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Symposium: Italy's "Charter of Workers' Rights" turns fifty

Understanding the Charter of Workers' Rights in its historical context

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Abstract:

The Charter of Workers' Rights was a major achievement of the Italian Socialist Party and of the center-left governments. This article explores some of the factors in the international context that allowed for a period of reforms in Italy. Changes in the policies of the US administration; a difficult leadership succession in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; the renewal of the Catholic Church thanks to the Vatican Council; and the enlargement of the Italian working class plus the role of the Socialist Minister of Labor must all be given credit for a truly significant piece of legislation. The Charter also contained a vision of the future, of a new society, still to come.

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In order to understand any important law in a satisfying and convincing way, it is essential to frame it in the context in which it was prepared, discussed, and approved. In my opinion, this approach is particularly—but not solely—useful for the Charter of Workers' Rights (Italian Law n. 300/1970). It is not within my abilities, nor is it the purpose of this article to explain the legal framing of the law, its starting points, or its content—all within the context of Italian labor laws at the time. Instead, I will try to frame the Charter of Workers' Rights as it deserves to be, within the political, social, and cultural trends trends of the time. Hopefully, this will serve to improve the reader's ability to understand and interpret such an innovative law. I will approach this task while trying to avoid any nostalgia for the sixties, and the expectations and hopes of that time. As we now know, those opportunities for transformation haven't re-

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occurred since and, consequently, reformists have an obligation to create these opportunities almost from scratch.[1]

As we are often reminded (though without the appropriate analysis), the international context at the time included significant innovations, which were regarded—by multiple parties and from multiple perspectives—as not only positive in and of themselves, but very promising. The Second Vatican Council began in October 1962, per Pope John XXIII's (1958-1963) wishes. This brought an extraordinary, almost unthinkable, wave of innovation of ideas and behaviors within the Church, which shaped the entire decade. This innovation, naturally, also related to labor and the workplace. In November 1960, the young (Catholic) senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy, was elected to the White House. In his inaugural address, he announced the political rise of the generation born in the 20th century to the world. Two years prior to that, Nikita Khrushchev, born at the end of the 19th century, became the head of the Soviet Communist Party, which brought the Union out of the tragic era of Stalinism and started an important chapter of détente between the USA and the Soviet Union. It seemed, at least for a few years, that the Cold War—characterized by a worrying balance of terror between the two great powers equipped with nuclear weapons—disappeared from international relations. However, in October 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis led to a flare-up of tensions, though it was also also the beginning of a period of reformation, characterized by highs and lows.

The Kennedy administration (wording is important here) allowed and/or became aware of the entrance of Italian socialists into center-left coalitions—the influential historian Arthur J. Schlesinger Jr., one of the advisors to the President, bragged about having contributed to making the USA more open towards Italian politics. The Johnson administration, on the other hand, drowned in the swamps of Vietnam. The well-known Tet offensive in February 1968 brought an end to the Johnson administration—in March, the President announced that he would not seek a second term. In the meantime, however, his reformist politics—dubbed the "Great Society"—created new opportunities and invigorated the country, second only to Franklin D. Roosevelt's *New Deal.* In Central-Eastern Europe, after the removal of Krusciov in October 1964, a reformist form of communism seemed to be gaining ground. Rather, the possibility for reform within communist regimes seemed to be gaining ground. The high point of this reformation attempt was the Prague Spring, lead by Alexander Dubcek, which was put to an end by Soviet tanks on August 21st, 1968, and buried by the USA's declaration (based on the doctrine of Helmut Sonnenfeldt, Henry Kissinger's closest collaborator) that Czechoslovakia was within the Soviet sphere of influence and, as such, the US would not take any direct action. The balance of terror between the USA and the USSR led to the acceptance of reciprocal spheres of influence and the recognition of the other's (limited) sovereignty. However, within this 'limited' sovereignty, there were shifts.

As such, the international landscape of the 1960s was characterized by high points and low points, but, somehow, Italian politics were given new life. However, it would be wrong to say that the era of Italian reformation was a (more or less direct) consequence of the above-discussed uncertain détente and encouragement coming from outside the country.

The national political context was changing significantly, but the shift was gradual, after the separation of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) from The Italian Communist Party (PCI), which had already begun in the mid 1950s. This shift toward the left and the first center-left

[1] A lot has been written about the 1960s. The writings of Amato and Graziosi (2013) and Capussela (2019) are indispensable for a better understanding of the political and economic context within which the Charter of Workers' Rights was created.

government seemed to be a major breakthrough, the start of a long-awaited "magnificent and progressive fate". This was the title, attributed to Pietro Nenni, of the socialist newspaper *Avanti!* on December 6th, 1963: "Da oggi ognuno è più libero. I lavoratori rappresentati nel governo del Paese" ("Starting today, everyone is free. The working class is represented in the government of our country"). This title highlighted a historic conquest—and it remains historic still today, even though many ill-intentioned commentators and analysts periodically try to re-write this history. Unfortunately, the January 1964 split of Basso, Valori, and Vecchietti [from the Italian Socialist Party]—which led to the creation of the Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity (PSIUP)—weakened the position of the socialists in the Italian government. Then came, to use Nenni's rich lexicon, "the saber-rattling" [that is, unrest in the upper echelons of the Italian armed forces]—including, above all, that of General De Lorenzo. This dramatically signaled the fact that in Italy, any truly reformist government action would encounter tremendous and dangerous resistance. The resignation of the Moro-Nenni government in June 1964 signified the end of the first, most decisive, phase of Italy's center-left government.

In an October 1964 edition of the weekly Italian magazine *Rinascita,* Norberto Bobbio invited communists—right after the dismissal of Khrushchev—to form a United National Workers' Party with the socialists. The roundabout and open-ended response to this invitation by Giorgio Amendola was not positive. I have sometimes asked myself if this invitation suggested the need to bolster the position of the socialists in the Italian government.[2] It's clear that after Palmiro Togliatti's death in August 1964, the Italian Communist Party was trying to find its place and determine how to oppose the center-left government. This role was certainly not defined in the exchange of letters between Riccardo Lombardi and Palmiro Togliatti one year before, in which the secretary of the Italian Communist Party revealed ambiguities and contradictions within the party that were not easily resolvable. There is no general consensus with regards to the actions of the communists during this period. Even in relation to the Charter of Workers' Rights—which they couldn't help but look at with significant interest and thinly veiled political sympathy—their behavior was ambiguous, rather than linear. In fact, they abstained from the final vote. It is right to question this abstention, even today.

The period defined by the 1968 student movement was also part of the national political context of the time. For an intelligent analysis on this subject, I will refer the reader to the work of Flores and Gozzini (2018). Naturally, one must be able to choose what is relevant when trying to frame the Charter of Workers' Rights. Here, very briefly—though it certainly merits much more than some pithy analysis—I will highlight a few problematic elements that allow us to better understand the 1968 period. The *Quaderni Rossi* (1961-1965) by Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti, included a working-class analysis. The most vigorous wing (which is, perhaps, a euphemism) of the student movement during the 1968 period may have been workerist, but it was anything but reformist. Their interest in the creation of a Charter of Workers' Rights was absolutely marginal. To them, the condition of the working class was mystical, not based on knowledge about life and labor, on studies and research done in the field, nor on prospective transformation and improvement. Those student leaders did not know much about all that, nor were they interested. From my experience, and from what I have read, I can't help but think that there was an all-around ideologization that came at the

[2] The answer is, certainly: yes. Because I am convinced that history is also made with "maybes" and "buts", I would like to add that, over time, the (very possible) Workers' Party would have not only changed the negative developments in the Italian Socialist Party and the Italian Communist Party, and the left as a whole, but also the history of Italy.

expense of the knowledge to be acquired and used, of concrete demands, (*soyez réalistes demandez l'impossible*) and of the kind of future imagined.

Many of the student leaders viewed the Charter not as a chance to solidify achievements that the movement could respond to and use to advance, but rather as an instrument to cage the progress of the workers' movement. This vision was absolutely not shared by the unions and the unionists—who were, inevitably, divided in their opinions as well. I would add, however, even though this topic is (rightfully) controversial, that many union leaders and their consultants in academia were unable to take advantage of what had been achieved in terms of rights and to use these achievements to see and go beyond. This could have included, for example, an analysis of if and how workers' rights could have "overflowed" into a form of *Mitbestimmung* (co-determination) which had already been successfully achieved in the Federal Republic of Germany. Years later, reflecting on the unkept promises of democracy, Norberto Bobbio (1984, p. 16), referred to the (possibility of) democracy in factories, citing the Charter of Workers' Rights.

Ideas and the working class

My reference to Bobbio is neither random nor banal. If Bobbio was concerned with the plausibility of expanding democracy, other intellectuals had previously ploughed those cultural, social and—to some extent—political terrains, which are useful in order to understand the broader (international) evolution of the condition of the working class. I will limit myself to three high-level references. The first is to a thesis—which was well known at the time—on the end of political ideas, formulated by Daniel Bell in 1959 (Italian translation 1961). The subtitle of his book—*On the exhaustion of political ideas in the fifties*—also deserves to be quoted. This is not the place to go into the substance of this complex, articulate, stimulating, and controversial analysis. I will only underline the fact that Bell seizes, with great acumen, how powerful ideologies—especially on the left—developed into social practices, which are legitimated based on the results achieved. The Charter of Workers' Rights was certainly one of the most significant outcomes of the reformist practices that went beyond ideological constraints. In his own way, Bell also went above and beyond, gathering his essays in an ambitious and brilliant volume titled *The coming of post-industrial society.* Naturally, the protection and the promotion of workers' rights in post-industrial society differed significantly from the past. Moreover, the protection and promotion of worker's rights were starting to be coupled with the protection and promotion of the rights of consumers/end-users.

If Bell had the foresight to audaciously project a future that he already had glimpses of, the analysis of the German political sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) was deliberately more connected to developments related to the working class. Though he was very young at the time, Dahrendorf's wise analysis was extraordinarily suggestive and filled with implications for the future. The main thesis of the book (which was designed to "complete" Marx's *Das Kapital*) is that at the end of the 1950's, the social classes—but especially the working class—were losing their homogeneity. Social stratification would have required a new equilibrium between moments of conflict and necessary moments of agreement. When seen under this light, the Charter of Workers' Rights could have also been interpreted—beyond its indisputable recognition of the fact that workers' rights don't stop at the factory gate—as a way to obtain and maintain maximum class cohesion and, at the same time, attenuate the conflict between

capital and labor. The highest and most acrimonious level of conflict in the 1960's took place in Great Britain. It may not be paradoxical, but it certainly was a consequence of significant differences within the (broader) working class—which was characterized by the undeniable multiplicity of union associations. The English Labor government wrote an important White Paper titled *In Place of Strife: A Policy for Industrial Relations*, not so much to lessen the power of the unions, but to contain it in order to avoid damage. However, the government was unable to obtain the necessary consensus from the unions to be able to put the contents of the White Paper into action. It is not my task to do a comparative analysis between the Charter of Workers' Rights and this important White Paper, but I think this exercise may provide some useful lessons.

Knowing more—and being able to understand and position the importance of the Charter of Workers' Rights in the Italian context and within the history of the power of unions—requires in-depth analysis. This analysis, to some extent, can be found in the impressive and important research coordinated by Alessandro Pizzorno and Colin Crouch (1977) regarding the democracies of Western Europe: Italy, France, Germany, Great Britain, Belgium, and Holland. The analysis of the different modes of expression of working-class struggles refers significantly to the formation of collective identities and workers' search for recognition. This "recognition" is also found in the Charter of Workers' Rights, starting with the the rights of workers.

Compared to other countries—including France (for the analysis thereof, I will refer the reader to Touraine, 1969) whose major union associations were similar to Italy's—two elements were unique to Italy between the second half of the 1950's and the end of the 1960's: the great migration from the South to the North and, relatedly, farmers becoming workers/laborers. Some may also point out the subsequent appearance of "mass workers"—all the more reason for which it was crucial to guarantee the rights that allowed these workers to be integrated into the system of production with the lowest possible number of inconveniences. Instead, this "mass worker" was ideologically exploited in order to project some kind of imaginary outcome of the post-Marxist revolution. In hindsight, we know that the subversion that elitist theorists desired from the "mass worker" did not take place nor was he/she satisfactorily integrated into the context of industrial relations. This integration was incomplete, troubled, and riddled with tensions and contradictions that marked all of the 1970's and ended with the "marcia dei quarantamila quadri" [a union-critical worker's march] in Turin. If we follow the steep path of expectations that was paved during this time, we would find that these rapidly-increasing aspirations eventually spilled into a waterfall of disturbing disappointments.

The Charter created expectations that could not be translated into action. Unfortunately, the developments that followed were characterized by significant economic and social tumult, including the bloody pursuits of left-wing terrorists, which were justified in the name of the working class. On that topic, it is my great pleasure to cite the book written in 1981 by the influential professor of labor Federico Mancini (1927-1999), a friend and colleague of Gino Giugni (1927-2009). In his book, Mancini, theorizes—with incredible lucidity—the task of the reformists (not only the intellectuals).

Upon further reflection, no description of the individual elements that made up the setting at the time—in and of themselves fragmented and divisive—can suffice to make the Charter of Workers' Rights comprehensible if that description does not include a broader vision thereof. For that purpose, I would like to point out two key elements: the first, which is included in

Nenni's proclamation, is the increased rate of collective liberties brought forth by the first center-left government. The other, included in the editorial page of *Avanti!,* is that the Constitution (that "promised revolution" according to Piero Calamandrei) started to be applied inside factories. "Freedom" and "Constitution" delineate the field that the reformist game was played on at the time. In fact, no matter the point of view from which one approaches the theme of reformation, it's clear that reforms aim to expand the freedom of citizens: freedom of choice, freedom of action, and freedom from dangerous and harmful events. Freedom exists within a context that includes not only economic rights—starting with the right to work and everything related thereto—but also "opportunities", that is, the freedom to pursue one's personal goals—which Italy's reform of the junior high school system contributed to significantly. Additionally, more rights and freedoms began to be guaranteed after the era of the center-left government. This era led to the law on divorce and the law on abortion, thanks to the very important contributions made by the radical parties led by Marco Pannella and Emma Bonino.

Any discussion of the constitution is complicated, due to conceptual confusion, but also due to the unfounded, nonsensical, proposals that started in 1976—which were, to some extent, consciously manipulative. In the sixties, the reformist task essentially consisted in carrying out the constitution. As such, it is right to highlight the fact that the Charter of Workers' Rights did not go far enough, seeing as—because of internal conflict within union movements—it was unable to fully to be completely fulfill art. 39 and 40 of the constitution. The three major union federations[3] were largely responsible for this. Even today, though these union leaders may be more aware of the negative consequences (for them, for industrial relations, and for the socio-economic system as a whole) of the lack of regulation, they still continue along that path.

My final reflection concerns reformism. The Charter of Workers' Rights, following the political vision of the Minister of Labor Giacomo Brodolini and Professor Gino Giugni—who was the Charter's main writer—was an integral part of a series of transformations that the socialists, thanks to their alliance with the Christian Democrat government, brought about. The raison d'être of the center-left had to be reforms that profoundly changed the country: "structural reforms" as Riccardo Lombardi put it—a statement which was unjustly criticized. The unequal power balance between employers and workers "structurally" characterizes/characterized those relationships. Changing and rethinking this power balance was effectively an act of reformation. However, reformism is also the knowledge that no reform is perfect or designed to last forever. Reformism is to periodically reform reforms. The Italian left, characterized by its divisions and conflicts, has been reluctant and often incapable of doing that.[4] The events following the Charter being signed into law are proof of this incapacity. Since the international (in terms of competition), the national political (the decline of political parties), the socio-economic and cultural (the fragmentation of the social classes) contexts have changed, and Italian reformists have not been able to coherently change this reform. However, the Charter remains one of the high points of socialist reforms of Italy's center-left government.

[3] The overall summary of this subject can be found in Regini (2015).

[4] Unfortunately, the Italian left has also been incapable of learning from other examples in Europe that have improved the workplace conditions and the lives of the working class.

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