

The Evolution of Maritime Labour in Italy in the Age of Transition: 1880–1920

Luca Lo Basso

1 Introduction

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 marked a watershed moment between the worlds of sail and steam-powered navigation. Yet, almost everywhere, the transition to the new technology was still rather drawn out. In 1880, 75% of transport still took place by sail, with such vessels being considered more convenient, especially for particular commodities. The 1880s were thus decisive in the transition to steam: ships became larger in size and were built in iron and steel. More significantly, the advent of the triple expansion engine, together with the production of lighter hulls, significantly reduced the need for coal, minimising the space taken up by fuel on board and allowing for the loading of a greater quantity of commodities. In this way, late-century steamers began to cover long routes in shorter times and with less ports of call for supplies. In general, the technological development of maritime transport marked the blossoming of world trade, which continued to grow at a steady rate until the outbreak of the First World War.¹

Along with the expansion of marine traffic came the growth of both the costs and dimensions of steamships. These expenses could only be sustainable through considerable investments, which only large shipping lines could afford, with the financial support of banks. Small marine entrepreneurs, who had contributed so greatly to the Golden Age of Sail, no longer had a place in the new economy. This had enormous repercussions on the economy of coastal communities, and on the entire industry of maritime labour in general, which was increasingly undergoing profound changes.

1 Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells, “Filiere di prodotto in un economia globale,” in *Storia del Mondo, I mercati e le guerre mondiali 1870–1945*, vol. 5, ed. Emily S. Rosenberg, (Torino: Einaudi, 2012), 730–733.

2 The Transition from Sail to Steam and the Italian Merchant Marine

In those years, the development of the merchant marine of the new-born Kingdom of Italy was closely tied to the growth of the port of Genoa and of the Ligurian fleet,² as well as the new large shipping lines' commitment to the colonial project, as in the case of Rubattino who, in November 1869, favoured the agreement for an Italian presence in Assab, in the southern Red Sea. Rubattino's enthusiasm for the armament of steamers, however, did not prevent the growth of sailing ships in the marine, which reached its apex in 1870 before beginning to decrease.³

According to Edoardo Pantano—a member of parliament as well as the *Commissione Reale per i servizi marittimi*, established on 13 September 1902—in 1870, the Italian merchant fleet was fifth in terms of shipping tonnage, being preceded only by England, the USA, Norway, and France. The number of steamers, however, was so low that in the tonnage of steamships Italy found itself below Germany and Austria-Hungary. According to Pantano, while other countries transformed and mechanised their merchant navies, Italian shipyards remained anchored to the production of sailing ships, with large financial groups still investing too little capital. In 1880, Italy had only 80,000 tons of steamers, as opposed to the 3,000,000 possessed by England. The Kingdom was alarmed by this delay, and on 24 March 1881 it passed a law promoting a parliamentary inquiry on the sector, which will be discussed below with regards to maritime labour. The data gathered through the inquiry, especially thanks to the work of Paolo Boselli, pushed the Italian state to invest in the armament sector, financing companies with construction and shipping premiums. The law of 6 December 1885 pushed the Kingdom to spend 150 million lire on its marine between 1885 and 1896, although this did not produce great results.⁴ In fact, the official data shows an overall decrease in shipping, which went from a tonnage of 999,196 in 1880 to 765,281 in 1896. On the other hand, the number of steamships had increased, with many becoming larger, faster and more trustworthy. Although the marine started to grow again thanks to the transportation of emigrants in the 1890s, it had nonetheless declined to sixth position in the world rankings, now surpassed by Germany. At the beginning

2 Giorgio Doria, *Investimenti e sviluppo economico a Genova alla vigilia della Prima Guerra Mondiale*, 2 vols. (Milano: Pantarei, 2008).

3 Francesco Surdich, "I viaggi, i commerci, le colonie: radici locali dell'iniziativa espansionistica," in *Storia d'Italia, La Liguria*, ed. Antonio Gibelli and Paride Rugafiori, (Torino: Einaudi, 1994), 456–509.

4 Archivio Storico della Camera dei Deputati (hereafter ASCD), *Legislatura XIX*, Sessione Unica, vol. 616, n. 97.

of the new century, the Italian fleet was still made up of too many sailing ships, many of which were old and of poor quality, while according to Lloyd's register, Italian steamers formed only 2.5% of the world's steamships. In 1904, Pantano reported that Italy did not possess any transatlantic ships exceeding 7,000 tons in gross tonnage, while the average cruise speed of Italian steamers was 11.2 knots and the average age was sixteen years, compared, for example, to the German average of 7.1 years.⁵

In short, in spite of all its efforts in the early years of the Kingdom of Italy, the merchant marine was unable to undergo the rapid transformation experienced by other navies in the world. This was largely due to the persisting preference for sailing, due to its poor ability to find the capital necessary to arm new powerful and expensive steamers. As Ludovica De Courten has noted, "from the very beginning, the transformation of shipping was hampered by the lack of capital willing to flow to the maritime industry and from the lack of a spirit of partnership, since the transformation required large, suitably coordinated means given by the elevated cost of steamships and their higher operating expenses".⁶

The vast majority of Italian shipowners were slow to keep up with steam technology. There were, however, exceptions to the rule, most notably the *Navigazione Generale Italiana* (NGI), founded on 23 July 1881 through the merger of the old and famous companies of Raffaele Rubattino and that of Ignazio and Vincenzo Florio.⁷ The new colossus of Italian shipping managed to take over large proportions of the foreign as well as Italian market. This was in large part possible thanks to the aforementioned subsidy laws of 1885 and 1896, which were to the detriment of smaller shipowners who continued to invest in the traditional shipbuilding methods of the *ancien regime*. The enormous investment of the Italian state thus favoured NGI not so much in the subsidised routes, which remained rather undeveloped, but in the free routes, in which the company managed to prevail over others with the help of public aid. Francesco Crispi, the Italian prime minister, who saw the development of

5 *Atti della Commissione Reale per i servizi marittimi, Relazione generale*, vol. 1 (Imola: Editore Galeati, 1906), 11–20.

6 Ludovica De Courten, *La Marina mercantile italiana nella politica di espansione (1860–1914)* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1989), 44.

7 Maurizio Eliseo and Paolo Piccione, *Transatlantici. Storia delle grandi navi passeggeri italiane* (Genova: Tormena, 2001), 10–29; Giorgio Doria, *Debiti e navi. La compagnia di Rubattino 1839–1881* (Genova, Marietti, 1990); Orazio Cancila, *I Florio. Storia di una dinastia imprenditoriale* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2019).

NGI as a useful support for his expansionist and colonialist foreign policy, was particularly responsible for the government support.⁸

The limited and drawn-out growth of the Italian merchant fleet, in spite of all legislative efforts, was due in part to the extreme fragmentation of the public institutions which administered it. Up until the Sonnino-Bettolo law of 2 January 1910, which unified almost all authorities under the *Ministero della Marina*, the administration of the merchant marine had had a very troubled history.

With the unification of Italy, responsibilities for this matter had been delegated to the *Ministero della Marina*, which, according to the royal decree of 4 August 1861 n. 167, had established three divisions (*bagni, polizia della navigazione e sanità marittima; iscrizione marittima; materiale e tasse*), which later became part of the *Direzione Generale della marina mercantile* with royal decree n. 1963 of 26 July 1863, adding maritime health to its name. Later, in 1865, it was renamed the *Direzione Generale della marina mercantile e bagni penali*, but in 1886 the *bagni penali* were transferred to the control of the *Ministero dell'Interno*. Finally, with the royal decree of 26 April 1875, the establishment of the *Direzione Generale della marina mercantile* was reformulated and divided into two divisions (named VII and VIII). At the same time, however, many authorities related to the merchant fleet were subdivided into other ministries: subsidised lines, for example, fell under the protection of the *Ministero delle Poste e dei Telegrafi*, later named the *Ministero delle Comunicazioni*, which included within it an *Ispettorato per i servizi postali e commerciali marittimi*. The latter, in turn, was also part of the *Ministero dei Lavori Pubblici*. Other authorities fell under the aegis of the *Ministero degli Esteri*, while still others were under the control of the *Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio*. Furthermore, the picture was complicated by the fact that everything relating to the customs regime, maritime taxes, and state concessions fell under the *Ministero della Finanza*. After 1880, many people pushed for a concentration of powers under a single ministry, while many others, including Francesco Saverio Nitti, held that the merchant marine should not be under the control of the military. Finally, 1885 saw the establishment of the *Consiglio Superiore della Marina mercantile*, tasked with instructing all practices aiming to propose legislative interventions in favour of the shipping world. This important state organ was partially resized in 1898, only to be reconstituted in 1905. At a peripheral level

8 Giuseppe Barone, "Lo stato e la Marina mercantile in Italia (1881–1914)," *Studi Storici*, no. 15:3 (July–September 1974), 633–640; Fulvio Cammarano, *Storia dell'Italia liberale* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2011), 80–132; Archivio Centrale dello Stato (hereafter ACS), *Ministero delle Comunicazioni, Direzione Generale Marina Mercantile, Ispettorato Servizi marittimi*, b. 276.

the *Direzione Generale* stood above the three naval departments—initially Genoa, Naples, and Ancona—as well as the port authorities (instituted by royal decree on 30 June 1861), located in the headquarters of the Italian naval divisions, of which there were 23 in 1881, growing to reach 31 in 1914.⁹

3 Seafarers of the Kingdom of Italy: Numbers and Organization

Each port authority had well-defined powers, in geographic as well as human terms. Each individual registered to a naval district belonged to the category of “seafarers” (*Gente di mare*), which referred to all of those who were subject to maritime authority, whose activity came to be regulated by the *Codice della Marina mercantile del Regno d'Italia* of 25 June 1865 (royal decree n. 2360) and by successive amendments, with particular reference to the substantial update of 24 October 1878, royal decree n. 4146.¹⁰ The text of the first code was largely based on the *Regolamento della marina mercantile del Regno di Sardegna* of 13 January 1827, which, in turn, as far as classification and the registration of seafarers went, was based on the old ranking system of the French navy.

In the code of 1865, the Kingdom of Italy took inspiration from previous experience, and chapter 1 of title 11, article 17, specified that “seafarers are divided into two categories: those employed in navigation and those employed in maritime crafts and industries”.¹¹ The first category included captains and owners, sailors and cabin boys, engineers and firemen, and fishermen of the high seas. The second category, on the other hand, was comprised of shipbuilders, shipwrights and caulkers, pilots, and coastal boatmen and fishermen. In order to be registered, especially into the first category, individuals had to be at least ten years of age, vaccinated, and living in the naval division to which they belonged.

Seafarers therefore included various categories of people, whose number varied through time: while 176,491 Italians were registered in 1868, this number reached an apex of 210,267 a decade later, in large part thanks to the development of sailing, only to decrease in following years with the crisis of traditional navigation. In 1881 there were 176,335 registered individuals, making up only 0.6% of the Italian population, which numbered 28,951,546. A meagre

9 De Courten, *La Marina mercantile italiana*, 162–166; Marco Meriggi, “Le istituzioni del mare in età liberale,” in *A vela e a vapore. Economie, culture e istituzioni del mare nell'Italia dell'Ottocento*, ed. Paolo Frascani (Roma: Donzelli, 2001), 247–263.

10 Maria Stella Rollandi, “«Imparare a navigare». Istruzione e marina mercantile dalla legge Casati al primo dopoguerra,” in *A vela e a vapore*, 139–145.

11 *Codice per la Marina mercantile del Regno d'Italia* (Torino: Stamperia Reale, 1865), 5.

TABLE 2.1 Seafarers in Italy, 1881–1914

Year	First category	Second category	Total
1881	113,216	63,119	176,335
1886	118,301	71,620	189,921
1891	122,798	92,482	215,280
1896	126,540	113,828	240,368
1901	132,148	130,506	262,654
1909	160,224	169,821	330,045
1914	189,202	216,536	405,738

SOURCE: *SULLE CONDIZIONI DELLA MARINA MERCANTILE AL 31 DICEMBRE 1881* (ROMA: FORZANI TIPOGRAFI DEL SENATO, 1882), 3–23; *SULLE CONDIZIONI DELLA MARINA MERCANTILE AL 31 DICEMBRE 1886* (ROMA-FIRENZE: TIPOGRAFIA BENCINI, 1887), 22–32; *SULLE CONDIZIONI DELLA MARINA MERCANTILE AL 31 DICEMBRE 1891* (ROMA: TIPOGRAFIA CECCHINI, 1892), 37–47; *SULLE CONDIZIONI DELLA MARINA MERCANTILE AL 31 DICEMBRE 1896* (ROMA: TIPOGRAFIA CECCHINI, 1897), 3–13; *SULLE CONDIZIONI DELLA MARINA MERCANTILE AL 31 DICEMBRE 1901* (ROMA: TIPOGRAFIA CECCHINI, 1902), 3–12; *SULLE CONDIZIONI DELLA MARINA MERCANTILE AL 31 DICEMBRE 1909* (ROMA: OFFICINA POLIGRAFICA ITALIANA, 1911), 25–36; *SULLE CONDIZIONI DELLA MARINA MERCANTILE AL 31 DICEMBRE 1914* (ROMA: OFFICINA POLIGRAFICA ITALIANA, 1916), 23–35

percentage, nonetheless destined to rise rapidly in the following years, and which in any case represented a crucial category in the development of commerce and in the maintenance of a military navy on a par with the best in the world.

If we look at sample data from the years between 1881 and 1914, the era we define as the age of the great transformation, thanks to documents published yearly by the *Direzione Generale*, titled *Sulle condizioni della Marina mercantile*, we can note a general growth in seafarer numbers, depicted in Table 2.1.

As can be seen, a notable growth took place, with a doubling of the number of seafarers in the Kingdom of Italy. This doubling was chiefly caused by the development of the second category of seafarers, which had become the majority by the early 1900s. While the category of navigating personnel grew, this was with less intensity when compared to the shipwrights, caulkers, iron workers, and especially coastal fishermen and boatmen; together, these categories grew by about three and a half times during the age of transformation. More or less in the same period, 1887–1913, engine crew (engineers and firemen) grew from 5,002 to 16,977, while the number of deck personnel remained more or less the same, indeed the latter experienced a notable decrease in the

higher ranks, whose number was closely tied to geographic origin, especially the Ligurian divisions.

In order to closely observe the changes tied to maritime labour from the middle of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth century, the Ligurian area is therefore a privileged zone of observation and analysis. In 1881, according to the official census data of that year, the Ligurian population consisted of 936,476 individuals, while the total Italian population numbered 28,951,546; Liguria therefore made up 3.2% of the total. In spite of it being a small and sparsely populated region, Liguria alone—with its four divisions of Porto Maurizio, Savona, Genoa, and Spezia—supplied 22.2% (29,113) of the Kingdom's seafarers, out of a total of 176,635 men. Only two regions of the *Mezzogiorno*, southern Italy, namely Campania and Sicily, which were far larger in size and population, could compete with Liguria in this sense: Campania, with its two divisions from Naples and Castellammare di Stabia, supplied 20.7% of seafarers; while Sicily, with its five divisions from Messina, Catania, Porto Empedocle, Palermo, and Trapani, supplied 24.8%. These three regions were the most important areas for the supply of maritime workers, and together supplied 67.7% of the entire national category. In 1881, Liguria still supplied the largest number of sailing personnel, with those registered to the first category reaching 28,524, above Campania's 25,621 and Sicily's 22,021. The latter two regions saw a strong growth in coastal fishermen registered to the second category, largely absent from the Ligurian maritime tradition. The 1881 data confirms what can be defined as a historic trend: Liguria, to quote Braudel, boasted one of the highest rates of *maritimisation* in the entire Mediterranean, as well as in Europe.¹²

By comparing the 1881 data with data from the years 1886, 1891, 1896, 1901, 1909, and 1914, we note that Liguria lost its centrality as a source of seafarers with the advancement of technological transformation, while becoming the main source of the higher ranks on deck. As the work on board of steamships changed, to the detriment of the traditional figures tied to the world of sailing, Liguria began to specialise in the supply of higher officials, who were beginning to emerge from the local nautical schools. This is confirmed by the fact that in 1886 Liguria alone provided 58% of the national seafaring population working on deck, including sailors. Of the 4,460 master mariners in the Kingdom of Italy, 2,782 were Ligurian (62.4%).

In the years of our sample we can observe a general decrease in the Ligurian presence: from 21.5% in 1891 to 18.4% in 1901, up to the final datum of 1914,

12 GIS d'histoire maritime (ed.), *La Maritimisation du monde de la préhistoire à nos jours* (Paris: PUPS, 2016).

when the percentage of seafarers from the Ligurian divisions declined to 17.4%, compared to 20.8% from Campania (which at the time also gained two further naval divisions: Torre del Greco and Salerno), and 27% from Sicily (which had the added division of Siracusa). In any case, on the eve of the Great War, Liguria continued to supply the highest number of captains (54.7%), compared to the data available on Campania (19%) and Sicily (13.7%). The same trend can be observed with relation to engineers: 41.6% of which were from Liguria, 21.5% from Sicily, and 13.3% for Campania. All of this was occurring when in fact the transition from sail to steam had already taken place: 348,959 tons of the former still existed compared to 933,156 of the latter, bearing in mind that in 1881 the tonnage of sail ships amounted to 895,359, in contrast to a mere 93,698 of steamships.¹³ In Italy, too, the *ancien regime* of maritime history had waned.

4 Maritime Labour from the Modern Age to the 1881 Parliamentary Inquiry

For a long time, the recruitment of seafarers took place on a clientelistic or casual basis, and always according to a verbal contract, which took place on board, on the quays or simply in meeting places such as the inns and taverns of port cities. In many cases, more or less improvised mediators intervened between the parties, ensuring a safe embarkation in exchange for a small percentage of their client's signing bonus.¹⁴ The orally stipulated agreement between the captain and the recruit usually provided for an advance payment, a signing bonus, which could be quite substantial depending on the type of journey. Often stipulated in front of witnesses, oral contracts were based on the nature of the route and the type of retribution offered by the captain. A secondary but significant part concerned food, drink, and perquisites which could be obtained during the journey, all of which were regulated by unwritten

13 *Sulle Condizioni della marina mercantile al 31 dicembre 1881* (Roma: Forzani Tipografi del Senato, 1882), 3–23; *Sulle Condizioni della marina mercantile al 31 dicembre 1886* (Roma-Firenze: Tipografia Bencini, 1887), 22–32; *Sulle Condizioni della marina mercantile al 31 dicembre 1891* (Roma: Tipografia Cecchini, 1892), 37–47; *Sulle Condizioni della marina mercantile al 31 dicembre 1896* (Roma: Tipografia Cecchini, 1897), 3–13; *Sulle Condizioni della marina mercantile al 31 dicembre 1901* (Roma: Tipografia Cecchini, 1902), 3–12; *Sulle Condizioni della marina mercantile al 31 dicembre 1909* (Roma: Officina Poligrafica Italiana, 1911), 25–36; *Sulle Condizioni della marina mercantile al 31 dicembre 1914* (Roma: Officina Poligrafica Italiana, 1916), 23–35.

14 Luca Lo Basso, "Gli intermediari del lavoro marittimo a Venezia tra XVII e XVIII secolo: galeotti e marinai," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome—Italie et Méditerranée modernes et contemporaines*, no. 129.1 (2017): 57–65.

custom. Generally speaking, only three types of contracts were in use in the modern era. The first was the share system: in practice each crew member earned according to an individual share, calculated in proportion to the profits earned from the journey. The second form, common in northern Europe, provided for a lump sum payment calculated on each single journey. Last but not least was the monthly salary, calculated according to each crew member's assigned role, and increasingly prevalent on long journeys and larger ships. The latter contractual form became steadily established, increasingly subordinating the waged sailor to the will of the captains and the decisions of the owners. However, in many sectors, such as small and medium cabotage, privateering, and fishing, share-based contracts remained widespread, guaranteeing larger margins of income for weaker members of the crew, such as sailors and cabin boys. On top of all this, in any case, in the maritime world of the *ancien regime*, a substantial part of seafarers' income was based on each crew member's ability to transport a certain quantity of cargo, known in Italian as *paccottiglia*, without having to comply with customs law. While difficult to calculate, due to the fact that it was not subject to control and therefore was not recorded on the ship's documents, income from *paccottiglia* often formed the most significant part of each sailor's income, and therefore served to compensate for low wages or low profits derived from the journey.¹⁵

In the second half of the nineteenth century, as the maritime *ancien regime* transitioned to the contemporary age, work at sea became increasingly globalised and tied to rapid capitalist and industrial development. The wage form was imposed as the contractual basis for all seafarers in the world, barring a section of those embarked on sailing ships, smaller vessels on shorter journeys, and those on fishing ships. Wage payments, similar to those taking place in factories on land, together with processes of industrialization, increasingly subordinated sailors to capital. On large steamships especially, due in part to the introduction of new professional figures tied to machinery, proletarianisation became a growing phenomenon.¹⁶ These vessels saw a steady growth of the wage gap between officials, headed by the captain, and the men of the lower ranks, reaching proportions which far exceeded those of the age of sail. In other words, if wages are still today calculated according to skills and marginal productivity—that is to say, based upon each worker's individual

15 Luca Lo Basso, *Gente di bordo. La vita quotidiana dei marittimi genovesi nel XVIII secolo* (Roma: Carocci, 2016), 160–161 and 164; Marcus Rediker, *Sulle tracce dei pirati. La storia affascinante della vita sui mari del '700* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1996), 149–162.

16 Maria Elisabetta Tonizzi, "Lavoro e lavoratori del mare nell'età della globalizzazione," *Contemporanea*, no. 17.4 (October–December 2014): 691–701.

contributions to the enterprise he works for—it can be observed that the advent of steamships devalued the role of the sailor, who began to play a minor role in the functioning of the vessel, while also experiencing a clear loss of skills in comparison to work on sailing ships. All of this resulted in a fall in wages for a social category which therefore became marginal when compared to other professions tied to machines. In addition to this, the mass of sailors no longer formed the social basis for careers which rose to the higher ranks, as, with the advent of steam, officials began to emerge almost exclusively from nautical schools rather than through practical experience on board a ship.¹⁷ Crews on steamships came from two separate worlds: the world of the officials, who were largely recruited from the urban bourgeois middle classes or from the sons of captains themselves, who at the end of the nineteenth century had access to education; and the world of the sailors, working class men who worked at sea out of strict necessity or in order to escape punishment on the mainland. This was a drawn-out process which would only reach completion well into the twentieth century. By taking a look at the registry of the Porto Maurizio division, starting from 1886, we can note that many of those who began as sailors or cabin boys ended their careers in more or less the same positions. This is the case with Emanuele Bonifai, born in Alassio in 1872, who first embarked on 2 June 1886 as a cabin boy, became a sailor in 1893 and ended his career at sea in 1916, still a sailor, on an Italian steamer sunk by a German submarine in Rhodes. A similar story can be found in the career of Giambattista Gandolfo, born in 1873, who embarked as a cabin boy in 1886 and ended his service as a sailor in 1905. Aboard sailing ships, however, at least some career progression was still possible. Sebastiano Cerrisano, born in 1860 in Cervo, first embarked in 1886 and was relieved of duty in 1913 with the rank of boatswain. In other cases, albeit very few, the transition from sail to steam allowed some workers in the low ranks to be promoted to the level of lower officials. Giuseppe Salvo, born in Porto Maurizio in 1872, embarked as a cabin boy on a sailing ship in 1886 and became third mate on the brigantine *Teresa* in 1896, before passing with the same rank onto the NGI steamer *Bisagno* in 1898, and ending his career in 1900, still as third mate. Lastly, in other examples, we

17 Thomas Piketty, *Il capitale nel XXI secolo*, (Milano: Bompiani, 2014), 466; Valerie Burton, “The making of a nineteenth-century profession: shipmasters and the British shipping industry,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, no. 1.1 (1990): 97; Karel Davids, “Technological change and the professionalism of masters and mates in the Dutch mercantile marine, 1815–1914,” *Collectanea Maritima*, no. 5 (1991): 282–303; Rodrigo de Oliveira Torres, “Handling the ship: rights and duties of masters, mates, seamen and owners of ships in nineteenth-century merchant marine,” *International Journal of Maritime History*, no. 26.3 (August 2014): 587–99.

catch a glimpse of the new path to officialdom by attending nautical schools. This was the case with Carlo Vincenzo Dolce, born in Borghetto S. Spirito in 1854, who, in 1886, was second mate on a brigantine, and two years later passed with the same rank onto a small steamship, before taking leave in 1897 as mate on the NGI steamship *Domenico Balduino*.¹⁸

By taking a step back and observing the career data for the Genoa division from two decades earlier, we can better observe the phases of the transformation of maritime labour. For those registered at the end of the 1860s, in the world of sail, it was still possible to begin as cabin boy and end as master mariner, just as it had been in the eighteenth century. Such was the case for Giovanni Battista Marco Mango, born in Genoa on 25 April 1846, who registered as a seafarer on 6 April 1869 to embark with the lowest rank of the crew on a brigantine headed to Tabarka, Tunisia and then to Naples. After sailing for a few years on Mediterranean ships, he managed to become a mate at the beginning of 1875 and obtained his master mariner licence in the same year. Similarly, on 14 April 1869, the cabin boy Giuseppe Antonio Andrea Devillaine, born in Voltri on 14 April 1851, embarked on a sailing ship commanded by captain Maggiolo, where he pursued his career before being nominated master mariner on 10 August 1877.¹⁹ These career progressions vanished in the transition to steam, after which seafarers began and ended their career in the same category.

In spite of the efforts of several prominent members of the shipping industry, problems related to recruitment and wages of seafarers in Italy and the rest of the world weighed heavily on the steady proletarianisation of the lower ranks, only gradually slowed down by the organisation of trade unions and by the dramatic outbreaks of social protest which took place in the first decade of the twentieth century.²⁰

The *Parliamentary Inquiry of 1881–1882*—brainchild of Paolo Boselli, Member of Parliament from Savona and vice president of the inquiry's commission—offers a vivid early snapshot of the long journey which redefined labour relations in the Italian maritime sector. Established on 24 March 1881,

18 Archivio di Stato di Imperia (hereafter AS1), *Capitaneria di Porto, Matricole della Gente di Mare*, reg. 1.

19 Archivio di Stato di Genova (hereafter ASG), *Matricole della Gente di mare*, reg. 7, matricola 6703 e matricola 6718.

20 Leon Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea: Merchant Seamen in the World's First Globalized Industry, from 1812 to the Present* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Brad Beaven, "From jolly sailor to proletarian jack: the remaking of sailortown and the merchant seafarer in Victorian London," in *Port Towns and Urban Cultures*, eds. Brad Beaven, Karl Bell and Robert James (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 159–178.

the commission was to study the conditions of the merchant marine and propose any improvements which could ensure its future and development. It was made up of fifteen members: five members of the senate, five members of the chamber of deputies, and five experts nominated by royal decree. It met for the first time on 21 June 1881, and based on Boselli's proposal it proceeded to organise its research which concluded a year later, after having gathered 275 oral statements and 460 written pleadings from all businesses in the sector. The findings, in turn, were published in seven volumes.²¹

With regards to issues concerning the "moral and material conditions of seafarers", published in the third volume of the *Inquiry*, the commission highlighted the specific interests of the interviewed businesses, which focused on three major themes: wages, working hours, and the education of seafarers.

Various voices spoke in favour of spreading education among seafarers, including those of lower rank. One of these was Enrico Cheirasco, harbour-master of Bari, according to whom only "mandatory education could improve the moral conditions of seafarers", who in turn should receive a minimum wage decided by the state.²² Several parties voiced their agreement with the Bari harbourmaster, including the Venice Chamber of Commerce, the "Vincenzo Bartolo" Mutual Aid Society of Palermo, and captain Giuseppe Messina Manzo of Trapani. For all of these figures, low levels of education corresponded to immoral behaviour, which promoted the detriment of the shipping industry. According to Domenico Renier, president of the fishermen's school of Chioggia, it was necessary to raise literacy levels among seafarers, and to introduce a virtuous system for the promotion of owners and captains based on moral and other merits. In addition to this, several parties all over Italy spoke in favour of an accurate reform of the retirement system based on the *casse invalidi*.²³

Wages, however, remained the most burning question. Many respondents to the inquiry argued that there had been a significant drop in income following the transition from the share system to the monthly wage system, for the lower ranks especially. The economist Sabino Fiorese, from Bari, proposed to increase the recruitment of sailors working for shares, which had typically been used on sailing ships in the past. According to him, with this solution "the sailor does not earn a wage, or does so only in minimal proportions, enjoying

21 *Inchiesta parlamentare sulla Marina mercantile (1881–1882)*, vol. 1 (Roma: Tipografia Eredi Botta, 1882), III–VIII.

22 *Inchiesta parlamentare sulla Marina mercantile (1881–1882)*, vol. 3 (Roma: Tipografia Eredi Botta, 1882), 144.

23 *Ibid.*, 167–69 and 152. In this book: Andrea Zappia, *Between Maritime Labor and Social Security in the Kingdom of Italy: the Cassa degli invalidi della Marina mercantile of Genova in the Age of Transition (1861–1894)*.

instead a share of the profits of the journey, in addition to the right to transport his *paccottiglia* which he can sell in his motherland to make a further profit".²⁴ Those in agreement with this proposal included the aforementioned Domenico Renier of Chioggia and Sir Alberto Nattini of Genoa, who stressed the elimination of the customary right of *paccottiglia* as a key element in understanding the crisis of sailors' wages. All of these figures, who give us a picture of the maritime mentality of the time, saw the centuries-old traditions of the age of sail as the ideal labour regime, corrupted only by the advent of industrialization. At least in part, they were right. The gradual growth of wage labour, which excluded the lower ranks from a share of the profits, and eliminated the right of carrying *paccottiglia*, had proletarianised the lower crew members, who faced a difficult and dangerous job with shrinking remuneration. This tendency had in fact already begun in the modern era on big ships with very large crews employed on long routes. The advent of steam, with the increased tonnage and crew size that came with it, had only expanded and deepened these issues. Finally, the arrival of new professional figures on board precipitated the downfall of wages, with sailors considered increasingly unskilled and therefore paid less than others.

TABLE 2.2 Italian wages, 1871–1880 (Italian lira)

Port/Year	1871	1872	1873	1874	1875	1876	1877	1878	1879	1880
Savona	58,49	58,8	62,18	62,21	62,54	60,09	58,01	56,31	50,44	50,33
Genova	65	65	65	65	62,5	62,5	60,55	55,5	55,5	50
Livorno	54,75	57,16	60,41	59,17	59	58	59	55	51	56
Naples	65,4	74	61,5	71,14	72,4	73,85	70,91	75,14	69,67	66,87
Castellammare di Stabia	70	71,25	70,4	70,8	67,15	66,4	66,3	65,13	65,28	65,26
Bari	34	34	37,5	34	34,08	38,83	43,16	43,16	50	57
Ancona	55,87	53,04	55,14	57,5	54,22	52,6	55,66	52,75	50	50
Venezia	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
Cagliari	65	60	60	60	60	60	60	55	55	50
Messina	72	70	73	73	72,25	70	69	65	63	65
Palermo	71,41	73,6	73,91	80,05	80,09	81,66	78,66	66,41	71,58	71,33

SOURCE: *INCHIESTA PARLAMENTARE SULLA MARINA MERCANTILE (1881–1882)*, VOL. 3 (ROMA: TIPOGRAFIA EREDI BOTTA, 1882), 188

²⁴ Ibid., 145.

Many respondents spoke out in general against the low wages earned by Italian sailors. One of such voices was commander Luigi Orlando of Livorno, according to whom: “our sailors are underpaid, they get 60 or 65 lire a month, including a deduction for the *cassa invalidi*; they are often married with children and can’t survive on their income”.²⁵ All of this was coupled with a rising cost of living due to a steep rise in food prices while, according to Orlando, Italian shipowners had not adjusted their wage rates. According to data gathered by the Mutual Aid Society among seafarers in Palermo, the average salary was 75 lire, of which 5.5 lire were spent on medical expenses and on the *cassa invalidi*, 40 on food, which was usually of mediocre quality, and 15 on rent. At the end of the day, sailors ended up with only 15.5 lire in their pockets.²⁶ According to the Italian consul in Aleppo, the low wages worsened with the years, for as long as a sailor was young, unmarried, and lived several months on board, he managed to set aside some money, but after turning 30, when most got married and had children, the real problems began.²⁷

Finally, the *Parliamentary Inquiry* stressed the issue of working hours, which in those years, as a close examination of Genoese logbooks will demonstrate, still had no limits and remained at the discretion of the companies and captains. It was pointed out that the working day in the port of Genoa could last up to 21 hours, as sailors worked to unload commodities, going “against any principle of justice and hygiene, even more so given that the sailor doesn’t receive any overtime pay”. According to the Mutual Aid Society of the Italian workers in Genoa, this practice put sailors “at the mercy of the more or less inhumane shipowner, who, not satisfied by his lucrative commercial transactions, speculates on the very bread earned by his crew with many privations”. Finally, it was claimed “that the condition of the Italian sailor deserves to be taken into serious consideration, for its miserable remuneration as well as for the victuals and for the unbearable duration of the work, which oppress our mariner class”.²⁸

5 Employment Contracts, Wage Conditions and Working Hours: 1881–1906

In order to better regulate working conditions on board, at the time of embarking each crew member signed an employment contract, which specified the

25 Ibid., 161.

26 Ibid., 167–169.

27 Ibid., 181.

28 Ibid., 153–157.

length of the journey and all aspects related to tasks and duties, working hours, victuals, and life on board in general.²⁹ Each contract was transcribed into a dedicated register, deposited at the port authority of the ship's division and written into the ship's own logbook. This is clearly an extraordinary source, useful to better understand all aspects of maritime labour at the time of the transition from sail to steam, even if the point of view is a formal one posed by the shipowner. In order to better analyse the working conditions at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first years of the following century, we will use a number of examples from the enormous collection of logbooks produced by the division of Genoa held in the local state archive, basing ourselves on the methodological model which Paolo Frascani proposed a few years ago in his pioneering essay on sailing ships,³⁰ as well as the fundamental work of Maria Stella Rollandi³¹ and a recent study by Carlo Stiacchini.³²

According to the rules of procedure for the writing of logbooks of 7 December 1885, there were five types of logbooks in Italy: general and accounting; navigation; hold logbooks; inventory; and machine. Each of these had its own functions and characteristics, but logbooks of the first type are what we need to look at in order to better analyse the recruitment and working conditions of the crew. According to the regulations, this type of document was exclusively written and signed by the captain and, on rare occasions, by the first mate. Although the log was a public document, which was to be deposited with the port authority for legal purposes, it was the direct expression of the will and mentality of the captain, who compiled it as he liked, inserting or omitting information at the end to justify his position of leadership. Besides the ship's and the captain's administrative data, the log contained the employment contract of the whole crew, followed by the crew list. The captain had to record, on a daily basis: all the items which formed the ship's cargo; all the damage and injuries which took place on board; the list of advance payments conceded to the crew on the journey; everything regarding desertions, absences, deaths and births; wills drawn up at sea; every crime and penalty; all information regarding health and daily life; and all accounting and technical issues regarding the vessels, whether it was a sailing ship or a steamer.

29 Maria Stella Rollandi, "Persistenze e mutamenti. L'organizzazione del lavoro marittimo in Italia (1861–1939)," *Storia e problemi contemporanei*, no. 63 (maggio 2013): 17.

30 Paolo Frascani, "Una comunità in viaggio: dal racconto dei giornali di bordo delle navi napoletane (1861–1900)," in *A vela e a vapore*, 115–119.

31 Maria Stella Rollandi, *Lavorare sul mare. Economia e organizzazione del lavoro marittimo fra Otto e Novecento* (Genova: Società Ligure di Storia Patria, 2002).

32 Carlo Stiacchini, *Andar per mare. Storie di navi, capitani coraggiosi e migranti tra Otto e Novecento* (Torino: L'Harmattan, 2019). In the Genoa State Archives for the period 1883–1953 there are 12,039 registers, of which 1303 are general and accounting journals.

By observing a set of contracts, and comparing sailing vessels and steamers, we can note differing conditions with regards to duration, wage payments, and working hours. The length of the contract, which also took into account the possibility of the employee's military duty, varied from the most traditional journey-based contract, as in the case of the brig *Catterina G.* commanded by Filippo D'Aste, to a length of twelve months in the case of the brigantine *Edinburgh*, or even 30 months on the sailing ship *Edilio Raggio*, destined to cover the route from Genoa to New York. On sailing ships, two months of advance pay were paid out as a signing bonus, while successive payments were paid each month starting from the signing of the contract itself. Captains had a wide margin of operation in the distribution of victuals and in the concession of advance payments. On sailing vessels, contracts almost always included different conditions when the ship rounded the Cape of Good Hope or the infamous Cape Horn. In general, monthly wage rates offered captains a salary three times that of the simple sailor, as can be inferred from the case of the *Catterina G.*, destined in 1894 to cover the route between Genoa and Rio de la Plata, before returning towards northern Europe to load timber. On this vessel the captain earned a wage of 150 lire, the mate earned 95, the boatswain 75, and sailors 50, while younger cabin boys earned as little as 15 lire. There was no regulation against the practice of carrying *paccottiglia*, which therefore probably continued to at least partly compensate for the low income of the lower ranks.³³

On the aforementioned sailing vessel *Edilio Raggio*, the pay gap was far wider, as the captain received a monthly salary of 300 lire, while a simple sailor received only 60 lire, a ratio approaching that of steamships. Working hours were almost never specified for sailing ships, and overtime pay was consequently unknown, following a system that was more typical of the *ancien regime*. Nonetheless, on the *Caterina G.*, captain d'Aste specified that "work is from six in the morning to six in the evening, both in summer and winter, barring extraordinary cases in ports", where shifts could even exceed twelve hours a day.

Employment contracts on steamships, on the other hand, appear to have been more formalised and regulated, especially on those ships belonging to large companies specialised in passenger transport, often subsidised by the state and therefore obligated to offer more standardised labour contracts. But even in this case there is a notable difference between the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth, when

33 ASG, *Giornali nautici*, reg. 438/1 del 1° febbraio 1894, reg. 594/1 del 30 dicembre 1890 e 602/1 del 27 marzo 1898.

crews benefitted from the new national employment contract modified by the *Commissione Reale per i servizi marittimi* in 1905 and by the *Consiglio Superiore della Marina mercantile* in 1906–07.

In the first place, hundreds of people embarked on steamships, in contrast to sailing ships whose personnel often amounted to a few dozen crew members. This fact alone meant that the two workplaces differed widely, but steamships also included new professional figures including engineers, firemen, electricians, oilers, and coalmen, among several others. Secondly, signing bonuses were rarely awarded on steamships, barring few exceptions such as the case of the *Colombo*, belonging to Sir Giacomo Cresta, which serviced the routes between Genoa and South America at the end of the 1890s, or the collier steamship *Carlo R.*, which was ready to leave Newcastle for Genoa on 27 December 1886.³⁴

While wages on the *Colombo* were paid on a monthly basis, payments on passenger steamships directed to America were only made at the end of the return journey. This was done in order to avoid desertion as much as possible, given that fact the lower ranks often included people who tried to emigrate, taking advantage of employment aboard passenger ships.

By examining the employment contract of the steamship *Centro America* (5 June 1897), of the La Veloce company, we can note that in addition to the payment of wages at the end of the journey, the distribution of victuals was more standardised. Though the final word remained with the captain, there were certain perquisites for the engine crew: “half a litre of wine will be distributed to the engine crew, including at breakfast when the latter consists of cheese or saltfish”. In any case, for all crew members the soup included no meat for two days of the week, and pasta on Thursdays and Sundays, except during navigation. The working day was not standardised (although it never exceeded twelve hours), but in any case all overtime had to be paid at 50 cents an hour. The *Centro America* also had an exponentially higher wage gap between officials and the lower ranks: the captain’s salary was 6.6 times higher than the sailors’ wage. Another innovation on these vessels, which was destined to heavily influence the internal structure of life aboard, was the fact that the chief engineer earned the same salary as the captain (400 lire). While the captain himself remained absolutely responsible for the ship, his authority was put into question for the first time in centuries. Finally, observing the wage register demonstrates a wage differentiation according to technical skills. Electricians earned 150 a month, in contrast to the more traditional figure of the boatswain, who earned only 115. Oilers earned 90 lire, the fireman 85, the

34 ASG, *Giornali nautici*, reg. 501/1 del 25 ottobre 1897 e reg. 408/1 del 27 dicembre 1886.

butcher 80 and the baker 70. Beneath the sailors (who were paid 60 lire) we find only the kitchen boys with a wage of 50 lire—high if compared to that of sailors—and cabin boys who earned a mere 25 lire a month.³⁵

The same situation can be found on other steamships belonging to La Veloce at the end of the nineteenth century, such as the *Città di Milano* and the *Città di Torino*, two twin steamers with a tonnage of 2,500 each. The contract aboard these vessels was practically identical to the one discussed before, with only the addition of work shifts, which could have been extended at will by the captain, while only the engine crew had the right to an overtime pay of 60 cents an hour.³⁶ In all cases, as clearly specified on the contract of the *Colombo*, the ability to carry any kind of *paccottiglia* whatsoever was expressly prohibited, as was any type of commerce with the passengers on board. Wages were even lower on small merchant steamships in the Mediterranean, such as the *Eden* which weighed only 536 tons. This was true for the officials—the chief engineer earned 150 lire a month in comparison to the 400 earned on transatlantic vessels—as for the lower ranks, with sailors earning only 55 lire and cabin boys earning 20. The conditions on the contracts of these kinds of ship remained poor until the first decade of the twentieth century, as in the case of the cargo steamer *Ebe*, of 993.71 tons belonging to Francesco Chianca, which in 1902 still allowed for the termination of contracts at the whim of the captain.³⁷

At the end of the 1890s, the wages of the lower ranks remained rather low. Sailors no longer paid in shares, as was the custom on sailing ships, the working day remained rather undefined, and overtime pay depended entirely on the will of the captain or other officials; only in a few cases were any bonuses paid out at all.

Article 71 of the *Codice della Marina mercantile* ordered that crews had to be made up by two-thirds of Italian nationals, but did not specify a minimum crew size. Owners therefore recruited as sparingly as possible, thus making watch keeping difficult on board the ship itself. Regarding the national composition of crews, it is worth bringing up a petition presented to the Chamber of Deputies by the Italian Federation of Seafarers in 1903. The presenters of this enlightening document denounced that “there are subsidised shipping lines which carry the Italian flag, but who give an opposite example by employing crews made up by two-thirds of foreign workers aboard several of their

35 ASG, *Giornali nautici*, reg. 448/1 del 5 giugno 1897. For a comparison with the Greek case see Apostolos Delis, “Ship Operation in Transition: Greek Cargo Sailing Ships and Steamers, 1860s–1910s”, in the present volume.

36 ASG, *Giornali nautici*, reg. 479/1 del 26 aprile 1899 e reg. 482/1 del 29 ottobre 1900.

37 ASG, *Giornali nautici*, reg. 501/1 del 25 ottobre 1897, reg. 598/1 del 10 marzo 1894 e reg. 596/1 del 13 settembre 1902.

ships. These companies have justified their violation of the law with a fable according to which torrid climates are unbearable by the white races. But this excuse, which conceals malicious economies to the detriment of Italian workers, is proven to be absurd by the fact that other foreign companies, which travel on the same routes, employ white workers, including Italian workers. The latter, in terms of productivity and resistance to climate conditions, have proven to be superior to workers of the black races, who offer no advantage other than selling their labour for the vilest and lowest wage".³⁸ Furthermore, according to the same trade unionists, recruitment did not always take place among those people registered as the legal category of seafarer. "According to current practice", the document continued, "companies recruit workers from the port authorities who are only in possession of a document obtained from the police headquarters, and haven't officially registered as seafarers. And yet, these workers are made to work as firemen, as sailors, and other work servicing the ship, which means that any person in the crew is considered a seafarer, according to the wider meaning of the word".³⁹

In spite of the flagrant abuses, observing the logbooks of the Genoa division reveals that the crews, or at least those registered officially, were Italian. For example, 650-ton vessels such as the *Catterina G.* were manned by around twelve to fifteen people, while the crews of passenger steamships were far more numerous. The aforementioned *Colombo*, for example, weighed 1,577 tons and had a crew of 58 men, of which 34 came from the division of Genoa, while others primarily came from the *Mezzogiorno* (southern Italy).⁴⁰ This is confirmed by looking at the collection of crew lists in the age of the Sardinian marine, held at the Genoa State Archives. In the last years of the Kingdom of Sardinia we can clearly see how sailing crews were still all exclusively made up of Ligurians, almost always hailing from the same location or even the same family, as was common during the *ancien regime*. On 29 January 1856, for example, the brig *Caterina*, weighing 179.70 tons and built in Varazze in 1841, had a crew of twelve people, of which ten came from Nervi, one from Genoa and one from Savona. The captain, his mate and the boatswain all came from the same family: Massone. And still, on 12 October 1860, aboard the brigantine *Aquila*, weighing 256.98 tons and commanded by captain Gio Batta Lavarello of Recco,

38 ASCD, *Petizioni a stampa*, b. 10, n. 46, *Legalità e riforme necessarie al lavoro sul mare*, Genova, 1903, 4.

39 *Ibid.*, 5.

40 ASG, *Giornali nautici*, reg. 438/1 del 1° febbraio 1894 e reg. 501/1 del 25 ottobre 1897.

there were 25 crew members, of which only one was from Naples, while the others were primarily from Recco and Camogli.⁴¹

In order to construct a more accurate picture of the working conditions of seafarers, it is useful to analyse the state inspection of the NGI's 65 steamships, the report of which was presented on 23 November 1893 to the minister of Posts and Telegraphs. Conserved in the Historical Archive of the Chamber of Deputies, the thick file not only contains a technical inspection, but also a review of the crews, confronted with the company's 1888 shipping regulations.⁴²

The report of the Naples commission of the inspection revealed that "the captains and other officials take good care of the nautical, maritime and commercial aspects of their work. The same cannot be said of all other aspects".⁴³ The inspectors reported that captains had become increasingly less important, as they did not take care of many aspects, including technical ones, related to the vessels. They had little knowledge of how the internal spaces of the ship were structured, the organisation of the hold, the types of materials present on board, and the social dynamics which existed between crew members. In this regard, the report revealed that "The men's personal hygiene, the cleanliness of their clothing and their lodgings are neglected, as nobody looks after them or cares for their decency. They are therefore often ragged and dirty". Things went better when it came to meals, of which there were three a day: "Bread and coffee are served in the morning, around midday a pasta, rice and legume soup with meat and half a litre of wine, and in the evening meat with potatoes and bread. In normal times of *salute pubblica*, meat is served three times a week and replaced in the evening with saltfish or something of the kind".⁴⁴

On the terrible conditions of sailors' living quarters on steamships, an interesting account is given by Dr. Rosati who, writing in 1908, argued that sailing ships had superior sanitary conditions because "everyone lives outdoors and the lack of machinery allows for some space used for cabins and lodgings. There is also a lack of all those causes of fermentation and development of noxious gases which wreak havoc on steamships".⁴⁵ On steamships, by contrast, Rosati continued, "the crew's quarters are found primarily at the far end of the bow, between wells and chains, among winches and moving derricks, in close proximity to latrines and stables. It's true that sailors here also almost always live outdoors, but it's also true that not all who work on steamships

41 ASG, *Ruoli d'equipaggio*, anno 1856 e 1860.

42 ASCD, *Legislatura XVIII*, vol. 603 quater.

43 *Ibid.*, 416r.

44 *Ibid.*, 416v.

45 Teodorico Rosati, *Assistenza sanitaria degli emigranti e dei marinai*, (Milano: Vallardi, 1908), 305.

are authentic sailors, there being an abundance of firemen and engineers who require rest and clarity. On the larger steamships, one needs only to lean into the doorway of the crew's quarters to be apprehended by the most unpleasant feeling of stagnant and rotten air".⁴⁶ Finally, even if at the time the effects on health were virtually unknown, we must not ignore the impact of the polluting dust produced by machines, which constantly fell onto the main deck.

The inspection commission of the naval division of Venice also revealed the hitherto undiscussed question of engine crew, reporting that the NGI, like most shipping companies, provided only two engineers for each steamship, not enough to maintain any shifts shorter than twelve hours. According to the inspectors it was necessary to have three engineers and three firemen, considering that almost all steamships had four boilers with two furnaces, and therefore briefer shifts had to be considered for this second category.⁴⁷ Dr. Rosati, too, reflected on this issue, noting that "it is striking to see certain enormous freighters with the bare minimum number of firemen and engineers, who work intensely and without interruption, attending to the fires and machines. Few men alternate working on the same arduous work, at extreme temperatures, under the pressure of torrid climates and raging seas, which makes the work even more tiring and ungrateful".⁴⁸

6 From Institutional Interventions to Strikes: 1906–20

In 1907, the *Consiglio Superiore della Marina mercantile* finally intervened on employment contracts. At its assembly on 4 March, presided by Giovanni di Montermartini, it prepared a contract outline for subsidised companies. The council had been working on the outline throughout the course of 1906, taking up what the *Commissione per la riforma del codice* had already attempted in 1902–04. According to certain members of the council, such as Vincenzo Adelfio, a national contract for subsidised companies would have forced other companies to follow suit. Approved in its final form on 27 June 1907, the model provided for a twelve-month contract in order to tackle the practice by which companies fired crews in order to avoid paying them during months of inactivity, only to hire them again through the usual port mediators. Wages were to be paid at the end of each month and registered in the crew list attached to the contract. Victuals should be distributed according to a ministerial schedule

46 Ibid.

47 ASCD, *Legislatura XVIII*, vol. 603 quater, 426v–427r.

48 Rosati, *Assistenza sanitaria*, 306.

and, in the case of any variation due to extraordinary events, the difference would have to be paid in cash to the crew members. The ministerial provisions schedule was strongly requested by the Seafarers' Federation, and was motivated by the continuous complaints that seafarers made about the low and terrible quality of victuals. In the case of travel to zones which posed a health risk, the captain would have had to increase wages by 15%, and in case this did not take place the crew members should be able to terminate the contract without any repercussions. The working day in the ports should not exceed eight and a half hours in the winter and nine and a half hours in the summer, while every hour of overtime should be paid at 50 cents an hour. As for navigation, the advisor Agostino Crespi, who was co-director of NGI proposed a different system: shifts should not exceed twelve hours, with alternating shifts of four hours each.⁴⁹

All the changes decided by the *Consiglio Superiore* were reflected in the drafting of employment contracts, which from then on began to be more precise and printed, rather than handwritten. We can find examples of this in the *Nord America* in 1908, a *La Veloce* steamship (famous for being the protagonist of the 1889 Edmondo De Amicis novel *Sull'Oceano*⁵⁰), as well as on the Lloyd Italiano steamship *Principessa Mafalda* in 1911, and the *Regina d'Italia* owned by Marittima Italiana in 1915.

The first case reveals a number of changes compared to the same company's documents from the end of the nineteenth century. This included the introduction of advance payments on crew members' wages, the introduction of a balance to be delivered on the day of arrival in Genoa, and finally the provision of victuals, which followed a schedule deposited with the port authority. Issues regarding shift patterns and layoffs remained rather nebulous, and were still at the complete discretion of the shipping lines.⁵¹

The 1911 contract for the 5,087-ton steamer *Principesa Mafalda*, on the other hand, was far more innovative and articulate. While maintaining a number of traces from the recent past, such as the customary payment of wages at the end of the journey, it provided both parties with the possibility of terminating the contract at any time. The contract also included a set of precise rules on the subdivision of the working day. This followed the dictates of the *Consiglio Superiore*, as well as the agitation and protests which seafarers' unions had organised in the preceding years. Watchkeeping shifts lasted four hours, with

49 *Atti del Consiglio Superiore della Marina Mercantile*, vol. 3 (Roma: Tipografia Cecchini, 1911), 137–297.

50 Edmondo De Amicis, *Sull'Oceano* (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2005).

51 ASG, *Giornali nautici*, reg. 1402/1 del novembre 1908.

changes taking place from 16:00 to 18:00 and from 18:00 to 20:00. Meanwhile, the engine crew's shifts were divided into three in order to guarantee eight hours of work and sixteen hours of rest. Electricians and labourers were not supposed to exceed ten hours of daily duty. Any overtime requested by the captain would have had to be paid between 40 and 60 cents an hour, depending on the worker's role. Lastly, holidays, including May Day, were paid as overtime.⁵²

Finally, in the case of the 1915 contract of the *Regina d'Italia*, a 3,998-ton steamer belonging to *Marittima Italiana*, there was a further qualitative jump in detailing the rules regarding shifts. The engine crew, for example, was to have "shifts divided in three parts, and their work will be governed according to the type of engine and the journeys to be made, so that firemen don't need to handle more than four tons of steel in 24 hours and don't need to manage more than three furnaces. In no case should the engine crew, including the water tender, be forced to work more than eight out of 24 hours". There were also special regulations for the younger and weaker crew members, such as in the case of cabin boys under sixteen years of age, who could not be made to work for more than ten hours, nor at night. Pay scales and provisions schedules were attached to the contracts. At the same time however, there was a clear growth in the difference between the wages of officials and those of the lower ranks. For example: while sailors continued to earn a wage of 50 lire a month, captain Giorgio Groppi earned a whopping 800 lire, sixteen times as much as sailors and twice as much as steamer captains earned just fifteen years ago.⁵³

The contract reforms and the improvement of living conditions on board were in part due to the intervention of the *Federazione dei lavoratori del mare*, which in the first decades of the twentieth century had brought seafarers out on strike a number of times, sometimes controversially within the public opinion of the time. The radical strength of the workers' movement had forced institutions to intervene in order to improve maritime labour, in line with what was happening in other European countries as well.

In fact, between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the first seafarers' unions formed all over Europe. In France, for example, the *Fédération nationale des syndicats maritimes* (FNSM) was the first union experiences of the 1880s.⁵⁴ Analogously, in 1901, Italy saw the formation of the *Federazione italiana dei lavoratori del mare* (FILM), which led to the

52 ASG, *Giornali nautici*, reg. 1582/3 del 26 maggio 1911.

53 ASG, *Giornali nautici*, reg. 1635/1 dell'8 aprile 1915.

54 Ronan Viaud, *Le Syndicalisme maritime français. Les organisations, les hommes, les lutes (1890-1950)* (Rennes: PUR, 2005), 33-40.

organisation of strikes in 1906 and in 1913–14, the latter being led by the famous socialist and trade unionist captain Giuseppe Giulietti.⁵⁵

While in the 1901 strike demands were oriented towards the issue of low wages, in 1906 the objectives went beyond wages, demanding the drafting of a new national contract for subsidised companies, first and foremost NGI.

The 1906 strike, launched on the symbolic day of 1 May, had been called by the union on 16 April. In a long document, the FILM demanded that the NGI edit its contracts, improving the entries on shifts and better regulate overtime pay, particularly on the lines between Naples and Palermo and between Naples and Tunis. Protests took place on 2 May in Naples, Palermo, and Genoa. In Naples the crews of the *Galileo*, the *Tirreno*, the *Sumatra*, and the *Umberto I* went out on strike, demanding the improvements written in the FILM's 16 April manifesto. On the same day, Crespi, the NGI director, left for Naples to try to stop the protesting sailors, most of whom came from the Palermo division. In a long document, the shipping line specified that "the ministry should know that there is no possible way, at this moment especially, to justify the reckless actions of our crews. Just in the past few days, the Board of Directors of the company has approved a set of special provisions in favour of lower ranking personnel".⁵⁶ In short, NGI was convinced that the wage conditions of its maritime employees were significantly superior to those of other international companies. The next day, in response to a letter of the *Ministero della Marina*, NGI management showed its intransigence towards the seafarers. The response spoke of the crime of mutiny, but also criticised the Ministry itself, which was accused of having done too little to support the shipping company. In fact, in a long protest document, the company attacked the government, presided over by Sidney Sonnino, and especially the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, Alfredo Baccelli. NGI management specified in detail that the wages of all staff had risen between 1901 and 1903. For sailors, wages had risen from 54 to 65 lire a month. "Furthermore, all sailors receive overtime pay, whose rates, fixed in 1903, have almost doubled this year. If we consider wages, victuals, and overtime, a sailor today earns around 125 lire a month, not including lodging". Lastly, the company had created a special sickness relief fund, a maritime union, and had established a Sailors' House in Genoa used to assist crews awaiting embarkation. In addition to raising all monthly wages, the company had also given a share of the profits derived "from the coal economy" to the engine crew, as well as "a share on cargo freights to all deck officials". In conclusion, according to

55 ASG, *Prefettura italiana*, b. 269.

56 ACS, *Ministero delle Comunicazioni, Direzione Generale Marina Mercantile, Ispettorato Servizi marittimi*, b. 338.

NGI management “it is therefore certain that each time sailors under contract refuse *en masse* to do their work for any reason whatsoever, and especially in order to obtain changes in contract, they commit a veritable maritime crime: the crime of mutiny, which public authorities have a duty to rapidly and vigorously repress”.⁵⁷

The Navy Minister, in fact, intervened by replacing striking workers with soldiers from the war fleet, as in the case of the *Colombo*, or by replacing the entire steamer, as in Naples in the first days of June. In the latter case, 1,800 emigrants ready to depart for New York were moved from the *Sannio* to the *Italia* by means of a makeshift gangway between the two ships. On 13 June, the unrest was quelled by resolving tensions aboard the *Sannio*. In the meantime, the government had fallen and NGI took steps to dismiss or distance staff involved with the strike. The company also began pushing to withdraw from the postal service concession, aiming instead towards gaining leadership of the emigrant transport market.⁵⁸ The 1906 strike had concluded with the partial success of the FILM, which at least obtained improvements in a new contract drawn up a year after the strikes by the *Consiglio Superiore*, thanks to Crespi himself, the director of the NGI.

In fact, analogous strikes had taken place in other European countries, such as in France, where seafarers in Marseilles had mobilised against low wages in 1900, then in December 1902, and finally in May 1907. Another wave of strikes took place in 1912, with repercussions in the famous Italian strikes of 1913–14. Again to demand improved contracts, sailors working for the companies *Puglia*, *Sicilia*, *Compagnia Napoletana* and *Marittima Italiana* decided to down their tools and block the port with the ships themselves.⁵⁹ The FILM was again to lead these strikes thanks to the work of Giuseppe Giulietti, a sailor who had obtained the rank of first mate, and subsequently dedicated his time to trade unionism until taking control of the Federation in 1909 and remaining its main point of reference until 1953.⁶⁰

57 Ibid.

58 Roberto Giulianelli, *Armatori, banche e Stato. Il credito navale in Italia dall'Unità alla prima crisi petrolifera* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017), 53–60.

59 ACS, *Ministero delle Comunicazioni, Direzione Generale Marina Mercantile, Ispettorato Servizi marittimi*, b. 339.

60 Guglielmo Salotti, *Giuseppe Giulietti. Il Sindacato dei Marittimi dal 1910 al 1953* (Roma: Bonacci, 1982); Francesco D'Agno, *L'Onorevole Oceano. Storia del capitano Giuseppe Giulietti. Mare, lavoro e fede* (Genova: ERGA, 2007), 23; Gaetano Perillo and Camillo Gibelli, *Storia della Camera del lavoro di Genova: dalle origini alla Seconda Guerra Mondiale* (Roma: Editrice sindacale italiana, 1980).

Despite partial successes obtained on wages and working hours, during the Great War there were no trade union victories. It was only in 1919–20, during the Nitti government, that trade unionism would re-emerge, in a time where the maritime sector's demands made themselves heard all over the world. The International Conference of Seafarers, called by the League of Nations, was held at Palazzo San Giorgio in Genoa from 15 June to 10 July 1920. Four topics were on the agenda: working hours, employment contracts, child labour, and the writing of an International Seafarers' Charter.

The length of the working day was still an unresolved issue in the majority of the world's navies. In this sense Italy seemed to be at the vanguard, considering the state interventions of the *Consiglio Superiore della Marina mercantile* in 1906–07 and a successive *Commissione Reale* established after the war in 1919 which elaborated on a new employment contract. All officials were entitled to eight hours of work, alternated by four hours of watch and four hours of rest. For the lower ranks on deck, it was established that watchkeeping was to be divided into two shifts of four hours each, with a change from 16:00 to 18:00 and from 18:00 to 20:00. In ports, too, work could not exceed eight hours, while all overtime pay had to be paid according to the tables published by the ministry. Therefore, the Italian regulations were proposed at the assembly of the seafarers' conference, but the motion was only supported by a relative majority, not enough to be adopted by everyone. The colonial powers—which used a large number of staff originating from poor countries, who worked on board in a state of slavery—were largely opposed to the motion.⁶¹ Giulietti spoke in favour of the eight-hour working day, defining it as a right which sailors had won by merit during the war. The government delegate, Foscolo Fedozzi, notably suggested for the first article of the Seafarers' Charter to oppose any distinction according to race or nationality, but this evoked a strong reaction on the part of the delegates of the British and Indian navies. The French delegate, on the other hand, believed that an eight-hour day would have made the crews lazy, demoralized and undisciplined. At last, it was decided that cabin boys could not be below thirteen years of age, that spaces on board should be reorganised in order to be more comfortable for the crew, and an outline was laid out for the writing of the International Seafarers' Charter.⁶²

Problems related to working conditions of Italian seafarers also became a subject of discussion during the fascist period. In 1931, the regime laid down

61 Alessandro Stanziani, *Sailors, Slaves, and Immigrants. Bondage in the Indian Ocean World, 1750–1914* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

62 Odone Sciolla, *Conferenza internazionale dei marinai* (Genova: Libreria Editrice Moderna, 1920).

a new collective contract which was not modified until the famous strike of 8 June 1959, when crews stopped 118 Italian vessels around the world.⁶³ The unions' demands were still the same: better wages, better working conditions on board, a new employment contract, less exhausting shifts—at the time some ships had watches lasting fourteen hours—and better retirement conditions. The strike lasted 40 days and gave way to a long season of social protests and union victories in republican Italy, which also brought Italian sailors into a new age, oriented towards globalisation.

7 Conclusions

From the perspective of maritime labour, the transition from sail to steam in late nineteenth-century Italy represents an extraordinary observatory to assess how the underlying historical processes cannot be read through positivistic interpretations. Indeed, such transformations revealed themselves as much more complex and elaborate than expected: who among us would deny that the future lied in steam? In retrospect everything appears clear; however, in order to investigate the past, historical contextualization is imperative. With regard to maritime labour, the transition from sail to steam turned out to be problematic, cumbersome to some extent, and very much complicated, both in qualitative and chronological terms. In the Italian case, the actual transition occurred between the 1880s and the First World War, not without resistance and impositions from above. Firstly, the Italian merchant marine sought to individuate new resources to create shipping companies, through the fundamental involvement of the banking system. Secondly, the institutional framework of the merchant marine was continuously questioned and reached a stable configuration only at the beginning of the twentieth century. All these features were reflected in sea workers' labour conditions and recruitment: the transition from sail to steam did open up new professional opportunities to them, but at the expense of wage reduction and the sharpening of the inequalities between crews and officials. Afterwards, these inequalities were partially offset through advances in the field of seafarers' education and through improvements in working conditions, achieved with the support of the new maritime trade unions.

63 Giordano Bruschi, *La sfida dei marittimi ai padroni del vapore. Lo sciopero di quaranta giorni del 1959* (Genova: Fratelli Frilli, 2006).