

The contentious politics of unemployment: The Italian case in comparative perspective

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Abstract. This article discusses the evolution of the public debate in Italy about unemployment over a period of almost ten years (1995–2002) that was particularly crucial for the Italian labour and political systems. From the early 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the country experienced major industrial change, which dramatically restructured its labour landscape. Moreover, this industrial earthquake occurred within internal (a deep political party system re-assessment and the fluctuating importance of unions) and external (European Union-driven state budgetary limits) political constraints that have heavily influenced the debate itself. The analysis of the public policy debates allows the authors of this article to portray the agendas, concepts and strategies introduced and discussed by experts, politicians and interest groups as pillars of a new edifice of public policies. Although other sources are more complete in presenting the policy-making process on unemployment issues, the focus in this article on the public debate in the mass media reflects a specific interest in the discursive interactions between the symbolic images promoted by different actors. To this end, the authors have combined claims analysis and semi-structured interviews. Through their combined use, the article describes the selective field of contentious politics as far as main actors are concerned: its effect on the policy issues addressed, and the repertoire used for making claims and influencing policies. The authors also single out the role of the European Union and its potential impact on Italian public debates. In particular, the authors are interested in learning how inclusive these public debates are with reference to weakly represented interests and precariously organised groups (particularly the unemployed).

The contentious politics of unemployment in Italy: An introduction

For several decades, unemployment has been a crucial issue in the Italian political, social and economic debate. Until few years ago, it was considered a major problem only for Southern Italy or, at least, ‘weak sectors’ of the population, such as women and young people. From the early 1980s and through the 1990s, however, the country experienced a major process of industrial change that dramatically restructured its labour landscape. Following a general trend

among industrialised countries, although few years later than elsewhere, from 1980 to 1996 Italian manufacturing lost 1.5 million workers (Berta 2006). Moreover, in the 1990s the country's major state-driven industrial sectors (chemical, mechanical, food, etc.) also witnessed a drastic reduction that may qualify as evidence of an Italian 'de-industrialisation' process (Gallino 2003). Such changes in the country's industrial configuration have shown that there no longer are any 'safe' areas. Most regions were exposed to the risk of mass unemployment due to dismissals in major companies as well as to a more general economic underdevelopment and lack of infrastructure.

Moreover, this industrial earthquake occurred within internal (a deep political party system re-assessment and the fluctuating importance of unions) and external (European Union-driven state budgetary limits) political constraints that heavily influenced the debate itself. Thus, instead of focusing on the needs of the unemployed, the debate was shaped by issues like the control of inflation as a main goal of economic policy. In the political language, 'social cohesion' replaced equality, flexibility replaced workers' rights and 'workfare' replaced welfare state. While the Italian state traditionally had intervened mainly through unemployment payments and support for strategic industries, the growing public deficit as well as EU directives limiting the possibility of policies seen to be anti-competitive in effect pushed for a dramatic change in approach with the development of the rhetoric of 'activation' and a general impulse to market competition.

In this article, the analysis of the public debates allows us to portray the agendas, concepts and strategies introduced and discussed by experts, politicians and interest groups as pillars of a new edifice of public policies. Although other sources are more complete in presenting the policy-making process on unemployment issues, our focus on the public debate in the mass media reflects a specific interest in the discursive interactions between the symbolic images promoted by different actors. Our research on the discourse about unemployment in the media addresses questions such as: How is this change of paradigm reflected in the mass media? Which actors appear as public entrepreneurs of these reforms? And which actors voice resistance to these changes? How is party politics affected by this re-articulation of frames?

Although this article deals with the Italian case, we locate it in a comparative perspective. Much research on the welfare state has suggested that, although faced with common challenges, different welfare regimes reacted in different ways (Pierson 2001; Taylor Gooby 2004). The Italian welfare state and the related labour policies represent an example of the Southern European model of employment policies, which, beside Italy, includes Spain and Greece (Ferrera 1993). This model was initially characterised by the prevalence of passive policies, dramatic occupational gaps among different regions

in the same country and an impressive record of youth as well as long-term unemployment (Gualmini 1998). Unions were said to enjoy political influence through their partners in the party system.

The Italian model has evolved more recently since two important reforms (1997 and 2003) 'opened up' the labour market, making it more 'flexible' thanks to the introduction of new, less guaranteed labour contracts and to the increasing relevance of activating measures promoting trainings, geographical mobility and job placement services (Graziano 2004). Such changes determined new challenges for the established policy actors' network, including mainly political parties, trade unions and employers' organisations. Additionally, the political scandals of the early 1990s had disruptive effects on the party system (Della Porta & Vannucci 2007). From this standpoint, we shall observe the extent to which these changes have affected the public debate on unemployment, which traditionally reflected the typical characteristics of distributive policies, with a strong presence of few and well-organised interest groups.

The article aims to illuminate the evolution of the public debate over a period of almost ten years (1995–2002) that were particularly crucial for the Italian political system. As we explain in the following section, to this end we have combined claims analysis and semi-structured interviews to describe the selective field of contentious politics as far as main actors are concerned, its effect on the policy issues addressed, and the repertoire used for making claims and influencing policies. We also single out the role of the EU and its potential impact on Italian public debates. In this first analysis, the use of the data is admittedly descriptive, although some interpretative lines emerge through the triangulation of our data as well as the historical knowledge of our case study. In particular, we are interested in learning how inclusive these public debates are with reference to weakly represented interests and precariously organised groups (particularly the unemployed).

Claims analysis and interviews: Methodological considerations

The research on the Italian case is part of a broader cross-national comparative analysis that also covers France, Germany, Great Britain, Switzerland and Sweden, within the framework of a research project on 'The Contentious Politics of Unemployment in Europe: Political Claim Making, Policy Deliberation and Exclusion from the Labour Market' (see the Acknowledgements). A first part of the research is based upon *political claim analysis* (Koopmans & Statham 1999, 2002), which is a quantitative method that takes individual political claims as units of analysis and uses newspapers as a source on the

publicly visible part of this claims making. A 'claim' is defined as a unit of strategic action in the mass media: it consists of a purposive and public articulation of political demands, call for action, proposals, criticism or physical action that addresses the interest of the claimants and/or other collective action (Giugni & Statham 2002). The claimants are media, governments, civil society actors and so on. The claim analysis approach builds upon two relevant methodological traditions of social movement research: (quantitative) protest event analysis (Tarrow 1989; Franzosi 1994) and (qualitative) frame analysis (Snow et al. 1986; Gamson & Modigliani 1989). An act of claims making is normally broken down into such elements as: a *claimant*, an actor who makes a demand, proposal, appeal or criticism; an *addressee*, who is the target of the criticism or support; an *object actor*, whose interests are affected by the claim; and finally the *substantive content* of the claim, which states what is to be done (aim) and why (frame) (Koopmans & Erbe 2002).

The source is newspaper coverage. Newspapers are searched as sources of relevant events in the field, but even more as producers of public discourse, constituting a mass media public sphere. Focusing on the (part of the) public discourse represented in the media does not imply that these are the only arenas where claims are presented. In particular, some actors are less dependent upon the mass media, as they enjoy direct access to decision makers; others are less able to influence the mass media and therefore need to resort to alternative communication channels. However, we assume that the print media are among the most important arenas of public claims making, and that most actors will, at one stage or another, use them in order to make their views public.¹

In this article we focus in particular on the framing of unemployment proposed by different types of actors. Data have been collected from news coverage in the daily *La Repubblica*, usually considered a quality newspaper, leaning towards the centre-left. Similar types of newspapers were used for the other countries. Being mainly interested in the turning points in the debate on unemployment, we focused our attention on the years 1995–2002, covering selected issues of the newspaper. We have read and coded all articles referring to unemployment, underemployment, joblessness, exclusion from the labour market and provisions for unemployed people. More general issues, such as labour market, economic development policies and employment policies, were coded only if there was an explicit reference to unemployment.

The debate in the print media represents, however, only one side of the coin. The media coverage of a public debate is strongly selective, and the presence of different voices is influenced by the different resources available to the various actors as well as their resonance with the editorial line and issue cycles. For this reason, we integrated the data from newspapers with 15

semi-directed interviews, conducted between November 2003 and September 2004, with representatives of the Italian organisations that had emerged as the most important claims makers from the claim analysis in the field of unemployment. The interviews tried to get a better understanding and possible explanation of the results of the claim analysis. The questionnaire focused especially on the interactions of the selected actors with each other, as well as their perception of relations of influence in the field and their main strategies. Among the interviewees are representatives of the main Italian political parties, the three most important national trade unions, two of the most unemployed-friendly autonomous trade unions, two of the most relevant ministerial experts involved in unemployment policy in Italy and three civil society associations (the Catholic Caritas, the left-oriented Arci and the Third Sector National Forum) that have been close to unemployment issues from the unemployed and social economy point of view.

Media actors, policy actors

Political parties, trade unions and employers' organisations are the most relevant actors bargaining with the state in Italian labour policy making. During a relevant part of the period considered in our study, Italian labour policy making has been identified with the word '*concertazione*', which defines a decision-making process that actively engages peak employers' representatives, peak unions and the government. According to this policy-making model, decisions are made with the agreement of all three components, usually with the state acting as a mediator between workers and employers (Gualmini 1995, 1998; Mania & Sateriale, 2002). The results of this 'concerted action' are labour policies that are agreed upon by all actors present at the '*concertazione* table'. This mechanism has been accused, on the one hand, of producing delays in decision making and difficulties in implementation and, on the other hand, of having co-opted some unions' leadership and tamed their demands, while excluding other actors.

The results of our claims analysis fit quite well with the model described by the literature focused on Italian labour policies (see Table 1). The state traditionally has been an important player in labour policies: after the Second World War and until the first centre-left government in the early 1960s, Italian governments delayed the building of a modern industrial system with autonomous and well-organised interest representation bodies. Later on, they entered into 'political exchanges', offering public resources for political consensus (Pizzorno 1993).

Table 1. Actors involved in claim-making in unemployment politics, 1995-2002 (percentages)

Actors	France	Germany	Italy	Sweden	Switzerland	United Kingdom	Total	N
State	38.2	33.2	38.8	54.5	42.2	35.3	37.8	3,380
Parties	17.0	10.9	14.9	12.3	11.1	4.5	11.5	1,023
Labour organisations	21.0	18.2	23.1	14.2	8.7	17.3	16.5	1,473
Employers	8.1	26.0	15.2	5.1	20.7	25.2	20.6	1,840
Unemployed	2.9	0.7	1.6	1.7	0.3	0.1	0.9	82
Welfare organisations	6.5	0.4	-	0.7	2.2	1.5	1.4	127
Experts	4.4	9.5	5.9	10.1	12.7	15.7	10.0	890
Others	1.9	1.1	0.5	1.4	2.1	0.3	1.3	115
Total	790	3,837	950	584	2,019	750	100.0	8,930

Source: UNEMPOL dataset.

As Table 1 shows, *state actors* prove to be very relevant claimants in the recent public debate on unemployment (in line with most other European states covered in our research). *Labour organisations* (23.1 per cent of claims against an average of 16.5 per cent in the total dataset) are also very important actors in the public debate. Research on the Italian unions has stressed their relative weakness, reflecting their past and recent difficulties: the traditional fragmentation, with increasing internal tensions in recent periods, as well as a never fully formalised integration of unions in corporatist institutions and a steady decline in membership after the peak of the 1970s (Accornero 1992).

In Italy, in fact, there are three large union federations: CGIL is the biggest national trade union, traditionally affiliated with the left parties; CISL has a tradition of proximity to Catholic actors; and UIL is the expression of the smaller non-religious parties. Labour rights were late to develop, and in the 1950s and the 1960s the activities of the CGIL were repressed inside and outside of factories. Only in the 1970s were the three major trade unions recognised as partners in negotiations that involved the business associations along with the relevant government ministries. Decisions over industrial policies became objects of political exchange between government and interest groups, with a frequent use of public resources in support of crucial economic sectors. *Concertational* decision making became more widespread in the 1990s, when trade unions replaced political parties in providing the government with a consensual social basis for the structural economic reforms needed to enter the European monetary space, but was then challenged by the centre-right governments from 2001 onward (Ferrera & Gualmini, 2004). However, our data indicate that the Italian unions still represent an important voice in the public debate on unemployment.

The same can be said of the *employers' representatives*, which are, however, less present in the debate in comparison with other countries (15.2 per cent per cent against an average of 20.6 per cent). Also, in terms of employers' organisations, the Italian case is characterised by a certain fragmentation as industries and firms are organised in different bodies depending on their sector of activity, size and the nature of their ownership (Gualmini 1995). The most relevant peak employers' organisation is *Confindustria*, the organisation of Italian industrialists, which was created in 1944 with the aim of representing 'capital' both in the promotion of economic policies and at the negotiating table with trade unions. Notwithstanding their fragmentation and diversification, the employers are still a relevant voice in the public debate and, as we will see in the following section, they play an important role in the country's labour policy making.

Organisations of the unemployed are instead, in Italy as in the other countries, very little represented in the mass media debate (1.6 per cent, against an

even lower average of 0.9 per cent). The absence in the media is explained in part by the lack of such organisations at the national level: while our analysis is based only on the national pages of *La Repubblica*, the Italian unemployed organise almost exclusively at the local level. The fact that unemployment traditionally has been widespread, especially in Southern regions, might help explain why it has been so difficult for jobless people to build national organisations and thus to get their claims ‘covered’ by a national newspaper. More substantively, however, their quasi-absence from the debate reflects the difficulties of ‘resourceless’ actors to mobilise successfully and gain access to the mass media (Piven & Cloward 1977; Bagguley 1992; Maurer 2001; Richards 2002; Baglioni et al. forthcoming). In fact, the situation in Italy is similar in the field of immigration, where the representation of immigrants’ issues and interests occurs only indirectly, through the work of advocacy coalitions made up of Catholic organisations, experts and relief groups (Zincone 2006).

Civil society is, however, also represented in the national labour debate by research institutes, experts, church representatives and pro-unemployed groups such as local social forums. In comparison with the data coming for similar research on migration issues,² the presence of these types of civil society actors in the debate on unemployment remains limited: while unions cover there only 3.5 per cent of claims, migrant associations are present with 8.1 per cent and civil society organisations with 26.8 per cent.

In comparison with other countries, the presence in the debate of *political parties* is quite relevant (with 14.9 per cent against an average of 11.5 per cent). It has been often observed that political parties’ role and strength in Italy was dramatically reduced by the discovery of the corruption system, and the ‘technical’ (non-political) government that was established in 1993 found in the trade unions the political actor able to provide it with the necessary social consensus. The three most relevant trade unions had to assume a full political role and thus their intervention in national policy making increased (Di Palma et al. 2000; Mania & Sateriale 2002). Our data indicate, however, a continuous visibility of political parties in the public discourse on unemployment, even though their presence in the media is not homogenously distributed during the years considered. In fact, centre-right parties made more than half of their claims in the years they were in government (2001–2002), whereas they were almost absent from the debate in the previous period. On the contrary, centre-left parties participated with strong emphasis in the debate from 1995 until 1998 (i.e., when they were in government), but they also continued to take part in the public discussion, even if with minor emphasis, once in opposition.

Furthermore, the presence of political parties in the collective discussion on unemployment is not (at least in the centre-left leaning *La Repubblica*) proportional to their electoral strength. Parties of the centre-left (‘Olive Tree’)

coalition predominate; indeed, 81.7 per cent of the claims made by political representatives come from the left or the centre-left, whereas the parties of the right emerge as much less engaged in the debate on unemployment (the claims associated to them are 18 per cent). On the left or centre-left side, the social democratic party (*Democratici di Sinistra*) was the most active (37.4 per cent of claims), and its Christian democratic ally, at that time called the 'Popular Party' (PPI), was also well engaged in the debate, with a share of 16.8 per cent of all of the party claims. *Rifondazione Comunista* (RC) is an important actor as well, with 14.2 per cent of claims (this becomes even more relevant if we bear in mind that RC did not occupy seats in the national government during the period considered). *La Margherita* (which was a party assembling different parts of the Olive Tree coalition, including the PPI) is also well represented in the media (6.4 per cent) due to the fact that one of the most influential ministers in charge of social and labour policies during some of the years considered, Mr Treu, was a member of this party. He was the mastermind of a deep political reform in the unemployment domain that introduced in Italy the new contractual forms of flexible work.

On the contrary, parties of the right-wing are weakly active in this domain (or at least, weakly reported by the centre-left *La Repubblica*). For instance, *Forza Italia*, Mr Berlusconi's party, the most relevant party in terms of votes obtained in the last national elections considered here (29.5 per cent), made only 6.7 per cent of claims; the right-wing *Alleanza Nazionale* and *Lega* are also marginally present (with a low 4.9 and 4.6 per cent, respectively).

This picture is confirmed by the interviews (see Table 2). With respect to the most influential actors at the national level, it is not surprising that the most often cited organisations are the trade unions (and in particular CGIL, CISL and UIL) and *Confindustria*. Additionally, the influential role of the government reflects the development, especially since the 1990s, of institutions of bargaining and negotiation between some unions, business representatives and the government. The Labour Ministry was considered a key actor in formulating labour policy during the past decade, and even more during the last few years. Traditionally, the government was perceived as trying to limit social conflict and keep consensus by supporting socially painless (but expensive) solutions in order to avoid mass dismissals. After 1992, in the new context of budgetary constraint, the government has become a relevant actor in pre-selecting the policy options on which trade unions and business associations were called to express their opinions. This new trend is becoming more and more visible – for instance, the new L. 30 (passed in February 2003) was 'imposed' by the government on reluctant trade unions and (less reluctant) business associations. The centre-right government replaced the old trilateral pacts (when the three main unions were united in signing) with new

Table 2. Influential actors at the national level

Organisations	Number of mentions				
	Policy actor	Intermediary actor	NGOs	Unemployed organisations	Total
Trade unions together (CGIL, CISL, UIL)	2	8	3	–	13
Confindustria – Business associations	2	10	1	–	13
Labour Ministry	1	7	2	–	10
UGL – Trade union	0	3	–	–	3
CISL	0	3	–	–	3
UIL	0	2	–	–	2
CGIL	0	1	1	–	2
Compagnia delle Opere	0	1	1	–	2
Lega delle Cooperative	0	1	–	–	1
Confartigianato	0	1	–	–	1
Confagricoltura	0	1	–	–	1
Confcommercio	0	1	–	–	1
Cobas	0	1	–	–	1

Source: UNEMPOL dataset.

agreements prepared by the government – with the help of *Confindustria* – and with the agreement of CISL and UIL, but not of the most important union, CGIL. This is confirmed by some party interviewees (see Appendix, Interviews 2, 3, 5, 8, 9), who think that in recent times only CISL and UIL have been influential in labour policy, whereas nobody mentions the CGIL as a influential actor in its own right. Furthermore, due to the new (2001–2006) centre-right government, minor right-wing-oriented unions such as UGL have gained importance. Finally, there are other actors that are mentioned, but only once (e.g., *Lega delle Cooperative*, *Compagnia delle Opere*) and thus may be considered of marginal relevance if we look at the overall picture.

The data on the targeted actors reflect the previous section since most actors try to establish contacts with those organisations that they think are more influential. Nevertheless, there are some differences that deserve our attention. The main target of trade unions, as expected, is the Ministry, but they are also interested in influencing *Confindustria* – their traditional counterpart. The reasoning behind such behaviour seems to be that social partners need to share common goals in order to keep Italian productive sectors competitive in the increasingly competitive international business environ-

ment, and therefore trying to build common policy options and preferences strengthens their potential influence in the decision-making process. Furthermore, within the Ministry, the policy actors interviewed – experts working at the level of the Prime Minister’s staff – claim to devote time to influencing their own Ministry in order for their ‘expertise’ to come through and become a fully fledged policy. Finally, the parties – in particular those that were in the government in the last part of the time considered – have no specific targets, asserting a right to decide on public matters based upon their popular mandate. Nevertheless, the representative of *Forza Italia* clearly stated that within that party, and within the government, there are various lines of thought: there are those who believe in the need and relevance of a continuous social dialogue (i.e., those who are directly involved in labour policy making) and those who are part of the governmental coalition but are not engaged directly in labour policy making, who believe that social dialogue and, even more *concertazione*, is damaging. In the words of the *Forza Italia* representative:

[W]hen we won the elections, I remember hearing in a national conference one of the most influential people in *Forza Italia*’s leadership with respect to labour policies, and the message was that since we have won the elections, then we did not need any social ‘intermediation’. We were legitimised by the people and therefore we did not need to search for support of social partners. I personally thought, and still think, that such idea was – and still is – absurd. (Interview 8)

In fact, with the new Berlusconi governments (2001–2006), a shift in labour policy making occurred: although not as isolated as it could have been, the government operated in a more autonomous way, limiting contacts or traditional concertation procedures with trade unions or business associations. The idea behind such a ‘top-down’ approach seems to be the one expressed by Berlusconi (half joking, half not) in one of his first public statements as Prime Minister: ‘*ghe pensi mi*’, which sounds more or less like ‘I’ll take care of it’ in Milanese³ dialect. This means that there is no need for concertation since the government did not need societal support and counselling on what was to be done to solve labour policy problems. Furthermore, the party approach to labour issues also reflects the fact that, after a decade, political parties had taken back their power over unions and other bodies of social representation.

If we now turn to the governmental agencies to which the interviewed actors claim to devote much of their time, it emerges quite clearly that although parliament (and in particular, the relevant parliamentary commissions) remains a key target, during the past decade, governmental bodies

(ministries and ministerial commissions) have become more and more relevant. As for the actors with whom major collaborations have taken place, the trade unions and the Labour Ministry are said to have played a key role during the 1990s, whereas all the other organisations appeared somewhat in the background of the policy process.

Finally, if we look at the major disagreements that have emerged over the years, for the government, trade unions have been a source of disagreement and in particular the CGIL trade union. In particular, the Berlusconi II & III governments (2001–2006) promoted the separate signature of the *Patto per l'Italia* (2002) by CISL and UIL, singling out the CGIL, which had already managed to organise a million person demonstration against the government on 23 March 2002, as a main opposition.

Policy cycles, media cycles and repertoires of action

The main actors we have singled out as carriers of the debate on unemployment had a huge influence on the resonance and content of the public discourse on unemployment. Looking first at how the debate on unemployment developed, we would expect that the number of claims linked to this issue in specific, or to labour issues in general, tends to increase when the *unemployment rate* grows. When the number of jobless people starts to increase, government representatives, party politicians, labour unions, business organisations or even unemployed groups are more likely to express concerns and to act on them. As a consequence, the newspapers should pay more attention to this phenomenon, especially when it assumes dramatic dimensions. This trend has been confirmed by historical research (Richards 2002), but also by recent findings within the UNEMPOL project (Giugni & Berclaz 2003), which is the basis of our research (see the Acknowledgements).

As can be seen from Figure 1, the Italian case helps elaborate these previous findings. In fact, the number of claims made in the labour domain in the period considered for the newspaper analysis (1995–2002) follows the number of unemployed, but only until 2001: during that period, unemployment and claims developed in parallel. However starting from 2001, the claims increase substantially notwithstanding that the unemployment rate decreases. This suggests that claims making in the field of labour depends also on other circumstances.

The media debate seems in fact influenced by shorter cycles of attention, related in particular to specific *political contingencies*. For instance, the increase in attention in 1998 seems related to the entrepreneurial role played by the left-wing party *Rifondazione Comunista* (RC), whose support was

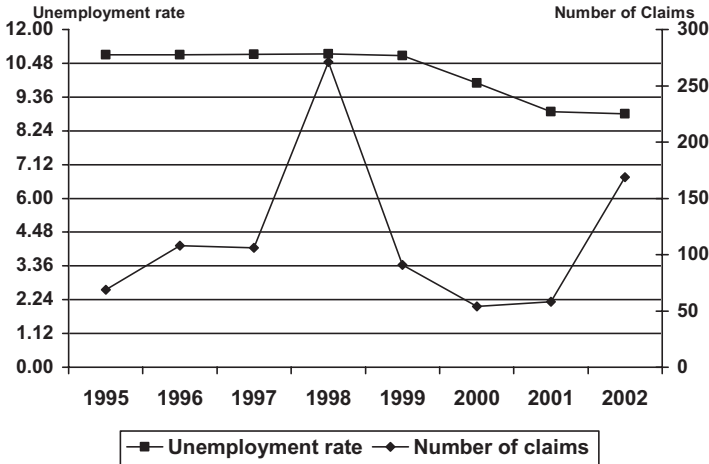


Figure 1. Number of claims in unemployment politics and unemployment rate by year.
Source: UNEMPOL dataset for the claims; Italian statistical office dataset (Istat 2001).

pivotal for the survival of the centre-left coalition, elected in 1996 and led by Romano Prodi, including the most important left-wing party, *Democratici di Sinistra* (the former Italian Communist Party, PCI). Labour issues are a considerable ingredient of RC's DNA, as this party continues to understand itself basically as a working-class party. Moreover, the relevance that employment issues have in *Rifondazione's* agenda emerges very clearly from our claims analysis. From a quantitative point of view, notwithstanding its relative electoral weight (it obtained 5 per cent of votes during the last political national elections in the period considered in 2001), this party is the third most important actor among political parties in the field of unemployment and labour policy (14.2 per cent of parties claims were made by RC).

It is understandable that the support guaranteed to Prodi's government by *Rifondazione Comunista* depended mostly on the adoption of policies aiming to fight unemployment. In particular, RC was strongly in favour of the reduction of collective labour time (the French case of the '35 hours' law was the model to be followed) and, in general, it encouraged the government to intervene against unemployment through the adoption of expansive economic policies and through the direct creation of jobs. The government resisted adopting these expansive policies because of the priority given to entering the European Monetary Union, and the rigid criteria established by the Maastricht Treaty. Moreover, Prodi's coalition was quite heterogeneous. Indeed, while *Rifondazione* was against flexibility in the labour market and against state subsidies to private companies, there were other allies, such as the

Popular Party or the social democratic *Democratici di Sinistra* and *Socialisti Democratici Italiani*, which were strongly in favour of flexibility and also of state subsidies to private industries.

These different conceptions of labour policies fostered a long contentious policy-making process (reflected in the mass media) in which *Rifondazione* made several proposals, almost entirely rejected by its governmental partners, and often threatened to withdraw its support of the government, up to the fall of Prodi's government. In sum, the high number of claims found in the newspaper in the period between 1997 and 1999 seems influenced not only by the increasing unemployment rate, but also by the fact that the government was irreconcilably split on the actions to adopt in this field. This division polarised the political debate and gained the attention of the media, which were conscious that the future of the government would depend on choices to be made in the labour domain.

Differently from claims making in general, *protest* claims tend to follow the unemployment rate (see Figure 2): the use of protest (or at least its coverage) increases with unemployment. In particular, protest grew dramatically between 2001 and 2002, when two other events polarised the debate on unemployment. First, the Fiat crisis, which had tremendous consequences for thousands of workers who were made redundant in different localities (in Turin, where Fiat's headquarters is based, but also in southern cities like Termini Imerese and Melfi). Fiat workers struggled to save their jobs and used a wide repertoire of protest. Several other actors protested in their favour.

Second, the labour policy of the right-wing government elected in 2001 provoked strong opposition. The second Berlusconi government indeed broke with the tradition of 'concerted' labour policy making inaugurated in early 1990s. This paved the way for a new period of social conflict during which protest often has been used to pressure the government to change its attitude. Moreover, the same government continued the turn towards more flexibility in

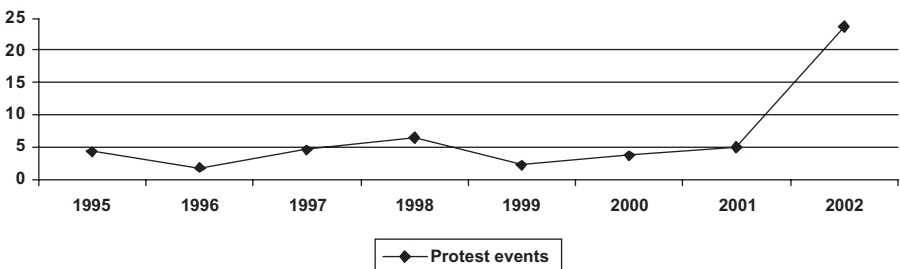


Figure 2. Protest events on total claims per year (percentages).

Source: UNEMPOL dataset.

the labour market, which had already been part of the centre-left policy at the end of the 1990s. In particular, the (aborted) plan to abrogate an article of the workers' statute (Article 18) protecting workers against unjust dismissals, provoked a widespread and deep mobilisation led by trade unions and by the opposition parties, but also by social movement organisations – an opposition that succeeded in its major aim of bringing about the crisis of the Berlusconi government.

This leads us to a third explanation for the peaks of protest events about unemployment. As other types of collective action, they tend to intensify during protest cycles, with alliances between different oppositional actors and movements. In fact, in the early 2000s Italy, as other countries, witnessed a wave of different (heavily media covered) social protests, of which the movement against neoliberal globalisation was the largest example (Della Porta et al. 2006).

From our data, it emerges that protest is not a marginal part of claims making. In fact, protests represent 7.8 per cent of all claims. In particular, 2.7 per cent of these protest actions are demonstrative (public rallies, protest marches), 4.9 per cent are confrontational (occupation, boycott, self-imposed constraints, perturbation of actions by others) and 0.2 per cent are violent (violent demonstrations, limited destruction of property). Protest, however, is not the dominant form of claims making. Public statements represent the most common form of claims reported in the newspaper, and among these declarations in the media, written statements and direct information to the public are the most diffused forms. Political decisions represent 12 per cent of all the claims (most of them as proposal or adoption of new legislation), and only 2.2 per cent of claims consist of conventional political actions (such as judicial action, 0.2 per cent, or participation in committees/consultations/negotiations, 0.6 per cent).

Different actors make their claims in the media in different ways. Violent actions are set up only by unemployed groups and, indeed, these kinds of action are really rare: just 2 cases out of 950 (these cases refer to the protest of Neapolitan unemployed). It is also not surprising that the groups that have used more intensively demonstrative and confrontational actions are labour groups and organisations (precarious workers, people recently made redundant or trade unions, etc.). Neither is it surprising that we do not find the employers' organisations among the actors having recourse to protest since their repertoire of actions usually does not include such a form of activity. Less expected among those who have carried out public acts of dissent is the presence of other civil society actors, such as church representatives or local citizens committees (19.2 per cent of demonstrative protest and 12.8 per cent of confrontational ones are performed by these actors). In particular, civil society actors have protested

through: hunger strikes (several cases of priests protesting against dismissals or against governmental inactivity *vis-à-vis* unemployment); sit-ins (some cases of the 'new global' groups that occupied Fiat offices as a sign of protest against the firm's decision to fire workers); public rallies and marches (several cases of the so-called '*girotondi*' – groups of people adopting a particular symbolic form of protest: dancing hand-in-hand around public buildings like tribunals (on justice policies), schools (educational policies), the public broadcaster RAI (public communication policies), but also around private ones (performing in support of Fiat workers in Turin)). Finally, the only political party that has used a demonstrative form of action is *Rifondazione Comunista*, which organised a protest march against unemployment.

Claims are filtered through the media: in the interviews we asked the main national actors directly about their strategies to influence policy makers. The responses confirm a strong media bias; those actors who rely most on public strategies are less covered by the media. Previous research on the Italian case indicated that Italian social and political actors have used a limited repertoire of actions. In general, in the Italian case 'court strategies' are (moderately) relevant only for the trade unions, whereas other actors devote much more attention and energy – in particular with respect to the 'intermediary actors' – to mobilising the public and to 'internal communication'. The unions have used public mobilisation of affiliates and workers in order to pressure the government effectively. Limited 'unionised' attention has been given to 'media strategies' since, as the representative of the biggest trade union organisation, CGIL, states in our interview (see Appendix, Interview 7): '[W]e do not need a media strategy; journalists come to us if the government makes any proposal.'

Also, in the past, the government has limited its institutional communication with respect to unemployment issues; in fact, quite often until the beginning of the 1990s, the 'quality' of the information available regarding labour policies was very poor since the data was sometimes not even available to the decision makers themselves. To give an example: in the second half of the 1990s, one of the most relevant policies was the so-called 'LSU' (*Lavori socialmente utili*, socially useful jobs) programme. For several years, the government did not know exactly how many people were benefiting from the programme, and this was also the case for numerous other labour policies. Therefore, the only information that was regularly passed over by the government was related to unemployment or employment rates, while other pieces of information regarding specific policies were not always available, at least until recent years (Ferrera & Sacchi 2005).

Social partners (unions and business associations) and parties do play a key role in defining policy goals and instruments since they quite often take part –

more or less formally – in the decision-making process. As expected, at the national level, only on very special occasions are the courts involved in labour policy regulation or implementation, even though in the past a major role has been played by courts that were called by workers and unionists to intervene on specific matters. Political parties have not used the judiciary in order to make their voice heard, preferring either the parliamentary arena (for the governmental parties) or the street (for opposition parties). Finally, the activity of lobbying parliamentary and governmental bodies is of great relevance for both parties and trade unions (see Table 3, which shows the average use of actions by the various actors).

Towards Europeanisation? Not yet (at least, not in the public sphere)

A main question about policy making and the public discourse about it is to what extent national cases have been ‘Europeanised’. In the social science debate, Europeanisation has taken different meaning, indicating the implementation of EU decisions at national level, but also the role of the building of European institutions and identities for national social and political actors (on the Italian case, see Graziano 2004; Della Porta & Caiani 2006). Although the EU institutions have limited competence on unemployment policies per se – since the open method of coordination, the most relevant and comprehensive EU policy tool on this issue, is still heavily based on national actors as regards implementation – there are quite relevant EU competences in other policy domains that affect unemployment policies (first of all: monetary policies).

Our claims analysis offers us information about how often claims had a European scope in terms of claimants, targets, objects (object actors of claims, such as young unemployed, unemployed women, precarious workers, etc.) and

Table 3. The action repertoire used by selected national actors

Action form	Institutional actors	Political actors	Social actors
Media-related	0.70	0.82	0.10
Informing the public	0.00	0.54	0.53
Negotiating/lobbying	0.75	0.80	0.75
Consultation	0.87	0.85	0.92
Court action	0.00	0.50	0.33
Political campaign contributions	n/a	0.70	0.33
Mobilising the public	n/a	0.74	0.67
N	2	10	3

specific policy issues (thematic focus of claims, like employment promotion, unemployment benefits, etc.). As we can see from Table 4, although the policy choice reflects the general fascination of EU institutions with flexibility of the labour market and 'active' policies (such as training), the European dimension is not very important in the public discourse in any of our countries. In the Italian case in particular, only 3.9 per cent of claim makers have a European scope and 7.9 per cent of issues are raised at the EU level, and similar results are scored by the other countries. However, the European level is targeted much more often than the regional and local ones in all countries (apart from Switzerland, because it does not belong to the EU and because of its strong federal structure). In the Italian case, the European level is targeted in the 10.9 per cent of all claims, whereas targeted actors at regional and local level represent respectively 0.9 and 4.3 per cent of all claims. Considering the important role played in the labour field by local political institutions, and especially the Italian regional governments, we could have expected a different result. Moreover, the claims with a European object also score higher than those with a local one.

Our interviews allow better understanding of these results. While in fact local actors seem to ignore the EU level, national ones acknowledge instead European institutions as potentially relevant for unemployment policies (Table 5). For all the interviewees at the national level, the European dimension is becoming increasingly relevant with respect to labour policy. In fact, all of them – except for one who says there is 'some discussion' – indicated that there is a 'lot of discussion' in their own organisation regarding the EU and the European Employment Strategy (EES). Therefore, much discussion regarding the EU is going on, but the European institutions are not considered to be good targets for political action.

Finally, although there are limited opportunities to express 'voice' in the supranational arena, the evaluation of the EES is generally very positive. The idea shared – also by *Rifondazione Comunista* and the CGIL – is that thanks to the EU, the importance of activation policies is better understood and the relevance of labour policy data collection and evaluation has become much more acknowledged than in the past. Nevertheless, some nuances emerge. For instance, the *Gruppo di monitoraggio* (a technical ministerial unit that collects and analyses labour policy data) representative points out that the EES does not sufficiently take into consideration the specificities of Italy (Interview 4), being too rigid in the selection of the European guidelines and policy goals; and the representative of *Rifondazione Comunista* argues that no EES can be effective without a broader Keynesian re-orientation of macroeconomic policy at the European level (Interview 3). In sum, the actors involved in Italian labour policy recognise the influence of a supranational policy and political

Table 4. European versus regional and local scopes of claimant, target, object and issue (percentages)

Countries	Claimant's scopes			Target's scopes			Object's scopes			Issue's scopes		
	EU	Regional/local	EU	Regional/local	EU	Regional/local	EU	Regional/local	EU	Regional/local	EU	Regional/local
France	5.1	2.3/2.4	5.6	1.2/1.8	8.1	2.3/2.3	8.7	2.0/3.0	790			
Germany	2.2	7.5/3.0	2.9	2.6/1.4	2.8	10.0/4.0	2.8	9.7/5.4	3,837			
Italy	3.9	1.6/7.5	10.9	0.9/4.3	8.3	14.3/6.5	7.9	13.6/7.2	950			
United K.	5.0	4.3/4.3	6.3	2.0/4.5	5.6	6.2/19.4	5.5	6.7/19.1	750			
Sweden	4.6	4.5/10.6	5.0	2.4/5.0	5.8	3.8/6.3	4.8	4.8/8.0	584			
Switzerland	1.2	17.4/21.2	1.3	11.7/10.6	1.1	15.3/23.5	0.9	15.6/22.8	2,019			

Source: UNEMPOL dataset.

Table 5. The extent of intra-organisational discussion on the role of EU, different actor types

Actor	Discussion about the EU		
	Lots	Some	None
Policy actor	1	1	0
Intermediary actor	9	1	0
NGOs	2	1	0
Unemployed organisations	–	–	–

Source: UNEMPOL dataset.

arena, but stress that specific national traits of labour policy making remain and probably will remain in the future, maybe in a broader (i.e., European) labour market regulation setting.

Concluding remarks

The analysis of the claims making as well as the interviews with public and private organisations involved in policy making on labour policies offers a quite complex picture of the actors, targets, strategies and frames used in the public debate on unemployment, its causes, consequences and possible remedies in Italy. Moreover, such an analysis of a public debate over an issue that has to be considered as crucial in most European countries' political agendas has several implications worth being considered.

We can summarise some of the main findings beginning with the elements that according to this study favoured a growth in claims making on unemployment. Obviously, public claims about a specific issue tend to increase when such an issue is perceived as urgent – in our case, when the unemployment rate remains high. In fact in Italy, the debates on unemployment (and especially, protest action) have developed in periods of job scarcity, especially in some parts of the country. However, and less obviously, our research shows that the 'objective' relevance of a grievance alone does not predict how and how strongly people will voice their claim. Indeed, our data indicate an intensification of claims making on unemployment that is related to two additional dimensions: the presence of political entrepreneurs and their visibility, which depends also on specific political configurations (like the role of *Rifondazione Comunista* and its veto power on the first Prodi government); and the

development of claims on multiple issues during cycles of protest (in particular, opposition to right-wing government and the spread of wide social struggles that have gone under the name of 'alter-global' mobilisation).

A second important result concerns the actors that make claims – that is, those whose voices succeed in publicly being heard. Our data confirm, as is often the case on distributive issues, the dominance of an 'iron triangle' of well structured organisations of business and labour, interacting with representatives of the relevant national ministries. This dominance is indeed reflected in the debate in the media, where however some – albeit minor – visibility is gained also by other societal actors (such as voluntary associations and social movement organisations).

As in the other European countries considered in the UNEMPOL project, the unemployed themselves rarely appear in the media: their voices have an extremely limited chance to influence policy making on issues that concern them directly, with the exception of some local contexts. In Italy, their complete absence from the national debate is due, on the one side, to the prevailing presence in the representation of the labour interests of other better organised actors such as unions and employers' organisations, and, on the other, on their territorial diffusion, which remains limited to very few Southern areas.

The absence from the national debate of the unemployed themselves has an impact on how public discourses are framed and shaped in a contemporary European democracy. In fact, if normative theories of democracy stress the need for inclusive deliberative processes, our research confirms that in Italy (as well as in contemporary Europe more broadly), access to such public and deliberative arenas still depends heavily on the availability of relevant resources. In order to be able to compete with the major actors, such as governmental agencies, private corporate representatives or unions, for representation and for accessing the public sphere, the unemployed – like other weak actors such as immigrants – either need to resort to nonconventional and violent protest actions or rely on the voices of other civil society actors. These latter may succeed in building up fairly strong advocacy coalitions, as in the case of immigration policy making in Italy (Zincone 2006). However, where such successful coalitions are not created, 'poor' people risk either remaining excluded from the public discourse on issues that most directly affect them, or being included only if they 'shout'. Such an outcome seems to support recent criticism concerning the achievement and the virtues of contemporary participatory democratic models (Rosanvallon 2006).

Another finding of our study regards the forms of claims making – that is, how actors try to make their voices heard in the public discourse. As in other fields, verbal claims dominate the media debate on unemployment (see Della Porta & Caiani (2006) on monetary policy, agriculture, education, pensions,

migration, defence). Protest, however, is also present. At the national level, its visibility increases especially when trade unions oppose massive dismissals, sometimes finding alliances among the local governments and church representatives. At the local level, we found some instances of protest of long-term unemployed, supported by voluntary associations and movement organisations.

A fourth point concerns the degree of Europeanisation that certain issues reach in national debates. Also in this respect, our findings challenge optimistic assumptions about the importance of an emerging European public sphere. In fact, the target of claims making on unemployment remains the nation-state, with limited reference to the European level, which political and social actors recognise instead as a more and more relevant 'substantive' player on labour issues. European institutions are, however, addressed on unemployment more often than in other issue domains (such as immigration) where the EU has more formal competences (at least on border control and, increasingly, security issues; Della Porta & Caiani 2006). EU control over the relevant leverage of monetary policy, as well as the dynamics of 'externalisation' of protest,⁴ might explain why there is a growing focus on EU institutions as addressees of national actors.

Finally, the characteristics of the contentious politics of unemployment as they result from our study also might find a partial explanation in national political opportunity structures. In fact, we have made explicit reference to the so-called 'Southern European model of welfare', based upon the protection of the bread-winner *pater familias* and clientelistic distributions of small subsidies. This interacts with the specific structural conditions of unemployed (mainly concentrated among young people, women and in the Southern regions) who are not strongly protected by the trade unions, making their chances to be strongly heard at the national level very weak – no matter how loudly they 'shout'.

Acknowledgements

The data used in this article have been collected within the UNEMPOL project ('The Contentious Politics of Unemployment in Europe: Political Claim Making, Policy Deliberation and Exclusion from the Labour Market'). The project includes six countries: Britain (study supervised by Paul Statham, University of Leeds), Switzerland (Marco Giugni, University of Geneva), France (Didier Chabanet, University of Lyon), Italy (Donatella della Porta, European University Institute, Florence), Germany (Christian Lahusen, University of Bamberg) and Sweden (Anna Linders, University of Cincinnati and

University of Karlstad). The project is financed by the European Commission (HPSE-CT200100053 UNEMPOL) and the Swiss Federal Office for Education and Science through the Fifth Framework program of research of the EU. We thank all the members of the UNEMPOL research consortium for their contribution to the project. See the project's website for further information: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/ics/euro/unempol/>.

Appendix: Actors interviewed at the national level, May–July 2004

Policy actors:

Gruppo di monitoraggio delle politiche occupazionali, Presidenza del Consiglio (responsible for the monitoring and evaluation unit within the Prime Minister staff, interview 4)

Comitato per il coordinamento delle iniziative occupazionali, Ministry of Labour (responsible for the national Committee for the coordination of labour policies, interview 1)

Intermediary actors:

Responsible for labour market issues, Democratici di Sinistra party, interview 2

Responsible for labour market issues, Rifondazione Comunista party, interview 3

Responsible for labour market issues, Forza Italia party, interview 8

Responsible for labour market issues, Alleanza Nazionale party, interview 5

Responsible for labour market issues, Margherita, interview 9

Responsible for labour market issues, CGIL (trade union), interview 7

Responsible for labour market issues, UIL (trade union), interview 6

Responsible for labour market issues, CISL (trade union), interview 10

Responsible for labour market issues, CUB (trade union), interview 11

Spokesperson, COBAS (trade union), interview 12

NGOs/grassroots

Spokesperson, Forum del Terzo Settore, third sector association, interview 13

Responsible for labour market issues, CARITAS, third sector association, interview 14

Member of National Board, ARCI, third sector association, interview 15

Notes

1. If the use of the daily press as a source of information on protest or public discourse has been criticised on the basis of the selection biases introduced by the rules of journalistic coverage, in our research this risk is limited since we are interested specifically in public claims making.
2. The research results are not published yet. Some preliminary reflections are in Della Porta (2004).

3. Berlusconi comes from Milan, the most important industrial and financial city of Italy.
4. By 'externalisation' of protest we mean protest asking the EU to intervene in order to solve problems at national level (see Chabanet 2002).

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