



Out of the Shadows: Unionizing in Rome

By Anne Milano Appel

In my former life as a library director, unions were a bane and an anathema, but this was probably because I was “management” and the staff union was seen as “the adversary.” Now that I work as a freelancer, the distinction between the two is decidedly blurred. My recent trip to Italy provided me with the opportunity to rethink the utility of union membership for a freelance literary translator.

In May, while in Rome, I attended the XX Congresso Sindacato Nazionale Scrittori (SNS) at the headquarters of the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL), the Italian labor federation. The SNS, one of several writers’ unions in Italy, had recently been bolstered—I am tempted to say enhanced—by the presence of a vocal activist group of literary translators who were ready and willing to push for better working conditions for both writers and translators in their profession. I had decided to attend the Congresso to see how things were done “all’Italiana,” wondering why we American translators did not have a similar union presence in the U.S., and whether there was indeed a material difference between a union and a professional association as we know it.

What follows is a summary of some of the key issues discussed at the Congresso. The quotes come directly from the speakers and attendees, who generously agreed to be interviewed or were kind enough to provide me with written transcripts of their comments.

The Attraction of a Union

The issues facing literary translators in Italy are the same as those we face here in the U.S., including visibility, due attribution, decent compensation, and copyright protection.

Professional associations in Italy do not seem to be any more effective at resolving these issues than associations in the U.S. As a means of comparison, I looked through the mission statements of several U.S. organizations, and the National Writers Union is the only one I found that specifically states that it is working to defend the rights and improve the economic and working conditions of writers, though this statement does not explicitly include translators.¹

Perhaps the underlying issue here lies in the fact that unions and professional associations serve a different purpose, although there are some unions that call themselves profes-

From a Virtual Community to an Act of Faith

In looking at the situation of literary translators in Italy, it is probably no accident that most of the translators who are now part of SNS are loosely associated through Biblit, a virtual community and discussion forum established in 1999 made up of translators working from and into Italian. In her comments to the assembly at the Congresso, Marina Rullo, founder of Biblit, explained that literary translators were participating at the Congresso for the first time, calling it, “a sign of our determination to come out of the shadows and make our voices heard.”

faith on our part and at the same time a declaration of intent. We are here to act for dignified working conditions and fair compensation.”

Though conscious of their responsibility as the vanguard of a potentially much greater number of translators who might decide to join Biblit should there be strong, concrete signs of activity and change and greater professional visibility, Rullo explained that no one appears to be looking at the situation through rose-colored glasses: “We are aware that the road is long and the available resources limited...all the more reason to have an organization like the union behind us.”

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sional associations and vice versa. As I see it, unions are concerned with defending the rights of translators, improving their economic and working conditions, and safeguarding legal interests regarding their work (e.g., copyright). Professional associations tend to be concerned with promoting the profession as a category, focusing on professional training and disseminating information about the profession. Both naturally have an interest in promoting and supporting legislative initiatives benefiting the profession and its practitioners. Perhaps these differences might explain why literary translators would look to membership in a union to promote the visibility of their profession.

As an online community with no legal ties, Biblit serves as a network of solidarity that occasionally undertakes initiatives to promote the cause of translators, but efforts at raising awareness can only go so far: “At a certain point, we realized that these initiatives were not enough, and that a more incisive action was needed at the political and institutional level that only a union could guarantee,” says Rullo.

Still, she conceded that the decision to join SNS was not an easy one to make. In a profession marked by isolation and individualism, there is a natural mistrust of associations of any kind, and unions are perceived as being particularly bureaucratic and political. Rullo went on to say: “Joining SNS represents an act of

The Role of Culture

Perhaps the note that struck me most at the Congresso was the repeated emphasis on the word *cultura* (culture in the broadest sense of the term). Indeed, the opening remarks by SNS President Mario Lunetta set the tone, when he stated that the objectives of the union were to encourage creativity, safeguard authors’ rights, and promote culture.

The endorsement of culture is an important element in Italy that is indicative of a way of life that values civilization, education, and tradition. In fact, one speaker began his remarks by quoting from Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia*: “*fatti non foste a viver come bruti, ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza*”; that is, “you were not created to live like insensitive brutes, but to pursue virtue and knowledge” (*Inferno*, XXVI: 119-120). Brutishness resides in ignorance and is always lying in wait. The book is a shield against living brutishly and is considered a *bene culturale* (part of the cultural heritage).

At the same time, there was a strong current running ➡

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through the comments of the various speakers that suggested an ongoing decline in culture, not just in Italy, but in other countries as well. The media are less and less interested in culture, said a speaker, while another noted that there has never been a great interest in reading in Italy: “The book has always been a bit at the margins.” Along this line, Trond Andreassen, president of the European Writers’ Congress (EWC), stated that he was “both surprised and saddened” by the fact that the role of authors was barely mentioned in a recent European Union (EU) paper on how to strengthen the publishing sector within the EU, rightly noting that “without authors...the book industry has nothing to trade.”

all, the importance of good translations, adequate translations.”

He went on to cite José Saramago, the Portuguese novelist and 1998 Nobel Prize winner for literature, who once stated that writers create national literatures with their language, but world literature is written by translators.² These statements were reinforced by Rullo, who stressed the decisive role of translation in the cultural transmission, appreciation, and awareness of European cultural diversity.

If it is true that a disregard for culture in Italy is currently “at an elevated level,” as one speaker expressed it, why is this so? The consensus seemed to be that culture is threatened both in the political and economic arenas.

America, held in New York City, Beatriz Casoy Ashfield, who directed the last two London Book Fairs before the event was sold to Reed Exhibitions, was quoted as saying that “...in America, ‘commerce’ isn’t a dirty word...no one is afraid to sell.” In both cases, political and economic, the autonomy of culture as a creative activity is at risk.

There was strong sentiment expressed by speakers and attendees at the Congresso that literary content should not be determined either by the State or by the publishers; nor should it be determined by profit. How to reconcile the need for a profitable, viable publishing industry with the goal of creativity? One suggestion put forth was to recognize that the writer’s work is not only creative, but also representative of a skill. The writer is not just an artist, but also a *tecnico* (technician), in the sense of being an expert in his or her craft. In a word, culture, creativity, and technique must go hand in hand, just as in the union the promotion of creativity and the diffusion of culture are two goals that share the spotlight with the safeguarding of authors’ rights.

Rullo, speaking for the translators, made the defense of rights a priority while not excluding the other two goals: “Our commitment to action does not mean that cultural promotion is excluded a priori from our intentions. Nevertheless, we feel that the energies of our section and of the union must be applied principally to the legal, economic, and professional protection of the sector.” She went to say that she considers the entry of translators into SNS as a “first step toward change.”

Resistance to Change

One of the most sobering things I heard at the Congresso was a state-

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Andreassen went on to stress the role of translators as well as authors, citing the “invaluable importance of translations and translators” in a context of intercultural dialogue. As he put it:

“Each writer can sit in his own country and play a more or less important role at home, but when his stories and thoughts are to move across borders and make their way in a different linguistic landscape, a writer needs another writer—*l’auteur invisible*, the translator. As the world grows tighter, distances are shortened; as our eyes are opened to new realities, new cultures, and literatures, we gradually discover the importance of translation, and above

Political currents pressure culture through attempts to transform it into ideology. Just as economic interests view the book as a revenue-producing article, so political interests see it as a product to persuade and even manipulate the reader. When political tides exert pressure to determine content, to use the book to further a political plan, promote specific policies, or endorse a specific agenda, the writer and the book become a tool in the service of ideology, and the idea of culture as a self-sufficient act of creation is compromised. The economic field, in turn, views culture as a commodity to be transformed into an industry: the book is seen as a product to generate profit. This is certainly true in the U.S., where at the recent BEA, BookExpo

ment by Marcella Dallatorre, who said: “I have been a translator for 40 years, and in 40 years nothing has changed.” In her remarks, Rullo regretfully noted that, “not even the great commitment and dedication to the union on the part of colleagues such as Marcella Dallatorre” has been able to effect change. Yet, Dallatorre was far from resigned, and her comments were challenging and provoking rather than defeatist. Italy is so far behind other nations, it risks looking ridiculous, she said, yet there is no reason for it to remain so: “We’re not isolated, we’re part of the European context. All we have to do is look around and see what other countries have done to resolve the problems.”

Examples of the kinds of solutions Dallatorre was referring to can be easily found. Consider the recent formation of HALMA, the European network of literary centers intended to serve as a platform for literary exchange. The main idea behind the network is to create a European structure across national borders, enabling authors, translators, editors, and literary facilitators to be active across different cultural regions, organizing joint projects and other endeavors. Still at the development stage, the program, which is expected to begin in 2008, calls for 16 literary centers to be set up in 11 participating countries (Italy is not one of the founding member nations).

Another type of example, aimed at a more activist defense of translators’ rights rather than cross-cultural exchange, is the so-called “Frankfurt Admonition” regarding a planned new version of the copyright law. In this case, German authors, publishers, and booksellers spoke out jointly for the protection of intellectual and cultural property, formulating their demands in an open letter to the German gov-

ernment. The view expressed in the “Admonition” is that: “Any sort of political pressure to achieve open access to copyright protected works is a gravely misguided decision.”³

make dignified working conditions and fair compensation for writers possible are systematically disregarded, not only because the law fails to be applied, but because the Italian copy-

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More than 10 years ago, in a paper presented at the International Conference on Legislation for the Book World, held in Warsaw in November 1996, Dallatorre had outlined three “essential conditions for a fair translator-publisher relationship”:

1. The existence of a written contract, rather than an informal oral agreement.
2. The enforcement of the provisions of the copyright law that are often ignored without any legal consequence.
3. The existence of a copyright law that is clearly written, unequivocal, and detailed, without any ambiguity or vagueness.

Today, these conditions still remain out of reach, as do other conditions of equity. As Rullo pointed out: “Though the law confers on us the qualification of ‘writer,’ many things, such as royalties, that are considered a given for writers, for translators remain a mirage.” The consensus seemed to be that, in Italy, the prerequisites that

right law (*diritto d’autore*) has remained more or less unchanged since it went into effect in 1941. Unlike in many European countries, where copyright laws underwent a profound revision in the 1990s, the commission to revise the Italian law, after a hopeful start during the years of Silvio Berlusconi’s government, ultimately ran aground on the shoals of politics.

Principal Goals

In view of the situation, the translators of SNS have set the following goals:

- Revise the copyright law to:
 - Eliminate the “unless otherwise stipulated” clauses (*clausole del patto contrario*).
 - Require that percentages regarding secondary uses of the work, including electronic formats, be specified.
 - Reduce the maximum duration of the contract from 20 to 10 years.

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- Make explicit the provision of the need to pay the translator a fixed fee plus royalties proportional to the success of the work.
- Negotiate a standard contract with publishers. This has already occurred in various European nations, where translators and publishers' associations have agreed to a sensible contract that represents a compromise between the economic interests of the two categories and serves as a model for individual contracts.
- Work toward effective implementation of the European directives on reprography and library loans, with distribution for the entire category of any non-apportionable funds, in the form of grants, courses, and programs for professional formation and development.
- Create an autonomous social security fund.

“I cannot fail to mention the so-called translators strike in Norway last year. After many years of drawn-out negotiations with the publishers' association to renew the standard contract, the united translators from different organizations unanimously said: ‘Enough is enough! The contract is outdated!’ And to make this point clear, the translators sat down in the square between the major publishing houses in Oslo with old-style typewriters. The contract stated that translations were to be consigned as ‘typewritten manuscripts’—which just shows how old-fashioned the contract used to be—and our translators said: ‘Well, fine, here you are: typewritten pages!’

The newspapers and television reported this as a funny stunt, and in this manner, the translators managed to show that they were the creative element, while the publishers were conservative bores.

press and in the publishing business as funny and high-spirited, but it was also a strong political statement. In many ways, the Norwegian translators have paved the way for other groups of creative professions, such as writers and freelance journalists.”

Andreassen concluded his remarks by stating that SNS had every reason to give its Translators Section a very warm welcome.

The members of the Translators Section of SNS have already begun working toward the achievement of their objectives, in the belief that the time may now be ripe. Never before has it been more essential to join forces in order to convince the government to adopt a serious cultural policy that will afford authors the same respect accorded to the other professional categories, and allow them to keep pace with the rest of Europe. Are their objectives attainable? Are their expectations realistic? A few of the translators who attended the Congresso shared their views with me.

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Finding a Place at the Table

Claudia Valeria Letizia admitted to a certain skepticism that tempers optimism. Her cynicism derives from the prevalently “industrial-political” nature of Italian publishing, in which “cultural” aspirations necessarily take second place because of the ultimate need to sell and make a profit. “The SNS is the only pre-existing structure that can offer us a shred of help to change the status quo. Assuming that we are able to find a seat at the famous table,” she explained.

Her enthusiasm, if any, is stirred by the group of translator colleagues who are demonstrating their willingness to act in order to change things, and she praised them for their human quali-

Are these goals attainable? What can translators realistically hope to achieve through membership in SNS? Perhaps a note of optimism can be found in Andreassen's words to the assembled group as he recounted a recent translators' strike in Norway:

The strike went on for several months, but a lot was obtained in the end, including a totally new standard contract with annual regulations of the fee, copyright for electronic publication, and better remuneration for re-publishing. The strike was perceived in the

Additional Information:

**American Literary
Translators Association**
www.literarytranslators.org

**Associazione Italiana
Traduttori e Interpreti**
www.aiti.org

**Associazione Nazionale Italiana
Traduttori e Interpreti**
www.aniti.it

Biblit
www.biblit.it

**Confederazione Generale
Italiana del Lavoro**
www.cgil.it

European Writers' Congress
www.european-writers-congress.org

HALMA
www.halma-network.eu

**International Association of
Translation and Intercultural
Studies**
www.iatis.org

National Writers Union
www.nwu.org/nwu

PEN American Center
www.pen.org

Sindacato Nazionale Scrittori
www.sindacatoscrittori.net

ties, their commitment, and their ability to organize and publicize their cause. Still, their number is relatively small, both with respect to the SNS membership and, especially, with respect to the overall number of translators in the Italian publishing arena. “Sometimes I wonder: will it really be worth it?” Letizia told me.

Isabella Zani agrees with Letizia that the most crucial point is for translators to find a seat at the table. It is not clear to her how SNS plans to convince publishers to sit down and discuss contracts. “The publishers have no interest in changing things, and we have no clout to force them to nego-

ciate,” she said. Zani believes it will take an intervention “from the top,” that is, from the legislature, in order to revise the copyright law. “Only then can we think about sitting down with the publishers to discuss how to make the contracts conform to the new norms.” Since this means involving the Italian parliament (even if only at the commission level), and since the nation is currently struggling with so many other urgent issues, Zani concedes that the endeavor “seems nothing short of utopian.” While admitting that she may perhaps be more pessimistic than Letizia, she says she will wait and see, and try to

make a contribution in whatever way she can.

Guarded Optimism and a Wait-and-See Approach

Luisa Piussi also arrived at the Congresso with a good deal of skepticism and low expectations, but was pleased by the significant representation of translators and the fact that their approach (at their first appearance at an SNS conference) appeared to gratify long-time members of SNS. As for finding a seat at the table, Piussi asked: “What choice do we have?” She pointed out that with SNS about to join CGIL, which is ➤

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Italy's oldest labor union organization, "it is the only realistic possibility we have to be heard 'from the top,' and it is only from above that an authoritative invitation to sit down at the discussion table can come." She noted that although SNS and CGIL do not necessarily have the knowledge to negotiate the conditions of the Translators Section of SNS, they have the formal structure, know the political procedures, and command the necessary channels to request meetings that an individual translator, working in isolation, does not have.

Rosaria Contestabile more or less shares these views: "Let's just say that union membership and, above all, a growing awareness as a profession is something that has to be done, but the results will only be seen in the long term, if at all." Though she does not see any inclination on the part of the Italian government to do anything to represent translators' interests, she felt that "the exchange of information among us and a certain group spirit are the positive side of the coin."

Laura Prandino, regional manager for the Tuscany Section of SNS, saw a "bit more concreteness and a little less self-referentiality" on the part of the union's "historic" component, chalking it up in part to "an injection of enthusiasm and pragmatism from the Translators Section." Fundamentally, however, there remains the problem of identifying issues on which writers and translators in SNS might find common ground.

For Prandino, the immediate objective is to earn visibility and credibility as a union, explaining that this is the only way to be able to "count" for something during negotiations, but that visibility must be earned through participation. She explained, "We must take advantage of the few

already existing structures, such as the various regional centers of SNS, and establish contacts with regional and local authorities, as well as with other European organizations, to find out what is being done in other countries (for example, Germany, Norway, and Spain), and try to avoid the errors that have already been made in other countries."

Still, Prandino admits that the disheartenment that she sees in some who have joined the union is a little worrisome. Being part of SNS, or any translators' union, necessarily means coming to terms with long periods of time and considerable effort, she says, even just to reach the first results. To expect anything else at this time, she cautions, will only mean coming up against inevitable disappointment.

Further Thoughts

On the whole, most attendees I spoke with saw the participation of translators at the Congresso as a first step toward unified class action on the part of the profession toward greater visibility, agreeing that in the meantime, they must wait and see, while continuing to persevere and do what they can.

All things considered, are the translators right in considering their entry into SNS as a first step toward change? Only time will tell. Meanwhile, Rullo remains guardedly optimistic: "The four years until the next Congresso will hopefully confirm that we made the right choice."

Notes

1. The mission statement of the National Writers Union (www.nwu.org/nwu) states that it is: "The trade union for freelance and contract writers: journalists, book authors, business and technical writers, web

content providers, and poets. With the combined strength of nearly 2,000 members in 16 chapters nationwide, and with the support of the United Automobile Workers, the Union works to defend the rights and improve the economic and working conditions of all writers."

2. José Saramago, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize for literature, came out in favor of inquisitive translators in May 2003 during a speech to attendees at the Fourth Latin American Conference on Translation and Interpretation in Buenos Aires.

3. The admonition letter was signed by the Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels (German Publishers & Booksellers Association), the Verband deutscher Schriftsteller (VS - Association of German Writers), and the PEN-Zentrum Deutschland. Calling on the government to think through a considered concept for "meaningful reinforcement of protection for creative production in the 21st century," they expressed a concern that goes beyond that of material interests. "This is about fantasy and creative powers, both on the part of authors and of publishing companies," said Börsenverein President Gottfried Honnefelder. He went on to state that, "an unfiltered surplus of sources that have not been subject to the quality control of publishing companies will inevitably lead to the absence of creativity." (See <http://nl.buchmesse.de/ref.php?id=32f8a2e17093ms455>.)

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