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Contemporary Workplaces in the Making: The Case of an Italian Shopping Centre

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1. Declining industrial relations in the face of changing workplaces

In recent years, socio-economic literature has provided evidence of an overall decline of industrial relations as labour regulation activities carried out, mainly but not only, by organized collective actors¹. This decline arose as a crisis of trade union representation, expressed by a fall of union density and mobilization capacity². Closely related to this phenomenon, there was a decline of collective bargaining as privileged method of industrial relations, expressed by a decrease, even though small, of union coverage – i.e. the proportion of employees covered by wage bargaining agreements – and a tendency to the decentralization of bargaining structures. Furthermore, a certain number of large companies – in Italy, a practice initiated by Fiat – have unilaterally decided to leave their employers' associations in order to represent themselves in negotiation processes.

The decentralization of collective bargaining towards the company or even plant level implies a change in the power balance between employers and employees, since trade unions lose their control over the whole sector (Crouch 2012). The individualization of employment relationships, fostered by the rapid growth of temporary employment, has sharpened this power asymmetry. Further pressures have then come from both *structural* factors

This paper is the result of a joint effort of the authors. However, sections 1, 2, 3 and 6 may be attributed to Andrea Bellini, sections 4 and 5 to Alberto Gherardini.

1. On this matter, see above all Streeck (2009) and Baccaro and Howell (2011). Among others, see Bordogna (2012), Cella (2012), Crouch (2012) and Regini (2012).

2. Several authors, such as Tilly (1978), Offe (1985) and Kelly (1998), have recognized these aspects as the two key indicators of trade union power.

(the social dumping due to the internationalization of the value chain) and *short-term* factors (the financial and economic crisis).

It is a fact that the rise, mainly in the tertiary, of “new” workplaces – in addition to the deconstruction of traditional ones – has given a contribution to the weakening of collective bargaining and, more generally, of collective action, since they show a low permeability to trade unions. Several studies, for instance, have focused on the question of representing and supporting workers in call centres. Far less attention, instead, has been paid to those (work)places which better represent the spirit of contemporary society, as “new” places of consumption: the *shopping centres*.

In the past ten years, large retail floor spaces such as shopping centres rapidly increased in number all over Europe, following changes in urban planning regulations and profiting from a high productivity (Giaccone, Di Nunzio 2012). This has had a considerable impact on the structure of the sector and of the labour market, leading to a decline of small businesses – e.g. local shops offering essential goods and services, such as grocery – and to a drop in the number of self-employed workers.

As workplaces, the shopping centres are characterized by a high degree of fragmentation of the workforce – by employment contract, working hours, work organization, etc. – and the diversification of protection, in the light of the application of different industry-wide agreements. These places, in fact, include a wide variety of businesses, in terms of product sector, firm size, legal form, corporate culture and style of management. What is more, decentralized bargaining covers a limited amount of workers (mostly employees of large retail stores). Employment relationships are therefore affected by a misalignment between employers’ responsibility and workers’ needs. In particular, the regulation of opening hours and Sunday openings – two strategic issues in a context of increasing competition, mainly around prices (Baret *et al.* 1999) – is often subject to unilateral decisions by the management of the centres and by larger employers, with a negative effect on the ability of the workers to reconcile work and family life.

The hypothesis underlying the study presented in this paper is that the use of complementary forms of negotiation, such as site-level bargaining, may contribute to increasing the quality of working life and, ultimately, to improving the climate of industrial relations in “changing” workplaces. In such a sense, shopping centres could represent a starting point for a renewal of collective action and for a cognitive reframing of union representation strategies.

2. Deep inside the shopping centre: scope and context of the study

The survey presented in this paper is part of a pilot project developed in the form of action research. As such, it is based on a case study, conducted on a specific retail complex classified as “shopping centre”. The purposes of the project are: improving knowledge of trade unions on the regulation of employment and working conditions in a multi-employer workplace and on its social implications; contributing to the preparation of a set of proposals for the development of site-level bargaining; and evaluating the possibility of extending this practice to similar realities.

The rationales for the choice of the case study were therefore that the research area had features that made it a breeding ground for “experimentation” in the field of industrial relations, and that the project itself was feasible and repeatable.

The selected complex is a shopping centre (from here on, “the Centre”), located in a small town of less than 50,000 inhabitants, Empoli, which is in the province of Firenze, in Tuscany (Italy). This choice is justified by three main reasons.

First of all, the region of Tuscany, and the area of Empoli in particular, are characterized by a “red” political subculture, pro-labour local governments, and strong traditions in “neo-corporative” practices of meso- and micro-concertation³. Besides, the regional government in charge has always expressed its steady opposition to the deregulation of opening hours and Sunday working in retailing, and on this subject it was often in conflict with the State government and municipalities⁴.

Second, the main anchor tenant of the Centre is a superstore of a large (over 100 stores and almost 8,000 employees) retail cooperative company⁵, which has placed solidarity and participation at the core of its value system and has developed a corporate social responsibility policy. Very important,

3. On this concepts, see Regini (1991). In this regard, it is also to be noted that the Code of commerce adopted by the regional government of Tuscany promotes the development of concertation and “cooperative governance” as methods of regulation in the retail sector.

4. In 2001, a constitutional reform gave the regional governments exclusive (residual) legislative competence on retail policies. Ten years later, following an intervention by the State government led by Mario Monti providing for a deregulation of opening hours in the sector, a number of questions of legitimacy were brought before the Constitutional court. In 2013, the Court ruled in favour of the *illegitimacy* of a disposition included in a Tuscany regional act re-introducing limits to opening hours and imposing closures on Sundays and bank holidays, since this was considered a violation of the exclusive competence of the State in the field of protection of competition.

5. The cooperative is also the owner of the area where the Centre was built and of the Centre itself, while all other businesses are rent-paying tenants.

in the recent renewal of the company agreement, the cooperative has reaffirmed its commitment to limit openings on Sundays and bank holidays.

Third, the major Italian trade union established its local headquarters in the Centre. This could be an added value for collective action in support of workers' interests.

A further reason lies in the structure of the Centre. This has a total gross leasable area of 31,000 m², 2,000 parking spaces, 61 units and an estimated 500 workers⁶. Hence, according to Italian standards, it can be considered of a medium size, which makes it a good basis for comparisons.

This complex, opened in 2007, is a “polyfunctional” shopping centre, that is a large building with multiple primary uses. In addition to the superstore, in fact, it hosts three smaller anchor stores, a gallery of shops and services, and food courts. Other than this, two distinguishing features of the Centre are that: it has an area assigned to artisan businesses; and it is embedded in a natural park and uses renewable energy sources and rainwater recovery systems.

Since it was designed with the purpose of supporting the principle of environmental sustainability and it also assumed the function of promotion of artisan activities, the Centre studied can therefore be seen as an attempt to go beyond the representation of the shopping centre as the «hyperspace of the commodity» and «an ensemble of “black boxes”» (Baudrillard 1981: 75, 78) or even a *non-place*⁷, which «creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude» (Augé 1992: 103).

In the following pages, we will consider the shopping centre – generally speaking – above all as a *work-place*, which also fits well with the idea of *flexible capitalism* (Sennett 1998) and its impact on employment and the quality of work: more low-skilled/low-paid jobs; wider use of fixed-term (and often part-time) contracts; increasing working hours and/or work pace. In particular, we will concentrate on working hours and Sunday working, to account for the variety of work situations within the Centre and also explain how these variables affect work satisfaction and work-life balance. Then, we will explore the “spaces of action” of trade unions, addressing the issues of union participation and solidarity among the workers as preconditions for an effective collective action.

6. The source of employment data is an informal talk with the local officers of Filcams-Cgil, which is the most representative trade union in the Centre.

7. This concept has been subjected to critique. Here, it is to be noticed that the places Augé indicated as *non-places* – among which shopping centres themselves – can even be a “landmark” for many people, in particular for those who are “natives” of those places.

3. Methodology and description of the sample

In a preliminary phase, a focus group was convened with 8 participants, selected among the workers of the Centre, in order to identify the key issues and design a structured questionnaire. After that, the choice of distribution methods was a critical point. In fact, all target groups were difficult to reach and part of potential respondents was characterized by a low education level, so that it might have been convenient to opt for a survey administered by an interviewer, who could explain the questions that the respondents did not understand. For this reason, we decided for a paper-based questionnaire and face-to-face interviews, conducted by intercepting the respondents at the workplace or the surrounding area⁸.

Overall, we collected 141 usable responses, which represent about 28 per cent of the estimated total employment in the Centre. Nevertheless, due to the impossibility to have access to more detailed employment data, no conclusion can be drawn about the representativeness of the sample. A possible remark is that the proportion of women (73.8 per cent; see Table 1) appears largely overestimated, especially if compared with the average in retail trade (Nace G47) in Italy (52.1 per cent; elaboration on Eurostat data, *Lfs*, 2013).

Table 1 and 2 draw a detailed social profile of the respondents. As already outlined, they are mostly women, of 35 years of age or more (60.3 per cent), with an upper or post-secondary non-tertiary education (66.7), a permanent job (73.3) and a length of service of 4 years or more (64.9). Thus, the average worker is *an adult woman with a medium education, who has a secure job and works at the Centre since a long time*. Frequently, it is *a person with family responsibilities*, married or living common law (53.2 per cent) and with children (52.1). Among these, a relevant number of respondents has one or more children with less than 6 years of age (21.3 per cent), but this proportion grows if we consider children with less than 15 years (31.2). This could partly explain the incidence of part-time work (45.0 per cent), as several respondents are working mothers with dependent children and have to manage their “double presence”, at work and in the family⁹.

Here, three further remarks are needed.

8. A small number of questionnaires were self-completed. This is the explanation for the variable number of valid cases in the tables in sections 4 and 5.

9. On the other hand, according to Cerruti (2010), large retailers make an extensive use of part-timers mainly because they are reliable and more willing to work overtime to get an extra pay. As Giaccone and Di Nunzio (2012) have pointed out, the use of overtime for part-timers is due to an increased unpredictability of customer inflows and to the need to cover Sunday shifts.

First, the average age of the workers in the Centre, 37 years, is in any case relatively low, although it is higher in anchor stores (40 years) and lower in the gallery of shops and services (34).

Second, while the employees of larger stores and those of smaller shops are equally represented (48.1 and 47.3 per cent respectively), the former are for the most part employees of the superstore, who are 34.0 per cent of the sample.

Third and last, there is also a significant 26.7 per cent of workers with fixed-term or atypical employment contracts, who are mainly employed in small shops (77.1 per cent). In effect, their proportion is much likely to be underestimated, although it is highly variable and subject to peaks during specific periods, and therefore quite difficult to weigh.

Table 1 - Socio-demographic features

	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Sex</i>	
Male	26.2
Female	73.8
<i>Age class</i>	
Less than 35 years	39.7
35 years or more	60.3
<i>Education level (Isced equivalent)</i>	
No education, primary or lower secondary (0-2)	18.4
Upper or post-secondary non-tertiary (3-4)	66.7
Tertiary (5-6)	14.9
<i>Marital status</i>	
Single	37.6
Married or living common law	53.2
Separated, divorced or widowed	9.2
<i>Children</i>	
With	52.1
Without	47.9
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<i>(N)</i>	<i>(141)</i>

Note: the sample includes 10 owners of small businesses.

Table 2 - Economic features (only employees)

	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Type of employer</i>	
Anchor stores	48.1
Shops and services	47.3
Other	4.6
<i>Term of contract</i>	
Permanent	73.3
Non-permanent	26.7
<i>Work schedule</i>	
Full-time	55.0
Part-time	45.0
<i>Length of service</i>	
Less than 4 years	35.1
4 years or more	64.9
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<i>(N)</i>	<i>(131)</i>

4. Two different “worlds” of work

The workers of the Centre have quite different working hours (see Table 3). Excluding Sundays and bank holidays, slightly more than one third works less than 26 hours per week, 42.9 per cent between 26 and 36 hours, while only 22.2 per cent exceeds 36 hours. The type of employer influences this distribution: while the employees of anchor stores have not a high rhythm of work, intense working hours are concentrated in small shops and services. Here, employees doing 37 hours or more per week are 35.0 per cent, against 4.8 per cent of those working in large retail stores. Moreover, those who work less than 26 hours are only 28.3 per cent compared to 43.5 per cent of the employees of anchor stores. In these shops the workload is mainly divided on the basis of the seniority of the staff: younger people work more than people in their thirties or forties. Actually, about a half of the under-30 works more than 36 hours.

Table 3 - Weekly working hours by type of employer (percent)

	<i>Type of employer</i>		<i>Total</i>
	Anchor stores	Shops and services	
Less than 26 hours	43.5	28.3	34.9
From 26 to 36 hours	51.6	36.7	42.9
37 hours or more	4.8	35.0	22.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<i>(N)</i>	<i>(62)</i>	<i>(60)</i>	<i>(122)</i>

Working hours on Sundays and bank holidays denotes a further rift between anchor stores and shops and services (see Table 4). The number of hours worked in small shops is higher than in larger stores, both in months with fewer openings (e.g. November and January) and in those when the Centre is open every Sunday (December). The research, therefore, shows that the work in the shopping centre has an invisible boundary between two different “worlds”: on the one hand, larger stores, where working hours are shared by a high number of people; on the other hand, all other shops, which are forced to rotate its limited staff.

Table 4 - Monthly working hours on Sundays and bank holidays by month and type of employer (hours, mean and standard deviation)

<i>Month</i>	<i>Type of employer</i>		<i>Total</i>
	Anchor stores	Shops and services	
November 2013	9.7 (5.2)	12.9 (7.0)	11.2 (6.3)
December 2013	18.6 (8.9)	27.3 (13.1)	22.8 (11.9)
January 2014	9.3(4.9)	13.8 (7.4)	11.5 (6.6)

Concerning satisfaction with working hours, it is not surprising that it is higher in larger stores than in small shops: 88.9 per cent of the employees of anchor stores feel that their working hours are adequate, while 9.3 per cent would even lengthen their workday. On the contrary, satisfaction among the employees of small shops drops to 76.7 per cent, while 6.7 per cent would increase their working hours, and 16.7 per cent would reduce it.

Although the degree of dissatisfaction is inevitably higher among those who carry out more hours, it is also important to point out a general appreciation (about two thirds) for the time worked during the weekdays. Two dimensions of analysis may explain such approval: the first one relates to contractual elements, while the second concerns workers’ socio-demographic features. Regarding the former, however, it should be remarked that working

hours in the Centre are shorter on average than those of other workers. The typical working day of the employees of anchor stores has a duration of 5.8 hours, while that of the employees of small shops (6.6 hours) is lower than the Italian average (8 hours). First, this is a consequence of the standard contract applied to the employees of the large retail cooperative, which until a few years ago was of 35 hours per week, as established by the former company agreement. Second, the length of the workday is influenced by the diffusion of part-time contracts, which cover 45.0 per cent of the sample (see Table 2 above). Excluding part-time workers – equally represented in anchor stores and small shops – the standard working day has a duration of 7.2 hours, with a peak of 7.5 in the gallery.

The socio-demographic factors that have an effect on working hours are age and the presence of at least a child in the worker’s family. In the first place, daily working hours decrease with increasing age, albeit workers in their fifties raise their workload, probably as a result of the achievement of positions of responsibility (see Table 5). This inverse relationship between hours worked and age is even more evident when we consider working hours on Sundays and bank holidays that fall from 12.8 per month for younger workers to 9.3 for older ones. The privilege of having the main part of the working hours during the weekdays is also extended to those with children, who on average work more during the weekdays compared to Sundays.

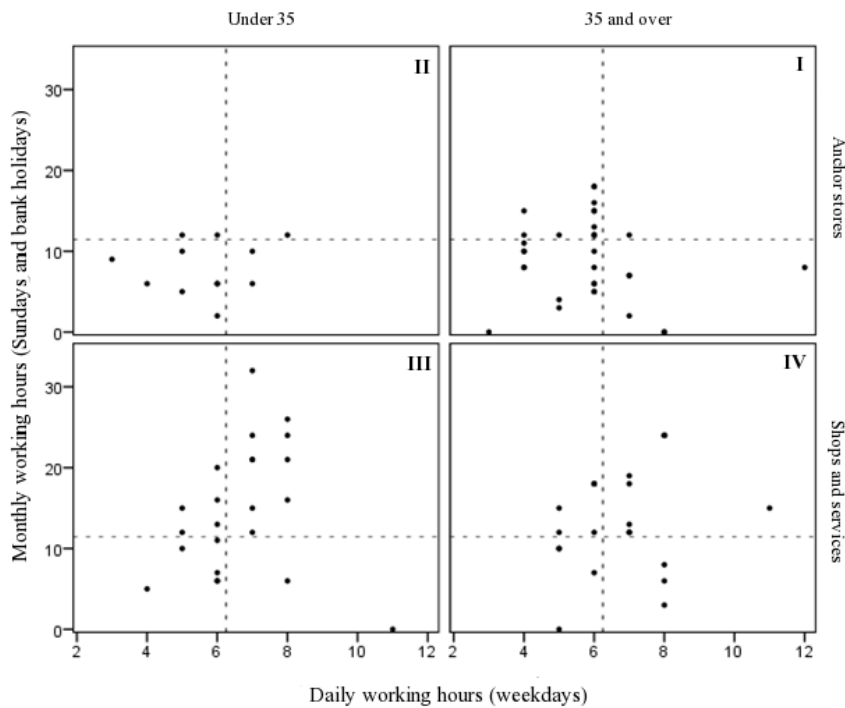
Table 5 - Working hours by age class (mean and standard deviation)

	Daily working hours	Monthly working hours on Sundays and bank holidays (January 2014)
Less than 30 years	6.7 (2.0)	12.8 (8.6)
From 30 to 39 years	6.1 (1.5)	12.4 (7.8)
From 40 to 49 years	6.1 (1.7)	11.4 (6.8)
50 years or more	7.5 (1.6)	9.3 (4.6)

Taking together these two dimensions, namely the type of employer and socio-demographic features, it is possible to distinguish four ideal-types of workers (see Figure 1). First, senior employees of larger stores who are characterized by a balanced distribution of working hours between weekdays and weekends, in accordance with collective agreements and because of well-organized weekend shifts. These are the *shift workers* (quadrant I). Second, the young *under-employed* who also work in larger stores, but have short working hours, both in weekdays and weekends (quadrant II). Finally, among the employees of small shops, there are two different types of work-

ers: the young *over-employed*, who play a full schedule during the week as well as on Sundays and bank holidays (quadrant III); and the over-35 that seem *settled* at their workplace and, as a consequence of their seniority, have a more balanced working hours than their younger colleagues, despite a still high rhythm of work (quadrant IV).

Figure 1 - Four ideal-types of workers



Regarding their employment contracts, open-ended contracts prevail in larger stores, both among juniors and seniors, while in small shops the share of fixed-term or atypical contracts is higher, especially among the young over-employed.

Nevertheless, 80.3 per cent of respondents perceive the time spent working as adequate, while only 12.6 per cent would like to reduce it and 7.1 per cent to increase it. At the same time, most part of respondents would like to have more time to dedicate to their personal life: in particular, 74.2 per cent would like to have more spare time, 41.0 per cent would need to spend longer hours in unpaid domestic work, while 27.1 per cent would reduce longer commute time. Regarding care activities, only 29.3 per cent of respondents

are satisfied by the time spent in care-giving to kids or other family members and 68.3 per cent would increase it.

A useful insight for understanding the distribution of dissatisfaction with working hours comes from the typology already mentioned (see Table 6). Specifically, the most dissatisfied are senior employees of small shops (the settled). Despite they have shorter working hours compared to younger colleagues, they are disappointed about Sunday openings and, in a broader sense, of their work-life balance. The settled are actually the only type of workers in the Centre that would swap working time for personal life, such as caregiving, spare time and unpaid domestic work. On the opposite side, senior employees of larger stores (the shift workers) benefit from shorter weekly working hours and a well-organized rotation of the staff. Among these workers, dissatisfaction with the work-life balance is low and only the claim for more free time is strong as well as general. Because of their age or, probably, of a shorter length of service in the Centre, younger people are less dissatisfied than their colleagues with their workloads, nevertheless they would definitely change their work-life balance by increasing spare time and time for caregiving.

Table 6 - Dissatisfaction with the use of time by type of activity and type of worker (percent)

<i>Type of activity</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Type of worker</i>			
		Over-employed	Settled	Under-employed	Shift workers
Work	17.5	20.6	26.9	7.1	12.5
Commute	27.8	29.4	26.9	42.9	22.0
Unpaid domestic work	47.1	44.8	60.0	57.1	36.1
Caregiving	67.6	80.0	85.0	75.0	48.4
Spare time	75.7	78.8	79.2	84.6	68.3

Notes: every cell reports the percentage of those who responded «I would like to dedicate more time» or «I would like to dedicate less time» to each sub-question (type of activity), by type of worker; N is variable.

To a large extent, workers' dissatisfaction with working hours does not regard the weekdays, but Sundays and bank holidays. In order to measure the dissatisfaction with Sunday working, we created a synthetic index which takes into account different facets, such as the effect of salary on the choice to work on Sunday, the judgment on personal sacrifices, the willingness to change the rules for extra openings (see Table 7). In this case, the degree of strong dissatisfaction (74.6 per cent) exceeds greatly that of strong satisfaction (3.2 per cent). The index also shows that the degree of dissatisfaction is

quite similar for the employees of larger stores and those of small shops, while the owners of small shops and other professionals are obviously much more satisfied with Sunday working.

Table 7 - Dissatisfaction with Sunday working by type of employer (percent)

<i>Type of employer</i>	<i>Index of dissatisfaction</i>			<i>Total (N)</i>
	<i>Completely satisfied (0)</i>	<i>Not much dissatisfied (1-2)</i>	<i>Dissatisfied or strongly dissatisfied (3-4)</i>	
Anchor stores	1.9	22.6	75.5	100.0 (53)
Shops and services	5.1	18.7	76.2	100.0 (59)
Employers and other professionals	28.6	42.8	28.6	100.0 (14)
<i>Total</i>	3.2	22.2	74.6	100.0 (126)

By unfolding the indicator for its components, the picture is even clearer and the judgment on Sunday working is disentangled (see Table 8). 91.3 per cent of respondents believe that working on Sunday entails sacrifices for personal life, while 80.0 per cent would reduce the number of openings. The sacrifice of working on Sunday does not seem to be outweighed by more income: 62.5 per cent of respondents assert, in fact, that working on Sunday is not even a good way to increase pay. In any case, more than a half of those who outstand that salary impact is economically relevant would also reduce the number of extra openings.

72.3 per cent of respondents ask for more freedom of choice with regard to the organization of shifts. However, this solution is not in contrast with the request for a reduction of extra openings. More in detail, 65.7 per cent agree with both, while only 6.2 per cent would like to have more freedom of choice without reducing the number of openings.

Table 8 - Opinions on Sunday working (percent)

	<i>Strongly disagree or disagree</i>	<i>Agree or strongly agree</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>
<i>It is a good way to increase pay</i>	62.5	37.5	100.0 (136)
<i>It entails sacrifices for personal life</i>	8.7	91.3	100.0 (137)
<i>I would reduce the number of openings</i>	20.0	80.0	100.0 (135)
<i>I would like to have more freedom of choice</i>	27.7	72.3	100.0 (130)

From a socio-demographic point of view, the demand for a reduction of Sunday openings is across the board and does not depend on having children or on being married, while it is significantly more frequent among young over-employed in small shops that have too little staff (83.9 per cent). It is also interesting to point out that among the employees of larger stores, those less willing to reduce Sunday openings are the employees of the superstore (76.7 per cent), while the employees of other anchor stores are almost unanimously in favour of the reduction of openings (93.8 per cent). Finally, among the four types identified, the reduction of openings regards less the shift workers (77.8 per cent) which, among other things, are the ones who judge more positively openings as a form of income support (41.3 per cent).

Many respondents would also favour a less antagonistic strategy to reconcile working hours and personal life through the creation of a variety of new social and personal service activities (see Table 9). First, 89.3 per cent say that a caregiving facility for kids (e.g. kindergarten, crèche or playroom) would be useful or very useful. This claim is obviously stronger among people that already have children (95.4 per cent), but also among those who have not yet (83.1 per cent). A kindergarten is also the first request for those who live far away from the Centre: 92.0 per cent in the case of those living more than 20 km away, against 88.0 per cent of those living less than 5 km away.

Table 9 - Agree on the usefulness of new public service activities within the Centre (percent)

	<i>Strongly disagree or disagree</i>	<i>Agree or strongly agree</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>
Kindergarten	10.7	89.3	<i>100.0 (131)</i>
Post office	16.5	85.0	<i>100.0 (133)</i>
Public medical service	23.3	80.8	<i>100.0 (125)</i>
Bank branch	25.2	74.8	<i>100.0 (123)</i>
Day centre for the elderly	34.4	65.6	<i>100.0 (125)</i>
Local government office	63.7	36.3	<i>100.0 (124)</i>

They also strongly agree on the functional qualification of the Centre by the opening of a postal office, a public medical service, and a bank branch. These results lay probably on the opinion that new service activities would give much degree of freedom in the organization of personal life, especially for those who live far away from the shopping centre or do not have family support in caregiving.

5. Micro and systemic foundations of workers' dissatisfaction without collective action

The case study confirms that the shopping centres are workplaces characterized by a high degree of fragmentation of the workforce in terms of working hours and work organization. In particular, the survey results bring to light the existence of two separate worlds of work: on the one side, the employees of large retail stores have short weekly working hours and better organized shifts to cover Sunday openings; on the other, the employees of small shops work more hours during the weekdays as well as on Sundays and bank holidays. Among the latter, young people in particular appear over-employed, even though the older ones, so-called settled workers, are more keen to exchange time spent working for time to dedicate to other activities, such as caregiving and unpaid domestic work.

Furthermore, the first world benefit from “formal” regulation through company-level bargaining, while the second one is the place of “informal” regulation mainly, if not exclusively, through individual negotiations between employers and employees.

The differences between these two worlds also result in different degrees of dissatisfaction with the working hours during the weekdays, which in any case is relatively low (see the comments on Table 6 above), probably because contractual working hours are lower than the Italian average in the sector. Conversely, the two worlds come together in a strong feeling of dissatisfaction with Sunday working (see again Table 7 above). In effect, 80.0 per cent of total respondents agree or strongly agree with the reduction of the number of extra openings (see Table 8 above).

Anyway, this shared dissatisfaction has not yet driven to a protest or to a request for collective bargaining with the management of the Centre, even when the shopping centre opened despite the main anchor tenant and owner of the complex – the superstore – decided to remain closed.

The lack of collective action is a puzzling issue. As already noticed, the case study had been selected because the Centre is located in an area characterized by a pro-labour political culture and strong traditions in meso and micro-concertation practices. Besides, the presence of the local headquarters of the major Italian trade union within the mall let us suppose that workers might have been more unionized. Further figures reveal that 35.3 per cent of respondents are indeed members of a trade union¹⁰, while 62.4

10. Union density in the Centre is in line with the Italian average (35.2 per cent; Aias, *Ictwss*, data updated to 2011), but much higher than the average in the trade sector (23.1 per cent, updated to 1997). Biases in the sample, however, do not allow suitable comparisons.

per cent express their solidarity with the former employees of a business that has recently closed down by declaring that, in such cases, trade unions should be proactive in negotiating with the employer. On the other hand, it is to be underlined that more than 90 per cent declared that a protest action, either in a traditional (e.g. a strike) or an innovative form (work-to-rule or virtual strike), would not be useful.

In our opinion, the resistance to collective action, and in particular of more antagonistic forms of protest, could be explained as follows. At the micro level, the employees of the larger stores are highly unionized (see Table 10) and benefit from a company-level bargaining that takes place on a regular basis, hence although they are sympathetic with other workers, they have no incentives to support protest actions. As to the employees of small shops, instead, they seem to suffer from a certain “isolation”, due to the fragmentation and individualization of employment relationships in this kind of businesses, but also to their poor links with the trade union, as the very low frequency of relations with union delegates demonstrates.

Table 10 - Union membership and frequency of relations with union delegates by type of employer (percent)

<i>Type of employer</i>	<i>Member of a union</i>	<i>Frequency of relations with union delegates (frequent or highly frequent)</i>
Anchor stores	58.1	29.3
Shops and services	13.8	6.6
<i>N</i>	<i>120</i>	<i>119</i>

Moreover, the reasons that prompted workers to join a trade union, as well as the role that the members think trade unions should play, are surely of a traditional kind. Consistently with the “red” subculture tradition, most of those who are already members declared to have joined a union because of ideological reasons (39.1 per cent) or because the trade unions protect workers’ interests in a broader sense (21.7 per cent). Only 26.1 per cent of them were motivated by the will to change their working conditions or by the hope to get personal advantages. Coherently with this pattern, three out of four respondents assigned a “defensive” role to the unions, which should focus on safeguarding jobs and increasing workers’ protection in case of job loss (see Table 11). Here, it is interesting to notice that only a few of them believe that the unions should be the means through which trying to improve their work-life balance.

Table 11 - What the unions should focus on (multiple response, percent of cases, N = 130)

	<i>Percent</i>
Safeguarding jobs	74.6
Increasing workers' protection in case of job loss	63.8
Monitoring working conditions	40.8
Protecting non-permanent workers	38.5
Increasing pay	37.7
Enhancing health and safety at work and the work environment	22.3
Reducing working hours	3.8
Other	3.8
<i>Total</i>	<i>285.4</i>

Notes: the respondents were asked to rank the above items from high (1) to low priority (7); the table reports the percentage of the number of times each item was ranked from 1 to 3.

Furthermore, the research shows a certain scepticism of the workers of the Centre about devolving the function of bargaining to the unions. In their opinion, in fact, the unions ought to consult the workers before starting a negotiation (54.5 per cent) and listen to their voices to get information on their working conditions (43.1 per cent). They also feel that the traditional participation tools do not fit with the changed social context. For example, the election of a union delegate at the site level received the lowest priority in a list of seven items, while the involvement of the workers in formal bargaining process received a lower priority than the practices of informal interaction (see Table 12).

Table 12 - How the unions should work (multiple response, percent of cases, N = 123)

	<i>Percent</i>
Consulting the workers before starting a negotiation	54.5
Increasing the amount and quality of services delivered	47.2
Consulting the workers on their working conditions	43.1
Opening spaces for informal dialogue and exchange of ideas	43.1
Encouraging workers' participation in union activities	32.5
Involving the workers in industry-level and/or decentralized bargaining	31.7
Promoting the election of a union delegate at the site level	26.0
Other	1.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>279.7</i>

Notes: the respondents were asked to rank the above items from high (1) to low priority (7); the table reports the percentage of the number of times each item was ranked from 1 to 3.

Splitting the sample in the two worlds of work of the Centre, another insight emerges. While the employees of anchor stores, which to a great extent are already members of a union, ask for informal participation in union activities, the others seem to be more interested in formal decentralized bargaining, from which they are *de facto* excluded.

Summing up, union members: a) are predominantly much satisfied with Sunday openings; b) are employed in anchor stores where the union works for a decentralized bargaining, although at the firm level and not at the site level; c) perceive the union in a traditional way and assign it a passive role. On the contrary, outside the anchor stores, where workers are more dissatisfied with working hours, a) union membership is weak, and b) the relationships between workers and trade unionists are sporadic. In other words, it seems that the union has a role in framing the division between the two worlds.

The systemic level of analysis that may complete the understanding of the resistance to collective action lays on two dimensions. First, the concept of “red” subculture, still relevant in the Empoli area, which central feature is that the regulation of the economic sphere is embedded in *a network of formal and informal agreements* between political parties, trade unions, employers’ representatives and cooperative companies (Bagnasco, Trigilia 1985). This subculture has framed consistently the retail sector in Tuscany by different acts and agreements (in particular, see the regional act against openings on Sundays and bank holidays and some framework agreements for a “cooperative” governance in the sector). It also reflects in the decision of the cooperative company which is the owner of the Centre to open only two Sundays per months, with a few exceptions.

Second, the agreement on a limited number of openings on Sundays and bank holidays, which resulted from an informal negotiation between the unions and the employer, should also be contextualized in a historical phase of deregulation of openings and, at the same time, in a geographical area where, not far from Empoli, other shopping centres, factory outlets centres or even supermarkets are open every Sunday and often on bank holidays. Despite their dissatisfaction, the workers of the Centre, well aware of the working conditions in other similar workplaces, seem to have “introjected” the employers’ norms for which a minimum of extra openings is necessary to avoid a loss of customers. In other words, both unions and workers feel that the openings on Sundays decided by the Centre are a fair compromise in comparison with other similar situations.

6. Commentary

The analysis has shown that the shopping centres can be considered as a sort of “open laboratories”, where different worlds of work are reproduced in scale. In general, they reflect the dualism of the labour market, between insiders (the employees of larger stores) and outsiders (the employees of small shops), but with a certain differentiation (or polarization?) of work situations, especially among the latter.

In this context, the role of trade unions, when based on an old-fashioned model of representation, is more likely to *reproduce* rather than to combat inequalities. In effect, the case study has revealed that the employees of small shops are less protected, since they do not benefit from decentralized bargaining, but are also left out from the range of ordinary action of local trade unionists and union delegates. Here is a dilemma for the unions: if continuing to focus their action on the “over-protected” and thus becoming a “system of exclusion”, or moving towards a more comprehensive model of representation.

Another question has to do with the social representation, emerged from the analysis, of trade unions as collective actors pursuing primarily passive or defensive strategies. In the case study, for example, the major Italian trade union, which has its local headquarters within the shopping centre, faces the challenge to requalify its presence and to go beyond its role of “service centre”. In light of the willingness of union members for an active participation in the life of the union itself, along with the demand for voice from non-members, the union should promote a more inclusive strategy to create the preconditions for future collective actions.

Finally, given also their configuration as “containers” of businesses, the shopping centres could be good places where experimenting practices of informal consultation and further involvement of workers. Moreover, the unions should direct their action to the improvement of the quality of work and work-life balance, since this is one of their natural goals. In particular, they should engage on two main fronts. On the one hand, they should “take care” of the employees of small shops, trying to listen to their voices and to find contractual and organizational solutions to their condition of under-staffing and over-working. On the other hand, they should assume the task of negotiating with the owner of the shopping centre and with local public authorities in order to introduce new services (e.g. kindergartens) which are likely to improve workers’ quality of life.

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