IMMIGRANTS TURNED ACTIVISTS
ITALIANS IN 1970s MELBOURNE

SIMONE BATTISTON
Errata corrige:

'Noel Stuart' should read 'Noel Stewart' (pp. 133, 147)
'Carme Davis' should read 'Carmel Davies' (pp. 115, 144)
To my parents Agnese and Paolo,
and to my twin brother Roberto
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I alone am responsible for any mistakes and deficiencies of this study.
### List of Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AMWU</td>
<td>Amalgamated Metal Workers Union</td>
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<td>ANFE</td>
<td><em>Associazione Nazionale Famiglie degli Emigrati</em> (National Association of Migrants’ Families)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>Australian Labor Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>CALD</td>
<td>culturally and linguistically diverse</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIA</td>
<td><em>Club Italo-Australiano</em> (Italian-Australian Club)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIAL</td>
<td><em>Consiglio Italo-Australiano del Lavoro</em> (Italian-Australian Labour Council)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIC</td>
<td><em>Comitato Italiano di Coordinamento</em> (Italian Committee of Coordination)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNEL</td>
<td><em>Consiglio Nazionale dell’Economia e del Lavoro</em> (National Council for Economy and Labour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COASIT</td>
<td><em>Comitato Assistenza Italiani</em> (Italian Welfare Committee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPA</td>
<td>Communist Party of Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CURA</td>
<td>Centre for Urban Research and Action (FEC before 1975)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DC</td>
<td><em>Democrazia Cristiana</em> (Christian Democratic Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DLP</td>
<td>Democratic Labor Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>DP</td>
<td>displaced person</td>
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<tr>
<td>EMC</td>
<td>Ecumenical Migration Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEC</td>
<td>Fitzroy Ecumenical Centre (renamed CURA in 1975)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FIG</td>
<td><em>Fondazione Istituto Gramsci</em> (Gramsci Institute Foundation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FM</td>
<td>FILEF Melbourne</td>
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<tr>
<td>FGCI</td>
<td><em>Federazione Giovanile Comunista Italiana</em> (Italian Communist Youth Federation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FILEF</td>
<td><em>Federazione Italiana Lavoratori Emigrati e Famiglie</em> (Italian Federation of Migrant Workers and Their Families)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMA</td>
<td>FILEF Melbourne Archive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPCIF</td>
<td>Independent PCI Federation</td>
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<tr>
<td>LIA</td>
<td><em>Lega Italo-Australiana</em> (Italo-Australian League)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MWC</td>
<td>Migrant Workers Conference</td>
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x
Introduction

Political scientist Don Aitkin once argued that the whole area of migrant politics in Australia was far from being fully and properly investigated, especially at the very local level: “It remains true that we will not have real knowledge about migrants and politics until we first know a good deal about Australian Greeks and politics, Australian Italians and politics, and so on” (introduction to Jupp 1984a: 2-3). Such comprehensive knowledge could only be acquired, he implied, through thorough background research into ethno-specific organisations, from grassroots level up.

James Jupp (1984b: 7-8), a leading scholar on multicultural studies, explained the lack of research in this way: “Perhaps the simplest explanation lies in the ‘excluded’ and ‘peripheral’ character of ethnics in most professions [including political scientists]. There are simply very few academics with the language skills and social access necessary to penetrate ethnic communities.” He also noted the general lack of academic interest in Australia “in community structures, in politics at the lowest levels, in municipalities, in party and union structures, in local and ethnic associations”. Combined with “the low political profile of most ethnics as contrasted to their role in the US, Canada or even Britain”, academic interest in the political history of the ethnics in Australia was to remain marginal for the time being, according to Jupp.

Australian political scientist and economist Gianni Zappalà, who in more recent times provided a valuable insight into ethnicity and representation in Australian federal politics, claimed that, rather than a general paucity of research, the real issue was the dominant approach adopted by the political science community whose emphasis remained on the macro-level institutions of parliament, electoral systems and parties (Zappalà 1997: 1-2). Since the 1990s, however, several studies – many conducted in university-based research centres of multicultural studies in Australia by academics from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds – have attempted to bring new scholarship to the field and challenge the arguable “dominant assimilationist intellectual climate” denounced by Zappalà (1997: 30-1, endnote 3).

Yet there remains a dearth of studies on ethnic politics in Australia, especially on Italian-Australian political participation and representation. For instance, studies on political activity (and politicking) within Italian-Australian community-based institutions and grassroots associations present considerable gaps, and the observation of migrant studies historian Gianfranco Cresciani (1988a: 56) still holds true today: “hardly any research has been done on the post-war political activities of Italian fascists and communists in Australia, and on the relationship between Italian-Australian migrants and Italian political parties”. One explanation for this, among other possible
explanations such as data accessibility and availability, may lie in the chronically marginal position that is assigned to migrant politics within Italian-Australian migrant studies. Such studies have paid considerable attention to, for example, immigration, settlement, ethnicity, social integration, migrant identity and cultural maintenance, but much less to the politics of ethnicities, and ethnic political participation and representation in Australia. Apart from the in-depth work by Cresciani (1980) on Italian-Australian fascists and anti-fascists before and during the Second World War, scholars have rarely tried to come to terms with Italian-Australian politics. However, some academic work has begun to explore this area of research. For example, Mauro Di Nicola’s thesis (1973; see also the published version of 1984) examined the political impact of Italian migrants in Leichhardt (Sydney) between 1961 and 1973, Carlo Carli (1982) provided valuable insights into Italian-Australian politics in post-war Melbourne and Anthony Cappello (1999) analysed the religious, cultural and political impact of the Catholic church on Italian-Australians during fascism, the war and the immediate post-war period. Over the last ten years or so, more research on Italian-Australians and politics has been published, as underlined by Matteo Pretelli (2009) in his comprehensive literature review on Italians in Australia.

But if “real knowledge about migrants and politics” in Australia is to emerge, as Aitkin argued nearly 30 years ago, the post-war political activities of Italian-born Australians and Australians of Italian ancestry and their participation in party and union structures, pressure groups and politically-minded organisations need to be more fully investigated.

To contribute to this investigation, this book aims to look into past events and present recollections of Italian immigrants who belonged to an Italian-run, left-leaning organisation which has not attracted the scholarly interest that has been granted to other organisations, despite its involvement in the emancipation of migrants in Australia, its activism in the migrant rights movement of the 1970s and its broader influence on the Italian-Australian community: the Australian chapter of the Italian Federation of Migrant Workers and Their Families (FILEF), particularly its Melbourne branch in the 1970s. This history, which showed successful pro-migrant lobbying as well as organisational failures and political sectarianism, can be viewed as a telling example of the political potential and limits of immigrant activism and of the CALD lobby in Australia. Contemporary CALD community organisations, especially if voicing the views and concerns of recent newcomers (e.g. Asian, Middle Eastern and African migrants), could see this study as a valuable contribution to the understanding of past pro-migrant lobbying in Australia, where several ethnic and pro-ethnic associations – with their political culture and grassroots activism – applied pressure on governments for support services and multicultural policies.

Studies on the degree of ethnic participation and representation in Australia’s political arena could perhaps not be more appropriate at a time in which society appears to be less inclusive than just a few years ago, when multiculturalism arguably reached its visible peak at the time of the Olympic Games (2000) and Federation centenary celebrations (2001). The rising political profile of CALD Australians (including the recent generational and demographic changes in New South Wales state politics as a new generation of Italian–Australians and Greek–Australians gained political power) tells us that ethnic politics is now far from being a peripheral and out-of-date topic for academic discussion. Thus, the history of grassroots-level activism, such as that of FILEF Melbourne from whose ranks came Victorian Labor state politicians Giovanni Sgrò and Carlo Carli, can potentially be as significant as the history of macro-level political institutions. Similarly, the lessons from Italian immigrant women anarchists in industrialising America, as
well reconstructed by historian Jennifer Guglielmo, are “especially significant now, as antiglobalization and immigrant-rights movements are again exploding, and workers, their activist allies, academics, policy makers, and others, are analyzing the human costs of globalization and the politics of inclusion and exclusion within nations” (Guglielmo 2010: 25).

Especially in Melbourne and Sydney, FILEF played a prominent role in politicising Italian-Australian migrants and encouraging them to be involved in community activities and in migrant rights’ organisations. As opposed to other Italian-Australian community organisations, e.g. the welfare assistance committees (COASIT) of Melbourne and Sydney, FILEF aimed to jolt their political consciousness into “a more advanced stage of political awareness”, while exerting pressure in institutions within and beyond the community to foster “a ‘cultural conscience’ among Italian workers” (Cresciani 1988b: 281).

While following the life trajectories of several Italian left-wing militants, this book aims to provide a critical, analytical account of key events in the history of FILEF Melbourne during the 1970s, using archival data and fresh information from oral history testimonies of members. It also aims to re-examine the political and social role played by FILEF Melbourne in the Italian-Australian community. The reasons behind its rise, success and decline between the early 1970s and the early 1980s are investigated. It is argued that, although FILEF lost much of its influence as a vocal ethnic organisation in the 1980s and 1990s, its ‘political experiment’ in Melbourne in the 1970s, as well as in other Australian cities, has continued to influence the life trajectories of many activists, leaving deep traces in Australian political and cultural life. Moreover, not only has FILEF been the launching pad for the professional careers of some of its members, but at a smaller scale it forged the political consciousness of rank-and-file activists and ordinary members who through their activism or presence in FILEF were able to retain, express and foster their political culture, whether communist, Labor or broadly left-wing.

This book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 sets the theoretical framework, reviews the representation of the history of FILEF in previous publications, elucidates the research strategy and methodology, and lists the primary and secondary sources. Chapter 2 focuses on the manner in which emigration was politicised by the Italian Left in the 1960s and 1970s, paving the way for left-wing grassroots migrant organisations such as FILEF. The history of the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) emigration office in Rome (with which FILEF shared close links since its establishment) is discussed in the light of the politicisation of emigration and the migrants who were by and large of peasant and working-class background. The aim of both FILEF and the PCI to encourage migrants to be more actively involved in their host society and to cultivate a political allegiance is outlined, and the political-historical background of 1970s Italy is explored, both of which are pivotal to a contextualisation of events discussed throughout this book.

In Chapter 3 a review and historical contextualisation of the waves of post-war Italian emigration to Australia is presented. It outlines the socio-economic impact of Italian settlement and contains a discussion of the radical transformation of the social fabric of urban Australia, primarily in booming industrial centres such as Sydney and Melbourne, and the formation of a complex Italian-Australian community in the 1960s. This chapter concludes by outlining the working and living circumstances and the cultural and social status of Italian working-class migrants and their families.

Chapter 4 analyses the history of the Italian-Australian Left between the mid-1940s and the late 1960s, that is, from the establishment of the anti-fascist organisation Italia Libera to that of the
Legato Italo-Australiana. Common threads that link the two, and the organisations and their main missions that emerged and faded in between, are discussed. It also outlines the circumstances that led to the establishment in 1971 of the PCI in Australia with the formation of the Independent PCI Federation, a loose federation of party cells. It touches on the Cold War climate and ideological factionalism which negatively affected the development of these organisations. The establishment of FILEF in Australia and some of its areas of activism during the 1970s are examined: the launching of its periodical *Nuovo Paese* and its role in the Italian-language press, the controversial FILEF-FEC social survey that investigated the socio-economic conditions of the Italian families living in the Coburg-Brunswick area, participation in the federally-funded Welfare Rights Officer Program, and the pro-ALP initiatives in which FILEF was involved during the Whitlam government and before and after the election of Giovanni Sgrò to the Victorian parliament.

Chapter 5 examines the perception of FILEF within conservative quarters and the reactions provoked by the so-called ‘Italian communists move in’ incident – a front-page article in the *Age* newspaper in April 1975 that sensationaly exposed the FILEF-PCI link and stirred up anti-communist hysteria. This chapter also recounts the federal funding cut episode of 1976.

In Chapter 6, the Salemi deportation case is examined, a court case in which the FILEF activist found himself at the centre of a controversial dispute over his amnesty application. With the support of FILEF and the Australian Left, Salemi fought all the way to the High Court, putting the Australian notion of ‘giving someone a fair go’ to the test. After almost two years, the court case ended with the deportation of Salemi, which left FILEF without a pivotal organiser. The effects of Salemi’s 1977 deportation on FILEF are also discussed, in particular the breakdown of the alliance between the ‘young’ and ‘old’ factions and the emergence of the PCI as leading actor in the Italian-Australian Left in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

This book also contains two appendices: a chronology of selected events 1970-80, which includes significant dates for the history of the Italian-Australian and Australian Left, and a plates section.

NOTES

3. For instance, ALP politicians Giovanni Sgrò, Carlo Carli and Joe Caputo (who became mayor of Brunswick and later of Moreland), and people such as Stefano de Pieri who played an important role as multicultural advisor to the Victorian state minister Peter Spyker in the 1980s before becoming a celebrity chef and a passionate campaigner on environmental and regional issues (Jane Faulkner, ‘Passion without puff’, *Age*, 24 Nov. 2003). Other FILEF members and collaborators forged their professional careers, for instance, in academia: people such as language and literacy education professor Joe Lo Bianco of Melbourne University, Italian lecturer Mirna Cicioni of Monash University, and the late Franco Schiavoni who was an editorial board member of the journal *Thesis Eleven* and chairperson of the Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission (renamed Victorian Multicultural Commission in 1996).
Immigrants and Immigrant Activism

Framing a theoretical context

As an introductory note, it should be stressed that the social, political and cultural activities and struggles of immigrant workers in immigrant-receiving societies and their labour movements during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries happened against a background of processes such as class formation, nation building and national identity taking place in both the host and the mother countries’ economic and social structures. Labour historians Donna Gabaccia and Fraser Ottanelli (2001) offer a collection of essays describing Italian immigrant worker experiences similar to those in Australia that occurred in different historical periods and were set in quite different environments and contexts. From a global perspective they explore the consequences of the comings and goings, in Europe and the Americas and before and after the Second World War, of Italians whose diaspora “constitutes an ideal case study for anyone interested in how migration can transform identities and influence other historical processes, such as the rise of multiethnic states and the formation of classes” (DiGirolamo 2003). Gabaccia and Ottanelli underscore in particular the importance of the process of nation building in countries in which “Italy’s migrants pioneered a surprising range of transnational, multiethnic, and multiracial organising strategies that transcended ethnic and national divisions”. Ultimately, it was the labour movements in countries such as France, Latin America and the USA which “played important roles in defining how foreigners would find incorporation into these multiethnic nations as workers and as citizens” (Gabaccia and Ottanelli 2001: 3).

Immigrant workers often found themselves in the position of belonging to “racist and xenophobic mainstream labour movement[s, which for long] did not encourage multiethnic mingling” (Gabaccia and Ottanelli 2001: 11). As the vast majority entered the labour force in advanced industrial countries at the very bottom, “within the confines set by the world economy, the state, and the structure of work, immigrant workers face the challenge of defending their interests in competition with other groups holding power in society” (Guerin-Gonzales and Strikwerda 1993: 22).

Guerin-Gonzales and Strikwerda (1993) point out that immigrant workers have been
perceived in most of their host countries as politically controversial as well as economically crucial. This has been true throughout historic periods and across continents, whether they were exploited immigrant workers in New England’s textile industry in the 1910s, undocumented Mexican workers in rural California in the 1920s and 1930s, Turkish guest workers in German auto plants or Italians in Melbourne’s textile and manufacturing industries in the 1960s and 1970s.

Italian-Australians entered the labour market at the lowest point and in typically labour-intensive industries, such as manufacturing and construction (Panucci et al. 1992: 57). This labour market was segmented not only by industrial conflict between native workers and employers, but also along ethnic lines, as documented by Lever-Tracy and Quinlan (1988). The presence of immigrant workers in labour markets in which native workers dominated typically aroused deep-rooted fears about threats to jobs and wages, disruption of the social order and the weakening of trade union movements. A classic instance in which fear and suspicion between native and immigrant workers produced social conflict and distrust by the authorities led to the 1925 Royal Commission to investigate the social and economic effects of the increase in the number of aliens in North Queensland, known as the Ferry Report, which “arose out of the low wages and poor conditions that Italian workers accepted” (Collins 1992: 75).

Yet it was the presence of politically minded immigrants in working-class organisations and native labour movements, crucially important for class solidarity and class consciousness amid fellow immigrant workers, which aroused even more deep-seated fears and was even more dangerously radical in the eyes of local authorities and society than the presence of immigrants alone. Topp (2001: 139) notes that during the Lawrence (Massachusetts) strike of 1912 – when 20,000 immigrant textile mill workers, many of Italian origin, struck for weeks demanding (and in part achieving) a wage increase, a 54-hour working week, abolition of the premium and bonus system, double pay for overtime and no recriminations against those who struck – “terrified nativists … feared immigrants more as radicals then as wage depressers”.1

The potential and limits of left-wing immigrant Italian labour activism in early twentieth-century American society and its labour movement are explored in the works of, for instance, Topp, with his study of Italian-American transnationalists, and Vezzosi (2001), with her study of Italian socialist leaders acting as radical ethnic brokers between ethnic community and wider society. Both shed light on aspects of immigrant labour activism that need to be taken into consideration when analysing the potential of and limits to a CALD lobby organisation and the life trajectories of immigrants turned activists.

Topp illustrates the extraordinary achievements gained by Italian syndicalists at the time of the Lawrence strike, which also represented “the high point of immigrant women’s activism, as well as a successful example of multiethnic collaboration under Italian leadership” (Gabaccia and Ottanelli 2001: 10). Yet the course of Italian-American syndicalism quickly took a different direction, reacting with violence and with a rhetoric based on national pride when accused of being anti-American by nativist Americans. Vezzosi describes how Italian socialists sought both to shape class consciousness and to foster an Italian cultural identity among fellow migrants, while at the same time promoting a process of Americanisation by encouraging them to join the Socialist Party of America.

These two studies suggest that “in the long run, Italian American radical and working-
class activists failed in their challenge to more conservative, nationalist brokers”. Eventually, anti-fascism would glue together the most class-conscious Italian migrants and would serve as a bridge between Italy and the labour movements of the countries where they worked (Gabaccia and Ottanelli 2001: 10, 12).

In a similar fashion, left-wing organisations such as FILEF or political parties through their overseas networks such as the PCI did attempt to gather, under the same political and ideological umbrella, politically minded working-class Italians in Australia who sought to retain their political and cultural traditions while mingling to various degrees in the ethnic rights, labour and trade union movements and in mainstream politics. Yet they failed to significantly shape the Italian-Australian ethnic identity through the activism of its ethnic brokers, leaving room for more moderate to conservative alternatives (e.g. COASIT and Il Globo) to take this role and to liaise with mainstream Australian institutions.

Theoretically contextualising the experience of one of the main progressive Italian organisations in Melbourne in the 1970s also means adopting a typology of immigrant working-class organisation which seems appropriate in relation to the history and membership of FILEF at the time. Lever-Tracy and Quinlan (1988: 117-66) looked into post-war interactions of immigrants with working-class organisations in Australia by examining the diverse organisational options open to immigrants and their involvement in them. They identified three possible types: spontaneous groups, separate immigrant unions and ethno-specific immigrant worker clubs. If the spontaneous groups or loose collective alliances, “often of a temporary and informal nature”, formed within hostel immigrant centres and sought “to influence, through petition and protest, matters which are of general concern to Australia’s trade unions” (Lever-Tracy and Quinlan 1988: 118-19), the separate immigrant unions remained a potential never fully realised in Australia, and abhorred by native unions. It is the description of ethno-specific immigrant worker clubs, which Lever-Tracy and Quinlan classify as bodies which laid no claim to union status and whose *raison d’être* was rather that of providing a political and cultural focal point for immigrant workers, which seems to fit best the organisational structure of FILEF:

They have acted … as a catalyst by which relatively poorly integrated immigrant workers could be converted into active union members. These bodies were also a focus for shared cultural, ideological and social values among particular groups of immigrants. They facilitated the exchange of ideas and experiences, and the provision of social outlets and welfare services on a self-help basis (Lever-Tracy and Quinlan 1988: 151).

FILEF was formed in a period when similar immigrant worker clubs were being established among other ethnic communities, e.g. the Greek community (Lever-Tracy and Quinlan 1988: 151-3). It is in these organisations that a few hundred Italian immigrants throughout Australia (mainly in the major urban centres of Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth) learned (or continued to follow) left-wing politics and became (or became again) involved in political, cultural and social activity.
Background histories of FILEF

There are no monographs, theses or comprehensive critical essays on the history of FILEF Melbourne and its activists along the lines of, for instance, Graham Marsh’s MA thesis *An Historical and Sociological Study of the Australian Greek Welfare Society* (1983) or Michele Langfield’s *Espresso Bar to EMC: A Thirty-Year History of the Ecumenical Migration Centre* (1996). However, over the last three decades some have documented and analysed FILEF Melbourne’s history, or at least parts of it. Such histories can be found embedded in several studies and constitute an important source of information for this book, for instance, the works of Carlo Carli (1982) and Mark Lopez (2000).

By the time he submitted his honours thesis, Carli was a young former activist of FILEF Melbourne. He had left the organisation approximately a year earlier, in 1981. This happened around the time that fellow activist Joe Caputo was expelled from its steering executive as the result of internal political tensions and power struggles, an expulsion which had sent a message of dejection to activists like Carli. Although his short-lived experience in FILEF Melbourne lasted only three years, he had first-hand inside knowledge of it. In his thesis, while examining the post-war political scene within Melbourne’s Italian-Australian community, he recounted several otherwise undocumented episodes of its history, such as its close ties with the Australian branch of the PCI and the effects of the deportation of one of its key activists Ignazio Salemi on the organisational structure.

Carli placed FILEF Melbourne’s history in this context: the traditional, conservative leadership of the Italian-Australian community, which had consolidated its hegemony during the post-war years, saw itself progressively challenged during the period of the Whitlam Labor government (1972-75) by a community vanguard organisation, namely FILEF. Immediately before and after the Fraser Liberal government (1975-83) took office, FILEF began to suffer a number of political and structural setbacks, including cuts in federal funding and the deportation of Salemi, who was both a prominent FILEF organiser and a PCI official. The Salemi court-political case, deportation included, created a division between what Carli defined as the ‘young’ and the ‘old’ factions; the former “wanted to use FILEF as a broad coordinating organisation for different initiatives”, while the latter, headed by FILEF secretary Giovanni Sgrò and the PCI group within FILEF, “wanted to build a tight organisation that would maintain a dialogue with Australian political parties”. The latter faction prevailed, “leaving FILEF as an isolated political sect” (Carli 1982: 51). Carli concluded that, plagued by lack of funding and growing internal factionalism, FILEF Melbourne rapidly lost influence in the ethnic and Australian scene by the early 1980s.

His main argument is centred on the conservative nature of the multicultural model matured around the second half of the 1970s and articulated in the policy guidelines of the 1978 Galbally Report on migrant services and programs, which according to Carli supported rather than questioned the influence of the post-war middle-class leaders of migrant communities, such as the Italian-Australian community of Melbourne that FILEF had challenged. He eventually argued (this is an interesting observation) that Fraser’s model of multiculturalism helped block structural and generational change even within the progressive migrant organisations, such as FILEF Melbourne, that had emerged at the onset of the multicultural era.
When researching his thesis, Carli saw historical similarities between FILEF Melbourne and the Italian-Australian anti-fascist movement of the 1930s. Both were emerging vanguard movements within the Italian-Australian Left, and both had “a strong bohemian component” mainly composed of “city people” who managed to generate “a surge of activities”. Likewise both movements suffered political and organisational setbacks and collapsed, restoring the community leadership once again to the notabili (‘notables’, that is, members of the establishment), consisting mainly of businesspeople and fairly “apolitical types”.

Notwithstanding Carli’s contribution to local Italian-Australian historiography, his thesis is open to question at a methodological level. He failed to acknowledge that he once belonged to FILEF’s ‘young faction’ and that his strained relationship with the Melbourne leadership of the time, in particular with Sgrò, had prevented him from accessing primary sources, which made the oral testimonies of sixteen people, mainly past and present FILEF members and collaborators, essential to help him clarify issues and events. Carli failed to acknowledge in the main text or in the footnotes this source which would have been essential for the reconstruction of FILEF Melbourne’s history. In the absence of a basic formalisation of his oral history sources, it is impossible to discern who contributes what information and to appreciate each person’s contribution. Nonetheless, Carli’s account remains noteworthy. He contextualised the history of FILEF Melbourne by anchoring it in the broader historical framework of post-war Italian-Australian political activism, and in so doing he continued the trend of investigation started by Cresciani (1980).

Another study which also recounts some episodes of the history of FILEF Melbourne is Lopez’s (2000) comprehensive account of the origins of multiculturalism in Australian politics up until 1975. Lopez discussed FILEF Melbourne within the context of the history of the migrant rights movement. Unlike Carli, he had the opportunity to access its files and to gather recollections of Giovanni Sgrò (Lopez 2000: 30, 532). Lopez constructed the following narrative. FILEF was formed in Melbourne in 1972 with the key support of the Fitzroy Ecumenical Centre (FEC) and of local Labor activist Sgrò who was eager to draw “working-class Italians away from the Comitato Assistenza Italiani (COASIT), an organisation he regarded as an ideological enemy that provided an obstacle to the Italian migrants supporting the political left” (Lopez 2000: 149). Unlike other migrant organisations, such as the Australian Greek Welfare Society and the Greek Professionals Association, FILEF Melbourne was according to Lopez a self-confessed working-class and Marxist-oriented organisation. Influenced by FEC activists Arthur Faulkner and Des Storer, it adopted an ethnic rights approach which during the Whitlam government, through the effective lobbying of its activists, first and foremost Sgrò, resulted in attracting government funding and access to ethnic-language media.

The arrival of Salemi in 1974 boosted FILEF Melbourne’s activities but also created frictions between him and Sgrò (Lopez 2000: 328). Lopez argued that his presence led to incidents such as the ‘Italian communists move in’ of April 1975 that resonated heavily in the media (the Age sensationally revealed the FILEF-PCI ‘red’ link): “The Salemi scandal singled FILEF out to Liberal politicians, otherwise favourably disposed towards ethnic organisations, as an example of what they considered to be an undesirable organisation. [Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs] MacKellar resolved to deport Salemi as soon as his visa expired.” Lopez took FILEF Melbourne as an example of how politically one-sided organisations suffered setbacks following a change of government, unlike others such as the...
Australian Greek Welfare Society which have established connections with both major political parties (Lopez 2000: 403-4).

Given the divergent source material of Carli and Lopez, it is striking to note the ways in which both recall the same episodes of FILEF Melbourne's history. Their readings of a number of episodes, in particular, the organisation's establishment and the 'Italian communists move in' incident, diverge markedly. On the establishment of FILEF in Melbourne, Lopez (2000: 148-9) wrote:

In 1972 the ethnic rights activists at the FEC were also involved in the establishment of an Italian ethnic organisation. They regarded COASIT as right-wing and conservative, and were interested in establishing a left-wing Italian organisation to challenge the position of COASIT in the Italian community. Storer and others were sceptical about their chances of achieving this until they met Giovanni Sgrò ... When Sgrò visited the FEC, Faulkner and Storer were impressed by his enthusiasm. Sgrò told them he had organised a group of Italians to meet regularly at his home under the banner of FILEF ... an association that had been established in Europe by the PCI ... to care for Italian workers and their families in foreign countries. Sgrò had established a FILEF branch as an outlet to express his Marxist philosophy that was not available to him in the ALP, and to organise migrant workers.

Carli (1982: 21-2) places its establishment in the context of Melbourne's Italian-Australian left-wing politics of the time, which saw the emergence of Australian PCI branches:

By the late sixties the organised Italian Left was reduced to an isolated and divided Italo-Australian League which posed no serious threat to the hegemony of the Right [in the Italian-Australian community]. This decline of the Italo-Australian League partly followed the fortunes of the CPA [Communist Party of Australia] ... When a further division occurred between the CPA and its pro-Soviet wing, the Italian communists further distanced themselves and in 1971 formed an Australian branch of the PCI ... Then in 1972 another organisation was set up in Melbourne which clearly overlapped with the formation of the PCI branch. It was FILEF which was a Rome-based, international body with branches in the major regions of Italian migration. FILEF aimed to unite migrant workers to work for their human and civil rights. It was also largely a PCI influenced organisation. When it was set up in Melbourne the newly formed PCI branch served as its initial mass base, although non-communists were also involved in its formation.

Lopez (2000: 403-4) interpreted the 'Italian communists move in' episode within the context of some existing friction between Sgrò and Salemi, stemming from Salemi's manner of organising and coordinating activities:

[Salemi] was active in attempting to organise the Italian community around FILEF and, as Sgrò recalled, he often acted on his initiative without Sgrò's authority: 'Salemi got too big [for his] boots, a bit too big for himself. He used to ... go on radio, or
whatever, and write anything without consulting the bloody FILEF Committee; and I said to FILEF in Rome, he must go’. Salemi spoke candidly to The Age about his activities and precipitated a public relations disaster for FILEF. On 26 April 1975, The Age presented a front-page exposé on Salemi and FILEF, highlighting his status as an employee of the PCI and that FILEF received a Welfare Rights Officer grant from the federal Government. The report created a scandal, forcing Sgrò to make mainstream media appearances to attempt to contain the damage caused by the sensationalisation of FILEF’s Communist connections.

Conversely, Carli placed the episode within the tense climate generated by the publication in the FILEF periodical Nuovo Paese (2 Feb. 1975; see also Storer 1979) of the findings of a social survey, carried out in 1974 by FILEF Melbourne in conjunction with the FEC, among 400 Italian migrant families in the then working-class area of Coburg-Brunswick and titled Gli italiani in Australia. The findings undermined a common belief in the good, or at least above average, living conditions of Italian migrants, suggesting instead that, overall, Italian-Australians were economically, socially and culturally disadvantaged and discriminated against when compared to the general Australian population. The findings were tabled at the First World Conference on Italian Emigration, held in Rome and sponsored by the Italian Foreign Office in late February 1975. In Melbourne, the conference infuriated the Italian-Australian establishment:

[Then] on the 26th April, 1975 The Age published an article entitled ‘Italian communists move in’. Now the article itself was not particularly anti-communist, as it spelt out some of the activities of FILEF, claimed that it was trying to win the support of the Italian community and accurately stated that Salemi was a member of the PCI. Yet for a reason that has never been explained a sensationalist headline was placed over the article, which made it sound as though the Italian communist party was making a bid to gain political control of Melbourne’s 250,000 strong Italian community (Carli 1982: 37-8).

If Carli reflects the standpoint of FILEF Melbourne’s ‘young faction’, Lopez represents that of Sgrò, and this leads him to emphasise the role of Sgrò with the risk of overshadowing that of others within the organisational structure.

Besides Carli’s and Lopez’s studies, some aspects of FILEF’s history (including other branches in Australia) are noted in other works of scholarship. For instance, Jakubowicz et al. (1984: 62-3) emphasised that FILEF Melbourne was essentially a working-class based and Marxist oriented organisation which in the emerging ethnic welfare sector of mid-1970s Melbourne provided an alternative to COASIT, which up until 1972 represented the main response to the welfare needs of Italian immigrants and was the organisation preferred by the conservative governments. Unlike COASIT, it combined community work with political demands through a grassroots approach. By training organisers locally, FILEF hoped to “transfer the lessons of Italian [post-68] urban social movements to the Australian context”. Salemi’s deportation could be read as the denouement of the conflict between the two organisations (COASIT saw arguably its influential position in the Italian-Australian community challenged
by FILEF) and the failure of FILEF Melbourne’s strategy of “aggressive advocacy of social and welfare rights” (Jakubowicz et al. 1984: 81).

Other historians drew attention to the controlling role played by the Australian authorities when dealing with ‘radical’ organisations and organisers. Jupp (1984c: 187) pointed out that “the refusal to subsidise the radical Italian organisation FILEF” in 1976 suggested that the government’s subsidising of ethnic welfare organisations could further or thwart pressure groups, depending on their policy orientations. Cresciani (1985: 103) took the case of Salemi, who was deported “for political activities carried out as a leader of the pro-Communist FILEF”, as an example of how determined Australian authorities discouraged the roles assumed by “uncomfortably active left-wing Italians”.

Political economist Joseph Halevi’s (1989) Gramscian interpretation of the FILEF experience in Australia diverges from the preceding social- and political-historical analyses. Halevi precisely examined the cultural role played by FILEF in Australia. He refuted the social theorem that second and third generation migrants had “the conceptual means to understand, assimilate, and indeed repossess, the original culture [of their parents or grandparents] in its contemporary dimension”. Following the Gramscian notion that a lack of education does not imply the absence of culture, he demonstrated that the not formally educated working class, to which many members of FILEF in Australia belonged, had the ability to organise itself in a modern way and find “a way out from the lower forms of culture which beset the everyday life of the uneducated, such as commonsense and religion” (Halevi 1989: 223-4).

Some other studies of Australian multiculturalism touch on FILEF Melbourne only briefly. For instance, Jupp’s article on Italians and multicultural Australia contains a discussion of the channels through which Italian-Australians expressed their particular community demands, such as “maintenance of the Italian language and culture … protection of wages and conditions of industrial workers” (Jupp et al. 1989: 25). Jupp listed the newspapers, welfare organisations, “of which the largest and most effective is COASIT”, Catholic religious organisations and a “handful of Italian politicians such as Franca Arena or Con Sciacca”. He only mentioned FILEF when acknowledging that Italian welfare organisations did not always “work together” and there had been “some rivalry between the radical FILEF and the more conservative COASIT”.

On the other hand, in some other studies FILEF Melbourne (and in other Australian cities) and its activists are strikingly absent. Take for example the ground-breaking study of post-war migrants by Jean Martin, *The Migrant Presence* (1978), where FILEF Melbourne’s activities in the welfare and trade union fields are totally ignored. Neither did it receive any mention in some minor publications, e.g. in an official bicentenary publication (O’Brien 1988), the brief history of Italians in Australia features COASIT as the only Italian-Australian welfare agency.

**Research strategy, methodology and sources**

In late 2001 I started thinking about the history of history of the workers’ organisation FILEF when stories of its past political and cultural activism were conveyed to me by friends who were former members of its Melbourne branch. I was intrigued by their uncommon life trajectories and migration experiences, compared to the mainstream post-Second World War narrative of migrants to Australia from Italy.
Preliminary background research made me realise that FILEF Melbourne’s history constituted a pivotal episode in Italian-Australian community politics that was worth investigating and could provide significant insights into the political potential and limits of CALD lobbies in Australia. As explained above, earlier attempts at writing (parts of) a history of FILEF Melbourne have not been adequately comprehensive. Nor have a significant number of life histories of immigrants turned activists of Italian background been comprehensively researched. FILEF’s history has, for instance, rarely been viewed against a wider historical background that pays attention to earlier political developments of the Left in Italy and Australia. Primary sources appeared to be relatively abundant, yet many would not be available in a few decades, for these sources do not just include archival materials but recollections of FILEF members as well.

From the outset, this research project presented challenging issues of methodology, practice and ethics. For instance, it was not at all obvious what chronological and geographical scope needed to be adopted. Would it best be a complete history of FILEF in Australia from its foundation (1972) to the present, or had it better focus in detail on FILEF in, for instance, the 1970s, 1980s and/or 1990s? Should it take the form of a history of one of the major ‘sezioni’ (branches), e.g. FILEF Sydney, or should it include a discussion of minor or short-lived ones, e.g. FILEF Geelong?

Historical practice also demanded some clarifications. Which methodology was to be adopted? What historical perspective? Should I write, so to speak, a people’s history (with a relatively strong emphasis on oral testimonies and life writing material) or an ‘official’ organisational history (putting more weight on official documents reflecting the public rendering of FILEF)? Would FILEF’s history be best understood if placed in the wider historical context of the Left in both Italy and Australia, or would it be best to historically situate it in the Australian ethnic rights movement and Australian socio-cultural context – or both?

Planning to gather recollections of surviving FILEF members posed its dilemmas too. Who should be contacted and interviewed? How many? Should they be former or current FILEF members only, or should they include former or current collaborators, sympathisers and/or outsiders who played a role in its structure? And how could the oral history material best be used and intertwined with the rest of the sources?

As the project progressed I attempted to answer these questions. Initially, a history of FILEF in Australia from its foundation to the present seemed feasible. The project would start in Melbourne, given that I was based there and had easy access to the local branch and people, and then move on to other branches: Sydney, Adelaide and, ideally, even Brisbane, Perth and Canberra. However, the amount of material that could be taken into account and the extent of the analysis that could be done were intrinsically constrained by the timeframe and resources of a doctoral project and, in its later stages, the chronological and geographical scope was narrowed down to ‘The 1970s history of FILEF Melbourne’.

It needs to be stressed that my choice to focus on FILEF Melbourne does not imply that the history of FILEF Sydney and FILEF Adelaide is not equally important, especially for a thorough history of FILEF in Australia, but such a project will clearly have to be a longer-term aim. There were several reasons for the decision to limit the scope of the project to the Melbourne branch. First, Melbourne is where multicultural policies were first experimented with and implemented in the 1970s (Lopez 2000: passim). Second, some pioneering ethno-
specific lobby and welfare organisations of the period, including the Australian Greek Welfare Society and COASIT, were established there, as was the first FILEF branch. The self-imposed chronological limitation to the 1970s was eventually prompted by the wealth of material available and the historical significance of that period (e.g. launch of Nuovo Paese and establishment of the welfare office, the Salemi case, the election of Giovanni Sgrò to state parliament). It quickly became apparent that the 1970s were an important decade in the history of this FILEF branch which deserves close attention. FILEF Melbourne activities and activists in the 1970s were of a particular character that was worthy to be considered by themselves.

Methodologically speaking, I planned initially to approach the project in a way in which I could sensibly combine the use of both quantitative and qualitative data, e.g. archival material and oral history testimonies. As the project progressed, with the literature being reviewed and the background research being conducted, the gathering and analysis of quantitative data took priority over the analysis (rather than the gathering) of qualitative data. The purpose was to establish the amount and value of earlier studies and to gain an understanding of the ‘hard data’ underlying them before proceeding with the study of the oral accounts collected. This may explain the fact that a large part of this book is essentially based on literature and archival material. From the beginning, it was deemed appropriate to put a lot of emphasis on the need for thorough background research into what had already been said about FILEF and the historical contexts in which it operated. The main reason was the need to compare and contrast the several histories of FILEF Melbourne: public/institutional, private/subjective, individual/collective, written/oral etc.

The gathering of quantitative data ran in parallel with the gathering of qualitative data. Since late 2001, contacts with current and former members and collaborators were made with the purpose of mapping, or at least beginning to map, the collective memory surrounding the history of FILEF Melbourne. This research strategy resulted in the compilation of a list of names of potential interviewees and helped establish an atmosphere of open communication with former FILEF Melbourne associates – because open communication is relevant. It was by means of these initial contacts that I was introduced to other associates, some of whom were interviewed. In this process, members of the first FILEF Melbourne generation (the 1950s and 1960s migrants) were prioritised, as they were most vulnerable to the passing of time. People belonging to the 1970s generation of migrants, and those who worked with, for or indirectly with the organisation, were also interviewed. In total, 27 current and former FILEF members and collaborators, primarily of the Melbourne branch, were interviewed between April 2002 and May 2004 and their memories and views recorded. Many interviews were conducted in Italian. Excerpts from some interviews formed the basis for the oral history contribution to this research.

This study has made extensive use of primary sources, which constitute the main source of information on the history of FILEF Melbourne due to the scarcity of secondary sources. As previously argued (see Introduction), post-war Italian-Australian political history has been a neglected field of study (Cresciani 1988a: 55-6; Rando 1973: 94-5), and FILEF Melbourne’s history is no exception. Yet, there seems to be no lack of primary sources. Archival data is abundant and relatively accessible (with more record files held in public archives expected to be released once the 30-year access rule is no longer applicable), while a substantial number of surviving ex-members and ex-collaborators of FILEF Melbourne could be traced for
consultation and interviewing. For these reasons, primary sources such as letters, statements, press releases, conference proceedings, leaflets and interviews form the main body of data which this study has relied on.

Public and private collections in Australia, Italy and the USA hold a rich and diverse set of correspondence and photos, conference proceedings and newspaper clippings. During fieldwork trips to Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney, Modena, Rome and New York, record files and memorabilia were located that shed light on the issues discussed here. Some material is directly related to FILEF’s presence and activity in Australia, while other material only touches on it briefly or indirectly.

Many of the records used were unearthed in the most obvious place: the archive of FILEF Melbourne, located at its office in Coburg. Scholars and researchers have only occasionally consulted the FILEF Melbourne Archive (FMA). This comprises approximately 260 uncatalogued folders, one-tenth of which date back to the 1970s. It also includes an incomplete set of Nuovo Paese from circa 1974 to 1983 and miscellaneous posters, photos, videos, audiocassettes and films. Some memorabilia are kept there too: a red flag and a portrait of Lenin, supposedly painted by the late Tom Diele, a FILEF member himself and coordinator of the FILEF art group.

The FMA has not been formally catalogued, which made it necessary to carry out a preliminary survey in order to comprehend the location and significance of the various records. In the context of this project, a systematic reading of a dozen ‘catalogued’ folders was conducted (those regarding the Salemi case, the 1974 and 1975 federal election campaigns, Nuovo Paese, and the 1977 and 1980 FILEF national congresses). Cursory attention was paid to the remaining 1970s folders which are concerned with, for example, the activities of the FILEF youth and women’s groups, transcriptions of the FILEF Italian-language radio programs produced and broadcast by Australian Broadcasting Corporation access radio station 3ZZ, and correspondence with other Australian FILEF branches.

The ‘Salemi case’ folders contain an extraordinarily rich assortment of records. Besides newspaper clippings (165 items from local and international papers), there are letters exchanged between FILEF Melbourne and other organisations, including the Immigration Department; letters exchanged between the Immigration Department and Holding & Redlich, the legal firm defending Salemi; press and news releases by FILEF and others on its behalf; FILEF information bulletins; minutes; telegrams; letters to Nuovo Paese; posters; and miscellaneous materials. These provided the opportunity for a comprehensive study of the Salemi court case and the political campaign that surrounded it.

The folders regarding the 1974 and 1975 election campaigns shed light on the support offered by FILEF in the re-election bid of the Labor Party in 1974, while those regarding the 1977 and 1980 national congresses offered a snapshot of the several ‘fronts’ and debates in which FILEF was involved: debates about multiculturalism in schools, consular committees, the role of Nuovo Paese in the press, female migrant workers, the relationship between migrants and trade unions, the Liberal government’s strategies towards the migrant workers’ movement and so on.

A second collection consulted is that held at the Gramsci Institute Foundation (FIG) in Rome, which contains the rich archival collection of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) (1921-91). This material revealed a large amount of information about the history of the PCI in Australia, as well as on the history of FILEF in Australia. Despite recent efforts (Davidson 2007;
Battiston 2009a), the history of the PCI in Australia remains largely unknown among historians and scholars; apart from the links with FILEF’s history, it is absent from the literature.7 Research on the records from the ufficio emigrazione (emigration office) collection was limited to those that could potentially elucidate the nexus between FILEF and the PCI in the 1970s. At the time of a second field trip to Italy in 2005, access was limited to records dated before 1974, because of the 30-year restriction policy. Some 40 records dated between 1970 and 1973 – mainly letters, statistics and reports – were closely studied. By reconstructing the struggles of the Italian-Australian communists who established the PCI between 1971 and 1972, it has also been possible to shed new light on the origins of FILEF.

Additionally, other public collections yielded valuable material, part of which was used in this study. The FILEF New South Wales collection preserves records of the early history of FILEF Sydney, from the early 1970s to 1985. Some records regarding the Salemi case were examined, particularly those that were unavailable in Melbourne. Unfortunately, the FILEF collection in Rome holds very few records regarding the organisation’s activities in the 1970s.

Private collections form an unexpectedly rich and significant data source used in this research. They were, in a sense, opened up as a by-product of the interviewing process, “a means of discovering written documents and photographs which would not have otherwise been traced” (Thompson 1998: 24). Many interviewees voluntarily made their private collections available for consultation. Many different kinds of materials are present in these collections: letters, minutes drafts, newspaper clippings, posters and photographs. Subject to agreement with the interviewees, some of this material has been digitally duplicated, as its survival would have been compromised over the years.

NOTES

1. Italian immigrants and syndicalists of the Industrial Workers of the World union played a central role in the multi-ethnic Lawrence strike as strike adherents and leaders (Topp 2001: 141).
2. While some historians of Italian-Australian studies have often tackled wide-ranging issues (for example, Pascoe 1987; Castles 1987; Cresciani 2003), others have limited their research to specific areas. This is the case, for example, of the study by Giorgio Cheda (1976) on Swiss-Italians in nineteenth century Australia, the comparative study of Italian migrants in Sydney and Griffith by Rina Huber (1977), and Stephanie Lindsay Thompson’s (1980) work on a group of Italians who returned to Italy. However, these and other researchers carried out their projects as part of historical enquiries, which did not strictly relate to migrant politics.
4. By ‘private collection’ I mean a body of written and photographic material held by a person or family in their own house, kindly lent to me for research purposes.
5. Lopez consulted the FILEF files for his study on the origins of multiculturalism in Australian politics (2000: 532).
6. Citations from the FMA quoted in this book appear only as ‘FMA’.
7. One reason for this gap in the literature could be the dispersion of primary sources. The transformation of the PCI into the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) in 1991, and eventually into the Democrats of the Left (DS) in 1998, rapidly dissolved the structure and membership of the PCI in Australia. Records have been found during fieldwork for this project, but apart from those in the Gramsci Institute Foundation (FIG), PCI Collection, they are almost exclusively in private hands. A ‘PCI Australia Collection’ is yet to be created.
The Politicisation of Italian Emigration

Post-war Italian emigration: an overview

During his opening speech at the 1975 World Conference on Italian Emigration, Christian Democratic Party (DC) prime minister Aldo Moro underlined the dramatic extent of emigration: some 30 million Italians had experienced overseas migration since unification in 1861 – a figure that was comparable to the entire urban population at the beginning of the twentieth century (Ciuffoletti and Degl’Innocenti 1978: v). More than half of these had emigrated before the First World War. Approximately six million were, at the time of Moro’s speech, still living and working overseas. According to Favero and Tassello (1978: 64), 26.8 million Italians emigrated overseas during the hundred years of statistical surveys (1876–1976). Repatriations from 1905 – when the first repatriation data was officially recorded – to 1976 were approximately 8.5 million.

Italian emigration certainly was, in its magnitude and duration (approximately a century, from the 1860s to the early 1970s), one of the most significant socio-economic events occurring in contemporary Italy. Its implications for the country’s growth and social structure have been extraordinary and complex (Rosoli 1978; Ciuffoletti and Degl’Innocenti 1978; Bevilacqua et al. 2001–02; Audenino and Tirabassi 2008). To comprehend how emigration has influenced the social and economic fabric of the country, in Sicily alone 38% of the population, or 1,703,000, moved away from the island between 1947 and 1961. Several provinces (Agrigento, Caltanissetta, Enna, Messina) halved their population, producing an incalculable socio-economic drain (Renda 1989: 8).

The size and the direction of the emigration flow has been very much influenced by a set of factors: the alternation of cycles of economic growth and downturn, the changing patterns of the labour markets, and the impact of the immigration policies of Italy and the host countries (Monferrini 1987: 7). For instance, during the first decade of the twentieth century, the USA became the main destination outside Europe, receiving 36% of the overall emigration flow in 1901–05 and 41% in 1906–10 (Favero and Tassello 1978: 27). Some 3.5 million Italians migrated to North America (mainly the USA) between 1900 and 1915. US immigration policies
favoured a high quota of Italians. Moreover, the lack of industrial development in southern Italy towards the end of the nineteenth century led to the failure of the rationalisation and mechanisation of the main agricultural sector. Thus the surplus of southern labour, not employable by the local industry in what Francesco Cerase termed a “precarious economy”, turned to emigration (Cerase 1978: 122-35, 152).

Immediately after the First World War, emigration returned to pre-1915 levels, some 900,000 in 1919-20 alone; more than half of these were to France and Switzerland (Favero and Tassello 1978: 30-1). On the other hand, the USA’s revised immigration quotas for Italians (1924), the new Italian fascist policy (1927) which opposed permanent emigration (Cannistraro and Rosoli 1979: 687) and the Second World War restricted the emigration flow up to the mid-1940s.

Italians emigrated *en masse* after the Second World War, with 200,000 to 300,000 departures and 65,000 to 119,000 repatriations yearly (Favero and Tassello 1978: 27) (see Table 1). By 1951, some 1,420,000 had already emigrated since 1946 (787,700 within Europe; 633,100 outside Europe), while 471,900 were repatriated (Favero and Lucrezio 1975: 39-40). Between 1956 and 1962, emigration reached record levels: 344,802 in 1956, 341,793 in 1957, 383,908 in 1960, 387,123 in 1961 and 365,611 in 1962. Repatriations were also high, averaging around 190,000 a year (Rosoli 1978: 347, 349).

Data on net emigration during 1946-70 shows record numbers in the late 1940s (139,000 in 1949), mid-1950s (115,000 in 1955) and mid-1960s (70,000 in 1966), before a consistent drop from 1968 onwards (Calvaruso et al. 1975: 22).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Expatriated</th>
<th>Repatriated</th>
<th>Net emigration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1946-51</td>
<td>1,421,000</td>
<td>472,000</td>
<td>949,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952-57</td>
<td>1,737,000</td>
<td>744,000</td>
<td>992,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958-63</td>
<td>1,938,000</td>
<td>1,148,000</td>
<td>790,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964-69</td>
<td>1,465,000</td>
<td>1,066,000</td>
<td>399,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6,712,000</td>
<td>3,572,000</td>
<td>3,140,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In a phase of economic reconstruction and rapid growth, the so-called *periodo della ricostruzione* (1946-51), western European countries (primarily Switzerland, France and Germany) became
the main destinations for Italian migrants (Audenino and Tirabassi 2008: 136). They turned to
the reserve of manpower in the underdeveloped regions of southern Europe to meet
production demands (Volpe 1980a: 44).

The labour markets of western European countries opened for unemployed foreign workers
as the new political circumstances of the continent (which prompted the signing in 1957 of the
Treaty of Rome, the mainstay of today’s European Union) improved cooperation in matters
such as workers’ mobility and the cross-border traffic of people (Colucci 2008: 25-8).

Such economic circumstances favoured the flow of an impressive number of unemployed
and under-employed Italians: between 1946 and 1976 there were 7.3 million expatriations and
4.3 million repatriations (Favero and Tassello 1978: 37). In 1975 repatriations outnumbered
expatriations for the first time, with a ratio of 123:100, while in 1970–74 it had been 93:100
(Favero and Tassello 1978: 12). Approximately two-thirds of the emigrant flow was within
Europe, and the remaining third to North and South America (80%), Australia (16%), Africa
(4%) and Asia (1%) (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Table 2</strong></th>
<th><strong>Recipient countries of Italian migration flows, 1946-76</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country</strong></td>
<td><strong>Number of Italian migrants received</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>2,330,230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany (West)</td>
<td>1,137,810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1,032,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>500,116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>488,483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>440,796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benelux (Belgium, Netherlands and Luxemburg)</td>
<td>381,692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>360,708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>260,048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>166,402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>124,227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>88,852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>13,958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>7,326,052</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Favero and Tassello (1978: 39)
The dynamics of the 1950s reconstruction boom in western Europe, including some areas of Italy, and the massive drain of manpower from the agricultural sector favoured occupational mobility and emigration from the underdeveloped Mezzogiorno (literally ‘Midday’, that is, Southern Italy) and Trevenezie (mostly comprising the Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia regions), both overseas and, within the country, towards the triangolo industriale (industrial triangle) between Turin, Milan and Genoa (Favero and Lucrezio 1975: 41). It is during this period of economic take-off of 1952-57 that net overseas emigration reached its peak for 1946-70, with 992,000 permanent departures (Favero and Lucrezio 1975: 75). Those who emigrated outside Europe favoured North America (35%, up from 18%) and Australia (16%, up from 7%) or other countries (6%), rather than South America (45%, down from 69%), when compared with the previous six-year period.

Mass emigration was also triggered by the government’s economic, employment and emigration policies which played a crucial role in encouraging emigration of large numbers from the South and North-east. Governments of the late 1940s and 1950s eagerly supported a policy that deemed individual or collective emigration a suitable solution to the high level of unemployment (Ciuffoletti and Degl’Innocenti 1978: 280). Even before the end of the Second World War, the economic and political elite had envisaged mass emigration as a likely phenomenon in the immediate future (Colucci 2008: 41-5). As the post-war economic and industrial reconstruction boom primarily progressed in the triangolo industriale, while it remained marginal elsewhere, the relative underdevelopment of the South perpetuated its precarious economy of the late 19th century into the 1950s. This resulted in a surplus of local labour, with many people facing the dilemma of returning to agricultural work or migrating.

In 1948, the Italian government reported that there were some 832,000 prospective migrants over a four-year period (Volpe 1979a: 36). A confidential government report dated March 1949 which contained data and projections of migration flows up until 1952 unveiled a much higher target: approximately four million people were regarded as “in excess”, of whom two million were officially unemployed (Favero and Lucrezio 1975: 36-7; Sacchetti 1978: 260).

As a migrant recipient country, Australia seems to have been well aware of the Italian government’s intentions, for example, in November 1950 a Labor MP suggested to the Minister for Immigration Harold Holt that he should consider the immigration of Italian stonemasons and quarry workers, given that their government wanted “to get rid of 250,000 people a year”.1

The Italian government’s ten-year plan for the development of employment and wealth (the Piano Vannoni) of 1954, when departures reached record levels, considered a high number of yearly departures of Italian workers to overseas countries to be one of the key strategies in the fight against unemployment (Ciuffoletti and Degl’Innocenti 1978: 282).

Emigration reached dramatic levels in the 1950s and well into the 1960s, with most migrants coming from southern regions. It has been calculated that some 1.8 million southern peasants resorted to emigration between 1951 and 1971, halving the total rural workforce in those regions (Malfatti 1978: 108). A typical example of a southerner migrating to make a better living was Giovanni Sgrò. He grew up in a peasant family in the small town of Seminara in Reggio Calabria and migrated to Australia in 1952. His memoirs tell of the devastating impact of emigration in the South which “after the Second World War emptied the town [of Seminara] of many young people and much of the countryside became abandoned” (Sgrò 2000: 1).
The vicissitudes to which another southerner, Vincenzo Mammoliti, was subjected when migrating from the Calabrian countryside to Australia in 1951 may well embody the archetypal experience of the southern Italian migrant of this time. In the 1940s, Mammoliti worked as a farm labourer on a large landed estate. However, the partially failed post-war attempts of the government to reform the agricultural sector, and the unsuccessful, short-lived peasant movement of the occupazione delle terre (occupation of former common land), had reduced the work prospects for young southerners. Many resorted to emigration to escape, in Mammoliti’s words, from the clutches of local ‘barons’ and their farm managers who actually dominated their employees’ and subordinates’ life decisions:

One day the baron’s uncle, the landowner Don Franco, said to me: “When are you getting married?” I say: “Soon.” “Cesare will help you,” – Cesare was the baron, because with fascism he had had a free house built every 30 hectares and a lot of those houses were empty. And so when I told him that, he told me that he would give me an answer. He came a week later and said to me: “You know Peppe u Pazzu – which was the nickname of a guard – said that we have to put some wheat in …” When I gave him one week’s notice [I said to him]: “You know that I’m going to Australia.” “But you know, down there, what are you going to do, there’s nothing there, barely any people, sheep, baa baa, moo moo: they’ll do your head in.” I told him: “Yes, yes, maybe that’s true but at least Peppe u Pazzu won’t be there, right?”, the guard won’t be there. He was flabbergasted. I was a peasant who’d only been to primary school – I shouldn’t have let myself say those things to him. He was the baron.

The struggles of migrants like Sgrò and Mammoliti, who represented the weakest and largest link in the chain of emigration during the post-war period, namely the working-class and peasant component, became a matter of concern for the Italian Left from the 1950s onwards. When the emigration flows reached record high levels, the voices most critical of government policy on emigration within the Italian Left came indeed from the South, the region where the socio-economic consequences (depopulation and economic underdevelopment) were most severe. Giorgio Napolitano (1954) of the PCI publicly doubted the main argument of the government’s policy which claimed that the surplus of population rather than the discrepancy between the socio-economic conditions of the different classes within Italian society and the partial failure of industrialisation and agricultural reforms in the South was causing mass emigration. For Napolitano, the solution to stemming the tide of mass emigration from the rural South lay in the completion of the agricultural reform, in the formulation of fair collective agreements for farm labourers and in industrialisation, rather than ‘colonisation’ by the private enterprise of the industrialised North (Ciuffoletti and Degl’Innocenti 1978: 295–6).

A political and politicised issue

In the late nineteenth century, Italy’s political class had tolerated the fact that soaring numbers emigrated every year without being adequately protected by legislative measures
against profiteers and exploiting entrepreneurs. Bipartisanly, it shared the view that emigration was somewhat inevitable and irretrievable. The political answer of the time to the alarming phenomenon revolved around control measures for managing the flow (for instance, the government's emigration policy of 1901 and the creation of the Commissariato Generale dell'Emigrazione [General Commissariat of Emigration]) rather than solving the causes that provoked it. Mass emigration was set in the context of the political debate about land reform and the South's economic development. In his 1877-84 inquiries into the agricultural sector, statesman and economist Stefano Jacini concluded that a land reform, with emphasis on technological development hence an outflow of farm labourers to balance the uneven demographics in the countryside, was badly needed. Jacini viewed emigration, as economic historian Ercole Sori (1983: 25) put it, as "un volano da far agire in una fase di riorganizzazione agricola [e un mezzo] per temperar[e] le asprezze sociali" (a driving force for the technological restructuring of the agricultural sector and a way of softening social frictions).

In the early days of mass emigration, lack of attention by the political establishment left the door open for Catholic and socialist movements to create their own emigration policies, agendas and organisations. Catholic movements focused on the spiritual and material care of emigrants. The Scalabrinian Fathers, for example, emigrated along with them and encouraged maintenance of their Catholic heritage, values and education, as well as the culture of the country they left behind, knowing that faith was not possible to flourish without fostering culture too. In a time of tension between church and state, Piacenza bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, the founder of the Scalabrinian order, saw the opportunity which migration offered to the church for the reconciliation of religion and country (Tomasi 1983: 146-7).

Another Catholic-based movement that assisted Italian emigrants, the Opera Bonomelli, aspired to harmonise the concepts of religion and patria (fatherland) in order to modernise the church and offer Catholics modern tools to comprehend better life's adversities (Rosoli 1983: 166-7). For its founder, Cremona bishop Geremia Bonomelli, the Opera Bonomelli ought to bring religious, moral and material comfort to the emigrants, as well as to defend them against the wave of socialist ideas and organisations that were spreading among and around Italian communities abroad.

Socialists chiefly looked at emigration from a class struggle point of view. It not only temporarily or permanently deprived the workforce of large numbers of sound workers, but it also compromised the emerging influence of the Italian working class as a whole by fragmenting its rank and file and lessening the sowing of revolutionary class-consciousness. Well-known socialists such as Angiolo Cabrini, the founder of the first Camera del Lavoro (trade union council) in Italy and a promoter of the first Italian workers’ organisations in Switzerland, and Antonio Labriola, the father of Marxism in Italy, elaborated thorough studies and innovative legislative proposals on the emigration issue. At the turn of the century, Italian socialists were involved in establishing progressive newspapers among migrant communities in France, Switzerland and Germany (Ciuffoletti 1983: 207).

Emigration became an important item in Italian political parties’ agendas from the mid- to late 1960s. Up to the 1950s, it had still been a marginal issue for both the ruling DC and the left-wing opposition, and was seen as a safety valve for the release of pressure building up as a result of the unevenness of the socio-economic structure of the country.
In a paper delivered at the third national DC congress in 1949, MP Mariano Rumor affirmed that emigration was a vital necessity and that a policy of permanent emigration was to be highly encouraged. As more than half a century before, such a phenomenon was considered to be inevitable, as a high unemployment rate was thought to be congenital to the Italian economic situation on the basis of the country’s lack of mineral wealth and capital, and its population surplus (Ciuffoletti and Degl’Innocenti 1978: 235).

Rumor’s line of reasoning followed that of DC prime minister Alcide De Gasperi whose vision of emigration was free-trade-inspired and neo-colonial, which let Italian migrants be subordinated to the market demands that regulated the availability and mobility of migrant manpower in western Europe and overseas. Welfare assistance was, as in the past, limited to religious and philanthropic organisations, with very little involvement by the government. De Gasperi wished to boost emigration towards Italy’s former colonies in Africa. Italian settlers could represent a bridgehead for possible economic penetration for Italian enterprise in what were thought to be booming countries, as well as strengthening the country’s balance of payments with their remittances (Ciuffoletti and Degl’Innocenti 1978: 230-2).

Until the 1940s, the Italian Left fundamentally backed the emigration policy of the government. It justified this by the need for thousands of unemployed to make a living, and the requirement of the government to find a way to lighten the unemployment pressure (Ciuffoletti and Degl’Innocenti 1978: 260). Yet it advocated an internationalist rather than a liberal approach to the issue of emigration and immigrant mobility by promoting closer collaboration among the nations involved. Moreover, the Italian Left questioned any possible exploitation of migrant labour which the government’s policy did not help eradicate. This issue was a particularly serious one which struck a sensitive chord in the left-wing ranks.

In 1948, PCI MP Antonio Giolitti told parliament that the government’s emigration policy had failed to give precedence to safeguarding the rights of migrants, who as workers ought to be defended from unscrupulous entrepreneurs, and not regarded simply as Italian nationals living abroad. The examples of exploitation put forward by Giolitti were many and deplorable. In Venezuela, for instance, the circumstances of some unemployed Italian women were so desperate that they were forced, in conditions of absolute indigence and hunger, to prostitute themselves to survive (Ciuffoletti and Degl’Innocenti: 271-2). A group of 1,000 farm labourers who had emigrated to Belgium by means of a collective contract with the promise of excellent working conditions were instead compelled to work up to fifteen hours or more a day, and overtime was regularly not paid to them. By the early 1950s Communist propaganda overtly criticised the government policy on emigration and became hostile to the emigration phenomenon, seeing it as the ultimate failure of capitalist-style reconstruction efforts (Colucci 2008: 71 and, for the debate on the post-war emigration policy, 41-96).

Morag Loh (1980) gathered similar instances of labour exploitation from recollections of the life experiences of 35 Italian migrant workers and their families in pre-war and post-war Australia. ‘Assunto’, who unwittingly ended up in the clutches of profiteers when emigrating, stands out as an example of such exploitation in the immediate post-war period. In the late 1940s, at 22, he decided to better his circumstances by joining his brother in Australia. However, neither Assunto nor his family had the money to pay his fare. Through family connections he was put in contact with an Italian–Australian employer who offered not only his fare and an
entry permit, but also to provide him with work, as long as he would sign a two-year contract. Assunto signed the contract and set out for Australia:

I thought Australia was going to be a new world and for a couple of months I really enjoyed it … Then after a couple of months I start to realise how hard it was for migrants. This boss has his factory in Footscray, block and chain. He put me on as a turner, and being young, I was quick to learn how to operate a machine. As soon as I learn he push me to produce more and more. I felt I have lost my freedom, I really have sold myself to this boss because of the fare and the contract I signed. I was suffering morally, he made me feel [he] took me down here because I was starving and consequently I had to be obedient. Fortunately, after the war I already have a taste of freedom in my town and I encourage myself to confront him. We come to a clash so I quietly said, “Look, I get some money for two years.” I felt as a prisoner (Loh 1980: 46).

Assunto managed to free himself from the contractual obligations by borrowing 70 pounds from his father-in-law only nine months later.

In the early 1950s, Giovanni Sgrò experienced something similar in country Victoria while looking for work as a fruit picker together with a fellow migrant. At the Cobram employment office, they were told that a nearby farm was looking for labourers:

They gave us the address and off we went. We introduced ourselves and the manager said that we could start the next day. We asked how much they were paying per case and accepted the price. So the next morning at 7 o’clock we were ready to begin work. There was still the problem of a place to stay. The friends who had been our hosts the previous evening had learned that the empty wagons were not about to be removed so they said: “If the worst comes to the worst, eat with us and sleep in the wagons”. That’s what we did for the next six weeks. The worst part was that we had done this in order to save money. But the man for whom we had agreed to work wasn’t the owner, he was a thieving contractor. He took advantage of the fact that we were foreigners and, instead of paying us weekly, he gave us some money on account, saying that we would be paid in full when the harvest was completed. We worked for six hard weeks, on piecework. When payday came this turd had disappeared. We complained at the employment office, but where were they to find him? All our sacrifice went for nothing (Sgrò 2000: 38–9).

Pro-migrant organisations, such as the philanthropic society L’Umanitaria, countered the government’s optimistic picture of the conditions of Italian migrants overseas with a gloomy one in which profiteers too often swindled unexperienced migrants (Bauer 1951, from Ciuffoletti and Degl’Innocenti 1978: 259). L’Umanitaria urged the government to tackle the exportation and exploitation of human capital overseas, by proposing a more efficient use of existing welfare services and the re-establishment of two government bodies abolished under fascism which had provided much-needed data about migration and services to migrants.

Up to the 1960s, Italian migrant workers, and migrant workers in general, were particularly
vulnerable to incidents in the workplace, and received very little protection against them. Poor working conditions had led to a high number of fatal incidents. In 1956, 256 miners (of whom 136 were Italian nationals) lost their lives in a coalmine accident in the Belgian village of Marcinelle. Nine years later, an ice avalanche in Mattmark, Switzerland, killed 88 workers (of whom 56 were Italian nationals) on a dam construction site. These incidents sparked public indignation and the perception that protective legislation was needed for Italian nationals working overseas (Volpe 1980b: 11).

In the mid- to late 1960s and early 1970s, when expatriations started to decrease, the political debate on emigration in Italy intensified. It shifted focus too: from preventing the (declining) emigration flow to improving aid and assistance to those who had already emigrated. In 1968, DC prime minister Giovanni Leone, later president of the Italian Republic (1971-78), stressed in his first official address that the newly formed government would pay the utmost attention to safeguarding Italian labour abroad. However, emigration remained a marginal issue for the governments' economic and political agendas of 1960-75, according to Mario Monferrini (1987: 94), although by 1963 critical voices emerged from within the ruling DC.10

Due to the mounting pressure from migrant organisations and the renewed interest of the political parties in the welfare of the Italian migrants overseas, the government’s emigration policy was questioned in two public enquiries (Monferrini 1987: 99). The government-funded National Council for Economy and Labour (CNEL) carried out a survey between March 1969 and June 1970, while an indagine conoscitiva (parliamentary survey) was proposed by PCI and left-wing MPs and conducted between 1969 and 1971.

The CNEL survey proposed to lessen the devastating impact of emigration on the socio-economic fabric of some areas by promoting better employment opportunities in Italy, by entering into agreements with other nations and by better safeguarding the rights of nationals abroad (Monferrini 1987: 100). It pointed out that the departure of Italian manpower was not sufficiently counterbalanced by the migrants’ remittances and by the easing of the unemployment pressure (Volpe 1979b: 10). The economic costs of emigration and the social burden for the communities involved were far greater for Italy than for the recipient countries, not to mention the psychological toll on the migrant and the families left behind. The parliamentary survey took stock of the government and trade union stances on the issue, which converged on the need to move from a pro-emigration to a pro-employment policy.

For Gaetano Volpe, long-standing secretary of FILEF Rome, these two surveys represented a turning point, not only because they backed what the Left had been claiming for years, but also because the trade union movement11 and migrant organisations such as FILEF and the National Association of Migrants’ Families (ANFE)12 were, for the first time, participants in their drafting (Ciuffoletti and Degl’Innocenti 1978: 427; Volpe 1979b: 8). Trade unions, along with migrant lobby groups, were playing an increasingly prominent role as advocates for migrants. In 1969, the trade union movement demanded from the government that it be consulted on all issues directly and indirectly concerning emigration (Ciuffoletti and Degl’Innocenti 1978: 423). According to economic historian Napoleone Colajanni (1990: 216-17), the trade union movement became the new political and cultural landmark for social reform and cultural debate in the country at that time. Between 1969 and 1975, with the establishment throughout the country of consigli di fabbrica (factory councils) in which both
unionised and non-unionised workers participated, the influence of the unions in Italy was overwhelming.\textsuperscript{13}

The FILEF organisation and the PCI emigration office

FILEF (\textit{Federazione Italiana Lavoratori Emigrati e Famiglie}, or the Italian Federation of Migrant Workers and Their Families) emerged in the late 1960s. For Volpe (1979b: 7, 10), its establishment represented (in the rhetorical terms of the time) the breaking of the “conspiracy of silence” on emigration, the turning point for the Italian “migrant workers’ struggle”. FILEF was established on 12 December 1967 at the Teatro Centrale, Rome, where migrant representatives, progressive MPs and senators, as well as leading national figures from the cultural and art scenes such as painter Renato Guttuso and sculptor Marino Mazzacurati,\textsuperscript{14} were gathered together. Independent left-wing senator, writer and artist Carlo Levi was its leading promoter and first president. For him, FILEF had to be the wake-up call for migrants (Volpe 1979a: 41). Levi’s Marxist views on emigration became FILEF’s manifesto.

Levi interpreted the emigration of millions of Italian men and women as a forced exile, an act of social ostracism by the Italian state. The cause was the ‘racist’ component of the relationship between the hegemonic and subaltern Italian classes. The Italian authorities had, in his view, adopted paternalist, marginal measures to lighten the hardship of Italians overseas. The migrants had to awaken their ‘revolutionary’ consciousness, get together and stick up for their rights, wherever they worked and lived. FILEF was to provide migrants of working-class and peasant background with an organisational umbrella under which they could represent themselves before the Italian authorities and those of the countries they were living in.\textsuperscript{15} FILEF emerged relatively late, compared to similar organisations such as the Catholic Committee for Emigration and the ANFE, both set up in 1947 (Colucci 2008: 92), but it branched out rapidly and successfully among the emigrant communities.

Between the late 1960s and early 1970s, FILEF branches were set up in Switzerland, Belgium, Argentina, Germany, the UK, Canada, Australia, Peru and Sweden. Some worked alongside pre-existing organisations, such as the \textit{Colonie Libere} in Switzerland (Volpe 1980a: 44). Volpe (1979b: 7) identified 1970 as a turning point in the struggle for better working and living conditions when FILEF organised a rally of 1,500 migrant workers before the European parliament in Luxemburg in November, and handed a report to the MPs denouncing the harsh work, life and social conditions suffered by Italian migrants in Europe.

FILEF’s collaboration in the CNEL and parliamentary surveys on emigration gave members the opportunity to express the organisation’s standpoint on emigration, putting emphasis on the fact that it was the socio-economic unevenness existing in the country that had encouraged the \textit{en masse} departure of Italian workers (Volpe 1979a: 40, 1979b: 12). FILEF provided the CNEL researchers with data that documented the exploitation of Italian workers in Germany where, according to the German Communist Party, some lived in sheds and were treated like prisoners of war. In Belgium, Italian miners who developed silicosis were refused compensation, and similar work-related illnesses of Italian workers in Switzerland were unrecognised (Volpe 1979b: 13).

By 1970 FILEF counted a widespread membership of some 50,000 and began to attract
grants-in-aid from the Foreign Affairs Ministry, ending the monopoly of the DC and Social Democrats “and associates, as far as funding to migrant organisations based in Italy and overseas was concerned”.

By setting up branches in Italian migrant communities in Europe (including Italy), North and South America and Australia, it created a network of social, political and cultural support, and became a means for direct participation by hundreds of thousands of migrants in the new societies (Zaccari 1986: 2). FILEF offered them the opportunity to represent themselves, their work and social concerns, as well as a platform to realise programs and advance proposals.

In the 1970s FILEF maintained close ties with the PCI. At the time of the parliamentary survey on emigration, for instance, FILEF and PCI MPs collaborated fruitfully together. Several of its activists were also PCI members, officials and MPs. FILEF's political stance in the emigration debate converged on that of the PCI (Volpe 1979a: 42). Yet, FILEF and the PCI remained two separated identities, although everything could lead one to suppose that they were one and the same organisation. It was not in FILEF's interests to appear officially linked to any specific party, let alone the PCI – in principle, it was apolitical and open to all. Equally, it was not in the PCI's interests to appear officially linked to FILEF. Unlike the PCI, FILEF encompassed in its ranks people from the entire left-wing political spectrum. It was also able to cooperate openly and without restraint with local organisations and institutions, even in countries where Communist Parties were banned or persecuted, such as Argentina. FILEF was instrumental in the development of the attività di massa (grassroots activities) in which PCI members, too, could get involved.

Soon after FILEF was established, the PCI set up an emigration office under the supervision of Nicola Gallo, probably around 1968. This functioned as a base for the party's activities overseas and as a liaison office for organisations such as FILEF. Structurally, it worked along the lines of a PCI comitato regionale (regional committee). According to Rita Riccio, who worked there from 1972 to 1990, the office only began to function fully in 1972 when the party appointed Giuliano Pajetta as its new chief. Pajetta was a figure of high status within the party. Having had first-hand experience of emigration in the inter-war years and having worked in the PCI foreign affairs office together with his brother Giancarlo, he had a good knowledge of both migrant and foreign affairs. In addition, he was a “natural-born globetrotter” with a gift for languages.

In 1972, Pajetta carried on Gallo's attempts to create a party structure overseas similar to that existing in Italy. The strategy was to strengthen the already-established federations and create new ones. By 1970, at least four PCI federations had been or were being established (one in Belgium, one in Luxemburg, and two in Switzerland), with a total membership of 8,500. In the 1970s, there was a noteworthy increase in members (Battiston 2009a: 560) and in the number of branches and federations overseas. Simultaneously, the party and local progressive press circulated more widely, and the attività di massa became more common. In 1973, PCI membership overseas increased to 12,234, including Young Communist (FGCI) members. The number of PCI branches increased from 102 to 146 in a single year. Fund-raising activities resulted in 22,623,400 million liras, up from 13,100,000 million in 1972. The number of Feste de L'Unità (PCI festivals) jumped from 22 to 66, with a record 26 held in Belgium.

The increase of party activities overseas continued throughout the 1970s and mirrored
the fortunes of the PCI in Italy where it experienced a sudden upsurge in votes and in membership. In 1976, it achieved one of its best electoral results with 34.4% of the national vote (Agosti 1999: 106). Since the end of the Second World War, it had never been so close to becoming the leading (and thus ruling) party in Italy. The PCI enjoyed increased support in the wake of the 1968 events that saw the student and working-class movements emerging, and managed to penetrate the peripheral and less controllable pockets of society, including that of emigrant workers (Are 1980: 15).

The primary objective of the emigration office was to enrol as many migrants as possible in the PCI (Battiston 2009a: 557-61), especially in Europe (90% of PCI members overseas resided in Switzerland, Germany and Belgium). For the PCI, the politicising of emigration meant, in the end, the politicising of Italian migrants. Their enrolment in the party had two goals: officially, to ‘emancipate’ the Italian working class, which meant to encourage the migrant workers to get involved in politics by joining left-wing party and union structures; in practice, to cultivate a political allegiance among the migrants in the prospect of their temporary or definitive homecoming.

The success of the party on polling day, as far as the migrants’ homecoming was concerned, could involve capitalising on the political allegiance previously cultivated overseas. The ‘migrant vote’ constituted a significant portion of the total Italian electorate, approximately two and a half million. In 1973, Pajetta estimated that an average of 300,000 to 350,000 migrants returned home and cast their votes during national and local elections. The PCI developed several initiatives to help the migrants come back home and vote. Riccio recalled the *treni rossi* (‘red trains’), a term denoting the homecoming, assisted by the PCI, FILEF and like-minded organisations, of thousands of Italian migrants from all over Europe. As the PCI held out hopes of attracting the migrant vote, the migrants who had joined the party looked forward to electing a pro-workers government, especially in the 1970s. They hoped that a PCI-led government would promote full employment and eventually eradicate emigration. In other words, the cultivation of the migrant vote was seen as a strategy which might succeed in giving the PCI, already close behind the DC in votes, a majority in the electorate.

The politicising by the PCI of the migrants living in the Americas and Australia took on a different character, due to the prohibitive cost of assisting their return so they could vote. Up until 2001, the Italian constitution required nationals residing abroad and wishing to cast their votes during national elections to come back to vote in their hometowns. For this reason, the PCI propaganda machine relied on the traditional correspondence between the migrants and their relatives in Italy. The party attempted to persuade its migrant members to write home and to encourage their family to vote for the PCI. The following is from an undated draft of a letter that was intended to convince overseas members to influence their friends’ and family’s votes:

I write to you upon an occasion that I consider very important for all of you in Italy, but especially for us emigrants overseas – that is, the occasion of the political elections … We emigrants want a government that will finally deal with the problems of all Italian workers, both in Italy and overseas, a government that no longer forces masses of workers to go to look for work in faraway lands, where they will more often find suffering rather than comfort. We also think that the Christian Democrats must no
longer govern in Italy, and that the time for change has come. I write to you to invite you to vote, and to make all our friends and acquaintances vote for the Italian Communist Party, which gives us the hope that we may one day return to Italy and find work (emphasis in the original).  

The close collaboration established between the PCI and FILEF fulfilled the second objective of the emigration office: to help affiliated organisations emerge in the overseas communities. The PCI encouraged its members to set up affiliated organisations with broader interests in the welfare, social and cultural fields by providing material, financial and human resources.

NOTES

2. The 1949 agricultural reform of the sector aspired to dispossess big landowners and ‘barons’ of untilled land from their latifondi (large landed estates) and allot it to the contadini senza terra (landless peasants). The reform was only partially successful. The excessive fragmentation of the confiscated land and the lack of cooperatives among allottees prevented them from purchasing the machinery necessary for the cultivation of the poor soils of the allocated land.
3. In the mid- to late 1940s, the southern Italian peasant movement occupied some terre del demanio (areas of formerly state-owned land) included in the large landed estates. It claimed the right to public access and use of the once-common land.
8. L’Umanitaria was established in 1893 through a bequest from the Mantua-born Prospero Moisè Loira, a wealthy Jewish philanthropist. The philanthropic society looked after unemployed and migrants by setting up and running trade and arts classes.
9. These are the Commissariato Generale dell’Emigrazione (General Commissariat of Emigration) and the Consiglio Superiore per l’Emigrazione (Higher Committee for Emigration).
10. At the eighth DC national congress (Naples 1962), MPs Emilio Colombo and Amintore Fanfani expressed their deep concern on how acutely emigration was effecting the social fabric of the country (Monferrini 1987: 90-1).
11. That is, the three major Italian trade unions: the Italian Federation of Labour (CGIL), the Italian Confederation of Workers Unions (CISL) and the Union of Italian Labour (UIL).
12. The religious order of the Scalabrinians founded ANFE in 1947 in support and assistance of the Italian migrants overseas.
13. This stemmed from the 1968-69 student and workers movements who demanded free education, better salaries and better working conditions.


18. For example, all the federations of one Italian region reported to their own regional committee. Similarly, all the overseas federations reported to the emigration office in Rome.


22. As above.

23. Rita Riccio, interview, 8 April 2003, Rome.

24. Draft of a letter, undated, FMA. Original text: “Vi scrivo in un’occasione che ritengo molto importante per voi tutti in Italia, ma soprattutto per noi emigrati all’estero, cioè l’occasione delle elezioni politiche … Noi emigrati vogliamo un governo che finalmente affronti i problemi di tutti i lavoratori italiani, sia quelli in Italia che quelli all’estero, un governo che non costringa più masse di lavoratori ad andare a cercare lavoro in terre lontane, dove troveranno più spesso sofferenze che benessere. Pensiamo anche che i democristiani non debbano più governare in Italia, e che è giunto il momento di cambiare. Io vi scrivo per invitarti a votare e a far votare tutti i nostri amici e conoscenti per il Partito Comunista Italiano, che ci dà la speranza di tornare un giorno in Italia e di trovare lavoro.” See also Rita Riccio, interview, 8 April 2003, Rome; Umberto Martinengo, interview, 24 Dec. 2002, Carlton, Vic., Australia. Martinengo has pointed out that during national elections in Italy Il Globo asked its readership not to vote for the PCI.
Since the end of the Second World War, the Australian government has revised the country’s immigration policy many times. The mainstay of the pre-war policy was the Immigration Act of 1901, well known as the ‘White Australia’ policy, which discouraged, restricted or hampered immigration from predominantly non-white countries. Since 1945, Australian immigration policy has gradually yet substantially changed, shifting from being restricted and racist to being more flexible and tolerant.

The turning point was the conception and implementation of the post-war immigration program. This allowed into the country the ‘abhorred ‘foreigners’ – ‘Balts’, Poles, Germans, Dutch, Italians, Yugoslavs, Greeks, and Lebanese, and, eventually, even Vietnamese, Filipinos, black Africans, and other Asians and Pacific Islanders” (Wilton and Bosworth 1984: 1). The impact on the demographic characteristics of the population has been extraordinary. Census data recorded the leap in the percentage of overseas-born residents within the total population from 9.8% of 7.5 million people in 1947 to 20.2% of 12.7 million in 1971 (see Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Years</th>
<th>Overseas-born population</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Overseas-born as % of total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>744,187</td>
<td>7,579,358</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>1,286,466</td>
<td>8,986,530</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>1,778,780</td>
<td>10,508,186</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The causes that prompted the post-war immigration program were situated in geo-strategic and socio-economic circumstances. Australia faced three crucial issues: national security, under-population and post-war reconstruction. A new, more aggressive immigration program was considered by the government to be a cure-all solution to these problems, and already “in late 1943 an inter-departmental committee was established to investigate and report specifically on immigration” (Wilton and Bosworth 1984: 7). National security deficiencies during wartime had highlighted the ever-present under-population issue.1 The low natural-growth population increase, confirmed by the census data of the Depression years, in turn became a labour supply dilemma for manufacturing industry as the war ended.2

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was an urgent need for skilled and particularly unskilled labourers to unleash Australia’s industrial potential. Ambitious public works projects such as the Snowy Mountains hydroelectric scheme needed nothing but a substantial labour force to be realised (Collis 1989: 31-3). The new immigration program became the solution to the paucity of local manpower.

The program initially put emphasis on increasing the quota of immigrants, leaving unchallenged the traditional policy regarding ethnicity and race. The idea was to recruit “‘white British subjects’ and, failing that, ‘white aliens’” (Wilton and Bosworth 1984: 7). To keep Australia as white and as British as possible, the first Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell (1945-49), even set an ideal ratio of ten new British migrants for every foreigner (Wilton and Bosworth 1984: 11).

When the immigration program was first implemented in 1945, the bulk of the annual quota of newcomers – approximately 70,000 – was to be composed of people from the British Isles. An agreement between the British and Australian governments was signed in March 1946 to “provide free and assisted passages for British ex-servicemen and their dependants”, followed a year later by one for selected civilians. Yet the two schemes failed to generate the expected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Years (…continued)</th>
<th>Overseas-born population (…continued)</th>
<th>Total population (…continued)</th>
<th>Overseas-born as % of total population (…continued)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>2,718,318</td>
<td>13,548,448</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>2,579,318</td>
<td>12,755,638</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>3,003,834</td>
<td>14,576,330</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>3,247,301</td>
<td>15,602,163</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>3,688,385</td>
<td>16,850,334</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>3,907,993</td>
<td>17,892,423</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>4,105,444</td>
<td>18,972,350</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Castles et al. (1992: 46) and Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001 Census.
outcome. The subsidised ten-pound fare did not lure enough Britons, with barely 30,000 a year making the trip. One of the reasons was that, as in Australia, the UK’s post-war economy had generated a high demand for labour, and therefore the government was reluctant to let thousands of young workers migrate (Appleyard 2001: 62-3).

Already in the mid-1940s, authorities suspected that fewer prospective British immigrants might actually come to Australia than was hoped for. As Jakubowicz et al. (1984) have pointed out, in 1945 “the Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Committee had raised the possibility of mass immigration of non-British Displaced Persons (DPs)”1. The government feared, on the other hand, that the importation of non-British migrants might well encounter a guaranteed opposition from the Australian working class which had in the past opposed the importation of cheap non-British labour (Wilton and Bosworth 1984: 3). Australia’s trade unions in fact feared that the influx of non-British migrants into the labour force would entail an erosion of work conditions and wages.

However, despite this initial opposition, more and more non-British immigrants were coming to Australia by means of assisted passages or agreements with the International Refugee Organization, mainly from the eastern European and Baltic countries. Thousands of refugees who had been caught between Nazism and communism (e.g. Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians and Ukrainians) were recruited in the DP camps between 1947 and 1953 (Jupp 1966: 7). Transported in former American troop ships, they were housed in former army and prisoner of war camps in rural areas, contractually bound to work for two years at any occupation set by the Commonwealth (Jupp 2002: 12). By 1953-54, a total of 170,000 refugees had arrived (Jordens 2001: 66).

Despite all the efforts to bring as many British, and later DPs, to Australia as possible, the annual migrant inflow rapidly dried up in the early 1950s, while the need for extra labour in large engineering schemes and industrial factories increased.2 The obvious solution was to turn to supplementary migrant source countries. New assisted passage agreements were signed with Holland and Italy (1951), and with Austria, Belgium, West Germany, Greece and Spain (1952) (Jordens 2001: 67). Thousands of non-British, non-DP migrants came to Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. Among them, Italians formed the largest contingent.

Bonegilla

A great number of Italian migrants who arrived in Australia immediately after the Second World War and up until the early 1970s were first housed in migrant hostels.4 Their stay in these structures was meant to be temporary, to allow the authorities to honour government and private contracts. According to Australian historian Glenda Sluga (1998: ix), the role of Bonegilla Immigration Reception Centre in north-east Victoria, one of the most infamous, was “integral to the development of an Australian post-war immigration programme”. Sluga (1998: ix-x) described Bonegilla, and the experience as shared by thousands of newly arrived immigrants, in the following way:

Bonegilla was in some ways unique. It was to be used as a “staging camp” for “processing” migrants. Voluntary and refugee migrants who had exchanged two years
of their labour for assisted or free passages could be railed from Bonegilla to remote areas of the Australian continent, to be placed in jobs Australians did not want to do, away from metropolitan centres and in “critical areas of the economy”. It would also be a place where these migrants were to be “Australianised”, given training in the English language and familiarised with the Australian way of life, all of which was to take place within a period of six weeks. In actuality the nature of their experience varied; for some, the time there stretched out to months, for others, it may have been a matter of only a week. What all had in common was Bonegilla – as a place where their fates, at least in the immediate future, would be decided for them.

The effects of economic downturns and periods of unemployment were immediately felt in the hostels amid the mostly unskilled migrants who were often forced to sit idle for months, fuelling widespread resentment (Sluga 1988: 74-5). The Bonegilla incident of 1952 occurred at a time of economic stagnation and high unemployment. New migrants kept flowing into the camp, while earlier arrivals were forced to remain there until further notice. This created an explosive situation. Initially lured by the prospect of working for two years, making a ‘fortune’ and returning home, but now finding themselves faced with an uncertain future, Italians began to demonstrate and protest (Loh 1980: 47-8). They demanded that both the Italian and Australian authorities take measures: immediate repatriation or employment (Sgrò 2000: 26).

Depression and anger were reaching dangerous levels, with some people hanging themselves out of sheer desperation, while others were increasingly determined to rally (Sgrò 2000: 26). Very few people were trained to help the newly arrived migrants, and interpretation and translation services were virtually non-existent (Cresciani 1988b: 249). The later recollection of the Bonegilla incident by Giovanni Sgrò, who was one of the rebels’ delegates, recalled the drama of the situation. His account is filled with a profound feeling of distrust towards the local Italian religious authorities and government representatives:

After many requests, the Italian consul came from Melbourne in his 131 Fiat and in a big hall, absolutely full of people, he repeated the same message that the priest had given us [“Be patient, my sons”]. We rebelled, and only the intervention of the military police saved him. But his car was smashed to pieces … We were only asking “Give us work or send us home to Italy” … We felt that all our protests up until then had been a waste of time, even the action with the consul (Sgrò 2000: 26-7).

Amid the recollections of those past events, Sgrò recounts his reticent, almost accidental beginnings in migrant activism which would translate into life-long political activity in the ranks of the Labor Party, climaxing with his 1979 election to the Victorian Legislative Council as the state’s first Italian-born parliamentarian:

So a group who came from the cities, and had more experience in organising demonstrations than us Calabrians, decided to go around to all the blocks in the camp to urge all of us to rebel … they asked each block to nominate a representative … Our block held a meeting and after a long debate they decided to nominate me – not
because I was anyone special but because no-one wanted to do it. Later, I met three
or four times with other young men like myself and we fixed the date of “the great
revolt”, as many called it. We prepared banners. It was towards the end of June when
nearly all of us marched one day, in a long procession, towards the administrative
centre. Along the way we smashed many windows and set fire to some of the huts.
Once they saw what was happening, the authorities alerted the police, but there were
only four or five of them, not nearly enough. However, when we arrived near the
centre, behind the administrative offices which were our destination, four tanks
appeared, followed by over 200 soldiers. When we saw them we stopped dead in our
tracks – we didn’t take one step forward. A few minutes later the office manager came
out, saying that he was prepared to meet with a group of ten to fifteen of us (Sgrò
2000: 27).

For similar reasons, other riots occurred in 1952. In October 200 Italians from the Villawood
and Matraville camps in Sydney marched to the consulate, demanding that they be given work
or repatriated. Clashes with the police followed (Cresciani 1988b: 253). Incidents in hostels
like Bonegilla immediately suspended the assisted passage accord between Italy and Australia
and subsequently (if momentarily) reduced the Australian intake of Italian migrants. The
Italians were not the only migrant group to protest. In 1952 the British protested too, albeit
for different reasons: “British migrant associations coordinated marches and campaigns across
Australia to protest about living conditions in the hostels, and especially about the quality of
the food provided in the communal canteens” (Hassam 2009: 314). But as the economy revived
in 1954, the accord with Italy was reactivated. Thousands upon thousands of Italians arrived in
the following years. Large numbers made a yearly ‘pilgrimage’ to Ingham, Innisfail and Cairns
in Queensland, working seasonally in the cane fields – a hard and, at the time, dangerous job
(Cresciani 1988b: 255). Many others were sent to do “hard manual jobs in industry or in large-
scale construction projects” (Castles 1987: 41).

The 1950s and 1960s saw the most substantial influx ever of Italian migrants into Australia.
Already by 1950 (before any assisted passage scheme was signed between Italy and Australia),
the Italian-born population had doubled, jumping from 33,632 in 1947 to 66,912. Some two
decades later, in 1971, it represented 2.2% of the total Australian population, 9.3% of the total
foreign-born population, and just over half of the total southern-European-born population
(Ware 1981: 16).

The demographic curve of the Italian-born population recorded a rise and a fall: it rose
steeply between 1947 and 1951, peaked around 1961 and progressively declined from the early
1970s (Castles 1987: 43). In the 1970s, a new wave of Italian migrants settled in Australia, as is
discussed below. Altogether, from 1947 to 1980, 367,614 arrived, with a net immigration gain
of Italians of 272,900.

Yet the Australian authorities did not encourage the immigration of Italians at first. Calwell’s immigration program, in fact, “did not envisage recruiting south of the Alps” (Bosworth 2001: 505). Statistics on assisted passages suggest that Italians were severely restricted
in their access to the scheme (1947-73). Only 16.6% of Italian migrants arrived in Australia in
this way, compared to 86.5% of British and 75.3% of German migrants (Jordens 2001: 68). By
and large, in the post-war period Italians emigrated to Australia by means of unassisted passage,
often by chain migration (Bosworth 2001: 506), that is, the emigration of earlier migrants’ immediate family members or relatives. According to the ‘desirable types’ hierarchy of the Australian government, the northern European was preferred to the southern European. It was commonly believed that northerners were racially more acceptable and adapted more easily to the Australian way of life (Wilton and Bosworth 1984: 1-16; Castles 1987: 39). A further distinction was made between northern and southern Italians. The presumption that Italy was racially divided between the ‘Alpines’ and the ‘Mediterraneans’, as once classified by Lyng (1927: 93), seems to have still been well ingrained in the minds of the Australian authorities in 1948-49 when they began discussing with Italian diplomats the possibility of admitting only northern Italians to Australia. These presumptions were confirmed when the chairman of the Immigration Planning Council, Sir John Storey, visited exclusively the northern part of Italy in the summer of 1950. However, “attitudes soon began to waver … and categories that were declared rigid turned out to be elastic”. A year later an agreement was reached between Italy and Australia, with the promise by both governments to assist the passage of 20,000 migrants annually over five years (Bosworth 2001: 506).

The ideal candidate for the assisted passage to Australia was to be healthy, young, male and preferably without either communist or fascist political affiliations, but very few prospective Italian migrants passed the initial selections. Of the first batch of 8,191 applications, “only 62 had survived Australian screening procedures and 47 were on the high seas” (Bosworth 2001: 506). The ten years between 1951 and 1961, however, saw a net migration of 179,420 Italians to Australia. This is the period properly described as a time of mass emigration, especially when compared to the one that followed: between 1961 and 1971 only 72,333 Italians emigrated permanently to Australia (Castles 1987: 43).

The making of a community

The presence of large numbers of Italian migrants in Australia, mainly concentrated in large urban centres, led to the formation of the Italian–Australian community that, after 1960, developed a complex structure covering not only economic, social and sporting activities but also religion, welfare, culture, education and language (Rando 1973: 184). The historical functions of FILEF Melbourne need to be set within the socio-economic framework of this community in the 1970s, a period during which “discussions, conferences and committees of enquiries related to migrants and ethnic issues” proliferated (Martin 1978: 50).

Census data as well as enquiries and surveys carried out throughout the 1970s shed some light on the community’s residential distribution, and on the working, economic and social conditions of Italian men and women. Post-war emigration did not only lay the groundwork for ‘Little Italies’ scattered around the country, but also contributed to the transformation of Australian urban space (Castles 1987: 35). It radically transformed the pattern of the residential distribution of the Italian-Australian community, with a major shift occurring from rural to urban environments. From the 1950s onwards, Italians tended to live in the booming industrial and urban centres, with the highest concentrations being in Melbourne and Sydney. The southern state capitals attracted more Italians than any other areas. In 1976, two-thirds of Italians
were concentrated primarily in two states, Victoria (42%) and New South Wales (27%), with the remaining third distributed among South Australia (11%), Western Australia (10%) and Queensland (6%) (Ware 1981: 39-43).

The post-war urbanisation of Italians shifted their overall occupational distribution in the Australian workforce from farming to manufacturing. The 1976 census showed that the great majority, like other southern European migrants, were over-represented, when compared to their Australian-born peers, in the tradesmen and labourers categories. In cities, Italians found better employment opportunities which “would give them economic security and a better future for their families” (Loh 1980: 45). Yet the lack of recognition of overseas qualifications prevented them from taking better jobs, even though the 1976 census data showed that the proportion holding some form of qualification was not significantly smaller than among the Australian-born population (Ware 1981: 36-9).

The lack of recognition of qualifications was combined with a lack of command of the English language. Many Italian migrants had little formal education, which clearly aggravated the language problems faced by them, given that it was very difficult to acquire literacy in a second language when one was not literate in one’s mother tongue (Ware 1981: 36). Thus, for many overseas-trained migrants, the lack of recognition of their qualifications and poor knowledge of the English language limited their upwardly mobile progress. Franco Lugarini, whose Italian hairdresser’s qualification was not recognised until he obtained the equivalent Australian certificate, remarked:

Certificates are a big problem for migrants. I have a friend who is a welder. Eighteen years ago he didn’t do so well in his examination, so for eighteen years he has worked as a welder but is forced to accept less pay because he hasn’t a ticket. Another friend, a barber from Argentina, has trouble too. If we can take the examination in our own language, then it would be all right, because we know our jobs. But in English, it becomes very hard (Loh 1980: 52).

Unskilled and semi-skilled Italian workers were usually confined to blue-collar positions where a limited knowledge of English sufficed and no qualifications were necessary. ‘Grazia’’s testimony of her mother’s work experience in Australia in the 1950s reflects the working conditions of migrant women with poor or no knowledge of the English language:

In the ’50s when we first came here my mother couldn’t find any work because of the language. My father couldn’t stay home and lose work because of taking my mother around and she couldn’t speak English. We had a friend who worked nightshift and he volunteered to take my mother round. They went for about two weeks or so and at the end, at one place, the man said: “We haven’t much work, and the language …” My mother said, “But let me try. I’m a dressmaker. If you don’t like me I can go away. I don’t know why you don’t want me as a machinist.” They let her try and she became one of the best machinists in the room (Loh 1980: 52).

Despite the difficulties they experienced, Italians showed a propensity to reach high levels of employment, even in times of large-scale unemployment such as 1972 (Cox and Martin 1975: 33).
In 1976, only 2.5% of the male Italian-born population of working age (15 and over) were unemployed, lower than for the Australian-born population or for other southern-European-born groups such as Yugoslavs and Greeks. High employment rates were also recorded among the adult female Italian-born population. In 1976, as many as 45%, mostly married, were part of the workforce; 36% were in the production/process workers and labourers categories, compared to 14% of Australian-born women. Female Italian-born workers were also relatively over-represented in the construction, farm work and service areas, where they filled various positions “in family businesses or firms with an Italian connection” (Ware 1981: 52), while they failed to be adequately represented in the clerical, administrative and above all professional areas.

Research on the situation of female migrant women in industrial occupations in Australia carried out by Melbourne’s Centre for Urban Research and Action (CURA), however, showed that they “had little choice but to work in factories”. The physical conditions on factory floors varied “from reasonable to appalling”, while “the abuse from management related to constant work pressure” was widespread. Moreover, female migrant workers had little contact with predominantly English-speaking trade union officials, which did not help them “to be in a position to achieve the improvements in their everyday working situations that they themselves want and justice demands” (CURA and Storer 1976: 108-9, 114).

In 1979, ‘Francesca’ had been working for six years in a cord factory where “work was fine”, but the physical conditions were bad, especially in winter (Loh 1980: 62). The lack of multilingual interpreters to liaise between the union representatives and the workers was a key issue for her:

Workers need a union but the union is a problem for me. The organiser comes and talks always in English, he talks and talks and I don’t know a thing. Out of a hundred and fifty women working full time, there’s only one Australian. There are some men too, about ten of them are Australians, mostly supervisors and mechanics. There should be interpreters but there aren’t and what are we, the Italians, Greeks, Yugoslavs, Arabs and Turks to do? I try to ask an Egyptian lady who speaks English and Italian, “What are they talking about?” “Oh nothing. They want a rise.” “What do you think?” “Oh, I don’t know.” Why should I pay two dollars every week if I don’t know what they are talking about? If I’ve got a problem how can I go and explain? If workers are sacked the union should ask, “Why do you sack our workers?” They should ask, “Why does it rain in here? Why don’t we have heating? Why are the toilets dirty?” … In Italy it was different. In my factory we had commissi interne, the shop committee, to take up the problems in the factory (Loh 1980: 64).

Although Italian migrants proved to be unflagging workers (Cox and Martin 1975: 43), their aspiration to achieve solid economic security clashed with their over-representation in low-paid employment, which led to regular overtime and the need for second jobs. Yet even working overtime did not guarantee them a chance to dramatically improve their economic situation and to become upwardly mobile, given that “even working full-time Italian-born men and women [were] among the worst paid employees, usually contesting the title of the worst paid ethnic group with the Greeks” (Ware 1981: 67-8).
A survey aimed at mapping poverty in Melbourne by Henderson et al. (1970) showed that about 15% of Italians, and at least a quarter of those who arrived after 1960, were living below the poverty line. There appeared to be many causes of the relatively high percentage of Italians in poor economic conditions (twice as many as amongst the overall population). The Henderson survey identified some of them: low occupational status, the shortage of cheap rental accommodation, the burden of helping relatives and friends waiting to come to Australia, and the lack of adequate and accessible information (that is, in the Italian language) about welfare assistance and services. As far as the Coburg-Brunswick area was concerned, the 1974 FILEF-FEC social survey confirmed the Henderson survey findings. It found that 60% of Italian males were earning between $65 and $95 per week, and only 18% earned over $100 per week, while the median weekly wage of the Australian worker was $124 (Storer 1979: 293-4).

A new type of Italian arrives

Italian migrants of the 1950s and 1960s were from mainly peasant backgrounds:

Most migrants came from Calabria, Sicily, Abruzzi and Campania, although there were some from the north, particularly the Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia. The majority were from rural areas, particularly from small towns, yet they soon concentrated in Australia’s growing industrial cities. Most migrants were aged between 20 and 40 when they left Italy. They were usually impoverished and came in order to obtain the means for family survival, or to earn the money needed to buy land or pay debts at home. Often their education was limited to primary school level, and most basic level (Castles 1987: 42-3).

A different type of migrant appeared in the 1970s, due to the relative economic prosperity in Italy and the accompanying dramatic decrease in emigration. For these newcomers, emigration was not necessarily an act of despair fuelled by the pressing need to find financial security. Typically more formally educated and politically more sensitised than their predecessors, they came to Australia to broaden their personal experiences (Bertelli 1979: 4).

Some gravitated towards left-wing migrant organisations such as FILEF rather than towards the migrant clubs that catered to Italians from a particular region or township (Alcorso et al. 1992: 115). According to Carli, these new migrants were politically ‘post-68’ types, “often far left rather than the PCI; people [who] have been involved as anarchists in Italy, or in various Marxist organisations, and here they come to Australia”. The struggles faced by three of them – Stefano de Pieri, Edoardo Burani and Roberto Malara – are in many ways representative of the experiences of this set of newcomers.

Stefano de Pieri grew up in a farmhouse in Dosson, in the Treviso countryside in the Veneto region. He dropped out of school at fifteen and started working in a local factory. In the early 1970s, he realised that his future was not in his own hometown. De Pieri joined the FGCI (Italian Communist Youth Federation) during a period when, he later recalled, “if you
were young you had to be a left-winger”, as he found the socio-political climate of the Veneto particularly suffocating:

They were quite difficult years in Italy, quite tough in the Veneto region. And also, you know what the Veneto is like, it’s very limited: house, church, family, especially in those years, very provincial. Everything was already all planned out for you: military service, you find a girlfriend, you get married, have a family and keep working. So with Sergio [Stefano’s brother] we decided that it was best that I emigrate.15

As a young left-winger, he felt the influence and excessive power of the ruling DC that was overwhelmingly present in every facet of the traditionally conservative and devout Veneto society:

They were the times of … Rumor’s government, Andreotti’s government, we’re talking about monsters. We’re talking about Fanfani. It was a tough time. The Christian Democracy was everywhere. They had built a system of corruption that was so obvious, so evident that in the municipality of Casier you could go get permission to do any crap … It was something that you could feel, that dominance of the DC. I felt it more on a cultural level than on a, I don’t know, economic level. I felt this lack of democracy. Then Italy itself got mixed into that natural conservatism of the Italians who put a lot of effort into their appearance, how you’re dressed, who you hang round with, how much money you have, and all that then got twisted by this corrupt Christian Democracy. For me, it was a scary thing. I couldn’t wait to clear out, run away, get away.16

In 1974, de Pieri decided to join his brother in Australia. Sergio had migrated in 1961 and had established a name for himself as a fine organist. De Pieri’s first visa application failed, possibly because of his FGCI ticket. Only when he “took care to flourish before the authorities a written guarantee signed by the Hannans”17 was his application finally accepted (Armstrong 2001: 96, 183). Not long after his arrival in Australia, he met FILEF activist Joe Caputo while attending a conference addressed by the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire, who later introduced him to Ignazio Salemi.

Edoardo Burani was the only son of a family of tenant farmers from Carpi, Modena. He dropped out of school at sixteen and went to work in a shirt-manufacturing factory in Carpi. Simultaneously, he began to explore left-wing politics and joined the Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori. In 1973, his desire to travel took him to the UK where, with “the excuse to learn English”, he spent ten months. After returning home, he declined a job offer and started backpacking through Asia with a friend:

It was a time where I had no family commitments, I didn’t have children, I didn’t have a girlfriend and so I left for Asia. We crossed Asia on foot. Once we got to India we had to decide whether to continue on and go to Australia, then work there, get money and go back, or to go home.18
In 1975, he arrived in Sydney where he decided to stay. Like de Pieri, he got in contact with members of the local FILEF branch in Leichhardt not long after his arrival. In 1976, he was granted permanent residence and became committed to FILEF full-time.

Unlike de Pieri and Burani, Roberto Malara, although coming from the South of Italy, belonged to an urban, middle-class family. During his university years, Malara was attracted to the anarchist movement. In the mid-1970s, he met an Australian girl with whom he fell in love while living in an anarchist commune in the Calabrian countryside. As the wave of terror associated with the far left/far right antagonism intensified during the anni di piombo (‘years of lead’), Malara followed his girlfriend who had been deported around 1977 for breaching visa regulations:

There was an unbearable mood [in Italy] and so when the idea of coming to Australia was brought up, I immediately said yes, I want to get out. It was a bad story. I didn’t have an actual proper job. I said “Why not, I had this Australian girl …” We had plans to travel together, even to come to Australia by land. And instead the fact that they chucked her out cut the whole thing short. So I applied at the Australian embassy in Rome. I didn’t believe that they would have given me the visa, because of all the political stuff, and instead in the end when I wasn’t even thinking of travelling to Australia anymore, the visa arrived … Within a month I sold the few things I had, the car, I got the money for a one-way trip and I left for Australia.19

Initially, he found it difficult to settle and returned to Italy. Months later, however, he returned to Australia and accidentally became acquainted with Alberto Bruni who was running the FILEF program on Radio 3CR in Melbourne. Bruni then brought him into contact with FILEF which was the decisive factor that convinced him to remain in the country.

NOTES

1. During the Second World War, the Japanese threatened the security of mainland Australia when they invaded the Australian-controlled islands of New Ireland and Papua, bombèd the scarcely populated top-end cities of Darwin and Broome, and managed an incursion of midget submarines into Sydney Harbour (Castles et al. 1987: 38).
2. Along with labour supply, Australian private enterprise and government alike faced the issue of domestic worker mobility (Jakubowicz et al. 1984: 20-1).
3. Post-war migrants were often needed in dangerous and unskilled jobs in infrastructure projects such as the Snowy Mountains scheme, “in heavy industry such as the steelworks of Newcastle and Wollongong, or in the new engineering and textile factories of Sydney and Melbourne” (Castles 1992: 39).
4. The hostels that accommodated the largest numbers of refugees, DPs and migrants were at Bathurst, Liverpool and Greta in New South Wales, Williamstown, Bonegilla and Fishermen’s Bend in Victoria, and Wacol in Queensland (Cresciani 1988b: 249).
5. The accord for assisted passage was suspended and renegotiated in 1961, once again in time of economic crisis (Castles 1987: 41).
6. Previously, the Italian-born population had increased almost ninefold between 1891 (3,890) and the Second World War (33,000), accounting for 0.4% of the Australian population by 1947 (Rando 1973: 63).
7. Cresciani (1988b: 241) noted that “it was common for one member of the family to emigrate, find
work and accommodation, and for other members of the family to join him later."

8. Between the 1930s and the 1960s, Italians in Australia transitioned from being a mostly rural community (61% in 1933) to an overwhelmingly urban one (71% in 1961) (Cox and Martin 1975: 39). In 1947, just over half lived in rural areas such as around the cane fields of Queensland, in the fishing port of Fremantle in Western Australia, and in the irrigation districts of Griffith in New South Wales (Price 1963). Most Italians (8,500) lived in rural Queensland, even though in the most populated states (New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia) they resided predominantly in urban areas (Borrie 1954).

9. In 1976, 63% of the male Italian-born population and almost 38% of the female Italian-born population were employed in the tradesmen and labourers group, compared to 37% and 7% of their Australian-born counterparts.

10. The 1975 Commission of Inquiry into Poverty (Cox and Martin 1975: 42-3) proposed to provide facilities for those who were capable of being retrained or upgraded to perform more satisfying and more remunerative occupations in order to lessen this over-representation in the manufacturing and construction sectors. It also suggested de-urbanising the Italian-Australian communities, given that the attraction of the land was clearly there.

11. Ware explained the low unemployment rate among Italian migrants by the "relatively high proportion of the Italian-born who have their own small businesses and who give preference to other Italians when employing labour from outside the family" (1981: 45).

12. In 1971-76, a negative migration trend of Italians to Australia was recorded for the first time: 4,463 (annual average of 892) (Castles 1987: 43).


14. Original text: "se eri giovane era obbligatorio essere di sinistra."


17. Bill and Lorna Hannan. Bill was a left-wing intellectual, teacher and education administrator who was also a cathedral chorister and a fluent Italian speaker. He met Sergio de Pieri with whom he struck up a strong friendship. Lorna was a teacher who served on the Henderson Commission of Inquiry into Poverty (Armstrong 2001: 119, 181).

18. Edoardo Burani, interview, 26 March 2003, Modena, Italy. Original text: "Erano i tempi che non avevo nessun impegno familiare, non avevo figli, non avevo fidanzata, e quindi son partito per l'Asia. Abbiamo attraversato l'Asia a piedi. Una volta India dovevamo decidere se continuare e andare in Australia, per poi lì lavorare, prendere i soldi e tornare indietro, oppure tornare a casa."

Italian Immigrant Activity and Grassroots Organisations

Italian politics before the Whitlam era

In the 1970s, with the establishment of branches of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and of the Italian Federation of Migrant Workers and their Families (FILEF) in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and other cities, a long-lasting tradition of Italian-run working-class organisations continued in Australia. The PCI and FILEF inherited their ‘mission’ from previous organisations: to bring together the diverse wings within the Italian-Australian Left and to create a pressure group advocating the interests of the working class. A number of influential organisations which brought together and galvanised left-wing Italians from the mid-1940s to the late 1960s can be considered their precursors, including Italia Libera of Sydney (renamed the Club Italo-Australiano (CIA) in 1950), the Consiglio Italo-Australiano del Lavoro (CIAL) and the Lega Italo-Australiana (LIA) of Melbourne.

A few months before the fall of fascism in Italy in March 1943, Italia Libera was established in Melbourne. It offered the opportunity “to all Italians … to exercise a distinct political choice and, to those who took it, a feeling of pride in contributing to the liberation of their country” (Cresciani 1988b: 222). At this time Italians were still considered ‘enemy aliens’ (Montagnana 1993: 140), and it is all the more remarkable that eminent Australian politicians and personalities supported the establishment of Italia Libera, such as the former Governor General Sir Isaac Isaacs, the Minister for Social Services E. J. Holloway, the Minister for Aircraft Production Senator Don Cameron, and Professor A. R. Chisholm, Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne (Cresciani 1988b: 124). Chisholm was also, for some years, the honorary president of Italia Libera (Venturini 2007: 697-8).

Its main agenda was to lobby for the release of Italian civilians and prisoners of war from internment camps and to carry out a campaign of anti-fascist and democratic education among Italian-Australians who were accustomed to two decades of fascist propaganda by the Italian consular and community networks. Italia Libera’s size and organisational structure were...
considerable, for a non-English-speaking organisation of the time, with a membership of 1,500, a central committee in charge of matters at a federal level and of the relationship with the Australian government, six state committees and dozens of local branches (Montagnana 1993: 141; Venturini 2007: 697).

According to former Italia Libera secretary Marcello Montagnana (1993), its success was due to its link with the Allenza Internazionale Giuseppe Garibaldi – an organisation founded in Mexico by socialist and communist émigrés – and the vital contribution of educated Jewish Italians: Marcello and Massimo Montagnana, Fulvio Levi, Franco Forti, Rosa Narducci Montagnana and Ernesto Monti in Melbourne, Alberto Levi, Claudio Piperno Alcorso, Orlando Piperno Alcorso and Paolo Sonnino in Sydney, and Adriano Muggia in Brisbane (Venturini 2007: 699-706) who had fled Italy after the promulgation of the 1938 racial laws and were committed to the organisation. They held important positions in Italia Libera: Massimo Montagnana became secretary, Fulvio Levi vice-secretary, Franco Forti, Rosa Narducci Montagnana and Ernesto Monti were founding members.

In November 1944, Italia Libera began publication of its biweekly Il Risveglio, which represented the first regular means of contact with anti-fascist Italians in Australia after the past failed attempts of similar newspapers. At least 20% to 25% of the Italian readership in Australia was believed to have had access to Il Risveglio, which had a circulation of 3,500 copies by mid-1945 (Montagnana 1993: 144; Venturini 2007: 754). The rising popularity of Italia Libera and its periodical alarmed the Catholic church and ultra-conservative quarters (Venturini 2007: 719-22, 754). In 1944, Jesuit Ugo Modotti began publishing L’Angelo della Famiglia, which warned Italians to be aware of the “atheist” anti-fascists (Cresciani 1980: 213; Cappello 1999: 96-100). Then, in 1947, diocesan priest Giuseppe La Rosa, who worked for the Apostolic Delegate Giovanni Panico, launched the more successful La Fiamma to offset “the poisonous influence of a leftist and pro-communist Italian newspaper” (Cresciani 1988b: 243; La Rosa 1995: 177-85; Cappello 1999: 99). Equally alarming to Italian and Australian conservatives was Italia Libera’s connection with the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), with which it shared the political platform. According to Carli (1982: 11), the CPA exercised considerable influence on the Italian organisation which was reflected, for instance, in the decision by Italia Libera in late 1944 to move its central office from Melbourne to Sydney where the CPA also had its headquarters. Venturini (2007: 744-5), on the other hand, cites internal disagreements as the trigger for the move.

With the Australian government showing increased intolerance towards what it perceived as the ‘red menace’ in the 1950s, Italia Libera’s members were often subjected to harassment by the authorities (Carli 1982: 13; Venturini 2007: passim). The most notable incident happened in 1953 when the government attempted to deport the secretary of Italia Libera and Il Risveglio editor Mario Abbiezzi, allegedly for his left-wing militancy and for the critique of Italian emigration and Australian immigration policies published in Il Risveglio (Lever-Tracy and Quinlan 1988: 161; Venturini 2007: 784-91).

By 1950, Italia Libera felt the need to re-focus its mission and activities. Several of its activists had returned to Italy and its original raison d’être, the fight against fascism, no longer existed. A new objective was found in the task of assisting newly arrived migrants who were emigrating en masse to Australia. During the February 1950 Italo-Australian national congress in Sydney, Italia Libera articulated a program of assistance for fellow migrants (Carli 1982: 11-12; Venturini
2007: 764) and not long after changed its name to Club Italo-Australiano (CIA).1 Yet, harassed by the Catholic press and the Australian government, the CIA was cornered politically and fell into isolation and factionalism (Carli 1982: 12), as did the CPA. Furthermore, it was closely monitored by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), promptly alerting the Australian authorities which were keen on hampering left-wing and communist activity (Venturini 2007: 771-90). Il Risveglio failed to achieve a mass circulation and became too overtly political for its readership. In January 1957, it folded, partly due “to the death of Omero Schiassi in Melbourne [in January 1956], who was not only the first Italian lecturer at Melbourne University but also the intellectual mainstay of the anti-fascist movement and Il Risveglio” (Carli 1982: 16). With the closing down of its periodical, the CIA found its influence much reduced.

In Melbourne, two organisations similar to the CIA were formed towards the end of the 1950s: the Consiglio Italo-Australiano del Lavoro (CIAL) and the Lega Italo-Australiana (LIA). The CIAL was established around 1956 by a retired sea captain Giuseppe Di Salvo, ALP member and union organiser Nino Randazzo and CPA member Giovanni Sgro who later joined the ALP. It was, according to Allan’s topography of migrant political activity in Victoria (Allan 1978: 23-4), an extra-party ethnic adherent organisation not formally linked with the ALP but one that had organised the Italian-Australian community to vote for it.2 In 1956, the CIAL began publishing its bimonthly, then monthly, Il Progresso Italo-Australiano, which was distributed through several unions. Based at the Trades Hall in Carlton, Il Progresso Italo-Australiano and the CIAL during the 1960s organised “Italian migrants within the union movement, in support of the ALP, and against the Vietnam War” (Lopez 2000: 435-6).

The fortunes of the CIAL, and partly of Il Progresso Italo-Australiano, were closely linked to Di Salvo’s political career. He ran for preselection for the Victorian federal seat of Batman in 1966. Although he was endorsed by all three delegates from the local campaign committee, his bid failed. Left-wing unions, which dominated the ALP Victorian central executive and had the ultimate say on preselections, eventually backed another candidate, J. W. Anderson, a former mayor of Heidelberg. Many Italians felt that this was an intolerable and anti-migrant interference by the unions and left the CIAL in large numbers, leading to its quick demise (Allan 1978: 24; Carli 1982: 18).

Randazzo also attempted to forge a political career. By 1959, he was editor of Il Globo and no longer in the CIAL. He was also involved in Australian politics as a member of the conservative Democratic Labor Party (DLP) and was their candidate for Fitzroy at the 1964 state elections. The DLP enjoyed a special relationship with prominent figures in the Italian community such as Gualtiero Vaccari due to his connection with the higher echelons of the Catholic church. Randazzo’s was “the first political attempt to win the Italian vote by appealing to the ethnic loyalties of Italians” (Carli 1982: 16-17). Although the Fitzroy electorate seemed ideal with its high concentration of Italians,3 and despite the full support of Il Globo and the DLP electoral machine, Randazzo was defeated (Carli 1982: 17; Jupp 1966: 94, 2009: 8-9).

The Italian-style road to socialism and the PCI in Australia

From the mid-1960s, the CPA leadership developed a new party policy termed “The Australian
road to socialism’, articulated along the lines of the similar policy of the PCI. As the CPA worked towards an Italian-style communist party, at both political and organisational levels, Italian communists in (mostly Stalinists) found themselves increasingly uneasy with the CPA and, in 1971, eventually decided to establish PCI branches in. The Independent PCI Federation (IPCIF) was meant to act as liaison between the CPA, the Italian communists and the large Italian-Australian community, yet soon found itself trapped in out-of-date ideological rows, personal disputes and organisational impotence. However, these circumstances would rapidly change in 1973 with the visits of PCI officials Giuliano Pajetta and Ignazio Salemi.

When the party lines of international communism divided during the so-called Sino-Soviet dispute, the CPA leadership’s dependency on international communism and its vulnerability were revealed. In 1961, the leadership that had at first supported China “switched its loyalties to the USSR” and came out deeply divided and torn by internal factionalism (Davidson 1969: 148). As the dispute resolved with the split in international communism, the hard-line pro-Chinese faction of the CPA found itself in bitter conflict with the pro-Soviet majority. In 1963, the split became inevitable. The Victorian state secretary Ted Hill, who was “accused of pursuing an extremist ultra-left line totally unsuitable for a country like Australia”, led the pro-Chinese faction to split from the party and to form the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) (Taft 1994: 127).

This split and the election of the progressive Laurie Aarons as national secretary in 1965 was a turning point in the history of the CPA. Bernie Taft, a party leader in Victoria from the 1960s to 1984, recalled that the party then freed itself “from the old concepts and restrictions which had acted as a barrier to growth and change” and allowed “younger, more creative people [to] come to the forefront” (Taft 1994: 131). The CPA moved towards a new party policy which included “the possibility of peaceful establishment of socialism by parliamentary means” and rejected the inept long-lasting idea of the violent taking of power by the Australian proletariat and the Stalinist theory of socialism in one country (Davidson 1969: 158).

Since 1956, “national communists” had formed a loose grouping in Victoria and lobbied for the return of the CPA to the origins of Australian socialism. Young party cadres and trade unionists had become interested in “the polycentrist theories of Togliatti” which “rejected the prevailing view that there was a single centre, namely Moscow, for the world communist movement”. While the higher party echelons dismantled the “Victorians” at the time, about a decade later, the “Victorians”, now the “Australian” group, regrouped and coalesced with Aarons’ followers (Davidson 1969: 148, 150, 163). With Aarons as national secretary, the party looked to the PCI for inspiration. The PCI represented a beacon of light for small, western Communist Parties, then being the biggest and the most influential Communist Party in the West.

The CPA press promoted the writings of the PCI leaders, thus increasing the popularity of the PCI among Australian communists. Although “most Australian communists interested in the Italian developments probably left in the 1956–58 expulsions of ‘revisionists’ … the PCI Foreign Bulletin continued to arrive regularly, and the ideas contained in it caused a ferment in 1959–60 among the Victorian ‘younger cadres’”. By 1963–64, many young Italian-line communists in Sydney and Melbourne were reading as much Italian material as possible (Davidson 1969: 166). Reporting to the central committee about his visit to Italy and France at the end of 1964, Aarons said he was “impressed by the Italian and French parties” and
discussed “the possibility of a plurality of parties in a socialist society, and the need to work for a mass communist party of the Italian and French type” (Taft 1994: 150).

As the CPA developed a party policy which drew inspiration from the PCI, Italian communists in Australia who belonged to or sympathised with the CPA were beginning to distance themselves further from it (Carli 1982: 22-3). As events and developments taking place in the international communist world once more determined the CPA's future, so did they determine the relationship between Italian and Australian communists in Australia.

The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 obliged the CPA, as well as all the other Communist Parties around the world, to take a stance on the violent ending of the “Prague Spring”. While the CPA strongly opposed it, the hard-line pro-Soviet faction inside the party – backed by USSR diplomatic personnel in Australia – supported the invasion and lobbied for a “changing of the guard” at party leadership level in Czechoslovakia. In Australia, “the dispute over the Soviet invasion … developed into a faction fight in which both sides were able to accuse the other of ‘splitting’. By June 1971, the pro-Moscow Socialist Party of Australia (SPA) had been launched with the practice of following the line from Moscow through thick and thin as its foundation” (Blunden 1993).

Ideological divergences, and most likely cultural differences as well, were starting to create and deepen frictions between the Italian communists and the CPA, a situation that eventually helped the establishment of the PCI in Australia. In the early 1970s, the Italian communists considered the PCI as a valid alternative to the CPA at an ideological and organisational level. It was a party that they had known or to which they had belonged before emigrating, “a party they viewed with great nostalgia” (Carli 1982: 22). Just before a further division occurred between the main body of the CPA and its pro-Soviet wing in December 1971, Italian communists in Australia distanced themselves from the CPA and formed Australian branches of the PCI.

The PCI had already established a network of branches and federations abroad by the late 1960s. Like other Italian parties, it too sought to benefit politically from being present and active amid the masses of Italians emigrated abroad, most of whom were of peasant or working-class background (Battiston 2009a: 558-9). The PCI, through the visits of Giuliano Pajetta to Australia, acknowledged that too few Italians were enrolled in the CPA. Local Italian communists thought the answer lay in the establishment of an autonomous, ethnic based group within the CPA which was to woo more Italian emigrants – the potential for new members was believed to the enormous – into the party. Yet, by the late 1960s the CPA realised that Italians in Australia were still by and large unpoliticised and not keen to join the party, even after an Italian section was established in 1967 (Battiston 2009a: 562-4).

The occasion that triggered the establishment of what would be an independent PCI federation (IPCIF) – an embryonic network of cells with the potential to become a well-structured federation, similar to those existing in Switzerland and Germany, with thousands of PCI members – was the visit of Diego Novelli, a L’Unità journalist and PCI official (Novelli 2006: 63). Novelli came to Australia in August-September 1971 to report on the conditions of Italian migrant workers. His trip, which also included meetings with CPA leaders and Italian communists, was a joint initiative between the PCI in Rome and the CPA, in the person of trade union leader Laurie Carmichael during a visit to PCI headquarters in late 1970 (Battiston 2009a: 564). In an account of his trip written for the party secretariat, Novelli acknowledged
that the relationship between the CPA and the Italian communists was an uneasy one. Because of past ideological and organisational divergences, there was still much mistrust between them, especially as a result of the anti-Soviet stance of the CPA leadership in the wake of the Prague events of 1968:

From the first evening that I got to Sydney, I had contact with a group of Italian comrades who had come to Australia, summoned by comrade Palmada (who was responsible for work among migrants) at the local headquarters of the Australian Communist Party. From the first words exchanged I realised that there wasn’t a good atmosphere between our comrades and the Australian ones because of internal divisions within the Australian CP. There was especially a lot of distrust for what had happened in the past. Our comrades complained about not being helped when the decision was made to publish the newspaper “New Country” and then “New Era”. Not only that, but according to some opinions that in my mind were a bit too harsh, the CPA was rumoured to have been scared of an autonomous organisation of Italian communists. I held lengthy discussions with the Italian comrades to clear up the various disagreements, inviting them to overcome certain conflicts brought about by the somewhat rigid positions taken in the past by leaders of the Australian CP. Several of our comrades are in strong disagreement with the CPA stance regarding the events in Czechoslovakia, not because they don’t share that point of view (the same as ours) regarding the Czechoslovakian intervention but because they don’t explain certain extreme forms of anti-Sovietism.8

To Novelli, Italian communists in Australia appeared remarkably pro-Soviet. He concluded that this could be the product of the tyranny of distance and the lack of up-to-date information in the Italian language. In fact, the ideas of Italians who migrated in the early post-war period had stagnated, still reflecting the political scene of the time before their migration when the PCI was very much following the Moscow line. The change that had occurred in Italy “after 1961 – and particularly the changes within the PCI, which went from a fairly hard line pro-Soviet party of the 1950s to the independent Euro-communist party of the 1970s – was largely unknown to those that formed the PCI in Australia and unknown to the Australian Italians” (Carli 1982: 22). Novelli noted that the scarce Italian communist publications that had from time to time reached Australia had not been delivered for months, and that this prolonged lack of information had resulted in an “almost absolute” ignorance among Italian communists of current PCI policies and strategies.9

One of Novelli’s tasks was to facilitate a renewed rapport between the CPA and its Italian members and sympathisers. During his stay in Sydney, he spoke at great length with top-level CPA members such as Aarons, Taft and Palmada, aimed at finding a common ground to end the dispute. In the meeting that followed between Novelli and the Italian communists, he put forward three possible solutions: admission of Italian communists to the CPA, formation of an independent PCI federation in Australia, or formation of a left-wing federation of Italian workers, that is, the organismo di massa. After the first solution was rejected, there was further debate on the remaining two. Eventually, it was decided to set up an independent PCI federation.10
As a result, a first PCI cell was established in Sydney, where an executive committee of Mario Abbiezzi, Salvatore Palazzolo, Francesco De Bella and Dimitri Oliva was appointed and a membership campaign launched. Other cells were set up as Novelli’s trip led him to Wollongong, Newcastle, Melbourne and Darwin. Whenever possible, Novelli met with local Italian migrants, often in their workplaces, and invited them to join the party. When he felt it was appropriate, he entrusted some of them with the tasks of establishing a party cell or coordinating the party’s propaganda activities. For instance, in Wollongong and Newcastle, he met with local Italian communists and put them in contact with those in Sydney. In Melbourne, through the mediation and with the help of Palazzolo, he organised meetings and managed to enrol some 20 Italian migrants in the party.

As he travelled from city to city, Novelli was struck by the disadvantaged living conditions of many Italian migrants:

The standards of living of our countrymen, with the exception of a small minority (those who emigrated before the Second World War or between 1947 and 1955) aren’t very good: they have to make great sacrifices to save money (working two jobs, endless overtime etc.).

These circumstances were reflected in a range of social and welfare dysfunctions which Novelli listed, demanding that they be discussed urgently in parliamentary debate in Italy:

The most urgent political problems to confront in Italy relate to: 1) The right to transfer their pension to Italy which is not possible currently; 2) recognition of professional qualifications; 3) the housing problem; 4) education for our children; 5) sickness benefits; 6) the cost of travel to go back to Italy, even just for a visit; 7) the information provided by the employment offices in Italy which is not truthful; 8) the attitude of the Italian consular authorities in Australia. I focused on these issues in all the meetings that I had with the various Italian communities in Sydney, Wollongong, Newcastle, Melbourne, Darwin etc. to present an inquiry from our parliamentary group so that the standards of living of our migrants can be discussed by the Italian government with the Australian government.

At the same time, Novelli foresaw the potential of the newly established IPCIF to tackle the supposedly widespread discontent among Italian-Australians, facilitating its penetration of the community, as had happened in western Europe:

The most important issue of all – pensions: if we manage to get somewhere with this issue, it’ll be a huge success! I won’t go into details about the standards of living of the latest arrivals, especially the young people that are living in camps … I’ll write about the whole issue in l’Unità, but as a party we have to take serious political action, complaining, also getting the unions active … We can’t afford to do nothing about this: a smart (communist!) comrade, in the course of a few months, can do an enormous amount of work: all we have to do is to get our act together, I’m not exaggerating, and I’m not being overly optimistic (emphasis in the original).
Novelli’s vision, which saw the IPCIF gaining political success among migrants by tackling their problems, followed the propaganda strategy of the PCI emigration office. This strategy was feasible in Europe, if aimed at cultivating an electoral allegiance, but unsuitable outside the continent. However, Novelli suggested to the PCI central committee to consider organising the *en masse* return of Italian migrants for the 1973 national elections, bearing in mind that “*i fascisti già si sono fatti vivi a Sydney … per il voto siciliano*” (for the elections to be held in Sicily, the fascists already turned up in Sydney).

To cement the friendship between Italian and Australian communists, the former now with their own “independent” federation, Novelli suggested the implementation of a set of proposals to be jointly supported by the IPCIF and the CPA. These proposals would represent the *de facto* launch *in loco* of PCI activities. For instance, a four-page newspaper was to be published, with three pages edited in Rome and sent to Australia, and a fourth one edited by the Italian communists in Australia. The CPA was entrusted with the task of publishing the periodical in its own printery. A second proposal suggested the establishment of a PCI training school, presumably along the lines of Le Frattocchie of Rome, noting that “just from having heard about it, the Spaniards sought to be part of it and to run classes together”. Another proposal even suggested the creation of a PCI-affiliated Italтурist travel agency in Australia, “given the monthly high volume of bookings by Italian migrants for 4-week holiday trips to Italy. The Australian comrades deem such a business enterprise a pretty lucrative one”.

The implementation of all these proposals would have closely and fruitfully linked both Italian and Australian communists. The CPA was eager to recruit members within the large Italian-Australian working class to enlarge its own membership of barely 3,000. It viewed the link with the IPCIF as a bridge that would allow it to reach Italians in Australia. However, as Novelli left Australia, developments took a different turn.

The good intentions originally declared by the IPCIF and the CPA to work side by side were derailed almost immediately. In November 1971, the IPCIF executive committee in Sydney advised Novelli that the CPA had expressed second thoughts about the organisation and had concerns about the development of its activities which were, according to the CPA, “not enough ideologically-driven and poorly elaborated at policy level”. Eight months later, the CPA also expressed irritation with the IPCIF executive committee for its failure to collaborate with the CPA and “get the necessary activities going”. Mutual mistrust grew instead of fading away, and all the activities on which the two organisations had previously agreed to cooperate were stalled for over a year.

The IPCIF formulated its political views in a report by its secretary Salvatore Palazzolo after its first congress held in Melbourne in March 1972 (Abbiezzi 1972). Written almost a year after Novelli’s visit, Palazzolo’s report conveys the stimulus of the new ideas that spread as a result of the established contacts with the PCI emigration office and the circulation of Italian communist propaganda. The IPCIF committed itself to embracing the PCI’s *via italiana al socialismo* (Italian road to socialism), which meant projecting onto Australia what the PCI was trying to realise in Italy and cooperating with all the left-wing parties, not just with the CPA. In other words, the IPCIF justified its practice of debating with left-wing Australian parties and trade unions whenever Italian workers were involved in industrial relations disputes, and of planning the adoption of common tactics and actions.
The IPCIF’s political project aimed to validate its split from the CPA, and to establish contacts with the Socialist Party of Australia and the left wing of the ALP “where a great deal of Italians were involved”. This was confirmed at the second IPCIF congress held in Melbourne in July 1972, and irritated the CPA.20

Meanwhile, the CPA had requested that the PCI in Rome take over the reins of the IPCIF. Laurie Aarons proposed that the PCI send one of its representatives, as the collaboration with the IPCIF was not getting off the ground.21 He felt that the IPCIF urgently needed some guidance from Rome.

In early 1973, Giuliano Pajetta acknowledged that the situation of the IPCIF in Australia was worsening and that it had not developed significantly. Neither did it seem to have organised any political or mass actions of relevance.22 Pajetta felt that the IPCIF’s stagnant situation and scarce results were even more disappointing given the fact that the national political scene in Australia had radically changed at the end of 1972, when Labor gained power.

The CPA thought the problem originated in its upper ranks. In a letter to Pajetta, Aarons commented:

The main problem is that most of these leaders live in the past, they are incapable of seeing change and they are also overbearing in their attitude towards comrades and particularly towards the young people who have joined the movement (mainly, if not totally, through our party). It is these young forces that constitute hope for the future.23

He mentioned that some young, very active but inexperienced Italian communists, such as Franco Schiavoni from Melbourne and Emilio Ciambotti from Sydney, were willing to work with and for the CPA.24

The PCI realised that its main branch in Sydney was indeed stuck in the mire of ideological rows, personal disputes and organisational incompetence. The launch in Australia of the independent federation had turned out to be far from successful. If the situation appeared better in Melbourne, in Sydney it was critical, while in Adelaide serious doubts were expressed about the branch’s real functionality. The overall membership of the three branches had stagnated, remaining around 100. The PCI thus decided to send delegates on two official visits to Australia: Giuliano Pajetta in April–May and Ignazio Salemi in September–November 1973.

Pajetta toured Australia for two weeks, arriving in time to participate in the first PCI national conference (or third IPCIF congress), organised by the IPCIF and the CPA in Sydney on 20–21 April 1973.25 The conference was an instrument for Pajetta’s attempts to reorganise the IPCIF. The thorniest issue, as already mentioned, was the conduct of the executive committee, whose results were reputed to be unsatisfactory. Eventually, a resolution was reached to disband the executive committee and replace it with two comitati di sezione (branch committees) in Sydney and Melbourne.

Pajetta’s visit did not result in a mere streamlining of the organisation’s structure, but aimed at training the membership, as well as popularising the PCI’s emigration policy within the Italian–Australian community. For this purpose, four meetings were organised between the Sydney and Melbourne committees, attended by some 500 people, mainly communists and communist supporters. For Pajetta, the high number of participants was tangible evidence that pressure from the migrant mass was mounting significantly, particularly from young people.
On other occasions, he noticed signs of an increasingly favourable attitude towards communists that gave him the impression that the anti-communist feelings in Australian society were slowly dissolving. In the light of the new socio-political situation, with Labor in office, Pajetta acknowledged that the possibilities for developing the PCI organisations in the country were greater than ever before. Italian migrants had shown a keen interest in participating in migrant lobby groups, parties and associations, but none of these organisations, according to Pajetta, were at that stage realistically able to tackle their problems or even understand them. He saw a great opportunity for the PCI to fill the gap. Furthermore, the Labor government showed a carefully encouraging attitude towards the migrants’ initiatives, even though many political and union sectors were still firmly opposed to sharing power with migrants. Although more receptive and better disposed towards the migrants’ needs than Labor, the CPA was largely unfamiliar to the wider public and did not constitute a sizeable pressure group, with its already slight political importance being further reduced by internal divisions.26

Pajetta came to the conclusion that a possible re-launch of the PCI in Australia had to be grounded in a “qualitative shift”.27 In practice, having realised that there were no culturally and politically prepared cadres in Australia who could build a bridge to the mass of Italian-Australians, the PCI opted to send one of its cadres from Italy. Although the PCI in Australia would have been able to mobilise dozens of willing Italian-speaking activists, only a well-formed cadre could fulfil the duty of “mass leader” and convincingly transmit his knowledge to others. Among Italian-Australian left activists, the need to attract a prepared cadre, possibly from Italy, to help run their organisation’s organ seems to have been a persistent one – in the mid-1950s, for instance, activists wrote to PCI secretary Togliatti asking for “a good mass worker from Italy for the newspaper Il Risveglio” (Venturini 2007: 787).

The qualified activist chosen to develop the attività di massa on the Australian continent was Ignazio Salemi. A versatile and experienced PCI official, he was a former correspondent of L’Unità and of the Italian-speaking PCI radio stations in Budapest and Prague.28 Salemi was now editor of Emigrazione, the periodical of FILEF Rome.

Salemi’s visit lasted about six weeks, and his mission, like that of his predecessors, was to observe and report on the conditions of Italian migrants. As Emigrazione editor, he was also officially invited to attend the first Migrant Workers Conferences (MWCs) in Melbourne and Sydney, and carefully noted down his impressions:

In Melbourne there was a real participation by immigrants, frequently sent along by factories and communities, and there was quite a widespread participation in debate at the grassroots level; in Sydney however there was a Conference on Emigration with officials and speeches from high-up people and very little participation from actual emigrants themselves. Italians however were the best-represented community (emphasis in the original).29

Besides attending these conferences, Salemi met with local communist and Labor Party officials, trade unionists and Italian migrant workers in factories and on building sites. He saw, particularly in Melbourne, a broad participation by Australian communists in political and trade union sectors, including in municipal affairs, often supporting the initiatives of the Italian communists who presented themselves under the FILEF banner.
He also witnessed what he saw as signs of an emerging Italian-Australian Left: the involvement of FILEF in the MWC’s committees, the petition against the closure of the last two sea lines between Italy and Australia, and the meetings about the debate regarding the international migrants charter proposed by FILEF Rome. In his opinion, these commitments positively prevented the Italian-Australian communists from becoming bogged down in “futile debates on philo-Sovietism, Maoism, Trotskyism, and so on that thrive in the Australian Left”.30

Salemi made a positive impression on many Italians in Australia who agreed that he was what FILEF and the PCI needed at the time: an activist with “great intellectual capacity combined with excellent organisational skills”.31 Thus, FILEF Melbourne asked its central office and the PCI in Rome to give him the task of coordinating the organisation’s activities in Australia.

From the Italo-Australian League to the FILEF experience

In July 1958, left-wing and Marxist Italians in Melbourne, including former Italia Libera-CIA members, established the Lega Italo-Australiana (LIA): Emilio Deleidi, Pietro Rivanera, Franco Schiavoni, R. Cernigoi, Giuseppe Zammarchi, Assunto Colli, Vincenzo Mammitoli, Ceccaroni, Coffa, De Battista, Saurini, Bucella, Stilla, La Riccia, Matteo Cristofaro and Paul De Angelis.32 The LIA’s manifesto reflected the social-welfare nature of the organisation33 and recognised the need to collaborate with the Australian community in a harmonious manner. It included the defence of Italian prestige, the fight against factionalism, the social and intellectual development of members, cementing of friendship between Italians and Australians, promotion of better understanding of the role of the trade unions, moral and material assistance to members in need, and collaboration with all migrant-related organisations.34

In April 1963, the LIA began the publication of its monthly Il Nuovo Paese, which proclaimed itself to be “an independent, social and commercial newspaper of the Italian community of Australia”.35 Il Nuovo Paese opted to challenge the conservative Il Globo, published by Tarcisio Valmorbinda and Ubaldo La Robina since 1959. As recalled by Il Nuovo Paese’s former editor Emilio Deleidi, Il Globo “pendeva troppo sulla parte dei signori” (was leaning towards the well-off elites).36 Il Nuovo Paese’s first editorial set out its raison d’être:

The time had come, it could no longer be put off, for someone to take the initiative in creating something that our emigrants had waited so long for. That’s how Il Nuovo Paese was born, this newspaper that began from nothing and not from any single initiative, but as a common necessity that was sought after, supported and financed across the board: from factory workers, to shopkeepers, tradesmen and office workers. So it was born from the general consensus of our community for whom Il Nuovo Paese could be the only genuine expression of our emigrants. Il Nuovo Paese was created as that democratic independent newspaper and with a program fit for meeting the needs which logically arise in a country with a different language. Its program aims at a greater coming-together, understanding and reciprocal collaboration between the Italians who live in this country and the Australian people with whom they share their needs and hopes on a daily basis.37
The LIA wanted to convey the message that Il Nuovo Paese was a community paper with no political or organisational affiliations, even with the LIA. Thus neither in the credits nor in the editorial was the LIA mentioned. The only references were in brief news items. While the first issue bore the name of Emilio Deleidi as editor, this was replaced for “security reasons” from the second issue onwards with the name of another LIA member, Assunto Colli. Il Nuovo Paese took these measures in order to not appear as a communist newspaper. Deleidi has recalled an episode that highlights how alive anti-communist feelings still were in the 1960s:

In Australia, to speak of socialism is like speaking of the devil … In the second year we used to live in Brunswick and there was a corner milkbar, at the corner of Dawson Street. We used to go there to buy the milk, at this time here, since we had distributed the newspapers at the milkbar and also where they sell newspapers, all normal. I remember one time I went there to buy the milk and I also took a newspaper, bought it, and I commented to the lady behind the counter “Good newspaper this one, I always read it, good newspaper.” I actually made it! She responded: “Oh no, no, no. Don’t take it home, they say it’s a communist newspaper. It’s dangerous, we don’t want it anymore. We’re going to tell the delivery man to not bring it anymore.” In fact, neither the milkbar nor the newsagent wanted it any longer. Il Globo, Randazzo. Randazzo, understand? so we stopped the sales there. It was hard … No-one wanted to support us, they were all too scared. Even the people who wanted to advertise were scared in the beginning. They’d just say, “Absolutely not, God forbid. That newspaper, no way. That’s a communist newspaper.”

Although Il Nuovo Paese pretended to be a social and commercial newspaper, it clearly offered Italian-speaking readers an alternative, left-wing source of information apart from the usual Il Globo and La Fiamma. A letter to the editor from Federico Sabatini of Griffith (New South Wales) indicates the kind of readership it attracted:

Finally the Italian workers have a newspaper that presents their aspirations and that wholly defends their rights. A paper that presents a clear and unbiased interpretation of what’s happening in the international community to our migrants. Similar to Neos Kosmos in the Greek community, the birth of Il Nuovo Paese is a fundamental turning point in the history of the Italian workers in Australia.

The paper mainly contained news items concerning unions, and political, social and sporting issues. Particular emphasis was put on discrimination suffered by migrant workers in Australia and elsewhere, ranging from low salaries to lack of social security or pension funds. Ample space was also given to local trade union initiatives and struggles in the form of interviews with union officials, reports of workers’ dismissals, pay rises, work-related accidents, strikes and public meetings.

Il Nuovo Paese reprinted news items from the international and Italian left-wing press, such as L’Unità and the progressive Vie Nuove. These reported on, for instance, social and political injustices against the African-American population in the USA and in South Africa, or the
peace marches against the Vietnam War organised around the world. Several articles recalled episodes of the Italian Resistance during the Second World War. These and other articles stimulated in particular the interest of some readers, among whom some were former partisans themselves.  

Although Il Nuovo Paese reached a maximum circulation as high as 5,000, it suffered from a chronic funding problem. It had to rely almost exclusively on volunteers for its management, editing and distribution because the hiring of professional journalists was simply too expensive. Eventually, in 1966, it ceased publication in Melbourne (Carli 1982: 16) and moved to Sydney.  

The LIA was supposed to be the organizzazione di massa (mass organisation) of the CPA within the Italian-Australian community (Carli 1982: 16). But like the CIA, by the late 1960s it was isolated and divided (Carli 1982: 21) and its activities “had been reduced to dinner-dances” in a hall hired by the CPA, the Albion Hall in Lygon Street, East Brunswick (Armstrong 2001: 196).  

Factors favouring the establishment and development of FILEF in Melbourne in the 1970s are to be found in both the Italian and local historical contexts. The pro-emigrant politics of the Italian Left in the 1960s prompted a renewed interest by political parties and trade unions in the welfare of the Italian migrants overseas, which in turn favoured the establishment of politically-inspired migrant organisations such as FILEF. The PCI, which enjoyed a close relationship with FILEF and whose militants played a key role in its activities, was particularly keen to see FILEF, viewed as its de facto appendage in the migrant world, develop. It was in FILEF, rather than the Australian-based PCI cells and branches, that Salemi saw the political potential for local Italian communists.  

During his first visit to Australia, Salemi sensed that the times were ripe for the development of the Italian communists’ attività di massa. In Melbourne, they were lobbying local councils on issues such as schooling, childcare centres, roads and so on. In Sydney, they organised meetings on migrant workers’ problems. According to Salemi, these activities had the merit of keeping Italian communists united, at least on an organisational level. He thus concluded that:

It’s obvious that if we looked deeper into the real issues facing immigrants, especially working-class immigrants (working conditions in factories are particularly bad), then there would be a greater chance of broadening the shorter hours platform for PCI supporters; this may also mean wider actions involving some unions as well. I think that if we work hard, member numbers could double or triple in a short time and this would increase our financial capabilities so that we would be able to take more public action, take part in our own right in some campaigns, develop larger-scale activities.  

The development of attività di massa implied the presence of an organismo (or organizzazione) di massa which could launch and coordinate such activities. But the IPCIF had proved not to be up to the task; neither was the LIA, which was very much plagued by internal divisions (Caputo 1980b: 8). The establishment of a brand new organismo di massa was considered a sound solution. This was an idea already aired by Novelli in 1971 when he proposed the creation of a left-wing federation of Italian workers. By the time Salemi first came to Australia, a new
organismo di massa had already been functioning in Melbourne since 1972: FILEF

FILEF Melbourne was established on 6 July 1972 at a meeting at Giovanni Sgrò’s house in North Coburg. During that meeting, a committee was elected: Umberto Frattali (president), Franco Schiavoni (vice-president), Giovanni Sgrò (secretary), Patrizia Archivio (vice-secretary), Asunto Colli (treasurer), Ferdinando Butera (legal advisor), Grace Masini, Armando Ceccaroni and Domenico Fammartino.44

According to Caputo, who joined later that year, Fammartino was the person who first introduced FILEF to Australia (Caputo 1980a: 52, 1980b: 8; Brunswick City Council and Brunswick Oral History Project 1985: 90).45 An Italian-born shop steward at the North Melbourne railway workshops and CPA member, Fammartino made a trip to Italy in early 1972. In Rome as a CPA delegate, he had met with Pajetta and had learned about the existence of FILEF.46 On his return, he encouraged fellow Italians to set up a branch in Melbourne. Among those he approached was Sgrò, who was invited by Fammartino to get in contact with Pajetta and Gaetano Volpe, secretary of FILEF Rome. Sgrò was authorised to hold meetings at his house under the banner of FILEF.47

Notwithstanding the PCI connection, a decisive factor in the establishment and early development of FILEF is to be found in the Australian political and social context. As recalled by Caputo, the Labor victory of December 1972 had created “in tutto il paese un clima di ottimismo” (a feeling of optimism in the country) which brought to FILEF “questo ‘vento fresco’ [che] ci ha dato l’opportunità di uscire dalle tane e operare in maniera diversa” (a breath of fresh air which gave us the opportunity to emerge from underground and do things in the open). Yet FILEF did not have the financial resources to begin work or to obtain a proper office, and meetings continued to be held at Sgrò’s house. Neither did it set an agenda of activities beyond the regular monthly meetings (Caputo 1980b: 8).

Decisive for the fortunes of FILEF was the financial and organisational help provided by the Fitzroy Ecumenical Centre (FEC). In 1972, FEC activists Arthur Faulkner and Des Storer were “interested in establishing a left-wing Italian organisation” in Melbourne, as they regarded COASIT as “right-wing and conservative”. When Sgrò invited them to a FILEF meeting, they “were impressed by the size of the meeting, over a hundred people, and saw the potential to establish a viable organisation”. Later that year, the FEC used some funds received from the Ross Trust to conduct a study of Italians in Coburg, and established a FILEF office at 34-36 Munro Street, Coburg, “to provide a base from which pressure-group activity could be mounted” (Lopez 2000: 148-9).

FILEF’s activities effectively started in 1973. In April–June, FILEF activists, among whom were Caputo and Schiavoni, attended a series of seminars organised by the FEC (Carli 1982: 25; Caputo 1980a: 52). These seminars put forward the concept that “migrant rights had to be claimed by migrants, on their own behalf, instead of depending on the paternalism of the Australian community” (Martin 1978: 196). The debates that originated from these seminars resulted in a valuable publication, edited by Storer, that encapsulated the ethnic rights ideology from a grassroots perspective: Ethnic Rights, Power and Participation: Toward a Multi-cultural Australia (1975). Schiavoni contributed a paper on “The future shape of Australian society” in which he carefully singled out examples of “devaluation” of migrant cultures in Australian society, with its deeply ingrained assimilationist tendencies.

In June–October 1973, FILEF was involved in the committee that organised the first
Migrant Workers Conference (MWC), which “was the first attempt ever to bring [ethnic] groups together” (Loh 1980: 103). Participants included representatives of fifteen unions, two regional Trades and Labour Councils and the Victorian Trades Hall Council (Lopez 2000: 289). The delegates were mainly from non-English-speaking backgrounds, “elected from various workshops around Melbourne … shop stewards involved for a long time in their particular industries”; trade union officials from non-English-speaking backgrounds could be counted “on the fingers of one hand” (Loh 1980: 103). Proceedings were conducted in several languages other than English (Lever-Tracy and Quinlan 1988: 154).

Caputo, who was on the organising committee of the MWC, recalled some hostility during its preparation from Australians who were fearful that such conferences could lead to a split in the union movement. In September, migrant militants had defied union officials during the renowned strike at the Broadmeadows Ford vehicle plant in Melbourne, which had caused clashes at the gates when the union declared a return to work. “That strike typified – Joe [Caputo] recalled – the gap between migrant workers and trade union leadership, even the best trade union leadership, in this country” (Loh 1980: 105).

At the MWC, the growing tension which had erupted in the violence at Ford was articulated in a set of proposals for union action and support (Martin 1978: 200), summarised by Lever-Tracy and Quinlan (1988: 153-4):

Conference resolutions generally centred upon demands for improved wages and working conditions, the recognition of immigrant skills, special provisions for overseas leave and guaranteed job security for injured workers. Unions were called on to establish immigrant workers committees, elect immigrant organisers, conduct multilingual education programmes, publish multilingual information on workers’ compensation and other union matters and to employ multilingual office staff. Other demands included the mounting of union claims for paid English classes at work and child-care facilities together with proposals in the sphere of welfare, education and culture aimed at securing equality for immigrants.

After the two MWCs, debates on migrant issues and interpreting facilities were initiated inside the unions (Loh 1980: 105). The Victorian leadership of the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union (AMWU), together with some other unions, offered support and provided office space and funds for a Trade Union Migrant Workers Centre at its Melbourne headquarters (Lever-Tracy and Quinlan 1988: 154).

Easily “mistaken for one of the many combative and workerist papers that emerged in Italy after the 1968 student movement” (Carli 1982: 27), Nuovo Paese was an effective means of broadcasting FILEF’s activities and initiatives, as well as left-wing political thinking. Launched in May 1974, it was perhaps the first major, visible initiative that FILEF undertook in Australia. The closing down of what can be considered its predecessor, Il Nuovo Paese, the periodical of the LIA, had left them without a locally produced paper reflecting their views and reporting their issues.

Already towards the end of the 1960s, attempts had been made to launch a newspaper that could offer an alternative to Il Globo and La Fiamma. There had been rumours for some time that a newspaper called Nuovo Paese or Nuova Era might be published by Italian and Australian
communists in a joint venture, yet mistrust between the two had condemned the project, as Diego Novelli noted in the report of his 1971 visit.

Novelli thought that the publication of a periodical would be beneficial and saw an opportunity for the PCI to run its editing directly. He stated confidently: “the first issue of the periodical, which must be published by early October, will be supervised by myself directly from Turin. I will then send the proofs to Australia. From the second (November) issue onwards the job needs to be taken over by the Press and Propaganda Committee in Rome.”

However, the proposal became caught up in the political and personal disputes between the IPCIF and the CPA. On 30 August 1972, CPA national secretary Laurie Aarons expressed his frustration to Pajetta about the “continuing delay in the publication of the newspaper, although we have guaranteed the necessary finance to produce the first three issues. Our latest information is that the newspaper is to be printed in Melbourne, and there has been no further discussion with us since we received the letter dated August 7th, informing us of this fact.”

The idea of publishing a periodical was raised once again in 1973. The first PCI national conference (or third IPCIF congress) in April entrusted the Italian communists of Sydney with the task of its launching, editing and distribution. Yet it was Salemi, during his visit in September to November, who gave encouragement by backing the idea of involving Australian trade unions rather than the CPA. The CPA-influenced AMWU in particular expressed interest in financing the enterprise by bulk buying five or six thousand copies for their Italian-language members. Salemi wrote in his travel notes:

In both Melbourne and Sydney comrades have expressed the need for an Italian newspaper which distinguishes itself from the existing papers in Australia; one which besides being a means of propaganda also acts as a means of organisation. The need is clear even according to our Australian comrades, especially in Melbourne where there is a fairly big union representing the metal workers who have promised to finance the costs of printing a fortnightly four-page paper with a circulation of ten thousand copies. This financing will be provided on the understanding that it is a prepayment for 5 or 6 thousand copies of the newspaper to be distributed among the Italian members of this union. In Melbourne and the rest of Australia the only thing left to do is create a network of “friends” to distribute and sell the remaining copies and ensure the development of the newspaper in regards to circulation, the number of pages and how often it comes out. The situation looks promising but it’s clear that such an objective will require a lot of work.

Salemi returned to Australia in March 1974 and an agreement with five trade unions was eventually reached to support the publication of Nuovo Paese. He encountered great enthusiasm among left-wing Italians for the endeavour, which can be seen as highlighting their deeply felt need for their own periodical:

There was a very encouraging episode. As soon as I arrived in Australia I started to think about this sort of thing and one day some people came to visit me – mind you, not even at my address: I was just there visiting. It was a group of people from Veneto in Mildura together with a Colonel Simoni … These people came to me and said,
“You know, we heard that there’s someone who wants to set up a workers’ newspaper for the Labor Party … We organised a collection between us and we’ve brought it down.” Coming to visit me from Mildura to Melbourne with about 380 dollars wasn’t a joke in those days. I remember a flight from Melbourne to Sydney cost 30 dollars. It was quite a lot for those days.53

Salemi’s journalistic experience was essential to fill what Caputo saw as the intellectual gap among Italian communists. This had proved to be not only the main impediment to the launch and editing of a new periodical, but also to undertaking more wide-ranging initiatives:

This was our problem … Up until 1970 the only activists that we had who were well prepared were Deleidi and myself. I wasn’t educated in Italy so I have a few difficulties with Italian even today. All the Italian I know I taught myself by reading books, magazines and newspapers. We never had a well prepared group of people in terms of an intellectual level, not even from a Gramscian point of view. So, we felt this deficiency and even those few we had, like Deleidi, who could write a bit of Italian, weren’t really able to develop complex ideas. They didn’t have the ability to reflect. The reason why the Left was in the position that we were was because we didn’t have the intellect and the human resources. We had a few, but they left … Coming back to FILEF, Salemi had what we were lacking. He was a good activist, he was dynamic, in the sense that he was able to initiate activities, but he also had the capacity to analyse the situation. Even if he was 40-odd, he was still really dynamic, full of energy and able to get things going and creating a lot of interest in himself.54

Eventually, *Nuovo Paese* was launched on International Labour Day, the first of May,55 and bore the catchy sub-heading “Learn to recognise your rights”. The editorial set out its mission: “to fill the vacuum of the lack of information regarding the struggle and the successes of local workers, and of other countries that constitute the reality of this world – of which even Australia is part”.56 *Nuovo Paese* aspired to make its readers aware that the working classes in Italy and Europe in general were successfully having their demands fulfilled and that the lack of adequate information in Australia about these successes contributed to maintain “privileges and life styles that indeed are, by 1974 standards, of another era”.57 Like other Italian language newspapers around the world (Prencipe 2009: 516), *Nuovo Paese* fulfilled at least two roles: keeping alive the cultural linkage between the emigrants and their country of origin, whilst aiming to assist their integration into the new host society.

*Nuovo Paese* republished news items from *L’Unità* and articles about local Labor and trade union initiatives, again dedicating extensive space to the struggles of the Italian workers’ rights movement and its powerful bargaining power during union disputes, taking it as a role model for local union actions. In this way, the paper offered an alternative source of information to the Italian-Australian community.

According to Brennan Wales (1988: 136), *Nuovo Paese* was, in comparison to *Il Globo* and *La Fiamma*, more abreast with the times and more in tune with multicultural Australia (see also Rando 2009: 621). In a survey he conducted on the news content of the three papers, he concluded that *Nuovo Paese* was far more committed to covering Australian, Italian and
international news, and far less sport and local Italian clubs’ news. Moreover, it contained the highest percentage (20%) of news items in English, compared to Il Globo (5%) and La Fiamma (3%). Wales argued that while Il Globo and La Fiamma essentially offered news items in English for second-generation Italian-Australians who were less familiar with the Italian language, Nuovo Paese’s purpose was to expand its readership beyond the Italian-speaking community, distributing the newspaper in factories and the like.

In February 1977, Nuovo Paese added four more pages, expanding to twelve pages. Its editors proudly stated that “il modesto quindicinale dei lavoratori, erede di altri tentativi sfortunati del passato, ha superato la prova della stabilità e ora cresce di misura” (the unpretentious workers’ weekly, successor of ill-fated ones, successfully passed the test of time and it is now about to grow). Twelve unions in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland were now distributing it, and in Melbourne it was also sold for fifteen cents in ten milk bars, five bar/restaurants, three shops and one newsagency.

Nevertheless, Nuovo Paese failed to become a widely read newspaper and could not compete with the commercially oriented La Fiamma and Il Globo, despite offering more news and being distributed by several trade unions. At the first FILEF national congress in October 1977, its editor Umberto Martinengo explained why: La Fiamma and Il Globo sold approximately 30,000 and 15,000 copies a week respectively, Nuovo Paese only approximately 6,000 a fortnight. Due to its limited circulation, Nuovo Paese also attracted fewer classified advertisements, most of which were linked to businesses owned by FILEF members. For example, four of the six in Nuovo Paese in February 1977 were paid for by FILEF members: Pizza Restaurant Edelweiss by Tom Diele, Cleaning Service by Vincenzo Mammoliti, Frattali’s Designing Services by Umberto Frattali, and Ladies Hairdresser of Frank di Roma by Franco Lugarini.

Although Nuovo Paese began to obtain funding from the Italian government through the Italian Commission for the Italian Press Abroad from 1978 onwards, it was run almost exclusively on a voluntary basis, including distribution. In 1978 Martinengo, who was editor between 1976 and 1978 (he then became a La Fiamma correspondent), pointed out that the distribution process left much to be desired:

Today, the situation is still unsatisfactory despite some improvement of the last few years, at least in Melbourne. While the potential is enormous it is still untapped for the most part: only a handful of people actually contribute to the distribution process and they are only able to reach very few sales points. Not even the unions really distribute them to the factories. Often, they buy them and leave them sitting in the secretaries’ offices.

Martinengo also recalled that Rome’s strategy for the paper was – suprisingly – to reduce its circulation, thereby reducing the resources needed. Stefano de Pieri, editor between 1978 and 1980, stressed that working for Nuovo Paese was to a large degree a labour of love. Financially, it could cover editing and printing costs but was able to retain little for individual salaries.

With the departures of Martinengo in 1978 and de Pieri in 1980, Cira La Gioia, a graduate from Apulia who migrated in the late 1970s, became the new editor until 1983 when the
editor’s office was transferred to Sydney. In 1986, *Nuovo Paese* became a monthly. Since 1989, Frank Barbaro from FILEF Adelaide has been editor.

In the 1970s, *Nuovo Paese* played a significant role in the Italian-Australian press and probably beyond, for its strong focus on advocating the migrants’ cause, for portraying a rather controversial image of migrant life in Australia, and for attempting to raise the cultural level of the community by promoting engagement with contemporary cultural products from Italy. Its stance diverged from that of the Melbourne-based *Il Globo*. By analysing *Il Globo’s* ideological and cultural roles, Carli (1982: 29) pinpointed their profoundly different approach to news reporting:

*Il Globo* has consistently presented Italians with a quite distorted picture of Italy. Italy in its pages has been presented as crisis ridden, with many of the articles on Italy being the so-called “cronaca nera”, that is, stories of rapes, assaults, murders, terrorism and scandals. It has fostered an image of Italy which altogether neglects the positive social and political changes which have occurred in the period since the Italians emigrated. Yet while Italy and the rest of the world are presented as areas of unrest, the Italians in Australia are presented as living an idyllic and peaceful existence.

Carli’s argument was that *Il Globo*, by expressing the views of its owner the Valmorbida family, who stood for the Italian-Australian establishment, presented a conservative and unrealistic portrayal of the Italian-Australian community as “well-established, successful and unified” (Carli 1982: 30). Conversely, *Nuovo Paese* and FILEF were keen to present a less edifying representation, one that took into account a working-class viewpoint.

The 1970s saw the politicising of migrant issues and welfare in Australia. In Melbourne, the Fitzroy Ecumenical Centre (FEC) emerged as one of the main organisations of the ethnic rights movement which, along the lines of the American civil rights movement, lobbied for recognition of migrant rights, implementation of migrant-suited welfare services and safeguarding of migrant cultures. Headed by Brian Howe, a young left-wing Methodist minister (who in 1991 became deputy prime minister), the FEC produced an agenda for social action and change (Howe 1974: 1) which drew inspiration from the Chicago urban research centres and “other concepts of community mobilisation and clerical involvement in social reform” (Lopez 2000: 135).

One of its top objectives was to study and critically analyse urban social relations, particularly in inner Melbourne. The FEC itself was based in the migrant-populated inner northern suburb of Fitzroy. It recognised that migrant involvement in civic affairs was “crucial for any real progress towards social justice in the city” and that only research and action programs could shift this “serious imbalance” in participation and control of community organisation (Howe 1974: 1–2). The discovery of Giovanni Sgrò and FILEF in its neighbourhood led the FEC to propose a social survey of Italian families living in the Coburg-Brunswick area.

Planning had begun in 1972 and the survey was carried out between May and December 1974. According to Storer (1974: 8, 1979: 290) and Howe (1974: 2), the survey was groundbreaking. Not only was it entirely devised and implemented by FILEF members, that is, at a very grassroots level, but it also, for the first time in Australia, gave resources to a migrant
group to carry out research with the aim of “achieving social and political change” (Howe 1974: 2). The survey focused on a whole range of issues: settlement, occupation, income, education, participation and representation in decision-making processes, and use of existing social structures and services (Storer 1979: 290). It aspired to evaluate how Italians who were living in this area perceived their socio-economic conditions and status, and subsequently “elaborare un piano di richieste alle autorità locali, statali e centrali per alleggerire il peso di tutti quei problemi che … costituiscono insieme il problema dell’emigrazione” (to articulate a list of demands to be put forward to local, state and federal authorities so to ease the burden of all those issues deriving from the complex issue of emigration).64

The survey’s results were first published in *Nuovo Paese* on 6 February 1975. They concluded that Italian migrants were economically, socially and culturally disadvantaged and discriminated against compared to the Australian population. At trade union and political level, they were poorly represented, and the tiny but vocal minority involved in such activities had been refused Australian citizenship several times and were hence excluded from mainstream politics (Storer 1979: 297-8).

The publication of the survey stirred up the local press65 and caused protests by the Victorian government which denied any claims of discrimination against Italian children in state schools.66 When the survey was also tabled at the First World Conference on Italian Emigration in Rome in late February, conservative quarters made even louder complaints and questioned its findings.67

Despite the polemics it sparked, the survey laid bare the fact that the great majority of the people interviewed (over 80%) hardly ever used community facilities and welfare services such as day nurseries, kindergartens, elderly citizens’ clubs, home help services, meals on wheels, child endowment, sickness benefits, unemployment benefits, maternity allowance benefits, mental health services, legal services, child welfare or youth clubs. While more than half did not feel the need to use such services or claim such benefits, 20% were not aware of their existence and 10% failed to use them because of the language barrier or because they “found officials to be rude” (Storer 1979: 300). Many wished to be better informed (in Italian) and better represented (by a local Italian-run organisation lobbying for their rights and embodying their views).

Cathy Angelone and Ignazio Salemi recalled that up until then many migrants simply thought they were not entitled to basic rights:

*Angalone:* Up until now the word “rights” didn’t exist. For example, as an Italian or Greek immigrant it’s not like I could come to you as in my boss and say, “This is my right …”, but rather “Could you please …”

*Salemi:* You’d get to your last week of work prior to becoming eligible for benefits and they’d fire you so they didn’t have to give it to you.

*Angalone:* He’s referring to the fact that after having worked in a factory for fifteen years you were eligible for six months’ paid leave.

*Salemi:* … Not only that, but even your pension and entitlements too. It was quite common to be dismissed two weeks before your contract expired which meant you lost all your entitlements. It was happening everywhere. Do you know how hard we fought to bring about change? Even the Australian unions didn’t pay much attention to it.

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Angelone: They didn’t care too much. The question of entitlements didn’t just concern the workers, but also the pensioners, the unemployed, those on sick leave and so on. It was a matter of respect. Let’s say that I know I am entitled to receive my cheque every two weeks but it doesn’t arrive. So I come to you and I ask, “Tell me what I have to do to get my payment”, or, “Look, I’m in a bit of a situation at the moment and I’ve heard that there’s this allowance that I am entitled to, how do I get it?” This is what we were dealing with.68

With a federal Labor government in office from December 1972, there was “a shift in social welfare thinking from a perception of welfare benefits and services as privileges, to a recognition that people had social rights” (Sandford 1977: v). Ethnic rights activists successfully lobbied the Minister for Social Security, Bill Hayden, to have one of their central policies included in the government’s agenda: “the establishment of welfare rights workers to inform ethnic communities of their rights and organise pressure groups to pursue those rights” (Lopez 2000: 267).

By 1974, a Welfare Rights Officer Program was articulated and ready for implementation. FILEF was amongst five Victorian recipient organisations of the program, each granted $10,000 for twelve months. It was a pioneering program in which “the welfare rights workers became involved in a broad range of activities and new activities” (Sandford 1977: 3). FILEF opened a welfare office at its Coburg premises in November 1974 and employed Cathy Angelone as welfare rights officer.69

Migrants of all nationalities came in significant numbers from the surrounding areas to the office, as Devva Kasnitz, an American student who volunteered with FILEF, recalls.70 In 1975 alone it dealt with more than 2,000 cases. While it was not the only organisation involved in social welfare assistance for Italians (COASIT had been operating since 1967), FILEF was probably one of the few whose welfare activities formed an integral part of its general political activities,71 and this caused some friction with the Department of Social Security. For Angelone, there were conceptual differences between FILEF and the department:

Perhaps the major obstacle confronted by this program was that of the differing concepts of welfare rights held by our organisation and the Department. The major principle or concept from which we direct our activities is that people have to acquire total consciousness of all their legal rights. The Department however, directs its activities from the point of view of entitlements, attempting at times to limit what is a right (Angelone 1977: 64).

The department then re-allocated the FILEF funding to another organisation from 1977 onwards. This did not mark, however, the demise of the FILEF welfare services which received a $5,000 grant from the Social Security Department in July 1976 and a $3,000 grant-in-aid from the Fitzroy City Council to open a welfare office at the Social Planning Office in Fitzroy in February 1977.

While the progressive atmosphere brought about by the Whitlam government considerably aided FILEF’s activities (Halevi 1989: 225), it also brought FILEF closer to the ALP. FILEF after all embodied all the characteristics of a pro-Labor organisation. The then working-class suburb of Coburg, where its welfare office was later located, was a long-standing ALP
stronghold. It had a high migrant concentration, largely comprised of Italians, most of whom were believed to be Labor sympathisers.

Under Labor, FILEF secured funding as well as gained public legitimacy. When FILEF Melbourne was established, Sgrò quickly sought to align it with the ALP. Given its close connection with the PCI, this avoided any potentially damaging actions which would have led to blacklisting by the Labor Party. On the other hand, the Labor Party found in FILEF an organisation with a significant influence among its Italian constituency, and with a potentially high degree of consensus that had only been achieved by the extra-party Club Italo-Australiano del Lavoro in the early 1960s. Party leaders and Labor ministers used FILEF as a platform for a better delivery of their policies, for instance, the bilingual leaflet of the public speech on Labor’s health and welfare policy delivered by Hayden at Fitzroy Town Hall on 1 May 1974 was printed and distributed by FILEF among Italian workers.72

Yet it was during elections that the ties between FILEF and the ALP predictably tightened. In federal campaigns, Nuovo Paese published extensively articles and advertisements supporting Labor and Labor candidates.73 For the May 1974 and December 1975 elections, FILEF was part of an effective Italian-run, pro-Labor propaganda machine that set up ad hoc committees. In April 1974, FILEF, along with the Lega Italo-Australiana (LIA) and a group of Italian migrant workers, established the Italian Committee for the Federal ALP Government, with the aim of supporting the ALP in the run-up to the next election. The Minister for the Australian Capital Territory and federal member for Wills, Gordon Bryant, was coordinator of the committee’s activities. A few weeks before the 1974 election, FILEF and the LIA also became members of another pro-Labor committee: the Italian Electoral Committee for the Re-election of the Labor Government, which was based in both Coburg and Brunswick, that is, within the Wills electorate. Once again, Bryant was secretary and in charge of coordinating the initiative to be undertaken during the election campaign.74

Bryant was re-elected with an absolute majority of 61%, while the Labor Party increased its votes by 11% in Victoria. A letter sent by Whitlam to FILEF thanked them for their support:

I am profoundly encouraged by the support we received from the Italian community during the election and am grateful for the efforts of you and your members on the Government’s behalf. My colleagues and I fully share the aims and objectives of FILEF as you have outlined them to me.

In November 1975, FILEF showed its solidarity against the dismissal of the Whitlam government and support for the following campaign. It also set up an Italian Electoral Committee–ALP which organised meetings with Italian-speaking ALP sympathisers and members75 and printed and distributed several bilingual leaflets, as well as holding public meetings with local and national Labor politicians.

The link between FILEF and the ALP was particularly fostered by FILEF’s secretary Giovanni Sgrò, himself a local Labor activist. He became instrumental in the relationship between the two organisations at a time when post-war migrants increasingly played a part in the ALP in Victoria. The figure of Sgrò embodied the quintessential politically ambitious and successful migrant of the 1970s who managed unlike few others to climb the ladder of local politics from branch ranks to state parliament, reconciling activism for his “homeland group”
with allegiance to the ALP (Allan 1978: 21-2). Sgrò, of peasant background, started his political militancy almost by accident during the 1952 Bonegilla upheaval. There he began to form a class-conscious view of life and “to understand that many politicians and governments treat people as if they are nothing, especially if those people are immigrants” (Sgrò 2000: 43).

Having established himself in Melbourne as a painter he became a member of the CPA-influenced Painters Union. In 1954, he joined the CPA, but felt he could contribute more to the Australian labour movement by joining the ALP, which he did in 1958. The event that triggered his change from Communist Party to Labor Party was his close friendship with Gordon Bryant, who took to heart Sgrò’s long-standing case of denied citizenship (Sgrò 2000: 49).

Sgrò was the first Italian-born member of the ALP Coburg branch and as he recalled in his memoirs was “warmly welcomed by the Martins, McNoltys, Browns, Unmacks and Coxes, all of whom were active in Coburg affairs” (Sgrò 2000: 49). In the 1960s, he “became well known as a passionate and tireless campaigner on issues like the opposition to the Vietnam War” (Lopez 2000: 148). He was by then married to Labor activist Anne Foster and frequently opened his house to meetings and fundraising activities. By the early 1970s, Sgrò was a delegate to the Labor Party state conference and president of the Coburg branch.

With Labor in office, Sgrò began lobbying for the creation of local ethnic branches in the party structure “where each ethnic group could speak its own language” (Sgrò 2000: 69), in order to tap the potential of a wider migrant party membership. Around this time, the Victorian ALP underwent a significant change of attitude towards post-war migrant participation in the party, shifting from being overtly hostile to increasingly tolerant. The turning point in Labor’s stance, as stressed by Allan (1978: 24), is represented by the formation of ethnic branches in inner Melbourne, such as the Italian-speaking Croxton branch and the Greek-speaking Westgarth branch: “three developments made their existence viable. These are the federal intervention with the Victorian ALP in 1970, the decline in anti-migrant prejudice amongst ALP members, and the opening of the municipal franchise to non-naturalised migrants in Victoria in 1974.”

With the election of the Whitlam government, Sgrò was eventually granted citizenship. During the ceremony the Minister for Immigration, Al Grassby, and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Gordon Bryant, congratulated him personally. As secretary of FILEF, he continued his activism. In September 1974, he and June English, principal of Brunswick Girls High School, disrupted the opening of the Victorian parliament by unfurling a banner to protest against the lack of facilities in schools with a high percentage of migrant students. In March 1977 he won preselection for the safe Labor seat of Melbourne North in the Legislative Council province. This marked the high point of his and FILEF’s success in lobbying in mainstream politics. He made his maiden speech partly in Italian to prove that Australia was indeed a multicultural society.  

NOTES

1. According to Carli (1982: 12), Italia Libera was renamed the Italo-Australian League. Other sources (such as Lever-Tracy and Quinlan 1988: 153; Venturini 2007: 770) refer to it as the Italo-Australian Club.

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2. Several hundred Italians joined the CIAL, of whom only a handful later joined the ALP (Carli 1982: 16).

3. However, many Italians in Fitzroy were not naturalised, and thus could not vote (Jupp 1966: 94).

4. The Sino-Soviet dispute ended the subordination of all the Communist Parties outside of the USSR to the aim of building and defending socialism. As soon as “it became apparent that it was equally possible to ‘build socialism’ in China, Italy or Britain … in the early 1950s all the communist parties adopted the ‘Our-land Road to Socialism’ as their national program” (Blunden 1993).

5. The 1956 Khrushchev revelations of Stalin’s crimes sparked off an ideological dispute between the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union and China over which was most faithfully interpreting Marxist-Leninist principles. The Chinese party accused the Soviet party of “revisionism” of the original communist doctrine, while the former blamed the latter for fomenting a split in the international communist movement. The dispute culminated in 1960 with a split which saw the establishment of Peking as a second “Rome” vying with the Muscovite “Rome” as the true centre of authority for the movement (Davidson 1969: 147).


8. D. Novelli, ‘Nota per ufficio di segreteria (Pecchioli) – Viaggio in Australia’, Turin, 6 Sept. 1971, FIG, APC, mf. 162, ff. 118–23. Original text: “Sin dalla prima sera che sono giunto a Sydney ho avuto contatti con un gruppo di compagni italiani emigrati in Australia convocati presso la sede del PC Australiano dal compagno Palmada (responsabile del lavoro verso gli emigrati di ogni paese). Dalle prime battute mi sono reso conto che non c‘era una atmosfera cordiale tra i nostri compagni e quelli australiani a causa delle divisioni interne del PC australiano, soprattutto vi era molta diffidenza per ciò che era accaduto nel passato. I nostri compagni lamentavano di non essere stati aiutati quando venne decisa la pubblicazione del giornale ‘nuovo paese’ e poi ‘nuova era’; non solo, ma secondo alcuni giudizi a mio avviso un po‘ troppo severi, il PCA avrebbe avuto timore di una organizzazione autonoma deiunisti italiani. Ho discusso a lungo con i compagni italiani per chiarire con loro le varie divergenze invitandoli a superare certi contrasti determinati dalle posizioni un po‘ rigide assunte nel passato dai dirigenti del PC australiano. Alcuni nostri compagni sono in forte polemica con le posizioni del PCA in merito ai fatti della Cecoslovacchia non perché non condividano la posizione assunta (analoga alla nostra) in merito all’intervento della Cecoslovacchia ma perché non si spiegano, giustamente, certe forme esasperate di antisovietismo.”

9. Novelli advised the party headquarters in Rome that he would regularly deliver the party’s press statements to the migrants.


11. Original text: “Le condizioni di vita dei nostri connazionali, tranne che per una minoranza, (coloro che sono emigrati prima della seconda guerra mondiale o negli anni ’47-1955) non sono molto buone: possono effettuare dei risparmi a costo di grandi sacrifici, (doppio lavoro, straordinari a non finire ecc.).”

12. Original text: “I problemi più urgenti da affrontare in sede politica in Italia riguardano: 1°) Il diritto a trasferire la pensione in Italia oggi non concesso; 2°) riconoscimento delle qualifiche professionali; 3°) il problema delle abitazioni; 4°) l’istruzione per i figli; 5°) l’assistenza malattie; 6°) il costo dei viaggi per ritornare in Italia anche solo per una visita; 7°) le informazioni che forniscono gli uffici del lavoro in Italia non corrispondenti a verità; 8°) l’atteggiamento delle autorità consulari italiane in Australia. Su queste questioni mi sono impegnato in tutti gli incontri che ho avuto con le varie comunità italiane a Sydney, Wollongong, Newcastle, Melbourne, Darwin ecc. di fare presentare dal nostro gruppo parlamentare una interpellanza perché siano discusse dal Governo Italiano con il Governo Australiano le condizioni di vita dei nostri emigrati.”

13. Original text: “Prima fra tutte la questione delle pensioni: se riuscissimo a strappare qualche cosa su questo punto sarebbe un successo enorme! Non entro nei dettagli sulle condizioni di vita degli ultimi arrivati, soprattutto i giovani che vivono nei campi … scriverò sull’ Unità tutto, però come partito dobbiamo fare una grande azione sul piano politico, di denuncia, promuovendo anche una azione dei sindacati. A questo proposito tra le proposte formulate vi è quella di avere un compagno (comunista!) in Australia che faccia ufficialmente il lavoro sindacale … Su questo non dobbiamo dormire: un compagno sveglio, nel giro di pochi mesi può fare un lavoro gigantesco: c’è solo da raccogliere, non esagero, e non peccare di facile ottimismo.”
gli spagnoli appena hanno saputo di questa iniziativa hanno chiesto di poter partecipare e di fare i corsi assieme.

tenuto conto delle grandi richieste di viaggi per l’Italia che ogni mese vengono effettuate da italiani che rientrano per un mese di vacanza. I compagni Australiani vedono molto bene questa iniziativa che potrebbe rendere quattrini.

D. Novelli, ‘Lettera a Pecchioli e p.c alla Commissione Emigrazione (Gallo) e Commissione Esteri (Segre)’, [Nov.] 1971, FIG, APC, mf. 162, f. 124. Original text: ‘troppo poco ideologizzat[e], non ben definit[e] sul piano politico.’


That is, to implement a policy of lobbying for the industrial demands of the Italians by organising a new left-wing front which included Catholic forces.

S. Palazzolo, ‘Rapporto del Compagno Segretario della Federazione del PCI (Australia)’, Sydney, 30 July 1972, FIG, APC, mf. 53, ff. 1078-81.


Original text: ‘Il problema essenziale è che la maggior parte di questi dirigenti vivono nel passato, non sono capaci di vedere le novità e sono anche autoritari nel loro atteggiamento verso i compagni e particolarmente verso i giovani che sono entrati nel movimento (principialmente, anche se non tutti, attraverso il nostro partito). Sono queste giovani forze che costituiscono la speranza del futuro.’


Before the collapse of communism, the PCI broadcast radio programs in the Italian language from Eastern European countries, such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The purpose was to broadcast counter-propaganda to Italians, especially to those in neighbouring West Germany.

Original text: ‘A Melbourne vi è stata una vera e propria partecipazione degli immigrati, regolarmente delegati da fabbriche e comunità, e assai larga è stata la partecipazione dal basso al dibattito; a Sydney è stata invece una Conferenza sull’Emigrazione con relazioni e discorsi dall’alto e una scarsa partecipazione del mondo dell’emigrazione vero e proprio. La rappresentanza italiana, comunque, è stata la più numerosa.’


Original text: ‘polemiche sterili fra filosovietismo, filomoaoismo, troskismo, ecc. che abbondano in tutti i vari schieramenti della sinistra australiana.’


Cristofaro and De Angelis had also been founding members of Italia Libera, and Cristofaro alongside Omero Schiassi (founding member and chairperson of Italia Libera) of an Italian anti-fascist Movement in 1942. See Venturini (2007: 707-8); Emilio Deleidi, interview, 23 May 2002, Fawkner, Vic., Australia; and ‘Draft of the minutes of the LIA’s executive committee elections’, circa 1963, courtesy of the Emilio Deleidi Private Collection.

For instance, in June 1959 the LIA formed an assistance committee in solidarity with the unionised Italian-born seamen on strike, and during the economic crisis of 1961 it formed another assistance committee in favour of unemployed Italians. See ‘Lega Italo-Australiana’, Il Nuovo Paese, April 1963.

From the LIA program printed on the inside of membership tickets, courtesy of the Emilio Deleidi Private Collection.

Il Nuovo Paese has escaped the notice of nearly all historians. Only Gilson and Zubrzycki (1967: 203) list it in their bibliography.

Emilio Deleidi, interview, 23 May 2002, Fawkner, Vic., Australia.


s'erano allontanati

posizione che eravamo era perché non avevamo le capacità intellettuali e le risorse umane. Quei pochi che avevamo un grande intellettuale, non avevano la capacità di grandi riflessioni. La ragione perché nella sinistra eravamo nella sentivamo questa lacuna. Quei pochi che avevamo come Deleidi, che scrive anche un po' di italiano, non è che avevano ben preparate a livello intellettuale, nemmeno degli intellettuali organici dal punto di vista gramsciano. E allora italiano è autodidatta, leggendo sui libri, sulla rivista, sul giornale. Noi non avevamo mai un gruppo di persone italiane, ancora oggi ho delle inibizioni, delle difficoltà, perché la mia istruzione non è stata fatta in Italia. Tutto il mio
1978. Original text: 

61. U. Martinengo, 'Relazione', Prima Conferenza Stampa e Propaganda del PCI in Australia, 28 June
Paese', paper no. 3 delivered at first FILEF national congress, Oct. 1977, FMA.

60. U. Martinengo, 'Caratteristiche e funzioni della stampa italiana in Australia – il ruolo di Nuovo


58. According to Wales (1988: 153), Nuovo Paese dedicated 46.8%, 19.2% and 15.4% respectively to Australian, Italian and international news coverage. Il Globo on the other hand allocated for the same type of news only 8.3%, 16.7% and 6.3% of coverage. Sport and local migrant clubs news took up 1.9% and 3.8% of coverage in Nuovo Paese and 23.8% and 11.9% in Il Globo.


56. ‘Australia is also part of the world’, Nuovo Paese, 1 May 1974.


4. Original text: “Sia a Melbourne che a Sydney i compagni hanno posto la necessità di un giornale in italiano che si differenzia da quelli esistenti attualmente in Australia e che sia oltre che uno strumento di propaganda anche uno strumento di organizzazione. Tale esigenza è abbastanza sentita anche dai compagni australiani ed è stata recepita in modo concreto soprattutto dai compagni australiani di Melbourne i quali, attraverso un sindacato abbastanza grosso, quello dei metallurgici, hanno anche assunto impegni per un finanziamento che copra le spese di stampa di un quindicinale a quattro pagine per una tiratura di diecimila copie, finanziamento inteso come prepagamento di 5 e 6 mila copie del giornale stesso che dovrebbero essere distribuite fra gli operai italiani iscritti al sindacato che si è assunto l’impegno. Resta da costruire, a Melbourne e nel resto dell’Australia, la rete di ‘amici’ per la distribuzione e la vendita delle copie restanti e per lo sviluppo del giornale in modo da assicurare una crescita sia in relazione alla tiratura, che al numero delle pagine e alla frequenza in uscita. Le premesse ci sono ma è evidente che un obiettivo di questo genere richiede un intenso lavoro.”

52. Alongside the AMWU, the Miscellaneous Workers Union, Painters Union, Clothing Trades Union and Meat Workers Union pledged to support the publication of Nuovo Paese and to buy it in bulk for their Italian-language members.


Io appena arrivato in Australia avevo cominciato a pensare a queste cose e un giorno mi è venuto a trovare – e non era neanche il mio indirizzo, io ero ospite – un gruppo di persone, di veneti di Mildura, insieme ad certo colonnello Simoni … Questi vennero da me: ‘Sai, noi abbiamo sentito dire che è uno che vuole fare un giornale dei lavoratori per il partito laburista … Noi abbiamo fatto una sottoscrizione fra noi e l’abbiamo portata.’ Da Mildura venire a Melbourne a cercarmi, insomma, con 380 dollari che allora non erano uno scherzo, mi ricordo che l’aero-Melbourne-Sydney erano 30 dollari. Era parecchio per quei tempi.”


72. ‘Bilingual leaflet on Labor’s Health and Welfare Policy Speech delivered by the Minister for Social Security Bill Hayden at the Fitzroy Town Hall on 1 May (1974)’, FMA.


74. ‘Comitato italiano per il governo laburista’, Nuovo Paese, 1 May 1974.

75. C. La Marchesina (secretary, ALP-Italian Electoral Committee), ‘Letter to members’, 3 Dec. 1975, FMA.

76. “Now, with your permission, Mr President, I will speak in Italian. It is easy for me because it is my mother tongue. Signor Presidente, sono passati tre anni da quando sono stato qui, in questa aula, assieme ad una donna coraggiosa, la signora June Engish, preside, allora, della Brunswick Girls High School. Noi due venimmo qui per attirare l’attenzione del governo sul fatto che a Brunswick East bisognava disperatamente costruire una nuova scuola. Quel giorno fui sacciato da questa aula dalla polizia e dalle guardie e venni rinchiuso in una cella sotto questo Palazzo. Se qualcuno mi avesse detto, quella volta, che un giorno io avrei parlato in questa aula in veste di membro parlamentare, io non ci avrei creduto. L’azione mia di tre anni, credo tutti ora, che fosse giusta per il bene dei bambini di Brunswick: infatti il governo poi fu d’accordo a stanziare dei fondi per un programma di ricostruzione a Brunswick East. Comunque, ora io sono un membro di questo parlamento e intendo continuare ad aiutare i miei elettori quanto meglio posso, usando la mia posizione di parlamentare a questo fine. The reason I have spoken in Italian is to prove to you, Mr President, and to all honorable members, that this is a multi-cultural society.” See <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/re-member/bioregspeechtxt.cfm?mid=1427&recno=149>.
5

Left-wing Italian Activism Under Threat

FILEF – a threat to conservatives

FILEF aimed to jolt the political consciousness of Italian migrants in Australia into “a more advanced stage of political awareness” (Cresciani 1988b: 281). A typical example of this was the pressure exerted on Italian consulates to abide by 1967 legislation which aimed for a greater level of participation by migrants in the decision-making processes concerning the funding by the Italian government of education and welfare activities. In the same way, FILEF exerted pressure in institutions within and beyond the Italian-Australian community for the “fostering of a ‘cultural conscience’ among Italian workers” (Cresciani 1988b: 281). For this reason, it developed its own cultural groups which included courses on Italian language, history, political and social movements, economics, organisation of concerts, of music and theatre groups, showing of films and so on.

At the same time, FILEF’s activism was challenging the authority of some well-established institutions within the Italian-Australian community such as the welfare agency COASIT and the conservative newspaper Il Globo. COASIT was thus far “the Italian welfare voice” (Jakubowicz et al. 1984: 62), the institutional response of the Italian government to migrants’ welfare needs. The allocation to FILEF of a Welfare Rights Officer Program grant in 1974 and the establishment of a welfare office created “a major crisis” for COASIT (Jakubowicz et al. 1984: 63) and produced a more-or-less declared rivalry between the two, although according to Umberto Martinengo, who a few years after he worked for FILEF’s Nuovo Paese moved to COASIT as coordinator of education services, such rivalry was, in reality, nothing but an occasional forced controversy:

I remember an issue that they wanted to beat up … Because if, well, if there’s FILEF, which is left-wing, then there must be a right-wing opposition – if there’s Coppi there must also be Bartali. So, let’s say FILEF is left-wing and COASIT is right-wing and closer to the conservative parties. There was a bit of banter but nothing out of the ordinary.
Although it did not aim to challenge *Il Globo* as a mass-selling newspaper, FILEF’s *Nuovo Paese* disputed the conservative values which it expressed (Carli 1982: 27-31). *Il Globo*, through the editorial commentary of its long-standing editor in chief Nino Randazzo, expressed openly its anti-communist stance (Carli 2009: 106-8).

Italian and Australian conservative quarters were neither sympathetic to FILEF’s way of demanding reform, nor to the changes it brought about. They saw in FILEF’s willingness to jolt the political and cultural consciousness of Italian migrants the opportunity for the Italian-Australian Left, that is, the PCI, to become an influential pressure group in close contact with the trade unions and the Labor Party. FILEF was “largely a PCI influenced organisation” (Carli 1982: 22) or, as explained by Caputo, an *organizzazione di massa allargata* (enlarged mass organisation) – an organisation whose task it was to gather support among communists and non-communists. To convey the idea that FILEF was an organisation open to people of various ideological creeds and political backgrounds, its president and secretary were usually not PCI members. In Rome, its president was Carlo Levi who although of left-wing background was not a PCI member; in Melbourne, FILEF’s secretary and president were both ALP members, Sgrò and Frattali.

The ‘Italian communists move in’ incident of 1975 alongside other incidents such as the re-allocation of FILEF’s Welfare Rights Officer grant in 1976 and the deportation of Salemi in 1977 aimed to undermine FILEF’s credibility, mounting considerable pressure on its functionality.

### ‘Italian communists move in’

In April 1975, Michael MacKellar, federal Liberal opposition spokesman on immigration, expressed his loathing for the FILEF-PCI connection during a meeting with George Papadopoulos and Spiro Moraitis of the Australian Greek Welfare Society, a migrant organisation similar to FILEF which had established contact with both major political parties (Lopez 2000: 378, 404). Moraitis noted in his journal a comment by MacKellar which is interesting to read given what would unfold soon after: “[MacKellar] will attack FILEF because one of the FILEF social workers publicly stated (to an Italian audience) that FILEF was committed to the Communist Party!! Very wrong for a voluntary agency to attach itself to a political party” (Lopez 2000: 378).

On 26 April 1975, the *Age* published a front-page article by Vincent Basile titled ‘Italian communists move in’. The article claimed that FILEF was sponsored by the PCI-affiliated *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* and was allegedly attempting to gain an “all-out bid for political and social control of Melbourne’s 250,000-strong Italian community”. These were sensational allegations, presented in a fashion and at a time that seems to have been well chosen by the *Age* editor. Besides being published on a Saturday, the article appeared at a time which, at an international level, coincided with the final phase of the Vietnam War: the North Vietnamese communist armed forces were pushing the US-led allied troops south. Almost every day in April 1975, the paper’s headlines were dedicated, and it could not be otherwise, to the war events. Given the frantic succession of events, one can reasonably infer that readers’
minds would have become conditioned to expect certain types of headlines which would emphasise the southward advance of the enemy troops.

A few days before the capitulation by the USA and its allies in early May, the *Age* published Basile’s article whose title bore a war-like tone that was reminiscent of the ongoing war in far-off Vietnam. By an association of ideas, it was hard to miss the connection between the communists in Vietnam and the Italian communists in Australia. The result was a transfer of the threat perception from the one to the other, with no apparent loss of intensity. Communists were perceived to be dangerous in Australia as well as in Vietnam. It seems unlikely that the editor of the *Age* was unaware of the effects of the timing of the article.

The article contained other elements that suggested a disproportionate and twisted representation of FILEF. A large, central photo picturing Salemi in a defiant pose conveyed an exaggerated feeling of menace (yet dryly contrasted by the plain modesty of the FILEF office in the background), while a cartoon at the bottom of the article ridiculed the presence of a “godfather from Moscow”.

Despite the headlines, the article was not particularly anti-communist. It acknowledged FILEF’s support for the 1974 Migrant Action Education Conference and 1975 establishment of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria and stressed that FILEF had “successfully tackled many migrant problems which had previously been largely ignored by other Italian organisations”. Other facts such as the findings of the FILEF-FEC social survey, the figure of Salemi and FILEF’s relationship with the federal Labor government from which it received a $10,000 grant under the Welfare Rights Officer Program were also mentioned.

Described with the attributes of a seasoned PCI official “heading two full-time workers and scores of volunteers”, Salemi was presented as the linchpin within FILEF. His comments on the upsurge – sparked by FILEF – of political activity in the Italian-Australian community encapsulated FILEF’s class-based view:

So far nothing has been done either by Australian or Italian organisations to widen migrant workers’ cultural and political knowledge that they can become active members of the community. In fact this lack of activity is a widespread and quiet kind of political terrorism. The conservative and capitalist classes have always made sure that migrants, through their spasmodic and desperate search for money and material welfare, have been kept in isolation and prevented from full and active participation in the affairs of the country.

The *Age*’s allegations were embarrassing for FILEF, and Sgrò was forced to make media appearances to contain the damage (Lopez 2000: 403-4). In the weekend of the publication of Basile’s article, Sgrò printed and distributed 20,000 leaflets “to explain and re-state FILEF’s function”. He stressed in the strongest possible terms that FILEF was not wishing to take control of the country, but “to inform people of their rights, and enable them to make up their own minds politically”. Above all, he downplayed Salemi’s role:

As far as Mr Salemi is concerned: no, he is not the leader of the organisation here. The elected committee runs FILEF … He is a communist, his job here is purely to carry out the work of the Committee. Every member of FILEF has the right to belong
to whichever political party he or she chooses, without any interference … No. The Italian Communists will not “move in” in Australia. But members of FILEF will continue with the good work that they have started, and will urge migrants to participate, socially and politically, in life in Australia.136

The allegations took by surprise Al Grassby, now the federal government’s advisor on community relations and a close friend of Sgro. Interviewed by the Age, he sensibly denied having been aware of any ‘red’ connections of FILEF: “My only contacts have been with the secretary of FILEF (Mr G. Sgro), who is a member of the Labor Party. My job is not to find out political affiliations of migrant organisations … If this is an attempt to bring Italian politics here, it must certainly be regretted and deplored.”137 The Minister for Social Security, Bill Hayden, stood by the government’s decision to allocate the $10,000 grant to FILEF: it had “demonstrated a capacity to reach and help a large proportion of Italian and other migrants”, and the grant “merely covered the salary and ancillary expenses of a welfare rights worker to assist migrants with welfare problems”138.

Judging by some letters sent to the Age, Basile’s article sparked concern among FILEF’s supporters, which are worth recalling. Bernie Taft of the CPA complained about the newspaper’s editorial policy and journalistic ethics which had breached the “norms of fair objective reporting”.139 Another letter, which was not published, written by J. K. Foster, a retired teacher who had conducted English classes for adult migrants for seventeen years, commented:

The report on FILEF … was quite an objective, factual report on the work of that organisation. Why did a false impression have to be created by crude, sensational headlines? … As a migrant myself of some fifty years standing, I may justifiably claim to have first hand knowledge of the problems that plague new settlers in this land. For the past twenty-five years there has been no organisation to assist the migrant at the grassroots level with the many problems that confront him from day to day in his new country. And now, from The Age report, this is precisely what FILEF is doing and appears to be doing very well. Why not let them get on with the job? Why raise the communist bogey? I thought we had left this sort of thinking behind us in the Sixties …140

Irritated by the claim that the FILEF-FEC survey was fallacious and carried out in order to please the PCI headquarters in Rome,141 Des Storer wrote a letter to the Age, which was also not published:

In Saturday’s article, you also quoted a Mr Randazzo who claims that the survey which I helped FILEF carry out last year was “an attempt to show Communist party bosses in Italy that their money was being well spent” and went on to say that the results of the survey were false. These assertions are completely wrong and false. The survey was largely organised by myself and I know no Italian politicians; the survey was financed by an independent Trust and I challenge Mr Randazzo to at least read the initial results of the survey before making such ridiculous assertions. The study was an independent survey of a random sample of 400 Italian families to scientifically determine their
social situation and social perceptions. Its results have been initially analysed and unlike Mr Basile in his article states, asked no questions on housing. It did not attempt to compare the position of Italians to other groups in the northern suburbs and cannot, therefore, be seen as “diametrically opposed” to the Abiuso study referred to which compared the situation of a number of different families, including 40 Italian families whose children attended one school in the area.

Some felt pleased with the Age’s allegations and hoped for more action. The right-wing Il Corriere di Settegiorni published a letter from an Italian ex-serviceman who preferred to remain anonymous. This letter could mirror the feeling of a section of the Italian-Australian community which saw organisations such as FILEF as a threat to peace and quiet:

To the Editor,

Why don’t you just say what the Italian communists want here in Australia? Because so many are silent, especially other Italian language papers that are creating such a bad impression, silent against the cockiness of these people that any government worthy of that name should get rid of? … I’ve never heard anyone talk about Italian politics. There have never before been comments about Italian politics, talk about anyone’s past; all those immigrants who come to Australia to create or recreate a new life for themselves, ready to raise their children as citizens of a country that up until recently has been an example of a healthy democracy. If we let them proceed, how will we end up? … With your consent, I’ll tell you [what the communists want]: they want to take away the peace which we’ve enjoyed for years, they want to build barriers between us and as you yourself have rightly commented, they want to order us about. They are jealous of us, of our circumstances as people who have a comfortable life – in all senses of the word. They’re jealous of us who are now wealthy, of those who have the luxury of modern conveniences and well-educated children, of those who have earned respect and made something of themselves. That’s what they are: those old men and women who have been here for years … Even if some things are still acceptable in Italy and there is a thirst for justice, this is caused by the dishonesty and corruption that runs rampant everywhere there. However, here in Australia it’s rare not to have success if you deserve it and put in the work. Communism justifies lack of success and other negative outcomes and what does that have to do with democracy?

Sgrò claimed that the Associazione Liberale Italiana (Italian Liberal Association), an organisation established in Melbourne in early 1975 that grouped a “small but powerful band of Italian businessmen”, might have been behind the attempt to discredit FILEF, and that Basile’s article could also be the result of a personal vendetta by Nino Randazzo: “Back in 1959, Randazzo stood for the DLP in Fitzroy and I played a part in discrediting him for attacking the Liberal government, insinuating that his party identification was less than stable. I don’t think he’s ever forgiven us.”
Local anti-communist hysteria and backlash

The *Age*’s allegations stirred up anti-communist hysteria. Cathy Angelone recalled that immediately after their publication, Jennifer McCallum, president of People Against Communism, organised at least two marches along the streets of Coburg.\(^{145}\) But the most serious incident occurred on the night of 13 May. An arsonist attempted to burn down the FILEF office in Coburg, partially damaging the editorial office of *Nuovo Paese*. For Sgrò, the arson could well have been the direct result of the *Age*’s allegations,\(^ {146}\) carried out by people who thought that FILEF was trying to introduce communism into the local Italian-Australian community. For *Nuovo Paese*, it was a “*provocazione deliberata [della] campagna di odio maccartistico scatenata dalla stampa padronale australiana e italiana*” (provoked by the deliberate hate campaign McCarthy-era style triggered off by the Italian and Australian bosses’ press),\(^ {147}\) a claim that was in turn taken up by the left-wing press in Italy.\(^ {148}\) The campaign against FILEF provoked “a strong sense of indignation and a vast movement of support”: many political and community organisations in Australia and in Italy showed their support and contributed financially to rebuilding the damaged office.\(^ {149}\)

Several of those interviewed for this research had vivid memories of the ‘Italian communists move in’ and arson incidents. Their recollections seem to revive mixed emotions even today. Asked what she remembers about these events, Anne Sgrò answered:

> If I remember the article ‘Italian communists move in’? I can still see the headlines. That weekend we were renovating this tumbledown tiny house that we still go to in Tallangatta in the north-east [of Victoria]. Giovanni used to go up for weekends with the van from work because he and his brother were painting … I had to ring a neighbour and say: “Look, go down and say to Giovanni he should either come home or go into town and buy a copy of the Age and have a look.” That was just astonishing. I think that Australians to a certain extent had got over the fear of the Yellow Peril, which was the embodiment of the Red Chinese, but I suppose now there isn’t that … but even then, you know, communism was something that was beyond the pale. People didn’t really admit to being communist activists on the whole. There was a quite strong anti-communist feeling.\(^ {150}\)

For Stefano de Pieri, the incident was quite frightening for FILEF. Implicitly, it compromised Salemi’s residence status, given that he held a temporary entry permit:

> Do I remember the article by Vince Basile? The first page of the Age … There weren’t many newspapers and other sources of news around in those days. There was the Sun in the morning and the Herald in the evening. Saturday morning you used to see this Italian guy leaning menacingly against this gate with “Italian communists move in”. He was a bit frightening … I remember that morning I was still with Bill and Lorna [Hannan]. They called me and said, “Come and take a look at this.” I got dressed, took the train and headed straight for Munro Street. I found a lot of people who were coming, blaspheming and swearing. The article was definitely not coincidence. Someone in the Italian community definitely had something to do with it, maybe,
who knows, the DLP said to Vince: “Do an article about that.” Vince used to boast to me all the time saying, “I gave you more publicity than you could possibly imagine. I made you famous.” But at the same time, he put Salemi in the eye of the storm as he was on a temporary visa. Personally, I think it was a set-up. Maybe the article wasn’t even meant for that purpose, maybe it was made for an inside page and some editor has said, “What a scoop! This is front page material, a lead story.”

For Cathy Angelone, the incident, despite its damaging headlines, projected FILEF into the national spotlight, enjoying mainstream media coverage and community support:

To tell you the truth, the discussion about the article and the fire didn’t really damage FILEF, quite the contrary because FILEF was talked about so much on the television and the radio, everyone was curious, asking “What’s this ‘Italian communists move in’ business? What is this new phenomenon? What is it? Have the communists arrived? We knew nothing about it.” And they were all coming, asking us to explain, trying to make things difficult for us.

Nonetheless, Salemi as well as FILEF were now, in de Pieri’s words, “nell’occhio del ciclone” (in the eye of the storm). With the change of government at federal level in December 1975, they suffered two significant setbacks: Salemi was deported, and FILEF had its government funding cut.

On 17 August 1976, the Department for Social Security informed FILEF, one of the five recipient organisations of the Welfare Rights Officer Program, that its funding would be cut as of 1 January 1977 and re-allocated to a lone parent group, Parents Without Partners. This was an unexpected about-turn by the department. Only a month earlier, FILEF had received a one-off grant of $5,000 from the Minister for Social Security, Senator Margaret Guilfoyle, who personally visited the office. The department justified its action on two bases: that there were two Italian-run organisations, FILEF and COASIT, that had received funding under the program, and that FILEF was located close to a similar organisation, the North-west One-stop Welfare (NOW) Centre (Sandford 1977:

Welfare rights organisations, including the NOW Centre, as well as community groups expressed concern about the re-allocation of FILEF’s grant, and found the reasons given by the department contradictory and inconsistent (Sandford 1977: 6). During a parliamentary debate, Guilfoyle denied that there was any link between the ongoing Salemi affair, the allegations published by the Age and her decision to terminate FILEF’s funding (Sandford 1977: 118). This represented a serious financial setback for FILEF which had relied on government funding to develop and further its activities.

NOTES

1. In Australia, the implementation of this legislation was delayed for more than a decade. See R. Licata, ‘Comitato unitario e comitati consolari’, paper no. 2 delivered at first FILEF national congress, Oct. 1977, FMA.
2. ‘FILEF’s 10 years of activities’, Nuovo Paese, [1982].
5. For instance, ‘Panic spreads as communist offensive pushes deeper into South, another Viet city in peril’, Age, 1 April 1975; ‘Army rules in Phnom Penh’, Age, 14 April 1975; ’Australia gets second warning: fly out while there’s a chance, Saigon awaits the big push’, Age, 19 April 1975.
7. G. Sgrò, ‘Some answers to The Age article 26-4-1975, Italian communists move in’, undated leaflet, courtesy of the Joe Caputo Private Collection.
9. ‘Hayden backs FILEF’s aid’, Age [April/May 1975].
12. Basile’s article claimed that the findings of the FILEF-FEC social survey were false and diametrically opposite to those of a survey carried out at approximately the same time by Joe Abiuso, an Italian-born teacher at La Trobe University. Quoting Il Globo editor Nino Randazzo, it said the survey “was an attempt to ‘show the communist party bosses in Italy that their money is being well spent’.”
17. ‘Fire was lit deliberately, says FILEF secretary’, Age, 15 May 1975.
pauna eh … Mi ricordo quella mattina io stavo ancora con Bill e Lorna. Mi hanno chiamato e mi dicono: ‘Come and have a look at this.’ Mi vestii, presi il treno e andai subito su a Munro Street. Beh, lì c’era tutto un subbuglio di gente che andava e che veniva, che porconava qua e là. E lì sicuramente l’articolo non nacque a caso, lì sicuramente qualcuno nell’ambiente italiano, magari DLP, chissà disse a Vince: ‘Và a fare un lavoro su di quello’, sicuramente. Vince vanta sempre con me, dice: ‘Vi diedi io più pubblicità che voi mai ve l’eravate immaginat, vi ho fatti famosi’, però mettendo Salemi nell’occhio del ciclone, che aveva appunto un permesso di residenza a termine. Secondo me era un set up. Forse l’articolo non era nemmeno fatto per quello scopo, forse era fatto per una pagina interna. E qualche editore ha detto: ‘Che scoop! Questo a dà front page, leading story!’"  
The Short- and Long-Term Consequences of a Controversial Deportation Case: Salemi v MacKellar

Challenging the unchallengeable

In 1976, Salemi was at the centre of a contentious dispute over his amnesty application. It is worth recalling not only as a case study in legal terms but also for the lesser-known short- and long-term consequences it would have for left-wing Italian immigrant activists in Melbourne, above all for those belonging to or sympathising with FILEF. Claiming that he was in the position to fully satisfy the criteria set by the amnesty, Salemi took the matter to the High Court with the full backing of FILEF, like-minded organisations and the Australian Left. Salemi's controversial court action lasted more than eighteen months and resulted in a passionate political campaign. For the government and the conservatives, Salemi was and remained an illegal immigrant who ought to be deported, for the Left he was being unfairly persecuted for his political background and had the right to defend himself before the courts. The Salemi case would put Australia's fair-go policy to the test, when in May 1977 an appeal to the full bench of the High Court split the six judges on the matter.

This was of course not the only controversial case of forced deportation at the time. In *R v MacKellar: ex parte Ratu*, the High Court ruled (five to one) that “the Minister in ordering the deportation of a person who had overstayed a visitor’s visa was not required to observe the principles of natural justice” (McMillan 2002). The cases of Salemi v MacKellar and *R v MacKellar: ex parte Ratu* occurred while hundreds of deportations took place. As well documented by Glenn Nicholls in *Deported: A History of Forced Departures from Australia*, more than 6,200 forced departures were recorded from 1971 to 1981, first and foremost due to breaching of entry visa conditions rather than for ‘poor health’ or ‘criminal offending’, reasons which had featured prominently in the 1950s and early 1960s. The deportation of Salemi and others occurred as “the White Australia Policy was put to rest, [but] alien status lived on quietly
in immigration law”. Eventually, Salemi’s case challenged the Australian government on the question of “what rights overstayers should have in fighting deportation orders” (Nicholls 2007: 103, 114, 116).

Liberal Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs Michael MacKellar outlined the 1976 amnesty¹ for prohibited immigrants who had overstayed their visitors’ visas in Migration Action (the journal of the Ecumenical Migration Centre):

> We believed that a lot of people who are living here in fear of deportation should be given an opportunity to remain in Australia. Of course, this amnesty arrangement will not apply to criminals and other undesirable people, but let me give you my assurance that every application for residence will be looked at with great sympathy (MacKellar 1976: 4).

The aim of this statement and of MacKellar’s four news releases² was to give illegal immigrants the confidence to come forward and legalise their residence status. They supposedly constituted 0.3% (or 35,000 to 45,000) of the overall Australian population. The amnesty came about for interconnected social, political and economic reasons (Storer 1977: 2-3): it mirrored the change of attitude among Australian politicians towards non-English-speaking immigrants who had lobbied hard through welfare agencies and church bodies for the readjustment of the status of illegal immigrants, it was the fulfilment of a specific promise made by the Liberals during the 1975 election campaign, and it had the support of many employers who were concerned about the ongoing shortage of manpower in the mining and manufacturing industries.

However the amnesty was more of a failure than a success, as MacKellar later recognised (Bertelli 1979: 10). Only 8,614 permanent-residence seekers, out of the prospective 35,000 to 45,000, sought to make their stay in Australia legal.³ Ethnic and community organisations complained about the failure of the amnesty and accused the Immigration Department of being un-cooperative, remarking that the period for the amnesty (26 January to 30 April 1976) was too short and that information about it was only through English-speaking media (Storer 1977: 3-4).⁴ A further amnesty, the last one to be offered in Australia, was launched and promoted far more vigorously in 1980, which may partly explain why nearly twice as many people (16,866) came forward compared to four years earlier. Eight out of ten applicants were successful in their bid for permanent residence (Nicholls 2007: 116).

At the time of the 1976 amnesty, Salemi had been a prohibited immigrant since July 1975. He applied under the amnesty but his application was one of the very few rejected by the Immigration Department, and supposedly the only rejection for a person without a criminal record, according to news reports.⁵ Although Salemi satisfied all three criteria – sound character, no criminal record and good health – the department alleged the application was not genuine. The minister argued that Salemi, being a temporary resident who had overstayed his visa, did not fall within the category of overstayed visitors to whom the amnesty offer was being made. In addition, when submitting his application, Salemi had stated to the interviewing officer that he “was not really seeking permanent residence but only wished to extend his temporary stay”.⁶ The department thus regarded Salemi’s application as not bona fide and felt that his exclusion from the amnesty was warranted. Under section 18 of the Immigration Act (1958),

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he was and remained a prohibited immigrant, liable to be arrested, imprisoned and deported at any time by ministerial fiat.

Salemi took the matter to the High Court and claimed that he was in a position to fully satisfy the amnesty criteria as stated by the news releases, particularly those of 27 January and 9 April which extended the offer to illegal immigrants other than overstayed visitors. Given that he belonged to the class of persons to whom the offer was made, he argued that he was not an “alien” to whom the minister’s deportation powers could be applied. The minister’s four news releases conveyed a determination to grant entry permits of indefinite duration and had created in him a legitimate expectation of being granted a residence permit.

Shadow Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs Ted Innes followed the developments of the Salemi case from the very beginning to the very end. To Innes, the Italian-born activist was “a skilled and valuable community worker” whose work for FILEF had been “absolutely essential”; he was unfairly refused amnesty “on extremely technical grounds” and without consideration of his merits. Innes’ stance epitomised the solidarity displayed by those sections of the Australian Left that were close to FILEF but, contrary to what one might have expected, the Immigration Department under the Whitlam government had not backed Salemi’s repeated requests to stay in Australia.

Salemi’s troubled relationship with the department had started in fact well before April 1976. The department first showed concern about his residence status when requests to extend his stay were made on his behalf in mid-1974. Archival data has revealed a rather detectable “unwillingness” of Labor Ministers for Immigration Clyde Cameron and James McClelland to extend Salemi’s residence permit after he returned to Australia with a six-month visitor’s visa in March 1974, following his participation in October 1973 in the first Migrant Workers Conferences in Melbourne and Sydney. Correspondence between the Immigration Department and FILEF and influential left-wing groups who were calling for Salemi to be allowed to stay in the country for longer shows reluctance by the department to settle the visa issue.

As early as June 1974, the Immigration Department received requests to turn Salemi’s short stay in Australia into a long-term one, for example Gordon Bryant inquired about the possibilities for a new visa, preferably valid for twelve to 24 months, “to enable him to carry on the intense activity in support of FILEF”. In spite of Bryant’s intervention, Salemi’s visa was not renewed. Bound for Rome to visit his family for a month, Salemi left Australia in early August 1974. He applied for a new visa at the Australian migration office in Rome, confident that he would be able to return swiftly to Melbourne, but officials told him that a new visa would not be available for two or three months. Anxious to come back, Salemi hoped to have his return to Australia “expedited” through a new intervention by Bryant.

Foreseeing a deliberate delay by the Australian authorities in processing his visa application, Salemi waited no longer and flew to New Zealand in the hope of reaching Australia. This “trip” to New Zealand proved to be a clever move. At the Australian migration office in Auckland he applied for a visitor’s visa for the purpose of sightseeing. Canberra negotiated Salemi’s return with FILEF and eventually agreed to grant him a nine-month temporary entry, but instead a three-month visit permit was issued in New Zealand. Salemi returned to Australia on 30 October 1974 and received his temporary entry permit “with authority to engage in specified employment” in February 1975.
Salemi’s visa status remained temporary. As the deadline of 30 July approached, he once more faced the dilemma of prolonging his stay. FILEF used its contacts to try and obtain a further extension of Salemi’s visa. A letter to Ted Innes by E. Forbes, assistant secretary of the Victorian branch of the Miscellaneous Workers Union, is another example of the exploration of new means of keeping Salemi in Australia. Forbes invited Innes to probe the possibilities of Salemi’s acceptability as a “migrant” without the necessity of having to return to Italy first, and guaranteed that he would have Salemi take up work more closely associated with the unions. Whether this and similar requests achieved any result is unknown, but no new visa was granted. A letter from Sgrò to Peter Wilenski, General Director of the Immigration Department, some three weeks before Salemi’s entry permit expired, vented all his frustration:

We have met with many obstacles from the Immigration Department. I have written many letters explaining the situation, and have filled the required forms two or three times, with no result. We have made direct representations to the former Minister, Mr Cameron, and have received no reply. Mr Salemi’s future in Australia is uncertain. The expiry date of his present visa is the end of July.

Wilenski’s reply is indicative of how the new requests for an extension of Salemi’s stay in Australia were dealt with: no trace of any applications for an extension of his permit was found in the department’s records, although both offices in Canberra and Melbourne indicated “a certain amount of correspondence” on his previous application. Salemi applied unsuccessfully for a two-year temporary entry permit immediately before his visa ran out, and thereafter became a prohibited immigrant. No action was taken by the Immigration Department against him until April 1976.

Perhaps more controversially than ever before, the legal and political case that followed the rejection of Salemi’s 1976 amnesty application put Australia’s fair-go policy to the test. This is best reflected in the culmination of the case: the evenly divided decision of the full bench of the High Court in May 1977. The High Court ruled by statutory majority that the principles of natural justice or procedural fairness were not applicable to section 18 of the Immigration Act (1958) which empowered the Minister for Immigration to deport any prohibited non-citizen at his or her absolute discretion. By employing the judicial system to challenge the unlimited deportation powers bestowed upon the minister, Salemi showed the inadequacy of the machinery for the review of deportation orders in place at the time. The Immigration Act was constructed in such a way that, in many cases, a deportation order was a “mere formality”, difficult to dispute. By appealing to the federal ombudsman, Salemi exhausted almost all the legal avenues at his disposal (the possibility of taking the matter to the Privy Council was considered but not pursued).

When MacKellar announced an amnesty for illegal immigrants in late January 1976, Salemi did not apply for it immediately. Initially he had paid very little attention to the announcement; having experienced two previous deportations, he had cultivated an innate “aversion” to visas and permits. Yet, when the Immigration Department ordered him to leave the country, and with Innes’ encouragement, he sought amnesty.

With Sgrò’s assistance, Salemi lodged an amnesty application at the Melbourne office of the Immigration Department on 1 April 1976. He recalled that the officials seemed “uneasy”
as soon as he declared his identity. Following a lengthy wait, he was told that his application would most likely be rejected. MacKellar recalled his department’s version of the event in parliament in September 1977:

Mr Salemi did submit an application. He told the officer who interviewed him that he did so at the instigation of the honourable member [Innes] who raised this matter in the present debate. He admitted to the interviewing officer that he did not want to remain permanently in Australia … The interviewing officer concerned verified by questions that Mr Salemi was not within the eligible categories and referred his application with her report to Canberra for consideration.

In late May 1976, MacKellar informed Salemi that his amnesty application was unsuccessful and invited him to make arrangements to depart from Australia no later than 30 June. As pressure began to mount for a review of the minister's decision, the “invitation” was extended until 14 August. Salemi took out a High Court writ, seeking an injunction to restrain the Minister for Immigration from issuing a deportation order. The Australian Left mobilised its best lawyers to represent Salemi: Peter Redlich and Clyde Holding, president of the Victorian ALP and Labor leader in the Victorian parliament respectively.

Neither of Salemi’s arguments, as mentioned above, were successful at the first hearing of the High Court on 26 August. Sir Harry Gibbs, sitting in chambers in Sydney, struck out Salemi’s writ because he had failed to establish a cause of action. Nevertheless, he pointed out that if Salemi fell within the description of the persons for whom the amnesty was meant, it would be “a grave breach of faith to fail to grant him the amnesty”. Salemi lodged an appeal to the full bench of the High Court, arguing that the minister had to apply the Immigration Act in accordance with the principles of natural justice, that is, to grant him the right to a hearing and an opportunity to challenge the deportation order. On 21 October, the full bench (Aickin, Jacobs, Mason and Murphy) granted Salemi’s appeal, allowing him to stay in Australia until further proceedings before the court were finalised.

Seven months elapsed before the High Court passed judgement on the case. On 11 May 1977, at the full hearing, the six judges (Aickin, Barwick, Gibbs, Jacobs, Murphy and Stephen,) were divided equally. The judgement was in favour of MacKellar, on Chief Justice Barwick’s casting vote. Barwick, Gibbs and Aickin argued that section 18 of the Immigration Act did not require the Minister for Immigration to abide by the principles of natural justice. The minister was not bound to give Salemi “an opportunity to be heard on such questions as whether he was of good character and normal health and was otherwise within the class described in the news releases, and whether or not he ought to be deported”. The minister was entitled to exercise his power to deport him, since he considered him a prohibited immigrant.

Jacobs, Murphy and Stephen dissented. Stephen rejected the first two of Salemi’s claims, namely that he was not a prohibited immigrant and was allowed to stay indefinitely in Australia, but pointed out that the minister was bound to afford him a hearing or provide a reason as to why he should be deported, even though the Immigration Act did not require any form of independent inquiry nor any hearing before the minister himself. Salemi was entitled to know precisely and in detail the grounds upon which the minister based his exclusion from the amnesty, and therefore his deportation. Jacobs insisted that
there had to be another reason for his exclusion and that Salemi was entitled to know that reason:

If the reason were national security, he could hardly expect to know more; but if the reason were personal to him, he could expect to know more so that he would have the opportunity to rebut them. If it is considered that he does not fall within the offer of amnesty he should be told the how and why, so that he can present arguments to the contrary. If there is an intention to depart from the terms of the offer of amnesty he should be told, so that he could present arguments against such a departure.

For Murphy, the Immigration Act did not enable the minister to exercise his discretion to order deportation “in bad faith, without regard to the interests of the person affected, and in a manner which denies natural justice. The power to deport, like other powers, is to be exercised bona fide” 25. Barwick insisted that Salemi, as a prohibited immigrant, had no right to remain in Australia. Nor did the amnesty’s stipulations alter his position, as they constituted a mere statement of policy without legal bound, although they could incite human expectations (as distinct from lawful expectations). As stressed by Nicholls (2007: 116-17):

Barwick maintained a hard line, arguing that because the Migration Act required the deportation of illegal immigrants by reason of their illegal status there was no need for a deportation hearing. He even denied that there was any room for the minister to decide against deportation. Barwick found that if Salemi was not granted a visa to regularise his status, the minister was duty-bound to deport him.

Although narrowly defeated, Salemi could claim a moral victory. Three of the six judges had accepted his argument, while trade unions, ethnic and community organisations, and civil liberty groups continued to express solidarity with him.26 Even so, Salemi’s future in Australia looked more uncertain than ever. The final word on his troubled stay rested with MacKellar who stood firm and gave Salemi until 8 June to supply further reasons as to why he should not be deported.27 Salemi’s legal advisers Redlich and Holding, who abandoned the idea of bringing the case before the Privy Council, appealed to the federal ombudsman; the argument was that false and misleading information supplied to ministry officials had led the minister into error when examining the case.

Professor J. E. Richardson, the first federal ombudsman, represented Salemi’s last hope. The best-case scenario would have been for Richardson to find that the Immigration Department had misled MacKellar and for MacKellar to agree. But this was, of course, very unlikely to happen.28 A month and a half later Richardson concluded his investigation. His report was critical of the Immigration Department’s handling of the case and of the way Salemi was treated. He found that officials failed to advise the minister properly but supplied no false information to him.29 MacKellar acknowledged the Richardson report but still decided that Salemi should leave the country. He informed Salemi that he saw no reason to depart from his earlier decision and now required him to leave by 8 July.30 When Salemi failed to comply, a deportation order was issued on 2 September. Salemi went into hiding, with the full support of FILEF, the trade unions and CURA activists.

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A last, desperate appeal to override MacKellar’s decision was made by Holding and Redlich directly to Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and his “sense of moral values”. The Italian government also intervened, asking the Australian government to withdraw the deportation order “in the interests of friendship between the two countries”. On 19 October, the federal police arrested Salemi and whisked him out of the country, ending what a dejected Redlich described as a case in which “a government has acted … stupidly and vindictively in respect of one individual”.

The politicisation of the case and its legacy

Predictably, given Salemi’s key role in the organisation, FILEF had placed itself at the forefront of the campaign to keep him in Australia, and was joined in this by other organisations and personalities of the Australian Left. FILEF aimed to raise public awareness of the case in an attempt to put as much pressure as possible on the Minister for Immigration, and hence on the Fraser government. Several press releases, including a detailed background briefing on the organisation itself, stressed the importance of the case and the vital role of a person of Salemi’s stature within the organisation and within the Italian-Australian community. As the first appeal to the High Court was launched, FILEF set up a defence fund to finance and carry out all aspects of the legal case, and started to circulate petitions, especially among the working class.

A set of bilingual information bulletins, produced between August and November 1976, summed up the central issues of the campaign.

FILEF portrayed its struggle as one in which the whole working class ought to be involved – a struggle against a conservative government whose strategy was to exhaust FILEF’s activism by deporting its mastermind and by ceasing funding under the Welfare Rights Officer Program:

Attacks against FILEF are attacks against the working class: there is still no word from the two Liberal Government’s interested Departments on their discrimination attacks against FILEF. The Minister for Social Security, Senator Guilfoyle, has given no plausible reason for the decision to reallocate FILEF’s Welfare Rights Grant. Obviously there is no reason other than political discrimination … Why then has the Government changed its mind? WE MUST DEFEND OUR RIGHTS! At the moment there is a real and pressing need to continue the campaign ensuring that the discrimination acts against FILEF are not forgotten, so that the struggle to keep Mr Salemi in Australia and to keep FILEF operating will continue.

FILEF was keen to involve as many organisations and people as possible in the campaign. It informed unions, ethnic organisations and community bodies that its fight for justice “must not be regarded as affecting Mr Salemi or FILEF only, but as a campaign in which the future of the migrant workers is in jeopardy – their right to having their own organisations, and skilled people to work in them, their right to organise themselves is what is in jeopardy”. The Committee Against Political Deportations saw the case as a battle in which “the principles of democracy and natural justice were virtually ignored”.

Support for Salemi soon reached the highest levels of the Australian Left, with the backing
of Australian Council of Trade Unions president Bob Hawke and opposition leader Gough Whitlam. More organisations became involved, sending letters and telegrams of protest to the minister and requests for information to FILEF. As support was mounting for Salemi to be allowed to stay, FILEF convened a public meeting at the Albion Hall in East Brunswick on Sunday 15 August 1976. Some 300 workers were present, joined by various political personalities: Bryant, Walter Lippmann (chairperson, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria), Labor Senator Bill Brown and John Bennett (secretary, Civil Liberties Council), all publicly affirming their support for Salemi’s cause.

Activists of the vanguard of the migrant welfare sector such as Arthur Faulkner and Des Storer from CURA and Alan Matheson from the Ecumenical Migration Centre embraced the campaign. They did so not only by inviting organisations to join FILEF’s struggle and documenting the case (Faulkner 1977; Storer 1977), but also by helping Salemi hide from the police. Oral testimonies recall that Faulkner, Storer and Matheson, together with Rev. Richard Wootton and former Methodist minister Brian Howe (chairman and director of CURA respectively), kept Salemi in hiding for some time, allegedly at Howe’s house in Fitzroy. Other churchmen, like Peter Hollingworth of the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Hamish Christie-Johnson of the Victorian Council of Churches, joined in expressing their dissent from MacKellar’s stance case in a sharp press release:

The group called on the Minister to grant amnesty to Ignazio Salemi who according to the High Court is eligible for amnesty and complies with the criteria laid down by the Minister. The group pointed out, that, to date, Mr MacKellar has failed to provide a genuine reason for his refusal of the amnesty. In the absence of a clear statement from the Minister it must be assumed that the sole reason is Mr Salemi’s political opinions and as such would represent a form of discrimination characteristic of the early fifties.

MPs Ted Innes, Tom Roper, Jim Simmonds and Jack Ginifer also embraced the cause, releasing press statements and posing questions in federal and state parliaments. A passionate grievance debate took place in federal parliament a few days after MacKellar signed the deportation order, marking perhaps the highest point of the Australian Left’s public commitment to Salemi. Innes, Bryant, Whitlam and Lionel Bowen invited the Minister for Immigration to withdraw the deportation order and to put an end to the “persecution” of Salemi. It was Bryant, having fought passionately for fifteen years for Sgro’s right to Australian citizenship (Sgro 2000: 51), who addressed the minister in the most pressing way:

I ask the minister: For heaven’s sake, just this once exercise common sense. It is not a question of clemency or humanitarianism; it is a question of sensitivity to the needs of the community. This matter has been running for years. I have handled hundreds of cases in my time as a member of Parliament on behalf of people who have been excluded from this country, refused residency or refused naturalisation on these grounds, and eventually I have won a lot of those cases. It is time to show common sense and do a service for the community.
Trade union leaders such as John Halfpenny from the AMWU labelled the case a “ruthless act of discrimination by the government” (emphasis in the original). Familiar with the persecution of people who were active in the union movement or in endeavours to better the lot of their fellows, they decided not to let the case go “unchallenged”. Hawke and other officials stated that the unions would be very loath to take part in any activity aimed at deporting Salemi. In August 1976, Hawke publicly threatened to undertake walk-offs and bans to prevent Salemi leaving the country; transport workers and other unionists “would stop the plane or ship trying to take him out”. A year later, he again pledged the unions’ support for Salemi, but remained vague about how far they would go to prevent his deportation.

Salemi’s arrest and sudden deportation took everyone — the press included — by surprise and did not spark the action predicted by Hawke. Strong protests, such as those by the Victorian branch of the Vehicle Builders Union and state shadow Labour and Industry Minister Jim Simmonds, channelled the dissent against the government’s stance. The VBU saw the deportation as “not merely the final act in a long travesty of justice, but also part of an orchestrated attack on all organisations fighting for migrant rights in Australia”, constituting “another step in the overall strategy of the Federal Government aimed at destroying the Australian working class”. Likewise, Simmonds saw it as further evidence that the government “was moving, step by step, closer to establishing something akin to a dictatorship … a step towards the tactic of the knock on the door in the middle of the night”.

Over the years, the Salemi case has attracted the attention of scholars and researchers, mainly of migrant and multicultural studies, who have offered political readings of the court case. These included Faulkner (1977: 13), Storer (1977: 8), Sornarajah (1985: 521), Cresciani (1985: 103), Castles (1987: 125), Lever-Tracy and Quinlan (1988: 155-6, 161), Jones (1995: 11), Langfield (1996: 61) and Davidson (1997a: 163-4, 1997b: 84). By and large, they support the argument that the true reason behind MacKellar’s refusal to allow Salemi to benefit from the amnesty was his communist background and activism within FILEF.

Cresciani (1985: 103) also linked the case to the 1975 arson attempt on the FILEF office, and considered that both were the price that Italian-Australian conservatives made FILEF pay for jolting the political consciousness of Italian immigrants. Jakubowicz et al. (1984: 81) argued instead that the case was the denouement of the conflict between FILEF and COASIT. Castles (1987: 128) took it as an example of the vulnerability of the civil rights of permanent and temporary residents, especially of those involved in political or trade union activities. For Davidson (1997b: 82-4), the case was an example of how the Australian government, driven by the anti-communist feelings inherited from earlier conservative governments, had a tendency to silence left-wing, vanguard voices among migrants.

The Salemi case has also been the subject of some interesting interpretations among legal scholars. The 1977 High Court decision sparked a debate on the meaning of the principles of natural justice and legitimate expectations in relation to the deportation of illegal immigrants (for example, Flick 1978; Johnson 1985; Sornarajah 1985; Mackie 1985). The ruling was of great significance to migrant administrative law for quite some time, but was based on a narrow view of what was entitled for the plaintiff by natural justice. At that time, people were permitted natural justice only if their rights were affected by a decision. Salemi’s interests were affected, but not his legal rights. This view of the natural justice requirements was open to question, even in the late 1970s.
There is little doubt that the case would be decided differently today (McMillan 2000: 8) when an appeal system (the Immigration Review Tribunal) is in place for those awaiting deportation. By the mid-1980s, this view of what was entailed by the natural justice requirements in the Salemi case, as well as in the *R v MacKellar: ex parte Ratu* case, was effectively overruled by the *Kioa v West* case. In the latter case, the High Court departed from the views expressed in the Salemi and Ratu cases and stated that there was an obligation, in principle, to observe natural justice in relation to decisions on immigrant status. The Salemi and Ratu cases have since been quoted in the literature so as to underscore the 1985 ruling (for example, Clothier 1986; Wong 1987; Allars 1987; Crock 1989; Paterson 1992; Jones 1995; O’Connor 1998).

Past interpretations have canvassed some important aspects of the event, but have failed to take account of others, such as the decisive role played by the conservative press before and throughout the court case in its depiction of Salemi as a dangerous ‘red’. People from anti-Salemi and anti–FILEF quarters sought to instil in the broader public a sense of the danger he supposedly represented, in the process misrepresenting facts concerning FILEF as well as Salemi and his case. For *Il Globo* editor Nino Randazzo, FILEF wished to incite a scandal, a “riot”, using the pretext of the court case, while Salemi was nothing but a highly experienced “political agent” who did not have “any right to the amnesty, reserved for (genuine) illegal immigrants”. According to the *Herald*, Salemi even had links with the Italian underworld, a view that was later quoted by *Il Globo*. A letter sent to MacKellar after Salemi’s deportation by one Angelo Sergi from “Turkey” seems to betray the absorption of some of this propaganda, referring to the “dago bastard” as “a well known communist and one of the heads of the dreaded mafia”. Salemi’s presence alone and his “past pugnacious activism”, as I have previously argued, generated “a set of controversies in and out of FILEF” and his deportation case could be seen as a “telling example of the type of political manoeuvring that existed within the Italian-Australian community of the 1970s” (Battiston 2005: 10).

**Towards the end of a turbulent decade**

Publicly, FILEF stood firmly behind Salemi throughout his court case. Some sources, however, suggest that in the last months of the case he was losing the backing of some members, especially among his peers and the older generation. There were many reasons for this. According to FILEF and PCI activist Franco Lugarini, the case compromised the relationship between Australia and Italy in terms of issuing of entry permits to PCI officials. On the other hand, it was a source of embarrassment for the PCI which at that time was engineering the *compromesso storico* (historic compromise) with the ruling DC:

One evening we had a dance festival to raise funds. At midnight Salemi came incognito … The situation was tricky because the Australian government was not happy with the way things were going and protested to the Italian ambassador in Canberra and the Italian ambassador then passed it on to the Communist Party headquarters here [in Italy]. In short, the PCI – in order not to make matters worse, because if you dig in your heels, the Australian government might stop all delegations

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from coming: Cianca, Volpe, Pajetta, Giadresco, a continuous parade of comrades—they told Salemi, “Look, you come back quietly to Italy so we can stay on good terms with the Australian government” … Was the protest big? For him, yes, it was. They defended him … they even hid him in the church but, in the end, so as to not ruin the good relationship between Italy and Australia. At that time, you know, the Christian Democratic Party was in power but we joined them under Berlinguer’s leadership. As a matter of fact, we showed the Italian ambassador Salemi’s return ticket that he had shown to MacKellar. But they saw he was still around and, afraid of a union protest, who knows, they arrested him. In the end, Salemi’s case jeopardised relations a bit. Every five to six months we had a visit from someone from over there.61

Salemi’s dynamic persona, while charismatic and appealing to young FILEF activists, seems to have been ill-suited to the older generation. Frictions had emerged, especially between Salemi and Sgrò, that probably began at the time of the ‘Italian communists move in’ incident. Sgrò admitted to Lopez (2000: 403) that he strongly disapproved of Salemi’s activism and did not have second thoughts about whether he should have gone back to Italy.

Signs of this tension during the court case were palpable in a letter to MacKellar of 25 May 1977. MacKellar quoted Sgrò’s letter in parliament to back his argument that neither Salemi nor FILEF had intended to benefit genuinely from the amnesty offer, but had only filed a request at the instigation of Labor spokesman Ted Innes:

MacKellar: I shall quote from a letter dated 25 May 1977 which I received from Mr Giovanni Sgrò, the secretary of … FILEF. The letter in part states: But I felt that we had to defend Mr Salemi’s right …

Innes: You are talking about a different interview.

MacKellar: The honourable member should listen to the letter. It states: But I felt that we had to defend Mr Salemi’s right to stay in Australia – and it is not so much Mr Salemi who wants to stay here … Mr Sgrò goes on to say in a later paragraph: I bring to your attention the fact that Mr Salemi does not intend to remain in Australia permanently … Later on he said: I feel that it is within your power and scope to allow Mr Salemi to stay here for another twelve to fifteen months at least, and I can assure you that if we could find a replacement for him, he would leave long before then.62

Two months earlier, Sgrò had won preselection for the safe Labor seat of Melbourne North in the Legislative Council. Salemi’s case and pending deportation could potentially boomerang on his rising political career. The pro-Salemi campaign therefore began to appear, in Sgrò’s eyes, politically counter-productive.

Sgrò and Salemi constituted the two heads of what Martinengo termed “FILEF’s diarchy”. They had notably different stances, which were reflected in their agendas: Sgrò had a good knowledge of the local reality and was bound hand and foot by the Australian Labor tradition (integrationist approach); Salemi had an internationalist approach with an eye for the contemporary Italian contribution (ethnocentric approach). Sgrò strongly aimed to develop FILEF’s political base in a Labor Party direction, while Salemi aspired to piece together old
and young forces in a broad left-wing organisation to influence the Italian-Australian community as well as other communities and organisations. Interviewees have given different recollections of both Sgrò and Salemi, which show their different personalities. Sgrò embodied the features of what Davidson called, in Gramscian terms, the “anarchist type of activist”:

Their personalities, Salemi and Sgrò, were quite different … Sgrò was much more of what you call the anarchist type. A lot of people found Sgrò difficult. He was the kind of person who would say something like “You are a fucking fool”, that kind of approach. He has mellowed in his old age, but he was that kind of person. He was always angry … Johnny Sgrò was more, he is really right out of the migrant tradition, comes in via the multicultural openings made by the ALP. Suddenly we start to get, in the Whitlam government, ethnic members of parliament, ethnic ministers, ethnic, ethnic … He is coming in that kind of route.

FILEF and PCI activist Edoardo Burani saw in Sgrò a self-made politician with limited cultural capabilities but with brilliant insight, although his election to the Victorian parliament presented new challenges for him:

I thought of him as a colleague with relatively little education but someone who was politically self-made, who really believed in political debate. But at one point he became a victim of the political situation he found himself in as a parliamentarian. He then had to react in a way that gained the consensus of the community and therefore some things that could backfire from the point of view of that consensus … He was a bit wary. On the whole, I have a positive opinion of Sgrò because of his background. He was self-educated, a worker who had made something of himself, one who was involved in the Labor Party. And then he becomes a candidate and he really wanted it, without a doubt. But then he’s elected but he finds that he’s in over his head. You can see him struggling but he has a working man’s intuition. He goes into parliament, makes his first speech in Italian, the press reports it and he’s happy about the situation. He’s also a bit overcome by the notoriety but he did what he could with the background that he had. Clearly if he had had a better background he would have had a different profile.

Recollections about Salemi emerge in a field of tension between two poles, one represented by old working-class activists such as Emilio Deleidi and Vincenzo Mammoliti, and the other by young FILEF activists such as Umberto Martinengo, Stefano de Pieri and Joe Caputo. The younger group, who felt both inspired and mentored by Salemi, recalled him as a versatile mind with a solid journalistic and organisational background. He had, in Caputo’s words, “great intellectual capacity combined with excellent organisational skills”; as a person, he was charismatic and charming, a man who “create[ed] a lot of interest in himself”.

FILEF lacked activists of a certain calibre who were at least able to write and speak Italian fluently, Caputo explained. Salemi was exactly what FILEF was looking for: a dynamic and resourceful organiser, quick to adapt to the local reality. According to Franco Lugarini, Salemi
knew “how to organise things”, from rallies to dinner dances, and transmitted his knowledge to fellow FILEF members. For de Pieri, Salemi was a sharp mind, conscious that all his actions led to specific consequences. He purposely chose not to speak English, for instance, because he believed that migrants had a right to interpreters.

Alastair Davidson, then a young lecturer in politics who invited Salemi to speak at Monash University, tells something of his political persona:

Salemi was cautious, thoughtful, even though when he talked, he would speak what I call “cadre speech”. When he was giving a lecture he was almost always “addressing the masses”. His personality was fairly cautious and systematic, and very much, as you say, party man … I never saw Salemi angry, he was contained, a bit urbane, in the Roman kind of fashion. He was in the style set by their high level cadres of the Communist Party who were very, very signorile. People like Amendola, who could have been a duke in the eighteenth century, that kind of style.

Mammoliti alternatively judged Salemi’s presence in Australia a “mistake”, while for Deleidi, he “ruined” FILEF with his activism, pushing away the moderate elements.

Carli has suggested that Salemi’s broad-minded manners estranged some FILEF members in another way, which may explain why some interviewees have very different recollections of him. In his late forties, Salemi expressed a morality that was characteristic of the post-68 generation of Italians. This was in clear contrast with the widespread conservative morality that was typical of the 1950s and 1960s migrants, including those within FILEF:

Salemi was a bit fond of women. I think that antagonised the older ones, so the sexual politics was disruptive to the organisation … You had essentially a communist working class, who were quite conservative about sexual behaviour, mixing with post-68 people who were quite liberal … plus Salemi. So that left a little bit of a legacy in the organisation … it did create a fairly big tension between the groups internally.

Salemi felt that the “valanga di crotinate cattive” (avalanche of spiteful idiocies) and “discorsi da lavandaia” (gossiping) that were being muttered about him among fellow members actually hid a power struggle inside FILEF, in which several movers wished to pull the strings in their own interests.

In an open letter to Vincenzo Mammoliti on 3 August 1977, two and a half months before his deportation, Salemi envisaged the dangers of factionalism and personalism for FILEF, and reminded Mammoliti to evaluate and treasure what it had so far laboriously achieved:

Therefore, it’s about defending the future development of the organisation as a whole, given not only the current difficulties it is faced with but also the considerable political success that it is enjoying. When the new state Labor opposition leader comes to visit our office or talk to us of his own accord, as happened last week, I think it demonstrates the prestige that we have accumulated. He had asked to meet me but I wanted him to meet a group of comrades. When a Presbyterian bishop publicly states that he is willing to hide the communist Salemi, it means that our efforts – everyone’s
efforts, not just mine – have earned the respect of all. All the support for our political
struggles, in every state, merely confirm the importance of our results and how proud
we should be of them … When after years of effort – which is often not appreciated
– to a meeting like the one that saw the formation of the joint committee of Italian
national organisations, it means that a lot of things are changing and we’re emerging
from that isolation to which they would like to confine us. And even that didn’t just
happen … Sgrò’s successful candidature is the result of our transparent public stances
and the support they enjoy. Our opponents obviously acknowledge this because the
concentrated attacks they (MacKellar, Globo, Corriere) make against us are aimed
only at stopping us or at least weakening us, forcing us back into isolation.76

With Salemi’s deportation, the alliance between the new activists he had gathered around him
and the old working-class activists broke down (Carli 1982: 51) and opened the way to
factionalism, according to Cathy Angelone.77

Carli, who appears to have been the only researcher to look at the deportation’s
implications for FILEF’s organisational structure, maintained that it symbolised the defeat of
FILEF’s vanguard elements: the new breed of young activists who would find it increasingly
difficult to operate within FILEF and who would gradually abandon the organisation in the
following years. This marked the emergence of the PCI:

The division in FILEF, although often manifested in personal conflict, did focus on a
fundamental point. For many of the activists wanted to exploit the new openings in the
ALP and the trade unions. They wanted to use FILEF as a broad coordinating organisation
for different initiatives, while others, particularly the older activists and in particular Sgrò,
wanted to build a tight organisation that would maintain a dialogue with Australian
political parties. The irony for Sgrò as an ALP member was that the organisation that
would be built up was the PCI and not FILEF. So of the two possible directions, the idea
of building the party was taken up. The consequence was that within a few years many
members, and in particular the younger cadres with the most contact with Australian
organisations, withdrew, leaving FILEF as an isolated sect (Carli 1982: 51).

The PCI component within FILEF was significant but not the only one: a gamut of political
leanings, from anarchist to Labor, characterised the leadership as well as the rank and file,
according to Carli. A map of FILEF revealed generational as well as political patterns. When
Carli joined in 1978, three generational components were present: “old working class”, “post-
68” and “second generation”.

The old working class comprised Italian-born members who had migrated from before
the Second World War up to the 1960s. They had had different political experiences in their
life in Italy and Australia: some were Sicilians and Calabrians who had been involved in the
land occupations of the late 1940s; others from Lazio and Piedmont had been partisans during
the 1943–45 Resistance War.78 Some were former members of Italia Libera, such as Charlie
D’Aprano (Carli 1982: 13), while others were concurrently members of the LIA, such as
Vincenzo Mammoliti and Emilio Deleidi, who was also a representative of the Istituto Nazionale
Confederale di Assistenza (National Federal Institute of Assistance).
The second group, the so-called post-68 types, represented Italian-born members who came to Australia in the 1970s, such as Stefano de Pieri, Roberto Malara, Edoardo Burani, Umberto Martinengo, Carlo Scalvini and Cira La Gioia. While some were “strictly PCI”, many were not; some were once involved in the anarchist movement and in various Marxist organisations in Italy. The third group, the so-called second generation, included those who were either born or raised in Australia, such as Carli himself, Gianfranco Spinoso, Joe Lo Bianco, Cathy Angelone and to an extent Joe Caputo.

Although many members experienced “a lot of cross-membership” – Caputo was a classic example: he was simultaneously a member of the LIA, Clothing Trades Union, CPA, PCI and FILEF – one could distinguish three major political poles towards which they gravitated: the ALP, the PCI and “community politics”. In the latter area, some of FILEF Melbourne’s activists followed particular political agendas, for instance, Lo Bianco advocated the teaching of community languages in Australian state schools and later became a major academic figure in this area.

Salemi’s ethnocentric yet internationalist approach to politics represented a compromise between the three major political poles which many in FILEF identified with. For Carli, with the deportation of Salemi, the PCI:

became too dominant, too many people who were too nostalgic and looking towards the PCI in Italy for inspiration. There was a very close link there; there would be PCI people sent from Italy to give direction and guidance and all of that … I have never quite worked out what they wanted to create in the end, I mean I was quite influenced by the PCI, but at the same time, at the end of the day I became very critical of it because I didn’t think they had quite a sense of what they wanted to do here.

In 1979, the PCI cells and branches formed the Australian PCI Federation, now fully recognised as a federation by the PCI in Rome, under the secretariat of Carlo Scalvini and Renato Licata. A founding congress in Melbourne in February 1979 marked the event. It was closely structured according to the model of the federations in Italy where a number of commissioni (committees) articulated policies and initiatives. According to de Pieri, the Australian PCI Federation was obsessively looking towards the Italian political scene rather than the Australian one, and this reduced the influence of FILEF. Stefania Pieri, who joined FILEF and the PCI in the late 1970s and attended a six-month course at the communist college Le Frattocchie in Rome in the early 1980s, recalled that some members of the Australian PCI Federation were progressively losing touch with Australian political reality:

After this experience [Le Frattocchie] I returned to Australia just to work for the party and FILEF … I was working with the organisation. Our job was to organise those who felt connected to a certain type of politics even in Australia. My deep-seated motivation was to encourage elderly Italians to participate in Australian politics. I never thought my affiliation with the PCI was placing me in some ghetto but this feeling was not shared by everyone.

Let’s just say that a lot of people kind of opposed it. At least that’s how I remember it.
This was one of the biggest debates at the beginning of the '80s: whether to participate in Australian politics, become active in the Australian organisations – something I would have thought natural even for the Italian communists – or whether to concentrate on strengthening our organisation, and in some way engage in a dialogue with one another. However it was a clash, the construction of an alternative to traditional Labor from within.

This was more or less the debate of the '80s and I saw my participation and my work as an activist with the PCI in this sense. In other words, as an Italian communist, I wanted to contribute to Australian politics if, like Carlo Carli, Stefano and all these young people, I were to stay there. There was a lot of debate about it, and even altercations and misunderstandings which were then were mixed up with personalities and personal ambitions. This was one of the most divisive issues: how to participate in Australian politics. I even remember the documents, la terza via del socialismo in Australia. They borrowed inspiration from Italian things that were then represented in a fairly simple way. I warned them of the danger. I was young, a lot younger and I mixed with young Australians, something which I don't think many of them did, and I knew that that type of dynamic would only create misunderstandings, but most importantly, it wouldn't have much effect. It wasn't familiar, it was something that came from far away.82

Joe Caputo joined the ALP after his FILEF membership ticket was abruptly revoked in 1980 after it was alleged that he had passed on distorted and defamatory information about FILEF and Sgrò to the Age.83 His memories about his experiences in the PCI and in FILEF highlight the limits and contradictions that these two organisations carried within them:

I think organising ourselves like the PCI was a mistake on our part. In a pluralist society, you can do what you want but strategically, for a progressive movement, I don’t think it was a good idea in hindsight. Now, 30 years later I admit that I was one of the protagonists. A few years after Salemi was expelled, I started to reflect and I realised it was for two reasons. Firstly, because we weren’t responsible for our own decisions. Even though our party was small, the decisions were arrogantly imposed on us by Rome … The other consideration was that we, as Italian communists, were against foreign interference, in particular from the Soviet Union, because as the PCI we didn’t want the Soviet Union interfering, but we behaved the same way. I remember in all of the discussions we had, and I’m not saying this because I was in the CPA and was a member of the CPA and the PCI, that we had become chauvinistic without realising it.

In other words, everything that was Italian was: big organisation, good brains, intellectuals, the policy of eurocommunism and so on. Everything that was Australian was: they’re idiots, inefficient, nothing worth anything. This didn’t allow for a serious analysis of things because it wasn’t like all Australians were stupid and not worth anything. The fact of the matter was that working with Australians and in Australia was really hard. For us it was easy. Come to think of it, the more you withdraw into
your shell the more you criticise others because you don’t dialogue with them. Do you know what I mean? This was another of our contradictions … When I realised that, I said to myself “no more” and then I joined the Labor Party …

There was also a kind of myth that FILEF was an active and dynamic organisation and this was partly true. There was a three to four year period from 1974 until 1977 when FILEF was active and involved and Nuovo Paese came out regularly: it was a fortnightly publication but it never really penetrated inside the Italian community. We had about a hundred or so subscriptions, more or less, which wasn’t even enough to cover the distribution expenses. We were always on the front line with the banners, this and that. Really, considering the little backing we had, we created a considerable stir. [Was the FILEF experience a positive or negative?] There were definitely some positive things. For example, together with other communities we were involved in promoting certain values and we were really active. In my opinion, we also had some, a few victories, not by ourselves but with other communities and ethnic groups. When we decided to go it alone, when things went to our heads, that’s when I think we got it wrong. That was a mistake, a big mistake. It means that you become somewhat deluded and that also discourages you from becoming completely involved with the society in which you live.

I think there was also a reluctance to admit that the community wasn’t about to join in a “revolution”. It was a community with practical objectives, security, housing, jobs, and good prospects for young people and so on, which in my opinion are universal. We should have focused on those things because when you do that you get a solid consensus.84

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Carli argued, many young FILEF activists became aware that their influence “could probably go elsewhere”.85 Umberto Martinengo became a La Fiamma journalist and later Special Broadcasting Service radio host and COASIT education coordinator; Joe Lo Bianco entered academia, becoming a leading professor of language and literacy education at the University of Melbourne; Cathy Angelone worked as a secretary at the Australian Railways Union until 1980 before returning to Italy where she joined her life-time companion Ignazio Salemi in Rome; Stefano de Pieri, Joe Caputo and Carlo Carli joined the ALP and held important positions at local and state levels. In 1986 de Pieri began working for the Victorian Minister for Ethnic Affairs, Peter Spyker, becoming his ministerial adviser in 1988. In 1991, his rising political career halted abruptly when he unsuccessfully attempted to win the preselection for the state seat of North Melbourne. Abandoning the idea of having a political career, he followed his long-standing passion for cooking and has made a name for himself as one of Victoria’s most celebrated country chefs (Armstrong 2001). From the 1980s to the 2000s, Joe Caputo was elected several times as councillor and mayor of Brunswick and later of Moreland (Brunswick City Council and Brunswick Oral History Project 1985: 88-94) and in 2011 became chairperson of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. Carlo Carli did a stint as a ministerial adviser in housing in the twilight months of the Kirner state government. From 1994 to 2010, he was a Labor member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly for the seat of Brunswick.
Eventually, FILEF no longer functioned as the liaison with mainstream Australian politics, as the emergence of the PCI element put more emphasis on Italian politics. The PCI wished to keep a political culture and tradition alive, given that this was still attractive to some left-wing Italians, but in so doing it became increasingly anachronistic, mingling less and less with the Australian Left.

NOTES

1. Two more amnesties to visa overstayers were offered by the Australian government in 1974 and 1980 (Nicholls 2007: 115-16).
3. According to the data supplied in June 1976 by the Immigration Department (see Storer 1977: 6), 5,574 applications had been approved, 3,036 were under consideration and four were refused.
4. On the lack of advertising about the amnesty in the ethnic media, see also ‘Il fatto di 50 mila clandestini – Nessuna amnistia’, La Fiamma, 23 May 1977.
7. “Mr MacKellar again urged overstayed visitors and others living illegally in Australia who were covered by the terms of the amnesty offer to come forward … Amnesty could be sought by all visitors who were overstayed at 31 Dec. 1975. Cases involving persons other than overstayed visitors would be considered on individual merits. Those who met normal standards of health and good character would be granted resident status” (M. MacKellar, ‘News release’, 27 Jan. 1976). “The amnesty basically applied to people who had overstayed visitors’ visas or entry permits” (M. MacKellar, ‘News release’, 9 April 1976).
16. The Judiciary Act of 1903, s. 23. Sub-s. (2)(b) states that, when the court is evenly divided, the judgement of the Chief Justice shall prevail (Wong 1987: 397, footnote 10).
18. In the 1960s Salemi was correspondent for the PCI organ L’Unità and a radio journalist for PCI-sponsored Italian-language radio programs in Budapest and Prague. He spent four years in Budapest, from approximately 1960 to 1964 or 1965, before being deported back to Italy. In 1966 he moved to Prague. In 1969, during the first anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, he was directly involved in an episode that led to his second deportation, when he tried to save an anti-occupation demonstrator by throwing a flowerpot at an army squad.
20. On 29 March 1976, the Immigration Department notified Salemi that there was no real justification for him to remain in the country, given that journalists trained in loco could fill his position, and given that no compassionate circumstances were present. See J. E. Blackie, ‘Letter to Holding Redlich & Co’.
21 June 1977, FMA.


34. In November 1976, a first petition totalled more than 11,000 of signatures. A second petition launched in the wake of the May 1977 High Court decision resulted collected around 12,000 signatures by August.


36. FILEF, 'Information bulletin No. 5', 7 Oct. 1976, FMA.

37. FILEF, 'Letter attached to the statement to all unions, community and ethnic organisations on FILEF’s fight for justice', 6 Aug. 1976, FMA.

38. C. Crollini (secretary, Committee Against Political Deportations), 'Letter to M. MacKellar', 21 June 1976, FMA.


43. Umberto Martinengo, interview, 24 Dec. 2002, Carlton, Vic., Australia; Franco Lugarini, interview, 9 April 2003, Cerveteri, Italy; Cathy Angelone, interview, 5 April 2003, Rome; Stefano de Pieri, interview, 22 Jan. 2004, Angleslea, Vic., Australia. At the launch of the book *Diaspora Parliaments: How Australia Faced the Italian Challenge* (by B. Mascitelli, R. Steele and S. Battiston, 2010) on 11 Feb. 2011, Harry Jenkins (Speaker of the House of Representatives) offered some insights into Salemi’s period in hiding: ‘During my political life I have known of Italians’ deep interest in politics in both Italy and Australia, and the intricate links between these interests. My earliest recollection of these intricate links was the celebrated case in the 1970s of Ignazio Salemi, an Italian communist journalist … In researching for tonight I was pleasantly surprised to learn that Simone Battiston has written about this case some six years ago. In
extreme shorthand, the gist of the Salemi case was that he ended up as a visa over-stayer leading to his deportation. The intrigue of the case is the effect of the influence of groups within the Australian Italian community with differing Australian political allegiances might have had. At a point in time before deportation, as Simone indicates in his article, ‘Salemi went underground to avoid arrest’. To avoid family and friends, some who are mentioned by Simone, I was well aware of some of the places where Salemi may have sought refuge.’ See <http://www.harryjenkins.com/media/harry-jenkins-speech-at-book-launch – –diaspora-par/>.

54. I am indebted to Professor Roger Douglas of the Law School of La Trobe University for his observations on the Salemi case.
58. A. Sergi, ‘Letter to M. MacKellar’, undated, FMA.
59. Franco Lugarini, interview, 9 April 2003, Cerveteri, Italy.
60. Through the compromesso storico, the PCI in opposition was to obtain a more active role and a more sympathetic relationship with the Italian government.
61. Franco Lugarini, interview, 9 April 2003, Cerveteri, Italy. Original text: “Una sera abbiamo fatto una festa da ballo, sempre per raccimolà i fondi, e a mezzanotte viene lui [Salemi] de nascosto … Però le cose se stanno a complicà, perché il governo australiano non ci stava a questo sistema, reclamava con l’ambasciata italiana e l’ambasciatore italiano trasmetteva al partito comunista qui [Italy]. Allora il PCI per non complicà le cose – perché se tu ti puntavi poi in Australia non ci veniva più nessuno: Cianca, Volpe, Pajetta, Giadresco, un continuo venì dei compagni – gli hanno detto a Salemi: ‘Guarda, rientra alle buone in Italia, così restano i buoni rapporti col governo australiano’ … Se la protesta era grande? A protestà per lui sì. L’hanno difeso … L’hanno pure nascosto dentro alla chiesa però alla fine per non compromette questi buoni rapporti tra l’Italia e loro, perché a quei tempi c’erano i democratici ma noi stavamo assieme ai tempi di Berlinguer. Infatti all’ambasciatore italiano gli abbiamo fatto vedè il biglietto per il rientro che lui l’aveva fatto vedè al ministro MacKellar. Però hanno visto che stava in giro per paura di qualche protesta del sindacato, chi lo sa. Insonma l’hanno chiappato. All’ultimo il caso Salemi era un po’ compromettente, sempre per i rapporti. Ogni cinque sei mesi ci avevano uno qui de lì.”
66. Edoardo Burani, interview, 26 March 2003, Modena, Italy. Original text: “[Sgrò] lo vedevo come un compagno con limitate capacità culturali però uno che si era fatto da sé politicamente, che tutto sommato ci credeva
nella lotta politica. Però ad un certo punto è diventato un po’ vittima della situazione, in cui si era venuto a trovare, di parlamentare. Doveva poi agire per avere il consenso della comunità e quindi certe cose che gli si potevano ritorsore in modo contro dal punto di vista del consenso … Lui era un po’ sospettoso. Io tutto sommato ho un giudizio positivo di Sgrò, perché lui aveva questa impostazione culturale. Lui era un operai che per se stava fatto da sè, che si era impegnato nel partito lavorista. Ad un certo punto si trova candidato, chiaro che lui ci teneva senz’altro, viene eletto e si trova in un ruolo più grande di sè, e se ne rende conto. Vede che fa fatica, ma ci ha delle intuizioni da operai: vu in parlamento e fa il primo discorso in italiano, la stampa lo riprende e lui è contento di questa situazione. Un po’ viene travolto da questa notorietà, e con i suoi strumenti culturali ha fatto quello che ha potuto. Chiaro che se aveva gli strumenti culturali superiori sarebbe stato un’altra figura.”


69. Franco Lugarini, interview, 9 April 2003, Cerveteri, Italy.


72. Vincenzo Mammoliti, interview, 8 April 2002, Bulla, Vic., Australia.


77. Cathy Angelone, interview, 13 April 2003, Rome.


contributo nella politica australiana, se rimanevo lì, come Carlo Carli, Stefano, e tutte queste persone che erano giovani. E su questo ci fu tanto dibattito, anche tanti scontri, incomprensioni che poi si intrecciavano sicuramente a personalismi, ambizioni personali. Questo era stato uno dei grandi temi di spaccature: come partecipare nella politica australiana …

Mi ricordo proprio i documenti, ‘la terza via del socialismo in Australia.’ Mutuavano quell'afflato, quelle cose italiane che venivano riportate in maniera abbastanza schematica. Io il pericolo l'avvertivo. Io ero più giovane, molto più giovane, frequentavo i giovani australiani cosa che credo loro non facessero molto, e capivo che quel tipo di dinamica poteva creare solo dei fraintendimenti, ma soprattutto non portava lontano. Non era una cosa autoctona, era una cosa che veniva da lontano.”

84. Joe Caputo, interview, 14 Jan. 2003, Brunswick, Vic., Australia. Original text: “Credo che sia stato uno sbaglio da parte nostra quello di organizzarci come PCI. In una società pluralista, uno può fare quello che vuole, però dico tatticamente come movimento progressista, secondo me, non è stata una buona idea, guardando indietro. Io ero uno dei protagonisti, lo ammetto adesso trent’anni dopo. Un paio di anni dopo che Salemi è stato espulso, incominciavo a riflettere e mi sono reso conto per due ragioni, una è perché non eravamo noi a decidere la direzione nostra. Anche nel nostro piccolo, le decisioni erano fatte a Roma, con molta arroganza…

L'altra riflessione che io avevo fatto era che noi come comunisti italiani parlavamo contro l'interferenza degli altri paesi, particolarmente dell'Unione Sovietica – perché come PCI non volevamo l'interferenza dell'Unione Sovietica – però noi facevamo ugualmente. In tutte le discussioni che facevamo, io mi ricordo, e non era soltanto per il fatto che io ero nel CPA e che ci avevi le due tessere del CPA e del PCI, si era diventato anche noi, e non ci rendevamo conto, sciocchini. Ciò è tutto quello che era in Italia era: grossi quadri, bravi pensatori, gli intellettuali, la linea dell'eurocomunismo e così via. Tutto quello che era australiano era: sono dei coglioni, inefficienti, è tutto da buttare. Questo non ci portava a fare un’analisi seria della cosa perché gli australiani non è che erano tutti coglioni, non è che erano tutti da buttare; era che gli australiani e l’Australia erano una realtà estremamente difficile da lavorarci dentro. Per noi era molto facile. Anzi, più ti rinchiudi nel tuo guscio, più critichi tutti gli altri, perché non è che devi andare fuori e parlare con qualcuno. Hai capito? Questa era anche la contraddizione che noi eravamo … Quando mi sono reso conto di questo mi sono detto no, e da allora mi sono iscritto al partito laburista … Si era creato anche un certo mito che la FILEF era un’organizzazione attiva e dinamica, ed era anche vero, c’era un periodo di tre, quattro anni, dal 1974 fino al 1977 dove la FILEF era attiva, coinvolta, Nuovo Paese usciva regolarmente, era un giornale quindicinale, ma non c’è mai stata una penetrazione all’interno della comunità italiana. Gli abbonamenti erano si e no un centinaio, e non erano sufficienti di coprire nemmeno le spese di distribuzione. Noi eravamo sempre in prima fila con gli striscioni, questo e quell’altro. Facevamo molto più chiasso in realtà di quanto appoggio avevamo … [Se l’esperienza della FILEF se è stata positiva o negativa?] Ci sono state delle cose che erano certamente positive. Noi eravamo coinvolti, per esempio, con altre comunità a promuovere certi principi, e ne abbiamo fatte di botte. Abbiamo ottenuto secondo me alcune vittorie, non da soli ma assieme ad altre comunità, altri gruppi etnici. Quando abbiamo voluto fare da noi, che ci siamo montati la testa, secondo me abbiamo sbagliato. E abbiamo sbagliato di brutto. Viol dire che ti porta anche ad una certa delusione e ti porta anche via dal coinvolgersi seriamente nella società dove vivi. Secondo me c’è stato anche un rifiuto di ammettere che la comunità non era pronta a fare la ‘rivoluzione’. Era una comunità che aveva obiettivi pratici, la sicurezza, la casa, il lavoro, una certa sicurezza per i propri figli e così via, che sono cose secondo me universali. Noi dovemmo concentrarci su quelle cose, dal momento che ci concentriamo su quelle cose otteniamo un consenso non indifferentere.”

Conclusion

The rise of FILEF in Melbourne in the 1970s – and of immigrants turned activists – can be viewed within two historic frameworks: the new political environment brought about by the Whitlam government, which paved the way, among other things, for the development of movements and organisations advocating ethnic consciousness and ethnic rights; and the political awakening of the Italian-Australian Left, which saw the link with the PCI as a means of regrouping and of gaining influence in the Italian-Australian community, and possibly beyond.

Like previous similar organisations, such as the Lega Italo-Australiana (LIA), FILEF aimed to speak for the large working-class strata of Italians in Melbourne whose socio-economic circumstances still left them subject to disadvantage and discrimination. Unlike the LIA, however, it operated in a new political climate and could count on leading figures such as Italian-born activists Ignazio Salemi and Giovanni Sgrò. Moreover, it gathered a new breed of young activists under its banner, some who had emigrated from Italy in the 1970s, others who had been born in Australia. Together they constituted the most dynamic force in the organisation. Salemi in particular galvanised them into action on several fronts and encouraged a qualitative cultural and political shift in its activities and initiatives.

Through Salemi and Giuliano Pajetta from the PCI emigration office, FILEF maintained close ties with the PCI, while at the same time it forged close links with Labor at local and federal levels through Sgrò. During the Whitlam government, the ALP enjoyed its relationship with migrant-run organisations such as FILEF which was seen as having quite an influence on the Italian vote.

The reasons behind the decline of FILEF Melbourne between the late 1970s and the early 1980s seem to lie in external (e.g. changing Australian political climate, pressure from conservative quarters) as well as internal factors (e.g. the different dynamics of the three political components within the organisation, namely ALP, PCI and community politics).

Italian and Australian conservative quarters around Il Globo and the Liberal Party felt alarmed by FILEF and its militant activism. The ‘Italian communists move in’ incident, which supposedly led to the arson attempt on the FILEF and Nuovo Paese office, shocked many FILEF activists, members and supporters. On the other hand, it attracted great support and media attention which raised the organisation’s profile. In the long term, nevertheless, it cast a negative light on Salemi who was pictured by the Italian-language conservative press as a red firebrand. The Salemi case saw the climax and denouement of the confrontation between FILEF, backed
by prominent elements of the Australian Left, and the Fraser Liberal government, in the person of its Minister for Immigration Michael MacKellar.

The subsequent deportation of Salemi did not only leave FILEF without a skilful organiser but also left the young vanguard without clear direction. With Sgrò on his way to becoming the first Italian-born member of the Victorian parliament, the PCI element within FILEF eventually became the leading faction and opted to strengthen the PCI ranks by founding the Australian PCI Federation. Many young activists found the new environment difficult and moved on towards other organisations. For them, FILEF had become the launching platform for a series of initiatives at community level, as well as a crucial stepping stone for their personal careers, whether in politics or in other sectors.

There is no doubt that eyewitness accounts by participants in FILEF’s and broader left-wing past events gathered for this research have proven to be pivotal and challenging for the purpose of historical reconstruction. The significance of these oral history interviews rests in the fact that they tell us, in Portelli’s words, “less about events than about their meaning”. Given that “memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meaning” (Portelli 1998: 67, 69), these oral sources attached significant meanings to the events.

Moreover, although they form only a tiny fraction of the oral testimonies potentially available, those collected so far have allowed the construction of a multi-sided and complex history of FILEF Melbourne and Italian-Australian progressive politics of the time. Not only do they point to new areas of inquiry (for instance, the legacy left by leaders Sgrò and Salemi to the organisation and its members, and the extent to which their differences may have influenced the organisation’s evolution), but they have also opened a unique window on what constitutes a surviving fragment of what might be arguably called “collective” oral memory itself. The oral testimonies form intricate narrative webs in which past historical events are tightly interwoven with personal stories, aspirations, frustrations and dreams. They have been particularly evocative of the interactions among FILEF members in a way that has suggested the presence of important frictions and tensions in the organisation and that reveals part of its inner workings in the 1970s.
## Selected Chronology of Events, 1970–80

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Italian-Australian</th>
<th>Australian</th>
<th>International</th>
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<tr>
<td>1970, 1 January</td>
<td>Bob Hawke becomes president of Australian Council of Trade Unions.</td>
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<td>1970, May</td>
<td>8 May: 200,000 Australians take part in Moratorium demonstrations against Vietnam War.</td>
<td>9 May: 100,000 people demonstrate against Vietnam War in Washington, DC.</td>
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<td>1970, August</td>
<td>Terrorist Red Brigades group is formed in Italy.</td>
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<td>1970, 15 October</td>
<td>Section of Melbourne West Gate Bridge under construction collapses. 35 workers die and 18 are injured. Many casualties are Italian-born immigrants.</td>
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<td>1970, 30 November – 3 December</td>
<td>Pope Paul VI visits Australia.</td>
<td>1 Oct.: Divorce Law bill is passed by House of Representatives in Italy. 8 Oct.: Coup led by former navy commander and far-right-wing militant Junio Valerio Borghese fails in Italy. Borghese flees to Spain.</td>
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<td>1970, December</td>
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<td>1971, January</td>
<td>Financed by the Methodist and Presbyterian churches, the Fitzroy Ecumenical Centre (FEC) (renamed the Centre for Urban Research and Action [CURA] in 1975) is opened under the supervision of Brian Howe, later supported by Arthur Faulkner and Des Storer.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971, August</td>
<td>11 Aug.: On census night, the Australian Bureau of Statistics records an Italian-born population of 289,47 – the largest migrant group from a non-English-speaking country in Australia.</td>
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<td>15 Aug.</td>
<td>US$ can no longer be exchanged to gold at a fixed value, de facto ending the Bretton Woods System of 1944.</td>
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<td>1971, August – September</td>
<td>Italian Communist Party (PCI) official and L’Unità correspondent Diego Novelli visits Australia. PCI branches are set up in Sydney, Wollongong and Melbourne.</td>
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<td>1971, December</td>
<td>5 Dec.: Split occurs in the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). The pro-Soviet splitters found the Socialist Party of Australia. 29 Dec.: Giovanni Leone becomes sixth president of the Italian Republic.</td>
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<td>1972, 26 January</td>
<td>Aboriginal Tent Embassy set up outside Parliament House, Canberra, in a demonstration for land rights.</td>
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<td>1972, March</td>
<td>Constituent congress of Independent PCI Federation is held in Melbourne. 13 March: 13th PCI congress elects Enrico Berlinguer as party secretary.</td>
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<td>1972, 7 May</td>
<td>General election in Italy. DC receives 38.7% of the votes, and PCI 27.1%.</td>
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<td>1972, July</td>
<td>Italian Federation of Migrant Workers and Their Families (FILEF) is founded in Melbourne and Sydney. In Melbourne, the first informal meetings are held in the North Coburg house of Giovanni Sgrò, a local ALP activist since 1958. Sgrò is elected secretary of the Melbourne branch. Second congress of Independent PCI Federation is held in Melbourne.</td>
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<td>1972, 23 August</td>
<td>Rupert Hamer (Liberal) becomes premier of Victoria.</td>
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<td>1972, October</td>
<td>21 Oct.: Snowy Mountains hydroelectric scheme is completed.</td>
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<td>6–25 Oct.: Yom Kippur war between Israel and Arab states led by Egypt and Syria.</td>
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<td>14 Dec.: Social Democrat Willy Brandt is elected chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany.</td>
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<td>1973, March</td>
<td>FEC organises series of seminars on migrant issues. FILEF activists take part. 26 March: Giovanni Sgrò is granted Australian citizenship at Coburg Town Hall. Minister for Immigration Al Grassby and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Gordon Bryant attend the ceremony and congratulate him personally.</td>
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<td>1973, April – May</td>
<td>Giuliano Pajetta, head of PCI emigration office, visits Australia.</td>
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<td>1973, 20–21 April</td>
<td>Third congress of Independent PCI Federation is held in Sydney. The executive committee is replaced with two comitati di sezione (branch committees), one in Melbourne and one in Sydney.</td>
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<td>1973, September</td>
<td>Industrial action takes place at the Ford automobile plant in Broadmeadows, Melbourne. Migrant workers defy request by union officials to return to work and clash with police at the plant's gates.</td>
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<td>1973, October – November</td>
<td>First Migrant Workers Conferences are held in Melbourne and Sydney. Approximately 400 delegates attend, including Ignazio Salemi, editor of the Rome-based FILEF magazine <em>Emigrazione</em> and PCI official. Salemi remains in Australia until November.</td>
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<td>1973, December</td>
<td>19 Dec.: Minister for Social Security Bill Hayden announces a scheme for the employment of welfare rights officers to assist disadvantaged ethnic groups. Ten migrant-based organisations are to be recipients of the program funds. From the Italian ethnic groups, FILEF and COASIT are chosen.</td>
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<td>1974, February</td>
<td>FEC receives a grant from the Ross Trust to conduct a study of Italians in the Coburg area. Part of the grant is diverted to establish FILEF office at 34–36 Munro Street, Coburg.</td>
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<td>1974, March</td>
<td>Ignazio Salemi returns to Australia to launch and edit the FILEF organ <em>Nuovo Paese</em>. He is also given the task of coordinating FILEF’s activities.</td>
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<td>1974, April</td>
<td>Italian Committee for the Federal ALP Government is founded, with Gordon Bryant as coordinator. 10 April: FILEF presents an ABC access TV program on workers’ rights. AMWU secretary John Halfpenny and state MP Tom Roper participate.</td>
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<td>1974, 1 May</td>
<td>FILEF biweekly organ <em>Nuovo Paese</em> is launched under the editorship of Joe Caputo. Bill O’Brien, Ted Forbes, Giovanni Sgò and Ignazio Salemi form the editorial staff.</td>
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<td>1974, May – December</td>
<td>In conjunction with the FEC, FILEF carries out a social survey among 400 Italian families in the Coburg-Brunswick area.</td>
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<td>1974, 20 July</td>
<td>FILEF premises in Coburg are officially opened. A few days later, Salemi returns to Italy for a short visit.</td>
<td>Turkey invades Cyprus.</td>
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<td>1974, 2 August</td>
<td>10 Sept.: June English, principal of Brunswick Girls High School, and Giovanni Sgrò disrupt the opening of the Victorian parliament, unfurling a banner to protest against lack of facilities in schools with a high percentage of migrant students. They avoid arrest after intervention by Labor MPs. 19 Sept.: FILEF is granted $10,000 by the federal government under the Welfare Rights Officer Program. FILEF presents second ABC access TV program.</td>
<td>8 Sept.: Red Brigades founders Renato Curcio and Alberto Franceschini are arrested, and later sentenced to 18 years in prison.</td>
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<td>1974, September</td>
<td>FILEF activist Cathy Angelone is employed as welfare rights officer.</td>
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<td>1974, November</td>
<td>FILEF office moves to 18 Munro Street, Coburg.</td>
<td>Cyclone Tracy devastates Darwin between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. 71 people are killed and widespread devastation recorded.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975, 5 January</td>
<td>Tasman Bridge in Hobart collapses when bulk ore carrier <em>Lake Illawarra</em> strikes two supporting piers. Twelve people die.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975, 24 February – 1 March</td>
<td>World Conference on Italian Emigration is held in Rome. Eight of the 20 Italian-Australian delegates belong to FILEF. Findings of FILEF-FEC 1974 social survey are tabled.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975, 6 April</td>
<td>FILEF public meeting at Coburg Town Hall is briefed on the World Conference on Italian Emigration.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975, 26 April</td>
<td>The Age publishes front-page article 'Italian communists move in' by Vincent Basile. Sensationally, it unveils the FILEF-PCI affiliation. The article raises concerns and anti-communist feelings in the community. Next day, Sgro distributes 20,000 leaflets denying the allegations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975, May</td>
<td>12 May: ABC access radio 3ZZ begins broadcasting programs in languages other than English. Ignazio Salemi and Umberto Martinengo fill the FILEF slot. 13 May: Arson attempt on FILEF premises in Coburg damages the editorial office of Nuovo Paese. The culprits are never found.</td>
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<td>1975, June</td>
<td>Ethnic radio stations 2EA in Sydney and 3EA in Melbourne begin broadcasting.</td>
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<td>1975, 30 July</td>
<td>Salemi fails to get an extension of his temporary residence permit and becomes a prohibited immigrant.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975, August</td>
<td>First Australian <em>Festa de l'Unità</em> is held in the Albion Hall, East Brunswick. Report of Henderson Commission of Inquiry into Poverty is tabled in federal parliament.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975, 11 November</td>
<td>Whitlam Labor government is dismissed by Governor-General Sir John Kerr. New election is called for 13 December.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975, 13 December</td>
<td>Liberal-Country Party coalition wins federal election, and Malcolm Fraser becomes prime minister. The only seat where the ALP increases its vote is Wills, where the FILEF Melbourne office is located.</td>
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<td>Year, Month</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976, 20 March</td>
<td>Hamer Liberal government is re-elected in Victoria.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976, April</td>
<td>First ‘boat people’ refugees arrive from Vietnam.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976, 6 May</td>
<td>Petitions for signatures begin to circulate demanding Salemi be granted amnesty.</td>
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</table>
| 1976, June       | Petitions for signatures begin to circulate demanding Salemi be granted amnesty.  
|                  | Earthquake hits north-eastern Italian region of Friuli, killing nearly 1,000 and making 100,000 homeless. |
| 1976, July       | 13 July: Minister for Social Security Margaret Guilfoyle pays a visit to FILEF in Coburg and hands over a $5,000 grant cheque. |
| 1976, July       | 2 July: Socialist Republic of Vietnam is formed, after unification of North and South Vietnam. |
| 1976, August     | Public pressure mounts on the government to grant Salemi a permanent visa.  
|                  | FILEF releases a press statement inviting all trade unions to join the struggle to keep him in Australia. |
|                  | 10 Aug.: Federal opposition spokesman on immigration Ted Innes suggests legal action to enable Salemi to remain in Australia. |
|                  | ACTU president Bob Hawke and opposition leader Gough Whitlam back the campaign. |
|                  | FILEF launches a defence fund.  
<p>|                  | 13 Aug.: Salemi takes out a High Court writ to challenge the constitutional validity of the refusal to grant amnesty to him. |
|                  | Peter Redlich, president of Victorian ALP, and Clyde Holding, Labor leader in Victorian parliament, represent Salemi. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 Aug.</td>
<td>FILEF organises pro-Salemi public meeting at the Albion Hall, East Brunswick. Peter Redlich, Gordon Bryant and Murray Gavin, mayor of Coburg, attend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Aug.</td>
<td>Innes receives a petition of 7,000 signatures which is tabled in parliament. FILEF is informed that its welfare rights officer funding will be cut as of 1 January 1977, and will be re-allocated to Parents Without Partners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Aug.</td>
<td>Salemi goes into hiding. Public support for his struggle intensifies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Aug.</td>
<td>At the first hearing in the High Court, Justice Gibbs strikes out Salemi's writ because he fails to establish a cause of action. In other words, Salemi is not entitled to an injunction to prevent his deportation. Innes receives a second petition of 1,100 signatures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976, 21 October</td>
<td>High Court full bench issues an order allowing Salemi to stay in Australia until further proceedings before the court are completed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977, February</td>
<td>With a $3,000 grant-in-aid from the Fitzroy City Council, FILEF opens a welfare office at the Social Planning Office in Fitzroy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977, May</td>
<td>Pro-Salemi petition collects 12,000 signatures. 11 May: High Court full bench rejects Salemi's appeal to challenge the Immigration Minister's right to deport him. In split decision, casting vote of Chief Justice Sir Garfield Barwick goes against Salemi. The minister is thus no longer obliged to abide by principles of natural justice in deportation decisions. Salemi's legal team ponders whether to appeal to the Privy Council. Salemi goes into hiding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977, 17 June</td>
<td>Federal ombudsman is asked to investigate charges that the Immigration Department supplied false information to its minister on the Salemi case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977, 24 August</td>
<td>Federal ombudsman concludes his report and finds that Immigration Department officials failed to properly advise their minister. However, the report has no legal implications and MacKellar decides Salemi should leave Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977, 2 September</td>
<td>An appeal to the federal government to allow Salemi to stay is rejected and a deportation order is issued. Australian federal police start searching for him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977, October</td>
<td>7-8 Oct.: First FILEF national congress is held in Melbourne. 18 Oct.: MacKellar refuses to say whether the Italian government asked the Australian government to withdraw deportation order against Salemi. 19 Oct. At approximately 10.30 a.m., Salemi is arrested while driving down Bell Street, Preston. After questioning, he is escorted to Tullamarine</td>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>109</td>
<td>Airport and placed on a Qantas flight to London. Salemi's sudden deportation takes the transportation unions by surprise, which had pledged to prevent his forced departure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977, 20 November</td>
<td>During the federal election campaign, more than 1,000 pro-Whitlam Italian migrants rally in front of Fitzroy Town Hall, organised by the Amici Italo-australiani dell’ALP.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977, December</td>
<td>FILEF activists campaign in Melbourne factories for the election of the ALP.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977, 10 December</td>
<td>Fraser Liberal government is re-elected.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978, 1 January</td>
<td>Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) is established to provide multilingual radio and television services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978, 16 March</td>
<td>DC president and former prime minister Aldo Moro is kidnapped by the Red Brigades, while his police escort of five is killed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978, April</td>
<td>Galbally Report on migrant services and programs is released.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978, May</td>
<td><em>Il Globo</em> buys out the Sydney based <em>La Fiamma</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978, 9 May</td>
<td>Moro's corpse is found in the boot of a car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978, 1 October</td>
<td>The <em>Festa de L’Unità</em> is held at the Italia Hall in Northcote, Melbourne.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1979, 25 February</td>
<td>First congress of Australian PCI Federation is held in Melbourne.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979, 5 May</td>
<td>Giovanni Sgrò becomes the first Italian-born person elected to the Victorian parliament.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979, 18 July</td>
<td>Sgrò makes his maiden parliamentary speech partly in Italian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979, November</td>
<td><em>Festa de L’Unità</em> is held in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>1980, August</td>
<td>30 Aug.: Australian PCI Federation organises <em>Festa Popolare</em> at the Albion Hall, with Bianca Bracci-Torsi from PCI central committee as guest speaker.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2 Aug.: Terrorist attack at Bologna railway station kills 85 people.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>14-31 Aug.: Strikes take place at Gdansk shipyard, paving the way for recognition of first non-communist trade union in Poland, Solidarity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980, 28 September</td>
<td>Second FILEF national congress is held at Princes Hill High School, Melbourne.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980, October</td>
<td>24 Oct.: Multilingual SBS television channel is launched.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31 Oct.: Polish government recognises Solidarity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980, 23 November</td>
<td>Earthquake measuring magnitude 7 rocks the Irpinia area in the province of Avellino, southern Italy. Nearly 3,000 people are killed and 200,000 left homeless.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980, December</td>
<td><em>Festa de l'Unità</em> is held in Coburg.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From FILEF, Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria

FILEF office, 2 Myrtle Street, Coburg, Vic., undated. Courtesy of Roberto Malara

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FILEF office, 2 Myrtle Street, Coburg, Vic., undated. From left: Renato Licata, Carlo Scalvini, Stefania Pieri, Stefano de Pieri. *Courtesy of Roberto Malara*

Antonio Gramsci Cultural Club, Coburg, Vic., undated. Cira La Gioia (front). *Courtesy of Roberto Malara*
A preparatory committee of the Migrant Workers Conference, 1975. From left: Des Storer, unknown, unknown (covered), unknown, Ignazio Salemi, Cathy Angelone, Joe Caputo, unknown, unknown. *From FILEF Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria*

FILEF members preparing the newspaper *Nuovo Paese*, 1975. From Left: Joe Caputo, Umberto Martinengo and Franco di Muro in the FILEF office. *From FILEF Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria*

Courtesy of Franco Lugarini


Courtesy of Umberto Martinengo
PCI public meeting, undated. From left: unknown, Renata Musolino, Margherita Gloster, unknown, unknown, unknown, Giuseppe Morsanutto, unknown, Franco Lugarini, Giuliano Pajetta, Renato Licata, unknown. *Courtesy of Franco Lugarini*
FILEF steering committee meeting, undated. From left: Renata Musolino, Cecilia Palma, Frank Barbaro, Renato Licata, Franco Lugarini and Antonio Coassin. Courtesy of Franco Lugarini

Antonio Gramsci Cultural Club, Thomastown, Vic., 1978. From right (seated): Michele Pizzichetta and Ilario Ierinò. From FILEF, Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria
FILEF meeting, Sydney, June 1978. From right (seated, panel members): Edoardo Burani, Giuliano Pajetta, Franca Arena, Umberto Martinengo and Gianni Gerberto. Courtesy of Umberto Martinengo

Festa de L’Unità, Melbourne, 1975. From left (standing): Vincenzo Mammoliti, Carlo Scalvini and Michele Pizzichetta. Antonio Gramsci’s quote (trans.): “Educate yourselves because we’ll need all your intelligence. Stir yourselves because we’ll need all your enthusiasm. Organise yourselves because we’ll need all your strength”. From A. Gramsci, L’Ordine Nuovo, 1(1), 1 May 1919. English translation from http://www.internationalgramscisociety.org. Courtesy of Franco Lugarini
PCI public meeting, East Brunswick, Vic., undated. Francesco Esposto (first from right, seated, in white shirt). *Courtesy of Franco Lugarini*

PCI public meeting, undated. First from left: Jim Simmonds, MLA. *Courtesy of Franco Lugarini*

PCI membership fundraising dinner, Albion Hall, East Brunswick, Vic., undated. *Courtesy of Franco Lugarini*
PCI membership fundraising dinner, Albion Hall, East Brunswick, Vic., undated. Third from right: Philip Herington (State Secretary of the CPA). On the left, front: Anne and Giovanni Sgro. *Courtesy of Franco Lugarini*

May Day, Melbourne, 1975. FILEF group, central banner-bearers Giovanni Sgro (L) and Umberto Frattali (R). *Courtesy of Umberto Frattali*
Protest against the closure of the Italy-Australia passengers’ sealine, undated. From left: Franco Lugarini, SS Guglielmo Marconi sea liner captain, unknown, Ignazio Salemi, Giovanni Sgrò, unknown. Courtesy of Franco Lugarini

Demonstration against dismissal of Whitlam government, City Square, Melbourne, 12 Nov. 1975. FILEF protesters. From left (front row): Cathy Angelone, Joe Caputo, Umberto Martinengo, Tom Diele. Courtesy of Umberto Martinengo
Demonstration against dismissal of Whitlam government, City Square, Melbourne, 12 Nov. 1975. From left: unknown, Cathy Angelone, Joe Caputo, unknown (row behind), Tom Diele, Umberto Martinengo. Courtesy of Umberto Martinengo

Demonstration against dismissal of Whitlam government, City Square, Melbourne, 12 Nov. 1975. From left: Joe Caputo, unknown (row behind), Umberto Martinengo, unknown. Courtesy of Umberto Martinengo

Town Hall, Fitzroy, Vic., 1975. Public assembly in support of access radio 3ZZ. *Courtesy of Umberto Martinengo*
Town Hall, Fitzroy, Vic., 1975. Public assembly in support of access radio 3ZZ. *Courtesy of Umberto Martinengo*

May Day, Melbourne, 1978. FILEF activists (front and central) Carlo Scalvini (L) and Umberto Martinengo (R). *Courtesy of Umberto Martinengo*

FILEF activists (front) Cathy Angelone (L) and Umberto Martinengo (R). Courtesy of Cathy Angelone and Ignazio Salemi

May Day, Melbourne, undated. Courtesy of Anne and Giovanni Sgro

*Courtesy of Roberto Malara*

Work stoppage, Ford factory, Fawkner, Vic., Aug. 1979. Giovanni Sgrò (fifth standing from left, in white jacket). *Courtesy of Roberto Malara*

World Conference on Italian Emigration, Rome, 27 Feb. 1975. Italy’s Minister for Budget and Economic Planning Giulio Andreotti (second from left) and PCI activist Franco Lugarini (standing, fifth from left). *From the FILEF Melbourne Archive*


Giovanni and Anne Sgrò, outside Parliament House, Melbourne, 1979. From the collection of the National Archives of Australia (NAA:A6180, 6/6/79/9)
Barbeque at Melbourne FILEF headquarters, undated. Cathy Angelone (centre) and Gordon Bryant MHR (centre turning to camera). Courtesy of Umberto Frattali

Barbeque at Melbourne FILEF headquarters, undated. Courtesy of Umberto Frattali
FILEF function, East Brunswick, Vic., early 1980s. Michele Pizzichetta (centre, front), Vincenzo Mammoliti (centre, back) and Renato Licata (right, front). From FILEF; Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria

Picnic of FILEF and PCI members, Melbourne, undated. From left: Cira La Gioia, Gianni Mamusa, Anna Maria Deiana, Franco Lugarini, Gaetano Greco, Noel Stuart, Cecilia Palma, Renata Musolino, Susan Licata, Lucia Licata (child), Roberto Malara and Carmela Ceglia. Courtesy of Franco Lugarini
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‘Caso Salemi – Fotocopie 1976’
‘Caso Salemi – Amnistia 1’
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‘Caso Salemi – Materiale vario’
‘Congressi FILEF 1977 e 1980’
‘Campagne [elettorali] 1974/75’
‘Corrispondenza Nuovo Paese’

Antonio Gramsci Institute Foundation, Rome

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Microfilm 42, ff. 713-16
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Microfilm 46, ff. 456-57
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Originals or digital/photocopies of the following personal papers have been made available for this research.

Joe Caputo
Emilio Deleidi
Ignazio Salemi
Giovanni Sgrò

INTERVIEWS

List of interviewees whose contributions are included in the main body of research (audio recordings and full transcription in possession of Simone Battiston).

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Burani, Edoardo Modena, Italy: 26 March 2003.
Deleidi, Emilio Fawkner, Vic., Australia: 23 May and 3 July 2002.
Lugarini, Franco Cerveteri, Italy: 9 April 2003.
Mammoliti, Vincenzo Bulla, Vic., Australia: 8 April and 16 May 2002.
Pieri, Stefania Rome, Italy: 8 April 2003.
Riccio, Rita Rome, Italy: 8 April 2003.
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