



**Partecipazione e Conflitto**

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 16(2) 2023: 234-251

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v16i2p234

Published 15 July 2023

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Political, general or economic strikes? New types of strikes and workers' contention

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### ABSTRACT

The article provides an overview of workers' collective actions occurred in Italy, characterizing a new wave of contention between 2008 and 2018. It focuses on the development of strike activities. While the literature suggests an increase in general/political strikes and a decline of economic strikes, we argue that this distinction does not sufficiently account for the variety of strikes that has recently occurred. Our contribution aims to clarify the differences between three types of strikes: general political strike, general/large-scale economic strike and local economic strike.

The empirical analysis is based on a new dataset on workers' collective actions, including strikes, observed in Italy in the decade 2008-2018. The dataset was built using protest event analysis (PEA). Multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) allows us to show that the three types of strikes differ along the actors promoting them, the workers' occupations involved, the issues claimed, the scale of action and the target of the actions.

Conclusions compare the characteristics of workers contention between 2008 and 2018 with the old cycle of protest and suggest to join economic and political explanations of strikes to account for the new types of strikes.

### KEYWORDS:

Collective action, industrial relations, social movement, strike, trade unions

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## 1. Introduction

The recent international debate on industrial relations and social movements recognizes that a new cycle of protests has begun after the 2008 crisis (della Porta and Andretta 2013; Kriesi et al. 2020). Globally, from 2008 onwards multiple waves of mobilization have been observed, starting with the December 2010 protests in Tunisia and 2011 Arab Uprising, that touched several countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, to the emergence of movements such as the 2011 Indignados in Spain, Greece and Portugal and Occupy Wall Street in the USA. Leading scholars such as Tilly and Tarrow argued that: “since 2007 the world has become even more contentious” (2015, p. xiii). In Italy, protests in 2008 started to peak with the student movement referred to as *Onda Anomala* but several authors argue that they never developed into a wave as it occurred in other Southern European countries such as Greece or Spain (Zamponi 2012; Kriesi et al. 2020) or in earlier periods like at the beginning of the nineties during the crisis of the Italian political system (Forno 2003). The waves of mobilization that mainly affected Southern European countries between 2008 and 2015 were nonetheless characterized by the resurgence of economic demands (della Porta 2015; Kriesi et al. 2020) and recent research shows that labor-related claims also peaked in Italy (Pilati and Perra 2022). This article precisely aims to disentangle some aspects of these protests by providing an analysis of strike trends in Italy after 2008.

Strikes are part of workers' mobilization strategies in which different types of actions are integrated (Hamann et al. 2013). Scholars have found that, while in the last decades there has been a decline in workers' participation in economic strikes, there has been a greater propensity to join general strikes which, in the past decade, challenged austerity policies implemented during the 2008 recession (Gall 2013; Hamann et al. 2013; Vandaele 2016). As a result, protest actions against national governments in their role as regulators and employers have increased (Altiparmakis and Lorenzini 2018; della Porta 2015; Diani and Kousis 2014). These trends have also been recorded in Italy (Andretta 2018) where the increased use of strikes during the crisis has only partially limited the systematic decline of economic strikes recorded in recent decades (Pedersini 2014)<sup>1</sup>. A partial recovery has been attempted with a diversification of the repertoire of actions that included demonstrations and forms of "street" protest (Tarrow 1989; Gentile 2015; Quaranta 2014).

While strikes still represent the main instrument of conflicts in which workers are involved (Pilati and Perra 2022), few studies are concerned with detecting and explaining their most recent changes. In particular, while the literature has stressed the importance of distinguishing between economic and political strikes, there has been a lack of in-depth exploration of this difference in Italy, both from a theoretical perspective and, mainly due to the lack of official data<sup>2</sup>, from an empirical perspective attempting to explain the trends of one and the other. Distinguishing whether a strike is political or economic is, however, of crucial importance. So far, to explain strikes, scholars have drawn on the role of the business cycles (Brandl and Traxler 2010). In contrast, the political nature of claims calls for the introduction of a more “political” interpretation that accounts for the role of the political cycles and the characteristics of the political context as well (Hamann et al. 2013).

Our contribution aims to push towards a better understanding of strikes in the attempt to provide suitable explanations for their emergence. In this framework, we aim to clarify the distinction between political and economic strike and propose a typology of strikes that distinguishes general political strikes, general/large

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<sup>1</sup> The decline of economic strikes was attributed, in part, to the loss of centrality of the Fordist model of production, the progressive deindustrialization, the transformations of tertiary sector work and the deep crisis of representation affecting collective actors.

<sup>2</sup> The National Institute of Statistics (Istat) stopped publishing statistics on labor conflicts in April 2010. The latest data available refer to conflicts in 2009. At the moment the only data which is available is that on strikes in public sector.

economic strikes and local economic strikes. To clarify the distinction between these strikes, the article integrates two types of literature, that on social movements and that on industrial relations, starting from the assumption that the two perspectives favored a dichotomous view of collective action by distinguishing unions and movements as actors operating in two different spheres of conflict, with different tools, purposes, and resources (Accornero *et al.* 1977; Pizzorno 1980). In contrast, the recent Italian experience suggests that the latest round of protests has fostered the attempt for the re-emergence of the labor movement and a reconfigured working class with different characteristics and actors involved which, we argue, are better explained by integrating both industrial relations and social movement theories (Milkman 2013; Nowak and Gallas 2014). Albeit in changed historical-political contexts, the current phase of mobilization recorded in Italy is partly connected to the history of the Italian labor movement in the Sixties when trade union federations became hegemonic actors in the industrial conflict, as well as in the institutional and political sphere thanks to the close relationship with political parties through the process known as *political exchange* (Pizzorno 1978; Gentile 2015; Gambilonghi 2020). The recent protests can be reconnected with the cycle of protests of the 1960's, particularly for the way in which economic grievances interact with political grievances in defining the space of social and political conflicts. We argue that Pizzorno's analysis of trade unions' actions through the concept of political exchange (1977) is particularly suited to guide us in the attempt to distinguish and to clarify economic and political strikes.

The empirical study proposes a descriptive-exploratory analysis of strikes since 2008 in Italy. Data are derived from an original dataset that has been conceived to collect data on collective actions by and pro workers, including strikes, in Italy from 2008 to 2018. Albeit partially, this dataset addresses the absence of data on strikes and other forms of protest in Italy and many European countries in the recent years (Vandaele 2016). The results show the specific characteristics of strikes and highlight the changes in the occupational categories mobilized, the organizations promoting strikes, the scale of action, the addressee of the action, and the different issues associated with the three types of strikes.

## **2. Economic, general and political strikes: theoretical aspects**

Strikes represent the most important protest event in the labor/capital conflict and signal the mobilizing capacity of collective actors, especially trade unions (Franzosi 2006; Pedersini 2014; Crouch 2017; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2018). The literature points to the persistent distinction between economic and political or general strikes (Hamann *et al.* 2013; Gallas 2018; Pizzorno 1980).

Economic strikes, *i.e.*, those that are directly related to the labor/capital conflict, have been the privileged instruments of class unions' protest actions in Italy (Pizzorno 1978). These strikes involve one or more occupational categories mobilizing against the employer counterpart, they are addressed to the employer (Pizzorno 1980), and aim to improve working conditions or regard layoffs and wages among others. In contrast, political strikes identify collective action claiming more general interests that are "not negotiable" in opposition to political-economic choices implemented by governments (Pizzorno 1980). In this case, the addressees are the government and its representatives as promoters of specific reforms or decisions. The definition of political strikes often overlaps with that of general strikes. According to Hyman's (1989: 17) definition, "a general strike is 'a temporary, national stoppage of work by workers from many industries, directed against the executive or legislative arms of government, to enforce a demand or give voice to a grievance.'" The concept of general strike is, however, ambiguous when we consider the nature of the issues claimed and grievances, the targets and the consequences of the strikes (Hamann *et al.* 2013; Gallas 2018; Pizzorno 1980). General strikes may in fact include both economic and political claims. Additionally,

according to a narrow conception, the general strike involves all sectors of production. In a broader conception, the general, and more properly, political strike involves not only the various categories of workers in one or more sectors, but also non-labor force categories.

In the case of general strikes focusing on economic claims, the issues at stake are indeed economic. However, the addressee can be either a private employer or the State acting as the employer, that is, the actor who should intervene to provide more and better jobs. When more categories in an economic sector - like workers from public transportation - go on strikes, their claims can concern working conditions, the renewal of the national contract, the salary or layoffs, that is, purely economic claims, but their addressee can still be the local government with the aim to make pressure on public transportation companies.

In turn, when general strikes focus on political issues, their target is the State acting as the political actor responsible for making decisions regarding specific reforms such as those related to the labor market, pensions, education or other government policies. When citizens and students go on strikes to demand the right to access good jobs, their target is indeed the State acting as the political actor responsible for influencing decisions concerning the labor market. At times, the aim of challengers is to be included as partners in the decision-making process. In the most recent European experiences, general strikes addressing political issues took the form of protest actions oriented, first and foremost, against government-sponsored austerity policies, welfare cuts, pension and labor market reforms (Bojar et al. 2021; Flesher-Fominaya 2017; Genovese *at al.* 2016). In Italy, instances of general political strikes were observed between 2008 and 2010 in conjunction with the discussions on the school reforms that preceded the passage of the so-called Gelmini law in 2010 and which involved students, researchers, and education workers (Zamponi 2012; Nowak and Gallas 2014) but also the general strikes against the austerity reforms proposed by the Monti government beginning in late 2011. In both cases, strikes could be defined as "political" in terms of their claims and the expected consequences, that is, changes in the political choices (Pizzorno 1980). In this context, the economic motivation is "politicized" and supported by unions in a revitalization perspective implemented through a movementist connotation of collective action that develops outside the workplace and combines the repertoire of labor and citizen protest actions according to the "double repertoire" (Gentile 2015).

The use of ambiguous definitions such as that of general strikes risks to complicate not only the classification of the content and outcomes of mobilization but also the correct measure of the events (Hamann et al. 2013). Empirical evidence so far shows that economic strikes have continued on the path of decline that has characterized them for several decades, while general political strikes have increased (Gall 2013; Vandaele 2016; Hamann et al. 2013). In Italy, the cycle of anti-austerity protests that began in 2008 has been fragmented and weak in comparison to the mobilizations in the 1990s and early 2000s, or to anti-austerity struggles in Greece and Spain (della Porta et al., 2017; Pradella and Cillo 2019). However, it has highlighted the involvement in the political and economic arenas of mobilization of a variety of collective actors. Trade union federations attempted to reinforce their position in the industrial relations system (Carrieri and Feltrin 2016) and, at the same time, to redefine their political role in a context where coordination with political parties had been widely reduced (Molina and Barranco 2016; Gambilonghi 2020). The direct and indirect effects of the crisis on labor and people's living conditions thus prompted unions to organize protests in collaboration with organizations and movement groups. In many cases, these actions responded to the unions' attempts, through so-called revitalization strategies, to increase membership (Frege and Kelly 2003; Baccaro et al. 2003; Hamann et al. 2013; Tapia and Turner 2013; Vandaele 2016; Bérout 2018). Through the coordination of collective mobilization, unions thus acted both in the industrial and in political conflict (Pizzorno 1978). However, this process was complicated by the high level of inter-union conflict that weakened their position in industrial relations and their legitimacy as political actor (Bradani 2014). While in post-World War II Italy, trade unions have been for long the hegemonic actors in industrial relations and coordinated the labor movement, in

more recent years they have lost this exclusivity in favor of the new actors of mobilization (Meardi et al. 2021; Carver and Doellgast 2021). Testifying to this evidence are the results of case - or sector - specific research using ethnographic techniques to explore the processes of individual and collective actions in and outside the workplace (Cillo and Pradella 2018; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Pulignano et al., 2018). Important evidence has emerged from these studies about the relationship between union federations, the grassroots, autonomous and spontaneous worker representations; their action in the contexts of organized labor and their abilities to build alliances and engage labor market outsiders. In particular, the latter face difficulties in having their interests effectively represented within the context of industrial conflicts, and this favored their participation in general strikes. Thus, the distinction between interests (class and occupation-specific) and rights also resurfaced and this may partly justify the ideological distance between unions and movements 'actors (Köhler and Calleja Jimenez 2015; Vandaele 2016).

### 3. Methods

Our empirical analysis explores strikes based on data derived from an original dataset containing information on conflictual collective actions in industrial relations observed in Italy during the decade 2008-2018. The latter was collected by following the established method in social movement studies, known as Protest Event Analysis (PEA) (Koopmans and Rucht 2002). To collect this data, we drew on a selection of articles from the print newspaper and online daily versions of *La Repubblica*, one of the major Italian newspapers. We collected data from 1 January 2008 up to 31 December 2018 using both the national and ten local editions of *La Repubblica* resulting in a sample of 9,910 collective actions. The dataset is original for a few reasons. It is the first to include collective actions that specifically concern workers and contains detailed information on the occupational category of workers involved in the protests. Second, unlike past studies that have used PEA and focused only on protests, the dataset contains both information on protests such as strike, sit-in, occupation, and traffic blockade and on more conventional, albeit confrontational, actions such as negotiations and actions that take place using institutional channels. Third, the dataset contains information on actions at the local level, and this overcomes the limitation of many PEA studies that focus only on the national level (Andretta 2018; Kriesi et al. 2020). This captures the consequences of the process of "downward scaleshift", the mechanism of collective action that implies a decrease in the scale of action, in particular, from the national level to actions closely related to local issues (McAdam et al. 2001), which is more frequent in the field of industrial relations as a result of decentralization processes of bargaining.

Our empirical analysis first investigates the forms of action workers engaged in. For these analyses we use the full sample of data (N=9,910 actions). Secondly, we focus on strikes and we try to understand their characteristics. The sample we use to investigate strikes focuses on 2,482 cases. We first identify general strikes by drawing on the direct information collected in our dataset assessing whenever a "general strike" was reported in our source. We end up with 360 general strikes that represent 3.6 percent of all 9,910 actions. General strikes are often defined as such regardless of the specific type of action that is undertaken: 44.6 of general strikes in our data are demonstrations, 29.2 are strikes defined as abstention from work, and 9.5 percent are sit-ins. From this data we also selected strikes as a specific form of action by including all actions identifying abstention from work. These strikes represent 2,122 events<sup>3</sup>.

We then explore how certain characteristics of the aforementioned strikes cluster together thus identifying groups of different types of strikes. To do this, we use multiple correspondence analysis (MCA), a technique for nominal categorical data, used to detect and represent underlying and latent structures (Greenacre and

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<sup>3</sup> In the analysis of strikes we did not include 36 cases of white strikes representing 0.36 of all workers' actions, due to the different nature of actions and the low number of cases for elaborating separate analysis on this type.

Blasius 2006). By focusing on the full sample of strikes, MCA is helpful because it allows us to examine how different characteristics, namely, the types of issues claimed, the organizations promoting the strikes, the workers' occupations mobilized, the target of the strikes and the scale of the strike cluster together in groups identifying types of strikes. MCA provides a visual representation that graphically represent the associations among these variables and the groups.

In particular, the characteristics are identified through the following variables:

*Workers' occupation* is a nominal variable whose categories include the major occupations involved in strikes as identified through the 2008 ISCO (International Standard Classification of Occupations) code: plant and machine operators, craft and related trade workers, elementary occupations, service and sales workers, professionals, other occupations.

*Type of issues claimed* is a nominal variable that identifies the focus of the action, whose categories are the following ones: economic, political, social rights issues and a residual categories aggregating those claims not falling in the previous ones.

*Actors involved* identifies the organizations promoting or involved in the events. This is a nominal variable whose categories are the following ones: trade unions federations, independent trade unions, non - working categories including student organizations, social movement organizations (SMOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs), professional associations, unorganized workers.

*Scale of action* is a variable distinguishing strikes occurring at the city level (local level) from those occurring on a larger scale.

*Addressee of the action* identifies to whom the action is targeted. A political addressee identifies the target of the action in the government, the region, the province, the municipality, the juridical system and the police forces; economic addressees include actions whose target is a private company or a private entity. Other addressees identify actions whose targets are actors such as public companies and institutions (INPS, University, Poste, Fincantieri), unions or professional associations, theatre/ museums and other actors not included in the previous categories.

#### 4. Patterns of strikes in the broader field of collective action

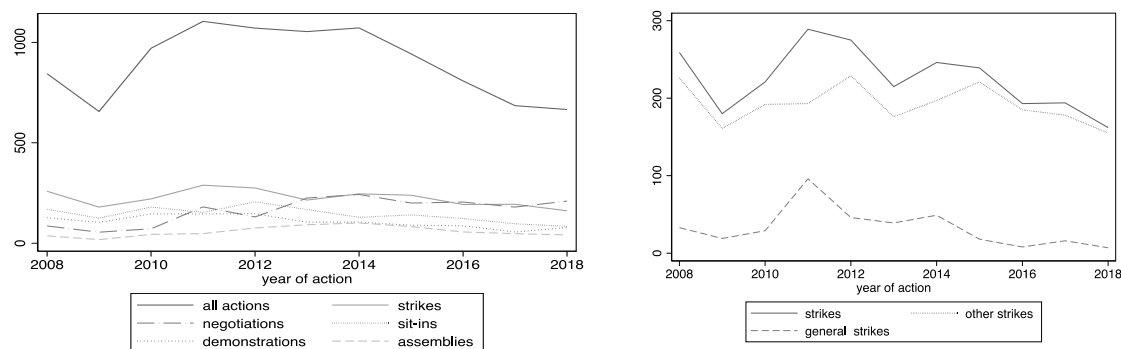
The analysis of the number of work-related collective actions occurred between 2008 and the end of 2018 shows a clear wave of contention in the labor field (Figure 1), characterized by a rather steady increase in the number of contentious actions up to 2010. The years between 2011 and the end of 2014 witness high and persistent levels of contention and a phase of demobilization which starts in January 2015. Approximately 40 percent of all work-related collective actions developed in the Northern regions of Italy, 27 percent of all labor conflicts emerged in the South and in the islands including Sicily and Sardinia, and 27 percent of conflicts developed in the Center.

Of all the actions, strikes have been the most common form of protest, representing, on average, 21.4 percent of all forms of actions occurring in the decade considered (see Figure 1 on the left-hand side). As shown on the right-hand side of Figure 1 – illustrating both overall strikes (N= 2,482) and their distinction in general strikes (N= 360) and other strikes (N= 2,122) between 2008 and 2018 – general strikes are by far less than other strikes over the period considered<sup>4</sup>.

**Figure 1 - Total number of workers' collective actions and main workers' collective actions by year (left hand graph); total number of strikes, general strikes and other strikes (right hand graph). Italy 2008-2018**

<sup>4</sup> These strikes include all actions of abstention from work with the exclusion of those that are general strikes.





**Source:** own elaboration on our original PEA dataset (*N* all actions (left graph)=9910; *N* total strikes (right graph)=2,482; *N* general strikes=360; *N* other strikes=2,122)

Separate analyses show that there is a general decreasing trend of classical forms of actions in the decade considered which concerns strikes as well as other forms of classical actions such as sit-ins. However, Figure 1 also suggests that general strikes reached their peak in 2011 and decreased thereafter, while other types of strikes showed a rather steady trend until 2018 (see right hand graph). In turn, institutional actions – which comprise those actions implemented through institutional channels, and that are also considered the most conventional ones for advancing claims on work-related issues – negotiations, legal actions, and states of agitation – are much less used at the beginning of the wave but increase after 2012 and then show a steady trend (Pilati and Perra 2022). Finally, disruptive actions prevail in the early phase of the wave of mobilization and then, they constantly decrease throughout the 11 years observed.

#### 4.1 New types of strikes?

To investigate further the strikes in the decade examined, we elaborate multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) and scrutinize how different issues claimed, scales of action, organizations promoting the strikes, the occupational category of workers mobilized and the addressee of the strikes cluster together in groups that represent different types of strikes. By this, we examine whether certain issues, scales, actors, organizations and addressees tend to be associated more with one group and type of strike than another one. In particular, following Pizzorno (1977), we try to understand whether economic issues and political issues, as well as economic targets and political targets are associated with different types of strikes. If economic and political issues and targets are associated to different types of strikes, our analysis then supports our argument on the need to distinguish general political strikes from general economic strikes. In the following analyses, we perform an MCA considering all strikes occurred between 2008 and 2018 in Italy. The MCA shows that there are 7 dimensions, that is, 7 different profiles (see Table 2 showing the first four dimensions due to space constraints).

As shown in Table 2, the first two dimensions are sufficient to retain almost 80 percent of the total inertia (variation) contained in the data. Through multiple correspondence analysis variable categories with a similar profile are grouped together.

Figure 2 plots the results of the MCA on the issue claimed, targets/addressees of the strike, occupational categories, scale and organizations/groups promoting strikes (Figure 2). Considering the two dimensions, we look at the variable categories with the larger value as they contribute the most to the definition of the dimensions. We consider their contributions (in percentage) to the definition of the dimensions to highlight

the most important characteristics. Variable categories that contribute to dimension 1 and dimension 2 are the most important in explaining the variability of data. In particular, targets such as economic actors or the residual category of targets such as public companies, professional associations and unions, craft and related trades workers and plant and machine operators all have an important contribution to the positive pole of the first dimension. In turn, political issues, political targets, a national scale, professional and other occupations have a major contribution to the negative pole of the first dimension.

**Table 2 - Multiple/Joint correspondence analysis**

Dimensions	Principal inertia	%	Cumulative %
1	.049	47.1	47.1
2	.033	31.1	78.2
3	.004	4.1	82.4
4	.000	0.7	83.0
<i>Total inertia:</i>	.10	100	

**Source:** own elaboration on our original PEA dataset (N=2,153)

The categories of the variables associated to the positive pole of the second dimension are the following ones: the presence of issues that do not fall under the categories of political, economic or social rights issues, plant and machine operators, independent trade unions, targets that include public companies. In turn, craft and related trade workers and economic targets are the variables that contribute the most to the negative pole of this dimension. Considering the distance between the points in Figure 2, we can figure out the characteristics associated to the new typology of strikes. In fact, the distance between any row points or column points in Figure 2 gives a measure of their similarity (or dissimilarity).

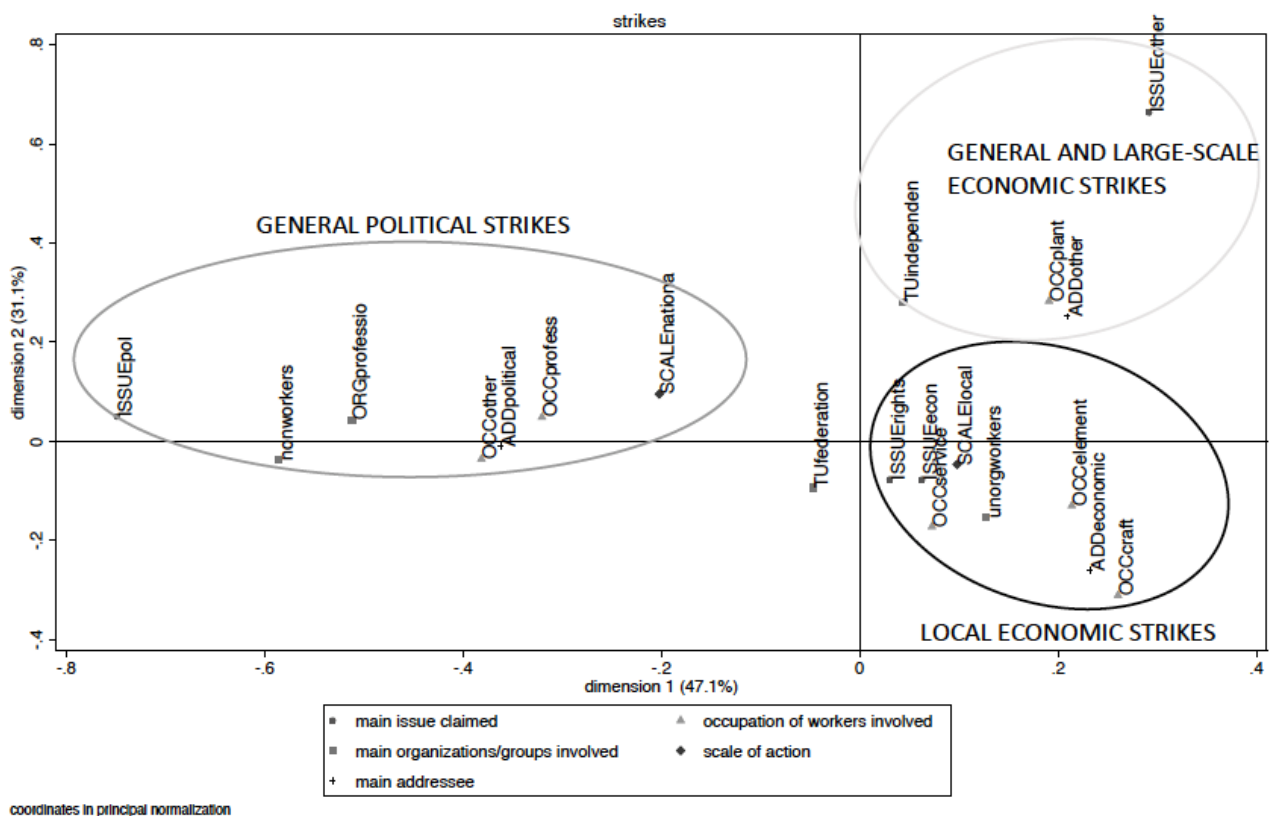
Figure 2 clearly identifies three groups: one in the upper right part of the graph, the second one in the lower right part, and a third one on the left side of the graph. Each group or type of strike shares a certain number of characteristics. Some variable categories are not associated with any specific type of strike and lie close to the origin of Figure 2, namely, trade union federations. This suggest that trade union federations are present across the three types of strikes.

Regarding issues, the figure emerging from the MCA clearly shows how claims on political and economic issues are associated with different types of strikes. Likewise, the types of strikes differ along the actor that is targeted by the strike - opposing political addressees to economic addressees and the actors mobilized. Non-working actors are clearly at the opposite side of workers occupied in elementary and craft occupations as well as workers without any organizational affiliation, unorganized workers. In turn, the scale of action also distinguishes the types of strikes. The strikes focused on economic issues tend to be organized at the local level while strikes addressed to political actors tend to have a larger scale.

Synthesizing the information deriving from Figure 2, we end up with identifying the following three type of strikes: one is referred to as *general political strikes*, a second group identifies *local economic strikes* and a third group is associated with a fewer number of characteristics. These strikes include both *general economic strikes* and *economic strikes* whose scale goes beyond the local or city level. The three types of strikes can be thought as ideal types which provide us with some hints on specific characteristics that are more closely associated with one type than the other.

**Figure 2 - Characteristics of different types of strikes: local economic strikes, general/large scale economic strikes and general political strikes (Italy, 2008-2018)**





Note: Economic, political, social rights and other issues claimed are respectively identified by the labels ISSecon, ISSpol, ISSright, ISSother. The workers' occupation involved in the strikes (plant and machine operators, craft and related trade workers, elementary occupations, service and sales workers, technicians and professionals, other occupations) are labelled as follows: OCCplant, OCCcraft, OCCelement, OCCservice, OCCprofess, OCCother). Organizations promoting the strikes include trade unions federations, independent trade unions, non-working categories such as student organizations, SMOs and CSOs, professional associations, and unorganized workers. They are identified through the following labels: TUfederation, TUindependent, nonworkers, unorgworkers. The scale, local or large-scale, is identified through SCALElocal and SCALEnational. The addressees/targets include political, economic and other addressees labelled through ADDpolitical, ADDeconomic, ADDother.

**Source:** own elaboration on our original PEA dataset

### General political strikes

The first type of strike identified in the analysis is associated with the characteristics regrouped on the left side of Figure 2. We define these strikes as general political strikes as they focus on political issues and address political actors by advancing claims against specific governmental reforms or policies. Strikes characterizing this type include those protests against the budget Laws (“legge finanziaria”) as well as claims that regarded reforms and government policies like the austerity reforms passed from 2011 onwards, or the 2014-2015 labor market reform, referred to as Renzi’s “Jobs Act”.

These strikes tend to be organized on a national scale and mostly involve non-working categories. By looking more in depth at this type of strikes, more than 75 percent of actors involved are non-working categories such as students or citizens, or social categories like parents protesting to grant a good education to their children (see also della Porta 2015; Kriesi et al. 2020; for the Italian case Andretta 2018). Students, for instance, were present in more than 10 percent of all these actions.

While no specific trade union appears to be associated to these strikes, our data shows that trade union federations engaged in more than 80 percent of general political strikes while independent and grassroots trade unions were only present in one fourth of them. Most workers involved were professionals particularly teaching professionals. Their involvement, together with that by professional organizations is closely associated with this type of strike. Teachers was especially present in the 2008 university strikes and the Onda movement (Zamponi 2011). These were mostly general political strikes involving the school sector against Berlusconi's cabinet. Additionally, strikes by school professionals continued in June 2010 and concerned the school and university reform, the so called "Gelmini's reform", named after the proposing Minister of Education Mariastella Gelmini and around 2015, in concomitance with the introduction of another school reform, the so called Buona Scuola under Renzi's cabinet.

General political strikes mostly occurred between 2011 and 2014, namely against Monti's government austerity reforms in 2011 and 2012, and in 2014 against the Jobs Act. An important peak of protest resulted at the end of 2011 in concomitance with the end of Berlusconi IV's cabinet and the beginning of Mario Monti's technocrat government in November 2011. Specifically, protests began to erupt in September 2011 and reached the highest peak in January 2012 after the approval of two decrees. The first one was the "Save Italy" measures passed in December 2011. This was a package of spending cuts and tax increases which included deeply unpopular measures like the Fornero pension reform named after the Ministry of labor and social policies. This reform raised the country's retirement age and concluded the cycle of the pension reform began in 1995 with the Dini Reform<sup>5</sup>. Within the austerity measures adopted, a second decree, known as the "Grow-decree" Italy, passed under Monti's cabinet in January 2012. On this occasion, many professionals engaged in several protests against the austerity measures adopted by Monti's cabinet. Among the measures adopted, the decree initially aimed to force lawyers and notaries to agree on the fee before any assignment, and to increase the number of pharmacies per inhabitants. Professionals such as pharmacists, lawyers and notaries all protested against the decree and forced Monti's cabinet to partly revise the decree. In 2014 many protests occurred against the new labor market reforms, including the Poletti Decree which liberalized the use of fixed-term contracts in March 2014. Afterwards, protests continued against the decrees implemented through the 2015 Jobs Act promoted by the prime minister Matteo Renzi. The Jobs Act increased the overall flexibility of the labor market while extending passive and active policies for the unemployed. The "Jobs Act" also modified the 1970 Workers' Statute, in several ways, inter-alia, by allowing a greater discretion to employers in the allocation of employees' tasks; improving the opportunity of stricter monitoring of employees' performance to increase organization and safety (art. 4); revising the rules and the (implicit) costs of severance payment (art. 18) along with a new regulation for open-end contracts (*contratto a tutele crescenti*) (Boeri and Garibaldi, 2018; Lucifora and Naticchioni 2018).

### *Local economic strikes*

The second type of strikes is identified by those characteristics highlighted at the bottom right-hand side of Figure 2. These strikes, identified as local economic strikes, regard the city level and focus on economic issues - such as working and contractual conditions, layoffs and the non-payment of salary - as well as on social rights, despite this category is close to the origin of the graph in Figure 2 and is thus not a clear distinctive

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<sup>5</sup> The Law n.335/1995, named after the President of the Cabinet Lamberto Dini, was based on the principle of 'actuarial fairness on average', which is only guaranteed in the Legislated Conversion Factors (LCFs) 'on average', without distinguishing between different categories of workers or between men and women. This principle links the contributions and benefits of future pensioners at the age of retirement to the present value of their contributions (or the value of their retirement wealth), which should equal the expected present value of the benefit stream.

characteristic of this type of strike. These strikes target private companies and involve specific occupational categories, namely craft and related trade workers, services and sales workers, and workers in elementary occupations. While trade unions are not absent, these strikes are also widely characterized by the presence of unorganized workers, that is, those workers with very low levels of unionization. Metal workers show a very high percentage of engagement in unorganized strikes. This is likely to concern the precarious component of this occupational category, as metal workers with stable employment conditions tend to have high levels of affiliations to trade union federations, even though from our data we can not investigate the type of employment contract. The high presence of unorganized workers is also in line with the local scale of the actions, as previous analyses show that “action by unorganized workers tends to be on a local scale” (Pilati and Perra 2022).

Craft and related trade workers, especially metal, machinery and related trades workers, like steel workers, mobilized throughout the whole decade. They challenged important private companies like FIAT, Fincantieri - one of the world's largest shipbuilding groups - Leonardo-Finmeccanica - one of the world biggest companies on high technologies, including those for defense, aerospace and security - and ILVA. The latter is one of the major Italian steel company whose plant site in Taranto was at the centre of an environmental scandal in 2012 that led to the conviction of some of the owners, the Riva family, and the transfer and control of the company to ArcelorMittal, the world largest steel producer. These workers mainly engaged in strikes (21.51 percent of all their actions) but their actions also included a high share of negotiations (21.45 percent). Many of their actions occurred in Liguria (18.1 percent) where steel workers mobilized at Fincantieri Sestri Levante, against Leonardo-Finmeccanica, and at ILVA in Cornigliano. Claims addressed to Fincantieri in 2011 regarded the cuts included in the industrial plan and the possible closure of the plant sites at Sestri Ponente (Genova) and the one in Castellammare di Stabia (Napoli). Protests by metal workers also occurred at FIAT, now Stellantis, when a new employment contract was introduced. In particular, the protests followed the December 2010 deal in Mirafiori - the largest plant site and headquarters in Turin – which was subsequent to the one signed in June in Pomigliano (Naples). On these occasions, FIAT, under the Chief Executive Sergio Marchionne, and trade unions - except for left-leaning FIOM - signed an agreement on a new contract for workers at the site. The agreement held that FIAT would not apply the Italian national contract law to the Mirafiori plant site and would ban all union activity for those that did not sign the deal. Other protests occurred in Sicily where metal workers mobilized both in 2010 and 2011 at the Termini Imerese FIAT plant site, as well as against the Fincantieri shipyards, and Ansaldo Breda, later on Leonardo-Finmeccanica.

Local economic strikes by services and sales workers, mostly targeted private companies, also focused on issues such as the working conditions. Examples include protests against timekeeping at Almagora, or against the opening of shops on Sundays and festivities, like on the 25 April, the Liberation Day in Italy. Protests also focused on the recovery plans that companies meant to or were implementing. They also involved sales workers occupied in general retail trade - like Auchan, Carrefour, Coop, Decathlon, IKEA, Mercatone Uno - or call centers like Almagora Acea. Contention involving services and sales workers also occurred in 2014 in Lazio, where the major airport Fiumicino hub is located, and involved workers at Alitalia, Meridiana, and Easyjet against the employers' claims on redundancies among employees set in the recovery plan of the companies.

Finally, elementary occupations - mostly unskilled workers such as refuse workers (34.05 percent of all workers in this occupational category) and cleaners and helpers – also predominantly engaged in strikes (19.18 percent) although they were also active in sit-ins (18.26 percent). One fifth of the protests by workers in elementary occupations occurred in Palermo (21.22 percent) and around 10 percent in several other big cities like Rome, Milan, and Naples. Many of these actions were addressed against the companies dealing with the city refuse collection.

### *General and large-scale economic strikes*

The last type of strikes identified at the right and upper side of Figure 2 is less straightforward and, a part the presence of independent trade unions and the involvement of drivers and mobile plant operators, does not show as many shared characteristics as the first two types of strikes do. We define these strikes as general and large-scale economic strikes<sup>6</sup>. Most of these strikes regard drivers and mobile plant operators. In general, plant and machine operators and assemblers represent the largest share of workers who engaged in contentious collective actions between 2008 and 2018 (24.1 percent of all actions) even though they mostly joined strikes in 2008 and during the core of the crisis, in 2011 and 2012. Their actions regarded workers in public transports - trains, buses, metro, ports – and truck drivers and most strikes focused on economic issues such as contract renewal, working and contract conditions, as well as the non-payment of salary, workplace safety ad layoffs.

In 2011, the first year of the core period of contention, a variety of categories of workers joined protests but drivers of public transports mobilized the most, often against the companies managing public transports. Strikes frequently occurred in 2012 as well. Just to cite some important ones, workers of local public transports - often joined by truck drivers as well as workers employed in the sector of highways and car rentals - went on strike on 1 March 2012, on 20 April 2012, again on 20 July 2012, and then also on 2 October 2012 against the position hold by employers' associations and the companies operating in the sector which did not want to apply the national collective agreement.

Separate analyses on our data show that more than half of these strikes were organized by trade union federations and around 40 percent by independent trade unions. In this type of strike, as shown in Figure 2, independent trade unions play a pivotal role because they organized most protests and strikes in the public transportations sector at the local and national level (Bordogna and Pedersini 2013). Public service workers, including public transportation drivers, have been historically associated to independent trade unions and they escaped the control of the major trade union federations even back in Sixties (Regalia, Regini and Reyneri 1978: 120). This is confirmed by the *Commissione di garanzia dell'attuazione della legge sullo sciopero nei servizi pubblici essenziali* that emphasizes that a large part of general economic strikes is organized by independent and grassroots trade unions that mobilize resources to improve their power relationship. The transformation of the Italian industrial relations system, its low level of institutionalization (Pulignano et al. 2018) and the disorganized form of decentralization of the collective bargaining (Pedersini 2014) in fact offered a structural opportunity to autonomous trade unions to increase their presence at the company level and their representativeness in many sectors.

## **5. Conclusions**

Our results show that the 2008 crisis and post-crisis period were characterized by a distinct wave of mobilization by workers in Italy. While this wave can be considered as part of the protests that have followed the global crisis, the national arena has remained predominant. As comparative analyses suggested, claims, repertoire, trade unions' strategies follow transformations of the economic, social and political Italian society.

The characteristics of workers' repertoire of actions in this wave substantially differ from those in the past: today, strikes are part of a wider repertoire of actions; blue collars – the core of workers who protested under

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<sup>6</sup> Previous analysis (Pilati and Perra 2022) show that national and local protest actions diverge in their characteristics. They show that more than 80 percent protests between 2008 and 2018 were local protests. The scale of action may affect strikes as well, with large-scale strikes that are likely to be coordinated by some structured organization and local strikes to be organized by small and informal actors (Pedersini and Bordogna 2013; Pedersini 2014).

industrial societies - join protests next to other workers and non-working categories such as students, especially in political strikes. Workers' current repertoire resembles the repertoire of protests studied by Tarrow (1989: 68) during the Sixties and Seventies. Similarly to what we find, Tarrow reports that 20.3 percent of all forms of actions occurred between 1965 and 1974 were strikes, 12.4 percent were marches and 9.8 percent were public meetings. Likewise, we find that between 2008 and 2018, 21.5 percent were strikes, 12.0 percent were demonstrations and approximately 7 percent were assemblies<sup>7</sup>. While today's workers' repertoire of actions is similar to Tarrow's, what differs in our research is the type of actors and protests that are examined. As a matter of fact, we only focus on actions by workers and for workers while Tarrow targeted all protests developed between 1965 and 1974 including, in addition to those whose main organizers were workers, those organized by students and young people who were the largest group of challengers. The latter made up a third of all social actors, but their protests may not have necessarily concerned work (Tarrow 1989: 86). Today, workers' repertoire of actions seems thus blurred towards a more general repertoire, losing its own specificity characterized by prevailing strategies of strike activity (Franzosi 2006 [1995]). This is further confirmed in our analysis by the fact that economic claims are integrated by political claims. Today, the State and local institutions are the direct target of many workers' strikes. The transformation of the Fordist regulation model has changed the process of the representation of workers and citizens' interests. The weakness of collective class identities goes in parallel with the emergence of new forms of social belonging that influence claims, the repertoire and targets of collective action. The role and tools of unions in the processes of workers' representation started combining political and economic types of collective actions back in the Nineties, coinciding with the decrease of industrial struggles (Molina and Barranco 2016).

Our empirical analysis thus suggests the importance of distinguishing political from economic strikes. General political strikes addressed to institutions seems to be the other side of the coin of what Pizzorno referred to as *political exchange* (Pizzorno 1977). In the Sixties *political exchange* equated collective bargaining (Ragini 1983): institutions incorporated trade unions in negotiations by exchanging with them social order and consensus. Through collective bargaining, trade unions exchanged participation in institutional decisions with social consensus. Today, through general political strikes, trade unions exert political pressure with the aim to change a political decision or reform from which they have been excluded. Trade unions' exclusion from participation in institutional channels and in decision making processes regarding government reforms or policies, has thus consequence on consensus and social order that are reflected in increasing numbers of political strikes. Consensus and social order that was once granted by trade unions, which were once incorporated in institutional decisions through concertation, have been replaced by an increase in general political strikes. Strikes are thus partly the consequence of the failure of concertation as a form of political exchange between institutions and trade unions. When the institutional subjects reject political exchange with trade unions by excluding them from concertation, trade unions respond by withdrawing their collaboration in sustaining social order. Instead, they promote political strikes. This framework suggests that we need to incorporate political approaches in the explanation of strikes, especially political strikes, given that these approaches, namely, the political process model (Tilly 1978; Tarrow 1989), allow to focus on the role of institutions in granting opportunities or in constraining trade unions' access and participation into processes of negotiations.

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<sup>7</sup> A form of action that differs from the past is the presence of sit-ins. 15.9 percent of actions occurred between 2008 and 2018 are sit-ins while in Tarrow's research this type of action is discussed together with occupations which represented 8.3 percent of all forms of actions (1989: 74). Sit-ins were largely used during the US civil rights movements from 1955 until the end of the sixties. In Italy they may have thus become more common later than during the period examined by Tarrow.

Our results further suggest that, differently from the experience of the Sixties, the labor struggles that appear to be rising from the last economic crisis have introduced innovative organizing tactics and strategies that could be more suitable for non-standard labor arrangements and workers in atypical employment arrangements. Today trade unions coordinate protests in combination with independent trade unions and workers are often unorganized. The boundaries of the labor/capital conflict, especially for general political strikes, seem more permeable allowing for the entry of new actors and the building of alliances between trade unions and other actors allowing to merge their grievances and organize solidarity between workers belonging to different economic sectors. Moreover, the new grassroots unions promote experimental schemes (i.e. social welfare, benefit advice and assistance to members) and innovative solutions for the participation of immigrants and non-standard workers that are not covered by the traditional forms of representation. This opens competition for representation between union federations, and the autonomous and independent groups of workers inside and outside the plant sites (Colombo and Regalia 2016). This competition is more important in the current context of decentralization of collective bargaining processes and the enhancement of the second level of the bargaining. In a situation characterized by competitive pluralism and in the absence of specific rules about the measures of representativeness, trade unions are thus positioned in between two roles: as organizations defending the rights of their own members and as actors of social movements defending broader rights (Regalia 2013; Regalia and Regini 2018). Therefore, they move from the economic to the political sphere to maintain their pivotal role in the industrial relations system<sup>8</sup>.

Despite these difficulties, unionization in Italy is higher than the European average, although this trend is not an indicator of the ability to mobilize and participate in strikes<sup>9</sup>, nor a sign of workers' belief in the union's ability to represent class interests (Regalia 2012). The legitimacy of trade unions has been rather erratic since the 1993 Interconfederal Agreement. Since 2008, unions have been perceived by political institutions as well as by their members as too weak to ensure support for austerity policies deemed inevitable (Culpepper and Regan 2014). As mentioned, this resulted in inter-union competition and the growth of grassroots autonomous unions. The union fragmentation and stratification of the mobilization process increases, additionally, the risk that workers and unions that represent them do not recognize each other and end up with fewer opportunities to develop solidarity and shared collective identity required for the emergence of a new labor movement (Doellgast et al. 2018).

The pattern of strikes, economic and political, the types of membership and the motivations for one and the other also highlight the distinction between interests and rights and the need for unions to define how one and the other can be represented and defended. This especially concerns non-standard workers. Even though our data do not enable us to test the presence of different types of employment contracts, employees in sectors where non-standard work is more common appear to constitute the interconnection between the economic and the political spheres of conflict. It is more difficult for these workers to distinguish between interests and rights, given the characteristics of their employment relationship. For a migrant precarious worker, is joining a trade union a way to get information about tax reductions or to defend her/his interests as a worker? The answer is important to understand processes of emergence of collective social actors, such as classes. In this regard, our data suggest that occupational categories of workers show different behaviors that relate to class belonging. Particularly, occupational categories with high levels of affiliations to trade union federations, like the insider

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<sup>8</sup> This point has always been crucial in the history of Italian trade unions, especially in the 1960s where the distinction between political and economic action became less clear-cut than in the first experiences of the workers' movement (Pizzorno 1980).

<sup>9</sup> Despite the high level of unionization compared to other Southern European countries, Italy has a lower level of strikes and labor/capital conflict and seems not able to produce a strong social and political coalitions (Andretta 2017; Molina and Barranco 2016).



component of metal workers - which represent yet the core of the working class - are more likely to see their actions reaching a higher visibility, legitimacy, and effectiveness than other occupational categories. In contrast, elementary occupations such as cleaners and refuse workers with low levels of affiliation in trade union federations, with high levels of workers without any affiliation or affiliated to autonomous trade unions, are more likely to suffer from the lack of resource mobilization by trade union federations and their promotion of collective action. This condition thus increases the risk of marginalization for unskilled and manual workers in precarious conditions. Their participation to general political strikes could be a signal of the weakness of these workers and their loss of political influence through economic strikes (Accornero 1985; Bordogna and Cella 2002). In this ambiguous situation, these actors may have the opportunity to reinforce themselves through new models of political mobilization that combine interests and rights in both the economic and political sphere.

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