**'The public force of the private state' - strikebreaking and visions of subversion in liberal Italy (1880s to 1914)***

ABSTRACT. From the end of the 19th century onwards, Italy witnessed a significant increase in labour conflicts, trade unionism and social protests, all of which shook the foundations of the liberal state. Following the failure of the authorities' attempts to deal with mass protests, efforts were made under the governments of Giovanni Giolitti to adopt new policing policies that embraced state neutrality in social conflicts and the deployment at the same time of substantial police forces to prevent the escalation of conflict and bloodshed. The success of these policies is highly questionable and there were major differences in this respect between northern and southern Italy, and between rural and industrial areas. Nevertheless, these policies contributed to the fear of abandonment and desire for revenge felt by significant sections of the propertied classes, and the issue of strikebreaking was at the centre of the controversy. Focussing on the Po Valley, this article first presents a broad overview of the political situation in Italy with emphasis on policing policies and work replacement, then analyses the various forms of legal and illegal private strikebreaker protection organisations that took on clear subversive aims. Drawing on newspapers and archival records, the article highlights the overlap between private and public law enforcement and the combination of coercion and consensus in the Italian countryside. The long-term consequences of the unresolved issue of strikebreaking and private policing help explain the rise of fascism after the Great War.

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In May 1893, during his first government, the Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti presented to the Senate the 'basic policy' that was to be adopted by central government for many years to come in cases of agricultural strikes: 'the labourer is perfectly free to work or not, to accept or not the wages that are offered to him, but he does not have the right to prevent other labourers from working. […] Our legislation recognises the right to strike; but the right to work is equally recognised. […] Government authorities have intervened and will intervene to protect the right to work for *all* labourers'.[1] This new policy aimed to enforce the rule of law and to put into practice the new Penal Code – the so-called *Codice Zanardelli* (1889) – that equally secured the right to strike and the right to work, and at the same time established harsher punishments for those who engaged in violence, threatening behaviour and intimidation during strikes.[2] In December 1901, Giolitti, then Minister of the Interior in Giuseppe Zanardelli's cabinet, criticised the policies of previous governments with regards to trade unions and Chambers of Labour, which, according to Giolitti, had led to three fatal errors. Firstly, they fostered injustice, since the state failed to act impartially towards all citizens. Secondly, they were an economic mistake, since the authorities intervened in the economic law of supply and demand. Thirdly, they were also a political mistake, since the authorities made enemies of those classes that accounted for the majority of the country's population. Mere repression, concluded Giolitti, was not sustainable and was, in fact, counterproductive in an increasingly mass society. However, state neutrality did not mean state weakness: no one 'should believe that the liberal government is weak', he declared.[3]

Seven years after his 1901 discourse, a major agricultural strike broke out in Parma, one of the most productive and advanced agricultural provinces in Italy. The strike saw one of the strongest agricultural associations, led by the lawyer Lino Carrara, clash with day labourers' unions under the charismatic leadership of the revolutionary trade unionist Alceste De Ambris.[4] Because of the policy of neutrality in social conflicts pursued by Giolitti and by the local prefect, Carrara was well aware that he could not count on state support to help disband the unions. In a clear challenge to state authorities, but confident of widespread support from fellow members of the agricultural association, Carrara organised a sort of private police force to protect the blacklegs and intimidate the unionised workers. The activities

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1 Atti del Parlamento Italiano, Discussioni della Camera dei deputati (hereafter Camera), XVIII legislatura, 3 May 1893, 3123. On Giolitti: Giampiero Carocci, *Giolitti e l'età giolittiana* (Torino: Einaudi, 1961); Alberto Aquarone, *L'Italia giolittiana* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1988); Alexander J. De Grand, *The Hunchback's Tailor: Giovanni Giolitti and Liberal Italy, from the Challenge of Mass Politics to the Rise of Fascism, 1882-1922* (London: Praeger, 2001).

2 Guido Neppi Modona, *Sciopero, potere politico e magistratura. 1870-1922* (Bari: Laterza, 1969), 71–80.

3 Camera, XVIII legislatura, 15 December 1902.

4 Thomas Sykes, «Revolutionary Syndicalism in the Italian Labor Movement: The Agrarian Strikes of 1907-08 in the Province of Parma», *International Review of Social History*, 1976, 186–211; Salvatore Adorno, *Gli Agrari a Parma. Politica, interessi e conflitti di una borghesia padana in età giolittiana* (Parma: Diabasis, 2008).

of the so-called Volunteer Workers appeared to be aimed at substituting both the police forces and unionised workers. The situation in Parma epitomised the failure of Giolitti's policy of equally securing the right to strike and the right to work and his affirmation of the liberal government's strength. This article aims to shed light on the process that brought the issues of strikebreaking, work replacement and the armed protection of blacklegs to the forefront of the challenges faced by Italian society and the Italian political system prior to the Great War.

Historians have used the conflicts in the Po Valley as a lens through which to examine the crisis in the liberal state and the development of fascism. According to Adrian Lyttelton, the 'agrarian conflict' played a pivotal role 'in bringing about the final breakdown of liberal institutions' and in explaining the 'long-term origins of Fascism'.[5] Anthony Cardoza, in his exhaustive *Agrarian Elites and Italian Fascism*, provides a detailed description of the violence perpetrated by the propertied classes in Bologna from the late 19th century to 1925, placing emphasis on the continuities between the waves of strikes and conflicts before the Great War and the spread of fascism.[6] In an important article published in 2002, Paul Corner asked provocatively whether it was possible to speak of an Italian *Sonderweg*. Although he criticised any form of deterministic and teleological perspective, Corner focussed on the conflicts in the Po Valley in concluding that the continuities between the pre- and post-war conditions were more important than the ruptures and changes.[7] However, in the significant historiography of social conflicts in the Po Valley little attention has been paid to the grey zone of work replacement and strikebreaking.[8] This article aims to fill this gap by focussing on the generally neglected topic of blacklegs (the so-called *krumiri* or *crumiri*), work replacement and the forms of protection adopted either by private citizens or by the state to guarantee the right to work. The subject will be approached from two perspectives. Firstly, strikebreaking in Giolittian Italy will be investigated as a topic in its own right: the first section deals with the structural and political limits of state intervention in social conflicts, the second with the debate on strikebreaking and work replacement from the dual perspective of legal discourse and its concrete implementation, while the last section examines a number of case studies of strikebreaking in the Po Valley. Secondly, strikebreaking and work replacement have the potential to cast new light on major historiographical questions and to explain some (apparent) paradoxes in the history of the period in Italy. The first paradox

5 Adrian Lyttelton, «Landlords, Peasants and the Limits of Liberalism», in *Gramsci and Italy's Passive Revolution*, ed. by John A. Davis (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 104.
6 Anthony Cardoza, *Agrarian elites and Italian fascism: the Province of Bologna, 1901-1926* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).
7 Paul Corner, «The Road to Fascism: an Italian Sonderweg?», *Contemporary European History* 11, n. 2 (2002): 273–95.
8 Luigi Preti, *Le lotte agrarie nella valle padana* (Torino: Einaudi, 1955); Giuliano Procacci, *La lotta di classe in Italia agli inizi del secolo 20* (Roma: Editori riuniti, 1970); Teresa Isenburg, *Investimenti di capitale e organizzazione di classe nelle bonifiche ferraresi (1872-1901)* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1971); Alessandro Roveri, *Dal sindacalismo rivoluzionario al fascismo: capitalismo agrario e socialismo nel Ferrarese, 1870-1920* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1972); Umberto Sereni, *Il processo ai sindacalisti parmensi (Lucca, aprile-maggio 1909)* (Lucca: Pacini, 1978); Idomeneo Barbadoro, *Storia del sindacalismo italiano dalla nascita al fascismo. La Federterra*, vol. 1, 5 (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1973); Guido Crainz, *Padania: il mondo dei braccianti dall'Ottocento alla fuga dalle campagne* (Roma: Donzelli, 2007); Marco Fincardi, *Campagne emiliane in transizione* (Bologna: CLUEB, 2008).

is that of a country facing major social troubles – including the almost revolutionary situation of the Red Week (June 1914) – at the height of its economic and political development. In this respect, the Po Valley (and especially the provinces of Bologna, Ferrara and Parma) was one of the most advanced agricultural areas of Europe and at the same time a hotbed of subversive political cultures that threatened the development of a stable liberal democracy. In the fertile lands of northern Italy, democracy and economic development seemed irreconcilable. A second paradox concerns Italy's international position after the Great War and the establishment of the fascist regime. With the partial exception of Spain, Italy was the only country (and the only victorious power) in Western Europe that had not experienced foreign invasion, the collapse of state institutions or significant ethnic clashes, but had nevertheless suffered a spiral of violence that ultimately resulted in the rise of an authoritarian regime. The epicentre of this unprecedented wave of violence was the Po Valley.[9] The explanation cannot be reduced to the customary catchphrase that the country had won the war but lost the peace. An examination of the origins of the unresolvable labour conflicts that characterised the more developed areas and the virulence of fascist squads is probably crucial to understanding the feasibility of authoritarian solutions to the challenges posed by mass politics.

**Policing the Strikes**

In 1894, the first of Giolitti's governments fell amid accusations of financial corruption and with it the new policy regarding social conflicts rang hollow for a long time to come. Brutal repression again became the main policy for dealing with social protests, as evidenced by the so-called Milan massacre of 1898.[10] Repressive measures were accompanied by attempts to reshape the state in a more authoritarian fashion, all with the blessing of King Umberto I. Eventually, opposition from within the liberal parties and from the socialists curbed the use of reactionary measures and reaffirmed the centrality of Parliament. In 1900, the anarchist Gaetano Bresci assassinated King Umberto, allegedly in revenge for the Milan massacre. The murder served as a powerful reminder of the consequences of illiberal and reactionary practices, which lent credence to Giolitti as the person best able to lead the country through a period of rapid change and new challenges. First as Minister of the Interior in Zanardelli's cabinet (1901–1903) and then as Prime Minister, Giolitti tried to implement the policy he had presented to the Senate in 1893. Equal enforcement of the right to strike and the right to work through rigorous police intervention were the twin pillars of Giolitti's political programme as well as a response to the enlargement of the public sphere

9 Cf. Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2016); Robert Gerwarth e John Horne, «Vectors of Violence: Paramilitarism in Europe after the Great War, 1917–1923», *Journal of Modern History* 83, n. 3 (2011): 489–512.

10 Umberto Levra, *Il colpo di Stato della borghesia: la crisi politica di fine secolo in Italia, 1896-1900* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1975); Mario Belardinelli, *Un esperimento liberal-conservatore: i governi Di Rudinì (1896-1898)* (Roma: Elia, 1976).

and the development of political, labour and social organisations. This policy had 'essentially conservative aims' and was 'designed to render the state more stable' and broaden its foundations.[11] Nevertheless, Giolitti's policy, and a significant portion of the legitimisation of the liberal state along with it, proved almost impossible to implement in the context of labour conflicts.

The beginning of the 20th century marked a turning point. Statistics may be limited in their scope and not always reliable, but they do offer an initial insight into the problem.[12] In 1900, there had been 388 strikes, increasing to 1,671 in 1901 before decreasing to 1,008 in 1902, statistics that reveal a sudden surge in the number of strikes. In the agricultural sector, the number of strikers rose from a previous peak of 24,000 in 1897 to almost 223,000 in 1901 and stood at 146,000 in 1902.[13] In 1901, strikers in the agricultural sector were for the first time more numerous than strikers in industry (222,985 *vs* 196,540).[14] During the period 1901–1905, the annual average number of strikes in the industrial sector was 732 involving some 150,000 workers, while in the agricultural sector it was 238 involving 106,000 workers. However, the number of disturbances increased again following the economic crisis of 1903–1904. Between 1906 and 1910, the annual average number of strikes reached 1,318 involving 220,000 workers in the industrial sector, and 250 involving 123,000 strikers in the agricultural sector.[15] There was an exceptional increase in the number of disturbances in 1907, which saw the highest number of agricultural strikers in the entire pre-WWI period at 254,131.[16] From 1901 onwards, therefore, 'the liberalisation of industrial conflicts fostered by Giolitti at a political level' clashed with 'the policies followed by employers'.[17]

The conflicts in agriculture had even more worrying features, as the ratio of strikes to strikers was much higher than in industrial conflicts, showing that although agricultural conflicts were less frequent they involved many more workers. In fact, where unskilled labourers predominate, a strike can only be won by potentially mobilising the entire workforce.[18] High levels of unemployment, the seasonal nature of many agricultural jobs, overpopulation in many areas and the introduction of labour-saving techniques and machines worsened the living conditions of hundreds of thousands of day labourers. The aim of the trade unions was therefore to establish a monopoly in control over the workforce and they made constant efforts in this direction. Class solidarity went hand in hand with boycotts and intimidation in an effort to

11 Corner, «The Road to Fascism», 278; Jonathan Dunnage, *The Italian police and the rise of Fascism: a case study of the Province of Bologna, 1897-1925* (Westport, Conn. - London: Praeger, 1997), 39.
12 Barbadoro, *La Federterra*, 1:132.
13 Crainz, *Padania,* 88.
14 Fiorenza Fiorentino, *Ordine pubblico nell'Italia giolittiana* (Roma: Carecas, 1978), 10.
15 Alberto Mario Banti, *Storia della borghesia italiana l'eta liberale* (Roma: Donzelli, 1996), 293.
16 Gian Primo Cella and Guido Baglioni, *Il movimento degli scioperi nel 20° secolo* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1979), 188–89.
17 Lorenzo Bordogna, Gina Primo Cella, Giancarlo Provasi, *Labor conflicts in Italy before the rise of fascism, 1881-1923: a quantitative analysis*, in *Labor Conflicts in Italy before the Rise of Fascism, 1881-1923: A Quantitative Analysis*, ed. by Leopold H. Haimson and Charles Tilly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 233.
18 See also the case of France: Gerald Friedman, «Strike Success and Union Ideology: The United States and France, 1880-1914», *The Journal of Economic History* 48 (1988): 1–25.

prevent landowners and leaseholders from recruiting blacklegs and breaking union solidarity.[19] Since the end of the 19th century, the Po Valley had witnessed a mushrooming of class organisations on both sides of the social spectrum. In 1901, the National Federation of Agricultural Labourers (Federterra) was founded, bringing together the various unions that had been formed throughout the Po Valley since the 1880s. Immediately after its establishment, membership of Federterra had already reached 228,000, larger than that of the other industrial or commercial unions.[20] Following a serious crisis in 1902–1904, when membership fell to only 45,000, it increased again after 1905–1906, eventually reaching 130,000 in 1908 and 150,000 in 1910.[21] However, the Federterra brought together only a fraction of the unionised rural workers and the numbers would be almost double if all the workers organised by the local Chambers of Labour or by unions that were not part of the federal organisation were taken into account.[22]

The massive increase in the number of labourers' organisations and their activism helped spread insecurity and panic in the Po Valley. The old guard and, especially, the new capitalist leaseholders did not give up easily and organised a 'united front of employer associations' that 'gradually took the offensive against the trade union movement and the Socialist Party and ultimately attacked the political compromises and social reforms' underlying Giolitti's policy.[23] After 1902, agrarian associations spread throughout the Po Valley, especially in Emilia Romagna and Lombardy.[24] In 1907, the main - and arguably most combative - association was founded in Parma, namely the *Interprovinciale Agraria*, which gathered together the main associations of the Veneto and Emilia Romagna.[25] In some provinces in particular, such as Parma, Bologna, Ferrara and Cremona, agriculture was a capitalist system employing intensive production and marketing techniques. Huge investments in fertilisers, machines, reclamation and transport went hand in hand with the most advanced breakthroughs in agronomics and zootechnics, making the Po Valley one of Europe's most productive agricultural regions. Although only 13% of Italy's cultivable land was in the Po Valley, it accounted for over one third of its agricultural production. The social composition of the area may have been highly varied, but the most modern and enterprising of the Po Valley large landowners and commercial farmers had graduated in agronomics, engineering or law,

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19 Michele Nani, «Fattori, caporali e capisquadra. Note su mediatori e " mercato " del lavoro agricolo nel Ferrarese dell'Ottocento», *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome*, n. 129–1 (1 gennaio 2017); Michele Nani, «Stampa di classe e mobilità nelle campagne ferraresi: "La Scintilla" (1901-1904)», in *Lavoro mobile. Migranti, organizzazioni, conflitti (XVIII-XX secolo)*, ed. by Michele Colucci e Michele Nani (Palermo: New digital frontiers, 2015); Anthony L. Cardoza, «Agrarians and industrialists: the evolution of an alliance in the Po delta,1896-1914», in *Gramsci and Italy's Passive Revolution*, ed. by John A. Davis (London: Croom Helm, 1979).

20 Barbadoro, *La Federterra*, 1:141.

21 Barbadoro, *La Federterra*, 1:161–80; Renato Zangheri, *Lotte agrarie in Italia: la Federazione nazionale dei lavoratori della terra, 1901-1926* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1960), 255–59, 370.

22 Adolfo Pepe, *Storia della CGdL dalla fondazione alla guerra di Libia, 1905-1911* (Bari: Laterza, 1972), 543; Adolfo Pepe, *Storia della CGdL dalla guerra di Libia all'intervento, 1911-1915* (Bari: Laterza, 1971), 379, 389. On the questionable reliability of such figures: Crainz, *Padania,* 96.

23 Cardoza, «Agrarians and industrialists: the evolution of an alliance in the Po delta,1896-1914», 176.

24 Francesco Giannini, *Le organizzazioni padronali. Le agrarie*, vol. 1 (Roma: Officina poligrafica italiana, 1912); Francesco Giannini, «La concentrazione padronale», *Rivista delle società commerciali*, 1913, 495–97.

25 Cardoza, *Agrarian elites and Italian fascism*, 119.

owned industries or banks, or edited newspapers and were far from the stereotypes of the paternalistic, detached landowner or the churlish, uneducated farmer.[26]

The flourishing of workers' and employers' associations mirrored an exceptionally intense period of social conflicts, which were aggravated by the agricultural crisis of the late 1880s and then again by the financial-economic crisis of 1907–1908 that resulted in stagnant markets and declining profits. The new generation of rural entrepreneurs were therefore pushed into passing the burden on to the workforce and to strongly opposing the unions. Given the huge interests at stake, the consequences, unsurprisingly, went far beyond mere economic facts. Referring to a major agricultural strike that took place in the province of Ferrara in 1901, the Conservative Member of Parliament Pietro Niccolini stated that 'the strike was the least important issue. […] It was the definitive rupture of all moral traditions upon which, along with agricultural contracts, the entire order of the province was based. […] The strike was a small psychological revolution'.[27]

Increased organisation among the two opposing fronts radicalised the struggle, with the consequence that it became even more difficult to implement a credible policing policy, while structural deficiencies in the state apparatus further aggravated the situation. The main difficulty was the lack of sufficient police forces. As Giolitti reminded the Senate (1904), there were only 8,000 policemen in the entire country while the city of London alone had 12,000. The comparison is still striking even when we include the 25,000 operational *carabinieri* (1909).[28] By way of example, the prefect of Milan could deploy only 1,000 soldiers, 600 policemen and 50 *carabinieri* against the 150,000 strikers who took to the streets during the general strike of 1904.[29] Insufficient numbers was usually the reason for the escalation of violence: the freedom to work couldn't be secured and collisions between strikers and blacklegs became inevitable, frequently with violent consequences.[30] Giolitti's new policing policy also induced deep resentment among police officers and even prefects, who were now restrained from using repression and violence when dealing with the masses, which they considered to be dangerous and even uncivilised.[31] As a police officer from Apulia – where violence was much more common than in northern Italy –

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26 Cardoza, «Agrarians and industrialists: the evolution of an alliance in the Po delta,1896-1914», 176–77; Cardoza, *Agrarian elites and Italian fascism*; Lawrence Squeri, «Who Benefited from Italian Fascism: A Look at Parma's Landowners», *Agricultural History* 64, n. 1 (1990): 18–38; Adorno, *Gli Agrari a Parma*; Maria Malatesta, *Il Resto del carlino: potere politico ed economico a Bologna dal 1885 al 1922* (Milano: Guanda, 1978); Pier Paolo D'Attorre, «La marcia dei rurali. Associazionismo padronale e rappresentanza politica delle élites agrarie e padane nel novecento», in *Trasformazioni delle società rurali nei paesi dell'Europa occidentale e mediterranea (secolo XIX-XX)*, ed. by Pasquale Villani (Napoli: Guida, 1986), 355–87; Pier Paolo D'Attorre, «Gli agrari padani: organizzazione di interessi e rappresentanza politica», *Padania* 1, n. 1 (1987): 11–40; Pier Paolo D'Attorre, «Gli agrari bolognesi dal liberalismo al fascismo», in *Bologna, 1920 le origini del fascismo*, ed. by Luciano Casali (Bologna: Cappelli, 1982), 115–67.

27 Pietro Niccolini, *La questione agraria nella provincia di Ferrara. Il versuro, la boaria, le partecipanze, i latifondi, gli scioperi, la disoccupazione* (Ferrara: Bresciani, 1907), 134–35.

28 Camera, XXIII Legislatura, 1 June 1909, p. 1755. Similar numbers in Dunnage, *The Italian police and the rise of Fascism*, 40.

29 Fiorentino, *Ordine pubblico*, 29.

30 Fiorentino, *Ordine pubblico*, 33; Neppi Modona, *Sciopero, potere politico e magistratura*, 141.

31 De Grand, *The Hunchback's Tailor*, 100–101.

exclaimed: 'Damn Giolitti! If it were not for him, you would all be burnt alive'.[32] Finally, it should be borne in mind that Giolitti still relied on the landowners' support in parliament and could not therefore push his liberal policy too far. Repression was therefore tolerated from time to time in order to reassure political supporters.[33]

For all these reasons, the new policing policy was far from consistent across the country. As Giolitti admitted, he followed an 'empirical' policy and the balance between dialogue and repression changed from province to province and from case to case.[34] A series of interconnected reasons influenced attitudes to policing. Firstly, there was the divide between the so-called economic and revolutionary strikes. Strikes aimed at achieving better wages and working conditions were met with relative mildness and prefects sought to reach a fair agreement: 'as long as there are disputes between work and capital, government action will not intervene in any way', Giolitti declared in 1893.[35] In contrast, the response to general and political strikes was usually a massive presence of troops and police, preventive arrests and the disbandment of associations and unions.[36] A second divide was that between agricultural and industrial strikes. Giolitti was always much more thorough in preventing major violent conflicts in urban areas in order to appease the reformist leadership of the Socialist Party, avoid major disruption to industrial production and show goodwill towards industrialists. However, as he admitted in the Senate, 'agricultural strikes are more extensive and more easily give rise to abuse out of proportion to the difficulties met by public authorities because of the vast expanses of land involved and the greater distances from habitations'.[37] This was aggravated by the 'inherently stronger tendencies' of agricultural strikes to result in violence.[38] Factors such as thousands of strikers acting over hundreds of hectares, high levels of underemployment, the crucial importance of seasonal jobs, the pressure to maintain union solidarity and counter unfair competition from strikebreakers, and the extremely hard living conditions of day labourers, who were constantly at risk of starvation and illness, made agricultural strikes a zero sum game with 'a frightening potency'.[39] A major strike at harvest time meant crops being left to rot in the fields and the loss of an entire year's worth of investment for employers, while the landowners' efficiency in recruiting and employing strikebreakers could mean starvation for unionised day labourers and retaliation for years to come.[40] The divide between rural and urban areas largely mirrored that

32 Quoted in Fiorentino, *Ordine pubblico*, 16.
33 Dunnage, *The Italian police and the rise of Fascism*, 52; Carocci, *Giolitti e l'età giolittiana*, 69–71; Aquarone, *L'Italia giolittiana*, 435-36.
34 Fiorentino, *Ordine pubblico*, 11.
35 Camera, XVIII legislatura, 3 May 1893, p. 3123.
36 Fiorentino, *Ordine pubblico*, 18.
37 Quoted in Fiorentino, *Ordine pubblico*, 15.
38 Adrian Lyttelton, «Fascism and Violence in Post-War Italy: Political Strategy and Social Conflict», in *Social Protest, Violence, and Terror in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. by Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Gerhard Hirschfeld (London: MacMillan, 1982), 258.
39 Edward E. Malefakis, *Agrarian Reform and Peasant Revolution in Spain: Origins of the Civil War* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1970), 108–9.
40 Cardoza, *Agrarian elites and Italian fascism*, 58–59.

between the revolutionary (or maximalist) and reformist socialists, since the latter were more prominent in urban-industrial areas, while the provinces were politically more fragmented. After 1904, when a revolutionary faction took control of the Socialist Party leadership, the collaborative alignment between Giolitti and the moderate socialist leaders (principally Filippo Turati) was seriously endangered. There were also differences at the provincial level. Whenever a workers' organisation failed to conform to Giolitti's political aims, force was considered more effective than dialogue and recognition.[41] For example, the prefects of Ferrara continued to offer protection to blacklegs recruited from neighbouring provinces as a way of weakening the revolutionary leadership of the local unions.[42] This had tragic consequences during a major strike in 1901 when, in the small village of Berra, an army unit fired on an unarmed crowd of 500 protesters to protect blacklegs working on land belonging to the Society for the Reclamation of Ferrara Lands killing four workers and injuring over 30.[43] In Parliament, Giolitti criticised the company's intransigence, but also clearly defended the army and attributed the events to a lack of organisation, with the workers 'acting like a mob'.[44] However, despite the new political climate, in 1907 the reformist socialist mayor of Molinella (Bologna), just a few kilometres from Ferrara, praised the prefects' decision to no longer provide armed escorts for blacklegs recruited by several leaseholders in the province.[45] All these divides converge on the main divide between northern and southern Italy. If the Berra massacre was quite exceptional in northern Italy,[46] in the south similar events took place almost daily. The paucity of socialist forces in the south resulted in less control and discipline amongst the masses, which, along with mistrust in the impartiality of the state, increasingly desperate living conditions, insufficient forces and a general prejudice that southern populations should be ruled with an iron fist, resulted in brutal repression occurring much more frequently.[47] In 1902, for example, one protester was killed and four injured in Cassano Murge (August), five workers were killed and 12 wounded at Candela (September), and a conflict in Giarratana (October) resulted in one *carabiniere* being lynched, two workers being killed and over 50 people being injured.[48]

**Work Replacement in Liberal Italy**

In Italy, strikebreakers had a very bad reputation and were generally addressed as *crumiri*. The word came from a misspelling of the name of an eastern Tunisian tribe, the Khumair, whose raids and

41 Carocci, *Giolitti e l'età giolittiana*, 69–70; Dunnage, *The Italian police and the rise of Fascism*, 44–49.
42 Fiorentino, *Ordine pubblico*, 19.
43 Isenburg, *Investimenti di capitale e organizzazione di classe*, 136–37.
44 Camera, XXI legislatura, 29 June 1901, 6125.
45 Avanti (20 June 1907); see also *Mezzolara*, 238; Cardoza, *Agrarian elites and Italian fascism*, 112ian.
46 One protester was killed in Turin (1906), and another in Milan (1907); one was killed in Rome during a funeral (1908): Fiorentino, *Ordine pubblico*, 19, 33.
47 Camera, XXI legislatura, 31 March 1903; Fiorentino, 15enti.
48 John Foot, *Modern Italy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), 101.

acts of banditry gave France the excuse to put the region under a protectorate. During a major strike in Marseille (1901), the rumours of incoming replacement workers from Tunisia gave rise to blacklegs being identified as *crumiri* and the derogative epithet was soon adopted by the Italian socialist movement.[49] Strikebreaking was generally widespread and used extensively in sectors that did not require special skills, that is, where the workers could be easily replaced. In the skilled industrial sectors (e.g. car factories, metal works, etc.) 'class dignity' was also probably much stronger, which helped make strikebreaking 'almost impossible – and very risky as well'.[50] As the metalworkers of Turin would say, 'someone can't play the role of a Fiat or Lancia worker'.[51] Indeed, when over 6,500 Turin metalworkers went on strike for over 90 days in 1913, no cases of blacklegs were recorded.[52] Nevertheless, blacklegs were sometimes recruited to substitute skilled workers. For instance, 60 *crumiri* were hired to replace workers at the *Officine di Savigliano* (Piedmont) during a strike in July 1907, although they were probably brought in from other plants operated by the same company.[53] *Crumiri* were also recruited (and armed with knives) by the *Officine Roma* to replace metalworkers who went on strike in October 1909.[54] However, it was much easier to recruit blacklegs for unskilled jobs: for example, over 800 *crumiri* were recruited by the *Union de Gaz* to run the gasworks during a strike in Milan in 1907.[55] The unskilled workers in sugar factories were also at risk of replacement, as in the case of a major strike in Forlì when the Eridania sugar company recruited several blacklegs and armed them with knives and guns.[56] The iron foundries of Piombino and Portoferraio (Tuscany) also tried to establish a parallel company union. By offering dedicated social insurance schemes, sales outlets and mutual aid funds, the company tried to organise a reservoir of loyal skilled workers with the aim of limiting the potential impact of strikes. To defend themselves against the socialist unions, these workers (who the unions were quick to call *crumiri*) were armed with guns. There were indeed a number of shootings during a strike in 1913.[57]

The violent social conflicts stemming from strikebreaking provoked reflection on the legitimacy of the practice. From the turn of the century, many began to question the extent to which it was legitimate to use replacement workers and defend them from strikers. In 1904, the lawyer and attorney Raffaele De Notaristefani wrote an article provocatively titled 'Punishment of the Blackleg' (*La punizione del krumiro*), in which he defended the employers' complete right to use replacement workers whenever strikers'

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49 Luciano Zuccoli, «Storia dei krumiri», *La Lettura*, 6 giugno 1908, 455–59; Vincenzo Orioles, «Il crumiro come effetto di irradiazione sinonimica», *Incontri linguistici*, n. 9 (1984).
50 Paolo Spriano, *Storia di Torino operaia e socialista: da De Amicis a Gramsci* (Torino: Einaudi, 1972), 289.
51 Spriano, *Storia di Torino operaia*, 294–95.
52 Fiorentino, *Ordine pubblico*, 21.
53 Livio Berardo, «Una città industriale e il suo movimento operaio», in *Storia di Savigliano. Il '900*, ed. by Sergio Soave (Savigliano: L'artistica, 2006), 237.
54 Avanti!, 11 October 1909.
55 Maurizio Antonioli e Jorge Torre Santos, *Riformisti e rivoluzionari: la Camera del lavoro di Milano dalle origini alla Grande Guerra* (Franco Angeli, 2006), 162.
56 Avanti!, 10 August, 1902.
57 Nora Carignani, Rosella Luchetti, e Graziella Poli, *La Camera del lavoro di Piombino: dalle origini agli anni sessanta* (All'insegna del giglio, 1985), 79.

demands were excessive and unfair. However, when strikers and unions were simply seeking moderate and reasonable improvements, the employers' use of unemployed, foreign or non-unionised workers became a form of 'unfair competition' and 'injustice' that state authorities should prevent.[58] The article was widely discussed and opened up a spirited debate on the legitimacy of strikebreaking.[59] De Notaristefani stressed that the progressive illegitimacy of strikebreaking was largely due to a 'new direction in private and public law towards limitation of individual freedom in keeping with demands of justice and morality'.[60] This position was shared by the lawyer Rodolfo Laschi, who recognised that national interests played a crucial role in determining whether or not strikebreaking was legitimate.[61] Pasquale Arena, a professor of law, wrote that the state should act according to the 'holy right of self-defence' and use both repression and replacement workers in response to public service strikes.[62] 'No-one can deny the state the opportunity to ban public service strikes in order to defend its own existence', stated his colleague Guglielmo Sabatini.[63]

It should be no surprise, therefore, that a policing policy based on state neutrality and equal recognition of the right to strike and the right to work was considered not to apply to public services. Strikes in these sectors (railways and tramways, gas and electricity supply, postal services) were treated severely and the state expended major resources not only to maintain public order but also to replace striking workers.[64] The significant threat posed by a general strike in the railway sector eventually resulted in a 1905 law putting railway workers on a par with public officials, thereby prohibiting them from striking.[65] With regard to strikes in other public services, the authorities resorted to two main strategies. Usually, troops or police officers were deployed to defend premises and factories and to protect the blacklegs hired by the employers. In some cases, however, the state took direct control and sent soldiers, sailors, firefighters or local policemen to replace striking workers. For example, during a strike at the Turin gasworks in 1902, the mayor replaced striking workers with road sweepers and firefighters, while city guards provided protection. Meanwhile, the gas companies recruited blacklegs from the countryside, while police forces and army battalions were mobilised to secure the 'freedom to work of those hired to replace the strikers'.[66] When a general strike was later declared, soldiers were sent to the gasworks, electric

58 Raffaele De Notaristefani, «La punizione del "krumiro"», *La Giustizia penale* 10 (1904): 1377–82..
59 Francesco Papafava, *Dieci anni di vita italiana (1899-1909): cronache* (Bari: Laterza, 1913), 453; Pasquale Arena, *Dei delitti contro la liberta del lavoro* (Torino: Bocca, 1908), 321–26..
60 De Notaristefani, «La punizione del "krumiro"».
61 Rodolfo Laschi, «Recenti questioni in materia di sciopero», *La scuola positiva* XV, n. 1 (1905): 334–41.
62 Arena, *Dei delitti contro la liberta del lavoro*, 286.
63 Guglielmo Sabatini, *I delitti contro la libertà del lavoro: nella sociologia, nella legislazione e nella psicologia collettiva* (Catanzaro: Tipografia del Tramonto, 1904), 136–37.
64 Fiorentino, *Ordine pubblico*, 18.
65 Mario Cevolotto, *I delitti contro la libertà del lavoro nel diritto penale italiano* (Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1911), 175; Neppi Modona, *Sciopero, potere politico e magistratura*, 138.
66 Questore to San Secondo Precint (15 February 1902), in Archivio di Stato di Torino (hereafter ASTo), Gabinetto di Prefettura (hereafter GP), Mazzo 151, cat. 1.; Adriano Ballone, Claudio Dellavalle, e Mario Grandinetti, *Il tempo della lotta e dell'organizzazione: linee di storia della Camera del lavoro di Torino* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1992), 38.

power plants and even bakeries to replace striking workers, while over 1,500 troops and hundreds of policemen and *carabinieri* kept the city centre under control.[67] Speaking to Parliament, Giolitti used public order arguments to vehemently defend the decision to use the army to replace striking workers: 'a city without public lighting is an unsafe city'. In the case of strikes in public services, especially the railways, he concluded that the country would face 'a greater state necessity which overcomes any other considerations'.[68] The use of troops to replace striking workers was therefore not uncommon. Sailors and navy ships were used to keep the postal service running in Genoa in 1901,[69] soldiers substituted bakers in Turin in 1907, and 50 soldiers were deployed to light street lamps in Rome in 1908.[70] Although not always legitimate, strikebreaking was generally considered necessary in sectors that involved public good and wealth.

The difference between public and private interests was not, however, always clear-cut.[71] For a long time, agriculture was considered by both agricultural landowners and the state itself to be a strategic sector, as evidenced by the employment of the so-called soldier-harvesters. During major agricultural strikes, the government frequently deployed army battalions in the area, not only to preserve public order, but also to replace striking workers, and soldiers were put to work harvesting crops in a militarised countryside.[72] In 1900, Saracco's government decided to stop using soldier-harvesters following public protests. The economist Luigi Einaudi considered the harvest a 'private affair' and the long-established practice of using the army to 'keep the salaries down' inappropriate in a 'civil country'.[73] Vilfredo Pareto thought somewhat similarly, pointing out that while landowners endorsed the free-trade credo, they hypocritically resorted to inappropriate support from the army. He invited them and the rest of the bourgeoisie to organise themselves and find the wherewithal to prevent the socialists from gaining power.[74]

Having become used to unconditional, direct government support, many were shocked by the decision to no longer deploy soldier-harvesters.[75] As noted by Bologna's Chief of Police (*questore*) in 1911, large landowners and capitalistic farmers believed that the right to private property was 'sacred', 'absolute

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67 Letter of the President of "Il Vetro" to Questore (21 Febraury 1902) and Report of the Prefect (22 February 1902), both in ASTo, GP, Mazzo 151, cat. 1.

68 Camera, XXI Legislatura, 14 March 1902, pp. 154-155. On the importance of the night, see Luigi Lacchè, «Loca occulta. Dimensioni notturne e legittima difesa: per un paradigma del diritto di punire», in *La Notte. Ordine, sicurezza e disciplinamento in età moderna*, ed. by Mario Sbriccoli (Firenze: Il Ponte delle Grazie, 1991), 127–41.

69 Luigi Einaudi, *Cronache economiche e politiche di un trentennio*, vol. 1 (Torino: Einaudi, 1964), 339.

70 Fiorentino, *Ordine pubblico*, 44.

71 Cevolotto, *I delitti contro la libertà*, 175-181.

72 See for example the Ferrara strike in 1894: Niccolini, *La questione agraria nella provincia di Ferrara*, 214.

73 Avanti!, 1 July 1900 and Resto del Carlino, 21 August 1900.

74 Vilfredo Pareto, Écrits politiques. Reazione Libertà Fascismo, ed. by Giovanni Bruno (Geneve: Droz, 1974), pp. 332-344; Vilfredo Pareto, *Trattato di sociologia generale*, vol. 2, (Firenze: Barbera, 1923) §2187; see also Sykes, «Revolutionary Syndicalism», 186.

75 Cardoza, *Agrarian elites and Italian fascism*, 60.

and intangible', and that 'because we pay taxes the government must protect us with every means'.[76] Facing what they perceived to be a personal and national betrayal, many of the Po Valley landowners and bourgeoisie decided to follow Pareto's advice to find the energy and resources needed to combat the unions.

**Strikebreaking in the Po Valley**

In the capitalist farms of the Po Valley, the figure of the *crumiro* came to embody extreme counter positions, deep-seated hatred and contrasted images. A variety of subjects were defined as *crumiri*. Although they could be workers from other provinces or villages who had agreed to work during strikes, either because they needed to do so or because they had been misled, they could also be permanent or semi-permanent workers hired directly by the employers. Eventually, the term was also typically applied to members of non-socialist unions. Unionised workers saw them as betrayers, exploiters, a threat to class solidarity and slaves of the masters, while union leaders described blacklegs as 'egoists, cynics and beasts'.[77] Poor farmers from the Veneto region were among the most eagerly sought-after (and desperate) blacklegs recruited by ruthless intermediaries then sold to landowners and leaseholders in Ferrara and Bologna. They were described by the socialist press as 'despicable human livestock'.[78] During a major strike in Ferrara in 1911, 'shady figures in the guise of brigands, at the complete mercy of the wine and money of betrayal' came up against the unions guns in the hands.[79]

On the other side, the propertied classes saw the strikebreakers as humble, devoted and loyal workers, whose courage ensured their wealth and prosperity. The journalist and economist Francesco Papafava criticised union members for their lack of empathy towards the *crumiri*, often the 'fifth estate of desperate people'.[80] Over the years, the word '*crumiri*' stopped being a 'cruel insult and became 'peaceably accepted and actually proudly donned by the agricultural worker', or so claimed Enrico Sturani, President of the Agrarian Association of Bologna, in 1906.[81] As we will see, after the 1908 strike in Parma, landowners and sometimes also state authorities started to refer to the *crumiri* as 'free workers', since they were outside the traditional unions.[82]

The enterprising landowners and leaseholders relied on specialist professionals to support their efforts to guarantee a constant availability of blacklegs.[83] Ferruccio Grazzi, a lawyer from Ferrara and son

76 Report of Questore to Prefect (22 September 1902), in Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione generale di Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Affari generali e riservati, Categorie Annuali (hereafter ACS, MI, PS), 1911, b. 31.
77 Scintilla, n. 214, 215; see also Nani, «Stampa di classe», 67.
78 Scintilla, n. 230, 231; see also Nani, «Stampa di classe», 68.
79 Scintilla, 11 June 1911.
80 Papafava, *Dieci anni di vita italiana*, 158, 646.
81 Le Consociazioni agrarie della Provincia di Bologna. Organizzazione e Programma, p. 21; See also Enrico Sturani, *Programma di azione economica e politica delle organizzazioni agrarie* (Bologna: Stab. Pol. Emiliano, 1909), 25–26.
82 Giulio Talamazzi, *La funzione morale, civile e Politica del Libero lavoratore* (Parma: Tip. Operaia, Adorni, Ugolotti e C, 1909).
83 Nani, «Fattori, caporali e capisquadra».

of the city's chief attorney, along with the mayor of a nearby village were accused of being '*crumiri* makers'.[84] The most infamous of these specialists was probably 'Mister' Primo Mangolini, with his signature American carbine.[85] Employers also tried to organise or at least support independent unions with the aim of circumventing the socialists' control over the workforce. Attempts to create alternative unions had started at the turn of the century, the most popular being the Catholic unions, which were initially formed in the provinces of Cremona and Lodi in 1901–1902 but became quite common elsewhere over the following years.[86] From 1901 onwards, the so-called Professional Unions or *Popolari* (Popular Unions) were organised in the province of Ferrara. These were Catholic trade unions that had the direct support of the church and and rested on values such as obedience, class cooperation and submission to legitimate authorities, church hierarchies and employers.[87] Not surprisingly, the Ferrara Catholic unions did not usually join in strikes or labour conflicts so their members were included among the blacklegs with the result that they often came into violent conflict with the left-wing unions.[88] The conservative and liberal elites also tried to directly organise the workforce along the lines of cross-class ideals and cooperation. The so-called 'Capital and Work' unions mainly gathered together artisans, small proprietors and sharecroppers, but also a few labourers. Although barely effective, they tried to attract workers by offering secure employment as well as other benefits and social activities (card games, taverns, dances, etc.).[89]

There were often insufficient numbers of non-unionised workers to break a strike. Blacklegs had always to be protected from propaganda and intimidation from the unions, and even moral and physical violence, which were not, however, necessarily illegal. Public security laws and penal procedures authorised proprietors to hire *guardie campestri* (rural guards), whose appointment was subject to the prefect's approval and who had to swear to maintain order and respect the law. The rural guards had a special gun licence, usually for a rifle, and they could wear a uniform. Until at least 1901–1904, the rural guards were generally considered equivalent to public officials and agents of the judiciary police, although they were paid by private citizens or companies.[90] Their duties included protecting the borders of estates, supervising day labourers and farmers, and defending private property against poachers, fishermen, thieves and poor people who might try to steal tools or food.[91] If trouble broke out, the rural guards were

84 Scintilla, 10 July 1904.
85 Nani, «Fattori, caporali e capisquadra».
86 Crainz, *Padania,* 98-99, 112, 124.
87 Roveri, *Dal sindacalismo rivoluzionario al fascismo*, 110–11; N. Trevisonno, «Gli scioperi agrari nel Ferrarese», *Giornale degli Economisti e Rivista di Statistica* 42 (Anno 22), n. 5 (1911): 429, 432.
88 Roveri, *Dal sindacalismo rivoluzionario al fascismo*, 109–52; Trevisonno, «Gli scioperi agrari nel Ferrarese», 432. See also Scintilla, 1903, n. 173 and Scintilla, 29 March 1903.
89 Scintilla 22 March 1903.
90 Marcello Finzi, *Le guardie particolari: Norme relative alla loro nomina. Doveri e facoltà ad esse inerenti* (Ferrara: Taddei, 1911).
91 On rural thieves, see Crainz, *Padania,* 44, 56; Federico Bozzini, *Il furto campestre : una forma di lotta di massa nel Veronese e nel Veneto durante la seconda metà dell'800* (Bari: Dedalo libri, 1977); Antonio Lazzarini, *Fra terra e acqua: l'azienda risicola di una famiglia veneziana nel Delta del Po* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1995), vol. 2, 478-480.

the first line of defence against both land invasions and peaceful rallies.[92] In the province of Ferrara, the rural guards were the armed wing of repression. In 1889, a guard following the orders of his masters fired on a group of fishermen, killing a 27-year-old man. In 1895, a guard shot and wounded a peasant as he was stealing some hay. In 1899, a guard wounded three women who were gathering leftover crops.[93] In March 1904, rural guard Blanzieri, who was on the payroll of a major landowner, killed one labourer and badly wounded another when he caught them sleeping on the estate. According to the socialist newspaper, *La Scintilla*, men like Blanzieri were hired from among the 'dregs of society' by 'lords' keen to reassert their absolute power over all men and things on their properties. At his trial, Blanzieri was acquitted of the killing because he had allegedly acted in self-defence.[94] All these episodes reflected a new meaning of private property, according to which the customary traditions of trespassing and gathering leftover crops became criminal offences that the guards could respond to with the use of firearms. These transformations were particularly profound in places where the land had been reclassified.[95]

Generally, rural guards acted alone or in small groups on single estates. Sometimes, however, they could be organised into something akin to a private police corps, as was the case of the Society for the Reclamation of the Ferrara Lands (*Società bonifica terreni ferraresi* – SBTF).[96] In the 1870s, the SBTF began acquiring huge swathes of marshlands in the province of Ferrara. Having attracted massive investments they constructed canals, streets and draining pumps and turned over 20,000 hectares of marsh into fertile lands, which had a huge impact on the province's hydraulic, geographical, social and economic landscape. In less than two decades, the province had doubled its area of fertile land. After various bankruptcies and controlled administrations, the Bank of Turin took control of the company and managed it as a purely capitalist enterprise, the main goal of which was to make a profit for the shareholders.[97] As a result of traditional forms of tenure being integrated into a strictly capitalist system, the workers' contracts resembled a legalised form of slavery.[98] For example, the workers could not leave the estate without permission from company agents, while misconduct was dealt with by fines and punishments.[99]

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92 Crainz, *Padania,* 103; Giovanni Cesareo-Consolo, *Trattato sul risarcimento del danno in materia di delitti e quasi delitti* (Torino: Unione tipografico-editrice, 1908), 402–3.

93 Teresa Isenburg, *Investimenti di capitale e organizzazione di classe nelle bonifiche ferraresi: 1872-1901* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1971), 68.

94 Scintilla, 1904 n. 216, 251.

95 On territorialisation see Charles S. Maier, «Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era», *The American Historical Review* 105, n. 3 (2000): 807–31.

96 This was not a unique case: for example, also the counts Della Gherardesca had a «disciplined» corps of mounted guards to patrol their estates in Tuscany: Guido Guidi, *La guardia campestre particolare di fronte al codice penale* (Roma: Diritto italiano, 1903), 8.

97 On the financial history of the SBTF, see Isenburg, *Investimenti di capitale e organizzazione di classe*; for technical aspect of reclamation see Giorgio Porisini, *Bonifiche e agricoltura nella Bassa Valle Padana: 1860-1915* (Milano: Banca commerciale italiana, 1978).

98 Trevisonno, «Gli scioperi agrari nel Ferrarese», 442.

99 Niccolini, *La questione agraria nella provincia di Ferrara*, 348.

Traditional behaviours and consolidated rights, such as gleaning wheat and corn, were formally forbidden and equated with theft.[100]

For a company whose lands were almost exclusively farmed directly, maintaining a workforce was crucial. During a major strike in 1901, the SBTF resorted to a two-fold strategy: mass redundancies were announced for all those who participated in or supported the strike,[101] and following a strict interpretation of their contracts the company also prevented the workers from accessing wells or using carriages to transport water, forcing thousands of people to walk more than five kilometres to fill bottles and jars from the cloudy waters of the Po di Volano.[102] The company also resorted to mass recruitment of blacklegs, who were hired in the neighbouring provinces of Bologna, Rovigo and Padua as well as within the province of Ferrara and were organised into squads ready for deployment wherever needed.[103] Exploiting its connections to the Bank of Turin – the SBTF's main shareholder – the company hired almost 900 workers in Piedmont and Apulia, an extraordinary logistical effort.[104] During the same strike, Mangolini – the specialist organiser of *crumiri* – was able to recruit 500 workers, which greatly contributed to weakening the strikers' resistance and led to the SBTF recognising Mangolini as its 'viceroy'. The socialist newspaper *La Scintilla* described the blacklegs as 'a tribe which set up a camp in the strike area, and there they sleep, live and eat as long as they are needed', and claimed that they had agreed to be paid less than the SBTF workers.[105] The recruitment of hundreds of strikebreakers, both locally and nationally, significantly contributed to alleviating the impact of the strike on SBTF lands,[106] albeit at the cost of major conflicts, including the massacre at Berra.

After the 'very serious damage' and economic losses of 1901, the following year 'a good number of mounted security guards were recruited'.[107] In fact, the SBTF had employed rural guards since its foundation. In 1897, a guard shot and killed a peasant in Copparo,[108] while two years later an armed land agent employed by the SBTF killed a labourer who was caught stealing corn.[109] In this context, the 1902 corps represented a step change in the company's repressive strategy. The employment contract stated that the guards should be men under 40 years of age who were physically fit and of high moral character. As was the case for other personnel, they could not leave the estate without permission and the company could not be held accountable for any criminal conduct on their part. Each guard received a horse, a rifle and a uniform and had, of course, to comply with all the requirements of the law under which the *guardie*

100 Società per la bonifica dei terreni ferraresi, Relazione del consiglio di amministrazione e dei sindaci, (hereafter, SBTF, RCDA), 1902, p. 17-18.
101 Isenburg, *Investimenti di capitale e organizzazione di classe*, 132.
102 *Gli scioperi in provincia,* 'La Scintilla', 20 ottobre 1901.
103 According to historian Michele Nani, they resembled Karl Marx's tramping gangs: Nani, «Fattori, caporali e capisquadra».
104 Scintilla, 1901, n. 75.
105 Scintilla, 1901 n. 75. See also Scintilla 2 August 1913.
106 Isenburg, *Investimenti di capitale e organizzazione di classe*, 132–33.
107 SBTF, RCDA, 1902, 18
108 Gazzetta Ferrarese, 10 July 1897.
109 Gazzetta Ferrarese, 18 September 1899 and 10 December 1899.

*campestri* were constituted.[110] With its corps of mounted rural guards, the SBTF was able to keep socialist propaganda and strikes outside the estate and to increase the control and discipline of its workers. This policy matched the new business strategy adopted by the company in 1904, which was to sell all the lands that could not be directly farmed. The project also had urbanistic and administrative ramifications. In 1904, the company founded the small village of Le Venezie at the exact centre of its estates and within the municipality of Copparo. The village was intended to be the new headquarters of the SBTF as well as a residential centre for its workers. A church, a primary school, a medical clinic employing a general practitioner and a midwife, and a police station were built.[111] In 1910, a new aqueduct was built, making the village the first in the reclaimed lands to have access to fresh drinking water. In 1909, Le Venezie became an autonomous municipality and in 1911 its name was changed to Jolanda di Savoia, after King Victor Emanuel's daughter.[112] According to company director Alessandro Marangoni, the SBTF estates would stretch to fit the limits of the municipality.[113] The company's control was almost absolute. The first mayor was a former rural guard, and no socialist unions or party were allowed within the municipality.[114]

The new strategy, which was based on control, repression, absolute isolation and very limited company welfare, actually worked. Violent incidents still occurred in 1907, although the majority of workers remained subdued and obedient to the company.[115] The SBTF remained totally unaffected by a boatmen's strike in 1909, since it had its own workers.[116] In 1912 and 1914, Marangoni could proudly state that during the previous years the SBTF had remained immune from the social conflicts that had swept the province.[117] Protected by armed mounted guards and wielding a regime of terror and subtle incentives for semi-enslaved workers, the SBTF effectively controlled an entire municipality where it exerted its power and rule. The company's pervasive control over its lands, men and things was legally effected by means of new contracts, urban initiatives and a corps of rural guards. This mirrored a radical and obsessive vision of private property in which private and public prerogatives continuously overlapped.

The Italian Supreme Court eventually declared, in 1904, that private guards were in fact private and could therefore not carry out police work, make arrests or undertake searches.[118] The SBTF partly overcame this with other strategies aimed at creating an autonomous, isolated work place. In other cases,

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110 SBTF, RCDA, 1902, 18; Società per la Bonifica dei Terreni Ferraresi, *Regolamento n. 5 Guardie giurate* (Torino: Tipografia Baravalle e Falconieri, 1902).
111 SBTF, RCDA, 1906 -1907.
112 SBTF, RCDA, 1912, 13.
113 SBTF, RCDA,1910, 8-9.
114 Scintilla, 11 February 1911.
115 SBTF, RCDA, 1908, 14.
116 Prefect of Ferrara to Minister of the Interior (18 July 1909), ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione generale di Pubblica sicurezza, Polizia Giudiziaria, 1907-1909, b. 210.
117 SBTF, RCDA, 1912, p. 11-12 and SBTF, RCDA, 1914, p. 12.
118 Finzi, *Le guardie particolari.*

however, the border between the legal and illegal protection of strikebreakers was significantly more blurred.

A good example is the case of Alfredo Benni. A farmer's son, Benni rapidly became one of the most important capitalist leaseholders in the entire province of Bologna. In 1904, he became the main shareholder and director of the Mezzolara estate, over 2,000 hectares owned by Napoleon III's widow, Princess Eugenia. Benni managed Mezzolara as a capitalist farm and with consistent investment he transformed it into one of the most productive estates in the Po Valley. Benni also circumvented the local unions control over the workforce. He hired over 500 permanent workers and gave them good wages, houses and various benefits.[119] As he stated, 'I will do everything to protect the family of my workers, whom, if loyal, I will never abandon'.[120] In 1907, journalists reported that masses of workers had gathered in the main courtyard of the farm, where they were praised by Benni for their loyalty.[121] The local unions defined them as *crumiri* and organised a lengthy boycott of Benni's personal workforce, which lasted from 1907 to 1910.[122] Armed with rifles and wearing bandoleers, Benni's rural guards formed the first line of defence of the estate and its workers.[123] Shootouts between Benni's private guards and protesters occurred in 1907 and 1908, in particular as a consequence of attempted land occupations.[124] Along with the rural guards, many *crumiri* and young boys were also armed with pistols and rifles, even though they did not have gun licences; others used work tools such as billhooks and knives for self-defence.[125] Benni's *crumiri* frequently attacked unionised workers or fired at their houses. Given this increasing violence, the socialist press threatened Benni and the police authorities that 'if the unlicensed *crumiri* were not arrested, the local [socialist] co-operative would buy revolvers for members of the union'.[126] The police authorities admitted that such incidents resulted from a lack of sufficient forces in the area and reported that Benni repeatedly used armed strikebreakers and rural guards not only to defend the company's estates but also to provoke incidents and probably also to have an excuse to call in troops to defend 'public order as well as [the estate's] own interests'.[127]

The landowners' two-fold strategy, which involved resorting to both legal and illegal means of protecting strikebreakers and at the same time provoking incidents, probably reached its peak during the 1908 strike in Parma. At the behest of Lino Carrara, squads of Volunteer Workers and Free Workers were organised in January 1908, at least five months prior to the lock-out declared by the 'strongest

119 Prefect of Bologna to Minister of Interior (20 June 1908), in Archivio di Stato di Bologna, Gabinetto di prefettura (hereafter, ASBo, GP), b. 1113. See also Cardoza, *Agrarian elites and Italian fascism*, 51, 124–25.
120 Letters of Alfredo Benni, published in Resto del Carlino, Gazzetta dell'Emilia e Avvenire d'Italia (21 June 1908).
121 Resto del Carlino, 17 July 1908.
122 Gazzetta dell'Emilia (30-31 August 1907).
123 Resto del Carlino (16 July 1908).
124 Police officer of Baricella to Prefect of Bologna (16 July 1908), in ASBo, GP, b. 1113.
125 Police officer of Molinella to Prefect of Bologna (6 July 1907), in ASBo, GP, b. 1096.
126 La Squilla, 27 October 1906.
127 Police officer of Budrio to Prefect of Bologna (29 August 1908) and report of Carabinieri (19 July 1908), in ASBo, GP, b. 1113.

agrarian association in Italy' in retaliation for the strike won by De Ambris and his unions the year before.[128] Young farmers, students and also former members of the military, that is, a 'concentrated segment of the bourgeoisie', formed the ranks of the Volunteer Workers, whose aim was to 'prevent violence, by using violence, [and] to defend the freedom to work'.[129] In practice, they escorted and protected the Free Workers - blacklegs recruited in other provinces as well as former members of the socialist unions.[130] In Carrara's words, the Volunteer Workers were 'the public force of the private state, substituting the official, now impotent, state'.[131]

Despite their clearly subversive aims, Carrara and his fellow agrarians did not completely break with legality. They always stressed the fact that the Volunteer Workers had official gun licences and that they acted in self-defence and to preserve the right to work that the Penal Code guaranteed them.[132] However, as the unions constantly protested, the Volunteer Workers did not act as individuals, but rather as 'armed bands', whose creation was clearly contrary to both the law and the constitution.[133] The Volunteer Workers' strategy was to provoke incidents in order to justify state repression, which in fact happened during the final phase of the strike: the Free Workers paraded provocatively through the city and Volunteer Workers fired randomly at strikers and bystanders in the city centre simply to enflame the strikers and hence justify state intervention. Following such incidents, cavalry and troops intervened *en masse*, occupied the Chamber of Labour and put an end to the strike. [134]

After the victorious conclusion of the strike, Carrara continued his efforts to create 'a stable organisation of labourers tied by relationships of dependency to the employers' association' by taking over the traditional haunts, rituals and spaces of unionised workers.[135] Volunteer Workers continued to provoke incidents in traditional working-class social spaces, such as bars, taverns and dance halls. Special funds and insurances for sickness, accidents and maternity, as well as forms of sharecropping and profit-sharing, were established to improve the Free Workers' conditions and keep them loyal.[136] These initiatives were aimed at legitimising the Free Workers: they came to understand the need for social hierarchies and were willing to defend production and national wealth, thereby embodying the ideals of class collaboration, sacrifice, obedience and loyalty.[137] On the other side, the left-wing unions denounced the Free Workers as not only traitors, but also technically inept.[138] If, in 1909 and 1910, Carrara's strategy

128 Scintilla, 1 November 1913.
129 Bollettino 17 June 1908, quoted in Adorno, *Gli Agrari a Parma*, 159.
130 Telegram of Prefect of Parma to Minister of Interior (26 May 1908), in ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Ufficio Cifra, Telegrammi in arrivo 13 May 1908-9 June 1908; La Scintilla, 30 May 1908.
131 Bollettino (June 1908).
132 Bollettino (June 1908).
133 Scintilla, 30 May 1908.
134 Adorno, *Gli Agrari a Parma.* ch. 3; Sereni, *Il processo ai sindicalisti.*
135 Adorno, *Gli Agrari a Parma*, 160.
136 Adorno, *Gli Agrari a* Parma, 165.
137 Talamazzi, *La funzione morale, civile e politica del Libero lavoratore*.
138 Scintilla, 16 May 1908 and 23 May 1908.

seemed to be working, from 1911 onwards internal and external opposition resulted in the Federation of Free Workers losing the majority of its membership.[139]

The 1908 strike in Parma marked a turning point, and both Free and Volunteer Workers became common in other provinces too. At the time of the 1908 strike, the Agrarian Federation of Ferrara sought to create a 'volunteer' corps, although the initiative probably met with little success.[140] Carrara and other leaders of the Po Valley agrarian associations also advocated the creation of an interprovincial corps of volunteers.[141] In official reports and documents, the word '*crumiri*' started to be replaced by 'volunteers' or 'free workers'.[142] According to the provincial Chief of Police of Bologna, after the 1908 strike in Parma the region's agrarian associations improved their activities, in particular in the 'organisation of the so-called *crumiraggio* [strikebreaking] and any means of defence and class struggle'.[143] These considerations were also shared by the union leaders. An article published in 1913 in the socialist newspaper *La Scintilla* described two types of Free Workers. The first, 'organised and specialised', were permanent members of independent unions managed by the employers and met all the 'necessary technical requirements' to adequately replace strikers. However, this group had very few members (only 440 men and 210 women in Parma) so they were fairly ineffective during massive strikes that might involve 'tens of thousands of strikers'. In contrast, the second type of Free Workers included 'those who had learnt well the job of the layabout: they are totally incapable of doing anything'. They were mainly used to intimidate striking workers with their numbers, although they were actually harmless: 'if an agreement is not reached, they will be unable to save the harvest'.[144]

After the Parma strike, *crumiri* armed with revolvers and rifles (often without licences) became an increasingly familiar sight.[145] Back in 1907, the socialist mayor of Molinella complained of the presence of '*crumiri* armed by the same leaseholders to beat and injure unionised workers in order to have the excuse to call for repression'.[146] In 1911, a strike was declared in the province of Ferrara with the precise aim of protesting against the 'armed bands' of '"squires" and blacklegs, armed to the teeth' that the agrarian association had organised in order to 'provoke and challenge'.[147] During a conflict in Bologna in November 1911, 'free workers' were arrested as they were pulling out the revolvers they had in their possession 'without licences'; according to the police, they were 'permanent employees' of a local

139 Adorno, *Gli Agrari a Parma*, 164.
140 Scintilla, 5 May 1908.
141 Cardoza, *Agrarian elites and Italian fascism*, 146.
142 Adorno, *Gli Agrari a Parma*, 99–124; Sykes, «Revolutionary Syndicalism»; Sereni, *Il processo ai sindicalisti*; Umberto Sereni, «Lo sciopero di Parma del 1908: un episodio della lotta di classe», in *Lo Sciopero agrario del 1908: un problema storico*, a c. di Valerio Cervetti (Parma: Step, 1984), 13–154.
143 Report of Questore to Prefect (22 September 1902), in ACS, PS 1911, b. 31.
144 Scintilla, 8 November 1913.
145 Scintilla, 2 August 1913.
146 Telegram of the Mayor of Molinella to prefect (7 July 1907), in ASBo, GP, b. 1096.
147 Scintilla, 11 June 1911.

landowner.[148] The agrarian associations took extraordinary risks to fulfil their policy goal of full autonomy from both the state and the unions. In Bologna, in particular, the local agrarian association informed the police authorities only a few hours before the arrival of 'free workers' in the fields. Their ulterior motive was to challenge both the state authorities (by accusing them of incompetence in the case of disorder) and the socialist unions (by showing that the agrarian association could carry out farm work independently). It was during one of these 'challenges' that a brutal incident occurred in Guarda. In October 1914, five blacklegs – extremely poor and desperate day labourers from the province of Padua – were killed with sticks and stones by hundreds of unionised workers, who were exasperated by the leaseholders' resistance and provocations. The authorities intervened promptly to disband the unions and arrest their leaders. The agrarians blamed 'Giolittian permissiveness' for being the main cause of the massacre and then took advantage of the repression to establish an 'apolitical league' based on 'good relations' between employers and the workforce.[149]

As the incident in Guarda and the previous examples have made clear, such conflicts were not the sole result of state weakness or unpreparedness, they were also the outcome of deliberate provocation on the part of the employers. According to historian Anthony Cardoza, men like Benni and Carrara represented the 'vanguard of a new movement of agrarian insurgency', which was directed against the socialist unions, traditional landowners and the state.[150] The extreme bitterness of the unsolvable social conflicts together with the proprietors' conscious decision to challenge the unions gave rise to struggles that became subversive. This contributed to an escalation in conflict that could barely be solved within the boundaries of a liberal democracy.

**Conclusion**

Although generally underestimated, strikebreaking was an absolutely crucial aspect of the social dynamics in liberal Italy. In this regard, the Po Valley represented a contradiction: in spite of the abundance of unskilled workers, the solid, pervasive network of day labourers' unions largely prevented the hiring of replacement workers. The general unwritten rule that the strength of a union should be proportionate to the skill of the trade was subject to a significant exception here.[151] Giolitti's policing and political strategies for breaking the deadlock were uncertain, shifting and opportunistic. Certainly, the Giolittian policy of state neutrality (in all its forms, including the new status of rural guards) exposed the fact that repression had a class-based nature.[152] This forced employers to confront the inherent

148 Report of carabinieri to prefect (12 May 1912) and Report of police officer of Molinella to prefect (11 May 1911), in ASBo, GP, b. 1163.
149 Cardoza, *Agrarian elites and Italian fascism*, 215–17.
150 Cardoza, *Agrarian elites and Italian fascism*, 215
151 Arthur McIvor, «Employers' Organisation and Strikebreaking in Britain, 1880- 1914», *International Review of Social History*, n. 29 (1984): 7; Jack London, *War of Classes*, 1905, 37.
152 Aquarone, *L'Italia giolittiana*, 563.

contradictions of their declared *laissez-faire* attitude. On the one hand, landowners and leaseholders were always eager to obtain state support for repression and economic benefits (above all, protectionism[153]), while on the other hand, and quite paradoxically, state intervention was fiercely criticised and private intervention lauded whenever issues of economic, political or symbolic power were at stake.[154] As a leaseholder stated during the strike in Parma, in 'well-organised societies, social defence is a duty of the government, by tacit social agreement. Nowadays, however, faced with multiple offences, we are reclaiming the natural right to provide for our defence'.[155] Leaders of the agrarian associations had therefore no hesitation in declaring their determination to confront 'whoever attacks our rights, whether they are socialists, municipal government, or the state'.[156] In this context, the timid efforts to improve the conditions of the working classes, reduce repressive policies and enlarge political participation in order to make government a credible interlocutor were not only contradictory in themselves, they did nothing but exacerbate the situation and widen the gap between rulers and ruled. The strategies adopted in social conflicts in fact mirrored broader political conundrums. Within the framework of a fairly elitist liberal state lacking sufficient political capital, policies to foster economic development by extending political participation were pursued by a minority of the political elites. Faced with the contradictions and counterproductive consequences of Giolitti's policies of tolerance, Po Valley large landowners and commercial leaseholders created political cultures and employed strategies based on the more effective combination of organised violence, authoritarian seduction, labour discipline and productivist tendencies. It was on these cultural and practical foundations that fascism was able to prosper after the end of the Great War.

The ultimate outcome was the establishment of the authoritarian fascist regime, but it was not predetermined. The comparative perspective adopted in this special issue helps situate the Italian case within a wider European framework: the semblance of direct continuity between the Giolittian era and fascism is belied by similarities with other European countries during the Belle Époque that were having similar difficulties in striking a balance between social order and the rule of law in increasingly mass societies. However, what sets Italy apart is the particular social, economic and political features of the Po Valley which had a strong hand in shaping the 'agrarian roots of Fascism'.[157] There is agreement among historians that the fascist black-shirts cannot be portrayed simply as the 'white guards' of agricultural proprietors and their *raison d'être* was not strikebreaking. Nevertheless, fascism prospered because it was able to offer an effective and durable solution for controlling the workforce in regions where the problem had been almost unresolvable for decades.

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153 Silvio Lanaro, *Nazione e lavoro: saggio sulla cultura borghese in Italia, 1870-1925* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1979).
154 Davis, *Conflict and control: law and order in nineteenth-century Italy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 353–57; Silvio Lanaro, *Nazione e lavoro: saggio sulla cultura borghese in Italia, 1870-1925* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1979).
155 Benni, Montanari and Crestani to Prefect, 15 July 1908, Stagni to Giolitti, 26 April 1911, in ASBO, b. 1113.
156 *L'agraria bolognese*, 1 February 1911, quoted in Cardoza, *Agrarian Elites and Italian Fascism*, 187.
157 Corner, «The road to Fascism», 277-278.

The paradox of strikebreaking may then help explain the paradox in the shift of a fragile Italian democracy toward authoritarianism. Consideration of the interplay between violence and consensus and the reconfiguration of the public and private domains from the specialised perspective of strikebreaking and within a broader comparative framework may help resolve the paradox of Italy's apparent exceptionality.