



LABOUR HISTORY IN THE NEW CENTURY

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Edited by **Bobbie Oliver**

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LABOUR HISTORY IN THE NEW CENTURY

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Exercising Workers' Rights: The Italian COBAS Experience

Riccardo Baldissoni¹

In this paper I will use the Italian union COBAS as an example of successful grass-roots organisations, as an opportunity to explore the transformations of Italian unions during the last few decades, and as a starting point for a more general reflection on the dynamics of trade unionism. In particular, I will recall how COBAS were built in the 1980s to defend the rights of school workers from kindergarten to secondary education. Moreover, I will emphasise that COBAS were organised as a structure of short-term representatives, who were elected by open assemblies of workers. Whilst COBAS organised highly successful strikes and rallies, they never had access to the actual negotiation process, which the government granted only to those unions that accepted substantial limitations on the right to strike. However, industrial action promoted by COBAS resulted in the highest pay increase for school workers in decades. More generally, COBAS demonstrated in practice that it was possible to reject the professionalisation of union representatives. Moreover, they broke the nearly absolute monopoly of the three Italian trade union confederations, namely CGIL, CISL and UIL, which were closely affiliated with the three major Italian political parties. Finally, they exposed the shift of focus of such union confederations, which were prioritising the defence of their own negotiating power as organisations over the defence of the rights of the workers they claimed to represent.

The name COBAS is the acronym of 'Comitati di Base della Scuola', meaning grass-roots, or rank-and-file school committees,² which between 1986 and 1987 spread to all Italian schools involving not only tenured teachers from pre-primary to high school, but also *precari*³ (precarious or non-tenured teachers) and school workers in general, from clerks to cleaners.⁴ While school committees were the product of the autonomous self-organising activity of school workers, they joined forces in a two-tier structure that consisted of city and national assemblies. City assemblies were open to all local school workers, who were also allowed to intervene and to vote for their representatives to the succeeding national assembly. On the one hand, as in this first stage of COBAS activities, no formal affiliation was required for workers to participate at any level, COBAS performed the role of a conveyor for the demands of school workers in general, rather than pursuing the realisation of a specific union's program. On the other hand, such openness greatly favoured the participation of workers regardless of these workers' affiliation with other unions.

In 1986, most unionised school workers belonged to one of the three school branches of the three trade union confederations, namely CGIL, CISL and UIL, which exerted a nearly complete monopoly on Italian union activities. Each confederation was linked to a major Italian political party. CGIL had traditionally performed the function of a 'conveyor belt'⁵ for the Communist Party and it had been the main actor in the often-harsh confrontations between workers and employers after the Second World War. CISL had been devised as a catholic-inspired counterbalance to communist and socialist unions, and it was the expression of the major government party, the Christian Democracy. UIL had strong links with the Socialist Party, and it had many fewer members than CGIL and CISL. However, the differences between the positions of the three confederations tended progressively to blur during the 1970s, when their leaderships promoted among the workers the so-called 'policy of sacrifice'. In particular, the sacrifices – that in a quite appropriate Christian penitential jargon the workers were required to accept – were justified by the specific conditions of the contemporary economic crisis. In other words, union leaders requested the workers to share the costs of the crisis as their necessary contribution to economic recovery. In 1978 this previously temporary request became a strategic plan⁶ as the leaderships of the confederations jointly adopted the general principle of compatibility between the demands of the workers and the supposed limitations set by the economy. In the meantime, the neoliberal creed was redefining economy merely in terms of objective mechanisms and budget criteria, and so, by endorsing compatibility, the confederations *de facto* favoured the spreading of the neoliberal view and the adoption of neoliberal policies.⁷ Moreover, as these policies included both the cutting of expenditures for social services and the privatisation of the public sector, as well as the liberalisation of the markets from the constraints set by government and labour unions, the acceptance of compatibility was to undermine the unions themselves.

While the positions of the union confederations were shifting towards the principle of compatibility, the Italian political movements of 1968 and 1977⁸ promoted radical workers' demands, so that the leaderships of the confederations often retreated towards a role of mediation between the workers and their counterparts. Such a mediation role, which entailed the paradoxical autonomy of union representatives from the will of the very workers they were representing, was more apparent in the contrasts between government employees and their government counterpart. In these cases, the leaderships of the confederations even joined the representatives of their respective political parties in attacking workers' specific protest activities, from strikes to rallies, in the name of the alleged public interest.⁹

In the 1980s, after the defeat of the movements of the previous two decades and the beginning of the neoliberal backlash, the separation between the workers and their union representatives began to be justified in technical rather than political terms. It was the expertise of unionists that granted them a position akin to that of professionals selling services to their clients. Nevertheless, whilst professionals face

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competition, union confederations operated in a condition of virtual monopoly, so that the workers were left no alternative but to endure both the dismantling of the system of social security and the erosion of their salaries in real terms.

In 1986, the inadequate level of pay was the immediate trigger for the protest in the education sector. Nevertheless, though COBAS gained momentum as a protest on wage conditions, they were not a *corporative*¹⁰ union that only defended the rights of a relatively privileged set of workers. On the contrary, as previously mentioned, COBAS stood for the rights of both tenured and non-tenured teachers, and also of all school workers, from administrative staff to cleaners. COBAS even discussed a proposal to demand the same treatment for all teachers regardless of their degrees,¹¹ which would have strengthened the unity of teachers and would have stressed the importance of the actual educational practice rather than its formal outcome – that is, educational qualifications. Moreover, COBAS defended public schooling in the name of the general right to education. In particular, they were concerned with the quality of public education and vehemently opposed the cut of expenditure in the schooling system. More generally, they questioned the supposed rational need to cut public expenditures. Furthermore, they set a participatory model for union activities that could be applied to any other work sector.

Many COBAS activists¹² shared the diffidence towards hierarchical structures, which characterised the 1968 movement and more decidedly the 1977 movement. These movements raised an awareness of the risks resulting from the mechanisms of political representation and from the division of labour and the consequential severance between experts and laypeople¹³. Hence, COBAS activists devised a union structure that promoted the coordination of the struggle of school workers without limiting the possibility for these workers to determine tasks and methods of their struggle.

As previously mentioned, the basic unit of COBAS was the school committee. In Italian government schools principals could be in charge of more than one school and so a COBAS committee might encompass one or more schools that were under the same management. School workers had the individual right to join union meetings during school time, but principals at first often argued that such meetings could only be called by officially recognised unions. In this case, as most unionised workers joined COBAS activities, they bypassed the resistance of their principals by calling meetings as representatives of their respective unions until the meeting right of workers as such was officially recognised. The argument about meeting rights is symptomatic of the role played by school principals, who generally did not join the protest. Moreover, it is an example of how the professionalisation of unions could turn the exercise of workers' rights into a specialised activity beyond the control of the workers themselves. In order to fill the gap that had opened between the workers and union professionals, COBAS representatives instead remained in office only until the subsequent workers' assembly. Moreover, COBAS requests did not include the deployment of workers as full-time union staff – a right granted to the other unions.

COBAS activities were based on the participation of the workers both in the protests and in the definition of aims and methods of the protests themselves. Such participation was granted through the mechanism of short-time representation, but it also relied on a network of other activities. This network included meetings of specific subsets of school workers, for example staff or primary teachers; conferences and workshops in which a collective reflection on the experience of the protest and its long-term perspectives was attempted; and open working groups that devised a proposal for a new agreement on working conditions with the Minister of Public Instruction. In particular, the activity of these working groups was an extraordinary example of the possibility for workers to elaborate collectively their requests instead of just endorsing ready-made proposals. As this *collective* elaboration was also a shared learning path, it was slow and difficult. Nevertheless, because it was a learning path, on the one hand it raised individual awareness of the participants, and on the other hand it could convey into the proposal the specific knowledge of the workers. More generally, whilst COBAS activities were meant to produce the short-term result of the improvement of school workers' conditions, they were also conceived of by many COBAS activists as a part of a long-term process of collective self-education, which was also a necessary aspect of political engagement. This political perspective was not necessarily shared by the participants in COBAS activities, but it did shape COBAS collective practice, whose openness and transparency soon gained the support of the majority of school workers.¹⁴

The COBAS phenomenon took both the Minister of Public Instruction and the centre-left government by surprise, as well as the union confederations. Moreover, COBAS not only challenged but also sidelined these confederations, whose actual representativeness nearly disappeared in a few months. COBAS committees and assemblies spread all over Italy, and the protest activities organised by COBAS were increasingly successful, peaking with strikes that involved the vast majority of the 900,000 Italian school teachers, and most non-teaching staff. Almost paradoxically, COBAS initiatives gained in a period of neoliberal backlash a mass support that the movements of the previous two decades were never able to take away from union confederations. Hence, the significance of the national school agreement to come went beyond the specific issue at stake. In particular, the success of COBAS activities demonstrated that workers could collectively define their rights and they could demand to exercise these rights. Moreover, it showed that in doing so, the workers were not bound to accept the assistance or the mediation of institutions acting supposedly on their behalf. Last but not least, it was an example of the possibility for workers to reject the principle of compatibility and, more in general, that one of profit. All these achievements were reached with the simple democratic tools of discussion, representation and strike. With the collaboration of union confederations, the attack on the very traditional democratic workers' tool of strike was to be the instrument of government response to COBAS.

In the 1970s the right to strike was under attack not only by employers and government, but also by union confederations.¹⁵ In 1980, these confederations jointly adopted a code for self-regulation of the right to strike. Union confederations justified such self-imposed limitations with the need to prevent the disruption of public services resulting from strikes. Three years later, these limitations were included in a law that set the framework for public servants' working conditions. In particular, the 1983 *Legge quadro sul pubblico impiego*,¹⁶ meaning framework law on public sector employment, requested unions to adopt codes for self-regulation of the right to strike as a necessary condition to be allowed to join negotiations with the government. Because COBAS defended the right to strike as a legitimate and democratic tool of the workers, they not only refused to accept any code for self-regulation of strike, but also questioned on legal and political grounds the legitimacy of the imposition of such limitations. As a consequence, COBAS were not allowed to negotiate the new agreement on working conditions with the Minister of Public Instruction. On the contrary, union confederations, together with a few small unions that also adopted codes for self-regulation of the right to strike, were admitted to the negotiation and they obtained from the government the highest pay rise in decades. Hence, the exclusion of COBAS from the actual negotiation did not undermine the participation of school workers in COBAS activities. Nevertheless, such exclusion denied the protest an immediate outcome, and it restated in legal terms the role of mediation of professionalised unions. However, even if the new agreement was the product of this mediation, it clearly met, at least in part, the workers' demands. Therefore, while the positive results of the national collective agreement were obtained through the mediation of the confederations and a few smaller corporative unions, they were actually the effect of school workers' protest activities.¹⁷ In other words, COBAS successfully gave voice to school workers' demands, which neither government nor union confederations could ignore.

COBAS initiatives did not stop after the 1987 agreement. After more than twenty years, COBAS are still active in Italian schools,¹⁸ and their model has been applied in other work sectors. Nowadays, COBAS of the education sector are part of a COBAS confederation that includes grassroots unions of factory and tertiary workers. Moreover, though neither COBAS nor the COBAS confederation could obtain again the same mass support of the first stage of COBAS activities, they are a reference point for many Italian workers. For example, in 2008 the COBAS confederation organised with two other alliances of grassroots unions (CUB and SdL) a national rally in Rome that was joined by 300,000 participants.¹⁹ Moreover, whilst a COBAS membership was introduced in the 1990s, the COBAS structure is still self-financed and COBAS activists are all volunteers. Hence, COBAS overall are still an example of workers' organization that is a viable alternative to hierarchical and professionalised unions and parties. More importantly, COBAS are evidence of the possibility to challenge the very

distinction between economic and political struggles, resulting from the distinction between the economic and the political sphere.

From their inception COBAS exposed the factitious severance between economy and politics, which justified the alleged need to make workers' demands compatible with supposedly autonomous economic mechanisms. These supposed structural limitations of the economic system have been often invoked by employers to justify their resistance to accept a fairer sharing of revenues with employees. Nevertheless, as early as the 1930s the success of Keynesian policies showed that the very economic mechanisms could be improved through political intervention. In other words, the investment of public resources in public works and social security could grant not only the improvement of workers' conditions, but also economic recovery. After the Second World War the policy of state intervention in the economy became commonplace in industrialised countries, and in Italy it was also used to expand and strengthen the clientelistic support to the Christian Democrat party and its allies. Later on, when in the late 1970s neoliberal policies of privatisation and cutting of public expenditure began to set the agenda for Italian governments too, the same centre-left coalition unashamedly presented these policies as a rational reduction of the waste of public resources. Moreover, union confederations and progressive parties also endorsed the restructuring of the public sector in the name of economic efficiency.²⁰

COBAS refused to accept budget criteria as objective limits for the workers' requests. COBAS activists were generally aware that their demand for investments in education wages and structures also had a political content and it had an immediate political impact. In particular, this demand challenged the principle of compatibility, which hid behind the supposedly objective economic rules the political choices of unions, parties and employers. COBAS bypassed the mediation of political and economic institutions and took full responsibility for the political and economic challenge. In other words, COBAS showed that the exercise of workers' rights should, and in fact could, include the possibility for the workers to define these very rights.

Thirty years of neoliberal hegemony have exposed the limits of traditional workers' organisations, which at best attempted to resist neoliberal attacks, but were not able to provide an alternative view to the neoliberal conceptual framework. In particular, because neoliberalism succeeded in restating the narrative of the market as an autonomous economic system, it also depoliticised its own policies, which it presented as mere expressions of rational economic choices. Hence, the workers' opposition to neoliberal policies could be denied the status of a genuine economic factor and it could be instead conveniently attributed to extra or non-economic motivations.²¹ On the contrary, the exposure of the political content of the neoliberal so-called description of the economy would assist workers in rejecting the pretended rationality of such a description. In this regard, the experience of COBAS shows that COBAS' recognition of the political content of their demands assisted them in exposing the political underpinnings of their counterpart and its union allies. Moreover,

in this process of exposure all participants in COBAS activities had the opportunity to realise that not only institutional actors, from union confederations to ministerial bureaucracy and government, but also laws, work rules and economic theories were anything but politically neutral. This process of collective learning and producing, together with COBAS participatory structure,²² is the major contribution of COBAS not only to labour history but also to unions to be.

¹ I wish to thank Mario Sanguinetti, Lucy Fiske, Andrew Gill, Cedric Beidatsch and two anonymous reviewers for their collaboration.

² Writing this short paper I faced the double difficulty of introducing an alien issue to an English-speaking public, and of dealing with outsider or subaltern history. I have chosen to deal with these difficulties by adopting a simplified narrative structure because I am convinced that, despite the pretensions of modern thought, storytelling is still the most concise and effective communication tool. Of course, in a historiographic context we need to validate the content of narrated stories, which should be documentable, that is connectible with other stories and interpretative texts. Nevertheless, this connectibility is not an objective and politically neutral characteristic. In particular, cultural hegemony consists in the presence of reciprocally confirming stories and interpretations produced by a composite network of media, institutions, official archives and academic sources, which at the same time denies or demonises counter-hegemonic or subaltern discourses. The Italian counterculture of the 1960s and the 1970s also challenged such monopoly by producing an impressive amount of texts, some of which are still preserved in the *centri di documentazione*, i.e. documentation centres (see, for example, <http://www.centrodopciptoia.it/>). In line with this tradition, COBAS activities too were promoted and recorded on highly volatile media such as leaflets, brochures, dazibao and posters, but also in a magazine (Cobas) and later a website (<http://www.cobas-scuola.it/>), which also stores electronic copies of the magazine and of COBAS documents since the late 1990s. However, in this paper I have chosen to summarise COBAS activities without quoting COBAS documents mainly because of space limits.

³ The *coordinamenti dei precari*, i.e. the co-ordinating structures of non-tenured teachers, predates COBAS committees, of which they could be regarded as forerunner.

⁴ See Piero Bernocchi, *Dal Sindacato ai Cobas: La Ribellione del Lavoro Dipendente e l'Autorganizzazione fra Pubblico e Privato*, Erre Emme, Roma, 1993.

⁵ The role of the union as a conveyor belt for the party was first defined at the Seventh International Congress of the Second International, which was held in Stuttgart on 18-24 August, 1907.

⁶ This plan is generally referred to as 'linea dell'EUR', i.e. EUR line, from the name of the Roman suburb where the 1978 union congress was held.

⁷ Neoliberalism is not, strictly speaking, an economic doctrine. It is an umbrella label for the ideological background of the economic policies first applied in 1973 in Chile right after the military coup. These policies include the cut of the expenditures for social services, the privatisation of the public sector, the liberalisation of trade policies and the deregulation of the market.

⁸ See Primo Moroni and Nanni Balestrini, *L'Orda d'Oro*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1997; see also Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, Pluto, London, 2002.

⁹ See *The Resurgence of Class Conflict in Western Europe Since 1968*, Colin Crouch and Alessandro Pizzorno (eds.), New York, Holmes & Meyer, 1978.

¹⁰ In local and national COBAS assemblies the proposal of the *ruolo unico docente*, meaning the same teaching role or employment level for all teachers from kindergarten to high school regardless of teachers' qualification, was debated.

¹¹ In this paper I make a distinction between COBAS activists and COBAS participants as a way to acknowledge the actual novelty of the COBAS model of leadership. COBAS activists devised a structure of short-term representation in order to discourage individual leadership, whilst acting as an organic vanguard within the COBAS movement. They facilitated the participation of school workers in COBAS activities, which thrived on the organic osmosis between activists and participants via a self-learning process of political alphabetisation. It could be argued that COBAS activists generally renewed the attempt of the 1977 movement to act as a collective intellectual, and thus to construct a democratic, flexible and powerful political alternative to the party form.

¹² On the counter-productivity of experts, see Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, London, Calder & Boyars, 1971 and Ivan Illich, *Disabling Professions*, London, Marion Boyars, 1977.

¹³ See Bernocchi, 1993.

¹⁴ See 'Regolamentazione del Diritto di Sciopero' in:
http://www.senzacensura.org/public/rivista/sc04_1421.htm

¹⁵ See 'Legge 29 marzo 1983, n. 93', art.11 in http://www.fps.cisl.it/leggi/lex83/193_83.htm

¹⁶ See Bernocchi, 1993.

¹⁷ See the COBAS website: <http://www.cobas-scuola.it>.

¹⁸ The rally took place on 17 October 2008.

¹⁹ See, for example, Alessandro Pizzorno, Emilio Reyneri, Marino Regini and Ida Regalia, *Lotte Operaie e Sindacato: Il Ciclo 1968-1972 in Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1978.

²⁰ See Adolfo Pepe, *Il Sindacato nell'Italia del '900*, Rubbettino Editore, Catanzaro, 1996.

²¹ See Ludwig von Mises, *The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality*, Van Nostrand, Princeton, 1956.

²² I would stress again that COBAS' participatory model relied both on an organisational structure that allowed participation at all levels and on a critical mass of activists who constantly facilitated participatory and self-learning processes.