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**Analysis of Italian medium-sized enterprises'
collective bargaining from an international
perspective: Evidence from the manufacturing
sector**

Andrea Signoretti

Università di Brescia, Italy

Abstract

The article analyses local collective bargaining in seven medium-sized manufacturing firms operating in Northern Italy. The goals are to understand, within an international perspective, the degree of development of Italian MEs' collective bargaining, and its outcomes in the construction of participative industrial relations and innovative forms of work organisation. The analysis highlights a 'low-decentralised collective bargaining system', where the concrete regulatory space exerted by company collective contracts is usually limited. Then, industrial relations turn out to be characterised neither by participation nor by conflict, from which come forms of work organisation based on a good quantitative mutual availability, like overtime and related payments, among social actors, but with poor results in terms of more qualitative aspects. Institutions and the prevailing culture of

industrial relations turn out to be the main explanatory factors, requiring a more profound reflection on the Italian system of industrial relations.

Introduzione

Company collective bargaining has drawn increasing interest among social scientists, practitioners and policy makers since the late 1980s because of its increasing significance within the collective bargaining structure of developed countries (Katz, 1993). This trend

has been particularly important in Western European countries, where the contractual structure was based on cross-sectoral or wide-sectoral centralised collective bargaining since the 1950s, which regulated most local working conditions in terms of pay, working hours, job classification and dismissals (Marginson and Sisson, 2004; Marginson et al., 2003). Company collective bargaining in developed countries has acquired importance for various reasons. First of all, globalisation has intensified the international competition for greater alignment between industrial/labour and employment relations, on the one hand, and the competitive needs of single companies, on the other. Second, international competition requires stronger collaboration between the social actors (i.e. managers, unions and workers) to realise innovative forms of work organisation, if companies aim to reinforce their competitiveness via labour productivity increments based on production quality. Both the alignment of industrial and employment relations and their evolution into participative forms producing organisational innovations can be better attained by bargaining at the firm level (Appelbaum and Batt, 1994; Supiot, 2001). However, some companies have used the strengthening of local¹ collective bargaining to compete through lower labour costs or heightened work intensity. In fact, the development of company collective bargaining, especially when not subject to adequate union control, can constitute a route to the erosion of multi-employer and centralised collective agreements, which can worsen employment conditions (Schulten and Müller, 2013). Third, company collective bargaining decentralisation derives from the financialisation of the economy, which, inspired by neoliberal policies, has generated increasing profitability expectations that impact strongly on the European systems of industrial relations. This phenomenon has been particularly acute following the recent financial breakdown in 2008 and the European debt crisis in 2011, inducing several European governments to assign more power to local collective bargaining (Prosser, 2013).

All these factors have led to the attribution of a more relevant role to company collective bargaining in all the European countries. However, this common process of collective bargaining decentralisation has taken different forms among countries, implying different developments of company collective bargaining regarding the range of subjects treated at such a negotiating level and its derogatory possibilities with respect to multi-employer bargaining norms. At the same time, given that the construction of participative industrial relations and innovative forms of work organisation can be realised more appropriately at the company than at the national level, the process of collective bargaining decentralisation has been supported by political parties, employers and some unions too, though, in the latter case, by requiring centralised coordination. However, it is difficult for company collective bargaining to realise the goals of participative labour involvement and innovative work organisation models when there are no institutions aimed at imposing workplace collaboration (Thompson, 2003). On the other hand, while company collective bargaining is a precondition to negotiate workplace innovations, it should also be remembered that its increasing importance, particularly if not accompanied by appropriate systems of union control, can lead to productivity increments attained through worse employment conditions.

This article focuses on the case of Italy and on the analysis of company collective bargaining, in its real and formal shape, within a sample of unionised medium-sized companies (MEs).² Its aim is to present and explain the results achieved by company

collective bargaining within the firms examined in comparison with the findings from other European countries, by paying particular attention to the role of institutions. In detail, the goal of the article is twofold.

First, the form of company collective bargaining development within Italian unionised medium-sized companies will be analysed from an international perspective as regards the subjects treated and its derogation power with respect to multi-employer bargaining norms, especially following the economic crisis. This is because of the different spaces attributed to company collective bargaining in European countries and the increasing importance of firm-level collective bargaining in Italy since the early 1990s, endowed with derogatory options as of 2011. The hypothesis is that the continuous reinforcement of Italian company collective bargaining has progressively led to the widening of its content within unionised medium-sized companies, while derogatory options are not significantly applied since they are not part of the traditional Italian system of industrial relations.

Second, decentralisation processes within the collective bargaining structure have also been sustained in Italy by several political and social actors, as well as unions, keeping centralised control, just to improve the cooperation between the social parties and the work organisation. The intention was to settle the issues concerning low Italian labour productivity (Treu, 2011), which registered, within the decade 2001–2011, a negative trend equal to -3.4% , one of the worst among the European and developed countries (European Commission, 2012). However, to verify the capacity of company collective bargaining to produce such positive results in the fields of labour relations and work organisation, it is crucial to verify and explain its real qualitative outcomes along these dimensions. In fact, the reinforcement of local collective bargaining gives more power to social parties but, without proper institutions establishing workplace cooperation as it occurs in Italy, it could be

difficult to achieve participatory and innovative goals. The institutional reference, in this field, is constituted by 'beneficial constraints', an expression coined by Streeck (1997) to indicate those laws or, generally speaking, institutional measures that are approved and enforced by the state to impose workplace collaboration. Thus, the hypothesis that it is considered complicated to increase participation and thus improve work organisation without proper institutional constraints, despite the reinforcement of company collective bargaining, is to be discussed.

The choice to focus on Italian medium-sized manufacturing enterprises is based on different reasons. First, such companies represent the most dynamic part of the country's economy and labour relations should be relevant to their competitiveness, while in small enterprises informal mechanisms prevail in the regulation of employment practices. Second, few data are available with regard to the features and development of their company collective bargaining, since the analysis of local collective bargaining usually concerns large firms.

The structure of the article is as follows. The first section explains the existence of different forms of collective bargaining decentralisation, how to analyse the development achieved by company collective bargaining and the related hypothesis 1. The second section discusses the importance of participative labour relations and innovative organisational forms for the local social actors, how to capture and explain the quality of company collective bargaining in this respect and the emerging hypothesis 2. The third

section illustrates the methodology applied. The fourth section reports the empirical out-comes of the research, divided into the two research questions, and the fifth section concludes.

Different forms of company collective bargaining

Collective bargaining decentralisation, which has developed differently in various countries, can first be classified into two broad categories of ‘organised’ and ‘disorganised’ decentralisation (Traxler, 1995). These have been defined, respectively, as public or private ordering by Colvin and Darbshire (2013). Within the process of ‘organised decentralisation’ or public ordering, the strengthening of local bargaining has been guided by decisions taken at the central level of negotiation and, therefore, still subjects market forces to institutional influences. By comparison, in the case of ‘disorganised decentralisation’ or private ordering, companies and plants establish autonomously the terms and conditions of their employment practices, the regulation of which depends prominently on competitive labour market forces.

With reference to some important EU-15 countries,³ Italy, Germany, Sweden and Denmark have followed different directions of ‘organised decentralisation’, while in Greece and Spain, following the recent reforms, disorganised decentralisation prevails, as has already occurred in new member countries, in the UK and in the US as well. In more detail, to enquire into the degree of company collective bargaining development, the variables to be analysed are relative to the mutual recognition between the social parties and the frequency and range of subjects treated in local collective bargaining, especially their eventual derogation with respect to wide-sector contracts. The mutual recognition and content of collective bargaining are connected subjects, since the first is a prerequisite, though not sufficient alone, for realising an organic system of collective bargaining (Foster et al., 2009).

In Germany, opening exit clauses have been introduced in the last two decades by collective bargaining actors, allowing local parties (employers and work councils) to negotiate, through codetermination rights, employment conditions related to the circumstances of individual employers also undercutting the provisions established by sectoral agreements. In addition, employers' associations register declining membership, a fact that is rendering the application of sectoral contracts among companies less diffuse (Greer, 2008). In Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Denmark, industry contracts are binding for all employers and provide the general framework, leaving many subjects to local negotiations, inclusive of substantial pay rate increases. In countries like Greece and Spain, the economic and financial crises of 2008 and 2011 induced the governments to pass radical reforms widening the negotiating role of company collective bargaining and allowing its derogation from that established at higher levels of negotiation, an option that was previously absent or very limited. Employers can accomplish this by bargaining with the association of employees, and not necessarily with unions if these are not present at the company level – as in Greece (Voskeritsian and Kornelakis, 2011) – or, unilaterally, by having recourse to arbitration by a public tripartite body in Spain (Fulton, 2013).

Thus, it is evident that the process of decentralisation, despite its common process of reinforcement, has different meanings within EU-15 countries. In some countries, the

role of local bargaining is broad but remains subject to important forms of coordination, as it is in Scandinavian countries. Germany seems to constitute a peculiar case, since the relevant derogatory weight covered by company collective bargaining is combined with the strong codetermination rights exerted by work councils at the firm level. In other countries, like Greece and Spain, the current form of company collective bargaining foresees broad possibilities of derogation and very weak forms of union control over such derogation. Thus, these systems of collective bargaining have assumed, at least formally, the character of disorganised decentralisation, which explains why the unions, in both countries, have fiercely opposed these reforms.

Such are the formal spaces that company collective bargaining can fill up in these countries nowadays, but it is fundamental to understand what has happened concretely within medium-sized companies, the unit of analysis in this study in reference to real collective bargaining effects. Little research exists in this context. However, from recent data, it seems that employee representation and company collective bargaining are well developed in Germany (Silvia and Schroeder, 2007), Denmark and Sweden (Eurofound, 2010), which can be generally defined as having 'high-decentralised collective bargaining systems', though, as seen, there are important differences among them. On the other hand, in Spain (OECD, 2013) and Greece (Voskeritsian and Kornelakis, 2011), MEs' local collective bargaining does not handle a wide range of subjects. For instance, in Spain, companies facing competitive difficulties usually downsize instead of bargaining for different local employment conditions (European Central Bank, 2010), while in Greece, industrial relations turn out to be adversarial. To this regard, the concrete effects that the strong derogatory role recently assigned to local collective bargaining could exert have yet to be verified. Hence, these countries, for the time being, could be defined as having 'low-decentralised collective bargaining systems'.

Within this international context, it is interesting to enquire into the degree of development reached by company collective bargaining in Italian MEs, also within a longitudinal perspective. In the Italian context, as will be explained, wide-sector collective contracts (called *Contratti Collettivi Nazionali di Lavoro*, CCNLs) have historically covered the most important regulatory role, but, since the early 1990s, increasingly higher contractual responsibilities, often in voluntaristic and integrative forms, have been assigned to firm-level social parties. Initially related to company contingent bonuses, such collective bargaining tasks have progressively included working time, training, integrative health care and pensions, atypical workers' deployment, etc. (Negrelli and Pulignano, 2008). However, the opting-out possibilities for company collective bargaining were absent until 2011, since they were not part of the traditional Italian system of industrial relations (Cella and Treu, 2009). Their introduction has been shared by the social parties in June 2011 by keeping substantial centralised control and bypassing the reform approved subsequently by the centre-right government, entailing fewer constraints for opting-out employer possibilities. However, given that Italian employers' associations are not characterised by neoliberal ideas (Michelotti and Nyland, 2008), the adoption of such derogation appears improbable. The few empirical studies available, mostly based on statistical data, have shown that within Italian manufacturing medium-sized companies, local collective bargaining, where applied, is quite robust, especially in the north, though concentrated on traditional areas, such as health and safety, working

time and production quality (Banca d'Italia, 2009; Leoni and Albertini, 2009). As a result, the hypothesis on Italian MEs' collective bargaining, whose analysis goes from 1993 to 2013, is that:

Hypothesis 1: The realised reinforcement of company collective bargaining in Italy since the early 1990s has progressively broadened its content, making it significant within unionised medium-sized firms, while the implementation of its recent potentially derogatory role is not expected. Hence, from an international perspective, Italian MEs' collective bargaining would be characterised by a medium-decentralised development.

The speculation has an explorative goal, because the analysis concerns a limited sample of unionised MEs and because there are few empirical data concerning the development achieved by company collective bargaining, organically evaluated, within this category of firms. In fact, while the company collective contracts signed, also recently, in large firms like Fiat-Chrysler, Luxottica, Electrolux and SKF are sophisticated and widely known, what happens in medium-sized enterprises in this field is rarely examined.

The issue of the quality of local bargaining

Despite the differences, the continuous reinforcement of company bargaining represents a clear trend, and such a negotiating level has attracted particular attention in the form of workplace cooperation and partnership agreements among the social actors, which would lead to win-win results through the modernisation of work organisation (Pini and Santangelo, 2005; Wallace et al., 2004). Companies increase their competitiveness via labour productivity increments and unions are reinforced in their role within company governance and work organisation decision making,

while employees enjoy higher wages, stronger job security and tools to express their voice. Indeed, local collective bargaining can produce less positive socioeconomic outcomes. In fact, substantive concessions granted by unions and workers at the firm level have been registered, particularly since the economic crisis (Zagelmeyer, 2011).

At any rate, the development of company collective bargaining can be considered attractive for the Italian economy given its productivity deficit illustrated in the introduction. In fact, such a deficit derives from many factors, among which negative externalities, like the lack of adequate transportation infrastructures, play an important role and in which company social actors cannot intervene. However, empirical researchers have also shown that Italian companies are not at the forefront of work organisation. In fact, they adopt the practices of flexible working time arrangements, employee autonomy, direct participation and continuing training less frequently than their counterparts in other European countries, like France, Germany and the UK (Eurofound, 2012) – a bundle of practices that inform more modern forms of work organisation and produce better results in terms of product quality and productivity (Antonioli et al., 2011; Leoni, 2012). As a consequence, several authors and social parties have advocated further reinforcement of company collective bargaining and its diffusion to improve labour relations and work

organisation and thus increase productivity, by assigning, in parallel, a more limited role to CCNLs (Albini and De Caprariis, 2013; Caprioli, 2013).

Within this debate regarding the relation between company collective bargaining and industrial relations and work organisation, it is fundamental to verify the concrete outcomes produced by collective bargaining at such a level in Italian MEs as well. This qualitative appraisal should take into consideration different dimensions. In relation to the type of industrial relations, the degree of collaboration between employers and labour representatives and the existence and concrete application of participatory and adversarial practices, concerning information, consultation and codetermination rights on one hand and strikes and other types of conflict on the other, are to be considered (Cetto et al., 2013; Deery and Iverson, 2005).

To analyse work organisation, working time arrangements represent an important factor. In fact, such arrangements constitute an important aspect both for company competitiveness, given the variability and uncertainty of the current markets, and for the well-being of workers, who are increasingly pressured by the need to combine working time and family responsibilities (Eurofound, 2009).

Second, the level of employee participation in influencing work organisation and the related human resource management practices of continuing training activities are to be considered (Heyes, 2007). Workers' direct participation in affecting work organisation is appraised as crucial to realising both employees' involvement, through the valorisation of their contribution, and productivity increments, given that workers know very well how to execute their job tasks (Jones et al., 2010).

Third, it is important to consider company contingent bonuses, which exert a relevant role by strengthening the collaboration between the social actors. This is because managers, unions and workers, within the bonus system, cooperate to increase productivity and company competitiveness in order to allow for the

payment of higher wages, goals that would urge them all to improve the work organisation. Particularly, the attention is on the structure of company bonuses and, in this regard, its variable character and the distinction between input-oriented and output-oriented bonuses are relevant. In terms of the system of company contingent wages, within input-oriented systems rewards are handed out on the basis of the qualitative performance achieved by small teams within innovative practices of work organisation, while in output-oriented systems bonuses are distributed on the grounds of financial results or productive goals evaluated collectively among all the workers, ignoring any differences between teams of employees. Scientific studies show that only in the first case can bonuses increase productivity significantly, because social actors are spurred on to improve the work organisation and workers recognise the importance of their qualitative performance (Cappelli and Neumark, 2001). These are stimuli that are not realised when financial parameters are established or when the working performance of one employee is evaluated along with dozens of other co-workers.

Subsequently, the results from the analysis of company collective bargaining as regards workplace collaboration need to be interpreted. Some studies have made recourse primarily to national regulations to explain how management and unions interact and thus the result of local bargaining (Dobbins, 2010; Svalund and Kervinen, 2013). Between institutions, great importance is assigned to the concept of 'beneficial constraints' that somehow impose workplace collaboration. Permissive voluntarism is a

connected but different concept, since it describes a situation in which the system of industrial relations is defined by agreements that employers, union representatives and workers are willing to share, without any legal obligation (Flanders, 1970). Other studies have instead underlined the variation within countries, examining the development of heterogeneous and internally dynamic models of industrial relations (Marginson et al., 2004; Meardi et al., 2009). These variations are linked to the features of local union weight, product markets and, above all, the historical type of company industrial relations (Pulignano and Stewart, 2013; Roche and Geary, 2000). The importance of such elements to realise participative industrial relations would be greater in voluntaristic settings (Boxall and Purcell, 2008), as is the Italian case.

Overall, it is evident that workplace cooperation comes from the interplay between institutions on the one hand and the firm-level factors on the other, within which the historical relation between management and unions plays a relevant role. At any rate, it would seem that institutions cover the main role but these are absent in the Italian institutional context. In fact, only information and consultation rights, deriving from EU directives and CCNLs, are enforced in this regard, but they can easily be weakened by companies given that no regulations have been established concerning the official character of company information about such rights. On the other hand, committees or other institutions in which company and employee representatives can discuss the economic planning of the company (like mergers, amalgamations, etc.) and co-decide policies related to work organisation and personnel policies in terms of work methods, production processes, workers' performance and involvement have not been established. Therefore, their eventual adoption derives from the free will of local social parties. The activation of participatory decision-making processes has only been established for single practices, like continuing training and company contingent bonuses, as illustrated in

detail in the following paragraph related to the historical development of the Italian institutional context of industrial relations.

Given the lack of beneficial constraints in the Italian institutional context, the following hypothesis relates to the research question seeking to understand and explain the concrete results of Italian MEs' collective bargaining in terms of labour relations and work organisation:

Hypothesis 2: Given the absence of appropriate institutional constraints, participatory and innovative results could be difficult to achieve in Italian MEs.

The next section explains, in detail, the changes regarding Italian industrial relations institutions over time and their current shape, particularly with regard to company collective bargaining reinforcement and the introduction of participative decision-making processes.

The Italian context's development from an international perspective

As regards its institutional framework, Italy has strong union recognition rights at the workplace level, within a system of worker representation based on a single channel

represented by unions. In the Italian system, decentralised collective bargaining, at the company and territorial level, was institutionalised with the 1993 *Protocol*, an agreement signed by the government and most representatives of the social parties to help the country recover from a difficult economic situation. The *Protocol* established a two-tier system, formed by the prominence of sector-level national contracts, which were also responsible for determining the subjects to be negotiated at the company or territorial level and the relative procedures to follow; hence, it is a typical process of 'organised decentralisation'. In any case, the combination of globalisation pressures and the constant process of firm closure and deindustrialisation following the 2008 and 2011 crises compelled the social parties to introduce dramatic reforms. Employers asked for a major role for company collective bargaining, in order to adapt the employment practices to their competitive needs and to raise unions' and workers' involvement in the achievement of higher productivity levels. They also sought to allow local collective contracts, particularly company ones, to derogate from the regulations established in multi-employer contracts. Unions, to differing degrees, agreed with this request, but maintained substantial central control to regulate the process.

As a result, three relevant interconfederal agreements shared by *Confindustria*, the principal employers' association, and the most important unions, *Confederazione Generale Italiana del lavoro* (CGIL), *Confederazione Italiana Sindacato Lavoratori* (CISL) and *Unione Italiana del Lavoro* (UIL), have been signed with regard to collective bargaining. The Interconfederal Agreement of 28 June 2011, concerning the contractual structure, confirms the prominence of national contracts and the two-tier collective bargaining system, but, unlike the 1993 *Protocol*, the new agreement also allows for the amendment of arrangements at the national sector level on the grounds of constraints to be established in the CCNL. Where the CCNL does not foresee these norms of local modification, companies'

collective contracts stipulated by firms' union representatives can change, in agreement with provincial union representatives and, if confirmed by an eventual referendum among workers, only provisions regarding working performance, working time and work organisation. Therefore, Italy appears to be following the trend towards the deepening of 'organised decentralisation'.

However, a breakdown in the Italian system of industrial relations was brought about by art. 8 of the 138 Law Decree, issued in August 2011 by the then centre-right government, which allows, for a wide range of reasons (from company crisis to the emergence of irregular work), a general derogation of company or territorial agreements to the regulation contained both in the CCNL and in law, having as sole constraints the general principles incorporated in the Italian Constitution and in the European legislative framework. This is a process to be managed, at the company or territorial level, by the most representative unions at the national or territorial level, or by union representatives operating within firms. The aim of the law, further legitimising Fiat-Chrysler's decision to approve its own contract in derogation to the national one, is to align the employment conditions with the economic situation of individual firms realising a neoliberal agenda. However, it should be recognised that the passing of the law also derived from international pressures. At any rate, this strong liberalisation, opposed by CGIL but not by the other unions, is still subject to union control, unlike the situation in other Mediterranean countries that are also strongly affected by financial market pressures, such as Greece

and Spain. Besides, Confindustria, after the passing of the law, restated its aim to follow what was determined with the unions under the 28 June 2011 Interconfederal Agreement, as requested by labour organisations, and not to use the option allowed by art. 8. This decision further proves that neoliberal ideology is more evident among some political actors than employers (Negrelli and Signoretti, 2014).

As regards institutions of workplace cooperation, it has been shown the uncertain character of information and consultation rights, which represent the only effective means through which labour and capital can engage in active cooperation, since union codetermination rights are absent and their application is thus confined to the free will of the social parties. There is, however, the activation of participatory decision-making processes in single practices in the fields of work organisation and personnel policies, constituted by continuing training and company contingent bonuses.

In detail, in relation to continuing training, companies have strong incentives to adhere to inter-professional training funds by depositing within them a tax percentage, which, otherwise, firms need to pay to public institutions. On the other hand, local unions have important rights in the field of continuing training, since companies can use the money put aside in the inter-professional funds only if the planned training activities are shared by unions. As for company bonuses, following the Interconfederal Protocol signed in 1993, the social parties have agreed on the importance of collective bargaining, in order to link higher levels of firm competitiveness and higher wages. In 2008, the centre-right government, to encourage the diffusion of bargained company contingent compensation, passed the Legislative Decree No. 93, according to which such shared firm bonuses are subject to reduced taxation – from 23% or more (depending on the employee wage) to 10% – and to contributive relief. This incentive has been confirmed by subsequent governments.

Research method

The research method is based on case studies, a qualitative type of enquiry that presents drawbacks and advantages. The main drawback of case studies is the fact that they do not allow the identification of general trends within the population studied as regards the phenomena investigated. On the other hand, case studies enable the concrete results of the phenomena investigated and the mechanisms that lie behind the processes examined to be captured more effectively (Yin, 2003). Since the study aims to analyse and interpret the effective outcomes achieved by local collective bargaining, a case study is an appropriate methodology. The firms examined are all located in the Province of Verona in the region of Veneto (Northern Italy), a rich area with an important manufacturing presence, with industrial relations historically characterised by collaboration and a diffuse union regulation aimed, however, at supporting companies' needs (Viafora, 2011).

To reinforce the scientific validity of the data collected, an extended case study method, comprising seven manufacturing companies, was implemented. Furthermore, purposive sampling was chosen (Bryman, 2008), so firms, further to being unionised, were selected according to different criteria. First, they had to be industrial medium-sized companies, hence employing 50–250 employees⁴ and operating within different sectors in order to evaluate the relative importance of the product market and diverse

Table 1. Companies' general characteristics.

Companies Sector		Productmarket	Number of employees	Unionisation rate
Pharma	Pharmaceutical	Global	80	15%
Cable	Copper cables	European	75	51%
Marble	Marble	Global	140	68%
Steel	Foundry	Sub-national	205	49%
Pottery	Pottery	Global	143	21%
Machine	Lifting machines	European	145	14%
Beve	Beverage	National	330	42%

types of ownership (local vs multinational). Second, companies needed to have been active for many years to understand the changes in their industrial relations over time. Third, the firms examined have different unionisation rate levels, representing an important variable affecting local labour relations and mainly consisting of hourly workers, who are the principal subject of analysis. The general characteristics of the companies involved in the research are reported in Table 1, keeping their anonymity and using fantasy words associated with their sector of activity to help interpret the results.

The method followed for the extended case study, conducted in late 2012 to early 2013, was divided into three steps. In the first phase, with the help of shop stewards, all the collective contracts signed in the company since 1993 were collected, a time threshold selected on the basis of the firm collective bargaining institutionalisation that occurred during that year in Italy. All the contracts were thoroughly analysed.

In the second phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the author and

another researcher on the themes of firm collective bargaining with one manager (the HR manager where possible or the general manager in his or her absence) and one shop steward from each company, in order to compare formal bargaining with what really happens on the shop floor and therefore to understand the concrete outcomes produced by local collective bargaining. The shop steward with the highest company seniority, among the CGIL representatives, was selected to retrace correctly the local collective bargaining and industrial relations from a historical point of view as well. Conducting interviews with only CGIL members was not a limitation, since this union constitutes the major one in all the firms studied, and in some cases it represents the only active labour organisation. Moreover, in all the case studies examined, union representatives express a unitary position, which is quite common within MEs. The interviews lasted from one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours.

The third phase was represented by two seminars. In the first, the initial results from the analysis of company collective contracts and the interviews were explained to the CGIL shop stewards. During the meeting, which was organised to be participative, like a focus group, other useful information and interpretative insights emerged. In the second seminar, during which all the results of the research were illustrated, other shop stewards and territorial CGIL general secretaries of the different sectors involved participated. This represented an opportunity to interpret the results more effectively and to enlarge the focus to include company collective bargaining within MEs in the whole area.

Table 2. The level of mutual recognition between the social parties and the development of local collective bargaining.

Companies recognition	Mutual	Development of local collective bargaining
Pharma	Medium-high	Medium-low
Cable	Medium-high	Low
Marble	Medium-high	Low
Steel	High	High
Pottery	Medium-high	Medium-low
Machine	Medium-low	Medium-low
Beve	High	High

Table 3. The level of company collective bargaining over labour relations and work organisation.

Companies	Working time		Local	
	Participati		Worke	
ve	rs'			
	labour relations	Work timePart-time	direct participation and continuing training	compensatio n character

Pharma	Medium	High	Low	Medium-low	Low
Cable	Medium-low	High	Non-significant	Low	Low
Marble	Medium-low	High	Non-significant	Low	Medium-low
Steel	Medium-high	High	Non-significant	Medium-high	High
Pottery	Medium-low	High	Medium-low	Low	Low
Machin e	Low	Medium-high	Non-significant	Medium-low	Medium-low
Beve	Medium	High	Low	Medium-high	Low

The following section presents the empirical results according to the two research questions. To this end, Table 2 summarises the level of mutual recognition and development of local collective bargaining in the seven companies examined (first research question), while Table 3 presents the level of such collective bargaining with regard to industrial relations and work organisation (second research question). In both tables, the synthetic expressions low, medium and high are used.

Empirical findings

Mutual recognition and the content of collective bargaining

First of all, historically, the recognition of the local union role is good in almost all the companies examined, in which managers meet labour representatives regularly, listen to their requests and try to solve the major issues of employees, in line with the provisions contained in the CCNLs. Labour organisations receive little recognition in their representative task only in Machine, both because the unions represent a

small minority of

employees and the labour representatives are considered too adversarial. Thus, the unionisation rate exerts an important effect on determining managers' attitude towards unions, which, nevertheless, is not exclusive, since, in Pharma, labour officials' role is taken into account by the company in spite of the low level of support that union representatives receive from workers.

The range of subjects included in company collective bargaining presents more varied characteristics. It is well developed in Steel and Beve, with contracts that have been periodically renovated and enriched since the early 1990s and concern many subjects (information rights, training policies, personnel classification, integrative health care, holidays, firm compensation, etc.), the local regulation of which is greatly applied. The greater size of these two firms compared with the others certainly supports the realisation of articulated collective bargaining, but such a result can be better explained by the fact that the management–unions collaboration has always been strong and managers have defined their relation with labour organisations as strategic. This is because of the difficulty of sustaining Italian labour costs to keep the product competitive in the market (Steel) and because of the internal pressure on a multinational company (MNC), which implies the risk of delocalisation (Beve). However, such conditions characterise the other firms too, since, for instance, Pottery, Cable and Marble are strongly threatened by manufacturing firms operating in emerging countries, while Machine is also part of an MNC. Hence, the strategic choice made by Steel and Beve with regard to unions and collective bargaining is related to other factors. In Steel, in managing the relations with the unions, the members of the family owning the company have followed the path established by their predecessors, who considered the role of labour representatives as crucial, both for ethical and foreconomic reasons. By comparison, in Beve, an equal path-dependent pattern has originated among managers who also had the goal, because of reputational and competitive reasons established by the

headquarters, to keep good labour relations. As for other companies, collective contracts in Pottery, Machine and Pharma are signed with less periodicity and their content is confined to a lower but still significant number of subjects, related to information rights, training, personnel classification and company compensation. Furthermore, also in this case, the subjects treated in local collective bargaining have increased over time. However, some of these regulations, especially linked to labour relations and work organisation, are not really applied. This happens because managers are not convinced to deal with unions in some matters, like personnel classification, or to give some benefits to employees, and formalise them just because of union pressure (Machine and Pottery) or to maintain friendly relations (Pharma).

Different and peculiar situations are registered in Marble and Cable. In Marble, contracts signed at the territorial level and only regarding bonuses were usually applied, but the situation changed in 2008. In fact, the economic crisis has particularly hit the marble sector in the local area, rendering the sharing of bonuses impossible in the area, with many firms experiencing a fall in their turnover. However, given the still positive competitive situation in Marble, the company signed a local agreement with unions regarding bonuses only. In Cable, the only two local contracts (1998 and 2012) signed after the 1980s concerned economic bonuses and information rights, plus another agreement over a higher premium for the night shift. The local parties prefer informal discussions, confined, however, to daily matters.

All seven firms examined have always applied the appropriate CCNL. As for possible derogations from multi-employer agreements or laws, none of the companies has asked to apply them and, particularly, managers have not expressed any intention to have recourse to any derogatory options in the future, those shared between unions and Confindustria either. This is noteworthy given that, at the time of the analysis, almost two years had passed since the approval of the derogatory possibilities. Essentially, the alignment between the employment conditions and the competitive situation of the firms, induced by the economic crisis in Cable, Pottery, Marble, Steel and partly Machine, has been realised by reducing or eliminating integrative company provisions, which is better for workers than CCNL regulations, which had been signed before such a breakdown. For instance, overtime has been suspended or decreased, especially in times of high premiums, company bonuses being reduced or not distributed, etc.

Industrial relations and work organisation

The level of collaboration between the social parties. With regard to the participative dimension of industrial relations, which is part of the second research question, information and consultation rights are the first to be treated. From this point of view, information rights are formalised in local contracts in all the firms except Marble and concern many areas, from the company's economic situation to production methods and employee performance, but these formal provisions do not always find application. In fact, in Cable the information remains general and in Pottery it is rarely supplied, while in Machine the managers prefer to meet employees directly, in such a way replacing the informative meetings foreseen by the local contract with labour representatives. In other cases, like Marble, the opposite is true, since unions are given periodic data although without any formal obligation established by firm-level contracts on the part of managers. On the whole, the

quality of information received is judged to be satisfactory by the union officials only in Pharma and Steel, while in the other companies it has been pointed out that the information is excessively general and not supported by official documents that can prove managers' claims.

On the other hand, consultation rights are formally absent in all the local collective contracts, although their activation is foreseen by CCNLs, and the same happens for possible codetermination rights which are not established either by law or by CCNLs. Consultation rights are concretely activated only in Steel, where they have become informal codetermination rights, since local union officials are involved in making and managing decisions particularly on work organisation and personnel policies. In Beve, local union representatives have asked for a higher level of involvement in company governance. This is through a pilot project of codetermination on organisational subjects related to employee performance and work organisation, in order to improve the quality of the collaboration between the social parties, which has already been applied successfully in other organisational areas, like the flexible articulation of working time. However, managers have turned down the proposal.

Finally, it should be noted that the level of local conflict has been very low since the 1990s and it has not increased with the recent crisis, implying the reduction of employees' integrative benefits in some companies. Beve constitutes the only case in which

company strikes have been organised recently by unions, though additional benefits with respect to CCNLs have not been cut given the positive situation of the firm, and, importantly, this has not damaged the trust, which is a feature of local industrial relations. Five strikes have taken place in the last six years. In other cases, like Pottery and Pharma, there have been tensions and threats of collective action, like the overtime block, in order to obtain information meetings (Pottery) and higher overtime premiums (Pharma), but, ultimately, a compromise was found. This low level of conflict is also due to the missing application of derogatory possibilities, as seen before, which could lead to undercutting workers' benefits more than by reducing the integrative provisions granted previously, thus unleashing union and employee protests.

On the whole, firm industrial relations are characterised neither by participation nor by conflict. Collaborative behaviour is registered, resisting in spite of company decisions to reduce employee benefits after the crisis, but this does not lead to participative industrial relations. As emerged from the analysis and the interviews, this is linked to the conceptions shared by local social actors according to which running the company is an exclusively managerial prerogative, while unions are only devoted to defending and improving employees' working conditions. In addition, local labour representatives have repeatedly claimed insufficient competence to discuss organisational matters with managers, a lack of preparation that would frustrate eventual union responsibility in co-managing these issues.

Work organisation

Working time. Working time flexibility is an area in which local social parties have strongly intervened in the firms considered. Three elements of flexible working time are taken into account: shift organisation, overtime and part-time working.

Shift organisation is aimed at saturating productive systems and answering

readily to market fluctuations, and, in almost all the companies, it is formalised within collective bargaining. Some local contracts are sophisticated in this regard. In Steel, operating in the steel sector, which is strongly subject to market fluctuations, the contractual provision foresees a real working time menu, with different options to be used through specific agreements with the unions, on the grounds of contingent productive needs. Effectively, since 2000, many agreements have been signed to implement different working time options. In Beve, for which the market variability is strong too, the collaboration between the social actors has been equally solid. In fact, plant production increased from five days out of seven to six days in 2004, and seven days in 2010, changes that allowed the increase of both wages and employment levels and that were spurred by firm labour representatives in spite of the initial reluctance of workers.

As for overtime, equally good collaboration is registered among the social actors in all the companies, with recourse to formal local collective bargaining in some of the factories, in which the extra time request was or is structural, as in Steel, Cable, Pharma and Beve. For instance, in Pharma, local contracts have established higher premiums than CCNLs for working on Saturdays since 2004, and in 2012 the social parties agreed to equalise the Saturday working rate to holiday working days, thus entailing a premium of 80% with respect to the standard pay rate, plus €60 gross per day. The local premiums

are high in Steel (75%) and in Cable (83% for the night shift) as well. In the other contexts, informal bargaining has been sufficient to manage overtime.

However, overtime cuts, especially those implying high premiums, have been vigorous in all the companies studied except Beve and Pharma, because of reduced market demand, and this has had both economic and social consequences. From an economic point of view, the decrease in overtime has led to sensitive wage reductions in Cable, Marble, Machine and Steel, while in Pottery extra time has never been significant. From a social point of view, the close relations between companies and workers were damaged, since they were based mainly on the quantitative availability of employees to meet the productive needs, on the one hand, and on the higher wages due to overtime premiums, on the other. This happened in Cable, Marble and Machine, while in Steel the negative social effects of overtime cuts were reduced thanks to the participatory character of local labour and employment relations.

When focusing on part-time work, collaborative collective bargaining proves far less effective. In fact, apart from Steel, Cable, Marble and Machine, where the hourly workers are almost all males, so they do not request part-time work, obtaining such provisions turns out to be very difficult for unions. The most controversial situation is found in Pottery, where women represent 70% of the hourly workers, so the need to balance work and family commitments is crucial. Hence, many local collective contracts have focused on this subject in terms of the usage of paid permits on the part of workers, but without achieving significant results. As regards part-time work *strictu sensu*, the 1989 local collective agreement fixed the number of part-time employees at 6%, then increased it to 10% in the 2006 agreement. However, these percentages remain too low with respect to employees' requests; therefore, over time, several women, being unable to balance their work and family commitments, have been compelled to leave their job. In Pharma and

Beve, the unions have not even had the opportunity to discuss the provisions regarding part-time work with managers, because such personnel deployment is judged to be incompatible with work organisation by these companies.

The reasons given by firms to explain their diffidence towards part-time work are related to labour costs, since two part-time employees are more expensive than one full-time employee, and to cultural elements. In fact, companies, particularly if owned and run by a family, as is the case for Pottery, believe that part-time workers develop a lower degree of attachment to their job if they are engaged for four hours per day; hence, they are less productive.

Employee direct participation and continuing training. From the point of view of employee direct participation, the results are clear-cut. None of the collective agreements in the period examined foresees policies of employee direct participation; policies that are unilaterally established by the company are in place only in Beve and Steel. In Beve, a formalised suggestion system exists, and managers are obliged always to respond to the suggestions. It is an instrument that is appreciated by all the social actors, especially the youngest workers. In Steel, instead, workers can express their opinions principally through their union representatives, who then informally refer to the managers. This system seems to work, since employees have had the opportunity to influence the work organisation over time. As a result, union representatives complain about the missing

valorisation of employee qualifications in all the other companies (Cable, Marble, Pottery, Machine, Pharma). At any rate, in some cases, managers themselves lament the lack of workers' contribution because of employees' lack of interest in this matter (Marble) or unions' engagement in adversarial behaviour that does not facilitate collaboration (Machine).

Continuing training is well negotiated, because in six cases (Cable and Marble are excluded), local collective agreements foresee formal discussion between the social parties. However, such meetings never occur in Pottery and Beve, while in Pharma and Machine discussions take place but are weak; this is also because the local unions and employees show scarce proactive capabilities, as recognised by the labour representatives themselves. The dialogue on continuing training is based on the ideas put forward by union officials only in Steel. Concretely, the content of training activities for hourly workers is largely confined to safety issues, which are mandatory, and only in Steel and Machine have training activities exceeded such obligations.

Thus, it emerges that continuing training is not used as a strategic resource in these manufacturing companies, except, partly, Steel and Machine, in spite of the incentives and participative institutions foreseen by the Italian context. This is also due to the absence of practices of employee direct participation that would make investments in continuing training more valuable for all the social actors.

Company bonuses. The tool of company contingent bonuses has been bargained and applied in all the firms considered. The tool presents different characteristics in each case, and here the focus will be on its variable feature and the criteria shaping it. First of all, it is observed that in several firms the bonus shared is fictitious, and its goal is just to benefit from the tax and contributive relief established by law for the company wage increases fixed by local collective agreements. In fact, in Pottery,

Beve, Cable and Pharma, the established criteria are not really measured, and the amount shared is given to employees even if the fixed targets are not achieved, provided that the economic situation of the company is positive.

Second, in the companies examined, apart from Steel, output-oriented criteria are found, because, even when the parameters are connected to production efficiency or quality, they are measured collectively without any differentiation among teams. In fact, bonuses are differentiated, as often happens in the Italian context, only on the basis of workers' wages or attendance record, elements that do not alter the output-oriented characteristics of the system (Banca d'Italia, 2008). The conception of contingent wages as purely distributive means derives from the fact that the local social parties do not consider bonuses as useful channels to increase their cooperation and productivity, but there are other explanatory factors to consider. First, there is the issue of skills regarding both the social parties and the managers – in particular given their power of initiative – who have highlighted the lack of competences that they possess to elaborate sophisticated local bonuses. Second, the differentiation of the bonus among teams entails the differentiation of employee wages too, a result that is problematic for the unions, given that it contradicts the egalitarian principle traditionally followed by labour representatives.

To illustrate the latter point, reference should be made to the Steel case. Within this firm, the local bonus has always been conceived as a variable on the grounds of the

parameters established, though output-oriented. Nevertheless, the economic crisis represented a breaking point, inducing managers to think more about production quality than quantity. For this reason, managers put forward a bonus system based on a distinction among teams, with tailor-made productivity evaluations. Union officials were initially opposed to such formulation of the bonus, preferring the traditional collective appraisals, but, over negotiations, they were able to discuss it (as well as to introduce some changes) and, thanks to the trust existing between the social parties, to understand that the new system could be advantageous both for the firm and for the employees. Subsequently, they met consistent resistance among workers, but thanks to the union officials' embeddedness on the shop floor, the new system configuration was eventually approved by the employees. Now, all the social actors are satisfied with the new functioning of the bonus, because it has produced both an improvement in the firm's productive parameters and an increase in employees' wages, which are higher than under the previous system.

Conclusions

This article contributes to the understanding of the form of company collective bargaining and its detailed outcomes in the field of labour relations and work organisation within Italian MEs, being based on an in-depth historical analysis concerning concrete company collective bargaining effects (the gap between formal and real collective bargaining in several cases has been shown) and on a detailed description of a number of purposefully chosen subjects. However, the study examined a limited sample of ME companies, so its goals were exploratory; further research is needed to understand the character of collective bargaining within this category of firms, not only in Italy but also in other countries, given the lack of related data.

The first research question related to the degree of development achieved by

company collective bargaining. It has been shown that the range of subjects treated progressively increased from 1993 in most of the firms and that good mutual recognition exists between the social parties. However, as a whole, a 'low-decentralised collective bargaining system' has emerged, both in integrative and in derogatory form. In fact, company collective bargaining in reality comprises very few subjects, often linked to company bonuses, in most of the firms examined, while derogatory options are not used. This makes the Italian system of industrial relations similar to those registered in Greece and Spain, partly contradicting the exploratory hypothesis, which foresaw, on the grounds of the reforms approved until the early 1990s, local collective bargaining being of major importance within MEs and identified a medium level of development in comparison with the European countries considered. On the other hand, the missing application of derogatory options, particularly those connected with art. 8, is in line with expectations, showing that the political neoliberal agenda is not bound to produce significant effects in the Italian context. From this point of view, the weak development of company collective bargaining can be considered as positive, since it does not induce firms to reinforce their competitiveness through the worsening of workers' employment conditions. However, there are also differences among companies. Local collective contracts deal with a wide range of subjects (only) in those two companies, Beve and Steel, where the social parties, further spurred on by firm size, evaluate industrial relations as a key point of their

competitiveness. In the other firms, local collective contracts are very limited or, if broader, only partly applied. This results from the low collective bargaining predisposition of the local social parties, largely relying on CCNLs, and the weak skills that the social actors possess in this field are not irrelevant. As a result, it would seem that the increasing delegation of bargaining responsibilities in voluntary and integrative forms to company-level collective bargaining is not sufficient to boost the negotiations between local social actors.

The second hypothesis, foreseeing the low development of participatory industrial relations and more modern forms of work organisation given the absence of related institutional constraints, is confirmed. In fact, the empirical data clearly attest to the weak results achieved by Italian social parties in this regard and the key explanatory goal of institutions. The industrial relations, in the firms considered, were characterised neither by participation nor by conflicts, until the 1990s. Participation is not triggered by the tools foreseen in the CCNLs in terms of information and consultation rights, while conflicts do not break out despite the elimination of several employee benefits in most of the firms considered. From this type of industrial relations emerge forms of work organisation based on very good quantitative collaboration among the social actors, in line with the local territorial culture, in which loyalty in employment relations is mainly based on mutual quantitative availability. However, in terms of the quality of work organisation, the results are disappointing, as noted in the fields of part-time work, employee direct participation and continuing training and company bonuses, all elements that would require different working arrangements.

From the explanatory point of view, institutions cover the major role. There are certainly differences between companies regarding both labour relations and work organisation, which are due to the firms' size and predisposition and the unions' strength and attitude, while the product market and the type of ownership do not exert

significant effects. However, the common inter-firm trend attesting to the lack of participative labour relations and innovative forms of work organisation is more relevant than the inter-firm differences.

Such commonality is principally due to a monistic culture according to which running the company is exclusively a managerial prerogative, while unions should only have a defensive role. These conceptions hinder union participation even when the collaboration is good and the unions are proactive, as in Beve. The cultural bias is further supported by the limited knowledge of organisational matters that union officials feel they possess and by the same weak managerial skills in some fields, such as the case of company contingent compensation. This confirms the hypothesis according to which, without beneficial constraints that could also change social parties' culture and skills (McLaughlin, 2013), workplace cooperation is difficult and can be realised and survive only under unique conditions (Dobbins, 2010). This uniqueness is evident in the case of Steel, where the family owners have always considered unions as strategic partners, finding mutual collaboration with them. Moreover, in the Italian context, single practices have already been specified to encourage participation and innovation, as happens for information and consultation rights, continuing training and company contingent pay systems. However, these practices do not form a 'participative puzzle', instead remaining isolated and sometimes unapplied, even when considered individually. On the other hand, general fiscal incentives generate perverse effects, as with company bonuses.

In conclusion, it appears crucial, for Italian political and social parties, to start reflecting seriously on the institutional constraints aiming to reinforce company collective bargaining within a system of centralised controls, as agreed by the social parties, as well as to favour productivity increments through the realisation of participative labour relations and innovative forms of work organisation. Given the current Italian institutional context described in the introduction and in the development of the research questions, possible institutional constraints (not just general fiscal incentives that can produce counter-productive effects) could be directed towards delegating stronger collective bargaining responsibilities at the company level, not just in voluntary and integrative forms, by reducing the profundity of the national regulations. This reinforcement of company collective bargaining should then be accompanied by a vision of union involvement in the economic planning of firms and their co-decisional role in organisational matters. In turn, this union integration into the company decision making is itself bound to favour the development of company collective bargaining, as also demonstrated by the case of Steel in this study. But, more importantly, such a development would not be confined to quantitative subjects, like shift organisation and overtime, as it emerges from the study presented here. In fact, since all the social actors would be focused on finding ways to improve the company performance given their inclusion in decision-making processes, company collective bargaining would also involve more qualitative issues concerning work organisation and hence production methods, workers' direct participation and training, and company bonuses, which would also be affected, for instance in the case of firm-level pay, by regulations really directed towards the improvement of firms' performance. These hypotheses about the introduction of institutional constraints into the Italian context, reinforcing the union role inside companies, can appear excessively ambitious given the persistent economic crisis and the strong demands for deregulation on the part of

financial markets. However, if the goal consists of broadening the role of company collective bargaining, particularly to achieve more positive results regarding labour relations and work organisation in order to address the issue of low Italian labour productivity without undercutting workers' employment conditions, the introduction of appropriate institutional constraints appears to be important. Otherwise, the risk, despite the theoretical claims, is that the deepening of company collective bargaining will only lead, at most, to better alignment between companies' situations and their employment relations, but without utilising, in the great majority of firms, its potential positive spaces.

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Notes

The expression local collective bargaining can refer to both company and territorial level. In this article the expression is used as a synonym of company collective bargaining, since it is much more developed than territorial collective bargaining in the Italian context, especially in the manufacturing sector.

Another issue concerns the low diffusion of company collective bargaining within both small- and medium-sized firms, but the article focuses on the characteristics of the realised collective bargaining.

EU-15 refers to the number of member countries in the European Union prior to the admission of 10 candidate countries on 1 May 2004.

The number of workers is the most important element in defining firm size according to the European definition.

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