

Case Study: Federazione Lavoratori della Conoscenza – FLC CGIL (Italy)

Context:

The FLC is the union of all those who work in schools (public, private, and Italian schools abroad), adult education, universities (public and private), research (public and private), vocational training, and higher education in the arts and music. In short, it is the union of those who work in knowledge sectors: managers, teachers, administrative staff, school assistants, technicians, technologists, and researchers, regardless of their employment status (public or private), whether permanent, fixed-term, collaborative, or precarious.

The union is a member of the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL), which is one of the three trade union confederations that dominate Italian trade unionism. Education trade unions exist within the other confederations and so FLC operates in an environment often described as 'competitive multi-unionism', that is when different unions seek to recruit the same workers.

The FLC was created to bring together the entire knowledge cycle in a coherent framework, strengthen worker representation and protections, and serve as the political and professional reference point for a world that combines many diversities (skills, profiles) but with many commonalities (knowledge is a fundamental tool for providing people with equal opportunities).

A key challenge for the union is the level of resignation and passivity in society, and specifically in the world of work. The union perceives a lack of deep support for its struggles, and a tendency for citizens and workers to passively delegate their support to the unions. Political processes have been degraded and people have become cynical about their own role in society and their own ability to bring about change. For example, there is a lack of genuine social dialogue, and citizens' distance from governments and politics in general is growing. Clear political identities are lacking and this has facilitated the emergence of populist tendencies.

The current government is a coalition of right wing parties with its roots in an authoritarian populism. The government makes no effort to engage with society: and the trade union movement therefore lacks genuine interlocutors, both in government and in opposition.

The union's current priorities are promoting justice reform and challenging the growing seeds of authoritarianism that the government's policies are sowing. However collective bargaining is weak

and the government is not willing to engage in serious negotiations. This is compelled the CGIL (not just in education) to resort to increasingly confrontational action against the government and the parties that support them. This resulted in a series of high profile general strikes. However, this action does not always secure support from other trade union confederations and these divisions within the movement can be a source of weakness.

The overall picture in the country is one that continues to be framed by the austerity that has blighted Italy's public services for many years and which accounts for low levels of investment in education by international standards. All of this takes place against the backdrop of a lack of solid institutional relationships, which are increasingly being replaced by populism.

A key and immediate challenge for the union relates to the renewal of the national collective bargaining agreement. The most innovative aspect of this process is the one regarding integrated distance learning. However, also in the context of education, the union is opposing the government's revision of national guidelines on educational curricula for each of the academic cycles. The curriculum reforms reflect the political priorities of the government and represent a sovereignist and Western-leaning reform of the curriculum's content. These combine with more general issues related to authoritarian reforms, bureaucratic centralisation, and reforms that weaken the overall value of education. The central role of the democratic school within Italy's post-war constitution is increasingly being undermined.

The situation described above is unquestionably challenging for the union. However, there have been notable successes and these provide a platform for union building. Most significant is the increase in membership and votes of the Representatives of the Single Unions (RSU) (worker representations in the workplace, required by Italian law and collective bargaining, which are accountable to all workers, but are organized into lists of candidates with union affiliations) and growing political consensus. Within workplaces the role of RSUs is critical, and they provide tangible and visible evidence of the relevance of the union when representing employees' interests in their workplaces. FLC has seen the benefits of this success, both in terms of election results at individual workplaces and new members. These results are in part due to a strategic investment by the union in training, mentoring, and coaching RSU candidates. The growth in membership that has resulted highlights the benefits of a local level of union leadership that is located in workplaces and visible to workers.

What does 'local leadership' look like?

In Italy, public knowledge sectors are organised through national union membership and through the national measurement of workplace-level elected representatives (RSU). RSU elections are

extremely important because their outcome at the national level, along with membership, measures the representativeness of sectoral unions. In 2025, the FLC CGIL was the leading union in all knowledge sectors.

An RSU is composed of three or more members, taking into account the size of the workplace. For example, the RSU of Sapienza University of Rome is made up of 45 including representatives of technical-administrative and related healthcare workers. Although workers submit their candidacies on union lists, the role of RSU is closely linked to closeness to colleagues, the ability to share and address their problems in the workplace, and the negotiation of the school fund allocation that finances extracurricular activities at individual schools and supplementary wages at universities, academies, conservatories, and research institutions. It is therefore a formal role, included in industrial relations processes, but not mandatory within union structures, because the RSU delegate need not be a union member.

The FLC CGIL considers RSU delegates to be the union's primary hub, involving them in frequent training courses as well as in political activities, such as signature collections, mobilisations, and the dissemination of initiatives. They have a critical dual dimension: they are co-workers, close to everyone's problems, but also union personnel through their involvement in the union's public activities. As members of the workforce, rather than as union employees, their involvement remains voluntary. However, the union appreciates the value of the dual role performed by RSU delegates and so the coordination role of the secretariat of the relevant provincial body is very important in supporting their work. This work is supplemented by the members' committee - a grassroots body within the union organisation that operates in all workplaces. It plays a fundamental role in directly representing members. Its main functions and roles include: representation; information and communication; bargaining and labour relations; promoting membership and participation in union life; convening internal meetings and participating in mobilisations or initiatives; liaising with the local structure; and democratic participation. For union members in the workplace the members' committee is the key link to the democratic culture of the union.

From within the workplace area delegates, those workers who, while remaining fully or partially 'in production', play an important role on behalf of the provincial secretariats in establishing direct links between the union structure and the workplace, supporting the RSU in political activities and institutional bargaining, and bringing the union's perspective to the table.

How are local leaders identified and developed?

The FLC CGIL considers union renewal extremely important, so much so that in the summer of 2025 it brought together all national and territorial leaders for three days to discuss new organisational models. The process has just begun, and several solutions are being developed, including those at the confederal level, in preparation for the next CGIL congress scheduled for 2027. But the union is not starting year zero – the various territories have developed many different solutions suited to their contexts (one of which was presented during the *Your Turn 1* project). This is a network project that enhances direct contact with workers. The project envisions a new role for RSU delegates, or rather, for some of them, who may be the most motivated, the most enterprising, and consequently the most well-trained. Since each workplace has an elected RSU worker, the project aims to create a network of connections between schools, which, in groups of 10, constitute a node of the network. This intermediate level between the school and the local secretariat can become a hub for consultation, networking, and information exchange, even though official representation with school principals remains with the union secretariat. The intention is to maintain robust democratic structures, but to also create more informal spaces where activists can connect easily and learn from each other.

It is clear that training is an essential element of the project. Frequent local training sessions planned, in addition to the annual national training already scheduled. Local training can be more accessible and helps representatives connect with their peers. An important priority is the organisation, both locally and nationally, of meetings and training sessions for the RSU delegates. RSU delegates receive publications and documents to support their efforts, particularly in relation to the contract and the profession, but also about the history and values of the CGIL. Providing this type of organisational history is important in ensuring that representatives work within the distinctive spirit of CGIL. In addition, when selecting RSU (union representatives), and even more so for delegates—when they are not elected from the secretariats—mentoring and coaching are crucial.

How do local leaders link to the formal democracy of the union?

All these roles and institutions are formally defined both by Italian law and regulated by the national collective bargaining agreement, as well as by the union's bylaws and regulations. In this sense, every member is an integral part of the democratic organisation—both representative and participatory—of the CGIL and the FLC-CGIL.

Are there dedicated programmes to support particular groups within the union?

In FLC-CGIL, there is a commitment to gender balance as a principle, and the union's statutes require all union bodies to have a gender balance of no less than 40%. The 'regulatory centres',

those bodies responsible for monitoring and verifying, have the power to invalidate electoral bodies and procedures that do not comply with certified quotas. In the past, the union has attempted to develop similar initiatives for 'youth', meaning workers under 36, but these policies were not obviously successful.

Case Study: Federazione Lavoratori della Conoscenza – FLC CGIL (Italy)

Context:

The FLC is the union of all those who work in schools (public, private, and Italian schools abroad), adult education, universities (public and private), research (public and private), vocational training, and higher education in the arts and music. In short, it is the union of those who work in knowledge sectors: managers, teachers, administrative staff, school assistants, technicians, technologists, and researchers, regardless of their employment status (public or private), whether permanent, fixed-term, collaborative, or precarious.

The union is a member of the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL), which is one of the three trade union confederations that dominate Italian trade unionism. Education trade unions exist within the other confederations and so FLC operates in an environment often described as 'competitive multi-unionism', that is when different unions seek to recruit the same workers.

The FLC was created to bring together the entire knowledge cycle in a coherent framework, strengthen worker representation and protections, and serve as the political and professional reference point for a world that combines many diversities (skills, profiles) but with many commonalities (knowledge is a fundamental tool for providing people with equal opportunities).

A key challenge for the union is the level of resignation and passivity in society, and specifically in the world of work. The union perceives a lack of deep support for its struggles, and a tendency for citizens and workers to passively delegate their support to the unions. Political processes have been degraded and people have become cynical about their own role in society and their own ability to bring about change. For example, there is a lack of genuine social dialogue, and citizens' distance from governments and politics in general is growing. Clear political identities are lacking and this has facilitated the emergence of populist tendencies.

The current government is a coalition of right wing parties with its roots in an authoritarian populism. The government makes no effort to engage with society: and the trade union movement therefore lacks genuine interlocutors, both in government and in opposition.

The union's current priorities are promoting justice reform and challenging the growing seeds of authoritarianism that the government's policies are sowing. However collective bargaining is weak and the government is not willing to engage in serious negotiations. This is compelled the CGIL (not just in education) to resort to increasingly confrontational action against the government and the parties that support them. This resulted in a series of high profile general strikes. However, this action does not always secure support from other trade union confederations and these divisions within the movement can be a source of weakness.

The overall picture in the country is one that continues to be framed by the austerity that has blighted Italy's public services for many years and which accounts for low levels of investment in education by international standards. All of this takes place against the backdrop of a lack of solid institutional relationships, which are increasingly being replaced by populism.

A key and immediate challenge for the union relates to the renewal of the national collective bargaining agreement. The most innovative aspect of this process is the one regarding integrated distance learning. However, also in the context of education, the union is opposing the government's revision of national guidelines on educational curricula for each of the academic cycles. The curriculum reforms reflect the political priorities of the government and represent a sovereignist and Western-leaning reform of the curriculum's content. These combine with more general issues are related to authoritarian reforms, bureaucratic centralisation, and reforms that weaken the overall value of education. The central role of the democratic school within Italy's post-war constitution is increasingly being undermined.

The situation described above is unquestionably challenging for the union. However, there have been notable successes and these provide a platform for union building. Most significant is the increase in membership and votes of the Representatives of the Single Unions (RSU) (worker representations in the workplace, required by Italian law and collective bargaining, which are accountable to all workers, but are organized into lists of candidates with union affiliations) and growing political consensus. Within workplaces the role of RSUs is critical, and they provide tangible and visible evidence of the relevance of the union when representing employees' interests in their workplaces. FLC has seen the benefits of this success, both in terms of election results at individual workplaces and new members. These results are in part due to a strategic investment by the union in training, mentoring, and coaching RSU candidates. The growth in membership that has resulted highlights the benefits of a local level of union leadership that is located in workplaces and visible to workers.

What does 'local leadership' look like?

In Italy, public knowledge sectors are organised through national union membership and through the national measurement of workplace-level elected representatives (RSU). RSU elections are extremely important because their outcome at the national level, along with membership, measures the representativeness of sectoral unions. In 2025, the FLC CGIL was the leading union in all knowledge sectors.

An RSU is composed of three or more members, taking into account the size of the workplace. For example, the RSU of Sapienza University of Rome is made up of 45 including representatives of technical-administrative and related healthcare workers. Although workers submit their candidacies on union lists, the role of RSU is closely linked to closeness to colleagues, the ability to share and address their problems in the workplace, and the negotiation of the school fund allocation that finances extracurricular activities at individual schools and supplementary wages at universities, academies, conservatories, and research institutions. It is therefore a formal role, included in industrial relations processes, but not mandatory within union structures, because the RSU delegate need not be a union member.

The FLC CGIL considers RSU delegates to be the union's primary hub, involving them in frequent training courses as well as in political activities, such as signature collections, mobilisations, and the dissemination of initiatives. They have a critical dual dimension: they are co-workers, close to everyone's problems, but also union personnel through their involvement in the union's public activities. As members of the workforce, rather than as union employees, their involvement remains voluntary. However, the union appreciates the value of the dual role performed by RSU delegates and so the coordination role of the secretariat of the relevant provincial body is very important in supporting their work. This work is supplemented by the members' committee - a grassroots body within the union organisation that operates in all workplaces. It plays a fundamental role in directly representing members. Its main functions and roles include: representation; information and communication; bargaining and labour relations; promoting membership and participation in union life; convening internal meetings and participating in mobilisations or initiatives; liaising with the local structure; and democratic participation. For union members in the workplace the members' committee is the key link to the democratic culture of the union.

From within the workplace area delegates, those workers who, while remaining fully or partially 'in production', play an important role on behalf of the provincial secretariats in establishing direct links between the union structure and the workplace, supporting the RSU in political activities and institutional bargaining, and bringing the union's perspective to the table.

How are local leaders identified and developed?

The FLC CGIL considers union renewal extremely important, so much so that in the summer of 2025 it brought together all national and territorial leaders for three days to discuss new organisational models. The process has just begun, and several solutions are being developed, including those at the confederal level, in preparation for the next CGIL congress scheduled for 2027. But the union is not starting year zero – the various territories have developed many different solutions suited to their contexts (one of which was presented during the *Your Turn 1* project). This is a network project that enhances direct contact with workers. The project envisions a new role for RSU delegates, or rather, for some of them, who may be the most motivated, the most enterprising, and consequently the most well-trained. Since each workplace has an elected RSU worker, the project aims to create a network of connections between schools, which, in groups of 10, constitute a node of the network. This intermediate level between the school and the local secretariat can become a hub for consultation, networking, and information exchange, even though official representation with school principals remains with the union secretariat. The intention is to maintain robust democratic structures, but to also create more informal spaces where activists can connect easily and learn from each other.

It is clear that training is an essential element of the project. Frequent local training sessions planned, in addition to the annual national training already scheduled. Local training can be more accessible and helps representatives connect with their peers. An important priority is the organisation, both locally and nationally, of meetings and training sessions for the RSU delegates. RSU delegates receive publications and documents to support their efforts, particularly in relation to the contract and the profession, but also about the history and values of the CGIL. Providing this type of organisational history is important in ensuring that representatives work within the distinctive spirit of CGIL. In addition, when selecting RSU (union representatives), and even more so for delegates—when they are not elected from the secretariats—mentoring and coaching are crucial.

How do local leaders link to the formal democracy of the union?

All these roles and institutions are formally defined both by Italian law and regulated by the national collective bargaining agreement, as well as by the union's bylaws and regulations. In this sense, every member is an integral part of the democratic organisation—both representative and participatory—of the CGIL and the FLC-CGIL.

Are there dedicated programmes to support particular groups within the union?

In FLC-CGIL, there is a commitment to gender balance as a principle, and the union's statutes require all union bodies to have a gender balance of no less than 40%. The 'regulatory centres', those bodies responsible for monitoring and verifying, have the power to invalidate electoral bodies and procedures that do not comply with certified quotas. In the past, the union has attempted to develop similar initiatives for 'youth', meaning workers under 36, but these policies were not obviously successful.