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The Italian Main-d'œuvre étrangère offices in the French Trade Unions during the interwar period

Las oficinas italianas de la mano de obra extranjera en los sindicatos franceses en el periodo de entreguerras

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During the first half of the 1920s the French trade unions decided to establish the bureaus of the Main d'Oeuvre Étrangère (MOE, Foreign Workforce) to organize foreign workers through specific activities, led by trade unionists belonging to the same nationalities and newspapers printed in the languages of the main communities of immigrants. These initiatives were inspired by similar experiences which had taken place before the war in some specific sectors and communities, but they became an organizational priority when the Great War led to a new configuration in the workforce composition.¹

During the First World War, in fact, 1,325,000 French workers died and 1,100,000 were injured.² Immediately after the end of the war, the French government started to sign several agreements with European emigration countries in order to encourage the arrival of new workers, aiming at the recovery of the national economy and the reconstruction works in the devastated North-Eastern regions. The biggest foreign community to cross the French borders was Italian, which already represented the main immigrant community in France since the 1890s. Italians were employed in construction works, metallurgy, mining, glassmaking, agriculture and the chemistry industry. They were about one-third of all foreign workers employed in industrial sectors and accounted for nearly one million people by 1931.³

Previous research dealing with the relationship between French unionism and migrant workers had often underlined the contradictions that emerged between the unions' internationalist ideology and their protectionist behaviours. Historians have shown

¹—On the previous initiatives in France see GREEN, Nancy, *Du Sentier à la 7e Avenue*, Seuil, 1998, p. 367; on previous initiatives in other countries see MERIGGI, Maria Grazia, *L'Internazionale degli operai. Le relazioni internazionali dei lavoratori in Europa fra la caduta della Comune e gli anni '30*, Franco Angeli, 2014, pp. 21 and 82 (on Germany and Austria), p. 72 (on Russia), p. 74 (on the United States of America).

²—SCHOR, Ralph, *Histoire de l'immigration en France*, Armand Colin, 1996, p. 46.

³—MILZA, Olivier, «Les italiens dans l'économie française (1919-1939)», in MILZA, Pierre (dir.), *Les Italiens en France de 1914 à 1940*, Collection de l'école française de Rome, 1986, pp. 69-709.

4—GANI, Léon, *Syndicats et travailleurs immigrés*, Éditions Sociales, 1972; NOIRIEL, Gérard, *Longwy: immigrés et prolétaires. 1880-1980*, Presse Universitaire de France, 1984; SCHOR, Ralph, *op. cit.*; GREEN, Nancy, *op. cit.*; BLANC-CHALÉARD, Marie-Claude, *Les italiens dans l'est parisien, une histoire d'intégration (1880-1960)*, Collection de l'école française de Rome, 2000; D. LEWIS, Mary, *Les frontières de la République*, Agone, 2010; MERIGGI, Maria Grazia, *Entre fraternité et xénophobie*, Éditions Arbre Bleu, 2018.

5—POGGIOLI, Morgan, « Les sources pour faire l'histoire du syndicalisme. Le cas de la CGT : le fonds rapatrié de Moscou pour l'entre-deux-guerres », *Histoire@Politique*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2010, pp. 1-10.

6—The CGTU was the communist-controlled trade union which split from the CGT in 1921 and merged again in 1936.

that working class organizations claimed for stricter controls on migration flows. Trade Unions asserted that industrialists used migrant workers to reduce wages and social rights and, for this reason, they supported those laws which were supposed to limit the competition among national and foreign workers.⁴

This paper will analyse these contradictions in the trade union's internal debate thanks to the records kept in the Confédération Générale du Travail's archive. This archive has been repatriated in the 1990s from Russia, where it was stored since the end of the World War II after it had been stolen by the Nazi Army and brought to Germany.⁵ Unfortunately, these records are full of gaps and, above all, they are almost entirely about the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) and not the Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU).⁶ In fact, after the reunification between these two organizations in 1936, the archives were never merged, and the latter was completely destroyed during World War II. This paper will be consequently unbalanced and will analyse in greater depth the evolution of the Italian MOE bureau in the CGT.

My purpose is to show the large autonomy reached by the MOE offices within the French trade unions and how these structures became a space in which the Italian trade unionists legitimated their militancy during the exile.

This paper will focus on four main aspects of the development of the foreign workers' offices in the French trade unions.

Firstly, the MOE offices were the result of the trade unions' attempt to build, at the end of the First World War, a parallel diplomacy to the one which

was set up by the national Governments. This diplomacy sought to gain a key position in the mechanisms of the international labour market.⁷ Their main aim was to create a new way to manage labour migration throughout Europe in which the unions were supposed to take part in the definition of the flows' extent, the working conditions, the wages, etc. In other terms, the purpose of trade unions was to mediate the competition among the national workforces and to prevent the conflicts that could arise between local and migrant workers. The first part of the paper, thus, will deal with the very first attempts of the French and the German trade unions to reach an agreement inherent to the German workers who were supposed to work in the reconstruction of the devastated French regions. These first efforts were followed by those between the French trade unions and the Italian, Polish and Belgian ones, which appeared to be more fruitful.

The second part of this paper will focus on these new efforts, highlighting the differences between each community's MOE offices in order to understand the peculiarities of the experience of the Italian office.

Thirdly, this paper will emphasize the position held by the International Federation of Trade Unions, (IFTU) during the creation of the foreign workers' offices in France. In fact, the IFTU, especially through its professional federations, fostered the signature of the agreements between trade unions of different countries. Studying the creation of specific offices devoted to the unionization of foreign workers can help to better understand the peculiar way the IFTU conceived its internationalist action.

7—A similar idea of parallel diplomacy had been advocated during the meeting of the Socialist International Bureau which took place in Stuttgart in August 1907. Trade unions belonging to emigration and immigration countries were expected to sign bilateral agreements in order to exchange information on crises, working conditions, strikes, etc. Furthermore, trade unions sought to form an international cartel in order to impose their own regulation of the labour market. On this topic see MERIGGI, Maria Grazia, *L'Internazionale degli operai...*, pp. 75-80.

Finally, the last part will address the different types of activities that were organized by the MOE offices. I will first analyse the several tours Italian trade unionists did in order to organize meetings throughout France and to establish local branches of the MOE bureaus. Then, I will cover the various initiatives of social assistance to immigrant workers. MOE bureaus, in fact, established their own help desks, advertised free French language courses, informed about new laws and decrees, etc. One of the most important activities was that about refugees and against expulsions. In this section I will also analyse the development of the Italian MOE office after the dissolution of the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGDL) in Italy in January 1927 and the consequent relocation of its Central Bureau to Paris under the CGT's protection. Many Italian union's leaders moved from their home country to Paris, creating an ambiguous situation between the MOE Office and the central bureau of the exiled organization. Was the mission of this office to unionize Italians living in France or to be the core of the illegal organization activity in Italy? And, consequently, did the MOE office depend on the CGT for the recruitment in the French world of work or was it the head of the exiled Italian trade union? All the IFTU members were involved in this debate during the international conferences. The question was whether they had to give economic assistance to the Italian trade union in order to engage an undercover activity in its home country or, on the contrary, whether they had to finance the activity amongst the Italian workers living in France.

The most prominent task of the MOE bureau was to manage the union periodicals printed in the different

languages of the foreign workers' communities. Trade unions, especially the socialist and the communist ones, competed to secure broad consensus through this weekly or monthly press, conveying their slogans and advertising their activities. Studying the evolution of these tools of propaganda could help understand the main issues encountered by the trade unionists in their attempts to root the labour organizations among migrant workers.

First attempts to create immigrant workers' offices

Immediately after the end of the conflict, two main problems affected the French economy: the first was the reconstruction of the devastated zones in the north-east of the Hexagon; the second was the dramatic lack of manpower. About 10% of the French workforce was killed or injured during the war. The need for new workers from abroad became, therefore, the only way to trigger a new economic development.

The Treaty of Versailles required Germany to assume the reconstruction costs. Two types of reparations were contemplated: financial or in-kind. In accordance with this second typology, Germany should have been forced to send its own construction companies and workers to the French devastated regions.

Two months after the signature of the Treaty of Versailles, the French and German trade unions on one side, and the two Governments on the other side met to discuss about the economic and social conditions to be granted to the German

workers. There were some core issues that needed to be addressed. Were German workers entitled to Bismarckian social insurance as they were in their home country? Which minimum wage was valid: the French or the German one? This paper will not analyse how the Governments and the trade unions answered these questions. But, among the main issues discussed by the workers' organizations, there was one that is central for this research: which trade union had to organize these workers and how?

The trade unions aim was to gain a key role in the management of the workforce, in order to avoid the use of migration to increase unemployment and reduce social rights.

The German Government proposed to become the general contractor of the reconstruction work, subcontracting to German companies and employing German workers. According to the first draft approved by both governments and trade unions on 2 October 1919, German workers were allowed to remain belonging to their own organizations. Thus, the Allgemeinen Deutschen Gewerkschaftsbundes (ADGB) was allowed to create its own branches in the reconstruction territories, and their officials might monitor the working conditions and the respect for the collective bargaining agreements.⁸

During the IFTU Conference held in Amsterdam on 7 October 1919, the French construction federation proposed to organize the German workers through special groups within the CGT. As we can see, the two proposals were apparently similar, but with some substantial differences. In the first scenario,

German workers were allowed to stay in their national trade union, remaining separated from the CGT; in the second one they should be a part of this organization, creating nevertheless their own offices within the CGT.

Numerous bilateral meetings were held in the following months, and the construction trade unions reached a new agreement in Geneva on 16 January 1921. The two organizations proposed to their respective Governments to create a "Construction Social Guild" (*Soziale Baubetriebe*) in order to self-manage the reconstruction works. This Guild was supposed to be a cooperative of workers headed by the trade unions themselves. In other terms, the workers organizations claimed to control jointly the entire building works.⁹ In the final arrangement, the two organizations agreed on the mechanism to manage German workers' unionization. They were expected to join the French union, being allowed to create their own offices, administratively autonomous and depending on the CGT's *syndicat des instables* (unsettled workers' union). Simultaneously the German unions were allowed to implant their own secretariats and satellite offices of their cooperatives. Finally, the two trade unions had to appoint jointly special delegates with the task of controlling the working conditions.¹⁰ The proposal was a hybrid system in which each organization kept its own activities and autonomy in the same territories, but sowing the seeds for the forthcoming MOE bureau's operating principles.

The list of claims and proposals was subsequently presented to the International Labor Organisation (ILO), asking for its intervention before the French

9—DECLARATION of Grassmann and Hue, 97 CFD 5 – Conseil Économique du Travail, CGT Archives.

10—«ACCORD INTERVENU ENTRE LA FEDERATION DES TRAVAILLERS DE L'INDUSTRIE DU BATIMENT ET DES TRAVAUX PUBLICS DE FRANCE & COLONIES ET LA DEUTSCHER BAUARBEITER VERBAND (Fédération Allemande des Travailleurs du Bâtiment) C.A. L'EMPLOI DES TRAVAILLEURS ALLEMANDS DANS LES TRAVAUX DE RECONSTRUCTION DE PROVINCES DU NORD DE LA FRANCE (Genève, 16 Février 1921)», 97 CFD 5 – Conseil Économique du Travail, CGT Archives.

8—«LES ORGANISATIONS OUVRIERES FRANCAISES ET ALLEMANDES ET LE PROBLEME DES REPARTITIONS, Comptendu des négociations qui ont eu lieu en 1919 (Août à Octobre)», 97 CFD 5 – Conseil Économique du Travail, CGT Archives.

and German Governments, which at that time were defining the application terms of the Versailles Treaties. This document is important for multiple reasons. Firstly, the trade unions acted in parallel to the State. Secondly, this agreement was signed by the Deutscher Bauarbeiter Verband and by the Fédération Nationale du Bâtiment alongside the International Construction Union, led by Georg Kappler. Thirdly, the trade unions expected to take part in the international diplomacy at the same level as national Governments and ILO. Along with the States and the new-born international organizations, unions wanted to become the third pillar of the new order which should have governed the peaceful Europe and its labour market. As such, management of migrant workers became the arena in which to reach a new balance of power between these three actors. Thus, during its conference in Amsterdam held on 31st March and 1st April 1921, the IFTU claimed the creation of an International Office for Reparations headed by the League of Nations with the equal participation of unions, technicians and governments' representatives.¹¹ These propositions emerged in response to the London Schedule of Payments, imposed by the Allied Powers to Germany during the conference which took place in London on 5 May 1921. Allied Powers now conceived reparations only on a financial ground, whereas the building works were put aside. The outcome of this conference deeply worried the international trade unionism. The risk, they said, was that Germany would continue to experience economic depression and, in addition, reconstruction would never be achieved.

Further bilateral meetings were organized in France and in Germany about workers unionization, but

governmental decisions made them inconclusive.¹² The attempt to build a parallel diplomacy showed its limitations. The CGT's foreign workers sub-commission, gathered on 12 December 1921, concluded that the inter-governmental Treaties and the inter-union agreements ignored themselves reciprocally.¹³

Even if the German workers never arrived massively in France for the reconstruction, their place was taken by hundreds of thousands of newcomers from Italy, Belgium, Poland and Spain. For these new waves of migration, the same problems arose soon.

The Main d'Oeuvre Étrangère Bureaus

The first MOE office was established in 1923 by the CGTU. This organization was the communist-led minority which had left the CGT two years before. The decision to found a specific office for migrant workers had been triggered by the Red International of Labor Unions (Profintern).¹⁴ The MOE offices were, therefore, the outcome of the international debate; however, some national issues also contributed in their foundation. After the 1919-1920 strikes, in fact, the expulsion of foreign unionists had dramatically increased, forcing the trade unions to conceive new organizational tools.¹⁵ Moreover, French Law didn't allow foreign workers to fulfil positions in trade unions' summits.¹⁶

Thus, the creation of the MOE offices was an experiment to protect the foreign workers' participation, a tool to spread propaganda and, at the same time, a part of the new internationalist organizational model planned in Moscow and, in a different manner, in Amsterdam.

12—Further meetings were held in Berlin in December 1921 and in Frankfurt on 20-22 December 1921. The French Trade Union promoted a referendum in the Eastern Regions in order to demonstrate that the local population supported the arrival of German workers. On this topic: «LA C.G.T. ET LES REGIONS DEVASTÉES» e «Conseil Économique du Travail – Compte Rendu des négociations entre les Syndicats Français et Allemands 20 au 22 décembre 1921 à Francfort-sur-le-Mein», 97 CFD 5 – Conseil Économique du Travail, CGT Archives.

13—«SOUS-COMMISSION DE LA MAIN-D'ŒUVRE ÉTRANGÈRE. Réunion du 12 décembre 1921», 97CFD47 – MOE, CGT Archives.

14—LEQUIN, Yves, *Histoire des étrangers et de l'immigration en France*, Larousse, 2006, p. 355.

15—LEWIS, Mary D., *Les frontières de la République*, Agone, 2010, p. 63.

16—«Rapport Fédéral 1914-1918 (Fédération des métaux) – compte rendu de la Commission Executive et du Comité fédéral National de Septembre 1917 », Box 31, section « Rappresentanza Italiana in Francia (1861-1950) », AMAE (Italian Foreign Office Archives)

11—«RESOLUTION DE LA FEDERATION SYNDICALE INTERNATIONALE», 97 CFD 5 – Conseil Économique du Travail, CGT Archives.

CGTU established several *Comités Intersyndicaux* (inter-union committees) for each community. In 1927 there were thirteen of these committees for the Italian, Spanish, Polish, Hungarian, Jewish, Czech, Russian, Yugoslav, Romanian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Armenian and Chinese workers. Six inter-regional bureaux located in Paris, Lyon, Marseilles, Bordeaux, Lille and Nancy, were supposed to manage the local *Comités Intersyndicaux*.¹⁷

17—GANI, Léon, *op. cit.*, 1972.

CGT established its own MOE bureaux in 1925. In a letter sent to the IFTU on 16 February 1925, CGT mentioned for the very first time the ongoing discussions with the Italian, Polish and Hungarian trade unions, aiming at the creation of this new type of bureaux.¹⁸ Eighteen months later, on 21 November 1926 the *Commission Consultative des ouvriers polonais à la CGT* sent a letter to the CGT's Administrative Commission about the negative consequences of the Identity Card Law adopted by the Parliament the 3 August 1926.¹⁹ In this letter, the Polish commission mentioned five MOE offices within the CGT.²⁰ In fact, in the same months, we find similar letters sent by the Italian, Russian, and Jewish MOE bureaux about the same issue that was worrying all migrant communities: between early 1925 and the end of 1926, the MOE bureaux had become a reality in the CGT. What had happened in that period?

18—Letter sent on 16 February 1925 from the CGT's Administrative Commission to the IFTU, 97CFD47 – MOE, CGT Archives.

19—The *loi Durafour* (Durafour act) adopted on 11 August 1926 imposed an Identity Card to foreigners, containing the working sector where each immigrant was employed and the date of signature of the contract. Moreover, this law forbade changing work until the end of the first year after the signature.

20—Letter sent by the «Commission Consultative pour des ouvriers polonais à la C.G.T.» to the CGT's Administrative Commission on 21 November 1926, 97CFD47 – MOE, CGT Archives.

Three aspects need to be underlined. Firstly, as observed before, since 1921 the CGT faced the split of the communist-controlled CGTU, which became an important competitor in those sectors where foreign workers were massively employed. Secondly, the IFTU pushed national organizations to strengthen their activities towards labour

migration. Thirdly, the totalitarian evolution in the Soviet Union and especially in Italy drove to a massive wave of refugees that belonged to workers organizations.

The IFTU organized a specific conference on labour migration on 28 November 1924. The final resolution envisaged the signature of specific agreements between trade unions of immigration and emigration countries. The resolution required foreign workers to participate in the unions of the country where they emigrated.²¹

The 4th resolution of the International Congress on migration, jointly organized by the IFTU and by the Labour and Socialist International in June 1926, was focused on the propaganda that was supposed to be organized by the national unions towards migrant workers. This resolution hoped to create foreign workers bureaux within the organizations in the immigration countries.²²

The very first MOE bureau established was the Italian one. The CGT archives have preserved the convention signed the 7 May 1924 by Ludovico d'Aragona for the CGDL and Léon Jouhaux for the CGT to found a *Comité pour la Main d'œuvre étrangère* (Committee for the Foreign Workforce). It is interesting because Italians were expected to pave the way for other communities. In fact, the Italian MOE leader, Ernesto Caporali, became also the coordinator of all the MOE offices of the CGT, keeping this position until World War II.

The aims were to unionize emigrant workers, to defend foreign workers before both the administration and the employers, to organize

21—Letter sent by the IFTU to all its affiliated Trade Unions on 28 November 1924, 97CFD42 – FSI, CGT Archives.

22—«LE CONGRÈS MONDIALE DES MIGRATIONS DE LONDRES: L'EXECUTION DE SES RESOLUTIONS. Par J.W. Brown secrétaire de la Fédération Syndicale Internationale», 97CFD43 – FSI et BIT, CGT Archives.

23—Document titled «Convention», written on 7 May 1924, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

24—Handwritten document titled «Acte de fonction 15 Mai », 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

25—«VOEU formulé par le Comité franco-belge» written on 27 January 1924, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

26—Letter sent by the Russian Workers Association to the Administrative Council on 3 April 1925, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

27—Letter sent from London to Lenoir (CGT's Administrative Council) on 30 April 1925, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

legal support offices and local annexes, to defend minimum wages, to organize meetings for the Italian workers, etc.²³

The operation of this office was guaranteed by a board which was equally nominated by the two trade unions. The Italian members were Felice Quaglino, Baldini and Bruno Buozzi, whereas the French side was composed by Cordier, Labé and Puissol.²⁴ Ernesto Caporali was subsequently elected as secretary, keeping this position until the Second World War.

The Franco-Italian agreement was not the first inter-union deal. In the CGT archives there is a draft of a convention between the Belgian and the French metalworkers unions written in 1924. We do not know if this draft ever became effective, but we know that a Franco-Belgian committee was established the 27 January 1924 in Tourcoing between the CGT of the *département* of North and the Commission Syndicale Belge (CSB) of the West Flanders and the Hainault. Thus, this agreement was implemented on a regional scale and not on a national scale as was the Italian agreement.²⁵

In the following months, new national bureaus were born: the Russian, the Hungarian, the Polish, and the Jewish.

Since the CGT was unable to reach an agreement with the Soviet trade unions, the MOE bureau was founded by Russian refugees who had established the Association des Ouvriers Russes en France on 16 November 1924.²⁶ A letter sent from London on 30 April 1925 proposed Peter Agoston to become the CGT's Hungarian Secretary.²⁷

But the most important MOE bureau, together with the Italian, was that established for Poles. The agreement between the CGT and the *Związek Stowarzyszen Zawodowych w Polsce (ZSZ)* was signed at the end of 1924. The two organizations appointed a Central Commission composed by three French and three Polish unionists, in addition to one CGT board member and one Polish officer devoted to propaganda efforts. The three Polish members were proposed by their national union, but they had to be approved by the French organization.²⁸ The Commission had to meet every three months, whereas the three Polish unionists were expected to meet every fifteen days. In other words, the Polish members were the fully-fledged organizers of the bureau. The bureau might convene the congress of the local Polish branches, and every decision became a desideratum which needed to be approved by the CGT administrative commission to be viable.

The central Commission organized the propaganda and controlled *Prawo Ludu*, the newspaper founded by the CGT of the Calais Region. Previously, in this region the CGT had been able to unionize a vast number of Polish workers, so many that the first MOE secretary, named Probaut, came from the miner's federation of the Pas de Calais.²⁹ The Polish bureau experienced several internal controversies. Since January 1926 the administrative commission of the CGT informed its sister union in Warsaw that the Polish branches in France were deeply dissatisfied.³⁰ Probaut's positions were often criticized for their nationalistic bent and, therefore, in October 1926, the ZSZ sent a plenipotentiary in order to establish a Jewish bureau, because the

28—Letter sent from the Polish Trade Union to the CGT on 31 September and handwritten document of the «Commission centrale pour les questions concernant les ouvriers polonais affiliés à la C.G.T.», 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

29—Letter sent from the *Związek Stowarzyszen Zawodowych w Polsce* to the CGT on 10 February 1925 and letter sent by the Miners Trade union of Pas de Calais Region on 30 June 1925, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

30—Letter sent on 7 January 1926 by the CGT's Administrative Commission to the Polish Trade Union, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

31—Letter sent by the Polish Trade Union to the CGT on 14 October 1926 and letter sent by Peskine to the CGT's Administrative Commission on 16 October 1926, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

32—Letter sent by the Polish Trade Union to the CGT on 20 December 1926, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

catholic Poles had no interest in the unionization of workers belonging to the numerous Jewish community.³¹ Finally, in December 1926, the Polish Union proposed to the CGT to replace Probaut with Jesionowski, a Polish worker living in France for twenty years and always involved in the workers organization.³²

The role of the IFTU

We have mentioned these first conflicts within the Polish bureau in order to underline the capacity of the two trade unions to manage them jointly. The situation experienced by the Italian bureau was completely different.

In fact, the convention between the CGT and the CGDL had been signed nearly one month after the Italian elections where the Mussolini's Blocco Nazionale gained a two third majority in the Parliament. The repression against the trade unions dramatically increased and the CGDL became unable to sustain the activity of the Parisian Bureau. In this context, the IFTU played a central role filling the gap created by the Italian union. The key figures of this new IFTU activism were the leaders of the International Constructions Union, especially its secretary Georg Kappler and Felice Quaglino who found in the international union a new space of engagement.

In 1925 Georg Kappler and his organization bade the IFTU, the CGT and the weakened CGDL to devote their energies to unionize the Italians working in France and, especially, to start printing a periodical in Italian for the workers living in France,

Belgium and Luxembourg.³³ Felice Quaglino took immediately this task: *L'Operaio Italiano* appeared in April 1926 as a weekly periodical almost entirely economically supported by the International Constructions Union. In another section of this paper, we will analyse more deeply the evolution of this journal; here we only intend to highlight the key role played by the International organization.

With the rise of Fascism in Italy the IFTU faced multiple issues in its organization. After the dismantlement of the CGDL on 4 January 1927, two parts of the ancient union fought in different ways against this decision. The first one, led by Bruno Buozzi, decided to flee and move the reconstructed Central Commission to Paris, whereas the second one, led by the communists, tried to recreate the organization in Italy. This second part attempted to be recognized by the IFTU, asserting that the organization led by Buozzi in Paris was devoted only to the unionization of the Italians living in France and, thus, was unable to manage the unrest in Italy.³⁴ The international union finally decided to back the Buozzi's organization, but this debate revealed a question that became central in the following years: was the Italian bureau a structure devoted to the unionization of migrant workers or, on the contrary, was it the Central Bureau of the CGDL in exile, devoted to the undercover unionization in Italy?

This question inflamed the debate in the ad hoc session of the IFTU General Council held in Amsterdam on 25 and 26 September 1928, when Bruno Buozzi and Felice Quaglino requested economic support. Jouhaux declared that the

33—Letter from Georg Kappler to the IFTU, the CGT, the CGDL, and to International Federations on 15 August 1925, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

34—«Confédération Générale du Travail Italienne. Au Congrès de la Fédération Syndicale Internationale», 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

General Council always took position against the economic support of all those activities done abroad. Leipart, the German member of the IFTU Central Bureau, stated:

Concerning the union recruitment towards Italian emigrants, it is not the mission of the [CGDL's] central office in Paris, but that of the Trade Union of the immigration country. This is what it is all about: since there is no longer a Trade Union Federation in Italy and this Federation cannot exist in Paris, is the representation of the [CGDL] Parisian Office in our Council a situation that can continue?

Grassmann, from the ADGB, considered the CGDL bureau in Paris as a fiction since it was only an “emigration center.” In the end, the General Council chose to establish a special commission to be sent to Italy to examine in depth the possibilities to conduct any illegal activity.³⁵

As we know, Buozzi and the Parisian CGDL kept their position in the IFTU, becoming a precedent invoked when the German and Austrian organizations experienced similar problems in the 1930s.³⁶

However, this ambiguity persisted. For instance, when the CGT decided in 1927 to add a five-franc surcharge on the union cards for the Italian workers in order to sustain the Italian MOE's office, the flyer written in Italian announcing this measure was signed by the Confederazione Generale del Lavoro Italiana and not by the MOE's bureau.³⁷

The Italian trade unionists benefitted from this ambiguity, using their multiple militancies and memberships in different political and social arenas. Any worker could stress his membership in the CGDL when he was acting in the Italian community, his CGT

affiliation when he was in a French context or his activism in the IFTU when he sought to legitimate its action in the national trade union. This ambiguity, in short, accorded a wide independence and legitimacy to the foreign trade unionists.

The functions of MOE bureaus

The proposition to add a surcharge on the union's cards had been made in December 1925 by Caporali and Quaglino with the objective to hire a second person in the MOE office.³⁸ This purpose came after a period in which the Italian office, the IFTU and the CGT discussed about the necessary tools to react to the lack of participation in sectors, as the building sector, where Italians were massively employed.³⁹ The increased participation of the Italian workers in the trade unionism and in the MOE office had then become a priority.

We will now cover the activities aimed at the unionization of the Italian workforce.

Unionization

The Italian Bureau, led by Ernesto Caporali, tried immediately after his foundation to organize several local branches. One of the main focuses was the Parisian region, where Italians were employed in the construction sector as well as in the factories located in the suburbs. In the mid-1920s, 24 out of 35 Comités Intersyndicaux in Paris were committed to Italian workers⁴⁰. In 1925 the CGTU's Construction Federation was able to impose a closed-shop in the building sector, but was rapidly forced to retreat in

35—Original text: “En ce qui concerne le recrutement syndical des émigrants italiens, ce n'est point-là la mission de la centrale de Paris, mais celle de la Centrale syndicale respective des pays d'immigration. Voici de quoi il s'agit au fond: quand il n'existe plus de Fédération syndicale en Italie et que cette Fédération ne peut exister à Paris, la représentation de la Centrale parisienne dans notre Conseil est-elle oui ou non une situation qui puisse perdurer?” in «COMPTE-RENDU de la session extraordinaire du Conseil Général de la Fédération Syndicale Internationale des 25 et 26 septembre 1928 Amsterdam», 97CFD42 – FSI, CGT Archives. *Vid.* nota 49.

36—«Réservé aux membres du Bureau. SUPPLEMENT CONFIDENTIEL au compte rendu sommaire de la réunion du Bureau de la F.S.I. tenue le 20 mai 1935 à Copenhague, Maison Syndicale», 97CFD43 – FSI et BIT, CGT Archives.

37—«CONFEDERAZIONE GENERALE DEL LAVORO ITALIANA -Aux Travaillleurs italiens!», 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

38—Letter from Caporali to CGT Administrative Bureau on 4 January 1926, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

39—Letter from Georg Kappler to the IFTU, the CGT, the CGDL, and to International Federations on 15 August 1925, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

40—APP B/A1711, police report of the 15 October 1924, quoted in BLANC-CHALÉARD, Marie-Claude, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

the following years. According to Yves Lequin, at this moment, Italian workers went over to CGT, becoming in 1929 four times more numerous than those involved in the communist-led confederation.⁴¹

41—LEQUIN, Yves, *op. cit.*, p. 356

In 1926 a Comité Syndical de Popagande et d'Assistance pour les Travailleurs Italiens was established by the CGT. The first meeting, in which Froydeval of the Regional Constructions Federation was involved, decided to establish a permanent help desk in the Bourse du Travail since 26 March 1926.⁴² In the Seine department these assemblies became a continuous activity, as it happened with the help desk.⁴³

42—Letter of Caporali written on 20 March 1926, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

43—Table of contents of the issue of *L'Operaio Italiano* sent to Lenoir on 29 January 1927, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

In other regions, the MOE office organized several trips, for instance when Borghesio, a unionist from the Italian Constructions Federation, was sent in July and August 1926 in several regions to arrange meetings among Italian workers and to publicize *L'Operaio Italiano*.⁴⁴ Another tour was organized by Giuseppe Sardelli at the end of 1927 in the Jura, Ain, Isère and Rhone departments.⁴⁵

44—Letter from Lenoir to Borghesio on 28 July 1926 and letter from Quaglino to the CGT on 24 July 1926, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

45—Letter from Bruno Buozzi sent on 31 December 1927, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives

Even if in the archives there are no documents inherent the South-Western provinces, in every issue of *L'Operaio Italiano* there was a section specifically devoted to those regions.

On the contrary, the records extant in the CGT's archive show that the region most frequented by Italian unionists was Lorraine. Since December 1924, Caporali reached cities and industrial villages where Italians worked in mining, steel plants and building works. CGT found extremely hard to gain a wide consensus among Italian workers because of three different obstacles. The first was the

repression carried out by the administration and backed by industrialists, nicknamed "*les baronies du fer*" (the iron baronies) against those migrants that were involved in trade union struggles.⁴⁶ The second obstacle was represented by the fascist propaganda, which was able to open the *dopolavoro* and to run a wide range of services thanks to the money sent from Rome.⁴⁷ Finally, the third obstacle was the communist activism. The CGTU and the Parti Communiste Français were able to rely on a widespread organized network of officials and, since 1924, they had created several groups almost everywhere.⁴⁸ Caporali asserted: "The Italian element and the German element form the true force of communism in Moselle and there, more than somewhere else, the Bolshevik propaganda is intense towards Italians."⁴⁹ In Lorraine, the CGT was able to implant its own branches only after 1925, when the CGTU was decimated by police repression.⁵⁰

Even during the *Front Populaire* Government, the repression remained unabated. At this moment the CGT concentrated on opposing expulsions imposed on foreign militants.⁵¹

To understand the importance of the activity of the Italian MOE's bureau in the Eastern Regions we need to focus on the peculiar attention paid by the international organization on these territories. In this peculiar region unions' history there is an entanglement of local and trans-national history. In fact, the unionization of migrant workers in French Eastern Regions became a major concern for the Profintern and the IFTU, especially after the foundation in 1926 of the European Steel Cartel. In

46—LEWIS, Mary D., *op. cit.*, p. 166.

47—The Confederazione Fascista dei Lavoratori dell'Industria, which was a Fascist trade union, sent from Italy one of its trade unionists in order to decide how to prevent Italian workers to participate in the French organizations. Trip report sent by Lippi to Luigi Contu on 18 March 1937, box 40, folder « Relazioni sul viaggio di G. Lippi », fonds « Confederazione Fascista dei Lavoratori dell'Industria », CGIL Archives.

48—Report mailed from Caporali to Lenoir on 27 January 1925, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives

49—Original text: «L'élément allemand et l'élément italien constituent la force véritable du communisme de la Moselle et là-bas, plus qu'ailleurs, la propagande moscoutaire parmi les italiens est intense», in «RAPPORT SUR LA TOURNÉE DE PROPAGANDE DANS LA REGION DE L'EST», 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

50—NOIRIEL, Gérard, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

51—«RAPPORT sur la situation des travailleurs immigrés dans le Département de la Moselle», 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

52—NOIRIEL, Gérard, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

1927 the CGTU, along with its sister organizations in Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg, attempted to organize a trans-border bureau to manage jointly their propaganda.⁵² This experiment was never born, but it was followed by a similar effort made by the IFTU. In fact, this international organization decided in 1929 to establish the so-called «Four countries committee» in order to merge the propaganda activity done by the French, German, Belgian and Luxembourg unions in the border regions. In this manner, the IFTU decided to manage the unionization by creating a trans-national zone of activity. The committee was supposed to be financed by the four national organizations in addition to three international federations (constructions, mining, and metallurgy). This attempt was able to reach only a narrow range of its initial purposes and, therefore, the international federations stopped in 1932 to support the program and the CGT was forced to assume the whole costs.⁵³ The dissolution of the German trade unions brought the definitive end of the Four Countries Committee in September 1933.⁵⁴

53—«Rapport sur l'activité de la Fédération Syndicale Internationale 1930-1932» presented to the 6th Ordinary Brussels Congress of 1933, 97CFD42 – FSI, CGT Archives.

54—«RAPPORT DU SECRETARIAT SUR L'ACTIVITE DE LA FEDERATION SYNDICALE INTERNATIONALE DU 1er JUILLET 1933 AU 31 MARS 1934», 97CFD43 – FSI et BIT.

Legal and social assistance

The second type of activities organized by the MOE offices was the social assistance for migrant workers. In April 1924, when the Italian office was starting its activity, the IFTU wrote to all its affiliated organizations addressing multiple problems about the migrant workers' capacity to defend their rights in front of their employers. Firstly, foreign workers frequently didn't speak local languages; secondly, they

didn't know national laws, and thirdly, every judicial conflict could incur heavy expenses.⁵⁵

In order to face these problems, the CGT, as written above, decided to create a help desk at the Bourse du Travail in Paris. This office was open every day, during the evening hours from Monday to Friday, in the afternoon hours on Saturday and in the Sunday morning. This desk worked until the Second World War, and was widely advertised in almost every issue of *L'Operaio Italiano*.⁵⁶ At the end of the 30s, furthermore, *L'Operaio Italiano* promoted a lawyer office in Paris to give legal support to Italian workers.⁵⁷

All the MOE's periodicals gave visibility to several French courses arranged by the Foyer Français.⁵⁸

The juridical support initiatives and the language courses were organized also by the CGTU as highlighted in a report written by Racamond, the CGTU's MOE leader, to the Congress which took place in Lyon in 1927.⁵⁹

One of the most prominent activities of the MOE offices was based on the analysis of French laws and decrees. That was a two-tiered initiative. On one hand, it was needed to inform the CGT's Administrative Commission about the risks and the issues that could arise from the several new restrictive laws adopted during the 20s and the 30s pertaining to migrant workers.⁶⁰ On the other hand, MOE office's analysis became an important tool to inform foreign workers of their rights and how to defend them. The office translated the most important analyses made by the CGT's juridical office or produced its own studies about new reforms on rent,⁶¹ vacations and family allowances,⁶² the law on forty working hours,⁶³ conciliation and arbitration,⁶⁴ naturalizations,⁶⁵

55—Letter from the IFTU to all the affiliated Trade Unions on 3 April 1924, 97CFD42 – FSI, CGT Archives.

56—*L'Operaio Italiano*, 11 December 1926, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

57—*L'Operaio Italiano*, 20 March 1938, source: gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

58—*L'Operaio Italiano*, 11 December 1926, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

59—MERIGGI, Maria Grazia, *L'Internazionale degli operai...*, p. 193.

60—Letter from Caporali to CGT's Administrative Commission on 10 April 1927, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

61—*L'Operaio Italiano*, 15 February 1938, source: gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

62—*L'Operaio Italiano*, 5 February 1937, source: gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

63—*L'Operaio Italiano*, 5 January 1938, source: gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

64—*L'Operaio Italiano*, 20 March 1938, source: gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

65—*L'Operaio Italiano*, 30 November 1937, source: gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

66—*L'Operaio Italiano*, 30 October 1937, source: gallica. bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

67—*L'Operaio Italiano*, 30 October 1937, 30 November 1937, 15 February 1938, 5 March 1938, 20 March 1938.

68—*L'Operaio Italiano*, 30 November 1937, source: gallica. bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

69—«NOTES SUR LE DECRET-LOI DU 8 MAI 1938», 97CFD47 – MOE, CGT Archives.

and on collective bargaining agreements.⁶⁶ *L'Operaio Italiano* had a specific column, called «Consulenza dell'emigrante» (Advice for the emigrant), in which Italian workers might ask questions about social rights, new laws and reforms, how to manage a conflict with their employers, etc.⁶⁷ Furthermore, *L'Operaio Italiano* advertised the juridical conferences organized by the CGT in Paris in 1937 and 1938.⁶⁸

In the second half of the 1930s the MOE office became one of the main actors of the Centre de Liaison, which was a coalition of social and political organizations claiming the adoption of a *Statut Juridique de l'Étranger* (Migrants Juridical Statute) in order to defend migrant workers from arbitrary expulsions.⁶⁹

All this juridical work had a double objective. As shown before, the first aim was to help migrant workers in their daily life and to support them in any conflict with their employers. The second purpose was to push French trade unions to take a pro-immigrant dele position.

Frequently, foreign unionists weren't able to reach the latter goal, especially during the first half of the 1930s when the CGT supported protectionist laws. Nevertheless, the presence of these offices allowed a continuous debate and enabled migrants to take part in it.

The refugees

The archives show that the MOE was continuously involved in the defence of refugees fled from Fascist Italy. Many Italian refugees hit by expulsion decrees wrote to Ernesto Caporali asking for help.

An unofficial direct line was formed between the MOE offices, Léon Jouhaux and the Minister of the Interior from 1924 to 1939.

When the number of refugees dramatically increased after the Nazis assumed power in Germany, the IFTU decided to promote a dedicated office called Comité Matteotti on 1st August 1933. This structure was strongly backed by MOE offices within foreign communities.

The CGT and the IFTU started to act as guarantors for those who wanted to migrate to France for political or ethnic reasons. The international and the French trade unions were usually heard by the French Government, but the refugees problems didn't end with their entry in the Hexagon. One of the most outstanding issues, in fact, was derived from the status of refugee, which didn't allow obtaining the documents required to work (worker identity card, working card, etc.). Refugees, thus, often fluctuated in a limbo: they might stay in France, but they weren't allowed to work. Hence, the CGT founded a workshop employing twelve refugees as a cooperative, but police decided to forcibly close it in March 1934.⁷⁰

The CGT activism towards refugees became particularly intense in the mid-1930s when the French government hardened its politics against migrants through several repressive decrees, Italy declared war on Ethiopia, and the Spanish Civil War broke out. After these events, the MOE offices and the Comité Matteotti needed to impede expulsions from France and, moreover, to facilitate the influx of new refugees. New initiatives were undertaken

70—«Exposé pour le Haut-commissariat pour les Réfugiés allemands, relativement aux efforts entrepris en France par la F.S.I, la C.G.T. et le Comité Matteotti Français, en vue d'obtenir pour les réfugiés politiques allemands l'autorisation d'entrer en France, d'y rester et d'y travailler (passeports, visas, cartes de travail)», 97CFD42 – FSI, CGT Archives.

71—The CGT archive has preserved a huge amount of documents about several campaigns organized by the CGT to accommodate Spanish children during the Civil War.

72—«Rapport du Comité du Droit d'asile», 97CFD47 – MOE, CGT Archives.

73—«RAPPORT SUR LE CONGRES NATIONAL DU CENTRE DE LIAISON DES COMITES POUR LE STATUT DES IMMIGRES», 97CFD47 – MOE, CGT Archives.

to protect Italian deserters and, above all, to protect Spanish children fled to France.⁷¹ Between the end of 1934 and the beginning of the following year, the CGT and the Comité de Défense Sociale decided to create the Comité du Droit d'Asile in order to prevent French repressive policies.⁷²

As mentioned earlier, a new step was shown by the foundation of the Centre de Liaison des Comités pour le Statut des Immigrés in 1938 which, however, wasn't able to achieve its goals.⁷³

Press

The cornerstone activity of the MOE bureaus was the management of their periodicals. They were the main tool to promote the other activities. Furthermore, these periodicals were the main weapon to fight against other unions and rival political groups: fascist, catholic, communist, socialist, and unionist papers thrived in the biggest foreign communities in France.

For the Italian community this phenomenon was amplified, because every political group declared illegal in Italy moved to Paris and to other main cities, restarting to print their former journals.

The CGTU invested increasingly in its periodicals for immigrant workers. In 1925 the communist-led organization printed *El Proletario* (bimonthly, in Spanish), *La Riscossa* (weekly, in Italian), *La Voix Ouvrière* (weekly, in Yiddish), *Trybuna Robotnika* (weekly, in Polish), *Romania Muncitore* (weekly, in Romanian), *Parisi Munkas* (weekly, in Hungarian), *Glas* (bimonthly, for Yugoslavian workers), *Robotnik*

(monthly, in Czech).⁷⁴ In 1926, 16% of CGTU's budget was devoted to support these periodicals.⁷⁵ With the increase of the repression, a large number of these journals were forcibly closed by the police, as for instance: *La Riscossa* on 18 December 1926, *Tribuna Robotnika* on 22 February 1927 and *El Proletario* on 16 July 1927.⁷⁶

The first foreign language periodical to be founded by the CGT was *Pravo Ludu*. It started as the official organ of the CGT's North and Pas de Calais federations and became the official paper of the Polish MOE office after its foundation. Of the 5,763 copies printed during the third quarter of 1927, 3,710 were sold in Pas de Calais region, 417 in North, 819 in Ansin, 500 in Montceau-les-Mines, etc., showing that this initiative remained deeply rooted in its historical regions.⁷⁷ A handwritten note shows that between July 1938 and September 1939 *Pravo Ludu*, that meanwhile had become a weekly publication, published a print run of 7,000-8,000 copies of every issue.⁷⁸

As mentioned above, the CGT's periodical for Italian workers did not exist before the establishment of the MOE office, and was mainly an initiative of the International Construction Federation. A first meeting was organized on 13 February 1926 in Paris to discuss the launch of this journal. It was attended by Georg Kappler for the International Construction Federation, Jouhaux and Lenoir from the CGT's Administrative Council, Quagliano and Salvi for the Italian Construction Federation, Cordier, representing the French Construction Federation, and Caporali for the Italian MOE office. According to Kappler, an Italian periodical was increasingly necessary to prevent Italian workers

74—*La Vie syndicale. Bulletin mensuel de la Confédération générale du travail unitaire*, 1925/10-1925/12, source: gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

75—Mary D. LEWIS, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

76—*Bulletin du Comité de l'Afrique française*, 1928/01-1928/12, source: gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

77—«Rapport sur la gestion du "Pravo Ludu"», 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

78—Handwritten document, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

79—CGT proposed to deposit 15,000 francs (in the same year it gave 40,000 to *Pravo Ludu*) on a financial evaluation of 180,000 francs needed to launch the new periodical.

80—Minutes of the meeting held on 13 February 1926, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

81—«VERBALE DELLA SEDUTA TENUTASI A PARIGI PER L'ORGANIZZAZIONE DI UN GIORNALE IN LINGUA ITALIANA PER GLI EMIGRANTI ITALIANI ALL'ESTERO», 97CFD48 – MOE.

82—Report from 1 May 1925 to 30 October 1926, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives

in France from supporting the fascist regime. CGT agreed to support this new initiative, but the main amount had to be covered by Kappler's organization.⁷⁹

The editorial staff was composed by Caporali and Salvi, who had to collaborate with several news correspondents in other European countries (in Italy, the news correspondent was Rigola). The editorial staff's work was supervised by a committee composed by Lenoir for the CGT, Cordier for the Constructions Federation and Quaglino, representing both the Italian Constructions Federation and the International Constructions Federation.⁸⁰

In the following meeting, Quaglino proposed to name the periodical *L'Operaio Italiano* and to fix the launch date on 1 April 1926. Quaglino became its first director.⁸¹ Some months later, Pietro Nenni took Salvi's place in the editorial staff.⁸² Thanks to Quaglino and Nenni, the political emigration found in *L'Operaio Italiano* a way to get in touch with the mass of Italian workers living in France.

The financial statement about the first twenty months (march 1926-31 december 1927) shows that the total costs amounted to 158,551 francs, and the earnings were divided as follows: 101,740 francs from the International Constructions Federation, 15,000 francs from CGT, 5,000 francs from the Italian Cooperatives Union, 8,167 francs from collective subscriptions, 20,592 francs from sales, 4,441 francs from individual subscriptions and 3,586 from advertisements. *L'Operaio Italiano*, therefore, relied mainly on the International Constructions

Federations' subscriptions. The first years were very difficult. The Belgian trade union stopped to buy its 1,000 copies, and, above all, the competition with other Italian periodicals in France became increasingly hard. The number of printed copies shrank from 3,500 in April 1926 to 2,200 in June 1927 of an initial forecast of 5,000 copies.⁸³ After CGT and CGTU merged in 1936, *L'Operaio Italiano* became the periodical of the MOE office belonging to the reunited organization.

Conclusions

The MOE offices had been a very long-running experience. During the World War II groups of foreigners formed the Francs-Tireurs et Partisans-MOI (immigrant partisan groups) playing an important role in the French Resistance. At the end of the war, the trade unions decided to reactivate the former offices which definitively ended their activity between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, when immigration in France had deeply changed. The new waves of workers came from post-colonial countries and, thus, these tools which had been thought for national – and language based – communities were no longer responsive to the new organizational needs.⁸⁴

It is difficult to assert what the real impact of the MOE offices has been, both in the French trade unionism and in the immigrant workers conditions. Nancy Green has argued that the MOE offices were an ambiguous tool, because it wasn't clear if they were a genuine internationalist space, conceived to increase the direct participation of immigrant

83—«RAPPORT SUR LA GESTION DE "L'OPERAIO ITALIANO"», 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.

84—DEDIEU, Jean-Philippe, « L'internationalisme ouvrier à l'épreuve des migrations africaines en France », *Critique internationale*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2011, pp. 145-167.

workers, or they were merely a propaganda tool.⁸⁵ Analysing the documents in the CGT Archives, MOE bureaus appear to have been both at the same time. For instance, the head of the Polish MOE office was called «propaganda officer», but this didn't impede a large participation of Poles in some federations.

In other words, MOE offices never became an apparatus completely subject to the French organizations, a simple propaganda office, for multiple reasons. Firstly, they were usually the result of international agreements: MOE offices could benefit from their intermediate positions. Moreover, the Profintern and the IFTU played a central role forcing the CGTU and the CGT to invest in these new forms of organization. In other words, immigrant unionists found themselves in the heart of the international trade unions relationship. Secondly, the MOE offices' leaders were unionists with a long experience in working class' organizations. In the Italian case they came frequently from leading positions in their trade unions before they had to flee to France. Thirdly, MOE offices worked and communicated in languages which were unknown to French trade unions leaders. For example, in 1926 the CGT's Administrative Commission was forced to ask the Polish trade union for the translation of an internal memo that the Polish MOE bureau had sent to its local branches.⁸⁶ Finally, immigrant workers were very strong in some economic sectors and the French organization couldn't forget it. We can appreciate this phenomenon analysing the attention paid by the construction federation to Italians, or the by the mining federation to Poles. When in

1933 the Pomeranian Constructions Gild fled from Germany, it sent a letter to several addressees asking to be helped to restart its activity in France and to be supervised by them. These addressees were the IFTU, the International Constructions Federation, the CGT, the French Constructions Federation, the Italian Constructions Federation and the Italian Cooperatives Union.⁸⁷ This shows how the foreign organizations, in this case the Italian ones, could be strong and how their strength could be recognized internationally.

In conclusion, the MOE, as similar experiences analysed in this book, became an important space in which migrant workers legitimated their initiatives, especially when they fled a dictatorship in their county, and found a large independence of action.

87—Letter mailed on 28 June 1933, 97CFD42 – fsi, CGT Archives.

86—Letter from the CGT to the Polish Trade Union, on 7 January 1926, 97CFD48 – MOE, CGT Archives.