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# Employee participation: experiences with action research

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**ABSTRACT**

Employee participation has the potential to improve working conditions and employee well-being. However, management-driven participation often prioritises business benefits over industrial democracy, while evidence on trade union-driven participation remains limited. This paper presents and discusses an innovative action research experience of employee participation where academia mediated between trade unions and companies by providing a learning and experiential arena to explore new forms of employee and trade union engagement in workplace change.

The project outcomes show that under weak institutional enforcement voluntary engagement in a participative experience can encourage further employee participation when perceived benefits and mutual trust support commitment and embed participation in organisational routines. Without these positive factors, companies and trade unions often revert to traditional, more controlling, and adversarial behaviours.

**KEYWORDS:** Employee participation, action-research, industrial relations, trade unions, organisational change

**JEL Classification**: J53, J51, C93

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## 1. Introduction

All over the world, recent decades have been marked by a growing demand for improvement in work-life balance and job quality, with people attaching more importance to leisure time, meaningful tasks and interesting jobs that imply responsibility and competence (Schröder, 2023). Employee participation, which concerns employees' engagement in decisions regarding their job and their workplace (Knudsen *et al.*, 2011), could contribute to answering this search (Gonzalez, 2010; Gollan and Xu, 2015). However, management-driven participation tends to privilege business benefits over workers' well-being and industrial democracy (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2010; Boxall and Macky, 2014). Employee-supportive organisations such as trade unions may promote an alternative agenda for participation centred on employees' needs (Terry, 2003), but no agreement exists so far on viable tools and solutions (Hoque *et al.*, 2014; Armaroli, 2022).

The inconclusive debate on the most appropriate way to pursue employee participation is partly due to its inherently social nature. Employee participation aims at organisational change and involves iterative processes of communication, dialogue and experimentation among the involved parties. Turning employee participation into an organisational behaviour requires, therefore, a lasting engagement by employees and employers. An institutional framework that promotes employee participation and regulates interactions among parties, as in Germany (Müller-Jentsch, 2016), can facilitate the adoption and application of participative practices. However, when enforcing mechanisms are absent or weak, as in the case of Italy, what could support the establishment of participative practices within organisations? Specifically, could employee participation arise from voluntary engagement in field experiences?

To answer the above questions, this paper presents and discusses the first two editions of an innovative experience of workplace participation which has been developing in an industrialised province in Northern Italy where researchers from the local university mediate between trade unions and companies by providing a learning and experiential arena to explore new forms of employee and trade union engagement in workplace change. Under the umbrella of project *Università, Sindacato e Impresa al Lavoro* (USIL, University, Trade Unions, and Firms at Work), joint teams of students in engineering and trade union delegates worked together to design effective answers to operative challenges. Teams presented their outcomes to company representatives, who provided feedback on the devised solutions. The USIL project pursued a double target. On the one hand, it aimed at training students and trade union members in change management tools to turn them into change agents. On the other hand, the project sought to

advance industrial relations by exploring innovative forms of learning and dialogue among social partners.

The USIL project presented two important peculiarities. First, contrary to a more frequent reactive approach (Bacon and Blyton, 2004), the initiative was proactively promoted by a trade union (Armaroli, 2022). Second, the project developed according to an action-research approach (Huzzard and Björkman, 2012; Coghlan and Brannick, 2005), where academic staff, trade union delegates and staff members, students and managers of the involved firms collaborated on a workplace improvement initiative.

In general, participants from the two first editions of the project, conducted in 2022 and 2023, reported a positive assessment of the experience and expressed a willingness to replicate the initiative in the future. The USIL project demonstrated that also under weak institutional enforcement a positive experience of employee participation can increase perceived benefits, mutual trust and commitment and activate participation-oriented practices, thus supporting further participation initiatives. However, without these positive factors, companies and trade unions often revert to traditional, more controlling and adversarial behaviours.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The next section surveys the background literature on employee participation and industrial relations and focuses the peculiar features of the Italian case. Section three introduces the empirical methodology that underlies the project and section four details the project stages. Section five outlines the project deployment and critically discusses the project outcomes as resulting from the participants' opinions. Section six draws some concluding remarks.

## 2. Employee participation and industrial relations

### 2.1. Employee participation

As Schregle (1970, p.117) already emphasised decades ago, "Workers' participation has become a magic word in many countries. Yet almost everyone who employs the terms thinks of something different." Therefore, any discussion of employee participation needs to start from the identification and contextualisation of its meaning. The well-known definition by Knudsen *et al*. (2011, p.385) describes employee participation as "all forms through which employees take part in decisions regarding their job and their workplace". Employee participation extends beyond employee involvement practices, where employees' creative and non-trivial decision-making is primarily triggered and regulated by management for the benefit of firm performance. In this sense, employee participation not only targets the accomplishment of specific goals but

is also an end in itself (Abildgaard *et al.*, 2020) that challenges managerial prerogatives (Knudsen *et al.*, 2011).

In each organisation the mechanisms designed to govern participation processes shape the nature of employee participation (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2010) by specifying participation dimensions, which include depth, form and scope (Knudsen *et al*., 2011). Participation depth refers to the degree of control over decision-making exerted by employees, spanning a continuum from no involvement to receiving information, joint consultation, joint decision-making and employee control (Gollan and Xu, 2015).

Participation forms focus on the communication channels between employees and management. Depending on the presence of representatives that mediate the communication between individual employees or teams and their managers, participation can be either indirect or direct[1]. In case of indirect participation, representatives may be chosen by employees (as in the case of trade unions or work councils) or appointed by managers.

Eventually, participation scope addresses the range of decisions involved in the participation process, which span from operational matters concerning jobs and tasks to company-level strategic choices (Wikhamn *et al.*, 2022).

A favourable environment is vital for effective employee participation. To this end, Kearney and Hays (1994) identify four enabling conditions. The first condition concerns the expectation of mutual benefits among involved parties, which have to materialise to ensure the sustainability of subsequent participation rounds (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2010; Hasu *et al.*, 2014; Lemmetty and Billet, 2023). From this perspective, the existence of conflicting interests and goals among employees could hinder the alignment towards common participation goals (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, 2021b). Second, the success of a participation process demands commitment from all the involved parties in terms of time and effort, which typically requires an organisational culture supportive of employee contribution to idea generation and organisational change (Hasu *et al.*, 2014). Third, employee participation demands trust and mutual respect among the involved parties (Knudsen *et al.*, 2011) to reconcile different interests and misaligned conceptions of participation (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, 2021b). Fourth, participation should integrate into organisational routines (Telljohann, 2010). Viable collaborative mechanisms, established by legislation and collective bargaining (Knudsen *et al.*, 2011) or via

[1] Financial participation, involving employees in company profits or stock ownership plans, is sometimes listed among forms of employee participation (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2010). However, in line with the definition of employee participation adopted in this paper (Knudsen *et al.*, 2011), the procedures governing how employees receive additional rewards based on company performance are seen as a result of participation rather than a distinct form.

informal practices (Casey and Delaney, 2022), must be in place, and both management and employees should comprehend them.

The understanding of and the rationale for employee participation have evolved over time, mirroring changing perceptions of labour significance and employees' roles in labour systems (Gonzalez, 2010). In the case of Western Europe Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2021a) outline how the pursuit of industrial democracy in the decades following the end of World War II corresponded to an increasing power of trade unions and an expanding scope of collective bargaining that emphasised the representative dimension of participation. In contrast, from the 1980s, rising market competition and the growing sophistication of production technologies drew management's attention to the opportunity for more active employee involvement in pursuit of production efficiency and innovation. Accordingly, firms engaged in workplace-focused direct employee participation, where advisory functions and limited authority in operative decision-making stimulate upward problem-solving and bottom-up communication. The rapid increase in the diffusion of knowledge workers from the 1990s has more recently contributed to a further evolution in the perception of employee participation. With their professional competences, educated staff become increasingly crucial for innovation besides day-to-day operations (Høyrup, 2010; Lemmetty and Billet, 2023) and actively seek participation in organisational development as a means to achieve professional fulfilment. In this perspective, employees are not merely passive recipients of management-designed involvement practices; instead, they pursue influence in company decisions based on their expertise. However, while this development broadens the scope and depth of employee participation, it also reinforces direct communication channels between employees and managers and questions the capability of employee representatives to meet the changing needs of workers.

### 2.2. The interplay between participation and industrial relations

A substantial body of literature supports the personal benefits associated with employee participation, including personal growth and development, job satisfaction and a higher feeling of inclusion (Kearney and Hays, 1994; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2010; Gollan and Xu, 2015). However, participation may represent a double-edged sword for employees, sometimes leading to enhanced job quality and workplace relationships, other times resulting in increased stress, fatigue and conflicts (Gonzalez, 2010; Boxall and Macky, 2014; Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, 2021a).

Some evidence suggests that the positive impact of employee participation on perceived job quality increases when trade unions mediate employees' concerns and contributions (Eurofound, 2007; Hoque *et al.*, 2014; Grande *et al.*, 2020) by extending collective bargaining into areas traditionally dominated by managerial prerogative (Terry, 2003; Gonzalez, 2010). The addition

of an employee participation agenda to consolidated bargaining on pay and work conditions could revamp trade unions' mission and counteract the decline in traditional employee representation (Moore *et al.*, 2019) that some researchers explicitly connect to trade unions' weakness and ineffectiveness in influencing the organisation, pace and nature of work (Armaroli, 2022). Workplace representatives can play a critical role in achieving a balance between efficiency and equity in workplaces (Moore *et al.*, 2019) and by mediating between employees and management (Casey and Delaney, 2022). In this perspective, indirect employee participation organised by trade unions and management-supported direct participation could become complements rather than substitute (Telljohann, 2010; Antonioli *et al.*, 2011).

However, a positive outcome of social partnerships between labour and management cannot be taken for granted. Depending on managerial attitude and on employers and employees' relative power (Alsos and Trygstad, 2023), union members risk co-optation into agendas controlled by employers, at the expense of workers' terms and conditions (Bacon and Blyton, 2004; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2010; Gollan and Xu, 2015; Casey and Delaney, 2022). In addition, tensions may arise within trade unions, if participation programmes interfere with other negotiation targets such as pay or employment (Hoque *et al.*, 2014), or between trade unions and employees, when challenging managerial prerogatives over the organisation and pace of work risks creating a more adversarial industrial relation climate, which employees may oppose (Hirsch and Hirsch, 2007).

National institutions that regulate industrial relations affect the varied attitudes of trade unions towards employee participation in industrialised countries (Berger *et al.*, 2019; Armaroli, 2022). In post-war Italy, direct or negotiated participation has traditionally been more prevalent compared to institutionalised participation rights (Telljohann, 2010 and 2019). However, in recent decades, there has been a growing focus on institutional tools for promoting and regulating employee participation. The Protocol of 23 July 1993, established among the government and social partners, marked the first institutionalisation of firm-level bargaining on variable pay and information and consultation procedures related to corporate changes, including technological innovation, organisational innovation and governance change. The Legislative Decree 25/2007 implemented the EU Directive 2002/14 on information and consultation in workplaces, contributing to an increased emphasis on employee participation. For instance, the 2016 collective labour agreement for the metalworking industry promotes voluntary experiments of employee participation across all organisational areas (Paper 10). Other initiatives include the inter-confederal agreement signed on 9 March 2018 by Confindustria, CGIL, CISL and UIL[2] (known as the *Patto della Fabbrica*, Factory Pact) aimed at enhancing workplace safety through extensive

[2] Confindustria is the main employer organisation in Italy. CGIL (*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* – General Italian Confederation of Labour), CISL (*Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori* – Italian Confederation of Workers' Unions) and UIL (*Unione Italiana del Lavoro* –Italian Labour Union) are the three main confederate trade union organisations in Italy.

use of indirect employee participation. Additionally, in 2023 CISL promoted a signature collection campaign for a referendum on establishing a legislative framework to regulate employee participation.

Despite those institutional initiatives, the practical implementation of trade union-mediated employee participation in Italy remains limited (Telljohann, 2010; Antonioli *et al.*, 2011; Armaroli, 2022). This is partly attributed to the unitary structure of workplace unions in Italy, where union delegates are tasked with both negotiating and leading participation programs, a role that is typically divided between trade union and work council members in other countries. This dual responsibility creates a workload that may lead union delegates to prioritise their more traditional bargain and proselytism tasks. Additionally, the typical training provided to union delegates rarely equips them with the specific technical and managerial skills often necessary for effectively managing participation initiatives (Telljohann, 2019; Addison and Teixeira, 2021). Without adequate skills, the engagement of employees' representatives in addressing management challenges risks remaining predominantly reactive.

## 3. Employee participation and action research

The USIL project aims to enhance learning and awareness on employee participation through the resolution of genuine workplace challenges. These features guided the choice of action research as a research strategy. In contrast to traditional research approaches, which focus on knowledge creation, action research aims at both taking action and creating knowledge or theory about that action (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005).

Action research integrates the processes of change and research, as action serves as the catalyst for both change and knowledge generation. On the one hand, it is through an action that 'breaks' the *status quo* that the underlying dynamics of a specific situation become apparent. On the other hand, action continuation necessitates the involvement of stakeholders in the research process, as they formulate hypotheses to interpret the transformations initiated and determine how to address them. Since organisational actors are the primary holders of that practical and often tacit 'situated' knowledge (Polany, 1966) crucial to organisational functioning, the most effective way to alter entrenched routines and dynamics is by engaging these actors in the research process.

If action research combines research, action and participation, the specific ways in which they come together have evolved significantly over time (Greenwood and Levin, 2011; Bradbury 2015). Within the broad field of action research in organisation studies (Shani and Coghlan, 2021), the USIL project positions in the Northern Europe tradition that emphasises organisational change achieved through employee participation and industrial democracy, drawing particularly

from the experience of the Dialogue Conferences (Gustavsen, 1985, 2011; Palshaugen, 1998), although with some differences.

The Dialogue Conferences were initiated in Norway and Sweden during the 1980s by employer associations and trade unions to enhance employee participation and consequently improve firm productivity and efficiency. The Dialogue Conferences foster a democratic dialogue, inspired by Habermas' communication theory (1981), where stakeholders collaborate in identifying problems, setting objectives and devising solutions (Gustavsen and Engelstad, 1986). In this democratic process, agreement is reached based on the merits of arguments and researchers facilitate interactions among players to ensure sincere, open and respectful communication of diverse viewpoints.

Similarly to the Dialogue Conferences, the USIL project provides an opportunity to address genuine production issues, encourages employee representatives to develop solution proposals and facilitates dialogue with the company. In addition, it served as a dedicated space for reflecting on the unfolding participation process. However, unlike the Conferences, which typically progress over several months, the teamwork challenges in the USIL project had a more limited scope and aligned with the project's shorter timeframe (about two months). Additionally, the dialogue took place without a formal regulatory structure to frame participatory relationships.

Other significant differences from the Dialogue Conferences concern the participants involved. Firstly, employees involved in workgroups comprised only union delegates due to bureaucratic obstacles in securing participation from other employees. However, this limitation offered an opportunity to assess the advantages and disadvantages of the single-channel system of employee representation in Italy, which assigns both traditional negotiation and participative activities to trade union delegates.

Secondly, managers were excluded from teamwork to minimise their potential influence. This adjustment acknowledges the impracticality of fully extending deliberative democracy principles to organisations. Unlike citizens in political debates, organisational actors exert unequal power and strategically leverage differences in authority, expertise and information to influence discussions in their favour (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, 2011).

However, this asymmetry did not detract from the project's objective of fostering dialogue among stakeholders. Although argumentative actions can be driven by strategic purposes, the resulting dialogue is nonetheless influenced by what Elster (1993, p.349) defines as the "civilising force of hypocrisy". Basing one's proposals on instrumental arguments, carefully chosen to make them appear legitimate, compels the parties to appeal to potentially agreeable criteria or principles. Argument-based dialogue thus serves as a self-regulating mechanism that in the absence of a

binding normative framework to regulate employee participation can promote the adoption of more acceptable and fair solutions.

## 4. The USIL project

The USIL project involved the metalworking trade unions FIM-CISL, FIOM-CGIL and UILM-UIL, which affiliate to the three main Italian trade union confederations. The project was initiated by the local branch chair of the metalworking trade union FIM-CISL in an industrialised city in Northern Italy. Recognising that in dynamic workplaces with more sophisticated employees, a trade union's role extends beyond negotiating work conditions and monitoring rule application, he aimed to enhance participation by trade union delegates and staff members in decision-making regarding working conditions and job quality in operations. As documented by Armaroli (2022), that FIM-CISL branch had previously explored workplace participation, although with varying degrees of success. Seeking methodological support, the branch chair contacted the Department of Industrial Engineering at the local university in late 2018.

An informal working group, comprising the FIM-CISL branch chair and two researchers in organisation studies, began discussing the managerial and technical skills and competences needed by trade union members to engage in more participative industrial relations. Concurrently, the working group began designing a field experience to involve trade union delegates and staff members in company decision-making, enabling them to experience positive forms of collaboration and new interaction methods among social partners. This initiative aimed to overcome cultural and cognitive barriers often encountered by both firm and trade union players (Ahlstrand and Gautié, 2022).

Through repeated interactions, the project evolved from off-the-job training into an action research initiative shaped as a participatory experience shared by trade union delegates and staff members, students in industrial engineering and firms, all coordinated by academic staff. The course of Organisation Sociology, taught to undergraduate and postgraduate students in industrial engineering, was chosen to host the project because of its focus on labour organisation and work-technology interplay.

The first two rounds of the project, held in 2022 and 2023, comprised the following steps: 1) selecting companies and identifying the challenges for the working groups; 2) creating the working groups; 3) providing classroom training for union delegates and students; 4) visiting companies and presenting the challenges; 5) carrying out collaborative teamwork to analyse challenges and develop proposals; 6) receiving feedback from company representatives; and 7) conducting follow-up interviews. The next paragraphs will delve into each phase, detailing

objectives, participants and notable differences between the first and second editions of the project.

### 4.1 Companies and challenges selection

In both editions of the project, the identification of companies willing to participate was carried out by the local FIM-CISL branch trade union officers. The criteria used for selection included the presence of positive industrial relations, evidenced by firm-level bargaining and more generally by a consolidated dialogue based on mutual recognition among parties; the willingness of companies to engage and experiment with more participative industrial relations; and the presence of delegates belonging to FIM-CISL, FIOM-CGIL and (in the second edition) UILM-UIL metalworking trade unions.

The companies that agreed to join the project belong to various sectors of the metalworking industry (Table 1), where the involved trade unions operate. Each company indicated managerial and technical representatives for the project. In all cases, companies participated with the chief of human resource management and operations managers, thus demonstrating the importance attached to the initiative and the willingness to get involved.

In both editions of the project, the challenges proposed to the working groups were agreed upon by researchers and companies through an iterative process lasting several weeks. Table 1 summarises some characteristics of the participants and the challenges proposed. One company (referred to as Company 1 and Company 4 in Table 1) participated in both editions of the project. In the first edition, all companies hosted two working groups. Company 1 and Company 2 proposed differentiated challenges, while Company 3 presented the same challenge to both working groups. In the second edition, each of the four companies hosted only one working group. FIM-CISL, the proposing trade union organisation, had delegates in all participating companies, FIOM-CGIL in six out of seven companies and UILM-UIL, which joined only in the second year, was represented in a single company. Based on their nature, the challenges faced by the working groups can be characterised as either largely technical (Companies 2, 3, 5, and 6) or predominantly organisational (Companies 1, 4, and 7).

**Table 1. Companies and challenges in the USIL project**

| Company | Year | Involved trade unions | Challenge | Output adoption |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Company 1<br>Steel producer | 2022 | FIM<br>FIOM | - Safety improvement in steelworks<br>- Safety improvement in rolling mill | Yes – Partial<br>Yes – Partial |
| Company 2<br>Part manufacturer | 2022 | FIM<br>FIOM | - Optimisation of pallet flows<br>- Handling of defective parts | No<br>Yes – Partial |
| Company 3<br>Part manufacturer | 2022 | FIM<br>FIOM | Solutions to increase production volumes of a key component | No |
| Company 4<br>Steel producer | 2023 | FIM<br>FIOM | Turnover rate reduction | Yes – Partial |
| Company 5<br>Part manufacturer | 2023 | FIM<br>FIOM<br>UILM | Optimisation of truck inbound/outbound flows | Yes – Partial |
| Company 6<br>Manufacturer | 2023 | FIM<br>FIOM | Reduction of wastes due to part dents | Yes – Partial |
| Company 7<br>SW developer | 2023 | FIM | Sizing and organisation of a decentralised HR office | No |

### 4.2 Teams creation

The USIL project addressed corporate challenges by means of mixed working teams, comprising students, trade union delegates, and, in the first edition, trade union staff members. Participation of students and trade union delegates was voluntary, while local trade unions selected staff members based on individual availabilities. In the second edition, trade unions preferred excluding staff members from working groups, as they had already been involved in the previous wave of the project. Nevertheless, they continued as project coordinators and observers.

Participants in the first edition included 45 students, 15 union delegates and 13 union staff members, divided into six teams of approximately 12 members, with two teams for each of the three companies involved. In the second edition, there were 36 participants, including 23 students and 13 union delegates, divided into four teams, one for each of the companies involved. The teams were formed to maximise heterogeneity in terms of students' curricula, delegates' union membership and gender, aiming to benefit from the diversity of contributions. To foster relationship development and target achievement, the group size was limited by increasing the number of groups when necessary.

### 4.3 Classroom training

The USIL project incorporated a preliminary training session for team members. These lectures, held on the university campus, helped bridge the psychological divide between students and trade union delegates, who in most cases lacked a tertiary education background. The sessions aimed to establish a shared language among students, union delegates and union staff members, while also developing project-specific skills.

Classroom training focused on change management through lectures and exercises and also provided operational skills for analysing on-site situations and developing solutions. The first edition of the project supplemented change management training with a lecture on the Italian industrial relations system, while the second edition featured a roundtable with representatives from participating companies and local metalworking trade union organisations to showcase visions and practices of employee participation.

### 4.4 Company visits

The team visits to the companies, which also involved the two researchers and the union staff members supporting the company union delegates, followed a similar pattern. Following an initial introduction to the company, the teams surveyed the production plant, or the shop floor most closely related to the challenge. After that, technical staff and human resources managers presented the company challenge and answered questions by team members. Compared to classroom lectures, company visits shifted the relationship between union delegates and students, with the former now able to display full knowledge of the surrounding environment and provide additional explanations to those offered by the tour leaders appointed by company managers.

Challenge presentations highlighted the companies' expectations regarding the USIL project. While some companies emphasised the importance of developing ready-to-use solutions (Companies 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 in Table 1), others framed the challenge as an exercise primarily designed to stimulate and test the students' abilities (Companies 3 and 7). In the former case, there was greater emphasis on specifying constraints the project had to adhere to and providing quantitative data to support the solution process. Conversely, in the latter case, there was less emphasis on constraints (although still present) and greater generality in the information provided.

### 4.5 Collaborative teamwork

The project schedule included four teamworking sessions at the university premises. Teams were encouraged to meet also outside scheduled meetings, either in person or through remote

conference calls, and could also revisit their host company to gather additional information and test their intermediate outcomes on-site. Collaboration quickly fostered mutual trust among the student and trade union components of the teams and cultivated a commitment to achieving the proposed targets. Teams were encouraged to address the assigned challenges using problem-setting and problem-solving tools provided during classroom training. In this context, the researchers served as facilitators, nudging each team member to contribute their input without censorship or bias and promoting the development of shared proposals through open dialogue and argumentation-based discussions.

### 4.6 Feedback from companies

In both editions of the USIL project, the teams presented the outcomes of their work to other participants and to representatives from the involved companies in dedicated meetings at the local university. Opinion exchange, both for the venue (the university campus) and the presence of students and researchers, showed characteristics resembling those of argument-based dialogue.

Generally, students led presentations, with trade union delegates and staff members intervening only on strictly technical issues. This approach facilitated the expression of any criticisms towards the companies through students' 'neutral' perspective.

### 4.7 Follow-up interviews

Action research implies the active involvement of stakeholders not only in the development of solutions but also in reflecting on the dynamics triggered by actions and the results achieved, *i.e.*, in the co-production of new knowledge. For this reason, the USIL project did not end with the discussion of the team proposals. It also included a subsequent follow-up where the parties reflected on the experience lived to feed, in a cyclical perspective, the subsequent actions.

A few months after the conclusion of operational tasks for both editions, the researchers organised a series of focus groups. In these sessions, which included students, delegates by company, union staff by trade union organisation and firm representatives by company, participants were invited to share their reflections on the events following the presentation of project outcomes, any changes observed in behaviours and relationships among parties and lessons learned.

## 5. Discussion

As mentioned in the literature survey above, Kearney and Hays (1994) first identified the four enablers of employee participation, including the expectation of benefits by all involved parties, commitment in terms of time and effort, trust and mutual respect and organisational routines that integrate participation practices. However, although these four enablers are often discussed as separate entities, in practice, they are highly correlated. Furthermore, they are not only instrumental in enabling participation but are also influenced by the experience of participation itself, thereby shaping the evolution of organisation-level participation paths. For instance, when expectations about a participation initiative are met or exceeded, and positive experiences are gained, stakeholders' trust and commitment are reinforced, leading to the formation of optimistic future expectations. Over time, repeated cycles of positive participation experiences serve to establish and strengthen participatory practices, gradually integrating them into organisational routines.

Based on participants' feedback the first part of this section reviews if and how the USIL project was affected by and in turn impacted the antecedents to employee participation. The second part leverages the provided evidence to show how the first two editions of the USIL initiative achieved the project learning targets and also demonstrated a feasible, albeit constrained, route to participative industrial relations.

### 5.1 Impact on employee participation drivers

#### 5.1.1 Expected benefits

All parties manifested expected benefits from participating in the USIL experience. However, firms and students displayed a stronger awareness compared to trade union delegates and staff members. The former translated their participation in the project into tangible benefits: primarily solutions to actual problems and visibility among graduates and the local university for companies, real-world training and an exam bonus for students. In both cases follow-up interviews revealed the fulfilment of those expectations. In the case of companies most firms opted for a partial adoption of the proposed innovations and also benefited from new student internships activated thanks to the project.

In the case of the trade union organisations the perception of the expected benefits was somewhat more nuanced, perhaps also due to the different sensitivities to the theme of employee participation by the involved organisations, especially between FIM-CISL and FIOM-CGIL. For FIM-CISL staff the USIL project was an opportunity to experiment with a new form of trade union action that moved beyond a conflictual view of labour relations. Participation, in fact, is

one of the watchwords of CISL, the trade union confederation to which FIM-CISL belongs. According to CISL, participation aims to promote a cooperative management of issues, anticipating "the traditional moments of confrontation between the company and union representatives, not relegating them to a mere distributive function of the results obtained from individual choices, but acting before these are made, as well as during processes of change and innovation" (CISL, 2024). In this perspective, FIM-CISL staff members expected the USIL project to, on the one hand, provide the knowledge and skills necessary for union delegates to initiate this new phase of industrial relations and, on the other hand, to experiment with more collaborative behaviours in the field, beyond the formal prerogatives of the social parties and any consultation bodies provided for by supplementary agreements.

FIOM-CGIL is also in favour of increasing the weight of delegates in company decision-making. However, as stated by union representatives during the project, such participation necessarily involves negotiation by union delegates and not just cooperation in dedicated bodies, such as joint committees. FIOM-CGIL staff members therefore expected the USIL project to strengthen the bargaining capacity of the union delegates and increase their weight in company decisions, especially those concerning work organisation.

Irrespective of their affiliate trade union, most delegates did not express specific expectations from joining the project, which was on voluntary bases. Nevertheless, in follow-up interviews union delegates reported interest in repeating the experience and expressed satisfaction due to their participation in a creative process, the opportunity to present the outcomes to the company management, a change in their everyday routine and work with young and better educated teammates. They also expressed frustration when no information was provided on the implementation of their proposals (Company 5) or when the challenge left little room for their contribution (Company 3), suggesting that the experience stimulated their awareness of participation potential and their willingness for more involvement.

### 5.1.2 Project commitment

All non-academic participants tended to adopt a reactive rather than proactive approach towards the organisational tasks required by the project, typically waiting for inputs and solicitations from the involved researchers. Nevertheless, participants devoted significant effort and time to the project's success.

Firms committed by collaborating in the definition of teamwork challenges and providing information, data and sometimes workspace and support personnel. However, engagement in outcome presentations somehow reflected the approach displayed in challenge presentation.

Companies that adopted a more pragmatic and technical approach participated in outcome presentation with multiple representatives from production and personnel departments. In contrast, companies that provided fewer specific challenges, participated with only one representative from production (Company 3) and from human resources (Company 7), respectively.

Students actively engaged in all phases of the project, bringing forth knowledge and skills acquired through academic experience, while also interacting with and valuing the experiences of the union delegates. Union delegates' commitment to teamwork was less proactive, especially when asked to identify suitable topics for the teamwork challenges before the start of project activities. However, the delegates showed a great willingness to share their insights on the work environment and their professional experience with students and researchers.

Unlike the local branch of FIM-CISL, UILM-UIL was absent in the first edition of the project, while FIOM-CGIL joined when planning was virtually concluded. Initially, the engagement by FIOM-CGIL and UILM-UIL staff members was therefore control-oriented rather than prepositive-oriented. However, during the follow-up interviews at the end of the second edition, the local branches of all three trade unions expressed the desire to participate in subsequent editions, also claiming more involvement in the planning process. Commitment increased over time as expectations evolved and all trade unions increasingly perceived the project as an opportunity to test their visions of employee participation and to broaden the issues negotiable in firm-level bargaining.

### 5.1.3 Trust and mutual respect

Firms were invited to join the project based on the presence of collaborative industrial relationships. Since the beginning mutual respect and trust were consequently higher compared to average firms in the same area, as openly recognised by all involved players in the round table that launched the second edition of the USIL project and in follow-up interviews.

Mutual respect, both between trade unions and firms and among different trade unions, clearly emerged throughout all project phases. Trust was somehow more nuanced, reflecting the past experience of union delegates and firm managers. For instance, at Company 5 the contrast between initial declarations of openness to employee participation by the human resource manager and lack of information on the implementation of teamwork outcomes reinforced union delegates' mistrust. In some cases, firms tried to control teams' work by selecting participation in an internal survey (Company 4) and by encouraging the participation of a company manager in the team (Company 5). Follow-up interviews revealed firm managers' low trust on the quality of

trade unions' proposals and commitment (Company 3) but also delegates' low trust in the criteria to select employees participating in innovation projects (Company 2).

In general terms, the project reinforced rather than change trust dynamics at the organisation level, for instance by demonstrating (Companies 1 and 4) or confirming (Companies 6 and 7) the mutual benefits from employee participation. However, some positive change took place at the micro level, thanks to new interpersonal direct contacts. Union delegates had the opportunity to meet officers and managers from different organisation units (Companies 6 and 7) who provided informal communication channels after the end of project activities (Company 5).

Trust among the members of different trade union organisations also played a role in the project. In follow-up interviews students reported that differences and contrasts among the delegates of different trade unions were much lower than expected. Among union members, awareness of consolidated differences in their views on the role of trade unions still left considerable room for cooperation on operative goals.

#### 5.1.4 Participation integration into organisational routines

As in the case of trust relationships, the integration of employee participation practices into company routines also takes time. The USIL project overlapped with established situations, strongly linked to the organisational culture, which already involved specific participation practices and tools. For instance, at Company 6 a joint committee meets periodically to address operational and tactical matters raised by either trade union or company representatives. Companies 1 and 4 hold regular meetings with trade unions on safety issues, while Company 3 has a quality committee in place. Conversely, at Companies 2 and 5, the focus is on direct participation tools. Additionally, all companies feature RLSs (*Rappresentanti dei Lavoratori per la Sicurezza*, union members monitoring employee safety), who are typically also union delegates.

Considering also the limited duration of the USIL experience, a significant impact on organisational routines could not be expected. For example, consistent with their usual behaviour, companies did not feel the need to inform trade union delegates about the implementation or otherwise of the results achieved by the USIL work teams. However, in follow-up interviews some managers acknowledged the effectiveness of a proactive approach by trade unions and expressed hope for its continuation (Companies 4 and 6). In addition, the project strengthened some existing collaborative mechanisms. For instance, participation in a challenge on employee safety encouraged a union delegate to be more assertive in requesting additional interventions at Company 4. On the other hand, reflecting on his role in a follow-up interview, a manager from

Company 6 acknowledged the need to delegate his participation in the company joint committee to ensure greater attention and continuity to the committee's agenda.

## 5.2 Achievement of project targets

### 5.2.1 Training in participation practices

In follow-up interviews, both students and union delegates reported tangible benefits from the training received in the USIL project. On the one hand, students benefited from the in-depth dialogue that developed between their more formal knowledge and the practical knowledge of the delegates gained in the field. Specifically, students became more aware of the implications of 'science-based' solutions on the quality of employees' work. On the other hand, union delegates developed (Companies 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) or reinforced (Companies 6 and 7) awareness of technical and organisational problems in the workplace. By contributing to problem setting and problem-solving tasks, they also experienced how solutions do not necessarily arise from a top-down approach (*e.g.*, Companies 1, 2, 4 and 5).

Teamwork was not always straightforward. Most groups encountered significant problems. For instance, participants in groups dealing with less structured problems experienced frustration (Company 3 and Company 7). Students suffered a lack of detailed data and information, while union delegates found the issues to be distant from their daily work experience and expertise. In another case, Company 4 interfered in the team's approach by imposing its selection of employees chosen to participate in a questionnaire devised by the team. Additionally, Company 5 exerted pressure on the hosted team to gather information from suppliers about the commercial software needed to implement the proposed technical solution.

The mutual curiosity and collaborative relationships between students and union delegates were consistently reported as success factors in teamwork. The integration between practical insights gained from daily immersion in field operations and the formalised knowledge accessible to students helped the teams to overcome obstacles and achieve the learning targets of the USIL project. The devised solutions demonstrated the feasibility of employee participation in the selected companies, at least within the framework of an experimental setting. Nonetheless, students' involvement played a crucial role in solving the proposed challenge, with trade union members frequently delegating technical analyses and communication tasks to students.

Unclear expectations regarding the benefits of the project, coupled with limited trust in employers' commitment to its success due to past experiences, may have hindered the efforts of union delegates. A more concerted effort in selecting participants and presenting the initiative by the trade union staff could have fostered clearer expectations. Furthermore, addressing the lack

of technical skills, especially when compared to engineering students, could have enhanced the delegates' engagement with the project. When clearer expectations combined with adequate technical skills more intense participation and stronger commitment could be observed. In the case of Company 2, the willingness of union delegates to engage in a project beyond their usual routines and their technical proficiency led to more active involvement.

### 5.2.2 Promotion of participation-oriented industrial relations

The work groups effectively answered the assigned challenges by proposing solutions that prioritised efficiency and workers' ergonomics, safety and quality of work, as appropriate. Feedback obtained in the final meetings between work groups and company representatives was consistently positive. The follow-up interviews revealed that five out of the seven companies involved chose to partially adopt the teams' suggestions, with implementations still in progress (Companies 1 and 6), under further development (Companies 2 and 5) or negotiation (Company 4) at the time of the interviews. However, the solutions adopted were predominantly technical, such as the introduction of a customised cart, modification of signage, or redesign of information and parts flows, while organisational recommendations were mostly overlooked. Furthermore, after the conclusion of the project activities, companies did not engage in further discussions with the union delegates on project outcomes and there was no joint decision-making, either for adopting or abandoning the proposals. Communication of further steps was only provided upon active pursuit by trade union delegates or staff members.

The correlation between expectations from and commitment to the USIL project provides valuable insight into this outcome. First, the companies that chose not to implement the results of the working groups coincide with those that took a more generalist approach in defining the project challenges (Companies 3 and 5). Irrespective of the urgency declared by companies when presenting the challenge, low expectations of a viable solution and limited commitment to preparing and sharing detailed data and information resulted in only cursory attention to project outcomes.

Second, after achieving the prioritised benefits (*i.e.*, solutions to the posed challenges or visibility with students and local university) firms did not feel the need to further invest in the participation experience promoted by the project. Similarly, trade union organisations also maintained their focus primarily on further negotiable issues, as exemplified by Company 4, where personal protection equipment suggested by the project team became part of the second-level bargaining platform.

In addition to differences in perceived benefits and commitment, trust among the involved parts and organisational routines may also explain the observed outcomes. The project's limited duration and scope proved insufficient to bring about significant changes. As a result, all players tended to frame the project within preexisting relationships and procedures, largely replicating established behaviours. Partial innovation arose from the positive experience of collaborative interactions, the establishment of new personal relationships that have the potential to bridge mistrust and from more intense or creative use of existing tools and routines.

Commitment to achieve the expected benefits from the challenge solution, as well as (mis)trust in the counterpart, also help explain some deviations from the planned organisation of the project. For instance, the decision to include a technical manager in the team at Company 5 was partly driven by the company's desire to focus efforts towards a viable solution and partly by a delegate who was highly motivated to improve the chances of success by enhancing available competences.

## 6. Concluding remarks

The first two editions of the USIL project provided an action research experience at the intersection of research on employee participation, immersive training for trade union delegates and engineering students and in-field experimentation of industrial relations at work. By means of the USIL project we aimed at exploring whether voluntary engagement in an experience of employee participation under weak institutional enforcing mechanisms could favour the development of a participative culture. Collected evidence shows that a positive experience of employee participation can stimulate interest in further experimentation. However, the path to participation is not an easy walk.

On the one hand, the USIL project confirmed the importance of the antecedents to employee participation outlined in the literature (Kearney and Hays, 1994) and allowed for detailing how abstract concepts translate into a network of highly correlated needs, targets, and constrains expressed by all involved parties. When the project contributed to activating or reinforcing expectations of mutual benefits among parties, commitment, trust, mutual respect and the integration of participation into organisational routines, employee participation was also activated or reinforced.

However, on the other hand, voluntary engagement has not always been able to ensure the necessary conditions for employee participation. In their absence, the belief persists in companies that employee participation, even when union delegates are involved, should be approached in

the same way as direct employee participation, namely as a simple expression of voice without involvement in joint decision-making.

Similarly, prevailing within the union, especially in the FIOM-CGIL, is the belief that the solution to workplace problems, like any other company issue, may involve discussion between employees and management, but ultimately must be resolved by means of collective bargaining, where employee representatives are legitimised based on their union strength.

Organisational change, whether small or large, demands specific technical skills and, above all, a lengthy and complex decision-making process that advances through trial and error. This process requires collaborative relationships and continuous exchange among the involved parties, which is hardly compatible with the logic and customary practice of traditional collective bargaining. Focus on skills and knowledge relevant to trade union delegates' primary activity – negotiation – makes them less prepared to address technical and organisational challenges.

To improve the chances of overcoming a purely antagonistic approach among parties, the new edition of the USIL project implements some significant changes that promise a stronger impact on the four enabling dimensions of employee participation. These aspects include increased attention to the motivation of both union and company actors, greater involvement of union delegates in identifying company challenges, extending the project timeline and paying more attention to the organisational dimension of company challenges. Additionally, the project aims to promote USIL among entrepreneurial organisations and trade union associations to ensure visibility for participating companies and union organisations, thereby encouraging social parties to invest more and experiment with new participatory solutions.

In conclusion, the USIL project confirms the interest of companies in employee participation (or at least its outcomes) and the importance for trade unions to play an active role in this process, to ensure a fair distribution of benefits to workers, as well as to companies. To achieve this goal, the debate on employee participation, in its various perceptions and manifestations, needs to gain visibility and further development. With the USIL project, currently in its third edition, we aim to contribute in this direction.

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