

## Long abstract – Monographic section

### **EXPLOITATION OF WORK, RIGHTS AND HEALTH IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

*Edited by Marco Omizzolo*

#### ***“We hurt all over”. An experience of trade union struggle and workers inquiry for risk and harm prevention in the workplace***

Ottavia Salvador

The symptoms caused by labour exploitation are understood here as paradigmatic clues that reveal otherwise invisible conditions of suffering. These symptoms are at once individual, social and political, and offer pathways to recognition, resistance and healing if the latter dimensions are considered together in the construction of a critical discourse on pathologies, societies and praxis. This perspective draws mainly on the international debate in medical anthropology, on workers’ inquiries and on the experiences of self-organization in the prevention of risks and injuries at work developed in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s.

One of the practices that emerged in the Italian labour movement was the formation of “homogeneous groups” in factories, made up of workers who shared the same task and who, in meetings, analyzed their exposure to risks and harm in order to draw up platforms of demands.

The cornerstones of this approach were: the valorization of the knowledge of workers’ subjectivities; their expression and affirmation; the principle of non-delegation, which introduced new forms of self-protection; the consensual validation of environmental, health and socio-cultural knowledge, acquired with the contribution of experts.

Experimenting with these visions and practices while trying to translate states of suffering into demands were the main objectives of a collective process of trade union struggle and workers’ inquiry that began in 2023 in Modena across two factories in the meat sector, a sector greatly influenced by global supply chains and strongly characterized by the intensification of work, outsourcing, and dynamics of exploitation affecting workers with a largely migratory background in precarious working conditions.

The illnesses in both male and female workers that emerged from the “homogeneous groups” revealed the widespread presence of musculo-skeletal pathologies caused by biomechanical overload, particularly of the upper limbs, and by the manual handling of heavy loads. Several cases of gastritis and migraine headaches were reported, as well as the development of respiratory diseases caused by the thermal stress to which they are constantly exposed, with one female worker even hospitalized with hypothermia. Work-related stress particularly affects women, who often suffer the double burden of both factory and domestic work. A large number of injuries were reported, mainly related to the use of knives in meat processing on the conveyor belts, where the required safety distances are ignored and production speeds are high due to understaffing. The poor organization of the work is also a source of pathology and injury, as the risk and overload caused by these repetitive movements are exacerbated by the impossibility of carrying out the work ergonomically. Many of these incidents are hidden and go unreported due to fear of repercussions.

The resulting suffering is that of a class of body deprived of its autonomy, a body violated, damaged, humiliated, consumed, and marked in a moral dimension. Specific harms affect specific

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groups of people through arbitrary hierarchies of values established in a society that divides and separates people into unequal conditions and functions to profit from those forced into precarious and vulnerable situations.

The symptoms and conditions of suffering that have been brought to light would unlikely have emerged without the construction of an appropriate context to support their revelatory characteristics, which appears fundamental to base trade union strategies on the protection of workers' health and strengthening their autonomy.

Bringing the individual symptom into a collective dimension was also vital in confronting the state of alienation that isolates workers in an unshared pain, raising their awareness and challenging the perception of the lack of autonomy in the working (and living) environment. Difficulties abound, however, in setting up permanent worker-operated monitoring where turnover of workers is high, training is structurally absent, and cases are fragmented due to outsourcing and multiple contractors.

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