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The Strike Has Become Social

Paths of precarious mobilization in Italy

Maurilio Pirone[1]

[**Résumé**] L'article vise tout d'abord à retracer l'évolution de certaines trajectoires des mobilisations sociales concernant la précarité en Italie. L'hypothèse de base est que cette condition ne peut être réduite à une catégorie sociologique ou économique mais constitue plutôt un terrain d'organisation syndicale et de revendications politiques. L'analyse que je présente sera articulée en deux moments historiquement distincts selon la manière dont la précarité a été décrite et combattue. Par rapport à un premier moment, dans lequel la montée et la mise en récit de nouveaux sujets du travail ont pris le devant de la scène, il semble possible d'identifier une deuxième phase de mobilisations dans laquelle – tout en maintenant une alternance entre conflits spécifiques et mouvements généralistes – la question de la précarité a débordé et a inclus des dimensions biopolitiques comme la reproduction sociale et l'autodétermination. Par conséquent, les formes de contestation sont également transformées : dans la dernière partie de l'article, j'essaierai de clarifier les principales caractéristiques des expériences de grève sociale qui ont eu lieu en Italie ces dernières années.
Mots-clés : grève, syndicalisme, précarité, mouvements sociaux

[**Abstract**] The article aims first of all to retrace the evolution of some paths of social mobilization around precariousness in Italy. The basic assumption is that such condition cannot be reduced to a sociological or economic category, but rather constitutes a ground for trade union organisation and political claims. I will articulate this analysis into two historically distinct moments on the basis of the ways in which precariousness has been described and opposed. Compared to a first moment in which the rise and narration of new working subjects took the centre of the stage, it seems possible to identify a second kind of mobilisations in which – while maintaining an alternation between specific disputes and general movements – the issue of precariousness spilled over and involved bio-political aspects as social reproduction and self-determination. Therefore, the forms of protest are also transformed: in the final part of the article I will try to clarify the main features of the social strike experiments that have occurred in Italy in recent years.
Keywords: social strike, social unionism, precariousness, social movements

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Precariousness as a field of subjectivation

While precariousness can be interpreted as an economic condition or as a sociological category, this article chooses to focus on the processes of precarious subjectivation (Standing, 2011), and assumes that it constitutes an effective ground for the practice of political and trade union experimentation. Over time, in fact, the very definition of what precariousness is (see Choi, Mattoni, 2010 for the distinction between precarity, precariousness and precariat) has proved to be not simply an object of terminological clash but rather a mobile boundary between subjection and affirmation. In other words, to be a precarious subject does not simply mean to identify a more or less homogeneous social group in terms of lifestyles and problems, nor a set of transformations in the forms and rights of work, but constitutes a ground for confrontation between different and changing instances over time in terms of claims and organisation to improve or transform their condition. These paths are characterized by the plurality of potential actors as well as by the heterogeneity of proposed claims and areas of intervention.

Following Choi and Mattoni (2010: 214), it is possible to identify four different types of collective subjects engaged in the Italian mobilization of precarious subjectivities: "traditional trade unions, radical trade unions, groups of self-organized precarious workers, and grassroots activists". The more traditional unions as well as the horizontal forms of self-organised workers have in recent years faced the challenge of rethinking their bargaining and protest practices in the light of changes in the labour market and society (Choi, Mattoni, 2010; Giorgi, Caruso, 2015; Mathers, 2016). Starting from these assumptions, my intention is to examine some paths of precarious mobilization that were experimented in Italy from the early 2000s.

The first legislative measures that have driven the labour market towards increasing non-standard jobs were implemented in the 1990s – at least since the 1997 Pacchetto Treu – and were deepened in all subsequent reforms, until the recent Jobs Act of 2015 (Fumagalli, 2006; Gallino 2007; Allegri, Bronzini, 2015). The first reforms introduced casual jobs, while the latest embedded elements of uncertainty into open ended contracts. This legislative context being set, it is possible to distinguish two main waves of precarious mobilisation in Italy. The first, extending over the first half of the 2000s, is characterized by the attempt to make publicly visible a plurality of new forms of work that distanced themselves profoundly from the standard jobs. The second wave was sparked by the productive transformations resulting from the crisis of 2007/2008; it articulated the issue of precariousness to other issues such as migration, gender and welfare.

The aim of this article is to show the evolution of these practices of political-union mobilization. In particular, the redefinition of the practice of strikes seems to be the privileged ground for the creation of new forms of organization and of social critique.

1. The voice of the invisible

In the 1990s, the figure of precarious work was almost absent from public discourse (Mattoni, 2012). This does not mean that precarious forms of work did not already exist – the creation of which can be traced back to the early 1980s when, under the pressure of neoliberal deregulation policies, the rules of labour market were modified in favour of labour flexibility (Cordova, 1986; Vosko, 2000). As Choi and Mattoni (2010: 214) point out, "the process of precarization meant both the transformation of open-end, full-time standard work forms to flexible, temporary working arrangements and the emergence of new, insecure forms of work". Precarious work is therefore characterised by lower rights, lower wages, more uncertainty and working hours; the term of comparison is still the standard work, understood as permanent, employed, embedded in collective bargaining agreements and covered by a full welfare system. Yet, subjective pathways for precarious workers as such were then missing. Things changed in the beginning of the 2000s when various campaigns and subjects began to develop a narrative on so-called flexibility that highlighted its aspects of uncertainty and erosion of rights, in contradiction with labour reformers who presented it as something positive (Possenti, 2012).

The first forms of organization and narration of precariousness were born outside the traditional circuits of left-wing parties and Confederal unions, and in strong connection with social movements. In this regard, I would like to briefly mention three specific cases: MayDay Parades of Milan (Foti, 2017), the fictitious case of San Precario (Bruni, Murgia, 2007), and the conflict of the workers of the Atesia call center (Mattoni, 2012). The first case is an attempt to put precarious workers together, the second highlights the endeavour to produce a precarious narrative, and the third is a meaningful particular labour conflict. This tension between narration, generalization and controversy is one of the hallmarks of precarious mobilization.

MayDay Parade has been one of the first precarious demonstrations held in Italy. It had more the appearance of a carnival or rave party than that of trade union demonstrations: with loudspeakers reproducing music and people dancing, it introduced a form of Workers' Day celebration in sharp contrast with the traditional rallies and the concert organized by the three-main historical Italian trade union confederations (CGIL, CISL and UIL) in Rome. The invigorating character of this event had as its objectives both a representation of precariousness independent from traditional channels and subjects, and the expression of a potential strength of precarious workers. The first edition took place in Milan in 2001 and was organized by Chainworkers Crew, the social centre Deposito Bulk[2] and the regional branch of the radical union Confederazione Unitaria di Base (CUB). Since 2003, the event upgraded

[2] For a brief history of the Bulk Deposit, see « C'era una volta il Deposito Bulk », *Doppiozero*, accessed 30 January 2018. URL: http://www.doppiozero.com/rubriche/164/201310/cera-una-volta-il-deposito-bulk (accessed 30 January 2018).

into national through a preparatory process shared by groups of activists from many Italian cities. Since 2004, the Federazione Impiegati Operai Metallurgici (FIOM) – the oldest Italian industry trade union, part of CGIL – has joined the event, the same year in which the event began to take on a transnational character. In 2005 and 2006, the MayDay took place in many European cities, thanks to the construction of a network of activists from different countries, but it progressively lost its political importance in subsequent editions.

San Precario is an imaginary saint of popular tradition, an embodied narration of precarious life: "a collective invention, the attempt to get out of the vicious circles of precariousness through the elaboration of a symbolic imaginary capable of reuniting the fragmentary and inhomogeneous forms and conditions of contemporary work" (Bruni, Murgia, 2007: 73). The first apparition of the saint – carried in procession during the demonstrations and subject of ironic prayers – dates back to 2004 in Milan, at the hands of the Chainworkers. The San Precario iconography was then taken up in many cities where the procession was accompanied by so-called miracles, that is to say direct actions of self-reduction of commercial items or distribution of copied goods without respect for copyright. During the Milan fashion week in 2005 San Precario became Serpica Naro[3], a fabulous Anglo-Japanese stylist who presented her website with the slogan "We are not low class, we are not high class, we are the new class". Nobody at first understood the *détournement* until the day of the parade, when activists who had given life to the performance were revealed to the public wearing self-produced clothes that symbolized the difficulties and characteristics of the precarious condition (Bruni, Murgia, 2007). "San Precario then also works as a rhetorical artifact to bring into the public sphere a critical awareness of changes in working conditions and forms" (Bruni and Murgia, 2007: 72) and it does so through the activation of those communicative, relational and affective skills, that became central to post-Fordist production (Marazzi, 1999).

The Atesia call center in Rome was one of the largest in Europe with about 3 600 workers classified by the company – in agreement with the traditional trade unions – with contracts co. co. co. (coordinated and continuing collaboration) and co. co. pro (project work). In breach of a trade union attitude considered too conciliatory, a group of self-organized workers supported by the radical trade union confederation Confederazione COBAS[4] formed the Collective Precariatesia[5]. It launched a strike against the agreement signed by trade unions and Atesia that consisted in a gradual stabilization of jobs through apprenticeship and integration contracts (generally

[3] URL: http://www.serpicanaro.com/ (accessed January 30th 2018).

[4] "COBAS" means "basic committee". This denomination was adopted by many Italian rank and file unions in opposition to the three main Italian historical confederations (CGIL, CISL and UIL). It lays emphasis on locally-based as opposed to centralised organisation and also reminds the factory struggle committees of the 1970s.

[5] URL: http://precariatesia.altervista.org/main.php (accessed January 30th 2018).

considered as forms of precarious employment). A survey of the Labour Inspectorate established in 2006 that 87.5 % of the workforce in Atesia was *de facto* permanently precarious. However, the company had not in the meantime reconfirmed all the workers who signed the complaint. After the strike, Atesia was forced to recognise a part-time permanent contract for all workers but demanded the waiver of all related arrears by employees. On this point, about 50 workers embarked on a tough legal battle that has lasted for years. What should be stressed here is that "the target of mobilization was not only the management of the Atesia call center but also the traditional trade unions, considered as allies of the employer rather than a resource for precarious workers" (Choi and Mattoni, 2010: 226). A clear difficulty emerged from the traditional trade union in representing the new forms of work (Ballarino, 2005), also because of a working culture that prefers employment levels over other factors; this attitude, at the same time, left space to experimenting other forms of organization that hybridise rank and file unionism – generally more inclined to put in place radical instruments of protest – and collective decision-making practices. It should also be pointed out that, from a contractual point of view, the Atesia workers' strike was not a real strike because they were classified as project workers and not as employees; a traditional instrument of the workers' movement such as the strike thus became the object of both less legal and practical protection to be reinvented.

This first wave of protest against precariousness in Italy belonged to the wider political phase of so-called No Global mobilisations, highlighting that the living and working conditions of the global worker are the result of the transnational chain of value production and post-fordist transformations (Chaincrew 2002). The struggle for the emergence of these new figures of work is also conducted through the use of new forms of communication, from the web to flash mobs (Mattoni, 2008).

This first wave of precarious mobilization in Italy began to run out around 2006. The crisis of 2007-2008 – followed by austerity policies and labour market and welfare reforms – opened a transition period that schematically lasts until about the end of 2011 (Zamponi, 2012) in which the new precarious mobilizations have had to challenge and counteract the effects of these changes (Molé, 2011). As a result of the mobilisations of the early 2000s, precariousness is now described in public debates as a structural phenomenon of neoliberal economies, whose effects seem to hit especially the younger groups, producing erosion of welfare and social insecurity. The European Union itself started to discuss the need for action to remedy these problems, analysed in terms of social costs such as disparities between skills and education with respect to tax revenues, life expectancy and growth potential (Samek Ludovici, Semenza, 2012).

During this period, new precarious figures emerged: migrant workers (Cobbe, Grappi, 2011) and show business workers (Bailey, Marcucci, 2013). The first illustrate the numerous lines of differentiation inside precariousness; the second demonstrates the efficiency of struggles based on the re-appropriation of production sites, such as abandoned theatres, and on horizontal assemblies.

2. It's time to strike

The plurality of the precarious actors and the widening of their demands within a context of economic transformations constitute the basis for a renewed precarious mobilization. Innovative paths of reflection and experimentation got underway around the consequences of a capitalist production characterized by a global logistical dimension (Tsing, 2009), the impact of digital technologies (Srnicek, 2016) and a biopolitical subsuming of communicative, affective and social skills (Fumagalli, 2007).

The trade union form and the practice of striking become a central issue for discussion at this stage. All these elements, for example, have been picked up from the path of the Social Strike[6], a platform of collectives and trade unions that gathered in Rome for the first time in September 2014, promoting a mobilization against the Jobs Act of Renzi. To illustrate these passages, I will dwell on three paths: the struggles in logistics warehouses, the protests of the riders working in food delivery services and the feminist mobilisation of NonUnaDiMeno (NUDM).

Between 2013 and 2014, an intense cycle of logistical struggles developed in Italy, characterized by the reformulation of the strike around the radical practice of the blockades, by the growth of some radical trade unions, and by the emergence of a markedly-migrant workforce (Curcio, 2014; Cuppini, Frapporti, Pirone, 2015). Logistics is a sector of recent development in Italy (where it is mainly rooted in the northern regions) and central in the articulation of a global supply chain capitalism (Cowen, 2014). It is characterised by very intensive work rhythms, the strong presence of migrant workers, the absence of protections consolidated over the years and no historical sedimentation of trade union relations. The organization of labour process of such sector in Italy is mainly articulated around a system of subcontracting between the main international couriers and local cooperatives, many of which – before the struggles cycle – did not apply collective bargaining agreements in the sector, classified porters as associates and not as employees and often had a short life so that they did not have to recognize salary increases and workers' protections. Since 2008, however, some radical trade unions – the Associazione per i diritti dei lavoratori (ADL COBAS[7]) and the Sindacato Intercategoriale COBAS (SI COBAS[8]) – started to assist some workers employed in the major hubs of Lombardy and Veneto. In many cases they were workers who could not find support in traditional trade unions.

In Italy, in fact, the cooperative business model is historically rooted in the mid-twentieth century economic policies of local administrations led by the Italian Communist Party (PCI), linked in turn to the biggest of traditional Italian trade unions – CGIL (Sacchetto, Semenzin, 2014). The so-called Emilian model (De Maria, 2012) was

[6] URL: https://www.facebook.com/Sciopero-Sociale-501097433359830/ (accessed January 30th 2018).
[7] URL: http://www.adlcobas.it/ (accessed January 30th 2018).
[8] URL: https://sicobas.org/ (accessed January 30th 2018).

based on the collaboration between trade unions, workers and administrations. In some cases, former trade union representatives had become representatives of logistics cooperatives and this had undermined the reliability of the trade union's role in the eyes of workers. The radical trade unions, on the other hand, were more willing to implement practices of protest against cooperatives. The rapid growth of these organizations, the agreements signed and the leading role played by migrant workers in some disputes have led to the setting up of two general logistic strikes that have blocked some of the main Italian hubs (Bologna, Padua, Milan). Three characteristics of this movement are particularly noticeable. The first is that this cycle of struggles has not limited itself to investing logistics warehouses, but has been strongly welded with the housing movement. The second is the significant migrant participation with respect to which the unions have played a coordinating and safeguarding role. Some of the workers involved in the disputes subsequently became union representatives. The third is the radical nature of the practices put in place; with the support of activists and collectives, as well as trade unions, workers have often resorted to the blockade of road transport vehicles and the picketing of access routes to warehouses in order to interrupt the supply chain. As a more general result, beyond the improvement of working conditions in the logistics sector, this cycle has had the effect of giving visibility to the practice of strikes, the generalisation of precarious conditions and the link between working conditions and living conditions.

Food delivery services on app represent another sector that has been expanding strongly in Italy in recent years thanks to the platform business model and digital innovations (Srnicek, 2016). The so-called rider is a job generally ascribed to the gig economy, the economy of small jobs characterized by informality, playfulness and casualty (Friedman, 2014; De Stefano, 2016). The riders are presented as freelancers who provide free time, soft skills and personal consumer goods (bike or motorcycles), while digital platforms present themselves more like spaces of aggregation between demand and offer than traditional enterprises. However, in the wake of a widespread leopard spot mobilization throughout Europe (Cant, 2017), even in Italy such workers have begun to organize themselves in order to engage in disputes not with restaurateurs but with platforms (Maccarrone, Tassinari, 2017). The first strike of the gig economy in Italy took place in October 2016 in Turin, when a group of riders refused to carry out deliveries. The company initially agreed to meet with workers in order to discuss the requests they made, including the application of the national collective bargaining agreement, coverage in the event of accidents and illness, and a salary increase. Nevertheless, Foodora had not yet fully accepted any of these requests and had disconnected some of the riders who had stricken from the application that managed the shifts, which practically amounts to a dismissal. The workers, in turn, have reported the company, but the trial's verdict (that had been passed the 11th of April 2018) has established they are independent and not employee. Despite the difficulties encountered in putting in place forms of protest in a situation of poor protection,

especially in the event of strike, on 15th July 2017 Milan riders – in particular those of Deliveroo – created a critical mass that crossed the streets of the city to advertise a new platform of claims. A few months later, on 29th September 2017, the assembly "Mobilitarsi al tempo della gig economy" (Mobilizing at Gig economy time) was held in Turin, attended by riders from different cities in Italy and Europe to discuss the possibility of a first transnational strike in food delivery. This gave Bologna riders a push to organise and mobilise too, forming a sort of urban union of riders called Riders Union Bologna. This time they preferred to concentrate more on some particular claims (as health insurance, minimum wage and fixed total hours) than on a direct admission of employee working condition. Thanks to two strikes and some public rallies, they forced the local authorities to open at the beginning of 2018 an urban collective bargaining with food delivery platforms that is leading to the statement of a Chart of digital workers' rights (Pirone, 2018).

In this case, the role of trade unions – both traditional and radical – was almost exclusively instrumental (aimed at providing legal protection at the negotiating tables) or totally marginal. Workers have preferred to organise themselves using a wide urban-based support network. The practice of strike action has expanded to include the city's space, conceived as a diffused productive space. Finally, with respect to a new neo-liberal culture of work based on self-entrepreneurship (Cohen, Muñoz, 2016), riders, protests aim to re-establish a distinction of roles between employers and employees and seek to obtain greater labour and social protection without totally renouncing the flexibility of work.

The transnational character of this mobilization – inevitably connected to the global character of contemporary work – is also a distinctive feature of the third path named here, that of NonUnaDiMeno[9]. This mobilisation challenges expectations about labour activism. It was born in Argentina in 2015 against violence and gender discrimination, and has rapidly expanded in many countries, investing a multitude of themes. One of the movement's main slogans is "if we are not worthwhile, we do not produce", which underlines the link between discrimination, gender and (re)production. NonUnaDiMeno unveils the gender hierarchies, and intends to remove bodies from the mechanisms of productive and reproductive exploitation (Morini, 2010). In other words, it assumes that gender-based violence is closely linked to neoliberal dynamics.

These elements have also strongly characterized the Italian path of the movement, which arrived in Italy in 2016. From the beginning, it developed an assembly-based organization focused on thematic tables and collective decision-making processes. On November the 26th of the same year, on the occasion of the World Day against Violence against Women, a huge march took place in Rome which saw the participation of more than two hundred thousand people and which had among its main objectives the

[9] URL: https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/ (accessed January 30th 2018).

rewriting of the National Anti-violence Plan[10]. This includes the proposal of a self-determination income to get free from gender discrimination and to ensure economic autonomy. On March 8th, 2017, the first global strike of women took place thanks to a public call by NUDM Argentina that quickly extended to many countries with the aim of reviving March 8th as a day of struggle, instead of an institutional celebration. On this occasion, there was a clear break between NUDM – which had asked the trade unions to declare a strike for that day – and the secretary of CGIL Susanna Camusso, who defined it as a merely "symbolic" claim[11].

The strike issue takes on a markedly bio-political connotation where the reproductive dynamics are read as an integral part of contemporary production processes. The recognition of the value of these activities becomes the focus of political claims, before traditional trade union claims. "Therefore, striking in order to take back in hand the meaning and tradition of the workers' strike, means to affirm that the work of women (even the informal one) is to all intents and purposes work, above all because it is inseparable from the local and global mechanisms of labour governance that inhabit the development of capital; but more, it means to affirm that it is a constitutively female work, i.e. that it is inscribed in the processes of capitalist value extraction by virtue of subaltern conditions" (Rustighi, 2016). It is also clear that the boundaries of new forms of precariousness as well as the centrality of collective decision-making processes in the construction of mass participation are hard to grasp for traditional unions.

3. The social dimension of unionism

What are the breaking points and lines of continuity between the two periods of mobilization described? In particular, I will focus on the adjective "social" often associated with the words "strike" and "union".

The first wave has been based on the need to give voice to forms of work that were still invisible. As Choi and Mattoni (2010: 228) write, "One of the goals of many mobilizations was to represent precarious workers struggling against precarity as both new social subjects and political actors, albeit unconventional and developing their struggles outside the institutional political arena. In other words, the primary goal of collective action was a 'struggle for recognition' in the sense that grassroots activist groups look for a public and political recognition". In some cases, precarious

[10] Here is the NUDM plan against male violence on women and gender violence: https://nonunadimeno.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/abbiamo_un_piano.pdf (accessed January 30th 2018).

[11] Here is the NUDM statement in response to Camusso's declarations: http://www.dinamopress.it/news/sciopero-dell8-marzo-risposta-a-susanna-camusso-e-alla-cgil (accessed January 30th 2018).

mobilizations have managed to penetrate the "political invisibility of labour" (Renault, 2009) as a field of conflict and subjectivation.

The second wave of precarious mobilization faces the generalisation of the precarious condition, the entrepreneurisation of the self, the employment of life times and the erosion of the wage standard up to the affirmation of free work (Chicci, Leonardi, Lucarelli, 2016; Armano, Murgia, 2016; Coin, 2017). These movements attempt to go beyond the binary pattern between permanent and flexible job, standard and atypical. Confronted to a generalization of the precarious condition (de Peuter, 2014), they take into account both its productive and reproductive aspects. This is not only an Italian but also a transnational evolution of activism, judging by the similarities between the Italian mobilisations examined and other European paths – the mareas or Juventud sin futuro in Spain (Giorgi, Caruso, 2015) or Nuit Debout in France.

In this shift, the role of the media is also evolving, from a communicative channel intended to promote a common narration to an organizational platform. The development of new channels of communication is, in turn, not disconnected from the development of new forms of protest – which aim to block the flows and processes of reproduction – and of new forms of organization based on a more inclusive decision-making process (Thorburn, 2012). The adjective "social" – often assigned to the new forms of trade unionism and to the experimentation of forms of gender and metropolitan strikes – has an ambivalent meaning, indicating both the restructuring of a plurality of subjectivities crossed by different lines of individualisation/fragmentation/identification (so-called "multiple belongings", see Della Porta, 2005) and also the ambition to reclaim the control of a production that has extended far beyond specialised and limited workspaces, into the very fabric of social life. The restructuring of precarious subjectivities (declined in the plural to indicate their profound diversity and individualisation) is not limited to single labour sectors or struggles; it also depends on the terms of the production of coalitions across difference. Within a general crisis of representation, the precarious mobilizations of the second wave are characterized by a shift from the attempt to bring the union back to a full representation of workers to the commitment of various precarious figures in establishing forms of self-organization (Mazières-Vaysse, 2011; Standing, 2011; De Nicola, Quattrocchi, 2016; Mathers, 2016). Traditional top-down models seem to give way to "grassroots mobilization" forms (Porta, Diani, 2006) in which democratic participation and workers' activism become essential while traditional unions, at best, transform their function into a legal support tool rather than an organizational centre.

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