

The Italians Who Built Toronto: Italian Workers and Contractors in the City's Housebuilding Industry, 1950-1980 by Stefano Agnoletto

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***The Italians Who Built Toronto:
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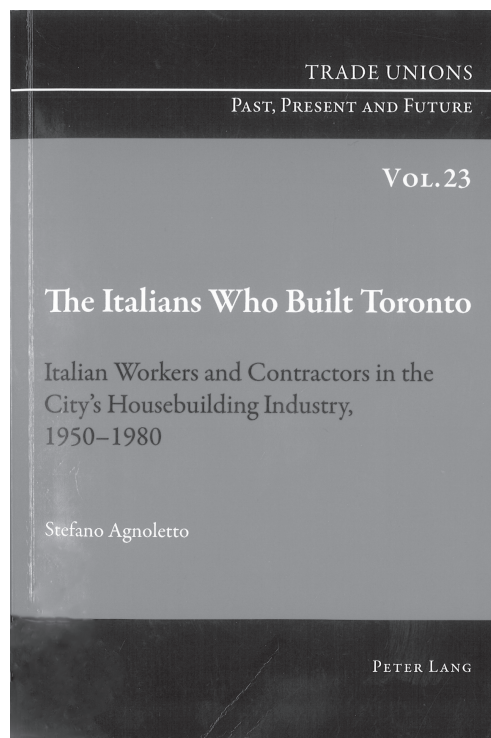
By Stefano Agnoletto

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Over ten years ago, in the introduction to Marino Toppan's book, *La voce del lavoro*, I lamented the fact that historians had little interest in the experience of Italian construction workers since they ignored even the epochal "illegal" strikes that shook Toronto in 1960 and 1961. Agnoletto's excellent book, *The Italians Who Built Toronto*, finally closes this gap. The book is a dramatic and at times even tragic portrait of the capitalist-versus-proletarian struggle in the unregulated housing construction industry where most Italian newcomers found employment.

Agnoletto also makes it clear that the unregulated housing construction industry in Toronto was an Italian industrial "niche," dominated by a few builders, and a large number of contractors and subcontractors, exploiting a multitude of their own countrymen. The exploitation was so severe that "in 1960 the cost of construction for square foot in Toronto decreased to \$9.74 from \$9.85 the year before" (211).

Under the leadership of Charles Irvine and Bruno Zanini, Italians organized the radical Brandon Union Group (BUG). They held the initial meetings in the Italian Brandon Hall and at the Lansdowne Theatre. Zanini, with his picturesque "Italiese", a mixture of English, Italian, and Friulan dialect, succeeded in firing up the enthusiasm of his audience. On one occasion, with his colourful language, he described the housing construction industry in Toronto



as a jungle where "if you walk for two feet, the lion eats you" (173).

The BUG led the Italian workers through two epochal wild-strikes triggered by "the Hogg's Hollow" tragedy that shook Toronto in 1960 when five Italian workers on the construction site of the new subway were killed. That tragedy acted as a catalyst for the massive Italian union drive undertaken by Irvine and Zanini in 1960 and 1961 (212). From meetings within the

Italian community, the BUG progressed to a huge rally at Exhibition Park where a multitude of Italian workers and their supporters, estimated over 17,000 strong, crowded the stadium in June 1971. That meeting was attended by the Toronto representatives of the established union: Gerry Gallegher, William Sifton, David Archer and others. Frank Drea, in the Toronto daily *The Telegram*, “described the meeting as ‘the greatest rank and file rally in the history of the Canadian labour movement’” (228).

The BUG came to an end when the International union leaders, alarmed by the BUG radical stand, came from the U.S. with the intention to curb or, as they said, to “educate” the BUG leadership and to limit its influence. Moreover, between September and October 1961, a series of violent “incidents” against the BUG building and personal, aimed particularly at Bruno Zanini, were carried out by unknown persons (245).

As a result of this violence, in October 1962 two locals, 40 (Labourers) and 811 (Carpenters), with a combined membership of over 2,000, left the BUG and in the following month even bricklayers, labourers and carpenters left as well, marking the end of the Brandon Union Group that, with its radicalism, marked a “particular” historical moment in the Italian immigrant struggle to unionize and be accepted in the labour movement as well as in the society at large (247).

Reacting to this American initiative, Zanini organized a Canadian union and, in a meeting held at Lansdowne Theatre attended by over 1,200 Italian workers, denounced the American union leaders for selling out Canadian workers: “So in Chicago, they decided what union you were and they didn’t even ask you [...] Do they think they’re selling cattle? [...] How do you sell people in Toronto at a meeting in

Chicago?” (261).

Adding chaos to this situation, in the 1960s the builder Marco Muzzo introduced into the housing industry an important innovation, “drywall” (180), and Nick Di Lorenzo “teamwork” (255), creating serious problems for the unions which were based on a specific single trade. After some initial disorientation, however, the unions created new locals which would represent all the workers involved in housing projects regardless of their trade.

In the struggle of those years, young Italian men like John Stefanini (who was jailed for six months for his union activity), Marino Toppan, Franco Colantonio and others began their lifelong involvement in the labour movement, and in the coming years they became union leaders, leaving their stamp on organized labour in Toronto. The struggle of the Italian construction workers was so important that the Ontario provincial government appointed two royal commissions in order to find a solution to the problem, and the *Minimum Waged Rate*, the *Industrial Standard Act*, and the *Labour Relations Act* were amended in order to alleviate such serious problems.¹¹

To crown this fine book, Agnoletto includes an impressive bibliography that is useful to anyone interested in Toronto Italian immigrants and their struggle to unionize, and it is of interest even to experts in emigration and immigration studies.

In ending these brief remarks on Agnoletto’s fine book, I feel that I should point out some doubts crowding my mind. The book is less convincing when it states that emigrants from various Italian regions became Italians only when they went abroad;²² and it ignores the three Italian NDPers—Grande, Lupusella and Silipo—elected, besides Odoardo Di Santo, to the provincial parliament in 1976.

Considering that some city councillors are discussed at length, leaving out these men, and particularly the late Tony Silipo, who at the age of 21 was elected to the Toronto School Board and at 34 became a provincial minister, a position he held as long as the NDP was in power, is an oversight that needs to be addressed.

Besides these and other unjustified omissions, *The Italians Who Built Toronto* is like an open window on thirty years of Italian life in Toronto; it gives a new face to the Italian construction workers and makes

it clear that the class issue was alive in Toronto and, it may be added, it still is...

Angelo Principe, PhD

Author of *The Darkest Side of the Fascist Years* (1999); co-author of *Rekindling Faded Memories* (1996); co-editor of *Enemies Within* (2000)

¹ Stewards' Handbook on *Labour Legislation in Ontario*, Ontario Federation of Labour, 1961, 31.

² The first chapter of my PhD dissertation (1989) deals with this naïve way of looking at the Italian immigrants to North America.