

**Black struggles, white claims: on the controversies of Italian labour unions regarding migrant agricultural workers in *Capitanata*.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the roles, disputes and strategies of four Italian trade unions in *Capitanata* (Apulia region) regarding the struggles to improve conditions for migrant farmworkers in the area. Detaching from previous academic trends, this dissertation focuses on local actors' actions, identifying the major differences when it comes to labour rights, living conditions and legal status of migrant farmworkers. Building upon some contributions regarding race and working class, the paper engages in a dialectic between black struggles and white claims, investigating if and how labour unions reproduce the hierarchical power structure inherent in the concept of whiteness. In the analysis, the fragmentation of unions' actions is displayed, and it is argued that the embeddedness of unions in broader structures of power stimulates the reproduction of extractive dynamics that might depower the strength of their efforts.

**Keywords:** *farmworkers, ghettos, labour unions, migrants, race*

## Introduction

In Italian, the word *braccianti* is used to describe workers engaged in tasks for which the strength of their arms is sufficient; in fact, *braccianti* derives from *braccia*, literally arms. The word *braccianti* is mainly used in agriculture - *braccianti agricoli* (farmworkers) - to portray those labourers who do not need any technical skills to perform their duties.

Over the last years, farmworkers of Sub-Saharan origin employed in tomato harvesting in Southern Italy have become a symbol of oppression and exploitation of migrants in the Italian agricultural sector. Their stories are frequently featured in national and international newspapers, emphasising how the Italian red gold is often soiled with black blood (Auvillain & Liberti, 2014). However, it is essential to consider that these exploitative phenomena afflict migrants of all origins - Eastern-European and South-Asian, among others - and are endemic to all types of cultivation (Macciani, 2019).

When speaking of exploitative phenomena in agriculture, reference is almost always made to *caporalato*, the traditional Italian gangmaster system. *Caporalato* is socially and historically rooted in the southern countryside as a “form of irregular and anomalous organisation of the agricultural labour market, in which some social brokers (*caporali*) –not necessarily linked to organised crime– act as a link between agricultural entrepreneurs and labourers” (Corrado, 2018, p.13). However, the term *caporalato* is often used to describe a plurality of mechanisms, from a simple selection of workers by team leaders, organisation of shifts, transportation, housing, meals etc. Indeed, often *caporali* strictly control workers’ lives, keeping a share of their wages as a payment for their services (Corrado, 2018).

The Italian Law<sup>1</sup> contrasts *caporalato* through the application of multiple provisions, such as criminal and property sanctions against those who employ gangmasters and hire workers in exploitative conditions; arrest for the crime of illegal brokering and labour exploitation committed with violence and threats; use of confiscated resources to compensate the victims. Notwithstanding, due to the inefficiency of the official employment

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<sup>1</sup> Law 199/2016.

services, caporalato has become the sole intermediation and recruiting apparatus able to secure the availability of non-qualified manual workers necessary to support the Italian agriculture system (Corrado, 2018).

For this thesis, the focus is on the area of Capitanata (Province of Foggia), in the Apulia region, known for a relevant share of migrant workers employed in the agricultural sector. This concentration has provoked, since the 1990s, the demand to create sites where migrant workers can live, which are close to the farms. This process has led to the emergence of multiple settlements, scattered throughout the different provinces, housing thousands of migrants, with high peaks during the harvesting season (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 2020). These settlements survive in precarious conditions, often lacking essential services such as electricity, water and toilets. Social and trade unions' struggles for the improvement of these labour and housing issues have been going on for decades. Some results have been obtained (e.g. increases in wages, sanitation of some settlement areas, construction of some brick houses) but, in general, the working and living conditions of migrant agricultural labourers in Apulia are still highly problematic.

Due to their complex nature, these dynamics have been of great academic interest, with a production that pivots especially around two larger subjects. On one side, the focus is on migrants, with flourishing literature regarding their living and working conditions and their political and social representation. For example, migrants are described as new slaves (Cristaldi, 2015; Meret & Aguiari, 2020; Scaturro, 2021), as resilient and active actors of change (Palmeri, 2016), as political subjects involved in political actions (Scotto, 2015) and their flexible practices of resistance have been analysed by multiple authors (Caruso, 2015; Scotto, 2016; Di Giusto, 2019; Perrotta, 2019).

Many other scholars have then analysed the macro-structures and processes that play a role in establishing and maintaining particular dynamics of exploitation. For example, Melossi (2021) applied the concepts of criminalisation, racialisation and deportability to the case study of some taxi drivers in the ghettos of the Capitanata; several authors have analysed the role of globalisation, mechanisation and the global value chain on the

production processes involving migrant workers (Perrotta, 2017; D'Onofrio, 2020; D'Onofrio & Heras, 2021); Dines & Rigo (2015) have coined the term *refugeeisation* to describe how the labour market gap in the agriculture sector has been covered by exploitable East Europeans and Sub-Saharan migrants, holding a refugee status or an international protection.

This second strand of research shifts the focus away from migrants and concentrates on the dynamics and responsibilities of *white systems*, understood as systems of power and control that act hierarchically over subaltern subjects (Ignatiev, 2003). The need for this shift was raised during one of the interviews for this thesis, when a trade unionist told me, “There is a lot of sociological research on the condition of labourers; this is important but not enough, we should look at the responsibilities of whites and not at the plights of blacks” (USB-01). This approach does not aim to devalue the suffering and the agency of migrants; instead, it attempts to give insight into systemic dynamics that are highly accountable for the conditions of local communities and that are nevertheless difficult to unhinge solely through the collective action of these communities.

Interested in this perspective and inspired by a recent International Political Economy of Labour (IPEL) analysis on the role of trade unions in Capitanata (D'Onofrio & Heras, 2021), this work intends to give a critical reading of the ideologies and approaches of the major labour unions in the area. In fact, although the literature is rich regarding the responsibilities of various macro systems (e.g. capitalism, global value chain), the role of local actors in Foggia has not yet been comprehensively examined. Furthermore, the choice to analyse these social structures comes from their privileged position of proximity to migrant workers and the enormous potential these institutions could have in radical change processes.

To this end, the research questions of this thesis are formulated as follows: what are the disputes of Foggia trade unions around the 'correct' strategies to expose and address the pressing matters regarding migrant agricultural labourers? Which roles do they play?

Moreover, in the final part of the analysis, this thesis sketches a first reflection on the responsibility of trade unions as 'white institutions'. Building on the theorisation of Ignatiev

and colleagues about whiteness as a social position of privilege (Ignatiev, 1997), it opens up for further inquiries regarding the effects that this positionality may have (and have had) on the outcomes of trade unions' actions.

After this introduction, a theoretical background is laid, concerning the relationship between labour unions and migrants, with a specific focus on the Italia context. A successive paragraph is dedicated to the role of race as a social structure of power, and its exerted influence over labour unions' actions. After some methodological notes, the dissertation continues with an overview of the active labour unions in Capitanata and a historical and geographical rundown of the existing informal settlements. The thesis then moves into an analysis of the collected materials. This part is divided into three chapters, covering three big topics faced by labour unions: legal status, labour and housing. In a final section, this thesis engages with a critical reading of the role of trade unions in Capitanata, challenging the social and racial positions they hold in the struggle for the rights of migrant labourers.

### **Labour unions, migrants and the Italian context**

The involvement of migrant workers has always been problematic for trade union organisations. The capitalist system has been strategically organised through a division of workers into “insiders” (native workers) and “outsiders” (migrant workers), creating the conditions for a reproduction of this racialised structure, especially by native workers, who often derive short-term profits from this differentiation (D’Onofrio & Las Heras, 2021). This dynamic hinders solidarity between equally oppressed but racially differentiated communities, separating the working class and reinforcing the identity of ingroups against outgroups (Oliveri, 2017).

In Italy, the relationship between trade unions and migrant workers is an exception compared to other European countries (Rinaldini & Marino, 2015). In fact, between the 1980s and the 1990s, the leading Italian trade unions (CGIL, CISL, UIL) approached the issue of migrant labour according to a logic of inclusion and cooperation. Although the initial

premise was the provision of support and resolution of labour issues, the unions actively sought to stimulate the membership of migrant workers, empowering their participation within the organisations themselves (Rinaldini & Marino, 2015). However, this situation has changed drastically since the 2000s. Efforts to involve migrants have been undermined by economic crises (Pradella & Cillo, 2015) and by the diminished power that Italian trade unions have over socio-economic decision-making processes at a national level (Marino, 2012). In fact, according to some authors (Simms et al., 2012), unions' recruitment drive toward migrants is often a top-down initiative striving to intensify unions' bargaining and representative functions rather than an attempt to organisational changes towards a more participatory model.

The positions of Italian unions concerning the national politics of migration have been analysed by Della Puppa (2018): some unions have taken a critical standpoint on governmental decisions; others either did not comment or even defended the most restrictive policies, such as CISL and UIL, with respect to the first so-called “Security package”<sup>2</sup>, which worsened migration policies (Ferrero, 2010 as cited in Della Puppa, 2018) and further accentuated the contrasts among trade unions (Della Puppa, 2018). From their positions, CGIL and independent unions presented critical stances against those provisions but never achieved a translation from public debate to real actions, remaining stagnated on merely symbolic efforts (Della Puppa, 2018). In fact, traditional left-wing actors, among which some trade unions, have been charged by some authors with failing to deliver feasible responses to the demands of vulnerable migrant workers (Mottura et al., 2010). Some grassroots trade unions have mobilized on issues of material justice, such as housing rights, refugees' rights, and the working rights of undocumented people (Cappiali, 2015 as cited in Cappiali, 2017). Nevertheless, most unions have been criticised by migrant activists for using a paternalistic attitude, with a tendency to speak on behalf of migrants rather than supporting the self-organisation of those communities (Cappiali, 2017). An additional issue

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<sup>2</sup> Law 94/09.

regards the recent intensification of institutional racism (Basso, 2010, as cited in Della Puppa, 2018) that has contaminated and penetrated trade unions, resulting in discriminatory phenomena (Della Puppa, 2018).

Considering all those critical elements, an academically interesting focus emerges regarding the hierarchical positionalities of labour unions and migrant workers, specifically about the distance between black migrant workers issues and white labour representatives stances.

### **Race: power and hierarchy**

In an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the abovementioned relationship, this paper considers the notion of race, deliberately using the juxtaposition of whiteness and blackness as a critical point. Careful of not naturalising and treating those concepts as unproblematic, the theorisations of Ignatiev (1969, 1995, 1997) and Ignatin<sup>3</sup> & Allen (1976) help explain their hierarchical and extractive relation. In Ignatiev's abolitionist speech at the University of California (1997), he describes how whiteness is not related to skin colour but refers to a system of values and privileges: "Without the privileges attached to it, the white race would not exist, and the white skin would have no more social significance than big feet". Reflecting on the works of Saxton, Roediger and Allen, and through his active membership in the working class, Ignatiev builds his theorisation on concepts of class struggle and around the question of why some fellows of the working class act in a group's interests rather than a class's interests, that is, as whites instead of as proletarians (Ignatiev, 2003). Trade unions are also part of his theorisation: for example, in introducing the concept of parallel struggle fallacy (Ignatin & Allen, 1976), he points out how unions (and political parties) tend to keep the struggles of black workers separated from the ones of white workers:

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<sup>3</sup> The names Ignatiev and Ignatin denote the same author that changed his last name around 1980.



It cannot be left to the Negro people to fight it alone [...], while the white workers "sympathise with their fight," "support it," "reject racist slanders" etc. but actually fight for their "own" demands. (p. 27)

For Ignatiev (1969), white supremacy is the hidden cause behind the failure of the labour movement in the US. He postulates that unions are, at best, just defensive organisations, while something different is needed to free the working class from its subordination to capital (Ignatiev, 2021).

Only a few authors have focused explicitly on the relationship between Italian trade unions and race/racism. In some of the most relevant pieces of research (Basso, 2007a, 2007b; Ferrero & Perocco, 2011), the authors focus on trade unions' responses in the fight against racist discrimination in the workplace. Della Puppa (2018), identifies differences between the various organisations in terms of 'hostile attitude' towards the discrimination of migrant workers, ranking CGIL as the most active, together with independent unions (like USB). Furthermore, the author highlights the tendency of unions to relegate migrant unionists to the role of interlocutors for their fellow nationals and not for the interests of workers in general, in what the author calls an "instrumental multicultural" stance. In his view, migrant unionists are considered more "symbolic" than substantial and are given the role of attracting other migrants and acting as community leaders.

Besides those contributions, there is scarce academic analysis encompassing the role of whiteness/blackness relational hierarchy in Italian trade unions' strategies towards migrants. For this reason, the theorisation of Ignatiev and colleagues is used here as a framework. Indeed, those authors refer to the US context, therefore, the applicability to the Italian situation is limited. Nevertheless, it is interesting to employ their positions to analyse if and how this power dynamic is reproduced in the relationship between trade unions and agricultural farmworkers in Foggia.

## **Methodology**

This dissertation was developed following a four-month research journey which included interviews and fieldwork, conducted between February and May 2022. In February, I began to approach the topic, reading as much as possible on the subject of migrant farm labourers in the Capitanata region of Puglia. Afterwards, I reached out to all the active trade unions in the area, along with other actors I had seen mentioned several times in my preliminary research. I put forward a request to conduct online interviews. At this stage, I was already oriented towards a period of fieldwork, however, I preferred to get to know my interlocutors beforehand to establish a connection before heading to Foggia. After the first interview, a snowball effect developed as each interviewee provided me with the contact details of other relevant participants. Online, I interviewed three trade union representatives (CGIL-FLAI, FAI-CISL, USB), a former worker of a humanitarian project (Intersos) and the provincial president of a large national association (ARCI). I used a semi-structured type of interview, including some questions linked to my focus. However, most of the time, I embraced an unstructured approach, letting people free to convey the issues they considered relevant and asking questions related to those contents. Consequently, some interviews resulted in a ‘stream of consciousness’, where interviewees shared details about their daily practices and concerns in a completely unrestricted, creative (and often highly passionate) manner. This interview style allowed me to acquire rich and in-depth narratives, carrying the disadvantage of fragmentation in the collected material, as each interviewee took different paths.

In April, I spent a week in Foggia, conducting fieldwork. Aware that the limited time would not be sufficient to establish solid connections and fully understand the intricate dynamics, I adopted a strategic and informal approach: I asked the union representatives if I could join them for one day in their usual working activities. This methodology proved fruitful because it allowed me to gather information not solely concerning their daily practices but also regarding how the unions decide to present themselves and what they consider relevant to be shown. For example, while one union invited me for a chat in their

office, another union took me to an informal settlement, where we spent the whole day together with other activists of the same union and the inhabitants of the settlement itself. I actively chose to consider these contextual elements as relevant to the purpose of my research; rather than treating them as actual data, I let them exert an influence and create an environment in which I performed my analysis.

In Foggia, I conducted a semi-structured interview with a UILA trade unionist; I attended a meeting with provincial and national USB exponents (held in the informal settlement of Torretta Antonacci); I spent a day at the immigration office held by CGIL-FLAI; I visited Casa Sankara with a CGIL-FLAI representative and interviewed one of the founders; I visited the settlement of Borgo Mezzanone together with a PhD student who is working on related issues and is one of the founders of the Italian-African Farmworkers Association.

During the fieldwork, I gathered information mostly informally, taking notes after conversations on the street, in a café, in the car or within the informal settlement. Due to the nature of these interactions, I was not always able/allowed to make recordings, and therefore my reflections are based on the notes taken during and afterwards. Throughout the thesis, I made use of a code system to refer to interviews and fieldnotes. Each interview and each piece of fieldnote has a specific code. In the final Appendix, each code is explained with data regarding the place, the date, the people involved, the roles and the type of activity.

In the text, I have often used the word *ghetto*: this word is frequently used by journalists (Mangano, 2014), media (Frisaldi, 2022), humanitarian associations (Verrusio, 2021) and the residents themselves to refer to where they live. For example, in Foggia, if you take an ‘informal taxi’<sup>4</sup>, you can say ‘Ghetto’, and they will drive you to the settlement of Torretta Antonacci. In this thesis, the word *ghetto* is not used in a derogatory tone but simply

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<sup>4</sup> Around the station of Foggia, some migrants have organised an informal taxi service to help people move between the city and the settlements, since public transportation is almost absent, and the settlement are positioned in remote areas.

as a word that is commonly used to describe informal settlements, including by the people who live in them.

A final clarification concerns the absence of direct data on Lega Braccianti. Unfortunately, although the role of Lega Braccianti was discussed in almost all the interviews (and thus forms part of my analysis), I was unable to speak directly with the members because I never received answers to my emails and WhatsApp messages.

### **Labour unions in Capitanata: an overview**

There are four main trade unions in the Capitanata area, which are also this thesis' subject. Three of these are described as confederal. A confederal union is an entity that, by aggregating different trades, coordinates and directs its actions and claims in pursuit of a more general purpose (Rosso, 2012). Those three subjects are the main Italian labour unions: CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour), CISL (Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions) and UIL (Italian Labour Union). They all grew from the 'CGIL Unitaria' (Unitary CGIL) formed in 1944, which later branched out to form the CISL and UIL. The differences between these three unions are mainly related to political orientation: CGIL is historically left-wing, CISL moderate left (some presidents were also members of the former Christian Democracy) and UIL belongs to the centre with solid secular connotations. Each of these unions has specific sub-unions for different categories of workers. In this thesis, the confederal subjects under analysis are:

- FLAI (Agroindustry workers federation) is the CGIL trade union for agricultural workers and workers in the food processing industry. It has deep roots in the province of Foggia thanks to the trade unionist Giuseppe Di Vittorio<sup>5</sup> and the labour struggles that affected the province throughout the 20th century. Today, it performs

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<sup>5</sup> Giuseppe Di Vittorio was an Italian trade unionist, politician and anti-fascist and one of the most influential exponents of Italian trade unions after World War II. Born into a family of farmworkers, after the war, he was elected as the first secretary of the CGIL, and he was a member of the Constituent Assembly in the ranks of the Italian Communist Party.

both a representative and supportive function in dealing with bureaucratic and administrative paperwork related to social security and the legal status of non-EU citizens, through its Immigration Office.

- FAI (Italian Agricultural Food Environmental Industrial Federation) is the CISL trade union for workers in agriculture and related activities, the food industry, forestry, fishing and tobacco. It has a predominantly service-oriented role (i.e. unemployment, legal paperwork), also through its affiliated voluntary association ANOLF (National Association Beyond Borders).
- UILA (Italian Union of Agri-Food Workers) is UIL trade union for agriculture and food industry. It is a secular and reformist trade union created in 1994 but rooted in the labour struggles of the late 19th century and the establishment of the first municipal leagues of farm workers. Currently, it has a strong focus on providing services, with a high number of collaborators and a growing membership.

The fourth union involved in the analysis is USB (Base Trade Union). USB is the most recent one and is considered an autonomous union or base union. Those historically emerged in the 1980s as alternative trade unions, composed of militants and workers who were fed up with confederal unions' actions, which often supported national provisions attacking the working class ("Sindacati Confederali, Sindacati di Base", 2016).

A fifth actor, mentioned several times in the analysis but not directly involved in the data collection, is Lega Braccianti. This group defines itself as a "social-labour association born from the desire for self-determination of labourers to improve their living conditions and working conditions" (Lega Braccianti, n.d.). Their website states that "Lega Braccianti is made up of women and men who no longer want to delegate their struggle for human dignity and improved social and working conditions to third parties." Despite this assertion, this group is fundamentally centred around the figure of Aboubakar Soumahoro, its president, spokesman and leading exponent in all the group's public activities. Soumahoro is a labour unionist, book author and a prominent figure in the Italian left-wing radical scene. He founded Lega Braccianti in 2020 after leaving USB, where he played a leading role in

representing and defending the rights of farmworkers (“Aboubakar Soumahoro Lascia”, 2020).

### **Informal settlement in Capitanata: geography and recent timeline**

The Province of Foggia, institutionally also called Capitanata, extends for approximately 7.000 km<sup>2</sup>, with 65,4 per cent of it dedicated to agriculture (ISTAT, 2021, as cited in Caruso & Corrado, 2021). During the summer season, between 35.000 and 40.000 agricultural workers are employed in the region, with high shares of labourers of Sub-Saharan African and Eastern-European origins (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 2016, as cited in INTERSOS, 2019). Of these, many reside permanently or for significant periods of the year in informal settlements located on the city's outskirts.

The living and labour conditions of migrant farmworkers are reported in numerous publications (Reyneri, 2004; Cristaldi, 2015; Melossi, 2018; Ferrando, 2021; ) and thus not analysed in detail here. However, it is significant to outline a geography of the informal settlements and a timeline of recent events that have shaped their current layout and organisation. In Capitanata, there are three large settlements: the one at the former Borgo Mezzanone airstrip (usually called '*Borgo*' or '*La Pista*' - the track), the one in Rignano Garganico (now renamed '*Torretta Antonacci*' but often referred as '*The ghetto*') and the one in Borgo Tre Titoli. In addition, there are numerous farmhouses scattered across the countryside, up to 80km away from Foggia (Carletti et al., 2021). In this thesis, the settlements of Borgo Mezzanone and Rignano Garganico are relevant, as the ones that trade unions referred to in their testimonies. Over the years, these settlements have undergone radical changes in size, structure, location and organisation. In March 2017, the settlement of Rignano was evicted as a consequence of a complaint filed with the DDA (Anti-mafia investigation district office) about mafia infiltration and enslavement. The DDA revoked the right of use of the land and started the clearance operations. Many residents opposed the evacuation despite the guarantees of being moved to other facilities, namely Casa Sankara

and l'Arena. The following day, almost two hundred migrants protested in Foggia, in front of the Prefecture's building, denouncing the lack of available accommodations, with the risk of hindering work opportunities (Raeymaekers, 2017) and they demanded the reopening of the settlement. As the alternative housing solutions proposed by the government were not sufficient (precisely because they were far from the fields, challenging to reach and therefore prevented people from finding work), after a short period, a new ghetto sprang up in an adjacent area. In January 2020, after a vast fire that destroyed most of the settlement, the Regional Civil Protection set up on-site a centre equipped with tents and containers that could host around 300 people. The management of the facility was entrusted to a religious organisation called Misericordie. Since that time, and following new developments (new containers, new shacks, new management), the settlement consists of a containerised (guarded) area and a 'free' area where new housing (sheet metal or brick buildings, campers, cars) has sprung up.

The ghetto of Borgo Mezzanone is known as *la pista* (the airstrip) because it stands next to the former airport used by the Americans in World War II. The conversion from airport to immigration centre began in 1999, with the arrival of refugees from Kosovo, who were housed in caravans along the runway where the ghetto now stands. Between 2002 and 2004, a series of interventions transformed the first reception facility into a permanent centre for asylum seekers (CARA). In 2019, as an effect of the Security Decree<sup>6</sup>, the CARA had been progressively emptied with a view to its definitive closure. In the meantime, the ghetto has been subjected to several demolitions and evictions; as already happened in Rignano Garganico, these interventions, in the absence of alternative solutions, always result in the immediate on-site reconstruction of the demolished shacks or the spreading of the settlement over the territory. As things stand today, all around the centre and along the

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<sup>6</sup> The Security Decree (also called 'Salvini Decree'; Law n° 132, 1 December 2018) was a law (amended in Law n° 173, 18 December 2020) that weighted heavily upon legal provisions and protections for migrants in Italy, particularly for migrants seeking asylum. It introduced substantive changes (the abolition of humanitarian protection), procedural changes (the introduction of accelerated procedures and new grounds for detention of individuals seeking asylum), and transformation of the modalities of reception (Corsi, 2019).

runway, a ghetto consisting of brick dwellings, tents, camper vans and cars extends over a vast area. The settlement has numerous businesses: bars, hairdressers, shops, discos, restaurants, brothels, car washes, a church and a mosque. The nationalities are numerous, and the people are more or less organised into 'zones' according to their reference community.

### **Analysis**

As a result of the interviews and the fieldwork conducted in Foggia, it was possible to recognise some relevant and thorny issues that characterise the ideologies and modes of action of the different trade unions. What stands out is the impossibility for unions, once they engage in the matters regarding migrant farmworkers, to prevent themselves from getting entangled in several other contentious issues. The four labour unions involved in this research have clearly undertaken tasks that go far beyond the original mission of unions, namely, the negotiation of working conditions and wages with the employers, in a process known as collective bargaining. While working conditions are indeed central in their actions, the questions of living conditions and legal status are on such a level intertwined that it is almost impossible to consider one without the others. This results in a comprehensive approach where unions are required to be knowledgeable and supportive on multiple levels to fulfil the stratified needs of migrant farmworkers. The following sections consider those three interlaced issues and highlight the positioning of unions, in an attempt to emphasise the emerging divergences.

For a better understanding of unions' approaches regarding the issue at stake, it is helpful to use Alberti et al. (2013) theorisation regarding intersectionality and diversity of migrant workers in the labour market. The authors analyse the unions' positions and distinguish between focusing on migrants as workers or as migrant workers. From the collected data, it emerges that in their general vision, confederal unions apply the so-called *universalistic* approach to migrant workers, meaning that they consider them primarily as



workers (CGIL-02; CISL-01). At the same time, however, confederal unions engage in practices defined as *particularistic* as they implement actions specifically addressed to improving the work and social situation of workers as migrants (e.g. specific offices for advice regarding immigration issues, bargaining regarding the acquisition of a legal residency).

USB, from its position, seems to display mainly a *particularistic* approach, with topics related to migration (e.g. legal status, residency, racism, discrimination, differences with other migrants) being central in interviews and participant observation (USB-01; USB-06; USB-07; USB-08). USB's effort to include migrants in the organisational ranks of the union (as discussed below) would be described as universalistic by Alberti et al. (2013). However, at the current time, in Foggia, there is no trace of USB activists that belong to the settlement communities.

### **On legal status: office work and noisy strikes**

Although not the leading role of trade unions, the discourse on the legal status of migrant workers emerges clearly in all interviews. Since workers' legal status is closely linked to the possibility of having a regular employment contract, trade unions had to take action to guarantee support services in this area (CISL-01). All the involved unions provide services related to immigration assistance, for example, support in the renewal of residence permits, passports requests, support in the asylum application process and fictitious residences for settlement dwellers.

The three confederal unions have highly structured services specifically targeting migrants. CGIL has an immigration office, open morning and afternoon, to help with any legal paperwork. CISL and UILA also hold a daily desk service, where besides the standard labour union's services, they provide full support for migration-related issues. In addition, CISL has ANOLF, an association that deals with protecting and promoting immigrants' rights, run by volunteers, which offers legal services with lawyers (CISL-01). Finally, CISL

also offers an on-site legal service via a minivan, travelling to informal settlements in the province (CISL-01). CGIL also offers this service: a unionist visits Casa Sankara weekly to provide legal and administrative assistance. However, this service is currently highly unstructured (e.g. only one operator, technical problems with the Internet connection, no reserved space) and unable to meet the needs of the more than 400 people in the facility (FN-3). As for the settlements, CGIL is not present in Torretta Antonacci, and their role in Borgo Mezzanone was not mentioned during the data collection. Regarding UILA, it does not appear they offer a service within the Capitanata settlements.

Alongside this work on individual cases, FAI-CISL and CGIL-FLAI are carrying out actions aimed at the collective protection of workers' rights. Some examples are the claim of a fictitious residence registration required for the residence permit renewal (CGIL-02) and some legal appeals carried out jointly with some lawyers from ASGI (Association for Legal Studies on Immigration) concerning the possibility for asylum seekers to access agricultural unemployment. These actions are considered fundamental as they would lay the foundations for real change in the long term (CISL-01).

As far as USB is concerned, their offer concerning individual services to support legal issues seems highly unstructured. USB has an office in Foggia, but it is unclear to what extent it has the capacity (economic and structural) to offer systematic support. During the fieldwork, it was possible to observe some USB activists in their daily practices. The feeling one gets is chaotic, with the impression that the legal work supporting migrants is carried out voluntarily, in spare time and with makeshift means (FN-4). USB's alleged inability to provide systematic responses to individual situations is highlighted by FAI-CISL (CISL-01). For them, USB does not have the strength and structure to solve individual workers' problems. Instead, USB would concentrate its action on a collective level, organising strikes and demonstrations that are judged positively by other unions (CISL-01; CGIL-02; UILA-01) but would not bring tangible results. In fact, while a demonstration would gain immediate media and institutional visibility, in the long run, their demands would be ignored (CISL-01; CGIL-02; UILA-01). This criticism was also raised with respect to the action of Lega

Braccianti (CGIL-02; CISL-01; UILA-01). For USB indeed, these striking actions are an essential tool, and USB activists place great emphasis on convincing the workers of the importance of those actions (USB-1; USB-06; USB-9), receiving mixed responses. The confederal unions also reported resistances regarding the willingness of migrant workers to participate in such actions (CISL-01; CGIL-02). To their alleged non-cooperation is attributed the lack of effectiveness of these methods, which belong to a trade union tradition of the past but would no longer be suitable at the current time (CISL-01).

In all the interviews with confederal unions (CGIL-02; CISL-01; UILA-01), a sort of accusation emerged towards 'certain people' (it is not clear whether they are talking about USB, Lega Braccianti, or both) that would only succeed in bringing workers to the streets thanks to unfeasible promises, such as obtaining residence permits for all. Soumahoro's slogan 'equal work, equal rights' is used as an example (CISL-01): although at an ideological level this concept is supported, confederal unions consider this attitude naive and not concrete.

In conclusion, all unions agree regarding the need for the government to regularise the positions of migrant workers. The issue of residence permits and residency is strongly present in all interviews, and it is evident that trade unionists and activists work hard to improve the legal situations of workers. In this case, the differences in approach between unions are dictated mainly by their structure and economic resources. Larger and more structured unions have the economic power and workforce to act on individual situations.

Despite this, from some interviews and the number of trade unionists in the field, as also pointed out by D'Onofrio & Heras (2021), it can be argued that their action is still not sufficient to cover the needs of the vast number of workers, especially those living isolated in the settlements. On the other hand, USB, with its more limited means, takes a more traditional approach, considering strikes as one of the fundamental instruments of trade union demands. In their action, they come up against situational dynamics, namely the difficulty of moving an audience of people who see the strike as a threat to their job stability.

It can be argued that these two approaches are fundamentally complementary, as they act on different levels and together have the potential to disrupt intertwined dynamics.

### **On work: hunting caporali, hunting members**

It is undoubtful that the caporalato system is a central, if not *the* central, topic when it comes to labour conditions among migrant farmworkers in Foggia. However, the embeddedness of caporalato in southern Italian regions and the negative reputation that this institution carries does not imply an alignment of unions regarding this matter. On a macro level, a difference is observable between the three confederal unions (CGIL-FLAI, FAI-CISL, UILA) and USB, but each union takes different perspectives on it and acts accordingly.

For CGIL-FLAI, one of the union's primary efforts is to strike and counter the figure of the caporale (CGIL-02) because its intermediary role impedes workers' auto-determination. Working with a caporale involves two main issues: firstly, the workers do not know who their employers are and in case of irregularities (i.e. in wages and payslips), they cannot even identify them. This makes legal actions more challenging to initiate. In addition, working under a caporale hinders job stability and skilling-up, due to the very mobile nature of this relationship (e.g. working every day on a different farm). Consequently, workers can hardly learn more complex tasks and get trapped in a dynamic of interchangeability. Based on those premises, CGIL-FLAI has mainly focused on a strategy of 'pressure' upon direct employers, in an attempt to counter labour exploitation. An example is a complaint they filed to the National Public Prosecutor (*Procura della Repubblica*) with the name of ten farms considered the most dangerous and exploitative of the province (CGIL-02). This action caused the arrest of the employers and the judicial control over the firms and initiated a series of further investigations. CGIL-FLAI considers those measures as impactful, as they function as dissuasive tools for other nearby firms and thus increase the adherence to salaries regulations and social security contributions (CGIL-02). The risk of these interventions is to only target single actors rather than considering the dynamics of the all

Global Production Network (Bagnardi et al., 2022). In fact, irregular employment patterns are also a reaction to the strains of adverse incorporation<sup>7</sup> and sanctioning only the direct employers is likely to be inadequate because their profits, deriving from precarious contracts with buyers– are often too little to improve working conditions (Barbu et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2018).

On an everyday basis, CGIL-FLAI carries on what they call 'a unionisation work' (CGIL-02), referring to the provision of services (e.g. checking the payslips, unemployment applications), bargaining procedures with employers and educational actions finalised to stimulate awareness of workers' rights. Those actions are carried out in their offices, in the companies and 'on location', through the use of minivans. Furthermore, from a grassroots perspective, CGIL-FLAI has attempted to train migrant trade unionists in order to have delegates in the main informal settlements of the Capitanata, to be able to give information to the farmhands about their working rights (D'Onofrio & Heras, 2021). This action refers to an interview held in 2018, but it has not been reported during the data collection of this research. For this reason, it is reasonable to think that it does not represent a priority of the union at the current time.

The position of FAI-CISL is similar to CGIL-FLAI: caporali are 'demonised', and their role as labour contractors is assessed based on its illegality, sanctioned by the laws in force (CISL-02). FAI-CISL recognises that labour intermediation always existed and played an essential role in history, not only among migrant workers but also among Italian labourers in the 1900s (Rinaldi, 2004). This intermediation system, specifically in agriculture, is challenging to organise because the demand for labour mutates drastically following the harvest seasons. Until now, national employment centres have failed to answer these demands effectively. Therefore, the FAI-CISL proposal against caporalato is oriented towards developing better governmental services and reinforcing the cooperation of the

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of adverse incorporation has been developed to refer to all the cases in which integration into Global Productive Networks leads to 'generating and reinforcing diverse forms of vulnerability and poverty among groups of poor workers' (Phillips, 2011: 383)

bilateral bodies (institutional bodies consisting of employers' associations and workers' trade unions). Despite this broader systemic approach, like CGIL-FLAI, FAI-CISL is also actively trying to increase the number of complaints against employers' irregular practices. On an everyday basis, they actively work on providing services, directly in their offices or through a mobile van used to perform 'on field' work in the informal settlements. In addition, FAI-CISL stated their goal of incorporating migrant workers residing in Foggia into the ranks of its organisation. However, at the current time, just one migrant is involved in this project, and there seem to be no active actions to stimulate this change.

Finally, UILA takes a strong stance against caporalato as well and, similarly to FAI-CISL, proposes the creation of controlled job intermediation services. Their position is divergent from other confederal unions since UILA does not believe that these services should necessarily be contracted out to public bodies, as they consider them unsuitable (for logistical reasons - such as opening hours) to manage such a service (UILA-01). On an everyday basis, UILA concentrates its operation mainly on the provision of services, in their offices, and it is described by other unions as a 'business model', since they actively try to recruit new members through the employment of collaborators who gain a percentage for each new one (CISL-01). For this reason, UILA does not seem to be fully recognised as a crucial actor in the struggles of migrant farmworkers and it is described as external to the dynamics at play (CISL-01).

Those three confederal unions believe that the best revendication strategy<sup>8</sup> lies in the power of representativity: the higher number of memberships for a union equals a larger bargaining impact at the institutional tables. This strategy entails a strong focus on 'services', mainly requests for agricultural unemployment subsidies, which represent the most common way for workers to become members of unions. Since services work on withholding a percentage of workers' paychecks, they also allow the organisation to grow. Those dynamics are strongly present in the collected data and display competitive dynamics between the

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<sup>8</sup> The term *revendication* has latin roots (*reī + vindicātiō*) and means to reclaim or demand the restoring of something. The same word is used in italian, 'rivendicazione' to define the claiming work of labour unions. The choice of this term lays in the power of its meaning for the italian context.

three unions, struggling to be the most representative. It is nevertheless unclear what this representativity means since specific contents (CGIL-02; CISL-01) vehiculate a message of 'conquer', more or less explicit, rather than attention to representing the workers' stances. In the example of UILA, despite not being considered an influencing actor by other unions, they present themselves as such because of the high numbers of their members (UILA-01).

One position that contrasts with these three is that of USB. First and foremost, what stands out is their different approach regarding the topic of caporalato and caporali. In the collected interviews and during the meeting held at Torretta Antonacci, none of the activists mentioned the issue of caporalato as a primary reason for the unstable working conditions of migrant farmworkers. Caporalato does not emerge as one of the union's primary concerns, but rather, the topic is assessed critically. Specifically, during the meeting at Torretta Antonacci, one of the community leaders<sup>9</sup> rejected the concept of '*capi neri*' (black caporali) and instead defined them as significant people who lead the community as they speak the language and can talk to employers (USB-03). Later, the concept of '*capi squadra*' (foreman; Scaturro, 2021) is dealt with, referring to some people who would be responsible for the work of many others. A USB activist (USB-02) reiterates that the charge of caporalato is unfair and that these people are representatives of the community. Finally, a person in the room, introduced as a *capo squadra*, recounts his experience, pointing out that the transportation service he provides cannot be free and that the accusation of caporalato is made by people who do not understand the situation (USB-05).

On this basis, USB builds their revendication approach on more structural dynamics (USB-01), focusing on the issue of labour contracts, how they are stipulated and what they provide for, and the role of the confederal trade unions in this bargaining. This last point creates much animosity among USB activists, who openly and harshly criticise the positions of their confederal colleagues, holding them accountable for 'playing along' with firms and 'turning a blind eye' to the companies' contractual failures (USB-01). They charge national

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<sup>9</sup> Community leaders are people considered influential for the community. Those roles come with a degree of controversy, as explained in the next paragraph.

and local politics of wanting to maintain a stalemate so as not to create too much damage to the economy. This stalemate is preserved to the detriment of migrant workers, and confederal unions are considered complicit in these dynamics. Furthermore, USB accuses other unions of profiteering from migrant workers, focusing on providing services (which create economic revenue) and accepting settlements with firms to avoid losing the economic contributions that they offer. In conclusion, USB feels that the legacy of Di Vittorio has been lost, and they seek to play a more active role and create political conflict on the issues they consider crucial. For these reasons, and because of their reduced territorial representation, USB's actions focus less on the individual case and more on a struggle for collective protections, with representative group actions such as national strikes and demonstrations.

USB's approach provokes criticism from the other trade unions, which consider their role to be insignificant, as their membership numbers are negligible and, therefore, not representative of workers (CISL-01). Specifically, CISL describes USB as focused solely on the community of Torretta Antonacci (CISL-01), where the union actually carries out its main actions. As USB does not sit at institutional tables, and especially after the split with Aboubakar Soumaharo, USB is considered a union that 'does not determine anything' (CGIL-02). As described above, membership numbers are not always an accurate indicator of (alleged or perceived) representativeness. USB, in fact, regards itself as being influential, standing on the side of workers and getting its hands dirty on the ground to improve things (USB-06). Moreover, they are credited with raising the minimum wage and with helping maintain the settlement (USB-05).

In conclusion, the positions of the confederal unions and those of USB seem to be completely irreconcilable. From the data collected, it could be argued that their contrasting positions have more to do with their political power and structural features, such as economic availability and institutionalisation, rather than ideological positioning. USB seems to play today the role that CGIL played in its early days, with a more conflictual approach, as recounted by many with respect to Di Vittorio's actions (CGIL-02; CILS-01; UIL-01; USB-01). The confederal unions, on the other hand, have evolved towards greater



institutionalisation, developing more democratic and bargaining-oriented strategies and focusing on the political power they could get in the shape of memberships and economic structures. This approach could be described as a consolidation of conflict since it often leads to agreements that are not sufficient to respect workers' rights but are thus institutionalised and normalised (CISL-01).

### **On living conditions: Torretta Antonacci as a battlefield**

As for the above section, a substantial divergence of view could also be observed between confederal and autonomous unions over the topic of living conditions. Confederal unions generally share the idea that informal settlements (or ghettos - as addressed in all the interviews) should not exist and should not be considered among the solutions for the living struggles. Ghettos are regarded as the 'biggest aberration one could find' (UILA-01) because of the lack of structural elements like water, electricity and sanitation facilities. In addition, ghettos are instrumental to exploitation (CGIL-02), in a dynamic difficult to unhinge: people have to live in ghettos in order to work, and if they work, they need to live in ghettos (because of the proximity to the lands). This forced relationship keeps people anchored to ghettos (UILA-01), making it difficult to find an alternative solution.

On this matter, the three unions positively assess accommodation like Casa Sankara, defined as an 'intermediate structure' (CISL-01), since it could represent a middle stage between ghettos and independent living. For FAI-CISL, however, Casa Sankara could not be deemed as a permanent solution, and it is valid exclusively as a transitional action towards further living improvements (CISL-01). Furthermore, Casa Sankara might be a good solution for somebody, but not everyone: during the fieldwork, some controversial opinions were expressed by a confederal unionist (FN-2) regarding the organisation of the project. Specifically, Casa Sankara was described as a highly controlled place, where people do not feel at ease and are somehow held hostage by the management. This 'tough' administration aims to discourage collaboration with caporali, and workers would be 'threatened' with being

thrown out if found to be involved in this type of activity (Sankara-01). This strategy is considered successful by those who administer the centre but criticised by others. In fact, with this approach, workers would be considered the perpetrators of caporalato processes, not the victims (FN-2).

The negative attitudes of confederal unions toward the existence of settlement are further motivated by the alleged role that caporali would play in their governance. For example, CGIL-FLAI defines the organisation of the ghettos as 'military', with caporali holding great power (CGIL-02). They harshly evaluate some actions of Lega Braccianti, as in their view, they are deeply implicated with the ghetto's caporali, being allowed by them in the settlements to carry out their activities. The relationship between Lega Braccianti and the caporali, according to CGIL-FLAI, is joint: Lega Braccianti needs caporali to have freedom of movement in the ghetto and achieve media visibility; the caporali need Lega Braccianti's struggle for self-determination in order to maintain power in the ghetto. Therefore, according to CGIL-FLAI, Lega Braccianti represents a danger to the condition of people in settlements as the assumption of self-determination and self-organisation from which they depart is bogus, and the ghetto's system of organisation is best described as mafia (CGIL-01).

For FAI-CISL (CISL-02), there is a difference between the two main settlements. The settlement of Borgo Mezzanone is broadly extended, less organised, with numerous nationalities represented. These features have made it complicated for 'institutional' figures to emerge because it is hard to hold power in such a context. However, within these circumstances, some people have become influential, such as the mosque's Imam. Their roles are not imposed or set in stone but have naturally developed due to their charismatic and prominent positions. However, the condition is different in Torretta Antonacci. There is a feeling that someone is in charge and imposing essential decisions on the settlement's management: entering there, one can observe that those figures are not perceived as community leaders but rather as commanders (CISL-02). Concerning Rignano, therefore, FAI-CISL strongly contests the presence of these individuals, to whom Lega Braccianti (and now, USB) allegedly provided legitimacy for their power dynamics (CISL-01).

USB's positions stand in open contrast to those described so far. They are present in Torretta Antonacci and actively collaborate with whom they call 'community leaders' (USB-02). USB recognises that these figures are generally considered *caporali* (FN-1), but they attribute a different meaning to their roles. In fact, at USB's national meeting held in Torretta Antonacci, the two community leaders hosted the session at the headquarters of their fledgling association, Terra e Libertà (Land and Freedom). The association was established to make the voice of the ghetto heard, to fight together and defend their dignity (CGIL-04). This struggle is carried on with the help of USB, which has supported them in recent years. In the interviews and fieldwork, USB activists consistently address the Rignano settlement as Torretta Antonacci, and the word ghetto is hardly ever used. During the meeting, a USB representative recalled the day when the signboard with the name Torretta Antonacci was placed at the entrance, recollecting feelings of pathos and pride and emphasising how that moment marked an act of recognition by the institutions (USB-06). During the same meeting, it became clear that USB's positions go toward a settlement's preservation. USB wishes the best for Torretta Antonacci: the place must become a symbol, appear in newspapers as a positive example of self-organisation and attract schools and scholars to visit it (USB-06). Some activists talked about funds from the EU and the necessity for the inhabitants to start a process of protagonism in order to have a voice in how that money will be used to improve the place (USB-06). Some testimonies of settlement residents support this position. Some raise the issue of the impossibility of finding housing in Foggia because they are black and therefore not accepted by the tenants (USB-07). On the other hand, the person described as *capo squadra* states that he prefers to live in the ghetto because there are no expenses, everything is free, and if he moved to the city, half of his profit would go to bills and rent (USB-05).

From the collected data, it is not possible to identify any suggestion of USB concerning alternative and desirable solutions to the ghetto. The entire meeting was focused on the process of developing community activists (USB-08) who, within the ghetto (in the meeting room, considered the headquarters of Terra e Libertà association), can provide

support to their brothers and sisters (USB-07). Throughout the meeting, there was great emphasis on describing Torretta Antonacci as a family (USB-04), an evolving community (USB-08) engaged in consciousness-raising and autonomisation dynamics, stimulated in the past years by USB itself (USB-07; USB-06).

In contrast, confederal unions firmly refuse this legitimisation approach and strongly condemn actions aimed at maintaining and empowering the ghetto (CGIL-02; CISL-01). The ghetto, in their opinion, cannot be the starting point for change (CGIL-02). In fact, the idea of improving the housing situation inside the ghettos, and not outside the ghettos, is challenged and considered unsustainable in the long run (CISL-02). CGIL-FLAI and FAI-CISL, for example, harshly judge the role that Aboubakar Soumahoro played in maintaining the Rignano settlement. This position, especially after the dismantling phase, created frictions between some confederal unions and some inhabitants of the settlement. CGIL-FLAI reported situations of violence that occurred in Torretta Antonacci at the hands of some people, who are referred to as 'Aboubakar's caporali' (CGIL-02). In some newspaper articles (Mira, 2020; Caporalato: Flai, Minacce A Volontari Gran Ghetto Foggiano, 2020), those episodes were reported by the hands of some 'troublemakers' and militants of USB, who allegedly stopped some CGIL-FLAI trade unionists and some humanitarian organisations that tried to enter the settlement of Rignano to conduct activities like the Italian school. In reaction to this event, CGIL-FLAI asked for the immediate intervention of authorities and advocated for institutional control over the settlement. USB responded with a statement (Di Gemma & Soumahoro, 2020) in which it emphasised that the single action of a few scapegoats cannot be sufficient reason to subvert the entire process of self-determination and emancipation that has been carried out with great effort.

Disputes about living conditions - specifically, informal settlements - seem to be the most heated, triggering allegedly violent reactions. All unions (including USB) generally recognise that the living circumstances in ghettos are undesirable and that change is necessary. USB focuses on the existing structural lack of collective labour protection strategies. As long as problems are solely attributed to caporalato, without looking at the

general dynamics of large-scale distribution, migrants' working and living conditions will never improve. Furthermore, USB also considers elements such as prejudice and racism, which would prevent migrants from finding a house in the city. In this situation, the ghetto is the 'best choice' for workers, because remaining in this dynamic can satisfy their need to work, earn and live in an accepting community. USB organises its action on this concept and tries to support workers in the process of improving living conditions in ghettos, self-organisation and participation. USB directs its attention beyond the material misery of the ghettos and focuses on human and community potential. However, this approach carries the risk of getting caught up in a 'ghetto's mindset', a process of adaptation (already in motion) that does not allow one to see beyond it. The other unions do not tolerate this compromise; they emphasise the inhuman living conditions and make overcoming the ghetto one of their main goals, as they consider it one of the places where caporalato proliferates. For some trade unions, this strategy has cost the workers trust: siding with the dismantling of ghettos, without a feasible alternative, has in the past led to feelings of mistrust on the part of the workers.

### **Black struggles, white claims**

In these last sections, the practices and strategies of unions have been carefully scrutinised to show the sometimes contrasting and conflicting positions taken to represent migrants' issues. In this last piece of analysis, the material is considered as a whole and, employing Ignatiev's theorisation, used to describe if and how Foggia's labour unions reproduce power and hierarchical relationship between whiteness and blackness. Specifically, the focus is on 'measuring the distance' between these two concepts, that is, to reflect on whether and how the unions' claims (whites) coincide with the workers' struggles (blacks).

It is clear that, in a problematic context such as the agriculture sector in Capitanata, unions address intricate issues that are undoubtedly relevant to migrant workers. Yet, in

different ways, unions' approaches to improving their conditions, may display logics of white privilege and whiteness (Ignatiev, 1969; 1997), which could prevent the workers' actual emergence from their state of need. Clearly, those mechanisms are mostly unintended, as they do not derive from an active purpose to subjugate the black community. Despite this, they may have mitigated the strength of unions' actions and the impact they could have had over these twenty years of struggle.

Specifically, all unions display hegemonic dynamics (Macciani, 2019): although aimed at securing political power and thus a capacity for action, this activity of 'catching members' risks sounding like a colonialist attempt without an actual translation in augmented representativeness. While this mechanism may look evident in confederal unions, even USB, despite its efforts to pursue a discourse of community autonomisation and empowerment, reproduces elements of racialisation (whites vs blacks), distancing (us vs you), and in general, a tendency to place the union at the centre of attention, with emphasis on membership and loyalty (USB-6; USB-8; USB-9). This 'conquest mission' causes a separatist and autonomous approach and, therefore, a fragmentation of action: unions rarely organise together and collaborate on common goals, resulting in a one-up strategy that disempowers their actions at the expense of migrant labourers.

Furthermore, unions complain about migrants' reluctance over strikes and blame them for not participating, looking back nostalgically at the memory of crowded squares and occupied factories during Italian farmworkers' protest. However, Italian workers, who still represent the majority in the agricultural sector (especially in the processing factories), are not involved in these demonstrations since the 'target' are the black migrant farmworkers. These issues are, in fact, treated as separate in what Ignatiev calls the parallel struggle fallacy (Ignatin & Allen, 1976), i.e. the tendency to maintain a focus on race instead of social class. This also became visible in the attempts to identify community leaders or migrant trade unionists. Unions imagine those roles as the direct representatives of migrant workers and not of workers as a class. The rationale behind these attempts is the supposed ability (and willingness) of migrant workers to better express the needs of their communities. While this

assumption is legit, this expected role risks falling into a tokenist practice, reproducing a hierarchical dynamic instead of promoting an enhanced voicing of the community.

In Foggia's specific case, these roles are mostly imagined and dreamed of, but concrete actions to develop them are scarce and discontinuous. Even in the case of USB, which makes building community leaders one of their main ideals, there is still a tendency to centralise the union's role. In fact, community leaders are, with regard to the union's structure, described as more external than internal entities and the somehow white assumption of 'because you are black you should help your black brothers and sisters', broadly present in USB' discourse, is applied and seems hesitantly embraced by the settlements' community.

To conclude, it is essential to consider that unions are embedded in wider systems whose ultimate interest is maintaining exploitative conditions and ghettos, in order to preserve boundaries and borders that are structurally necessary for power and extractive relationships. This piece of speech by Carmichael (1966), provides a sharp description of these dynamics:

[..] And this resistance to doing anything meaningful about conditions in that ghetto comes from the fact that the ghetto is itself a product of a combination of forces and special interests in the white community, and the groups that have access to the resources and power to change that situation benefit, politically and economically, from the existence of that ghetto.

Racial fractures are crucial to the Italian social and economic system, needing low-cost and disposable labour, and to a political system that does not make itself accountable for the ongoing crisis, by letting migrants be charged instead (Oliveri, 2017). Italian unions, therefore, inevitably maintain and reproduce parts of these dynamics, despite their real will and effort to fight for farmworkers' rights. Their involvement in these systems and the resulting actions, it is argued, would have an impact on the actual effectiveness of their struggles, undermining the potential for social change that these institutions could employ.

Fortunately, despite the strength of those dynamics, some authors have argued that racialisation should be seen as historical and reversible. For this purpose, Oliveri (2017) introduced the concept of counter-racialisation, and defines it as "the processes through which racialised outsiders affirm their political subjectivity, contest the place assigned to them in society and engage in struggles for a radical change" (p.1858).

To conclude, this analysis took us back to the beginning, where the need to shift the focus from migrants to white responsibility was stated. It is argued here that the importance of establishing these institutions' dysfunctional dynamics aims to raise their awareness over their own power roles. If and when unions wish to have a tangible impact on the issues at stake, they will have to play a supportive function to the racialised communities in their emergence from these 'assigned places in society'.

## **Conclusions**

The present paper exhaustively explores the actions and strategies employed by the four major labour unions of the Capitanata, when it comes to fighting for migrant farmworkers' rights. The issue proved to be sociologically and socially relevant as, after twenty years of unions' struggles, the living and working conditions of migrant farmworkers in the area are still highly problematic. Furthermore, literature on the subject is scarce, especially in analysing the roles of local actors.

The investigation recognises three areas in which unions are significantly involved and which often create conflicts and disagreements: work rights, legal status and living conditions. A first general difference was identified between confederal and autonomous unions: the data often revealed a strong dichotomy between these two institutional structures' strategies.

Regarding legal status, all unions share the same ideology toward the total recognition of legal status for the entire migrant workforce. The political and economic



structure of unions plays a role in this issue, with confederal unions holding a stronger power over the resolution of single cases and USB focusing more on collective actions, such as strikes and demonstrations.

Regarding living conditions, confederal unions strongly focus on overcoming informal settlements, as they consider them an aberration that should not be accepted and recognised. USB takes a different approach, 'starting' from ghettos to legitimise them as communities and facilitate the emergence of the inhabitant's voices. However, their approach is highly contested, and USB is charged with cooperating with caporali in order to run their activities in one of the ghettos.

The last subject concerns work rights: confederal unions have undergone a substantial institutionalisation, making them essential political agents but, at the same time, keen to accept and stipulate official deals that formally reinforce some degree of exploitation. Furthermore, they attribute to the caporalato system a great share of accountability for the degrading working conditions of farmworkers, and they structure part of their actions around the persecution of those practices. On their side, USB considers the confederates sell-outs, blaming them for losing their conflictual approach that belonged to the tradition of Di Vittorio and the historical farmworkers' fights. Instead of focusing on caporalato, USB looks at broader dynamics, considering the global mechanisms of exploitation inborn in the capitalist system.

Unions' practices are then further analysed by employing some insights by Ignatiev and colleagues on the relationship between race and the working class. This framework is used to investigate if and how unions replicate hierarchical power dynamics intrinsic to the social construction of whiteness. Due to their embeddedness with those dominant systems, it is argued that all unions cannot avoid re-acting extractive mechanisms toward racialised farmworkers. Three of those mechanisms are highlighted: a hegemonic approach to membership, a particularistic and separatist strategy over migrants' issues, and the risk of tokenism while intending to empower migrants' workforce.

Further investigations are needed in order to better account for the role of race positionality and its possible influence over the outcomes of labour unions' efforts. Furthermore, this analysis could be extended to other Italian contexts, in a comparative attempt, and expanded to unions' actions at the national level. Despite those possible developments, this dissertation enriches the academic and societal debate on those phenomena and highlights several factors that might have been crucial in maintaining a partial stalemate during those several years of struggles. Not only can these data be valid for further academic inquiries, but they can also provide critical insights for unions, stimulating reflections on their internal dynamics and renovating a real commitment to the support and empowerment of migrant farmworkers.

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### Appendix: codes explanation

Code	Type of material	Organisation	Role	Place	Date	Notes
CGIL-01	Phone call	CGIL-FLAI	Local representative	By phone	--	Recorded
CGIL-02	Online interview	CGIL-FLAI	Local representative	Online	23-02-2022	Recorded
CGIL-03	Participant observation	CGIL-FLAI	Immigration office employee	Foggia - CGIL Immigration office	22-04-2022	Not recorded; notes
USB-01	Online interview	USB	National representative	Online	22-03-2022	Recorded
USB-02	Participant observation	USB	USB Torino	Informal settlement of Torretta Antonacci	20-04-2022	Fragment of a meeting - Not recorded; notes
USB-03	Participant observation	Associazione Terra e Libertà / USB	Spokesperson of the ghetto	Informal settlement of Torretta Antonacci	20-04-2022	Fragment of a meeting - Not recorded; notes
USB-04	Participant observation	Associazione Terra e Libertà / USB	Spokesperson of the ghetto	Informal settlement of Torretta Antonacci	20-04-2022	Fragment of a meeting - Not recorded; notes
USB-05	Participant observation	--	Capo squadra (foreman)	Informal settlement of Torretta Antonacci	20-04-2022	Fragment of a meeting - Not recorded; notes
USB-06	Participant observation	USB	USB Foggia	Informal settlement of Torretta Antonacci	20-04-2022	Fragment of a meeting - Not recorded; notes
USB-07	Participant observation	USB	USB Pescara	Informal settlement of Torretta Antonacci	20-04-2022	Fragment of a meeting - Not recorded; notes
USB-08	Participant observation	USB	National representative	Informal settlement of Torretta Antonacci	20-04-2022	Fragment of a meeting - Not recorded; notes
USB-09	Participant observation	USB	USB Foggia	Informal settlement of Torretta Antonacci	20-04-2022	Fragment of a meeting - Not recorded; notes
USB-10	Participant observation	USB	USB activist	Informal settlement of Torretta Antonacci	20-04-2022	Fragment of a meeting - Not recorded; notes
USB-11	Participant observation	--	Settlement inhabitant	Informal settlement of Torretta Antonacci	20-04-2022	Fragment of a meeting - Not recorded; notes
CISL-01	Online interview	FAI-CISL	Local representative	Online	19-04-2022	Recorded
CISL-02	Phone call	FAI-CISL	Local representative	By phone	27-05-2022	Recorded
UILA-01	Interview	UILA	Secretary-General	Foggia - UILA office	19-04-2022	Recorded
Sankara-01	Interview	Casa Sankara	Founder and manager	Foggia - Casa Sankara	22-04-2022	Recorded
Code	Type of material	Type of activity	Participant(s)	Place	Date	Note
FN-1	Fieldnotes	Informal chat	USB Activist	Torretta Antonacci	20-04-2022	
FN-2	Fieldnotes	Informal chat	Labour unionists (Anonymous)	Foggia	--	
FN-3	Fieldnotes	Visit at Casa Sankara	CGIL-FLAI unionist, Casa Sankara Founders, other students	Casa Sankara	22-04-2022	
FN-4	Fieldnotes	Day with USB's activists	USB Activists	USB Office in Foggia; Torretta Antonacci	20-04-2022	