

Long abstract – Monographic section

EXPLOITATION OF WORK, RIGHTS AND HEALTH IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Edited by Marco Omizzolo

Exploiting within the rules. Outsourcing in agriculture and socio-educational services

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In recent decades, labour market deregulation policies have responded to economic transformations and increasing global competitiveness with flexibility measures that have led to job insecurity, underemployment, and poor work conditions.

The consolidation of atypical contractual forms has weakened labour law and the system of guarantees established by the Workers' Statute and collective bargaining. As the Oxfam Report 2023 states, “inequality knows no crisis,” and it is the result of public policy choices that have produced deep gaps and an unequal distribution of resources.

Outsourcing is a form of organizational flexibility aimed at optimizing spending and reducing labour and personnel costs. Since the 1980s, Italian legislation has favoured the use of outsourced workers, reducing protections and rights. This article examines the regulatory evolution of outsourcing in both the private and public sectors. Through two empirical studies, it compares the impacts of outsourcing on working conditions in the agriculture and socio-educational services sectors, focusing on issues of precariousness, wage inequalities, power dynamics and exploitation.

In the Tuscan agricultural sector, the article analyses the exploitative conditions of immigrant workers, who are often hired by spurious cooperatives and contractors.

Apparently legal caporalato practices and illegal labour intermediation conceal brutal forms of exploitation. Workers' testimonies reveal irregular payments, long working days, and constant pressure to increase productivity.

In the socio-educational services sector in Rome, the working conditions of outsourced workers hired by social cooperatives are examined. These workers face low wages, precarious contracts, and a lack of protection. The introduction of law no. 328/2000 and the adoption of neo-liberal managerial models in the public administration have led to the commodification of public services and the precarisation of labour. For example, social and welfare educators working in schools but employed by social cooperatives often need multiple jobs to achieve a sufficient income, earning a net wage of between 6 and 8 euros per hour without work continuity during school closures.

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The article also analyses some recent disputes initiated by workers in different sectors, which highlight the increasing exploitation in the outsourced service and logistics sectors. Trade unions denounce illegal contractual practices, contractual dumping and exploitation of migrant labour.

Despite dealing with different sectors, the article demonstrates how outsourcing allows companies to reduce costs at the expense of workers' dignity and rights. Agricultural workers, often foreigners, suffer particularly severe levels of exploitation and harassment, exacerbated by migration policies that make them vulnerable and easy to blackmail. Similarly, in the social and care sector, as in the other sectors mentioned, exploitation occurs within the boundaries of apparent legality. Companies draw organizational boundaries that allow them to circumvent regulatory constraints, making everything appear to be in order. This makes it difficult to detect wrongdoing, except through very precise and rigorous controls. Behind this façade of legality lie grey labour, exploitation, and serious harassment. Workers, who are aware of the precariousness of their situation, are only able to unionize or escape from this system if they are less vulnerable (e.g., Italian citizens or highly educated).

The use of outsourced workers emerges as a strategy to derecognize the final user of the workforce. In this reorganization of the public and private sectors, risks are transferred from the entrepreneurs to the workers, who see their working conditions worsen. Moreover, these processes of company breakdown and organizational outsourcing increase the gaps in terms of protection, income, and rights between the workers involved in outsourcing and the employees hired directly by the company.

The article concludes its analysis by reflecting on the need to question the entire organizational structure through bolder regulation. Besides increasing workplace controls, it is necessary to review how production, distribution, and work are organized.

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