

## NOTES FROM AROUND EUROPE: ITALY

# How Strade became part of the workers' union

*Eva Valvo*

“Strade” is the Italian word for “streets” or “roads”, but since 2012 it also stands for advocating literary translators’ rights in our country. Nowadays our “Sezione TRADuttori Editoriali” (‘Section of Literary Translators’) is a section of a larger union, but we’ve come a long way before getting there, as I’ll try to summarize here.

After having been the translators’ section of the national writers’ union for eight years, Strade was founded as an independent organisation in January 2012. Later that year, Strade signed a memorandum of understanding with SLC-CGIL. SLC is a communication workers’ union (ranging from cinema and television to postal services, from the publishing industry to telecommunications), while CGIL is the Italian General Confederation of Labour, i.e. the largest and most important workers’ union in Italy.

In collaboration with SLC-CGIL, Strade opened negotiations with publishers, drafted debt rescheduling plans for translators in financial difficulties, monitored how those plans were

implemented, and signed an agreement on good practices with ODEI, an organisation of independent publishers. The positive results achieved through this collaboration convinced the membership of Strade that the union should merge with the union SLC-CGIL.

Strade went through a complex administrative process, which lasted nearly two years (2016-2018) and involved several voting sessions on statutory changes, the election of a new board etc. This administrative undertaking took up most of our energies, even though we still tried to keep up with our main tasks, i.e. to protect and promote the interests of literary translators. Strade has thus become the translators’ section of SLC and its official name is now **Strade-SLC**.

**“Having a big union behind you surely helps your voice to be heard”**



*Members of both Strade boards, the coordinator of Strade's contract advice desk, and members of SLC, in Rome, September 2019. Photo: Private Archive*

### Two-fold nature

While strengthening our endeavours to protect translators in relation to their workers' rights on the one hand, we decided to found an independent association called StradeLab on the other, specifically focusing on cultural activities, e.g. by offering training opportunities and maintaining relationships with book fairs and other external partners.

As of today, Strade's work is carried out by two technically separate entities. Strade-SLC has a board of three, the current one being elected during the national CGIL congress in January 2019 for a four-year mandate, while StradeLab has a board of three, which was elected by its general assembly in February 2019 for a two-year mandate. One person has been appointed to both boards in order to have a clear link between the two and to ensure that both boards will function – wherever possible – as a single body.

A co-operation agreement between Strade-SLC and StradeLab was signed

in 2019. All members of Strade-SLC are entitled to become full members of StradeLab for a small additional fee, while translators who are not members of Strade-SLC can become associate members of StradeLab by paying a higher fee. However, all members have access to our services, such as our contract and tax advice desk and our health insurance plan.

All of this may seem a little complicated, and in some ways it probably is, but ultimately this new structure helps us to have a clearer overview of what we do and what we intend to do. We, translators, may advocate for translators' rights, for example, by organising a "translation slam" at a book festival and thereby increasing our visibility, or by negotiating better contracts and working conditions with publishers. Both activities are important but, while in the first case it is easier to act as a small and flexible independent association, in the latter having a big union behind you surely helps your voice being heard.



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**Eva Valvo**  
**Photo: Peter Ciaccio**

Anyway, the restructuring did create some confusion among our members in the beginning. Therefore, after thorough reflection, the Strade leadership decided to focus on unity of action and intent for both entities rather than on their different status, in order to become more effective in terms of communication and “branding”. Our subscription campaign strongly recommends translators to apply for both memberships. After a critical period with a decrease in members (probably due to the big changes within Strade and maybe some general confusion about its status), a positive trend started in 2018, a year for us to settle and find a new routine, and this trend is still going on.

### **Collaboration with other unions**

Being part of a larger union has had another positive outcome. While it is true that Strade’s main goal is to protect and promote the interests of all translators who work, partly or wholly, with texts governed by Italian authors’ rights law, we also seek to be a reference point for everyone working under authors’ rights law, involving people in projects and goals that are shared between different

unions. This is also why Strade is active in the CGIL council representing self-employed professionals and freelancers and the CGIL council on authors’ rights, where we co-operate with various other categories, ranging from writers to illustrators and artists, in order to have a stronger impact.

Strade has a few ambitious long-term goals, such as gradually working out minimum payment requirements, encouraging the creation of a specific fund to support translation (which Italy has never had), improving the existing authors’ rights law (particularly in terms of the length of time for which rights are granted and of secondary rights exploitation), and lobbying for a more transparent system for managing the proceeds of reprography (photocopies). A better-structured way of working, more effective lobbying and stronger network ties thanks to our new two-fold nature will hopefully help us to attain those goals.