

Severe forms of labour exploitation and workers' agency

The case of tourism sector in Rimini

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- Research: “Testing Eu Citizenship as ‘Labour citizenship’: From cases of Labour Rights Violations to a Strengthened Labour-Rights Regime”.
- Analyses of mechanisms that allow the presence of severe labour exploitation and forms of contrast put in field by institutions and the same migrant workers.
- Method: Method: we met 13 people in different hearings: 8 migrant workers (5 from Romania, 2 from Senegal and one from Morocco) and 5 privileged witnesses. The meetings have been held during the months of May and June 2015 in Rimini
- The role of **International Recruitment Agencies** and accommodation of workers in the workplace as devices² of severe labour exploitation.
- The role of institutions, trade unions and NGOs.
- Conclusion: the *agency* of migrant workers. Potentialities and limits.

Fieldwork: Italy's tourism sector



Tourism in Italy in 2014: **48 million** of foreign tourists, **10.1%** of the GDP, **2,6 million** of employed (but 1.1 million direct), **33,000 hotels** and other complementary exercises.

Workforce Features :

- age: young workforce
- gender: 60% are women
- nationality: 25% are migrants



Fieldwork: Rimini's hospitality industry



- Province of Rimini: 3.2 million tourists in 2014, 2.200 hotels, 34.000 employees;
- Strong influence of seasonality: 80% of the hotels is seasonal; 28.000 seasonal workers;
- Fragmentation of production, many three-star hotels, rent of facilities (60%), outsourcing of services;
- Multinational workforce: Italian (local and internal migrants) EU workers (Romanians) and non-EU (Moldovans, Ukrainians, Albanians and North Africans);
- Low overall levels of undeclared work, but many irregularities: contracts follow legislative changes.

The labour market has a strong internal stratification based on the following workforce features:

- Age: in 2014 over 70% of workers was under 44 years old, but over the last 6-7 years there has been a gradual aging of workforce;
- Gender: in 2014 women represented 59.4% of the workers;
- Nationality: foreign workers accounted for about 36.5% of the total. 20% was no-EU.

Migrant workforce has entered in the tourist sector since 2000.

Replacement process



“In the 70s and 80s many workers came from south Italy. In that period, like now, people said “they come to steal our jobs”, because southern migrants were paid less than local workers. Then, as in a battle of the have-nots, Romanians have replaced them and, even, several of them complain that was opened another market, that is the Moldavian one. Moldavians gain even less of Romanians, hence there is always a penultimate. Moldova, by the way, is not part of the EU so there is a even more intensive recruitment system and a higher exploitation as when Romania was not in the EU”

(Interview n. 4, trade unionist Cobas Adl Cesena, 12/05/2015)

Severe labour exploitation: the role of international recruitment agencies



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Does they satisfy temporary production needs or workforce management strategies?

Romanian workers are partly employed through **international recruitment agencies** which offer services of: recruitment, selection and workers' transfer to the hotels.

They operate mainly in two ways:

1. Through the direct employment of workers with a Romanian labour contract;
2. Through intermediation activities.

In both cases the employee must pay a fee for their services as well as for roundtrip travel costs.

**SUPERA LA CRISI! RIDUCI I COSTI!
CON I LAVORATORI INTERINALI CON
CONTRATTO RUMENO**

**TELEFONA IMMEDIATAMENTE:
328.**

E VINCI LA CRISI!

COSA STAI ANCORA ASPETTANDO:

CHI UTILIZZA UN LAVORATORE INTERINALE CON CONTRATTO RUMENO

RISPARMIA il 40%!!!

BENEFICIA DELLA MAX FLESSIBILITA'!

ED IN PIU':

- Niente INAIL!	Niente 13a!
- Niente INPS!	Niente 14a!

The role of international recruitment agencies



- **The agencies don't cover temporary needs nor open new labor markets, their aim is to recruit and manage workforce with specific features.** Key elements for the recruitment in a highly racialized working environment are: age, gender, nationality and race; furthermore, employers often prefer migrant workers from rural areas with complex individual and familiar biographies as they are more easily to manage.
- **At the intersection of these social features we have not only a worst contractual status of employees, but also specific tasks:** women migrants from Eastern Europe and, hence, of "white skin" are mainly used as chambermaids and cleaners while foreign workers of "black skin" carry out all those activities that not involve direct interactions with customers. In contrast, Italians are employed in higher skilled jobs.
- **Intersectional management produces fractures and hierarchies within the workforce. It assigns roles and different positions based on unequal power relations.**

The role of accommodation



The workforce that comes in Riviera exclusively for the tourist season usually stays in the same hotel where it works. **The link between production and reproduction is crucial** because in the case of loss of employment, they are also deprived of their accommodation. **Accommodation isn't only a disciplinary device but it is also a tool to reduce rest time and, consequently, extend working time.**

«I came back when it was Easter and they gave me an accommodation in the hotel, but after 10 days, I said to me: I prefer to spend 500 euro but I don't want to sleep any more in the hotel, because when you are there you work more, the hoteliers always call you. I must be always available [...] I am a woman, I need my privacy. If I wake up at 6 in the morning, I take the coffee and I smoke 4, 5, 10 cigarettes, I have to be quiet, I want to go to the bathroom ... I have to go to the bathroom».

(Interview n. 13, Romanian worker, 06/04/2015).

Contract work

Irregular employment:

- Non compliance with contractual conditions;
- Use of Romanian contracts;
- Non respect of regular shifts;
- Unpaid overtime;
- Denied weekly rest;
- De-skilling;
- Piece work (illegal in Italy);
- Unrecognized union rights.

Salary

The salary can be agreed informally between employer and employee. It varies from EUR 700 for several migrant workers recruited through international employment agencies to 1800 Euros for workers with a higher bargaining power recruited directly by the owner. In some cases, workers earn less than € 2.50 per hour. Some hotel managers pay only partially the wage to the workers, deducting money for food and accommodation.

Frauds

In some cases, workers may be victims of frauds by employers and intermediaries. In addition to the non-payment of wages (which happens to be one of the most common practices) there is also the partial payment of social security contributions which not enables workers to avail themselves of the fair unemployment benefits.

Threats, violence and health consequences

Presence of violence (psychological, physical, and in some cases even sexual) acted on workers, particularly women. Presence of cases of mental and physical exhaustion, fainting, weakness, fever. These conditions may be aggravated by the lack of day off, by the absence of prevention, unhealthy working environments. Access to health services is severely limited, especially for workers who live in the workplace.

Severe labour exploitation: a witness



*«I lost 6-7 kg weight because I didn't eat anything, without the rest day, 12 hours ... Hence I got pissed off, I couldn't do it, I was physically ... but also morally ... I was ruined, it was too much, he demanded too. Then he removed food from my pay and I ate only if something remained from the plates of customers at 3 pm otherwise I went to home without eat, without break and without anything. I worked those two or three hours longer because the others had a fixed schedule»
(Interview n. 3, Romanian worker, 11.5.2015)*

The case of “le Conchiglie”



Le Conchiglie is a large hotel structure between Rimini and Riccione:

- workers recruited through a Romanian agencies;
- hourly pay of 2-2.25 EUR;
- no security contributions and insurance;
- working time that exceeded 80 hours a week;
- no rest day.

After several months of unpaid wages, workers began to put in place various forms of protest with the support of solidarity associations and trade unions. The bankruptcy of the company prevented the full recovery of wages.

«We have opened bank accounts in Romania for our salary because the hiring was in Romania, but we worked here. When the first month passed, I don't remember if the date of pay was the 17 or 18, no one said a word. We called the agency: “the salary? A month is passed”. Little by little, we realized that that something was wrong. Also, he said always: “tomorrow, the day after tomorrow ... because I haven't received any money from Italy so I can't pay you»

(Interview n. 3, Romanian worker, 11.5.2015)

The strategies put in place to limit work abuses are not linear processes, they are often linked to subjective trajectories and the possibility to meet trade unions and solidarity networks. The factors that characterize and, at the same time, constrain and promote the *agency* of workers are manifold: social features, job career, migratory paths and social networks are certainly some of these.

On the other hand, the fragmentation of the production structure, the segmentation of the labor market, the seasonality and the various aim and purposes that migration assumes, seem to squeeze the empowerment processes on **an individual dimension**. In fact, when the aim of migration is temporally limited to seasonal work and to return to their country, workers may be discouraged from engaging in protest actions.

Finally, the *agency* strategies are influenced also by political climate that has encouraged the spread of racism and hatred towards immigrants.

Often recruitment agencies represent a way to find a first job and understand local labour market

For many workers the first period is useful to better know the territory and the local labour market. Later they are able to break free from the agencies.

Self-activation to looking for a job allows them to experiment with new job opportunities, increase their bargaining power, and use the economic resources otherwise allocated to agencies. This strategy is more evident when workers decide to reside in the area after the season. They can move independently looking for a job in other sectors.

The rejection of accommodation



Workers sometimes reject accommodation provided by hoteliers, preferring, when it is possible, a self-contained accommodation with other workers or with relatives and friends. **The waiver to housing, as well as limiting a major instrument of control and discipline of employees, allows them to repossess their rest time.**

*«I found this work through the advices of friends (..) not with the agency. I went alone to ask if there was a need, I gave my number ... now I've been working in this hotel for ten years and I'm well. When I come, I sleep from them for the first few days, then I try to find a rent with my friends, we get together ... Now that there are fewer customers, I work only in the morning, then in July and August I work also in the evening. I do maximum nine hours, I earn 1800 EUR per month»
(Interview n. 12, Romanian worker, 06/04/2015)*

- Link between free time and the **possibility of socialization** of workers and their knowledge of context and institutions. Militants of the NGO and trade unions, for example, emphasize how the first contact with workers happens, usually, in their free time.
- Barriers to the unionization process despite vibrant activities of the associations and of some unions. Employees avail themselves from union's services, but this interaction rarely produces activism, negotiation of working conditions and wage levels. Only in severe cases, those relating to fraud or failure to pay, the workers ask the trade union support.

Generally, **the presence of NGOs and trade unions is fundamental to help and support workers.** In fact, the contrast to severe labour exploitation is easier when the associative structures are more sensitive.

Conclusion 1



- International agencies: important channel of recruitment but, in recent years, migration have took autonomous features.
- Recruitment agencies have only supported a 'new' migration to cover some specific jobs.
- The Romanian migration in Italy precedes recruitment agencies activities.
- The decision to rely on recruitment agencies is based on the entrepreneurial desire to obtain a specific workforce with low access to local institutions.
- The recruitment of Romanians as a strategy based on stereotyping of workforce. Intersectionality of social characteristics is crucial in the composition of the workforce.
- The segmentation of the labor market is built daily by employers. The local labour markets are crossed by international social processes, but migrants **are not passive actors**.

Conclusion 2



- The expression “severe labour exploitation” often hides *agency* strategies put in field by migrant workers;
- Social features, working paths and social networks as key elements for *agency*;
- Fragmented structure, segmented labour market, seasonality, accommodation and recruitment agencies as *agency’s* limits;
- The role of institutions, organizations, trade unions and associations is crucial to build *agency* spaces.



Thank you for your attention

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