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Labor conflicts in the Toronto construction industry, 1968–1973. A crossroads of ethnic issues, business innovations, class struggle, and union action

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ABSTRACT

This article concerns a case study in labor history which represents an interesting example of union action in a workers' community characterized by intersections between ethnic and class belonging.

The focus of the article is on labor conflicts in Toronto's construction industry between 1968 and 1973. In that period, the Torontonians residential sector represented a sort of ethnic niche dominated by Italian immigrants, who populated this industry both as workers and as contractors. At the same time, important economic, technological, and organizational innovations formed part of this niche. In particular, it refers to the new Toronto real estate boom and to the introduction of new building techniques such as the drywall technique, or concrete forming, as well as business innovations such as the flying form or the creation of teamwork. This article tells the story of successful unionization in a peculiar industry dominated by continuous formal and informal bargaining. Moreover, the powerful presence of the phenomenon of *mafiosi* and widespread racism made the context still more difficult. In this situation, despite the ambiguities, the final result was the unionization of thousands of workers and the successful signing of collective contracts.

1. Introduction¹

This article concerns a case study in labor history that represents an interesting example of a workers' community characterized by intersections between ethnic and class belonging. It is, moreover, a significant case study of union action in the face of a new reality as a consequence of business innovations, both organizational and technological.

The focus of this article is on labor conflicts and union action in Toronto's construction industry at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. During this period, the residential sector in Toronto represented a sort of ethnic niche dominated by Italian immigrants, who populated this industry both as workers (bricklayers, plasterers, cement finishers, carpenters, laborers, etc.) and as contractors or subcontractors. At the same time, important economic, technological and organizational innovations and transformations formed part of this niche. In particular, this refers to the new real estate boom in Toronto characterized by high-rise neighbourhoods and to the introduction of new building techniques such as drywall or concrete forming, as well as business innovations such as the flying form or the creation of teamwork. This relates the main characteristics and features of labor relations and union action in the industry.²

This article tells an interesting story of successful unionization in a peculiar and complicated industry. Toronto's residential sector in the 1960s and early 1970s was an industry characterized by opportunistic attitudes and a lack of vertical cooperation and integration. It was dominated by continuous formal and informal bargaining, as each building project needed the creation of a temporary coalition of builders and contractors based on the inevitable differences in interest between the different firms who formed the project partnership. In addition, a lack of horizontal integration, an antagonistic culture and conflicting behaviours characterized relationships among the small contractors themselves (Agnoletto, 2017). The powerful presence of *mafiosi* and widespread racism made the context still more difficult. In this situation, despite the ambiguities, the final result was the unionization of thousands of workers and the successful signing of collective contracts.

The successful unionising experience in Toronto construction industry in the 1960s and 1970s is a paradigmatic case study of unionisation processes in an ethnic niche, which deserves to be investigated. It is a local story that presents a combination of interesting features, which in my opinion make it significant for the wider historiographical debate. It was an ethnic economic niche in a capitalistic market featuring a workers' community characterized by strong intersections between ethnic and class belonging, which created controversial but successful union actions in the face of a new reality as a consequence of important business innovations.

I believe that unionization in Toronto's residential sector represents a peculiar case study to analyze the processes by which ethnic identity is socially and politically constructed in a specific economic and social context (Miles, 1984). At the same time, the case study seems to suggest that ethnicity was not just a 'superstructure' that played the expected role of a regulatory process hiding the *real* economic relations, but that it was also the means by which to create class solidarity and to activate processes of unionization among Italian workers. The co-presence of ethnic and class identities described in this article finds a possible interpretative synthesis in the concept of 'ethclass', which combines both ethnic group and social class characteristics (Gordon, 1964, p. 51). For instance, it helps to highlight the conditions of stronger exploitation and long-term disadvantageous stereotypes that characterized the residential industry in Toronto during the period investigated in this article, as well as in many other ethnic niches.

This case study is an example of what Vecoli (1993, p. 294) has defined as the intersection between class and ethnicity, which is 'the locus of the most interesting and important work' both in labor history and immigration history. In this perspective, Toronto's residential sector at the end of the 1960s was a paradigmatic example of a situation where 'class and ethnicity have been among the most powerful sources of group solidarities and identities in twentieth century America'.

The approach proposed in this article has also been explicitly influenced by works such as those edited in the 1980s both by Hall (1980) and the group from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University (CCCS, 1982; See also Solomos, 1989). They have considered ethnic identity not just as a process of regulation operated by the state or capitalism, but, on the contrary, collective (and class) identities can act through ethnic belongings. I have considered these approaches to find a balance between class and ethnic reductionism. Indeed, the experience in the Toronto construction industry shows, on the one hand, the weakness of post-modernist or post-structuralist interpretations of immigrant economic behaviour, but on the other hand, it has also shown the persistence of ethnicity as a factor that can influence employer and worker attitudes.

From this perspective, the analysis of Italian unionization in Toronto's construction industry is also an occasion to confront the mainstream approaches to ethnic unionization in North America. We know that the spread of many experiences of ethnic unionization in North America makes it clear that Toronto's construction industry was not an isolated case and confirms the idea that the persistence of ethnicity was a factor affecting the history of workers' movements. For example, Luconi (2008, p. 126) has highlighted the spread of 'Italian locals' within the industrial unions as a consequence of the difficulties Italian workers faced in becoming integrated in the 'American' locals. Significant examples of Italian locals were Local 48 of the Italian Cloakmakers and Local 89 of

the Dress and Waist Makers for the ILGWU or Local 63 of the Coatmakers and Local 122 of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (Tirelli, 1991, pp. 1–3; Zappia, 2000, p. 327).

In the literature, the major interpretative questions on the process of ethnicization in American unionism concern the roles played by two aspects: the environment of anti-immigrant discrimination that often characterized the host society and the so-called ethnic retention – that is, the survival of feelings of ethnic belonging within the ethnic communities even in the second and third generations. According to Luconi (2008, p. 125), the retention of a strong Italian consciousness caused significant drawbacks for the development of the Italian-American labour movement by interfering with the spread of working-class solidarity across the lines of national origins. The foundation of Italian locals did, however, result from the marginalization of Italian-Americans within the labour movement in North America, as happened among many other minorities that were not of Anglo-Saxon heritage (Asher, 1982; Cartosio, 1983; Collomp, 1998; Martellone, 1973, 1980).

At the same time, the case study of the Toronto construction industry investigated in this article also shows aspects reminiscent of James R. Barrett's approach based on the concept of 'Americanization from the Bottom Up' for the American working class (Barrett, 1992). For many construction workers with foreigner (mainly Italian) roots in Toronto, the Locals represented the tool for a process of 'gradual acculturation' and 'socialization in working-class environments and contexts'. In Barrett's words, 'these settings provided immigrants with alternatives to the world view and the values advocated in programs sponsored by employers and government' (Barrett, 1992, pp. 998–1000).

The coexistence of both discriminatory and integrative approaches, as well as both class-ridden and assimilationist views, towards new immigrants within the trade unions was a major feature that is also apparent in the construction industry in post-WWII Toronto. The experience of unionization investigated in this article represents a peculiar case study for testing the relationships between the processes of urban proletarianization and unionization on one side and class or ethnic identities in an urban market economy on the other.

The complexity of the issues involved has required a dynamic approach that links different factors. This article has been an attempt to propose a non-static, structural micro-history approach based on the analysis of the context (the booming residential industry in Toronto and related business innovations) combined with the identification of the ways ethnicity and class-belonging continued to play a role in the history of the workers in the Toronto construction ethnic niche, and in particular in their experiences of unionization. This means that ethnicity mattered, although certainly it was not the primordial and immutable characteristic theorized by Edward Shils (1957) in his traditional 'naturalist' approach.

A complex combination of negotiations, social processes and invented ethnicization has emerged, that, put together, created a sort of ethnic influence that affected the structural and class relationships in the Toronto construction industry, as well as the industrial relations and the unions' strategies and conflicts between the 1960s and 1970s.

2. Toronto's construction industry

From 1941 to 1971, Toronto's economy was marked by a constantly increasing labor demand: in this period, close to one million jobs were created, and in the subsequent decade, from 1971 to 1981, the Metro Toronto labor force increased by more than 400,000 (Simerl & Goldfinger, 1982, p. 117). However, the characteristics of this booming labor force underwent dramatic changes.

Immediately after World War II, Toronto was a typical industry-based economy. In 1951, the local labor market was dominated by transformative industries, such as metal and machinery (73,295 workers), textiles and clothing (28,809 workers), chemical and minerals (21,256 workers), and construction (36,669 workers). In the following decades, the importance of the industrial sectors in the local labor market changed dramatically. The data show that, between 1941 and 1971, while the textiles and clothing industries showed a growth of just 27 percent of their labor force, the metal and machinery industries grew by 249.7 percent, the chemical and minerals industries by

341.9 per cent, and, above all, the construction sector labor force grew by 375.1 percent (Simerl & Goldfinger, 1982, pp. 23–24).

At the national level, between 1961 and 1972 the construction industry saw an increase of 130.4 percent, while in Ontario it increased by 127 per cent (Haythorne, 1973, pp. 4–14). In 1972 17 billion CAD was spent on construction of all kinds, accounting for about 6 percent of the GNP (Economic Council of Canada, 1974, p. 6), showing an impressive increase in absolute terms, although there was a decrease in the relative importance of the industry in the national economy.

The boom in the construction industry also meant impressive growth in the demand for labor. For the whole of Canada in 1951, the number of people employed in this industry was 350,896, while in 1961 there were 431,093 workers, an increase of 22.8 percent (Goldenberg & Crispo, 1968, p. 14). During the same period, the number of workers employed in the Toronto construction industry grew from 35,701 to 49,174 (Iacovetta, 1992, pp. 214–217), while in 1971 it was 75,525 (Simerl & Goldfinger, 1982, p. 24).

In 1967, the first 32-storey apartment in St. James Town was completed and fifteen more towers were already scheduled: this was the new Toronto real estate boom characterized by new high-rise neighborhoods (Wismer, 1980, pp. 121–122). This new approach to residential buildings needed enormous investment; it also required the introduction of new building techniques, such as drywall or concrete forming, a consequence of the combination of fewer skilled workers and cheaper materials and techniques.

In particular, the drywall technique was based on gypsum, which eliminated the need for plastering the interior (Toppan, 2003, p.122). It was a less labor-intensive method which pushed many plasterers, both contractors and workers, out of business. Concrete forming, instead, represented a definitive challenge to the traditional organization of the labor market in the residential sector managed by trade unions. In particular, it implied the employment of squads of unskilled workers who substituted the traditional trades, each of those with its Union's local to represent the workers (Wismer, 1980, p. 123).

About 3,000 workers were employed in the concrete forming industry, including laborers, carpenters, iron workers, cement finishers, and crane operators (Toppan, 2003, p. 124). This industry was a sort of ethnic economic niche dominated by Italian immigrants among workers, contractors, and employers. They were part of a mass of newcomers who made Toronto an important destination for Italian immigrants after World War II: between 1951 and 1961, close to 90,000 Italians settled in Toronto, while in the following decade, 72,000 more arrived (Iacovetta, 1992).

This important growth of the Italian presence meant a process of progressive Italianization of the city. In 1951, Italians made up just 2.5 percent of the total population, while in 1961 they represented 7.7 percent and in 1971 10.3 percent, having by this time replaced Jews as Toronto's largest non-British ethnic group (Iacovetta, 1992).

Since the 1950s, a significant proportion of new Toronto's construction industry labor force was male Italian immigrants. Between 1951 and 1961, the number of Italians employed in the industry grew threefold, from 3,572 to 15,560, representing one-third of the city's total construction work force (Agnoletto, 2014).

Moreover, construction workers formed 35 percent of the entire Italian laboring population in Toronto in 1951, and 36 percent in 1961 (Iacovetta, 1992, pp. 214–217). In particular, Italian males worked in the residential sector, the house and apartment field, a specific section of the construction industry. Angelo Principe writes that, at the beginning of the 1960s, over 15,000 Italians were employed in this sector as bricklayers, laborers, carpenters, plasterers, and cement finishers (Principe, 2003, p. 5). Moreover, Iacovetta (1992, p. 156) estimates that the Italian presence in the residential field was as high as 65 percent in the sector as a whole, and 85 percent for certain trades such as bricklaying.

In the 1960s, new sectors of the Toronto residential industry, such as the concrete forming industry, were considered 'Italian niches'. To describe this reality, on 4 November 1965, during the popular radio program *The Voice of Labor*, Marino Toppan, a union leader in the Toronto

construction industry, spoke about the hundreds of Italian workers who worked hard to nail the planks for armatures, to lay the iron bars, or to lay the cement on each crane tower that was erected high in the Toronto sky (Toppan Papers, November 4, 1965).

The Italianization of Toronto's construction industry also affected the unions. A paradigmatic example was represented by the so-called Irish to Italian 'transition in power' experienced by the Laborers' Local 183 (City Builders, 2019). In April 1968, Biagio Di Giovanni, a recently ousted member of Local 183's executive board, had been removed from his executive position and banned from holding office for life. An internal trial condemned him for writing an article in an Italian-Canadian newspaper accusing the Irish-led executive of discriminating against the local's 2,500 Italian members, who made up the vast majority of its 3,100 membership (*Dismissal protested*, 1968). A week later, on 19 April, about 300 Italian members of Local 183 battled with 200 English-speaking and Portuguese members during a union meeting at the Labor Lyceum on Spadina Avenue, where Di Giovanni was to be reinstated as a board member. According to the Local's leader, the Irish Gerry Gallagher, what had happened was 'a racial demonstration against those who don't speak Italian, caused by a few Italians who refused to keep quiet when English was spoken. Finally some English guy got fed up' (*Firing sparks*, 1968). On 19 May, another meeting was held and Di Giovanni was reinstated on the executive board after signing a public retraction a week earlier, but the new 'racial equilibrium' was highlighted (City Builders, 2019). In the summer of 1969, the Italian union leader Stefanini replaced Gallagher as Local 183's Business Manager, and to Gallagher himself was given the largely ceremonial role of President.

On the employers' side, a paradigmatic example of the new protagonists in the Toronto construction industry was Nicola (Nick) Di Lorenzo. He was an Italian immigrant, who arrived in Canada in 1954 when he was twenty years old. Initially, he worked for some Italian small contractors in the residential industry, and soon became a foreman. In 1958, he founded his own company in concrete forming and started a successful although controversial business history. At the end of the 1960s, his company was considered the largest in the residential field. Two business innovations were at the heart of his success: the flying form and the creation of teamwork (Public Hearings, 1973a, 7500–7543). Both these innovations had a dramatic impact on Toronto's residential sector as a whole.

The flying form was a method of scaffolding that could be reused from floor to floor as the building progressed, so greatly improving efficiency (Wisner, 1980, p. 123). The creation of teamwork implied new organization of the labor force. It meant employing men who were classified with different skills (such as carpenters or laborers) in a group of ten to eighteen men who worked together day by day. The point was that each of them was supposed to perform in turn all the various tasks involved in concrete forming (Public Hearings, 1973a, 7500–7543). In practice, a man could work one day as a carpenter and the next as a laborer.

3. The concrete forming campaign

Di Lorenzo's innovative organization of the labor force represented a shock for the Toronto construction industry. In particular, the teamwork approach was a direct challenge to the unions' control of the labor market, based on a segmentation characterized by jurisdictional barriers managed by local craftsmen.

Traditionally, the work concerned five unions, all claiming jurisdiction, and in theory a concrete forming contractor had to bargain with all five since

rod-setters placed steel rods to reinforce the concrete; carpenters built the wooden forms for the concrete pour; crane operators hoisted the buckets of concrete into place; cement finishers completed the job and labourers cleaned up the site (Wisner, 1980, p. 137).

The problem was that the new organizational apparatus created a new situation in the field: the point was that although De Lorenzo's concrete forming team used five separate skills, none required an accomplished craftsman.

Moreover, at the end of the 1960s, no union had been able to organize these men, most newly arrived Italian immigrants. Many of them were hired by Di Lorenzo who, in order to avoid union interference, resorted to many kinds of strategy: for example, his company operated a number of subsidiaries, and as soon as one was organized he would shut it down and start another (Stefanini, 2019, p. 72) to avoid having to comply with agreements signed with unions and workers. As Enzo Ragno, an organizer of Local 506, explained, Di Lorenzo:

changed names of his own companies [...] so it was hard to certify [...] So once certified under a certain Nick Di Lorenzo's company he changed to a different name (Public Hearings, 1973b, 7433).

At the same time, it was also true that the successful business and organizational innovations introduced by Di Lorenzo needed a new unions' approach. The problem for the unions was to identify a strategy that took into account the peculiar characteristics of this sector, the concrete forming industry.

A central point was the concept of 'multi-trade bargaining' that, in order to be implemented, needed a new organizational pattern, meaning a new coordinating structure. In this perspective, a first Council of Concrete Forming Trade Unions was created in 1965 by the Carpenters', Iron Workers', Operating Engineers', and Laborers' Commercial local members of the Toronto Building Trades Council (City Builders, 2019). At the beginning of 1968, following the failure of previous attempts to unionize concrete formers, the five international unions involved in concrete forming work agreed to create the new Council of Forming Trade Unions (CFTU) (Wismer, 1980, p. 138). It was an alliance to enable organizers of all these unions to sign up workers regardless of their trade. It was an attempt to overcome the segmentation of the labor force by introducing a pattern of multi-craft unionism. The Council immediately started a campaign of unionization (Toppan, 2003, p. 125):

After a series of meetings between the unions to discuss strategy, the organizers started to visit construction sites where concrete forming workers were employed, attempting either to sign up men or at least get their names and addresses. In the evening, all of us would meet at a designated place (a restaurant, shopping mall or union office) to exchange information, compare lists, and consult maps. Then we would begin visiting the workers at their homes to try to persuade them to join our omnibus union. We had to move fast if we were to reach the men before they went to bed. Eight to ten visits per night was the norm.

The campaign faced the difficult conditions which characterized this industry. Anonymous threatening phone calls to some organizers, as well as threats against the workers who signed up for the unions, were the norm (Toppan, 2003, p. 126). However, the organizational drive was successful, and by spring 1968 contractors were already meeting the Council's representatives (Wismer, 1980, p. 138).

It was then that old divisions inside the workers' movement in the residential sector reappeared. It happened that a union outside the Council – Local 562 of the Wood and Metal Lathers' International Union, a small local union related to the plastering industry – began to unionize concrete forming workers. Its leader was Gus Simone, an Italian immigrant who reached Toronto from Pescara in 1954 when he was sixteen years old. For a period he had then worked as a construction worker in Calgary and New York, and finally he had returned to work as a union organizer in the middle of the 1960s (Public Hearings, 1973c, 127–398). Simone was a controversial union leader: while he had been considered very successful and capable at unionizing the workers, his bargaining approach had been questioned in the past. For instance, in 1968, he had just signed a contract with the Metro Lathing Contractors Association for their residential work (Royal Commission on Certain Sectors of the Building Industry, 1974, p. 11), which cut wages and required a longer working week and less vacation time (Wismer, 1980, p. 131). Many other union organizers thought he was too employer-oriented, and when he began his campaign in concrete forming, the

Council wrote an open letter which warned concrete forming workers (Council of Forming Trades Unions, 1968):

If you have joined the Lathers' Union you have been once again the victim of your employers' maneuvers to avoid you being properly organized and represented by us.

As an apparent paradox, Simone began his venture into the concrete forming industry in 1968 together with two former trade unions' leaders, Bruno Zanini and Charles Irvine, who were considered by many too radical in their approach. In fact, Zanini and Irvine had been protagonists in the two illegal Italian strikes which in 1960 and 1961 characterized the Torontonians residential sector, when they had been leaders of the so-called Brandon Union Group (BUG), an independent trades union which, for the first time, was able to organize the Italian workers in that sector. The 1960 and 1961 strikes, and the BUG experience, were a turning point in the history of labor conflicts in Toronto's construction industry (on the 1960–1961 strikes and the BUG experience, see Agnoletto, 2014, 2016; Iacovetta, 1992; Stefanini, 2019; Toppan, 2003).

When he met Simone's union in 1968, Zanini had just been released from prison, where he had spent three years following a conviction for theft in 1965 (Wisner, 1980, pp. 138–143). He looked for a job as an organizer but, despite his indisputable capability and his ongoing popularity among Italian workers, unions did not want a man with his criminal record and his unionist past in the irregular BUG. Gus Simone, however, called on Zanini in a plan to capture the concrete forming industry. It was a declaration of war against the Council of Forming Trades Unions. In fact, according to the rules of the international unions and the usual labor policy, Simone's local, being related just to lathers, did not have the right to claim jurisdiction in this industry. Nevertheless, with the help of Charles Irvine, who was the leader of the plasterers' local in the residential building construction industry and who provided financial support, Simone launched a concrete forming division in Local 562. In this way, he created a sort of unitary union organization for all the workers of this sector, regardless of their specialization. Zanini began a successful campaign, as many workers, remembering Zanini's role in the BUG, signed up for Simone's local. In fact, Zanini knew where to meet with them. As he recalled: 'I went out to different places where Italians go to dance' (Public Hearings, 1973d, 6780).

At the same time, Simone was successful in convincing contractors to sign an agreement, Nick Di Lorenzo among them. The agreement was signed on 4 November 1968 between Local 562 and the new Forming Contractors Association, representing the first attempt at a unitary association of contractors and subcontractors in concrete forming (Royal Commission on Certain Sectors of the Building Industry, 1974, p. 25). As the contractor Marco de Luca explained, from the employers' point of view, the agreement with Simone was an attempt to bring 'peace in the industry' (Public Hearings, 1973e, 584–599).

Undoubtedly this agreement seemed to be an extraordinary success: it was the first contract for workers in the concrete forming industry in Toronto (*Approvato per acclamazione*, 1968). On the other hand, the agreement was strongly contested by the locals that had formed the CFTU, who argued that the contract terms were clearly pro-employer. According to the description given by Marino Toppan, who in that period supported the Council, the agreement had many attractive features for the contractors who signed it: for example, Simone set up forming as a single trade, eliminating the five unions by simply reclassifying the men into categories (A, B, C, and D) commensurate to skill, with wages which ranged from 2.75 CAD per hour to 3.75 CAD per hour, but without any rules about who would determine to which category a worker belonged (Toppan, 2003, p. 127). Moreover, according to Toppan, the contract lasted for five years, which meant a five-year no strike guarantee. Finally, the Council maintained that Simone had signed the contract without presenting it to the workers first, as he should have done.

On 8 November 1968, some contractors who did not belong to the Forming Contractors Association, since they did not accept the leadership of their competitor Nick Di Lorenzo, signed

a different contract with the Council in an attempt to limit the influence of Simone's local. This contract provided for the traditional classification of trades as carpenters, rodmen, cement finishers, and laborers (Royal Commission on Certain Sectors of the Building Industry, 1974, p. 26). This contract was signed in particular by the concrete forming contractors Leader Structures (owned by Aurelio Bianchini) and Fran Kiri Forming (owned by Kiriakos Vlahos), two important business rivals of Nick Di Lorenzo (City Builders, 2019).

The unions that belonged to the Council also questioned Simone's style in his approach to employers. For example, according to the description given by Catherine Wismer, Simone's relationship with Nick Di Lorenzo was very ambiguous, since this leading Italian contractor openly pushed his workers to join Simone's local, seeing in it the opportunity for a friendly union. In her book, Wismer maintains that Di Lorenzo gave his collaborator, another Italian immigrant, John D'Alimonte, the task of signing up his companies' workers. This unlikely campaign was well summarized by D'Alimonte himself: 'I told them, you'll have to join the union or I'll have to let you go' (Wismer, 1980, p. 142).

Another source seems to confirm Wismer's picture of Simone's Local. George Orla, the director of Di Lorenzo's companies, has recalled how Di Lorenzo himself, who until 1968 had been strongly against unions, supported Local 562 in organizing his companies (Public Hearings, 1973f, 2270). As a result, the organizing campaign took just a few days.

The 1968 agreement between contractors and Local 562, and the action of Simone's Local in general, created an unacceptable situation for the international unions, since it did not respect the jurisdictional rules which traditionally regulated the unionization process in the construction industry. In order to act against this agreement the CFTU filed charges against what they considered a 'sweetheart' agreement with the Labor Relations Board, which promptly ruled it illegal (Toppan, 2003, p. 127).

In the following months, the situation worsened: a series of threatening notes, along with acts of sabotage, hit some contractors (Another death, 1969; *Contractors: Injuries and sabotage*, 1969; *Zanini: No terror or extortion on our part*, 1969). As the *Sunday Sun* reported: 'Union war breeds fear and violence' (*Union war*, 1969). Between August 1968 and February 1969, nine incidents were reported at the sites of those contractors whose employees were not organized by Simone's Local 562 (Royal Commission on Certain Sectors of the Building Industry, 1974, p. 33). Police inspector Sworn Dorigo declared: 'in each case the victim was a concrete forming company that was close to Local 562' (Public Hearings, 1973g, 5844–5920). It was about that time that a special task force was formed by the Ontario Provincial Police and the Metropolitan Toronto Police, with the purpose of stopping such incidents.

However, things changed when Local 183, which did not belong to the Council, entered the fray. This local was part of the Laborers' International Union and it was run by John Stefanini, who had already played an important role in the 1960–61 events. It was part of the same international union as Local 562.

LIUNA (Laborers' International Union of North America)'s Washington office transferred jurisdiction over Metro Toronto's forming laborers from its commercial Local 506 (a CFTU member) to Local 183 (City Builders, 2019). This was part of a complex strategy. In fact, as John Stefanini writes in his memoir, the big international unions of carpenters, iron workers, and laborers would not accept that their jurisdiction could be usurped by the smallest of them, the Lathers International Union, which represented only 10,000 members in all of North America, while the others each represented hundreds of thousands of workers (Stefanini, 2019, 73). They asked the Building and Construction Trades Department of the AFL-CIO in Washington to convince the lathers, meaning Simone's Local 562, to leave concrete forming in Toronto.

In May 1969, a meeting was held in Chicago, attended by, among others, Peter Fosco, general president of LIUNA; Sol Maso, general president of Lathers International; Nick Di Lorenzo; Gus Simone; and John Stefanini (Stefanini, 2019, p. 74). At that meeting, the lathers formally renounced the right to represent the concrete forming workers in Toronto. Local 183

would hire Simone's three representatives, including Zanini, guaranteeing them jobs. In this way, Local 183 would become the Toronto concrete forming union representative for all trades (John Stefanini, personal interview, 2011). In fact, Local 183 could claim jurisdiction over the entire industry, since it originally represented trades more important than the lathers of Local 562, and could therefore now bring in all the workers who had been unionized in Zanini's organizing campaign.

However, the Chicago meeting did not resolve the situation. Bruno Zanini, who had not been invited, did not accept the agreement and decided to break away from the international unions and create an independent Canadian union in the concrete forming industry (John Stefanini, personal interview, 2011). In this, he had the support of his old colleague, Charles Irvine (Wismer, 1980, p. 150): a sort of new BUG was on the way. On 1 June 1969 at Lansdowne Theatre in front of 1,200 workers, mostly Italians, Zanini accused the unions of selling out the workers (Drea & Dodds, 1969):

So in Chicago, they decided what union you were and they didn't even ask you [...] Do they think they're selling cattle? [...] How do you sell people in Toronto at a meeting in Chicago?

At the end of the meeting, Zanini won a unanimous vote to break away and form a Canadian union, the Canadian Concrete Forming Union (Local 1), with an all-Italian leadership: Bruno Zanini as president, John D'Alimonte as vice-president, and Enzo Ragno as secretary-treasurer (Royal Commission on Certain Sectors of the Building Industry, 1974, p. 27).

At the same time, other sectors of the Toronto construction industry were experiencing important events which showed the possibility of gaining new contracts. On 9 June 1969, thousands of crane operators, electricians, iron workers, laborers, and lathers returned to work after being locked out since 1 May in an industry-wide shutdown (City Builders, 2019). In fact, in the previous days, their unions had ratified new collective agreements. For example, the Operating Engineers' Local 793 gained a 1.18 CAD hourly wage increase, the Laborers' Local 506 a 1.15 CAD increase, the Electrical Workers' Local a 1.50 CAD increase, and the Lathers' Local 97 a 1.35 CAD increase. On 22 June 1969, the Plumbers' Local 46 also ratified a new collective agreement which gave a 7 CAD hourly wage increase, the largest ever in the industry (City Builders, 2019).

In the concrete forming sector, Zanini and his new union immediately started a campaign for a new contract (Wismer, 1980, pp. 151–152). The problem was that the contractors, and Di Lorenzo in particular, did not want to recognize the new union. To break the company's resistance, Zanini organized strong picket lines on all Di Lorenzo projects, which paralyzed everything. As a result, on 16 July Di Lorenzo signed a new contract and the rest of the contractors immediately followed. It was an enormous victory for Zanini. Compared with Simone's policy, he had used an opposite strategy. Instead of friendly relationships with employers, he chose a conflictual approach reminiscent of the BUG and he got results. In comparison with Simone's contract, Zanini's raised wages, the new rates to be in effect within two weeks, and increased benefits and vacation pay (Irvine Papers, 1969). Apparently, the new strategy was successful. But it had as a consequence a new 'union war' (Vitale, 1969) in the concrete forming industry that lasted from 1969 to 1971.

An alliance between Local 183, the CFTU, and the Building Trade Council was created to face the challenge of Zanini's independent union. This alliance immediately called for an illegal strike in order to organize the entire sector, establish uniform wage rates, and force apartment builders to use only those contractors who hired union members belonging to the Council (Welling, 1969; *Zanini: They don't want a Canadian union to exist*, 1969). On 29 August 1969, Teamsters' Local 230, which represented 850 ready-mix concrete truck drivers, called an illegal strike against the suppliers in metropolitan Toronto (City Builders, 2019). The goal was to convince apartment builders not to deal with subcontractors who hired any of Zanini's independent Local 1. On 11 September 1969, Toronto police prevented 300 members of Zanini's Local 1 from invading the strike headquarters of Operating Engineers' Local 793, which supported the strike against Zanini's contract (City Builders, 2019).

A week later, the Toronto Building Trades Council reached a deal with six apartment builders: Meridian Property Management, Greenwin Property Management, Cadillac Development Corporation, Heathcliffe Development, Belmont Construction, and Goldlist Construction. This agreement failed to eliminate Zanini's Local 1, however, since developers refused to include concrete. The strike ended in September 1969, having failed to destroy Zanini's union (*Zanini claims victory, 1969*).

The Council began to use new weapons. In an open letter to 'Our Friends, the Concrete Forming Workers of Toronto', it accused Zanini of being involved in fraud and collusion with employers (Irvine Papers, 1969). Twice the Ontario Labor Relations Board refused to certify the right of Zanini's union to bargain for its members (Toppan Papers, 1970). As a consequence, Zanini merged his union with a Canadian union, the Canadian Union of Construction Workers, led by John Meiorin (*Zanini men spurn, 1970*), and thus obtained the legal certification.

It was in autumn 1970, when Zanini finalized a contract with one of the most important concrete forming companies, Acu-Forming Limited, that a new kind of attack emerged. A few days before the decisive meeting between Zanini and the contractor to sign the contract, Morton Shulman, a Member of the Provincial Parliament for the traditionally pro-worker New Democratic Party, made a speech claiming that the Mafia had organized a phony union in the construction industry and that Zanini was the front man of that union (Debates, 1970; *Shulman: Phony union, 1970*; *Shulman accuses: Zanini, 1970*). The speech won Shulman front page headlines the next day and, as a result, a good agreement with improved wages and conditions went unsigned. Shulman's speech represented a definitive step in the process of destroying the Canadian (and Italian) Zanini's independent union of concrete forming workers. According to Wismer's book, Bruno Zanini explained later: 'People wanted to get away from me!' (Wismer, 1980, p. 157).

Following the failure of Zanini's independent union, a headline appeared in the conservative newspaper *Globe and Mail*: 'Union war is declared' (1971). The Council and Local 183 on one side, supported by the Washington international headquarters, faced Charles Irvine's local and John Meiorin's independent union on the other. In fact, Irvine tried to use his plasterers' union to continue Zanini's action, and Zanini himself helped him as an organizer (*Trades Council declares, 1971*). As a consequence, on 8 March 1971, the Toronto Building Trades Council expelled Irvine's locals (the Residential Plasterers Local 117, Residential Cement Masons Local 172, Commercial Plasterers Local 48, and Commercial Cement Masons Local 598) accusing them of invading the field of other locals (*Trades Council declares open war on Irvine's union, 1971*; *Union organizer, 1971*).

Shulman's allegations of Mafia connections marked the reopening of the union war, but it also represented a paradigmatic example of the role played by ethnic-related stereotypes in social relations. In this case, for example, the Italianity of a large proportion of the workers played a role. During a local meeting on 15 March 1971, Charles Irvine, claiming that neither he nor Zanini had Mafia connections, accused Morton Shulman of 'smearing the whole Italian community by alleging they did' (*Construction union leaders, 1971*). On 15 April 1971, the same Irvine alleged that a man from the Mafia had approached him and had proposed help to bring together union factions as a sort of intermediary in union affairs (*Union boss Irvine, 1971*). Irvine maintained that this *mafioso* was sent by his former ally, Simone.

While the concrete forming industry was still experiencing this union war, other sectors of Toronto's construction industry succeeded in obtaining new contracts. Between July and September 1971, the roofers' section of the Sheet Metal Workers Local 30 went on strike to demand wage increases from 25 contractors in the Toronto Construction Association. After four weeks, they signed an agreement that provided a 2.07 CAD hourly wage increase (City Builders, 2019). Between January and March 1972, it was the turn of the Iron Workers' Local 721 to go on strike. The ten-week strike resulted in a 1.73 CAD hourly increase (City Builders, 2019).

Finally, there were new achievements in the concrete forming sector. In 1971, there was a definitive turning point. Local 183 of the Laborers' International Union dissolved its ties with the Council and started to campaign on its own. John Stefanini was able to obtain support for

Local 183 from men working in the concrete forming industry, and by the end of the year they had a contract for all the workers in the industry (John, 2011). Stefanini has recalled how this result was also made possible by the collaboration of a group of Italian contractors, such as Vito Bianchini from Friuli, Domenico Mesiti from Calabria, Guerrino Virilli from Campania, and Antonio Sabato and Italo Cirone from Rome. In the following months, both Irvine and the Council were convinced by Washington to accept the jurisdiction of Local 183 over the whole concrete forming sector (Wisner, 1980, pp. 161–162). In autumn 1971, during a meeting at the Lansdowne Theatre, Zanini disbanded his local (John Stefanini, personal interview, 2011).

To achieve these results, John Stefanini introduced an absolute novelty in the residential building construction industry: instead of contracting with a multitude of contractors and sub-contractors, he signed agreements directly with the apartment builders. In particular, Stefanini was able to make a deal with the five most important apartment building companies in Toronto: Meridian, Greenwin, Cadillac, Belmont, and Del Zotto (John Stefanini, personal interview, 2011). There remained the difficulty of convincing contractors to respect this deal. To solve this problem, in 1973, Stefanini was able to obtain a clause in the contract with the builders, that they would work only with contractors who respected the agreement with Local 183. This was a fundamental step in the process of overcoming the wild competition which had characterized the residential industry until then. In 1974, Local 183 signed a contract with the associations of concrete forming contractors and sub-contractors, which, in addition to wage increases, ensured a comprehensive welfare plan (Wisner, 1980, p. 184).

In 1974, Local 183 was also able to sign an agreement with workers in the house basement industry, the first in the history of this sector (John Stefanini, personal interview, 2011). This was another segment of the construction industry dominated by Italian contractors, the most important being the companies Tru Wall owned by Lenny Ursini and Star Wall owned by Luigi Aceto and Vince D'Onofrio. As a consequence of the campaign and the contract, more than 1,000 new workers joined Local 183.

Stefanini won the union war in the construction industry against both Zanini's idea of an independent union and the idea of the traditional craft union principle supported by the Council. Moreover, Local 183 succeeded in the process of unionizing and winning contracts for this construction industry niche.

4. Transcripts of public hearings of the Waisberg commission: portraits of industrial relations in an ethnic niche

The concrete forming campaign described above took place in the context of the Torontonian construction industry, a peculiar sector of the labor and business market. As I have already explained, it had the features of an ethnic economic niche, dominated by Italian immigrants. In the words of T. Mas, a former Italian contractor in the residential industry, this seemed to be a good setting for both contractors and workers (Sidlofsky, 1969, p. 217). The former could easily find a low-cost labor force, while for the latter (including unskilled workers), this kind of industry could be an opportunity for social mobility:

We would take a man on a job for a day and if he was good, we would keep him or if not, let him go [...] there was no union, no minimum wages, and no going rate. It was absolutely good for us; we could pay almost anything we want. It was terrific for the guys too. Had to have guts, though. He could work a day or a couple here, a day or a couple there, and before you know, in a couple months, he was a good bricklayer (Sidlofsky, 1969).

The problem was that, if this kind of situation created the conditions for access to the post-WWII Toronto labor market for many Italian immigrants, it also gave rise to many very dramatic and negative consequences for the workers. In fact, this market is often described as a 'jungle' by the protagonists. From this perspective, an effective description of the workers' conditions in the residential sector was provided by the Italian union organizer Bruno Zanini (Wisner, 1980, p. 47):

What is a jungle? If you walk for two feet, the lion eats you. The whole thing was wrong! Safety – forget it! Don't even talk about it. The scaffolding, the shoring, if those things caved in on you – you've had it! I don't know how the hell to put it fancy. Nobody cared. The pay was what you could get. And who could they complain to? They were afraid: afraid of losing their jobs, afraid of being deported – and you'd better believe that!

In particular, the threat of deportation was a real risk for many Italian workers. Interviews with first generation Italian immigrants show that, although formally they had arrived as legal immigrants and they were classified as such in the official database, many of them had resorted to subterfuge or false documents, such as lying on their immigration papers or avoiding obligations to their sponsors. In this situation, employers and builders could exploit the fears of many newcomers.

This 'jungle' worked as a combination of exploitation and illegality, on the one hand, together with manifestations of business abilities and hardworking attitudes on the other. The success of many Italian companies, such as De Lorenzo's, was the result of a *'disponibilità al sacrificio'* [readiness to sacrifice] and of entrepreneurship attitudes, the so-called *'ambizione di mettersi in proprio'* [the ambition to set up one's own business] shown by many Italian immigrants (Gino Cucchi, personal interview, 2011). At the same time, many workers remember that the contractors exploited the *paesani 'come bestie dall'alba al tramonto'* [like beasts from sunrise to sunset] (Fulvio Florio, personal interview, 2011), and so *'noi italiani lavoravamo come muli'* [we Italians worked like mules] (Franco Cieri, personal interview, 2011). The former construction worker and union leader John Stefanini summarized the situation of Italian workers in the post-WWII Toronto residential sector with the word 'slavery' (John Stefanini, personal interview, 2011).

In this context, it is no surprise to learn that the co-presence of Italian employers and workers in the same niche produced class conflicts within the Italian group. In the memories of many workers, the Italian contractors were *'i peggiori'* [the worst] (Fulvio Florio, personal interview, 2011), and in fact it was Italian contractors that *'ci dava calci nel sedere'* [gave us a kick up the backside] (Pio Drudi, personal interview, 2011), so, if possible, it was better not to work with them but with other (Canadian) contractors (Giuseppe Venditti, personal interview, 2011) who *'ci hanno sempre rispettato'* [have always respected us] (Dario Berardi, personal interview, 2011).

At the beginning of the 1970s, this reality was the stage for dramatic events.

On 23 August 1972, Bruno Zanini was shot in the legs by two men while he was in the basement garage of his apartment building (*Hanno sparato*, 1972). A week later, during the night, the premises of a lathing firm were hit by a blast of dynamite (Wisner, 1980, p. 166). In the same period, another company was hit by a bomb. In October 1972, two bombs exploded at a construction site managed by the contractor Stanley Sosin, who was put under 24-hour police protection (*Threatened North York contractor*, 1972). News of bombs and threats in the construction industry had filled the newspapers for years. The concrete forming campaign had been characterized by many acts of violence, and people still remembered Shulman's speech on Mafia infiltration. The end of 1972 and the beginning of 1973 saw similar events (Wisner, 1980, p. 170; Royal Commission on Certain Sectors of the Building Industry, 1974), and on 28 March 1973, a royal commission was set up to investigate a 'certain sector of the construction industry' – in particular, the violence and the supposed Mafia infiltration of industrial relations in the construction industry, not only the concrete forming sector, since 1968. County court judge Harry Waisberg was chosen to chair the commission, which became known as the 'Waisberg Commission' (Wisner, 1980, p. 171). The 13,000 pages of transcribed evidence, 75 volumes of public hearings' transcriptions, 200 witnesses interviewed, and 1,100 exhibits give an idea of the job carried out by the Commission. In December 1974, the two-volume report was published.

The Waisberg Commission had an enormous impact and high visibility in the press, particularly the public hearings of union leaders and employers. A long list of articles on the illegalities and violence which had characterized union-employer relations, as well as the role the Mafia was said to have played, gave a disturbing picture of the Italian niche. Histories of threats, bribery, kickbacks, fraud, and bombs were described on newspaper front pages.³ In particular, reports of ambiguous

links, with gifts and payments between union leaders and employers while strikes, pickets, and blockades were characterizing the construction sector, called into question the real role played by some unions.⁴ At the same time, it is important to highlight the effective results of the Commission: for example, not a single concrete forming contractor with a collective agreement with Local 183 was ever accused of any wrongdoing; nor were any of the Local representatives (Stefanini, 2019, p. 127).

However, transcripts of the public hearings often gave an impression of dubious industrial relations in the Italian niche of the construction industry. A paradigmatic case was described by Giuseppe Alessandro, a lathing contractor with Italian roots who ran Gemini Lathing Ltd. and who appeared in front of the Commission on 5 December 1973 (Public Hearings, 1973h, 451–495). In 1966, he had a job site situated on Broadview Avenue near Danforth, at the eastern end of Toronto. Alessandro recalled how one morning he found windows broken, tools and materials dispersed and destroyed, and all the work in jeopardy. Alessandro suspected that he and his partner were the subject of calculated attacks. During his testimony, he maintained that the solution to his problem had come over a steak dinner hosted by Frank Fiore. With Fiore and Alessandro were the head of an important Local and Cesidio Romanelli, another lathing contractor. Alessandro testified that during the meal Romanelli had suggested to him that he buy ‘a couple of freezers’ and ‘maybe you’ll be out of the heat’. Alessandro bought the freezers, and gave one to the Local’s leader: ‘And then after that, I had no trouble’. However, the same contractor maintained that two years later, in 1968, he received a call instructing him to bring 1,000 CAD to a meeting at the Conroy Hotel, in the north-west of the city. He was told that the money was intended for the same union leader, but he did not give the money directly to the union man, and so he could not be sure about it. Alessandro recalled that, in turn, he himself gave the same instructions to several other contractors. In his opinion, some ten firms were represented at the meeting, each of which contributed 1,000 CAD to ‘celebrate’ their agreement with that Local.

During the public hearings, other lathing contractors, all first or second generation Italian-Canadians, such as Bruno Gambin (Public Hearings, 1973i, 3405–3414), Anthony Cesaroni (Public Hearings, 1973l, 3276–3369), and Marco de Luca (Public Hearings, 1973e, 584–599), declared they had to pay money to the same Local leader quoted by Alessandro in order to reach an agreement with his Local. Ettore Milani, another lathing contractor and the partner of Giuseppe D’Alessandro, also explained how he was asked by Cesidio Romanelli to pay 1,000 CAD if he wanted to stay in business, but he recalled that he did not know who was supposed to receive this money (Public Hearings, 1973m, 1014–1025).

During the public hearings, it also emerged that on the contractors’ side there were many attempts to organize themselves to challenge both unions and builders. For example, Bruno Manias recalled that in 1969, in order to get a union agreement, he founded the Metro Tile & Terrazzo Association with other contractors, such as Bruno Tonelli (Public Hearings, 1973n, 3027–3060), Gino Da Re (Public Hearings, 1973o, 2618–2792), and Mario De Stefano (Public Hearings, 1973p, 2932–2980). The need to get an agreement with the unions was described as a condition of operating in the market. At the same time it implied some obligations, such as hiring union men, and this was not so satisfactory for some contractors who were used to acting freely in the ‘jungle’ of the construction labor market. Mario De Stefano complained that he could not use his own men (Public Hearings, 1973p, 2932–2980):

I did not know how much the union men would produce. Since my men were new immigrants, they were eager for work. I had to pay union men higher wages as well, and [gained] less production.

De Stefano’s statements made clear why, during the public hearings in front of the Waisberg Commission, many union men testified that they had encouraged the formation of contractors’ associations. As the president of the Ontario Conference of Bricklayers, Masons, and Plasterers International Union, Danilo del Monte, underlined, they needed counterparts for the bargaining process (Public Hearings, 1973q, 3716–3791). He recalled the difficulties of the 1950s when they had to contract individually with companies. The words of Del Monte highlighted the networks of

alliances that sometimes linked workers and contractors in the 'jungle'. The ability to bargain could mean a reduction in the wild competition which harmed both sides.

However, some contractors explained how this pattern of industrial relations created barriers against outsiders. Donald Louis Paolini, a second generation Italian-Canadian who was vice-president of the successful Tile and Marble Company, said that in 1969 his company was expelled from the residential building construction industry as a consequence of a regulatory monopoly which had been created (Public Hearings, 1973r, 2844–2932). In fact, the problem was that it did not belong to the contractors' Toronto District Tile and Terrazzo Association, which had signed an agreement with Local 31. Paolini had to move out of the residential and apartment building construction industry after 30 years of activity because 'a union contract was not available to us'. A different choice was that made by Bruno Tonelli, the president of Continental Terrazzo and Marble Company Limited, who remembered how he was trying to 'trade honestly' but was in the middle between 'speculators and unions' (Public Hearings, 1973p, 3027–3060). He explained that, in order to survive, he was forced to ask for help from Local 31 and he had to pay the union 625 CAD.

Many contractors underlined that at the end of the 1960s the barriers to entry into the construction market were not only those of union agreements and monopolies. They were often the result of dominant positions enjoyed by some companies, which controlled industrial relations within specific niches of the industry. An exemplary case was described by Nicola Giamberardino, an important Italian-Canadian contractor based in Ottawa, who operated in the drywall and plaster business (Public Hearings, 1973s 8504–8535). He recalled how, in 1971, he bid on the Manufacturers Life Insurance Building in Toronto and he needed a letter from the unions saying he was qualified. In front of the Commission, he maintained that he received an unexpected telephone call from Angelo Del Zotto, one of most important employers in the sector, but whom he had never met before. Del Zotto advised him to make a joint venture with his competitor Cesidio Romanelli and he would have not any problems with unions in Toronto. Giamberardino maintained that he lost the contract because he had refused to join Romanelli, and so the unions refused him.

5. Conclusions

The public hearings in front of the Waisberg Commission show how the construction industry hosted shady characters and illicit deals, but the testimonies reveal more than this: they show a Toronto residential building construction industry that, though with many contradictions, had become a unionized niche, even in new sectors such as concrete forming and drywall construction.

It is interesting to note that the Commission's final recommendations openly supported the process of unionization as a positive feature, despite the existence of dark aspects. For example, an important consequence of Waisberg's recommendations was the amendments to the Ontario Labor Relations Act. Most important was the introduction of Section 124, dealing with union grievances. Earlier, it took months if not years to take a grievance through private arbitration, and it was quite expensive, but Section 124 stated that 'notwithstanding' the language of a collective agreement, either party can take a grievance to the Ontario Labor Relations Board and have a hearing within fourteen days from the date of application at no cost (Stefanini, 2019, p. 128).

If the former unregulated market was still a 'jungle', it was no longer dominated only by builders who could impose their wills and strategies on the other actors. Organized workers and contractors were now protagonists in a system of industrial relations and contributed to defining the rules. Nevertheless, it was a system with hierarchies, dominant actors, balances of power, and a dark criminal side. In particular, these hierarchies and criminal aspects marked the ethnic relationships. The ideology, socially constructed, of solidarity among *paesani*, which had played a fundamental role in both the building of the Italian niche and the process of workers' awareness, was now an ambiguous framework which contained contradictory elements.

On the battleground, ethnic solidarity was overwhelmed by the economic rules of an unregulated market that highlighted the existence of structural class conflicts of interest. At the same time, if ethnic sensitivity did not survive in the everyday work experience, some workers showed a sort of class solidarity toward the Italian small subcontractors described as part of the exploited group (Iacovetta, 1992, p. 162):

People said we were exploited by our own kind. Exploited by whom? The builder hired peasants and made them employees. He is getting rich, but the Italians, doing the work cheap, are going under.

However, this tenuous feeling of class solidarity among Italian workers and contractors was often broken by the reality of the conflicts that daily characterized the workplaces. As the former construction worker Giuseppe Venditti has summarized, the Italian contractors were '*Giuda*' [Judas], '*ti fregavano*' [they got you], '*cambiavano sempre il prezzo e tagliavano sempre la paga oraria*' [they always changed the price and cut the hourly wage] (Venditti, 2011). Marino Toppan has added that '*pagavano spesso con assegni non coperti*' [they often paid by cheque without cover] (Marino Toppan, personal interview, 2011). Venditti again remembers that '*La sera avevo la schiena piegata, ma gli italiani ci dicevano di andare avanti, mentre gli inglesi la sera ci dicevano thank you*' [In the evening I had a broken back, but the Italians told us go, go. While the British told us thank you].

Not all the workers paint such a terrible picture of the relations between Italian workers and contractors. Some of them describe the greater strength of the ethnic linkage. An example is the case of the bricklayer Giuseppe Peruzzi and his relationship with his boss, the Italian construction employer Mike Zanini (Peruzzi, 1977). Zanini acted as a workers' lender in situations of need ('200 dollars for the winter') and as a gate to social mobility ('he brought me to Famiglia Friulana'). In short, Peruzzi summarizes his relationship with his employer by saying: 'Zanini was a good friend'.

However, the Waisberg Commission's public hearings highlighted the operation of ethnic social networks within a crucial economic sector in post-war Toronto. Certain construction trades, such as concrete forming, lathing, and dry walling, were almost exclusively populated by Italians, and within these niches they were employers and employees, union bosses and rank and file. Though playing different roles in a peculiar system of industrial relations, their connections with other co-nationals animated a crucial sector of the economy, providing ordered, if sometimes illegal, rules within an otherwise unregulated and unstable industry. In this way, they structured a crucial economic sector, since Italian social ties in Toronto seemed to fit with the demands of the construction trades.

The unionist history of Italian immigrants in Toronto at the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies represents an important aspect of the process of formation of a paradigmatic example of an ethnic economic niche. The mass of unskilled workers came to terms with the environment (both local and global) that defined the typology of their work experience. In this context, which they usually experienced as hostile, both as immigrants and workers, Italian immigrants reinforced a sense of both class and national identity (Gabaccia & Ottanelli, 2001, p. 10). The combination of these two identities played an important role of reinforcement of the Italianity of economic niches. The militant history of the Italians in the ethnic niche of Toronto is thus another example of how ethnic identities are socially and politically constructed in a specific context (Miles, 1984). The peculiarity is that, even if ethnicity is a human construction, in the case study of Toronto's residential building industry it did not play the expected role of a regulatory process hiding the real economic relations. On the contrary, it was the tool for a new and powerful class solidarity and awareness. In fact, Italianization was an aspect of the process of the urban proletarianization of Italian workers, who experienced the way toward a new class consciousness through the discovery of belonging to a larger ethnic community of exploited workers (Agnoletto, 2012).

Within this framework, it would be very reductive and wrong to evaluate the history of Italian unionism in the Toronto construction industry in the 1960s and the 1970s using only the category of legality and focusing on the Mafia/no Mafia dichotomy. As Pal di Iulio, a leading member of the

Italian community for decades, told me, community awareness during the 1950s had just meant going to Mass on Sunday, and it was with the construction industry strikes that the Italian workers realized there were thousands of other people in as bad a situation as they were (Pal di Iulio, personal interview, 2011). Joe Pantalone, another leading member of the Torontonion Italian community for decades, recalled that Italian unionism was the tool for overcoming this bad situation, since it made possible the social mobility of many Italian families (Joe Pantalone, personal interview, 2011). For example, it was Local 183 in the 1960s and 1970s which enabled Pantalone's father to find jobs in the construction industry despite his age and physical condition. In fact, when he arrived in Toronto from Sicily, he was already fifty years old and he worked until he was older than sixty: Local 183 forced employers to hire him, and so his seven sons were able to study.

It is certain that there was also a dark side to the Italian unionism experience in Toronto's residential construction sector. For example, Salvatore Greco told me the sad story of his father, Saverio Greco, a construction worker who challenged the corruption in his union (Salvatore Greco, personal interview, 2011). He was a cement finisher and, as a consequence of his campaign against the corrupt leader of his local, he was the victim of an attempted murder when one day in winter time he was pushed off the scaffold. He broke his back, but he took the corrupt leader to civil court. He could not prove the accusation of attempted murder, but finally the leader himself was tossed out and was ordered never to be a union leader again.

Despite stories such as Greco's, it is possible when speaking to many former Torontonion construction workers to understand the fundamental and positive role in their lives played by unions. As Pio Drudi, a retired construction worker, has summarized: 'The union worked for us [...] without the unions we had to look for the employers, then with the union the employers had to look for us' (Drudi, 2011). Giuseppe Venditti, after fifty years in Local 506, added that 'The unions solved the problems. They defended me and everyone' (Venditti, 2011). If Italian workers were initially diffident about unions, seeing them as a sort of guild which did not admit newcomers (John Stefanini, personal interview, 2011) later many of them found in the unions a kind of second family, not only a tool for the defense of workers' rights, but also a place to spend time and enjoy social life (Paolo Ferrera, personal interview, 2011).

The strikes are described as topical events; they were 'hard times', but it was with them that 'we got more wages, pensions, a medical plan' (Drudi, 2011). The newspaper reports which often reduced these strikes to their alleged *mafioso* background did not fit with workers' memories. Many of them have connected the newspapers' approach to the anti-Italian atmosphere: 'they said our trade unions were *mafiosi* because we were Italians. In their opinion, we had to work and keep quiet!' (Stefano [pseudonym], personal interview, 2011).

Nevertheless, as an apparent paradox, Italian unionism also exploited the widespread racism against Italians. It was the same path that Stefano Luconi has highlighted in relation to formation of the Italian identity in North America. He has described the Italianization of immigrants as a consequence of the discrimination and prejudice undergone by the newcomers in North America. These negative attitudes induced Italian-Americans from diverse regional backgrounds to join forces (Luconi, 2011, p. 300). However, the unionist experience in Toronto was something more. As Stefano, a former laborer, summarized (Stefano, 2011):

I joined the union because all the Italians entered it and there were many compatriots. But later I continued to stay because it defended the workers. Against Italian employers, too. And within the union, I have known workers who came from all [over] the world.

As Angelo Principe has underlined, if at the beginning they gathered on the basis of personal and ethnic relationships, with the unions 'they became workers' (Angelo Principe, personal interview, 2011). On their flyers and posters, written both in English and Italian, locals and unions called for the fight against 'workers' exploitation', or in favor of 'union unity' as well as 'unity of all the workers' (Irvine Papers, 1960–1970; Toppan Papers, 1960–1970; MHSO, 1960–1970).

Notes

1. Archival sources and interviews cited in the text were collected during the period September 2010–October 2011. At their request, some of the interviewees mentioned in the article have been given pseudonyms.
2. This article represents an update of my book 'The Italians Who Built Toronto' (Agnoletto, 2014). In particular, this article proposes a trade unions history perspective on the history of this ethnic economic niche. I have already published articles focusing on a business history approach (Agnoletto, 2017) or a gender and ethnic/migration history approach (Agnoletto, 2016) to the same issue.
3. For instance, see the following articles: Vince Devitt, 'Unionist claims builder tried threats, bribery', *Toronto Star*, 11 September 1973; 'Anti-Semitism, price-fixing behind bombing, inquiry told', *Toronto Star*, 11 September 1973; 'Union official says two associates lied about alleged bribe', *Toronto Star*, 19 September 1973; 'Union accounts \$16,000 short, lathers' secretary mystified', *Globe and Mail*, 13 October 1973; 'Developer is charged with \$158,000 fraud', *Toronto Star*, 19 October 1973; 'Hot dynamite in refrigerator had passed through many hands, construction probe told', *Toronto Star*, 22 January 1974; 'Union official names three in fire story', *Toronto Star*, 25 January 1974; 'As criminals came so did the violence building probe told', *Toronto Star*, 10 April 1974; 'Construction industry jungle of bribes, bullets described', *Globe and Mail*, 10 April 1974; 'Witness links organized crime to 1972 construction violence', *Globe and Mail*, 10 April 1974; 'Penetrating crime probe leaves builders shaken', *Toronto Star*, 11 April 1974.
4. For instance, see the following articles: 'Paid lathers' head \$5,000 over 4 years to avoid labor troubles, contractors say', *Globe and Mail*, 12 September 1973; 'Builder say they gave \$1,000 each to unionist', *Toronto Star*, 12 September 1973; 'Gift to leader of lathers', *Globe and Mail*, 11 September 1973; 'Claims union payoff to 'prevent trouble', *The Toronto Sun*, 12 September 1973; 'Contractor says union payoff went astray', *Toronto Star*, 14 September 1973; 'Union demanded cash, airline tickets. Splendid changes in firm's fortunes after gift of new car', *Toronto Star*, 30 October 1973; 'Builder says he bribes union men to get jobs', *Toronto Star*, 30 October 1973; 'Two builders deny awarding contracts in return for cash', *Toronto Star*, 8 November 1973; 'Union man doesn't know who put \$3,500 in his bank', *Toronto Star*, 14 December 1973; 'There's nothing wrong with giving gifts to customers, builder insists to probe', *Globe and Mail*, February 1974.

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