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# A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF LEFT-WING TRADE UNION POSITIONS REGARDING BANGLADESHI WORKERS IN MONFALCONE (ITALY) AND BOSNIAN WORKERS IN SLOVENIA

Loredana Panariti<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

### *A Historical Analysis of Left-Wing Trade Union Positions Regarding Bangladeshi Workers in Monfalcone (Italy) and Bosnian Workers in Slovenia*

The research reconstructs the employment conditions of Bangladeshis in Monfalcone and Bosnians in Slovenia and left-wing trade union positions toward migrant work. Bangladeshis work mainly under subcontract in constructing large cruise ships at Monfalcone's Fincantieri, while Bosnians work in Slovenia's building, transportation, and storage sectors. This exploratory work addresses two case studies viewed through the lens of the relationship between trade unions and migrant workers, identifying the new challenges it poses. The research also describes the geography of the different positions and their relationship with the type of work carried out by immigrants.

**KEYWORDS:** left-wing trade unions, Bosnian workers, Bangladeshi workers, global economic crisis, migration policies

## IZVLEČEK

### *Zgodovinska analiza stališč levičarskih sindikatov do bangladeških delavcev v italijanskem Tržiču in bosanskih delavcev v Sloveniji*

Namen prispevka je analizirati javno razpravo o zaposlitvenih in delovnih pogojih bangladeških delavcev v italijanskem Tržiču (Monfalcone) in bosanskih delavcev v Sloveniji ter stališča levičarskih sindikatov do migrantskega dela. Bangladeški delavci opravljajo predvsem podizvajalska dela pri gradnji velikih potniških ladij v tržiškem podjetju Fincantieri, bosanski delavci pa v Sloveniji delajo v gradbeništvu, prometu in skladiščenju. Raziskava obravnava dve različni študiji primerov z vidika odnosa med sindikati in delavci migranti ter opredeljuje nove izzive, ki jih ta predstavlja. Opisuje tudi geografijo različnih stališč in njihovo povezavo z vrsto dela, ki ga opravljajo priseljenci.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** sindikati, delavci iz BiH, bangladeški delavci, globalna gospodarska kriza, migracijske politike

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## INTRODUCTION

Foreign workers are a significant component of the Italian and Slovenian economies (Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali, 2023; ZRSZ, 2023), and their contribution to the labor market is clearly visible, although not always adequately valued. In both countries, the combination of restrictive migration policies and labor market reforms has expanded the space for the exploitation of immigrant labor (Della Puppa, 2020a; Calafà, 2016; Bembič & Stanojević, 2016). Although some crucial sectors in both economies would be crippled without the contribution of foreign labor, especially after the 2008 crisis, immigrants are accused of settling for lower wages and precarious conditions, effectively devaluing contemporary work; a “reserve army” which reduces already scarce welfare resources from the indigenous population, given their consequent higher eligibility for social assistance programs. These beliefs are prevalent in society across the board and are routinely amplified by the media, electoral campaigns, and political discourse.

Beyond the noise of media discussion, the working conditions of migrants directly affect the trade unions that tackle the issue according to their statutes and as active subjects in bargaining and the regulation of work. Such conditions are a trade union issue because migrant workers embody a large proportion of the global workforce and are among the most vulnerable in the labor market. Furthermore, protecting the rights of these workers means avoiding any possible downward competition between them and, at the same time, strengthening the trade union organizations with new participants active within them (ILO, 2020).

The issue of the relationship between migrant labor and unions is not new; several researchers have addressed it by studying both the relationship between the parties, as well as the memberships and the socio-economic conditions of the labor force in different sectors and territories (Basso & Perocco, 2003; Basso, 2007a; Basso, 2007b; Bembič & Stanojević, 2016; Bešter, 2005, Della Puppa, 2017; Della Puppa, 2018; Ferrero & Perocco, 2011). What emerges from the studies is a heterogeneity of positions and reactions, not traceable to general patterns and in close relation to the socio-economic contexts upon which they rest. These phenomena, the subject of in-depth sociological studies, have received little attention from historians except for a few important studies (Colucci, 2009; Colucci, 2019; Loreto, 2018; Boschiero et al., 2010; Jubany & Güell, 2012; Kovačič, 2018). For this reason, using the tools of historical analysis, the two case studies that are the subject of this research have been explored, paying particular attention to the dimensions and characteristics of the labor markets in which migrants are placed.

Examining trade union positions toward migrant labor, however, we are faced with a complex and articulated reality, which, on the one hand, shows a growing involvement of foreign workers, and on the other hand, it signals how, in some cases, discrimination has penetrated the organizations themselves, strengthened by the crisis and the anti-immigration campaigns of parties and governments. In both

cases examined, the relationship with migrant labor should be added to the general decline of the trade union characterized, albeit with the differences linked to different historical trajectories, a reduction in members, a decline in the industrial sector, growth in the tertiary sector, and precarious work. In addition, the contraction or stagnation of employment in the public sector should be included (Bembič, 2018, pp. 34–35; Danesh et al., 2017).

Penninx & Roosblad (2000), in *Trade Unions, Immigration and Immigrants in Europe (1960–1993)*, report three dilemmas that put trade union organizations under pressure to address the issue of migrant labor. The first concerns the attitude toward companies regarding hiring workers abroad: collaborate or resist? Collaboration can depress wages and thus weaken bargaining power, while resistance can negatively affect company growth and, consequently, workers. The second dilemma is determining what attitude to maintain toward newcomers: involve and integrate them into the union, perhaps endangering the rights acquired by local workers, or exclude them? If trade unions favor inclusion as a solution to the second dilemma and fully include immigrant workers in the union, then the real or alleged differences between native and immigrant workers will lead to the third dilemma: how to represent the different worker types? In the same way or by considering the specific needs of immigrant workers? There can be difficulties in both cases because although generalist policies may appear unfair, specific ones could alienate native support.

Since 1993, the final year of Penninx and Roosblad's research, the general picture of international migration has profoundly changed: Europe has become a continent of immigration, and in almost all its countries, the rules governing labor migration have been tightened, stimulating irregular forms of entry to which we have responded with a further closure. In any case, some of the questions the authors identified as essential for trade unions remain relevant today. However, the context has changed: the increase in the migrant workforce lies within the processes of job insecurity, technological changes, and reduction in the area of collective bargaining. These are phenomena that, in general, try to reduce the strength of trade unions by confronting them with various possibilities for evolution (Marino et al., 2017, pp. 7–11; Kralj, 2011, pp. 296–296).

The objective of this work is to examine the positions of the historically "Left" trade unions (with all the distinctions that the concept now brings with it) toward Bangladeshi immigrant workers at the Monfalcone shipyard (Italy) and Bosnian workers in Slovenia. The former are mostly employed under contract and subcontract in the construction of the large cruise ships of Fincantieri, and the latter in the

construction and tourism sectors.<sup>1</sup> This exploratory work addresses two different case studies through the lens of the relationship between trade unions and migrant workers, identifying the new challenges it poses. A picture emerges, still only partly delineated, e.g., the positions of smaller trade unions or migrant associations need to be examined, which nevertheless highlights two important specific issues. The first concerns the irreversible change that the crisis has brought, intensifying distortions and dualism in the labor market of the respective countries. The second highlights the growing contradiction between acquired and enforceable rights and the need to maintain native and immigrant workers together (Della Puppa, 2020a; Della Puppa, 2020b; Bembič & Stanojević, 2016).

We know the “Left” is an increasingly more complicated term to define and clarify. However, within the trade union organizations present in Italy and Slovenia, the CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro)<sup>2</sup> and the ZSSS (Zveza Svobodnih Sindikatov Slovenije) can be considered in a general sense as being oriented toward the Left<sup>3</sup>. They are also among the most representative to develop elements of the internal debate on migrant workers that are dealt with in both trade unions. While the historical trajectories of both organizations are relevant, we will limit ourselves to the two realities related to the period beginning with the 2008 crisis. Both Bangladeshis and Bosnians have always been considered “complementary” and not “substitutes” for the indigenous labor force, where complementary means they end up being employed almost exclusively in the heaviest and worst-paid jobs (Avola et al., 2005; Colombo & Della Zuanna, 2019; Pajnik et al., 2010; Medica & Lukič, 2011).

According to this point of view, the presence of immigrant workers satisfies an unmet demand and is helpful for the growth of the economy as a whole by solving, or at least countering, the imbalances in the labor market on which it is based. With the crisis, however, the idea that immigration has a competitive effect has strengthened, reducing employment opportunities for natives and lowering average wages.

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1 The workers involved in the Fincantieri subcontracting in Monfalcone are all males, while in Slovenia, the majority of Bosnian male workers are joined by a smaller number of women employed especially in services. For Bangladeshis, thanks also to the rules on family reunification, women in 2020 were over 42% of the group. In Slovenia, family reunification concerns those who have a permanent residence permit, while the numerous temporary workers are almost always alone.

2 The Italian General Confederation of Labor (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro; CGIL) is a national trade union based in Italy. It was formed by an agreement between socialists, communists, and Christian democrats in the “Pact of Rome” of June 1944. In 1950, socialists and Christian democrats split, forming UIL and CISL. These defections left the CGIL almost entirely dominated by communists, though it retained a significant socialist minority within its ranks. The CGIL is the largest Italian labor federation, but, as we will see, over time, it has changed some of its characteristics (Loreto, 2017).

3 The Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (Zveza svobodnih sindikatov Slovenije, ZSSS) is the largest national trade union confederation in Slovenia. Founded on April 6, 1990, it was formed from the remains of the old Yugoslav-era unions, but is now a voluntary and democratic organization, independent of political parties, parliament, government, and religious communities (Tomc, 1994).

In Slovenia, laws and regulations were promulgated in defense of indigenous workers. Soon afterward, a bilateral agreement was reached with the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which put Bosnian workers in the position of not being able to fully exercise their economic and social rights and be, in their first year of stay, at the complete mercy of their employers. In Monfalcone, separate paths within the labor market were de facto strengthened with different rights and various types of protection. The labor market passed, according to Stefano Zamagni's definition, from having a pyramidal structure with a vertex, base, and substantial intermediate category and offering greater possibilities to change position within it, to one that has the shape of an hourglass, with two ampoules which, ideally, contain very different workers from the point of view of rights and wages.

In the hourglass, the immigrant workers stand at the base with little chance of gaining a better position. They are considered, even by many of those who stand just above in the lower bulb or who have seen their position collapse downwards due to the crisis, as one of the elements triggering the process of job insecurity (Zamagni, 2011, pp. 5–6; Corvino, 2017, p. 76).

## BANGLADESHI IN MONFALCONE

The Bangladeshi community in Italy, present since the late 1990s, is the largest in the European Union and has experienced rapid growth: between 2002 and 2021, it increased fivefold, from 22,000 to 138,000 regulars. At first, these were unmarried, childless, middle-class men who migrated to improve their personal status and support their families through remittances; now, thanks to family reunifications, they are households with closer and more stable relationships with their places of arrival. A stronger presence of irregular migrants and frequent applications for international protection also characterizes more recent immigration. Bangladeshi workers, rooted and concentrated in certain territories and specific economic sectors, in Monfalcone are mainly employed in the construction of cruise ships in Fincantieri (Della Puppa, 2014; Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2022).

As of January 1, 2020, 7,353 foreigners were residing in Monfalcone, which is 26% of the resident population. The largest foreign group, with 3,188 registered people, was the Bangladeshi, representing more than 43% of all foreigners in the city. The Bangladeshi are a growing presence: in 2004, there were 382, compared to a nucleus of just 17 men in 1998 (Quattrocchi et al., 2003; Attanasio, 2017).

Figure 1 shows how in Monfalcone from 2004 to 2020, against a slight increase in the number of residents (27,401 in 2004 and 29,233 in 2020), the share of foreign residents increased and, among them, Bangladeshi ones. The growth of the Bangladeshi community has also depended on family reunification and marriages, as can be seen in the constant increase in women over time.

The available data record exclusively the residents, to which must be added the domiciled persons. These are usually people already present in other Italian cities, coming to Monfalcone to find a more stable job, or workers from other yards of the Fincantieri group, moved to Monfalcone by the contractors for more or less prolonged periods and a quota of illegal immigrants. The estimation, although uncertain, proposes a global figure of around five thousand units.

It is interesting to note how the number of Bangladeshi residents increased during the years of the crisis (with a slight decline in 2012), demonstrating how it amplified that profound upheaval, albeit started previously, of replacing precarious and poorly paid work for that more protected and permanent.

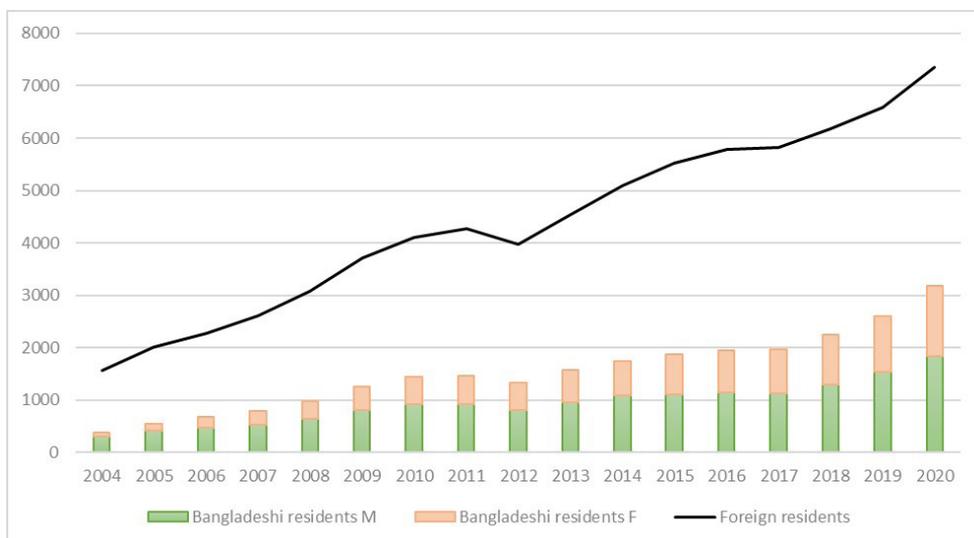


Figure 1: Foreign residents in Monfalcone 2004–2020. Data: ISTAT. Stranieri residenti al 1° gennaio. <http://dati.istat.it/index.aspx?queryid=7608>

The community, of course, is not a completely compact body and contains differences and divisions, i.e., variations in region of origin, wealth, the role of religion in daily life, and the level of education. Together with a large majority of people in often precarious employment, we also find some small entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, and owners of shops, houses, and apartments.

## THE DEBATE ON WORK

The presence of such a high number of foreigners in the city depends on the continuous growth of contracting and subcontracting, which became established almost simultaneously with the shipyard's specialization in the construction of cruise ships. Since the second half of the 1980s, partly in response to Asian competition in other

productions, Monfalcone has specialized in the production of cruise ships, irreversibly changing the organization of work. Because of its characteristics and size, the shipbuilding industry faced the challenge of organizing and regulating its workforce early on. A workforce now composed of an increasingly small nucleus of direct employees, partly employed in the construction of the hulls, but above all in control of work, administration, research and development activities, and a galaxy of small and medium-sized contractors. The latter, for the most part, although operating in the shipbuilding industry within the shipyard itself, apply very different forms of work organization and wage treatments and, in many cases, are characterized by the absence of protection and guarantees. The complexity of the multi-tiered chain of contracts and subcontracts distances the principal from responsibility for violating collective bargaining agreements. The fact that the victims are mostly foreign workers frowned upon in the city and discriminated against in access to welfare by the city administration makes it much more difficult for the union to promote solidarity and joint struggle between direct and contract workers. Labor market reform laws and the regulation of so-called economic migration have punctuated the tightening of conditions for Bangladeshis in the shipyards. The system of migration containment and legislative changes closely linking residence and work have increased the vulnerability of these workers who, worried about losing their jobs and plunging into a situation of irregularity, have often been forced to accept very severe exploitative conditions.

The type of contract with which Bangladeshi workers are hired is mostly on a fixed-term basis, with an increase in temporary work in recent years. Data from the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region Labor Market Observatory regarding Monfalcone (see Figure 2 and Figure 3) confirm the precariousness of the work of all third-country nationals and the great attraction that the Monfalcone shipyard continues to exert. The use of foreign workers has grown, even though planned entries for work purposes have been drastically reduced in Italy, and the system used (the annual definition of quotas) is so complex and cumbersome that it has made regular labor migration very complicated. In fact, in the last ten years, admissions for work have decreased by 97%, while those for family and humanitarian reasons have increased (Fondazione Leone Moressa, 2021).

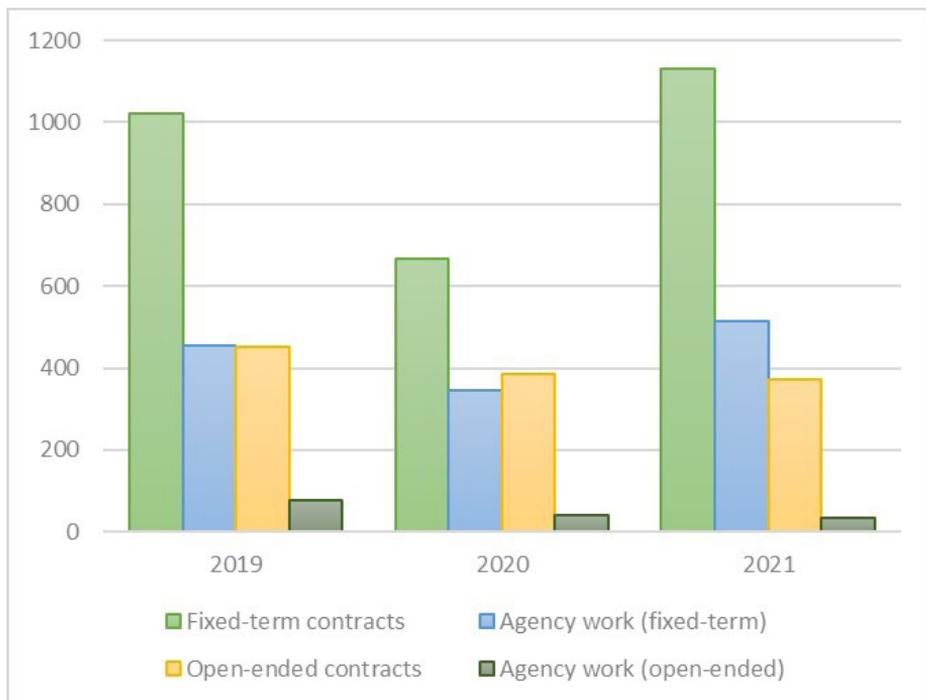


Figure 2: Contract type (Bangladeshi workers). Data: Osservatorio del Mercato del Lavoro della Regione Friuli Venezia Giulia (2021).

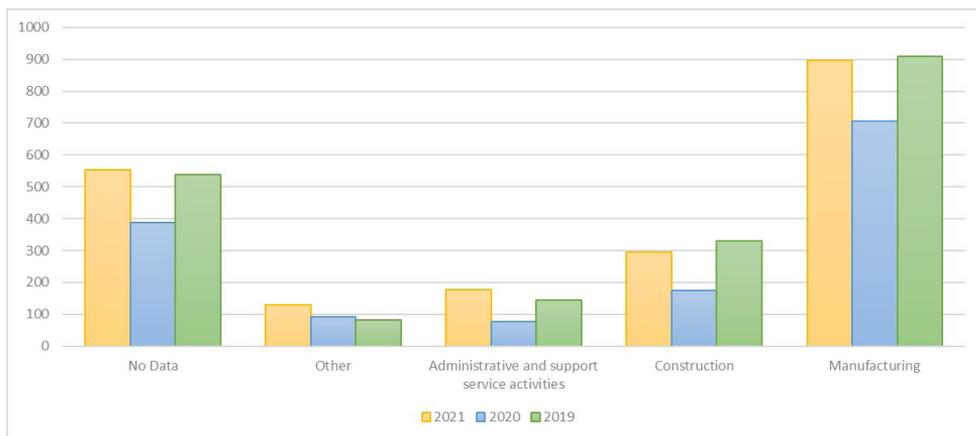


Figure 3: Fields of work (Bangladeshi workers). Data: Osservatorio del Mercato del Lavoro della Regione Friuli Venezia Giulia (2021).

Bangladeshi workers are considered the culprits in the increasing precariousness of work, not only according to the Northern League, but the debate has also involved the political forces and the unions. The presence of so many foreign workers with their families in Monfalcone follows a growth in orders in the city's shipyard, which, since the end of the 1980s, has specialized in the production of cruise ships. The construction of the "princesses" of the sea, real traveling tourist cities, requires the contribution of many workers who do not depend directly on Fincantieri but are employed under contract and subcontract (Panariti, 2011, pp. 242–243). Foreigners are employed in the most strenuous work. They are often the worst paid, with phenomena including "illegal hiring" and exploitation, which have already come to the judiciary's attention (Panariti, 2021, pp. 273–274).

Some citizens protest against this population on account of its religious, cultural, and social traditions, which citizens perceive as being "different" and, therefore, the Bangladeshi workers are considered responsible for the supposed "degradation" and have long been the subject of discussions in the city, in bars and social networks. However, such discussions had never before reached the extreme language used after the victory of the Right in the 2016 municipal elections. The fight against immigrant workers seems to be one of the reasons that allowed the Right to win the Municipality and undermine the tradition of the Left, which was one of the characteristic elements of the city.

The global economic crisis has deeply eroded the industrial fabric of the Monfalconese, with the closure of some important companies. On the other hand, despite some difficult moments, Fincantieri and its subcontracting companies have continued to grow and attract foreign labor, especially. More "malleable" workers, as they were defined by the provincial secretary of the CGIL, probably referring to the lack of unionization of foreigners and the title of the article: "There is work on site, but our unemployed are not hired" refers to the difficulty of reemployment for workers made redundant by some medium-sized companies in the area ("Casotto", 2019). Retirement is still a distant goal for the latter, while job relocation is complicated not only by the crisis but also by their age and type of training. For this reason, the public discourse (political and union) focuses on the need to "force" Fincantieri, a primarily public company, to hire the unemployed directly arising from those corporate crises. At the same time, the fact that Fincantieri outsources so much work to external firms that hire foreigners to the detriment of local citizens is much criticized.

In the province where Monfalcone is located, the unemployment rate has gone up, with even higher peaks, from 3.9% in 2006 to 8.2% in 2016, and although the 2018 data indicate a return of employment to pre-crisis levels, more in-depth qualitative analyses highlight the greater growth in risky and, often, underpaid work (Cappi, 2017, p. 248).

Workers who have lost their jobs in local factories look to Fincantieri as a possible place for relocation. In addition, the presence of a very large group of foreigners, mostly Bangladeshi, who are more willing to accept precarious and insecure working

conditions, has begun to enter the public debate, first political and then trade union (TGR FVG, 2019). Thus, the union finds itself in the balance between protecting the weakest, bargaining for its members, and the need to negotiate relocation places for those who have lost their jobs. This balance is delicate because the different trajectories can collide. In a situation of objective contraction of resources, the needs and interests of employed workers or the unemployed far from retirement do not always go in the same direction as those of workers in precarious jobs, the unemployed, and foreigners. Forecasts in this direction are difficult; however, it is perceived how the pushes toward a more “universalistic” union collide with those of an increasingly varied economic reality that requires very different representation experiences.

The contradiction came to light precisely on the shipyard where the company has repeatedly justified the presence of a significant number of foreign workers under subcontract with the difficulty of finding skilled workers in the local labor market. Moreover, they accused the direct employees of being absent and unproductive. In a situation of this type, the continuous use of direct employees, who are the most unionized, reduces the union’s strength.

The most representative trade union of the Monfalcone yard was, for a long time, the FIOM (Federazione Impiegati Operai Metallurgici). It is now surpassed, albeit slightly, by the FIM (Federazione Italiana Metalmeccanici), which represents more members among white-collar employees. The FIOM is considered the “redder” union in the CGIL, but the pressure of workers coming from the crisis largely enrolled in the FIOM led them to approach the slogan of the Northern League “Italians first” (Boschiero et al., 2010, pp. 31–34; Zazzara, 2018, pp. 101–102).

An examination of electoral flow data in the European elections (2019) presented by Ipsos reveals that among CGIL members, the Democratic Party and the Left share the primacy with almost 58%, but 38.4% voted with the Northern League (18.5%) and the Five Stars (19.9%). The trade union, indeed, is increasingly perceived as a service provider rather than as a transmitter of values or a political entity. So, there is no inconsistency, according to its members, to be part of the CGIL, appreciating their help at work, and then voting for the Right (Il Fatto, 2019). We do not have precise data for the Monfalcone area. Moreover, the support of the FIOM for the policies of the Northern League mayor, which aims to reduce the number of foreigners and replace them with native workers, has also been covered by the national press and television. Articles and interviews speak about the Northern League with the red sweatshirt, recalling the sweatshirts worn by FIOM militants in demonstrations (Linkiesta, 2019).

The issue of values ignites the debate within the union itself. Also, in the small microcosm of Monfalcone, especially from the CGIL Federation of School and University (FLC – Federation of Knowledge Workers), voices of dissent have been raised that have never conducted a direct comparison. During the conference with the eloquent title “From foreigners to citizens,” organized in Monfalcone by the FLC, the question of union values had been raised without a debate.

The unresolved issue lays bare the left-wing union's model of consultation and policy incompatible with the unionization of subcontracted workers. Agreements between the unions and the company repeatedly mention the need to increase the employment of direct workers and reduce subcontracting, indicating a gradual weakening of demands and difficulty in finding alternative solutions. Of the rest, the worsening of exploitative conditions has been punctuated by labor market reform laws: the strengthening of fixed-term contracts, the introduction of temporary, intermittent, and ancillary work, and, above all, the lifting of the ban on subcontracting in Law 30/2003. Regulations that facilitated productive disintegration and complicated the fight against illegality.

## BOSNIANS IN SLOVENIA

If we talk about "Bosnians" or "Bosnian-Herzegovinians," we are referring, at least in theory, to all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as it is written in the country's Constitution. However, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the wars that followed, and the delicate balance between citizenship and nationality present in Bosnia since the republic's creation in the Yugoslav federation make things much more complicated. It may happen that the term Bosnian is used to define only the country's Muslim population (Nuhefendić, 2008). Here, however, the discriminating element is citizenship, and when we refer to Bosnian workers in Slovenia, we are talking about all workers who are citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Workers from Bosnia began arriving in Slovenia in the late 1960s, and in the following decade, Bosnia became the most important immigration country for Slovenia (Dolenc, 2007, pp. 80–82).

Slovenia has always been an immigration destination for citizens of other Yugoslavian republics, especially after other European countries had inaugurated restrictive policies on foreign labor. The reasons for the move were the possibility of free professional training, scholarships for education, and, above all, jobs in the construction, agriculture, catering, and tourism sectors (Malačič, 2008, pp. 46–47).

After the independence of Slovenia in 1991, immigrants who had permanent residence could apply for and acquire Slovenian citizenship. Some of them, however, have been removed from the registers and have lost all civil and social rights. These are the so-called *izbrisani* ("erased")—non-Slovenian citizens who either refused to apply for citizenship or were unable, due to the war, to obtain the necessary documentation in their country of origin or had supposed that, as in the past, the rights they had enjoyed up to that moment would be sufficient for the permanent residence permit. Nearly 18,000 people from other republics lost all their rights related to permanent residence—it has been maintained that the original number of 30,000 had been reduced after 12,000 of them had left. Therefore, they would have had to redo all the necessary documentation for health care, welfare, work permit, etc.,

following the law for the employment of foreigners (July 1, 1992), which provided for a very short period of regularization (Zorn, 2003, pp. 85–86; Vidmar & Učkar, 2014).

The precarious existence of these men and women, who in some cases were not even aware that they had become “foreigners,” was resolved in the following period as new Bosnians reached Slovenia due to the war. The refugees, about 70,000 people in 1993, with many women and children, partly left the country in the following years to return to their homeland or emigrate to other states. In 2002, those who remained were regularized after a long period of marginalization and, probably, illegal work.

After Slovenia’s independence in 1991, there began further immigration from Bosnia, strengthened especially in 2004 after its accession to the European Union.

## LEGISLATION AND WORKING CONDITIONS

Regulations on the employment of workers in Slovenia from third countries have undergone several changes over time in relation to changes in the labor market, the country’s economic situation, and joining the European Union.

Let us briefly recall the introduction of quotas in 2001: permits for foreign workers could not exceed 5% of the active population, and in 2001, this percentage was approximately 41,000 people.

This law established one of the basic principles of subsequent Slovenian immigration policy: namely, the separation between those who already lived and worked in the country with a permanent permit, who were equalized to Slovenian workers, and new hires who, instead, were subjected to much stricter procedures. Although with several changes, the planned system remained in force until 2011, when it was replaced by a new legislative provision (Uradni list Republike Slovenije, 1992).

Post-independence Slovenian economic growth had made many jobs available for unskilled labor and increased the quotas available for foreign workers. With the crisis in 2008, the situation of these workers, primarily employed in construction, worsened, and many were fired.

The anti-crisis measures launched to protect domestic workers were accompanied by discriminatory rhetoric from government officials. Hilda Tovšak, general secretary of the Slovenian Christian Democrats, director of the Vegrad construction company, and then a leading figure in the purchase of the same after its bankruptcy, publicly stated that the Bosnians earned 600 euros a month and, not happy, they also wanted to play their Bosnian music like crazy. She concluded: “They live in places with a higher cultural level, so they don’t bring their habits with them” (Mihajlovič, 2008). The “building baroness,” the name the media gave to her, was subsequently sentenced to eight years in prison for embezzlement, money laundering, misuse of European funds, and numerous other counts. The workers, mostly Bosnians, were mistreated and often forced to wait months for their salary. They lost their jobs after the bankruptcy of Vegrad and its affiliates. Having no personal residence permit, the

workers had no right to unemployment benefits and had to be repatriated. The issue was resolved after a long strike, thanks to the government's intervention.

At the end of 2011, valid work permits for Bosnian citizens were more than 51% of the total (17,625 out of 34,266). Of these, however, almost 80% were personal permits, i.e., permits relating to a fixed-term or permanent job, but which, in any case, being granted to the person, guaranteed a better standard of access to welfare than those that were instead issued to the employer.

The law of 2011 kept the quota system in force, abolishing the possibilities of seasonal work in the tourism and construction sectors and inserting very stringent rules for employers wishing to hire foreign labor. This caused, in three years, a vertical drop in work permits issued, which fell by 33.4% (ZSRZ). This restrictive law was accompanied by an agreement between the government of the Republic of Slovenia and the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the employment of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Slovenia. The agreement identifies procedures and quantities of Bosnian workers to be employed in Slovenia and aims to reduce the exploitation of workers and guarantee them better working conditions and permanence. The recruitment of workers takes place through collaboration between Bosnian and Slovenian labor agencies and introduces the concept of circular migration (Uradni list Republike Slovenije, 2012; Kačapor-Džihic & Nermin, 2012).

The two agencies track the workers together, even after their permit has been granted, and they facilitate the acquisition of skills that can be used in a possible return to their country. The work permit for these workers, the largest group among foreigners employed in Slovenia, is valid for three years. However, during the first year, they must remain employed by a single employer. If they lose their job in the first year of activity, they must return to their homeland, while after three years, they can ask for a new three-year permit. Having to depend on a single employer for a full year puts workers in a state of extreme dependence; they are forced to accept lower wages, late pay, and, sometimes, no pay at all. As the unions, especially the ZSSS, have repeatedly pointed out, although the agreement aims to increase protection for Bosnian workers, in reality, workers in their first year in the country must accept every situation regarding security, wages, and working hours. Indeed, if they are sacked and have not found a new job within thirty days, they are forced to return to Bosnia, where they can only leave again after six months. Theoretically, if fired through no fault of their own, they would have the right to get unemployment benefits in Slovenia and look for work again in the country. The fact, then, that many companies shut down their business and then reopen under another name puts migrant workers at a further disadvantage. It may happen that they cannot even recover wages and contributions or have to work illegally. Furthermore, the workers often have no residence and live in makeshift accommodations made available by the employer or in a hostel for workers under deplorable sanitary conditions (Mulabdić, 2015, pp. 58–60).

Figure 4 and Figure 5 show the increasing number of Bosnian workers who arrived in Slovenia thanks to this agreement. Over time, they came to represent almost all the third-country workers in Slovenia. The sectors of activity most represented are those of manufacturing, building, and construction, also in line with the declared level of education, which in most of the annual permits issued specify completion of compulsory education or one or two years of qualification.

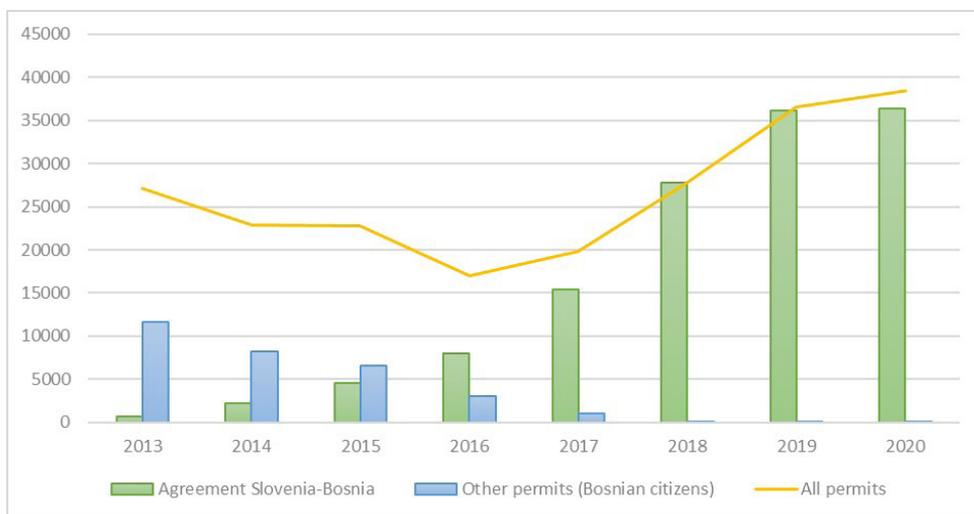


Figure 4: Valid work permits 2013–2020. Data: ZRSZ. Trg dela v številkah-ZRSZ. <https://www.ess.gov.si/partnerji/trg-dela/trg-dela-v-stevilkah>

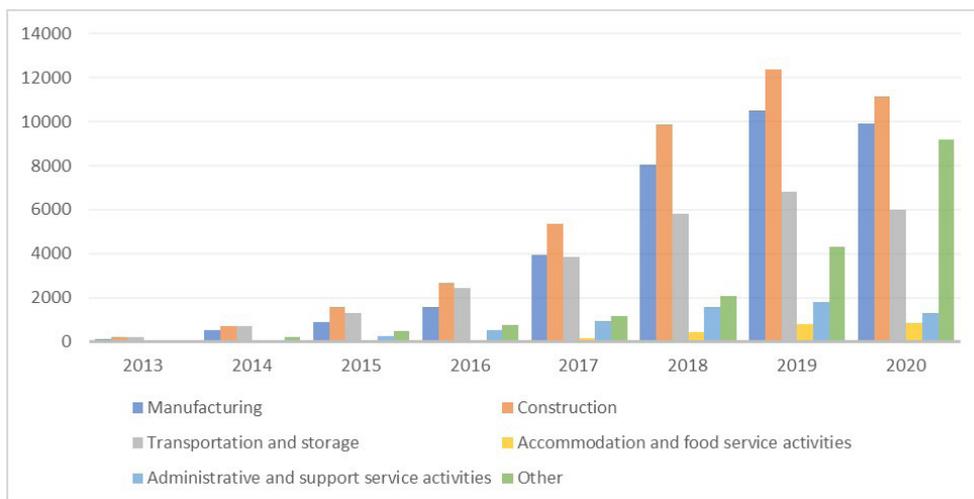


Figure 5: Fields of work (Bosnian workers). Data: ZRSZ. Trg dela v številkah-ZRSZ. <https://www.ess.gov.si/partnerji/trg-dela/trg-dela-v-stevilkah>

The lack of knowledge of the language and their rights makes Bosnian workers highly vulnerable. For this reason, in 2011, the ZSSS and Slovenska Filantropija (SF) created a Labor Counselling Service for migrant workers, refugees, and asylum seekers. In 2013, the service became an info point for foreigners funded by the National Employment Agency with offices nationwide.

The growth path of this organization is very interesting for our analysis. Now, the Delavska svetovalnica (Labor Counselling Service), which has since removed the reference to migrants from its name, is active thanks to the quotas of its members. It offers advice to all vulnerable workers. As we have read in many interviews with its founders, the central element of its activity is the rights obtained for vulnerable workers. So, when the project's financing ended, the Delavska svetovalnica activists decided to become independent.

Although in the first period of activity, they thought of organizing themselves as a real union, they decided instead to maintain the status of an association to have easier access to financing and a more fluid structure. This decision was because they preferred to have a less structured focus and to be closer to the workers in flesh and blood; also, because differences from the ZSSS became more and more marked.

The ZSSS, which had to protect its members from the restrictive policies imposed by Europe and defend the occupational standard inherited from the previous system, had delegated support for migrant workers to an external body that is not a union, even if some speak of a quasi-trade union (Sokler, 2019, pp. 29–36). Delavska svetovalnica lives off the membership fees of its members. Despite maintaining collaboration with the ZSSS and other institutions, it is completely autonomous, and while the other trade union organizations suffer from a decline in membership, it is expanding.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The article evaluates the tense dynamic between trade unions and foreign labor by presenting two case studies with particular characteristics that highlight the tensions and options involved in this relationship. It examines left-leaning trade unions, disregarding newly developed minor organizations with alternative paths and visions versus historical unions. The latter, however, are the most representative, dealing with the problems experienced by the entire trade union world, and can tell us a lot about the prospects of the report under consideration. We addressed a specific reality in two separate settings: the Monfalcone shipyard and its Bangladeshi workforce and the situation in Slovenia, where most of the foreign workforce comes from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In Monfalcone, the model of marked segmentation of the labor market on an ethnic basis has favored the differential exploitation of immigrant workers. The shipyard has experienced, alongside the fragmentation of the production process,

the racial stratification—and segregation—of its workforce. Foreigners are weak and vulnerable, accepting and suffering discrimination and abuse in the division of labor, wages, and the exercise of their rights.

At various levels, a picture emerges characterized by progressive forms of labor and social precariousness. This involves low training, safety, and pay levels and the absence of protections guaranteed by the standards set by national legislation. In the system of contracts and subcontracts that characterizes the site's production, immigrants are mainly entrusted with the least skilled or most difficult tasks, with a downward polarization of working conditions, the entrenchment of exploitation and illegal work, with Bangladeshis at the bottom rung of the hierarchical ladder of work.

The union is faced with a complex reality in which the only instrument to counter exploitation seems to be the repressive one, i.e., reporting abuses to the judiciary. The immigrant workers, supported by the union, denounced and brought civil action, and the trials ended with severe penalties, all without affecting the existing organizational and production model.

The tightening of exploitative conditions at the worksite has been punctuated by labor market reform laws: the strengthening of fixed-term contracts, the introduction of temporary, intermittent, and ancillary work, and, above all, the lifting of Law 30/200's ban on labor subcontracting.

As Cillo & Perocco (2016) and Dorigatti (2018) note, trade unions have been faced with the challenge of elaborating a strategy to combat the inequalities present in the subcontracting system, taking into account both the stratification of precariousness produced by the organization of labor and the racial segmentation of the labor market. As noted, the first knot to be unraveled concerns the relationship between direct employees, almost all Italians and unionized, and contract employees, almost all foreigners and much less unionized.

Furthermore, it should not be underestimated that neither the workers nor the organizations are immune to discrimination. At the same time, the intensification of institutional and popular racism in the city in recent years (Panariti, 2021) has led to a sort of "reflex inertia" (Gjergji, 2015) in the union. Inertia is defined as an inability to put immigrant workers' reception, integration, and unionization programs at the center, as has happened in other parts of Italy in addition to labor claims. For years, claims have centered on the need to reduce the use of contracting, bring some of the work back in-house, and thus increase the number of direct employees. In Slovenia, protecting migrant workers is also an issue of great interest to trade unions. Slovenia's segmentation of the labor market is regulated *ex lege* in a discriminatory manner. It has led to the compartmentalization and isolation of immigrants, especially Bosnians, who represent the largest percentage and who are traditionally employed in jobs characterized by precariousness, low pay, heavy and dangerous work, and social penalization (Kanduč & Bučar-Ručman, 2016).

Within the ZSSS, an EU-funded project created an entity (Delavska svetovalnica), which now runs independently. While maintaining relationships and contacts with the ZSSS, it operates independently and deals not only with migrant workers but with labor exploitation more generally. The fact that the attention paid to the most fragile sections of the workers has somehow left the perimeter of trade union activity itself was the subject of a long article by Marko Tanasić, which appeared on the ZSSS website (Tanasić, 2017). Tanasić, who deals with migrant labor within the trade union organization, made specific proposals, noting that the union had to get out of its comfort zone and get closer to the changes taking place in the world of work. In his opinion, it was up to the ZSSS to take on a leading and coordinating role between the different bodies and associations, going beyond the project phase to articulate an internal path of inclusion and unionization of migrant workers. A network capable of involving workers, families, organizations, and institutions and working, in collaboration with other European trade unions, on a shared platform of requests.

Repeated labor reforms have also accentuated the processes of precarization and, according to some (Visser, 2019, p. 54), have encouraged the idea that trade unions work for their members but not for non-members and, thus, are only committed to certain specific interests. Again, labor market segmentation has magnified the differences between those with well-organized and influential trade union representation and a better contractual status linked to their position in the labor market compared to those in precarious and exploitative situations. If openly, at least, the main challenge of the trade union movement is to build solidarity, unity, and better working conditions for all, the essential question is linked to the methods of organizing trade unions, the methods of organizing foreign workers, and the strategies to overcome fragmentation.

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## POVZETEK

### ZGODOVINSKA ANALIZA STALIŠČ LEVIČARSKIH SINDIKATOV DO BANGLADEŠKIH DELAVCEV V ITALIJANSKEM TRŽIČU IN BOSANSKIH DELAVCEV V SLOVENIJI

Loredana Panariti

Članek obravnava javno razpravo o zaposlitvenih in delovnih pogojih bangladeških delavcev v italijanskem Tržiču (Monfalcone) in bosanskih delavcev v Sloveniji. Razi-skava obravnava dve različni študiji primerov z vidika odnosa med sindikati in delavci migranti ter opredeljuje nove izzive, ki jih ta predstavlja. Gospodarska kriza je okrepila prepričanje, da priseljevanje zmanjšuje zaposlitvene možnosti domačinov in znižuje njihove povprečne plače. To je v Sloveniji privedlo do sprejetja pravil in predpisov za zaščito domačih delavcev, čemur je sledil dvostranski sporazum z vlado Bosne in Hercegovine. To postavlja bosanske delavce v položaj, v katerem ne morejo v celoti uveljavljati svojih ekonomskih in socialnih pravic. Tako so v prvem letu dela v popolni nemilosti delodajalcev. V ladjedelniškem Tržiču je trg dela segmentiran po etničnem ključu, pri čemer bangladeški delavci zasedajo najtežja in pogosto najslabše plačana delovna mesta.

Stališča sindikatov in levece pa so protislovna, saj v isti organizaciji najdemo različne ideje: od obtoževanja migrantskih delavcev, da so »preveč prilagodljivi« in da razvrednotijo delo, do zavzemanja za zaščito njihovih pravic.

Sindikati se bodo morali soočiti z odločitvijo, ali bodo branili delovna mesta in delavce na globalni ravni ali pa se bodo borili izključno za izboljšanje delovnih pogojev svojih članov z neokorporativističnega vidika.

## TEMATSKI SKLOP / THEMATIC SECTION

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