

Integrating direct employee voice within the framework of worker representation: The role of an Italian trade union in organising disintermediation

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Abstract

Facing the spread of management-led direct employee voice, trade unions are stuck with a theoretical and practical dilemma: *organising* against the *disintermediation* threats or accepting the risk of marginalisation and *partnering* with management to at least secure mutual gains. This article casts light on *organising disintermediation* as a chance for trade unions to overcome the ‘*organising* against vs surrendering to *disintermediation*’ trade-off, by taking the lead in the promotion, regulation and *implementation* of direct employee voice. The analysis of FIM-CISL Brescia shows that far from exclusively being a link to organisational performance and a challenge to union *intermediation*, direct employee voice may become a trade union goal, being the expression of employee self-determination and human dignity. Pursuing this goal translates into a multifaceted change for the trade union, regarding both its internal (*organising*) and external (*partnership*) dimension.

Keywords

Employee voice, *organising partnership*, trade unions,

Introduction

It has been argued that ‘worker voice used to mean trade unions’ (Ackers, 2015: 95) and that unions represented the almost universal public policy answer to the problem of missing worker voice. This was a common representation of the world of work across the vast majority of European countries until the end of the twentieth century.

However, the reality today is very different. Circumstances, such as the decline in trade union density and collective bargaining coverage, reduced union political influence and the increasing marginality of union discourses in society are commonplace in the

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literature (e.g. Addison et al., 2013; Carrieri and Feltrin, 2016; Vanchon et al., 2016). The main reasons behind these developments are often ascribed to deindustrialisation, globalisation and international migration, government measures in response to economic crisis, technological and organisational developments, the shift in the forms of employment from full-time permanent to precarious and temporary status, the increasing diversification of the workforce as well as the growth of individualism in society (e.g. Blanchflower and Bryson, 2009; Carrieri and Treu, 2013; Lee, 2005; Marginson, 2015; Murray et al., 2013; Rodrik, 2015).

Equally, at the same time as the presumed crisis of trade unionism, a new trend has emerged and triggered the interest of researchers: the spread of new forms of employee voice. The reference is generally to direct forms of voice such as teamwork, suggestion schemes and quality circles often as part of high-commitment human resource management, high-performance work practices, etc., developed in traditional industries since the second half of the twentieth century. The rationale behind the adoption of these practices is usually linked to the *business case* argument (Johnstone and Ackers, 2015: 8), deriving from the assumption that far from exclusively being the building block of *industrial democracy* (Webb and Webb, 1897), employee voice is today an essential link in the quest for increased organisational performance.

As regards the relationship with unions, the literature tends to consider these new forms of employee voice as either a substitute for indirect employee voice, organised by unions (especially in Anglo-American workplaces, as argued in Bryson, 2004; Foulkes, 1980; Leana et al., 1992; Reshef et al., 1999), or a complementary agent of workers' representatives in guaranteeing a balance between *efficiency* and *equity* at workplaces (e.g. EPOC Research Group, 1997; Gill, 2009; Pohler and Luchak, 2014). When dealing with such challenges, unions are found to hold different attitudes, ranging from cooperative and pragmatic (e.g. Ahlstrand and Sederblad, 2012; Ortiz, 1997) to apathetic and confrontational (e.g. Kochan et al., 1986; Ponzellini, 2017) approaches, though often implying a 'cautious scepticism', deriving from the fear that employee participation schemes do not represent a completely separate domain from union-based collective bargaining, but that they can jeopardise trade union density and power (Kochan et al., 1984). Within the framework of these various and sometimes contradictory behaviours, however, there has been no evidence of any trade union attempts at challenging the management-led nature of direct employee voice practices.

This article intends to deconstruct this apparent institutional deadlock by investigating the role of trade unions as promoters, rather than victims or antagonists of non-union and direct employee voice. This trade union behaviour is encapsulated by the term *organising disintermediation*, whereby *disintermediation* hints at the more individualised (since not mediated by trade unions) labour–management relationships entailed in the direct forms of employee voice (Bryson et al., 2006), and *organising* refers to the proactive role of unions in their promotion, regulation and implementation. More specifically, by focusing on the experience of a local metalworkers' organisation in Italy, namely FIM-CISL Brescia, this article sheds light on the reasons behind and the ways through which a local trade union comes to promote forms of work organisation that enhance direct employee participation in a traditional industry. In so doing, the article shows why direct employee voice, far from being exclusively a managerial choice, can

become a trade union goal, thus paving the way for an unexpected chance of integration between the two different rationales and forms of employee voice. By following a local trade union's attempt to embed direct employee voice, this article illustrates how the strategy of *organising disintermediation* can spur union multifaceted change, affecting both its internal (i.e. relationships with members and/or potential members) and external (i.e. relationships with managers) fulcrums of interest, often pursued through the logics of *organising* and *partnership* as they have been labelled in the literature (e.g. Heery, 2002; Simms, 2015).

To achieve its purposes, this article essentially relies on the method of participant observation, which took place from May 2016 to April 2018, and also included the analysis of primary documents (e.g. company-level collective agreements, business and action plans), on-site visits, attendance at negotiation tables and union internal meetings, interviews with local union officials, union delegates in companies and an external expert involved in the experience. The analytical framework underpinning this article draws from actor-centred institutionalism, according to which actors have a role in explaining social outcomes although institutions shape the action field and the type of interactions (Scharpf, 1997). The structure of the article is as follows. The second section reviews the literature on the interplay between union and non-union forms of employee voice, the next section explains the research methods, the fourth provides an overview of the research context, the fifth section develops the case study of FIM-CISL Brescia, the sixth section discusses the results and the seventh concludes.

Theoretical perspectives on the interplay between union and non-union forms of employee voice

The literature on employee voice is wide-ranging and affected by multiple disciplines and rationales (Barry et al., 2018). Employee voice has been at the heart of industrial relations (IR) since its inception, when in 1897 the Webbs coined the concept of *industrial democracy* (Markey and Townsend, 2013). Since then, it has informed a pluralist approach to the topic that promotes *representative participation* (e.g. via trade unions, collective bargaining, co-determination structures) to balance management power with employee voice (Johnstone and Ackers, 2015: 3). However, our traditional understanding of employee voice has expanded and changed over time, especially as new forms of voice have captured the interest of managers, organisational behaviour specialists and psychologists. Strauss (2006) wrote about fads and fashions in managerial interest and experimentation with participation, starting from the Human Relations School in the 1940s and 1950s (thanks to the works of Hawthorne, Lewin and sociotechnical systems theorists), followed by the philosophy of Quality of Work Life (QWL), whose roots are in the theories of Maslow, Herzberg and McGregor, and continuing since the early 1990s with organisational schemes such as Total Quality Management (TQM), Quality Circles (QCs) and Six Sigma, influenced by Japanese production systems. Modern employee participation practices are driven by workplace innovation (WPI), described as a 'developed and implemented practice or combination of practices that structurally (structure orientation or a focus on division of labour) and/or culturally (culture orientation or a

focus on empowerment) enable employees to participate in organisational change and renewal to improve quality of working life and organisational performance' (Oeij et al., 2015: 8). So defined, WPI relies on different approaches placing human relations and knowledge at the core of firm competitiveness, such as modern sociotechnical systems design, lean management, employee-driven innovation, high-performance work systems, knowledge-based capital and so on (Oeij et al., 2017). These contributions tend to overlook the issue of power imbalances in labour relations and with regard to trade unions, mainly their role 'as knowledgeable participants' as a function of workplace innovation (Totterdill and Exton, 2014) is expressly promoted. The focus is on direct relationships between management and the individual employee or small groups of employees, in the form of teamwork, suggestion schemes, tools for information sharing, etc., in line with the unitarist frame of *employee involvement*, regarding voice primarily as a link to organisational performance (Johnstone and Ackers, 2015: 2).

Although direct and indirect or representative forms of participation differ from each other as regards the primary reason behind their adoption (respectively, *democracy at work* and *business case* arguments), they can both serve *efficiency* and *equity* stances (Pohler and Luchak, 2014).¹ Firstly, unions challenge short-term managerial decision making, essentially driven by market pressures, to encompass also the interests of their membership, thus potentially contributing, in the long run, to better *efficiency* decisions and their smoother implementation (Gill, 2009). Secondly, direct participation practices may create opportunities for the incorporation of employees' needs for equitable treatment in operational decisions and day-to-day execution of tasks (Hackman and Oldham, 1976; Pohler and Luchak, 2014). As observed by Dundon et al. (2004), different disciplines and strands of literature can identify different meanings, purposes and practices of employee voice, but, in reality, distinctions between them and their outcomes are very hard to make.

Due to the multidimensional and potentially overlapping nature of the different forms of voice, the literature has particularly concentrated on whether they could coexist or whether they conflict with each other. On the one hand, direct employee participation practices have been depicted as union avoidance strategies (Kochan et al., 1986) and there are studies demonstrating that direct voice may be more effective than union-led voice in eliciting managerial responsiveness (Bryson, 2004) and that workers participating in employee involvement practices may support them as preferred decision-making structures, at the expense of collective bargaining (Leana et al., 1992). On the other hand, the interplay between direct and representative voice has proved to be sometimes synergistic (Addison, 2005; Bryson et al., 2005) and sometimes ineffective (Kim et al., 2010) in boosting organisational performance, while positive results have been largely brought up from analyses regarding the effect of the combination between the two forms of voice in balancing *efficiency* and *equity* outcomes (Bryson et al., 2013; Pohler and Luchak, 2014). Further complicating the picture is the evidence that different outcomes may be partly explained also by different institutional settings (Doellgast, 2008; Marsden, 2013).

Therefore, when dealing with management's intention to introduce direct employee voice, trade unions may find themselves stuck with an unresolved theoretical and practical dilemma: *organising* against the *disintermediation* threats posed by direct forms of voice or accepting the risk of the marginalisation of collective voice and engaging in

Table 1. Trade union options in the face of direct employee voice.

Goals	Strategy	Practical implications
To advance representative voice against <i>disintermediation</i> threats	<i>Organising</i> against <i>disintermediation</i>	Mobilising workers, rejecting management narrative on direct employee voice and pulling out of organisational innovation
To balance <i>efficiency</i> and <i>equity</i> gains from direct employee voice	<i>Partnership</i> in the <i>disintermediation</i>	Accepting management narrative on direct employee voice and getting involved in organisational innovation
To promote direct employee voice as an intrinsic goal	<i>Organising</i> <i>disintermediation</i>	Proposing a trade union narrative on direct employee voice and playing a proactive role in organisational innovation

partnership with management to at least secure mutual gains. Reflecting the strand of literature on the two logics of union action, while *organising* would aim at building internal legitimacy (with membership) by resting on a conflict of interest within the employment relationship, *partnership* would focus on external legitimacy (with managers) by seeking a common ground of interests. As partly revealed in empirical analyses on the interplay between direct and union-led employee voice (e.g. Ahlstrand and Sederblad, 2012; Kochan et al., 1986; Ortiz, 1997), the former approach would imply for trade unions to mobilise workers and advance representative participation at the expense of trade union involvement in workplace innovation, whereas the latter would allow for labour–management cooperation in organisational innovation and more sustainable results at the expense of trade union supremacy over worker voice (Table 1).

Within this framework, few studies have provided a different picture, by moving beyond this management-led trade-off constraining union behaviour, to investigate the role of trade unions as proactive promoters and architects of direct employee voice. The exceptions concern the experiences of Scandinavian trade unions in the face of lean organisational transformations and the advent of IT technologies: in these cases, however, direct employee participation is promoted as either a feature of good and sustainable work in lean organisations or an element of labour–management coordinated paths to technological innovation (Bartezzaghi and Della Rocca, 1983; Johansson et al., 2013; Schneider, 1986).

It is against this background that this study focuses on a local metalworkers' organisation expressly willing to promote and organise direct employee participation in workplaces. This specific unit of analysis will allow me to further deepen the complex interplay between trade unions and direct employee voice and better understand whether the latter can overcome its original market-oriented rationale and become a concrete objective of the former, thus being embedded in the pluralist frame of industrial relations and multiform system of worker representation. This attempt aims to move beyond partial conceptualisations of employee voice and to explore possibilities for their integration, as suggested by other scholars (Barry et al., 2018). As mentioned before, *equity* stances can be backed by both direct and indirect forms of employee voice, but this does not necessarily mean that they are mutually exclusive; to the contrary, it has been argued

that union and non-union institutions may perform complementary representative tasks and notably, that many employer-sponsored systems may help overcome union deficiencies in promoting intrinsic job quality (Heery, 2010). Even more importantly, employee input and participation in work-related decisions, in whatever way they are enabled, have been said to be intrinsically relevant as manifestations of employee self-determination and human dignity, irrespective of their instrumental role for *efficiency* and *equity* purposes (Budd, 2004). In line with these arguments, *organising disintermediation* can be seen as a revitalising union strategy, to some extent recalling the gradual adaptation of traditional institutions expressed in the 1990s concept of *organised decentralisation* (Traxler, 1995). Indeed, as in the wake of decentralisation and subsequent arguments for the erosion of the standard-setting capacity of sectoral agreements, national-level bargaining agents have been able to adopt ‘rules of coordination’, in times of increasing *workplace disintermediation* and concerns about collective voice marginalisation, unions could take a significant role in direct employee participation. This is so not only to contribute to a better balance between *efficiency* and *equity* needs for the success of these practices, in line with a *partnership* approach (Wilkinson et al., 2014), but also, from a more *organising*-oriented perspective, to reinforce the union representative function (Heery, 2010) and promote voice as an intrinsic standard (Budd, 2004). After all, *partnership* and *organising* cannot be considered as completely at odds, since the revitalisation of unions may lie in a marrying of the two approaches, which would link ‘the object of broadening the agenda of representation and extending union influence over the management of the firm, with the process of strengthening worker organisation and capacity for collective action’ (Heery, 2002: 33). From a purely theoretical perspective, *organising disintermediation* could thus constitute a way to do this (Table 1). What we need to do is examine why direct employee voice has become a trade union goal, how it is pursued and the effects of *organising disintermediation* on the traditional dynamics of workplace industrial relations.

Methods

This article adopts an inductive and qualitative case study design, which is regarded as the most suitable methodological approach to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ research questions (Yin, 2009). The Italian metalworkers’ organisation FIM-CISL Brescia is the case study. The reason behind this choice lies in the fact that during the first year of my PhD programme, I had the opportunity to come into contact with this organisation and cooperate with its officials on a daily basis in carrying out research activities on company-level collective bargaining. This circumstance allowed me to come to know the local trade union’s main concerns and activities and, notably, one of the issues most frequently raised by union representatives was related to non-union employee voice in work environments. When I started to work, as an external researcher, in FIM-CISL Brescia in May 2016, the metalworkers’ organisation had just begun to engage in some initiatives in this field and direct employee participation in work organisation had recently become a priority on the trade union policy agenda. Plus, within the trade union movement in Italy, no similar experiences had been reported at that time. Data and information were mainly collected through participant observation, together with the analysis of primary

documents (i.e. company-level collective agreements, business documents and newsletters, action plans and related reports), visits to production plants, attendance at negotiation tables and union internal meetings. Insights obtained during these informal occasions and discussions were complemented by semi-structured interviews with nine union officials (including two members of the secretarial body) and 10 union delegates from four different local companies, to look more deeply at the rationale behind the trade union approach and investigate the dynamics of *organising disintermediation* at workplace level. In many cases, it was necessary to conduct more than one interview with the same person in order to assess possible changes in trade union thoughts and activities over time. The attention specifically paid to the experimentation taking place in the four production units is explained by the fact that during my stay at the premises of FIM-CISL Brescia, the trade union succeeded in launching direct employee participation practices in these units. Finally, I conducted a semi-structured interview with an expert in work organisation, coming from the trade union environment and also working as a private consultant, who supported local union representatives in carrying out direct employee participation initiatives in workplaces.² The interview allowed me to understand the influence the expert exerted on local trade unionists' approach and behaviour as well as to have the views of a third party on the experiences of *organising disintermediation* in workplaces. The field research was conducted from May 2016 to April 2018: the first two years of experimentation in the area of Brescia.³

After collecting data and information, I performed a thematic analysis so as to discern major themes (e.g. union identity, power relations, economic pressures, institutional framework) potentially explaining the trade union's choice to promote direct employee voice, and main dimensions (e.g. union actions exclusively targeted at its officials and rank-and-file and union initiatives performed externally vis-a-vis employers) surrounding the trade union's action in this field. The search for such themes was largely driven by the analytical influence of Scharpf's (1997) actor-centred institutionalism (placing emphasis on institutional context, external pressures as well as actors' interests, values and resources to explain actions) and Hodder and Edwards' (2015) framework of union essence, as well as the logics of membership and influence (and their specular trade union approaches of *organising* and *partnership*) affecting organisational behaviour (Mundlak, 2017; Schmitter and Streeck, 1981).

Research context

FIM-CISL and industrial relations in Brescia

The empirical focus of this article is FIM-CISL Brescia, an area branch (covering the province of Brescia in Northern Italy) of the Italian Federation of Metalworkers, FIM-CISL (*Federazione Italiana Metalmeccanici*). Since its foundation on 30 March 1950, FIM-CISL has been affiliated to the Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions (*Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori*, CISL), established in 1950 after the split of the former General Italian Confederation of Labour (*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*, CGIL) into the current three largest workers' confederations, namely CGIL, CISL and UIL. Union pluralism is indeed a key element of industrial relations in

Italy. It derives not only from different political sympathies (CGIL is historically linked to the left-wing and Communist Party, while CISL embraces Catholic Christian values and UIL is traditionally close to the socialist and Republican political positions) but also from variations in the logics of collective action. Whereas CGIL adopts a *logic of class*, by making little distinction between members and non-members and acting as representative of the whole working class, CISL (and to a certain extent also UIL) prefers a *logic of association*, according to which only members are endowed with the right to influence and determine union orientations and actions. Associationism is indeed one of the pillars of CISL, along with autonomy (intended as the choice to be free and independent from all external powers, whether they be economic, political or cultural) and collective bargaining (meant as the main method of action providing the parties with the maximum level of autonomy from law and the highest level of accountability) (Lama, 2008). The *logic of association* and the relevance of collective bargaining explain why CISL has traditionally put emphasis on its vertical articulation in sectoral federations (whereas CGIL was more inclined to give power to territorial structures for class mobilisation) as well as on strong union representation in workplaces.

Within CISL, FIM has often played an important role in the renewal of trade union action (Bentivogli, 2010). In the 1960s, it was precisely FIM-CISL Brescia, whose identity was deeply shaped at that time by its General Secretary, Franco Castrezzati, that first affirmed the trade union's autonomy from the paternalistic approach of employers and the Confederation itself, in an attempt to overcome ideological differences with CGIL and conduct joint collective actions in workplaces. This strategy led to strikes against local employers and then the signing of important company-level collective agreements (Bibliolavoro, 2008). However, the union between FIM-CISL, FIOM-CGIL and UILM-UIL that found concrete expression in 1972 within the Federation of Metalworkers (FLM) ended in 1985 mainly due to the interference of political parties (FIM-CISL, 2019).

It was precisely in the 1980s, when Brescia's companies were troubled by increasing international competition and asked workers for more concessions at the bargaining table, that the so-called 'Brescia anomaly' emerged. It is characterised by a strong ideological polarisation between FIOM-CGIL, distinguishing itself by a militant and confrontational approach to negotiations, and FIM-CISL, attempting to establish cooperative labour-management relations and promoting worker participation in workplaces. In the 1980s, the main employers' association in the industrial sector in Brescia, AIB (*Associazione Industriale Bresciana*), exhibited a certain resistance to company-level collective bargaining. However, with a view to contain strikes, AIB ended up leaving room for the demands of the most radical components of trade union representation. Here are the foundations of the long hegemony of FIOM-CGIL in industrial relations in the metalworking sector in Brescia (Bibliolavoro, 2008). Only in more recent times, as a union official revealed,⁴ has FIM-CISL Brescia succeeded in establishing its identity, by firmly promoting decentralised collective bargaining, performance-related pay schemes, employee participation and welfare initiatives in companies. Over the past 10 years, the attempt to pursue these objectives has entailed public and angry disputes with FIOM-CGIL, that have led to different union platforms taking different positions (in companies where both unions have members) and the conclusion of 'separate agreements' (i.e. agreements not signed by all trade unions operating in a company) in Brescia.

Brescia's economy

In such a scenario, it is not surprising that FIM-CISL Brescia does not usually engage in joint activities with FIOM-CGIL, UILM-UIL and AIB. In 2014, an attempt was actually made to overcome past tensions for the benefit of the economic and social development of the area. However, after months of negotiations, the so-called 'Pact for Brescia', which should have taken the form of a territorial cross-sectoral agreement between CGIL, CISL, UIL and AIB setting the path for new industrial relations, reached a stalemate and was never signed due to the parties' inability to overcome their differences. Not even social dialogue has been well developed in Brescia: as the General Secretary of FIM-CISL revealed,⁵ except for company crises, local trade union organisations, employers' associations and public authorities do not usually cooperate with each other to find solutions to joint problems or reach common goals. Furthermore, the recent initiatives to bring Brescia into the digital age are also marked by division. On the one hand, AIB engaged in a cooperation with the employers' associations of Cremona and Mantova and the University of Brescia for the creation of a Digital Innovation Hub,⁶ and frequently organises seminars and conferences on the topic, within which, however, the involvement of trade unions is marginal. On the other hand, the association representing small and medium enterprises in the industrial sector, Apindustria, initiated a process to build a governance structure for Industry 4.0, the so-called 'Working Table on Industry 4.0' (*Tavolo 4.0*), by involving many local stakeholders such as the Chamber of Commerce, public authorities, universities, the confederation representing artisan companies, CGIL, CISL and UIL; however, AIB was not included.

These circumstances describe quite clearly the complexity of industrial relations and the fragmentation of interest representation in Brescia, which have been depicted as the result of the structural dualism of the local economy (Provasi, 1997). On the one hand, there are large enterprises especially in the steel and machinery industry, still inspired by Fordist organisational methods and managerial attitudes; on the other hand, there are many small and artisanal enterprises especially in the machine-tool and plumbing products field, organised around the principles of flexible specialisation and characterised by a more paternalistic approach to industrial relations (Provasi, 1997). This dichotomy negatively affects the institutional capacity to gather and represent collective interests and it compromises the overall system's coordination and management. Some large enterprises have survived the transition to post-Fordist times, but they have lost their leading role in the economy; at the same time, small companies have become widespread, but they cannot rely on a homogeneous institutional framework, capable of coordinating and supporting them. Borrowing Locke's (1995) distinction, Provasi (1997) defines Brescia's economy until the 1980s as polycentric and hierarchically organised; however, following the decline of the traditional industrial-urban subsystem and the increasing relevance of peripheral areas with small enterprises, the institutional set-up underwent a crisis of legitimacy and the economy became more polarised, where local actors and associations compete with each other in zero-sum struggles. With specific regard to the industrial sectors, this situation is reflected in the presence of both large manufacturing groups that, not surprisingly, best withstood the economic crisis of 2007 and seized on growth opportunities (Centro Studi AIB, 2016), and smaller enterprises that tend to lag behind; the latter are generally family businesses with a low presence of

professionals and a low propensity to innovation; they concentrate on traditional activities with low value added and make scant use of a qualified workforce (Provasi, 2011). Although traditional obstacles to growth (i.e. an individualistic entrepreneurial culture, the lack of institutions acting as catalysts for innovation, the inability of local stakeholders to team up together) seem difficult to overcome, Brescia is currently ranked fourth for gross value added among the Italian provinces after Milan, Turin and Rome (Eurostat, 2016). Contributing to this local development seems to be the growing number of medium-sized enterprises in the area since the 1990s, which combine elements of both large and small companies (such as the opportunity to occupy a dominant position and the aptitude for investments, with family management and high specialisation). An analysis conducted in the early 2000s shed light on the main success factors of Brescia's medium-sized companies: a strong propensity to export, technological investment and product and process innovation (Provasi and Squazzoni, 2009). Conversely, among the most critical aspects, there was low investment in skills development and a scant willingness to establish long-term collaborations with research institutes and universities (Provasi and Squazzoni, 2009). Today, in the aftermath of the economic crisis, both positive and negative signals can be detected: the utilisation rate has increased (Miniaci, 2015), the use of social shock absorbers has reduced, and employment growth rates are positive (AIB, 2019); however, the recovery of industrial production, started in 2015, is proceeding slowly (AIB and Chamber of Commerce, 2019) and most vacancies in the manufacturing sector are still for non-qualified jobs (Excelsior, 2017).

Case study development – the role of FIM-CISL Brescia in organising disintermediation

As industrial relations in Brescia's workplaces have often been depicted as either adversarial or paternalistic, it is not surprising that local employers have tended not to seek the involvement of FIM-CISL in the management of direct employee participation practices. The low level of integration between direct participation, generally organised by managers, and industrial relations in Italy has been noted in the literature and explained variously by the lack of a favourable institutional background, the persistence of a monistic managerial culture and a confrontational approach to labour relations as well as the trade unions' unpreparedness to deal with the topic (Ponzellini, 2017; Signoretti, 2016). However, among the main trade union organisations in Italy, CISL stands out for its traditional support for worker participation, as something inherent to its culture, which has been particularly inspired by the social doctrines of the Catholic Church. Accordingly, the speech by its first General Secretary, Giulio Pastore, during the Constituent Assembly in April 1950, echoed Christian social thought, by raising the themes of 'the social illnesses of capitalism; the participation of workers in company outcomes, both as employees and as shareholders; and, above all, an anti-capitalist ethic based on the denial of individualism and economic naturalism in the name of solidarity and social fairness in order to allow workers to develop completely as persons' (Lama, 2008: 50). Whereas no formal system of employee participation has ever developed in Italy, mainly due to the coexistence of contrasting cultures and objectives and the historical reluctance for legislative action in

this field, new opportunities have been identified in the area of the quality of work organisation and conditions on the shop floor (Leonardi, 2016). Indeed, FIM-CISL Brescia started to display a strong interest in direct employee participation in the aftermath of the economic crisis, when not only did lean manufacturing practices become more and more widespread among Italian companies (though some decades later than in other Western economies), but also scholarly attention to work organisation grew (Ponzellini, 2017). Surveys and case studies revealed the diffusion of these practices (Leoni, 2014; Pero and Ponzellini, 2015; Telljohan, 2015). In the FIM-CISL environment, their popularity grew considerably due to empirical research on the effects on work of the methods of World Class Manufacturing (combining lean manufacturing and Total Quality Management) in the Italian establishments of the multinational FCA-CNHI. The research was commissioned by the national body of FIM-CISL and conducted between 2013 and 2015 by a team from the Polytechnic of Milan and Turin. They reported decreased physical effort as well as workers' support for their involvement in the work environment, though along with increased mental effort and low satisfaction with bonuses associated with workers' suggestions for improvements in work organisation (Campagna et al., 2015). The diffusion of these practices and the evidence of their positive contribution to firm performance (Cox et al., 2012; Leoni, 2012) may also explain the introduction of economic incentives in Italian legislation since 2016 (firstly, in the form of tax reductions and more recently, in the form of cuts to social security contributions applied to variable pay schemes) for companies establishing direct employee participation practices in agreement with trade unions. It is in this context of growing scholarly, managerial and institutional attention to organisational innovation, that FIM-CISL Brescia started to integrate direct employee participation in its discourse and practice and the strategy of *organising disintermediation* began to take shape. Behind this approach was the recognition that new economic imperatives in Western companies would have brought in new models of work organisation with a strong emphasis on direct employee participation, and that the only way unions could retain their role in this changed scenario would be to take part in it. In the words of one representative of FIM-CISL Brescia, 'it is inevitable that employee participation increases with the transformation of work; but the point is taking part in it'.⁷ Furthermore, there emerged consensus among Brescia's unionists on the important role that direct employee participation could play in 'giving value to the work of people, after decades of dehumanisation in Fordist environments, and devising a new identity of blue-collars within society'.⁸ Overall, by impacting on both the (internally-oriented) logic of *organising*, especially in the form of 'member (and workers' representative) activism' (Nicklich and Helfen, 2019) as may be suited to partly unionised settings (Behrens, 2009; Haipeter, 2013), and the (externally-oriented) logic of *partnership*, with unions as co-directors of labour-management experiences of direct employee voice, *organised disintermediation* ended up integrating both conceptual alternatives and challenging managers as the sole advocates of direct employee voice.

Organising members and potential members around the concept of direct employee voice

According to the General Secretary of FIM-CISL Brescia,⁹ 'it would have not been possible to promote direct employee participation in workplaces without encouraging direct

participation within the trade union organisation'.¹⁰ That is why the union committed itself to abandon its hierarchical organisational structure and top-down representation initiatives to allow for more horizontal relationships between union members and officials and for bottom-up activities. Indeed, in late 2014 and in line with the principles of business process management, FIM-CISL Brescia started to organise its main activities into different processes (i.e. the training process, the collective bargaining process and the recruiting process), whose coordination was entrusted to different union officials, irrespective of their position in the organisation's hierarchy and simply according to their own interests and skills. Their task was to be the main contact for their colleagues performing activities related to the above-mentioned processes as well as to keep track of these activities and report the results to the General Secretary. The promotion and development of direct employee participation practices in workplaces was introduced as a further organisational process soon thereafter; its coordination was delegated to a very enthusiastic union official, who could also rely on the support of an external expert, coming from the trade union environment but also working as a private consultant, in advancing and implementing work reorganisation processes. At the same time, traditional union meetings and rituals have been progressively influenced by the union's commitment to *organised disintermediation* as well. Accordingly, some union officials have tested new ways to hold assemblies with workers, with the aim of overcoming the traditional, linear dynamics (consisting of a discourse pronounced by the unionist and a long list of questions made by workers) and to engage with collective debates open to the continuous suggestions and inputs from workers. In line with these changes, in October 2016, a General Council (a meeting held monthly in the presence of union delegates and members) was organised around the topic of workplace innovation and direct employee voice; all participants were divided into different groups, corresponding to the various geographical areas that make up the province of Brescia, and, under the coordination of an external expert, they selected a company case-study and discussed the related organisational issues and possible participatory solutions.¹¹ Union delegates were, moreover, involved in the preparatory activities for the Congress of FIM-CISL Brescia that took place on 23 and 24 February 2017. Firstly, they were asked to reflect upon the main topics (i.e. Industry 4.0; the future of industrial relations; a new trade union policy; the social role of trade unions; a new organisational structure) listed in the congressional document and then they were given the chance to report their arguments and viewpoints in front of the entire Congress audience.¹² It was apparently the first time that union delegates had actively participated in the Congress. The centrality of union delegates, arising from these initiatives, mirrors the union's belief in the crucial role they are deemed to play in workplace innovation. 'They cannot represent workers as they did in the past. . . . Adversarial practices towards management are not a valuable option anymore. . . . Union delegates must become partners of managers in the development of work reorganisation projects, by also coaching workers to deal with change', the General Secretary stated.¹³ By and large, the activation of union officials and delegates as well as of individual workers (both members and potential members) in partly unionised settings where the local trade union mostly operates constituted the core of the FIM-CISL Brescia strategy of *organising* and building internal legitimacy around the concept of direct employee voice and its union-led promotion.

Partnership with employers to have a role in direct employee voice

Between May 2016 and April 2018, FIM-CISL Brescia promoted and succeeded in launching four organisational innovation projects in different local workplaces.¹⁴ These were small and medium-sized enterprises (according to the definition provided in the EU recommendation 2003/361) with the sole exception of one company employing 320 workers. The selection of these companies did not follow any specific rationale but largely depended on the management's availability to initiate a dialogue with FIM-CISL on the topic. Managerial openness to dialogue was often positively influenced by the occurrence of either serious economic circumstances requiring action to optimise processes and contain costs or organisational and relational difficulties in production flows and firm performance.¹⁵

There were financial difficulties in the company. . . . We were the only establishment performing badly among all sites in the world, but the company had always kept us in the dark. (Company B's worker representative)¹⁶

Our company is totally disorganised; we cannot plan anything, and urgencies are the norm. . . . Orders are increasing but we struggle to respect deadlines. . . . Our turnover has rocketed but we are still organised as a craft company. (Company C's worker representative)¹⁷

These critical issues generally came out at the collective bargaining tables or within the framework of labour–management committees established for the regular monitoring of performance-related pay bonuses.

Performance indicators linked to pay bonuses never reached the targets. . . . They [management] gave us numbers that were unverifiable and unmanageable. (Company B's worker representative)¹⁸

In all companies, the industrial relations climate was depicted by trade union officials as collaborative. However, in two out of the four cases, FIM-CISL was not the only union with affiliates, as other organisations operated in the companies and FIOM-CGIL had the majority of union members. By and large, trade union density ranged between 24% and 36% of the workforce in all selected companies.

We [worker representatives] have good relationships with the employer; he trusts us and supports our role as intermediaries between him and the rest of workers. (Company C's worker representative)¹⁹

Our company is not highly unionised, probably because it was born as a family-run company and the employer and his employees worked traditionally side by side. . . . FIM-CISL members are in a minority with respect to the members of FIOM-CGIL. (Company A's worker representative)²⁰

While promoting, regulating and performing organisational innovation projects, FIM-CISL Brescia relied on the support of an external, trustworthy consultant, sometimes

accompanied by other experts in management engineering. The costs of consultancy services were borne by the companies, although in a few cases it was possible to finance these activities through interprofessional funds (originating from bilateral agreements between national trade unions and employers' associations and aimed at gathering and sharing resources for workers' training among companies). Conversely, the time spent by trade union officials assisting the expert in the meetings with workers and managers and in the definition and implementation of the projects during their whole duration, was totally at the cost of FIM-CISL.

As regards the projects' contents, they follow a quite homogeneous pattern entailing the establishment of organisational innovation 'control structures' (Della Rocca, 1985), in the form of continuous improvement groups and steering committees. The latter had a tripartite structure, composed of company managers, trade union representatives (both at the workplace and territorial level) and external experts. Steering committees generally have the duty to conduct a preliminary analysis of the business context and monitor and assess the overall functioning of the project. By contrast, continuous improvement groups are composed of workers and line managers; workers participating in these groups are either elected by the overall workforce or jointly appointed by the unitary workplace union structure (*Rappresentanza Sindacale Unitaria*, RSU)²¹ and company managers. Continuous improvement groups are generally entrusted with the definition and implementation of suggestions for the improvement of company processes. Critical issues and proposed solutions are sometimes gathered through tools for the direct participation of individual workers such as employee suggestion schemes. In more structured projects, before the establishment of 'control structures', experts conduct interviews with members of the workplace union structure and company managers and organise focus groups with workers from different departments to better identify critical areas. In other cases, training courses targeted at either the overall workforce or single members of continuous improvement groups are developed to raise workers' awareness of work organisation-related issues and provide them with the necessary tools for their active contribution to company innovation. Projects are therefore articulated in different phases starting from the analysis of the business context and ending with the assessment of the solutions implemented. This complex structure has required, in three out of four cases, the drafting of an actual project plan.²² In most cases, the plan complements a company-level collective agreement, which refers in broader terms to the launch of direct employee participation practices. Indeed, according to the legislation, the introduction of these practices via collective bargaining is a prerequisite for employers to get fiscal and contributory incentives.

As for the implementation of these projects, one can observe a certain discrepancy between what is written in the project plans and company-level collective agreements and what has been actually carried out. Delays to schedules, non-compliance with original plans and setbacks have been detected in all the companies analysed, and due to a number of reasons, including floor managers' hostility towards workers' active engagement in work organisation; the sudden need to move a department where a continuous improvement group should have been established to a new production site; the replacement of a former HR manager who initially agreed on the joint project; the change in the

composition of the unitary workplace union structure in favour of FIOM-CGIL less keen on direct employee voice.

Workers' representatives are still waiting for a company's response to the problems that have arisen in the continuous improvement group. . . . Furthermore, we [the trade union and worker representatives] do not have a clear idea of who makes the final decision as one manager (who is the son of the founder and participates in negotiating tables) appears to be very open to change and collaboration but his brother is completely different; plus, their father still seems to be in charge. (A trade union official dealing with the Company D case)²³

Over the last few months, there have been important organisational changes, with the entrance of new supervisors, and the feeling is that control has increased. . . . The new HR manager does not appreciate the project and displays a different vision from that expressed by the former manager who signed the agreement with us [the trade union and worker representatives]. . . . It is possible that the new HR manager acknowledges the value of employee participation but does not want to share its implementation with us. (A trade union official dealing with the Company B case)²⁴

The project has been interrupted; there have been elections for the members of the RSU and FIOM-CGIL got the majority of members. . . . FIOM-CGIL is not interested in the project we promoted and now displays a confrontational attitude towards the company. (A trade union official dealing with the Company A case)²⁵

Overall, the gap between projects' contents and their actual implementation would have largely depended on the inevitable incompleteness of collective bargaining (D'Antona, 1995) and project design; that is on the occurrence of unforeseen circumstances delaying or changing the development of the projects as well as on the difficulty of sustaining the high-level commitment of all players involved. These problems were further affected by the difficulty in engaging the whole workforce in the innovation process and delivering in a short time tangible economic results for both the employer and workers. Not even the historical cooperative approach to industrial relations was enough for the success of these projects, where the union was not merely being asked to accept and contribute to a work reorganisation project started by management, but was directly initiating a process of change and yearned to be a real partner with management.

The company does not interpret the trade union as an ally in this project and does not fully comprehend its engagement in the definition and implementation of organisational change. (A trade union official dealing with the Company D case)²⁶

In the end, continuous improvement groups were established only in two departments (instead of three departments as foreseen in the project plan), because major problems came out there. But now workers from different departments feel they are left behind and do not have any role in this project. (Company C's worker representative)²⁷

The new HR manager wants to know how much money the company will save thanks to the continuous improvement project, but our experts have a different way of doing things. (A trade union official dealing with the Company B case)²⁸

Discussion

Why did direct employee voice become a trade union goal?

The above description of the experience of FIM-CISL Brescia suggests that the approach of *organised disintermediation* could not have developed without a certain propensity for worker participation and a reformist and innovative inclination inherent in the trade union's identity, which positively interacted with the diffusion of particular organisational changes in Italian companies and their increasing popularity within the union environment and the public. More specifically, current determinants of organisational innovation as identified by the literature (i.e. emphasising human relations, knowledge and direct participation) have been interpreted not only as an asset for firms' competitiveness but also as an enabler for the realisation of the union's own mission, which primarily consists of counterbalancing the employer's power and advancing the needs of workers (Cataudella and Dell'Olio, 1974). This general goal, in both its work-related and external-to-employment dimension (Budd, 2014; Hyman, 1997), has been given content and subjected to a process of rearticulation by Brescia's unionists, interpreting direct employee participation not so much as a further means of worker 'bread-and-butter' interests but more as an end in itself: an expression of employee self-determination and human dignity (Budd, 2004). Why therefore is direct employee voice a goal of FIM-CISL Brescia? 'Because it leads to optimal results in terms of performance and productivity; because participation is bound to rise in the transformation of work and the main issue for us is to take part in it to provide workers the right tools to participate; and because it contributes to restoring value to the work of people and giving workers a new social identity, different from that they had in the past.'²⁹ Subsequently, it is by promoting direct employee participation that, according to FIM-CISL Brescia, unions can retain their original role, reaffirm the intrinsic value of voice and better pursue their humanisation demands, after decades of scientific management. In the area of Brescia, the increasing *business case* for direct employee voice ends up providing unions with an unexpected chance to be themselves and leverage for pushing forward the *industrial democracy* agenda. It is exactly through this unusual encounter between economic trends and union objectives in the field of direct employee voice that union engagement in *organised disintermediation* can be explained. This is despite the fact that the complex relationship between environmental pressures and union subjective features has been depicted as one of the various cleavages (besides leadership/membership, institutional/functional goals, etc.) affecting the multidimensional nature of trade unions (Craft, 1991; Drakopoulos and Katselidis, 2014; Frege and Kelly, 2003) and contributing to their belated reaction in the face of external transformation (Craft, 1991). Against this background, the above analysis shows not only that these cleavages do condition trade union discourse and action but also that the relationship between these apparently conflicting dimensions can be harmonised and this harmonisation can potentially be the key for union change and mobilisation. As previously mentioned, positively impacting on this process are the internal learning capabilities (especially from the previous experience at FCA-CNHI establishments) and infrastructural resources (i.e. the fruitful partnership with external experts) (Lévesque and Murray, 2010) of the trade union and the institutional support for

collective bargaining about direct employee voice (expressed through economic incentives set in the fiscal legislation).

How has direct employee voice been pursued by a trade union?

As shown in the analysis, FIM-CISL Brescia has acted in the sphere of *organised disintermediation*, by striking a balance between the two main dimensions of labour's association: the internally-oriented logic of *organising* (focused on seeking membership legitimacy) and the externally-oriented logic of *partnership* (centred on building legitimacy with managers). An inherent tension between these two dimensions has been detected in the literature, since a union approach focused on *organising* threatens to compromise relationships with managers and the state, while attempts to get external legitimacy from employers may be at odds with the objective to recruit, retain and activate members (Mundlak, 2017). Bridging the gap between internal and external legitimacy, while difficult, is crucial for trade unions' effectiveness (Mundlak, 2017), especially when they want to take up the role of innovation co-makers in workplaces: in these circumstances, the dominant confrontational position vis-a-vis the employer is not enough to get optimal results (Sprenger, 2011), while *organising* and *partnership* could be combined sequentially, by considering the latter as the end-point of the former (Heery, 2002). Coherently, neither *organising* nor *partnership* have been neglected by FIM-CISL Brescia, which, on the one hand, embarked on a process of change in its organisational structure in favour of more horizontal relationships and a bottom-up approach to collective representation, and on the other hand, advanced the idea of and started to implement labour-management work reorganisation projects in local workplaces. Interestingly, far from concerning completely different action fields, the two logics of labour's association interacted with each other especially at workplace level, where the union's most serious challenge has been to balance the search for consensus, trust and commitment by workers with that for consensus, trust and commitment by management. However, not only must workers and management trust trade unions, but all players, including the external experts and other unions, need to trust each other and commit to the shared management of a complex process of organisational innovation, which otherwise might face difficulties and setbacks. This is particularly true in circumstances where the IR backdrop switches from conflicting interests and zero-sum games to common goals and win-win processes, and collective bargaining gives way to the communal design and management of highly flexible, developmental projects. Their effectiveness, indeed, comes to depend upon the ability of unions to successfully exert both internal and external influence as well as to act as the glue between them and their various targets (i.e. workers, managers, experts). And that is how the theme of the reconciliation between apparently opposite domains returns, thus proving to be relevant not only to trigger trade union mobilisation but also to orient trade union action.

Further consequences of this commitment to *organising disintermediation* are the appearance of new players (i.e. external consultants) in the IR arena and the relevance of new tools (i.e. innovation plans) and dynamics (i.e. shared project design and management) complementing traditional collective bargaining. The former is due to Italian industrial relations entering the largely unexplored domain of workplace innovation,

which requires traditional players to equip themselves with new knowledge and cognitive sources of power. The latter is due to the degree of dynamism and flexibility of the innovation processes, which cannot be strictly regulated in normative clauses but rather rely on procedural aspects (i.e. the establishment of tripartite steering committees and labour–management continuous improvement groups, the increase and strengthening of information and consultation opportunities, etc.) and adaptable work plans to succeed. Therefore, unlike *distributive* bargaining (Walton and McKersie, 1965), effective rule-making cannot ensure the proper enforcement of innovation projects, which instead enlarge the scope of informality in labour–management relations and place higher emphasis on *attitudinal structuring* (Walton and McKersie, 1965), social capital (Putnam, 1993) and mutual trust between players: elements that are hard to build and retain, especially in contexts marked by a monistic managerial culture, the lack of formal participatory institutions and ideological rivalries within the trade union movement.

Figure 1 is an attempt to graphically display the genesis and functioning of *organising disintermediation* in the specific case of FIM-CISL Brescia. As the analysis of data and information has been influenced by Scharpf's (1997) actor-centred institutionalism and, with specific regard to union behaviour, by Hodder and Edwards' (2015) model and the conceptual ideal types of *organising* and *partnership*, the figure evokes these frameworks and references. Notably, Scharpf's influence is reflected in the role of institutional setting that along with the environmental context, contributes to shaping actors' preferences and choices, while Hodder and Edwards' work is echoed by the prominence of union identity, encompassing the mission, culture and the set of values and ideas inherent to the organisation. Partly deviating from these references, the framework of *organising disintermediation*, as arising from the specific case study, emphasises the peer-to-peer interplay between union identity and the institutional and environmental context, which are hence located at the same level in Figure 1 and together contribute to determining trade union discourse and purpose. As in Scharpf's argumentation, capabilities (i.e. learning capabilities and infrastructural and institutional resources) are found to play a role in this process by affecting trade union strategy and subsequent actions. Outcomes are eventually produced by trade union actions impacting on the search for both internal (concerning members and potential members) and external (concerning managers) influence, that I have traced back to the theoretical constructs of *organising* and *partnership*. Both logics of union action serve the objective of *organising disintermediation* and affect its outcomes.

Conclusions

At the crossroads between *organising* against *disintermediation* and *partnership*, while losing the supremacy over worker voice, to at least secure mutual employer–employee gains, one local trade union created for itself a third way. As emerged from the analysis of the specific case study, *organising disintermediation* derived from the acknowledgement of a *democracy at work* argument alongside traditionally managerially-led direct employee voice practices. This explains why the Brescia trade union proactively engaged in direct employee voice and experienced a multifaceted change, affecting both its internal (related to *organising* members and potential members) and external (related to

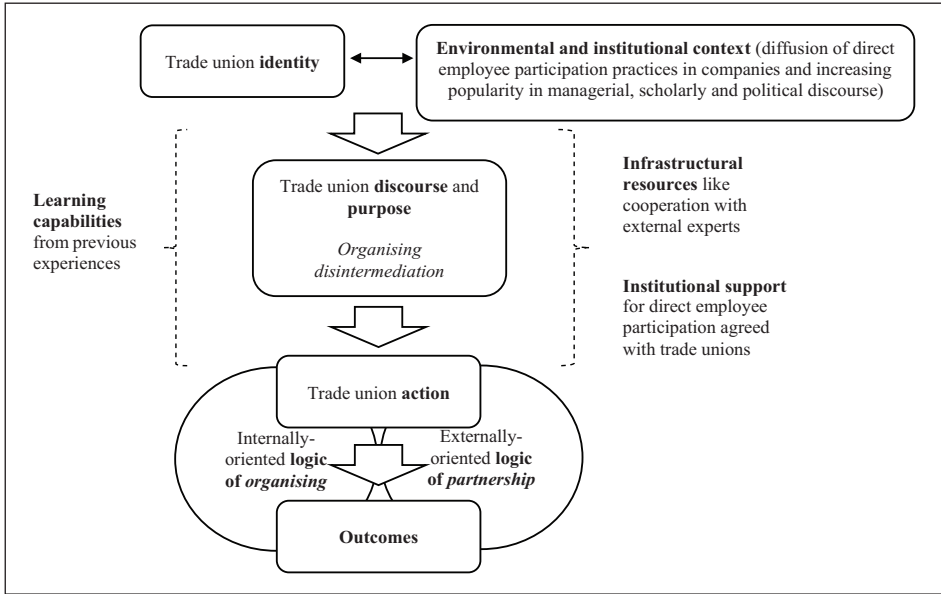


Figure 1. The framework of organising disintermediation.

partnership with management) focal interests. Consistent with Hodder and Edwards’ (2015) argumentation, this strategy of renewal has been deeply influenced by the union’s own history and identity, and in line with Fairbrother’s (2015) conceptualisation, it stands as an ongoing process of transition where union organisation, capacity and purpose continuously relate to each other. Like *organising*, the outcomes of this process are strictly related to union agency and capabilities (Fletcher and Hurd, 2001) and in a similar way to *partnership*, they also depend on institutional and structural determinants as well as on the quality of relationships between all players (Johnstone and Wilkinson, 2018). Although positive results from both *partnership* and *organising* viewpoints are hard to be achieved and properly measured, *organising disintermediation* deserves attention, as its potential to turn direct employee voice from an external challenge into a subjective goal offers unions new opportunities for comprehensive change. In Brescia, following the first four cases mapped in this article, the process has expanded into other workplaces and continues today.

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Notes

1. By borrowing Budd's conceptualisation (2004), *efficiency* stands for the effective use of scant resources, while *equity* is fairness in the employment relationship, implying employees receiving what they deserve in terms of minimum standards, a balanced distribution of income and equal opportunities.
2. Further details in the Appendix.
3. After this period, the trade union drew on previous experience to launch new projects in other companies with the support of different external consultants. The trade union engagement in *organising disintermediation* still continues today.
4. Interview held on 23 January 2017.
5. Interview held on 15 December 2017.
6. Digital Innovation Hubs are envisaged in the national plan for Industry 4.0 and aimed at providing support, information and training to companies dealing with the challenge of digitalisation.
7. Interview held on 23 January 2017.
8. Reflections arising from interviews with representatives from FIM-CISL Brescia held on 30 January 2017 and 3 April 2017.
9. Interview held on 15 December 2017.
10. This argument is clearly raised also by Cohen-Rosenthal (1997), when suggesting that applying a sociotechnical model also to union structure is required to make unions' demands for sociotechnical organisations in workplaces more credible.
11. Further information on the initiative, which I personally attended, can be found in the FIM-CISL Brescia magazine, *Nuovo Impegno Sindacale* (December 2016).
12. Further information on the initiative, which I attended, can be found in the FIM-CISL Brescia magazine, *Nuovo Impegno Sindacale* (June 2017).
13. Interview held on 30 January 2017.
14. The following information has been collected thanks to the analysis of primary documents and the conducting of semi-structured interviews listed in the Appendix.
15. These motivations are related to the so-called 'need pulls' urging UK firms to adopt new practices, according to Lesure et al. (2004).
16. Interview held on 13 February 2017.
17. Interview held on 25 August 2017.
18. Interview held on 13 February 2017.
19. Interview held on 25 August 2017.
20. Interview held on 20 December 2016.
21. The unitary workplace union structure represents the only channel of employees' representation in workplaces. Members of the unitary workplace union structure (also called union delegates) are elected by the whole workforce in workplaces with at least 15 employees and chosen from candidates proposed by the trade unions having affiliates in the company.
22. Project plans were drafted in local companies even before it was expressly suggested by the Revenue Agency with the Circular No. 5/E of 29 March 2018.
23. Reflections expressed by the trade union official during the meeting held on 8 September 2017.
24. Interview held on 2 August 2018.
25. Interview held on 22 November 2017.

26. Reflections expressed by the trade union official during the meeting held on 8 September 2017.
27. Interview held on 25 August 2017.
28. Interview held on 2 August 2018.
29. Interview conducted with the General Secretary on 30 January 2017.

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Ilaria Armaroli is Research Fellow at ADAPT – the Association for International and Comparative Studies in the Field of Labour Law and Industrial Relations. She received a PhD in Human Capital Formation and Labour Relations at the University of Bergamo (Italy). Her research focus is specifically related to industrial relations, trade union representation and employee voice. Among her recent publications are ‘A seat at the table: Negotiating data processing in the workplace’, *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal* 41(1) (with Emanuele Dagnino, 2020); ‘Progettare l’innovazione: la nuova frontiera dell’azione sindacale?’ *Economia & Lavoro* 1 (2019). She is member of the Editorial Board of ADAPT International Bulletin.

Appendix. Overview of the main sources of data collection.

	Attendance at union meetings	Interview(s)
FIM-CISL Brescia	4 main meetings (two meetings concerning the internal union reorganisation held on 9 May 2016 and 16 May 2016, a General Council held in October 2016 around the topic of workplace innovation and direct employee voice, and the trade union's Congress held on 23 and 24 February 2017). Prior to the Congress, many meetings were organised among workers' representatives to discuss Congress's main topics.	4 (three interviews with the General Secretary and one member of the secretarial body of FIM-CISL Brescia conducted on 23 January 2017, 30 January 2017 and 15 December 2017, one interview with two officials of FIM-CISL Brescia conducted on 10 April 2017). Plus, an interview with the external expert collaborating with the union was held on 7 September 2017.
Company case studies		
	Collective agreement(s) on direct employee participation	Attendance at negotiating tables
	Company documents	Attendance at union meetings
	Direct employee participation plans (and related reports)	Interview(s)
Company A: parent company of a multinational group; produces pipes and accessories; fewer than 100 employees	1 (signed on 15 April 2016 and explaining the direct employee participation project)	2 (one with a workers' representative on 20 December 2016 and one with a union official dealing with the case on 22 November 2017)
Company B: subsidiary company of a multinational group; manufactures press forming systems; around 320 employees	2 (one annual report of 2016 and one newsletter concerning the economic situation of the company released in March 2016) 4 (one project plan drafted by experts on 16 April 2016, one document drafted by experts in December 2016 summarising the first focus groups' results, two reports drafted by experts on 3 March 2017 and 3 May 2017 on the results of the first phase of the project and possible continuation)	1 meeting between an external expert and workers' representatives held in July 2016 to better understand the production process in the company and its gaps 3 (two with workers' representatives on 13 February 2017 and 2 August 2017, and one with a union official dealing with the case on 2 April 2018)

(Continued)

Appendix. (Continued)

Company case studies	Collective agreement(s) on direct employee participation	Company documents	Direct employee participation plans (and related reports)	Attendance at negotiating tables	Attendance at union meetings	Interview(s)
<p>Company C: consists of a unique establishment in Italy but exporting abroad; operates in the production of cylindrical and helical gears; about 75 workers</p>			<p>3 (one project plan drafted on 31 December 2016 and two related reports drafted on 10 April 2017 and 21 November 2017)</p>			<p>4 (three interviews with a union official dealing with the case on 3 April 2017, 24 May 2017 and 12 April 2018, and one interview with two workers' representatives on 25 August 2017)</p>
<p>Company D: parent company of a multinational group in the heating, ventilation and air conditioning industry; around 210 employees</p>	<p>1 collective agreement signed on 27 October 2016 and launching the direct employee participation plan</p>	<p>2 (one company profile document of 2016 and one company newsletter released on 27 February 2018)</p>	<p>4 (two project plans drafted respectively on 15 February 2017 and 26 April 2017 and the reports of the continuous improvement group of 2 October 2017 and 19 February 2018)</p>	<p>4 union internal meetings focusing on the case held on 14 June 2016, 31 August 2016, 7 September 2016 and 8 September 2017</p>	<p>2 interviews with a union official dealing with the case on 15 November 2017 and 12 April 2018</p>	