

Employment Pacts in Italy in the 1990's

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1 Introduction

In this paper, I give an overview over the employment pacts in Italy in the 1990's. To understand the issues of the agreements, it is first necessary to characterize the Italian economy and to present the main players in the negotiations. The 1990's are characterized by major changes and even turmoils on the political stage. The negotiations are strongly influenced by these events and I therefore present them in the sequel.

The portray of the major agreements in 1992, 1993, 1996 and 1998 is at the heart of this report. Their content and reception by the parties involved and by the public are described in detail. Then, I present developments accompanying and following the agreements.

In the final chapter, the results of a recent study by the Italian National Statistical Office about the implementation of the agreements and their influence on the flexibility of the labor market are discussed.

2 The Italian Economy

Italy is one of the leading economies of the world. At the same time it shows one of the highest regional disparities worldwide. The centre-north is characterized by more flexible modes of production, high labor mobility and its unemployment rate has hardly changed in the 1990's. In 1998, it was still at the 6.9 per cent observed 10 years earlier. By contrast, the south is marked by insufficient wage differentiation, lack of infrastructure, low quality

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of public services and the presence of organized crime. Its unemployment rate has continuously increased to 22 percent in 1997.

The following table¹ shows some indicators of regional disparities in 1997:

Per capita income	56.4
Total labor costs per employee in industry	77.3
Gross wages per employee in industry	90.9
Output	32.3
Employment	39.1
Level of labor productivity in industry	80.6
Exports	10.4

In 1997, the centre-north accounted for 76 per cent of Italy's GDP. These regional disparities make support for the South one of the central issues in all negotiations about employment pacts.

A further characteristic of the Italian labor market is its high youth (15-24 years) unemployment rate of more than 30 per cent. Long-duration unemployment (12 months and over) as a percentage of total unemployment was 66 per cent in 1997 (survey based).

Italy has a very high percentage of small and medium sized firms which are considered the motor of the Italian economy.²

Until the early 1990's Italy's industrial relations were characterized by a very low degree of concertation. The employment pacts described below (in particular the 1993 agreement) lead to a complete restructuring of industrial relations.

3 The Social Parties

3.1 Trade Unions

In Italy, there exist three big parent unions:

a) The Cgil (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro), the General Confederation of Italian Labor, was founded in 1944 and has close ties with the Democratic Party of the Left (Democrazia di Sinistra). It was formerly dominated by the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano).

b) The Cisl (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori), the Italian Confederation of Labor Unions, was founded in 1950. It has links with the

¹Drawn from OECD Economic Surveys: Italy (1999), Table 34.

²In 1990, 51.1 percent of all workers in Italy were working in firms with less than 20 employees which is by far the highest percentage in all G7 countries (the UK follows with 33 percent).

Italian Popular Party (Partito Popolare Italiano), formerly with the catholic Christian Democrat Party (Democrazia Cristiana).

c) The Uil (Unione Italiana del Lavoro), the Italian Confederation of Labor, was founded in 1950. It is associated with the socialists.

In 1994, Cgil had 5.2 million members (2.7 million retired), Cisl 3.7 million (1.5 million retired), Uil 1.7 million (0.5 million retired). This compares to a workforce of around 22.5 million.

There is very few information on membership outside the three main trade union confederations in Italy. Several so-called "autonomous" unions and confederations exist, but little is known about their internal organization, functions, status and strength. Most of them operate in the public sector. Rarely, these organizations are involved in collective bargaining. "These organizations play an important role in Italian industrial relations insofar as they allow discontent union members to 'vote with their feet' in a collective way." (Visser, 1989)

Each of the Italian union confederations includes large numbers of retired workers and also unemployed workers, in particular those unemployed workers who had been holding regular jobs in the official economy. In the Italian layoff system (the so-called *Cassa Integrazione Guadagni*) the 'employment contract' with the former employer is retained, and so will probably his link with the union in case he was a member.

On 1 March 1991 Cgil, Cisl and Uil agreed on the so-called *rappresentanze sindacali unitarie*, the unified union representation which was supposed to make unions speak with one voice and giving them more bargaining power by joining their forces.

3.2 Confindustria

On the employers' side, the main actor is the employers' association Confindustria which was founded in 1910 and re-established in 1944. As members, it currently has 107 territorial associations and 109 branch associations, totalling 107.000 firms with 4.1 million employees.

The CONFAPI (Confederazione Italiana della Piccola e Media Industria), which was founded in 1947, represents small and medium-sized private enterprises. It has more than 65.000 associated enterprises employing about a million of workers.

4 Political and institutional background in the 1990's

The negotiations of 1992 and 1993 have to be seen in light of the overthrow of the political class caused by the investigations into political corruption in early 1992. The Operation *Mani Pulite* (Clean Hands) revealed a complex web of corruption linking political parties, local authorities and business. It became clear that most political parties had long been involved in an institutionalized system of bribes which had "milked" state companies for political purposes and extracted huge sums from businessmen in return for public-sector contracts. When parliament was dissolved in January 1994, over one-third of its members were under investigation. These events are also commonly associated with the end of the *First Republic*.

From April 1992 to March 1994 the political parties left the task of reform to governments mainly made up of *tecnici* (non-party academics, managers or senior civil servants). They managed to carry through major reforms, including the toughest budget since the second world war and the abolition of the old inflationary system of wage indexation, the *scala mobile* (which was introduced in 1946). The government led by Giuliano Amato also laid the foundations for the sweeping program of privatisation now in progress.

Following the reform of the electoral system in the 1993 referendum, a right-wing coalition led by the media magnate Silvio Berlusconi formed the government after the May 1994 elections. After only 7 months in office, the coalition broke up and another technical government, led by Lamberto Dini was formed. The general elections in April 1996 led to the victory of Romano Prodi's centre-left Ulivo ("Olive tree") coalition. Since it failed to obtain an absolute majority, it had to rely on the external support of the far-left PRC ("refounded communist party"). This led to continued instability, notably on the occasion of the dispute over the reform of the pension and social welfare systems proposed in the 1998 budget. Mr. Prodi offered his resignation but a government collapse could be prevented. In exchange for a softening of the pension reform and a commitment to the introduction of a 35-hour working week by 2001, the PRC promised support for at least another year. However, after the agreement on Italy's EMU participation in May 1998, the PRC began to call for a radical shift in economic policy, with the aim of tackling unemployment by the creation of public-sector jobs. Since the government insisted that its policy focus on incentives for the creation of private-sector jobs, it failed to obtain the necessary support for the 1999 budget. After very long consultations, Massimo d'Alema, the leader of the DS (Democrats of the Left, the former Socialist Party) managed to form a

new government which is still in office today.

5 Major agreements in the 1990's

The 10 years following the first Italian experience of social concertation (*concertazione sociale*) (the agreements of 23 January 1983 and 14 February 1984) were marked by a large number of partial agreements that were characterized by their weak stability and effectiveness, due to both the fragility of the trade union environment and the weakness of the governments and, finally, due to the temporary nature of the measures agreed upon. Still, the central aim of these agreements was the reduction of the sliding wage scale (*scala mobile*) and of the cost of labor.

5.1 The 1992 agreement

The agreement of 31 July 1992 was the first step towards the major agreement of 23 July 1993. For the first time, it brought forward the idea of going over to a system of wage determination without automatic wage adjustments. It proposed national contracts with 3-year duration having as their basis the projected inflation rates for the following three years. At the end of each year of this three-year period, wages should be readjusted if the difference between projected and actual inflation rates is too high. However, this first step towards the abandoning of the *scala mobile* was not yet stated clearly enough and gave way to contesting. The restructuring of the bargaining system (both in the private and in the public sector) had been postponed to a second period of negotiations the start of which was considered insecure and controversial.

The most controversial practical result was the agreement to increase earnings by 20.000 Lira per month in exchange for the "temporary" suspension of the *scala mobile* for two years and for renouncing to any firm level agreements in the same period. While the Cisl celebrated the agreement to be the only way to save the social state and as first step towards the reshaping of industrial relations, in particular including true union *participation*, the other unions and left-wing newspapers saw it as an agreement forced upon them by the economic and political circumstances. The Amato government had threatened to resign and even left-wing newspapers commented that this was not a purely theatrical gesture but a real threat stressing how much the economic and financial future lies in the hands of the workers and of the unions. (L'Unità, 2 August 1992)

The long-lasting renegotiations about the cost of labor and the reform

of collective bargaining between government and social parties started in autumn 1992 and continued endlessly. They even seemed to dry out while there were two government changes in between. The whole process has to be seen against the background of the biggest political and institutional crisis after the second world war (described above) which was supposed to lead to the "Second Republic". The endless negotiations therefore were also due to the extreme instability of Italian politics during that period and in particular caused by the weakness of the third actor in the negotiations, the government.

5.2 The 1993 agreement

The final agreement of 1993 was reached after three-party negotiations (intese triangolari), bilateral agreements between trade unions and employers' associations and bilateral arrangements between trade unions and the government, some of which were followed by laws, thus constituting a whole mosaic of accords. It was signed by the government and 22 employer and employee organizations, with the exception of agricultural organizations. After 3 July 1993 the 3 major unions Cgil-Csil-Uil had for the first time consulted all their members for their support. 37.3% of the 3.650.000 members participated in the vote, out of which 67.05 % voted in favor.³ Union leaders regarded this vote as a "real democratic success for the union movement" and "as a reference method also for the future" (L'Unità, 24 July 1993).

The "Protocollo sulla politica dei redditi e dell'occupazione, sugli assetti contrattuali, sulle politiche del lavoro e sul sostegno al sistema produttivo" (Incomes Policy Agreement), agreed upon on 3 July 1993 and definitely signed by the social parties on 23 July 1993, was received as a historical agreement with "constitutional character" (Giugni, 1993a) because it reshaped the industrial relations in Italy. Indeed, the principal content of this agreement consists in new bargaining rules at all levels, in particular trade union *participation* at all levels. Participation was implemented as a prerequisite for economic performance of the firms and of the economy as a whole, thereby serving the interests of the workers and creating more stable relationships.

The agreement is characterized by a new attitude of both sides of industry (parti sociali): former agreements always consisted of advantages and sacrifices by all social partners while the 1993 agreement very often speaks of "common objectives".

The major issues of the agreement are

³The seemingly low turnout of 37.3% has to do with the time pressure in organizing the vote.

- a) the definite abandoning of the system of automatic adjustment of remunerations (*scala mobile*);
- b) a reform of the collective bargaining system with a new bargaining discipline, of the time and the procedures of contract renewals;
- c) diverse criteria, on the basis of union agreements, to cope with excessive wage demands, in the presence of firm restructuring which involve irreversible crises;
- d) flexible choices, agreed upon between the collective actors, in favor of the dependent work, which take into account the economic situation and allow to manage the labor market by mutual consent using new means.

The reform of the collective bargaining system is considered the most important piece of the agreement. The agreement provides for a two-tier bargaining system with specific indications for the relationship and functioning between them: a national collective labor contract (*contratto collettivo nazionale di lavoro*) and a second bargaining level (*secondo livello di contrattazione*), on a firm basis or on a regional basis. The national sectoral contracts provide for normative standards and minimum wages while the second bargaining level can agree on further wage increases and provide for more specific contract conditions. Put differently, the national contracts are aimed at keeping up purchasing power while the second level can distribute gains reached by higher productivity.

The national bargaining level is supposed to overcome the old automatic wage adjustments (*scala mobile*) and introduce bargaining as a means of interacting, not as a must but as a normality in industrial relations. While in the 1992 agreement some unions (with the positive exception of the Cisl) still considered their role to be passive and wage adjustments to be a fair *reaction* to past price increases, they now acknowledge that wage increases are also a *cause* of price increases and that therefore their role is a more active one which has to take into account the whole economic framework. The text says that in the national contracts "the dynamics of the economic effects of the contract should be coherent with the projected rate of inflation" taking into account a wide spectrum of elements including the objective of "safeguarding the purchasing power of incomes" and "the general tendency of the economy and the labor market, the international competitiveness and the specific situation of the sector." It is this wide range of factors which at first sight makes it difficult for national contracts to be far away from a pure inflation adjustment and thus from the old *scala mobile* system. However, the passage referring to "the specific situation of the sector" and the following one about "productivity increases used to recompense workers" paves the way to a more decentralized bargaining model, taking account of the *ability*

to pay of the single firm.

Firm-specific wage increases are made possible within the framework of the second bargaining level. Decentralized bargaining (secondo livello contrattuale) only takes place if agreed upon in the national contracts. Thus, the second bargaining level is no must and also no "right" in itself. It should be mentioned that the Confindustria wanted to restrict collective bargaining to one single national level. The second bargaining level, however, should not flout the national agreements and produce "inflationary pressure which would contradict the new conditions of the system". In contrast, the second level agreements should be "correlated" with the results reached in the national contracts.

To ensure discipline in negotiations, the 1993 agreement provides for two important measures:

- a) a "cease fire" in the four months preceding the contract expiration⁴
- b) compensation payments in case a contract renewal is not reached within three months after the expiration of the old contract. If employers' associations fail to make an offer, wages are automatically adjusted by 30% of the projected inflation rate and by 50% after six months from the expiration date. In case the protraction is caused by the unions, no wage adjustments are made until a new contract is signed which saves employers to pay wage increases.

The 1993 agreement also institutionalizes the *rappresentanze sindacali unitarie*. In all firms with more than 15 employees a single body representing employees is elected from a list of candidates presented by the trade union associations. The unique union representatives are legitimated to negotiate, at the firm level - together with the regional union organizations - all issues referred from the national contracts.

To sustain this political change, the social actors have planned a whole bunch of initiatives devoted at the promotion of research and innovation, of human capital formation and for the creation of business and employment, supported by large private and public investment programs. All parties agreed that with public finances being in better shape all these tasks could be accomplished more easily.

5.3 The Employment Pact (1996)

On 24 September 1996, the "Accordo interconfederale" was agreed upon by the government and the social partners. It is better known as the "Patto

⁴As for contract duration, the normative part of the contract is to be renewed every four years while wage adjustments are to be reconsidered every two years.

per il lavoro”, the Employment Pact, and was approved in parliament on 24 June 1997. It added the missing piece to the 1993 agreement by providing measures of implementation for labor market policy, in particular for fighting unemployment of the youth, women, in the South and long-term unemployment. The text of the agreement comprised 75 pages and mobilized ”fresh” resources for the years 97-99 equal to 15.000 billion Lira to be financed by fighting tax evasion and privatizing state-owned firms.

The ambitious aim was to halve the unemployment rate by the end of the century. In particular, 1.7 million persons between the age of 15 and 29 were unemployed at that time and half of them were unemployed for more than 2 years, desperately searching for work.

The agreement consists of several parts. In the area of professional formation, the following measures are to be implemented:

1. lifting compulsory schooling from 8 to 10 years of schooling
2. the right to training (off or on-the-job) between the age of 16 and 18
3. incentives for firms to offer training and internships
4. institution of a national fund for students
5. institution of a body for the coordination of education politics composed of the ministers for education, research, labor, industry, and the regional prime ministers.

In the field of research and innovation the implementation of a task force for allocating resources for scientific research was planned.

In order to promote employment, the parties agreed about

1. raising the maximum qualifying age for apprenticeships from 20 to 24 years, with a preferential clause for the south (26 years)
2. the gradual introduction of a dual system of apprenticeship, redefined as a relationship combining vocational training and working (following the German model); the apprenticeship contracts are subject to low entry wages and low social security contributions
3. investing 0.3 % of the total labor income in continuous formation
4. partial tax deductibility of training costs incurred by the worker
5. introduction of manpower/part-time work agencies (by authorization of the labor ministry) which employ (formerly unemployed) workers and rent them to other firms
6. giving incentives for part-time work (up to 24 hours of work per week) by adjusting social contributions for new entrants and re-entrants into the labor force
7. favoring business start-ups by providing easier credit access

As for working hours, the government ”expresses its ’orientation’ towards a legal maximum of 40 hours per week” instead of 48 hours.

So-called "area contracts" (contratti d'area) are targeted at economically depressed regions which are identified by a government agency from time to time. Under these agreements, local authorities and social partners collaborate to co-ordinate job-creating efforts in specific sectors, supported by simplified administrative procedures. The intention of these agreements is also to allow for more wage differentiation across geographical areas.

All these measures are to be accompanied by reviving public investment projects which were frozen in the wake of the corruption scandal. These projects will focus on transportation and the energy sector.

While all union leaders praised the employment pact to be "great", "very important", "innovative", the leader of Confindustria, Giorgio Fossa, added some scepticism: "It is an important step forward, but is certainly not yet the solution to all problems" He underlined the necessity to reduce the cost of labor by 1.2 percent by taking away (transferring it to the 1997 budget) from employers the duty of paying workers' health coverage. (La Repubblica, 25 September 1996)

5.4 The Social Pact for Development and Employment (1998)

On 22 December 1998, the Social Pact for Development and Employment (Patto sociale per lo sviluppo e l'occupazione) was agreed upon by 33 parties including the government, Confindustria and the three major parent unions Cgil, Cisl and Uil. It was signed in January after consultations in parliament which were scheduled in order to provide the agreement with a broader support.

At the beginning of the negotiations the bargaining system was a central point. While Confindustria expressed its dissatisfaction with the *doppio livello contrattuale*, the system of bargaining at both national and firm level, unions were even pushing for an extension of firm level negotiations to firms with less than 15 employees. During the negotiations the whole equilibrium between concertation on the one hand and bargaining on the other was at risk. The central figure in these difficult negotiations was Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, the minister of finance in 1998 who was prime minister during the 1993 negotiations. He was seen as the promoter of the system of industrial relations and it is to a great extent his personal success that in the end, the overall rules of the 1993 agreement were confirmed. The only change in the two level bargaining system was that the quota of the production premium on which the firms do not have to pay contributions was increased from 2 to 3 percent.

The major issues of the agreement were thus different ones:

a) labor costs will go down by 1.2 percent before the year 2003 by transferring employers' contributions for maternity leave and family allowances to the general budget; on top, employers' contributions for safe working are reduced and the state financing program for social security contributions in the South will be prolonged.

b) the income tax is reduced by 1 percentage point in the second tax interval (from 27 to 26 percent); this step is to be financed by fighting tax evasion.

c) the dual income tax (Dit) hitherto consisted in two different tax rates for firms: a lower one for those gains that were reinvested and a higher one for the gains used for dividends; the lower tax rate shall be extended to all capital accounts; this step leads to a tax relief of 6.000 billion Lira in the two years following investments.

d) concertation is now extended also to local authorities whose representatives have signed the agreement

e) to fight illegal work, adjustment contracts (*contratti di realleamenti*) should be more widely used; these contracts regularize black-market activities by treating underground employment as new visible employment which gives rise to preferential tax treatment

f) professional training is supported by 1.600 billion Lira in three years and allocation of resources is handed over to the regions

g) streamlining the administrative procedures for public investment projects

5.5 Further Developments

In March 1997, the *Bassanini* reform of public administration set the framework for extending the private sector agreements to the public sector. In addition, it adopted a couple of measures improving the quality of both regulations and administrative decision making. It promoted delegislation, simplification and codification, the latter aimed at conceiving a unified, consistent set of regulations. It combined the decentralization of state powers with the downsizing of the public sector as a whole.

In March 1998, the government presented draft legislation reducing by 2001 the standard working week to 35 hours for firms with more than 15 employees and placing sanctions on the use of overtime. This law, however, has not yet been approved.

In early October 1999 (La Repubblica, 5 and 8 October 1999), Giorgio Fossa, the leader of Confindustria, questioned the *doppio livello contrattuale*, the system of bargaining at both national and firm level. He was criticizing the draft of a law intended to have union delegates (*rappresentanze sindacali unitarie*) also in firms with less than 15 employees and to attribute value *erga*

omnes (i.e. make them apply not only to union members) to the agreements reached. At the same time, Confindustria was preparing a referendum in favor of more liberal firing rules.

6 Results of a study on the flexibility of the labor market

In 1997 the Istat, the National Statistical Office, commissioned a study on the flexibility of the labor market following the agreement of 1993.⁵ It interviewed 8.000 firms, a sample representing all firms in the production and service sector with more than 10 employees. In particular, all firms with more than 500 employees were interviewed. Firms were asked to give information on the main forms of contractual flexibility at the firm level. This study is an important confirmation of the "winds of change" towards more flexibility. The number of atypical contracts has increased a lot and the system of incentives (output premia) has undergone huge changes.

6.1 Firm-level negotiations

In the year 1995-96, 9.9 percent of firms with more than 10 employees, equivalent to 38.8 percent of the all workers, were involved in firm-level negotiations. There is a strong relationship between firm size and propensity to negotiate at the firm-level: the percentage of firms involved in firm-level negotiations goes from 3.3 percent of the firms with 10-19 employees, 15.7 percent of those with 20-49 employees, up to 61.1 percent in the class of firms with more than 500 employees. This pattern applies to both industrial and service sector and holds across all geographical areas. However, firm-level negotiations are more common in the industry than in the service sector. Also, they are more common in the north than in the south: while 44.4 percent of all workers in the north-west are involved in firm-level negotiations, it is only 34% in the centre and in the south.

6.2 Working time flexibility

As for working time flexibility, the following results have emerged:

- 47.8 percent of the workers are regularly working in shifts, 5.3 percent from time to time and 46.9 percent never

⁵"I principali risultati della rivelazione sulla flessibilità nel mercato del lavoro."

- 34.4 percent works on Saturdays
- 32.5 percent works during the night
- 22.8 percent work overtime
- 21.9 percent works on holidays
- only 0.4 percent are involved in telework
- the bigger the firm, the more likely it organizes work in shifts and the less likely it asks workers do work overtime or work on holidays

In the interviews firms claim using working time flexibility mostly for reorganization in the medium and long run and not to adjust to business cycle fluctuations.

6.3 Flexible compensation schemes

The 1993 agreement also suggested new schemes of remuneration, in particular different sorts of performance-related pay. In the sequel piece-rate pay, *una tantum* pay (i.e. bonuses from time to time), bonuses for team performance, so-called flexibility bonuses, bonuses for regular presence and premiums based on the economic performance of the whole firm were introduced in a large number of firms. In particular, premiums based on economic performance was introduced in 58.6 percent of the firms with new firm-level contracts, followed by bonuses for team performance which are applied in 32.2 percent of the firms.

6.4 Contract lengths

To evaluate the degree of flexibility in the labor market, it is important to have information on the distribution of different types of contracts. At the beginning of 1996, 92 percent of all those employed had an unlimited contract. This reveals a high degree of rigidity in the stock of workers in 1996. However, among those that started working on a new contract during the year 1996, only 45.3 percent were offered a contract of undetermined length. Thus, a remarkable 54.7 percent were offered contracts with limited length.

6.5 Corroborating evidence

The picture given above concerning the introduction of more flexibility in labor relations shows that the new system of industrial relations brought about by the 1993 agreement seems to work in the right direction. However, there are also some examples going in the opposite direction: to mention the most prominent case, at the end of 1996, Zanussi announced that it would withdraw from all contracts signed in the period of concertation after 1993. In the same period, the president of Confindustria called for a suspension of some months of the 1993 agreement. But despite these requests, the agreement is still effective and was confirmed by the 1998 Social Pact.

Corroborating evidence to the Istat study comes from a study by Fabiani and Pellegrini (1997): the pace of gross and net firm creation in the south increased during 1997, rising above the national average. Also, investment in the south has accelerated and southern exports have shown greater dynamism. At the same time youth unemployment has begun to decline and industrial employment began to rise. Wage differentiation increased, partly induced by the contracts between local authorities and social partners (*patti territoriali* and *contratti d'area*).

However, these signs of economic revival in the South may be also the consequence of spillover effects from the north (Pozzolo, 1998).

To conclude, there is no large-scale revival of the Italian labor market yet but the evidence presented in this chapter gives hope for the future.

7 Summary

In this paper, I gave an outline of the employment pacts that were reached in the 1990's and that reshaped the system of industrial relations in Italy. A short overview of the parties involved and about the political background in these years was given. Then, some evidence about the success of the implementation of the agreements was presented.

The agreements reached were a necessary and overdue step to pave the way for Italy's economy in the next century. Whether they will be sufficient remains to be seen.

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