

Business-Labor: Equal Status and Common Planning

Interview to Maurizio Landini by Fabrizio Perretti*

WHO REPRESENTS WHAT



In the conflict between capital and labor, in recent years the latter seems to have been the loser. This is a consequence of attacks that came not only from capital, but also from politics, on both the right and in some cases the left as well. Do you agree with this analysis?

We can say that in recent years the idea that has won, or prevailed, is that the market should be free and not have any social constraints. This has led to considerable job insecurity, that I believe is the largest problem to be faced. Job insecurity causes real harm to human dignity, and is an element that breaks down social cohesion. This dominant logic has provoked a devaluation of work precisely because capital has also changed. Among the different forms of capitalism, the one that has prevailed is that more oriented to giving value to finance, compared to guaranteeing a social role for businesses. These two elements, assisted also by the process of opening of the markets, what has been called globalization, favored the free circula-

tion of capital without controls, creating competition between billions of people divided between those who had no labor rights and those who had them.

All of this took place without any rules being in place, without the free circulation of capital being subject to controls. The construction of tax havens is a tangible result of that process. This not only modified the relationship between capital and labor, but certainly devalued the role of the latter, making representation difficult. The fact that such a culture took hold – creating a situation of group think among the political forces that in theory should have represented different points of view – is a real problem in my view. If I think of the labor market reforms in the past twenty years – and I'm referring to Germany, France, and Italy – in many cases the reforms were wrong and costly for workers, implemented by governments or political forces that said they were representing labor. I think the split that has taken place between the world of labor and political representation is an issue to be addressed as soon as possible, since it is a fundamental factor for maintaining social cohesion. This globalization – a globalization not of rights but of finance – has led to unprecedented competition among people, who have to work in order to live. And in some cases this has lowered the quality of work, the quality of products, and also social quality, greatly increasing inequality; to the point that today, not only those who aim to represent labor, but even those who seek to mediate between capital and labor, pose the problem of how to change a model of development that has exacerbated social inequality. In some cases, even those who defend the market wonder how to intervene to remedy the distortions and fragility that this model has caused. In this sense, I think that what has happened with the pandemic is paradigmatic, from a certain point of view.

So do you think that a reorientation of the capitalist system is underway, that is, that the system

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is conscious of having exceeded a limit? Do you think that the political system is also reacting this way?

I think too little has been done so far. I believe that today, we must re-establish the centrality of human beings and labor, not understood only as the right to employment, but also as the means for realization of the human person and as a tool to produce useful things, on both a social and environmental level. Today this approach is still definitely adopted by a minority, but it should be the starting point, including because processes of change require the participation of people. When I was saying that the situation of the pandemic is paradigmatic, I meant that many platitudes have probably been swept away in just a few months. For example, the idea that the more humble jobs, consisting of manual work, had disappeared and were no longer important, has been completely reconsidered. Think not only of the social and health sector, but also agriculture, logistics, and supermarkets. Even forms of work that had the highest level of insecurity, were invisible and paid little, suddenly became visible and important. Without those jobs and without the contribution of those people we would not be a condition to emerge from or defeat the pandemic. What happened has restored centrality and visibility to work. Furthermore, the effects of the pandemic around the world indicate that there are a series of fundamental rights that must be publicly guaranteed. I'm thinking of the right to health, the right to training and education; and also the right to culture and knowledge. I'm also thinking of the right to work, but to work that is acceptable, that is work when it allows the person who performs it to live with dignity. When you work but are still poor, it means that something is wrong, that there is an equilibrium that has been broken in the relationship between capital and labor.

The pandemic has also highlighted the phenomenon of smart working, that can have positive effects for workers and quality of life, but can also create a series of possibilities for exploitation and control by businesses. How do you judge that phenomenon and what opinion do labor unions have on this change in the organization of work?

To understand this phenomenon we have to analyze three very intense processes of transformation. The first regards the health question, a point on which I think everyone can see the need to invest in public health and prevention at the local level, thus strengthening the social state. By now everyone has realized that the cuts to the health sector in recent years were not only wrong, but also – let's put it this way – deeply harmful for the population and social cohesion. The second process of transformation regards the environ-



mental crisis. Many scholars have shown how the depredation of nature and climate change have contributed to what is called a “species jump,” and thus the more rapid spread of the virus. This is an issue whose nature is unprecedented. If we don't change our model of development, that can no longer be simply quantitative and without limits, if we don't initiate a discussion on the environmental and social sustainability of what we produce, if we don't rethink our lifestyle, and thus also our levels of consumption, we will place the very existence of our planet at risk. And lastly, there is the third process, the unprecedented acceleration of the potential of digital technology, that the pandemic has contributed to highlighting. From a certain standpoint, smart working is merely the tip of the iceberg. I say this as a man of the 1900s, with all of the resistance that I could have up until a few months ago, for example with regard to video-conferences. The use of these technologies can certainly allow for a different quality of work, but it also depends how they are used. It's not that technology is positive or negative per se; the question is how it is applied.

These are the three challenges that, in my view, everyone must face, and that labor unions certainly must tap into in order to respond to the request for change. This is a request that also involves those who run businesses and those who govern. If we take the issue of digital technologies, the problem is who controls them and who uses them. Because if there is a principal characteristic of digital technologies, it is their transversal nature, as regards all social areas and the economy, touching health and the organization of work and free time, as well as the relationships between people. Data is said to be the “new gold.” This poses major questions: who controls data? Who owns data? How is data used? I think there is a question of democracy here, and from a certain standpoint, there are good reasons for a new

role of the state and greater intervention in the economy. Moreover, if we speak of Italy, we see a clear image of a country with profound regional differences, both in terms of network infrastructure, and as a consequence, of the use of the technologies themselves.

It's clear that the picture described also influences work. Looking forward, each one of us will be required – in the same month, the same week, and sometimes the same day – to be physically present for work, as happened in the past, but also to work remotely with technological instruments. This raises two issues. The first regards the absolute centrality of knowledge, training, and study, that truly become subjective rights, with permanent value along an entire lifespan. This issue is also linked to the need for school reform, with an increase of compulsory education up to 18 years of age, and a rethinking of pre-school and kindergarten. The second question directly regards labor unions. Even after the conclusion of the education cycle, a person, or a worker who continues studying, updating, and acquiring new knowledge, must be guaranteed paid hours of work. From a certain standpoint, this also poses a new question regarding labor relations and the workers themselves. In the future, the union cannot limit itself to requesting higher salaries and lower work commitments – which however remain two very important elements, because there are many workers who have low salaries and long hours. An issue that is emerging is the worker's realization through the work they do, but above all the use of their intelligence in the discussions on what is produced, as well as how and why it is produced. At the same time, the company's goal cannot only be profit, but the quality of the work for the employee and its role in society become fundamental.

The pandemic has made the fragility and deep inequalities of the current system evident. A process has begun that we consider decisive, and that requires a profound change, the participation of workers in business decisions. This is a great challenge, certainly for labor unions but also for businesses, and can no longer

be postponed. It is on this point that I consider collective bargaining a tool to be upgraded, locating it in a more general dimension able to devise a different future for the country.

One of the effects of the pandemic has also been the success of e-commerce and home delivery services, that are often accused of exploiting workers, by many, not only labor unions.

In a general sense, this pandemic has highlighted the problem of the quality of people's consumption, behavior, and lifestyles. There is no automatic link between being an e-commerce company and home delivery services and exploiting workers as much as possible. These are choices linked to the idea a company has of its business model and relations. There are certainly laws that favor processes of this type, that should be changed. Having introduced measures that allow for many types of insecure work has inevitably increased job insecurity in general. Sometimes within the same business there are people who, despite doing the same job, do not have the same rights and protections. The pandemic has brought an explosion of these contradictions. Let's think about what we had to create in Italy in order to sustain the many forms of work that had no protection. Fifty years after Italy's "Workers' Statute" was passed, the time has come to define a new statute that guarantees the same rights and protections, independent of the type of employment relationship one has. Whatever employment relationship one has, there must be the same rights and protections. This also becomes a way to raise the level of competition between businesses, because at that point competition is no longer on costs and the reduction of rights, but on the quality of work, that ability to create new investments and new products. For example, think of the logistics sector and the laws that have been passed in recent years on contracting and subcontracting. We are speaking of a strategic sector for the activities and functioning of a country and an industrial system, that however is based on a logic of liberalization of the system of contracts, subcontracts, and fake cooperatives. I think there is a need for radical change in this sector.

Then there is the fiscal question, because as we said at the beginning, globalization has made possible the free circulation of capital without any restrictions, with the contradiction that it prevents people from moving around. We live in a strange sort of world where money can go where it wants, has no need for an identity card or a driver's license, but for people, some even want to build walls. One of the issues that should be addressed in Italy and Europe is the creation of a tax system able to prevent tax havens and operations in which multinational corporations can move, pay lower taxes than their employees, and make great profits by dividing and squeezing workers.



In light of these agonizing contradictions, politics should return to representing labor and the interests of the collectivity. A tax reform that goes in this direction should not be against business, but to affirm a model of business, the market, and compromise between labor and business that reaffirms those values of social justice that have been dramatically forgotten today.

In the relationship between capital and labor, many have noticed a recent aggressive posture by Confindustria and its new president. Do you agree with this evaluation? And how do you judge the relationship of the unions with Confindustria?

Regardless of what is included in interviews with journalists, just a few days ago, (this interview was conducted on 9 September 2020) after a period of months, we had a meeting with Confindustria and its president Bonomi. There are certainly some differences, in particular on the role of bargaining and national employment contracts. Personally, I believe it is a mistake to think of going beyond such contracts. Rather, returning to what I said before, I think we should abolish “pirate” contracts, those signed by bodies that are not representative of the parties. Furthermore, national collective contracts signed by bodies that are representative should be given the value of general law, *erga omnes*, and the representation of organizations that represent workers and businesses should be certified. The fact is that we need to raise the level of competition, to no longer be based on the reduction of rights but on the quality of work and products. I consider the idea of reducing the importance of national collective contracts to be dangerous. It risks taking us towards a logic of company-level relations, closer to the American model than the European one. Moreover, today we are seeing conflicts and new forms of competition between countries (think of tariffs) that make it very complicated to direct the economic growth of a country principally towards exports. Domestic demand thus becomes a decisive factor for development. To produce growth in domestic demand, it is necessary to stimulate consumption, and at the same time, change the quality of consumption. This is another reason that investing in contracts is decisive, with reference to the issues of salary, working hours, including reducing hours at equal salary, structure and organization, training, employment, and overcoming job insecurity. The opposite logic, that of blocking and reducing the value of national contracts, is something we certainly do not agree with. If Confindustria were to shift from declarations to concrete actions – which you have defined as “aggressive” – a conflict would arise which the country certainly doesn’t need.

There is another aspect of the president of Confindustria’s statements that I don’t find convincing: the idea

that it is sufficient to allow businesses and the market to define a new model of development. I think that one of the questions that needs to be discussed is precisely that of what role the state should have in the economy. I am not referring to the substitution of businesses by the public sector. But I think that now as never before – due to the level of investments needed, and their degree of priority – there is an urgent need for the State to play a role providing direction, regulation, and in some cases also direct intervention; for example, consider the need to guarantee broadband and a network connection for the whole country; think of the role that welfare can play in this period, from public health to education, from universities to culture as a public right.

One of the great changes that I see regards the very concept of product. Today, for example, it is mobility, no longer the automobile, that has taken hold as the

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new demand for the movement of people. And within this new concept of product, environmental sustainability and the use of digital technologies become essential. This requires a profound rethinking of the organization of urban areas and material and immaterial infrastructure. Changes of this scope cannot be left to the market, but require authoritative, high-quality public intervention.

The experience we have and the complexity of the problems we are facing tell us that the market and businesses alone are unable to deal with issues of this type; actually, they risk committing errors we need to avoid repeating. I heard that Bonomi wants to be revolutionary, while I am perhaps more pragmatic. I am not thinking of going past capitalism, but I think that in this phase it would be useful to reaffirm the equal dignity between labor and business, and to give new emphasis to the issue of bargaining understood as joint planning and mediation of the interests to be represented.

You come from the Fiom union, and previously defined yourself as a “man of the 1900s,” the century of laborers and the metalworking industry. Does that world still exist? And if so, what remains?

The pandemic has demonstrated that laborers still exist, manual labor exists. Work exists, and people exist, in flesh and blood, who work and without whom we couldn’t fight the pandemic. I think it will be precisely people’s work that defeats the pandemic, and that

will be able to construct a new social model. At the same time, it is impossible not to recognize a change in the world of work, its culture and its contents. When I began to work, many years ago, I was a welder apprentice in a metalworking company. If I think of the evolution of the past 30-40 years, it is clear that today there are jobs that didn't exist before, that we didn't even think could exist. This will be true in the future as well. What I consider irreplaceable is the person who works. Work represents a fundamental element for each of us. In fact, when we meet someone, after asking their name the second question is generally "what kind of work do you do?" It's true, the contents of work and its meaning can change, but people remain, they don't disappear. And unions exist because the people who work have the right to unite and orga-

nize. This right should not only be defended, but also guaranteed through laws that follow the principles of our constitution, not only on the issue of respectable salaries, but also regarding the exercise of collective bargaining and for participation of workers in the life and decisions of businesses.

I believe that the conflict that still exists between the worker and employer – that in theory is the proprietor of the work that is done and the person who limits autonomy and freedom within the workplace – should be overcome. In this phase of great change, the center of the discussion should shift to what is produced, why it is produced, and with what impact on the environment, always focusing on respect and dignity for the human person. I believe that these are the new issues we must all face.



SYNOPSIS

- The pandemic has highlighted the fragilities and deep inequalities that characterize the current economic system. At the same time, a process has begun that requires a profound change, the participation of workers in business decisions.
- Fifty years after Italy's "Workers' Statute" was passed, the time has come to define a new statute that guarantees the same rights and protections, independent of the type of employment relationship one has.
- The new forms of competition between countries make it complicated to direct the economic growth of a country principally towards exports. Domestic demand thus becomes a decisive factor for development. This is why it is important to strengthen purchasing power, intervening on labor contracts.
- Never before – due to the level of investments needed, and their degree of priority – has there been such an urgent need for the State to play a role providing direction, regulation, and in some cases direct intervention as well, from the need to guarantee broadband and a network connection for the whole country, to support for welfare, above all in public health and education.