

“Inspire and conspire”: Italian precarious workers between self-organization and self-advocacy¹

Annalisa Murgia and Giulia Selmi²

Abstract

The scenario we see today in the labor market in Italy is composed of a progressive proliferation of non-standard contracts. This involves first and foremost a problem of citizenship and welfare, due to the lower or almost non-existent possibility of access to social rights associated with these types of contracts. Faced with this situation, over the last ten years, Italy has seen the emergence of a complex social movement to counter precariousness. This movement at first concentrated its efforts in the rewriting of the symbolic vocabulary and imagination at work, in an attempt to consolidate the precarious as a collective subjectivity beyond its traditional representations. In recent years, however, this process of “self-representation” in terms of a collective narrative is matched by a process of “self-advocacy”: an effective self-organization of temporary workers to handle the conflict in the workplace. In a scenario of no confidence in political parties and trade unions in addressing the issue of precariousness, these movements refuse the delegation of the conflict, promoting instead a modality of action based on the organizational form of the network, sharing knowledge and direct representation. This paper explores two particular movement experiences in the Italian context.

Introduction

Research on the transformations of contemporary work has long emphasized the development of new forms of work and social organization in advanced capitalist countries. In Italy, as elsewhere in Western countries, some of the key elements of stability that characterized work have been called into question: times and places; forms of contract (jobs today are increasingly part-time, temporary, on-call or pseudo-freelance); salary; career paths, protections and

¹ The present article is a totally collaborative effort by the two authors, whose names appear in alphabetical order. If, however, individual responsibility is to be assigned for academic purposes, Annalisa Murgia wrote the introduction, Section 1 and the conclusion; Giulia Selmi wrote Sections 2, 2.1 and 2.2.

² “Inspire-conspire” is the title of a campaign promoted by the San Precario movement, begun in 2006, against precariousness in the fashion world. “Take force inspiring, breathe it out conspiring and kicking against a reality that claims that you’re alone, isolated, unable to exchange, share, mix, reshape everything that surrounds you”. Available at: <http://www.chainworkers.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=SerpicaNaro.DocumentoPolitico>

rights connected to the work contract and, finally, the forms of representation. We have witnessed a progressive proliferation of temporary contracts marked by instability both of income and employment together with a serious uncertainty due to the lack of adequate protections in terms of continuity of wage, social security and so on. These different contractual forms were complemented with traditional employment contracts and open-ended contracts whose regulation did not undergo any change and which continue to be associated with full access to the welfare state. Consequently, in Italy, the real problem concerning precarious occupations is first a problem of welfare, or it has to do with the lesser or absent possibility for precarious workers to access social protection (Cimaglia, Corbisiero and Rizza, 2009; Palidda, 2009).

The discontinuity of employment and income thus put the need to establish forms of protection to assist precarious workers and reconstruct the various temporary jobs (both dependent and independent) at the center of the debate. In order to address these issues, trade unions partially reviewed their traditional practices of representation. Given their increasing inability to be the bearer of the rights of homogeneous social subjects and their widespread interests (Carrieri, 2003; Ballarino, 2005; Regalia, 2009), they tried to open collective bargaining to the so-called atypical jobs (Ballarino and Pedersini, 2005; Cella, 2005; Pedersini, 2005; Regalia, 2005; Lazzari, 2006). However, up to date, none of the major trade unions managed to find neither new ways of gathering this new typology of workers nor new forms of bargaining that would allow to take responsibility for issues of workers with temporary contracts. According to the Country EIRO Report on "Flexicurity and industrial relations" (Madama and Coletto, 2009), all solutions concerning the extension of social security to temporary workers are rather fragmented. Overall, it appears that the government and trade unions as well as employer organizations have not been interested in such a debate.

So how is it possible to overcome the difficulties of organizing and representing individuals who, due to the unstable and dispersed (by category and area) features of their jobs, are struggling to build capacity for conflict and to express a power of alliance? Is it possible to try out cooperative and conflictual forms of action despite the apparent "non-organizable" feature of this precarious universe? Can a "precarious conspiracy" – as some Italian activists defined it – be possible outside the traditional union rules?

After a brief review of the issues related to the proliferation of atypical contracts and entry barriers to the welfare state, we will discuss the current configuration of the Italian movement against precariousness in relation to the crisis of representation of the traditional trade unions through the analysis of two emblematic cases of non-standard workers' self-organized movements in the metropolitan context of Lombardy.

We were invisible and we showed ourselves, we were unrepresentable and we self-represented

For several years, numerous studies on the Italian labor market have pointed out that in Italy the “hard core” is still represented by “standard” work, or permanent and full-time dependent contracts (18 million compared to 5 million of part-time and atypical contracts). However, over 60% of newcomers are currently on short term contracts, which means less security in terms of future perspectives of employment and career opportunities, a lower level of protection (in case of sickness, unemployment, maternity, so on), little or no job training and low wages. Besides, the average age of atypical workers is rapidly rising and almost half of those who work under atypical contracts have completed at least ten years of work experience (ISTAT, 2008; Murgia, 2010; Villa, 2010).

The introduction of the so-called non-standard jobs - due to the labor reforms of 1997 and 2003 - undoubtedly resulted in a series of advantages for companies that now can establish more elastic and flexible relations with workers, having the opportunity in some cases to “test” new hires, and - more frequently - to recruit staff for limited periods of time. However, it largely failed its stated goals: it didn't contribute to the reduction of the gender and generation gaps in the labor market while launching a further process of market segmentation and, as a result, of occupational segregation, to the detriment especially of youth and women (Berton, Richiardi and Sacchi, 2009; Villa, 2010).

Nor has the recent law (2012) promoted by Elsa Fornero – the current Minister of Labor – brought substantial changes, although it introduces some correctives in regard to the indiscriminate use of project contracts and better regulation of apprenticeships. It has not intervened on the wide range of temporary contractual forms still in effect, and it has not introduced any form of universal protection in the case of job loss, even less an income continuity scheme. The effects of precarious employment persist to be particularly negative on young workers (53% of all precarious workers are under 35 years of age), as difficult early experiences of transition into work are likely to be associated with deterioration in long-term life chances (“scarring effect”) (Samek, Semenza, 2012). Moreover, people not in education, employment or training – NEET people – have reached a figure of 2.1 million in Italy, or 22,1% (vs 15,3% in Europe; ISTAT, 2012). The current situation that young people are experiencing in the Italian labor market, in fact, forced them to the inactivity by a process of “discouragement”: they don't even look for a job, because they are aware that it is useless (Carrera, 2012).

Therefore, the new scenarios of work have obliged us to redefine the traditional interpretative categories constructed around work understood in term of a permanent and dependent job (Casey, 1995; Sennett, 1998; Beck, 1999). In the increasingly globalised and interconnected contemporary societies, a profound change – to which information communication technologies have largely contributed – is apparent not only in the nature of work but also in social relationships in all the life spheres (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Morini and Fumagalli, 2010). In a context like this, characterized by heterogeneous and

constantly changing situations, the images and meanings attributed to work are redefined as people constantly move among jobs and oscillate between employment and unemployment, between training and work, thus giving rise to new professional pathways and, in general, to new life-stories. What changes in this scenario is not only the geography of the world of work but also the different forms of social vulnerability incorporated it (Castel, 1995; Chicchi, 2001; Fumagalli, 2011).

These economic and social transformations contribute to the elaboration of a new representation of precariousness, which is much broader than the debate about the so-called atypical work, it overflows and extends into self and dependent employees, and it occurs as an existential condition that concerns young people, women and migrants, underserved populations, only barely protected by a welfare patterned on a Fordist world (Standing, 2011; Armano and Murgia, 2012). This raises the process of individualization that profoundly imbues contemporary society. This individualization has been subject to evident tensions – within the world of work – between projects for emancipation and self-fulfillment, on the one hand, and re-interpretation of the job through private experience on the other, in continuous oscillation between autonomy and subordination, and between old and new forms of (self)organization by workers (Gherardi and Murgia, forthcoming 2012).

In this picture, the growing apart of the structure of the labor market and the welfare state gave rise to a gap, growing over the years, between those with full guarantees acknowledged, and those who work with temporary contracts with reduced access to social rights. In this sense, the problem concerns not so much the labor market flexibility itself, but the lack of rights and of support for the periods between one job and another. More generally, this implies that the possibilities to practically acquire full citizenship are limited since - *de jure* or *de facto* (because of the brevity of contracts and/or the fear of a non-renewal of the contract) – people cannot (or can only partially) access the social protections granted to permanent employees (Samek and Semenza, 2008; Cimaglia, Corbisiero and Rizza, 2009; Berton, Richiardi and Sacchi, 2009).

Despite the high rate of stillborn enterprises and progressive discontinuity of employment in Italy, access to social protection for workers is still largely based on dependent work for which the Italian labor system recognizes certain rights and protections whereby people acquire a certain status and social citizenship. The spread of more frequent professional transitions and more fragmented careers was not matched with a redefinition of the forms of social protection and models of representation. In particular, with regard to the forms of representation, the new, flexible type of jobs had a decisive influence on the rate of unionisation, especially because bringing together workers with short-term contracts into a network of representation would require unions to renew their ability to provide answers to their questions, that are partially different, more difficult and heterogeneous than those of standard workers.

Since the late 1990s, the three main national confederal unions – CGIL, CISL and UIL – have sought to respond to the growth of atypical work and its lack of

representation with the creation of representative organisations for workers employed on atypical contracts. Membership in these organisations extends to all workers that can be defined as independent, quasi-dependent, or on fixed-term contracts, regardless of the sector and profession to which they belong. Yet we must face the fact that the trade unions no longer perform a cohesive social function based on traditional identity mechanisms, and they encounter great difficulties in aggregating and organizing non-standard workers. The heterogeneous nature of these workers not only makes any kind of collective action difficult, but also – in the case of “atypical” trade union organizations (e.g. NIDIL, FELSA and CPO) – means that these are not well-rooted in the work contexts of the rank and file that they wish to represent, owing above all to the temporary nature of employment relationships and the fragmentation of collective agreements (Ballarino, 2005; Bellardi, 2005).

This is the reason why the (few) successful actions of Italian unions in this field usually took place at company level where there were particularly large numbers of workers on temporary employment contracts, often hired on the basis of improper contractual arrangements, for instance freelancers instead of dependent employees – the typical situation in several Italian call centres. The negotiations aimed in these cases to improve working conditions and to reclaim a procedure of stabilization of temporary workers (Galetto, 2010). In most cases the trade unions therefore intervened on the issue of atypical work on one side with initiatives aimed at furnishing information on job stabilization procedures and at rights associated with temporary contracts; on the other hand, through the submission of legislative proposals on the recruitment of temporary workers (see in this regard the campaigns “Campagna di stabilizzazione 2008” by Nidil and the campaign “Assunti davvero” by grassroots trade unions).

On the contrary, in cases where there is not a large number of temporary workers, the unions are rarely able to obtain new rights for atypical work. It should be said that access to a right in the workplace – even in the case where the right exists – should not to be taken for granted for a temporary worker, whose contract renewal is totally at the discretion of the employer. Having a short-term contract makes precarious workers easy to blackmail and often holds back those who would like to participate in union activities. In situations where there is a high turnover and contracts are short, it is particularly difficult for unions to intercept the workers and to promote joint actions. For those who daily experience professional instability it is therefore difficult, to benefit of existing legal protections against the risks associated with the intermittency of employment by means of collective institutionalized actions.

Italian industrial relations scholars initially debated the fact that unions’ political action was excessively focused on the work of insiders, excluding those considered outsiders due to the type of contract (Accornero, 1992; Regalia, 2000; Regini, 2003). Later, the focus shifted to the concepts of representation and representativeness of trade unions, considering the changes of the labor market and the diversification of the workforce (Fasoli, Cella and Carrera, 2005; Galetto, 2010). Researches focused then on those organizational and regulatory

forms of trade union actions aimed at representing atypical workers. However, given the poor results gained by the unions dedicated to the protection of the rights of precarious workers, it seems interesting to explore new and “bottom-up” ways of organizing recently experienced in some areas of the country, in line of discontinuity with the practices of confederal unions.

Alongside more traditional practices of union representation, in recent years new forms of challenge based on networks of actions, people and practices bottom-up arose. Among them, the first and particularly significant is the May Day Parade – a parade of precarious workers held every first May in many Italian and European cities – which has transformed the traditional Labor Day into an opportunity for visibility and conflict on the issue of precariousness through ironic and subversive forms of communication (Mattoni, 2012).

This movement initially concentrated its efforts in the rewriting of the symbolic vocabulary and imaginary on labor in the attempt to consolidate the precarious workers as a collective subjectivity beyond its traditional representations. In recent years, however, this process of symbolic “self-representation” is supported by a process of actual “self-advocacy” in which these activists tried to experiment with forms of cooperative action and conflict beyond the apparent “impossibility to organize” the precarious universe.

In this sense, this movement differs from the traditional trade union action in at least two factors: first, activists and especially young people, women and the “cognitariat”³ have taken the form of precarious self-representation as a precondition to become a political subject, refusing to accept intermediate forms of organization as “interpreters” of their issue in more or less institutionalized areas of the political arena. Second, while the unions deal primarily with labor rights, demanding more guarantees for their patrons, or for all workers (according to whether they belong to an associative or general union), this movement developed demands for greater rights, which are connected not only to the working sphere, but more generally to the life paths of individuals.

In such a scenario of lack of confidence in political parties and trade unions in dealing with the issue of precariousness, these social movement actors reject the delegation of conflict, promoting instead modes of action based on the organizational form of the network, the sharing of knowledge and the direct representation in continuity with the so-called global justice movement born in Seattle in 1999, with whom they share the same political roots.

In the next section two cases of self-organization of temporary workers in the metropolitan territory of Lombardy will be discussed. They differ from one another in three main elements: the type of work (high skilled service industry vs. “poor” service industry), the relationship with traditional trade union organizations (collaboration, albeit conflictual, in the first case; sharp contrast,

³ What has been defined by Franco Bifo Berardi (2001) the new “virtual class” of the labor market, the “cognitive proletariat”.

in the second) and the form of self-organization (whether or not related to the workplace). From a methodological point of view, this contribution is based on the analysis of the paper-based and web-based documents, performance and political actions carried out by the activists of the San Precario Network from 2002 to 2011. Moreover, we identify ourselves as activists and precarious workers. So our reflections in this article come also from our personal and political experience within the Italian movement against precarity.

From self-representation to self-advocacy: the San Precario Network

The groups of precarious workers constituting the San Precario Network, as well as the Saint himself, are not new in the debate on precariousness. However, as already mentioned, academic attention focused mainly on communicative, iconographic and symbolic aspects of this movement (Bruni and Murgia, 2007; Mattoni, 2008; Bruni and Selmi, 2010). The first noteworthy element of this network, was its ability to create a new symbolic language capable of representing the experience of precariousness outside the traditional narratives on labor. In a framework of contractual fragmentation, deep blackmail and invisibility in the public space, these forms of self-representation – from the May Day Parade to the creation of the icon of San Precario up to the project “Imbattibili”⁴ - contributed to legitimize “precarious workers” as a political subjectivity in the social and political debate and gave them a language through which to represent their experiences and the fight for their rights. Early in the new millennium, the dominant narrative on precariousness was aimed at minimizing, if not completely denying, the wild deregulation of the labor market and the consequent loss of labor and welfare rights carried out at precarious workers’ own expenses. Within this frame, the Italian activists against precarity were able to politically legitimize the precarious subjectivity in the public debate and to claim different labor politics focused on a new idea of welfare state and citizenship rights.

In contrast, in this article we shift the focus from the forms of self-representation, to explore the processes of actual self-advocacy carried out by some groups of precarious workers within the frame of the San Precario network. The institutionalisation of precarity in the Italian labor market posed new challenges and encouraged a redefinition of political action towards an actual assumption of the social conflict in the workplace. The developing “system” of precariousness was not matched by the ability of traditional workers’ partners to understand and defend the instances of those who are outside of the standard frame of labor. Precisely in this *vacuum* of advocacy, the San Precario network is an interesting and eloquent experience to explore, both

4 For more information: <http://www.chainworkers.org/MAYDAY/index.html>,
<http://www.chainworkers.org/SANPRECARIO/index.html> e
<http://www.chainworkers.org/IMBATTIBILI/>

in terms of participation and self-organization of precarious workers and by virtue of its new ways to protect rights and interests in the workplace.

On one hand, the San Precario activists continue their “cultural actions” on the issue of precariousness that characterized them from the beginning⁵ and promote the emergence and consolidation of groups of self-organized workers in various employment sectors – from call center to university – as can be seen on the web site that collects their experiences: <http://precaria.org>. On the other hand, activists moved a step forward towards a direct assumption of conflict and bargaining in the workplace, without delegating to unions. This was possible thanks to the creation of the *San Precario Points* or a legal/political desk through which the rights of precarious workers were protected in a mode which mixed the traditional legal forms of strike with different forms of activism coming from a different political tradition mainly linked to the so-called social justice movements.

This network of activists sees the participation of both groups *ex ante* – or co-workers and/or workers of the same professional field that self-organize themselves in order to gain a voice in the protection of their rights – and *ex-post* groups or precarious workers that turn to the San Precario Point without ever having been a member previously to seek support to protect their rights in case of specific conflicts with the employer.

Following the thread of this dual belonging, we will discuss two emblematic experiences of self-organization and self-advocacy connected to the San Precario network to explore a variety of processes both of aggregation and relationship with traditional trade unions: the Network of Precarious Editors - self-organized workers in the world of publishing, and Sea Girls – workers of SEA s.p.a, the company that manages the services of the Linate and Malpensa airports in Milan.

When there is union, but without proxies: the network of precarious editors

The network of precarious editors (from now on Re.Re.Pre) gathers 150 workers in the publishing sector both print and digital:⁶ editors, but also employees in the legal offices, press agents, copywriters in advertising agencies, iconographic researchers and translators who share the same precarious contractual conditions.

Its birth is the first noteworthy element to explore the process of self-organization and the characteristics of innovation in comparison to the traditional forms of representation in the workplace. The starting point is a call,

5 Particularly the editorial activity “Quaderni di San Precario” downloadable at <http://quaderni.sanprecario.info/>.

6 Re.Re.Pre has its core in the city of Milan where it was founded. However in December 2010 two local hubs were created in Bologna and Rome.

circulated in January 2008 in specialized web sites and magazines, a sort of “call to arms” addressed to all precarious editors, inviting for an assembly to build a network “that serves to enhance us, defend us, support us. A network made up of experiences and proposals, aimed at reclaiming fairer working conditions, representing us in front of those who have so far believed only to squeeze ourselves out”.⁷ Re.Re.Pre immediately states the relationship that binds them to the “political subject closest to the issue of fighting precariousness”, thus tightening “an important link with the movement of San Precario (as set out in particular by the contribution to the drafting of the knowledge workers’ manifesto, the agreement to the Mayday 2009 and 2010 manifesto and, more recently, by participating at the General Assembly of Precarity)” (Rete dei Redattori Precari, 2010: 217).

From the beginning, the goals of this group of workers are clear: first, to give visibility to a collective subjectivity within the world of publishing; second to have direct voice in the negotiation and vindication of their working condition. In this sense choosing the network (both as organizational form and as technological platform through which grow this organization) is particularly eloquent: it is not an attempt to cause unrest within a single publisher or communication company, but rather the attempt to organize an entire working sector by trying to find a form of organization that is able to overcome the fragmentation and invisibility that characterizes it and to create a space for political action by which workers, with different backgrounds, but common precarious contractual conditions, can recognize each other and act together.

The digital call is followed by a founding meeting in April of the same year that establishes the goals and kicks off the creation of the web site that collects its activity (www.rerepre.org) and of the mailing list which serves as a virtual slot of the different members. The website gathers all the different activities of the group organized in sections. Alongside the programmatic pages that explain the identity and goals of the group, as well as the way to join it, there’s an interesting section – “Life of a precarious worker” – that gathers stories of precarious workers in the publishing sector who experience difficult situations; a section where the political documents produced by Re.Re.Pre can be downloaded; and a precariousness dictionary where useful information on job contract in the publishing sector can be found. It is precisely on this website that the claims for “a fair job” suggested in the first call of which Re.Re.Pre wants to be the direct representative are explained: a critique of the indiscriminate outsourcing of editorial services that promoted the progressive disappearance of long-term and guaranteed jobs towards contractual arrangements with fewer (or no) protection, while the same working methods were maintained; the need for consultation between the parties in terms of timing, mode and compensation in case of occasional collaborations and the real autonomy of these workers; the need to draw up a “tariff of the editor” that makes remuneration for different jobs in this sector transparent and fair.

7 Cf. Aa.Vv. (2010).

However, the implementation of these claims does not remain confined to the internet. Alongside the site and the mailing list, Re.Re.Pre organizes some public initiatives that embody and give visibility to its demands and expand the number of subjects involved: it organized a conference on precariousness in the publishing sector at the book fair in Turin, several leaflets were distributed in front of Milan's main bookstores to expose the working conditions that underlie the production of a book as well as a symbolic action of disturbance at the headquarters of AIE (Italian Publishers Association) during the negotiations for the renewal of the national graphic and editorial contract. For instance, in December 2010 some precarious editors – dressed as Santa Claus – entered without permission the AIE office in Milan – where a negotiation for the renewal of the graphic-editorial contracts was going on – to deliver to those present a document explaining the claims of the workers concerning the contract and some pieces of coal to underline the unfair behavior of the publishing companies towards their employees.

It is precisely during the renewal of the national contract that Re.Re.Pre becomes a significant experience in redefining the ways through which an entire working sector organizes and reshapes the relationship between self-organization of workers and traditional unionism. If workers usually turn to unions to support their claims, in particular during the negotiations for the renewal of the contract, in this case we face an opposite situation. The largest trade union confederation – the CGIL – seeks a direct connection with this network: first by inviting them to take part in the "Consultation of Professional Work" and second, through the SLC or the federation of communication's workers, by beginning a dialogue to explore the precarious conditions in the publishing sector in order to include a specific claim concerning temporary and non-standard workers in the trade union platform for the national contract renewal.

In this regard, self-organized workers burst onto the bargaining scene between employers and unions – historically dichotomous – and legitimize themselves not only as beneficiaries of decisions made for them by others, but as bearers of a direct experience and knowledge on the current configuration of work that the union, through its traditional ways, struggles to achieve and, therefore, to represent. The self-organization becomes, then, a way to do advocacy not only against employers, but against the trade unions themselves. It thus opens a gap in the supposed impossibility to represent precarious workers, starting from the experiences and demands of those who live precariousness in person.

When the union is not there: the experience of Sea workers

After the world of publishing, we now totally change register. The second experience we'll introduce and discuss is significantly different from that described above, both in terms of reasons and ways of self-organization and in terms of working sector. It concerns the experience of a group of workers of Sea

Handling S.p.a, one of several companies of the SEA group that manages services in the Milan airports of Malpensa and Linate. This is not the case of a group of workers that decide to create a self-organized subjectivity of precarious workers within their workplace and afterwards “join” the network of San Precario, but a group that turns to the San Precario network to look for support to handle a situation of serious contractual difficulty that the traditional trade unions did not take care of.

In October 2004, twenty-one hostesses turned to the lawyers and activists of the San Precario Point to seek advice on their contractual condition. From 2001 to 2005 these workers signed several fixed-term contracts with Sea. Although over the years the company had promised them a long-term contract, they were informed it wouldn't be renewed. Besides the non-renewal of the contract, the workers lived for years in conditions of particular blackmail since the company, by relying on seasonal peaks, had been able to rely on workers who provided the same services as people with long-term contracts through the ongoing drawing up of short-term contract even when long term hiring would have been a must.⁸

The initial consultancy between the Sea workers and the activists of the San Precario Point turned into actual cooperation to win the dispute, first through legal tools. In July the lawyers of the network appealed to the court stating the illegality of the temporary nature of the contracts drawn up until then. They demanded for them to be verified, reinstatement of the permanent workers and payment of wages gained in the meantime. In March 2006, the dispute was won and the workers were reinstated in the company. Similar legal actions by several other precarious workers in the company followed over the years, asking SEA for the conversion of their temporary contracts into long term ones. It's noteworthy that traditional trade union representatives in SEA recognized these requests only two years later in a formal agreement that included a commitment to stabilize those who still had temporary contracts within twenty-four months.

The first element that leaps out in this quick reconstruction of the longest stories of these workers is the almost complete absence of trade union organizations that, while present in the company, hadn't been able to take responsibility of the instances of precarious workers. They only succeeded in imposing their voice with the employer well after the workers' self-organized initiative. The second mirror like element is the ability of the San Precario Point to become not just a symbolic reference point for precarious workers, but a real partner in case of conflicts with employers, a partner capable of taking responsibility in a dispute and to support workers, regardless of the trade unions positioning.

The third element, then, concerns how this conflict was handled. While the dispute first of the twenty-one hostess of the Sea and of many other workers afterwards was conducted through the tools of traditional labor law, it was also supported by different conflict tools coming from the political tradition of the

⁸ For more legal information, see Paulli and Zappa (2010).

global justice movement and focused on communication and subvertizing. Alongside the legal work, several disruptive actions in the two Milan airports have been organized through subvertizing communication strategies aimed at consolidating them as representatives of the issues related to precariousness. Among others, the replacement of all the company cafeteria table mats which reported the official logo of the Sea Handling company along with a series of marketing information with graphically equal mats who reported on the one hand information on the actual behavior of company towards its employees and other useful information to move a lawsuit against the company is particularly eloquent. These actions denounced precariousness and the complete deregulation of contracts as a structural condition of the contemporary labor market.

On the one hand, in a high blackmail framework like the one just described, the presence of the San Precario activists in the workplace allowed a denunciation of the working conditions people experienced in SEA and to lobby in the company without exposing workers directly who, due to the ongoing expiry of contracts, are in a state of extreme vulnerability. On the other hand, the case of the SEA became an opportunity not only to support the claims of a specific group of workers, but also to give voice to a broader claim against the precariousness of working conditions, which cuts across locations and types of work.

Discussion and conclusion

The cases of self-organization of precarious workers discussed above suggest a reflection on a variety of issues. First, the de-standardization of work, detached from a redefinition of the criteria to benefit of the welfare state, leads to a further spread of precariousness for those working with non-standard contracts who can't benefit of same social citizenship guaranteed by "standard" jobs.

Secondly, the increasing diversity of forms of work resulted, in Italy as well as in other countries of continental southern Europe where a universal welfare system hasn't been developed (or a welfare system able to avoid a situation where legal and social guarantees are left to a wide variety of company bargaining), in a problem of redefining the role of traditional trade unions, mainly because of the questioning of the national collective bargaining systems and of the labor law itself.

The progressive individualization of employment relations has led the confederal unions (NIdiL, Felsea and CPO) to think of new forms of representation which, however, do not enjoy the same recognition by workers and the same power over the employer. Starting from these considerations, we wondered whether other forms of organization of precarious subjects and collective elaboration of conflict on the issue of precarity were possible or not. The cases of the Network of Precarious Editors (Re.Re.Pre.) and the Sea workers, although very different to one another, led us first to question the supposed "impossibility" to organize the precarious universe often invoked as

the main cause of the crisis of traditional representation.

The critical point, then, seems to be not so much the “impossibility to represent” precarious workers, but the inability to rethink the structure of trade union representation and organizing themselves in order to promote people participation and new communication strategies inside and outside the workplace (Sconvegno, 2008). This doesn't mean, however, that there isn't the possibility of a dialogue between groups of self-organized workers and the unions. Despite this crisis of representation, unions maintain a huge force of attraction with respect to areas of labor which, although numerically and politically in decline compared to past decades, are nevertheless far from disappearing (Curcio, 2005).

The main problem that concerns both traditional unions and the experience of self-organization is the dialogue and joint action among the different parts of contemporary work within the paradigm of a widespread precariousness. A first step, as shown by the cases of self-organization of precarious workers outlined above, was moved by social movements against precariousness that critically questioned the traditional ways of participation and representation of trade unions, pursuing their own demands autonomously, while not renouncing – whenever possible – to implement advocacy with the unions.

The strategies adopted by these networks offer exciting new possibilities for political action, by avoiding the sterile dichotomous opposition between “old” and “new” forms of work, “old” and “new” forms of organization and trying instead to build a relationship between the forms of self-advocacy and the structure of union representation that could be tactically collaborative and confrontational at the same time.

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About the authors

Annalisa Murgia currently holds a postdoctoral fellowship co-funded by the Marie Curie Actions of the European Commission at the Interdisciplinary Research Group on Socialisation, Education and Training (GIRSEF) of the Académie Universitaire de Louvain (Belgium). She is also a member of the Research Unit on Communication, Organizational Learning and Aesthetics and of the Centre of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Trento (Italy). Her research focuses on work trajectories, with a special focus on knowledge workers, workers with non-standard and precarious jobs, and the social construction of gender in professional careers. She can be contacted at annalisa.murgia AT unitn.it.

Giulia Selmi is a precarious worker and activist. Academically speaking, she holds a PhD in Sociology and Social Research at the University of Trento (Italy), where she is in the steering committee of the Center of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies. She is currently an Erasmus Mundus postdoctoral fellow at the University Mohammed V of Rabat (Morocco) where she researches the transformation of the intimate biographies of second-generation Moroccan youth living in Italy. She can be contacted at giulia.selmi AT unitn.it.