

CHAPTER 13

The “Two-Faced Janus” of Social Collaboration: The Consigli di Gestione in Italy between Corporatism and Industrial Democracy, 1943–1949

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INTRODUCTION

The establishment of democracy in Italy after the Second World War entailed long transitions within the realm of social policy, where even pre-Fascist legacies persisted long after 1945.¹ Workers’ participation in industry was a hot point of public debate at the dawn of the Republic, being a matter rooted in a long-term search for reconciling and representing opposing class interests into the economic and political institutions. Hence, Italian antifascists in 1945 faced the same issue that corporatist collaboration efforts had tried to solve since the late 1800s, an issue that transversally concerned all European industrial societies during the 19th and 20th centuries.² In this context, the debate on the *Consigli di Gestione* (CdG, Works Management Committees) involved the country’s post-war institutional

and socio-economic organisation.³ The CdG were introduced by the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (RSI, Italian Social Republic), a Nazi puppet government created in Northern Italy in September 1943, after the fall of Mussolini and the Fascist regime. The aim was enforcing industrial collaboration and countering the Resistance's influence in the factories, mostly located in the northern part of the country. At liberation in April 1945, the *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale Alta Italia* (CLNAI, Committee of National Liberation for Northern Italy), gathering the Resistance movements, repelled all Fascist legislation frameworks except for the CdG. Later, the attempts at regulating the committees during the constitutional debate only led to the reiteration of statements regarding the important principles of worker participation. Eventually, the looming Cold War divisions ended the national unity government in 1947, leading to the dismantling of the CdG beginning in 1948. This topic, however, resurfaced during the debates on planning policy and industrial democracy in the following decades, proving that workers' participation was an issue characterised by undeniable longevity in post-war Italy.⁴

While the 1948 Constitution proclaimed that "labour" was the foundation of the Italian Republic, the fundamental divergences on how to implement workers' participation revealed corporatist legacies that encompassed the institutional and socio-economic aspects of industrial relations.⁵ The non-implementation of the Constitution's most advanced socio-economic principles and the eviction of the workers from decision-making in the factories marked the demise of industrial democracy in post-war Italy.⁶ Albeit short-lived, the documented work of the CdG hence shed light on the scope and limits of the Resistance's projects to integrate the workers into the democratic institutions, offering an opportunity to study the contested visions of industrial citizenship in the post-war period.⁷

TWILIGHT AND RENEWAL OF "FASCIST" CORPORATISM, 1943-1945

Many industrial countries introduced workers' participation to mitigate class struggle and ensure production efficiency beginning in the late 19th century. While Italy did not have similar conciliatory bodies, the *Commissioni Interne* (CI, with comparable functions to the Shop Stewards' Committees) developed from company agreements and granted union representation in the factories beginning in 1906.⁸ After the Great War and the Bolshevik Revolution, factory councils prompted opposite proposals for socialist democracy, union control, or social collaboration in 1920-21.⁹ The socialist and Catholic unions, headed by Ludovico D'Aragona and Giovanni Gronchi, and the employers' association

concluded that workers' participation should be based on the wartime tripartite consultative committees, but they disagreed on their respective responsibilities in the companies.¹⁰ Eventually, Liberal governments failed to legislate on the issue, while fascist violence weakened labour organisations. Once in power, Fascism abolished the CI in 1925 and suppressed free unions to establish a corporatist order that eliminated class struggle in factories through an institutional, bureaucratic, and repressive framework.

The Fascist minority trends advocating for a more participatory model resurfaced only during the war as the corporatist system collapsed.¹¹ Building on the claim that labour was the "foundation and main object" of the RSI, the regime's constitutional drafts made full political, economic, and social rights conditional on the idealised notional category of the worker.¹² The RSI also introduced the so-called socialisation of industry, incorporating the newly established CdG into neo-Fascist corporatist ambitions. Angelo Tarchi, the Minister of Corporatist Economy, argued that the bill shifted the goals of social collaboration from the institutional to the economic sphere. While departing from earlier Fascist policy, it maintained the core aim of enforcing industrial peace, now pursued directly within the factories.¹³ The deliberately misleading notion of socialisation did not entail collectivisation of industry but referred to workers' participation in the CdG, institutional bodies with deliberative and advisory roles with regard to production, collective agreements, welfare, and safety, as established by the legislation adopted in February 1944. The committees also determined profit sharing, intended to dissolve class antagonism and foster solidarity in the factories.¹⁴ Tarchi further conceived the CdG as a corporatist tool for economic planning without incurring direct state control. Organised in provincial and national committees, they were to advise the Minister on industrial planning by providing data on output, labour allocation, distribution, prices, and costs.¹⁵

In practice, completed reforms were limited to CdG and profit-sharing schemes amid internal disagreements over the scope and aims of socialisation. Right-wing factions, alongside German authorities and employers, obstructed these measures, opposing unionists such as Giuseppe Spinelli, who instead hoped socialisation would dissolve class antagonism by abolishing the proletarian condition.¹⁶ These demands went beyond the regime's more moderate aim of reconciling class interests, and the RSI accommodated the unionists only late in the war, when a separate Ministry of Labour was granted to Spinelli in January 1945. He sought to turn the CdG into instruments of union representation, control, and propaganda in the factories, shaping them into a link between

state and unions.¹⁷ Spinelli also sought to accelerate their creation; a year after the law's promulgation, only about sixty large and medium-sized firms—mainly operating in publishing—had approved statutes, while socialisation was being prepared in another sixty, now including heavy industry.¹⁸ The limited scope of socialisation reflected internal divisions and weak implementation in the factories. While some officials saw the measures as too limited to secure social peace and boost productivity, others—including industrialists—argued that participation should not extend to co-management, which they feared would lead to Soviet-style state capitalism, the very outcome neo-Fascist legislation sought to prevent.¹⁹ Also Nazi authorities were sceptical about the committees, fearing they would “cause an almost permanent conflict between Capital and Labour”, disrupting the productive efficiency of the factories that worked for the German war machine.²⁰ Lastly, this measure antagonised the employers who were worried about the collectivisation of their enterprises, while the workers remained indifferent or hostile, swelling the ranks of the Resistance and waiting for a revolutionary outcome of the war.²¹

Benito Mussolini hoped that the RSI reforms would prove to be “social mines” that would explode on the Anglo-Americans and the Resistance after the war.²² Unionists more genuinely saw workers' participation as the basis for a new social order. In the final months of the war, they even sought contact with socialists, believing the conflict had given workers a new role in political and socio-economic life, regardless of what regime remained in power. They looked for common ground with parts of the Resistance, presenting the committees as core institutions of a “true democracy of labour” that would transcend the “liberal-bourgeois” system after the war.²³

“CAPITAL AND LABOUR FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION”, 1945-1946

The antifascist movements discussed workers' participation in their post-war programmes, rejecting the RSI's legislation touting it as a ploy to subjugate workers.²⁴ As the antifascist parties created the *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale* (CLN, National Liberation Committee), free unions and employers agreed on reintroducing the CI in September 1943, the debate on the CdG gained momentum by these developments.²⁵ The Catholics supported co-determination to ensure interclass solidarity, increased productive capacity, emancipation of the workers, while counteracting state control and collectivism.²⁶ Principles of social collaboration also informed Lib-Lab currents within the CLN, which promoted mixed committees to organise clandestine activity in factories and serve as a

blueprint for post-war reconstruction based on self-governance and cooperation, in opposition to state bureaucracy and corporatism.²⁷ The social-communists rejected this collaborative framework, believing that workers should take the economic and political lead after the war.²⁸ From summer 1944 to April 1945, more than 500 underground CLN factory committees were formed in Northern Italy, which protected the plants against the Germans after the employers fled and often supervised production, acquiring new technical competencies in the transition from war to peace.²⁹ On the eve of liberation, the CLNAI repealed the legislation on socialisation except for the CdG, which was deemed necessary to guarantee “the continuity and improvement of productive activity, in the spirit of securing an effective national solidarity”.³⁰

After the war, many CdG officials in medium and large companies oversaw corporate welfare and advised on production measures and modernisation efforts. They were coordinated by industry-based committees at the provincial level all across Northern Italy, which sought supervisory roles granting influence over individual firms and national policy.³¹ These requests aligned with the strategy of the social-communists, who wanted to frame the CdG as a force for grass-root democracy in the political, administrative and socio-economic spheres.³² Social collaboration hence should serve “the common interest of the reconstruction, enhancing the workers’ sense of national responsibility” through participatory bodies, rather than to instigate corporatist particularism.³³ In autumn 1945, all Resistance movements in the CLNAI agreed to regulate the status of the committees.³⁴ This compromise did not resolve fundamental divisions between Catholics, liberals, and employers who found themselves on one side of the struggle and the social-communists on the other. The former confined the CdG to technical advisory roles within the industry, while industrialists opposed them outright, arguing they undermined economic freedom and efficiency by allowing excessive opportunities for workers’ demands. The left, by contrast, maintained that the CdG promoted collaboration and national solidarity and should therefore be granted regulatory powers and a supra-company structure.³⁵ This controversy fell within the scope of the concerns regarding the socio-political stabilisation of the country after the war. The Allies solicited the abrogation of the RSI’s reforms, harmonising Northern Italy with the more moderate social legislation present in the South, fearing that the CdG escaped the control of the new authorities and jeopardised the normalisation of industrial relations.³⁶ The experts at the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labour worried that the CdG were a social-communist scheme to introduce collectivism under the guise of

class collaboration rhetoric.³⁷ The CLNAI commissioners were likewise wary of abolishing all neo-Fascist social provisions outright, despite their “demagogic” aims. They argued that indiscriminate repeal of provisions legislation already in place would make the new democracy appear more conservative than Fascism, risking alienating workers from the new institutions.³⁸

The dualism between Rome and Northern Italy persisted until the CLN absorbed the CLNAI in February 1946, and the June 1946 elections for the Constituent Assembly brought the CLN to an end. The constitutional debate in turn strengthened the CdG movement, which had already established a coordinating committee in the North in November 1945 to advocate its position across party boundaries and promote the creation of committees nationwide.³⁹ This unified direction reflected the organisational growth of the CdG, which had already developed territorial and sectoral coordinating bodies in Northern and Central Italy and expanded across private, semi-state, and municipal medium and large companies, as well as sectors such as hospitals, farms, banks, and schools. This expansion underpinned their ambition to shape the reconstruction process of Italy following the war, as the “converging interests” of productive forces were expected to influence the socio-economic provisions of the Constitution under discussion.⁴⁰ The CdG movement proclaimed to be non-partisan, non-class and non-revolutionary, and maintained its only aim was social collaboration.⁴¹ However, its agenda moved closer to that of the Marxist parties, which supported legal recognition of the committees and their role in participatory planning. At the same time, the CdG’s goal of settling industrial conflict aligned with the social-communists’ legalist approach, which sought to dissuade tensions that could jeopardise the unity government and the democratic transition.⁴² The first national congress of the CdG in October 1946 upheld the line of autonomy from parties and social partners’ organisations, arguing that the committees’ aims were incompatible with sectionalism. It endorsed a supra-company structure—vertical (by industry) and horizontal (by province)—to advise the government on industrial planning, maintaining that integrating workers into policymaking would prevent a return to harmful collusion between industrialists and ministerial bureaucracy and ensure more democratic and participatory representation.⁴³ The committees’ call for legal recognition and regulation within the democratic state was taken up by the attending ministers: the socialist Rodolfo Morandi (Industry), the communist Emilio Sereni (Post-War Assistance), and the reformist D’Aragona, now Minister of Labour and Social Insurance.

THE WORKERS' PARTICIPATION IN THE CONSTITUTIONAL DEBATE, 1946-1947

In the same period, two commissions on labour and economic issues examined workers' participation from January to June 1946 in preparation for the Constituent Assembly. Members of the CdG, along with workers' and employers' representatives, took part in these technical and political discussions.⁴⁴ The report for the labour commission, prepared by a former supporter of corporatism, argued that work committees and employee share schemes had not historically resulted in industrial democracy. Within a capitalist framework, such institutions could neither transform ownership structures nor overcome the divide between political and social representation. The report concluded that "social democracy [...] the natural and necessary complement to political democracy" should integrate workers' political and socio-economic rights.⁴⁵ Interviews with workers, employers, and experts revealed broad support for establishing the CdG, but disagreement over its functions. Employers sought to limit its officials to technical advisory roles, while workers and civil servants supported deliberative powers in industrial management and the inclusion of worker representatives in governing bodies—an option employers firmly rejected.⁴⁶ The commission ultimately recommended the legal recognition of the CdG and the constitutionalisation of workers' participation to mark: "... a decisive and irreversible step towards the collaboration among productive forces in the higher interest of the nation and its economy."⁴⁷ It also proposed involving unions in the CdG and creating a national coordinating body, modelled on existing structures in Northern Italy, to prevent corporatist practices within companies.

The newly elected Constituent Assembly appointed the Third Sub-Commission to discuss social, economic and labour matters in July 1946. There, the communist leader of the union argued that the recognition of CI and CdG allowed the working class to exercise its "social function of general interest" in the factories against capitalist and particularist vested interests.⁴⁸ By contrast, Catholic unionists such as Gronchi supported co-determination and profit-sharing initiatives to link workers more closely to the companies they worked for. Marxists opposed this as undermining working-class solidarity, accusing Christian Democrats of reintroducing a corporatist model that bound employers and workers within the company.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the ministers who attended the first CdG congress followed through on their commitment. D'Aragona's more moderate bill was merged with Morandi's December 1946 proposal, which endorsed the CdG's role in national economic planning.⁵⁰ The socialist project conceived the CdG as a tool of grassroots industrial democracy complementing political institutions and

granting workers political and economic rights. The introductory report rejected revolutionary aims, arguing that similar measures in capitalist countries did not subvert the socio-economic order but on the contrary improved productivity and political stability. Morandi's proposal was nonetheless torpedoed among growing opposition to workers' participation and a change of course in the public debate that signalled a more tense political climate between January and May 1947. The employers stiffened their position against the committees, which they regarded as a threat to the existing socio-economic order and to the post-war recovery because they introduced bureaucratic overreach and disrupted productive efficiency.⁵¹ Industrialists and committee leaders accused each other of pursuing a sectionalist policy. The former argued that only full restoration of free enterprise defended the general interest, scaring the middle class with "tyrannical" expansion of the state and renewed social divisions.⁵² The committees, on the other hand, claimed that the employers' organisations wanted to continue a consociational strategy as was observed during Fascism, hindering national solidarity.⁵³ Divergences also widened within the labour movement. Unions feared corporatist overrepresentation if the CdG became too independent and sought closer ties with the CI to secure representation in both social and economic matters. By contrast, CdG leaders favoured a separation between class demands pursued by the CI and the interclass collaboration promoted by the CdG.⁵⁴

In the same year, a national agreement on the CI confirmed unions' preference for centrally negotiated industrial relations over company-level arrangements. Catholics and liberals also resisted granting supra-company advisory roles to the CdG, fearing this would enable state control of companies. They instead saw the committees as technical bodies created to rationalise production and improve welfare within individual firms, thereby mitigating class conflict.⁵⁵ The controversy over the CdG led to a compromise in the Constituent Assembly and the adoption of Gronchi's proposal, which framed workers' participation as collaboration to improve productivity, without specifying how it should be implemented.⁵⁶ The constitutional article no. 46 passed in May 1947, the same period in which the national unity government ended due to growing domestic and international tensions.

FROM POST-WAR COLLABORATION TO COLD WAR DIVISIONS, 1947-1949

After being ousted from government, left-wing parties used the CdG movement to denounce what they saw as "collusion" between capitalist interests and the state, pursuing a corporatist, anti-labour policy in continuity with Fascism and shifting

the costs of post-war reconstruction onto workers.⁵⁷ Committee leaders accused this political bloc of betraying Resistance promises to give workers a leading role in factories and the national economy. At the second CdG congress, Morandi and Sereni abandoned collaboration in favour of socialist transformation based on workers' control, nationalisation of key industries, democratisation of state economic bodies inherited from Fascism, and legal recognition of the CdG.⁵⁸

These demands clashed with government's tighter monetary policies and repression of industrial action from mid-1947. In response, the CdG movement shifted from collaboration to confrontation, aligning more closely with unions and the CI. It advocated expansion of provisional measures and full employment against the austerity championed by the government, which brought rising unemployment, low wages, deflation, and underinvestment.⁵⁹ The CdG also criticised Italy's decision to join the US-sponsored European Recovery Program and the early European integration, which the committees believed had a harmful impact on the country's productive capacity and strategic choices in the international economic policy in favour of US interests.⁶⁰ The CdG aligned now with the left-wing parties against the domestic and international positioning of the Christian Democrats that anchored Italy to the Western Bloc, whereas the CdG movement wanted to maintain political and economic relations with both camps operating across the Iron Curtain.⁶¹ In this phase, the CdG coordinating committee acted mainly as a link between socio-economic and political spheres. It supplied the social-communist parties and unions with data on industrial production, used in opposition to Italy's alignment with the West, which was portrayed as a betrayal of national interests in favour of transnational capital and NATO's belligerent policy.⁶²

Between 1947 and 1948, abandoning the initial collaborative strategy pushed the CdG towards a more explicit class approach when operating within factories. The movement drew closer to the union-controlled CI, traditionally used to advocate for workers' demands. Whereas the CdG had earlier distinguished themselves from the CI due to differing roles and composition, employer resistance and the Christian Democrats' shift forced them to rely more on the *Commissioni Interne* to maintain a presence in the factories.⁶³ The latter, indeed, was a more established institution with a larger following amongst workers and the only recognised workers' institution by a national agreement between social partners.⁶⁴ The shift led the CdG movement to absorb several union demands and endorse the Marxist view that post-war state capitalism favoured trusts and monopolies, producing anti-labour policies and sectional interests rather

than safeguarding the common good.⁶⁵ While the committees did not abandon social collaboration, they argued that only labour organisations pursued participatory, decentralised, and democratic approaches to production and planning, as opposed to corporatism and state control.⁶⁶

The third CdG national congress in December 1948 highlighted both the movement's growth and the limits of possible action without the backing of a legal framework. Nearly 600 committees operated in medium and large firms in north-western Italy, involving about 750,000 workers and coordinated by bodies organised by territory, industry, or company.⁶⁷ This growing entrenchment led the movement's leaders to focus on organisation and drafting a CdG statute. Congress also confirmed the strategy of working through party representatives to advance the committees' agenda. The committees' new proposals dropped supra-company coordination, stepping back from Morandi's proposal and acknowledging that planning was no longer feasible in the new political context.⁶⁸ The Christian Democrats' victory in 1948 and subsequent splits of Catholics and social democrats from the trade union confederation in 1948–50 reflected shifts that blocked the CdG's implementation. From 1949, the committees were dismantled, while the government pursued anti-labour policies, sidelining industrial democracy. Unions instead strengthened the more established CI to maintain a factory presence. Left-wing parties also withdrew support, viewing the CdG as either too radical in a rightward climate or too corporatist in promoting cooperation with employers.⁶⁹

CONCLUSION

The dual nature of the *Consigli di Gestione* was illustrated by the image of a “two-faced Janus that said “revolution” on one face and “pacification” on the other”.⁷⁰ However, the true alternative was not class struggle versus interclass cooperation, but what form of social collaboration that was desirable to achieve. The dualism between corporatism and industrial democracy crossed the debate on the committees, regardless of the political government systems that succeeded one another in Italy from periods of war to peace, due to the structural needs to govern the economy and ensure the representation of social interests. The RSI introduced the CdG to pursue the “third way” between capitalism and collectivism that Fascism had already sought for twenty years, by shifting corporatist conciliation from political institutions to the factories.⁷¹ The Resistance and the CdG movement also wanted more collaborative industrial relations, but they framed the committees as a grassroots democracy that complemented parliamentary

institutions and union representation.⁷² During the Constituent debate, this vision gave way to a political compromise that shifted focus on political democracy and union freedom to further workers' interests, while the Catholic corporatist conceptions influenced the discussion on workers' participation.⁷³ Lastly, Italy's pro-western orientation after 1948 prompted the development of a mixed economy that dashed the CdG movement's hopes to co-determine industrial policy.

Although the CdG's experience showed that corporatist legacies shaped the Italian industrial, institutional and ideological frameworks after 1945, neither corporatist nor industrial democracy versions of the *Consigli di Gestione* were embedded into the model of industrial relations in Italy.⁷⁴ This outcome fell within the generally limited application of the socio-economic democratic aspirations of what the public debate often called the "unimplemented Constitution".⁷⁵ Nonetheless, the social ideas of the Resistance had a fundamental importance in post-war Italy. The debate on workers' control in the late 1950s and the quests for direct democracy during workers' struggles in the 1960s and 1970s reignited the claims already made by the CdG in 1945–48.⁷⁶ The 1970 Statute of the Workers that democratised industrial relations was viewed as the achievement of the 1948 principles on workers' participation.⁷⁷ The antifascist Constitution hence gave direction for expanding the boundaries of industrial democracy in Italy after 1945.