

# Political Economic History of Italy and Overview of Automotive, Energy Production, Long-term Care, and On- Demand Transport Sectors

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# 1 Economic history overview

Over the century and a half since Unification, Italy has undergone a major structural transformation: from an agricultural economy to an industrial power, and finally to a service-oriented system. At the end of the 19th century, most Italians were employed in agriculture, and the primary sector still contributed to nearly half of GDP (Amendola, 1984). With the industrialization of the 20th century, the weight of agriculture collapsed: the share of agricultural labour force dropped from over 50% in the early 1900s to less than 5% by the end of the century (de Benedictis, 2016). At the same time, manufacturing and construction industries grew, driving economic growth in the second half of the 20th century, while in more recent decades, the service sector has come to dominate the Italian economy, with over two-thirds of GDP now coming from services.

Economic transformations profoundly impacted the social fabric. Urbanization increased rapidly during the postwar industrial boom: millions moved from the countryside to industrial cities, redefining the country's geography and demographics (Sbrana, 2016). Living conditions improved dramatically: life expectancy at birth, a synthetic indicator of socio-health progress, rose from about 35 years in 1880 to about 65 years by the late 1950s, and today exceeds 80 years. Similar progress occurred in education (with mass literacy and extended compulsory schooling), in the reduction of absolute poverty, and in access to consumer goods once unimaginable. By the 1960s, Italian society, while still marked by class and territorial differences, had become more prosperous and relatively more equitable compared to the pre-war period, thanks to rising wages and the emergence of a network of social protections.

However, some imbalances persisted: the North-South dualism remained a historical constant (Cavalli, 2016), and there were still strong disparities between social groups, such as those between workers employed in protected, formal sectors and those in precarious sectors or the informal economy.

## Industrial development

Italian industrialisation has been a long-running process, marked by sudden accelerations and phases of stagnation, as well as pronounced regional disparities. In the post-unification period (1861–1914) the country laid the foundations of modern industry: the first industrial poles emerged in the “industrial triangle” of Turin–Milan–Genoa, driven by metallurgy, mechanical engineering (railway workshops, machine tools) and textiles. Up to the early twentieth century, however, industrialisation advanced relatively gradually and remained geographically confined.

During the economic miracle of the 1960s, Italian industry became the engine of growth (Carnazza, 2016). Branches such as mechanical engineering (machinery, household appliances), automobiles (FIAT in Turin mass-produced cars for the European market), chemicals (plastics, fertilisers) and construction expanded at breakneck speed. In 1963 the investment rate (investment-to-GDP ratio) reached its historical peak (Lucchese et al., 2017), attesting to widespread confidence in the future and the determination to expand productive capacity.

The State, acting through public holding companies such as IRI and ENI (energy), controlled large segments of heavy industry and public-utility services (from telecommunications to transport), ensuring strategic coordination and investment (Carnazza, 2016; Lucchese et al., 2017).

At the same time, private entrepreneurs created brands that would become world renowned (Olivetti in electronics, Pirelli in rubber, Montecatini/ENI in chemicals, Barilla in food, etc.), while a diffuse entrepreneurial base thrived in light-industry sectors such as textiles and clothing, furniture, and agri-food. This mixed public-private model made Italy the world's fifth-largest industrial power in the 1960s (Garofalo, 2007). Major technical innovations were adopted—for instance the electrification of railway lines, the construction of motorways (the *Autostrada del Sole*, 1955–64), and the introduction of automation processes in factories. Labour productivity rose rapidly and GDP doubled in a little more than a decade, irreversibly transforming the country's economic structure.

From the 1970s onwards, however, the industrial landscape began to change. Certain sectors—among them steel, shipbuilding and basic chemicals—entered crisis owing to technological change<sup>1</sup> and international competition.

Conversely, new industrial strengths emerged. In the 1980s the model of *industrial districts* became established (Seravalli, 2008): local production systems, often composed of highly specialised family-owned small and medium-sized enterprises capable of cooperating and competing with one another at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Although Italy achieved excellence in areas such as precision engineering, robotics (e.g. Comau robots and industrial automation), aerospace (satellites and Vega launchers, helicopter production with AgustaWestland) and other high-tech niches, the country has long suffered from a persistent shortage of investment in research and development. R&D expenditure has typically hovered around 1.3–1.4% of GDP, below the EU average, thereby limiting the capacity to generate radical innovations and new technological champions.

2 Classic examples include the footwear districts in Fermo and the Brenta area, the textile district in Prato, the furniture cluster in Brianza, the ceramic-tile district around Modena, the gold-smithing district in Arezzo, and the eyewear district in the Belluno area. These districts formed the backbone of *Made in Italy*, producing

By the end of the twentieth century, therefore, the Italian industrial profile combined, on the one hand, large firms—often formerly State-owned (Telecom Italia, ENEL, FIAT, Finmeccanica, etc.) or private (Ferrero, Luxottica, Benetton, Barilla)—holding dominant positions in their global markets and, on the other, a widespread fabric of SMEs that provided employment and wealth at the regional level (Cerrito, 2010).

## **Labour Market and Demographic Issues**

The dynamics of the Italian labour market reflect the broader economic and social transformations previously discussed, showing both significant progress and persistent structural weaknesses. In the post-war period, the exodus from agriculture and rapid industrialisation transformed the composition of the workforce: millions of former farmers became factory workers in the North, while the service sector began to absorb an increasing share of workers as both public and private services expanded. By the late 1960s, Italy had reached near-full employment, with the unemployment rate falling to around 3–4%, especially in the Centre-North, as industrial growth absorbed the available labour supply. This context contributed to a strengthening of workers' bargaining power. During this period, a powerful wave of trade union mobilisation emerged: major federations such as CGIL, CISL, and UIL<sup>3</sup> experienced a membership boom, with union density rising from about 25% in the early 1960s to nearly 50% by the mid-1970s (Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2025). The “Hot Autumn” labour protests of 1969 led to substantial contractual improvements and significant legislative gains, most notably the Workers' Statute of 1970. From then on, national sectoral collective bargaining—already in place since the immediate post-war years—was complemented by expanded trade union rights within firms, consolidating a concertative model of industrial relations. Wages and working conditions were typically negotiated between representatives of labour and business, often with active State mediation. This model contributed to a relatively equitable distribution of the benefits of economic growth.

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high-quality, design-oriented goods valued on international markets. Their strength lay in flexibility, incremental innovation and the ability to adjust rapidly to shifts in demand. Thanks to this model, Italy has maintained a significant share of world trade in mature sectors by differentiating its products towards medium-to-high market ranges.

<sup>3</sup> The Italian trade union system is historically structured around three main confederations. The Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL), founded in 1944, has traditionally been associated with left-wing and communist political currents. The Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions (CISL), established in 1950, emerged from a split with CGIL and has roots in Christian-democratic and Catholic social teachings. The Italian Labour Union (UIL), also founded in 1950, has a secular, socialist, and republican background.

From the 1980s onward, amid changing conditions (technological shifts, foreign competition, and economic crises), the Italian labour market evolved significantly. General unemployment, which had already increased during the crises of the 1970s, reached double-digit levels in the 1980s (approximately 10–12%), disproportionately affecting the South and young first-time job seekers. Union density began to decline from its peak: falling from 50% in 1980 to 39% in 1990 and around 35% in 2010 (Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2025). This decline is attributable to structural changes (a shrinking industrial workforce and expansion of less-unionised service sectors) and the entry of “atypical” workers into the labour force (temporary, part-time, and freelance workers). Labour reforms starting in the mid-1990s, such as the Treu Package (1997) and the Biagi Law (2003), introduced greater flexibility, liberalising fixed-term contracts, agency work, and project-based collaborations. These reforms resulted in growing labour market segmentation: alongside permanently employed workers protected by collective agreements, a precarious workforce has emerged, characterised by lower income and weaker social protections, often excluded from career advancement and welfare mechanisms.

Despite declining union membership, collective bargaining coverage remains high, thanks to the legally binding extension (*erga omnes*) of national labour contracts—ensuring that virtually all sectors apply collectively agreed minimum standards. Social dialogue continues to play an important role, particularly in managing unemployment benefit schemes and social safety nets.

A persistent feature of the Italian labour market is the low female labour force participation and pronounced gender gap. Although gradually increasing, Italy’s female employment rate remains among the lowest in the European Union: in 2022, just over 55% of women aged 20–64 was employed, compared to an EU average of over 69%. Multiple factors contribute to this disparity: limited access to family-support services (e.g., childcare, eldercare), which forces many women to withdraw from paid employment to assume caregiving roles; enduring gender stereotypes; and occupational segregation that concentrates women in lower-paid sectors with higher rates of involuntary part-time work. Regional disparities are also central to any labour market analysis: the Mezzogiorno has long suffered from chronic underemployment. The South’s unemployment rate is often double that of the Centre-North, with some southern regions still experiencing total unemployment around 15% and youth unemployment exceeding 30%. This is exacerbated by the continuous out-migration of highly educated young people to Northern Italy or abroad, which further drains the South’s human capital and perpetuates a vicious cycle of underdevelopment. Conversely, some productive regions in the North report

shortages of labour in specific sectors (e.g., skilled manufacturing, construction, personal care), with these gaps increasingly filled by migrant workers.

## **International Relations and Global Integration**

Italy has historically been a highly export-oriented economy and remains one of the world's leading exporters. Global integration has thus offered opportunities for growth, but has also exposed the Italian economy to international cycles and external shocks, revealing internal vulnerabilities during periods of crisis.

Starting in the 1970s, Italy faced a series of external shocks. The oil price hikes of 1973 and 1979, in an economy highly dependent on energy imports, triggered high inflation and recession. Inflation soared above 20%, eroding wages and savings, until strict containment policies—such as the 1992 abolition of automatic wage indexation (*scala mobile*) through social pacts—brought inflation under control.

From the late 1990s, and especially after 2001, globalisation accelerated. The rise of new economic powers brought millions of workers and low-cost goods into world markets. Many Italian industries—particularly in traditional sectors such as textiles and garments, home appliances, and consumer goods—came under pressure from emerging-market competitors. This prompted industrial restructuring, often leading to offshoring production to lower-wage countries. As noted by ISTAT, competition from emerging economies undermined a substantial portion of the industrial base on which Italy's specialisation had relied, prompting a difficult adjustment in the country's production structure (ISTAT, 2016). Some firms moved upmarket, focusing on quality and “Made in Italy” design, while others failed to adapt and exited the market.

The global financial crises of the 21st century had severe repercussions. In 2008–2009, the U.S.-originated recession caused Italy's GDP to shrink by more than 5% in 2009 alone. After a brief recovery, the sovereign debt crisis of 2011–2012 raised public borrowing costs, forcing the government to implement austerity measures. Between 2007 and 2013, the economy cumulatively contracted by approximately 9 percentage points of GDP, returning to mid-1990s output levels. Already fragile industrial sectors declined further, research and development spending was cut, and unemployment—especially among youth—reached record highs.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic triggered the worst contraction of the Italian economy since World War II (–8.9% of GDP), severely affecting tourism, hospitality, and culture. The government and the European Union responded with expansionary measures, including large fiscal deficits and the Next Generation EU plan, which contributed to a rapid rebound (+6.6% in 2021 and +3.7% in 2022).

## 2 Overview of selected industries

### 2.1 Automotive Sector

The Italian automotive industry is undergoing a profound transformation under the combined pressures of technological disruption, climate policy, and shifting industrial governance. Historically centred around a single national champion—Fiat, now integrated into Stellantis—the sector is navigating a complex transition toward electrification, digitalization, and supply chain restructuring.

#### *Market Structure and Institutional Evolution*

The Italian automotive sector has long been characterized by the dominance of Fiat, whose centrality shaped the structure and geography of the industry throughout the 20th century. Its integration into global markets began early, with exports constituting a major share of production already in the interwar period (Casalino, 2010). By the 1970s, Italy was the third largest car producer in Europe (Bubbico, 2007).

From the 1960s to the 1980s, Fiat was at the heart of major labour conflicts and social negotiations that significantly influenced Italian society at large. This period saw intense waves of strikes, particularly during the *Hot Autumn* (1969), with a growing political awareness among the working class.

However, the competitiveness of the Italian automotive sector began to deteriorate in the late 1990s, leading Fiat to adopt increasingly aggressive offshoring strategies, notably to Eastern Europe (Pardi, 2022). This strategy accelerated in the 2000s.

Fiat's exit from Confindustria<sup>4</sup> in 2011 marked a significant rupture, as did the subsequent implementation of firm-level agreements that undermined traditional sector-wide bargaining (Regalia and Regini, 2012). These developments represented the culmination of a crisis under the Marchionne management, whose production model failed to reverse the declining domestic production and employment levels (Bellucci, 2016). The creation of Stellantis in 2021, through the merger of FCA and PSA, further intensified debates over Italy's diminished control over industrial policy and strategic decision-making (Gaddi and Garbellini, 2021).

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<sup>4</sup> Confindustria is Italy's principal employers' association, representing large and medium-sized enterprises in negotiations and lobbying efforts.

Today, Italy's automotive landscape is notably heterogeneous. Stellantis remains dominant, but other prominent producers like Lamborghini, Ducati, and Ferrari, which operate within distinct global value chains, pursue highly specialized market segments (Gaddi and Garbellini, 2021). Additionally, Tier 1 suppliers such as Magneti Marelli face significant challenges related to the electrification transition and employment downsizing (Pardi, 2022).

### *Green and Digital Transitions: Challenges and Transformations*

The electrification of the sector, driven by EU regulations on combustion engines and global technological shifts, poses specific challenges to Italy. Cetrulo et al. (2023) highlight that while firms increased R&D investments following shocks like *Dieseldgate*, Italy remains behind in forming strategic alliances crucial for accelerating the Green transition. Additionally, critical infrastructure gaps and a relatively weak domestic market for electric vehicles hinder the broader diffusion of electric mobility technologies.

Scenario modelling shows that full electrification of the private car fleet could increase electricity demand by 27–40% by 2050, with significant implications for national energy planning and regional grid stability (Falfari and Bianchi, 2023).

### *Key Areas of Ongoing Social Dialogue and Negotiation*

Social dialogue in the Italian automotive sector has significantly weakened since the early 2000s. Fiat's pivot toward firm-level bargaining fragmented traditional sector-wide coordination (Regalia and Regini, 2012). Subsequent initiatives aiming to rebuild collective bargaining capacity have been isolated and regionally confined, notably in Emilia-Romagna, lacking nationwide coherence (Cetrulo et al., 2023).

According to ANFIA (2023), direct automotive employment in Italy decreased from around 250,000 in the early 2000s to approximately 170,000 in 2023, primarily affecting Tier 2 suppliers and traditional manufacturing roles. Unlike Germany, where IG Metall actively participates in the governance of Digital and Green transitions, Italian trade unions have limited influence, reducing their capacity to effectively negotiate comprehensive transition frameworks and retraining programs (Cetrulo et al., 2023).

The ongoing industrial transformation thus risks deepening existing territorial and social inequalities in the absence of strengthened multi-level governance and robust labour adjustment mechanisms.

## 2.2 Energy Sector

The Italian energy sector has experienced deep structural changes over the past decades, marked by the liberalization of electricity and gas markets, integration into EU energy frameworks, and the imperative to align with decarbonization goals. Historically dominated by State-owned monopolies, the sector has progressively shifted towards a mixed market model, characterized by the increasing role of private operators and a complex regulatory environment.

### *Market Structure and Institutional Evolution*

The Italian electricity sector was initially characterized by a public monopoly model following the nationalization of the electricity industry in 1962, which led to the creation of ENEL (Ente Nazionale per l'Energia Elettrica) (Segreto, 1998). Under this vertically integrated structure, ENEL held control over generation, transmission, and distribution, with the objective of ensuring universal service and strategic energy planning.

The 1990s marked a decisive shift with the implementation of EU directives promoting market liberalization and competition<sup>5</sup> in the energy sector. In Italy, this led to the unbundling of ENEL's activities and the creation of distinct entities for generation (ENEL Produzione), transmission (Terna), and distribution (e-distribuzione), while allowing private operators to enter the market (Lavatelli, 2019).

The privatization of ENEL began in 1999, with the gradual sale of government shares through public offerings. Although ENEL is now a publicly traded company, the Italian State retains a significant controlling interest through the Ministry of Economy and Finance. Transmission operator Terna, although listed on the stock exchange, is also partially State-owned. This hybrid model—where strategic infrastructure remains under public control while promoting competition in generation and retail markets—defines the current Italian energy governance.

The liberalization process also redefined institutional roles. The Autorità di Regolazione per Energia, Reti e Ambiente (ARERA), established in 1995, has become the key regulator of energy markets. ARERA oversees tariff structures, promotes market

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<sup>5</sup> The liberalization process was formalized through Legislative Decree No. 79/1999 (known as the Bersani Decree), which transposed EU Directive 96/92/EC into national law.

transparency, and supports investment in infrastructure, including incentives for renewables and energy efficiency (ARERA, 2023).

Despite the formal liberalization of the sector, legacy operators continue to exert significant market power. At the same time, the fragmentation of regulatory competencies across State, regional, and EU levels has generated coordination challenges, especially in implementing renewable energy projects and integrating new market actors such as energy communities (ARERA, 2023).

### *Green and Digital Transitions: Challenges and Transformations*

Italy remains structurally dependent on imported fossil fuels, especially natural gas, which accounted for approximately 35% of the energy supply in 2023, along with a similar share from petroleum products (Statista, 2023a). While coal has been progressively phased out, particularly in the electricity sector, it remains marginally present in specific industrial uses. Nuclear energy, once under consideration, has been abandoned after public referenda, and Italy remains the only G7 country without active nuclear plants (Nucci and Ricotti, 2006).

In contrast, renewable energy sources (RES) have expanded significantly, covering 41% of electricity demand in 2024. Hydropower leads among renewables (40.5% of RES production), followed by solar photovoltaic (26.4%) and wind energy (Enerdata, 2024; Statista, 2023b). However, seasonal variability and grid integration challenges limit their full potential. Emerging technologies such as geothermal and biogas play a localized but significant role, particularly in central Italy (Falcone et al., 2018; Chicco and Mandrone, 2024).

A share of electricity in Italy is also produced through industrial cogeneration, particularly in energy-intensive sectors such as steel and chemicals (Gestore dei Servizi Energetici (GSE), 2022). Additionally, combined heat and power (CHP) systems support district heating networks in urban northern areas, especially in cities like Milan and Turin, although their diffusion remains limited compared to other European countries (IEA, 2025).

### *Key Areas of Ongoing Social Dialogue and Negotiation*

The Italian energy sector is characterized by a dual structure that combines large, vertically integrated incumbents—such as ENEL, SNAM, and Terna—with a growing array of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), municipal utilities, and cooperative initiatives operating particularly in the field of renewables (Brandoni and Polonara, 2012; Lavatelli, 2019). While legacy actors dominate infrastructure-heavy segments like

electricity transmission and gas networks, newer entrants are most active in decentralized generation, photovoltaic installations, and energy service contracting.

This evolving structure has brought new employment dynamics. The Green transition has generated asymmetric effects across regions and occupational groups. Areas formerly reliant on coal-fired plants—such as Brindisi and parts of Sardinia—have experienced employment losses, necessitating active labour market policies and transition plans (Collettiva.it, 2023). Trade unions have been involved in negotiating conversion paths for affected workers, although tensions persist regarding job guarantees, skill mismatches, and investment timing (Rugiero, 2019).

Green jobs have proliferated in installation, maintenance, and retrofitting of energy systems, especially in the building sector. However, many of these jobs are characterized by temporary contracts, spatial concentration in the North and Centre, and weak integration into collective bargaining systems (Reatti et al., 2024). At the same time, the expansion of digital infrastructure in the energy sector—such as smart grids and remote monitoring platforms—is reshaping required skill profiles and organizational models, raising new challenges for worker representation and training.

Energy cooperatives and local utilities have also emerged as laboratories for new industrial relations practices, sometimes involving multi-stakeholder governance and local collective agreements (Zulianello and Angelucci, 2020). Yet, the broader sector remains segmented between capital-intensive incumbents and fragmented new actors, limiting cohesion and long-term workforce planning.

## 2.3 Care and Healthcare Services

### *Market Structure and Institutional Evolution*

**Healthcare Services** The Italian healthcare system is grounded in the Servizio Sanitario Nazionale (SSN), a universal, tax-funded model established in 1978. It guarantees essential levels of care across the territory, free at the point of use. However, decentralization has granted regions significant autonomy in planning and delivering services, leading to profound interregional disparities (Maturò, 2014; Cavalieri and Guccio, 2006).

Reforms in recent decades have aimed to increase efficiency through managerial modernization and public-private partnerships. Yet critics argue that such initiatives have often promoted the privatization of profits and the erosion of public oversight (Taroni et

al., 1998; Adinolfi, 2014). Private providers have increasingly penetrated ambulatory and specialist care, contributing to a stratification of access where those with higher incomes can bypass long waiting lists (Gianino et al., 2006). The Digital transition— anchored in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan—has introduced telemedicine, electronic health records, and community health hubs, but implementation remains uneven and hindered by digital literacy gaps among frontline professionals (Cascini et al., 2024).

**Long-Term Care (LTC)** Long-term care in Italy encompasses a fragmented array of services provided at home, in the community, and in residential institutions. Although some LTC services fall under the remit of the SSN, much of the system is administered through local social services, resulting in a highly heterogeneous landscape (Petrazzuoli, 2016). Formal home care services are limited in scope and vary by region, while residential care facilities face chronic underfunding and staff shortages (Fazzi, 2008).

Italy's LTC system is emblematic of the *welfare mix*, combining public, private, and third-sector actors. However, this mix often lacks coordination and oversight, leading to inefficiencies and duplication. Public-private partnerships have not always yielded equitable outcomes; critics note a tendency for public authorities to outsource without adequate regulation, exacerbating access gaps and quality inconsistencies (Adinolfi, 2014; Cavalieri and Guccio, 2006).

**Elderly Care** Elderly care occupies a distinct yet overlapping space within the broader care architecture. Italy is among the oldest countries in the world, with a growing demand for age-related services. Despite this, the system heavily relies on family-based care and migrant labour. The figure of the “badante”—a mostly female, foreign live-in caregiver—has become central to Italian eldercare, filling gaps left by insufficient public provision (Ferraro, 2017; Salaris and Tedesco, 2020).

Elderly individuals with limited financial means often face barriers in accessing adequate care, as residential facilities are scarce, expensive, and unevenly distributed across the territory. This reliance on familial and informal arrangements risks reproducing gender and class inequalities, particularly in southern regions (De Vita and Corasaniti, 2021; Petrazzuoli, 2016).

### *Green and Digital Transitions: Challenges and Transformations*

Digital healthcare reforms—including telemedicine, electronic health records (EHR), and the creation of Community Health Houses—have been central to Italy's post-COVID Recovery and Resilience Plan. Yet implementation varies widely across regions. Many frontline workers report limited digital literacy and uneven integration of new technologies (Cascini et al., 2024). The introduction of Territorial Coordination Centres (TCCs) and

telenursing represents an institutional innovation aimed at extending homebased care, but success hinges on workforce training and intersectoral coordination.

From a Green transition perspective, healthcare infrastructures are being reimagined to improve energy efficiency and reduce environmental impact. However, current investments often lack integration with broader health equity goals. Some scholars argue for a holistic governance model that links ecological and technological innovation while reinforcing public values (Bevere and Faccilongo, 2024). Private sector involvement is increasing, but in the absence of clear regulatory frameworks, there is a risk of cost-shifting and access stratification (Toth, 2015).

Digitalisation also affects long-term care. While technologies such as EHRs and monitoring systems have potential to improve coordination, their deployment remains limited in residential and home-based care. At the same time, market-oriented mechanisms introduced under the banner of innovation may erode public oversight (Cavalieri et al., 2009).

#### *Key Areas of Ongoing Social Dialogue and Negotiation*

Although healthcare, LTC, and elderly care operate through distinct institutional channels, they face shared systemic challenges:

- **Workforce stress and precarity:** Across all sectors, care workers face low pay, high emotional demands, and limited career pathways. Migrant labour remains overrepresented in the most precarious roles (De Vita and Corasaniti, 2021).
- **Territorial inequalities:** Regional autonomy has led to disparities in service availability, quality, and outcomes, challenging the equity goals of the SSN (Cavalieri and Guccio, 2006).
- **Fragmented governance:** Overlapping responsibilities among State, regional, and municipal authorities impede coordinated planning and integration of services (Fazzi, 2008).
- **Creeping privatization:** The growing reliance on market mechanisms, often justified in the name of efficiency, has led to segmented access and commodification of care (Adinolfi, 2014; Gianino et al., 2006).

## 2.4 On-Demand transport sector

### *Market Structure and Institutional Evolution*

The contested rise of platform-based mobility in Italy did not occur in a wholly static, corporatist environment. From the early 1990s the sector had already been traversed by intermittent waves of liberalisation and re-regulation that sought—only partially successfully—to loosen the tight quantitative control that Italian municipalities exercise over passenger-transport licences. A first watershed was *Framework Law 21/1992*, which, while reaffirming the public-utility nature of taxi services, introduced the separate *noleggio con conducente* (NCC)<sup>6</sup>, “rental with driver”, category and allowed local authorities to issue additional taxi or NCC permits when service shortages were demonstrated. Subsequent national packages—the so-called *Bersani Decree* (Decreto-Legge 223/2006, conv. in L. 248/2006) and the 2012 *Cresci-Italia* decree—pushed for larger licence contingents, multi-shift vehicles, and market-based compensation schemes. These attempts at “controlled liberalisation” were bitterly opposed by incumbent taxi cooperatives, leading to partial roll-backs, protracted court battles and the effective stalling of many local reforms.<sup>7</sup>

### *Green and Digital Transitions: Challenges and Transformations*

The development of platform-based mobility in Italy has been strongly shaped by the contested entry of Uber into the national market. Since its arrival, the platform has acted as a catalyst for structural tensions between traditional taxi services and emerging forms of digital intermediation, redefining the terms of competition, regulation, and labour relations in urban mobility. The Italian case has thus been characterized by a regulatory trajectory in which institutional responses—aimed at containing or adapting to this disruption—have played a central role, alongside more limited but notable technological reactions by incumbent actors<sup>8</sup>.

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6 These services are allowed to operate exclusively through prior booking and agreed-upon fares. Unlike traditional taxi services, which may circulate freely and pick up clients directly from the street, NCC operators are required to begin each trip from a designated garage or depot and are prohibited from waiting for customers in public spaces. NCC licenses are issued by individual municipalities based on locally defined quantitative criteria. While both taxi and NCC licenses are numerically limited, NCC licenses provide greater territorial flexibility, allowing operators to work outside the municipality where the license was granted.

7 On the political economy of these liberalisation attempts, see e.g. Bentivogli and Calderini (2007), Bergantino and Longobardi (2000), Visco Comandini et al. (2004). For an overview of Law 21/1992 and subsequent amendments see Bentivogli (2009).

8 Traditional taxi cooperatives have launched digital applications of their own to improve service quality and competitiveness. Notable examples include iTaxi, developed in 2012 by the Unione dei Radiotaxi d'Italia

From a regulatory perspective, the entry and expansion of digital platforms have triggered intense legal and political controversy, primarily centred on the regulation of passenger transport licenses and recurring allegations of unfair competition. Unlike in other countries where platforms such as Uber are allowed to operate using private drivers, the Italian legal framework severely restricts their operational scope. Only operators with an NCC license are legally permitted to provide services through these platforms (Uber Technologies Inc., 2024). This regulatory regime, largely defined by Framework Law No. 12/2019, aims to protect the traditional taxi sector by imposing specific operational constraints on NCC services—such as the prohibition of street parking and the obligation to return to the garage after each ride (Repubblica Italiana, 2019). The result is a system that maintains a high degree of market segmentation and formal control, in contrast with the more permissive and market-driven environments seen in other jurisdictions.

### *Key Areas of Ongoing Social Dialogue and Negotiation*

In addition to sector-specific concerns such as licensing rules and allegations of unfair competition, traditional issues associated with the platform economy remain highly relevant in the on-demand transport sector—first and foremost, the classification of employment relationships and the exercise of algorithmic control. As Birgillito argues, Uber’s model exemplifies a form of “concealed subordination” in which drivers, formally autonomous, are in practice subject to unilateral and opaque managerial oversight through algorithmic systems. These systems allocate tasks, determine access to bonuses, and impose sanctions without transparency or negotiation, reinforcing a power imbalance typical of dependent employment relationships (Birgillito, 2022). Moreover, the platform’s rhetorical emphasis on individual autonomy and flexibility contributes to the erosion of collective identity among drivers, thus impeding the emergence of organized forms of worker representation.

The Italian case mirrors, in important respects, the dynamics described by Collier, Dubal, and Carter (Collier et al., 2018) in their study of Uber’s political strategy in the United States. Rather than operating in a regulatory vacuum, Uber has systematically pursued a strategy of “disrupted regulation”—entering markets by deliberately violating existing legal norms and forcing public authorities to respond *ex post*. In Italy, this strategy was most evident in the launch of the now-defunct Uber Pop service, which allowed unlicensed private individuals to offer rides, prompting swift legal and institutional backlash. Uber’s efforts to mobilize users and drivers as “surrogate representatives” of its deregulatory

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(URI), and appTaxi, launched in 2015 as a consortium of local cooperatives. These apps allow users to book and pay for rides via smartphone, offering functionalities such as fare estimates and vehicle tracking—thus replicating the user experience associated with platform-based mobility services.

agenda—described by Collier et al. —also find echoes in the Italian context. By presenting itself as a technological enabler rather than a labour market actor, the platform has sought to bypass traditional forms of worker representation, much like food delivery platforms have successfully done in other segments of the platform economy.

However, unlike in the U.S., where Uber often managed to pre-empt municipal regulation through State-level interventions, Italian institutions have generally upheld a more restrictive stance. Taxi driver associations in Italy have played a critical role in shaping this regulatory resistance. Their coordinated protests and lobbying activities—framed around the defence of legal certainty, service quality, and job protection—have influenced both public discourse and policymaking. These movements have been instrumental in securing legal interventions aimed at limiting the scope of NCC operations and reinforcing the boundaries between traditional and platform-based services.

Over the past decade, Uber’s strategy in Italy has undergone a significant transformation. Moving away from its earlier confrontational stance—exemplified by the controversial launch of Uber Pop—the company has progressively repositioned itself as a more cooperative actor, aiming to consolidate its operations within the bounds of the national regulatory framework. The discontinuation of Uber Pop and the exclusive focus on Uber Black, which operates solely through licensed NCC drivers, marked a strategic pivot toward legal compliance and institutional engagement.

This shift culminated in a series of high-profile agreements with traditional taxi operators. In 2022, Uber signed a partnership with the Taxi IT consortium, enabling the integration of approximately 12,000 licensed taxis into the Uber platform, starting in major cities such as Milan, Rome, and Naples (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2022; la Repubblica Milano, 2022). The alliance has since expanded to include additional urban centers like Bologna, where CAT Bologna joined the initiative in early 2025 (ANSA Motori, 2025). Beyond operational integration, the partnership has also taken a programmatic turn, with joint commitments to electrification and sustainable urban mobility in Rome, Milan, and Naples (Unione Radiotaxi d’Italia, 2023).

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# Shifting Docklines: Social Dialogue and the Reorganisation of Port Work in Genoa and Trieste

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## Abstract

This paper analyses how social dialogue and labour-market institutions mediate technological and organisational change in liberalised port systems, through a comparative historical case study of the Italian ports of Genoa and Trieste. Focusing on the institutional transition triggered by the 1994 port reform (Law No. 84/1994), the study examines how the dismantling of corporatist labour regimes, combined with containerisation, logistics integration, and market competition, reshaped bargaining configurations, power resources, and governance arrangements at the local level. Drawing on a multi-source qualitative design—including legal analysis, archival material, secondary literature, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders—the paper reconstructs divergent post-reform trajectories. Genoa exhibits a path of institutional resilience, where the adaptation of worker-owned organisations sustained stable, predominantly distributive bargaining without fragmentation. Trieste, by contrast, experienced prolonged institutional drift and labour-market fragmentation, followed by a phase of re-regulation driven by an empowered Port System Authority that enabled the reconstruction of coordinated social dialogue. Interpreted through the lens of Power Resources Theory and bargaining theory, the findings show that liberalisation does not mechanically generate efficiency or innovation. Instead, outcomes depend on the presence of organisational legacies and public coordination capacities capable of embedding technological change within negotiated and socially sustainable governance frameworks.

# 1 Overview and Historical Context

Social dialogue institutions have long mediated technological and institutional transitions, seeking to contain their social costs. This paper examines these dynamics through a historical case study of the Italian port system—a setting where successive shocks have reshaped the relationship between technological change, labour-market institutions, and collective bargaining. Over recent decades, three forces have been particularly influential: the reconfiguration of institutional power following the dismantling of corporatist arrangements; technological shifts driven by containerization, logistics integration, and global competition; and the emergence of new constellations of actors alongside traditional ones. Together, these developments offer a vantage point for analysing how bargaining models—integrative or distributive—take form, why negotiated solutions hold or collapse, and how institutional legacies shape adaptive capacity.<sup>1</sup>

Our analysis focuses on the institutional transition related to the implementation of the 1994 port reform (Law No. 84/1994), which liberalised port activities in line with EU competition principles and formed part of a broader shift toward pro-market policies in Italy.

We focus on two ports—Genoa and Trieste—whose trajectories diverged sharply after the reform. Genoa maintained a collectively governed labour regime through the resilience and adaptation of worker-owned organisations; Trieste, by contrast, experienced a prolonged phase of fragmentation followed by institutional reconstruction. The following sections examine the factors behind these divergent paths, tracing how actors interpreted the reform, mobilised power resources, and renegotiated rules and practices within evolving bargaining configurations, ranging from distributive confrontation to more integrative coordination.

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<sup>1</sup> On ports as institutional fields and the centrality of governance structures for conflict and cooperation, see Turnbull and Sapsford (2001); Schwarz-Miller and Talley (2002).

## 1.1 Institutional Liberalisation and Technological Change

The 1994 port reform emerged within a broader neoliberal turn that reshaped labour market regulation, pensions, and corporate governance in Italy. Historical–institutionalist analyses identify 1992 as a critical juncture, when technocratic elites at the Treasury and the Bank of Italy—backed by major parties—used the macroeconomic and political crisis to launch a gradual but far-reaching liberalisation drive (Ferragina and Arrigoni, 2021). This trajectory took the form of selective neoliberalism: reforms initially targeted groups with weaker power resources before eroding core protections, progressively extending market principles across labour and social policy. Parallel changes in labour and corporate governance produced a hybrid and often incoherent institutional architecture, blending market-oriented flexibility and shareholder logics with residual elements of coordinated capitalism (Simoni, 2020).

These institutional changes intersected with a simultaneous wave of technological and organisational transformation: containerization, the rise of integrated logistics, and the growing influence of global shipping and terminal operators were reshaping ports’ operational imperatives (Castillo-Manzano and Asencio-Flores, 2012; Notteboom and Rodrigue, 2008). Responding to these pressures required new investments and continuous efficiency gains, prompting many countries to move away from centralised “service port” models toward landlord and hybrid arrangements in which infrastructure remained public, but operations were increasingly entrusted to private or mixed-ownership entities (Castillo Manzano and Asencio Flores, 2012; Debie et al., 2013). Seen together, these developments position the Italian reform as one national articulation of a broader international shift toward port devolution and commercialisation—an attempt to enhance autonomy, flexibility and competitiveness within a globalised maritime network (Castillo-Manzano and Asencio Flores, 2012).

## 1.2 Evolution of Italian Port Traffic (1980s–2010s)

Italian ports experienced sustained but uneven traffic expansion from the 1980s to the mid-2000s. Banca d'Italia reports a steady increase in maritime freight volumes through the 1980s and 1990s, accompanied by growing modal importance of containerised flows (Banca d'Italia, 2011). By the late 2000s, the country handled around 10–11 million TEUs annually, but this volume was distributed across a disproportionately high number of ports. Both Appetecchia et al. (2011) and Carrese et al. (2019) show that the Italian system lacks the concentration observed elsewhere: in 2016, Italy's 15 container ports handled roughly the same volume as Spain's 9 ports, but with an average of fewer than 700,000 TEUs per port. This fragmentation dilutes scale advantages and limits the formation of national gateway hubs.

**Divergent trajectories and basin asymmetries** Across the 2000s, traffic evolved along two sharply diverging patterns. The Tyrrhenian range consolidated its leadership: Genoa, La Spezia, Livorno and Civitavecchia accounted for nearly 90% of Italian container traffic in 2010 (Appetecchia et al., 2011). Genoa exceeded 2 million TEUs after 2012, while La Spezia and Livorno showed comparable upward trends. By contrast, the Adriatic ports maintained lower volumes, though with important internal differentiation. Carrese et al. (2019) highlight the steady ascent of Trieste and Venice, whose combined market share converged toward 8% of national hinterland flows by 2017, supported by deeper drafts and improved Central European connectivity.

**Transshipment decline and market instability** The Italian transshipment segment experienced severe contraction. ISFORT researchers document a 32% decline in transshipment traffic between 2007 and 2017, largely driven by losses in Gioia Tauro, Taranto and Cagliari (Appetecchia et al., 2011). Carrese et al. (2019) attribute this dynamic to two factors: (i) the rise of mega-alliances (2M, Ocean Alliance, THE Alliance) controlling over 80% of East–West capacity; and (ii) the reallocation of services to more competitive Mediterranean hubs such as Valencia, Algeciras, Tanger Med and Piraeus.

Instability indices (Hymer-Pashigian, Gini, HHI) confirm that the Italian hinterland market is competitive but highly fragmented, with substantial year-to-year variation for high-volume ports.

Within this fragmented system, Genoa and Trieste emerge as analytically relevant comparative cases. Both are universal ports with diversified cargo bases and historically significant institutional legacies; both underwent deep reconfiguration after the 1994 reform. Yet their trajectories diverged sharply. Genoa consolidated as the country's primary hinterland port, leveraging scale, connectivity, and organisational continuity. Trieste, by contrast, remained mid-sized in container terms, but its strategic position strengthened through integration into North–South and East–West corridors, supported by deep-water facilities and evolving governance arrangements.

### 1.3 Sources

This case study relies on a multi-source historical design combining: (i) national legislation and legal materials (Cod. Nav., L. 84/1994; the *Port of Genoa* ruling); (ii) secondary research (comparative port labour literature; sectoral studies); (iii) targeted gray literature and policy reports; and (iv) qualitative interviews with port stakeholders and experts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in December 2025 with key institutional and social actors in the two ports<sup>2</sup>. Specifically, they cover: (i) port authority managers; (ii) trade union representatives directly involved in workplace negotiations; (iii) sector experts with long-standing knowledge of port governance dynamics.

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<sup>2</sup> Interviews are anonymised and coded (e.g., *INT-GE-N*, *INT-TS-N*); Detailed information on the interview protocol, participant profiles, and data collection process is provided in Annex I (Qualitative Fieldwork Overview).

## 2 Negotiation Process and Social Dialogue Dynamics

### 2.1 Pre-Reform Power Resources in Genoa and Trieste

From the post-war period to the early 1990s, Italian dock work was regulated by a *public/corporatist* regime. The 1942 *Codice della Navigazione* and the 1952 executive rules framed loading/unloading as services of public interest, subject to administrative control. Dock labour was centrally allocated via dock labour schemes that ensured job rotation, income continuity, and collective representation; in this framework, the port was an extension of public administration, with infrastructure owned by the State and managed by the *Consorzi Autonomi del Porto* (CAP). Labour provision was entrusted to recognised port labour companies under *art. 110 Cod. Nav.*, which endowed them with an exclusive right to supply manpower for quay operations.<sup>3</sup>

*Genoa*: Before 1994, the Port of Genoa epitomised the corporatist model of port labour management. The *Consorzio Autonomo del Porto* (CAP), a public body founded in 1903 and reorganised under the 1942 *Codice della Navigazione*, owned port infrastructure and exercised concessionary authority. Labour was organised within the *Compagnia Unica Lavoratori Merci Varie* (CULMV), which held an exclusive right to loading and unloading under Article 110 of the Code, effectively granting it a monopolistic position. Work access and rotation were governed by personal networks linking workers, foremen and firms; in the absence of a unified collective agreement, wage-setting followed local practices and informal, often on-board negotiations.

*Trieste*: Before 1994, the Port of Trieste rested on two complementary pillars. The *Ente Autonomo del Porto di Trieste* (EAPT), established in 1967 under the region's special statute, combined administrative and operational functions, overseeing infrastructure and labour regulation. On the labour side, the *Compagnia Unica dei Lavoratori Portuali di*

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<sup>3</sup> On the historical set-up and the Italian variant of labour companies, see also (Appetecchia et al., 2011).

*Trieste* embodied the city's cooperative tradition, organising dockers as members responsible for on-board and on-shore tasks and collectively managing recruitment, rotation and revenue distribution. The system originated in the interwar shift from foreman-based hiring to collective organisation; in 1980, the Maritime Directorate consolidated three historical companies into a single *Compagnia Unica*, structured into *Bordo* and *Terra* sections.

### 2.1.1 Workers' Traditional Status and Power Resources

Within the pre-reform regime, port work represented a distinctive form of *protected employment*, combining income continuity, occupational closure, and collective control over work allocation. In analytical terms, this configuration can be examined through the lens of Power Resource Theory (Korpi, 1998) which offers a framework for analysing how the distribution of power among social groups shapes institutional outcomes and class compromises.<sup>4</sup> The port sector exemplifies a historically dense configuration of all four power resources: dockworkers' indispensable role in logistics (structural), the cooperative and union organisation (associational), the codified prerogatives under public law (institutional), and the civic visibility and political symbolism in port cities (societal). Analysing port labour through this lens allows for a systematic understanding of how material structures and institutional legacies interact to sustain or erode collective power over time. Before 1994, dock labour was deeply embedded in public governance structures and largely insulated from competitive pressures. Ports were managed under public authority with limited incentives for innovation, prioritising employment stability over productivity.

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<sup>4</sup> Power Resource Theory (PRT) originally developed within comparative political economy by Korpi (1998) and further elaborated by Esping-Andersen and others, identifies four main dimensions of labour power: *structural*, *associational*, *institutional*, and *societal*. These dimensions capture, respectively, workers' strategic position within production and markets, their collective organisation, their embeddedness in formal institutions, and their broader legitimacy in civil society.

*“Ports were entirely managed by the public hand, with almost no drive for innovation. It was a system that did not create value but was meant to provide work.”*

— Port authority manager, Trieste (INT-TS-1)

This state-led configuration endowed dockworkers with considerable *structural power*. Their labour was indispensable for the functioning of logistic operations, and their employment carried a political and civic function. Their control over the rhythm of operations and over cargo manipulation granted them leverage in wage bargaining and in shaping work organisation. Such control derived from the indeterminate and variable nature of dock work, which allowed collective exploitation of downtime and unpredictability to secure autonomy and income stability.

*“For decades, dockworkers could collectively benefit from the variability of the job—using waiting times, delays, and handling discretion as resources to negotiate better conditions.”*

— Adapted from Degl’Innocenti (2018)

The structural basis of this power, however, began to erode with the progressive mechanisation and containerization of port operations. The shift from a *job-shop* model—where “every ship was a different factory”—to a standardised *flow-shop* system transformed ports into linear, continuous production chains. These technological and organisational changes reduced the degree of indeterminacy that had historically sustained workers’ leverage, transferring control from labour to capital and machinery. As observed by Degl’Innocenti (2018) the ports evolved from multi-purpose trading emporia into integrated “gateways” of global logistics, where efficiency and throughput replaced solidarity and local autonomy as organising principles.

The *associational* and *institutional* dimensions of dock labour were equally distinctive. The *Compagnie Uniche* functioned as hybrid entities—simultaneously employers, unions, and welfare bodies. They administered the *Indennità di Mancato*

*Avviamento* (IMA, non-dispatch allowance), a mechanism ensuring income continuity for registered dockworkers during idle periods.<sup>5</sup> This arrangement consolidated labour’s institutional position within the public governance of port work, reinforcing its role as both economic operator and delegated regulator of employment stability. They collectively managed recruitment, rotation, training, and income redistribution among members, ensuring a degree of job stability that was rare in other sectors.

At the *societal* level, dockworkers enjoyed a distinctive civic legitimacy rooted in their visibility within port cities and in the historical prestige of their occupation. Port work was widely regarded as a stable and respectable form of employment that linked local industrial production to global trade networks. This symbolic capital translated into political protection and public tolerance for practices that prioritised employment continuity over efficiency, reinforcing a collective ethos of work as a social right rather than a purely economic exchange. The dockworker’s identity thus embodied both social utility and professional pride, but also a sense of self-contained corporatism that distinguished the port community from the rest of the urban workforce.

*“The dockworkers were seen as an aristocracy of labour. Until today—with the non-dispatch allowance—the port world has remained corporatist and self-referential. It lives under a special legal regime: those who work in the port have their own collective contract, generally more favourable than others.”*

— Port governance expert (INT-GE-2)

Such privilege also generated distance from other segments of the working class. As recalled by the same interviewee, industrial workers in the surrounding factories had lower

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<sup>5</sup> See *Associazione Autorità Portuali* (2020), “Indennità di mancato avviamento per i lavoratori somministrati alle imprese/agenzie di cui all’art. 17 della legge n. 84/94,” available at <https://www.assoporti.it/it/normestudi/normativa-italiana/legislazione-portuale/indennita-di-mancato-avviamento-per-i-lavoratori-somministrati-alle-imprese-agenzie/>.

wages, stricter hours, and tougher exploitation.

*“They saw the docker as a very particular kind of worker—someone who could manage his own time and income, since pay depended on how much he chose to work. He could even decline a call and still receive a social allowance.”*

— Port governance expert (INT-GE-2)

This self-contained moral economy of work and protection reinforced the societal dimension of dockworkers’ power. By combining material security with civic prestige, the port labour system created a socially legitimate yet closed occupational community.

### 2.1.2 From the “Port of Genoa” Case to the European Ruling and the 1994 Reform

The origins of Law No.84/1994 lie in a dispute that unfolded in Genoa at the end of the 1980s and culminated in the landmark judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Communities (*Case C-179/90*). In 1988 the vessel *Wallaroo*, unable to unload its cargo without resorting to the CULMV—as required by Article 110 of the Navigation Code—remained immobilised for months due to a strike. The consignee, *Siderurgica Gabrielli S.p.A.*, challenged the legality of this mandatory reliance on a monopolistic labour provider, arguing that it infringed European rules on competition and freedom of establishment. The Genoa District Court referred the matter to Luxembourg, and in December 1991 the Court of Justice ruled that national provisions granting exclusive rights over dock work, and obliging firms to employ a company composed solely of national workers, were incompatible with Community law. Dock work, the Court held, could not be classified as a service of general economic interest exempt from competition rules.

Following the 1991 ruling, the Ministry of Transport established a technical committee to align Italian port legislation with Community principles. This process led to Law No.

84/1994, which reorganised the sector through a functional tripartition—Articles 16, 17 and 18—defining access, roles, and responsibilities within port operations.

1. Article 16 – Port Enterprises. Defines port operations and authorises firms to perform them under licences issued by the port authority, subject to technical, organisational, and financial requirements. The provision ends the exclusive rights previously held by port labour companies and introduces a regulated competitive framework.
2. Article 17 – Temporary Port Labour Providers. Establishes a special regime for the supply of temporary port labour to Article 16 enterprises. Authorised providers must operate exclusively in labour supply and comply with professional, training, and safety standards, replacing the former guaranteed-dispatch system with regulated intermediation.
3. Article 18 – Concessions of Maritime Public Areas. Regulates the granting of quays and port areas to operators demonstrating adequate operational capacity and investment commitments. The provision separates administrative authority from operational functions and assigns port authorities explicit responsibilities for planning, supervision, and oversight.

Whereas labour had previously been part of the port’s public function, it now became an economic activity governed by competition law. The role of the State shifted from that of a direct guarantor of employment to that of a market regulator and safety supervisor. Port companies lost their quasi-public status, assuming instead the form of worker cooperatives or private labour-supply firms.

## 2.2 Post-Reform Power Resources in Genoa and Trieste

In Genoa, the legacy of the CULMV, the historic dockworkers’ cooperative, provided a dense organisational infrastructure which enabled continuity in collective coordination.

The cooperative reframed its legitimacy not as a statutory right but as a guarantee of reliability and productivity.

*“The Company has always resisted. Until the law made change mandatory, it held its ground and later digested the reform with difficulty. With the firms, it was a matter of negotiation: ‘we are here, and we do not intend to leave. We are capable of bringing the port to a halt, but we do not want to reach that point. We are productive—let’s find an agreement. We have a thousand families to feed; we will find a balance.’”*

— researcher specialising in shipping and port labour (INT-GE-2)

In Trieste, by contrast, the dismantling of the *Compagnia Unica Lavoratori Portuali* –the former dockworkers’ company– and the proliferation of small cooperatives eroded associational power and institutional memory. The absence of a unifying organisation led to low-trust relations and limited bargaining capacity. The 2015 re-regulation under the Autorità di Sistema Portuale del Mare Adriatico Orientale marked an attempt to rebuild those missing coordination structures, showing how institutional reconstruction can itself become a form of social dialogue.

*“In Trieste we found a highly fragmented situation. The failures of the Port Workers’ Company, the Primavera cooperative, and other labour cooperatives had created a climate of precariousness and resentment that was extremely detrimental.”*

— Mario Sommariva <sup>a</sup>, cited in Bologna (2017)

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<sup>a</sup>Mario Sommariva is a leading practitioner of Italian port governance. He has served as Secretary General of the Port Authority of Genoa and, subsequently, as President of the Port Network Authority of the Northern Adriatic Sea (Port of Trieste).

Building on this background, the following sections examine how these distinct institutional trajectories translate into concrete configurations of power and negotiation.

The analysis disentangles its multiple dimensions through the lens of Power Resources Theory (PRT).

## 2.2.1 Genoa

### *Structural Power*

Thirty years after Law No. 84/1994, port labour in Genoa operates as a plural system in which the CULMV remains central but no longer exclusive. Roughly half of the workforce is directly employed by terminal operators (Art. 18 or Art. 16), while the CULMV functions as a complementary Article 17 provider supplying labour on a call-based basis. In this structure, Art. 18 employees hold the more specialised and stable positions, whereas Art. 17 dockers constitute a flexible pool mobilised according to operational needs. Yet growing traffic and productivity pressures have progressively blurred these distinctions: Art. 17 workers now perform a broader set of specialised tasks, and call-ups often mirror routine organisational choices rather than temporary peaks, with some terminals relying structurally on Article 17 labour.

*“The largest terminal operator uses almost as many Company members as its own employees”*

*— researcher specialising in shipping and port labour (INT-GE-2)*

Genoa continues to rely on Article 17 labour far more than other Italian ports, reflecting the CULMV’s enduring role as an indispensable workforce provider. This is captured by the external dependency index, which in Genoa stands at 2.2 compared with 7.7 in Naples—the national benchmark—indicating a much stronger structural dependence on agency-mediated labour (Appetecchia et al., 2011). This reliance reflects a mutual convenience: terminal operators benefit from variable labour costs and immediate coverage, while the CULMV preserves its scale and bargaining power. Tensions nevertheless emerge when operators attempt to introduce alternative labour sources. A notable case arose during the dissolution of the small cooperative Pietro Chiesa, when a

major terminal tried to replace the CULMV workforce, prompting a rare moment of coordinated resistance between Company members and workplace representatives.

*“The operation had a clear political intent [...] the PSA workplace committee, with the support of the CULMV, blocked the required union agreement and ensured that the 80 Pietro Chiesa workers were absorbed into the CULMV”*  
— dockworkers’ union delegate (INT-GE-3)

From a technological standpoint, automation is perceived as a latent but contained challenge. As one expert noted, it progresses only through incremental adjustments—OCR at entry gates, tele-guided vehicles, and the gradual optimisation of ship–land flows—rather than through disruptive reorganisations.

*“In Genoa, automation is widely regarded as a taboo: it advances only in small, incremental steps.”*  
— researcher specialising in shipping and port labour (INT-GE-2)

These developments hint at a slow reconfiguration of operational roles, but they unfold within an essentially stable arrangement in which daily coordination continues to rely on the established Art. 18 / Art. 17 complementarity. Taken together, these dynamics produce a structural equilibrium that has proved remarkably resilient. Its stability does not rest on integrative bargaining in the strict sense but on a longstanding, mutually recognised distributive balance: terminals obtain flexibility, the CULMV preserves relevance, and neither side has incentives to destabilise a system that continues to function for both.

### *Associational Power*

A distinctive feature of Genoa’s port workforce is the internal divide between CULMV members—widely viewed, and self-described, as the “authentic dockworkers”—and terminal employees, perceived as standardised wage-earners embedded in managerial

routines.<sup>6</sup> This differentiation shapes associational power not only through contractual arrangements but also through contrasting occupational identities. Union representation reflects this dual structure. In private terminals, industrial relations follow the Port Workers' National Collective Agreement (CCNL Porti), supported by second level bargaining on shifts, safety, productivity and welfare.<sup>7</sup> Within the CULMV, by contrast, representation takes a hybrid form: as a worker-owned cooperative, it handles disputes, allocation criteria and working rules internally through member assemblies rather than through external union channels. The landscape has become more plural with the rise of USB, active especially in container and passenger terminals and adopting more confrontational repertoires on safety, hours and outsourcing. Yet the CULMV continues to shape collective action decisively. This is evident in the “variable geometry” of strikes: confederal actions gain immediate leverage because the cooperative suspends dispatching, while USB strikes have limited impact as CULMV continues to supply Article 17 labour. These dynamics produce a pragmatic form of attitudinal structuring that, despite distributive tensions, sustains a relatively orderly mode of social dialogue.

### *Institutional Power*

The 1994 reform marked a structural turning point in the institutional configuration of dock labour. By abolishing the CULMV's legal monopoly over loading and unloading operations, it dismantled a corporatist regime in which employment allocation, training, and wage stabilisation were collectively administered under public supervision. In the new framework, the CULMV no longer secures activity through statutory prerogatives but through commercial agreements with individual terminal operators.

The regime is private in its contractual logic, yet publicly regulated in its scope: the Port

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<sup>6</sup> See Degl'Innocenti (2018).

<sup>7</sup> FILT–CGIL, FIT–CISL and UILTrasporti act as the main representatives; CGIL is predominant in operational areas, CISL in administrative roles, while UIL plays a marginal role.

Authority authorises any expansion of the cooperative's workforce and annually sets the maximum tariff that the CULMV may negotiate with terminal operators. Within this ceiling, rates can vary across firms, reflecting the bargaining space available to each party. As a port labour representative explained:

*“The Console [President of the CULMV] negotiates every year both the tariff and the estimated number of dispatches with each terminal, while each company, in February, declares its investment plans and staffing needs for the next three years”*

— dockworkers' union delegate (INT-GE-3)

A key feature of this framework is the prevalence of commercial agreements over collective ones. Organisational changes that affect CULMV members must be formally renegotiated and compensated through an updated commercial contract:

*“If a terminal operator insists on changing the shift to 7:40 without an updated agreement, the CULMV simply dismantles the team after six hours—if you want 7:40, we renegotiate. If they really want the extended shift, they must pay thousands of euros under the commercial agreement.”*

— dockworkers' union delegate (INT-GE-3)

Here too, bargaining followed a distributive logic: the cooperative used institutional leverage to secure negotiated adjustments, while firms pursued operational flexibility within a known and predictable framework. The structure of institutionalised bargaining thus enables the CULMV to exercise a *de facto* veto on unilateral reorganisations, technological or organizational, perceived as detrimental to its members.

### *Societal Power*

Beyond its institutional and associational dimensions, Genoa's port labour system displays a complex configuration of societal power. A key actor in this respect is the *Collettivo Autonomo Lavoratori Portuali* (CALP), founded within the CGIL as part of its minority, the so-called “Second Motion”. As explained by one interviewee:

*“Its mission is to bring back clear slogans, solidarity with weaker workers, and international connections”*

— dockworkers’ union delegate (INT–GE–3)

CALP’s activism extends beyond industrial relations, mobilising around issues such as migration, militarisation, and global supply chains. As the same respondent noted:

*“In the city, CALP acts as a connector and a visible entity: many groups ask us to take a public stance when they cannot, for family or corporate reasons”*

— dockworkers’ union delegate (INT–GE–3)

A second aspect concerns the relationship between the port and the wider community. As highlighted by an expert on port governance:

*“The dockworker continues to be perceived as a privileged figure, someone who manages his own conditions. People might think everyone wants to work in the port, but the real question is: how can one access those jobs?”*

— researcher specialising in shipping and port labour (INT–GE–2)

Recruitment practices reinforce this perception. When the cooperative recently obtained authorisation to hire one hundred new members:

*“All one hundred new entrants were sons of existing members — a mechanism formally justified as ensuring generational turnover, but one that risks reproducing a hereditary system and deepening the distance between the port and the city.”*

— researcher specialising in shipping and port labour (INT–GE–2)

Overall, Genoa’s societal power rests on a tension between inherited solidarity and contemporary closure. The CULMV retains symbolic capital as a pillar of the city’s identity but struggles to convert this legacy into inclusive legitimacy. Meanwhile, grassroots actors such as CALP redefine the moral and civic narrative of dock labour, linking it to broader struggles over peace, precarity, and rights.

## 2.2.2 Trieste

### *Structural Power*

#### *Phase I — Decline*

The 1994 reform dismantled the publicly anchored division of functions and the legal centrality of Trieste's unitary dock labour company. The transition produced marked *labour market fragmentation*: the collapse of the Compagnia Portuale, Primavera and other cooperatives, tariff competition in labour provision, and the late emergence of a stable Article 17 framework.

The historical separation between quay and warehouse work (the so-called "*linea gialla*") further segmented recruitment, task allocation and wage setting, undermining labour's ability to act as a unified and indispensable supplier. This fragmentation—reinforced by conflict among firms, unions, cooperatives and public actors—eroded coordination and drove up transaction costs.

*"Unlike most Italian ports, in Trieste the transition [post-1994] effectively went over the 'corpse' of the Port Workers' Company. Rather than defining, as the law prescribed, the roles and spaces of the different actors, an exacerbated competition in labour provision was allowed, which ended up driving several cooperative enterprises into bankruptcy." — Mario Sommariva, cited in (Bologna, 2017)*

The result was a contraction in structural power: the workforce could no longer leverage unified dispatch or a single gatekeeping mechanism to constrain terminal operators' choices. In bargaining terms, this phase reflected a highly dysfunctional form of distributive interaction: fragmented actors defended narrow interests without the institutional means to reach even minimal joint gains, generating a lose-lose configuration.

## *Phase II — Recomposition*

From 2015 onwards, under the presidency of Zeno D’Agostino<sup>8</sup>, the Port System Authority pursued a strategy of institutionally mediated re-aggregation of the labour supply as a precondition to recover coordination capacity and restore the functional indispensability of dock labour within the local logistics system. The establishment of the Agenzia per il Lavoro Portuale di Trieste (ALPT) under Article 17(5) absorbed workers from failing cooperatives, closed irregular providers, and standardised contracts and operating rules.

*“In Trieste, at the beginning of 2016, we issued a new regulation on port operations to clarify more precisely the respective roles of the different companies. In particular, we established stricter rules for subcontracting and introduced higher quality standards for authorised operators.”*

— Mario Sommariva, cited in (Bologna, 2017)

The recomposition strategy relied on steady, rule-based enforcement rather than one-off shocks, consolidating a structural position through reliability, quality standards, and coordinated capacity.

*“It is a long-term endeavour, one that does not rely on dramatic gestures but on the patient and daily correction of non-conforming behaviours.”*

— Mario Sommariva, cited in (Bologna, 2017)

Reinternalization of key services (e.g., through *Porto Trieste Servizi*) reduced transaction frictions and rebuilt a single interface able to match volatile traffic with multi-skilled labour, stabilising dispatch and lowering the incidence of non-assigned shifts. In parallel, the Authority reoriented the port’s structural centrality toward rail and intermodal corridors, expanding the *indispensability* of local operations through

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<sup>8</sup> Zeno D’Agostino served as President of the Port System Authority of the Eastern Adriatic (2015–2024). A practitioner with long experience in port logistics and governance, he played a central role in the institutional recomposition of Trieste’s port labour system and in the establishment of the ALPT.

upstream/downstream complementarities (yard/rail logistics), thus replacing the lost legal monopoly with a *network-based* form of structural relevance.

*“We stopped all privatisations and brought operational activities back under public control, managing them more efficiently.”*

— Port Authority executive (INT-TS-1)

Technological change was treated as a managed, *anticipatory* process. Given the workforce’s age profile and limited generational renewal, the Authority pursued risk-mitigating complementarities (rail/logistics) and redeployment pathways.

*“We must be more innovative than innovation itself. If the port is going to be run by machines, we must build other pipelines where those who will lose jobs can be redeployed; we cannot assume a docker will become an AI programmer. We chose to develop the rail and logistics component, where new jobs, coherent with existing competences, could be created.”*

— Port Authority executive (INT-TS-1)

Structural power, in sum, moved from a legally protected bottleneck to a coordination intensive, system-embedded indispensability: the ALPT’s unified dispatch, the reinternalized service perimeter, and the rail/intermodal pivot reconstituted credible leverage over operations and technology adoption without reverting to pre-1994 monopoly structures.

### *Associational Power*

#### *Phase I — Fragmentation and the erosion of collective cohesion*

Following the collapse of the historical cooperative system, Trieste’s dock labour lost the organisational density that had previously supported collective representation. The bankruptcy of the Port Workers’ Company and other cooperatives deprived workers of a unified interlocutor, while competition among labour providers generated internal divisions and mutual distrust. In Sommariva’s words Trieste became the most fragmented

port labour market in Italy—a context in which associational power disintegrated, and the collective voice of workers was replaced by isolated, often antagonistic claims.

*“Every cooperative, every union, every company and freight forwarder, the members of the Port Workers’ Company and the employees of the Port Authority—all were drawn into a kind of factional warfare aimed at securing consensus or pursuing power plays. In this “everyone against everyone” context, where the port’s development as a common good for the city was never the shared objective, the Port Workers’ Company lost all of its traditional political and social reference points and—amid its own managerial mistakes—slid into a melancholy collapse. A unique case in Italy.”*

— Mario Sommariva, cited in Bologna (2017)

This environment undermined union legitimacy and reduced participation in collective decision-making. Individual disputes multiplied, and labour relations became transactional, with intermittent strikes and short-lived mobilisations but no stable organisational coordination. In this first phase, associational power was therefore residual—fragmented across multiple small entities unable to act collectively at the port-system scale.

### *Phase II — Reaggregation and negotiated inclusion*

The turning point came with the appointment of Zeno D’Agostino as president of the Port System Authority in 2015, who placed institutional recomposition and the restoration of legality at the centre of the port’s governance agenda. By integrating workers from failed cooperatives under a single governance structure, the Authority and terminal operators created a formal arena for social dialogue and continuous negotiation into daily operations. The Authority deliberately avoided a purely top-down approach, instead recognising all worker representatives with real legitimacy, regardless of their national affiliation or signature of the sectoral agreement.

*“I never looked at the union label: if the person in front of me genuinely represented the workers, that was enough. [...] I was often called to order: ‘How can you negotiate with unions that have not signed the national contract?’ Yes, because if they are the ones with real numbers in the port, they are the ones you must talk to.”*

— Port Authority executive (INT-TS-1)

The recomposition process required patience and sequential compromise. Dozens of unresolved individual disputes from the cooperative failures were settled one by one, enabling the ALPT to start operations.

*“It took a great deal of patience, but in the end all workers signed individual settlements, which allowed the agency to begin operating effectively.”*

— Mario Sommariva, cited in Bologna (2017)

Over time, this approach consolidated what can be described as a system of *embedded negotiation*. The creation of a *Steering Committee* within the agency institutionalised this participatory mode of governance, ensuring that even minority positions could influence strategic decisions.

*“Beyond the board of directors, we created a steering committee including representatives of the workers, terminal operators, and the Port Authority. [...] It served to ensure that even the minority component could contribute to strategic orientations.”*

— Port Authority executive (INT-TS-1)

This hybrid design of the ALPT combined managerial authority with negotiated legitimacy, allowing collective actors to regain voice and influence, gradually shifting the port from a purely distributive logic to a more integrative form of bargaining.

## *Institutional Power*

### *Phase I — Institutional vacuum and regulatory breakdown*

In the two decades following the 1994 reform, Trieste illustrated the effects of liberalisation without institutional consolidation. The collapse of the Port Workers' Company, followed by the failures of Primavera and other cooperatives, exposed the absence of a regulatory actor able to enforce standards or stabilise employment. Numerous small providers operating under Articles 16 and 17 produced a fragmented, volatile labour market—the “Far West” of port work—while limited public oversight led to regulatory drift. An early attempt at coordination, the 2008 Minerva initiative involving terminal operators, proved short-lived and ineffective.

*“The coexistence among the terminal operators, however, lasted only a short time in that general climate of heightened tensions.”*

*— Mario Sommariva, cited in (Bologna, 2017)*

The 2014 proposal advanced by Mario Sommariva anticipated the need for a new legal status for port labour agencies. He argued that such entities should be recognised as *public economic bodies* to allow the direct participation of Port Authorities in their governance. This position, which rejected a merely “notarial” conception of public authority, prefigured the direction later institutionalised by the 2016 reform.

*“A reform of Article 17 should fully contemplate a solution similar to ours. The agency, which the law distinguishes from the enterprise, should be defined as a public economic entity. This would remove the incompatibilities with Port Authorities’ participation and allow the use of public resources to support restructuring in the interest of the system as a whole. [...] We need Port Authorities ready to get their hands dirty and take responsibility — not a merely notarial vision of their role.”*

*— Mario Sommariva, cited in (Bologna, 2017)*

Legislative Decree No. 169/2016 reshaped the national port governance framework, transforming Port Authorities into Port System Authorities (AdSP) with expanded regulatory and planning powers. For Trieste, the reform created the Port System Authority of the Eastern Adriatic Sea (AdSP MAO), integrating Trieste and Monfalcone under a single governance structure. This merger strengthened strategic coordination, enabled regional-scale port policy, and established the institutional conditions for the subsequent creation of the *Agenzia per il Lavoro Portuale di Trieste* (ALPT).

### *Phase II — Institutional recomposition and regulatory authority*

Under D’Agostino’s presidency, the Port System Authority established the ALPT as a mixed public–private entity, integrating the fragmented labour pools emerging from the failed cooperatives and introducing standardised contracts, safety protocols, and training pathways under the Authority’s supervision.

*“We decided that the priority was to regularise port labour: without a legal and organised basis, we could not speak of competitiveness.”*

*— Port Authority executive (INT–TS–1)*

During its initial experimental phase, the Authority held a majority stake—later reduced to a qualified minority—while private companies equally shared the remaining equity. A three-member *Committee of Guarantors*, representing the Authority, employers’ associations, and trade unions, was established to oversee compliance and transparency.

*“The aim was to build a genuine form of institutionalised social dialogue, where all terminal operators would share responsibility for managing port labour.”*

*— Port Authority executive (INT–TS–1)*

The Port Authority moved beyond its traditional “notarial” remit to act as a coordinating institution, using its regulatory autonomy to ensure compliance with contracts and quality standards. Making adherence to collective agreements a prerequisite for authorisation tied market access to labour protections, reaffirming the state’s ability to influence employment conditions through the governance of concessions and licences.

*“For companies, compliance with collective agreements is one of the standards required to operate. Of course, this is not a situation that can ever be considered permanently consolidated. There is constant pressure to align with lower standards, which would be highly detrimental to the competitiveness of the ports themselves.”*

— Mario Sommariva, cited in (Bologna, 2017)

By reinforcing a rule-based environment and restoring credibility to local institutions, this shift gradually rebuilt trust among workers, enabling more predictable negotiation routines and reducing the sense of instability that had long characterised the port’s labour market.

*“This not only regularised employment but also restored stability to people’s lives: before, they could not even apply for a bank loan. Now they can.”*

— Port Authority executive (INT-TS-1)

Overall, the 2016 reform provided the institutional infrastructure necessary for the consolidation of Trieste’s model of hybrid governance. By combining national legal reform with local regulatory experimentation, the AdSP MAO reasserted public coordination in port labour, transforming institutional power from a formal prerogative into an operational capacity for integration, enforcement, and shared regulation.

## *Societal Power*

### *Phase I — Loss of legitimacy and social disembedding*

The prolonged crisis of Trieste's port labour during the 1990s and 2000s was not only organisational but also symbolic. The breakdown of the Port Workers' Company and the proliferation of small, competing cooperatives eroded the traditional civic legitimacy of dock labour as a collective profession. Once regarded as a pillar of the city's working-class identity, the port workforce became associated with disorder, litigation, and precariousness. Public opinion, fatigued by recurrent conflicts and political interference, ceased to view the port as a shared civic asset.

*"It was an uncertain and precarious situation, marked by periodic outbursts of union anger. The condition of Trieste—the Italian port with the most fragmented dock labour system—was described with great clarity in the 2011*

*ISFORT report."*

*— Mario Sommariva, cited in (Bologna, 2017)*

### *Phase II — Re-legitimation through governance and public value*

The institutional recomposition initiated after 2015 gradually restored the credibility of port governance. By reabsorbing fragmented labour pools and linking employment stability to service quality, the Port System Authority redefined the port as a collective resource.

*"The terminal operators, the unions, and the workers — I would say the city itself — have shared the project."*

*— Mario Sommariva, cited in (Bologna, 2017)*

The ALPT, as a publicly monitored entity, operationalised this renewed regulatory framework by ensuring fair and professional labour allocation within a socially regulated system. The parallel shift toward intermodality and logistics integration also repositioned the port within the city and its region, linking port labour to rail and hinterland development and framing industrial relations as part of a broader productive strategy rather than a zero-sum conflict.

*“We built a social context with a strong corporate discipline: sensitivity toward labour, but absolute rigour regarding figures, productivity, and economic sustainability.”*

— Port Authority executive (INT-TS-1)

## 3 Local-Level Social Dialogue Dynamics

### 3.1 Public Discourse and Framing of the Reform

Public debates around the 1994 port reform revealed a climate of uncertainty and competing visions for the future of Italian port governance<sup>9</sup>. The public sphere became a battleground in which the reform was framed either as overdue modernisation or as a threat to local economies, labour stability, and civic identity. Genoa occupied a central symbolic place in these narratives, while Trieste was increasingly portrayed as a key testing ground for liberalisation. In late 1993, Transport Minister Raffaele Costa announced the opening of Trieste's Container Terminal to private operators, presenting it as the first concrete step towards port privatisation and international competition.

*“Trieste will be the first port to be opened to private operators: the Container Terminal [...] is being offered to the market. This is the first step to assess the interest of national and international operators in the privatisation process and to position the port at competitive levels with major international hubs.”*

— *La Stampa*, 11 December 1993

Other contemporary articles focused on Genoa, framing the reform as a historic turning point for the city. The long-standing *Consorzio Autonomo del Porto* was replaced by a Port Authority with planning and regulatory functions rather than direct management.

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<sup>9</sup> The reconstructions presented are based on research conducted in the archives of *La Stampa* and *il manifesto*. *La Stampa* is one of Italy's major national newspapers, known for its centrist editorial line and extensive coverage of political and social affairs, while *il manifesto* is a left-wing daily recognized for its critical and investigative reporting. Further details on the methodology adopted for the archival research are provided in Section 5. .

*"The reform law was approved yesterday after years of exhausting negotiations. [...] In place of the autonomous Consortium, an "Authority" will be established with responsibilities of guidance rather than management."*  
— *La Stampa*, 14 January 1994

The reform was also narrated as the transformation of CULMV from a corporatist body into a market-oriented enterprise:

*"The CULMV has in fact already become a company; it will provide work to shipowners and to the agencies that request it, and it will in turn manage a terminal."*  
— *La Stampa*, 14 January 1994

At the same time, journalists highlighted the end of a highly symbolic historical figure—the traditional "camallo"<sup>10</sup>—and the corporatist culture attached to it:

*"What disappears is the old camallo [...] a member of a corporation founded as far back as 1340 and carried to the threshold of post-industrial society, accumulating privileges, guarantees, and managerial as well as economic powers."*  
— *La Stampa*, 14 January 1994

Newspaper accounts explicitly described the forms of rigidity associated with the old system of work organisation:

*"The rule was clear: no work if a few drops of rain fell, and fixed teams had to be present on the quayside (and paid) even when their contribution was not actually needed."*  
— *La Stampa*, 14 January 1994

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<sup>10</sup> The term *camallo* refers to the traditional Genoese dockworker, associated with strong occupational identity and collective self-management practices.

At the national level, a separate measure—the four-year extension of the labour monopoly—quickly became a focal point of debate. *La Stampa* recorded sharp criticism from freight forwarders, who argued that prolonging the monopoly would obstruct efficiency and private investment:

*“By extending for another four years the reserved pool of labour [...], it prevents cost control and accountability, and limits the scope for investment.”*

— *La Stampa*, 5 March 1994

Some articles added a political dimension, noting that the extension had been introduced suddenly and attributed to left-wing parliamentary forces:

*“The port reform [...] has reintroduced, for the next four to five years, the monopoly on labour [...], a law on which the PDS and Rifondazione carried out a ‘coup de main’ on the night of the vote.”<sup>a</sup>*

— *La Stampa*, 31 May 1994

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<sup>a</sup>In this context, the term “reform” refers to the parliamentary amendments introduced to Law No. 84/1994. The Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS) and Rifondazione Comunista were left-wing Italian political parties active in the 1990s, representing, respectively, a post-communist social-democratic orientation and a more traditional communist position.

The end of the monopoly was portrayed by labour-leaning newspapers as a challenge to be embraced through collective discipline and self-organisation:

*“An old terminal, granted for one year, with 40 million lire a day to be billed in order to prove that the ‘labour factor’ can stay on the market, albeit in its own way, with its rules and its forms of self-management.”*

— *Il Manifesto*, 17 February 1995

## 3.2 Actors and Coalitions

The reform crystallised a set of relatively stable coalitions among state actors, business interests, labour organisations and authorities. On the basis of contemporary press material, we can distinguish a pro-liberalisation state–business front and a labour and port-workers’ coalition.

**Pro-liberalisation state–business coalition** A first coalition brought together parts of the national government and key segments of the port business community. Undersecretary for Transport Sergio Cappelli (Lega Nord)<sup>11</sup> consistently presented himself as an advocate of liberalisation and of a revision of the law to remove what he depicted as obstacles to port development. In public statements he directly targeted the traditional port companies:

*“Cappelli criticised the ‘obstructionist’ role of some port companies, such as the one in Genoa.”*

— *La Stampa*, 31 May 1994

On the business side, freight forwarders, shipping agents, terminal operators and transport firms positioned themselves as the most vocal constituency in favour of a more liberal regime.

*“Freight forwarders, shipping agents, terminal operators and hauliers have criticised the reform law, against which they would like to appeal to the EEC.”*

— *La Stampa*, 7 April 1994

**Labour and port-workers’ coalition** The second coalition was led by labour organisations, whose priority was to protect employment security, social rights and the historical role of

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<sup>11</sup> Lega Nord was, in the early 1990s, a rapidly growing regionalist party rooted in Northern Italy, combining territorial federalism, anti-centralist positions, and a strong emphasis on administrative efficiency.

port labour. Left-wing parliamentary forces backed the four-year extension of the labour monopoly, interpreted by unions as an essential buffer to manage the social consequences of the transition. This support strengthened a broader protective front aimed at slowing restructuring and securing safeguards for incumbent workers. Within this coalition, unions stressed the need for investment in training and active labour-market measures, warning that an unsupported reform risked increasing unemployment and weakening the social fabric of port communities.

*“The unions are calling for a firm commitment from the Region to allocate adequate funds for vocational training and guidance.”*

— *La Stampa*, 7 April 1994

Labour representatives also rejected portrayals of the CULMV as a corporatist obstacle, arguing instead that the organisation could adapt and contribute to the new governance framework, provided that reform proceeded through negotiation rather than unilateral imposition.

*“CULMV should not be criminalised; it has played its role and is now transforming itself into an enterprise.”*

— *La Stampa*, 15 January 1994

Overall, labour organisations sought to secure a negotiated transition, preserve elements of collective self-organisation, and protect the symbolic and material status of port workers. Their actions were therefore less about resisting reform in principle than about ensuring that the emerging competitive framework did not erode hard-won rights and long-standing forms of occupational identity.

### 3.3 Negotiation Tactics

Negotiation dynamics in Genoa and Trieste followed distinct trajectories shaped by their institutional configurations. In Genoa, the CULMV’s operational centrality produced a stable—though predominantly distributive—bargaining pattern. The cooperative’s ability

to suspend dispatching gave unions immediate leverage, while employers invoked competitive pressures and the risk of traffic diversion to justify organisational change. Since replacing CULMV labour was not a credible option, interactions settled into a pragmatic form of attitudinal structuring: conflict persisted, but within routinised and mutually recognised boundaries. Trieste entered the post-reform period without a unified labour counterpart. Fragmented cooperatives, politicised rivalries and weak oversight created an adversarial setting in which employers' threats seldom translated into structured negotiation. Only with the Port System Authority's institutional reconstruction—culminating in the ALPT and mixed bodies for dispatching, training and safety—did bargaining gradually shift from disruptive tactics to formal committees, where technical considerations increasingly structured interaction. Across both ports, actors mobilised recurrent frames centred on competitiveness, employment continuity and technical necessity. In Genoa, employers stressed flexibility and productivity, while the CULMV emphasised continuity and the risks of destabilising the labour regime. In Trieste, efficiency narratives dominated the early phase but later gave way to problem-solving logics supported by the Authority's mediating role, which helped rebuild trust and align expectations. External relations also diverged. In Genoa, the cooperative and confederal unions drew on longstanding ties with municipal institutions and the broader port community, reinforcing their legitimacy. In Trieste, the Port System Authority became the pivotal relational actor, using legality, organisational discipline and infrastructural planning to coordinate previously disconnected parties and support the transition toward more cooperative negotiation.

## 4 Conclusions

The 1994 reform illustrates how regulatory change reshapes the institutional field by recalibrating the background rules that structure power relations and define how actors can deploy resources, form expectations, and pursue strategies. By dismantling longstanding collective arrangements and introducing competitive logics into port labour,

the reform expanded firms' strategic discretion while reducing labour's organisational capacity. This institutional shift was embedded in broader transformations occurring in Italy during the early 1990s, where public discourses on "modernisation" and "efficiency" helped legitimise a loosening of institutional constraints in favour of market governance. These institutional and ideological reframings intersected with a parallel trajectory of technological change—containerization, logistics integration, and later digital monitoring—that further narrowed areas of operational discretion historically controlled by labour and strengthened firms' ability to reorganise work. The interaction between these transformations set the stage for the divergent trajectories observed in Genoa and Trieste, as their outcomes ultimately depended on the resilience or weakness of local countervailing institutions.

In Genoa, enduring organisational and societal power resources limited unilateral adjustment. The cooperative structure, reputational mechanisms, and a relatively stable alignment of interests preserved negotiation as a workable mode of coordination, allowing conflicts to be managed without one-sided outcomes.

Trieste, instead, experienced the consequences of institutional fragmentation. The dissolution of the historical cooperative and the proliferation of small labour providers removed the organisational foundations for structured negotiation, pushing adjustment toward low-road strategies centred on labour-cost competition. Only with the later intervention of the Port System Authority—through a unified labour agency, clearer regulatory boundaries, and shared governance structures— did conditions for more stable coordination re-emerge, enabling firms and workers to identify areas of mutual interest.

The comparative trajectories of Genoa and Trieste suggest that institutional legacies shape not only how disruption unfolds, but also the range of feasible solutions that emerge through social dialogue. Seen through the lens of bargaining theory, Genoa demonstrates how a strong organisational legacy can sustain stable distributive bargaining without degenerating fragmentation, while Trieste illustrates how the absence

of such structures can trap actors in lose-lose distributive conflict until a credible institutional anchor enables integrative, problem-solving dialogue.

These dynamics highlight broader insights relevant for other European contexts undergoing technological and organisational transitions. Building on this evidence, two policy implications can be drawn.

First, competition does not automatically generate efficiency in critical infrastructures. The Italian case shows that liberalisation, when introduced into systems lacking structured channels of coordination, voice, and shared standards, tends to produce instability, higher transaction costs, and difficulty in incorporating technological innovation. For future institutional and technological transitions, policy should therefore treat coordination capacities and worker voice not as constraints but as productive assets that enhance the capacity for adjustment. This is particularly relevant for industries that are repeatedly the target of further liberalisation, e.g., on-demand transport (at least in the Italian context).

Second, public management capacity is crucial to preventing institutional drift and enabling negotiated adaptation. The contrast between Genoa and Trieste demonstrates that the presence of a capable and legitimate public actor shapes whether disruption leads to fragmentation or to constructive reconfiguration. Trieste's long phase of institutional drift after the 1994 reform illustrates the risks of liberalisation without public steering, while its later recovery shows the value of empowered authorities able to enforce standards, rebuild trust, and orchestrate collective problem-solving. Strengthening the strategic, organisational, and coordinative capabilities of public authorities is thus essential to ensure that institutional and technological transitions translate into socially sustainable and economically resilient trajectories.

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## Original sources and empirical materials

Types of Material	Description	Use in Analysis
Interviews	Four semi-structured interviews with: port authority executives; trade union representatives; experts in port governance and industrial relations.	Reconstruction of negotiation processes; identification of strategies and power resources; insight into trust dynamics, fragmentation, institutional recomposition; interpretation of perceptions of technological change.
Media Material	Articles retrieved using keywords: "riforma porti", "porto di Genova", "porto di Trieste" (1993–1995) in "La Stampa" and "il manifesto" archives.	Reconstruction of public discourse and political cleavages; identification of narrative frames and rhetorical strategies; collection of quotations.
Institutional Documents	Law 84/1994; ECJ ruling 179/90; D.Lgs. 169/2016; Organico Porto plans.	Definition of governance and regulatory framework; analysis of labour allocation rules; comparison of institutional trajectories in Genoa and Trieste; assessment of the effects of liberalisation and re-regulation.
Secondary Literature	Institutional studies (e.g. Banca d'Italia); Sociological and historical works (Degl'Innocenti).	Contextualisation of technological and organisational change; analytical framework for labour power (PRT); interpretation of integrative and distributive bargaining patterns.

## Timelines of key events

### Genoa

Key Events	Negotiation Process Characteristics
Late 1980s – Conflict between CULMV and private operators 1991 – ECJ ruling (C-179/90)	High distributive conflict; monopoly-based structural power; Legal shock removing exclusivity; shifts power balance; bargaining moves from legal entitlement to contractual coordination.
1994 – Law 84/1994 enacted	Institutional restructuring via Articles 16–17–18; CULMV loses statutory monopoly; bargaining centres on roles, dispatch rules, and commercial agreements.
1995–2000 – Cooperative adaptation of CULMV	CULMV reframes as flexible workforce provider; increased trust; partial equilibrium through agreements with terminals.
2000–2010 – Subcontracting and new unions	Diversification of actors; rise of USB; increased subcontracting; distributive tensions intensify.
2020s – Digitalisation and CALP–USB activism	Societal power mobilised through CALP; public framing becomes leverage in bargaining.

### Trieste

Key Events	Negotiation Process Characteristics
1967 – Creation of EAPT	Centralised public governance; labour relations embedded in administrative control.
1980 – Merger into Compagnia Unica	Strong associational and institutional power; high internal coordination; stable, low-conflict environment.
1994 – Law 84/1994 enacted	Loss of institutional guarantees; sudden exposure to competition; onset of fragmentation; distributive disputes emerge without stabilising mechanisms.
1995–2010 – Fragmented cooperatives and irregular providers	Severe breakdown of social dialogue; mistrust and litigation; workforce segmentation; absence of integrative bargaining; high-level conflictuality.
2015 – Start of reorganisation; creation of ALPT	Authority-led re-regulation; sequential settlement of disputes; reintroduction of rules and quality standards.
2016 – Integration into AdSP system	Strengthened institutional capacity; enhanced ability to enforce standards; structured negotiation reemerges.
2017–2022 – Consolidation of ALPT	Hybrid public–private governance model; stable integrative bargaining; improved trust.

## Annex I – Qualitative Fieldwork

The qualitative fieldwork aimed to document negotiation practices, actors' strategies, and the evolution of social dialogue mechanisms in the two port systems. Semi-structured interviews ensured comparability across respondents while allowing clarification of factual aspects relevant to institutional change.

### Sampling and participants

Four interviews were conducted in December 2025 with actors directly involved in, or with long-standing knowledge of, port labour governance: (i) port authority officials; (ii) workplace and sector-level trade union representatives; (iii) experts in port operations and industrial relations. Sampling followed a purposive logic, with interviewees selected for their institutional relevance. Limited snowballing was used to identify additional qualified respondents.

Interviewees were anonymised under the codes *INT-GE-N* and *INT-TS-N* for Genoa and Trieste.

Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes, were conducted in Italian via Microsoft Teams, and followed the E-GRUiEN ethical protocol on consent, confidentiality, and secure data handling. The interview guide was structured around four thematic blocks:

1. Institutional context: historical structure of port labour and main actors.
2. Impact of the 1994 reform: liberalisation, fragmentation, and sources of conflict.
3. Re-regulation and organisational responses: negotiation practices, coordination mechanisms, and changes in labour governance.
4. Technological and organisational change: perceived challenges and implications for social dialogue.

Questions focused on factual reconstruction and clarification of decision-making processes.

## Analytical framework and coding

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed through a structured thematic coding process:

- Initial coding: identification of recurrent events, practices, and claims.
- Thematic grouping: organisation of codes into categories consistent with the project framework (e.g. structural power, coordination, negotiation routines, technology related adjustments).
- Cross-case comparison: identification of contrasts and convergences between Genoa and Trieste to account for divergent institutional trajectories.

The analytical perspective drew on established concepts in industrial relations and comparative institutional analysis, focusing on mechanisms that shape social dialogue in liberalised port systems.

## Reliability, validity, and triangulation

Findings were triangulated with documentary sources, including collective agreements, port authority reports, legal texts (e.g. Law 84/1994; D.Lgs. 169/2016), and secondary literature on port labour. Coding decisions were checked through repeated manual review to ensure consistency. Given the small-N comparative design, the analysis relies on *analytical generalisation*, identifying plausible mechanisms linking institutional configurations, power resources, and negotiation outcomes.

Quotations are included to document claims and illustrate actors' positions while preserving anonymity.