

Work in the time of coronavirus

Mar 19th, 2020 / Maurizio Coppola



Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Italian government has adopted **a new decree practically every day** of the last twenty. These legislative texts introduce “urgent measures to prevent infection across the entire country”. To begin with, the decree of 5 March declared that the region of Lombardy and 14 other northern Italian provinces were henceforth a “red zone” whose inhabitants – numbering over 16 million – could only leave their homes to go to work or shop. On 9 March, a nationwide state of emergency was declared and the lockdown was extended to all 21 regions of Italy. In response, all the schools in the country closed (and have been closed ever since) and a lot of shops shut as early as 6 p.m. in many towns and cities. Yet there were also numerous reports of non-compliance with the new measures: people not keeping the required one metre apart, some bars remaining open beyond 6 p.m., and large numbers of young people gathering in the streets.

In light of the situation, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte once more addressed the media on 11 March, announcing even stricter measures. In his speech, he laid down the law clearly and succinctly: “all economic activities and businesses are temporarily shut down until at least 25 March, with the exception of food shops and pharmacies, so that we can continue to ensure access to essential items.” *Tutti a casa* – everyone stays at home – was the core message. Is this really the way to finally halt the spread of the virus? And can everyone really stay at home?

Everyone stays at home – except workers

A closer analysis of the latest **decree** reveals that it is not just food shops and pharmacies that are to continue operating. Virtually the entire Italian production system is to keep running too. The only exceptions are the retail sector, the hospitality sector (businesses such as bars, pubs, restaurants, ice-cream stands and pastry shops) and the personal services sector (including hairdressers, barbers and beauticians). People are to continue working – “complying with the hygiene rules”, of course! – in food delivery, in banks and financial institutions, in the insurance sector and the post office, in agriculture, animal husbandry, and throughout the entire food production chain (from the processing of agricultural products to the supply of goods and services for the sector).

As far as production activities are concerned, the Italian government recommends that people work from home, that leave be brought forward (which amounts to forcing people to take leave and work over the holidays), that the social measures laid down in collective agreements be applied (very vague!) and that health protection measures be adopted (set workspaces, distribution of protective masks and gloves, regular cleaning and disinfection of the workplace, and so on). However, these steps are just recommendations and are not mandatory.

Ensuring continuity of production

By adopting this urgent decree, the Italian government is attempting to pull off an impossible balancing act: it seeks to both seriously restrict people’s freedom of movement to slow the spread of the virus, while simultaneously satisfying the needs of companies that were already heading for disaster even before the virus broke out. In the past few days, we have heard a great deal from these companies about the impact of the coronavirus on the **economy**. They have consistently called for production to continue, despite the **exponential rise** in the number of coronavirus cases. Business association Cofindustria made its position clear in its organ *Il Sole 24 Ore*: “self-regulation and continuity of production is [our] recommended approach”. For the sake of competitiveness, it claims, it is “essential to keep businesses open and ensure that production activities and the free movement of goods can continue. If the production chain were disrupted today, the result would be a loss of market share and the closure of export-oriented businesses.” According to the newspaper’s commentator Nicoletta Picchio, this would in turn be “a sign of a lack of production capacity for foreign markets, and it would be almost impossible to make up [this capacity] in the short term. Interrupting production would be a grave error: it would kill us.” She can already see the vultures circling overhead: “our competitors are out to get us. They are primed to take advantage of our moments of weakness.” [1]

Work over health?

So Italy is still producing. But how are things currently looking in the “hidden abodes of production”? Special attention must first be given to healthcare workers. Since the virus broke out, the TV and the press have been telling these “heroes’ stories” every day: 18-

hour working days, no days off, and constant exposure to the risk of infection. Yet healthcare workers reject this depiction of themselves as “heroes”. In their view, the spotlight should not be on the individual efforts made by individual workers, but rather on the systemic shortcomings of the Italian healthcare system – **underfunding and restructuring** – that have required healthcare workers to make near-superhuman efforts on a daily basis in this state of emergency. They also say that personal protective equipment [DPI: *dispositivi di protezione individuale*] is almost always in short supply, that intensive care units are extremely overcrowded and other parts of hospitals must be converted into intensive care wards at the expense of other patients, that there are not enough doctors and nurses, with **medical students having to be drafted in** to plug the gaps in some cases, and so on.

However, it is not only healthcare workers in hospitals who are facing ever greater precarity in their day-to-day work. For all that Confindustria claims that “factories are the safest place to be right now because precautions have been taken”, the workers see things rather differently [2]: **“the coronavirus doesn’t just stop at the factory gates”**, as one worker puts it. In many production sectors, the pace of work has actually stepped up a gear, even though the rest of the country is paralysed. Some companies in the logistics industry, like Amazon, have seen a massive upsurge in orders because people are forced to stay at home and thus have more time for consumption. However, Amazon neither follows the hygiene recommendations for companies nor guarantees its workers personal protective equipment. Only after a **coronavirus case was detected in its Torrazza Piemonte warehouse** did the group clean and disinfect its plant and place a few workers in quarantine.

Many call centres have also seen their workload increase, especially those that have taken on contracts from public institutions and are currently providing additional hotline services. One Naples call centre has implemented some protective measures (assigning its workers to a set computer and requiring them to stay one metre apart) while neglecting others (failing to provide soap and disinfectant in the toilets). Some of the steps it has taken verge on the absurd, such as the order to switch off the coffee machines to “avoid unnecessary crowds”. The call centre’s management continues to oppose the suggestion that its workers could work from home – in fact, since the call centre is now offering additional services, its employees are being forced to work overtime.

Those who work irregularly, without employment contracts and thus without social security protection barely have any say in what happens to them: care workers have to stay at home for fear of infection, especially those who work with elderly people; people who are self-employed (whether genuinely or not) have no unemployment insurance and thus potentially face a protracted period without income if smart working is not practicable for them; young people working without contracts in bars, restaurants or other industries catering to tourists (especially in towns and cities) were dismissed overnight following the decree’s adoption and are now jobless. To date, the government’s decrees have not offered any solutions for these sectors.

Growing resistance

However, more and more workers are refusing to accept these inadequate health and social security measures and are starting to strike. There are numerous examples of nationwide work stoppages, especially in the **logistics sector** and in the **regions** where the virus is already widespread. In some cases, however, the protests are about much more than health. **Workers at the Cornelian luxury clothing factory in Mantua** are not only demanding compliance with all protective measures during production but also a temporary shutdown of the production of non-essential goods. Spontaneous protests by workers are curbing Confindustria’s drive to continue production at all costs, even at the expense of workers’ health.

However, the large trade union federations CGIL, CISL and UIL are much less vocal at present than the business association. The three machinery and metalworking unions FIOM, FIM and UILM are jumping on the bandwagon of the workers’ protests and demanding the **closure of factories** until 22 March, “in order to refurbish, make safe and reorganise all workstations”. The grassroots unions are going further, with USB calling for a **32-hour strike** and the “temporary suspension of all industrial activities, except those closely linked to the fight against the pandemic” and SI Cobas urging **immediate mobilisations and walkouts across Italy** in all categories and demanding the opening of negotiations with the government and the Ministry of Labour.

The coronavirus crisis has thus exposed and aggravated the conflict of interest between companies’ desire to maximise profits and workers’ desire to safeguard their health and not lose their jobs. With the outcome of the labour protests still unclear, only one thing is certain: workers are fed up with having to pay for the crisis with their health, their job security and their social protection. These industrial conflicts are likely to be around for much longer than the coronavirus.

Notes:

[1] Nicoletta Picchio, Imprese decisiva la continuità aziendale, *ilsole24ore* 12/03/2020, p. 2.

[2] The examples of precarisation and work stoppages are based on **newspaper articles** and information from trade unions, as well as reports submitted via *Potere al Popolo’s Red Telephone* service, opened in response to the coronavirus outbreak. The Red Telephone is a hotline that workers can call to report violations and inadequate protective measures at work. Potere al Popolo activists and labour lawyers provide information about what companies are legally required to do and how workers can organise and take action. Hundreds of cases have been documented so far.

This article was first published (in German) at: <https://revoltmag.org/articles/arbeiten-zeiten-des-coronavirus/>

Quelle: <https://www.rosalux.eu/en/article/1599.work-in-the-time-of-coronavirus.html>