

Inner West Council

History Week 2021 Podcast 'From the Ground Up'

Interview with Claudio Marcello and Bruno di Biase

0:00 AZ:: Welcome to History Week 2021, 'From the Ground Up'. Today I'm interviewing the President of FILEF, Claudio Marcello and the Secretary, Bruno di Biase. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land, the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora Nation and pay my respects to the elders, past, present and emerging. This is Amie Zar, coordinator of Community History for the Inner West Council. This is a History Week 2021 podcast 'From the Ground Up', a series of interviews exploring, celebrating, commemorating and sharing remarkable stories of Inner West community groups which began as small seedling groups and grew into fully fledged movements. These groups have brought about a lot of change in our community.

Claudio, can I ask you about the early days in 1971 and '72 the location of your office on Parramatta Road and what the activities, mission and purpose of FILEF was at that time?

CM: FILEF is the Italian Federation of Migrant Workers and Families and was started in Australia in Melbourne and then in Sydney in 1972 and there was a time of mass migration from Italy to many other countries all over the world and FILEF was started also in those countries and was an initiative of the two main leftist parties in Italy, the Socialist and the Communist Party and the main purpose was to make migrants aware of their rights as workers to connect them with the unions and in fact the unions had a great role in the beginning to promote the activities of FILEF. FILEF started a fortnightly paper called *Nuovo Paese*, "New Country" in '72 and the unions were helping to distribute the paper, some of our volunteers were also distributing it outside the factories, and so that was the main area of interest, of activity, but there was also then cooperation in connection with other migrant organisations. In the '70s, there were some major communities, Italians, Greeks, Yugoslavs and later on Lebanese that had their own associations and some of them were more progressive and more involved with supporting integration of the people in the new country. Together with them FILEF organised also a campaign to promote the teaching of Italian community languages as part of the curriculum in the schools, an alternative to the Saturday schools and also for the Bicentenary FILEF organised the Migrants for Aboriginal Rights together with other progressive organisations for other migrant communities.

AZ: Can you talk about FILEF's connection to Leichhardt, the suburb, and Parramatta Road, Norton Street and Catherine Street throughout the time that FILEF was active?

CM: So FILEF started, naturally, in Leichhardt – that was the area where most of the Italian community was concentrated – and FILEF has been able over the years to carry out many activities, meetings, cultural events, with the support of Leichhardt Council using their main hall that was great for our events and also being able to obtain grants to finance our activities. Now, over the years the initial aims of FILEF are obviously not current anymore but gradually FILEF has been involved more and more closely with not only other ethnic or community organisations but also with groups that promote human rights in other countries. So first of all in Australia, naturally, with Indigenous Australians and again with the support of the Leichhardt Council we've been able over the years to use first the Italian Cultural Centre, the Italian Forum, in Norton Street and more recently in the Leichhardt Library and over the last few years every month we've been able to run information nights on progressive issues about the environment and on natural human rights, as I was saying, mostly in cooperation with other organisations involved in human rights.

5:25 **AZ: Hi Bruno. Can I ask you about the early days of FILEF in 1972? What was the location of the office and what were the activities, mission and purpose at that time?**

BD: O.K, the first FILEF office was in Norton Street, very close to the first bus stop as you turn from Parramatta Road and just on the first floor and on the street there were many Italian shops. There was an Italian jeweller, there was Scarcella who's still around in Norton Street but not there anymore. There was the shoemaker downstairs, then the butcher, there was the passport (indistinct) 610 which is still there, there used to be a pizzeria, Bolognese. Now, I mention this because these were all shops, or many of them anyway, were owned by people who were quite progressive and who actually helped FILEF quite a bit by giving us or helping us when we had some sort of barbeque or like the butcher would contribute. When we had some function, the man from La Fiorentina which used to be a cake shop just across Norton Street on Parramatta Road, he also was very good and always gave us cakes and bread and so on. So all these shops actually helped FILEF quite a lot. It may be useful to remind ourselves that at the time that is in the '70s, the Italian community in Australia overall but also say in Sydney at that time was really the most numerous non-English speaking community and so there were many people, of course, working in factories, working by themselves or in casual jobs, women and men, women particularly in the sweatshops and the men metalwork or building construction. Now, I myself joined FILEF in 1974 and I was a fairly recent arrival but I could say that part of the success of FILEF over the years has been precisely that kind of alliance, if you like, between the older migration and the newer migration, the people like myself like at the tail end of the migration boom from Italy, who managed to work together in a quite harmonious way to advance as far as we could the rights of workers, particularly the workplace but also in society, so in terms of the structures like health centres or hospitals, even churches. I remember we once went together with some parents who asked a priest, an Italian priest, to do the mass in Italian. I mean I'm not religious myself but we certainly did that, which a problem (indistinct) 913 happened to come up at the time. Initially, our work with Italian migrants was supported by Italian unions who helped pay the rent of the little office which we had together with INCA,

which was kind of the arm of the general union of labour in Italy. This was important because many migrants – I mean there was a fair bit of return migration and when they went back they had no rights accumulated here in Australia because there was no way that Australia would pay a pension in Italy at the time.

10:00

Vice versa, those migrants who had already worked in Italy, they could not claim their own rights in terms of accumulation towards pension. O.K, so one of the very early achievements, I think, where FILEF contributed – of course we cannot say exactly what was just an achievement of FILEF but FILEF did give an enormous contribution towards achieving the bilateral agreement between Italy and Australia on pensions and social security. Now, that's a very important thing, where we campaigned. The Leichhardt Town Hall was very kindly allowed for use by us from the Leichhardt Council and that was always really fantastic that we could do that: we collected signatures on petitions and so on. Other things like that that we helped construct were certainly (indistinct) 1110 ethnic TVs, SBS, and so we always sort of helped in that direction of having a greater presence, a greater voice for our communities, not only the Italian community but also the other migrant communities. We worked very well together with other migrant groups, organisations, as well as for instance cultural events where our group, we formed a group, a music group, Bella Ciao, performed together with say a Chilean group, Papalote (indistinct) 1154, Turkish musician, Greek musician, and it was really quite fantastic to have those occasions where all these musicians came together from different cultures. Because we were coming at the end of a period of assimilationism, of a fair bit of racism that is never missing, of course, and after the Labor government of Whitlam in early '72 to '75, there was quite an opening up towards all the communities in Australia and diversity started to be recognised. So the primary goal of FILEF is them to assist Italian migrants in organising themselves around issues and problems concerning them and so this promote the participation in all aspects of Australian society. The process encourages the integration of Italian migrant workers and their families within the whole society and provides, let's say, the organisational conditions to enable them to defend and extend their rights along with the rest of the labour movement.

Now, having this as some objective, it is certainly not surprising that FILEF takes a stake and always traditionally an active part in initiatives aimed at improving the social, political, economic and industrial circumstances of migrant workers and, yes, FILEF has campaigned constantly not only for the rights of Italian migrants but, as we said, for the rights of all migrant workers as well, paying particular attention to, yeah, the industrial rights of migrant workers because it recognises the union movement as a major vehicle for democratic change in Australia. Then, of course, we believe that the right to participate in the workforce is of the utmost importance to migrants. However, a person's rights should not be confined to the workplace and so equally important is the right for migrants and their families to participate outside the workplace.

14:38

Our relationship with the union movement in Australia was very fruitful. We (indistinct) 1450, so a way of helping the unions on the one hand to understand their own migrant membership and for us contacting more workers to be able to interpret their problems, as I said, not only at work but also in society and their families in order to help, so it was a quite symbiotic relationship. Some unions even let us look at their list of members

to work out which nationalities, which country they might have been coming from and they also gave us material, the raw material, to be translated in Italian and then because we had contacts with other communities with our community organisations, we got them often translated in different languages, especially on health and safety issues. In this campaign we were very fortunate to actually be working from Leichhardt because the council was very receptive to what our needs were and that is quite remarkable because really, I mean the council did it because they were concerned about their community. I say it's remarkable because it was not quite clearly just a political issue for them, it wasn't a matter of getting votes because we did not vote at the time - In fact, still if you're not a citizen you don't vote - but nevertheless the council was always extremely receptive. And we managed for instance to set up a conference, a public conference, in about November '82 where the Mayor of Leichhardt, Evan Jones, opened and apart from FILEF's main paper (indistinct) 1711 there was Paul Whelan, the representative, Minister for Education of New South Wales, the Italian Consul was there, there were teachers, there was Franca Arena who was a state senator at the time – she was President of the consulting committee for the Minister of Multiculturalism. There was the Teachers Federation, of course, academics from Sydney University and so on. Now, that was an extremely successful conference and soon after that a number of programs became a reality in the school; they were no longer just a small thing on Saturday or something like that but they were part of the general program of the school.

AZ: Can you talk a bit about FILEF's activities in the realms of education and culture?

BD: Around FILEF there was a whole number of teachers of Italian origin who also helped in this campaign and they helped and we helped them and they helped us to create materials for the school, to create publications about language and dialect and events in the schools, such as the Bella Ciao teaching folksongs and Italian children's songs to the children. This work continued over quite some time and in the '90s we also managed to put together a program for between holidays or between terms. When there was a school term break, then we had a program which we called vacanza scuola, school holiday, where kind of immersion programs – immersion in the sense that all activities were done in Italian, so the play and the little bit of teaching, some songs and poetry and the children did theatre and the parents came and helped. We also took them out for excursions: we took them around Leichhardt to eat pizza, to look at gelato-making and so on, so that was quite positive. Unfortunately, of course, as the community became older and children were already in their third generation, then it was much more difficult to continue that kind of activity.

20:22 We believe like many other migrant organisations that teaching a community language is a very important contribution to the school system and to the maintenance of the languages in Australia.

AZ: In conclusion, what would you like to say about FILEF's time and contribution in the local community?

BD: Well, just to conclude this part, I think it would be fair to say that FILEF has given a quite positive contribution and continues to give a positive contribution to the construction of a multicultural Australia that is proud of its diversity.

Interview ends