

SPECIAL FEATURE

## “We won’t go back home!” Women’s Experiences with Deindustrialization and Unemployment at Fiat and LIP, a Comparative Perspective

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### Abstract

This article stems from a project aiming to investigate women’s unemployment in the phase of deindustrialization that affected Western European countries from the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis. Countries such as Italy and France, with both a strong working-class movement and a vibrant feminist movement, have had to face economic crises since the mid-seventies and from the eighties have witnessed how neoliberal capitalism started to heavily reshape the global labor market. The old stereotype of female salary as ‘pin money’ within the household budget was again publicly put forth. How did women experience unemployment? What did it mean in terms of their social status, economic independence, sense of self, relationship to the home? To answer these questions and to understand the reconfiguration of class and gender identities, I focus on two milestone cases of labour struggles that are recognized as turning points in the history of the affirmation of neoliberal dynamics: the crisis of FIAT in Italy and of LIP in France. Despite their being at the center of many academic investigations as fundamental sites of resistance, their outcomes in terms of unemployment and particularly the gender dimension of this phenomenon have been largely overlooked so far. I will delineate a comparison between the two cases by drawing on my past research about trade union feminism in the two countries, on archival sources, published accounts and oral histories of two key activists in these struggles. Key factors that will be analysed are: women’s participation in the collective mobilisations in the face of unemployment, their relation to the domestic sphere and to care work, their ability to build female networks within their wounded communities.

**Keywords:** gender; deindustrialization; 1980s; oral sources; trade unions

This article constitutes an exploratory entry point for investigating women’s experiences with unemployment during the deindustrialization phase that affected Western Europe in the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis. Countries such as Italy and France, which both had a strong working class and vibrant feminist movements, faced economic crises commencing in the mid-1970s, and in the 1980s witnessed

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how neoliberal capitalism started to heavily reshape the global labor market. In some instances, the old stereotype that women's wages were "pin money" for the household budget again came to the fore. The article asks: How did women experience the transition to unemployment? What did it mean in terms of their social status, economic independence, sense of self, and relationship to the home? To understand the impact of this transition on class and gender identities, I focus on two milestone labor struggles that are recognized as turning points in the affirmation of neoliberal dynamics in Europe: the crises at Fiat in Italy and LIP in France. Despite having already been the focus of many academic investigations as fundamental sites of resistance, the outcomes of these labor disputes in terms of unemployment and in particular the gender dimension of this phenomenon have been largely overlooked. I will analyze the two cases by drawing on my previous research on trade union feminism in the two countries and by interweaving oral histories to build a narrative from below of unemployed women experiences. Three key factors will be considered: women's participation in the collective mobilizations organized to fight against unemployment, their reflections about the weight of domestic-scary work in the new situation they were facing, and the different paths they adopted to cope with unemployment.

Women's experiences as workers have long remained in the shadows, becoming a "legitimate" object of study only around fifty years ago. Since then, historians and social scientists interested in the gendered dimensions of the labor market have highlighted convincingly that the very meaning of the word "work" changes when considered from a gendered perspective. Joan Wallach Scott, in her seminal book *Gender and the Politics of History* developed a rich and path-breaking analysis of the symbolic and different discursive meanings attached to the extra-domestic paid labor and domestic unpaid labor historically performed by men and women respectively.<sup>1</sup> A similar gendered perspective is still lacking in the field of studies on unemployment, where today women face the same invisibility that they long suffered in the realm of labor history. Although the major social change of the afterwar period was the growing number of women entering the formal labor market and thus the feminization of the active population, yet in the 1980s women represented approximately a half of the unemployed population: their presence among those expelled by the labor market is significant and worth exploring. Indeed, between the 1970s and 1980s, women researchers conducted a variety of surveys and analysis on the overall relation between women and the labor market, including the impact of care work performed by women in the domestic sphere on their participation in extra-domestic and remunerated activities (and thus on their economic independence). Many of these studies also had an activist aim and were made available to the working-class movement and to the trade unions.<sup>2</sup>

In more recent years, women's unemployment has certainly been dealt with in works by feminist scholars in the fields of economy, sociology, and psychology.<sup>3</sup> Yet labor and social historians have mainly focused on the links between employment, identity, and masculinity, thus overlooking the experience of women.<sup>4</sup> In the other disciplines mentioned above, a significant number of enquiries and reflections, stimulated by the 2008 economic crisis, looked at its impact on unemployment rates on the basis of gender differences.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the ongoing crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted similar commentaries and studies.<sup>6</sup> This article

aims to complement this literature by offering a historical perspective. In labor and social history, the main focus rested on deindustrialization because of its role in the dismantling of the traditional working class. Historians have investigated the impact of unemployment on the redefinition of blue-collar identities and have explored the links between masculinity and labor (in terms of physical effort, collective identity, and professional pride). However, their work has often shown an incredible indifference to the issue of female unemployment, with its specific features and questions.<sup>7</sup> Only very recently has historical research re-emerged on female resistance to collective redundancies, which in turn forms part of more established research exploring methods of gender-based, socio-political mobilization. This new analysis devoted to deindustrialization from a gendered perspective certainly represents the best framework in which to situate the case studies presented in this article. While my approach differs in that it considers the aftermath of labor struggles (on *being* unemployed and not just threatened with unemployment), re-visiting the pivotal moments that led to unemployment for women is fundamental. This article is thus well-placed in the context of works such as those by Jackie Clarke,<sup>8</sup> Eloisa Betti,<sup>9</sup> and others.<sup>10</sup>

Women started entering the formal labor market on a massive scale in the second half of the twentieth century following the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> Within a few decades, women had gained employment in new sectors, developed careers, and obtained new rights. Research has highlighted a few major shared tendencies: on the one hand, a generalized increase in women's participation in the workforce; on the other, the persistence of significant gender inequalities connected to the prominent role traditionally attributed to the male bread-winner.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Western countries experienced economic crises starting in the mid-1970s, and in the 1980s neoliberal capitalism strongly oriented toward *laissez-faire* started to heavily reshape the global labor market.<sup>13</sup> There are indications from various countries to suggest that women were often considered the first to be made redundant.<sup>14</sup> The idea that women's income was a "*salairé d'appoint*," or the old stereotype "pin money," for the household budget again came to the fore, thus implicitly questioning women's right to work<sup>15</sup>: This perspective was articulated not only by businessmen, but also by some politicians, trade unions, and by male workers.<sup>16</sup> During earlier research, a photo I found in a labor union archive in Turin captured my attention and provides the title for this article. The image showed women who were laid-off by Fiat in 1980 participating in a demonstration carrying a banner that stated: "We won't go back home!" I doubt that unemployed men would ever use the expression "go back" in reference to the domestic sphere. It became the cornerstone of my reflection in two ways:

- (i) The first is theoretical: the different relationships that men and women historically developed with the domestic sphere crucially affects their perceived legitimacy to take active part in the job market and thus also their experience with unemployment.<sup>17</sup>
- (ii) The second is methodological: investigating the links and fractures between domestic and public implies the recognition of multiple discourses and thus a quest for a plurality of sources.

The main objective of this article is to explore women's experiences with unemployment and to uncover the different elements that contribute to delineating it, such as a previous labor commitment, feminist consciousness, collective and individual dimensions, and the above-mentioned relationship to the domestic sphere. The core of my analysis is that women's experiences with unemployment were significantly different than those of men, because of the historic tradition of defining women as supposedly dependent on a male bread-winner: a custom that affected legislative strategies, public debates, and also self-perceptions (resting at the center of this article).<sup>18</sup> Thus, the questions that revolve around the issue of women's unemployment include: What did it mean in terms of women's social status, their economic independence, their sense of self, and their relationship to the home? To what extent did the always shifting border between "domestic" and "public"<sup>19</sup> risk being once again re-established?

### Research Approach and Methodology

This article is based on a case-study approach considering two micro-historical, individual experiences in two different national settings.<sup>20</sup> Of interest in this comparison is the entanglement of similarities and differences characterizing the France and Italy at that time. Both countries were facing industrial decline and increasing unemployment rates, after the economic boom that followed the end of the Second World War. Women's participation in trade union activism had been developing, fueled by the involvement of a new generation of women in the students' and workers' struggles of 1966/8/9.<sup>21</sup> However, female presence in the extra-domestic sphere was significantly higher in France than in Italy,<sup>22</sup> and the overall political situation was different in each country.<sup>23</sup> While it is important to touch on these elements, here institutional responses to unemployment remain in the background and the focus is on the analysis of the lived experiences and their narration.

The companies I selected went through phases of crisis and heavy restructuring, resulting in the dismissal of much of their female workforce. In order to best highlight the specific features of female unemployment, I identified companies in the manufacturing sector, where women had employment histories similar to men and had previously developed a significant feminist awareness, which made them particularly sensitive and responsive to gender inequalities and potential discrimination both in their experiences at work and with unemployment.<sup>24</sup> The milestone labor struggles at Fiat in Italy and LIP in France perfectly corresponded to these criteria. Despite their being widely scrutinized as fundamental sites of resistance, both in militant and academic works, the aftermath of these glorious labor conflicts remains largely unexplored, especially with regards to the gender dimension.<sup>25</sup>

First, consider Fiat,<sup>26</sup> a major automotive company headquartered in Turin, Italy. Female workers were a minority there, many of them had been hired only a few years earlier, thanks to a labor reform law enacted in 1977. The women had developed a strong commitment to their workplace and sense of collective identity. When, in 1980, Fiat announced a restructuring plan involving thousands of layoffs (soon to become real dismissals<sup>27</sup>), workers conducted a thirty-five-day strike that ended with the famous "March of 40,000,"<sup>28</sup> organized by company managers. Afterward, an unemployment committee was put into place and, thanks to the participation of some women who had previously been part of a union separatist structure—Intercategoriale Donne—

the committee showed significant awareness of gender specific issues. In fact, its connection with the communist-socialist trade union Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL) was assured by the woman I interviewed, Alessandra Mecozzi.<sup>29</sup>

Secondly, I consider LIP, a watch factory based in Besançon, France, whose workers first faced the threat of massive dismissals in 1973. Subsequent strikes and occupation became an important national and international struggle for the workers' movement and had an apparently positive outcome about which much was written at the time.<sup>30</sup> However, in 1976, a new crisis arose (trade unions founded the first "unemployed committee" in town), and in 1977, the firm went bankrupt. Workers put into place six cooperatives, recruiting around half of the LIP workers (220 out of 403). However, many others experienced unemployment, as in the case of Monique Piton, which I investigate here. Almost 50 percent of the LIP workforce was made up of women (especially in the lower levels), who had conducted a highly self-reflexive struggle from a gender perspective during the "1973/'74 labour dispute;<sup>31</sup> thus, it is of considerable interest to understand Piton's grasp of the overall situation and her perspective on the formation of the workers' cooperatives in particular.

In terms of primary sources, I draw on material from a range of archive collections in France and Italy,<sup>32</sup> but most importantly these sources are complemented by two in-depth interviews. As effectively demonstrated by Demazière, a leading sociologist on unemployment: "Unemployment is [...] one of those operative categories that are both shared representations of the social universe and resources for taking action in and on that universe."<sup>33</sup> The choice of integrating archival material with original oral sources makes for an effective strategy that enabled me to catch overlaps or fractures among multiple representations.<sup>34</sup> I illustrate my research with the testimonies of the two aforementioned women, Alessandra Mecozzi and Monique Piton, both of whom were key figures in the contexts of Fiat and LIP. In doing so, I bring to the fore the experiences of women activists.

In my conversations with these two women, we focused not only on the period of layoffs and unemployment, but also previous labor struggles and their aftermath.<sup>35</sup> Since work itself can be considered a problematic "object" with regard to women's experience and most importantly to our conceptualization of it,<sup>36</sup> the wider perspective adopted here—one that is not strictly limited to the unemployment period—is crucial for understanding the evolution of women's self-perception in the *continuum* of their relationship with work and its loss. Given the significant work-based activism in the past by both women, in fact, their narrations of unemployment acquire meaning when set in context with their previous struggles and their subsequent reflections. The purpose here is not to present paradigmatic stories to illustrate the collective or the (inexistent) "average" experience of unemployed women, but rather to benefit from the stories of two women who—in different ways—had to face this situation and, having already developed significant feminist consciousness, could elaborate on their own experiences in connection with gender inequalities.<sup>37</sup>

## Fiat and LIP

At both Fiat and LIP, there was strong participation by the labor force in resisting the restructuring plans proposed by ownership, but the reality that workers faced in

defeat after being made redundant varied. Most Fiat workers affected by the restructuring were laid off under a mechanism in Italian labor law known as *cassa integrazione*. This meant that they received a subsidy of their salary from the state and, most importantly, Fiat committed to progressively rehire a majority of them. As extensively reported,<sup>38</sup> this objective fell far short of being met, only a minority were rehired after a great delay and with problematic bullying dynamics. However, the workers' approach and experience were critically shaped by this perspective. For years they nurtured a deep sense of belonging to Fiat, and particularly to a working community, thus they decided to get organized and invest significant energies in the founding of the Coordinamento Cassintegrati (unemployed committee). LIP workers, on the contrary, were made redundant and could count on state benefits, but these gradually decreased, and the workers had no hope of being rehired. Local trade unions and leading figures of the resistance at LIP eventually agreed on attempting a transition towards forms of self-employment, choosing to create worker-led cooperatives. This might be seen as a way of collectively organizing and a follow-up to the forms of "autogestion"<sup>39</sup> experienced during the factory's occupation. However, it was decided that not all workers could be included in the cooperatives, and this led to an internal fracture within the LIP workforce that deeply marked the end of their struggle and the passage, for some of them, into a phase of unemployment.

In 1981 Turin, a core group of former trade unionists who had been suspended from the factory, together with many other workers, founded the Coordinamento Cassintegrati and started a rich series of initiatives to continue shedding light on how the agreement on rehiring was being applied by Fiat's management. In a sense, while the Coordinamento often expressed some resentment and alienation toward the trade union delegates who had kept their jobs at Fiat, still the main common enemy was clearly identified as the company and the political powers that had favored the agreement and the end of the thirty-five-day strike. At LIP, on the contrary, the fact that, by creating the cooperatives, workers' themselves took the responsibility of letting some workers' go broke trust within a community that had long fought together, and which finally disintegrated. LIP's mythology survives in connection with the struggle period—that lasted years and was very intense thanks to the dynamics deriving from the occupation of the factory (shared time, shared spaces, shared missions around France to sell the watches and keep paying the salaries). However, the launch of the cooperatives represented a very bitter turning point in the collective experience: it marked the people who were forced to abandon the community, as well as those who, despite being allowed to participate in the cooperative project, decided to leave.

The two women I interviewed have similar backgrounds in terms of their paths to political engagement but also represent the two different outcomes of the Italian and the French experiences. Both Alessandra Mecozzi and Monique Piton had been deeply involved in the workers' struggles. Mecozzi was not unemployed herself, but she was a union delegate who decided to support the Coordinamento Cassintegrati at the time of the company restructuring in 1981, to constitute a link between the suspended workers and the union still active inside the factory. Piton was not a union figure, but certainly at the center of LIP mobilization. When the first conflict erupted at the Palente plant in 1973, she soon joined a select group known as the

*noyau impulseur* (stimulus group), formed by union leaders as well as other workers who were particularly involved in planning and organizing resistance to layoffs and the occupation of the factory. Mecozzi and Piton are widely recognized as prominent activist figures. An archival catalog of all the documentation Mecozzi donated to the Zumaglino Archive at the Women's House in Turin was curated and published by feminist archivist Paola De Ferrari. Piton published two books, one about her own political struggle (*C'est possible! Le récit de ce que j'ai éprouvé durant cette lutte de Lip*) and the other her personal autobiography (*Mémoires libres*).<sup>40</sup> Both women participated in women-only collectives organized in their respective workplaces: in Turin, the Intercategoriale Donne, an interconfederal, interprofessional, separatist structure that gathered together working women (particularly female trade union delegates) in the city; in Besançon, the separatist Groupe Femmes, born in the context of LIP labor dispute. Encouraged by some feminist activists, the latter group was developed and nurtured by working women who became aware of the sex discrimination they suffered not only at work, but even within the labor struggle. They published the booklet "*LIP aufFéminin*" and their initiatives were featured in several short videos created by the feminist documentary director Carole Roussopoulos in 1976.<sup>41</sup>

Mecozzi was always convinced of the need to support the efforts and activities of traditional trade union organizations from within (she was a CGIL delegate in Turin and later moved to Rome to hold various positions at the national level), while Piton was not a union delegate and remained quite critical of workers' organizations (even the very progressive Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT) leadership of LIP, embodied by Charles Piaget). But the strong and public political commitment of the two women, together with their acute feminist conscience, mean that they offer an interesting comparison. The different perspectives that characterized the end of the antilayoff struggles at Fiat and LIP, together with the different roles played by the trade unions in those circumstances led Mecozzi and Piton to develop different understandings and experiences with regard to the issue of women's unemployment.

### *Alessandra Mecozzi, union delegate at Fiat, Personal Engagement and Collective Difficulties*

Alessandra Mecozzi's experience as a CGIL<sup>42</sup> delegate, who volunteered to function as a link between the autonomous Coordinamento Cassintegrati (Unemployed Committee), active in Turin starting in 1981, and the unions, represents an interesting point of view for understanding the gender dynamics connected to unemployment at Fiat. Throughout the '70s, Mecozzi had been a pillar of the Intercategoriale Donne, which shaped her understanding of unemployment as well as her more recent reflections on the success and limits of the Unemployed Committee. The Intercategoriale was one of the most productive organizations of its kind in Italy. The group always maintained strong ties with the overall women's movement in Turin, organized women-only courses to tackle issues often overlooked in union bargaining and debates, and in 1983, organized an international conference titled "Produrre e Riprodurre"<sup>43</sup> (Production and Reproduction), bringing together working women from all over Europe and beyond.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, the Intercategoriale had been particularly active in promoting female hiring at Fiat, thus the phase of restructuring and layoffs proved exceptionally frustrating to them. Despite being a minority in the heavy metal-working sector, many women had in fact been hired in the years prior to the layoffs and this represented a crucial element in the identity building process connected to labor and in the development of gender dynamics on the factory floor. In December 1977, at the impetus of Catholic Minister of Labour Tina Anselmi, the so-called “Equality Law” (no. 903) was approved by the Italian Parliament. The new law required that the official public unemployment registers (hitherto segregated: one for men and one for women) had to be merged. This measure forced many companies, such as Fiat, to hire male and female workers regardless of their gender, simply on the basis of their ranking in the register. Among the criteria to set workers’ ranking in the newly merged register was time already spent unemployed. Since previously companies used to pick most of their workers from the male-only register, women tended to be unemployed for longer. Thus, after the approval of the new law, companies had to hire many of them.<sup>45</sup> The actual power of the Anselmi law on companies’ hiring policies can be seen in a Fiat “internal relations” document titled “Hiring of Female Employees – Turin Area” dated February 27, 1978.

Since the '78/'82 hiring plan originally foresaw only male staff, the percentage of female labour would have presumably followed this decreasing trend: from 9.1% to 6.8%. [...] As a consequence of the enforcement of the new law, there will be a different trend of female personnel. We have assumed a mix of assumptions as follows: 1978 = 50%, 1979 = 50%, 1980 = 40%, 1981 = 30%, 1982 = 25-30%. [...] The current trend, due to the accumulation of unemployment and the difficult economic situation, should however terminate in around 2 years. Since female employment is conditioned by the lack of services and social structures, which are not expected to be eliminated in the short term, and still linked to the economic boom that would favour a great appeal of the tertiary sector or an early exit from the labour market, the percentage of female staff among the newly employed Fiat will stabilize later on at levels of 25-30%.<sup>46</sup>

It is interesting to note how Fiat company officials were fully aware of the social constraints affecting women’s access to the labor market. Moreover, this document shows, through further assumptions on the issue of absenteeism, that the presence of female employees was clearly considered as an obstacle to the company’s productivity, and that it was solely because of the new “Equality Law” that women had the opportunity to be hired. This perspective represents widely held assumptions that the Italian labor force was imagined as based on male breadwinners, and that women’s unemployment was considered a “natural” status, especially for mothers. A critical analysis of this same perspective allows us to understand that women were targeted first in case of layoffs, and that their job losses were marginalized in terms of public policies and public debate.

The massive hiring of women began in 1978, which meant only two years later many of the newly hired women were involved in the dismissals. The layoffs targeted groups that were considered particularly antagonist to the company, such as union



delegates and/or the “unproductive”—the elderly, disabled workers, and women. The labor struggles of the so-called “hot autumn” of 1969 and all the subsequent achievements obtained by the working class in Italy during the following decade had strongly marked labor relations within Fiat plants (Rivalta, Mirafiori, etc.) In 1980, the Fiat managerial board decided to break workers’ activism and took advantage of the changing political and cultural climate (due to increasing terrorism and to the growing economic crisis) to pursue a reorganization and regain full control over labor conditions in its factories. It signed an agreement that formally foresaw the progressive rehiring of all workers, but its application was long delayed and eventually largely failed. Moreover, as Mecozzi recalls: “At the time we had this journal, titled *The Other Half of the Factory* where workers and delegates wrote... When the agreement with Fiat was signed, we immediately realized – and we denounced it in the journal – that women’s share among the expelled workers was disproportionate when compared to their presence in the workplace. In 1980 in all of [the region of] Piedmont, women constituted the 20 percent of the 147,000 workers, but the number terminated was more than 30 percent.”<sup>47</sup>

In 1981, when the autonomous unemployed committee was formed by former delegates, Mecozzi decided to get involved as the CGIL representative. She told me, “My decision, my request to take care of the Unemployed Committee had this meaning: I thought that the trade unions, and personally I as trade unionist, should not abandon those workers expelled by Fiat. The trade union had to include those workers who were now outside of the factory.”<sup>48</sup> Mecozzi does not describe her engagement in terms of gender dynamics here, although we can certainly glimpse—in her choice—the heritage of her strong commitment within the women’s Intercategoriale. In fact, feminist unionists have always worked to increase trade union inclusiveness by discussing new issues that historically remained outside the traditional union perimeter (such as workers’ reproductive rights, the factory + domestic “double burden” experienced by working women, etc.). They also engaged to include marginalized and under-represented categories, such as homeworkers working far from the big factories. Lastly, they were committed to involve women beyond all borders, not only workers, but also students and housewives, in their activities. Mecozzi felt that being a woman among mostly unemployed men presented few problems. However, she spoke of the difficulty of her position caught between the autonomous body of the Unemployed Committee and the trade union hierarchies.

I was a kind of “transmission belt” [...] in between two opposite pressures: from the committee and from the trade unions. Actually, the heaviest pressure came from Fiat delays with regard to the application of the industrial agreement. All this brought anger and indignation in the committee... We need to remember that there were also some suicides among the unemployed at the time. Therefore, this situation, that was very difficult to bear, eventually was a great burden on me. A surely significant experience, but also a difficult one in terms of the integration of different needs.<sup>49</sup>

Facing this complex situation, Mecozzi’s commitment to the Intercategoriale was a source of relief and hope for her; she told me:

At the same time, we tried, as female delegates, together with the urban collectives of the Women's House, not to give up and - on the contrary - to carry on an analysis of the very issue of women's work. In fact, in 1983, we hosted in Turin the International Congress "Produrre e Riprodurre", which was great and important and very well attended. There, we tried to overcome an exclusively 'defensive' logic (that was typical of the Unemployed Committee) and to build a strategic idea... It included a wide reflection on the reduction of worktime and on the subsequent possibility of an employment increment. Moreover, it included a lively debate on the issue of identity that was crucial to women with regards to labour: what it meant, how it was experienced by blue-collars and white-collars, how its loss had been lived by women (Fiat was the largest and most famous case, but not the only one). At the Congress we discussed all these connecting the issues of so-called "productive labour" with the "socially reproductive labour."<sup>50</sup>

This way of looking at the various aspects of unemployment directly derived from the feminist political agenda developed by women unionists in the previous years. Their approach was, in fact, more comprehensive than the usual one adopted by the unions, which leveled out all differences by class dimension only. The Intercategoriale wanted to provide a more nuanced, varied and realistic portrait of the working class, and this commitment allowed feminist unionists to better take into account the different intersecting elements that revolve around the issue of unemployment: the connection between production and social reproduction (care work), the relationship with the domestic sphere, the value attached to time available for personal and social activities, and so on.<sup>51</sup> Mecozzi was deeply involved in the feminist union activities and recently decided to donate all of her documents from the experience not to a union archive, but to the archive of the Women's House in Turin. As she explained:

The women from the radical collectives were also always very much involved in our struggle in support of the [Equality Law]. [...] We always collaborated. Turin is probably peculiar from this point of view because of all the activism we conducted jointly with the collectives of the Women's House.<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, the close connection established between feminist unionists and radical feminists in Turin was an exception in Italy. Yet despite articulated activism with regards to feminist consciousness being widespread in the city, when I asked Mecozzi about women's participation in the Unemployed Committee she commented:

There were women, but we need to take into account a major difference (to a certain extent a positive element, depending on the perspective...): for them, losing their "productive" factory job (let's call it this way!) didn't mean losing everything as it did for men. Of course, they were in a losing position, but after all women - as we all know - always have tons of things to do! Children, family and so on... Thus, in a certain sense, in terms of life balance, women had the chance to re-build their balance on a different basis, while for men it proved to be more difficult since they were losing a fundamental and

unique piece of their life. Activism [within the unemployed committee] was certainly more common among men than among women.<sup>53</sup>

Mecozzi recalled that beyond her there were a few other female delegates who were present and active in the framework of the committee, but female workers were largely absent, often absorbed by their daily struggles for the family budget. However, other more personal memories emerged during our conversation. Mecozzi recounted:

I remember very well my next-door neighbour who had been left at home, together with her husband, and I perfectly remember that she was so happy when she could go back to work! She was happy, even though due to the re-organisation promoted by Fiat in order to increase the productivity levels, the labour rhythms had become much harder. However, she didn't want to give up: having a job was surely important for economic reasons, but not only! It was a matter of keeping an achievement, because indeed, it had been an achievement!<sup>54</sup>

Recalling the impact of the Equality Law, Mecozzi explained that at Fiat, most of the newly hired people "were young women who had a great enthusiasm and, above all, something that impressed their colleagues very much: a great will (let's say so) to win this challenge. Because, indeed, it was a challenge especially with regards to some workshops that were really tough. A challenge in the sense that the work was hard - and women carried out all tasks - but also in the sense that these tasks needed to be reformed for the benefit of all. This was our idea, our vision: we wanted to change the whole organisation of labour."<sup>55</sup> To exemplify this strategic approach, Giovanna Cuminatto, another CGT representative who was part of the Intercategoriale and whom I interviewed for a previous project, reported this exchange:

- A male worker to a new female colleague: "You can't lift this 30 kg load!"
- Her reply, "While for you it is good to lift 30 kg, isn't it?"<sup>56</sup>

Mecozzi underlined many times the enthusiasm and commitment shown by the young women hired at Fiat from 1978.<sup>57</sup> My interest in Fiat is motivated precisely by the situation of these women, who had only recently entered the workplace before being laid off. Mecozzi commented, "For these women, kicked out of the factory (some of them within just a couple of years), it was widespread the feeling of a defeat with regards to that challenge. But, also, the willingness and determination not to give up."<sup>58</sup> She admits that perceptions may differ on this. Thus, the aim of further research should be precisely to investigate the subjective and collective reactions to and elaborations on the experience of female unemployment on a larger scale.

### *Besançon, Fracture in the Workers' Front: Cooperative Experience vs Unemployment*

LIP in France, like Fiat in Italy, certainly represented the mythological struggle of the working class, but at the same time, as Donald Reid elucidated in his recent work, a

crucial turning point in French power relationships under advanced capitalism, and thus in French labor history. “The LIP Affair was at once a bridge from the ‘thirty glorious years’ of growth to the long period of recession and unemployment, and from the politics of 1968 to those of 1981.”<sup>59</sup> The LIP watch factory in Besançon was in the region of Franche-Comté in eastern France. It had a long history, founded as a small workshop in 1867, but in the ’70s began increasingly suffering from international competition, especially from Switzerland. The first labor conflict was set off in 1973 to avoid massive layoffs (the ownership planned to reduce the factory to a mere assembly line, selling off the design and research sectors). Between 1973 and 1974 the factory was occupied by its workers who, reunited in their General Assembly, decided to continue production and to sell watches to pay their own salaries and prove the profitability of their company and counter the dismantling plans. LIP was crucial because the struggle was conducted adhering deeply to the idea of “*autogestion*”<sup>60</sup> (self-management) that was supported by the CFDT union (non-religious, but inspired by progressive Catholicism at the time) and widely debated among the Left. The story of this struggle is not without contradictions: my interviewee, Monique Piton, LIP worker and very active in the “action committee” (an informal collective structure that greatly supported the labor initiatives) reported:

I always took my union card; I respected the activity of unions because in many cases they are useful. But of course, afterwards I realized that women were not full citizens. [...] In 1973, when we decided to pay ourselves with the sale of watches, I wanted the highest wages to be lowered a little bit and the low wages, mostly women’s, to be raised a bit. (There were also those who said, “Equal pay for all!”). And no, as it was the unions that decided, the payroll was kept identical as before! Actually, mine was not too bad, but there were women who were assembly-line workers and who had a very small salary during the whole struggle, and it wasn’t fair!<sup>61</sup>

Beyond all the difficulties and different approaches, the practice of *autogestion*, with its traits of egalitarian involvement and encouragement of workers’ responsibility, proved revolutionary by echoing the dynamics developed by the global student movement, which was particularly strong in France.<sup>62</sup> In the years that followed, there was an attempt to relaunch the company under the illuminated direction of Claude Neuschwander,<sup>63</sup> but later the French state—headed by Giscard d’Estaing—withdrawed its support and the fate of LIP was once again uncertain. It is on this point, where all the usual accounts stop, that our interest focuses. LIP workers under the guidance of their trade union leaders decided to create cooperatives in order to gain self-employment.<sup>64</sup>

As can be traced through the pages of the journal *Lip-Unité*,<sup>65</sup> the cooperatives were set up over time between 1978 and 1981. The biggest one was once again called LIP—Industries de Palente (L.I.P.)—and it included mechanics and watchmaking. The Commissions Artisanales de Palente (CAP) were also launched, including activities such as a sewing workshop and a laboratory for handcrafted wood and pottery products. Later, a restaurant was added called *Au chemin de Palente* (after the one established to feed workers engaged in the 1976 conflict). Finally, another workshop

called “4M” (Medical material and Micro-Mechanics), a hair salon, a printing workshop, a garage, a collective (CLEF) focusing on research and vocational courses, and a kindergarten were created.

After the tough confrontations between LIP workers and public authorities in the prior years, the French state allowed this reorganization, but demanded a significant reduction in the number of employees. Three lists were prepared by the trade unions, dividing the workers among (A) those who would immediately become part of the new cooperatives, (B) those who would be hired at a later stage, (C) those who would not have a place in this new situation. On October 3, 1979, LIP workers were then convened to a general assembly to cast their vote for or against the project. Thus, while a cooperative usually represents a means of workers’ resilience and a positive self-supporting initiative, in the case of LIP—a community of workers who shared years of struggle sticking together to fight and be victorious, who suffered state and police repression, who shared daily life during the occupation of their factory—the creation of cooperatives that did not include everyone, was in fact a defeat.

Piton, who decided to leave, recalled clearly. “I opposed the creation of small cooperatives, because there was nothing about self-management there. They were run by a few people, and they could not hire all of us. At the time of the struggle, we used to say, ‘One for all, all for one!’ thus this was a terrible moment for me, as for many other people. There was a dispersal.”<sup>66</sup> Despite a widespread feeling of disillusionment, a majority of the workers voted in favor of creating the cooperatives. Newspapers, both at the local and national level, described a very tense situation that demonstrated the fracture the vote created in a once mostly-united front. An article in *Libération* published the day after the vote underlined the ratio used to rate the workers. “[Among] those left outside the plan, [...] of course, we find above all the mass of low-skilled workers, the *ouvrières spécialisées* (OS) of Lip, that is to say: the women.”<sup>67</sup> That women constituted the bulk of workers in the lowest levels of the factory qualification hierarchy was acutely described by Piton herself in a video created by director Carole Roussopoulos in 1976. Here, Piton adopts a sort of metaphor, speaking of men and women as white and Arabs, because she’s convinced this will demonstrate more vividly the kind of vertical segregation suffered by women at LIP, both in the ordinary work organization and in the framework of the LIP struggle. “At LIP, it’s half white and half Arab. Clearly, all the top bosses are white people: there are not Arab bosses. The white top bosses think, reflect and talk; we, the Arabs, we think (I know that, because I am an Arab) and we reflect, but the white bosses can’t know this, because we’re never allowed to talk.”<sup>68</sup> Pauline Brangolo, in her compelling master thesis devoted to LIP’s women, demonstrated the relevance of skills in the decision-making process to come up with the three lists (A, B, C) regarding the new cooperatives and she proved how gender discrimination was realized under the label of “qualification evaluation.”<sup>69</sup> The majority of the spots in the cooperatives were for technicians and skilled workers (*ouvriers professionnels*, OP), predominantly male occupations. Most of the workers left out were semi-skilled (*ouvrières spécialisées*, OS) and thus women who worked at the assembly line. As Piton told me, the dynamic was very far removed from that of the previous workers’ struggles. A flyer distributed on the day of the vote read, “I am voting against

reclassifications. LIP belongs to those who struggle. Sacrificing part of the workers for the profitability of a company—even a cooperative—is unacceptable. I didn't fight for this. I cannot accept that we take charge of compiling the list of friends that we abandon to unemployment."<sup>70</sup>

The ethical assumption and political stance expressed in this statement was widespread among LIP workers and shared particularly by those, mostly women, who were excluded from the new-born cooperatives not by a distant capitalist manager but by their peers. A poignant example is narrated by director Thomas Faverjon in his documentary *Fils de LIP*, where he portrays the story of his family. Both his parents had worked at LIP, but in 1979 while his father was able to enter a cooperative, his mother was left out, officially on account of a lack of technical qualification, but also (as the documentary implies) because it was considered that the household was already included in the cooperative project because her husband had been hired.<sup>71</sup> In the documentary, Liliane Faverjon appears unwilling to speak about both the episode of the vote on the cooperatives and the subsequent phase of unemployment: a mixture of resentment and a feeling of defeat affects all her brief answers to her son. More eloquent testimony is provided by a former LIP leader, Jacques Burtz, who admits, "But from my point of view, eh, we left aside the...the most fragile people to put them on the C list, as vulgar bosses would have done. There's no need to speculate on more complicated stuff, eh? The cooperatives recruited the most efficient employees."<sup>72</sup> Brangolo reports that during the interviews she conducted a few years ago, mostly focused on the on the period of labor struggle, "the creation of the cooperatives constituted a painful moment for LIP workers and during our exchanges any reference to it was either very quick or completely avoided."<sup>73</sup> According to Thomas Faverjon, this understanding and the consequent anger and pain it provoked was particularly deep among the women who were laid off, but it also affected other women. Fatima Demougeot, for example, a member of the Action Committee and activist within the LIP feminist collective said at a women-only meeting in January 1980, "I perceive the vote on October 3, 1979 as an end."<sup>74</sup>

Piton shared this perspective. Her experience with unemployment, as a reflection of a wounded community, was particularly harsh because it was lived in complete solitude.<sup>75</sup> "In order to survive I enrolled in a vocational course for which I got a small salary. After an internship, a boss who had seen my skills wanted to hire me. I prepared my move, I gave up my apartment, and the day I was to take this new job, the boss changed his mind. [...] So, I had no more housing, no more income, and after the course I had no right to unemployment benefits... So, I only managed to store my remaining furniture in kind of a warehouse, but I was homeless: this was the worst part of unemployment. I was homeless, totally unemployed, I could not pay rent, have a car ... I was S.D.F. (*sans domicile fixe*), that means 'homeless.'"<sup>76</sup>

This is the bleak beginning of Piton's account. As a political activist, she is a masterful speaker, and thus of course it's important to keep in mind that she's very much aware of the power of her language and she obviously chooses her words very carefully. In fact, she never had to live on the street, but managed to find her way by leaving Besançon and moving to Paris, where she had previously worked and had a few connections. The significance of her being "homeless" lies in the way this narrative amplifies her experience of unemployment and the feelings associated with it, feelings

of erasure, loneliness, and shame.<sup>77</sup> Piton moved to Paris, finding “odd, undeclared jobs while I was hosted by some nice friends. [...] I kept looking for a real job, but when I said that I had worked at LIP, I was rejected and sometimes in a very nasty way.”<sup>78</sup> The very fame of the LIP struggle, rapidly turned into a stigma that prevented many of the workers from finding decent jobs afterward. Their fight to keep their jobs and save their company was considered by potential employers as a rebellious act of which they had to be wary. Piton confirmed, “others from LIP also had difficulties like that!”<sup>79</sup>

In the history of working-class struggle and resistance in capitalist societies, these forms of ostracism are of course widespread for workers who are unionized or simply activists and are considered “problematic” because they are not docile in the face of employers’ abuse. In the case of Fiat, for example, this stigma translated into the notorious practice of isolating into “ghetto-departments,” those unionized/politicized workers whom the company had to rehire after their period of *cassa integrazione*.<sup>80</sup> As described in some of the testimonies included in a book edited by Pietro Ingrao, such situations (that today we would define as mobbing) led many unionists to leave. This was the case for the only woman whose story is included in those pages, Ebe Matta.<sup>81</sup> Unfortunately, dispersing and isolating activists usually proves effective in breaking the workers’ front.<sup>82</sup> The case of LIP mirrors these dynamics in two different ways: on the one hand, due to the constraints imposed by the French state on the creation of the cooperatives, workers were led to disaggregate and thus weakened their negotiating power. On the other hand, those who were not integrated in the cooperatives, such as Liliane Faverjon, or those who decided to refuse the whole outcome and to leave, such as Piton, faced many difficulties finding a new job after having participated in the LIP workers’ struggle.

Piton’s decision to move to Paris also represents symbolically (in physical and geographical terms) the fracture among workers at LIP and the solitary path this woman—always fiercely independent<sup>83</sup>—decided to undertake. In explaining her choices and describing her situation, her thoughts go immediately to her family. “My parents lived in the countryside, but I didn’t want to ask for their help and go to my parents’ place...that’s why I went to Paris. I had nothing left in Besançon.”<sup>84</sup> This last statement is astonishing if we consider that Piton actively took part in the struggle at LIP and shared daily life with her fellow coworkers for years. She was consciously and explicitly at the heart of the LIP fight. Obviously, the end of this fight led her to believe that there was nothing of value left for her in Besançon (nothing that could be as fulfilling as the previous period). Yet it is certainly surprising how empty the reality that came out of that struggle appeared to her. The intensity of that period made everything else appear unworthy, but despite this intensity, not much in terms of human connections survived, especially after the workers’ front split with the founding of the cooperatives.

The material experience of unemployment may put people in deep isolation, even after they shared years of collective resistance.<sup>85</sup> In Piton’s experience, distance established itself both with former coworkers and family members. Beyond her parents, she also mentioned her daughter. “She was over 18, she managed to take care of herself, but we were far apart...” For many women with family responsibilities unemployment often meant giving up their economic independence and facing a sense

of invisibility due to leaving the public space. However, Piton's situation sheds light on a different (but real and not isolated) case where the invisibility came from having no home to "go back" to. Our gendered mental landscape is populated by married women with children, especially with regards to the '70s, but single women and mono-parental families did exist and were also affected by job loss, and dislocations.<sup>86</sup> Piton continued, "It was a very hard period, one of precarity."<sup>87</sup> This description encompasses both her economic and existential situation. Her move to Paris allowed Piton to carry on with her life but affected her relationships considerably and also her political commitment. She added, "I'm telling you, when you have no home of your own, no fixed address (I had no address, no telephone)...you're lonely. I had, in a way, *disappeared*."<sup>88</sup> As disturbing as this term may seem, it expresses the feeling of disconnection that unemployed people develop in production-oriented, commodified societies.<sup>89</sup> Piton further explained to me, "I was isolated from my old friends. I met people in Paris, but they were unaware that I was so poor. [...] I built new personal relationships, but I did not say that I was poor. Eventually, I couldn't continue to meet with these friends because I could never...for example pay at the restaurant. I accepted that they paid twice for me, but afterwards... I was ashamed. I couldn't say I had nothing! [Not even to friends?] No, that was too much. It was not that I wasn't rich: *I had nothing*."<sup>90</sup>

Piton found it difficult to establish deep personal links because of the precarity of her existence as an unemployed, single woman, as is often the case, and this made her experience more painful to deal with. Precarity and isolation also affected her political commitment, which heretofore had been fundamental in Piton's life (and happily, has returned to being so again, later in her life). When I asked her if she knew about the struggles that occurred in Italy during the same period, she replied, "With regards to the 1980 Fiat strike that you mention, I lacked any information. I couldn't even buy the newspapers in 1980, I was too busy *surviving*, 'keeping my head above water' as it's said. I kind of *forgot the world around me*."<sup>91</sup> This last statement, coming from a woman who has always been passionate about collective emancipation (among fellow workers and among women), proves much in the telling of the harshness of unemployment and of the impact of this circumstance on one's relation to the public sphere. And it was echoed by Mecozzi when she said participation of unemployed women in collective political struggle was clearly prevented by the weight of "keeping the wolf from the door."

Piton was absorbed by the need to sustain herself, but she knew that for other women similar difficulties could arise from family duties. "Other unemployed women, in families with one or two small children, have more constraints in accepting a job. If it's a bit far, for example, or if the schedule doesn't match school's hours. On the contrary, men don't really take all this into account. They accept a job offer even if it's a bit far away or if the schedule doesn't match... They find a job, it's easier. For a woman it is harder. In addition, employers are often reluctant to hire a woman who has children under fourteen, because they know that she is the one who would be absent if, for example, the child is sick. On the other hand, a man's presence at work wouldn't be affected by having children. This is a big deal for women, and it lasts for years."<sup>92</sup> While it was a tough period, Piton was relieved to bear responsibility just for herself at the time. Of course, not having accommodations of her own was painful,



but with reference to my questions about the role of domesticity in the interplay between work and its loss/private life/gendered roles, Monique commented, "At least I had some freedom. I was in Besançon, I went to Paris and Courchevel. [...] There were women who lost their jobs and could not find new ones. If their husband had a job, they could live; but they once again became a domestic servant. My experience has been different."<sup>93</sup> This quote, which underlines the value Piton attached to her freedom and independence, brings us back to the issue raised in the title of this article: working women's refusal to accept that unemployment meant returning to a domestic life with no economic power, no freedom, and no social status other than that of the traditional housewife.

## Conclusions

This article points to some significant ways in which women's experiences with job loss and unemployment differed from men in the case studies considered. The findings in turn pave the way for further research. Firstly, in both instances it appears that women were discriminated against and targeted for layoffs by their employers, whether they were company managers (Fiat) or fellow coworkers (LIP with the founding of the cooperatives). Discrimination against women often develops "in disguise." At Fiat, management's discriminatory approach counted on the inefficiency of the country's social services that would inevitably lead women to abandon their jobs because of their role as primary caregivers within the household. Another way women were pushed out of Fiat in a disproportionate ratio compared to the gender composition of the factory's workforce was the mobbing practice of assigning women to physically demanding departments where they were also bullied by their male coworkers.<sup>94</sup> At LIP, discrimination took place under the pretext of "skills and qualification": instead of organizing vocational courses, this choice led women, mostly employed in lower technical levels, to outnumber men among the workers made redundant, even though they were not the majority at LIP. Gender discrimination in layoff dynamics, although disguised, is a reality that needs to be addressed. It relies on gender inequalities in society as a whole: family and domestic duties that rest primarily on women's shoulders and widespread stereotypes that discourage girls from pursuing an education, and subsequently a professional path, in technical and scientific domains.

A second suggestive conclusion reached is that unemployment affects women's participation in collective struggles more than men. Both women interviewed recall the additional constraints (largely domestic obligations) women contended with during unemployment. While women were active in the struggles against layoffs and factory closure at both sites, in the aftermath of the mobilizations they often abandoned all collective political commitment. In part, they felt disillusioned by their marginalization as they were disproportionately targeted for layoffs; they were also absorbed by the domestic tasks they were supposed to perform solely since they no longer had extra-domestic employment.

The case studies addressed here represent sites where female workers had not only been widely involved in the battle against layoffs, but where they had specifically developed highly reflexive and committed struggles oriented by a new feminist

perspective (as was the case with the Intercategoriale Donne in Turin and the Groupe Femmes at LIP). The difficulty the women faced carrying on their already well-advanced, collective political engagement after being touched by unemployment is stark. Piton left Besançon and was completely overwhelmed to the point where she “kind of forgot the world around” because she was “too busy surviving.”<sup>95</sup> Mecozzi was not unemployed (she worked full time for the trade unions) but she acknowledges the scarcity of women active in the unemployed committee. Women’s role as primary caregivers not only makes it harder for them to find a new jobs with good conditions that meet their family’s needs, but also constrains their ability to take part in forms of mobilization. However, this reality should not lead us to underestimate women’s attachment to their nondomestic jobs; rather it should lead to further analysis of the persistent, gender-based delineations within the domestic sphere and its core activities, its meaning in defining gender roles and identities in modern Western societies, and its impact on activism and political commitment.

Finally, the individual paths illustrated here highlight that while we can retrace a few of the general features that characterized women’s experiences with unemployment, in a micro-historical perspective it is also very interesting to illuminate a more nuanced reality. A reality that includes a female trade unionist who chose to continue fighting to maintain a link between unemployed workers and the unions, and a single woman who didn’t have a “home” to return to and was deeply affected by unemployment, facing dislocation and solitude as well as economic poverty. While the two women had atypical paths, their voices help us reflect critically about their coworkers, whose memories are ever present in their accounts since both women were deeply engaged in collective feminist practice, and to avoid any simplistic assumptions about women, especially as we strive to uncover their marginalized stories.

## Notes

1. See Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 72–74. When discussing the fundamental book of E.P. Thompson (*The Making of the English working class* [V. Gollancz, 1964]), Scott explains: “This is preeminently a story about men, and class is, in its origin and its expression, constructed as a masculine identity, even when not all the actors are men. [...] The] association of women and domesticity crops up even when the subject is women workers, even, that is, when women’s experience is referred primarily to relations of production. [...] Since women’s independence is cast in terms of a prior domesticity instead of work, their claims and political activities had less weight in the *making* of the class. In a sense, the domestic sphere operates as a double foil: it is the place where a presumably natural sexual division of labor prevails, as compared to the workplace, where relations of production are socially constructed; but it is also the place from which politics can not emanate because it does not provide the experience of exploitation that contains within it the possibility of the collective identity of interest that is class consciousness.”

2. For the Italian case, see the works by the group for the research on the family and on the female condition (GRIFF), informally founded in 1973 and later officially integrated as a lab at the University of Milan: Laura Balbo, Marina Bianchi, Lorenza Zanuso, Elisabeth Wilson, eds., *Doppia presenza e mercato del lavoro* (1978), 32. For the French case, see the survey conducted by sociologist Madelaine Guilbert for the union Central Général du Travail (CGT) and available at the Institut d’Histoire Sociale, 43 CFD 5 = Inchieste, f.1, Centre Confederal d’Etudes Economiques et Sociales CGT, *Enquete sur les ouvrières et les employées* (December 1975).

3. In economics, see, for example, Tuovi Allén, “Economic Development and the Feminization of Poverty,” in *Women’s Work in the World Economy*, eds. Nancy Folbre, Barbara Bergmann, Bina Agarwal, and Maria Floro (4<sup>th</sup> volume of Amartya Sen, ed., *Issues in Contemporary Economics*, London: MacMillan, 1992). In

sociology, see Margaret Maruani, eds., *Les nouvelles frontières de l'inégalité. Hommes et femmes sur le marché du travail* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998); in particular the third section: Chantal Rogerat and Rachel Silvera, eds., *La flexibilité plurielle: (in)activité, précarité, chômage*, 195–276. Again in sociology, but with a more micro-dynamic perspective, see Aliya Hamid Rao, *Crunch time: how married couples confront unemployment* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020). See also Sarah Damaske, *The Tolls of Uncertainty. How Privilege and the Guilt Gap Shape Unemployment in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021). In psychology, see, for example, Margaret E. Ensminger and David D. Celentano, “Gender differences in the effect of unemployment on psychological distress,” *Social Science & Medicine* 30 (1990): 469–477.

4. A happy exception is constituted, for the Italian case and in the *longue durée* perspective, by the richly documented economic-history research of Manfredi Alberti, “La disoccupazione delle donne nell’Italia liberale (1861–1915): realtà e rappresentazioni statistiche,” *Italia contemporanea* 277 (2015): 7–33. The attention to this specific aspect is present also in his comprehensive book *Senza lavoro: la disoccupazione in Italia dall’Unità a oggi* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2016).

5. See Rania Antonopoulos, ed., *Gender Perspectives and Gender Impacts of the Global Economic Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Harriet Bradley, *Fractured Identities: Changing Patterns of Inequality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

6. See the coverage launched by international media, such in the case of Patricia Cohen, “Recession With a Difference: Women Face Special Burden,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 2020.

7. See John Burnett, *Idle Hands. The Experience of Unemployment, 1790 - 1990* (London: Routledge, 1994). Ava Baron, “Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historian’s Gaze,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 69 (2006): 143–60.

8. Jackie Clarke, “Closing time: deindustrialization and nostalgia in contemporary France,” *History Workshop Journal* 79 (2015): 107–125. Jackie Clarke, *Afterlives of a factory: memory, place and space in Alençon*, in *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Postindustrial Places*, eds. S. High, L. MacKinnon, and A. Perchar (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017): 111–125.

9. Eloisa Betti and Elisa Giovannetti, *Senza giusta causa. Le donne licenziate per rappresaglia politico-sindacale a Bologna negli anni Cinquanta* (Bologna: Editrice Socialmente, 2014). Eloisa Betti, *Le ombre del fordismo. Sviluppo industriale, occupazione femminile e precarietà del lavoro nel trentennio glorioso (Bologna, Emilia-Romagna, Italia)* (Bologna: Bononia University Press srl, 2020).

10. Maud Ann Bracke, “Labour, gender, and de-industrialisation: women workers at Fiat (Italy, 1970s–1980s),” *Contemporary European History* 28 (2019): 484–499. Fanny Gallot and Eve Meuret-Campfort, “Des ouvrières en lutte dans l’après 1968: Rapports au féminisme et subversions de genre,” *Politix* 109 (2015): 21–43. Chiara Bonfiglioli, *Women and Industry in the Balkans: The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Textile Sector* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019).

11. See Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metalworking Industries, 1914-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

12. See Alessandra Pescarolo, *Il lavoro delle donne nell’Italia contemporanea* (Roma: Viella, 2019).

13. See, for example, Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

14. As highlighted by Cédric Afsa Essafi and Sophie Buffeteau: “Women have been affected by the labor market crisis that began with the first oil shock and worsened thereafter. Men have not been preserved, but their unemployment rate was below the female rate” in their article “L’activité féminine en France : quelles évolutions récentes, quelles tendances pour l’avenir ?” *Economie et Statistique* 398–399 (2006): 85–97.

15. In the deregulation process affecting women’s participation in the labor market, a crucial role is played by forms of flexible/precarious work. See Margaret Maruani, “L’emploi féminin à l’ombre du chômage,” *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 115 (1996): 48–57.

16. See, for example, a declaration of the General Office of the French trade union “Confédération Générale du Travail,” published March 8, 1979: “Speculating both on the dramatic situation of unemployment [...] a campaign against women’s work is conducted.” Document preserved at the Institut d’Histoire Sociale, box 43 CFD 10 file 7. See also this report, from Toulouse: “At the municipal congress in February 1977 a comrade said that if women remained at home, there would be more job for men...”. IHS, box 43 CFD 35 file 2. [Translations are mine]

17. See Didier Demazière, “Les femmes et le chômage,” *Sociologies* [En ligne], Théories et recherches, mis en ligne le 21 février 2017, consulté le 22 février 2017, available at: <http://sociologies.revues.org/5966>.

18. See Didier Demazière, “The Boundaries of Unemployment Institutional Rules and Real-Life Experiences,” in *The deconstruction of employment as a political question. ‘Employment’ as a Floating Signifier*, eds. Amparo Serrano-Pascual and Maria Jepsen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
19. See Susan Gal, “A Semiotic of the Public/Private Distinction,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13 (Spring 2002): 77–95.
20. About the fact that collective bargaining, legislative initiatives, and individual responses to unemployment may vary significantly according to national settings, leading to different strategies put into place to tackle this issue, see Didier Demazière, Olivier Giraud, and Michel Lallement, “Comparer. Options et inflexions d’une pratique de recherche,” *Sociologie du travail* 55 (2013).
21. See Marica Tolomelli, *L’Italia dei movimenti. Politica e società nella Prima repubblica* (Roma: Carocci, 2015). See also Xavier Vigna, *L’insubordination ouvrière dans les années 68. Essai d’histoire politique des usines* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007).
22. In 1977, France saw a female employment rate, for the age group 15–64 years, of 54.8 percent. In Italy, this rate was 33.5 percent. Data respectively from INSEE (<https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/6047733?sommaire=6047805#consulter>) and ISTAT ([https://www.istat.it/it/files/2013/04/Report-serie-storiche\\_Occupati-e-disoccupati2.pdf](https://www.istat.it/it/files/2013/04/Report-serie-storiche_Occupati-e-disoccupati2.pdf), 2).
23. Between the 1970s and the 1980s we find: in Italy, a government of Christian Democrats followed by a government led by Socialist Bettino Craxi with Christian Democrats’ support (1983); in France, a major change from Giscard D’Estaing’s presidency to the first Socialist president François Mitterrand (1981).
24. See the last chapter of Gisela Bock, *Women in European History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002). See Heidi Hartmann, *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union*, in *Women and Revolution*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston: Black Rose Books, 1981).
25. Only recently a couple of exceptions emerged that adopted a gendered perspective with regard to these cases (but mainly focusing of the phase of fighting against factory closure). See Maud Ann Bracke, “Labour, gender, and de-industrialisation: women workers at Fiat (Italy, 1970s–1980s),” *Contemporary European History* 28 (2019): 484–499. See also Donald Reid, *Opening the gates. The Lip Affair, 1968–1981* (New York: Verso, 2018).
26. See Maud Bracke, “Building a ‘Counter-Community of Emotions’: Feminist Encounters and Socio-Cultural Difference in 1970s Turin,” *Modern Italy* 2 (2012): 223–236. See also her *Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy (1968–1983)* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
27. The site of Mirafiori went from having 57,700 works in 1980 to 36,000 in 1988.
28. See Andrea Sangiovanni, *Tute blu, la parabola operaia nell’Italia repubblicana* (Roma: Donzelli, 2006).
29. See also the archive cataloguing made of this unionist’s documents by Paola De Ferrari, *Salva con nome, L’archivio di Alessandra Mecozzi. 1974–1999*, Associazione Piera Zumaglini Archivio storico del movimento femminista – Torino (Torino, 2007).
30. See Edmond Maire, *Lip 73* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973). See various authors, *LIP: how French workers are fighting the sack* (Bristol: RSM, 1973).
31. See the collective booklet *Lip au féminin* (Paris: Syros, 1977).
32. LIP: a) CFDT archives in Paris: collection “Soutien de la CFDT lors du conflit de l’usine horlogère LIP à Besançon”; b) Archives Départementales du Doubs: 45J fonds Michel Jeanningros - Documentation sur le conflit à Lip Besançon; c) Archives Municipales de Besançon: collection LIP. FIAT: a) Archivio Fondazione Istituto Gramsci: collections CGIL and FIOM, particularly the collection “Coordinamento lavoratori Fiat in Cassa integrazione guadagni” now intergated in the archive Polo del 900; b) Archivio Ass. Zumaglini at the Casa delle Donne di Torino: collection Alessandra Mecozzi.
33. Demazière, *The Boundaries of Unemployment* (2019), here 224.
34. Luisa Passerini stated that: “It has taken place a long process of integration between oral history and gender history: [...] they went together in broadening the territory of history and so renewing its objects and methods.” Passerini, “Il genere è ancora una categoria utile per la storia orale?” *Quaderno di storia contemporanea* 40 (2006): 12–14. [Translation is mine]
35. For a methodological reflection on the use of biographical accounts as primary sources, see the collection by Ana Caetano and Magda Nico, eds., *Biographical Research. Challenges and Creativity* (New York: Routledge, 2022). Concerning the choice of these sources about historically marginalized subjects, see, in particular, the chapter by Elsa Lechner, *Migrants’ lives matter. Biographical research, recognition and social participation*, 146–160. A text that effectively combines the discussion of oral sources and the relevance of

individual biographies is Susan A. Crane, “Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory,” in *American Historical Review* 102 (1997): 1372–1385.

36. See Raffaella Sarti, Anna Bellavitis, and Manuela Martini, eds., *What is Work? Gender at the Crossroads of Home, Family, and Business* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2018).

37. See Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter. The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

38. See Valerio Castronovo, *FIAT, 1899-1999. Un secolo di storia italiana* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1999).

39. See Pierre Rosanvallon, *L'Âge de l'autogestion* (Paris: Edition de Seuil, 1976).

40. See De Ferrari, *Salva con nome*. See also Monique Piton, *C'est possible ! Le récit de ce que j'ai éprouvé durant cette lutte de Lip* (Paris: Éditions des Femmes, 1975). Monique Piton, *Mémoires libres* (Paris: Syllepses, 2010).

41. In one of the most famous ones, Piton—convinced that racial discrimination appears more evident than gender discrimination—uses the metaphor of white people/Arab people to speak of the men/women relationship in the framework of LIP's occupation. Two videos are available at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF): Carole Roussopoulos (directed by), *LIP V – Christiane et Monique ; LIP VI – Jacqueline et Marcel* (Paris: Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir [distrib.], copy, 1976).

42. Italian General Confederation of Labour.

43. Archivio dei Movimenti – Genoa, Collection *Coordinamento Donne FLM e corsi 150 ore delle donne*, box XI *Produrre e Riprodurre. Convegno delle donne dei Paesi industrializzati sul tema: donne e lavoro (Torino, 23-24-25 aprile 1983)*.

44. See Nicoletta Giorda, *Fare la differenza: l'esperienza dell'Intercategoriale donne di Torino, 1975-1986* (Torino: Angolo Manzoni, 2007).

45. See Maud Ann Bracke, “Labour, gender, and de-industrialisation: women workers at Fiat (Italy, 1970s-1980s),” *Contemporary European History* 28 (2019): 484-499.

46. Archivio Gramsci Piemonte, Collection FIOM-CGIL, box 630, file 5, FIAT Relazioni Interne, *Assunzioni di personale femminile - Area torinese, 27/02/78*.

47. Alessandra Mecozzi, CGIL Turin, original interview, August 2, 2018.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.* And see Archivio dei Movimenti – Genoa, Collection *Coordinamento Donne FLM e corsi 150 ore delle donne*, box XI *Produrre e Riprodurre. Convegno delle donne dei Paesi industrializzati sul tema: donne e lavoro (Torino, 23-24-25 aprile 1983)*.

51. For an iconic representation of this melting-pot of new issues that women introduced in the union framework, see the description given by Laura Fiori of the poster she realized for the conference *Produrre e Riprodurre*: “Vaguely inspired by the work of D. Hockney that I knew, it was based on three pictures of the same woman in three different settings and moments. It addressed the fragmentation, women's experience as divided among freedom, family links, work-emancipation.” The transcription of this interview can be found in Giorda, *op. cit.*, 93 (original testimonies, integral version).

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. Giovanna Cuminatto, CGIL Turin, original interview, April 16, 2014.

57. Evidence of this in the report from a workshop organized at the beginning of 1980 for the new female delegates and whose documents are collected in the booklet: Various authors, *Il sindacato di Eva*, Torino, Centro Stampa FLM, 1981.

58. Alessandra Mecozzi, CGIL Turin, original interview, August 2, 2018.

59. Donald Reid, *Opening the gates. Th Lip Affair, 1968-1981* (New York: Verso, 2018), 230.

60. See Frank Georgi, ed., *Autogestion. La dernière utopie ?* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003).

61. Monique Piton, (CFDT) Besançon, original interview, December 28, 2020.

62. See Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, *Le moment 68: une histoire contestée* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008).

63. Manager with a left-wing approach. See his co-authored book: Guillaume Gourgues and Claude Neuschwander, *Pourquoi ont-ils tué LIP ? De la victoire ouvrière au tournant néolibéral* (Paris: Raisons d'Agir, 2018).

64. Note that this paragraph owes much to a master thesis I wrote a few years ago by Pauline Brangolo under the supervision of Prof. Frank Georgi: *Les filles de Lip (1968–1981). Trajectoires de salariées, mobilisations féminines et conflits sociaux*, Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, Master Histoire contemporaine des sociétés occidentales, Spécialité Histoire sociale, academic year 2014–2015.
65. The issues of the journal *LIP Unité* are available at the BnF, no. 1 (1973)–no. 19 (1975), 2e série, no. 1 (1976)–no. 26 (1981), 3e série, no. 1 (1982)–no. 5/6 (1983).
66. Monique Piton, (CFDT) Besançon, original interview – December 28th 2020.
67. “Palente au tournant,” *Libération*, October 4, 1979, 1026W23, Archives Départementales du Doubs.
68. BnF: Carole Roussopoulos (directed by), *LIP V – Christiane et Monique*, Paris: Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, 1976.
69. See the tables realized by Brangolo at 191–192 of her master thesis. Among the workers designated for the C list (that of layoffs), 39 were OS and 18 were OP. Women were respectively 38 in the first group and 13 in the second. Among workers designated for re-hiring, 29 were OS and 36 were OP: women were 23 in the first group and only 11 in the second one.
70. The flyer is quoted in “Lip: une majorité se dessine pour entrer dans la voie des sacrifices,” *L’Est républicain*, October 4, 1979.
71. BnF: Thomas Faverjon (directed by), *Fils de Lip*, Paris, TS productions, 2007.
72. *Ibid.*, interview with Jacques Burtz.
73. Brangolo, *Les filles de Lip*, 195.
74. Favron, *Fils de LIP*, interview with Fatima Demougeot.
75. French social security benefits for the unemployed were a contentious tool in the case of LIP workers: Messmer’s government, for example, had used them to try forcing workers to cease their self-employment practices and register with the Agence Nationale de l’Emploi (Archives départementales du Doubs, 1026W10 Ministère de la Santé Publique to Direction de la Sécurité Sociale de Bourgogne, November 1, 1973). To get a sense of the overall situation of unemployment in France, I provide some information from the datasets of the INSEE: at the end of 1979, the women’s unemployment rate was 7.7 percent while the men’s rate was 3.8 percent. Back in 1975, these data were respectively 4.6 percent and 2.3 percent (<https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/fichier/2532173/econ-gen-taux-cho-trim-2.xlsx>).
76. Monique Piton, (CFDT) Besançon, original interview, December 28, 2020.
77. See Steven C. High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: the Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2007).
78. Monique Piton, (CFDT) Besançon, original interview, December 28, 2020.
79. *Ibid.*
80. See Andrea Sangiovanni, *Tute blu, la parabola operaia nell’Italia repubblicana* (Roma: Donzelli, 2006).
81. Coordinamento Cassintegri, *L’altra faccia della FIAT. I protagonisti raccontano* (Roma: ErreEmme, 1990).
82. An interesting reference can be made to the efforts realized in Italy to unionize homeworkers, mostly women: see my contribution “Lavoro domestico e femminismo sindacale: un incontro mancato? Alcune riflessioni,” in *Separate in casa. Lavoratrici domestiche, femministe e sindacaliste: una mancata alleanza*, ed. Beatrice Busi (Roma: Ediesse, 2020), 159–181.
83. See, for example, her choice of divorcing her husband, narrated in her biography in the chapter “1967, quitter le domicile...redémarrer,” in *Mémoires libres* (Paris: Syllepses, 2010), 49–56.
84. Monique Piton, (CFDT) Besançon, original interview, December 28, 2020.
85. For an interesting reflection on the weight of political boosting of individualism during phases of unemployment, see Jane Elliott and Jon Lawrence, “The Emotional Economy of Unemployment: A Re-Analysis of Testimony From a Sheppey Family, 1978–1983,” *Sage Open*, October 2016.
86. For more general discussions about the link between different household patterns, economic well-being, and public policies, see, for example, Nancy Folbre, *Women on Their Own: Global Patterns of Female Headship* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
87. Monique Piton, (CFDT) Besançon, original interview, December 28, 2020.
88. *Ibid.*
89. See Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
90. Monique Piton, (CFDT) Besançon, original interview, December 28, 2020.
91. *Ibid.*

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid.

94. See the exchange reported by another interviewee from Fiat, Giovanna Cuminatto, cited earlier in the article (endnote 56). This practice by Fiat is also denounced in a flyer collected in a booklet edited by the Intercategoriale. Various authors, *La spina all'occhiello* (Torino: Musolini Editore, 1979), 107–108.

95. Ibid.