

THE MULTIPLE LABOUR MOBILITIES OF NORTH AFRICAN MIGRANT WORKERS WITHIN AND THROUGH ITALY TO EUROPE

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INTRODUCTION

Referring to labour studies and migration studies and taking a life-course perspective, this chapter examines the forms and experiences of mobility of North African workers in Italy throughout their migration pathways.¹ Sometimes, migration is examined from a linear point of view, in what we could call a surface perspective, describing the movement from one place to another place and from one economic sector to another. However, within migration journeys and migratory experiences, there are multiple experiences of mobility in relation to working conditions (depending on the economic sector, the type of employment, the qualification, and the type of employment contract), their legal status, the geographical space, and so on. This chapter focuses on transitions and mobilities in migration and on mobilities within labour mobility. Of course, all workers have mobility experiences. However, in the case of migrant workers, there is the additional variable of “migration”, which is often also a political variable rather than simply, for example, a legal one (the legal status of being a foreigner).

The first section of this chapter² begins by examining the presence and working conditions of North African immigrants in Italy from a diachronic perspective. It then analyses the primary forms of mobility they have experienced

1 Obviously, these forms of experience are not exclusive to North African immigrants but also concern other immigrant workers in Italy. However, North African workers are not only always involved but are key players in the tendencies and phenomena covered in this chapter.

2 Rossana Cillo is the author of sections “A New Form of Mobility of North African Workers: Posting in the Construction Sector”; “The Italian construction sector in crisis”; “Internationalisation of the construction sector and the new labour mobility of migrant workers”; “Labour mobility in posting: A double-sided solution”. Fabio Perocco is the author of sections “Migration and Mobilities of North African Workers in the Italian Context”, “Intra-mobility pathways: Transits and transitions in labour mobility”.

over time. These include intra- and inter-sectoral mobility, upward and downward labour mobility, geographical mobility between Southern and Northern Italy and vice versa, and labour and legal status transitions (from irregular to regular work and vice versa, from undocumented and under-documented migration to regular migration and vice versa). The second section analyses a recent specific form of mobility affecting North African workers with residency in Italy: the posting of workers to the construction sector in other European countries. After examining posted work and the construction sector in Italy, it focuses on the pathways and working conditions of North African immigrants sent from Italy to Central and Northern European countries as posted workers. This chapter is based on a study of the literature and an analysis of the empirical material (interviews, focus groups, and statistical data) collected during three European projects on the posting of workers – Poosh,³ Con3Post,⁴ and Pow-Bridge⁵ – in which the authors took part.

MIGRATION AND MOBILITIES OF NORTH AFRICAN WORKERS IN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

Labour migration from North Africa to Italy is closely connected to the history of migration from North African countries to Central and Northern Europe, which began on a large scale in the post-World War II boom period. In order to confront labour shortages at the time, Germany, Great Britain, France, Belgium, and Switzerland, which were focusing on their internal industrialisation, recruited labour from Southern European countries, which at the time still had large agricultural populations. In the 1950s and 1960s, Italy was the principal country of departure, alongside Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Yugoslavia. Workers from these countries were recruited mainly under bilateral agreements between emigration and immigration states. In the early 1970s, the intra-European South-North migratory movement reached a balance of 15 million individuals (Bade 2001: 342). However, from the end of the 1970s, it decreased considerably,

3 Poosh – Occupational Safety and Health of Posted Workers: Depicting the existing and future challenges in assuring decent working conditions and wellbeing of workers in hazardous sectors. See <http://www.poosh.eu/>.

4 Con3Post – Posting of Third Country Nationals: Mapping the Trend in the Construction Sector. See <https://isim.zrc-sazu.si/en/programi-in-projekti/con3post-posting-of-third-country-nationals-mapping-the-trend-in-the>.

5 Pow-Bridge – Bridging the gap between legislation and practice in the posting of workers. See <https://www.euro.centre.org/projects/detail/3633>.

although it never completely disappeared. Therefore, in the 1960s and 1970s, non-European countries with which these European countries had links, mostly dating back to colonialism, also functioned as labour pools for the central and leading area of the European economy: in the 1960s, Algeria, India, Pakistan, and the Caribbean, and, in the 1970s, Turkey, Morocco and Tunisia, acted as labour pools for the steel, automotive, metal, and mining industries of the most industrialised European countries. Since the 1960s, bilateral agreements between European countries, such as Belgium, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, and Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria have led to the emigration of hundreds of thousands of adult men (De Bel-Air 2016a, 2016b; Khachani 2019). Most were unskilled workers recruited through temporary migration schemes to compensate for workforce shortages in the abovementioned sectors. This phase ended after the 1973 economic crisis, with the adoption of policies aimed at stopping immigration for labour purposes. Until then, employment contracts enjoyed relative stability, benefitting from a long economic period of solid growth and low unemployment. From the second half of the 1980s, despite the anti-immigration policies adopted in the most industrialised European countries and in the wake of the increase in migration under the new international migration system, North African immigration to Central and Northern Europe increasingly occurred, with migrants beginning to put down roots in the receiving countries (in particular through family reunification). At the same time, labour migration turned towards Southern European countries, particularly Italy and Spain (Cohen 2009; Colucci 2018a, 2018b; De Bel-Air 2016a, 2016b).

Intra-mobility pathways: Transits and transitions in labour mobility

In the 1980s, Italy became the destination of migrant men from North African countries. The 1990s saw a steady growth in labour immigration, followed in the 2000s by family reunifications (Colucci 2018b). From the 1990s until the 2010s, there was an increase in the Moroccan population (until 2004, the principal foreign population in Italy), namely from 80,495 in 1990 (Caritas 1999: 119) to 452,424 in 2010 (Caritas-Migrantes 2011: 451); on 31 December 2019 Moroccans were 432,458.⁶ Among the North African populations, the next largest groups were Tunisians and Egyptians; they were respectively 98,321 and 136,113 on 31

6 The decrease in the number of residents is, among other things, a result of Moroccans acquiring Italian citizenship. Moroccans constitute the second largest foreign population in Italy in terms of numbers of those who have acquired citizenship. For example, 16,588 of them acquired citizenship in 2021 (Ministero del Lavoro, <https://integrazionemigranti.gov.it/it-it/Ricerca-news/Dettaglio-news/id/3238/In-crescita-di-quasi-il-10-le-acquisizioni-di-cittadinanza-italiana>, accessed 20 June 2023).

December 2019 (Idos 2020: 19). In more recent years, there has been a slowdown in labour immigration from North Africa to Italy. Even though migratory pressure from North Africa has increased due to the 2008 economic crisis and the 2011 North African uprisings, the EU and the main immigration countries, including Italy, have adopted restrictive migration policies. Consequently, in the last decade, emigration from Morocco and Tunisia has occurred mainly through family reunification, asylum seeking, and visas for students, seasonal workers, and highly skilled workers (European Commission 2019a, 2019b). North African immigrants have rapidly rooted in the Italian territory, making it their final destination. Over the years, they have created new families or have reunited their families, fuelling the familiarisation process of immigration, transforming it from “labour immigration” to “population immigration” (Sayad 1999). This transformation means that in Italy today, together with Albanians and Romanians, North African immigrants are the most numerous and very well-established and organised. Thus, within the context of labour migration, we see, in this case, a passage from provisional and transitory immigration to permanent and definitive immigration.

In the 1980s and 1990s, North African immigrants were almost exclusively employed in so-called 3D jobs (meaning jobs that are “dirty, dangerous, and demeaning”)⁷ in the secondary and marginal segment of the labour market in labour-intensive sectors in which the underground economy is very present and there is a high incidence of irregular work. These included agricultural work as seasonal labourers, particularly in Italy’s southern regions (especially Sicily, Campania, and Apulia), street vending, fishing in Mazara del Vallo (Sicily) and San Benedetto del Tronto (Marche), low-skilled services in some large cities (as warehouse workers, porters, caretakers, waiters, and dishwashers), and, to a limited extent, construction and small industrial enterprises as labourers and general workers (Colasanto & Ambrosini 1993; Frey 1992; Maciotti & Pugliese 1991). Agriculture and construction (and sometimes street vending) were the main entry sectors into the Italian productive system, acting as transit sectors through which workers could subsequently move into other sectors (particularly the industrial sector) and the regular labour market. These three sectors also saw the first concentration of immigrant labour and the formation of “ethnically” characterised labour niches. These sectors made the continuous rotation of immigrant workers their system of operation. Even today, after a few years or seasons as labourers in agriculture or construction, migrant workers move

7 In Italian, these jobs are called *lavori 5P*: “*precario, poco pagato, pesante, pericoloso e penalizzato*” (precarious, badly paid, heavy, dangerous, and penalised).

on to other sectors and occupations (Maciotti & Pugliese 2003). Over time, a minority of these workers have remained within these sectors, sometimes in conditions of precarious work and social marginality, while the majority have moved towards particular industrial sectors (the metal, mechanical, chemical, wood, electrical, and food industries), jobs in the logistics and transport sectors, or low-skilled work in the service sector (sometimes as self-employed workers in commerce and catering) (CNR 2004). Thus, within the context of labour migration, in this case, we observe the mobility of North African workers between different economic sectors (intersectoral mobility) and different types of work (inter-professional mobility).

The transition from street vendors to the factory – “from the beaches to the factories” (Vicarelli 1991) – from seasonal agricultural labour to service work in the tertiary sector or to industrial work corresponded to a physical movement from Southern Italian regions, which are the initial destinations of newly arrived migrants, to the Northern Italian regions, which are more industrialised and have more job opportunities. Thus, within the context of labour migration, in this case, we see that North African workers’ geographical mobility is linked to their inter-sectoral labour mobility. This transfer from the South to the North of Italy – a sort of “migration within migration” (Pugliese 2002) – was at first aimed at large Northern Italy cities (Milan, Turin, Bologna, Genoa, and Verona) and the economically more dynamic provincial capitals (Brescia, Bergamo, Treviso, Vicenza, Padua, Reggio Emilia, and Modena); then, suddenly, towards medium-sized and medium-small cities and small towns and villages in urban-rural or rural-urban contexts. Therefore, after an internal migration between North and South Italy, there was an abrupt internal dislocation between the various territories of Northern Italy so that, over a short time, the widespread presence of these workers in the valleys of Lombardy and Trentino, the foothills of Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, the Po Valley, and the industrial districts of Tuscany and Marche, became stabilized. This stabilisation reflects the productive, economic, and urban geography of Italy, characterised by polycentrism, urban fragmentation, and the scattering of production activities across the territory, and reproduces the diffuse and parcelled-out character of the Italian industrial apparatus, primarily made up of small businesses spread across the territory. Of the Moroccan population in Italy, the most numerous and “the most important” population from North Africa, in 2020, 67.5% lived in Northern Italy (22.1% in Lombardy, 14.5% in Emilia-Romagna, and 12.7% in Piedmont), 15% in Central Italy (7% in Tuscany), and 17.5% in Southern Italy (5.2% in Campania). The largest non-EU population in Italy and the third largest Moroccan population in Europe after Spain and France, by the end of

2020, the Moroccan population in Italy had an average age of 33 years, was made up of 25% minors, was the second largest foreign nationality in Italy for mixed marriages (1,615), and, most significantly, 70.7% of its members held a long-term EU residence permit (Ministero del Lavoro 2021).

In the last two decades, the number of North African workers in the Italian labour market has grown and become more central, so much so that they constitute, together with workers from Eastern Europe and the Indian subcontinent, a significant structural component of the regular labour market, especially in the industrial sector. The transition to industrial work has improved working and living conditions: many workers have entered into employment contracts, thus receiving better wages and gaining protection through national collective bargaining. Albeit slowly and to a limited extent, some have made progress in their careers and have been employed in diverse sectors (CNR 2004). Their presence in the labour market has become more heterogeneous and segmented due to various differentiating factors, such as the composition and extent of the organisation of migratory movements or the selection mechanisms operating in the labour market. By entering the industrial sector, these workers have emerged from the isolation typical of marginal labour market segments and have entered into relations with native Italian workers and workers from other nationalities. Employment in industrial enterprises has fostered the establishment of relationships with trade unions. Thus, the transit from the secondary labour market to the regular labour market has had positive consequences. In the context of labour migration, in this case, we observe a dynamic of upward (albeit limited) labour mobility parallel with a process of social rooting.

However, this insertion process into the labour market happened in conjunction with the channelling of North African workers into the heaviest, most dangerous, most precarious, and lowest-paid occupations (Fincati 2007a, 2007b; Ministero del Lavoro 2014; Oim 2009). Inserted into the industrial sector (mainly in small enterprises) and the tertiary sector, they were heavily concentrated in the roles of general workers and manual labourers. Within the context of labour migration, in this case, we witness a concentration of North African workers in specific sectors and tasks, which has sometimes resulted in the “racialization” of workplace and production processes, with their concentration in the heaviest and most demanding jobs and phases of the production process. For example, again with reference to the Moroccan population, in 2018, 45% of Moroccan workers were doing “unskilled manual labour”,⁸ 34% “skilled manual labour”,⁹

8 39.9% in 2020 (Ministero del Lavoro 2021: 19).

9 39.2% in 2020 (Ministero del Lavoro 2021: 19).

19% a job such as “office worker, salesperson, and care services” (Ministero del Lavoro 2019: 22). In addition to employment segregation, North African workers also face problems concerning employment and unemployment rates: in 2022, the unemployment rate for Italians was 7.6%, for EU citizens 11.9%, and for non-EU citizens 12%, but the unemployment rate of Moroccans was 14.3%, Tunisians 18.4% (Ministero del Lavoro 2023: 35, 37). In 2018, among the Moroccan population aged between 15 and 64, there was an unemployment rate of 22.3%¹⁰ (compared to 14.3% for non-EU workers as a whole), an employment rate of 45.2%¹¹ (compared to 60.1% for non-EU workers as a whole), and an inactivity rate of 41.7% (compared to 29.8% for non-EU workers) (Ministero del Lavoro 2019: 19). In 2018, Tunisian and Egyptian workers’ unemployment, employment, and inactivity rates appeared better (19.9% and 13.4%, 51.3% and 60%, and 35.9% and 37%, respectively).

Another issue is vertical mobility in employment (career advancement). Most of these workers make only very slow progress in their careers and see equally slow increases in their wages, partly because they are employed in jobs with few opportunities for advancement. Often, career advancement is linked to migratory seniority. However, sometimes, it is precisely because of migratory seniority that workers are penalised and replaced with recently arrived workers who are poorly established, poorly integrated, and more blackmailable. In some sectors, such as agriculture (Corrado et al. 2018; De Bonis 2005; Macrì 2021), North African workers have slowly been ousted, as they are more rooted and unionised, to be replaced by Eastern European workers. These practises happen in a wider context in which non-EU workers have been replaced with workers from new EU member states, who do not require a residence permit and thus, employers can hire them irregularly without the risk being accused of facilitating illegal immigration. This process of the marginalisation and replacement of North African workers is linked to their resistance to exploitation (often through trade union activity) and to the decades-long anti-Arab and anti-Muslim climate in Europe. Their resistance has made them undesirable to employers, who use cultural or religious differences as a pretext to get rid of them, giving preference to other nationalities, usually of recent immigration (CNR 2004). In the context of labour migration, in this case, we observe limited vertical mobility as well as exclusion and marginalisation within the labour market.

On the other hand, we can observe intra-sectoral labour mobility associated with geographical mobility in the agricultural sector. This sector has long

10 Amongst women, 33.1%.

11 Amongst women, 23.1%.

seen the circulation of immigrant workers (partly North African, but mostly sub-Saharan) who follow the seasonality of the different crops which different regions specialise in, moving from one region to another, from one territory to another, from one produce to another, as part of circular mobility within the national territory linked to harvest periods (Corrado et al. 2017; Sanò 2018; Sanò & Zanotelli 2022), in the name of just-in-time and “just-in-place”. For example, in August–September, they might work in the grape harvest in Italy’s northeastern regions or in Apulia; in the autumn, in the citrus fruit harvest in Calabria and Sicily, apples in Trentino, and olives in Apulia; in the spring, in the strawberry harvest in Basilicata and Campania, early fruit and strawberries in Sicily, or asparagus in Veneto, or in the summer, in the fruit harvest (peaches and apricots) in Emilia-Romagna. Thus, in this case, we observe a transhumant migration within the agricultural sector, which primarily affects Southern Italian regions, depending on the agricultural seasons and the opportunities for employment in harvesting.

The transition to the regular labour market and the possession of an employment contract allow migrant workers to become regularised and obtain a residence permit. This improvement in their administrative status improves their living conditions, further strengthening the stabilisation process and increasing their social rootedness. However, this transition in their legal-administrative status towards regularity was and is by no means easy or guaranteed. It was and is an obstacle course (“forced clandestinity – emergence from undeclared work – labour regularisation – administrative regularisation”) marked by exploitation and precariousness, their slow emergence from the underground economy, and total precariousness, in which, at each stage, they acquire a few rights and better living conditions. The way they are set up means that Italian immigration legislation and national migration policies effectively force immigrants into the condition of being undocumented (that is, subject to becoming clandestine, made illegal) while waiting for amnesty or a new flows decree¹² to regularise their labour and administrative position. Here, we observe the transition, the mobility of the legal status linked to labour mobility: undocumented workers transition within the framework of labour mobility and the pathways of undocumented workers towards regularity. It is important to note that this mobility of legal status is a structural element of Italy’s history of immigration, national migration policies, and government model of immigration (Colucci 2018a, 2018b). Still today, the main sectors in which North African workers have experienced mobility in their legal status – their passage from

12 This decree is actually a hidden amnesty as it regularises those who are already present in Italy.

undocumented or under-documented migrants to regular migrants – have been agriculture and construction.

However, in the Italian context, regularisation and obtaining a residence permit are by no means definitive achievements. Since the residence permit is linked to the possession of a work contract and a place to live, if a migrant has not been able to renew their expired residence permit, the relapse into clandestinity (overstay)¹³ is common, and a structural phenomenon of immigration in Italy (Idos 2005, 2020: 110–112). The high percentage of overstayers amongst undocumented migrants who periodically become regularised demonstrates that the status of regular or irregular resident is often transitory: it is a status that can easily be “entered” or “exited”, so much so that we could say that there is a sort of “revolving door” of administrative regularity in Italian migration policies. As a result of the loss of work or housing or not having a work contract, the non-renewal of residence permits and the consequent lapse into clandestinity has involved and continues to involve many non-EU migrants, particularly North Africans. This phenomenon is especially intense not only in periods of (economic, social, or political) crisis, in phases of economic and labour market restructuring, in periods of mass layoffs and unemployment, but also when ultra-restrictive migration policies are applied in relation to presence and residence in the national territory. Therefore, within the context of labour mobility, in this case, we observe downward mobility in legal status combined with labour market dynamics and migration policies.

In cases of loss of work and/or relapse into administrative irregularity (overstay), a number of unemployed workers find a new job that is completely or partly irregular. This entry (or, better, relapse) into the underground economy worsens their working conditions – in terms of wages, hours, work tasks, and safety – and decreases in protection from discrimination in the workplace. This never-ending cycle between administrative and labour regularity and irregularity amplifies migrants’ deskilling and worsens their professional qualification as, in the context of high unemployment and increasingly harsh migration policies, to obtain or renew their residence permit, immigrants are forced to accept lower-skilled jobs or worse labour conditions to find or keep a job. In this process, which includes North African workers, we observe downward labour mobility linked to the dynamics of the economy and the labour market, as well as to migration policies.

13 In this case, we are not referring to non-EU citizens who have entered Italy with a tourist visa and then remain after it has expired.

In situations of economic crisis, job loss, and relapse into clandestinity (overstay), a small portion of North African workers residing in Northern Italy return temporarily to Southern Italy to work in the agricultural sector as seasonal labourers, as part of a temporary return migration between North and South Italy (Corrado et al. 2017; De Filippo & Strozza 2011; Pugliese 2013). Therefore, within the context of labour mobility, in this case, we find a circular migration as commuting in the form of long-haul commutes from Northern Italian regions to Southern Italy, in which downward labour mobility is associated with reverse geographic mobility. This journey goes against the paths of social advancement described above.

Again, also as a result of economic crises and job insecurity, but also often to improve or maintain their economic conditions or preserve the unity of their family, many North African workers and families have moved to other European countries, in particular to France and Belgium (where French is spoken and where there are stable settlements of their compatriots), but also to Switzerland, Germany, and Austria, where there are more job opportunities. These movements are made possible by the possession of a long-term EU residence permit and even more so by having Italian citizenship, which allows complete freedom of movement in Europe (Della Puppa 2018; Della Puppa et al. 2021). In the context of labour mobility, in this case, we observe the phenomenon of onward migration, the reactivation of migratory mobility by undertaking further migration from the receiving country in which they initially settled (in this case, Italy) to a new destination country in Europe.

A NEW FORM OF MOBILITY OF NORTH AFRICAN WORKERS: POSTING IN THE CONSTRUCTION SECTOR

In addition to the various forms of mobility involving North African immigrants mentioned above, a new form has emerged in recent years: the posting of workers from Italy to Central and Northern European countries to work in the construction sector. Also, in this case, Italy's role within European mobility pathways is strongly influenced by the characteristics of its national economy and domestic labour market, as shown in the following pages, the analysis of the construction sector and Italy's growing importance in sending posted workers to Central and Northern European countries. Between 2012 and 2021, outgoing postings increased fivefold, from 52,237 PDs A1 to 274,789 PDs A1, and were mainly to France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, and Austria (De Wispelaere et al. 2022). Although there is no data on employment sectors, recent research has

shown that construction is one of the leading employment sectors in receiving countries (Cillo 2022).

In Central and Northern Europe, the construction sector has been affected by intense growth in incoming postings with significant repercussions on the domestic labour market. In the case of Belgium, for example, 249,755 individual posted workers were recorded in 2018, the result of a significant and constant increase that has almost tripled the total number of individual posted workers since 2009 (83,958) (Idea & Ecorys 2011; De Wispelaere et al. 2020). In Italy, by contrast, the labour market impact of incoming postings has been limited, as their number has so far remained lower compared to Belgium, rising from 48,663 PDs A1 in 2012 to 107,791 PDs A1 in 2021, with a peak of 173,727 PDs A1 in 2019 (De Wispelaere et al. 2022). The alternation of periods of stagnation, outright recession, and slow recovery that characterised the period following the 2008 economic crisis discouraged investment by companies providing services in the EU single market, particularly in the construction sector (Istat 2019). Furthermore, Italian companies managed to adapt workforce recruitment to the needs and cyclical trends of the production process by drawing on the national labour market without having to resort to the posting of workers. Various factors made this practice possible: the use of various forms of irregular and semi-regular work, enabled by the strong presence of the underground economy in Italy, in particular in the construction sector¹⁴; the use of temporary, circular, and seasonal migrations – from North African, Eastern European, and Balkan countries – facilitated by bilateral mobility partnership agreements (Cassarino 2008; CE 2000, 2007; Gjergji 2016); and the presence of a large workforce reserve, above all of foreign origin (Dimitriadis 2022; Iannuzzi & Sacchetto 2019).

This workforce reserve has expanded further, a process which began in the second half of the 2000s, the same period in which Central and Northern European countries became the preferred destination for postings from the new Member States. The expansion of workforce reserve was due both to the increase in unemployment caused by the impact of the 2008 crisis on the Italian economy and to the transformation in the stratification and composition of the labour market, which accentuated long-term changes that were already underway, such as the increase in salaried employment, the loss of the most protected and unionised jobs in manufacturing and construction, the growth of employment in the services sector, the process of the de-standardisation of employment relations, the spread of fixed-term contracts, and the growth of

14 In 2020, the underground economy accounted for 10.6% of the national GDP; 19.3% in the construction sector (Istat 2022).

involuntary part-time work (Cillo 2021; Cillo & Perocco 2020, 2021; Istat 2019). In Italy, the reserve workforce that has been created because of these processes has played the same role as posted workers in Central and Northern Europe: a pool of labour from which to draw in order to increase flexibility and lower costs for enterprises (Cillo & Perocco 2022; Wagner 2018). As we will see in the next section about the construction sector, labour mobility has played a key role in this process – particularly concerning workers from North Africa.

The Italian construction sector in crisis

The 2008 economic crisis had a profound impact on the entire Italian construction sector and its supply chain. If we look at the sector and along the supply chain, between 2009 and 2017, the economic value generated decreased by 27.5%, while employment diminished by 21.7%, going from 3,450,000 to 2,700,000 employees (Federcostruzioni 2019). Taking the construction sector alone, between 2008 and 2018, the total number of people employed decreased from 1,925,500 to 1,406,800 units,¹⁵ whereas the number of employees decreased from 1,238,500 to 860,100¹⁶ (Eurostat database). The Italian construction sector has had a more difficult time recovering than Central and Northern European countries, which have responded to the crisis by investing heavily in infrastructure. Italy's problems on this front are due both to the crisis in its private sector and the austerity measures it adopted over the last decade, which have blocked public spending, causing delays in payments for the execution of public works at a local level and increasing the number of bankruptcies among companies involved in these projects (European Construction Sector Observatory 2018).

In 2021, 34.4% of the workers employed in the construction sector were of immigrant origin (Idos 2022), particularly from North Africa and Eastern European countries such as Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, and Romania (Fillea-Cgil 2023; Ministero del Lavoro 2018a, 2018b). The increased employment of immigrant workers over the last thirty years has changed the composition of the workforce. This change has gone hand in hand with the racialisation of the labour market in the construction sector. The sector has become characterised by a stratification of the workforce along “racial” lines: immigrant workers, including those from North Africa, perform the more difficult and dangerous tasks and are mainly employed at lower skill levels, although many have been working in

15 See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/LFSA_EGAN2__custom_6836981/default/table?lang=en, last accessed on 7 July 2023.

16 See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/LFSA_EEGAN2__custom_6836988/default/table?lang=en, last accessed on 7 July 2023.

the industry for many years and would be capable of doing higher-skilled jobs (Cillo & Perocco 2015; Galossi 2015).

Although the 2008 economic crisis affected all workers in the construction sector, it had a deeper impact on immigrant workers. It led to a deterioration in immigrants' working conditions due to the higher frequency of layoffs, a lack of access to social rights, increased difficulty in receiving redundancy pay, and increased the wage differential with respect to Italian workers. Growing unemployment has favoured labour mobility at the sectoral level, leading many immigrant workers to seek work in agriculture or the service sector in jobs with worse working conditions and greater precariousness. As for immigrant workers who managed to keep their jobs in the construction sector, in many cases, they have been obliged to accept worse working conditions to avoid losing their employment contract. This situation had consequences in terms of contractual mobility since many of the immigrant workers who managed to keep their jobs had to accept part-time contracts while continuing to work eight to ten hours a day, five days a week. Furthermore, the organisation of work has been affected by a growing drive to outsource and increase the use of subcontracting, pushing many immigrant workers towards bogus self-employment, thus resulting in intra-sector labour mobility that concerns both the type of employment and the type of contract (Cillo & Perocco 2015; Ires-Fillea Cgil 2012).

Internationalisation of the construction sector and the new labour mobility of migrant workers

To counter the effects of the crisis on the internal market, large multinationals based in Italy have intensified the process of internationalisation, investing in the EU, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East (European Construction Sector Observatory 2018) and operating with a growing number of small and medium-sized enterprises through the subcontracting system. The trend towards internationalisation has meant that in recent years, Italy has become one of the main countries sending posted workers to Europe, particularly to Central and Northern European countries (De Wispelaere & Pacolet 2020).¹⁷

Although no data is available on the sectors in which posted workers from Italy are employed, the field research conducted within the Poosh, Con3Post, and Pow-Bridge projects has shown that the construction sector is the most affected. Italian construction companies turned the focus of their investments

17 The main receiving countries of postings from Italy are France (46,034 PDs A1), Switzerland (38,016), Germany (23,991), Spain (14,106), Austria (7,696), Belgium (6,181), and the United Kingdom (6,060) (De Wispelaere & Pacolet 2020).

to foreign markets, primarily in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, and Switzerland. These are all countries where the impact of the 2008 economic crisis on the construction sector was less severe, thanks to public investment programmes launched to stimulate the economy (as in the case of Denmark) or adopted before the 2008 crisis to improve existing infrastructure (as in the case of Switzerland). In many cases, Italian companies have been able to win these contracts thanks to the lowest bidding mechanism, which in some cases has resulted in savings of 30% for the public bodies that financed the projects. In addition, field research has shown that some of these companies have guaranteed shorter project delivery times than local companies and other foreign investors, thanks to the flexibility provided by the systematic use of the subcontracting system and the posting of workers.

The growing competitiveness of Italian firms in the European single market has been made possible, above all, by the large labour reserve available in the Italian labour market. As described above, this labour pool became available following the impact of the 2008 economic crisis on the construction sector and includes both low-skilled workers and highly skilled workers with long professional experience in Italy. The changes in the composition of the construction workforce since the 1990s and the impact of the 2008 economic crisis were fundamental elements in creating a large reserve of immigrant labour. Creating a labour reserve of North African immigrants was a prerequisite for the posting of workers from Italy to Central and Northern Europe. At the same time, this labour reserve has been one of the most essential factors in making Italy one of the primary sending countries for posted workers in the construction sector.

The nationalities of posted workers are very diverse, and the immigrant component is significant, as shown by a study by the National Commission of Building Funds on a sample of outgoing postings between October 2020 and January 2021, which showed that “60.8% were Italian and 39.2% foreign, both EU nationals, mainly Romanian and Bulgarian, and non-EU nationals (Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, etc.)” (CNCE 2021). The composition of the workforce in terms of nationalities results from specific entrepreneurial choices made by the sending companies. For example, enterprises that have won contracts in Central and Northern Europe have recruited both Italian workers and immigrant workers who have resided in Italy for several years from North Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and Eastern Europe (both EU and non-EU countries). To a lesser extent, workers from other EU Member States (especially from Eastern Europe) and third countries were also recruited, specifically as posted workers, making Italy a “transit country”, a crossroads of international migration and labour mobility.

Labour mobility in posting: A double-sided solution

Field research from the abovementioned projects has revealed working and living conditions very similar to those identified by studies carried out in other countries (Cremers 2011; Danaj & Zólyomi 2022; Vah Jevšnik & Toplak 2022; Wagner 2018; Wagner & Lillie 2014). However, some specific aggravating factors derive from the peculiarity of the Italian labour market in the construction sector and its racial stratification. Posted workers of foreign origin, especially those from non-EU countries with short-term residence permits, are more vulnerable to extreme exploitation due to their precarious migratory status in Italy. The empirical research highlighted that this situation – which is common in the case of North African workers, particularly from Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt – pushes them to accept worse working conditions and to postpone their requests for assistance to the trade unions or labour inspectors in order to avoid losing their jobs, which would jeopardise the renewal of their residence permit. For instance, during the Poosh project, a Belgian labour inspector reported the case of a recently arrived Tunisian worker in Italy whom an Italian company had hired to be posted to Belgium. After suffering a serious accident that left him unable to work, he returned to Italy without reporting what had happened for fear of losing his residence permit and affecting the mobility achieved in his legal status, thus lengthening the time it took to receive compensation for the accident.

On the other hand, in the case of migrant workers who have resided in Italy for a long time or from other Member States, their greater vulnerability is directly connected to the system of racial discrimination in the Italian labour market. An example that emerged during the fieldwork is the practice of under-employment, which is widespread in the Italian labour market and common during postings. It allows companies to be more competitive by exploiting a lower-cost workforce but also has a considerable impact on working conditions, not only in terms of wages but also in terms of access to rights and occupational safety and health protection.

The field research also revealed various episodes of undeclared work involving posted workers. One of these cases concerned an Italian company, X, subcontracting for a Belgian company, Y, to which a Belgian client, Z, had entrusted some work on a construction site in Antwerp. To carry out the work, the Italian company employed twelve posted workers of Egyptian and Moroccan origin, legally residing in Italy. In October 2018, seven of these workers climbed onto a crane to protest after not receiving wages for many months due to the delay accumulated by Belgian company Y in paying for the services provided

by Italian company X. As a result of this protest, the developer ousted Belgian company Y, directly paying Italian company for its the services, while all the posted workers obtained the assistance of the local trade unions and labour inspectorate in recovering their wage arrears. Subsequent investigations revealed that Italian company X employed two of the twelve workers in Belgium without any contract. In addition, labour inspectors found that five of them were working directly for Belgian company Y, in contravention of EU directives requiring that, in the case of subcontracting, posted workers remain under the direct authority of their original employer (in this case, Italian company X), and of Belgian legislation requiring that Belgian companies can only employ third-country nationals with a residence permit issued by the national authorities. Belgian company Y was subsequently indicted for trafficking in human beings with the aggravating circumstance of participation in a criminal organisation and the employment of non-EU citizens without a regular residence permit, and Italian company X received a penal charge for the irregular recruitment of two workers.

Similar situations – concerning posted workers of immigrant origin and Italian companies reported for widespread irregularities and, in some cases, for extreme exploitation and human trafficking – also emerged during the construction of a new shopping centre in Charleroi (2015–2017) and a hospital in Liège (2015) (Bernard 2015; Cillo 2021). In the case of Charleroi, for example, a protest by eight Egyptian workers posted by an Italian company revealed that dozens of workers had not been paid for six months, accumulating a debt of between 10,000 EUR and 20,000 EUR per worker, totalling 1,200,000 EUR. In addition to the non-payment of wages, the unions revealed that these workers worked 10 hours a day, Monday to Saturday, and sometimes even on Sundays, without overtime pay, as the “allowance for travelling abroad” was used to pay for irregular work. Most of these workers were of North African and Romanian origin who, having lived in Italy and worked in its construction sector for many years, had agreed to be posted to various construction sites in Europe to avoid losing their jobs. However, some had a more precarious migratory status, having arrived in Italy from North Africa through family reunification and previously employed in Italy’s agricultural sector without a regular employment contract. In the latter case, the contract with the company that had sent them to Belgium had allowed them to obtain a temporary residence permit for work purposes, thus allowing mobility through a legal status linked to labour mobility and inter-sectoral mobility, similar to the pathways mentioned in previous paragraphs.

Additionally, in Denmark, France, and Switzerland, labour inspectorates and trade unions have detected a series of fraudulent and illegal practices regarding

the posting procedure and the payment of wages and social contributions, along with violations relating to working conditions (Acciari 2022; Mesure 2018; Sartor 2022). In the case of Switzerland and Denmark, the fieldwork revealed a case in which there was severe exploitation of posted workers that implicated an Italian company linked to organised crime and specialised in railway construction (Acciari & Bellobuono 2019; Sartor 2022). After winning contracts for important public infrastructure projects thanks to the maximum bid system, this company employed both Italians and immigrants from North Africa and non-EU Eastern European countries as posted workers. To cut production costs, the company obliged workers to work 13–14 hours a day without breaks and without paying overtime, night work and holidays while resorting to the gangmaster system to control workers and avoid contact with trade unions and journalists. In the Swiss site, these workers habitually received a payslip based on Italian payroll items. By using the item “allowance for travelling abroad”, the Italian company could pay (and hide) overtime hours, which amounted to up to 120 hours per month, and illegally deduct a part of the workers’ salary by recovering false tax credits. However, in both Denmark and Switzerland, some of the workers broke their isolation and denounced their working conditions, paving the way for controls by public authorities (Acciari & Bellobuono 2019; Franchini 2019; Sartor 2022).

All these cases highlight that the lack of compliance with working time legislation negatively impacts occupational safety and health (OSH). Frequent violations relating to work at night and on public holidays, breaks, rest, shifts, and vacations negatively affect the workers’ psychophysical state and increase the risk of their being victims of workplace accidents (Danaj & Zólyomi 2022). During the Con3Post fieldwork, a journalist reported the case of a worker of Moroccan origin who had lived in Italy for many years and was sent by an Italian company to Switzerland for the construction of the Gotthard tunnel. Investigations revealed that he had been forced to work for 20 hours straight on some days, using machinery for which he had no licence and putting his own life and the lives of others at risk. Additionally, the empirical research highlighted other factors that contribute to increasing OSH risks for outgoing posted workers, such as the inadequacy of the training received, language barriers, and the temporary nature of the job – which means workers have to adapt to the various OSH prevention and protection practices adopted on construction sites in different countries – and the cut in investment in OSH by both the sending and the receiving companies.

CONCLUSION

Over the last decade, Italy has become one of the countries specialising in sending workers to work in the construction sector in Central and Northern European countries. This phenomenon, closely linked to the impact of the 2008 economic crisis on the domestic market, has involved a growing proportion of migrant workers from EU and non-EU countries, affecting their labour, contractual, and administrative status differently. By examining the case of North African workers posted by Italian companies to countries such as Belgium, Switzerland, and Denmark, this chapter shows how the posting of workers resumes, in a new form, the pathways of transition and mobility that have characterised the migratory experience of North African workers in Italy since the 1980s.

In particular, both the analysis of the conditions of workers who have recently immigrated to Italy and that of workers who have been residents for many years show how the posting of workers is often linked to forms of downward mobility. In the former case, one example of this is the acquisition of a temporary residence permit through employment under posting contracts that do not guarantee the continuity of work necessary to maintain administrative regularity, and, in the latter case, an example is the deterioration of working conditions due to the just-in-time (and just-in-place) organisation that characterises the posting of workers in the construction sector and contracts in the EU single market. The field research shows that the posting of workers is characterised by extreme precariousness closely linked to the process of the de-stabilisation of immigrant populations and the casualisation of working conditions initiated in the neoliberal era and accelerated in the last 15 years following the economic crisis of 2008. It subordinates labour mobility to the needs of economic cycles and seems to re-propose, under a different guise, the extreme temporariness that characterised the first forms of labour mobility to Europe in the post-war period.

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