoner, a convinced believer in the “vital alliance for survival” between workers’ and environmental movements, was a highly influential figure for the Italian left²⁷. Moreover, the work of the Communist physician Laura Conti was specifically addressed to the working class which she suggested should see itself not “as a different class from others, but [...] as a species faced with the global nature of the world”²⁸. The assumption underlying this view of reality was that capitalism was an intrinsically anti-ecological system. The “ecological fraud” lay in claiming that environmental problems could be resolved within the framework of a market society²⁹.

These reflections tended to circulate to a greater extent in political and cultural circles than in strictly trade union spheres, although there was considerable mobility of militants between the two realms. One context where the arguments put forward by political ecologists got through to grassroots union representatives were the “lecture courses” organised in Italy’s universities as from 1974, as part of the “150 hours” paid leave granted to workers wishing to further their education. The question of occupational health and safety was one of the most hotly-debated topics witnessed in this mass working-class adult education experiment³⁰.

The conference “Health protection in the workplace” held by Cgil, Cisl and Uil in 1972 was one of the most significant moments in which workers could share their respective experiences and thoughts. 800 people attended the conference, including works council delegates from all over Italy, union leaders, occupational physicians and other “health experts”. While workplace struggles

²⁶ Alberto Baldasseroni, Fabio Capacci, Franco Carnevale, *La salute e la sicurezza dei lavoratori in Italia. Una prospettiva storica a partire dal testo “Classe e salute” del 1973 di Giulio A. Maccacaro*, Pisa, Pacini, 2024.

²⁷ Barry Commoner, Virginio Bettini, *Ecologia e lotte sociali: ambiente, popolazione, inquinamento*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1976, p. 201; Giovanni Berlinguer, *The Contribution of Barry Commoner to the Renewal of the Italian Left*, in “New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy”, 1998, n. 1, pp. 65-68.

²⁸ Laura Conti, *Che cos’è l’ecologia. Capitale, lavoro e ambiente*, Milano, Mazzotta, 1981 [1st ed. 1977], p. 8.

²⁹ Dario Paccino, *L’imbroglio ecologico. L’ideologia della natura*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1972.

³⁰ Martin Yarnit, *150 Hours – Italy’s Experiment in Mass Working Class Adult Education*, in Jane L. Thompson (ed.), *Adult Education for a Change*, London, Hutchinson, 1980, pp. 192-223.

represented the key theme, the conference papers also reveal the emergence of a broader vision of ecological issues³¹.

In his introductory speech, Ruggero Ravenna from the confederation's secretariat stated that the environment could no longer be considered merely "that place where productive activities are conducted, but necessarily also constitutes the human condition of workers and citizens in their relationship with the machine, with the means of production, and with the consequences thereof within society"³². The environmental policies that the trade unions were to promote, in conjunction with the local authorities, included combatting building-industry speculation, industrial pollution and consumerism.

This argument was taken up again, in his conference conclusions, by Elio Giovannini, one of the most important representatives of the "union left", who since the late 1950s had initiated a self-critique of "productivist" values³³. In criticising "bourgeois environmentalism", Giovannini stated that "the fight for a new ecological balance is not a hobby, and neither can it be considered a topic of conversation at Rotary Club meetings; it is, on the contrary, the identification of a series of specific responsibilities"³⁴. In keeping with his workerist approach, Giovannini saw the factory as the source of harmfulness, and thus as the key place from which to combat that harm. Both speeches – by Ravenna and Giovannini – reiterated the union's support for the idea of progress, where this progress was to be led by the working class.

While union leaders limited any mention of environmental issues to within certain specific boundaries – its ascription to the world of production, in the belief that "industrial democracy" would be able to resolve said question –, conference delegates offered a number of wider reflections on the matter. For example, some pointed out that workers were affected by environmental degradation outside of the workplace as well, during their leisure time when trying to enjoy the peace and quiet of their natural surroundings. One delegate from the cement works in Castellammare di Stabia – a large industrial town on the outskirts of Naples, where large-scale protests were ongoing regarding the environmental conditions inside the plant – denounced the fact that "we've got beaches in our

³¹ *Fabbrica e salute. Atti della conferenza nazionale Cgil-Cisl-Uil "La tutela della salute nell'ambiente di lavoro", Rimini 27-30 marzo 1972*, Roma, Seusi, 1972.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³³ Fabrizio Loreto, *L'«anima bella» del sindacato. Storia della sinistra sindacale 1960-1980*, Roma, Ediesse, 2005.

³⁴ *Fabbrica e salute*, cit., p. 218.

town that workers cannot enjoy because the surrounding sea is polluted: and so we are fighting, and will continue to fight, in order that the Local Council takes the appropriate action to ensure that those beaches are rendered usable by working people”³⁵. A delegate from the Bank of Italy’s Central Workshop in Rome brought people’s attention to “the world we live in outside of the workplace”: an unhealthy world from the point of view of the air people breathe, the water they use and drink, and the food they eat. The main priorities included the promotion of “a large-scale awareness campaign requiring all trade unions together with the entire labour force to protect and safeguard environmental heritage”³⁶.

Grassroots militants involved in disputes at factory level posed questions about the actions that companies, under pressure from environmental protests and from local institutions, had begun to take to mitigate pollution. One delegate from the power station in Piacenza argued that American green-washing policies would soon be introduced in Italy as well, whereby “those who caused the ecological imbalance in the first place are now trying to utilise said imbalance to their own advantage, by getting society to pay the bill for the damage caused, and above all by getting working people to pay for the perpetrators’ misdeeds”³⁷. Alongside an ecology of the workers, an “ecology of the employers” was taking shape, using the rhetoric of environmental responsibility as a pretext to downsize companies, with a double toll on the workers: polluted and laid off³⁸.

However, the delegates’ speeches also expressed the opposite idea, namely that environmental improvements should be promoted and supported by the workers, so that they do not become an instrument of employment blackmail but, on the contrary, of employment consolidation and growth. The union representative from the Montedison works in Castellanza, Lombardy, stated that “installing water treatment plants and making workplaces safe means safeguarding our health and that of our children, and protecting jobs as well”³⁹. In his view, environmental improvements would have forced companies to maintain high standards of competitiveness in order to recover the costs of the investments made, thus avoiding the urge to recoup profits through the lower labour

³⁵ Ibid., p. 359.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 137.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 595.

³⁸ Salvatore Romeo, *L'altra faccia del benessere. Una storia ambientale nell'Italia contemporanea (1950-1979)*, Roma, Carocci, 2024, p. 219 ff.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 104-105.

costs of delocalisation or outsourcing production to areas “where the working class remains weak”⁴⁰.

There were already signs in various parts of Italy that outsourcing of production was to be a response from the business class to the growing environmental concerns. The Montedison delegate from the Spinetta Marengo plant in Piedmont, for example, made specific reference to this fact: “a shop producing dichromate was closed, and its production was moved to a small factory in the province of Genoa, in which trade unions were absent”⁴¹.

During those years, workers from factories across Italy went on strike against hazardous forms of production, exercising a new right, that of not endangering their own health or that of the local community. Workers protested in Tuscany, in the small town of Scarlino near the Maremma coast, against the dumping of titanium dioxide into the nearby sea; at Porto Marghera, in the Veneto region, against sulphur dioxide poisoning; in the dye factories, such as Ipca at Ciriè, in Piedmont, there were protests as a result of the fact that workers were urinating blood due to exposure to aromatic amines⁴². In 1976, the works council at the Montedison plant in Priolo, Sicily, declared a strike against the announced construction of new aniline production plants, which was deemed to be an investment out of keeping with an increase in jobs and with depollution and maintenance requirements⁴³. In the same year, Medicina Democratica (Democratic Medicine) was founded, an association that would go on to coordinate grass-roots movements challenging toxicity both within and beyond the workplace. Among its founders were workers from Montedison in Castellanza, who held much more radical views on environmental and health issues than the National Federation of Chemical Workers⁴⁴.

The classic conflict between capital and labour, between the exploited and the exploiter, had begun to intertwine with the conflict between “the polluter

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 162.

⁴² Flavio Agresti, *Una bella pagina di storia. La lotta contro i “fanghi rossi” della Montedison di Scarlino (1971-1988)*, Napoli, Iod, 2023; Gianni Moriani, *Nocività in fabbrica e nel territorio*, Verona, Bertani, 1974; Pierpaolo Benedetto, Graziano Masselli, Ugo Spagnoli *et al.*, *La fabbrica del cancro. L’Ipca di Ciriè*, Torino, Einaudi, 1977; Tonino Campagna, *Smantellare la fabbrica dei tumori*, in “Conquiste del lavoro”, 1973, n. 51-52, pp. 36-39.

⁴³ Consiglio di fabbrica dello stabilimento Montedison di Priolo, *Disprezzo per la comunità locale*, in “Conquiste del lavoro”, 1976, n. 66, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Elena Davigo, *Il Consiglio di fabbrica della Montedison di Castellanza (1969-1982)*, in “Medicina Democratica”, 2016, n. 227-230, pp. 15-46.

and the polluted”, putting the workers in an unprecedented and difficult situation⁴⁵. Labour’s future could no longer ignore this.

The Seveso Disaster: Nothing Will Ever Be the Same Again

The “Seveso disaster” of 1976 was a turning point in the acknowledgement that industrial risk went far beyond the confines of the factory and the health of the workers, investing the sphere of reproduction of human and non-human life not only in the present but also in the future. It was an accident of such severity that reopening the factory even under new safety conditions was unimaginable: deindustrialisation was in this case the only possible response to the trauma that affected the community and local ecosystem.

The accident, known by the name of the worst-affected locality, occurred at the Icmesa factory, a chemical company not far from Milan⁴⁶. A fault in one of its plants resulted in dioxin leaking and forming a cloud over the surrounding, densely-populated towns. The dioxin’s effects initially visibly manifested in skin problems affecting children living in the area, alongside the deaths of numerous animals and plants. Scientists were already well aware of the severe risks to human health associated with dioxin, whereas local citizens and, above all, the company’s workers, were not. Icmesa had only established a company medical service a year prior to the disaster⁴⁷. The fact that people were not mindful of the precise hazards of production did not mean that they were unaware of their exposure to risk. In 1971, an Icmesa delegate reported that in reply to requests for environmental improvements, the company – owned by a Swiss multinational – responded by “constantly threatening to close workshops”⁴⁸.

For a full week following the incident, workers continued to be sent into the plant to work. The company was forced to break its silence on the nature of the leaked substance by, among other things, the strike by the plant’s workers who had, from the day of the incident itself, demanded details of events. Theirs was

⁴⁵ Nebbia, *Breve storia della contestazione ecologica*, cit.

⁴⁶ Bruno Ziglioli, *La mina vagante. Il disastro di Seveso e la solidarietà nazionale*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2010; Laura Centemeri, *Ritorno a Seveso. Il danno ambientale, il suo riconoscimento, la sua riparazione*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2006.

⁴⁷ Interview with Amedeo Argiuolo, in “Il Giorno”, 26 November 2023.

⁴⁸ *La salute in fabbrica. Atti del Convegno provinciale Cgil-Cisl-Uil, Milano 14-15 giugno 1971*, Roma, Stasind, 1971, pp. 202-221.

a genuine “environmental strike” based on the refusal to expose themselves to harm and their right to be informed of the nature of the risks they ran. It was not until then that the area most affected by the leak was evacuated and measures were taken to prevent further contamination.

The Seveso disaster shook Italy: industrial risks could no longer be considered limited to the factory workers. Italy’s institutions and political parties had to deal with the reality of the practical handling of the emergency and of a cynical, lacklustre corporate management. Environmental groups, on the other hand, had to deal with a local community intent upon returning to normality, even if this meant playing down the tragic nature of what had happened. The harm that the dioxin could cause pregnant women, together with the form that decontamination operations were to take, constituted the two main topics of a public debate often exasperated by fears, diffidence and misunderstanding. The role and voice of some 160 Seveso factory workers were disregarded. What is known is that they took part in decontamination operations, and that a trade union agreement found everyone an alternative to the loss of their livelihoods, either through their early retirement or their relocation elsewhere, given that it was quickly clear that Icmesa was never going to re-open, and indeed that it was destined to be treated as one large unit of hazardous waste. A photo reportage shows the workers demonstrating in favour of the clean-up operations: one highly symbolic shot portrays an older worker holding up a placard reading “multinationals need to respect local areas, not destroy them”⁴⁹. It is an iconic image of the framework of labour environmentalism at the time, coping with an unprecedented event in the long history of industrial accidents.

The people of Seveso obtained no justice for the disaster: the Swiss multinational, moreover, spent heavily to get out of a difficult predicament, and managed to emerge without suffering any legal consequences whatsoever. The radical left and the trade unions both pointed the finger at the company’s irresponsible, “colonial-like” conduct. Faced with the fact that “Italy appears [...] to be the ideal colony for whosoever wishes to set up highly-toxic forms of production characterised by significant levels of pollution”, the trade union demanded laws, regulations and authorities capable of controlling the hazardous nature of

⁴⁹ Associazione Archivio del Lavoro di Milano, Fondo Silvestre Loconsole, Manifestazione dei lavoratori Icmesa davanti alla direzione Roche per la bonifica della zona inquinata dalla fabbrica. Presidio. Lavoratori con cartelli, 1976.

production in conjunction with union representatives⁵⁰. The adopted line was in favour of the “democratic control of the territory”⁵¹. Following the Seveso disaster, a senior member of the Lombardy regional branch of the Cgil declared “the question of the protection of the workplace and external environments has to become the prime concern of the trade union movement, one that it should focus all of its energies on”⁵².

The Seveso disaster was undoubtedly an opportunity for the growth of all those involved in environmental conflict. The trade unions, however, focused on the question of the legislative control and regulation of the “thresholds” of acceptable pollution, without challenging the nature of production per se. Seveso led to the first-ever European Directive “on the major-accident hazards of certain industrial activities”, representing a key moment in the history of environmental legislation, despite the fact that in Italy laws to transpose the Directive were only passed by parliament some considerable time later⁵³. Nonetheless, the trade unions failed to embrace a broader, more systemic vision of the matter. They were still a long way from adopting Laura Conti’s perspective of “ecological consciousness” as a sense of the future, according to which “we are responsible to our descendants, just as we are responsible to our contemporaries”⁵⁴.

From the perspective of the Icmesa workers, the disaster ended with the disappearance of the factory, buried underground so that its corpse would no longer contaminate the soil. It was the extreme outcome of a life-threatening production that had been allowed to flourish uncontrolled for years, both from within and without, in a context of disinformation and disinterest on the part of the entire community. However, at the very moment when a broader demand for a future without harmful production could have opened up in the workers’ movement, the threat of a future without factories prevailed, weakening a path of political and cultural innovation.

⁵⁰ *Rilanciare le lotte per la salute e l’ambiente*, anon., in “Conquiste del lavoro”, 1976, n. 58, p. 18.

⁵¹ M.B., *Controllo democratico del territorio: esigenza vitale*, *ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

⁵² Silvestro Prota, *La salute all’ultimo posto*, in “Rassegna Sindacale”, 1976, n. 364, p. 34.

⁵³ André Laurent, Alexis Pey, Peter Gurtel, Bruno Fabiano, *A Critical Perspective on the Implementation of the EU Council Seveso Directives in France, Germany, Italy and Spain*, in “Process Safety and Environmental Protection”, 2021, n. 4, pp. 47-74; Laura Centemeri, *The Seveso Disaster Legacy*, in Armiero, Hall (eds.), *Nature and History in Modern Italy*, cit., pp. 195-211.

⁵⁴ Laura Conti, *Visto da Seveso. L’evento straordinario e l’ordinaria amministrazione*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1977, pp. 108-109.

Fragments of an Environmental Discourse

The 1970s economic crisis proved to be decisive in changing the unitary trade union's political line, which was made official – albeit not without a certain degree of discord and division among those concerned – by the *Assemblea nazionale dei consigli generali e dei delegati* (National Assembly of General Councils and Delegates) in February 1978⁵⁵. “Sacrifices” were offered – in particular in the form of limiting wage demands and accepting worker mobility within those companies undergoing restructuring operations – in exchange for involvement in expansive economic policies and industrial policies. By proposing this, the union joined the austerity discourse with its own proposals. The word “austerity” first appeared in public discourse in 1973-74, at the time that the Italian government was busy promulgating measures to limit energy consumption and to establish limits on the concession of credit, in its attempt to deal with the twin problems of excessive public deficit and high inflation. The Italian Communist Party's secretary suggested that austerity was not to be seen as an economic measure, but rather as a moral turning point, based on the recognition of “authentic values”, including a “healthy relationship with nature”⁵⁶.

The question of austerity led the unions to formulate their own proposal regarding the provision of energy. In addition to reducing energy consumption among the population (for example, by strengthening the rail network and making town centres traffic-free), this proposal targeted the diversification of energy sources: natural gas in Southern Italy brought in through the Algerian pipeline; Sardinian coal (adopting measures for the transportation and disposal of coal ash within “acceptable pollution limits”); water (“within the framework of a policy for the conservation of water resources”); solar energy; and above all, nuclear power⁵⁷.

The nuclear issue was to create a rift between the labour movement and the environmentalists. The unions supported the plan for the building of new nu-

⁵⁵ *Per una svolta di politica economica e di sviluppo civile e democratico. Il documento definitivo approvato dall'Assemblea nazionale*, in “Rassegna Sindacale”, 1978, n. 8, pp. XIX-XXX.

⁵⁶ Enrico Berlinguer, *Austerità occasione per trasformare l'Italia. Le conclusioni al convegno degli intellettuali (Roma, 15-1-77) e alla assemblea degli operai comunisti (Milano, 30-1-77)*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1977, p. 54. See also Saverio Luzzi, *Il virus del benessere. Ambiente, salute, sviluppo nell'Italia repubblicana*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2009; Miriam Golden, *Labor Divided. Austerity and Working-Class Politics in Contemporary Italy*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1988.

⁵⁷ *Per una svolta di politica economica e di sviluppo civile e democratico*, cit., p. XXIII and p. XXIV.

clear power plants, while going no further than offering certain rather generic recommendations regarding the “democratic control” exercised by local institutions concerning the siting of such plants and the disposal of radioactive waste⁵⁸. The anti-nuclear views expressed by a growing number of respected left-wing scientists went unheeded⁵⁹. Nonetheless, certain trade union organisations joined forces with the protest movements in those places concerned by construction projects⁶⁰.

The social concertation approach, however, failed to produce the desired results. In the 1980s, first the large private industrial groups (Fiat, Montedison, Alfa Romeo, Pirelli), and then giant state-owned industries, implemented drastic reorganisation schemes. Trade union agreements always sought an undertaking to create “alternative activities” to replace those forms of production being decommissioned. However, the concrete measures adopted consisted above all in the broad income support granted to those workers laid off, and in large-scale early retirement schemes for older workers who had lost their jobs⁶¹. The neo-corporatist approach flopped in the mid-1980s, as a new political context resulted in the collapse of the previous unity between the three major trade union confederations, and in bitter competition between Italy’s Socialist and Communist Parties.

It was not only the power relationship between the parties that had traditionally represented the working class that was transformed; the workers themselves had quickly changed, and were now older, and increasingly less combative and engaged. Young people now largely refused to accept factory work, in favour of more creative jobs that offered them greater freedom. This profound identity crisis meant that bargaining in regard to questions of health and safety patently declined, as was reported in the trade union circles themselves⁶². On the one

⁵⁸ Corrado Perna, *La sicurezza del nucleare non è in mano ai professori*, in “Rassegna Sindacale”, 1980, n. 4, pp. 9-10.

⁵⁹ Virginio Bettini, *Contro il nucleare. Ecologia e centrali nucleari*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1977.

⁶⁰ Catia Papa, *Energia, democrazia, sviluppo: il movimento antinucleare in Italia (1976-86)*, in “Meridiana”, 2020, n. 98, pp. 241-254. See also Elisabetta Bini, Giulia Iannuzzi and Igor Londero (eds.), *Nuclear Italy. An International History of Italian Nuclear Policies During the Cold War*, Trieste, Eut, 2017.

⁶¹ Gilda Zazzara, *The Role of Labor Relations in the Process of Deindustrialization in Italy’s Northwest*, in Stefan Berger, Stefano Musso, Christian Wicke (eds.), *Deindustrialisation in Twentieth-Century Europe: The Northwest of Italy and the Ruhr Region in Comparison*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 221-248.

⁶² *Ambiente e organizzazione del lavoro: bilancio critico e prospettive*, in “Quaderni di Rassegna Sindacale”, 1980, n. 83.

hand, it was recognised that in particular following the large-scale reform of the national health system in 1978, massive improvements had been made. On the other hand, it was clear for all to see that the focus on the safeguarding of jobs had resulted in less attention being paid to environmental problems. In 1988, only 27 out of a total of 2,000 company contracts made provision for any specific rules governing questions of occupational health and the safety of working environments⁶³.

The union leadership's attention remained very much focused on the factory and technical solutions to problems. It was still believed that by controlling the sites of production, the harmfulness of the output could be limited through abatement, recycling and waste reduction systems. However, less optimistic, more self-critical views slowly began to emerge. In 1986, during the course of the chemical industry's national trade union conference, the secretary expressed very strong views about the dangers of remaining exclusively focused on the workplace: "the real stumbling block so far, in regard to which we've failed to identify any suitable contractual instruments, has been that of the impact on the local area, on environmental questions in general, on questions, that is, of ecology"⁶⁴. The objectives he proposed included a closer relationship with the environmental movements, which were a hive of activity by that time. However, no representatives from grassroots movements or committees were invited to that conference, whereas numerous speeches were given by corporate representatives.

The process of deindustrialisation was weakening the unions' environmental interests while strengthening environmentalism⁶⁵. The profitability and sustainability crisis affecting heavy industry lent renewed vigour to, and increased the radical nature of, local movements battling against the nation's polluting industries. While the ecological movement was strongly linked to workers' demands in the 1970s, the situation was very different now: in many of Italy's "sacrifice zones", local communities demanded the closure for good of certain productive activities that had already been significantly downsized, leading to clashes

⁶³ Simonetta Renga, *Il modello sindacale di tutela della salute nei luoghi di lavoro dal dopoguerra ad oggi*, in "Rassegna di Medicina dei lavoratori", 1991, n. 23, pp. 444-462.

⁶⁴ Sergio Cofferati, *L'iniziativa ma anche i ritardi del sindacato sui temi dell'ambiente*, in *Chimica e ambiente. Sicurezza nel lavoro, tutela ecologica, modelli di analisi e di intervento*, Roma, Datanews, 1986, pp. 9-16: 11.

⁶⁵ Salvatore Adorno, Simone Neri Serneri (eds.), *Industria, ambiente e territorio. Per una storia ambientale delle aree industriali in Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009, p. 27.

between those communities on the one hand, and the unions and workers on the other. The labour-environment conflict shifted from historic urban concentrations to more peripheral or inland areas, characterised by peculiar natural features: the Alpine Bormida Valley, where the residents protested against the devastation of the river and the local economy by factories; the Venice lagoon, with protests against the sea-dumping of waste from the chemical industry; the seaside town of Manfredonia, in Puglia, where the state-owned petrochemical company tried to deal with the crisis by increasing the incineration of toxic waste⁶⁶. In the Tuscan area of Massa Carrara, where the local population had lived for years threatened by black clouds of pesticides rising up from the Farmoplant works, the unions were beaten in a local referendum in which the vast majority of people voted for the definitive closure of the plant rather than its proposed “reconversion”⁶⁷.

The arguments put forward by the trade unions, contrary to the positions adopted by environmentalist committees, included the protection of jobs at all costs, but also the idea that a toxic factory remained so even after decommissioning. The Italian map of “sites of national interest” for clean-up shows that this vision was not entirely without sense. Abandoned and derelict, many former industrial sites continue to pose a threat to the health of the local population and the natural environment, without anyone from the inside being able to challenge that⁶⁸. What was beginning to become clear, in the 1980s, was that, far from resolving environmental conflicts, deindustrialisation was often exacerbating them.

Rehearsals of Dialogue

The 1980s were not only years of tension between labour and the environment. During that decade the unions tried to renew or “reactivate” their own ecolog-

⁶⁶ Pier Paolo Poggio (ed.), *Una storia ad alto rischio. L'Acna e la Valle Bormida*, Torino, Edizioni Gruppo Abele, 1996; Michele Boato, *Arcipelago verde. Dal '68 all'ecologia... il passo è breve*, Venezia, Ecoistituto del Veneto, 2020; Malavasi, *Manfredonia*, cit.

⁶⁷ Carlo Gnetti, *Il referendum a Massa. Farmoplant? No grazie*, in “Nuova Rassegna Sindacale”, 1987, n. 41, pp. 16-18; Id., *Lavoro e ambiente ai ferri corti*, ibid., 1987, n. 43, pp. 21-23. See also Simone Ortori, *Figli della Farmoplant*, Brescia, Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, 2017.

⁶⁸ Marco Caldiroli, *I siti di bonifica di interesse nazionale: l'eredità avvelenata dell'antropocene*, in “Medicina Democratica”, 2019, n. 247-248, pp. 9-26.

ical culture, albeit not always in a coherent, explicit manner. Journals such as the Cgil's "Rassegna di medicina dei lavoratori" ("The Review of Occupational Medicine"), the Cisl's "Il Progetto" ("The Project") and "Azimut", and the Uil's "Verde Uil" ("Green Uil") bear witness to an attempted refresh of political and scientific ideas. The smallest of the three trade union confederations – the Uil – undertook to create a "green trade union", "after a long black-out that had interrupted the development of an initiative in favour of public health dating from the early Seventies"⁶⁹. The organisation welcomed contributions from Alex Langer – one of the founders of the Greens – regarding "indispensable cooperation" with the union, whom Langer asked to "reject its subjugation to the logic of productivism and to finally deal with the question of the quality (ecological and human, as well as social and class-based) of labour and the conditions of workers"⁷⁰.

Dialogue between the unions and the environmental movement was renewed in the small town of Casale Monferrato, in the Piedmont region, where protests against the deaths caused by one hundred years of asbestos production brought together workers, scientists and civil society. The local community unanimously accepted the factory's closure, and was involved in the lengthy decontamination process and in the recognition, by the courts, of the company's serious liability for what had happened. The story of Casale Monferrato was to constitute the reference point for the campaign that eventually led to the total prohibition of the use of asbestos in Italy in 1992⁷¹. It is worth noting that this was the first time that trade unions supported the proposal to ban an entire production sector from extraction to marketing.

In 1985, the Cgil, Cisl and Uil confederations together created the first-ever national environmental platform, the purpose of which was to clean up the Po River and the Adriatic Sea. With regard to the public depollution plan, the unions indicated the opportunity for the creation of new, qualified jobs in the agricultural and construction sectors, designed to compensate for the inevitable job losses in the aforementioned toxic industries. One of the programme's assumptions was

⁶⁹ As put by unionist Giuseppe Piccinini in Aldo Forbice *et al.*, *Sindacato «verde»*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 1987, p. 21.

⁷⁰ Alex Langer, *Ecologia e movimento operaio. Un conflitto inevitabile?*, in "VerdeUil", 5 February 1990.

⁷¹ Bruno Ziglioli, "Sembrava nevicasse". *La Eternit di Casale Monferrato e la Fibronit di Broni: due comunità di fronte all'amianto*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2016; Giampiero Rossi, *La lana della salamandra. La vera storia della strage dell'amianto a Casale Monferrato*, Roma, Ediesse, 2008.

that “where environmental protection has not been taken care of, there has been an ecological disaster as well as an employment and economic crisis”⁷².

It became impossible to avoid addressing the problem of what to do about the country's domestic and industrial waste disposal. Following the Seveso disaster, a good many waste incineration plants had been closed, and this resulted in a sharp rise in legal and illegal waste dumping. From the unions' point of view, it was increasingly difficult to control these waste disposal processes within factories, since the companies systematically resorted to the outsourcing of waste disposal to small subcontractors that were often capable of avoiding checks and regulations. Disappointingly, cases of companies colluding with trade unionists to illegally dispose of hazardous waste also emerged⁷³.

However, it was the Chernobyl nuclear disaster that shook the union's membership, resulting in shifts of entire segments thereof towards anti-nuclear positions. Although the unions were not among the promoters of the referendum that shortly afterwards marked the end of investment in the nuclear sector, they nevertheless did not offer their members advice on how to vote. At that point, a prudent initial reconsideration of the unions' official line began to emerge, albeit based more on the problem of nuclear plant safety than on environmental considerations⁷⁴. The end of the nuclear development programme forced the workers' organisations to reconsider the problems raised by the coal-fired power stations. In Venice's industrial district, where the largest such plant employed more than 500 workers, the Cgil tried to deal with the need for “a policy of transition” by proposing a series of measures concerning ash storage, fume washing, and the cooling of the water poured into the Venice lagoon; moreover, it did so without playing down the serious impact that fossil fuels had on the local area⁷⁵.

⁷² Cgil, Cisl, Uil, *Un'emergenza nazionale: il risanamento del Po e il disinquinamento dell'Adriatico*, gennaio 1985, attached to circular letter 3854/1985, in Archivio storico Cgil, Archivio confederale, Circolari.

⁷³ Fabrizio Fabbri, *Porto Marghera e la laguna di Venezia. Vita, morte, miracoli*, Milano, Jaca Book, 2003.

⁷⁴ Paolo Pellizzari, *Socialisti e comunisti italiani di fronte alla questione energetico-nucleare*, in “Italia contemporanea”, 2010, n. 259, pp. 237-261. For trade union positions following Chernobyl, see Cgil, *Documento sulla questione nucleare*, in “Nuova Rassegna sindacale”, 1986, n. 19, pp. 33-34; *Un contributo Cisl per la riflessione. Documento elaborato dalla segreteria*, in “Conquiste del lavoro”, 1987, n. 40, p. 12; *Energia e ambiente*, numero monografico de “Il Progetto”, 1987, n. 39; Marco Boato, *Ma ci sarà una terra da ereditare?*, in Forbice et al., *Sindacato «verde»*, cit., pp. 81-89.

⁷⁵ Camera del lavoro territoriale di Venezia, *Ambiente ed energia a Porto Marghera. Le proposte della Cgil al dibattito dei lavoratori*, 11 dicembre 1987, 8 cc., in Centro studi Ettore Luccini di Padova, Camera del Lavoro provinciale e territoriale di Padova, b. 7, fasc. 7.

A turning point was the election of Bruno Trentin as Cgil general secretary, in 1988. In Trentin's mind, the workers' movement needed to broaden its horizons in terms of solidarity and alliances, and to accept that the days of a Fordist "civilisation" based on large-scale industry were over. His programme was the first to state so clearly that the idea of unlimited economic development, which had been the basis of all the union's policies, including "environmental" ones, was now untenable. The "possible destruction of the world's ecological balance" made it necessary for the union of the future to "establish a different relationship with nature"⁷⁶.

This opened up a possible transition from the idea that environmental protection principally served to safeguard labour and that environmental policies were simply forms of industrial policy, to a vision of labour as constituting an interface between humankind and nature, there no longer being any genuine distinction between the internal and external worlds, between production and services, because – as one trade union publication pointed out: "workers' tumours caused by asbestos [...] are the direct consequence of this system, just like the greenhouse effect and the hole in the ozone layer are"⁷⁷.

A precise balance sheet for that period has yet to be drawn up. Nevertheless, one can see that the aforesaid broadening of perspectives was always one step behind the developments of the ecologists' critique of the existing system. In the year 2000, during a heated discussion with the eco-feminist Carla Ravaioli, Trentin and the latter strongly criticised one another's positions: Trentin accused the environmentalists of having "kicked the workers out of nature"⁷⁸. Ravaioli, on the other hand, accused the Cgil of not having thoroughly reckoned with productivism and with the clearly untenable idea of "sustainable growth". Faced with the developing nations' race to modernise through industry, the union leader distanced himself from what he saw as the ecologists' "fundamentalism", since "those suffering hunger are never going to share the conservative line of a halt to economic growth"⁷⁹.

⁷⁶ Bruno Trentin, *Per una nuova solidarietà riscoprire i diritti, ripensare il sindacato* [1989], in Id., *Lavoro e libertà. Scritti scelti e un dialogo inedito con Vittorio Foa e Andrea Ranieri*, ed. by Michele Magno, Roma, Ediesse, 2008, pp. 219-252: 223.

⁷⁷ Ivan Cavicchi, *Il segno politico dell'impegno Cgil tra ambiente e salute: cinque opinioni*, in "Rassegna di Medicina dei lavoratori", 1992, n. 25, pp. 150-155: 153.

⁷⁸ Carla Ravaioli, Bruno Trentin, *Processo alla crescita. Ambiente, occupazione, giustizia sociale nel mondo neoliberista*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 2000, p. 25.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

The room for convergence between labour and the environment, which had emerged in the wake of the West's ongoing process of deindustrialisation, and of the new socio-ecological challenges thrown up by post-industrial society, was now being squeezed by the stark alternative offered of either growth or degrowth. This "alternative" was basically a reworking of the choice between jobs on the one hand, and the environment on the other. Langer's proposal for an "ecological conversion" towards a model of development that from the qualitative viewpoint should move in the direction of "zero growth" and towards a much more qualitative form of development was basically rejected⁸⁰. Similarly, we think we can say that the profound eco-feminist reflection on the "awareness of the limits" has not become a common heritage of the trade union movement⁸¹.

The idea of environmentalism as binding a new alliance between a deindustrialising working class, the emergent classes in a knowledge-based society, and workers in the poorer service sector, was disregarded⁸². With the crisis of the Fordist society, the working class found itself bereft of one of the strongest concepts underlying its own historical commitment to health and ecology, namely that union control over workplace organisation, was the main weapon with which to combat environmental degradation.

Conclusions

In this article, I have tried to argue how the double challenge of deindustrialisation and environmental crisis impacted the Italian labour movement, acutely questioning its idea of the future. I have done so by highlighting those moments and issues that suggest a closer dialogue between Labour History and Environmental History, two sub-disciplines that so far have shared perspectives insufficiently⁸³. This conversation is now further stimulated by the emergence

⁸⁰ Alex Langer, *Sindacato e limiti della crescita*, in Johannes Agnoli et al., *Sindacato stato società. Il sindacato oggi tra movimento e istituzioni*, UIB-UIL Materiali, 1983, pp. 6-13. On the role that labour can have in degrowth politics, see Stefania Barca, *The Labor(s) of Degrowth*, in "Capitalism Nature Socialism", 2019, n. 2, pp. 207-216.

⁸¹ Elisabetta Donini, *La nube e il limite. Donne, scienza, percorsi nel tempo*, Torino, Rosenberg & Sellier, 1990.

⁸² Bologna, *Emarginazione e ambientalismo*, cit., p. 44.

⁸³ Scott Dewey, *Working for the Environment: Organized Labor and the Origins of Environmentalism in the United States, 1948-1970*, in "Environmental History", 1998, n. 1, pp. 45-63; Gunther

of Environmental Labour Studies, focusing research aiming beyond the central topic of the trade unions' environmental practices and policies towards a broader reflection on the relationship between labour and nature⁸⁴. Those scholars contributing to the aforesaid area share the idea that the opposition between work and the environment represents both a discourse requiring deconstruction, and a set of policies to be challenged; they believe that there is ample space for a coalition between workers' organisations and environmental movements, provided that they both recognise a common enemy in the form of corporate interests, and that both work to limit their disruptive power, even when they do not act in a joint manner⁸⁵.

On the wings of the "economic miracle", trade unions participated in the nascent environmental movement, fighting for workers' health, cleaning up the working environment and extending their influence on public health and quality of life issues in cities. Factories were seen as both the source of environmental problems and the place where solutions could be developed, through workers' power over work organisation and democratically controlled investments in the "best available techniques". The "what" being produced, and the productivist imperative, were not questioned.

From the late 1970s, the trade union agenda was overwhelmed by the need to resist industrial restructuring. While the defence of jobs became dominant and there were many local conflicts between workers and environmentalists, it is also true that the unions recognised new and unprecedented problems arising from the complex interplay of deindustrialisation and environmental critique: energy transition, compensation for victims of occupational diseases and industrial disasters, management of toxic waste and brownfield redevelopment, relocation and outsourcing as methods of bypassing environmental regulation, and corporate greenwashing strategies.

Most notably after the Chernobyl nuclear tragedy, Italian trade unions made a serious attempt to update their culture with the ecological, criticising the idea

Peck, *The Nature of Labor: Fault Lines and Common Ground in Environmental and Labor History*, in "Environmental History", 2006, n. 2, pp. 212-238; Janis Bailey, Ross Gwyther, *Red and Green: Towards a Cross-Fertilisation of Labour and Environmental History*, in "Labour History", 2010, n. 99, pp. 1-16; Stefania Barca, *Laboring the Earth. Transnational Reflections on the Environmental History of Work*, in "Environmental History", 2014, n. 1, pp. 3-27.

⁸⁴ Nora Räthzel, Dimitris Stevis, David Uzzell (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Environmental Labour Studies*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

⁸⁵ Brian K. Obach, *Labor and the Environmental Movement: The Quest for Common Ground*, Cambridge (MA) and London, MIT Press, 2004.

of unlimited development and promoting the end of entire production chains, such as that of asbestos. Admittedly, it cannot be said that this gave rise to a deep-rooted and recognisable “eco-unionism”, while the weakening of unions due to deindustrialisation is an incontrovertible fact. Today, it is not easy to discern a space for dialogue and hybridisation between international trade unionism, which is committed to giving the Green Economy a more social character, and glocal movements against climate change and the ecological crisis. The latter are increasingly permeated by the perception of an imminent catastrophe, in which the “end of the future” has become terrifyingly present. The convergence of these movements, around a credible vision of the future that is worth allying and fighting for, is now more necessary than ever.