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Coalition of Labour

Worker's Voices in Europe

Coalition of Labour Worker's Voices in Europe

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION, by Roberto Morea	3
RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND MAIN ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS	3
THE MAIN GOALS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS	10
THE CASE OF GERMANY, by Beatriz Casas González	12
THE CASE OF FRANCE, by Nathan Gaborit	46
THE CASE OF ITALY, by Edoardo Esposto	80
THE NEOLIBERAL "REFORM POLICIES" IN FRANCE, GERMANY, ITALY AND THE ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES OF LABOUR, by Andrea Allamprese	114
CONCLUDING REMARKS	123
RESEARCHERS PROFILES	126

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INTRODUCTION

by Roberto Morea

The research, that we had thought and defined in 2019 well before the beginning of the pandemic, now a syndemic, was driven by the purpose to know how people felt about their living and working conditions.

For many years, work has represented a process of emancipation, of individual and collective growth. Work has been essential to defining the individual's role both in society and in the family sphere.

Therefore, changes in work relations have had profound consequences, eroding purchasing power and rights and, above all, the workers' ability to feel part of a collective growth.

The pandemic and the lockdown of non-essential activities have brought to the fore the social relevance of certain jobs and roles, underestimated and underpaid for decades.

But will it be just a fleeting ray of sunshine glimpsed through a break in the clouds? Will this new awareness survive the blows of "profits first"?

We have collected the voices of workers, men and women, both with secure or precarious jobs, who have told us about their working and living conditions and their vision of the future.

These testimonies are relevant not only to imagine an informed solution to the current crisis, but also are an essential starting point to stop workers from paying the cost of an unsustainable economic and social production model.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND MAIN ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic is generally portrayed as a crisis that originated outside the growth model and socio-political paradigm we live in. Through this characterisation, it acquires nature-like features. Its effects can be presented as unprecedented natural challenges to the social order. This narrative does not consider that the enabling conditions for zoonotic diseases to transfer onto humans, are connected to the strain put on the socio-natural metabolism by the current development model (Connolly, Keil & Ali, 2021). Moreover, the health and socio-economic crisis exacerbates the existing unequal social structure and reveals the failures of the one-sided 'modernisation' carried out by national governments. The pandemic produces different effects between geo-institutional spaces and within them. In the latter case, lower-income households, often in precarious employment, are disproportionately impacted (Harvey, 2020). In the former case, the most severe health and social consequences are felt in those systems that have not established, or have retrenched, universal healthcare, social security policies and employment protections (Saad-Fihlo,

2020). Far from being exogenous shocks, the pandemic's nefarious effects are strictly connected to the inherited unequal socio-economic configuration that characterises, with significant differences, both the Global North and the Global South. The pandemic acts both as an inflammatory agent and a tracer, which compounds and highlights the structural injustice, brutality, and dysfunctionality of the current global economy, of the socio-political and institutional order.

The results of our research reflect this relationship between the recent past and the present. The consequences of the crisis we observed were not unexpected. Rather than focusing on the discontinuities, our results highlight the continuity between the long-lasting shift of the economic and political power distribution towards capital and the pandemic's unequal effects.

Thus, it is useful to briefly review some of the most important trends concerning European workers and labour mar-

kets to introduce then a summary of the most important points explored in our interviews.

The decade following the 2008-2011 financial crisis was marked by a slow recovery from the peak in unemployment registered in 2013 (around 12% in the EU27) with the setting in of the full effect of the austerity measures implemented after the crisis, which morphed into a fiscal crisis for many European states. The average unemployment rate in the EU27 fell below the 7% of the working population, at 2008 level, only in 2018.

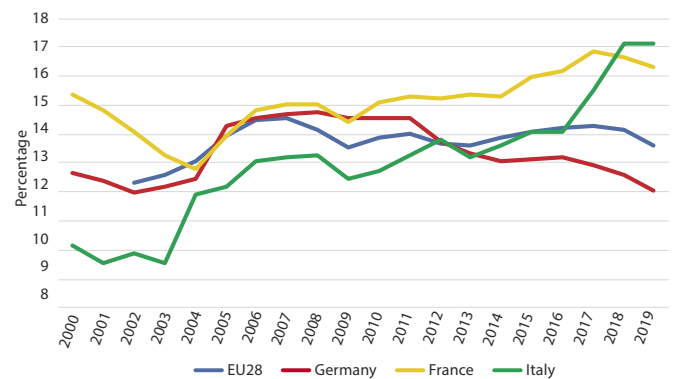
In 2020, unemployment increased in the EU27, as measures for containing the pandemic were put in place, reaching 7.5% in November (up from 6.6% in the same month of 2019), and 8.3% in the Euro area (up from 7.4% in the previous year)¹. However, the magnitude of the job losses caused by the current crisis is still to be fully grasped by unemployment statics.

Looking at the employment rate, in the second quarter of 2020 the share of the European population employed fell by 1% (to 72.1%) compared to the same quarter of 2019, the most significant decrease since 2000². At the eve of the second wave of the infection, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) had raised the alarm about the number of workers potentially affected by redundancies and loss of income, once the temporary measures adopted by many EU member states for preventing mass lay-offs expired. The ETUC estimated that ten to twenty million workers could be affected³. The short-time working schemes and other employment supporting measures were extended during the second wave⁴. However, the future remains uncertain, with a fresh batch of restrictive measures implemented in early 2021 for preventing a third wave of contagions and the temporary employment support due to expire later in that year.

This dramatic, but contingent, situation is compounded by the European labour market's characteristics in the past three to four decades. The precarisation of labour relations

has been a constant trend in the continent as in most of the global labour markets. The sustained level of temporary employment and part-time jobs indicates one of the precarity dimensions: contracts' instability through time.

Fig. 1 Temporary employees as a percentage of total employees (age 15-64)



Source: Eurostat [lfsa_eegaed; lfsa_etgaed]

Temporary and part-time employment have been associated in the long season of the restructuring of labour relations, with the positive aspects of flexibility (Pink, 2001), because they allegedly allowed greater employees' control over career choices and working schedule while providing time for learning and training opportunities. It is worth noting that, according to a recent research drawing upon data from Eurostat (ETUI, 2020, p. 53), up to the 80% of temporary employees in Southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal) accepted a fixed-term contract because they were unable to find a permanent job. Involuntary temporary employment is a significant problem, albeit with different intensity levels, in many EU member states. Similarly, involuntary part-time employment is widespread across the Union, with extreme cases such as in Italy, where more than three-quarters of part-time workers claim of being underemployed.

Precarisation of labour relations affects another aspect of employment, reducing or negating the collective rights and protection that labour law and collective agreements granted to workers. This aspect is especially evident when self-employment is considered.

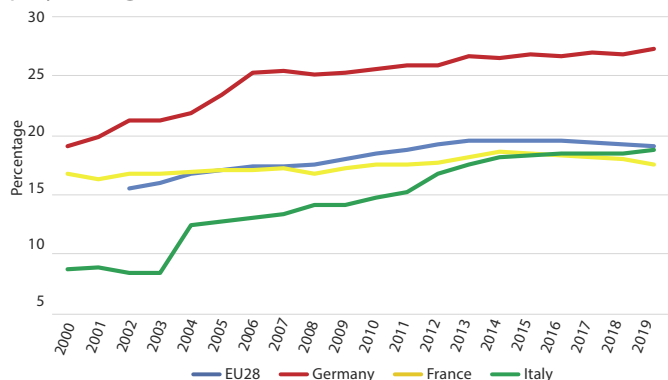
1 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics.

2 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Employment_-_quarterly_statistics.

3 <https://www.etuc.org/sites/default/files/press-release/file/2020-10/20201027%20-%20ETUC%20Letter%20to%20Employment%20and%20Finance%20Ministers.pdf>.

4 https://www.etuc.org/sites/default/files/publication/file/2020-12/20201204_overview%20of%20measures%20second%20wave.pdf.

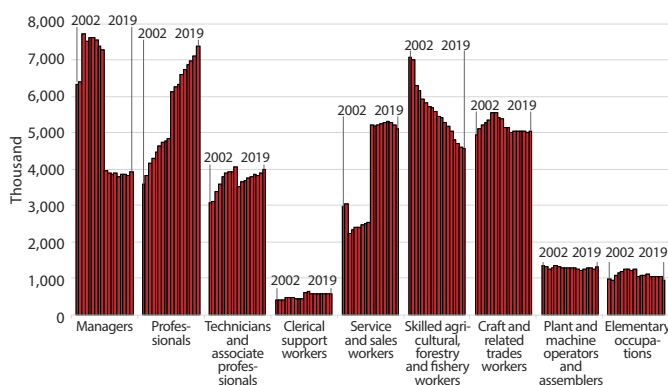
Fig. 2 Part-time employees as a percentage of total employees (age 15-64)



Source: Eurostat [lfsa_eggpa]

Capturing the salient features of self-employment is not unproblematic. A wide range of professions and employment agreements co-exist within this broad category.

Fig. 3 Number of self-employed workers (age 15-74) by professional status between 2002 and 2019 in EU28



Source: Eurostat [lfsa_esgais]

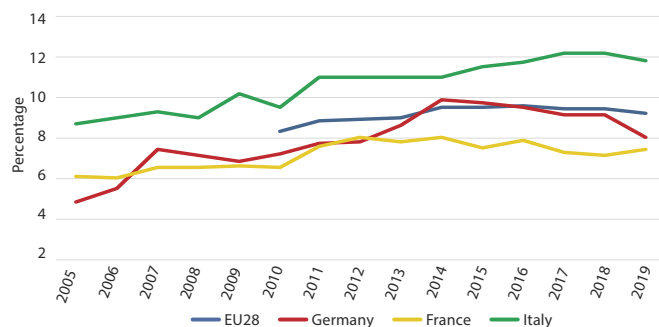
A useful distinction can be made between independent self-employed, or true self-employed, and dependent self-employment.

The former concept refers to working people who: 1. invest their own capital in their business; 2. have multiple clients and enter in multiple and simultaneous contracts of provision with them; 3. have responsibility for and control of their own employment conditions; 4. hire employees to carry out the contracted supply of goods or services (Pedersini and Coletto, 2010).

Conversely, the concept of ‘dependent-self-employed’ often described as false or bogus self-employment, refers to a worker that ‘is self-employed in legal terms [...], but [...] he or she has only one firm they are contracted to. [...] Since such workers have only one (main) principal they generate their whole (or a substantial part of their) income from this business relationship. This implies that the dependent self-employed person is dependent on the orders of the principal’ (Muehlberger 2007, p. 5). Dependent self-employment lacks the autonomy and the entrepreneurial motivation and practices that characterise independent self-employment. The choice of hiring workers performing continuous, exclusive, and coordinated tasks under the guise of self-employment has been associated with the evasion of employment rights and statutory restrictions to redundancies (Román, Congregado and Millán, 2011) and, thus, with an increased companies’ flexibility and a significant reduction of labour costs. The problem has acquired a renewed importance due to the platform capitalists’ heavy reliance on false self-employment (Drahokoupil and Fabo 2016). Still, this form of contract predates the advent of the so-called ‘platform economy’, and it extends to occupations and sectors that are not usually associated with the ‘gig economy’ (Williams and Lapeyre, 2017).

The deterioration of employment conditions has moved together with the sluggish wage growth in the past decade and the worsening of vulnerable workers’ living conditions. Policy experts in the EU have widely explored the first aspect (see *inter alia* EC, 2020; Nickel et al., 2019). On the contrary, the second is less discussed in the continent’s political and public debate (Pradella, 2015).

Fig. 4 In-work at-risk-of-poverty as percentage of total employed (age 18 or over)

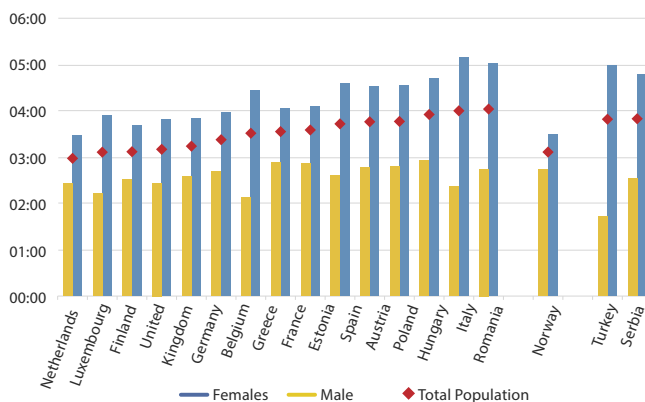


Source: Eurostat [ilc_iw01]

In-work poverty has increased in the past decade in both the EU27 and the Euro area⁵, even in core countries like Germany and France. Being unable to meet the day-to-day necessities or achieve some moderate life goals, such as moving out from the parents' house, is becoming recurrent problems among European workers.

Gender inequality in the formal labour market – measured in terms of gender pay gap, gender hours gap, and gender gaps in employment⁶ – remains a defining feature of labour relations (also) at the European level. The reasons behind it are complex, but have ultimately a common root, namely, the gender division of labour: women still do most of the reproductive work⁷ both at home and in the workplace. On average, women spend twice as many hours as men on unpaid reproductive work at home (see graphic below). And they often do so on top of their paid job – a phenomenon also known as the 'second shift' (Hochschild, 1989) – resulting in the double exploitation of women's work.

Fig. 5 Participation time per day in household and family care, by gender (hh:mm; 2008 to 2015)



Source: Eurostat (online data code: tus_00age)

Notwithstanding the value of reproductive work for society (especially during the current pandemic), women get low or no pay for it. Carers' salaries rarely go above the minimum wage, despite the prerequisites and skills required for the job. Furthermore, because women still bear the brunt of reproductive work at home, they are more likely than men to work part-time (almost 30% of the women in Europe vs 8% of men), and they are much more likely to stop working to take care of children and relatives⁸. Women in Europe -and elsewhere- are overrepresented in precarious jobs: insecure, low-paid, irregular, with few or no benefits, lacking social protection, etc. (Standing, 1999; 2015).

The qualitative research we conducted allowed us to explore the themes introduced above and isolate additional problems our interviewees faced.

The following chapters will provide the reader with a detailed presentation of the results of the interviews. However, it is useful to introduce here the core analytical dimensions that emerged from the data (see **Tab. 1**). They show substantial similarities across the three countries surveyed (France, Germany and Italy).

5 <https://www.etuc.org/en/pressrelease/pay-rises-needed-work-poverty-rises-12-eu>.

6 Gender pay gap refers to the difference in average wage between men and women. In 2018, women's gross hourly earnings were on average 14.1% below those of men in the European Union (EU-27) and 15.0% in the euro area (EA-19). Gender hours gap represents the difference between average monthly hours paid to men and women expressed as a percentage of average hours paid to men. Gender employment gap is based on the average earnings of all women of working age – whether employed or not employed – compared to men (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Gender_statistics#Labour_market).

7 By reproductive labour we mean those «activities that nurture future workers, regenerate the current work force, and maintain those who cannot work – that is, the set of tasks that together maintain and reproduce life, both daily and generationally» (Hester, 2018).

8 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20200227STO73519/gender-pay-gap-in-europe-facts-and-figures-infographic>.

Tab. 1 Interviews: core analytical dimensions and examples of the results

Multidimensional precarity

- Examples tendency to greater contractual instability
- perception of a decreasing control over working conditions increasing relevance of the trade-off between decent employment conditions and decent wage

Growing institutional isomorphism (public = private sector)

Examples:

- corporatization, commercialization of public goods and services
- intensified performance-based management
- public sector coping with diminishing resources

Unequal impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

Examples:

- impact is harsher where labour relations are more instable and exploitative
- gender-related discrimination aggravates the impact of Covid-19
- uneven support by public policies in response to the pandemic

Workers' collective identity under threat

Examples:

- internalisation of market fragmentation
- disconnection between workers and unions
- perception of a growing distance between the workplace and the public sphere and institutional politics

Spaces of (political) resistance

Examples:

- solidarity among workers still present, but is increasingly limited to the personal sphere
- growth of individual actions and localised mobilisation
- political engagement influences the belief in the individual or collective responsibility for change

The interviews exemplify the general deterioration of European workers' working conditions, tough with different degrees among workers of different countries or areas. Significant contractual instability and the perception of a decreasing control over one's employment situation were typical among respondents. Job insecurity is coupled with low salaries, increasing the relevance of having to trade decent employment conditions with earning enough. Workers must work increasingly overtime and in multiple jobs as the only viable solution to low wages. Even where, as in Germany, the interviewees widely believed that the labour markets' conditions were exceptionally favourable, slash workers were typical among the respondents.

Contrary to the widespread notion that the public sector is a more benevolent employer or, from the opposite point of view, a dangerous laggard vis-à-vis labour market innovations, the public-sector employee' interviews show a significant homogeneity with those of the private sector (an example of "institutional isomorphism"). Many of the Italian social-care workers interviewed, for example, had sub-contracted jobs outsourced from the public sector, with wages, employment protection and job stability far inferior to those they would have had if they had a traditional contract of public employment. The interviewees reported an intensification of managerial control, often in the form of performance-based management, connected to the dominance of neo-managerial logics – in line with New Public Management – introduced to cope with stagnant or diminishing public resources. However, performance-based control and compensation strategies run across the separation between the public and private sectors: they are a central governance tool for directing increasingly discontinuous or legally autonomous workers towards greater productivity levels. Flexible work and self-employment are associated with micro-management and control in the workplace, rather than freedom of choice and autonomy.

The consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic are an important dimension explored in our interviews. Interviewees' opinions on the governments' response to the health and socio-economic crisis are noticeably different among the three countries, with interviewees having a mostly positive perception of them in Germany, mildly positive in France and mostly negative in Italy, despite the uneven support received by respondents in all the three countries. However, whilst the perception of the governments' response to the pandemic presents a significant discontinuity in

the results, the pandemic has affected working conditions and employment situation in similar ways in the three countries. The impact of the first wave of Covid-19 has been harsher among the most vulnerable workers, those in the more unstable and exploitative labour relations, often young adults and women. Not all the flexible workers, though, reported a worsening of their employment situation. Some interviewees working for platform firms, for example, experienced an increase of the workload and better pay (due to pay-per-piece rates). The pandemic has reinforced entrenched disparities between men and women in accessing or re-entering the labour market because of the different impact between genders. The different impact extended over and above the labour market. In the domestic circumstances, as well, the pandemic deepened gender inequalities regarding reproductive work. A series of international studies show that among heterosexual couples, when both partners are in employment, most of the additional housework and childcare associated to Covid-19 falls on women (see *inter alia* Del Boca *et al.* 2020, Kohlrausch and Zucco 2020).

Finally, we asked the interviewees a set of questions to understand their opinions and beliefs about collective mobilisation to improve their conditions and (re-) assert their rights.

The objective fragmentation of the labour market, we would argue, has been internalised by most workers we interviewed. Only a few referred explicitly to the trade unions as a means to advance their material conditions. For many, the unions are absent or far from their day-to-day working experience. The idea of collective interests, held jointly by all workers, was even less discussed. A sense of disconnection prevailed: between the various workplaces, even within the same sector, and between the public sphere and institutional politics, on one side, and the workplace, on the other.

If unions' role as a catalyst of solidarity among workers has seemingly faded, mutual help among colleagues is still widely present. However, it is increasingly practised within the individual sphere of personal relationships in the workplace, rather than in the collective sphere of social and political mobilisation. Workers' solidarity is undergoing – making use of a somewhat arguable concept – a process of depoliticisation.

The disconnect between workers and unions is changing the way the conflicts inside the workplace are expressed. They are not suppressed, but increasingly take the form of individual actions or workplace-specific mobilisation. However, we found that the interviewees most passionate about politics and socio-political events were also strongly opposing the idea that improving one's own employment situation and working conditions is an individual responsibility, and they were well-aware of the collective nature of the workers' struggles.

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THE MAIN GOALS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We have conducted the interviews to improve our understanding of four main research areas.

First, we wanted to inquire into how the respondents perceived themselves and their living conditions *vis-à-vis* their employment situation. Are they happy with their contract? Are they in secure employment, and how do they feel about their wages?

Second, we wanted to know what they think are the causes of their situation. Who do they think is responsible for their conditions? Are they sharing their problems with their colleagues, and are they relying on each other for solving them?

Third, we had to consider the deep disruption to social life caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. What was the impact of the first wave on them? Did they have to work during the first surge in cases? How do they cope with the economic fallout?

Finally, we wanted to ask them to imagine the future and how would it be possible to change it. What are the interviewees' hopes and desires? Can they imagine how to fulfil them, and does this entails collective political actions?

1. ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEES AND THE DATA GATHERING PROCESS

Tab. 2 General overview of the interviewees in the three countries

Type of contract	Number of interviews	Gender	Age group	Geographical Areas	Sector
Unemployed	5 1 It + 4 De	3xM 2xF	(20-40+)	North Italy; Berlin, Magdeburg, Munich	–
Self-employed	7 3 It + 2 Fr + 2 De	5xM 2xF	(25-40+)	North, central and south Italy; Paris (surroundings); Munich	Legal, insurance, sport and recreation, marketing, technology, arts
Fixed-term	9 4 It + 2 Fr + 3 De	5xM 4xF	(25-35)	North and central Italy; South-east France; Leipzig, Berlin, Munich	Pharmaceutical retail, private education, tourism, production, administration, social and health care
Permanent	16 5 It + 8 Fr + 3 De	8xM 8xF	(20-50+)	North and south Italy; South-east, central-east and south-west France, Paris; Munich, Berlin	Retail, social care, private education, IT, engineer, human resources, public sector (social and health care, education)
Intern	2 1 It + 1 Fr	2xF	(20-30)	North Italy; Paris	Retail
Slash workers	7 1 Fr + 6 De	3xM 4xF	(25-40+)	South-west France; Düsseldorf, Berlin, Augsburg	Arts, food delivery, cleaning, accountability, translation, text editing, gastronomy, construction, social care, political education
Total number of interviewees	46	24xM 22xF			

2. THE DATA GATHERING PROCESS

The sample was selected according to the following criteria. Firstly, it was designed to capture a variety of professional and personal situations. In addition, genders had to be equally represented. Also, the survey meant to cover different cities and geographical areas. Finally, the workers selected were to reflect different political views and degrees of political commitment.

The interviewees were selected and contacted through personal, professional and political networks. More interviewees were contacted through 'snowball effect', i.e. participants put other people they knew in touch with us. This made it possible to cover all the criteria we had set for this survey.

We carried out the interviews between August and November 2020 through different channels: mostly face-to-face and, due to the current health restrictions and the extensive geographical locations covered, by phone and video call. The interviews were conducted in different languages (Italian, French, German, Spanish and English) and lasted an average of 60 minutes. Once recorded, they were transcribed, anonymised and finally translated into English. We apologise to the interviewees and the readers, for potential mistranslation of respondents' opinions and words.

3. STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE SAMPLE

The research we conducted does not intend to represent exhaustively the work and employment situation in each national case study, let alone Europe. Instead, we aimed to provide a glimpse of workers' working and living conditions, professional and personal history, and aspirations and plans for the future.

The survey sample covers many sectors, socio-professional categories and situations, from public servants to precarious, slash workers. It notably allows a comparison between the public and private sectors, within the health, education and social care sector, a comparison between manual workers, employees, semi-skilled workers and managers.

Moreover, the research geographical scope covers workers in metropolitan, suburban, and rural areas and the differences and similarities vis-à-vis the labour and housing markets. This enables us to grasp the impact of the living and working environment on people perception of work.

To a large extent, we could ensure that respondents from different age groups and genders were equally represented. Furthermore, the research offers insights into various living conditions: property-owners, tenants, with and without dependents, etc.

A further strength of the sample is the intentional focus on atypical jobs, fictitious self-employment and precarious employment, and the testimony, whenever possible, of migrant workers (both EU and non-EU citizens).

Last but not least, the sample presents a heterogeneity of degrees of political awareness and of types of political orientation. This allows us to appreciate both work and employment as an instance of political socialisation, and how political sensitivity influences the perception both of the personal self and of the society.

4. THE RESEARCH DESIGN: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS AND CONTENT ANALYSIS

We opted for semi-structured guided interviews, because on the one hand, this method provides a common framework for comparison between the different respondents within and across countries. On the other hand, it allows the necessary openness for new issues and topics to come up during the interviews.

We followed a kind of content analysis for the analysis of the interviews where inductive and deductive elements coexisted, allowing new themes that were not included in the interview's guideline (deductive approach) to emerge (inductive approach).

THE CASE OF GERMANY

by Beatriz Casas González

1. BRIEF REPORT ON GERMANY'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CURRENT SITUATION

Tab. 3 Data of the Federal Statistical Office on the German labour market to years 2009, 2018 and 2019

Specification	2009	2018	2019
Labour force ^{1,2}	43,957,000	46,177,000	46,476,000
Persons in employment (national concept) ^{2,3}	40,859,000	44,709,000	45,104,000
Persons in employment (domestic concept) ⁴	40,903,000	44,854,000	45,256,000
Self-employed ⁵	4,492,000	4,223,000	4,150,000
Employees	36,411,000	40,631,000	41,106,000
By industries ⁴			
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	652,000	608,000	596,000
Production industry (incl. construction)	10,155,000	10,830,000	10,925,000
Services	30,096,000	33,416,000	33,735,000
Unemployed ²	3,098,000	1,468,000	1,372,000
Unemployment rate ²	7.0%	3.2%	3.0%
Data of the Federal Employment Agency			
Employees subject to social insurance contributions ⁶	27,603,000	32,870,000	33,407,000
Persons exclusively in marginal employment ⁶	5,089,000	4,742,000	4,646,000
Registered unemployed	3,415,000	2,340,000	2,267,000
Rate of registered unemployment ⁷	8.1%	5.2%	5.0%
Reported job vacancies	301,000	796,000	774,000

Unless otherwise stated, all figures are rounded annual average results (Last updated: January 2020).

- 1: All residents who are active in the labour market (unemployed and persons in employment).
 2: According to the international ILO employment status concept.
 3: Persons in employment whose place of residence is in Germany.
 4: Persons in employment whose place of work is in Germany.
 5: Including unpaid family workers.
 6: As at 30 June of each year.
 7: Unemployed as a proportion of the total civilian labour force.

Source: <https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Labour/Labour-Market/Employment/Tables/labor-market-key-figures.html>

In 2019 7,333,000 people were "atypically employed", including those with fixed-term and part-time contracts, and those in marginal and temporary employment. Atypical employment is strongly feminised: 5,060 thousand women vs 2,273 men. Differences are especially dramatic vis-à-vis part-time and marginal employment, as the following table shows:

Tab. 4 Persons in atypical employment (by gender)

Persons in atypical employment (by gender)					
	Together	Fixed term	Part-time	Marginal employment	Temporary employees
Total	7,333	2,296	4,650	2,013	853
Women	5,060	1,116	3,952	1,508	290
Men	2,273	1,180	698	506	563
Persons in atypical employment (by citizenship)					
	Together	Fixed term	Part-time	Marginal employment	Temporary employees
German	5,870	1,683	3,880	1,569	565
EU 28 Foreigners	686	294	330	175	150
Non EU 28 Foreigners	778	319	440	269	137

Source: <https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Labour/Labour-Market/Employment/Tables/atypical-employment.html>

1.1. Gender pay gap

The gender pay gap has narrowed in Germany in recent years – but only by a few percentage points: Since 2006, the gender pay gap has crawled down from 23% to 20% – a relatively minor improvement. This has to do with women being more likely to work part-time or fewer hours, often because they still bear the brunt of childcare and house-keeping responsibilities. Besides, jobs in sectors that employ mostly women or are traditionally done by women often pay less despite requiring a similar qualification level as better paid jobs. The statistics office estimates these circumstances affect the 47% of women compared to the 9% of men between the ages of 20 and 64.

For women and men employed for the same number of hours with the same qualifications in the same kinds of jobs, the statistics show that women earn 6% less than men on average.

Women in the East Germany states are more on a par with men than women in the West. In the states of Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia, the pay gap was on average 7%. In all the other states, that make up most Germany's population, and in Berlin, the gap was on average 21%. This difference may reflect the fact that wages, in general, are lower in the east-

ern states. The eastern states made up the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR) until 1990⁹.

1.2. Low wage rate

The low-wage rate refers to the proportion of employees who earn less than two-thirds of all employees' median earnings.

Slightly more than one in five people in dependent employment (21%) earned a low-wage rate as in April 2018. This means that roughly eight million jobs were low-pay jobs (less than a gross 11.05 euros per hour). Furthermore, the Federal Statistical Office (Destatis) reports an increase of 393,000 low-pay jobs compared with April 2014¹⁰.

Indeed, 'the so-called German "employment miracle" has been accompanied by a rising prevalence of low hourly pay and atypical work forms in recent years. Women's employment growth is primarily based on a steadily rising numbers of part-time and mini-jobs – a very particular German institution that provides incentives to keep the monthly earnings below €450'¹¹.

9 <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-women-earn-20-less-than-men/a-52800735>

10 However, one should note that an important limit to these statistics is the fact low-wage sector is often informal, and there are no numbers for "black economy".

11 Weinkopf, Claudia (2014/01/01): Women's Employment in Germany. Robust in crisis but vulnerable in job quality

1.3. The economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis

According to official sources¹², Germany's economic dynamism remained sluggish at the beginning of 2020, but it is gradually emerging from its slowdown. For 2020, the Federal Government expects an annual average increase in gross domestic product of 1.1% in price-adjusted terms. The coronavirus pandemic continues to have a strong impact on the labour market, but the situation is slightly improving. Unemployment declined further in September, and short-time employment is becoming less widespread every month. The Federal Employment Agency estimates that the number of unemployed in 2019 increased by 2.27%, by +2.69% in 2020, and forecasts an expected increase for 2021 by +2.58%

According to the data released by the Federal Statistical Office, the number of people in employment declined by 1.4% (654,000) compared with the third quarter of 2019. The service sector was the main contributor to the year-on-year decline in the total number of people in employment in the third quarter of 2020 (-419,000; -1.2%).

The data provided by Eurostat, the Statistical Office of the European Union, on 13 November 2020, show that employment decreased more markedly in the 27 Member States of the European Union (EU) and the euro area than in Germany in the third quarter of 2020 compared with the same quarter a year earlier. The decline amounted to 1.8% in the EU and 2.0% in the euro area¹³.

1.4. Trade unions and trade union density

Figures from the unions indicate that there are some 7.7 million trade unions members in Germany. There are no official estimates of union density, but with almost 40 million employees in Germany in 2017, this implies a density figure of 19.3%. However, the unions' figures include a substantial number of retired trade unions members, estimated at 21.6% of the total membership in the largest confederation, the DGB, in 2009. Applying this proportion to total unions membership produces a density figure based on employed unions members of 15.1%. However, this may be an underestimate,

and the OECD figures for union density are 17.0% in 2016 and 16.5% for 2018¹⁴.

The main trade union confederation in Germany is the DGB, which aims to recruit across sectors. It is by far the largest confederation with 5,974,950 members (2019). The "IG Metall" (IGM), representing 2.27 million metalworkers in 2018, is the biggest of the eight unions affiliated to the DGB in terms of members. It is followed by the 'Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft' (ver.di), that is the United Services Union, with 1.97 million members, and the 'IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie' (IG BCE), which has 632,389 members (end 2018) in the mining, chemicals, and energy sector. Other affiliated unions are the 'Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft' (GEW) for education and science (279,389 members); 'IG Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt' (IG BAU), representing construction, agriculture, and environment (247,181 members); the 'Gewerkschaft Nahrung-Genuss-Gaststätten' (NGG) for the food, beverages and catering sector (198,026 members); the 'Gewerkschaft der Polizei' (GdP), for Police workers (190,931 members), 'Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft' (EVG) counting 187,396 affiliated railway workers and employees.

DGB unions face significant competition from non-DGB unions in the public sector and former public sectors, where another confederation, the DBB, has 1,317,729 members (2018). There is also a smaller Christian confederation, the CGB, which claims 280,000 members.

Women are under-represented in unions, accounting for only a third of the union members in both the DGB (33.7%) and the DBB (32.4%) in 2019, whilst they make up almost half (48.6% in 2019) of those in dependent employment (although only 35.0% of those working full time)¹⁵.

1.5. Housing market

On average, people in Germany spend 26% of their income on housing. In 2019, 11.4 million people in Germany were living in households with too high housing costs. They represented about 14% of the total population. Housing costs are considered too high for a household if more than 40% of its disposable income is spent on housing, either as a rented or a owner-occupied accommodation¹⁶.

12 Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy <https://www.bmwi.de/Redaktion/EN/Dossier/economic-development.html>.

13 https://www.destatis.de/EN/Home/_node.html

14 <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TUD>

15 <https://fowid.de/meldung/deutsche-gewerkschaften>, <https://www.worker-participation.eu/National-Industrial-Relations/Countries/Germany/Trade-Unions>

16 https://www.destatis.de/EN/Press/2020/10/PE20_428_639.html

2. TOPICS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

2.1. Self-perception (a): Self-perceived control over labour

On this point we find significant differences among workers, mostly regardless of their employment status.

Precarious workers feel they have little control over their work in terms of trade activity, income, and time. Work-life balance is often perceived as 'unsatisfactory', as voiced by Emin, a self-described precarious slash worker, in the following interview excerpt:

“ Q: *How is your work-life balance? Did you have a good one?*
 A: *[laughs] No, not really. Because I depended on my wages and as a cook you don't earn much. So I had to earn money somehow and to work in the bar was cool, because that was at night, it was a lot of fun, and also really good money with this tip money, but working until late, until 5, 6 in the morning and then the day after at 10 am you have a lecture, and most of the times I just missed them. I studied at night when I had something to do, but the seminars and the lectures in the morning I just couldn't attend. And about my free time... I don't know, I just didn't care much about my free time, that was not a big issue.*

Self-employed workers usually express their sense of little control over trade activity and therefore, income. However, they feel they have a greater control on their working schedule than employees. This is Steffi, a self-employed photographer on how she enjoys the feeling of being able to set her working schedule with more freedom than most employees have:

“ *I find kind of difficult that you go to work from Monday to Friday because you have to work there, that's just your schedule. I want to work if there is work, then I like to work on weekends also! It's been the way I lived all the time. Yes, I don't have a normal weekly rhythm except for this Sunday, which I'll keep free for now. I'm afraid that if I were in a permanent position, for a company with no much to do, then I'd just sit there and that would be the worst thing for me. Simply losing time by just sitting around doing nothing. I find that so hard to imagine.*

Still, she thinks, as other self-employed interviewees, that there are no clear boundaries between work and free time:

“ *(Separating between free and labour time) is very difficult for me, because in my free time I take pictures as well. But those are my free projects, where I actually do what I want to do (Steffi).*

Employees (especially public-school teacher, informatic engineers) often experience a greater sense of control over their work than the other workers' groups. An interviewed informatic engineer, in full time employment and with a permanent contract, talks about the great sense of power over her work in the following terms:

“ *'If I ask them (my bosses) to run, they run. If I ask them to jump, they jump', because her boss and her boss' bosses know 'that I add value to the company' (Int_Employed_1).*

This also applies to some interviewees in multiple employment, like Marisa, who is employed full time as a project coordinator for a patent translation company, and works as a freelance translator and as a translation click-worker. She can make decisions about her workload and free time – normally she works 10h/day during the week and 2h/day during the weekends – as she does not feel under stress because she is financially secure.

However, for precarious workers without financial security, having two jobs at the same time often means having no free time. This is the case of Gabriela, a migrant worker who works both as a fictitious self-employed for a platform-based cleaning company in Berlin and as a kitchen assistant:

“ A: *In [name of the platform-based cleaning company] I also worked on Saturdays, and the kitchen job was Thursday, Friday and Saturday, right? And on Thursdays, Fridays it was a little difficult, but nothing that I couldn't take, because I worked in the morning until, you know, 4 in the afternoon and I went to the kitchen at 6pm, so I even had time to go home and get a shower.*
 Q: *And free time? Did you have free time?*
 A: *No, not at that time, nothing, no recreational time and so on, no.*

In most cases, the improvement of the working and living conditions is seen as an individual responsibility. In that sense, Steffi, a young self-employed photographer, offers an interesting example:

“*My cousin had always been my role model because she saved her whole life. And now at 50 she built her house, you know? Now she can afford everything because she has saved. And she has worked everything towards having this house. And I mean, 50 would perhaps already be a bit late. Maybe I would like to be a bit earlier, but I think mid-30s and early 40s would be ok for me to have children, to start a family and I think that for what I am doing is realistic.*

However, there are exceptions to that widespread view, especially among workers with a high political awareness, like Josef, a self-employed cellist, and Emin, a slash worker from Augsburg. Both are keen militants in labour unions and left-wing parties:

“*No, I don't think you can say you are self-responsible, or you can make it on your own, or all that neoliberal bullshit. That's just not true. And most of the people know that, most of the people in lower classes know that. For example, I come from a migrant family in Germany, my father is Kurdish, my mother is Turkish, and both my parents are workers. And sometimes people tell me: well, here you can study. But I cannot study because of the system, I can study despite the system. It was really hard time for me to get where I am now (Emin). 'In a capitalist system, you don't have this freedom because you are forced to sell your labour. Yes, I think this is a very neoliberal view of society, because people say that it's only personal responsibility. But there are also many who fall by the wayside. And that's not their responsibility, it's the social conditions. And society has a duty to bring about improvements, and this cannot be reduced to personal responsibility. Even if there are of course some of them' (Josef).*

Javier, an unemployed informatic engineer in Munich, highlights how working conditions can be sometime beyond one's personal control and efforts. He says that when the Covid-crisis started, the company prioritised the retention of workers with a longer employment history over newer employees, like him. In his opinion, this decision

was beyond his responsibility and control. Furthermore, it shows the limits of meritocracy as in his view, this was just a 'game of numbers', and the real reason was that making redundant more senior workers would have been more expensive for the company. He sees this as 'the negative side of jobs security'.

2.2. Self-perception (b): Description of the own working and living situation

Regarding the questions of workers' rights, precarity and informality in Germany, there is a widespread opinion among interviewees that there are good working conditions in Germany (not without exceptions and degrees). The following examples illustrate this point:

- Example 1: Javier, an unemployed migrant worker, admits having 'no idea' about unions affiliation in the company he used to work for. He assumes that most of his colleagues were not members of the unions, because 'there is no need to, the employer is respecting your rights'. He would consider joining the unions to stay informed about his rights and German labour law, and access certain courses, and not so much because of the fear that his rights could be abused.
- Example 2: Anna, a part-time German teacher in a state-school, says that she is very satisfied with her life and has never felt, so far, restricted, by politics. She thinks that maybe it would be different in another, 'more precarious' country, but she doesn't see the need in this country of any action to change policies. She urges other teachers in Europe to obtain 'the same conditions as in Germany'.
- But, as already mentioned, other interviewees had first-hand or knew of other people's experience of exploitation and abuse in the workplace (for instance, because of their political militancy) and challenge this widespread view.
- Example 1: Patricia, unemployed migrant worker based in Magdeburg expresses her shock when she and her partner – also a migrant worker – had to face the reality of precarious employment, in the form of mini jobs, informality, and violation of workers' rights: 'I

thought that labour law violations didn't happen here in Germany'.

“ I thought that didn't happen here in Germany, that people didn't work cash in hand. But here they make them work on contracts for mini jobs to avoid taxes and they give them cash in hand for the rest of the hours. It's crazy, I didn't think that would happen here. The situation of my partner and his co-workers with Amazon is crazy. An abuse of power and an abuse of rights that I didn't think happened in Europe. The same thing happened to me in the restaurant, in this gym, two days ago. I found myself recently in a horrible situation. I was only working one day in a gym, a cleaning job. And it was a horrible experience, of abuse of rights, no transparency. They didn't even pay me. I mean, they even chose not to pay me. I didn't think that was possible in Europe! But it happens, indeed.

- Example 2: Emin, a slash worker from Augsburg is critical of Germany's labour market in general, starting from the educational system: 'This happens in Germany too, but it's not acknowledged by society'.

“ In the German labour market, the traditional jobs you can get, like the old unions contracts, like for example in the metal industry, they are amazing! But Germany is also the country in Europe with the biggest low-wage sector. I think in Germany we are still better off, compared to other countries, depending on where you live, of course, but many people in Germany live very precarious lives. And I don't think they're really acknowledged by society, and also with our system of education, which is always praised, and it's said to be a good system, but if you look at reports it's not. Germany is always the last country in Europe when it comes to achieving higher education degrees for people coming from lower income families. So, you have a perpetuating system of inequality.

- Migrant workers often compare their current work and life situation with that of people in their country of origin, or with their own before they left:

“ Here, despite the whole situation, I can eat every day, I can pay rent and I can even treat myself. I can go on vacation to Greece for 20 days, despite

the bad things, Despite all that, I was able to make money, I was able to save. Well, yeah, it doesn't compare, it's never going to compare. South America is destroyed and devastated, and we are talking about the likelihood of eating. Here we are talking about the likelihood of going on vacation. So, it still suits me to stay here (Gabriela, self-defined precarious worker).

This attitude is common among migrant workers, irrespective of their working situations. For instance, Lucía, another migrant worker, employed with a permanent contract as an IT engineer by a private company in Munich says that she doesn't want to go back to her country of origin, because she knows 'the working conditions that my colleagues have there, people from the university and so on. And in Spain it would be unthinkable that an employer gives back overtime'. She's aware that in Spain she 'would be paid much less' and should be thankful of having 'been given a job'. Whereas here she's 'thanked for working and valued as a person, as a resource. I am not just a number, but I bring value and I am recognised. So, I don't think that I'll go back to Spain, not for now. I am quite comfortable here in Germany and if I change it would only be from one company to another. I don't see myself going back right now'.

Eva, an unemployed sociologist, talks about migrant workers' self-perception and how the comparison with their countries of origin affects it, drawing from her experience of social activism as voluntary labour advisor in Berlin:

“ It's true that many people who say that even though they have problems here, know that where they come from, be it Spain or some Latin American country, it would be worse. In other words, Germany is the least bad thing, so to speak. They are asking for help or are getting information before signing a contract so that they won't get screwed. There is mistrust between the employee and the employer, which I think it's healthy and natural. But is Germany a better and safer option than their places of origin? yes, even when they, although they have qualifications, end up working in a precarious job because they do not speak good German or have German qualifications. Many prefer to be here. And it is possible that in their countries of origin they would not have a position according to their qualification either.

2.2. Covid-crisis (1st wave)

The pandemic and the consequent political and economic measures do not affect all workers' groups in the same way. Thus, self-employed workers often speak of a sense of insecurity, because jobs are often cancelled and not replaced, because they fear getting sick and not being able to work – and still having to face fix costs, such as health insurance and costs of living. From this perspective they perceive themselves as disadvantaged compared to employees, as Josef, a self-employed cellist, explains:

“ For those who are permanently employed in orchestras, the corona crisis is not bad at all. I mean, they'll complain, too, that they cannot perform so much and express themselves. Perhaps. Or have so small audiences. But each of them still gets the same amount of money as before. Or maybe there's short-time work or something, but that's not bad at all compared to freelancers.

Self-employed workers often have to look for a supplementary source of income (like a second job) to face this situation. This is the case of Marisa, who combines her full-time employment as project coordinator for a patent translation company with her freelance activity and supplementary click-work. For her, slash working is a good strategy to tackle the decrease of freelance projects during summer and the Covid-crisis.

For platform workers, like Gabriela and Gustavo, jobs level remained the same or even increased. Both work in Berlin: she, as a cleaner via an app that connects her with customers, and he as a rider for a food delivery platform. This is how they experience the first months of the pandemic at work:

“ I thought I would lose clients, was very worried because people were paranoid. But no, on the contrary, I even got more jobs. Some clients asked me to wear a mask. Very few, very, very few indeed. But no, work increased at that time, luckily (Gabriela). I worked all Summer for (name of the food delivery platform). I worked about 45 hours a week, all through the Summer, and I earned quite a lot. In the beginning it was only very short distances. With Corona there were a lot of orders and tips, I made about 2500 euros net (Gustavo).

We find big differences among the employees interviewed, as the measures introduced to tackle the crisis change from

workplace to workplace. Thus, Kurzarbeit (short-time working) was implemented for some companies, and not in others. Furthermore, even those companies that resorted to Kurzarbeit did not extend it to all workers. This is what happened to Lucía, a migrant worker employed as an engineer in Munich. She didn't receive Kurzarbeit support, although she would have welcomed shorter working hours. But she was sure from the beginning 'that this was not possible' where she works now because the 'client pays for a human resource, which is her full 40 hours service'. Pedro's situation is different. He works as an informatic engineer for a private company in Berlin. There Kurzarbeit was introduced for everyone. For him working less hours meant a positive change in his working situation. It did not have a serious negative impact on his income (his pay is 'good', and he was already working part-time before the crisis) and he enjoyed having more free time for recreational activities.

In all cases, the recourse to Kurzarbeit and the terms of eligibility are considered decisions taken 'from above'. However, most of the workers interviewed approve it since it seemed the 'right thing to do' given the circumstances. There are some exceptions: Roberto, a social care worker from a private institution caring for people with mental health problems in Leipzig complains about the way Kurzarbeit was implemented in his workplace and its consequences:

“ From an economic, capitalist standpoint these measures are very, very good. From a human point of view, I found them very hard.

The economic impact of Kurzarbeit depends on each employee's working conditions. Thus, for Lavinia, who has a part-time, fixed-termed employment contract as an administrative worker at a language school for migrants and refugees, Kurzarbeit meant having to live on 300€/month. During the first lockdown, the language school had to close, and she saw her income reduced almost by half:

“ Q: Did you find difficult affording basic goods during this time? A: Of course I had, [...] I mean, less than 300 euros, it's almost nothing, you know... of course, I was not even pretending to have a good life. But then I had to buy a computer. I have stuff that I'm still paying. And so it was really not easy; one month I had one euro and 58 cents left on my bank account, ... really ... counting the cents, you know, but I cannot complain that much.

Other people's situation is often taken into account when the interviewees assess the impact of the Covid-crisis on their own work and life situation. This is the case of Josef, a self-employed cellist based in Munich. When the first lockdown was announced, all concerts until summer were 'simply cancelled, everything without replacement failed'. Still he, unlike other self-employed workers, got state support. He is also aware that, worst-case scenario, he could rely on this family's financial support. This is how he talks about his concerns for the future:

“ I am worried about the future. But it doesn't bring me down or anything. But I'm definitely thinking about it a lot more than I used to [...] Well, I can put into perspective a bit, because I can't really complain. And if I somehow say that I'm worried, then it's not about my survival because I know that I'm covered.

Interviewees who lost their job during the Covid crisis, like Javier, find that comparing themselves with those who still have their job can negatively impact their self-perception. Javier, an unemployed migrant worker, explains how unemployment is affecting his mental health and personal relationships:

“ Everybody is working, but me, even those with less qualifications. This is affecting my sense of self-worth. I've considered going back to the crypto coin, but with my current state of mind I don't think I'd be able to manage the pressure. [...] My working situation is affecting my partnership and more broadly my personal relationships, because of my mood. I fear not finding a job, and sometimes regret having moved to Germany. There are moments when I want to avoid big groups of people or people who work on the same company as I used to, because it makes me feel a fake.

State support

Some of the interviewees think that the Government's financial support is vital, yet not so easily available to those facing economic insecurities, like the self-employed workers. Difficulties in claiming state support for the self-employed workers is often due to bureaucratic red-tape and the prerequisites necessary to qualify for it. The aid aims to cover business expenses but not living costs; thus, it does not apply to self-employed workers like Judith. She is a

self-employed slash worker, working as a text editor and a carer in Berlin. She did not get any financial support from the state. Her situation is, as she defines it, precarious:

“ I don't get financial support, no. I have applied for housing benefit because of Corona and because some customers had cancelled [...] I find it all a bit contradictory and the information is somehow not that clear. They always make a lot of promises, but when you look at it carefully, it's not like that. Well, I heard about it back then, about this payment to the self-employed, and I read it through carefully and I know that many have applied without reading it through carefully. And I think only certain categories can apply. I wanted to do it correctly and then I didn't apply because it was only supposed to be for business expenses. And now I'm really happy that I didn't apply, because maybe I would have been fined. Because I don't have business expenses, no, for me it's really the cost of living, though it wouldn't have been bad if you could get that too.

Unlike Judith, Josef, a self-employed cellist, got some financial aid from the Bavarian Ministry. Yet, he is aware of the associated bureaucratic red-tape, which has left many other self-employed workers without support:

“ I got 3000 Euros from the Bavarian Ministry. That was meant for three months at 1,000 euros per month. So I got three of them at once, 3000 euros as a lump sum. And of course, I had to prove that I really am a freelance musician. [...] For other artists this help was difficult to get and the paperwork not so easy. It worked out well for me, but I heard from people who had very difficult experiences.

In this context, some workers resort to individual coping strategies. For one of them Gustavo, a precarious slash worker, based in Berlin the solution is to cheat the system:

“ Corona was super good. In fact, I asked for help as a self-employed. I still had the status from the time I worked for this cleaning app and I asked for the 5,000 euro help, although I wasn't self-employed anymore, but they gave it anyway. After all, they want you to spend money because they don't want to stop production (Int_Precarious_4).

2.3. Workers' solidarity and mobilisation, labour unions

Whilst many of the interviewees think that the trade unions are a good thing, they don't join them. The reasons for this are various: the lack of information on unions (due to time and language constraints, in the case of migrant workers across different groups), the lack of free time to contact them, or because the interviewees don't feel they need support at present (under the motto 'my working conditions are "good"').

Conversely, there is often a sense of self-perceived powerlessness and isolation among most interviewees, irrespective of their working condition and status. Thus, John, a migrant worker employed in Munich's private education sector, tells us how he feels powerless as there are no unions in the school where he teaches:

“ *A: To an extent I agree that every individual is responsible for improving their own working conditions, but I think there's a limit, certainly in a top-down structure as a school and in non-unionised companies [...]*

Q: Do you feel powerless?

A: Yes! Because of the way teachers work, we're very isolated, you're the only adult in the room, most of the time. And that gives you a great sense of autonomy (in terms of how you carry out your job as a teacher), so if you equate that autonomy with power, then you can say we have some, but in terms of the more general organisation of the school, we don't.

For migrant workers on limited leave to remain, taking part to industrial actions is even more complicated, because the fear of 'getting in trouble with migration law' is a deterrent. Gabriela's experience as non-EU citizen and precarious worker in Berlin is a good example:

“ *I don't know how things work here in Germany. I know that in Argentina, I go, I group with people and we occupy the street. I would have had to deal with the police, in most cases. I don't know, here there is a fear of breaking the law, because we have permits for one year only. And I'm afraid of the Germans. I don't know their laws. I know that they are super strict about everything. I don't want to have a problem with the law. Not with (the*

cleaning company), with German law. We don't know what it's like. It's worrying on that side.

For others, like Patricia, an unemployed migrant worker in Magdeburg, the lack of language skills and social contacts is an impossible obstacle to join the unions and take action to change her current situation:

“ *But now that I am settled in Magdeburg, I see it as complicated. I don't have contacts, I don't have friends, I don't know people here. I'm trying to spend time in learning the language. Now that I have time, because I'm unemployed and looking for a job, I have plenty of time to prepare myself, because if I move to another country next year, I don't want to keep cleaning up the gringos' shit.*

Anna's experience offers an alternative perspective and confirms that the interviewees' opinion on militancy depends greatly on their working and living conditions. Her position as state-school teacher in Munich gives her a 'good quality of life' and she sees no need to mobilise for better conditions. The fact that the civil servants in Germany, and among them the teachers in the state school system, don't have a right to strike is not a problem for her, because 'the teachers in Bavaria are satisfied with their conditions' and the state looks after education with satisfaction surveys, teachers' trainings, etc.). Germany's strike prohibition for the civil servants, and therefore for some of the state-school teachers, should 'protect the state from losing its control over schools'. She admits that this is 'an old-fashion system', but useful to face crises like the Covid-19, 'otherwise some teachers wouldn't carry out their duties. The state should guarantee that education is not interrupted, because education plays a central role for the functioning of the state'. She finds it 'good' that state schools operate differently than other workplaces ('otherwise it'd be like a company'), because education is essential for society.

Workers' solidarity and competitiveness is also a common topic in most interviews. For instance, Eva, an unemployed sociologist based in Berlin, thinks that the academic working environment is highly competitive:

“ *I hear stories of people stealing data from others to do their research, writing papers that don't reference the source., I would say this is unethical and I think it goes against everything that has to do with science. In other words, instead of cooper-*

ation, which I think is science, there is selfishness that only lead to one person becoming known and having a better position than the other. It's a lot of competition and unfair competition, elbowing each other.

The Covid-19 crisis has increased, in some cases, competition among workers. This is Javier's experience, a migrant worker who lost his job as an engineer in Munich shortly after the crisis started. For him, competition among workers became apparent once the consequences of the pandemic began to be felt in the workplace, and decisions were made on who was to keep their job.

Workers' solidarity came up also in relation to platform jobs. Gabriela explains how some apps can hinder workers' communication and therefore, the possibilities of mobilisation for better working conditions:

“ I don't have colleagues, of course. It's an application that completely isolates the worker from the colleagues. It cuts off communication channels and I think it's also intentional. It's not innocent. If you hire a group of people who can't communicate, it's a group of people who can't organise themselves against you or for their rights.

2.4. Gender

Another interesting aspect emerging from the interviews is the relationship between gendered, unpaid care work and self-perceived control over workload.

Thus, Judith, a precarious self-employed worker from Berlin, and a single mother, says that part-time employment is the only option that allows her the time to care for her child. However, she often struggles to have enough money for basic expenses. For her, childcare, especially during her son early age, was an obstacle (on top of the uncertainty attached to self-employment) to control her work schedule:

“ Q: How is your work-life balance – do you have enough free time?

A: It's always different and because of that, you can only plan it badly. Yes, at the moment it's actually possible. It was worse. At the moment it's actually possible.

Q: When was it worse?

A: When my son was younger. He was of school age, but still not that independent, and I had time to write only at night. That was really exhausting and I'm glad that I don't have to do it anymore. Yes, right now I'm so happy that I have a little bit of free time. But that can change again if something else comes up.

This feeling of lacking control over work-life balance is exacerbated by the lack of state support – and by the additional burdens that even public institutions like the Job Centre impose on workers:

“ I definitely don't want to go to the Job Centre anymore. I claimed benefits when my child was younger, and I don't want that anymore because I felt very bad there [...] It was just when I couldn't work full-time because of childcare. And yes, I didn't feel well treated. I joined a self-employed team and they always assumed that I would be able to make a living from it at some point. Moreover they didn't take into account that I had a child and that I was alone and that it is actually quite difficult. I had to apply anyway and do everything they required, but that wasn't realistic. And yes, I was always afraid of getting letters from the Job Centre. So I thought I'd rather try some alternatives, even if it was little, than go back to the Job Centre. (Judith).

Another issue that comes up in the interviews is the actual threat of gender violence in the workplace. Gabriela, a migrant worker, working as a cleaner in Berlin, reports the feeling of vulnerability to gender violence at work:

“ It happened to me; I went to a guy's house and was very afraid. I texted my partner the location and told him: if I don't talk to you for a long time, come and get me, because the house looked like something out of a horror movie. Berlin has millions of people and some of them are very nice and then there are people who are very sick in their heads. I came across this man who had American flags everywhere, images of girls in a house that was from a horror movie, the dirt, the smell, everything... dreadful. That had never happened to me before, I was really scared and I thought: who's going to take care of me if something happens here? The application does not have staff or

procedures to check the clients; on the contrary, I am required to present and carry my passport, I have to put my picture in my profile, a lot of things. There aren't pictures of the customers in their profile. I don't know who the customer is. I have no idea. I just accept the offer, get the job and I get there and well, let's cross fingers.

2.5. Politics

There are noticeable differences, especially between Germans and non-Germans in the interviewees' approach to the country's politics.

Among the migrant workers, we find a widespread sense of detachment from the national politics because they see themselves as temporary residents and/or are more interested in their own countries' politics. Limited citizenship rights (i.e. voting) and language barriers also are causes for social disenfranchisement.

This disinterest can lead to misinformation and thus to the idea that in Germany everything is fine. John, a migrant worker from the UK employed in Munich as a private school teacher, explains:

“ I think that the German society is relatively well functioning. I have trust in the decisions that are being taken, but that's probably more out of disinformation. But I do think that Germany, and the German government and Angela Merkel have proven themselves competent. There are lots of things in the way German society is organised and decisions that have been taken at a political level that I agree with. I don't mean that I agree with everything, far from it, but in general things are more or less going in the right direction in Germany, as opposed to the UK.

Conversely, German interviewees hold different political view according to their degree of militancy: more politically engaged interviewees see collective action as a necessary means for social transformation, like Anna, an unemployed sociologist from Berlin:

“ Q: Do you think that there is something you can do to change those kinds of trends (the rise of the far-right)?

A: Yes, of course. I think that you have to bring politics out in the street. What we are doing now, talk about these issues, talk to people who are not necessarily our friends, who have different opinions, to come together and make, I don't know, a more supportive and kinder way of life for each other. I think it is important to express what one thinks because we are not alone. It's not just you and me who think that way. There are many other people, and the important thing is to give power to their voices. I believe much more in this approach than voting at elections time or joining a party.

Conversely, workers who see themselves as 'less politically active', emphasise more individual responsibility. This is the case, for instance, of Anna, a German state-school teacher, who declares herself 'very satisfied with her life, and never felt restricted by politics. In another, 'more precarious' country, she says, it'd be maybe different, but for her there is no need for a political change. She's more interested in personal development and transformation, and in personal forms of social activism (through ethical consumption, personal relations and through her work, which she perceives as a socially relevant profession): 'conscious living can be transformative, transformation does not only have to be political', 'political' meaning coming from political parties' decisions.

However, there are common topics of concern. A central concern is the rise of the far-right, especially now as a reaction to the Covid-19 crisis. The following excerpts from the interviews with Lucía, a migrant worker who works as an IT engineer in Munich, Eva, an unemployed German sociologist based in Berlin, and Josef, German self-employed musician in Munich, illustrate these concerns:

“ The political right or the more fascist part of it is growing a lot, and we are not able to stop it [...] there is room, and I think there has also been a socially important movement, but we have to do a lot more. I don't see much action, not even from me, for example, as I've told you, I'm not politically involved with anything. [...] the rise of the extreme right in Europe is more than worrying at this moment. It worries me, because I cannot explain it and it makes me very angry (Lucía). I find it worrying, especially now, in these times of crisis, and change...When was that, last month?

About three or four weeks ago there was a huge demonstration in Berlin. I was caught in the middle of it because I had to cross the city on my bike, and there was this group of people that one would say were clearly fascists, because of their flags and the way they dressed, and next to them a black family, a lot of gay flags, people smoking joints... Now they are all together, against the anti-Covid measures. Yes, it's all mixed up, and it doesn't fit in my world. It's a super weird thing, and it scares me a little, because there are two sides there, the Nazis, and people who are not Nazis. But I don't know if they perceive each other like that. Many defend themselves; they say that they are not Nazis, they just want freedom. I think there are coalitions going on between people who apparently don't have anything in common. Or maybe they do have (Eva). I expect that the economic crisis will intensify and the situation will get worse. So it is possible that if the social unrest gets even worse, maybe the AfD will profit from it again. I think it is a real concern that the AfD will now become more powerful because of the worsening of the crisis. That can happen. I don't think it is imminent that the AfD will take power. But I think it is possible that there will be a general shift to the right, isn't it? (Josef).

Other topics of concern in the interviews are the relentless gentrification in most German cities, the persisting sexism, the work exploitation, and the all-pervading dominance of economic profit interests. However, even if experiences of powerlessness and isolation are the norm rather than the exception, some interviewees find reasons for hope: Emin's critical analysis of society, which nonetheless leaves room for optimism and international workers' solidarity illustrated this point well:

“ Many things need to change, the root of our problems is our economic system based on profit, which affects, for instance, our insurance and health system. In Germany there is this stupid idea that the health system should make a profit, instead of making people healthy. We always have more machines, more artificial intelligence that could work instead of us and that'd be amazing, but in fact there are fewer people who make more money. And I think we should redistribute the social wealth, and progress should benefit the whole society, and not just the few. [...] However, there are people in Germany too who are trying to improve the situation. We know, for example, that people from Eastern Europe who grow vegetables for the German supermarkets are exploited like hell, and are trying to organise unions across Europe to change that.

SELECTED INTERVIEWS – GERMANY

Gabriela: Woman, late 20s, non-German, slash worker, platform worker, precarious worker, based in Berlin

Steffi: Woman, 27 years old, German, self-employed, Munich based

Emin: Man, German, slash worker, late 20s, precarious worker. Based in Augsburg

Gerhard: Man, German, early-40s, concurrently employed, platform worker, Düsseldorf based

Judith: Woman, mid-40s, German, slash worker, self-employed, precarious worker. Based in Berlin

Roberto: Man, non-German, late 20s, fix-termed, part-time employed, Leipzig based

1. Gabriela

Q: Can you please start by telling me a bit about yourself?

A: I come from the province of Cordoba, in Argentina. I am a drama teacher. When I wasn't working as a drama teacher, I earned some money working in a call centre, and I wanted to start travelling. Argentina has many agreements with several countries for Working Holiday. I came with my boyfriend. We came here because it was perhaps one of the most accessible countries in terms of costs and visas. First, I spent two weeks in a small town and then since February I have been living in Berlin and started looking for a job, unsuccessfully at first. The job search was not easy because of my shortcomings. First, I am an immigrant, and second, I didn't speak German and my English was rudimentary. Now it is much more fluent because I take classes regu-

larly. The job market is very difficult, and one takes what is offered, what is available, and what one can get when the possibilities are limited, with the lack of language proficiency, of course.

Q: And you were telling me that in Argentina you studied to be a drama teacher?

A: Yes, I am an actress and a drama teacher, and I also have training in art management, theatre production management. Last year, 2019, I worked in three plays in Córdoba, in the second largest province of Argentina, and I was very busy, plus I worked in a call centre, two jobs at the same time. Argentina is a hard country; it was difficult to get a job. I almost always had two part-time jobs at once. Germany was not in the original plans. But our choice of visa, the Working Holiday visa, depended on the price of the dollar. The more inflation there was in our country, the more the value of the Argentine peso was affected, the more difficult it was to get the visas that I really wanted. I wanted to go to Denmark. It was about making decisions as you went along, and before the devaluation escalated into a very, very, very big devaluation of the peso, I managed to change my money. There was no other option but to see which visa was more affordable, and the only one I could afford was for Germany. Initially Germany didn't catch my attention. Today, in my experience, I think it is a beautiful country, but at that time, it was more the desire to leave and the economic possibilities.

Q: And why did you want to leave Argentina?

A: Because of a my ambition to explore the world, that's more or less the romantic explanation, and besides, my biggest dream is to go to Spain, to study theatre there. To achieve that, I had to go to other countries because Spain does not have this type of visa. And I had to make a detour and save some money. I left Argentina because there are very few opportunities in that country. Economic and political, as it is a country that was devastated by a neoliberal government. And we have no job opportunities. My work was horrible: working in a call centre is horrendous. It's working a lot for little money, little money, not enough to feed yourself properly, not enough to pay for your basics. So, I opted for Germany.

Q: I understand. But then the final goal would be to move to Spain someday?

A: Yes, yes, yes, maybe. Making money and saving. We have the possibility, especially my boyfriend, of applying for [a European] citizenship. If I then marry him, I can apply too. Once I have citizenship, I can go and live in Spain, and I can realise the biggest dream that I have, which is to study there.

Q: What nationality do you plan to apply for?

A: We are considering Italian citizenship. But at present, we have to find the money to make it happen. We'll see if it works out.

Q: So, right now, the idea is to work to save money.

A: Yes, exactly.

Q: And you were saying that it wasn't easy at first to find a job in Germany because you didn't speak German.

A: Obviously, I don't think any migrant has an easy time with the language issue. Berlin is a city that opens its doors to anyone. But language is a challenging issue. So, I'm not going to tell you that I started working with [name of the online cleaning platform] because I wanted to be a cleaner; that wasn't the case. I think few people like cleaning other people's homes. No, it was because that's what I had left, within my possibilities. It's an app that I dislike, to be very frank with you. I don't like them, I don't like their staff, I don't like their platform, I don't like their people. I find them despicable. But it's also a fact that people like me need to go through it, because it's the easiest and fastest way. Because to clean a house you don't need much more than knowing the cleaning products, basic words and maybe the clients' sympathy who can understand that you don't speak well, but that if they give you two minutes you can manage using a German translator program. This didn't make taking cleaning jobs any easier because it wasn't my plan of choice. I didn't want to clean houses. First, I had to come to terms with the fact that I had no other option, but the platform.

Q: How did you happen to know about the app?

A: All of us Latinos who come to Berlin have Facebook pages and groups as the first hub, where we pass on the information. At that time, I had already heard that there was a platform called [name of the cleaning company], where you could find cleaning jobs, and that you didn't need almost any qualifications, or your "anmeldung" (residence registration) to get a job. Having a registered residence is

a massive problem in Germany. Not all people give you a job without that registration, so the app is the only system that allows you to arrive in the country, pay your 20 euros subscription and find a job the next day. I arrived at a hostel, and there were many Argentinian and many Latinos because Berlin is the first stop and everybody uses [name of the cleaning company] until something better comes along. As it happens – to them like to me – it never gets better, so you are stuck.

Q: And can you explain how the platform works? What are the conditions?

A: You have to have a credit card. You download the application, and you have to pay for training, which is actually training on the cleaning products. I feel that this is just a way to make money. Because it's not a good training, it's just a lovely person who tells you: this product is for cleaning the floor, and nothing else. Then they take 20 euros, and they set up the platform [account] for you. They give you the okay, and you start getting job offers. The platform itself is very, very frightening; in the sense that at the beginning it will find you jobs far from your home, and you have to take them in any case. The first jobs are like that; they are terrible; they are going to be more than an hour away from where you live. It's the same for everybody, more than one hour away from where you live. You have to go and start, and you start. Now, suppose you get your first four clients. Yes, these four clients because they didn't have time, or they forgot or whatever, they didn't rate you. So, the app stops sending you new clients. This is an ugly situation, as it was at the beginning for me. It's an ugly time when you don't know if you're going to get more jobs, because they freeze your account until someone says you're doing the right thing. [The people who run the platform] could quickly solve the problem by telling the client: you have to send a score to this girl, but they don't do it. So, one has to ask, to beg the client: please rate me. That's humiliating. Or at least in my experience, it was very humiliating because I don't speak the language and because I haven't met Germans who were, let's say cool. The houses in those city areas are usually very luxurious, generally very big houses. They are usually houses that belong to very rich people who have no interest in knowing if I need their rating and are not interested in my life. That's the first experience. After begging and begging, things start to move a little, and they start to find you jobs closer to your area, and depending on the number of stars you have, they start to

give you jobs. That's it, they give you jobs, when the clients, according to their disposition, at their leisure, will evaluate you. I began to have a lot of work and could choose where I wanted to go. Because I began to work a lot, they began to give me a lot of stars, very high scores and I had a lot of houses each week. It takes time to build a group of regular clients, of course. In Berlin, I was, for example, working a maximum of 9 hours per day, but not every day. Days vary, there are days when people cancel the jobs, but in general I've worked between three to a maximum of nine hours a day, it varies between that, but in general it's two houses a day, so you do it in three, six, seven hours. The most I worked, as a personal decision for my mental wellbeing, is nine hours.

Q: Do you include the hours of commuting from one house to the next in those nine hours?

A: No, no, no, no, that's extra, and I try to make good use of the time on the train anyway, doing something, of course. It is about 12 hours in total a day, including the commuting .

Q: Apart from the short course for which they charged you 20 euros to explain what soap is, have you had any personal contact, face-to-face, with anybody from the company?

A:, There are more classes and messages, like: 'we can give you a more in-depth training for 20 euros'. They just try to sell you more training to show you another type of soap, nothing else. 'Coronavirus time, we want to teach you how to take care of yourself'. And they charge you for that too. But you don't have to reply.

Q: Was the training one-to-one with a company's trainer, or were there more people? Other colleagues?

A: Yes, there were some colleagues. They put together a small group of 10 people who have signed up for the day. We start at two in the afternoon; I don't remember the exact address. There are two girls and a girl who speaks English and Spanish, and as there are always mostly trainees from Argentina or from other Spanish speaking countries, they do the training in Spanish. The trainer is a girl who used to work as a cleaner for [name of the cleaning company] but had had such good ratings that they told her: okay, you can be a trainer.

Q: And did you keep in touch or meet colleagues at [name of the cleaning company]?

A: Yes, yes, yes, yes, I have some friends too. Yes, they could also tell you about their bad experience because none of them is happy. You do it because it is the fastest and most effective way for us Spanish speakers to make some money. But in general, no, I haven't met people who are happy with the application. However sometimes in the reviews you see that there are happy people who are having a good time, who like it. I guess they are people who don't have the limitation of the language. Many people make arrangements 'outside the app', and this is a game changer. When you meet very cool clients, and you tell them: look, [name of the cleaning company] is stealing a large commission every time I clean your home. And some of them agree. In my case, very few agreed because, well, the Germans are very straight, and that's fine. So, they don't want to hear anything that sounds illegal, even if it isn't.

Q: How do commissions work?

A: That's the biggest issue for all of us who work there. What [name of the cleaning company] does is charging a percentage. We start with a 13€ pay per hour. They decide that that's the fee for your services, then, as you go up (in the rating system), your pay increases. My fee is already 18€, which I never saw, ever. You feel happy, but no, what they do is take a percentage of the first three jobs. You are left with 6€ per hour. Well, suppose you work three hours, every hour you get six euros. Or, just a little more.

Q: That's almost 50 per cent of the first three hours taken off.

A: Yes, I have never been paid more than ten euros per hour after commission, never, never; Even with excellent ratings. Even now that there is a fee of 18 euros for my services. No, because as my hourly pay goes up, they increase their commission. So, I think I get 10 euros an hour when customers pay 18 for me. The first three hours are those with more deductions, and then they still get a percentage, a little less, maybe 5€ an hour or so. I don't remember well, but it's a lot of money. If I've been working for two hours, I am paid for one. It's always that way. They're still taking an hour of my work. You get excited when you start having more clients, but the money never really increases.

Q: So, from what you say, they don't pay the minimum wage. Because they promise you 13€, which would be

above the minimum wage, but they deduct six euros, so they pay you less than the minimum wage.

A: Of course, you have to make a big effort to try to compensate for that. It's like a race where I have to make more than the usual effort to get a decent salary, when in reality it could have been easy if the agency weren't taking money from me. I understand that they need money to maintain their platform. Still, I think that there are other ways to do it, for instance, making the client pay for a commission or even deducting a charge only from my first three jobs. I don't understand why they keep taking money away from my salary every day. I think it's crazy. I think it's a robbery, yes.

Q: And what does the platform offer you in return?

A: I never checked this, – but when we work for [name of the cleaning company] we should be insured, but I don't think this is the case I believe is not true. I don't have any paper that says that I have an insurance cover. I don't even have social security. We're supposed to be insured if I break something worth more than 300€, I will pay up to 300€, and they will pay the difference. If I break a television set worth 1000€, well, I pay 300, and they pay the remaining 700. That would be the only insurance they offer to us. You are not entitled to any benefit. I can't get sick or have an emergency, because they're going to fine me 60 euro for missing a job. So I have to go to work or be very confident, as I have done with a customer and say: I'm very sick, I ask you to let me tell the application that I went to your house and we agree that I will come to your house another day to make up for today. That's also horrible, because no, you can't get sick, no, you can't be late because they fine us 60€. If you don't show up for a job, you can cancel it if you want to, but you have to give 48 hours notice to avoid a penalty. Or talk to the client. If you don't want to work in that house anymore, the best thing is to make them [the clients] say they don't want you anymore. But you can't say that you don't want them anymore. Other application customers won't know why I didn't show up for some jobs, they will look at my profile and say, 'Look, this girl didn't show up four times, and I'm sure this can negatively affect you. I still have lots of work because my [positive] ratings compensate for my not-showings. But today, there is very little protection for workers. I think there is a lot of protection for clients who have the money. There is a reason why they [can] afford someone to come and clean their house.

Q: So, in a way, the worker has a liability both from the platform and the client?

A: Yes, yes, and there are some extreme situations, when I don't know for sure who the client [involved] is. I was very afraid to go to a guy's house. I sent my partner [an SMS with] the location and told him: if I don't call you for a long time, come and get me, because the guy had a house that looked like something out of a horror movie. You get all sorts. There are millions of people in Berlin, and some of them are very nice, and then there are people very sick in their heads. This man who had American flags everywhere, images of girls in a house that was from a horror movie, the dirt, the smell, everything... scary. That had never happened to me before, I was terrified, and I thought: who's going to take care of me if something happens here? The application does not have staff or ways to check the clients out. Whereas I am required to carry with me and show my passport. I have to put my picture in a profile and a lot of information. I can't see [a picture of] the client. I can't see a customer's profile with a picture. I don't know who the customer is. I have no idea. I just accept the offer, get the job, and I get there, and well, let's hope for the best.

Q: Did anybody support you at that time?

A: My friends and my partner, I can let them know and message them the location in real-time, so they know where I am, in which house. No much more than that... I can rely on friends. One of them recommended me [to do] this. Every time she had a client, she would look him up on Facebook or Instagram. She researches before because she had already been through some awful situations. So, she would research before pressing the enter button to take the appointment. Also, there is a gender issue, since most of the people who work for the platform are women. It has to do with a conventional idea that cleaners must be women, and clients believe that women are those who will clean well. So, 80 percent of the cleaners are women. There is a general idea that women are better than men when it comes to household work. So, women have more jobs. I've seen it with my boyfriend and a male friend of mine, who worked for [name of the cleaning company] and didn't get the same number of jobs [as me].

Q: And you told me that you never heard of the unions in your workplace.

A: Never, ever. The only thing closer to a political and unions activity was once when I read on Facebook that they

were organising a demonstration at the place where the trainings were being held or occupy the premises as a protest against the large commissions charged though it came to nothing. I know of an organisation called Working Holiday Visa Germany, whose members are mostly Spanish speakers. There are many organisations of Latinos in Germany and in Berlin, and I must have read about some of them. [...]

It is also crazy, now that you've mentioned the problems with communication more in general. I can only contact the clients I've already worked for. I can't talk to a client unless I had an appointment. They have to contact me first. Also, there is a lot of pressure. You can't talk and have a relaxed dialogue with clients at your leisure. When I left Berlin, I had good relations with many clients who said to me: if you come back, talk to me, look for me, I want you to continue cleaning my house. I didn't think of asking for their phone number. If I wanted to contact these people again, they had disappeared forever because all the communication had happened through an application chat. Then, as soon as I leave the job, they delete my chat. I can't get back to that person.

Q: The [name of the cleaning company] workers you know are people you knew before?

A: I met them while I was looking for an accommodation. I met a girl because I rented her room, and she was the first to tell me about the platform. And the other one is a friend. I passed her some of my clients, outside the app. We don't meet directly through the application.

Q: I see. And does the application allow you to contact other [name of the cleaning company] workers?

A: No, no, no, no, I don't have colleagues, of course. So, it's an application that completely isolates the worker from the colleagues. It cuts off all communication channels, and I think it's intentional. It's not innocent. If you manage a group of people who can't communicate, it's a group of people who can't get organised against you or claim their rights.

Q: Do you personally know any [name of the cleaning company] workers who have started industrial action? There was this attempt that you mentioned. You said it was not successful. What happened?

A: I guess we're all foreigners, and we don't know how German law works. I don't know how things work here in Germany. I know how it is in Argentina, I go, join other people, and occupy the street. The worst outcome is to have to deal with the police, as it happens in most cases. But here [in Germany], there is a fear of breaking the laws because we have permits valid only for one year. And I'm afraid of the Germans. I don't know their laws. I know that they are super strict about everything. I don't want to have a problem with the law. Not with [name of the cleaning company], nor with German law. We don't know what it's like. Just the chance worries us.

Q: And did you ever consider seeking advice on employment law in this country? From the unions or similar organisations?

A: Here in Germany, honestly no, because I always thought it [my situation] would be temporary. When I later started working in a kitchen as a kitchen assistant, I was excited that I would finally have a job with a contract. So, it's always like...you consider [name of the cleaning company] as something that's going to be a temporary solution, and then you end up working for them forever. But also, you don't have the time either. I'll be honest with you; you don't find the time nor the strength. Sometimes it's too exhausting to make a decent living. I have to work long hours. And it is a very tiring job. I don't feel like getting up, meeting people, and trying to get ahead. I don't know Germany, and I don't speak English, I don't speak German. Who do I complain to? In what language will I complain?

Q: And you said that you also work in a kitchen. On top of the jobs with [name of the cleaning company].

A: Yes, yes, I worked in a Spanish tapas kitchen. The Coronavirus happened, and they closed the kitchen like everything else in Germany. It wasn't a great experience either. In this tapas bar, I was supposed to have a regular contract, but it ended up that I had to work illegally without registration. They also knew I was doing cleaning jobs. I was paid below minimum wage. I worked cash in hand and promised that they would pay me 9.35€ minimum, but they paid me 7.50, pretending to deduct taxes that I didn't have to pay because I was paid cash in hand. So, I worked for seven Euros and fifty cents an hour without benefits (such as sick pay, holiday, etc.).

Q: And how long did you work in that restaurant?

A: Almost a month. Yes, three weeks, almost a month. And then they closed it down. For me, it was more an apprenticeship, a way to learn how to cook because they gave me jobs to do as a cook. I liked it. I wouldn't have done it just for the money.

Q: So, in that sense, the crisis did affect you, as you lost the job that you had started just recently?

A: Yes, yes, yes. In that sense, yes. It went differently with [name of the cleaning company]. I thought I would lose clients; I was very worried because people were paranoid. But no, on the contrary, I got even more jobs. Sometimes some clients asked me to wear a mask. Very few, very, very few indeed. Indeed, the number of jobs increased, luckily.

Q: Did you have to have two jobs, the kitchen and [name of the cleaning company], because of the money?

A: Yes, mainly an economic decision, but I also decided to get the kitchen job because I wanted to leave [name of the cleaning company], to get a job as a full-time chef.

Q: How many hours did you work in those three weeks that you had two jobs?

A: I worked also Saturdays for [name of the cleaning company], and the kitchen job was Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, right? It was a little tricky, but nothing that I couldn't manage, because I worked as a cleaner from the morning until 4 in the afternoon and I started in the kitchen at 6 pm, so I even had time to go home and get a shower.

Q: What about free time? Did you have any free time?

A: No, not at that time, nothing, no time off, and so on, no.

Q: Was your situation in Córdoba better or worse than now?

A: Here, despite the whole situation, I can eat every day, I can pay the rent, and I can even treat myself. I can go on holiday to Greece for 20 days, that is, despite all the bad things I told you. Despite all that, I was able to make money. I was able to save. Well, yeah, it doesn't compare; it's never going to compare. South America is bust and devastated, and we are literally talking about the likelihood to feed ourselves. Here we are talking about the likelihood of going on holiday. So it still suits me to stay here.

2. Steffi

Q: Thank you for taking the time to be interviewed. Maybe you can start by briefly telling me about yourself and what you do in Munich?

A: I am a freelance photographer and I am 27.

Q: How long have you been living here?

A: For a year and before that I lived in Berlin for six or seven years and before that with my parents in the countryside.

Q: Ah, okay.

A: I studied photography in Berlin, and then three years ago, I started my own business. I also had other odd jobs from time to time: as a hostess, in catering and all sorts of things

Q: Were you already self-employed at the time?

A: Yes, also when I was a student.

Q: Why did you do that?

A: Because I didn't have enough money and I had to do these jobs. I was with one of those agencies, and they would always give me a job at events. I was hired only on the day and paid for the number of days I worked. It was a bit difficult because they chose you according to your looks, a bit sexist...well, that's what many students do. I did it because I didn't have enough money and because I wasn't ready to go 100 per cent into free-lancing. Also, because unfortunately, I didn't have that many contacts yet. It is generally difficult to get a job in Berlin because there are not so many opportunities, and an incredible number of photographers have second jobs. Yes, and that wasn't easy, but I enjoyed this part-time job, because it allowed me to get to different locations and meet different people. You get booked for a job and you work with a team that you have never met before. It is the same as working as a photographer. When I have a job, I meet an editor I have never seen before. It's the same with the jobs as a waitress.

Q: Does that mean that you acquired certain skills that you can use now?

A: Yes, funnily enough, I did. The self-confidence to say to customers: no, everything is not possible. I think some self-confidence is important because, for example, I didn't dare to say that it was too much with my first jobs as a waitress. When standing for a very long time was too much, for example. Or

that I need a break or that maybe I was going to cancel a job because I knew it was too much. I think the older you get and the more experience you have, the more self-confident you become to say: Hey, I'm going to do that, or maybe not, right? I take a break for 5 minutes, and that's okay, because I have already taken two or three good pictures, right? I've already worked enough to earn my break now. And if someone comes and says: No, you are not allowed to do that, then I say: Yes, I am. This is what I mean about more self-confidence, because if I don't take care of myself, then it's not good for my work either. First of all, you can't be nice and friendly anymore if you're in a bad mood and the pictures won't be good either if you're not good to yourself. I think the most important thing is to be good to yourself.

Q: And do you always manage to do that?

A: No, no, no; sometimes, you can't. But it gets better. I've tried to stick to some rules, because I don't have a company that organises my schedule. I have certain days, like Sundays, when I try not to do anything, right? I always try to go out, normally. When I am exhausted because I had an unexpected job or worked as a photographer, I like to reward myself somehow and go out for a good meal. And I don't say: I'm saving now, because I will only get paid in three months, but rather: I have to reward myself now. That helps me, because otherwise you can work yourself to pieces, if you don't impose such limits.

Q: Do you sometimes find it hard to afford basic goods?

A: Quite often. I still feel like I am a student. Now and then, there are months when things are going pretty well. Then there are months when nothing is going well. It's difficult, and I usually save 10 or 15 per cent of my earnings into a separate saving account. However, I can't save at the moment, because I have a lot of expenses, for example, I had to buy all the equipment. I often take photos for my free projects. That also costs money. So all the money I earn goes right out into something. The earning from my work is invested into my work and my unpaid projects, so my job is somehow all my life.

Q: So there is no separation between free time and working time?

A: That's very difficult for me, because in my free time I take pictures as well. But those are my free projects, the chance of doing what I want to do. If I had a fixed basic income, I would probably only do my free projects.

Q: Oh well, okay. Would a basic income be a good idea?

A: It would be a very good idea, I think, because a lot of creativity and knowledge is lost by always having to think about this money issue. But I have to pay my rent. I have to take a job, even if I am not one hundred per cent convinced. Yes, and that wouldn't mean that nobody would work anymore, because I also enjoy my work and I also work part-time in a gallery for contemporary photography for a very low pay. But I do that because it makes me feel like I can do something for the community. And I think that everybody needs to find fulfilment in their work somehow.

Q: Yes. Do you feel fulfilled by your job?

A: Yes, actually, I do. Well, I always feel good when I am busy. When I have projects, I don't like to call it work, but they are projects. If I have a project that makes me use my brain, then I feel good. But if I feel that I can't think of anything that I want to communicate or that I want to photograph, then I'm not doing so well. So there are moments. Yes, yes.

Q: Why don't you want to call these projects 'work'?

A: Because work for me always sounds like it's hard, it's hard to do ...Also, with my free projects I don't necessarily do them to earn money, and work is somehow connected with money, or is like that for me. I also think...maybe that's a very pretentious thing to say, but with my pictures, maybe I also save something for the future generations. Maybe it's not so valuable now, but maybe in forty or fifty years it will be important, and it's a pity that I can't do that enough, because I still have to work to earn money. But this won't be easy. You can apply for scholarships, but they are difficult to get. And you couldn't live on 1,000 euros a month. So if the fixed basic income was introduced now, you would still have to work to have some other income on top.

Q: Do you have to look always for new ways to earn money?

A: I do indeed. Well, the good thing is that I already have one or two clients who I'm sure will give me some security. And I also enjoy working for them, even if it's simple jobs, like taking photos for their website. They keep coming back. Yes, that is a certain security. I never know how the next month will go and that's difficult, but I think I can do it now, because I'm young and because I'm alone and because I have no dependents, but I know that at some point...that I can't do it forever. Well...

Q: So, what are your plans for the future?

A: Maybe I'll work more as a photographer for organisations, maybe I'll find some part-time job. Also I'll work as a part-time employee either for newspapers, magazines or a gallery, because your employer will pay for your health insurance and you won't have to pay everything yourself. I'm not paying contributions towards my pension at the moment. Though I don't think I will ever be able to get a pension.

Q: Okay, why?

A: We don't know what will be. Also pensions are so small right now, when people retire. The other day I took a picture of an old woman who lived on a very small pension, she doesn't even... her fridge broke down and she needs a new one and she doesn't have money to buy one. I went to a charity that gives old people extra money to buy it, because otherwise they couldn't afford it on 500 euros a month. That money barely covers the rent, a little bit of food and that's it. And the woman has worked all her life.

Q: Are you afraid that you will be in a similar situation?

A: For some reason I don't think like that yet. Unfortunately, maybe it's wrong, but I don't think I'll ever get that old [laughs].

Q: Oh, why?

A: I also think I want to work as long as I can. I don't want to retire or anything... My uncle is 75 and he still works as a miller. So is in our family.

Q: Do you think you would be able to work to that age?

A: Yes, just anything. Yes, yes. I think it's just fun. I can't imagine that I will just stay at home and won't meet people anymore. It doesn't matter what, a part-time job in a restaurant where I go once a week to serve food like a little grandma, I don't know [laughs].

Q: You said before that there are times when money is tight and when things are better. What is it like at the moment?

A: Funnily enough, right now it's working. It's still always pretty tight at the end of the month. So I don't have any saving, but I'm always happy when I'm not in the red. And I don't think I am now.

Q: Have you ever had debts?

A: Yeah, a lot, though now it's more because of the pandemic and because I had a lot of expenses. But somehow I'm not too afraid; it's something I'm used to. I think that generally money problems are really bad and that they can be a real psychological pain. But as far as I am concerned, it's just stupid money.

Q: Do you have any support, like your parents or someone else who could help you financially if things get bad?

A: Yes, maybe I feel easier, because theoretically, I could always ask my parents, but I don't want to do that. I would try to get a bank loan before. If my camera breaks down or something serious, I could theoretically ask my parents for a loan. Bank of mum and dad, so to speak. I usually keep a list of my debts; it makes me feel better.

Q: Do you mean that you had to borrow money from your parents before?

A: Yes, for larger purchases, for example, because I don't have any saving. I'm 27 and I can't afford anything. I buy almost nothing; I never buy clothes. I always have second-hand clothes. And my mother bought a house and started a family when she was my age, so I asked myself, 'How is it possible that they had that?' They just got married and then the family gave them money. Because I'm not yet married I am not getting any money now. I know, it was different with some families back then. But I don't need much either. I don't want a house right now, or to be part of the consumer society. I'm going to buy a second-hand car, not a new one, because I know that I can get the spare parts for 50 euros on eBay whereas for a new car they'd cost a fortune.

Q: Do you mean that you wouldn't like a life like your parents'?

A: Well, of course, it'd be nice to have a house someday. But I'm happy with so little, I bought some chairs the other day, they cost 100 euros, four chairs, and I was really happy. I don't want to have debts for 25,000 euros to buy any great car. I am just happy with things that cost less. So, I think that's quite okay.

Q: Overall, are you happy with your work and your life?

A: Actually, I'm enjoying it very much and I know this will last for a few more years. But then I will have a family and move on from renting and buy a home of my own.

Q: Don't you think you can do it in the next two years?

A: Two years? I don't think so. I think that it will be possible only later on, like my cousin. My cousin has always been my role model because she saved her whole life. And at 50 she built her house, you know? Now she can afford everything because she has saved. And she has focused all her efforts to have this house. And I mean, 50 would perhaps already be a bit late. Maybe I would like it to be a bit earlier, I think mid-30s and early 40s would be okay for me to have children, to start a family and I think that is realistic, based on my situation.

Q: To what extent do you believe that every person is responsible for their welfare? As in your cousin's example, do we have to take care of ourselves, or do you think society and the state have responsibilities too?

A: We live in a welfare state. If I have no more money, I can still claim Hartz IV theoretically.

Q: Do you think that claiming state benefit is one of your options?

A: I don't know, never done it before, I think it is quite tricky, but it is better than nothing. There are countries where there is no government's support at all. And I don't think that claiming benefit is so bad. But I don't have any experience of it.

Q: However, is your attitude like: I have to look after myself, I have to save money, I am responsible for my welfare, so that I will be better off in the future?

A: Yes, of course, but it is still difficult for me. I just can't make it work yet. Every investment I make now is something for the future. All my possessions are valuable: my cameras, for example. If the situation turns bad, I could sell my camera, for example. But I wouldn't sell it now, would I? I also have pictures like that one [she shows a picture in her apartment], which is worth a lot, signed and stuff. I collect things like that as a security so that somehow I own something valuable.

Q: Are you afraid of the future?

A: Funnily enough, not. At the moment, I feel confident. That's why I'm not afraid at all. There were other moments when I was afraid, but I tell myself: How many different jobs have I done? I will find something to do. The only thing I find difficult is to get a permanent job.

Q: Is a permanent job what you want?

A: Maybe a job for a company I like. Yet many of my friends have jobs that don't require much. I find it difficult to work Monday to Friday just because you have to, because that's just your schedule. I want to work if there is something worthwhile to do, then I can work even on weekends if necessary! This has always been my lifestyle approach. Yes, I don't have a normal weekly pattern except for Sundays, which I keep free for now. The worst thing for me would be if I had a permanent position, for a not very demanding job so that I'd just sit there. Simply wasting time by just sitting around doing nothing. I find that so hard to imagine.

Q: Do you think you have a precarious situation?

A: No, I think I'm privileged. Other people are in much worse situations than me. I have a family that could give me support. Things are a bit better with my job now. And I have a network that often gives me support. Though I think there is always some insecurity when you are on your own, really I do not have a precarious situation.

Q: How has the Corona pandemic impacted you and your job?

A: Very much. Yes, it affected me because there were no jobs and I couldn't photograph anything, because I usually take pictures of people and though I love very much working with people I couldn't get closer to them than 2 meters. And then I get so emotional and just hope we will go back sooner or later to how it was before, when it was normal to hug somebody and get close to somebody. Also, I didn't get any government's support. At first, I had applied for emergency support because I could prove that several jobs had been cancelled that would have secured me a monthly income. And this is the preliminary condition. In Bavaria, there would have been a 5000 euros benefit to cover cash shortages. But that was only available for the company's fixed costs such as a studio rent. So I thought: here, this apartment is almost like a studio. Actually, it is. I do work in here. I could've claimed for half of the rent. But in case of an investigation, many had to pay back. So, I didn't claim it.

Q: Why?

A: Because most of my expenses are personal costs, i.e. private rent and food and so on, and the support was for employees' salaries, business rent and so on... As an alternative Hartz IV [unemployment benefit] would have been interesting.

Q: Can you apply for Hartz IV?

A: No, not now, because that's so difficult, because you must be unemployed for at least two months. Also if you unexpectedly get a commission, you would probably have to pay back the Hartz IV. Somehow it isn't very easy, I think. But I have never done it before. I have never tried.

Q: Yes, so that was a difficult time?

A: Yes but thank God I'm always exploring different ways and I could find some work.

Q: Are you interested in politics? Do you think that the political decisions taken at the national level have any influence on you? Do they have any impact on your day-to-day life?

A: In general, or now with Corona?

Q: Both, because Corona has become the main issue.

A: I discovered that somehow I am an independent person. I have such independent thinking and don't like rules and restrictions because I can decide for myself about things... I just look around and even before any government's decision, I wore a mask when no one did and I was always very careful. When the rule was introduced, I felt more like a little child instructed from above: You must not do this, you must not do that. I felt then treated like I were stupid. As if I could not see the situation for myself. Today would have been the beginning of the Oktoberfest. But in the Theresienwiese there is a ban on alcohol consumption and people gatherings. Yes, I mean, it's all right. But it would be really annoying if people were that stupid and gathered in mass.

Q: Do you feel restricted by these measures?

A: No, I don't feel restricted. Funnily enough, these decisions don't affect me, and I don't have to behave any differently.

Q: Are you talking about Corona now or about political measures in general?

A: Mainly about Corona just now, but also in general because often these decisions are far away from my reality, like just on TV.

Q: Do you think the future will improve your situation?

A: I talked to a journalist yesterday and told her that what bothers me is that so few people of our generation actu-

ally go out on the streets or stand up for things. I get the feeling that somehow they all just live on the internet and maybe they're busy tweeting. I feel that people are so little active. However, my little brothers, 12, are already posting stuff on Instagram on 'Black Lives Matter'. It's not much, but it's more than what I did when I was 12 years old. They are growing up much more open now. I can't remember anyone in my class coming from abroad except maybe one. Now it is quite normal that so many different cultures grow up together, even in the countryside. And I think that this alone changes the way young people think.

Q: That's right. And do you think of anything that you personally or together with other people can do to make things better?

A: What I can do now, is to be at least aware of what I buy, how I spend my money. Because I believe that money still has some power in our system. And if certain companies lose their customers, then yes, things can change. You can also visit places out of the beaten track or that are not always comfortable and safe. I think travelling is important; it also makes people a little bit more open to other cultures. And I think maybe we could even introduce something like a government grant so that people can travel, young people, I think that somehow that can open people's mind.

Q: Is there anything you would like to say to people in other countries in Europe. If you could speak to someone from Spain, France, or Italy now, what you would like to share with them?

A: The whole world looks super negative, The biggest mistake is when you let yourself be influenced by negative thoughts, positive thinking in general is important for you because otherwise you might end up in a dark place with a very negative attitude.

3. Emin

I'm a student and I have several jobs to support my studies. I first attended a cooks' training course, then "Abitur" [general qualification for university admission]. I had several jobs last year. My main job was as a bar attendant and it was also my main source of income. I earned 450€ cash in hand. I worked in this bar for five years, night shifts and used to get good tips. I also run workshops and seminars on political education to get extra money. I worked as a

self-employed with a fee-based pay, sometimes in cash, sometimes through the PAYE system.

From time to time to get extra money I used to work unregistered at a construction site, doing apartment renovations, basic tasks, like wall painting, carrying stuff, nothing too fancy, but it was good money, no contract, just cash in hand. I started seven years ago, this year I did it for four months. It's 20€/h but it is really hard work.

But now, during the corona pandemic, the bar had to shut down. This rich Munich company has bought the bar building as part of the process of the area gentrification, and now the bar is gone.

So, I lost my job, which was pretty bad, because there were fewer construction sites during that time, so it was really hard to get a new job. So, until the beginning of the pandemic, I had two jobs, but after that, I had just the job at the building sites. Though I can't do that too much because I have a bad back that I got when I was working as a cook, so I had to look for other jobs. So, I found this job in an old people's home, where I was in charge of some basic activities, I'd have a conversation with the residents, play games with them, walk with them in the garden [...] But then I had to quit it too because it was mostly during the day and I couldn't attend my course. I'm trying to get my last marks, and I have to write my undergraduate dissertation, to get a degree. So, I had to get a loan for the last three months and I stopped working at the old people home two months ago. Because with that job... It was nice, it was good money, but it required too much time and I didn't have any spare time left to study. And it was also quite hard sometimes, because officially we don't have to do actual care work, but the reality is different. For instance, if there is this old woman next to me and she urgently needs to go to the toilet and there is no staff around, then of course I help her. So that was hard too and I used to get home exhausted.

Q: Do you have a good work-life balance?

A: [laughs] No, not really. Because I needed money and as a cook you don't earn much. So I worked in the bar. It was cool because I had night shifts, it was a lot of fun, and I also earned really good money with the tips. But I had to work until late, until 5, 6 in the morning and then the day after I had a lecture at 10 am, and most of the times I just missed it. I studied at night when I could, but I just couldn't attend

the seminars and the lectures in the morning. And about my free time...I don't know, I just didn't care much about my free time, that was not a big issue.

Q: Did you have time for political activism?

A: Yes. Right now, I'm in the 10th semester, studying sociology for my degree, so I gave myself a lot of time and I did a lot of political work. I joined the left party and a communist organisation, in which I was an active member, and I worked a lot for the trade unions, sometimes even as a paid job. For example, I work for the Ver.di trade union as an organiser in hospitals. So yes, I did a lot of political work too.

Q: Did you join the unions also because of your working situation?

A: Yes, that was where I started. During my training to become a chef, I joined the NGG, which was like my sector union, and even before, when I worked in a factory, I joined the IG Metall. It is important to me to be a unions member. Now that I'm also studying, I am a member of the GEW, the students and working student union. I've always had a union membership.

Q: How were your working conditions in your last job?

A: That was the old people home, and the conditions were good enough. I did have worse jobs, especially as a cook, that was the worst, that's why I decided to leave it. Although I love cooking.

But at the old people home...we had our ups and downs... we got a new boss and were not allowed to use our smartphones. When we talked to the residents, we were not allowed to address them with a "du"; we had to talk to them with a "Sie" [German formal pronoun for "you"]. I think it is very stupid, because old people are very lonely, especially during Corona times and I can get along with them very well. The pay was okay for me, but not very good for the colleagues who had only that job. For me, as a part-time job to support my study, 12€/hour is okay, but for the colleagues who work there full time, that's not a lot of money.

Q: Do you rent a flat or are you in a sharing accommodation?

A: I moved in here two months ago, before that I was living with two friends, now I'm living with my girlfriend. I always lived in shared accommodation. [...] as rents are very, very, high, especially here in Augsburg, Augsburg has

the third-fastest rising rent costs in Germany. On the other hand, I enjoy living with people. [...]

Q: How do you survive without a job?

A: I had to ask my parents for a loan. I had to. They're paying for my rent now, and my girlfriend is helping me out a bit.

Q: Is it a problem for you? Is it affecting your relationship with them or your self-esteem?

A: Yes, of course. It's the first time since I'm 14 that I don't have a job, part-time or full-time, it's the first time in my life. And that's really weird. Although I am very busy with my degree thesis, but that's really weird. With my girlfriend, we talk openly about that, that's okay. My girlfriend is doing an "Ausbildung" [professional training] as a young people and children psychotherapist. Next, year she has to do her "Praktikum" [internship] and I'll support her, so that's okay for both of us.

Q: How do you compare your current situation with five years ago?

A: Now it's better because I have this job starting in November, like a real job, with good money. To be honest, I'm really looking forward. Normally, I'm not that obsessed with money, but I think it's just a good feeling to have money in the bank account, and when I shop, I don't have to think all the time: can I afford it or not? I'm really looking forward to that. During my Ausbildung as a cook, that was five years ago, I was worse off. I worked 70-80 hours a week, in really bad conditions for 500€/month, basically nothing. It was really, really hard to get by, so now I'm definitely better off.

Q: Would you say you were in a precarious situation?

A: Yes, definitely. [...] the traditional jobs you can get in Germany, with the old union contracts, such as in the metal industry, are amazing! But Germany is also the country in Europe with the largest low-wage sector. Compared with other countries, we are still well off, depending on where you live, of course, but many people in Germany have very precarious lives. And I don't think society acknowledges them. Consider our education system, which is always praised, and it's said to be a good system, but if you look closely, it's not. Germany is the country in Europe with the smallest number of people from lower-income families to get into higher education. So, you have a perpetuating system of inequality.

Q: Do you agree with the idea that people are responsible for the improvement of their living conditions?

A: I don't think that you can be responsible for your living standard! You don't have the same support and background even if you live in the same country or city. The conditions of rich people and families with four children living on Hartz 4 [benefit] are entirely different; there is just no comparison! No, I don't think you can say you are responsible or have to rely just on your capabilities; that is neoliberal bullshit. That's not true, and most people know it. Most people in the lower classes know that. For example, I come from a migrant family; my father is Kurdish, my mother is Turkish, and both my parents are workers. And sometimes people tell me: well, here you can study. But I can study not because of the system, but despite the system. It was tough to get where I am now. And when I was living in Cologne, I was living in a very working-class part of the city, and most people I would talk to didn't even know they had the chance of getting on a Ausbildung, or getting an education, they didn't know that. So, I don't think you can say you have a personal responsibility or a personal chance to make something out of your life.

Q: Did you ever have a "normal" work contract? By normal I mean employed, full time...?

A: No, though I had the Ausbildung, that was like a full-time job, and at the old people home I had a 35 hours per week contract. I lived in Argentina for two years, and there I had a work contract. That was from 2010 to 2011. [...] Most of the times, you don't have the opportunity to choose jobs matching your skills, so I just took what I could.

Q: What about your health insurance?

A: Sometimes I'd ask my employers to tell the health insurance company I was still working for them even if I didn't anymore, and sometimes it'd work because people could be nice. But sometimes I was without insurance. That sucks, it was not a nice feeling. I was lucky because I didn't get sick and I didn't have any problems, but I was always worried that I didn't have any insurance if anything happened to me. And when I tried to get insurance, they wouldn't accept me because I had a lot of debts. So that was a shitty time. I couldn't even sleep, I always had that in mind. I couldn't stop thinking about that. And when I was walking on the street or going out with friends I'd always think, I need to be more careful, because nothing should happen to me.

Q: How is it now?

A: Now I am a student, the insurance costs 80€/month, I can afford that.

Q: You said you're looking forward to starting this new job in November, because then you can stop worrying about not being able to afford the basic necessities. Is it something you have already experienced?

A: Yes, there were times where I didn't have enough money to buy food, where I'd look if I had any refundable bottles to buy myself a bag of rice, and a bag of rice had to last me for maybe a couple of days. Or I would tell my friends we had a fight at my place and could I come over? Because I didn't want to tell them that I didn't have any money for food.

Q: Were you ashamed?

A: Yes, of course, and most of the things you can do with your friends cost money, even if it's just buying a beer in a supermarket and sitting outside. And I'd say to my friends I had forgotten my wallet or similar excuses. Some friends noticed that I was broke and were super supportive, they asked me if I needed anything, they'd offer to pay for me when we'd go out [...] they helped me out a lot, that was nice.

Q: Could you get any support from anybody else?

A: [Pause] I didn't really look for it. Sometimes I'd go "scavenging", meaning I'd look in supermarket bins at nighttime looking for food, but I didn't go to any charity, it was mostly my friends, and sometimes my parents [...]

Q: Do you think that the unions give support to the workers who are in situations like yours, in precarious multiple occupation, etc.?

A: No. The unions, especially in Germany, are just focused on sectors where they were traditionally strong and still are, like the metal industry, the milk and cheese industry. But the unions do nothing for the growing number of precarious workers like me, or any bartender who's officially working for 450€, but is earning a lot more, and don't know that we are entitled to paid holiday, sick pay... also the unions don't have any representation, for example for all those Foodora/Deliveroo drivers, who are officially self-employed or for the whole gig economy like crowd-workers or click-workers. However, even the IGMetall has signed this code of conduct, which is basically shit, without any action. They think they are still the mighty unions, and people

should join to get help. It just doesn't work anymore, you can see it in the fall of unions memberships. A few local unions memberships have been rising for the last couple of years, but these unions are also trying to implement new techniques and a different approach.

Q: In your opinion, how can the unions today reach out to these new workers' categories?

A: I think unions should go back to what they were 100 years ago, not just being this organisation you can join to get services, like legal advice...I think that's not enough, unions should be more local, more like a solidarity network for workers and for workers who have precarious jobs. And unions shouldn't just focus on people in their workplace but see the whole person and not limit their activities to the members who pay them ten bucks a month. And I think unions should be more approachable and should work more locally.

Q: How did the Corona crisis affect your job?

A: It started, and I didn't have a job anymore. Because I wasn't paid into my bank account, but cash in hand at the end of each shift, I didn't have any saving or income when the Corona crisis started.

Q: And no support from the state?

A: No, because officially, I am a student with a 450€ job, so no support. I received this letter from the government department saying they'd give 500€ to students who had no money in their bank account. But though 500€ wouldn't have been enough for the rent and food, and I had already got a loan, so I didn't get the money from the state.

My colleagues in the bar are friends and comrades. The bar was a place for political activity and fun. In the ol people home, this solidarity among colleagues is missing. Though I convinced my colleagues to join the union (ver.di) and create a support centre to get better working conditions.

I expect a positive change in my future working condition (regular contract, 30h/week, over 2000€/month). I want to be optimistic about the future of society but am aware that there is a lot of work to do. I'm willing to continue to engage politically and with the unions to contribute to that change. Many things need to change, the root of our problems is our economic system based on profit, which affects, for instance, our insurance and health system. In Germa-

ny there is this stupid idea that the health system should make a profit, instead of making people healthy. We will have more machines, more artificial intelligence that could do the work for us and that'd be amazing, but in reality, they concentrated wealth in fewer people who make more and more money. And that wealth should be redistributed and progress should benefit the whole society, and not just the few. And if we're talking about the exploitation of the wages, the exploitation of surplus-value, that's another important point to start with.

Message for other European workers: there are people also in Germany trying to improve their situation. For example, we know that people from eastern Europe who grow the vegetables for the German supermarkets are exploited like hell. Some people here know and are trying to organise European-wide unions to take action on that issue, and we're still small, but I think is already a change.

4. Gerhard

I am 41, live in Düsseldorf, I work full-time for the city administration as an administrative assistant. And I work also part-time as a self-employed accountant.

Q: Does that mean that, on the one hand, you are an employee?

A: Exactly.

Q: On the other hand, you are self-employed and work online, is that correct?

A: Exactly, from home. I am a virtual assistant, as they are called.

Q: How do you get your freelance jobs?

A: Different ways. I use platforms like [name of the service portal for jobs], I have my own website to get customers. And of course, I have already acquired many new customers through satisfied customers' referrals.

[...]

I have been self-employed since 2014, so for six years. Before that I also... well, as far as I can remember, I always had at least two jobs. I was a part-time delivery driver. I don't know what else. I've always had two jobs or two professions, yes.

Q: Why have you always had a second job?

A: The big reason is, of course, financial. Earnings from my main job are enough for a good standard of living. But I want to treat myself or my family to a few extras, like a nice vacation or something special, that's of course a reason. Also, to put it bluntly, I like to work. Of course, I still have my free time, which I enjoy too. But I am restless. I have to do something. And yes, I just enjoy it.

[...]

I own the house I live in. I am divorced, have two children and live with a new partner.

Q: Are you happy with your amount of free time compared to the amount of working hours?

A: Yes, I cannot decide about my main job. With my self-employment, I can decide how much I work and when [...] And that's why I think I have enough free time.

[...]

There is enough competition on the internet, to put you under pressure. And of course, I don't work for any customer, but I do extra work for long-standing, good customers.

[...]

I work full-time, I think that's about eight and a half hours. With the breaks, it's a little longer. And on average I would say between two and three hours a day for my online job. Sometimes a little more, sometimes a little less. Sometimes I don't work for a whole day, that happens, or two days, but roughly two hours, I would say, yes, I think that's a good average.

Q: Can you always have the weekend off, or do you have to work sometimes?

A: I work at weekends sometimes too. I have the children with me every two weeks and I make sure that I'm free. Still I may work also on weekends, just for my freelancing.

Q: What do you enjoy the most?

A: That I am financially independent. Not completely independent, but more independent than if I only had my main job. I can afford a good life standard for myself and my children or my family. That I am my boss in my part-time job

and can decide the time or the workload and only do what I want to do, what I enjoy. Yes, that's the main reason I've been enjoying this for six years now.

Q: Are there any negative aspects to this situation?

A: Yes of course. You're a bit on your own. You are your own boss, but on the other hand, you don't have someone to share any problem with and you have to solve it yourself. You can hardly talk to anybody, I had to learn that too, of course. Now it works, but at the beginning I found it very difficult to earn enough money to make the job worthwhile. Especially with [name of the service portal for jobs] money are really bad. No one can do that... no normal person can accept those rates. Sometimes you have to work for less than 5 euros an hour. I don't want to nor I can work for less than 5 euros an hour. Of course there is a lot of competition, especially in certain industries that attract students who want to earn a few euros with a part-time job and are more likely to be happy with six euros than with ten. It was really difficult at the beginning. However, if you have regular customers, you can also do your job face-to-face. In the off-line world rates are different. So, I think if I had to find my customers only digitally, only through platforms, I would have given up.

Q: But it's incredible that the platform pays such low rates. Is that not regulated at all?

A: No, it is not regulated. Supply and demand determines the price. This is tough; you have no alternative.

[...]

Q: What would you be missing besides the extra money without this extra job?

A: Self-realisation to a certain extent. I like the job, as I said at the beginning, I enjoy it. So, this is not the traditional job with someone telling me I have to do it now. I do it of my own accord because I really enjoy it. I like to be in contact with people, I like to solve problems, I like to offer my help, I am there for people. The clients ask for my advice because they don't have the time or cannot do it, and that's how I help people.

Q: Do you think your current life-work balance has improved in the last five years?

A: It has become more hectic.

Q: More hectic?

A: It has become more hectic, yes, both with the main and the second job.

Q: How do you mean?

A: There is only success, success, success, success. Fast and hectic, and there is more pressure. Yes, something has changed. I don't know whether that has anything to do with the digitalisation of services, but everything has become much, much faster and more hectic. And success, yes, people want results. For example, if I have a target of orders for each week and I've achieved it in just three days, people were pleased because they didn't expect it. But then it becomes more or less expected that I will finish well before the deadline, so when I hand in my work on time, I sometimes feel that is considered just not good enough. And of course, the competition is getting bigger because there are more people online today. There are more platforms; there are more possibilities; you can feel that too.

Q: Do you feel pressurised by this?

A: That puts some pressure on me, of course. I am glad that I am no longer completely dependent on this platform, that I have my customers. I look at the platform only when I have some spare time, because sometimes you can get an extremely good job that is also very well paid, though it doesn't happen very often. That's why you always have to look out. I actually always check every day, even when I'm very busy, because sometimes it's worth it. But I'm glad I'm not wholly dependent on it because I think that would break me.

Q: Were you affected by the Corona in the last few months?

A: Yes, of course. Some orders have been cancelled. Some regular clients disappeared. Because some of the shops have closed or stopped trading. But I think I got through the crisis pretty well or at least through these last months. I have noticed things gradually started improving in the last few weeks. You're always on the move. You never stand still... If I've earned so much this month, I can't say that I will next month too. Last month was very good, I don't know about this month... I hope this month will be very good, but I just don't know. I don't know until the end of the month whether it was good or not.

Q: Would you say you have a precarious situation?

A: No, it's not precarious. No. As I said, I'm slowly noticing that things are looking up again. There are more inquiries. It's fine again, more customers, who disappeared for the last six months, suddenly came back and have something for me again. I can already see that. And now I just hope that it will continue, that it won't be as bad as it was at the beginning of the year.

Q: Is not a precarious situation because you have your secure main job?

A: Yes, exactly, that too. I could stop my second job tomorrow, and I wouldn't starve. I'm not dependent on it. I don't have to do it if I don't want.

[...]

I don't have a good relationship with the unions. I do think they're essential, though it's good that they exist, definitely. But personally, I would never join a union. For instance, there are two unions in my workplace, one of the civil servants' association, the other one is ver.di. And we are just one workforce. And these two unions work against each other. And that is not beneficial. On the contrary. That makes everything even more complicated and divides the employees, between ver.di members and the German Association of Officials members. And there has been a lot of anger and controversy for years. Also I don't really agree with many unions' decisions. Or I don't understand them. I think it's good they have a presence, yes, on various issues, but personally I wouldn't join a union now.

Q: Do you speak from personal experience?

A: Since I work in HR, of course we also have contacts and hear things from the unions. Some colleagues, when they disagree with a decision, they immediately consult the union to know whether it is legal. And I have the feeling that these unions are not interested in what the law says, but they tell the employee, yes, you are definitely right – and your employers are not allowed to do that. And I think the unions are not doing the employees any favour, but yes, they promise something that they cannot keep. Just because they're scared of losing members.

Q: Do you think that the trade unions can represent the interests of the self-employed?

A: There are topics where it would make complete sense to have a large organisation to speak for the self-employed. Definitely.

Q: For example?

A: There was an issue about self-employment. I can no longer recall what it was. I think it was about the allowance for part-time self-employed. I am exempt from sales tax because I don't earn more than a certain amount a year. And the government wanted to cap and reduce that amount. I think, the unions could have then represented the interests of the self-employed.

Q: Okay, yes.

A: With something that affects us all, I think it makes sense, definitely. But I don't believe there are that many issues. But with these general issues, of course, it would definitely make sense, yes, to have the unions.

Q: Could you claim any state support to face the Covid crisis?

A: No, I didn't qualify. Because my income is too low, and it's not my main earning since I still have my full-time job. Whether I have freelance jobs or not, I still have my main income.

Q: What do you think of the measures taken to respond to the Corona pandemic?

A: I think they are good. And also right. But I think it could have been done differently, because the response came across a bit limited. A lot of money was just thrown out, but not targeted where it made sense. I believe that a lot of companies got money whilst they didn't need it. Large corporations as DAX corporations can definitely survive for a few months with reduced revenues because they have billions of funds. They don't need any help – what for? There were a lot of companies that would have gone belly up anyway, whether because of Corona or not, because they were already close to bankruptcy. The government support just delayed this bankruptcy for two or three months. Well, it was a difficult decision, because the government had to act quickly, of course it couldn't think about it for months and think about how to distribute the money, I understand that. But I think a lot of money was just thrown away.

Q: Yes, and maybe other companies that would have needed, didn't get any money?

A: Right, exactly, you hear that again and again. And when I hear that especially the older self-employed, or the smaller self-employed who do not have that much savings and now have to use their retirement savings, they don't get that kind of help I find that very sad. Or just badly scheduled.

5. Judith

I am 46, I am a qualified foreign language correspondent and have worked for a long time in various jobs, and then I was a freelancer for three years. After that I had to make some changes because I had a child. I tried all sorts of things and have now been self-employed and freelancing again for over a year.

Q: So you worked first as an employee, then became self-employed, then you had a child and now are both a freelancer and a self-employed?

A: Yes. Last year I also had temporary jobs. I have always more than one job.

Q: But always as a foreign language correspondent?

A: Well, not really, I do translations, not very often. I'm actually a copywriter and I also do writing and proofreading, sometimes translations, but not that often.

Q: What did you study?

A: Foreign language correspondent in English

Q: And are you from Berlin?

A: Yes, from Berlin.

Q: Do you live there too?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me briefly about your personal situation, not in detail, but you said you have a child, do you have any other care responsibilities?

A: Yes, my child is already twelve years old. I am a single parent and stopped me from getting a full-time job. I always found that when I work as a freelancer, I'm a bit more flexible, that I can manage my time a little better. That was the reason why I finally stucked to it, and also because I wouldn't earn much more by working full-time anyway. And for a year now I've also been working as a carer for older people. But I don't have any specific training. It is always

easy to get jobs like these, just stop-gaps. I also started recently to work for the mothers' emergency service. You register and then you are hired and paid for each session. I can also choose the customers. And I do this job on the side.

Q: All right.

A: Well, I always find it difficult to say what my main activity is now, because it always depends on which job is more in demand at any moment.

Q: Then you are more or less busy depending on the demand?

A: Yes, because it's hard to make a living just from editing and translating.

Q: Is that the reason why you still have additional jobs?

A: Yes. And sometimes I also try to deal with clients directly. Because a lot of my work is anonymous, the customers don't actually know who is writing for them. And everything is done through the online portals, including the payment. This is actually more practical because it makes payments more reliable. It has happened that suddenly nobody answers my e-mails after I sent the work.

[...]

Q: Do you work with other colleagues?

A: Well, I have some colleagues, but I don't see them.

[...]

Also the pay rates are a problem. Right now, I think it has become a bit more difficult because everyone can do the job. And I guess that many don't pay taxes and they can offer their work more cheaply.

Q: Do you sometimes find yourself to be either too busy or without enough work?

A: Yes, both. It varies a lot. At the moment it's difficult to manage as a self-employed. You get an order, and everything looks good and you get organised, also in terms of time. And then suddenly they cancel for any reason. Other times you think you can take the day off and then something comes up that needs finishing quickly, it varies a lot.

Q: Is it because of this unpredictability that you have extra jobs?

A: Yes, definitely. I used to think, when my child was younger, that maybe I could make a living from my profession, but that's not the case.

Q: Because there is never enough money?

A: Yes. You also have costs. I mean, I must pay health insurance and rent anyway, and I wouldn't manage just with the writing jobs.

[...]

I am self-employed also in my job as a carer I wanted to find a job as a childminder, but that is very difficult because most customers prefer to hire non-registered people because it is cheaper.

[...]

Q: Do you earn enough for a comfortable life?

A: Well, financially, yes, though I can't save any money. I actually earn as much as with the office job.

Q: When you were a full-time employee, you mean?

A: Yes. I think that the advantage is the freedom and that you can choose your work. I go through different phases. Sometimes I think that maybe I should go back to the office and on the other hand, for my wellbeing, being self-employed is better, because I have more freedom than if I had office hours.

Q: And how do you do manage with your pension contributions?

A: I don't have a voluntary pension right now. But I've thought about it and calculated that it would not be worth it. Because I would have to put quite a lot into my pension every month and I cannot afford it. And what I could afford would not even be enough to survive when I retire. And if you have to claim support anyway, then it's not worth saving now. This is a pity. I always get this pension information, and even if I had kept my job at the office, I think it would still not be enough. Well, certainly not enough to bring up a child.

Q: And do you worry about it?

A: I'm a little worried, yes.

Q: Do you get any support from your family or friends or the state?

A: I don't get financial support, no. I've applied for housing benefit now because of the Corona crisis and because some customers had cancelled. I feel lucky that as self-employed I learned that you always have to plan your finances. And yes, I definitely don't want to go to the Job Centre again. I was on benefit when my child was younger, and I don't want that anymore because I felt uncomfortable. I've now applied for housing benefit so that I have a little bit of respite. If I earn more, I'll just have to pay it back because it's based on my income estimate. And that's just a very small support right now. Otherwise I don't know, I couldn't really get any support from anyone, no.

Q: I didn't understand why you don't want to go to the Job Centre again.

A: I went when I couldn't work full-time because of my child. I wasn't treated well. They put me with the self-employed team and they assume that at some point you will be able to support yourself with your job. And they didn't take into account that I had a child and that I was a single parent and that it is difficult. So, you had to apply anyway, but that wasn't realistic. I was always afraid of getting letters from the Job Centre, and then I thought I'd rather try with self-employment, than go back.

Q: Do you think your situation has improved in the last five years?

A: Five years ago? Yes, my personal situation has improved because my child has grown up. He is a bit more independent and can be left longer at home on his own. That was not possible before. And that's why I had to work less. That is definitely an advantage. But I would say that my situation has actually got worse in terms of number of jobs. The situation was a little better back then, I think.

Q: Why has the level of business got worse?

A: There is too much competition, and prices just went down. The Job Centre advisor always told me that you couldn't really make a living from writing, She saw a lot of unemployed people in this sector. I never really believed that then, but now I have to say that it is true. You could only do it if you were employed, and you had a lot of good references and a lot, a lot of experience, and then could work overtime. I would have to be really committed. And

this in itself is difficult, if you are a single parent. I don't think I could make a living as a freelancer.

Q: I see.

A: Yes, right now it's difficult. I don't know if it's because of the Corona pandemic or because clients' numbers fluctuate a lot. There are many people making inquiries, but you don't get the commission in the end. They are probably looking for the cheapest rate. My prices are not high, but there are people who charge less.

Q: How did the pandemic affect you?

A: I got a bit too stressed because I thought that if I had been employed I could go on sick leave and still get my salary. Whereas it was impossible in my situation. I had to self-isolate as a precaution. Regardless of whether I was really sick or not, I didn't want to be a danger for the retirement home residents. And I had no income and had to live on my savings. I knew I would get no help from the state or any other organisation. I guess you're pretty much left on your own. And I'm a little scared. I still had the writing job, but that wouldn't be enough.

Q: Is the situation better now?

A: I got used to the situation now. It may last a bit longer, but I'm pretty careful, I don't want to take risks now, because you don't know what's going to happen.

Q: Is your main worry the risk of getting sick and having fewer jobs?

A: Definitely, you don't know what your health will be, whether you will be able to work. Though, you could still work from home. If I were to be out of work for a month or so... I could somehow bridge the gap, because I still have some small savings. But we don't know how long it's going to last.

Q: Sure.

A: Well, my saving wouldn't last for months. And I would find very annoying using all my savings for something like that.

Q: Sure.

A: And that's just the same with the Job Centre, because to claim support you have to use all your savings first. I actually find it unfair that you don't get support because you

made the effort to save some of your small earnings. That's stupid.

Q: Were your saving meant for the future, for your retirement?

A: Yes, now I am thinking to save for my retirement too. It won't be much, but at least a bit every month. I can see how difficult it is for my mother to live on her pension. And even if it is 50 euros a month, that's actually not bad. Yes, have always been a thrifty person and always had some small savings to make sure that I have something if anything happens.

Q: What do you think is the best thing about your work situation at the moment? What do you enjoy the most?

A: My health has improved: when I was working in the office, I always had headaches in the evening and back pains. I don't sit so much now and I can take breaks when I want. There is less pressure because I don't have colleagues or a boss. I actually find it more pleasant.

Q: A relief?

A: Thinking about it, yes.

Q: And what is the thing that you like the least about this situation?

A: Worrying that something might happen, like me being ill for a long time and unable to work for a few weeks. Or things like the current public transport strike, or the PC suddenly doesn't work. Unforeseen things that suddenly happen and that you can't control are pretty annoying and cost money.

Q: Have you ever considered getting some support from the unions?

A: I haven't considered it yet. I don't always have enough time for everything I'd like to do. Yes, I should've got some information about it, but I haven't done it yet.

Q: Because you didn't have time?

A: Yes.

Q: But you think you should

A: Yes, that would be interesting. Well, I don't even know whether there is anything in this area.

Q: Do you think you can personally improve your situation?

A: Now I'm happy things don't get worse. And actually, I don't expect too much, because some people have bigger problems than me. And yes, you have to see how it turns out. Some things really depend on luck or chance, I think.

Q: You don't have that much room for improvements?

A: No, I don't. I always say that if it doesn't work anymore, I could still find some office work. I mean, you always must be a bit flexible too.

Q: Do you say so because your situation is precarious?

A: Yes. If I think about it, yes. I don't want to sound as if I am complaining all the time, but if I think about it carefully, it's actually precarious. I always try to see the positive side, but if I look at it closely, that's how it is.

Q: Do you know many people in the same situation as yours?

A: From my work?

Q: No, more in general.

A: I met people in a similar situation before. I think it's a shame that I don't know any other small self-employed, it would be very interesting to talk to them about this situation. I don't know anybody now, but I know that there are many people around in a position similar to mine.

Q: Didn't you stay in touch with these people?

A: No, I did it initially, not anymore, not now.

Q: Would you like to re-establish these contacts?

B: Yes, I would really like to, yes. It's a shame that I don't really know anyone at the moment because people who have permanent secure jobs sometimes don't really understand what I am talking about.

Q: How is your work-life balance – do you have enough free time?

A: It changes all the times and you can never plan it properly. At the moment I can take some time off. It was worse before.

Q: When was it worse?

A: When my son was smaller and not that independent, I had to work at night. That was really exhausting and I'm

glad that I don't have to do it anymore. Right now I'm so happy that I can have a little free time. But it can change again if something else comes up.

Q: You can't plan much in advance?

A: No, I can't

Q: Do you think the state and the politicians should have acted differently, for example about the pandemic? You said you didn't get any government support.

A: Yes.

Q: How could their initiative have been better?

A: It's a difficult subject. I also find it all a bit inconsistent and the information is somehow not that clear. They always make a lot of promises, but when you look at it carefully, it's not like that. For instance when I heard about this self-employed support grant, I read carefully the regulations though I know that many have applied for it without being informed. I found out that I wasn't entitled because it was only supposed to cover business expenses. And now I'm happy that I didn't apply, because I could have been fined. I don't have business expenses, for me it's really just the cost of living. It would have been good to have some financial support to cover the cost of living as well, for instance, or have support for the loss of earnings based on your tax return compared to the previous year.

Q: Are you optimistic? Do you think the situation will improve?

A: I don't know. I don't think so much about it now. You just must wait. Can't say now.

[...] I would say people should realise that instead of asking the state for help, they must try to do something themselves so that they don't fall through the cracks of the system if they have any problem. They should never say: it's not worth it anyway. I mean, it is worth it, isn't it? So, any job is better than claiming benefit even if you don't earn much money.

Q: What do you mean?

A: There are always people who say, 'if it's not worth it, you'd better give it up,' or say that the self-employed should get a more secure job, right? But being self-employed is a decision someone has taken to be independent. I think that there should be a change in perspective, because it's not

about doing nothing all day. Sometimes you actually do more than the employees, all the bookkeeping and the rest.

Q: Do you experience this lack of recognition as a self-employed in everyday life?

A: Not in everyday life. Not from the people I know. But I just read about the self-employed workers who found impossible to get any government help and I find it a little unfair.

Q: That you didn't get more support?

A: Yes. You have built something, and it's a shame that you should simply register as unemployed now, just because your business had to stop for a few weeks. Because you have built something and you want it to continue.

6. Roberto

I was born in Rome and have Spanish citizenship. I've lived in Germany for the last 9 years and consider myself European. I came to Germany in 2012, when the financial crisis hit the most. I felt supported by the German state: I got BaföG [student grant] and attended a vocational training as a social care worker.

First, I lived in a village in Saxony for eight years and from there I moved to Leipzig. The first year I worked as an au-pair, then I did one year of voluntary social work, spent the next 3 years on this vocational training and the next two working as a social care worker.

I made my first experiences in that field when I was 14/15, as a volunteer. I am currently employed by a temporary employment agency, where I officially work part-time, 30-35h/week, but I always do between 40 and 45h/week. On top of working time, I spend two hours every day commuting. I'm not paid for that time.

My employer is a private organisation, but publicly funded, providing services to people with mental health issues, people with schizophrenia, postnatal depression, etc. I've now been in this profession for nine years and feel a bit tired. It's mentally demanding, involving a lot of responsibility and there is a high risk of being physically assaulted. One could end up either burnout or being stabbed. Once a patient threatened me with a knife. It is a job you don't do

for the money! That's why not so many people want to do it. Indeed, often it's just two social care workers for 30 patients, which is insufficient. There is too little staff, because the pay is too low for the work and there is a high sick-leave rate. Also, you don't see quick results from your work, and that affects your motivation.

I want to change my job and do something that doesn't involve people, like electricians, quite the opposite of what I do now.

I live in a shared flat because I chose to, although I could afford to live on my own. But that wouldn't be good for my mental health. In my work your mental wellbeing is at risk too, you need people to tell you: what you're doing is not normal mate [laughs].

Jokes aside, this work affects your mental health: despite the provocations, the abuses, etc., you have to stay objective. You work with people who could easily kill themselves. This is mentally very demanding.

Over the years, I've learnt to leave work behind when it's finished. It's like switching to another language, but sometimes it's really difficult. For me, sport is a form of physical release, to let off steam.

My amount of free time is average but differently distributed than for most people. My shifts are mostly in the evenings and at nights, which makes normal life more difficult. Weekends are also working days, since mental illness doesn't care if it's Sunday or not [laughs].

Compared to my working situation of five years ago, I now have a higher position, but also more responsibility and less fun at work. A qualitative improvement for me would mean more staff (volunteers would be enough) and two or three times pay increase. Now I'm earning 12€/hour, for that money I'd take the responsibility of baking a pizza, not for a bunch of people in very difficult conditions.

I don't speak about money with my co-workers, since this is not an easy conversation topic. Solidarity among colleagues is often missing, and I've experienced xenophobia.

In 2020 I joined the union, because I think that my employer is trying to cheat me. In my view the employer is trying to

reduce the costs at the expenses of workers and patients. I still cannot tell if joining the union was a good decision, because I didn't have the time to attend any of the meetings. I'm the only union member among my colleagues. I don't feel well informed about my work rights and feel powerless, because I cannot go on strike: people have to be taken care of, and everyone has to be ready to stand in for the patients. You develop a personal relationship with them, you care for them, and this is also important. But it makes self-exploitation very easy too [...] Quitting is for many the only alternative.

During Covid I had more work to do, the assistants were partly furloughed, but I, as a qualified social carer, wasn't. As a result, there was the same number of staff for double the number of patients. The workshops closed and the people who usually attended them were all moved to the living area. That also meant that the patients were more stressed, because they couldn't leave the institution and the usual recreational activities were suspended. I couldn't have any say about these measures. From a profit-minded, capitalist standpoint, these measures were very, very good. From a human point of view, I found them very hard.

For me it was challenging to find a balance during this time. My flatmates helped me to get through it.

Normally I'd be very interested in politics, but now I feel disenfranchised, because as a migrant I cannot vote. Apart from participating in elections, I don't see many other options to engage politically. I can join a demo, if I have the day off. But I cannot take a day off to go to a demo, I cannot leave my people (i.e., the patients) on their own. We have a staff shortage. This week a colleague and must cover 14 shifts; this is physically impossible. [...] When we work like that, we just keep the boat afloat, that means, feeding and cleaning people, giving them their medicines, but there is not time for anything else beyond that.

Gentrification in Leipzig is a problem that affects me directly. I see possibilities to counteract collectively this process (refers to a specific initiative which tackles this issue in Leipzig). I recently engaged in a queer project but couldn't attend a single meeting because I always had to work. That's a bit frustrating.

My future will be better, because I hope to get Bafög again and go to college.

Message to workers in Europe:

To the people in Italy, I'd tell them to demand a minimum wage. They are being taken advantage of in so many ways, it is really terrible. I'd tell them to block everything until minimum wage legislation is passed.

In general, I'd say: without us, nothing works!

THE CASE OF FRANCE

by Nathan Gaborit

1. BRIEF REPORT ON FRANCE CURRENT ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SITUATION

Tab. 5 Data of the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) on the French labour market to years 2009, 2018 and 2019

	Overall (2019)*	By Gender in % (2019)*		
	In thousand	in %	Women	Men
Labour force	29,246	71.7	68.2	75.3
Persons in employment	26,751	65.5	62.4	68.8
Unemployed	2,495	6.1	5.8	6.5
Without activity	11,569	28.3	31.8	24.7
Self-employed	3,297	12.1	8.8	15.3
Employees	23,876	87.9	91.2	84.7
Open-ended contract	20,284	74.6	77.3	72.1
Fixed-term contract	2,472	9.1	11.1	7.2
Apprenticeship	454	1.7	1.3	2.0
Interim	666	2.4	1.5	3.3
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	404	1.5	0.8	2.1
Artisans, merchants, entrepreneurs	1,825	6.7	3.9	9.3
Executives	5,241	19.3	16.8	21.6
Intermediate professions	6,957	25.6	28.3	23.1
Skilled employees	3,785	13.9	21.4	6.9
Unskilled employees	3,507	12.9	20.3	6.0
Skilled workers	3,494	12.9	3.5	21.7
Unskilled workers	1,843	6.8	4.6	8.8
Not determined	121	0.4	0.4	0.4

* France excluding Mayotte, household population, persons aged 15 to 64.

Source: Insee, enquête Emploi 2019, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4314980>

Tab. 6 Employment rate*

	Employment rate
2009	63.5%
2018	65.3%
2019	65.5%

* France excluding Mayotte, household population, persons aged 15 to 64.

Tab. 7 Proportion of fixed-term or temporary contracts, self-employed, executives and part-time workers in employment*

	Part-time	Execu- tives	Fixed-term or temporary contracts	Self- employed
2009	17.5%	16.2%	10.1%	11.0%
2018	18.5%	18.3%	11.9%	11.6%
2019	18.1%	19.3%	11.5%	12.1%

* France excluding Mayotte, household population, persons in employment.

2. DESCRIPTION OF NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

2.1. Labour market evolutions

According to data from the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), the employment rate continued to rise in France to reach 65.5% in 2019. When we examine the details, we can see an increase in the percentage of self-employed workers and a decrease in the percentage of short-term jobs compared to 2018. However, salaried employment remains the main form of work and there is a shift towards increasingly skilled jobs: according to INSEE figures, between 2009 and 2019, there has been an increase of 3.1% in the proportion of executive jobs. Finally, in terms of types of activity sectors, France has completed the cycle of tertiarisation of its economy: in 2018, more than 76% of workers in employment were in the services sector.

The results also show the persistence of a gender gap. A higher proportion of women than men are in precarious contractual situations, more of them are out of work, and fewer have access to managerial roles. Women are significantly more likely than men to be hired as an employee, whilst men are the majority among blue-collar workers. However, in these two socio-professional categories, women are proportionally more likely to have unskilled jobs (50% as against 34.1%). This gap is reflected in salaries since, according to INSEE, for a full-time job in the private sector, the pay gap between men and women is 16.8%.

2.2. Social tensions in France

The recent years in France have been marked by numerous social unrests that have fuelled political activism and led to questioning the trade unions' role. In 2016, several mobilisations and demonstrations took place throughout the country in response to the Labour Law, that if approved would have wiped out many social rights enshrined in the Labour Code. This social movement led to the occupation of squares through *Nuit Debout*. This initiative consisted of occupying the streets and squares after the demonstrations and setting up forms of participatory democracy.

At the beginning of 2018, the public service unions organised a major mobilisation to oppose the reforms announced by Emmanuel Macron, who had been elected president in May 2017. The plan to cut more than 100,000

civil servants' jobs and a major reform of the National Railway Company (SNCF) were, among other issues, at the root of these demonstrations, which nonetheless failed to bring the government to its knees.

At the end of 2018, the Yellow Vests movement started as a protest against the fuel tax. Although this social movement was not about working conditions, studies showed that the demonstrators were mainly precarious workers. This mobilisation on a national scale took new forms of protest. Many 'yellow jackets' occupied roundabouts all over France and blocked roads, independently from any trade unions' support. In the big cities, the demonstrations became riots, notably in the Avenue des Champs Élysées in Paris. However, after a heavy police crackdown that caused the demolition of roundabouts blocks and many casualties among the demonstrators, the mobilisation finally ran out of steam at the beginning of 2019.

Simultaneously, huge climate demonstrations were taking place in France, in the wake of the movement launched by Greta Thunberg. The 'March of the Century' on 16 March 2019 was accompanied by a petition, the Affair of the Century, which was signed by 2 million people and started a legal action against the French state to denounce its inaction on the matter.

Finally, in December 2019 and February 2020, the trade unions returned to the political scene. In reaction to the government's announcement of a pension reform, the unions called for mobilisation on 5 December 2019. This resulted in a all-out strike joined in the following weeks by the railway and the civil service (education) unions. This unprecedented mobilisation forced the government to back down and abandon part of the measures. The bill was finally abandoned because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.3. The impact of the Covid-19 crisis

The Covid-19 global pandemic, which has caused more than 60,000 deaths in France, has significantly impacted people's living and working conditions and more generally the country's economic activity. INSEE estimates a 9% decline in Gross Domestic Product.

The 2020 report by INSEE 'Employment and Unemployment' gives a glimpse of the consequences for workers. Around 700,000 salaried jobs were lost in the first semester of the year. While the third quarter showed a rebound in employment, the second lockdown imposed from October 2020 led to a further fall in employment for the fourth quarter. According to forecasts, the hospitality sector would be numerically the most affected, with a 17.3% drop in jobs. While the unemployment rate itself does not seem to be significantly impacted, quasi-unemployment, includ-

ing precarious forms of activity, have grown considerably. To sum up, beside the psychological and economic consequences, the full extent of which we cannot yet grasp, the health crisis seems to have had a strong impact on workers, including the most precarious among them.

However, this merely statistical approach doesn't provide a qualitative account of how workers experienced the situation.

3. TOPICS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

3.1. Self-perception (a): Self-perceived control over labour

The high-skilled workers interviewed, such as executives and managers, show a strong sense of autonomy and control over their jobs. This is the case of Jean-Michel, an executive engineer in aeronautics, who was asked how he manages the balance between his professional and private life.

“ J-M: I manage to keep them separate, even if sometimes I work late or occasionally at week-ends. However some days I finish much earlier to make up for it. r.

Nevertheless, this independence does not allow him to work on projects that he would find interesting:

“ Q: How do you see yourself in relation to your job?
J-M: Not so stressful... Not so fulfilling either, because after a certain number of years in the same job, it becomes almost a routine. But fortunately, there are new projects coming up. It's not completely fulfilling because we don't have the chance to take on other roles or work on different projects. It's all a bit painful. Many people want to change and do other things, but there are obstacles

The statements from the private sector high-skilled professionals are indicative of two outcomes typical of a neo-managerial approach: on the one hand, work encroaches more on private life and on the other hand, the interviewees rarely question how they feel about their jobs, even when the conditions are not particularly good. Earnings and not the satisfaction from their occupation is the main reward.

“ Q: What satisfaction do you get from your job?
J-M: The salary at the end of the month [laughs]. That's not bad at all. The colleagues are nice to work with. It's generally going well from a human point of view.

For workers in the entertainment industry or working as self-employed, the situation is more difficult. They claim to have a greater autonomy and ability to choose their projects and employers. Vivien, an intermittent worker in the performing arts, describes it very well:

“ A: I can't imagine changing it for a second. I would be so sad. It's a job where on Mondays I'm with a team of 5 people that I've never met before, I spend 3 days with them working about 12-14 hours a day. Maybe I'll see them again in 5 or 6 years, it will be as if we had met the day before. On Tuesday I meet more new people. I am never with the same people! I don't see myself going to the office and seeing the same faces all my life. Those are the positive points. I'm on the move, I've been all over France, all over Europe, a small part of the world. Well, yeah, fulfilling every day.

However, as we will see in the section on Covid, this independence and being outside the conventional labour market implies a greater vulnerability to the economic situation and a weaker social protection. Arthur, self-employed, points this out:

“ A: It suits me very well to be the one in charge of my income. I don't have a salary that comes in every month, it all depends on how much I work.

It suits me very well. Except this year! With the pandemic. You realise that being in a company and having a permanent contract, especially in France, is rather nice in these situations.

There is generally a high degree of self-satisfaction for workers in the public sectors, health and education, as they can have meaningful jobs. Nevertheless, these jobs are very demanding and tiring and impact all spheres of workers' lives. This is what Stéphanie, a care assistant in the south-east of France, reveals:

“ *S: I like my work very much. I like working in a team with my colleagues. I like working with people. I find myself there as a person. Afterwards, yes, it's tiring, it's stressful. Sometimes at the end of our shift we end up crying.*

Rémi (manual worker) and Camille (employee) don't have much control over their job, although this doesn't seem to be an issue. They have room for independent choices on other issues. The informal nature of Camille's work, which is not rigidly structured, allows her to invest more time in the tasks she prefers.

“ *C: I do everything. I am really the free electron of the thing. I can very well be at the e-shop, manage paperwork, do accounting, make estimates, and serve customers. Now I have the skills. I've been there for two months now, and I've learned the basics. It gives me a certain amount of freedom to decide what work needs to be done, and I can manage my time.*

When Rémi is asked if he has a positive outlook about his professional future, his priorities is security more than the job's material conditions.

“ *R: I hope positive [laughs]. That is to say, no accidents at work, to be in good health because given the work I do. [...] It doesn't 'scare' me, but I'm really careful because I need both hands to work so yes, I'm careful, and I think twice before doing a dangerous tasks. So it doesn't scare me, but I'm very careful. My future, in a few years, if I continue on this path should be fine.*

3.2. Self-perception (b): Description of the working and living situation

Structural evolution of the working environment

Comparison between the public and private sectors. The trend towards worker autonomy, which is central to the neo-liberal form of work, is accompanied by a permeating logic of competition and management by performance. This can be seen, for example, in interviews with executives and managers. When asked whether her working conditions have improved, Christine, an engineer, replies:

“ *C: No, it has deteriorated. Since some positions were not renewed, I had to take on more to reach the same results at the end of the year, I had to cover roles that were not renewed and that I couldn't redistribute to other people.*

Sébastien, manager, tries to escape these logics when dealing with his team. However, he is aware that his approach is not the norm.

“ *S: I don't stick too much to my company's procedures. It's a fairly competitive business. People call it a 'shark's box'.*

Justine, a nurse, worked in a public hospital before her job in a private clinic, and gives a testimony of the commercial logic that drives the private health care sector:

“ *A: The private sector is concerned with image, which is completely the opposite of the public sector. In the private sector, patients are hardly patients anymore, they are clients. You have to present a good image if you want them to come back. In the public sector, the fundamentals of our nursing profession. are first and foremost ethics, empathy, support, caring. In the private sector the requirements are different, you are asked to smile, to be pleasant, which is already part of my personality, so I don't need to be reminded, but the professional demands are not the same as in the public sector.*

However, when Justine explains why she left the public hospital, she describes the worsening of her working conditions both in terms of budget cuts that caused shortages

of equipment, beds and staff; and in terms of a creeping commercialisation.

“ A: I liked the public sector. I liked the fact that we welcome everyone, that we don't exclude anyone, that we are open to everyone, whether they are homeless, whether they are people with no income, whether they are foreigners, whether they are migrants, whether they are polypathological people, whether they are dirty. I liked this open-mindedness, and I think that the difficulties we had to live through create very close-knit teams focused on getting by no matter what... It was a bit like being at war. We had no equipment, we had overcrowding, there was shouting, screaming, there was madness. We were understaffed and yet I thought we were sticking together.

According to Frédéric, a secondary school sports teacher, the French National Education system is going the same way. The recent reform has caused a reduction in funding and more competition between teachers.

“ F: There are more and more constraints on new projects, more and more operational constraints, especially in terms of the number of pupils per division, per class. Since we are in high school, for example, we have 36 pupils per class. There are fewer and fewer financial resources allocated to schools as we are moving towards financial self-reliance, towards more independent schools in charge of their budget. But this budget is increasingly smaller, and the margin for new projects is constantly decreasing. It means that the French state school system will become like a low-cost education and that if you want the best, you'll have to go elsewhere than state schools.

Living situation

Camille, an apprentice saleswoman who recently moved to Paris, talks about her financial difficulties. She describes the sacrifices she must undergo because of the very high cost of living in Paris,

“ Q: And how would you describe your economic conditions?
C: I'm fine, because I work a lot and I have money. I get by very well but, Paris is not cheap. Life is expensive. I'm coming from a small town, which is all I've

known, there are things I used to do there, expenses I had, that I can no longer afford in Paris. Aspects of my daily life have changed. My way of eating when I was there and since I've been here is not the same at all. Now in Paris I'm really cautious. Essentials come first. If I see a tank top that I like and that isn't too expensive, even if it's 5 euros I won't take it because it's not in season. I'd rather pay 10 euros for a sweater that fits me and makes me feel good...

The same goes for Dorothée, mother of one child, who cannot afford to take holidays because her multiple jobs as a self-employed do not have paid time-off.

“ Q: How would you describe your living conditions?
A: They are below average. For example, I decide what I can do on the basis of my hourly pay which is closer to 4 or 5 euros per hour than 20 euros per hour. My living conditions are therefore close to survival. I never have any spare money. I never have money put aside for the rent. I never have any spare money, so my living conditions are stressful.

However, workers in precarious jobs such as Dorothée or Rémi, a young welder, stress the importance of living in a pleasant environment. This living environment helps to counterbalance the lack of security. Rémi left an industrial town to run his new company in a more pleasant environment.

“ R: It's in the mountains, I like it, I like it a lot! It's great, it's close to nature, and it's a much simpler way of life than before.

Also, Dorothée, who lives precariously taking up multiple jobs, discusses the importance of her living environment.

“ A: I don't live in the centre of Paris, but I have a good life anyway. [...] I live five minutes from the beaches, so everything is fine. I'm in a really nice place. The Basque Country is still very beautiful, very pleasant to live in. So even with limited financial resources, I think it's still possible to live well. And I feel good, I am not at all to be pitied.

Clearly, the place where one lives is an important factor of how workers approach employment. Many of those who live in Paris show a desire to leave the city to find a more agreeable environment, start a more meaningful job and

live according to one's own values, as Arthur, a self-entrepreneur, points out.

“ *A: There are two things on my mind. Maybe going abroad. Staying in a European capital, maybe Amsterdam or Berlin, which seem more in line with my values. But then I also feel like moving to the countryside! A few years ago I could see myself making my life in Paris, but today... If I can work remotely, maybe I'll go and live in a place that is more rural.*
Q: How do you explain this aversion to Paris?
A: I'm not overdosed on Paris. But it's a desire to live better; holistically. More air, more nature, a slower pace, more caring people.

However, job demands make it often impossible to change one's living conditions and place of residence. This is what Vivien, an intermittent performer in Paris, explains.

“ *Q: What would you change in the immediate future?*
A: I would like to keep my living condition and move it out to the countryside,, moving from Paris, from Ile de France in fact.
Q: And it is not something that is feasible now?
A: No, it's a bit complicated...It's between the 'I want to do it, but I find excuses saying I can't do it' and the truth, which is that I have a lot of employers in the Paris region and therefore for my tranquillity and security, it's better for me to stay here for the moment. Later on if I really want to be rock'n'roll and say I'll slam the door on everything, it's definitely doable. Part of me likes my couch, and I like to sit quietly in the evening.

3.3. Covid-crisis (1st wave)

Impact on labour for the different groups of workers

Some of the workers interviewed, lost their jobs because of the Covid pandemic. Rémi, who was working as a welder with a short-term contract for a large company, has not been contacted any more by the company after the beginning of the pandemic.

“ *Q: How has the pandemic affected your living conditions?*

R: At the beginning, it was awful. [...] when lockdown started I was working for a company under conditions that I didn't like, in a place that I didn't like. And so thanks to the pandemic we had to stop working and I wasn't contacted for several months [...] This is a company that used to work for Arcelormittal, a global metalwork company. Arcelormittal decided to cut its production, putting most of its employees in misery and since my company was working for them, they didn't call me back because there was no work. As a temporary worker, I was not a priority. I called them several times and they told me that there was no news, that they had nothing for me.

Arthur, a self-employed entrepreneur, or Vivien, who works in the entertainment industry, had to stop working, and were unable to claim any support.

“ *A: I had plans for May and June, but everything was cancelled during the lockdown. And since then I haven't had any new project, it's a bit hard.*

The wide range of views also allows us to understand the impact on the health sector, which is at the forefront on the fight against the epidemic. This is what Stéphanie says:

“ *S: During those two months when we had the first wave, our working schedule changed completely. We were enlisted and asked to work a lot more hours. The pandemic required us to reorganise our equipment. In our case we created septic zones. As a result, we had to systematically get dressed, undressed and biocleaned. It required a much greater degree of work. Later we received reinforcements, both in terms of equipment and workforce. We had additional care workers. Post-lockdown, when the wave came down a little, it got even more complicated because we had all the other patients, but we still had the Covid threat. We had to get dressed, undressed, bio-cleaned and did a lot of maintenance. And next to the other patients who came for other reasons. It was complicated to combine everything.*

The impact has also been significant on the education sector, where Covid has caused an increase in workload and different forms of contact with the students. Tania, a secondary school teacher, relates:

“ Q: We were talking about Covid, do you feel that it has changed something in your work-life balance?
 A: As my children are already grown up, they weren't a problem, but I think that for most people the pandemic affected family life because I know that it was very complicated to manage both work and family life. I had to work up to 13-14 hours a day in front of the computer to achieve a satisfactory result. It lasted few months and it would have been impossible to carry on like that forever. I thought it was terrible... I have no other way to describe it but as utterly time-consuming.

Ibrahim, a social worker in work integration, gives us the size of the health crisis's disastrous impact on unemployed people, who find themselves in challenging situations.

“ A: It has negatively affected my clients more than us. It was very complicated to get them into our initiatives, some of them were traumatised by what happened. So joining integration initiatives was not their first priority, even if the economic situation was very difficult for some of them.

Most workers who must work remotely, are unhappy with the blurring of the boundaries between private and working life and the loss of contact with colleagues. This is particularly the case for Géraldine, director of Human Resources:

“ G: I still prefer to be at the office with people. There are many people you can meet at the office just by chance, and eventually, you find out about them and realise that they're not doing so well. Otherwise people don't call you spontaneously to tell you that things aren't going well. So I prefer to work at the office, honestly.

However, the Covid pandemic by having adversely impacted unprotected jobs, may have spurred career decisions and changes. Dorothee, for example, plans to open a clothing line to relaunch her activity as an alternative to her previous job in the entertainment sector. Arthur, a self-employed entrepreneur, considers finding a job with a permanent contract, as it would mean greater security.

“ A: These days I often run out of projects, and my objective was to expand the volume of projects. It was my objective for the year 2020 and I couldn't achieve it. I'll keep it in mind for the future as it's

still what I want to do but after this difficult period... I've also started to think about the possibility of taking up a permanent position.

Personal impact

All workers pointed out the negative impact on personal relationships of the restrictions imposed for public health reasons and to protect their relatives. Justine, a nurse, notes this.

“ A: From a personal point of view I am not particularly afraid of Covid, perhaps wrongly so. I believe that my health condition allows me to potentially face this pathology but on the other hand I protect my relations and my friends which could be at risk, either by seeing them less or by wearing a mask.

Moreover, the Covid impact on the economic activity, has often had disastrous financial consequences on workers. Rémi, for example, confesses with some embarrassment that he had to return to live with his mother during the lockdown because he no longer had a source of income.

“ R: I'll be honest, I went back to my mother's house in the mountains.

The lockdown, however, had even more serious consequences. The health crisis, for instance, has been the cause of depression for Arthur, a self-employed entrepreneur who had to stop his activity.

“ A: During the lockdown, I worked a bit on myself in the sense that I took time to think about the whole situation. Then, this summer, I got depressed... about the situation, not having a job.

Because he has lost all his contracts, he has also to be more careful with his money.

“ A: I avoid big expenses. I haven't gone on holiday this year. I am much more careful. I haven't worked since February. I received a state aid, 1500 euros per month until June. But then it stopped. So I'm living off my savings. I've made my calculation of what I'm allowed to spend every month to survive as long as possible on them. And so yes, I am careful and I keep track of everything I spend so that I don't exceed the budget I set myself every month to live on my savings at least until the end of December.

Conversely, the more secure workers who had their workload reduced may have found the lockdown enjoyable. Indeed, it has given them a glimpse of the positive possibility of breaking free from employment constraints. This is, for example, the case of Christine, an engineer:

“ C: Compared to my living conditions before, it was a very pleasant period. Apart from the worry that a loved one, and especially an elderly relative could catch this disease, on the whole it was still a very pleasant period. [...] First, I had one of my sons and his girlfriend at home for two months, the weather was nice, I have a big garden, I had less work during this period. Though I was working remotely it wasn't at all the same way of working as before the lockdown.

Ibrahim was also able to take advantage of this period away from work.

“ A: I was fine during the period of lockdown. I organised my day, I did a lot of things. The frustration was the lack of social life but it was really very pleasant. We weren't furloughed, we were paid normal salary. But working remotely was very complicated.

State support

Most of the workers interviewed comment on the vital financial aid. This is notably the case for Arthur, a self-employed entrepreneur, and Vivien, an intermittent worker in the entertainment industry, who received it.

However, in many cases the government's support turned out to be largely insufficient, as in the case of Arthur, who stopped receiving it even though he didn't have any other income:

“ A: They have reduced the number of categories that can get the support. I am one of the people excluded. They cut my aid though I don't have a job because of the coronavirus.

Dorothee did not receive any support at all:

“ Q: Did you receive any government benefit?
A: None, none. I started my independent business in 2017. But between 2017 and 2020, I didn't work much, so in 2020 I worked more than the years before. So I didn't qualify [for government's support].

Interviewees' opinions differ also on the health measures taken. Workers consider the measures as necessary, but many found them inconsistent, particularly on the imposition of surgical masks. Christine perfectly sums up this position:

“ C: Since the beginning, there has been no consistency. Decisions were contradictory. I can understand that a certain number of French people are completely confused and think that we are being told lies, that we are being told nonsense since communication has been very, very bad from the beginning. When they tell you that you shouldn't wear a mask and then they tell you that you have to wear one all the time. When you are told that children are the main vectors of the disease and then you are told that they are not contagious at all... I understand that some people rush in to talk about conspiracy theories and all the rest...

3.4. Workers' solidarity and mobilisation, labour unions

All respondents stress the importance of a good atmosphere at work, and of solidarity. Camille, an apprentice-saleswoman, emphasised the value of recognition at work and the importance of the relationships with the colleagues.

“ C: I've been working for 8 years and been unemployed just for a short period. I've worked for a lot of companies, I've worked for a lot of big brands, where the rule has always been: there is a chain of command, and you have just to carry out things to the letter. It's really super strict. It wasn't pleasant. I'd just left the family business with my parents, I've always enjoyed the friendliness, the aperitif at the end of a day's work, and if I needed people ready to help. Mutual help! This is something I'd lost in my professional experience. When I've started a second job, I clearly wanted something of that kind. Not a job without freedom. I don't want to be just a number and have no recognition. I needed to work for a company where there was recognition, open-mindedness, where I could grow. That's what my company is all about. For me, it's important.

This is also the case for Rémi, who is starting out as a welder and greatly appreciates the support and help of a more experienced welder.

“ *R: I am a beginner, but in my company, there is a welder who has a lot of experience and a lot to teach me. I was working on an important piece that I had to deliver. The welder saw me, she came and helped me. She explained to me how to manage my work better, how to do it. The fact that she approached me, that she explained and helped me, gave me more confidence, speeded up my working time, helped me and made me want to work for that company again. Because I could see that I wasn't alone.*

The case of Vivien, an intermittent worker in the entertainment industry, is quite instructive on how budget and job cuts impact relations between workers.

“ *A: I almost only have friends who are part of the show business. It's more friendship than being colleagues. I don't have any colleagues, in fact, I only have friends at work, with the exception of the bosses of the company or of the owners of the venues that are just colleagues, but... The 90% of the other technicians are friends. But competition is changing the situation... it's starting to happen with this pandemic. We're all wondering where and when there is going to be any work, we wonder why some colleagues have it and I don't. We work in the same building; we meet sometimes... there's no competition yet but unfortunately, it's starting to happen. This is quite new: in the past I may have happened to be jealous and then quickly forgot about it or found a reason either in the fact that I didn't have skills that were required or... that there were not enough opportunities.*

Frédéric explains how budget and job cuts are also one of the major consequences of the National Education reforms that are causing greater competition among teachers.

“ *F: The Blanquer reform is creating competition between departments since there are less and less funds for extra-curricular projects. This is affecting a number of projects and initiatives that were feasible in the past by paying a few extra hours to the teachers who were organising them. But now, this margin is shrinking... there is an increasing-*

ly tough selection on the projects, and there is competition among the teachers. This makes the teachers neglect the very essence of our profession, the constitutional mandate to look after the students. Instead they promote their own projects in competition with other courses, because of personal interests. What prevails is the idea that one's subject will bring more to the student than another, that the implementation of a project is good for the school's image, but it's also good for the teacher's. So now merit-based promotions are starting to impact the state schools. In this sense everybody has been feeling for some years now that this has somewhat polluted the shared value we had, the support of the adolescent towards academic success.

The interviews reveal a relatively unanimous perception that trade unions have an increasingly limited role. As they have less and less weight in negotiations, their role is changing. This is what Sébastien notes:

“ *S: I work for a company that employ mostly executive workers. We still have trade unions, but I don't think they have a very big role. Decisions are taken beforehand. There aren't always many things they can change.*

The trade unions are sometimes completely absent, as in the big communications company in which Géraldine is a human resources director. However, even when they do have a presence, the workers often don't know about their initiatives. This is the case, for example, of Vivien, an intermittent worker in the entertainment industry. He recognises the unions' essential role even if he does not know the details of it.

“ *Q: What about the trade unions?*
A: There are several, though I don't know much. There are some, there are the CGT, CFDT, FO who have negotiated a lot lately and who bargained precisely this extension of the financial support until 31 August 2021. They've been quite active lately. But I don't know the details of the discussions.

Q: But you think that they have a role to play in defending your interests?

A: Oh yes, for sure.

In the IT company where Sébastien works, the trade unions essentially have a communication role. They keep employees informed of the decisions that the management tries to hide.

“ S: At the moment there is a pay negotiation. I think they are pretty good at giving us feedback. They share information with us that management doesn't necessarily share. They keep people informed, and for that I think they are very good.

Because unions are often seen as ineffective and disconnected from workers' reality, industrial action to improve working conditions tend to bypass them, either by adopting more individual forms of protest or by self-organising outside the unions. This is the case of Stéphanie, a care assistant at a public hospital.

“ S: We have a lot of requests, we often go out and demonstrate in front of hospitals and if we were isolated we wouldn't have many chances. It's precisely because we're united, because we all go out together, that we sometimes manage to get things moving within our services. We need to stick together to move things forward. [...] We had a very big problem with beds this summer in the emergency ward. It was always overcrowded. We created a group. A doctor started a group to link us together, to communicate to each other and to convey to the management, on behalf of all of us, our problems, our requests, our demands. Sometimes we send e-mails on behalf of all of us, we meet to discuss a subject, and we make sure that we all agree to go and make a request to the management. We get ourselves organised.

However, when they have to take action against unfair dismissals, Stéphanie and her colleagues turn to the trade unions as a last resort to have some leverage.

“ S: In our case, we use them very, very little. We once had to call on them when a colleague's contract was terminated to everybody's surprise. In that case we appealed to the unions because we were a bit helpless. But when we need to talk to our management, we don't call on them, not at all.

Another consequence of the unions' diminished role is workers retreating into the idea of individual self-reliance:

this is typical among executives and managers as is the case, for example, of Sébastien, an IT manager.

“ Q: Who do you think has a role to play in the improvement of your working conditions?
S: Everyone. Me first. After the line management you are in charge of your working conditions and your professional life... It's always the same. Every year, there are promotions and obviously you can't give promotions to everyone. So you have a system of performance reviews and rankings... But as soon as you do your job well without worrying about others, you move forward.

Rémi, a young welder in the South-East of France, shares this self-relying attitude. When he is asked about improving his working conditions, he does not mention his employers, the trade unions or even the State.

“ R: It depends on me since I have all the tools I need. So when I talk about tools, I'm not just talking about the tools to work with, but about everything I need to be safe and comfortable. I am the only one responsible for deciding whether or not I use these tools. I don't see what the State could give me in terms of quality of life or anything else, for example.

3.5. Gender

Gender is central to understanding how workers experience employment. Although the issue is not always directly discussed, the answers suggest that women are underpaid, receive less recognition for their work or are confined to subordinate positions whilst men monopolise the high-skilled jobs.

Dorothee, a dressmaker and seamstress, complains about the low recognition of her job, carried out mainly by women in the entertainment industry.

“ A: In an intellectual and artistic creation [...] the costumes come a bit last. If there is any money left, we can make beautiful costumes. It's a very painstaking work, work that should have more recognition, because often, when small hands make big costumes, we see only the big costumes. You can see the designer's name credited, but all the seamstresses and tailors who work behind the scenes are not very well paid. I think it's still a job where you're not valued enough.

Justine, a nurse, points out the problematic division between the highly-skilled role of a doctor who makes the medical decisions and that of the nurses aides who have to carry out them without being involved on the medical assessments. In the private sector, however, it is the nurses who have the delicate role of listening to, nursing and caring for the patients.

“ A: *There is a sense of hierarchy which is completely different from that in the hospital. In the hospital we were all equal, we had to sort out things together. In the clinic or in private health care I find that the idea of hierarchy is very, very important. The doctor is the one who thinks who is qualified and the nurse is the one who is there to provide care, to act, to be with the patient, but is not asked to think.*

Géraldine, director of human resources in a communications company, says that her salary is significantly less than that of other positions held by men with the same level of education and skills.

“ G: *The people who are in other services in the marketing and communication agencies, are much better paid than I am, with the same years of experience and academic qualifications, in general... Creative directors are paid more.*

Finally, Ibrahim, a social worker and job coach, give some help to understand the unbearable situation of migrant women with precarious jobs, as they are forced to work at an exhausting pace to clean hotel rooms and to live in poverty on low wages.

“ A: *95% of the women who do this work are immigrants. Sometimes they can't work because there aren't enough rooms to do and their salary is cut at the end of the month. [...] Jobs are timed, they must do everything well and quickly.*

3.6. Politics

People responsible for policy developments within the labour sphere

Public sector workers are fully aware that there are political strategies aimed at privatising public services, as Frédéric, a teacher, points out in his interview:

“ F: *For me, responsibility means... A political consensus for a gradual privatisation of the education sector.*

This is also the case in the cultural sector. Vivien complains about the budget cuts.

“ A: *The financial reason is that the budgets allocated to culture are getting smaller and smaller. So this has repercussions on the programmes, the artists, the technicians. The lack of staff is probably due to that.*

Private sector workers find it more difficult to identify responsibilities. Rémi, a young welder, reckons that the problems he had in his previous job come from the large size of the company when he draws a comparison with his present situation.

“ Q: *Why does the new company suit you better?*
R: *First of all, it has not responsibilities to shareholders. It's a small company, not a huge company like Total for example. We can see that there are still better conditions at work when a small employer runs it. We can directly talk to the manager so he can see the problems first-hand and solve them as quickly as possible. On the contrary the old company where I worked before was run by shareholders, if we had requests it took... It was incredible how long it took to get just a little improvement or even an answer.*

Political issues in France

Some interviewees feel that politicians are not addressing many central issues of France's political debate. This is what Tania, a teacher, thinks:

“ A: *I'm quite interested in what's going on, but not in depth. I would say that the gap is widening between the richest and the poorest, the important problems are not... Well, we talk about ecology but... I think that things are moving too slowly and I don't know... Society is very unequal, We still have a good health system, but I think that overall inequality is increasing.*

Even when these central issues are addressed, Arthur points out how the matter is eventually put aside without real solutions.

“ A: I've had the feeling for the last few years, that there are no real topics. In the sense that topics come up because of some specific events, they are discussed for a fortnight, but nothing happens and they are eventually replaced by other topics because something new comes up. We have had topics on environmental issues, notably with the citizens' convention, but things don't change. The same goes for racism, but we have moved on. I always have the impression that there are just a few voices that rise to give their point of view, there is a small debate, but that basically it doesn't yield anything. There are topics that I find relevant but the way they are treated...

Three main approaches to politics come up from the interviews: indifference, accusations of incompetence and disapproval. Rémi's, a young worker, attitude is one of indifference as he is not interested in politics. Sébastien, conversely, thinks that governments are more knowledgeable than he is and therefore does not dare to criticise them.

“ S: I tend to think that the government have experts to think about the real issues. That they are far more knowledgeable than the 70 million people who can give their opinions. There aren't 66 million doctors in France. I am convinced that these experts, in spite of everything, try to make the best decisions based on their knowledge of the situation.

Ibrahim, a social worker, is much more critical:

“ A: It's not because of Macron. But all the governments that have succeeded one another over the last twenty years or so have moved against the values of solidarity and mutual aid. These are damaging choices. There is no shortage of examples! Just on unemployment: Everyone knows that the duration of unemployment benefit has been reduced, and that the benefit has been capped even more because the aim is to force people back to work, implying that people don't want to work according to a well-established concept. It is not by making people even more precarious that we are going to make them able to integrate professionally. That's completely off the mark.

Finally, when asked what message they would like to send to the other European workers, different answers came up. On the one hand, some are aware that France is in a privileged situation and is doing too little at European level, with particular reference to helping the countries hardest hit by the health crisis. On the other hand, many interviewees expressed their interest in the working conditions in neighbouring countries, their current lack of knowledge of these conditions, and the need to set up a dialogue between European workers that could lead to the organisation of forms of mutual aid and joint action. There is hope, widely shared anger, and the desire to fight battles together.

SELECTED INTERVIEWS – FRANCE

Dorothee: Woman, multiple jobs (costume designer and seamstress), late 40s, south-west

Ibrahim: Man, socio-professional counsellor in a semi-public structure, late 50s south-west

Arthur: Man, freelance worker in marketing, late 20s, around Paris

Vivien: Man, technician, late 30s, around Paris

Justine: Woman, nurse, late 20s, south-east

Tania: Woman, French teacher, mid 50s, central-east

1. Dorothee

Q: Could you briefly introduce yourself?

A: I'm 48. I'm going to be 49 soon. I've been a costume designer for four years. And I've been in dance for a long time, since I was very young: training, conservatory, all that. And then I joined a modern company. It was in Paris. At the same time I was teaching for a year. I taught classical, contemporary and jazz dance. And then I had an emergency operation and a rather brutal stop to dancing.

As a result, I quietly converted to teaching and then to the costume making.

In the following four years I passed the CAP (certificate of professional competence) in sewing, a training on the basic sewing techniques typical of ready-to-wear. And then I specialised in costume making to stay in touch with the arts world.

For the past year I've been renting a workshop not far from my home and it's great because it allows me to develop this passion a little more.

So for the past few years I have been making costumes for the circus, theatre and dance... Let's say locally. But that's OK, it's enough to support myself, because I'm also working as a tailor. I'm an intermittent worker (recurring status). So I occasionally make costumes for specific projects and also for micro-businesses. And at the same time, I work as a tailor, only on a casual basis. I work for several employers, which give me some income... It's more or less all right.

And then, the lockdown, the first lockdown came, I didn't make any suits... from March to July. I only made surgical masks. I made a lot of them for free and then, some contractors offered to buy them and I accepted because I didn't have much choice... Even if I liked to do them as a volunteer but it was getting a bit too much. So, it was a good timing. I was able to work for restaurants, for various companies, always locally. I was even able to pay the rent for the workshop, to invest in an industrial sewing machine. I was very busy and earned some money. As a result, I got through the summer and then jobs started to pick up again. So I started making clothes again, but no longer in ready-to-wear. I had two/three orders and that has lifted my expectations... Maybe I will develop this a little bit.

Q: Did you receive any support from the government?

A: None, none. I started my own business in 2017. But between 2017 and 2020, I wasn't very busy, so in 2020 when my work increased I earned more than in the years before and I didn't qualify for government support.

Q: How would you describe your living conditions?

A: They are below average. For example, something very stupid, but I link what I can do to my hourly rate... It's closer to 4 or 5 euros per hour than 20 euros per hour. So, I'm close to survival. Even if my job remains a passion, still it's very hard to carry on.

I never have any spare money. I never have rent money put aside. I never have any savings. So there is still a certain amount of stress.

Q: do you rent your accommodation?

A: I am a tenant and I live with my friend and my son. We share the costs. I live in a nice flat, I live comfortably.

But I don't live... in the centre of Paris. It's a choice that makes it possible to live well anyway.

Q: Did you experience day-to-day hardship because of your reduced income and business level?

A: No, not much because I don't have big expenses. I didn't go on holiday, but I live by the sea [laughs]. I live five minutes from the beaches, so everything is fine anyway. Because I live in a nice place. I'm really... Well, the Basque Country is still very beautiful, very pleasant. So even with limited financial resources, I think it's still possible to live well. And I feel good, I'm not at all to be pitied.

Q: Do you think that your work has an impact on your private life, on your relationships with the people close to you?

A: Yes, definitely. I know, and I think I'm quite aware of the situation, that there is not a balance between the time spent working – whether it's sewing costumes or other things – and my private life. In other words, I don't have a lot of time. For example, I work every day from Monday to Friday from 8.30am to 8pm. And on Saturdays, sometimes I go back to the studio for small things though I try to avoid that. Also on Saturdays I have to do the paperwork, research on fabrics, research on costumes. I have to go to Emmaüs, I have to research costumes or materials. Right now I'm working on my website. So I spend my weekends doing the website, thinking about a possible ready-to-wear collection that I want to create with my friend. So my private life is suffering a little bit anyway. Because I rarely answer telephone calls, it's hard for me.

Q: And on this point has there been any improvement over the last few years?

A: I'm... very, very busy, and it takes me a lot of time... sewing is long, the smallest thing takes long. But at the same time, I met a lot of people through my work, it allowed me to create contacts, whereas as a dancer, I was a bit in a closed environment. So, as a result, I find that yes, since

this change of career I have a private life... Before, it was all about dancing. Because dancing takes up everything. Here, sewing, the costumes take up 'almost' everything. The fact that I have the workshop, that I don't sew at home anymore, helps keep separated two different places of life. When I was in a dance company it was like being in a family, it's like being really... I ate, I thought, and I slept dancing. And so there was no real break between my private life and my professional life. Whereas in my job as a seamstress, there is one. And for me it's a positive evolution.

Q: In your opinion, how will you be able in the future to have your business without financial worries and with more time for your private life? Are your problems just temporary and linked to the current situation, or do you think, for example, you need more support from the government for your business?

A: So I'm sure that the current situation is making things worse, but generally speaking in the sector of the cultural and artistic creation, costume making comes last. If there is money left, we make beautiful costumes. It's really a very painstaking work that should be a little more valued because small hands often make big costumes, and we only see the big costumes. After all, you know the name of the creator, but all the seamstresses and costume designers behind the scenes are not very well paid. I think it's still a job where you're massively undervalued. But this is perhaps also valid for other manual jobs in the arts world, eh? Maybe it's not just the costumes. I don't know, and I don't mean to say that only the costume designers are badly paid. But in any case, we are not among those who come first to mind in budgeting for a production.

Q: What about the changes in the subsidies granted to the Culture sector in general?

A: Maybe the drop in subsidies has affected us... Even if everyone agrees that costumes are really important... and it's true that they are important. It's what you see on stage, it's what you wear to embody the character. A costume is very important. Maybe there isn't just enough money to support everybody.

Q: You were talking earlier about meeting people. Is it important for you in your job to have these personal contacts?

A: Ah yes, yes, yes, because it's always nice to meet artists (or not only artists by the way!). Both as professional and

personal contacts. Also it satisfies my passion for art performances. Creativity is important for me and that's what drives me. I love it. I'd rather be creative than just a performer. But also I like a lot directing, I really like it. I like meeting different type of professionals. But at the same time, I follow the health restrictions, I understand the situation very well and I have relatives who are health professionals and very, very worried. As a result, I respect the government decisions.

Q: Do you think that the health crisis management was always proportionate and appropriate, both in terms of public health and the type of measures to support the economy?

A: Yes and no. I'm like everyone else, I don't understand why there are people in the metro but no one in the theatres. But I imagine that it must be very, very complicated to make this or that decision. And that inevitably, people will complain about either this or that decision, and that's normal. That's what I tell myself every time, that's it, when a decision is taken... Admittedly, some decisions seem inconsistent, for example, the booksellers and all that... But I try to believe in any case that there are always reasons that I don't know and that I can't know. And when it comes to culture, I manage to understand things a bit better. For example, I'm making costumes for an in-residence performance from the 16th to the 20th, but the show and the tour that was supposed to follow have been cancelled. But on the other hand, the in-residence performance is going ahead so, well, I have the commission all the same. Because an in-residence performance means an order for costumes. And so for the 16th, I've got a lot of work to do. So it doesn't change anything for me, on the contrary. And I think it's not bad that rehearsals and in-residence are still going ahead.

Q: You were talking about branching out into ready-to-wear clothes production?

A: Yes. I am creating a collection with my friend. We're creating a women's collection for the moment because we don't want to be too... And so I hope it will be ready by the beginning of 2021.

Q: Are you moving a little bit away from the entertainment industry just because of Covid or is it also out of your choice?

A: The idea was there before the health crisis but it needed maturing.

The health crisis sped up the process. And then the second lockdown, convinced me to go all the way. Even so, I still think to continue with the bespoke tailoring as an alternative business. I hope that I will manage these two activities by delegating some of the seamstress's work. I've taken on a trainee, at least from October. She is attending her CAP in sewing.

Q: Is your casual worker situation right for you?

A: So, I have a lot of trouble... In fact, it doesn't reassure me at all to be an intermittent worker. On the contrary, it makes me anxious. Every month I count my hours, even when I haven't worked any hours I count my hours again. In short, all I do is add, subtract, stuff, until August. But even before that, I was counting my hours all the time. But no, I'm not obsessed. I think it's great that I have some work because I need it, but... For example, there are people who, to have enough business, go and take contracts left and right. I don't even think about it. I'm not like that, I can't do it. I hope I'm going to have the 507 hours in August, I think I'm going to have them anyway because I have about 300 hours already. August is still a bit far away. But I don't find it very comfortable, it makes me a little insecure.

Q: Are you optimistic about your future?

A: Honestly, right now, I'm very negative. I'm quite pessimistic. It's a bit harsh. Until November 16th I know what I have to do. I'm happy to have the opportunity to make costumes for the in-residence performance but at the same time, it's a huge job because I have a lot of things to do and I have to do them. So I am a bit stressed about my deadlines. Even if, in the end, I will manage and I know it. But still, it's still stressful. After the 16th: the unknown, I don't know. So I hang on to the women's collection I'm going to make. But actually, I think you have to have a really resilient state of mind and bounce back all the time.

I find that it takes a lot of energy to still believe in it, to say to oneself... In any case, I'm taking my worries head-on. I feel it.

Q: What would you change straightway about the public perception of your situation?

A: I would like that the work of an artist be considered like any other work. Currently to be an artist is anything but synonymous with being lazy. It's just the opposite, it's hours and hours and hours of trials and errors. You spend

your time making mistakes to achieve something. I find that there are not many professional fields where you have to come back to it, where you have to restart all the times. In dance you start from scratch every morning. So it's an enormous amount of work. Music, an instrument, you have to play it every day. Theatre is the same, it is an enormous work to perfect a character. And finally, the costumes are the same. It's a huge job. Not so much practical, but just in people's heads. Being an artist is a job, it's doing an artist's job.

Q: In your opinion, how could we move towards this new approach? Who could bring it about?

A: Perhaps through education. It shouldn't be a secondary or optional subject. To have violin classes as one has French classes. Maybe through education but also considering artists like other tradespeople. For example, my studio is opposite the airport and on the other side there is a transports company. And you can see when the transport workers are busy. But my work is less visible. Just until a month ago, there was a baker there who made custom-made pastries. We were both at work all the time. There were always our two cars and I think that maybe people could see how busy we were, well yes, the pastry cook works a lot and so does the costume designer. Because of ignorance, people don't realise what it takes for the whole preparation, when they see a show. And it's not necessarily their fault. It's up to us to show them that we work.

Q: Similar questions in this survey are asked to other workers across Europe, if you had a message for them what would it be?

A: Trying not to stay in your corner. And I apply this to myself. Maybe a little more mutual support to help each other and continue to create. Because no one can stop the imagination. So we must continue to create, create, create. Even if it's something 'non-essential' [laughs]. But, in fact, it is essential to create. So, we must continue to create and then perhaps make ourselves known to each other a little more.

2. Ibrahim

Q: Can you start by introducing yourself?

A: I am 59. I live in Talence near Bordeaux and work in a private company in charge of public services (so it's a semi-public structure), in the back to work schemes for people 25 and above. I do individual coaching to help peo-

ple in a situation of unemployment. I am therefore a socio-professional counsellor. I've been a work coach for 25 years. I have been working there for 7 years in my current position.

Q: So you are on a permanent contract?

A: Yes.

Q: How would you describe your living conditions?

A: Rather average... I think I'm a little bit in that category.

Q: And in terms of accommodation, do you rent?

A: No, I own my accommodation.

Q: Do you think that your job has an impact on your relationships with your family and friends?

A: Of course, inevitably. But I think that with age we get used to it. But when the object of intervention are human beings, it isn't easy because the boundaries are not watertight. There are a lot of personal things involved. It's true that some evenings we may come back home a little shaken up because of a story we've heard. But with time I've learnt to manage it, and luckily because otherwise we wouldn't last in this sector, I can keep things separate. When we do this kind of work, humanity touches us, of course, but we're there to keep it going. To help someone, you have to be able to manage your emotions.

Q: Are you satisfied with this balance?

A: Yes, I think I'm very lucky to have a job that combines my values and my skills. It is a job that makes sense, and that's fundamental. I meet people with very different levels of education, and expensive and highly regarded diplomas don't necessarily imply personal fulfilment. But that's a central element! I do a job that I have chosen and is in line with my values. So that alone is a very, very interesting added value that makes me feel fulfilled in what I do.

Q: Do you think, have that your working conditions have changed over the last few years?

A: I sit on a national panel for a diploma on job coaching. So I see what's going on. Socio-professional integration was established as a public service at the beginning of the 1980s. Local centres were created to address the issue of unemployment. Originally it was a holistic approach, we take the person in their environment and deal with the question of employment in its entirety (with housing and

health). These structures had tools to respond to this issue. What has changed over the last 15 years is that we have moved from a holistic to a technical approach. We see the person who present to us just as a job seeker. It's an approach that reduces the person to his or her immediate circumstances. And this doesn't lead to holistic support. The problem becomes the person who does not know how to find a job rather than the lack of job offers. The paradigm has completely changed. It has also imposed a change on the counsellors' side.

Public and European funding forces the organisations to deliver results. We receive people and the organisation has to show that at least 50% of them managed to get a temporary job with a contract for more than six months. This has an utterly perverse effect. We have to decide which applicants we can take on to achieve the expected results. Those who are rejected are precisely those for whom the scheme was set up in the first place.

Q: How do you cope with these changes?

A: The question is: how do we perceive people in this back to work process? Now we must focus solely on employment.

It is a daily struggle. Personally, I can't complain about my working conditions. My structure is well funded, even if there are more and more restrictions. We are experiencing just the very beginning of this political and financial changes. I still think that when people are perceived and considered honest and efficient professionals, they are maybe allowed to make themselves heard.

Q: But who do you hold responsible for these changes?

A: These are political choices. Because when you hear politicians talk about unemployment, often there are incredible aberrations.

If there are vacancies that are not filled, it's because there is a problem: people are not interested either because it's not their job or because... Take a look at the hotel/restaurant and building sectors. These are extremely hard jobs. There is a lot of exploitation, they are very poorly paid, how can you attract people to these jobs. They say some people don't want to work, but you don't dig! We don't ask ourselves why people don't want to work in these sectors. The

job is not respected, there is exploitation, it's very badly paid.

Q: Who do you think can improve your working conditions?

A: You know, in the associations there is no trade unions presence. And in some centres, the trade unions are almost chosen by the employers. Some people say nothing for fear of being sacked. Fear, indifference... Some people negotiate personally the improvements of their working conditions.

Q: How would you describe the relations with your colleagues?

A: No solidarity... We always want to do better for others, and for ourselves, but... Solidarity I can't say that there is any.

Q: Do you have performance-based management also in your organisation?

A: Yes, these are things that were introduced several years ago. But I'm going to tell you something in confidence: the idea of the performance bonus has been publicly advertised, but in reality the bonus is paid in turns so that everybody receives it. While the private sector normally is for the highest achievers, here we have a somehow hybrid situation.

Q: Have you ever had a conflictual situation with your colleagues, or, conversely, is there any colleagues that you consider a friend?

A: Friendly relationships can develop more with some and less with others. It's a question of personality. We approach work according to our values.

Q: How has the pandemic affected your living conditions?

A: I was fine during the period of lockdown. I organised my day, I did a lot of things. Lack of social life was frustrating; otherwise it was really very pleasant.

We weren't furloughed, we were paid full salary. But working remotely was very complicated.

Q: I imagine that the pandemic has affected your working conditions, at least because of the health measures... How do you cope?

A: The thing I can least stand is the mask. But you have to do it; you also have to protect people. I think it has affect-

ed and penalised the clients much more than the staff. It wasn't very easy to engage with them; some of them came out traumatised by what happened. So getting into a back to work scheme was not their first concern, even if the economic situation was tough for some of them.

Q: I imagine that there are also problems with jobs availability.

A: For example, before the pandemic, we couldn't find enough chambermaids for the jobs. 95% of the women who do this job are immigrants. Now there aren't enough rooms to clean and at the end of the month their salary is cut. To work in conditions like that you have to want to. I don't decide the jobs the conditions... The job is timed, you must do everything well and quickly. These people are in a tough situation at the moment, because of the circumstances in the hospitality sector.

Q: What is your opinion of the political debate in France? Do you think that the government has the right priorities on identifying the people problems in France?

A: They have reached the bottom! But for a while now! It's not just Macron. The governments that have succeeded one another over the last twenty years or so have been moving against the values of solidarity and mutual aid. They've been making choices that cause damage. There is no shortage of examples! Just on unemployment. Everybody knows that the duration of unemployment benefit has been reduced, and that the benefit has been capped even more to force people to work. Implying that people are lazy. This is a political decision linked to a well-established concept. It is not because we are going to make people's lives even more precarious that we are going to push them back to work. That's completely off the mark.

Q: What is your opinion of the management of Covid?

A: We are lucky they invented the masks! [laughs] Frankly, even people who are not interested in politics still call it a total failure. However, would a different government have done better... I'm not sure. But it's catastrophic all the same.

Q: Can you foresee any improvement in your future situation?

A: You know, my job has taught me to stay optimistic. Because when you help people, you have to believe in the person. So by definition, I am optimistic. If I'm not, I have to change my job.

Q: Talking about the retirement, are you looking forwards to it?

A: Retirement with or without the pivot age? [laughs] At some point you must stop, but I'll never have full retirement... At times I look forward to it, when things don't go the way I want. I have friends who are retired; they are fine. But I love what I do. I chose it, and I learn from people.

Q: What changes do you think are going to happen in your job in the near future?

A: What worries me is that even though we are in the public (or semi-public) sector, we are more and more affected by cuts... All those ideas typical of commercial companies are increasingly gaining ground in our business. As a result, the ranking...

Q: Who do you think should take action to change the situation and avoid this?

A: They have now put in place All these performance benchmarks. I am in favour of evaluations, for me it is something positive and it is not because we work with people in need that we should not have evaluations of our work. We can evaluate it, but we must choose criteria that fit the organisation and its semi-public nature. The problem is that today they take any criteria and apply them to a different sector. But we have to evaluate because people deserve to be looked after well. But with different criteria.

Q: Similar questions as in this survey are asked to other workers in Europe as well. What message would you send to them ?

A: We're not going to sing the International together anyway [laughs]. I don't know, frankly, you're giving me a hard time. There are certainly common concerns but it's so fragmented that in the end... What brings us all together? To be honest, I don't know.

3. Arthur

Q: Can you introduce yourself briefly?

A: My name is Artur, I'm 29 and I live in Saint-Ouen (suburb of Paris). I work freelance as a marketing researcher, mainly with research companies. I started freelancing in July 2018.

Q: What did you do before?

A: I worked in a branding agency in Paris. Then I worked in a research and consulting firm. I left this company to join a

social media startup, in application format. I went there to take care of the commercial strategy with a friend but the investors withdrew their backing after 6 months, so staff was let go. I found myself unemployed and at that point I wanted to try freelance.

Q: Can you briefly describe your living conditions?

A: I would say that they are higher than the average. This is typical in my social group, but let's say I have the financial situation of a 30-year-old Parisian who is relatively well off in life. I don't have any particular financial problems but I'm not rolling in gold either. I earned very well last year as a freelancer, better than when I was an employee. And that's what helps me to survive today because the year 2020 has been challenging. I haven't been working since February.

Q: Because of Covid?

A: Yes. As a result of it, I had planned jobs for May and June, but everything was cancelled during the lockdown. And since then I haven't had any project, it's a bit difficult. However, if everything goes well, something is coming up in November that should revive the business a bit.

Q: Do you rent your accommodation?

A: Yes, I've been renting a flat in Saint-Ouen since February.

Q: Does this situation suit you?

A: For the moment it suits me. I live on my own and one day yes, why not, become a homeowner. But not necessarily in Paris. But it's not at all a short-term objective.

Q: Can you briefly explain your working situation?

A: So it's called "auto-entrepreneur". I am my own company. The big advantage of this is that you pay contributions to URSSAF only if you have an income. So typically, every month of this year when I've earned nothing, I had nothing to pay either. So that's the big advantage. My contractors invoice my work so they calculate the number of working days. They are exempt from VAT so they pay you gross and then I declare my income and pay contributions according to that.

Q: And you are satisfied with this situation?

A: Yes, it suits me very well to be the one in charge of my income. I don't have a fixed salary that comes in every month but it all depends on how much I work. So it suits me very well. Except this year! With the pandemic. You realise that

being an employee for a company with a permanent contract, especially in France, is rather nice in these conditions.

Q: Have you seen any change in the way you work? In your contracts?

A: No, because as I started working as a freelancer in 2019, there hasn't been time enough to appreciate the impact of the changed situation. My objective was the drive my projects up. It was an objective for the year 2020 that I couldn't achieve. I'll keep it in mind. It's still what I want to do after this difficult period... But I've also started to think about the possibility of taking up a permanent job.

Q: And would it be in the same field?

A: Yes, sure. A few weeks ago, while sending CVs to companies to work as a freelancer, one in particular called me saying they were interested in my profile but for a permanent contract. So I'm going to see...

Q: And about yourself, what did you do after February?

A: During the lockdown, I focused a bit on myself in the sense that I took time to think about my whole situation. Then, this summer, I got depressed... about the situation, not having a job. So I took advantage of the summer, but without going on holiday, to clear my head. So, I sent really many CVs at the beginning of the school year to try to find a job and to introduce myself to people who didn't know me yet. And generally, the answers are all the same: we don't have enough work even for our employees at the moment, so we don't work with freelancers.

Q: Before the pandemic, how did you manage the balance between private and professional life?

A: It wasn't really a problem. I cannot control when projects come in, and I'm still at a stage where I accept almost everything, I can't afford to be picky. So being a freelancer and even more my attitude make my job very intense. I do a bit more than what is just necessary, and I work very long hours. But that's why last year I could take a lot of time out, so I could do what I wanted to do. So it suited me very well as a way of working, but afterwards... I didn't really have control over it.

Q: Do you think that, for example, working all the time can affect your relations?

A: Yes clearly. Last year I was living together with my partner. I can work 12 hours in a row without realising it. Obvi-

ously, this has an impact when you live with someone because you're not around much. Even with my friends. When you're working and you have deadlines... I'm able to cancel going out together because I have to stay at work. So yes it has an impact. However, it's also something I accept and if I really wanted to, I could do something about it, if I wanted. So I'm not entirely a victim.

Q: How would you describe your relationship with your job?

A: It depends on the point of view but my job is a passion. I really like what I do, I'm very interested in it and I can even work 'just for me' because I like it. However, as I am a contractor, there's also some frustration because I cannot choose the type of jobs. I depend on the companies I work for. That's why I want to develop my business to be in control what I want to do.

Q: Is it stressful?

A: Yes it is. But maybe it's my fault too because I'm the kind of person who wants things to be perfect. So maybe I'm spending more time than I should and I'm increasing my personal stress. Today the most stressful bit is still to have to depend on others to tell me whether I'm going to get a job or not.

Q: Do you miss having colleagues, people you work with on a regular and permanent basis?

A: It has its advantages and disadvantages. I'm a rather solitary person, especially at work. It suits me well overall to work alone. However, I miss discussing things with other people, and a spirit of emulation. That's also one of the things I'd like to develop. To work in collaboration with other people.

Q: You said that Covid has changed things. Has also your personal situation changed after March 2020?

A: Overall, my living conditions have not changed, except that I avoid big expenses. I haven't gone on holiday this year. I am much more careful. I haven't worked since February. I received a state benefit, 1,500 euros per month until June. But then it stopped. So I'm living off my savings. I've made my little calculation of what I'm allowed to spend every month to survive as long as possible on that. And so yes, I am careful and I calculate everything I spend so that I don't exceed the budget I set myself every month so that I can live on my savings at least until the end of December.

And afterwards, I wait for other projects to come along so that I can take a breather.

The lockdown wasn't a negative experience for me. I used to work from home before; so with the lockdown people had a bit of the same lifestyle as me. Usually, my lifestyle looked a bit peculiar, and I felt a little more normal. Now that is over it's changed a bit but I don't think it's impacted my work aspirations. The big difference is job security. When there's a crisis like this, you realise that you are taking extra risks when you're self-employed and don't control everything. However, I think it made me want to work less alone from home and work more with other people.

Q: Do you think that France's political debate has any relation with your day-to-day problems?

A: I would say no. I have had feeling for the last few years that the issues are not real. In the sense that there's a topic that comes up because of a specific ongoing event and it is debated for a fortnight and nothing changes and it's replaced by another one because there's a new ongoing event. We have had debates on the environment, notably with the citizens' convention, but things didn't change. The same goes for racism, but we have moved on. I always have the impression that there are just a few voices that rise to give their point of view, there is a small debate, but that basically it doesn't yield anything. There are topics that I find relevant but the way they are approached, treated...

Q: Did the Covid health measures seem adequate to you?

A: I avoid judging certain decisions too much. Because I don't have the elements in hand to judge them objectively. For example, whether to go into lockdown, I don't have the elements to say whether it's right or wrong. About the financial decisions, they have reduced the number of categories that can get state support. I am one of the people excluded; they cut my support while I can't get a job because of the coronavirus. Then, more generally, about society, there are incongruities that I find difficult to understand. Wearing the mask, for instance, I find it quite bizarre. Wearing it in the street but not when you're on a bar terrace. I don't find it consistent. And having let us do what we pleased this summer... I have trouble following the logic, so I'm quite skeptical. I would have liked clear explanations.

For the medium- and long-term implications, I think it opened a way to rethink our lifestyles regarding the plan-

et, consumption. However, I have the impression that it was discussed during the lockdown and then it was swept aside at the end of the summer. Just to push consumption to boost the French economy, I'm not at all sure that this is the right way, the right lesson to learn from this period.

Q: Do you foresee a positive change in your future?

A: I confess that I'm not making predictions too much at the moment, as I have no short-term idea of what I'm going to do with my life. It's a bit complicated all the same. It will depend on the events of the next few months. As for my flat, I don't know if I can afford it anymore. The possibility of having to go back to my parents is not at all pleasant to me. I'm thinking about two projects. I am maybe going abroad. Staying in a European capital, maybe Amsterdam or Berlin, seems more in line with my lifestyle. But then I also would like move to the countryside! A few years ago I could see myself making my life in Paris, but today... But if I can work from a distance, maybe I'll go and live in a more rural place.

Q: How do you explain this aversion to Paris?

A: I've not overdosed on Paris. But it's also a general desire to live better: more air, more nature, a slower pace, more caring people.

France has disappointed me a bit lately... Especially on the issues of racism, ecology, what we are going to do with our future. The government, but more generally the whole politics because there is not any side that is good...

Q: Which of the things you have mentioned would you choose to change in the immediate future?

A: I would say the capitalist model. From my point of view, I have the impression that the major issues today, as much on the economy as on society, on the relationship to the planet, are linked to capitalism and to what it has become today. So if there is one thing I would change, it is this. To find a model of society that is more based on equality, compassion and respect. But we're a long way from that [laughs].

Q: And was your choice of becoming a freelancer a bit an attempt to get off that model?

A: No, on the contrary, being a freelancer is the opposite of that. I've become my own boss, I do the accounts, I try to earn as much money as possible [laughs]. In addition, I

work in marketing, wholly rooted in the consumer society. But in a way yes, because when you are in a company, you don't decide where the company wants to go, what you work on, you don't have control over everything. What I would like to do is to help brands adapt to tomorrow's society. We will have to evolve.

Q: Who do you think could or should act to bring about the changes you mentioned?

A: Everybody! Individually, we all have a role to play and we can even, individually, be a driving force for change. Then, logically, the politicians should lead these changes and make them happen.

But this is not the case. Partly because the politicians are completely anchored in this capitalist model, as are the business people, it's the same world. But it doesn't work.

But I am also one of those people who think that companies also have a role to play. They have a huge impact on us, and they are so important in our lifestyles that when they give us opportunities to consume or live differently, when they make us think differently, it can have a huge impact.

Q: Similar questions as in this survey are asked to other workers in Europe as well. What message would you send to them?

A: Tell them something... I don't know but I would like to talk to them! To find out how they live. What I say to myself and what I could tell them is that we are linked to each other, we are in a globalised society and the stakes go far beyond borders. Particularly on the issue of Covid, I know that the northern European countries did not want to contribute to help other European countries. But we are all linked to each other and we cannot ignore that.

4. Vivien

Q: How do you feel and how are you doing in these uncertain and troubled times?

A: I felt a little better at the beginning of September. But now uh... Considering the way things are going, I feel a little less well, not necessarily in my head but rather about my work. So in my head I'm fine. I have a lot of free time [laughs] to do a lot of things that I couldn't do before. It's a bit like my escape route; thanks to that I feel better although I'm quite a pessimist. I don't see things going well.

I can see March coming fast and furiously in 15 days. So naturally I am... Yes, I ask myself a lot more questions than I would normally ask myself and that's it... I'm giving up a lot of personal things, a lot of social ties. I stopped seeing a few people and especially the family. However, my mother is closer to me, so it's true that there's been a real change. I think I'm not the only one affected.

Q: Can you briefly describe yourself, your age, your situation?

A: I'm 39, I've just turned 39, so I've been working in the show business since 2001 so for 18-19 years, I've never done anything else, clearly. Yes, I had to work for one month in a supermarket at 16 to stack pallets. So I only know the entertainment industry. I work a lot; work is a big part of my life.

Q: So, you are a technician?

A: I'm a technician ... A lighting technician, lighting director, that's my job and I am an intermittent (recurring status) contractor. When I'm not working, I do sports. That's it, that's more or less my life.

Q: How would you describe your living conditions?

A: Really, I think your question can be answered considering the earning brackets. My earnings are in the middle of the average, I think I belong to the middle of the general population, neither too well-off nor... not poor, I am really in this French middle bracket, I think.

Q: What about your accommodation?

A: I own my accommodation. I bought a flat in 2015-2016. It was my first purchase and before... And before, I'm going to give you some details, before I lived a bit in squats and before the squat it was papa-mama.

Q: You are a casual worker in the entertainment industry. Do you work regularly and continually for somebody? Do you have any job security?

A: Yes. that's my worker status. Not at the moment. Until March 2019 I was hyper secure. It's true that, to go back to your previous question, I felt rather not belonging to the middle earning bracket, but I had work, a lot of work, a big network full of different employers and so I was really relaxed about that. A situation that has changed a lot since March. I work for companies like 3rd floor and for theatres, even in the reception, to welcome people, for boxes, sound

and light installation and I even did a bit of TV at a time. So yes, I had a lot of employers.

Q: Then there was the Covid impact...

A: Oh yes, that's very clear. It has been... Apart from this period of pause, like for everybody, everything has stopped since the beginning of September. The theatres have reduced their programs, I work for the Vuitton foundation too. So the Vuitton Foundation is closed until January 2021. The sound and light boxes requests for all the events stopped. So yeah, I don't have too many things to tell you. If I can give you an idea. When I went back to school in September, I usually worked about 15 to 20 days a month, which is a lot for someone who works on a casual basis for the entertainment industry. And then, we did the 3rd Floor, but I worked just eight days, so there you are... And in October I have 3 days of work ahead of me. In a normal month of October I'd have worked 12 to 15 days.

Q: How have been affected your working conditions?

A: Yes, I have a rather clear example. Lately there has been talk of reducing salaries, quite simply, to be able to resume performances. That was with 3rd Floor. So there is a financial side to it. On top of that, a lot has changed with the health regulations and all that, but I am very, very happy to go to work. Before I was happy, now I'm very, very, very, very happy to go to work.

Q: Have your employers consulted you about these changes?

A: The sector is a bit special, that is to say that we all talk to each other all the time, unlikely in a company, let's say. Yes, in a way I was consulted, we were all kept up to date on the evolution of the events more than just saying "well, it's going to be hard during this period and there will be less work". Yes there were indeed some employers who called me to tell me that they were going to close. With the Third Floor we had real meetings about this, we really took a collective decision about the salaries. Yes and no, we consult, we call each other, we keep each other informed, but in the end there are no jobs.

Q: Are you saying that your future is financially uncertain because of a potential new lockdown and the shortage of jobs?

A: Oh yeah, completely. That's for sure, it's clear. There is a huge uncertainty: the government has promised to take

care of us until the end of August 2021 but we don't yet know all the conditions, who is going to be eligible, how, why... How will be the fees we can charge for next year going to be calculated... I don't even know how much I will get next year. To explain the casual employment system to you, it's quite complicated, so I'll give you a general picture. You get paid by the employers for the days you work, and then you claim benefit from the Pôle Emploi which compensates you when you don't work. These compensation days are known in advance, and we know more or less how much we will receive, whereas at the moment we don't know. So there is a real uncertainty about this and, yes, I worry about this. As a result, I pay much more attention to a lot of things.

Q: So you are complaining that the government is not providing enough information?

A: No. So frankly no, I am not a great supporter of the government, but no... I have to admit that I've been partially unemployed during this period of lockdown, and I benefited from measures which were put in place for the casual workers in the entertainment industry. Though I don't have much information and I don't know all the possible solutions, but very clearly I could continue to live thanks to all these measures though they were very often late, that's for sure. However, no, for the moment I don't hold them responsible for these late measures, but I hold them responsible for many other things.

At the beginning of the crisis... On the masks... On all this, finally, for me, clearly we wouldn't have had the lockdown, we probably wouldn't have had such an economic crisis if we had done things correctly at the beginning and very clearly, that includes the masks, that's what I really think.

Q: So you think we should have started much earlier to make wearing the masks compulsory?

A: Oh yes, it's very clear to me. Because of the consequence I am really very very very much angry with this government. That's clear. I think that we could have continued working, that we wouldn't have reached this point if we had taken the measures such as testing and the masks at the very beginning.

Q: What about the trade unions?

A: There are several, yeah... I'm not very good at it. The CGT, CFDT, FO have negotiated a lot lately and obtained precise-

ly this extension of support benefit until 31 August 2021. They've been quite active lately, keeping you informed on all points discussed, but I'm not a member.

Q: But you consider that they have a role to play in defending your interests?

A: Oh yeah. Ah yeah yeah. Ah yes for sure.

Q: Do you think your situation and working conditions have changed in the last years, even before the pandemic?

A: Oh yes. There has been a huge change in these engineers' jobs. On the one hand we have seen – I have seen in the last 18 or 19 years – much smaller technical teams in every event, less and less staff. And it continues to go in that direction, by the way. So the working conditions are, of course, more difficult because of the amount of work done by fewer people. We have also seen more casual work contracts which always had negative effects. That's clear. I had other types of contracts; before I could earn one and a half times what I'm earning now, though this was 15 years ago. So that's the financial side. And then, on the positive side, in my field, there have been many, many, many things that have greatly improved over the last ten years, especially on health and safety. It has evolved a lot, we are asked to take training courses in electricity, hanging, lifting, height, driving a machine... So that's a big positive point. So the job is safer and safer.

Q: Why these changes? Who do you think wants them?

A: Oh well, the financial cause is that the budgets allocated to culture are getting smaller and smaller. So this has repercussions on the performances, the artists, the technicians. The lack of staff is probably due to that. Regarding the health and safety improvements, they were introduced because the employers want people to become responsible for their problems. So they authorise you to take a job once you've been trained. From then on, the people in charge are no longer responsible. It's you who become responsible; it's a super positive thing i.e. we work more safely but the responsibilities fall on us.

Q: What do you think of the statement: the improvement of my living conditions is above all my responsibility?

A: No I don't agree. I have always been responsible since I was 16 or 18 years old, I made my choices whether things were going well or not. But when the costs of living, price

of goods, rents and everything else increase, how can I consider myself fully responsible since my salaries have fallen?

Q: Would you describe your work as stressful? Or fulfilling? Or enriching?

A: It's clear I told you, my job is all I've done in my life. When I was waking up 20 years ago I was happy and now I am still always happy to wake up very early in the morning and finish very late in the evening. So there is no doubt in my mind that this is the best job in the world. I can't imagine changing it for a second, I would be so sad. It's a job where on Monday I'm with a team of 5 people that I've never met before, I spend 3 days with them working about 12-14 hours a day. Maybe when I see them again in 5 or 6 years, it is as if we met the day before and on Tuesday I'll see new people again. I am never with the same people! I don't see myself going to the office and seeing the same faces all my life. Those are the positive points. I'm on the move; I've been all over France, all over Europe, a small part of the world. Well, yeah, fulfilling every day. That's it, for the moment... I'm very afraid of this crisis because many people are restructuring, so I thought about it, but it unbearably saddens me.

Q: Does your work have an impact on your relationships with those close to you?

A: Yes. Negative point, clearly my job prevents me from having the same social life as my mates. All my weekends are taken by work. So it's a bit complicated when you see all your friends doing something that you can't do. It's the same with my family, I've missed out on some big events, weddings, even deaths, because of work. And the positive points are that I always talk about my work to my friends and family, it's a very good subject that everyone appreciates and I tell everything I've done, everything I've seen. So that's it.

Q: And how are, in your opinion, the relations with your colleagues?

A: Almost all my friends are in the entertainment business. So... with this I've said everything. It's more friendship than working relations. In fact, I don't have colleagues, I just have friends at work. No, but that's not completely true, of course, the bosses of the company or of the venues are colleagues, but... The other technicians, 90% are friends. However, competition is starting... It cannot be denied that it's starting to happen with this crisis. We're all won-

dering where to find work. We wonder why you work and I don't. We work in the same venues; we meet up from time to time... So there's no competition yet but unfortunately it's starting to happen, it's clear. In any case, I've never had any rivalry; I may have been jealous in some way, yes, it's already happened to me. Though, I quickly forget or accept that either are required skills that I don't have or that it is just lack of enough jobs, that's it.

Q: What is your opinion on the political debate? Do you think that the current political issues are related to your daily problems? Do you find these debates close to your personal experience?

A: Not really. I don't know if it's a good or a bad thing but I don't care about it anymore. So I don't follow a lot of the current political debates; besides, I think they are not even real debates. It's pure and hard PR war. I'm not even interested in that. At the moment, in these last 15, 20 years, there have been more abstract and hard political debates, it's PR. We've entered into something else from what I knew before and clearly that's making me confused, I can't see any relevance to myself. I try to be responsible as much as possible and once I've taken care of myself, I don't get too concerned...

Q: Are you optimistic or pessimistic about your future?

A: I'm quite pessimistic in the medium term but no, not, in the long term, I'm quite optimistic. Because the long term is when there will be more jobs, it is when I retire, so I'm very optimistic about that, I have a lot of plans, like everybody I think. Lots of things to do, to get out of Paris.

Q: Are you looking forwards to retirement?

A: No... Not retirement because it would be really the opposite of what I've just told you I like. On the other, hand moving out of Paris, I'm looking forward to it. I can't quite do it yet. What makes me very, very optimistic is that. About my professional career, I'm a little more pessimistic, but there will always be culture. So the forms will change, so a guys at the age of 40 like me will have to accept the new ways of doing things. But there will always be culture, so there will always be work, so yes, I'm quite optimistic.

Q: What would you change in the immediate future?

A: I would like to keep my standard of living whilst moving to the countryside, it's moving from Paris in fact, moving from Ile de France specifically.

Q: And it is not possible at the moment?

A: No it's a bit complicated... So it's between the "I want to do it" but I find excuses saying "I can't do it" and the truth is that I have many employers in Paris and surroundings. Therefore for reasons of peace of mind and job security, I should stay here for the moment. Though I really want to be rock'n'roll and say I'll slam the door on everything, it's doable. Also, a side of me likes my couch and I like to sit quietly in the evening.

Q: On the subject of global warming, does it worry you?

A: Yes. But yes it's fucking scary. But since... not this year. It's been fucking scaring for 15 years. Well me... yeah yeah yeah it really scares. It scares me so much that I even said to myself "Oh well, now I'm sure I'm going to have kids". I thought "Oh well, so now I'm going to have an offspring to offer them what? To offer them us in X10", even though we're pretending there's going to be an electric metro in the air next year".

Q: We asked the questions to other workers in various countries in Europe, what would you like to tell them?

A: Maybe I would say... that I am probably far from being a person to be pitied compared to other countries in Europe. I have nothing to say to the others [laughs], just maybe we stick together. Finally, I believe quite a lot in Europe, we have to stay together on the climate issues, against capitalist policies. So when I say solidarity, it's not to support capitalist policies [laughs].

5. Justine

Q: Can you briefly describe yourself: your age, your situation, your job?

A: So, my name is Justine, I'm 27, I started my three-year training as a nurse in 2014, I passed my exams in 2017 and was awarded a degree in nursing. I first started working in the public sector, for two years. From 2017 to 2019 I worked at the hospital in Nice. I chose to work only in emergency services because I think it was more formative than starting in more quiet wards. Currently I am working in a private clinic, still in an A&E service. It's been about a year and a half.

Q: Where do you live?

A: I live in Cagnes-sur-Mer near Nice in a flat with my partner.

Q: How do you feel about Covid?

A: From a personal point of view, I am not particularly afraid of Covid, perhaps wrongly. I still believe that my good health conditions allow me to face the event of this pathology; however, I protect my close relations and people, both by meeting them less often and protecting myself with a mask. From a work point of view, until now, the PACA region has been a lucky region in relation to Covid and the services I have worked (emergency) in, have not been the worst hit. If I worked in a resuscitation unit I wouldn't say the same at all, but in the emergency room and in the PACA region during the lockdown, I wasn't exposed much to people with Covid.

Q: How would you describe your standard of living?

A: I think my income is in the lower average. Let's say that when I was working in the hospital, I think I was below average because of my earnings and the rent costs in the area. My salary didn't give me any security, I started at 1550€ net per month. Renting an accommodation should cost a third of your salary. Find accommodation for 500€ in the PACA region is hard. I chose to work for a private clinic also to earn more. So there I am in an average or even a lower average. I work overtime to have a reasonable salary.

Q: Do you rent your accommodation?

A: I'm a tenant, I live together with my husband who has a good salary, and it was fairly easy to find an accommodation. However, I plan to buy my own property, though at the moment I cannot because I'm currently on a temporary-term contract, and the banks won't give me a mortgage.

Q: How long did you have a temporary contract for?

A: This is my 4th temporary contract in just over a year. I started with a 4-month fixed-term contract, that was renewed for another 4 months. Then I had a 3-month fixed-term contract, then I was in paid holiday for a few months and now I'm on a one-year temporary contract that ends on 28 February 2021.

Q: How do you feel about this situation?

A: When I was hired on a temporary contract in the structure where I am currently working, I was delighted. Firstly because it gave me a lot of freedom on the duration of the contracts, which was short, so if I didn't like the structure after 4 months I didn't have to renew my contract and

move on. In retrospect, now, I would rather say to myself that... After a year on a temporary contract, I had enough; I'd rather be on a long-term contract. I'd rather be on a permanent contract. I'd like to do my two months' notice and leave my structure if I want to. Now I'm a bit stuck on my temporary contract until 28th February 2021.

Q: Do you think that your job impacts your relationships with your family and friends?

A: Yes absolutely. Depending on the day, I can be very affected by my work, more or less positively. Very positive things that I want to tell. More wearisome things that I need to vent in one way or another. Either I manage to voice them or I think that it can have an impact, especially on my partner since we live together and every night, I go home, and I need to share sometimes. It's easier with friends or relatives who work in my sector, being able to express things that may have touched me at work or that may have hit me a little bit and it's rather good to be able to discuss them with people.

Q: Are you happy with your work-life balance?

A: Not really now. I don't think I'm lazy, but I think I work too much. I work long hours because it's a job that is often organised in 12-hour shifts, which is not little, because in reality, on top of the 12 hours shift you have to come in half an hour beforehand, to be dressed and you don't count the hours when you finish late. On average it's 13 hours a day and when you work 3-4 consecutive days, well the two following days of rest are spent recovering. So the balance is sometimes a little difficult to achieve even if I don't mind having 12 hour shifts because it allows me to rest the rest of the week.

Q: Do you think your working conditions and professional situation have changed over the last few years?

A: The question is complicated because first I started in the public sector which is very different from the clinic where I work now. I can tell you first about the changes in the public and then in the private sector. In the public hospital, I didn't see any positive developments when I was working there. In my opinion, we were understaffed, I think that the type of service provided was completely out of step with the population's demand. We are in the PACA region, 80% of our population is over 75 years old, so we need geriatric beds. We need to hospitalise people. The premises and the reception capacity are not adequate at all. This is the sec-

ond element which seems to me to be completely absurd. Third element: the size of financial budget. The hospital is a big structure that brings together different bosses with whom of course the nurses don't have direct contacts: I don't know who the hospital director is, I don't know who the hospital finance director is. We put requests to our direct superiors to adapt the budgets according to what we need in the wards. I have never had any positive answers. We lacked equipment. We lacked basic material: sheets for patients, blankets, pillows, urinals, well, it's material that I consider basic... Stretchers that are not broken! So that was it... The budget allocations didn't take this in consideration; all we know is that I rarely got positive answers. I think the hospital was a bit of an anthill where there were a lot of employees. In the emergency ward there were 90 nurses working day and night, which is a lot. Managing such large teams requires health managers who know how to give us guidance. Unfortunately, our managers weren't front-line managers, nurses, or nurses who worked in the emergency ward. Without direct experience in the emergency ward, I think it's a bit complicated to understand logistics and to be able to respond to our needs. I haven't seen any positive developments; on the contrary, we had fewer and fewer beds available to accommodate people. In addition, the hospital was a training centre, the CHU, which means that we worked together with doctors who are recalled senior citizens, graduates, interns, students undergoing apprenticeship, day students, i.e. young graduates who do not have the right to prescribe but who have the right to observe, with student nurses who were under my responsibility as a young graduate plus we had care assistants whose duties were cleaning the toilets, accompanying people and cleaners who ensured the general hygiene of the structure. Having so many employees in the same place causes loss of information and disorganisation of the structure. And there was no one to keep it all together. I think it wasn't a solid organisation. Not to mention the salaries, which I found aberrant, knowing that I was asked to work day and night, so for me the salaries must also be proportionate to your capacity to be flexible and work either day or night. This was the public sector.

For the private sector, since I got in it's been a stable situation. Having a good image is the main concern for the private sector, completely the opposite of the public sector. In the private sector, patients are hardly patients anymore; they are clients. You have to have a good image if you want

them to come back, and this changes the fundamental basis of our nursing profession, which is first and foremost about ethics, empathy, support and caring. We still provide these, but the demand is not the same as in the public sector: in the private sector, you are asked to smile, to be pleasant, which is already part of my personality, so I don't need to be reminded of it. And I haven't observed any particular changes over the last year and a half.

Q: How these two systems compare, in your opinion? I have the impression that you have, though for different reasons, problems with both.

A: Yes, but because it's my nature always to question things. Let's say that explicitly, I like the public sector. I like the fact that we welcome everyone, that we don't reject anyone, that we are open to everyone; whether they are homeless, whether they are people with no income, whether they are foreigners, whether they are migrants, whether they are polypathological people, whether they are unwashed. I liked this "generosity" and I find that the difficulties we had to go through created very close-knit teams that had to sort out the problems no matter what... It was a bit like being at war. We had no equipment, we had overcrowding, there was shouting, screaming, it was madness. We were understaffed and yet I thought we were sticking together. It's an aspect that I found very very positive and very formative at the hospital.

In the private sector, they have a different approach. Development training is not valued, so apart from nursing students there will be no one in training, only graduates. This limits the number of people you can discuss a treatment with and we work in pair. It's the nurse and her doctor for each patient. I find that in terms of learning, it's a little less open, the questions are less frequent because when we have interns, people who are being trained, they ask questions or they question our practices from the point of view of their fresh outlook or their inexperience, that's when we say to ourselves: "Ah, but we're completely off the mark", or they confirm that we're not completely off the mark. So I think it's a pity we don't work with these people.

Q: What do you think of the relationships with your colleagues, perhaps also in comparison to those you had in the public hospital?

A: I had stronger relationships of trust and solidarity in the hospital than in the private clinic. In the private sector, the

difference, in my opinion, is that I work with doctors who are freelancers. So they are paid on a fee-for-service basis and not per patient. We already take in only people with full documentation, doctors only deal with the actual condition and the freelancers tend to have a little bit more of a mind of their own. There is a sense of hierarchy that is completely different from that in the hospital. In the hospital, we were all equal. In the clinic or in the private sector, I find that there is a real sense of hierarchy, which is very, very important. The doctor is the one who thinks, who thinks, who has the skills and the nurse is the one who is there to provide care, to carry out instructions, to be with the patient, but she is not asked to think.

Q: Are there groups of colleagues with whom you may have had confrontations or, conversely, you may have developed a good relationship?

A: I don't remember any confrontation. Confrontation with management, yes, it happened to me in the public sector when we disagreed on management issues, or about trying out something or about decisions taken on which we disagreed. We all met and discussed together and we found a spokesperson in the team, the one who expressed themselves best, who managed to get ideas across, who was well regarded by the management. We'd meet, we'd think about it, we'd write down our ideas, requests, what we agreed on, and what we were angry about. We'd ask for a meeting that would accept or not our requests to discuss and express them... Yes, it united us, it bound us together, and we knew who among us was defending what and it was important to know it.

Q: All this without the trade unions support?

A: There were trade unions then, but in our opinion, at least in the emergencies, they seemed to us a little backward, disconnected with reality. The unions reps were pensioners, 65; they told us about their old times: "Once it wasn't like that for us." But then they were stuck in those times and useless to fight for what we wanted to fight. And so, we didn't call on them. We had a spokesperson we chose among us. Someone brave enough to propose something and ask for meetings, and that helped us a lot. What united us was the need to solve difficult situations with the patients.

Q: Who do you think could or should improve your working and living conditions?

A: I think there are two different points. The first is that I think has their own issues and I think it involves so many issues that it's like the Arabic telephone. As a result, the information will never be well conveyed. If the request starts on my terms, and then on the terms of my executive's and then my management's, the director's and then the prefect's (who is the regional authority) and then at the departmental level and then the president's. By then, I think we will have lost our request. But if we at our level do nothing, we can wait forever and nothing changes. It depends on the proposed or requested changes, it depends on whom, why and in whose interest.

Q: How has Covid affected your living conditions?

A: They are unchanged. Post-lockdown, in my working experience, I find that people have changed. People have become... after lockdown there is anxiety. During the lockdown, I had very, very few patients; it was the opposite when there was the lowest level of Covid infections, in our region, at least. Post-lockdown people arrived for treatment upset, impatient, unwilling to wait, afraid of each other. With wild, anxious, angry requests, I did not find the people the same as before Covid.

Q: Has your professional situation remained the same?

A: As a nurse, yes, because... When you start studying nursing, you know that you are preparing for a potential catastrophe. You are prepared for exceptional situations which concern large-scale populations. We know that sometimes we would be confronted with something that can be cataclysmic, Covid for me is one of them though, our region was not the most affected, but it was cataclysmic for the populations and our country in general, in terms of the number of deaths. I think we are prepared for this. We know that one day we may be faced with complicated situations that affect a lot of people. So yes, unchanged, I still do the same job.

Q: And have your working conditions changed?

A: What have changed are the additional preventive measures we take to carry out our profession. At the beginning of the Covid in February we were asked to wear surgical masks for all the treatments that we suspected to be unsafe. After the confinement we were asked to wear surgical masks in all circumstances, even to attend an isolated trauma of the ankle, well yes, we still had to wear our masks because of the number of staff affected by the Covid. We

were asked to wear the FFP2 masks, which are more inconvenient while working. I admit that to wear them for more than 12 hours it's not very easy and it's very unpleasant, and it hurts.

Q: Have you been consulted on security measures?

A: No. No.

Q: Were there no complains?

A: Well... We were contacted and told that measures were going to be put in place, but with the aim of making the employee feel safe when coming into contact with the patient. It's quite understandable that we were asked to take good precautionary measures, the best possible. Firstly, to set an example to people who don't want to wear masks in our structures and secondly to protect ourselves because if we, the care workers are infected or sick there would be a staff shortage.

Q: So, despite the difficulty that these measures can represent in the long term, you think they are appropriate measures.

A: It seems to me that they are rather appropriate. I wouldn't have chosen these FFP2s because I think they hurt my nose but otherwise I think they are the cheapest on the market... So I'm not going to say anything... Yes of course I'm protected, I have over-blouses, charlottes, kazakhs, I have all the equipment I need to take care of someone who is suspected to have Covid or has Covid and thanks to that I go home in the evening telling myself that I won't infect anyone.

Q: What do you think of the political debate in France? Do you believe that it has any relation to your day-to-day problems?

A: What do you mean? What are the issues?

Q: Do you think that what occupies the public debate at the moment reflects the reality that you experience?

A: Yes. Maybe I don't know enough to give a precise answer to this question. What seems problematic to me is that I have the impression that decisions are being made about the medical staff's and the patients' future. I don't have (not me Justine, but me as an emergency ward nurse or if I was in any other position for example) the impression that I have been consulted or that I have been questioned or contacted by the government. I don't mind being asked,

even very simply, briefly or in three words what could improve the state of health in France, how to take better care of patients. Though I think that compared to other countries we are very lucky, Thanks to either the social security cover or private insurance policies I think that almost everyone in our country can be treated free of charge and for all types of pathologies including specialistic treatments. So although we are lucky, there are still decisions that are taken, for example on salaries, about which we have not been consulted. I see that the Covid crisis has allowed the public sector to achieve, for nurses and orderlies, a monthly increase of 180€, which is not negligible even if for the moment, it doesn't seem to be enough. Eventually, revolts protracted for several months have obtained some changes, although perhaps these are not the changes we originally wanted. Yes, the medical staff ask to be better paid, but they are also asking to work in conditions that make sense for their profession. And here I have the impression that we're losing the sense of our profession a little bit. At least as far as my situation is concerned.

Q: Concerning Covid, what do you think of the pandemic's management at the national level?

A: I think these are very complicated decisions to make. It's very complicated for a country to make a consistent decision, and I think we should, even if it takes a lot of work, do it on a case-by-case basis. About the lockdown for example, I was first against it, revolted, then in favour of it, then in the middle of thinking about it. At first, I was angry, then I relaxed, I said to myself that it was good, I stop working on my days off, I even do things that I like. I mean, cooking, sleeping, reading all that. About these decisions, I agreed and then disagreed, and I said to myself that we shouldn't only think from a general countrywide point of view but we should think closer to the people. We must offer to help the regions most affected. For example, I proposed to my structure to be transferred as a reinforcement in the high-infection Covid zones in France, but that was rejected. I thought that we weren't working hard enough at the clinic and that they certainly needed a pair of hands elsewhere. I just wanted to be able to bring some help and relieve the medical staff who were working 72 hours in a row. I think you have to make decisions case by case. Wearing a mask unfortunately seems almost compulsory to me and I think it is a good solution. In China, before Covid, sick people used to wear masks to avoid to contaminate other people. I don't think that we should impose lockdown on

the population and close bars and restaurants. We have a country in economic difficulties. Economically speaking, I think we have sunk a lot of businesses. And I like to go out, I like to go to restaurants, I like to be able to do things outside of my job, which only represents 50% of my life, because yes I work but the rest of the time I do many other things. I'm not sure about taking such an overreaching decision. Lockdown has been a never-ending process. Two weeks is enough. But on the other hand, you have to be able to propose a more precise and more thought-through alternative.

Q: Do you think that also on this matters there is this lack of consultation?

A: Yes well, I don't feel I've been consulted. Though I am not the spokesperson for the nursing profession in France. But no... But I didn't miss it, maybe I was questioning myself in my own thing, or I was thinking "Why did we come to take such radical decisions?". Is it because people don't understand half measures? Maybe because everything seems excessive, they took a decision that seems excessive. I think that we are at a stage in Covid where the only solution is to make the populations take responsibility. People must be told: "this is what Covid is all about"; they must be given clear, precise and short information ; "Yes, Covid exists, here are the risks of infection, here is what you can risk by catching it; these are the people or type of population at risk; this is what is suggested to you". Then everyone can do as they wish.

We are currently in an emergency situation of 'plan blanc' for the PACA region, which means that I can be called upon 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to go and work in my clinic.

Q: Do you foresee any positive change when you think about your future,?

A: At the moment I'm telling myself that I want to change departments. I don't want to work in A&E anymore. I think that at the end of my contract I'm going to change department. In the long term, I don't think I'll be working in this job all my life. I'm thinking of doing something else afterwards. I find it a little difficult to see the positive side of nursing in the long term. When I hear my mother, for example, talk to me about her profession, she was a nurse when she was 19, that was more than 30 years ago. I have the impression that the basic problems are still the same. So from the 1970s and 1980s to 2020, the human problems

are always the same. The medical problems are less, since medicine's evolution allows us to change things radically, and so much for the better. We no longer talk about contaminated blood; we can save people who have strokes. On the other hand, the fundamental human problems, I am not sure that there has been a great positive evolution, in any case, I hope that people will be in control of their health in the years to come. However, it is also our fault as medical staff; we must make people responsible for their own health. We promise that we must always give a clear, fair and appropriate explanation. It is not simple. And it's our responsibility to give people that.

Q: Are you worried about the future more in general, such as the economy and the environment situation?

A: I don't think I'm anxious, but wrongly so. I am aware but I'm not at the stage of anxiety. Maybe it should worry me. What actually worries me is when I see every day the material that is distributed to protect us, for example the FFP2 masks, each mask is packed in a plastic bag. I didn't understand why we ordered these masks. Yes, I'm a bit annoyed that each mask is packed in a plastic bag; I don't think that's normal. A cardboard box, even if it wasn't cardboard. We can take our mask safely from a box of 500, without contaminating other masks. Maybe we don't have to pack each mask. And when I see people throw their masks on the floor; I'm not exactly sure how decomposable is a mask, but I think it takes close to 100 years minimum to break down. It isn't as disposable as a handkerchief because 1 it's dirty, 2 it's contaminated and 3 we don't throw plastic on the floor and I'm a bit upset about that... I don't know maybe they're going to create biodegradable masks. I think people who are afraid will not take cloth masks. I would like to be able to wear a cloth mask all day but I don't think it protects me like a surgical mask or FFP2 so it's a bit annoying.

Q: And if you could change something in the immediate future, what would you do?

A: In my job? I will always try to do my job a little better than I did yesterday.

Q: And a change that would not necessarily depend on you?

A: Teamwork. I think it needs to evolve. I think we need to think together and not in isolation. We need to have groups and meetings and discuss what we can do better, what we

can change, and the added value we can always bring to the patient. This requires consultation.

Q: The same questions are asked to other workers in various countries in Europe, what message would you send them?

A: Take courage, to begin with. And I would like to tell them, hoping that it is true, that I and I expect my country, we can help them when times are difficult. I thought straight away of Italy. I saw the Italian medical staff... I think they are going through something even more difficult than we are...

6. Tania

Q: How are you coping with the difficult period we are going through not only in France but worldwide with the pandemic and Covid?

A: Personally I'm fine but it's true that it's very difficult, this problem of Covid with the implications that it can have. In the context of my work with the social distancing measures, we have to respect that, it seems normal, but it changes a number of things and it's rather negative, in the sense that the communication with children it's more complicated, it's less spontaneous. So it remains a problem, even if it is manageable.

Q: Can you briefly introduce yourself?

A: I am a teacher. I teach in a college and I teach 11- to 15-year-olds children. I teach Latin and French. It is a college with 740 students, in a small town, a very average provincial town.

Q: Do you think you have an above-average living standard?

A: I think my living standards are above average. Tough, it depends on what we mean by average. It's a little complicated to explain but compared to situations I see with some children, I realise that I'm in a rather privileged position because I have a salaried job, no worries about where the money will come from tomorrow. I don't think it's an easy job, but I would say that... that I'm rather... It seems to me that, compared to the majority of French people, I belong to a rather privileged category of people.

Q: It isn't just about the size of your income then?

A: I don't worry about the next day. It's still a job that sometimes is difficult, to the point that some people give up or

try to change and it's quite complicated to find something else once you've got yourself into that career, but in any case, personally I... I feel rather, how can I put it... I feel rather, how can I put it? Privileged, I don't know if that's the right word, but in any case, I'm not constantly worried about what's going to happen tomorrow.

Q: Can you tell us what is your accommodation?

A: I live in a house that I bought with my partner 10 years ago and currently I have two relations that live with us. So it's a very big place, which is nice... However, it's how to say... We are trying to sell this house because it's too expensive compared to our income.

Q: Going back to your job, how long have you been working at this college?

A: Since 2014.

Q: In term of contracts, are you an associate professor?

A: I've become an associate professor only very recently. I passed the CAPES (Certificate of aptitude for secondary school teachers) in 1986 and since then I haven't been able or willing to take the agrégation. But I ended up getting an offer of a position recently. How can I say, quite to my advantage, which is quite rare after all, let's just say I was lucky.

Q: Do you believe that your job affects your relationship with the people you love?

A: I would say that. My children have said that. It hasn't affected the holidays which are important in this profession. I've often been told that I spend too much time on my work. Because it's difficult to forget it once you're back home. It's very time-demanding if you don't set limits. So I would say that, as it's a job that I continue to love, I can take it on relatively well, but I think the children were right and the advice I get from my friends and acquaintances I think they're right too. That is to say that it's difficult to get away from it.

Q: Do you think Covid has changed something in your work-life balance?

A: I didn't have problems with my children as they are already grown up, but the pandemic has negatively affected most people's family lives. I know that it is always very complicated to balance life and work and I sometimes had to work up to 13-14 hours a day in front of the computer

to feel satisfied with my work. It lasted a few months but it couldn't last forever. I thought it was terribly... I have no other term than time-consuming.

Q: How is it the situation in your school since the beginning of the new academic year?

A: I try to find moments when I can stop. For example, in the evenings, I try to finish earlier than I did last year. I don't know if I would last. The relatively positive side of Covid for my profession, is that, because we were calling many families to find out how things were, we established a bond of trust with some people beyond the usual phone call from a teacher who gets in touch with parents because there is a problem. It was a more holistic approach to hear about news and if the children were doing well. It created a closeness that I found pleasant. But for the rest it was rather negative. Since we came back it's been hard because the protection measures have made difficult any closeness with the children, we have to stay away, everyone wears the mask all the time, though we take it off for lunch. We wear it during the breaks and during the lessons. It's very, very heavy, that's what it is.

Q: Have you been consulted on the measures about Covid?

A: On this point, we didn't approve all the measures put in place in my college. However, at the end of the holidays, these measures were imposed. It doesn't seem like much, but now the children have staggered breaks in my school. That means that children in the sixth and fifth grade don't go out at the same time as the fourth and third grade. This creates a real commotion in the corridors and the hours of classes are not the same, which has been rather negative. In this case, the headmaster knew that the majority were against it and tried to find other solutions because we understood the necessity of these health measures. Also we found them relatively inconsistent after all, because the children get together before entering and leaving school and in other circumstances anyway. I think some additional restrictions are not necessary and are a great inconvenience without being really effective to protect public health.

Q: Did the teachers demonstrate against this situation?

A: We're trying, we're in the process. We told the headmaster that we found the measures really unjustified and rather negative. He hid behind the safety concerns, and I think

he's waiting for the first board of directors to reconsider the measures because some parents will support the teachers. We don't know what it will lead to, especially since of all the schools in the area we're the only one to have staggered breaks, so we're taking measures that go beyond what has been done elsewhere and we don't think it's appropriate. For the moment we wait and see. But we haven't been listened to.

Q: Wasn't the headteacher just following directives?

A: There were compulsory measures, like wearing of masks, social distancing etc. All that was respected, nobody disputes that. However some of the measures he implemented, go beyond what is recommended by the institution. And in our opinion, this is not appropriate, and it is instead to the detriment of teaching quality.

Q: Do trade unions have a role in this?

A: For the moment not because the headmaster can take independent decisions. In theory, they should be discussed in the board of directors meeting, but he argued that these were safety measures. We are in a limbo at the moment until the measures will be discussed again during the first board meeting. Compared to last year, more people asked to attend the Board of Directors, to be heard.

Q: Do wearing a mask and the health measures affect the actual relationship with your students?

A: First, it's difficult for them to wear the mask all day long. They have to have it on all the time at school, they take it off only during sports and when they have lunch. They come from home with the mask, take it off during the meal and put it back afterwards. This is non-stop. The school is open from 7.30 am until 5 pm, and it's the same for us. It's a real pain. There are children who, sometimes, lower it a little bit to get their nose out, and you should always ask them to put it back on properly. It's also a hindrance to communication because we sometimes don't hear what they say. Some people speak very quickly, we have difficulty hearing what they say. We make them repeat it several times, we can't see their faces and they have the same problem. There is a whole part of communication that is not verbal, which is made more difficult with this mask. I'm not saying we should take it off, but we think that, for example, when we keep our distance from the children, is it really necessary to have our mask on all the time? When they are sitting away from each other, do they have to have

their mask on all the time? If a child is sick, they may have the accidental cough. But with the mask it's continuously all the time and it is hard.

Q: Do you think that more consultation was necessary and could have led to alternative solutions?

A: Certainly, if we had been consulted. I feel a little uncomfortable because I don't know to what extent it really would have had an impact. The problem is that the classes are crowded, there are 30 students in each classroom. This makes things twice as complicated. We complained, but were never consulted afterwards! The main problem with the classes is that there are too many children per classroom. The thresholds were raised 2-3 years ago. We've gone to 28 for 6th grade and 30 for other grades, which means that we have classrooms that are really packed. Some measures we have to apply, for example, wearing the mask, would probably be more appropriate if there were 20 or 22 students in a classroom and more space. Some classrooms are small and the kids are on top of each other. And it's the same in the corridors! When they come down, it's impossible to enforce social distancing. It's a commotion of kids coming down.

Q: Expanding on the issue of the number of children per class, do you think that there have been changes in your working conditions or professional situation in the last five years?

A: It's deteriorating. It would be difficult to draw a comparison with five years ago, but how can I say it, the fact is that – and I don't think it's just an impression – the children are finding it harder and harder to concentrate. For some of them it is more and more difficult to respect the general rules. I'm pretty sure that there is a real problem with the children watching too much TV, computers and mobile phones at home. I think that there are kids who don't get enough sleep, who spend too much time in front of their screens and I think that we are all directly affected. I can't measure it scientifically, but I think they are more tired.

Q: Do you think there have also been changes within the national education system?

A: Well, we find the job more and more difficult. It's difficult to determine which are the most important factors. Every year I am one year older, so I'm 6-8 years maximum away from retirement, I'm definitely more tired than 20 years ago. But then I see some younger colleagues leaving the

profession, it's very difficult for them too. Regarding the children's ability to stay focused, their respect for others, for what other people say; the trust their parents place on them, we try to take situations into account but, for example, the headteacher's role is much more complicated than it was a few years ago, there are many more things to do. And then we have the impression that they want us to apply extra skills that will later become the norm at national level and would just increase the workload without a real vision of what's going on. For example, we are asked to evaluate the students' performances. We do it in a certain way, and we know that the educational authorities will disagree. We will be told "you shouldn't evaluate performances like that because you are excessively strict". At the end of the day, we're going to pass many children, whilst we know that a certain number of those who will go to high school will fail. Because of the criteria imposed on us, they will get a pass when they shouldn't.

Q: Who do you think is responsible for these changes?

A: Those in charge, I think. Recommendations at the ministerial level. I think those people are cut off from reality. There's a clear argument for that. Certainly there are also good decisions, for example, the decision to halve the pre-school classes' size. I don't know to what extent this has been implemented, and although this is very good, it's not enough. It should have been applied to other settings. All classrooms should not exceed the number of 22 children. There should be fewer students per class for some grades, there should be resident psychologists in each school. In primary school, there are teachers who take care of children with special needs, and there should be more of them. In reality, we take care of students with special needs. Here, for example, I have a pupil who has just arrived in ninth grade, I think he's not much better than being illiterate because he had a large part of his schooling in Mayotte. I don't think he can read fluently and I don't know how this little one will be looked after. At the moment he's in a class, he can't keep up with the lessons. So we put the social worker on the case, but it has made no difference: she is following I don't know how many pupils, she has a one-day shift per week in our school, so there is not enough support she can give. There are not enough of us, both teachers in the classrooms and administration and general duties staff. There should be many more adults present to look after the kids, that's for sure. Because those who do well are pupils from families in which things work well. Moreover, we have

extra-curricular courses, open to all the kids, whatever the family's socio-professional level, but in reality, the kids who attend them are kids from privileged backgrounds. It is clear that there are a lot of things in place that in my opinion are not essential compared to others.

Q: How would you describe your relations with your colleagues?

A: It's very difficult to generalise. I would say that in my school there is a level of solidarity, but at the personal level, as people are not all the same, there are still frictions, especially because the management wants to divide people rather than unite them. So it's actually very difficult. I would say that now, they really try, we have the impression that they try to divide people. However, for example, in the humanities department, solidarity is very good. In contrast, sometimes in certain teams, there will be a negative situation because people are made jealous of each other by creating the impression that some have better timetables, better allocation of classes. It's a bit complicated to answer this question.

Q: Have you either difficult or good relations with any specific group of colleagues?

A: That's also a will on my part. However, I don't get too involved; in 30 years of career I have met people for whom I have no sympathy and whom I don't see outside of work, and others who are friends. Who have become friends, with whom I enjoy working and I feel I am on the same wavelength. Overall, it's so individual when I think of examples around me. I think that other people would decide that it's too difficult, other people who have decided to invest less in the professional relations, so they distance themselves. So it isn't easy to give a general answer.

Q: What is your approach to politics and the current political debate in France? Do you think that it is relevant to the problems you face on a day-by-day basis?

A: I'm quite interested in what's going on but I don't think it's deep enough. I would say that the gap between the richest and the poorest are widening, the important problems are not... Well, we can talk about ecology but... I think that things are moving too slowly and I don't know... Society is exceptionally unequal, We still have a good health system, but I think that overall, between what is shown and what is said, what is done, it seems to me that inequalities are increasing.... and that as a result... Well, I'm lucky enough to

be one of the people who are among the most privileged, but rather on the side of... without, in my opinion, being part of the small privileged minority, I'm not very optimistic.

Q: Do you think that the measures taken with Covid were sufficient and appropriate?

A: It would seem that the lockdown was effective but afterwards it was the same, I find it difficult to have a clear-cut opinion compared to other health crisis. I have doctor friends who tell me that too much importance is given to this disease compared to others that are more lethal. I know that, thinking about the people in residential care, if you cut people's social links, some of them completely alone and depressed would let themselves die. I honestly don't know. I know that not introducing restrictions... There are clusters because there are people who don't respect the health rules, so I find it difficult to have a clear-cut opinion, I find the situation very complicated to manage and I don't have a clear-cut opinion but I hope that there won't be a new lockdown. In my opinion, there are too many negative effects.

Q: Do you think that your future will be better or worse than your current situation? How do you see it?

A: I'm rather afraid about the future of my children, about the future of the planet. We're already in the process, well, I mean about the species that are going to be extinct, diseases that are increasingly difficult to cure. I would say that from a purely selfish point of view, as I will be retired in a few years, I pray to be healthy and be able to enjoy life a little.

Q: Are you looking forward to retirement?

A: [...] Though getting older is no fun, I can't wait to retire. Though I still like looking after young people I can't wait to retire. If I could go back to the time... when there was what was called a progressive reduction of employment, i.e. you could work less from the age of 55, I'll sign for it right away.

Q: So it's not because you don't like your job, it's more because of the exhaustion, the workload.

A: That's it, mental burden, not being listened to. And even if I find that many people individually show a lot of good will, it's just their personal attitude more than what is happening in reality. Superficially, when we compare education in France or even in Mayotte, which is still France, we

are still in better conditions than other countries, but if we look into it carefully, many children don't receive any support at all.

Q: What would you like to see changed in the immediate future?

A: The immigration policies. Well, I don't know... There are so many things... About the economy... Considering environmental problems, I would say that these are the two issues that seem to me... And perhaps in the emergency, yes migrants are the number one priority. What happened in Greece, I mean... I think it's shameful.

Q: How do you think you, us, or other people could take action about these issues?

A: Well, I'm ready to pay more taxes. Honestly, I thought that we could accommodate homeless people because we live in a house big enough, but I think it would not be practically possible. I would be ready to, in a collective effort, I would be ready to give from my pocket to make things go differently. Apart from this, I'm not sure I'll have the energy to do some volunteer work. For example, I was thinking, when I retire, I would join an association to help migrants to learn French etc... but I think I would really like to change my occupation so I'm not sure I'll do that. But I would still like to be able to do something useful later on. It seems to me that doing something useful is still part of my job and that's what I like about it, I have a profession that I think is useful. I prefer it to selling phones for example.

Q: Do you think that the individual initiative will bring about this change or that it is something that must also come "from above"?

A: I think it has to come from above. Some people are in such a situation that you can't expect them... When you have a lot of personal problems, I don't see how you can have a time to. It seems complicated to me. However, some people manage to show solidarity whatever their own difficulties are. At times, I feel that the more privileged we are, the more we are in a bubble far from reality and we curl up on ourselves. Or what we consider to be problems are not really problems. That's why, when I complain about my work, I tell myself that I, for example, my kids... I could have paid for their studies. After all, it's all a question of... Well... It's all relative, it's a bit silly to say so, but... that's it. I don't have to teach anyone a lesson.

Q: I just have one last question which is a bit of a concluding question. These questions are asked to other workers in other countries in Europe. Is there anything you would like to tell them?

A: I would say, use your vote but at the same time one wonders if it's really... To work to improve things. It's all very vague. Yes that we... Big movements can achieve results. So that yes, it would be good if, without borders separation, we could stop certain trends in our society. I would be happy to take part. And it seems to me that young people, for example, are doing more than what we have done for the environment, and I think that's good. I don't know what will happen next. It is not so much the workers but the people who have access to information, who have more possibility. It isn't easy to answer.

THE CASE OF ITALY

by Edoardo Esposto

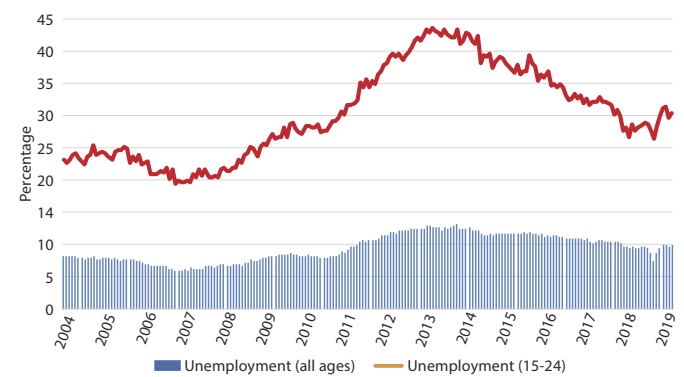
1. BRIEF REPORT ON ITALY'S CURRENT ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SITUATION

European workers are still facing precarity as a basic employment condition. Even if the EU and many individual governments belonging to opposite political families in the last decades have touted flex-security as a successful policy paradigm for reconciling job security and 'healthy' flexibility (see Allamprese in this publication). Moreover, in Italy as in all the other EU countries, the labour market is extremely fragmented. Workers performing similar tasks and having similar skills, working in the same sector or even in the same workplace, are employed under various contracts, wage level and employment protections.

This policy failure is extremely evident in Italy. The 2017 centre-left government's *Jobs Act* (law no. 183/2014) was representative of flex-security tenets: making hire-and-fire easier for businesses, thus increasing the labour relations' instability. Then, offer incremental employment protections for those who manage to get on the ladder of permanent employment and residual and workfare-centric unemployment benefits and programmes to the great many who do not. These choices are mirrored in the labour market: for example, the replenishing pool of temporary employment allowed the consolidation of various labour-supply services in the hands of corporate labour brokers (think, for example, to the *Adecco Group*).

The high level of unemployment (**Fig. 6**) registered in the country has been associated, in the economic and political discourses, with the need to 'modernise' national employment protection laws, implementing more active labour market policies, fostering school-to-work transition (e.g. apprenticeship schemes) and, more generally, reducing 'unproductive' public expenditures to direct public resources towards pro-growth investments.

Fig. 6 Unemployment in Italy (all ages and 15-24)

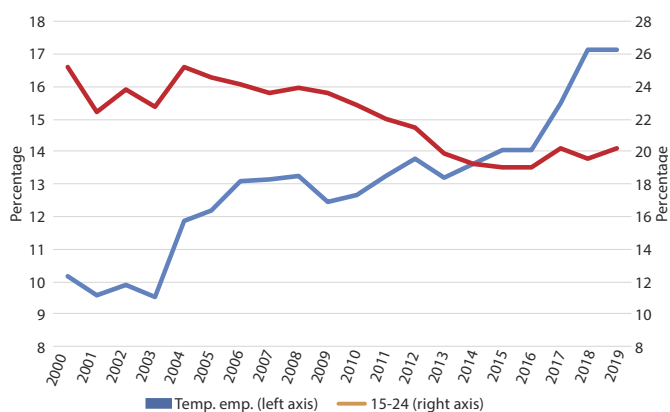


Source: ISTAT (<https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/251152>)

The geographic segmentation of the labour market in Italy is certainly still shaped by the century-old North-South divide, with the Southern regions lagging behind in terms of employment, GDP growth, investments, etc. This structural expression, in Italy, of an uneven and combined development, has been coupled, since the 2000s, with the decentralisation and the regionalisation of public policy (for instance, employment agencies are managed at the regional level). Finally, collective bargaining at the national level is increasingly replaced by regional, company-level or plant-level bargaining (D'Amuri & Giorgiantonio 2015).

The intergenerational divide in the labour market is particularly significant in the country. Youth unemployment is well above the EU average, and young workers remain a sizeable share of the temporary employed (**Fig. 7**).

Fig. 7 Temporary employment as percentage of total employment; employees age 15-24 as percentage of temporary employment in Italy.

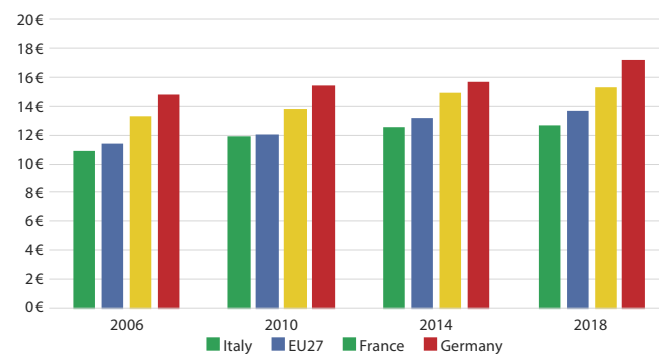


Source: Eurostat [lfsa_eeaed; lfsa_etgaed]

While the overall level of temporary employment has been increasing stably over the past decades, temporary youth employment decreased after the 2008 crisis. It is just worth noting that this decrease corresponded to a sharp increase in youth unemployment, and thus it cannot be taken as an unqualified sign of a smoother transition to permanent employment.

High unemployment and discontinuous labour relations are instrumental to (re)establish a permanent pool of reserve labour, which is necessary to keep the wage level low. The stagnation of wages in the country has been worsened by the 2008/2011 crisis. The average hourly earnings are now lower than the EU27 average and far below the other important economies of Western Europe (Fig. 8). The possibility of an upward convergence of the Italian wages and the EU average seems today far less likely than fifteen years ago.

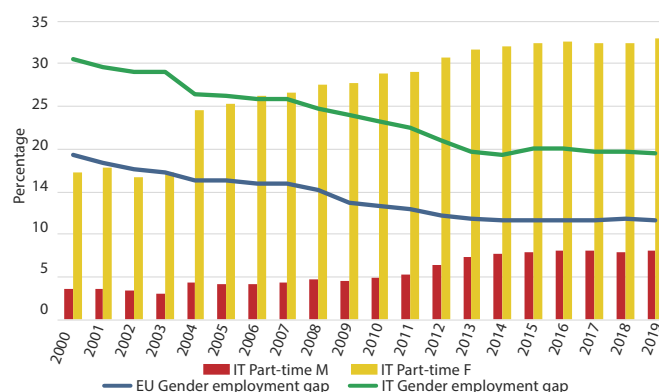
Fig. 8 Median hourly earnings, all employees (excluding apprentices).



Source: Eurostat [EARN_SES_PUB2S]

If we look to gender segmentation, and women’s unfair and discriminatory treatment at work, Italy has a low level of gender pay gap, around 5% in 2017, well below the EU average (14.5% in the EU27 in the same year)¹⁷. However, the country has a far higher level of women exclusion from the labour market, represented by the gender employment gap (Fig. 9), calculated as the difference between the percentage of male and female workers in employment. Moreover, part-time employment is mainly female (a feature common to many EU countries). Thus, Italian women are less likely to be employed than men and more likely to work less hours.

Fig. 9 Gender employment gap in EU28 and Italy; male and female part-time employment as percentage of total employment.



Source: Eurostat [lfsi_emp_a; lfsa_eeppga]

The high level of involuntary part-time employment, a problem already discussed in the previous chapter, is compounded by a gender division of care work, which incentivises women to accept part-time jobs (Tab. 8).

17 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_05_20/default/table?lang=en.

Tab. 8 Main reason for part-time employment, Italy, 2019

Reasons	Total	Male	Female
Could not find a full-time job	65.8	80.0	61.1
Own illness or disability	1.8	2.5	1.5
Other family or personal responsibilities	5.5	1.4	6.9
Looking after children or incapacitated adults	12.7	1.2	16.5
In education or training	1.9	3.5	1.4
Other	12.2	11.4	12.5

Source: Eurostat [lfsa_epgar]

The segmentation of the labour market is a concern for the European institutions too. In its recommendations to the country, the European Commission has repeatedly pointed out the de-segmentation as a priority for Italy. However, as convincingly argued by Eichhorst and Marx (2020), the European political and economic discourses about the fragmentation of the labour market are still informed by a static conception of a dualised labour force, where a stable set of ‘protected’ workers confront a stable set of unprotected ones. This insiders-outsiders representation is missing, as the authors correctly note, the incremental effect of policy reforms, eroding specific labour rights, the entire working population and the – often unexpected – feedback of localised innovation on firms’ decisions and, thus, on the trajectory of the labour market.

The two most recent reforms of Italy’s labour relations show signs of this type of ambiguities and contradictions. On the one hand, the ‘post-ideological’ party *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S) sponsored a re-regulation of labour relations, with the so-called *Dignity Decree* (law no. 96/2018), which re-introduced some restrictions to the use of fixed-term contracts (2 years maximum length and the requirement to justify their use) and increased the compensation for unfair dismissal (Nannicini *et al.* 2019).

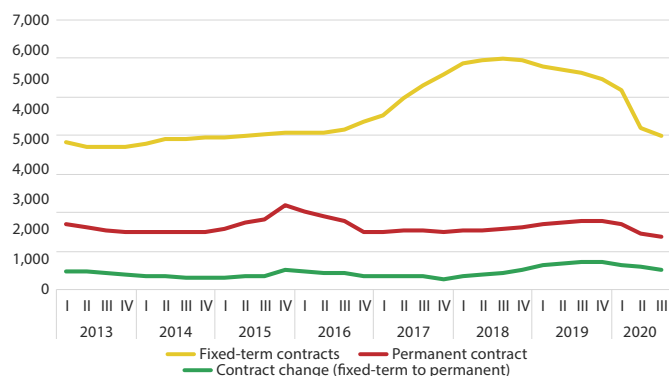
On the other hand, the M5S pushed for a reform of income support measures, the so-called *Citizenship Income* (law no. 28/2019), a conditional minimum income (with a payable maximum of 780€) which introduces in the Italian welfare system a new component (the benefit is conditional to the acceptance of one out of three job offers received from an employment agency). And it is not a leap of imagination thinking that, despite the coexisting (and in some respects competing) *Dignity Decree*, beneficiaries of *Citizenship Income* will be offered low wage, temporary or part-time

jobs, and their income support will be withdrawn for 18 months if they refuse to accept those working conditions.

Finally, if we turn to the foreseeable effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on Italian workers, the first data available confirm the trend observed in the EU. The unemployment level did not increase dramatically thanks to the public support measures implemented in the first months of the crisis (e.g. short-time working schemes and temporary stop to redundancies in some sectors). However, the decrease in the creation of new jobs (minus 595.000 new contracts in June 2020, compared to June 2019) is a stark reminder of the magnitude of the current crisis and the looming risk of a social disaster if the emergency social protections are lifted soon.

New fixed-term vacancies have been affected the most by the employment contraction following the first year of the pandemic (**Fig. 10**). Figure 10 allows us to appreciate in full the Job Act’s effect, with fixed-term contracts sharply increasing after its implementation. The re-regulating effect of *Dignity Decree*, which induced the relative pre-Covid decline of fixed-term contracts, is somehow contradicted by the moderate increase of new permanent vacancies and of contractual switches (from fixed-term to permanent employment). The possibility of a variegation of precarious labour relations, which makes a renewed and extensive use of non-contractual arrangements such as false self-employment, is a likely outcome of the piecemeal re-regulation of labour relations that the country experienced in the recent past.

Fig. 10 New contracts by contract type; number of transitions from fixed-term to permanent contract



Source: INPS Uniemens (<https://www.lavoro.gov.it/documenti-e-norme/studi-e-statistiche/Pagine/default.aspx>)

2. TOPICS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF RESULTS¹⁸

2.1. Self-perception: Self-perceived control over labour and description of own working and living conditions

Q: *What are your specific aspirations?*
A: *A stable job, to be less stressed. The absence of job stability gives me anxiety.*
Arianna, intern in a retail shop.

Precarity: from temporary contracts to 'self-employment'

Precarity is not a one-dimensional phenomenon. It worsens the basic source of income and wellbeing for the great majority of the people. It alters the temporal and spatial terms we use to navigate the course of our life. Being certain about making ends meet in a month or a year or five does modify the way we think and act in the present. Having a fixed number of working hours per day every week, negotiating those hours to accommodate personal life, rest, leisure are essential – yet for many unrealistic – demands to reduce exploitation.

Finally, precarious contractual arrangements go hand in hand with low and stagnant wages. The collective capability of the working class to negotiate the terms of the labour relations has weakened to the point that the objective segmentation of the labour market has started to be reflected subjectively. The political identities acting in the class struggle are disjointed, and the fragmentation facilitates the regressive political discourses hinging upon false oppositions: 'protected' and 'unprotected' workers, individualised producers competing against each other, and so on.

As one of our respondents, Michaela, a key interviewee and an activist for women rights, puts it:

Q: *The solution must not be: reduce the rights of the most protected workers, like public workers, for starting on a level playing field, as it is always proposed by pundits and politicians.*

A stable labour relation is, for the greatest number of interviewees, a desired but not achievable condition. Instability, on the other hand, is the norm. Alessio, a very young worker, who lives in the outskirts of Milan, has had an exemplar history of casual labour.

¹⁸ We would like to thank Michele Losindaco for his essential contribution in gathering the interviews we will discuss in this chapter.

“ Right after high school, I helped my uncle, who is a plumber. After a few months, I found a job in the nautical sector to produce luxury dinghies. I was tasked with the final gluing of rubber details. After 8 months, the cooperative we were working for had troubles, and we were all laid off. For a while after, I received unemployment benefit. When I wasn't hired somewhere, I was helping my uncle with his business.

The problem is not limited to the young and less-skilled workers entering the job market for the first time and facing a difficult transition from lower education to employment.

People who entered higher education to acquire the skills they need to advance in a career of their choice, face a similar situation. Laura, who studied to become a pharmacist, described the experience of finding employment in her sector: an ordeal that ends, in the best-case scenario, in temporary employment.

“ I have a 'type 1' commercial contract for the health sector. It is fixed-term and it will expire in December. It is a rather peculiar situation... I have been hired as a replacement for a [employee in] maternity leave, then my contract was renewed because I replaced another [employee in] maternity leave. [...] My contract has been extended for another three months. In few weeks I will take a competitive exam [to in a public pharmacy]. If I pass, I will get another 6 months fixed-term contract.

However, employers' increased opportunity of hiring workers under temporary contract is not a phenomenon happening in isolation. It is the result – and, at the same time, one of the enabling conditions – of the de-structuring and restructuring of the production process, on the one hand, and of the public and welfare service sectors, on the other. Sub-contracting (or outsourcing) features prominently in both cases.

Lucia, who specialised in psychological help for mentally or physically vulnerable people, experienced the negative effects of competitive outsourcing of public care.

“ From January 2019 to September 2020, I was employed as a disability support worker by a cooperative under an 'occasional collaboration' contract [voucher-based work]. Then, I was hired as a care assistant, under a part-time fixed-term contract by the same cooperative. [...] Before this job, I worked two years as a care assistant for another big cooperative in Rome, in a centre for refugee women and children of the Department of Social Policy of Rome.

In Italy, cooperatives have been regeared (since the '90s) into a cog of the mechanism fostering precarisation. Corporations downsized in-house production and outsourced an increasing number of phases and production tasks to competitive sub-contractors, often hiring the very same workers laid off in a downsizing. This has been a standard procedure in contemporary capitalism (Cingolani, 2019). In Italy, the cooperative legal form proved particularly well-suited for these sub-contractors, in strong need of flexible labour relations and cost-cutting managerial practices to cope with the uncertainty over the renewal of the outsourcing contract and sustain the competitive pressure of other sub-contractors.

This process took place both in the private and the public sector. Social cooperatives' growth matched the increasing use of contracting out by local municipalities, regional healthcare agencies, and other institutional. Lucia's experience embodies the casualisation of employment in the welfare service sector.

“ Q: The contract you had was...
A: It was fixed term. It has been renewed several times: for a month, the first time, then 3 months, then 7 months, then another 3 months... [...]. After a year and a half, I was forced to take a 20-days [unpaid] break; otherwise the cooperative would have had to hire me under a permanent contract [as for the 2017 'Jobs Act']. [...] Then they hired me from June to October... the contract was not renewed further, and they didn't notify me until two weeks before the end.

The cost-cutting potential of outsourcing has been positively received by the Italian State, in the continuous effort (at least since the 1990s) to reduce public expenditures

and roll back public goods and services. Another manifestation of the attempts to reduce public expenditures is the decrease and worsening of public jobs available in crucial sectors, such as education.

As a direct effect of the welfare state's retrenchment, the pension system has been 'modernised' with recurring reforms since 1992, increasing the age limit for retirement. The workforce permanently employed in the public education system is the oldest, on average, in Europe (with the 57.2% of public teachers above 50 years old, in 2017, compared to 44.6% in Germany, 29.6% in France and 35.7% EU average)¹⁹. The indirect effect has been the unwillingness to expand permanent employment in the sector, and the reliance instead on a growing precarious workforce. Giulia, who works in private education but 'would rather teach in a public school', gives a precise depiction of how public hiring procedures become mechanisms for reproducing precarity.

“ Unfortunately, I couldn't meet the eligibility requirements to take the competitive exam. [...] [The] exam system [...] is a pure madness now. It takes so much time and effort to simply participate...it is not realistic. Suppose you want to be a teacher you need to graduate from a specific university, under a specific and ever-changing set of rules [for meeting eligibility requirements]. In that case, you need to do vocational training, apply and study for the exams...this costs time and money. A university graduate has to wait 5 years on average to get into the roster [the merit ranking for teaching in public schools]. And this isn't ensuring you are gonna get a job! So, you reach 30 at the bottom of the roster for a job you are not yet familiar with, without a source of income for supporting your family, paying for your house... this is not a job for young people. All these tests are creating a hodgepodge of young teachers that cannot start the career they studied so much for.

As mentioned above, the situation is by no means limited to the public sector; thus, accounts that trace these problems back to the public sector's inability to cope with accel-

erating transformations are myopic at best. They are, most likely, politically motivated.

In the private sector the apparent devolution of responsibility and control over production to independent, lower-level productive units, takes, increasingly, the form of false self-employment. Workers that perform a continuous, exclusive, and coordinated job for a firm are hired under the pretence of providing a simple consultancy to the contractor. For example, Giorgio is a claims adjuster, working continuously for a firm specialising in providing liabilities determination services to insurance companies.

“ Q: Which type of contract do you have?
A: Being self-employed, [my job] is not based on a contract, not at all. I signed, at the beginning, a corporate policy about the rules of conduct for collaborators...it was rather generic and has nothing to do with an employment contract. It didn't include working time, nothing...I am paid monthly, based on the cases I was following that have been paid to my employer by the customers [insurance companies]. [...] The mechanism is: the firm I work for tenders for contracts provided by the insurance companies, then they [the insurance companies] outsource cases, in huge numbers, [to us], requiring, quite obviously, [certain standards:] deadlines, pace, average liquidation, etc. [...] [T]hese [indicators] are systematised by the firm I work for, and presented daily, like it was an institutional simulcast, to all my colleagues. [...] A percentage [of the payment] made [to] the firm is then transferred to the claims adjuster, and on this we pay pension contributions, taxes, etc.

Unstable labour relations and overwork

Precarity causes not only the worsening of the terms of the contract in terms of job stability. It also means a worse hourly rate and a great risk to be forced to become overworked. The interviewees gave us a highly mixed depiction of the working conditions prevailing in the country, in line with the labour market segmentation.

¹⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20171004-1>.

For example, Laura, with a fixed-term contract in a public pharmacy,

“ spend 8 hours a day at work, with a two-hours break, but it feels like I am always working. I return home at 8 p.m. every working day. Fortunately, on Sunday, I am free at the weekend... on Sunday I am free, and I don't think to work on Sunday or in the evenings.

Though it can be argued that her case represents an example of a bad life-work balance, she is in the less impacted group by the casualisation of labour relations. Lucia, during her time with the social cooperative, has had a harsher experience.

“ Q: How was your life-work balance before Covid?
A: My previous contract was 40 hours [per week], distributed daily over the 24 hours, 7 days a week... I mean, including the weekend. Thus, I wasn't happy with my life-work balance, no. [...] In the meantime, I was attending the classes for my specialisation school, three days a month over the weekend. I struggled to slot it in during my free time.

Her type of job entails a strong personal commitment to provide care for the beneficiaries, and it is a career path that is often selected on the basis of moral or political values rather than on career and money expectations.

For these jobs, a well-known 'secondary exploitation' of gratuitous work, stemming from workers' commitment to their duties, occurs. Katia is an educator working on social projects. She describes this strong bond to her work, deriving from a personal vocation.

“ Q: How much of your daytime is dedicated to your work?
A: [My job] is a life choice. I mean, it is a job that completely merges with your personal life. It isn't a type of job that ends when you get home after 8 hours [...]. It is greatly enriching, too. I have chosen not to work in full-time education because I wanted more free time. But I am using this free time for doing activities that are related to my job, like readings and trainings [...]. There isn't a clear separation, but neither a total encroachment [of work on personal life].

The issue at stake becomes how to enforce the separation between work and personal life and spare some free time. The respondent presented us with a series of trade-offs that they face when trying to keep work and life balanced.

Laura, for example, would like to have a family. Still, she cannot because of the prospect of an even lower wage in a part-time contract and the present impossibility of starting a second job (because of overwork in the first one).

“ Q: What are your specific aspirations?
A: Well, [...] in the future, perhaps, having a family... Sure, my job should change, I will have to go on part-time... This means earning less and having too little income to support a family. I think I will have too little [income] for having a family. And I don't have enough free time now to look for a second job.

The situation she describes hints to workers' rights and pay so severely reduced that self-exploitation, as in doing several jobs to earn just enough to maintain a family, seems the only possibility.

This problem is compounded by the condition of false self-employment, under which workers have to work a maximum of long hours to increase their piece rates. Giorgio describes the trade-off he and his colleagues face between a decent wage and a decent life.

“ Q: How is the life-work balance of a self-employed worker subjected to these performance indicators?
A: [T]he problem with life-work balance [...] is that being paid on the basis of the closed cases, you are pushed to work as hard as you possibly can. I mean, if you don't need to overwork, or you are able to impose some self-restraint on yourself – or both – you can balance life and work as you prefer, so to speak. For example, I try – and it is difficult to work as little as I can on the weekend [...], not even for dealing with those issues that are very important to me, like preparing invoices for my company and check if I have been paid for all my cases... many of my colleagues are doing this over the weekend. I refuse to. Surely, I have less time left for taking up more cases than them because I am doing all the paperwork during the week. Some of

my colleagues are much better at keeping a faster pace [than me], some work twice as much as I do. Their life-work balance is utterly unbalanced, very lacking, and there is little hope to revert it, because you become deeply embroiled in this logic. Many of my colleagues are at their first work experience; many are very, very young [...]. They don't know that work can be different than this.

Giorgio is over 30, and he has previous experiences with different contract types. For him, 'self-employment' has a clear exploitative connotation. His younger colleagues, he argues, may not see things in the same way. The naturalisation of exploitation, or in other words taking for granted that overwork is a necessity in labour relations, is becoming more widespread among the population of 'self-employed' workers.

Nicola A. is a personal trainer in a gym. He is 'self-employed', and his colleagues are too. He gave us a precise description of his circumstances.

“ Q: How much of your daytime is dedicated to your work?

A: Ehm... all of it. 100% or so. The thing is, to earn a living you have to manage your free time starting from what is left from work.

Q: Do you think you have little free time?

A: Well no, not "little"... sacrificed, yes.

Q: Do you work extra-hours on top of your contract hours?

A: I am a self-employed, work is our home.

Q: Is this a necessity or a choice you made?

A: This is a fact, because in the context of personal training or fitness is a basic requirement.

The importance of institutional and collective recognition

A common problem for the respondents is the lack of recognition for their jobs in institutional and social terms. This, they argue, is the cause of the low protection and the low pay they receive. Nicola A., for example, is complaining that

“ [s]ince my job is not considered a social or cultural necessity, the State is not safeguarding us. Universities tried to pressure [for professional recogni-

tion] and I supported that effort. But today... years have passed, and zero results.

In the third sector, the perception of not being recognised by institutions, as workers undertaking essential social tasks, goes hand-in-hand with the privatisation of welfare systems and the transformation of social services into a private industry. Katia is reporting her experience in education:

“ *it's a matter of ensuring recognition to an entire category of workers, and of investing in the welfare system too... [public investments] in projects that have a positive effect on a broad range of social groups and families. [...] We, on the other hand, are financed mostly by private funds, and this cannot be right. The welfare system should not rely on private actors.*

Diminishing institutional recognition has directly impacted workers who had to face the risk connected to the Covid-19 pandemic in their daily working tasks. Laura is giving an insightful description of what happened during the first wave of the pandemic.

“ *In those months, of Covid, institutions completely forgot about us. At the beginning of the pandemic, for example, they didn't distribute PPE [personal protection equipment], we had to buy it personally. [...]*

We should be recognised as health workers, not as commercial employees. Vaccines, for example... they will be delivered to health workers first, and we are not included [in the priority delivery]. We don't take care of hospitalised people, as nurses do, true... but we do meet sick people, mine is a relational job, after all.

Thus, the lack of institutional recognition for the protection of labour rights goes together with the perception of unfair treatment regarding economic recognition, with endemic low wages.

The problem of low wages, especially when compared to high workload and little or no paid time off, is generalised. Almost all our respondents pointed it out. We will return to this issue when we discuss the respondents' expectations for the future.

Here, we want to stress the link established by the interviewees, between lack of public recognition and lack of economic recognition in their jobs. This connection is important since, we would argue, it represents the expression, in workers' daily life, of the fragmentation of political (class) identities brought about by the segmentation of the labour market and the individualisation of labour relations.

As explained by Tommaso – who has worked for years in the third sector and is firmly aware of the social workers' role in society –

“ have ill-defined duties and work processes. Workers end up handling several tasks at once. To be clear, this is not all bad. You may take up more responsibilities, which is gratifying at the personal level. But there is little economic recognition for your efforts: take the case of the head of a cooperative earning around 2000€ [per month], being at the same time responsible for all the work [...], while in the private sector, managers have one or two zeros more added to their salary.

The disparities between sectors induce the feeling of being treated unequally and thus help foster the narrative centred on the idea of the unfairly privileged treatment received by 'protected' workers.

The diminished recognition of one's job as part of the broader organisation of labour inside a company and a sector, on the other hand, is a powerful enabler for unopposed exploitation, as Giorgio reminds us.

“ I do not have an employer, in legal terms. This is such a... powerful thing. It is a scheme that frees what is my de facto employer from several obligations and responsibilities it would have had. And it gets workers accustomed to not thinking [of their rights].

'Self-employment' invites the naturalisation of exploitative working conditions. When asked if he thinks that his income is fair, when compared to the workload, Nicola A. responded that

“ today, as a thirty-year-old, yes. I mean, these working hours I can do now, they are going to decrease over time, for various reasons: biology, family... thus my income, if the way I am doing my job will not change, will decrease.

Responsibility: on the individuals or the rules of the game?

The problems we discussed in the previous sections – precarity, overwork, low wages, and lack of institutional and collective recognition – have been experienced by most of our respondents across sectors and geographical areas. To better understand the impact of these issues on workers' self-perception and their view on labour relations, we asked to trace these problems back to their causes, thus identifying a possible goal for transformative actions.

The responses we had can be organised in an ideal range, going from answers pinning the problems on individuals and their actions to answers acknowledging the collective and systemic nature of those issues.

Working in the third sector, Tommaso conceives of his job situation as being mostly the result and the responsibility of his individual choices. He, however, is moderately happy with his working conditions and sees them as the positive results of a long-term investment in improving his skills and connecting with more experienced people working in the sector.

“ Work depends firstly upon me. I invested quite a bit in education, I have three university degrees, a vocational master [...]. I also have a 'natural' predisposition for this kind of job: my family has been involved in the Third Sector for decades, [...] I was introduced to the sector when I was younger, volunteering and helping with project design, [...] learning and networking. I would say my family and me... Then there are the people I met while working. I am thinking of my colleagues and my supervisor. For example, my supervisor [...] helped me to develop a new way of looking at things [and] he surely helped me a lot with getting my contract.

In this first explanation, the employment situation derives from an individual effort: it is the result of self-entrepreneurship.

Andrea works in the retail sector, and he was recently hired with a permanent contract. He is happy about the income stability the contract is ensuring.

“ I am ok with it now, but in few years, who knows? It is a pretty repetitive activity, you end up doing always the same things, [...] if I have to find a problem with my work, it's this one. And it is my fault, so to speak. I settled for convenience.

Q: Thus, your working conditions, the shift, the wage, etc., are fundamentally determined by choices you made?

A: No, ok, not everything is my choice. The working environment...the business...the way it is organised, the distances...this is managed by Luca.

Q: Luca is...

A: Luca is the owner. For the wage...his decisions count for the 90%, the 99%. I can try to influence it a bit but...really, he decides my wage, that's it.

Andrea feels responsible for accepting the trade-off between trying to find a more satisfying – and better paid – job and the stability ensured by his present contract. He recognises, too, the limit to his responsibility and the role that the employer plays in deciding about his working life. This recognition, however, does not directly translate into a reason for collective action carried out by him and his colleagues. The subordination to the employer's decisions remains a given natural fact.

Other respondents better framed the causal chain running from the systemic level to employers and, finally, to individuals. Another worker in private education, Matteo, explains these connections.

“ Q: What or who determines, in your opinion, your working conditions?

A: Well... they are determined by many factors. First of all, by the State and the policies that set the level of teachers' salary. I work in a secondary private school, but our contracts are negotiated at the national level. Then... there is the owner of our school, because he has the last word on all the decisions concerning our jobs. Then [...] my colleagues, because the type of relationship we established among ourselves is important for determining our work's quality. Then there is me, I would include myself too.

Arianna is completing an internship in a retail shop. She is acutely aware of the collective nature of the problems she is facing at work. She identifies outsourcing as one of

the systemic reasons that explains the general worsening of working conditions.

“ The general situation we have here in Italy [is:] nobody gets a stable job anymore. That alone would improve the stability of a number of things in our lives. All these cooperatives...I mean, I understand that that makes entrepreneurs' lives easier with hiring, but...sub-contracting makes it more difficult to have wage increases and stability in contracts.

Q: Ok, let me try to summarise. You think it is a systemic problem, but employers have their own responsibilities.

A: Correct. They can decide not to take advantage of the situation. Ok, there are the cooperatives, and in some cases they are ok. But the employers always decide if and under which conditions they are hiring you.

Tommaso is strongly supportive of the positive role that worker cooperatives may have on the betterment of the working conditions prevailing in a society because

“ being the general assembly a democratic space, the member workers can participate and influence the decisions.

However, he recognises that this is true only

“ when they function as intended, yes. The assembly should be sovereign. This is not always the case, though.

We cannot emphasise enough the importance of this remark. Worker cooperatives are indeed one of the most significant historical expressions of workers' autonomous economic organisation and collective ownership of production. In the past decades, the change they have undergone in Italy has a great relevance not only because it fostered precarisation: it represented a disempowerment of the working class as a whole.

A radical reform of cooperatives, accompanied by workers' repossession of this fundamental instrument of economic and political struggle, is urgently needed in the country.

The relationship between workers and their collective organisation

Respondents' different views on the causes of their present situation are mirrored in how they think about the possibility of collective action.

When interviewees were asked if they are on good terms with their colleagues, they overwhelmingly answered that they have a positive and strong bond with colleagues. Gender or nationality differences are not influencing this positive disposition.

Even in the cases where the individualisation of labour relations is stronger, such as for the 'self-employed' respondents, solidarity between workers seems to overcome competition.

“ Well, in my view... I have never felt we were in a [competitive], difficult relationship. Competition is strongly, strongly, incentivised by our manager, who has a real contract [i.e. is hired by the sub-contracting firm]. Since he started, he has constantly tried to instil competition, what he calls a 'healthy' competition... [E]very Sunday, our manager sends us all a weekly spreadsheet with all the cases we were supposed to close and [the ones] we actually closed – our names are obviously there to be seen by everybody else.

This managerial practice is a particularly odious variation on the performance-related compensation theme, another standard of current capitalism (Chicchi & Simone, 2017). Since decades, tracing performances and making wage conditional on them has been touted as a productivity-enhancing revolution. As Giorgio told us, it is used as a tool for attempting (in his case, unsuccessfully) to erode solidarity among workers.

Nicola B. is working under very different conditions. He is a highly skilled public worker. His contract is permanent, the wage fairer and the workload more manageable. However, he confirms that this mechanism for increasing productivity and eroding solidarity in the workplace has been imported in the public sector.

“ A recent change in my sector is that [...], since a decade or so, public employees now have performance indicators and goals. These [features] increased the pressure over the deadlines... where I work, several of these indicators have been introduced. Every single task as a time requirement and a deadline [...]. It's... a private sector logic. [...] These indicators increased a bit the sense of competition among us. It is not very useful, I mean, it risks reducing rather than improving the quality of service. [Quality] is more related to the organisation, to the cultural and practical means of your organisation. [...] Anyway, here competition is not very strong.

Moving to the possibility of collective action to solve common problems, our respondents were less in agreement. We will tackle the issue of collective mobilisation below; here we will briefly report on the interviewees' opinions on worker collective organisations. Unions do not feature prominently in their answers.

Katia is one of the few respondents to directly and positively acknowledges

“ the unions, which are acting for a relatively new category of workers such as educators.

When he has issues at work, Tommaso relies mostly on the

“ people I consider very competent and whose opinions on these issues I trust. It is a personal relationship, though, not an 'institutional' one.

The distance between these workers and the unions is easy to perceive. For some, for example, Nicola A., work is so demanding that

“ we don't have time to organise. Perhaps among colleagues in the same workplace, but at a macrolevel it is impossible [...], if you want to work you have no time for that.

For others, like Alessio, who is presently unemployed, unions were helpful in the past but not supportive enough or resolute. This experience represents a disincentive to seek their help again.

Once I went to a union which had an office in my area. They gave me the information I was seeking. Turned out nothing could be done. I went in feeling lost, but fortunately they helped me. I had

been fired and the cooperative didn't pay my last month because they went bankrupt. [Unionists] made clear I would have paid more money hiring a lawyer than the amount I was owed.

Finally, some interviewee seems unaware of the possibility of seeking help from the unions for work-related issues.

“ *Q: When you have issues at work, who are you turning to for help?*

A: I will go to the agency that is dealing with this kind of things.

Q: Which kind of agency? You are a member of some organisation or...

A: Eh, now no... before I was backed by AFOL [employment agency in Milan] ... Every month they called me and if there were issues or anything I could tell them. Now I am under Luca, I was hired by him and, for now, only him. In my personal life, I seek advice from my family and friends.

Q: Leaving AFOL aside, which other agency or institution comes to your mind?

A: I would say INPS [National Social Security Institute], but I may be wrong...

Q: Have you ever thought about going to a union?

A: No, I never thought about it. But, if I knew more about the unions that are nearby, I might consider it.

This last remark is rather insightful. It appears that a young worker, searching for a job for a prolonged period through a public employment agency, never stumbled upon the idea of unions membership. Unions – or a sub-set of them, that is still primarily committed to be the instrument of organised labour – have to better cope with their lack of resources or of strategic foresight and increase their presence in those vital knots in the ever-stretching network of precarious employment, or they risk losing the ability to represent the workers of the future.

2.2. Covid-19: impact on labour for different groups and state support

The effect of the pandemic on working conditions

We asked our respondents about the impact of the pandemic on their working conditions. At the time, we were in between the first and the second wave of Covid-19. The

memories of the first national lockdown were fresh, and the possibilities of a second surge in the contagion rate, thus of a second round of restrictive measures, was unclear.

At the time of writing, the second wave is still raging in the country, and the prospect of a third one is not out of the question. Each of these waves compounded the difficulties for the population. Simultaneously, public policies have significantly changed between the first and the second one wave. The attempt to enact 'soft lockdowns' was carried out during autumn and winter 2020.

In all the advanced capitalist countries, Conservative pundits, media and politicians have spearheaded a 'light-handed' approach to the pandemic, reflecting the concerns of the private sector for the economic losses generated by strict lockdowns. Left organisations and parties have decried the exploding contradiction between an unrestrained, business-as-usual economy and collective health and advocated for wider lockdowns accompanied by the introduction (at least temporary) of universal basic income. Centrist or centre-left, like the Italian, governments have irresolutely taken a middle road, especially during the second wave. The immediate result has been a significant increase in cases and victims. The political results are yet to be fully appreciated.

We wanted to better understand the pandemic's effect on the interviewees' working conditions because we are convinced that too little space has been given to the actual difficulties experienced by workers during the first phase of the pandemic. We wanted to hear from both the luckier ones, who could work from home, and from the many compelled to go to work throughout the health crisis.

All the issues that we have pointed out in the previous sections were reproduced and magnified by the pandemic. Alessio has been in and out of unemployment for the better part of his short working life.

“ *After that the pandemic began, I was lucky. In April I was hired by a chemical industry, a big one. I worked for a month, because they had a peak of orders for sanitisers. Then I was laid off.*

Q: Are you are receiving any unemployment benefit?

A: No, because I have already 'used up' all my months after being laid off from the [previous job].

I worked only one more month, thus I didn't earn any benefit. [...]

Q: Did you have any job interview in the last month?

A: No. Paradoxically, the month I was working at the chemical firm, I received many offers, always in the chemical sector, since demand was up.

The casualisation of work continues unabated, and workers are truly used as a flexible and temporary resource to be deployed for coping with market fluctuations.

The shifting boundaries between work and free time have been blurred further for many workers that entered a smart working regime. Katia told us about the passion she has for her work as an educator and how it was difficult distinguishing the paid working time from the time she dedicated to work-related activities out of her commitment to her job.

“ *When work became part of domestic life during the lockdown, it has been essential to set some limits. [...] Smart working made us always available, and we had to organise to set a hard border between work and personal life, a fair separation. It wasn't always easy. If a student was writing you at 10 p.m. because the day after she had a test... I mean, once or twice it's ok, but it cannot be the rule. We needed [time] management not to go crazy.*

The pandemic had a stark effect on social services' unregulated landscape, outsourced welfare, and precarious employment in social work. Lucia explains the lack of preparation for the emergency that the public sector and the third sector contractors revealed during the first lockdown.

“ *My job is not well-suited for smart working. [...] During the lockdown, I was able... we were able, with my colleagues, to turn most of homecare services into 'virtual care'. We were calling beneficiaries on the phone... I mean, this was possible for those beneficiaries that do not require continuous basic care, like help with feeding, bathing, etc. [...] The local authority was ok with us working on the phone, and we did for around 3 months.*

The need for an improvised solution, devised by the workers themselves, was already showing signs of a broader tendency: employers were shifting the responsibility for coping with the crisis on their employees. The situation did not improve; rather, when

“ *the lockdown ended, we resumed homecare. The cooperative was still facing several problems with the procurement of the PPEs. The Civil Protection [Department] delivered masks that were... unusable. [They were] just a piece of paper. [...] The quality of the masks got better over time, but there weren't enough of them. Last month I received for the first time 20 FFP2 masks... normally I was receiving 3-4 per months. I was receiving a lot of surgical masks, but... I don't trust those, especially when I am at work [...].*

Q: Since you and your colleagues are working with people with health conditions, were you routinely tested for Covid?

A: Ah! Not at all. I don't even know who is in charge of the Covid response in my cooperative.

Giorgio describes his experience in similar terms from the perspective of the private sector. When the first lockdown ended and the inspections for assessing insurance liabilities resumed,

“ *the company drafted several safety protocols. Initially, we perceived them as cumbersome... then, practically [...] it felt almost like the company was trying to offload some of its responsibility rather than trying to protect me. I, and my colleagues too, abided by the main request [...] which was about using a mask that we had – and still have – to buy personally. [...] So, we were forced to sign a policy certifying that we were responsible for abiding by the standards the company gave to itself. Q: So, if I understood correctly, in the unfortunate case you were positive for Covid, your employer will have no responsibilities...*

A: We have always had the possibility of accepting or refusing... to carry out the inspections or not [...]. I have been always up for it, but I know that the colleagues that were afraid of the pandemic, they reduced their workload by a lot. They halved it [...]. I believe [they have lost] up to 50% [of their wage]. [...] Why do I know it? Because [of the spreadsheet] our manager sends to us [...].

The employers' offloading of their responsibilities entailed, thus, both the blindness to employees' increasingly difficult working conditions and the decision to force workers to face the trade-off between getting an income and protect their health.

Lucia told us of her own choice.

“ I asked my cooperative to provide me with the PPEs... I am taking care of old people, and people with serious health conditions. The cooperative replied that everything was stuck at the borders... and it was probably true, in the first phase [of the pandemic] it was impossible to find masks in the pharmacies... [...] I decided to... I am going to beneficiaries' houses with public transport, I didn't want to put my and their health at risk. Thus, I decided to interrupt my work. [...] I took unpaid leave until I was able to buy a mask by myself... I took a week... 10 days.

If the pandemic severely impacted workers hired under precarious fixed-term contract or, even worse, in fictitious 'self-employment', higher-level professionals, truly self-employed, were not spared. Valentina is a criminal law lawyer; she has a one-person law firm in Southern Italy.

“ I have to tell you this: even our professional association doesn't consider being a lawyer as a 'true' job. It is still mostly considered a sinecure for a wealthy individual. Thus, our professional association is not concerned with issues of income of lawyers that, presently, are not working. For the three months of lockdown, courts have been closed, and the trials suspended. For a professional like me, that relies on trials to make a living... and not on consultancies [or other alternatives]... this meant three months without any income.

When asked if she and her colleagues received income support during the lockdown, Valentina replied that she, as Giorgio, received the 600€ per month that the national government allocated to self-employed workers, and

“ I was luckier because the Regional government gave an extra 1000€ to self-employed workers. I received 2800€ welfare transfers [...]. Our professional social security fund complemented INPS measures by delaying the annual mandatory contribution... because we have a fix mandatory

contribution to the fund, it is around 3000€ no matter what your income is...and you can see that [...] in this situation, income risks to be zero for this year...the fund delayed the payment to the 31st of December 2020. That is it. No other integrative measures. I am spending the 2800€ I received to pay the annual contribution in instalments. That's my whole retirement fund, I can't risk.

Recognising the disparities existing within the black box of 'professional jobs' may prove a crucial part of a wide political strategy aiming at reconstructing conflictual political identities and progressive alliances.

The effect of the pandemic on gender discrimination and gender-based violence

One of our interviewees became a key informant for an extremely important aspect of the pandemic, albeit seldom discussed in the Italian public debate in these months: its effect on gender inequalities and gender-based violence.

Michaela is the president of an association promoting gender equality and managing a centre helping victims of gender-based violence.

She is a feminist activist and

“ a single parent, and I had to become a special education teacher for my kid [during the pandemic], who has special educational needs [...]. In some families, which had more means, this situation was an inconvenience...for other families, less capable or [...] simply less lucky, it was a disaster. [...] Covid intensified all these problems. A reason why it happened this way is that in Italy, and in Europe, there is a very weak social welfare, and we rely upon unpaid care work, mostly done by women. Women had to adapt...if they were smart working, they had to find the time for taking care of children [...] this doubled...quadrupled their workload.

The women's voices, the reality of gender inequalities compounding the dramatic situation imposed by the crisis, have not been given representation in collective discussion and decision making.

“ *The case of health care was particularly representative. The majority of workers there are women, nurses, doctors... but we saw [on the media] interviews to directors and managers...mostly men. We weren't given the women's narratives on the crisis. Even essential services, like abortions, [...] were suspended. [...] This added problems to problems. For example, a pregnant woman unable to end the pregnancy, while staying all day at home with her partner, and she doesn't want to tell him that she is pregnant, because he is violent...These situations unfortunately happened. Our association petitioned hospitals in our areas for granting the right to abortion to women.*

Michaela presented us with two aspects of the problems she and the other activists have seen increasing during the lockdown from her association's vantage point.

“ *We registered an increase of work-related problems for women. [...] I think the reason is that many women, especially in the care sector, are undeclared workers. They have no legal safeguards. They may have lost their jobs, and they have to take care of children. This is making it even harder to re-enter the job market. This is true for young self-employed women too, as many young professionals. [...] In a social emergency, the rights of the most fragile people... women, people with special needs, older people... are weakened.*

Second, and even more tragically, to the question about the type of requests for help they are receiving since the beginning of the pandemic began, she answered

“ *especially for cases of gender-based violence. Gender-based violence is overwhelmingly taking place inside homes. Domestic abuse victims have some coping mechanisms for protecting themselves and their children from abusive partners [...]. The most common is leaving their house for some time. Now, locked in their houses with a violent partner... domestic abuses increased terribly in the past months. [...] The pandemic made many victims unable to find shelter. Even sending the police at home, as we helped them to do, was not a solution. In Italy, if a woman reports her partner to the police, she has to leave her home and find*

temporary accommodation in a shelter, not the man. This is a huge disincentive to report abusive partners. [...] Now we have the additional problem of finding a place to quarantine victims before moving them into the shelters.

These issues cannot remain unsolved. The mass mobilisation in defence of women rights that predated the pandemic and is still taking place notwithstanding the restrictive rules for demonstrations introduced during the crisis is a sign that the time is high for political actions that will end these deadly injustices.

2.3. Workers' solidarity and mobilisation, labour unions

Moderate expectations and reasonable dreams

In the final part of the interviews, we asked the respondents what kind of future they imagine and what kind of actions may help them realise their aspirations. We received in return a set of rather reasonable expectations and desires.

The main problem, as we mentioned above, all the respondents agreed upon, is the low wage rate.

Alessio is unemployed, but he does not give up the dream of finding a decent job, at a decent wage, in a sector or profession he may grow to like.

“ *Q: What do you wish for the most?
A: As I said, a job I like. All rest is... This situation, and also the education I received by my family, made me value the most what I really need. I think that once you are left with nothing but the basic means to live, you really understand what you need and what you don't. It may sound banal, but...*

He is, nonetheless, aware of the challenges he will face to achieve the reasonable aspiration of moving out of his parents' house.

“ *If I find a stable job, I think I can rent out a room. I would do it, not because I have issues at home but because I want to be more independent and relieve my parents of some pressure. Whether I will be able to do it is another matter. [Here,] in the*

province of Milan costs are high and job opportunities few. And the job offers you get are always for short-term contracts. Without certainty over the future, you can't plan that far ahead.

For others, the limited income from their job is not enough to fulfil even the modest dreams. Andrea, too, still lives with his parents, although he has a full-time job. He would like to move to a new accommodation,

“ *perhaps moving in with a friend, to be more independent from my family.*

Q: What is preventing you from achieving that?

A: Costs. I cannot deal with them alone. And time, too. My monthly salary is not very... on time, and for a mortgage there are timely payments to meet. It is difficult to pay it, or utility bills. [With] a higher wage, perhaps...

Katia is happy with her job, as caring for the education of children and young adults is for her a personal vocation. However, her wage is not reflecting the passion and effort she puts into her work.

“ *I am doing what I perceive as an essential job, and I wish it could gain a greater economic recognition. Sure, I have a permanent contract and thus job stability, but the hourly wage is not fair, especially if it is compared to the for-profit sector. This pisses me off. Moreover, advancing my career is pretty difficult, and even if I will succeed, the improvement would be very little.*

Matteo, a teacher in a private school, has the same issue. His wage is too low to afford some of his long-term life goals.

“ *My income should be higher. Now I can't afford any 'extra', and I don't save either, because I have to pay rent. [...] I wish I could move in a new apartment. But I am limited by my economic situation. I cannot afford to move to a new flat... moving means paying for new utility contracts too. In the future, I would like to buy a house. And I would like to spend a year abroad, I have been thinking about it since I was at university, but I haven't had the chance to do it.*

The need to increase his work income is important to Tommaso as well. For him, the uncertainty surrounding his and his partner income and job stability is what matter.

“ *My income... I am trying to get some additional earnings; I need additional earnings. I am paid 'above average' somehow, but my partner seldom makes 1000€ per month, and I never earn more than 1500€. I am not talking about making a crazy amount of money. I am talking about having the means to meet the needs of my family and, perhaps, of the children we may have. Now, I can do it, but... with the mortgage, all the expenses, things to pay... I mean, we really just want some more peace of mind, not to worry about next summer, when perhaps there will be no summer camp, and thus my girlfriend will not work and we will have only my income. Or of the shutdown of the centre I work for, because of Covid... I would feel much better [having extra earnings].*

He decided to highlight that his concern was not about earning more per se; rather, his concerns are about the stability of future revenues vis-à-vis ever-changing labour relations due to precarious contracts.

“ *I am at peace, normally... It's not about me, it is about my partner. Her contract is terrible. It's like that for everybody in that sector. And in mine, too. I have a better pay, and this means some decency. That's all the difference: my contract is decent, many of my colleagues have indecent contracts instead. [...] Decent in relation to the necessities we all have.*

For Giorgio, the most important thing to achieve in the future is escaping the 'self-employment' trap.

“ *After years of [...] 'self-employment' and having worked as an employee with a contract too, I think it is obvious. The best solution is getting a proper contract. Self-employment has some positive features, but it is... tiring, in a very peculiar way. You cannot work this way your entire life... or, if you do, best of luck.*

It is not easy for him, to entirely change his professional career, especially in a time of surging unemployment and general economic crisis.

Thus,

“ *if I have to think to more realistically...practical changes to my working situation...I think having a minimum income... a monthly basic earning level... a safety net for dealing with troubles you may go through, rather than pretending they do not exist, as we actually do. [...] If you have a health problem, or somebody next to you does, the abyss opens under your feet. You are terrified. [...] As it is now, having a sort of 'social protection' fund is, once more, your responsibility, and your alone. You have to work more to pay for it, in the anticipation there will be periods in which you cannot work.*

This consideration is rather important because it introduces the need to achieve a collective improvement of the working conditions and increase one's own earnings via individual actions.

Similarly, Giulia has an aspiration for her future that entails a broad, social and political change to be realised.

“ *I think that a team of teachers [like ours], if employed by the public sector, could be of great value for the students, because it is passionate and dynamic... In a [...] different school system, this [experience] could be enriching the whole community, not only those that are able to pay for it.*

From individual 'hard work' to collective mobilisation

Future goals may be centred around personal priorities, or collective transformation, or both. Either ways, for some respondents, these aspirations seem just unrealisable.

For Andrea, for example, change appears distant from his agency, almost out of reach.

“ *My boss Luca told me, well, the firm is in trouble now. Perhaps my wage in another situation would have... perhaps in 5 years it will be higher, with the same contract. Now there is this emergency, you see...[...]*
 Q: *And who may have an influence over that?*
 A: *Surely not my employer. He is giving me what he can, at this moment. Perhaps institutions, like the State may direct some economic incentives to small firms like mine.*

For others, an increase in income is enough to cope with the more general precarious employment situation they face. Nicola A. is happy with his earnings level but recognises the insecurity connected with his job as a 'self-employed' personal trainer.

“ *There is always the possibility that something can prevent me from working, on a day-by-day basis. For example, if I have an accident: an injury is enough to prevent me from working an entire month. It is fair to earn something more every month, so that I can always save.*

The generalisation of false self-employment is feeding, we would argue, another tendency of contemporary capitalism: the monetisation of workers' rights.

Lucia gives us another example of this tendency.

“ *When I was under the 'occasional collaboration' contract, I was paid 7.5€. I don't think I will get 7.5€ under the new contract. The problem with being hired under a proper [fixed-term] contract is that you are paid less.*

In her case, the increased legal protection under a more stable contract came at the expenses of her hourly rate. In the case imagined by Andrea, instead, compensation for work-related injuries or public insurances can be substituted by a wage increase. Monetisation of rights is a powerful lever for countering workers' claims for better employment and social protection.

On the other hand, Matteo conceives change as related to his actions because collective action did not achieve credible results in the recent past.

“ *It's all on me. To change my income, I would have to find a second job. Now I am tutoring students, but I need something more...I am not sure about it but...my salary will not rise, it depends on national negotiations...*
 Q: *Thus, it may change?*
 A: *Yes, it may. But it is up to the decision-makers, thus the State. And the unions too. I don't think it's going to happen in the medium term. Italian politics takes a long time. I think finding a second job is a much more realistic option.*

Arianna, too, think that individual actions are the only viable – but rather ineffective – strategy the workers have in striving for better working conditions. She does not, however, imply that one should work harder. Quite on the contrary, she thinks of

“ rebellions. Alone, one can do only so much... For example, they offered me a year-long internship. I am 27, I said no. I asked for a 6 month one, instead, and I will try to negotiate a better one later. I try to make my voice heard, when I can... but these are little things, they always have the upper hand.

These individual actions are a micro expression of the respondent's need to resist oppressive labour relations.

Tommaso is quite sharp in judging what is needed for change.

“ Well, if we are talking about working conditions at a broader level... it's class struggle, you know what I mean? The capacity of being recognised as a group, and fight for your rights. I have not been involved in this that much.

His interest, and his actions, are directed towards changing the culture of the sector he is working in, and in which he is deeply personally invested.

“ From inside the cooperative, perhaps. I helped with the fight for broadening the number of our member workers, and we succeeded. It wasn't class struggle, though, but a fight inside the cooperative, which may help better balancing power inside it.

Alessio recognises the importance of political involvement for achieving change. He is dissatisfied with current politics, though.

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“ It is us, the people, we can do something about that. The rulers take decisions, but the ones who rule are selected by us, the people. They are our voice... they should be. Presently, I think we have a 'crooked' voice.

Finally, Katia gave a more direct depiction of how workers' mobilisation is a collective political action capable of altering our societies' trajectory of development.

“ I don't think my income can improve in the short run... it feels like it is completely stuck.

Q: Who do you think can help changing your situation?

A: I think the action of all the workers in the not-for-profit and social sector. For organising such a big mobilisation... perhaps the unions [could], through public assemblies and a major focus on these issues. It should become a mobilisation of the majority of the people.

Despite his young age, Alessio is hinting at a common thread that unifies all the workers' experiences: that the value of their work must reflect the value of their life. As a young unemployed worker, he realised that impoverishing labour relations means devaluing workers' existences. There are no better conclusions for our analysis than his words.

“ I think, in general, that the themes are the ones we discussed: a wage that reflects your effort... the classic issues. I would suggest: value your personal life over your work. But this is relative, too. If you like to work 10 hours per day for 700€ a month, what can I say? Perhaps: look, you are underpaid. I don't know how they value their time. For me, our time is worth more than gold, it is worth infinitely more than few euros.

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SELECTED INTERVIEWS – ITALY

Alessio: Man, unemployed, early 20s, Northern Italy.

Andrea: Man, retail worker (open-ended contract), early 20s, Northern Italy.

Arianna: Women, intern in the retail sector (6 months internship contract), late 20s, Northern Italy.

Giulia: Women teacher in a private school (open-ended contract), early 30s, Northern Italy

Giorgio: Man, insurance assessor (self-employed), mid 30s, Central Italy.

Lucia: Women, care worker (fixed-term contract), early 30s, Central Italy.

1. Alessio

Q: Where do you live and what is your occupation?

A: I am from Cologno Monzese [Milan]. [...] I tried several jobs, changing now and then. I studied for three years finance and marketing, then tourism... completely different. I started working... after high school, I was a bit lost. I enjoyed what I was studying but it wasn't very useful to find a job. Tourism, for example, hotels... I am not very friendly; thus, I was not very suitable for those jobs.

Q: After high school, what did you do?

A: I looked for a job I could enjoy, because I think you must enjoy what you do; otherwise, you waste your time. I tried several things, as I said... Right after high school, I helped my uncle, who is a plumber. After a few months, I found a job in the nautical sector to make luxury dinghies. My job was the final gluing of the rubber details. After eight months, the cooperative we worked for got into financial trouble, and we were all laid off. I claimed unemployment

benefit for a while. When I wasn't working for someone, I was helping my uncle with his business.

Q: Did you claim NASPI (unemployment benefit for XZY)

A: Yes, not always, though. When I was claiming, I wasn't helping my uncle since I had enough [income]. I worked for eight months; so, I received the benefit for three months only. Then I went back to work for my uncle.

After that, the pandemic began. I was lucky that in April, I was hired by a chemical company, a big one. I worked for a month because they had a high demand for sanitisers. Then they laid me off.

Q: Are you claiming any unemployment benefit now?

A: No, because I have already "used up" all my allowance based on my eight months of employment.

Q: How do you feel about your life, in general?

A: I still feel kind of dazed and lost; looking for a job is...I mean, I think working is a pain. But it is essential, unfortunately. This is why I want a job that I like, on top of having an income.

Q: It is a matter of personal fulfilment?

A: Precisely.

[...]

Q: What are you doing, in practical terms, to find a job?

A: I check online advertising, and I am registered with an employment agency.

Q: Did you have any interview in the last month?

A: No. Funnily enough, I received many jobs offers the month I worked for the chemical company, also in the chemical sector, since demand was up.

Q: Has your situation improved, worsened, or remained the same during the past five years?

A: At a personal level, growing up and acquiring a lot of experience, I improved... matured. Whereas the working and income situation didn't improve. Even if I had a job, I would have given the same answer.

Q: What or who determines, in your opinion, your living conditions?

A: Ehh... surely it is not me. I am part of the "normal" population; thus I have no say in the matter. It is determined by... well, the pandemic didn't help. I think it is affecting my response quite a bit. If there wasn't [the pandemic], I might have some more ideas. But now, well, I say the pandemic. This is not to say that the government, the employment agencies, are not responsible.

Q: Do you think it is a systemic problem?

A: Right, systemic. For example, I've been registered with AFOL [employment agency in Milan], which is a good thing in theory. Still, after one year I've received only one job offer, and it was about enrolling in some vocational training.

[...]

Q: Do you think you are to blame for your life and working situation?

A: No. I know I don't want to do a certain kind of jobs. Some jobs are simply too exploitative. For example, supermarket jobs. I know some people doing that. They work almost every day, weekends and public holidays included. They have too little time off... I think this is exploitative.

If I had to choose between income and freedom, I would choose the latter. Many died for freedom.

Q: Who are you asking for help when you have issues at work?

A: [...] If they are personal issues, I try to solve them by myself, although I do seek advice from people I trust. If they are issues related to my job, working conditions... Once I went to a union that had an office in my area. They gave me the information I was seeking, but it turned out nothing could be done. I went in feeling lost, but fortunately, they helped me. I had been fired, and the cooperative didn't pay my last month because they went bankrupt. [The union

rep] explained I would have cost me more hiring a lawyer than the money I had to receive.

Q: How was the relationships with your colleagues?

A: In the last job I met almost nobody. I am friendly with the other jobseekers, I respect people, but I don't try to establish relations with them.

I had female colleagues. In the shipyard job I had an African colleague that had been living here for years. It makes no difference for me if they are Italian or foreigners.

Q: What would you like to change in your life, work and income?

A: There are so many things I would change, I am not even sure they are the right ones. I wish job careers were more based on individual merit because, in my work experience, I didn't see it. In Italy, it all depends on who you know, not on merit.

Some jobs are paid less than others, I think it is a regrettable consequence of how the system works. Some differences [in wages] are fair, but some jobs are underpaid and exploitative.

Q: What is your most important wish?

A: As I said, a job I like. All rest is... This situation and the education I received from my family made me value the most my essential needs. Once you experienced living without the basics, you understand what you really need and what is superfluous. It may sound trite, but I don't want a big house with a pool, I would rather have a small house filled with family feelings than a uge empty house, filled only with money.

I prefer to live where we do now, in three rooms for five people. It is small, but we have strong family ties.

Q: Do you want to get accommodation on your own in the future?

A: Yes if I had the means, I would do it.

Q:21 Do you think it is realistic? How long will it take?

A: If I find a permanent job, I think I would rent out a room. I would do it, not because I have issues at home but because I want to be more independent and relieve my parents of some pressure. If I will be able to do it or not is another

matter. [Here,] In Milan's province, the costs are high and the job opportunities not many. And the job offers you get are always for short-term contracts. Without security, you can't plan that far ahead.

Q: Who do you think can help to change your situation?

A: At the personal level, I have nothing to complain about. I mean, I live in the society I was born into. I have friends, I chose them, I have a nice relationship with my family... all of this is good. The economic situation is another matter entirely... I think it is a consequence of how the system works... I would say the market...

Q: You have said the system doesn't work very well. Who can change it?

A: It is us, the people; we have a voice to say something about that. The rulers make the decisions, but who rules is decided by us, the people. They are our voice... they should be. Presently, I think we have a "crooked" voice.

Q: Among the public figures in Italy, is there somebody that inspire trust in you?

A: Honestly, no. In the past, perhaps, there were people I can relate to ideologically. But they can't really help now, since they are gone. Thus, no trust. Today, nobody.

[...]

Q: What is your opinion about Europe?

A: The idea of the EU was a beautiful idea at the beginning. Today... well, leaving aside the present situation [and] political leaders in some nations that impact... It's a tense situation, from immigration to economic crisis. There is anger and scapegoating. We are [the culprits], the States and thus the people that live in them. I am pessimistic, although I don't like it to be this way.

Q: What is your opinion about the migrants and immigration?

A: For me, it is evident: it is not an issue. Again, I think the migrants are the scapegoats of our situation.

I don't think most of them choose to migrate, but they do it out of necessity. They are seldom receiving help, and this results in mutual distrust and uneasiness for everyone. [...] We "natives" are looking for a culprit for our problems, and we find it in them. They feel rejected and attacked. No

bridges are built, only barricades. I think we are making things worse; we make their life hell... they defend themselves. It's a difficult matter, I just tried to give a summary of my thoughts about it.

Q: These questions are being asked to other workers in various European countries. Is there something you would like to tell them?

A: I don't know. I don't know them or how they live in their countries.

Q: And for workers in Italy?

A: There too. I don't really know their problems, and thus I don't know how to help.

In general, I think that the themes are the ones we discussed: wages that reflect your effort... the classic issues. I would suggest value your personal life over your work. But this is relative, too. If you like to work 10 hours per day for 700€ a month, what can I say? Perhaps: look, you are underpaid. I don't know how they quantify and value their time. For me, my time worth more than gold, it is worth infinitely more than few euros.

2. Andrea

[...]

Q: Where do you work?

A. 14. I work in Segrate [Milan], I will not tell for whom... And it is going ok, since I've had this job for a year and 8 months.

[...] As a working environment, I am sure there are better places. But, you know, it's my first job... my first experience, and it is rather positive.

Q: How much of your time do you spend on your job?

[...]

A: If I had to pick a number between 1 and 10, I would say 8. The kind of job I have... I must go in and install everything and meet people. There is this relationship with total strangers, and you must like your customers.

Q: And how many hours do you work?

A: I mean, not even that much, 6 hours per day. I manage to go to work and... I don't have any hobby, but I could have. And work would not be a problem if I had other things to do.

[...]

Q: So you don't find your job overwhelming.

A: No, it is not.

Q: Ok. Have your living conditions improved in the last five years?

A: My economic or general circumstances?

Q: General.

A: Alright then. My situation got better... Luckily, I started working. It has improved things. My personal life got a bit worse, I ended a relationship... In general, though, in the past years, several things have improved...

Q: Such as?

[...]

A: My income and, as I said before, meeting new people every day [...] I may meet one, two, three new people each day. Ok, after the work is done, you don't hang out with them. But it's a relationship that you have over time. A customer once said to me: "come back when you want, I will prepare pizza for you". I mean, these relationships last.

[...]

Q: What or who determines, in your opinion, your working conditions?

[...]

A: Me.

Q: It is determined by you alone?

A: At present, it is determined by me. Take my job, for example. [...] I am ok with it now, but in few years, who knows? It is a pretty repetitive activity; you end up always doing the same things. It's common to all jobs. This is the only problem with my work. And it is my fault, so to speak. I settled for convenience.

Q: Do you think your working conditions, the shifts, the wages, etc., are fundamentally determined by the choices you made?

[...]

A: No, ok, not everything is my choice. The working environment... the business... the way it is organised, the distances... this is managed by Luca.

Q: Luca is your...

A: Luca is my boss. For the wages... his decisions count for 90%, 99%. I can try to influence it a bit but... really, he decides my wages, that's it.

[...]

Q: Do you think your salary is fair compared with the efforts put into your job?

A: Yes, in general terms, yes.

[...]

I am still finishing my 90 days trial period. Thus, I may be laid off after that but...

[...]

I haven't received a full salary yet, my contract started in July... it should be around a thousand euros, 900 and a bit.

[...] I think it is fair, for the shift I have [6 hours per day, 5 days a week] it's fair.

[...]

Q: Do you think that factors such as politics, the EU, the type of contract determine your working conditions?

A: They have an influence, yes, especially in this period. There is this crisis due to the epidemic... my boss Luca told me, well, the firm is in trouble now. Perhaps my wages in another situation would have... probably in five years it will increase, with the same contract. Now there is this emergency, you see...

Q: Do you think it is because of the emergency or was there a previous general situation that...

A: Well, maybe. I don't know, I didn't think about it it, so it is difficult to tell.

Q: Ok, we can say you don't have a firm opinion about that.

A: Right.

[...]

Q: Who are you turning to for help when you have issues at work?

A: I will go to my job agency.

Q: Which kind of agency? You are a member of some organisation or...

A: Eh, now no... before I was registered with AFOL [employment agency in Milan]... they used to call me every month and if there were issues or anything I could tell them.

Now I am under Luca, I was hired by him and, for now, only him.

About my personal life, I seek advice from my family and friends.

Q: Would you ask for their advice also for issues at work?

A: Yeah, sure, I will ask my parents first.

Q: What is the first agency or institution able to help you with work problems that comes to your mind?

A: I would say INPS [Italian public pension provider], but I may be wrong...

Q: Have you ever thought to contact the unions?

A: No, I never thought about it. But, if I knew more about those unions, I might consider it.

[...]

Q: How would you describe the relations with your colleagues?

A: Good, let's say, especially with the newcomer, A. She started three months ago. We have the same tasks, thus getting along has been easier. I have a good relationship with the other ladies at the call centre, too.

[...]

Q: Are your relations with A. and the other colleagues better than those with your managers?

A: Indeed. Managers are always out of the office, and there is an age gap. They have a different status, too.

Q: Have any of your colleagues a migrant background?

A: Yes, E.

[...] She is not working with us anymore. We had a good relationship, the same as with Italians. Actually, for a while, I didn't realise she was from Peru.

Q: What would you like to change the most about your job, income, etc.?

A: Income, job, life... Job no, no changes for the time being. I may try to change some bad habits. I should take some exercise or perhaps find an occupation when I have time off, like going to the library, read...

Q: What are your aspirations?

A: To find my own accommodation. I was about to do just that with my girlfriend before we split. Probably in a year or two, we would have moved into a flat together. Now I am single, but I still think about it. Perhaps moving in with a friend, to be more independent from my family.

Q: What is preventing you from doing it? Costs, effort...

A: Costs. I cannot afford it alone. Also, my monthly salary is not always... on time, and a mortgage or utility bills require timely payments.

Q: Is there something that may help to change your situation?

A: Better wages probably...

Q: And who can do that?

A: Surely, not my employer. He is paying me what he can afford now. Perhaps institutions like the state may give economic incentives to small companies like mine and the workers. For example, a colleague of mine had troubles paying the mortgage... now I think they are helping people on low incomes a bit.

Q: You think politics may help, though.

A: Yes, I think it should. [...] I don't know how, but I think it could.

Q: Is there any public figure you trust?

A: Honestly, no.

Q: What do you think of the EU?

A: Europe... I don't know much about this topic. From the media, my understanding is that the countries [in EU] are fighting a lot. I don't think this is good for progress. In fact, when I have a family, I will send my children to the USA for their education, because I think it is the most developed country.

Q: What is your opinion about migrants and immigration?

A: It makes no difference to me. In Italy, we always talk about migrants landing [on our shores]. I think it is positive for our country. Sure, we cannot receive 100.000 per day, and they must integrate into the new country, the new society. Still, I think it's something useful to Italy, a positive thing. I welcome migrants.

Q: And what do you think about the problems related to immigration?

A: There may be problems, especially because of those few people that act stupidly. Other than that, the main issue is integration, and it is an issue for them. [...]

Q: These questions are asked to other workers in various European countries. Is there something you would like to tell them?

A: To the Italians, I would say: do not listen to people who hate migrants. [...] Those stories [they tell] are media and politicians' inventions. Think with your own head.

3. Arianna**Q: How long have you been working here?**

A: 6 months.

Q: Is it your first job?

A: No, I worked elsewhere before. Like, four years in a clothing shop, but they laid me off after Covid started. Before that, I worked for my father as a secretary.

Q: Briefly, how do you feel about your present life direction?

A: Not that great. Having a fixed-term contract and a house and bills to pay isn't exactly a rosy situation. Anyway, find-

ing a job at the moment isn't easy; thus I am thankful I have one

Q: So, your think that current job is just "better than nothing"?

A: Right enough. Well, I did learn something new about banking, I acquired some new skills.

[...]

Q: Are you looking for another job in the meantime?

A: Yes. I am still enrolled with the employment centre list, and I also use other tools for job hunting.

Q: Have your living conditions improved in the past five years?

A: I moved some steps up: I have my home now... If we speak about jobs, it got worse. I feel a bit depressed thinking of my work situation.

Q: What or who determines, in your opinion, your living conditions?

A: It is me, on the one hand, on the other, political context matters.

Q: And your working conditions?

A: Those are mostly determined by the general situation we have here in Italy. Nobody gets a job with a permanent contract anymore. That alone would improve the security of several things in our lives.

All these cooperatives... I understand that that makes it easier for companies to hire and fire, but... sub-contracting makes it more difficult for workers to have regular wages increases and security in contracts.

Q: Who is, in your opinion, most responsible for this precarious situation?

A: I think employers are. The government gives them incentives to act this way, like tax reductions. But an employer can always choose to hire with a type of contract or another.

Q: In other words, you think it is a systemic problem, but employers have their own responsibilities.

A: Correct. They can decide not to take advantage of the situation. Ok, there are the cooperatives, and in some cas-

es, this is ok. But the employers always decide if and under which conditions they are hiring you.

Q: Do you think you are to blame for your life and working situation?

A: I know I should have finished high school... back in the days I didn't. And now, while I am working, it's impossible.

Q: Who are you turning to for help when you have issues at work?

A: At work, I talk with the colleagues that are mentoring me. In my personal life, I try just to rely on myself.

[...]

Q: How would you describe the relations with your colleagues?

A: Generally good.

[...]

Q: What would you like to change about your work, income and personal life?

A: Income! Without doubt. My job... I am still learning new things, but if I think about my pay... it is not fair compared to what I do.

Q: What are your aspirations?

A: A secure job, to be less stressed. The lack of job stability gives me anxiety.

Q: Do you think it is realistic?

A: Well, only in the long term. I don't know, though... I am hopeful.

Q: Who do you think can help to change your situation?

A: I think employers can, as I said. Some employers could hire more people, and they don't.

Q: Do you think public institutions may help to improve this situation?

A: They can better regulate contracts. We need more stringent rules for hiring.

Q: What does it take to change these rules?

A: I think... rebellions. Alone, one can do only so much... For example, they offered me a year-long internship. I am

27, I said no. Instead, I asked for one of six months, and I will try to negotiate a better deal later. I try to make my voice heard when I can... but these are little things; they always have the upper hand.

Q: Who would you trust of the public figures in Italy?

A: To be frank, nobody.

Q: What is your opinion about Europe?

A: In this moment, I have an extremely negative judgement. The EU is not helping; it is making things messier. It is not working properly.

Q: What is your opinion about migrants and immigration?

A: I am ok with people coming here because they are fleeing war. I am ok with welcoming them, but you need a plan for after their arrival: you can't just abandon them when they are here. That's how they are pushed into criminal activities. We need to make sure that they have what they need. Also, I think that they should be distributed more evenly among countries in EU.

Q: These questions are being asked to other workers in various European countries. Is there something you would like to tell them?

A: Ah, lucky you, perhaps you are in a better spot than we are here... I have friends living abroad, and they are far better off, as far as job is concerned.

4. Giorgio

Q: How would you describe your employment situation before Covid-19?

A: Well, there weren't changes in my employment situation after Covid, because my professional position stayed the same. Quite obviously, the day-by-day activities changed because of the DPCM [Prime Minister's decrees]. I was, and I am still, self-employed, registered as an insurance assessor. I exclusively work for a firm that provides liabilities determination services to insurance companies, large insurance groups... different insurance groups at the national level. There are many local offices; I am working in the office in Rome. I am sent to other locations for assessments now and then when there is an emergency.

Q: Which type of contract do you have?

A: I am self-employed, so my relationship with the firm is not based on a contract, not at all. At the beginning, I signed a corporate policy about the rules of conduct for collaborators... it was rather generic and has nothing to do with an employment contract. It didn't include working time, nothing... I am paid monthly, based on the number of my closed cases that have been paid to my employer by the customers [insurance companies]. Not the cases I have closed, thus there is a discrepancy between my output and payments, which evens out at the end of the year, naturally. Still, the gap... the "entrepreneurial risk", so to speak, is passed onto the individual assessors, like me and my colleagues, that carry out the inspections and write the assessments and [do] all the paperwork. The mechanism is: the firm I work for tenders for contracts provided by the insurance companies, then they [the insurance companies] outsource cases, in huge numbers, [to us], requiring, quite obviously, [certain standards:] time, pace, average liquidation, etc.

Q: They are, we may say, performance indicators...

A: Yes, they definitively are... these [indicators] are set up by the firm I work for, and sent daily, like it was an institutional simulcast, to all my colleagues. Every month we receive these spreadsheets, which should have all the information about the closed cases that were paid to the firm... A percentage [of the payment] is then paid to the claims' adjuster, less the deductions for pension contributions, taxes, etc.

Q: How is the life-work balance of a self-employed worker under the pressure of these performance indicators?

A: Life-work balance is... ehm... the problem with life-work balance – last year or this year, there is no difference – When you are being paid based on the closed cases, you are pushed to work as hard as you possibly can. I mean, if you don't need to do overtime, or you can impose some self-restraint on yourself – or both – you can balance life and work as you prefer. For example, I try – and it is difficult to work as little as I can on weekends, an hour on Saturday if it is strictly necessary, like at the end of the month. I try not to work on the weekend, not even if there are very important issues, like preparing invoices for my company and checking if I have been paid for all my cases. Many of my colleagues do this over the weekend. I refuse to do the same. Surely, compared to them, I have less time left for taking up more cases because I am doing all the paperwork

during the week. Some of my colleagues are much better at keeping a faster pace [than me]. Some work twice as much as I do. Their life-work balance is utterly all over the place, and there is little hope to change because you become deeply entangled in this logic. Many of my colleagues are at their first work experience, many are incredibly young... first professional experience. They don't know that work can be different than this. This [situation] affected me, and it was scary, but when I think about how it affects my colleagues, I am shocked.

Q: I would like to add, if you don't mind, a comment. You are saying that "each individual is responsible for improving their living conditions" [...]. In your opinion, does this individual responsibility create a rivalry between you and your colleagues?

A: Well, in my view... I have never felt we were in a [competitive], difficult relationship. Competition is strongly, strongly, incentivised by our manager, who has a real contract [i.e., is hired by the sub-contracting firm]. Since he started, he has constantly tried to instill competition, what he calls a "healthy" competition... To put pressure on a person who has experience, who is resilient, who knows which are the priorities it is almost superfluous. On the contrary, if you put pressure on somebody who is "gullible", and you decide the priorities for them, then [the situation] becomes utterly unbalanced, and this competition has nothing to do with health, because it is like a carrot on a stick, that you never reach. Because these goals, naturally, are moved farther away every time you reach them... they don't say "well done" to you; or rather they do say "well done", but you must do twice as much next Monday. I can say that in my experience – but I am thinking aloud now, you made me think about this – when we used to meet all of us together at least twice a week, in the office, and we created very strong and fraternal personal bonds, competition between us never caused an unpleasant situation. Instead, there was a strong feeling of unity, of fraternity, among us and of mutual help. This experience we shared, physically, face-to-face, today is still there. I think I am speaking mostly for myself, that the feeling of belonging to the same [professional] category is still stronger than the competition among us. This was also possible because none of us ever lost our job; we went through constant company growth, and work was increasing. New colleagues were hired all the time. I think that it would have been different if work were decreasing. Colleagues were fired because they couldn't

reach the [performance] targets... sometimes they did threaten to lay off the less productive [among us], but actually... we had a good laugh about these threats, because we know too well they can't do it: they need us all, and we are not expensive. [Being laid off] is rare, except perhaps in cases of serious misconduct; if the business level keeps increasing, there will be even fewer chances. Regardless, earnings are still too low, and you are forced to do overtime. This is the fundamental problem. Thus, although the prerequisites were there, there was no "fratricidal strife" among colleagues, and now, the solidarity among us is still strong. The lack of daily face-to-face interactions, or at least weekly [interactions], makes things harder in the office. Indeed, there is less [of a bond] with the newcomers... never met, never got to know... but this affects the relationship with the others too, time dilutes the memories...

Q: How did the work routine change with the pandemic?

A: The work routine changed... Well, all the remote working has increased; I found myself to... My job is in part an office job, and in part an inspection field job. When the lockdown and the other restrictive measures were in place, the office job became work from home. For three months, everything was done from home, especially because we had – well, I had – a huge backlog to clear, with no relation to Covid... I was just in that situation. What changed was that I moved around less and less, instead I didn't move at all, and I worked for three months every day from home. This made it even more complicated, separating life from work. There, again, I realised that my colleagues couldn't set limits between the two. I was, thank to my partner, setting the pace saying: "ok, that's all, you need to stop now, you going to do it tomorrow, makes no difference" – she still helps me with this, I can't tell yet [when it is too much]. So, the routine changed, at least for me, because before I was going around a lot, then I stopped, then I restarted, but at a slower pace.

Q: Did the field inspection work change as well? Did your employer set up new safety measures?

A: When the lockdown was lifted, and we were able to go back to the fieldwork, the company placed several safety rules. Initially, we perceived them as cumbersome... then, practically... they were followed, but it felt almost like the company was trying to offload some of its responsibility rather than trying to protect us. I, and my colleagues too, stick to the main request – which was common sense too –

which was about using a mask that we had –and still have – to buy personally, according to the company's specifications, FFP2 masks, to be clear. So, we had to sign a policy document stating that we were accountable to follow the company's safety standards.

Q: So, if I've understood correctly, in the unfortunate case you were Covid positive, [...] your employer would have no responsibilities...

A: No, I don't think so. Look, I am so used to this treatment that I don't even think about it. I don't even look for a responsibility.

Q: ...because, as you may know, according to the new law, if an employee is infected in the workplace, the employer may face civil and criminal consequences... [this remark is inaccurate, infection with Covid-19 has simply been equated to any other accident at work].

A: I do not have an employer in official legal terms. This is such a... powerful thing. It is a scheme that frees my de facto employer from several obligations and responsibilities. And it makes workers become unaware [of their rights]. In reality, [self-employed workers] do not expect [those rights] and do not even find it a legitimate expectation.

Q: I would have asked you if your employer has contacted you and your colleagues about the health and safety decisions introduced with the pandemic [...]. I now think it is superfluous since you are not even an employee to your company...

A: My company regard me for what I am, a collaborator. We weren't contacted in the decision-making process, but... We have always had the possibility of accepting or refusing... to carry on the inspections or not... in these transitory phases, so to speak, [between lockdowns]. Nobody has... I have been always up for it, but I know some colleagues were afraid of the pandemic; they reduced their workload by a lot. They halved it, if not more.

Q: Can you quantify the consequences of this, in terms of their earnings? How much did they lose?

A: I believe up to the 50% [...]. I believe so, it is an extreme example...

Q: ... that's the upper limit...

A: Yes... it is a lot... Why do I know it? Why do I know it? It is hilarious explaining why I know it. Because every weekend,

every Sunday, our manager sends to us all a weekly spreadsheet with all the cases we were supposed to close and [the ones] we closed. Our names are there for everybody to see them... naturally, none of the assessors reach the targets. You know, I receive it on my mobile, on Sunday, I look at the first few lines, until I spot my name... I can tell you this [about the wage losses] because the person I am referring to is the first in the spreadsheet... Since I need to go through it to find my name, I always look the people before me; then there are 15-20 more after me... This is a helpful [example of] what we were talking about at the beginning... I found this list a miserable move [by the management]; anyway, the important thing is that it has, on me, a limited influence, but I realise that on others it has a disruptive influence... not good at all. [...] This spreadsheet goes together with a note, a summary – without specific references to any of us – of the results, which are always short of the targets, because [the targets] must be unattainable. This [document is] both a lesson on the need to work harder and a list of demands for the following week.

[...]

Q: I would like to ask you about the future, about how to exit the pandemic and to be better than when we entered it. What would you change about your work in the next future?

A: I would like to find something completely different. After years working like this, in “self-employment”, and having worked as an employee with a contract, I think it is obvious. The best-case scenario is getting a proper contract. Self-employment has some positive features, but it is... tiring, in a very peculiar way. You cannot work this way your entire life... or, if you do, best luck... one must develop antibodies... as long as you are young, and you have the strength, you can do it, but you can't carry on all your life with it. This is the general premise. I don't know if I would ask [for proper contract employment] with my current company or other sectors. The ambition, the ideal result is this one. If I must change something, let's say, if I have to think to more realistic... practical changes to my working situation... I think having a minimum income... a basic monthly earning level... a safety net for dealing with troubles you may go through, rather than pretending they do not exist, as we do because this is what we do. I mean, you must find the time for it, but you have no time. It is impossible to find the time if you have none. If you have

a health problem, or somebody near you does, the abyss opens under your feet. You live in fear. I was lucky, I have a certain economic buffer; thus I haven't had to make enormous sacrifices yet. But the risk is there, always. I would like to improve this, and it is realistic, I think, if it is done properly, [even] compatible with this feral logic of performance targets, etc. As it is now, having a sort of “social security” fund is, once more, your responsibility, and your alone. You must work more to pay for it, in the anticipation there will be periods in which you cannot work.

Q: These questions are being asked to other workers in various European countries. Is there something you would like to tell them?

A: Look, unfortunately, I do not have experience of a working-class... outside the extremely limited one in my office. I think it is because everything is so fragmented [that] I can barely think of an Italian working class, let alone a European one. I would like to tell them, and I am telling it to myself first, it would be beautiful if we were able to create something like it. I don't know how, though, because I can't contemplate this possibility either. So, this is what I would like to tell them, while rethinking my behavior too. It is a matter of time, but it is not [a lack of] time alone, time can be found for something so close to all of us. The tools, on the other hand... It would be necessary to develop a culture of this sort... a class culture, so to speak.

4. Giulia

[...]

Q: In a nutshell, how do you feel these days about your life?

A: Well, it is getting better compared to last year. My job has taken up most of my life, as my social life has shrunk quite a lot in these months [of pandemic]. I have returned to school [for face-to-face classes] too. I feel more relaxed.

Q: Ok. And what about your work, how is it going?

A: [...], work is so-so. There are incredibly positive aspects, like the fact that we went back to teaching in the classroom. Face-to-face is especially good for the students... they must spend time outside their homes, in a place where they are “protected” and have some basic rules to follow, where they can socialise with each other and with us, teachers. On the other hand, I have to say that school,

under these circumstances, has become a bit of a burden. Preparing lessons, which is hard even in normal times, has become even more demanding: safety trainings, trainings on Covid... we spend so much time on the computer.

Q: How was it before the lockdown?

A: Before, we had more free time. Mine is undoubtedly not a job that ends when your class ends: you have work to do to prepare your lessons in the afternoons and on the weekends, and there are meetings... but there were always some hours of the day, or a day in the weekend, when you were free. Let's put it this way: you had the chance to be more than just a teacher, to be somebody else than the person you are at work.

Q: Which type of contract do you have?

A: Now, permanent employment.

Q: In which school are you teaching?

A: I work in a private school. For three years, I had a temporary contract. In 2020 it was upgraded to a permanent contract.

Q: Has your situation improved, worsened, or remained the same during the past five years?

A: Well, in the past five years... I think it has improved, I mean, finding this job was very, very hard. I went through so many different jobs, always in a temporary position, and now this [permanent position]. This job gives me much more security. It is not just the type of contract: I now have a "permanent" school and "permanent" students, I feel more "motivated" to go to work, even if it is still a difficult job. The situation has improved, I think.

Q: Does a more secure job make you feel happier at work and in your private life?

A: Precisely. Knowing that somebody values your work gives you the motivation to go to work every morning.

Q: What or who determines, in your opinion, your living and working conditions?

A: Well, as far as work is concerned, a private school is different from a state school. Our employer is one individual, which is a bit unsettling. On the other hand, the way you feel about your situation is individual, although your job undoubtedly influences it. Having a good team at work... Thinking that one person pays our salaries... [...] not just

the teaching, the entire business is in the hands of one individual... [...].

Q: So, how did you become a teacher in a private school? Was it your first choice?

A: I would have preferred to teach in a state school. Unfortunately, I couldn't meet the eligibility requirements for the accreditation exams...

Q: Eligibility requirements?

A: Yes, you know, the examinations one must take? Well, there are all sorts of incongruencies between age and education requirements: either you must be young and with an unrealistic work experience for that age, or the Italian system does not recognise some degrees awarded abroad. In my case, they changed the rules for taking part in the accreditation exams twice since I had graduated. I just had not enough [ECTS] credits to be admitted to the examination, and the vocational training I did abroad was not recognised. Thus, I cannot apply to teach in a state school, even if I had strong qualifications...

Q: So, the training and accreditation mechanisms that are, in your opinion, inadequate are responsible for the employment situation?

A: Indeed.

Q: Expanding on this subject: which institutions connected with the education sector (government department, EU, Unions, etc.) do you think are more responsible for the current situation?

A: Not the European Union, although [countries of] the Union offered me some work opportunities... they consider more important the working experience, rather than the academic training. The Italian education system is based on academic awards and grades and is more suitable for an academic research career than a teaching career. The current trend is to provide general knowledge on a wide range of subjects, more than an actual teaching training.

Q: How were the job opportunities abroad better?

A: For instance, I was offered a teaching job in a French university at the end of my training placement. They offered the position mainly because I was an Italian native speaker since I didn't have any work experience. Conversely, back in Italy, the Italian authorities considered my six-year aca-

demic training in Italy and the year spent in a French university not sufficient qualifications for a teaching job.

Q: Why did you decide to come back to Italy, despite the better opportunities abroad?

Well, it has always been somewhat complicated because of my specific career in foreign languages. I've always aimed, anyway, to gain skills abroad that I could use back home.

Q: Do you think you are to blame for any of the negative aspects of your working career?

A: Regrets? No, I don't have many, apart from the choice of working for a private school. I realise that the private secondary school's specific environment and the teacher's role lead to a close relationship with the pupils. I sometimes wonder whether I have been too soft with them... it is a peculiar feeling. Probably it depends a lot on the students' age group.

Q: Where do you find support for problems related to your job? Who do you ask for it?

A: Although I haven't had the need so far, I'm not sure I would consider the Unions for support. So far, I've resolved all issues (administrative, academic), relying on the colleagues' help.

Q: What about personal problems? Would you also rely, in this case, on your colleagues' support?

A: Since both my colleagues and I have all failed to get a job in a State school and therefore need a 'serene' working environment, we usually help each other. However, suppose there was a very personal situation, such as personal accusations of a specific student's parents. In that case, I'd consult the headmistress, as, although she is not the 'ultimate authority,' it would be an excellent first step.

Q: How are your relations with your colleagues?

A.19.They are generally good, both thanks to sheer luck and because we are of the same age group, mostly very young. Furthermore, in my specific school, many teachers have different national backgrounds.

Q: Do you have, then, colleagues from different national backgrounds?

A.20.Yes, as mine is a foreign languages school, there are many teachers of different nationalities: French, German, English native speakers. Subjects other than languages

are also taught in English by teachers from other countries such as India and South Africa. It could be challenging to have to communicate in a foreign language all the time. However, there is always a lot of cooperation among colleagues: everybody helps each other translate when needed. It is a very relaxing working environment.

Q: Is there, then, no discriminations among your colleagues?

A: Absolutely not.

Q: What would you change about your work, money and lifestyle?

A: I wouldn't change much about the job. In my case, the big difference is the specific teaching experience... I hope we are back to a normal situation soon. About my salary, the private state-approved schools have the lowest wages, and the pay depends on the individual institution and the number of hours. I want a salary that reflects my commitment, considering the large workload outside the class hours. This workload affects my private life, and I would welcome a more precise separation between working and leisure time.

Q: Do you think, then, that your salary is not enough for the time, the training, and commitment it requires from you?

A: It is always difficult to assess your situation. I am single, so my living costs are limited. Other colleagues have a family to support and need to take up a second job. Our salaries are lower than the colleagues' in the state schools, and yet they complain. The discrepancy is even more striking than the situation in other countries, even within the EU. On the other hand, in private schools, salaries depend on the specific institution's or owner's policies.

Q: What are your practical projects for the future? What would you like to achieve?

A: I would like to buy my own house. However, given the present situation, I had my contract renewed just one year ago... I am only 32... my savings, affected by the cost of renting... [owning my house] would give me more peace of mind. I would have something safe that nobody can take from me.

Q: Do you think this is feasible in the short term?

A: Probably not in the short, but in the medium term. I must be very careful about how I spend my money. Now that I have a new work contract, I'm confident that I will have a certain earnings level for a few years (I sincerely hope this will be the case). I could be able to save enough to afford a mortgage in a couple of years.

Q: According to these considerations on your situation, who do you think could improve it?

A: Do you mean my working conditions?

Q: Regarding both your working and your more general situation.

A: Quite a lot of things need changing, starting with the smallest changes, starting with me. If I approached my job more lightly, I would have more energy to spend in my everyday life. Moving on, I don't see any need for changes as far as my colleagues and headmistress are concerned, apart from the general issues. Also, I would like to see no changes from the 'capo supremo,' as he is already providing us with the conditions to carry out our job the best we could. Better than what is done in other schools. It is just unrealistic to think about an improvement of the working hours or a salary increase. The significant change would be to become part of the State school system. It would be a huge resort, considering our level of passion and commitment. That would not necessarily require a change of government but just a reform of the education system... This would improve everybody's finances and not only those of people already better off.

Q: How do you think this can be achieved?

A: Let's just consider the teaching accreditation exams... it is crazy. The amount of time required to achieve specific results is just not realistic. To have a teaching career, you must graduate from a restricted number of universities following a particular syllabus. You need to attend extramural courses, take nation-wide examinations... this is very expensive and time-consuming. It takes an average of five years after graduation to join the accredited teachers' list, and even this doesn't guarantee the security of a permanent job. You could end up at 30 at the bottom of the list, doing a job for which you are not qualified, without enough money to start a family, to buy a house... this profession doesn't attract young people. The current teaching accreditation system creates a mass of young and qualified people who cannot find adequate employment.

Q: Who are the public bodies that can provide a solution to the problems you have so well pointed out?

A: Definitely, the Department of Education. The problem is that the government is only strictly concerned with the state education system. The state should run the education system in its entirety. In all matters of training and investments... the state doesn't have the efficacy that it could have.

Q: Do you think that a change of government policies is needed to bring about changes in the current situation?

A: I do think so.

Q: Do you think these changes are feasible in the current situation?

A: As much as they are desirable, I don't think they are currently achievable. Even in a normal situation, the education system is not that important for the Italians, as it is mirrored in the government's failure to consider education a national priority. It is even worse now [with the pandemic].

Q: Can you think of any other institution that can promote these changes?

A: ...

Q: Can you think of any alternative institution that can change the status quo?

A: I don't think there is anything in the short term. Maybe there is a chance in the exceptionally long term. A first step could be a more explicit role of the Department of Education in matters such as the teachers' jobs appointment.

Q: ok. Do you trust any of the prominent politicians, in the present or in the past?

A: No.

Q: What is your opinion on the European Union?

A: About my professional career or more in general?

Q: In general, Europe as the "European project".

A: I feel optimistic as far as the idea is concerned. I am in complete favour of the total removal of "any division" between countries. Education is one of the more pertinent examples: I couldn't point out any discrepancy [between the European countries]. I find amazing the concept that the European countries could "work united" to achieve a homogenous level of excellence. However, Europe, as op-

posed to other continents, is very diversified. Therefore, the idea [of a unified European community] is a great idea, but I think it will take a long time to achieve it. It is a complex issue: for instance, each member state has its approach to workplace regulations and legislation. It would be desirable to see a unified system.

Q: Then, you have a favourable opinion of the [European] project. However, it is not working yet, because the original discrepancies among the member countries still don't allow a unified vision.

A: Precisely.

Q: What is your opinion on the issues related to migrants?

A: It is a tricky question. There have always been migrations, and they have always been unpopular because of the problems created in the country of arrival by people escaping poverty or dangers. I understand how it is difficult for a single government to deal with the arrival and integration of many migrants. It is a difficult situation. The opinion of someone who lives close to migrant arrival points is entirely different than mine, I live [hundreds of miles away] in Milan province. The general public's naïve approach in the Milan area would be the removal of border controls between countries. Because migrations respond to unsustainable situations in the countries of origin, we cannot ignore the causes, and an 'open harms' policy should be the only realistic response. This is, of course, not enough. It would be desirable to improve the situation in the countries of origin so that the migrants can return home. Nevertheless, the main issue is giving shelter and a new life opportunity to the migrants that risk their lives every day.

Q: We have asked these same questions to several workers in different European countries: have you got a message for them?

A: There are a few things I would like to say, each for a different country. It would be nice to collect all the good points made. Some [of the people interviewed] would agree with my answers; some would have had better or worse experiences than mine. It would be nice to select the better approaches and use them as a shared experience.

6. Lucia

Q: Can you briefly tell us about your job before the pandemic?

A: Before the pandemic I worked for a cooperative as an occasional carer for people with disabilities.

Q: Has this been your job for the last five years?

A: I was on a zero-hour contract from the first of October 2019 to the end of September 2020, when I was re-employed on a part-time temporary contract for 21 and a half hours per week.

Q: Did you have any previous job with the same qualifications before?

A: Yes, I worked as a carer for a well known cooperative for two years. I worked in a reception centre for single mothers of under age children linked to Quinto Dipartimento, delle Politiche Sociali, in the municipality of Rome.

Q: Was it a precarious job as well?

A: Yes, it was a temporary job, the contract was renewed after the first month, then three months later, then again after seven months and again for three more months. The longest contract I had was 7 months. After one and a half year on this type of contract I was laid off for twenty days, otherwise my employer would have been under the statutory obligation to employ me on a permanent contract. I was then re-employed in June, to be eventually laid off in October with a two-weeks notice

Q: What has been the impact of this uncertainty on your ability to plan your future and working career?

A: It has had a very big impact. In my previous job, I was working according to a rota that changed monthly. I had to be available 24/7. This made any planning beyond the month schedule impossible, on top of the uncertainty about the job itself: I knew only month by month that my employment was not going to be terminated, and it was completely unexpected when it eventually was. I then claimed unemployment benefit for a year. After this, I found employment as a home carer, on a zero-hour contract. I was relatively busy, however some weeks I worked just eight hours and some weeks up to twenty-four hours, with exceptionally busy weeks of thirty hours. For the first year, I mainly covered for colleagues on sick leave and holiday. Then I started to acquire some fixed customers, which

guaranteed me a minimum amount of hours, up to a maximum compatible with attending college for a vocational course.

Q: Do you think that these flexible forms of employment you have experienced have improved your work-life balance?

A: My previous job was full-time (40 hours) i had to be available 24/7 so that it was difficult to have any life and attend college for the three-half-days. It is easier with my current part-time job to plan a life outside work. However, because I have to travel to clients' houses, it takes me from 7:30 am to 7 pm to clock a seven-hour shift.

Q: Travelling time and expenses are not paid by your employer...

A: Indeed, everything is on me.

Q: So, although you are an employee, you have to take care of expenses and costs as if you were self-employed.

A: Absolutely, I have to pay for my lunch, travelling ... I asked my employer what was my hourly pay, and they told me they didn't know. I have not had my first payslip yet and think net it could be just over 7.20 euros, less than 7.50 euros per hour. The problem with having a contract is that you get less.

Q: How has your job been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?

A: Assistance to people with disability doesn't give much choice. It was difficult to find PPE, surgical masks, disinfectants in Rome at the beginning of the pandemic. I asked my employers for PPE, because most of my clients were very vulnerable, and they replied that nothing was available because all shipments were blocked at the borders. This was true, as even the pharmacies didn't stock any mask. I had to stop working until I got hold of an FFP2 mask, also because I had to use public transports to travel to work.

Q: Do you mean to say that you voluntarily stopped working and went without wages?

A: Yes, under my contract I could decide not to be available for work, but that meant that I went without any wages for the first week. Then not only I got hold of a mask, but also I managed, as also my colleagues did, to replace some face-to-face visits with telephone calls when the assistance didn't involved personal care services such as help

to shower, getting dressed, etc. This solution was supported also by the clients' relatives, so that I was able to use a telephone, mine, of course, to deliver a big part of the assistance needed. Later on, this approach was officially approved by the local authority. I resumed face-to-face visits when the lock-down measures were lifted. The coop, my employer found it difficult to get adequate PPE. The masks they received from the government department of Protezione Civile were unusable. So several employees had to buy their masks. Also, the level of supply was always very inadequate. It was only in October 2020 that I received for the first time twenty FFP2 masks; before it was just three or four for each month. I have a lot of unused surgical masks that I thought were no good. The hand sanitiser was also provided in very small doses in tiny single-use water bottles.

Q: Were you and your colleagues, as carers of very vulnerable people, regularly tested for Coronavirus?

A: No, never. We don't even know who is the person in the company to whom report issues with Covid.

Q: Since your employer is a coop, the employees should be managing it. Were you ever asked for any feedback on the problems caused by the pandemic and your contribution to possible solutions?

A: No, never. Maybe because until last month I was just an occasional worker, but my employers never asked me for any feedback. The coop just posted some e-mails with the generic government's health and safety guidelines, and I didn't even received those.

Q: Is this because you weren't considered an employee?

A: Yes, this is the only reason I can think of.

Q: Did you manage, though, to get organised together with your colleagues and to tackle the situation?

A: My job is normally based on a one-to-one relation with the client and I am fairly isolated. I met some colleagues and discussed our problems just on personal basis. I joined the Unions only after I had a permanent contract, so just recently. I was advised against it before. I thought that joining the Unions would have provided more information on the situation and the chance to discuss them collectively, but until now all my information still come from personal exchanges with some colleagues. I know that there have been some industrial actions to have more surgical masks

and PPE, though if the masks the coop receive from the government are useless, there is very little they can do about it.

Q: Could you tell us why you were advised against joining the Unions?

A: Maybe it was just my impression, but I thought my employers didn't like it...

Q: Did your employers told you not to join the Unions?

A: Not at all, as I don't have any direct contact with my bosses. It was just my colleagues. Anyway, unions' membership is always considered a problem. If you are not a Unions member, you are not aware of your rights and it is difficult to speak up for them. Employers can find the unions representation an unwanted difficulty in dealing with the employees. Therefore, my colleagues advised me not to join the unions or ask for their representation.

Q: What do you think will be the situation once the pandemic is over? Do you think that the current political debate reflects the issues you are dealing with at work?

A: I think that people at a certain level are detached from reality, that they do not have a notion of what front-line work is and what it means working in the national health system without the support of infrastructures such as hospitals and clinics. None of the government's decisions ever mentioned our job. As if it didn't exist. There is an even worse situation with colleagues who works as SEN teaching assistants (OEPA). They at least work supervised as part of an institution, but the government has completely forgotten them, and they have been left with no income. They've been treated as they never existed, though they are workers who used to spend seven, eight hours every day supporting children with special needs, working close to the teachers and the other children. Many are still waiting for the financial support promised in the past. If we stopped, a large population of vulnerable people would be left without basic care.

Q: By the way, your employers, the coops, are the only organisations providing this type of assistance, since there isn't an equivalent service from the national health system.

A: I think so, though I'm not sure...

Q: However, you never met a public sector employee with a job as your...

A: No, never.

Q: This is an important point, as we are considering a public service that is completely privatised, for arguable reasons of efficiency and costs, and it is an essential service, though is not treated as such.

A: Yes, indeed this is exactly the situation.

Q: As a last question, what would you change about your job in the short term?

A: My salary. The national contract agreed a pay that is not proportionate to our job demands. This is the priority. My colleagues and I agree that this wouldn't be a bad job if we had a fair salary. It is a matter of personal dignity, of workers' dignity. We are not some kind of automated service providers, but we take upon us the responsibility of the whole care of our clients.

THE NEOLIBERAL “REFORM POLICIES” IN FRANCE, GERMANY, ITALY AND THE ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES OF LABOUR

by *Andrea Allamprese*

1. PREMISE

In this article, I present a compendium of the evolution of employment legal framework in France, Germany, and Italy – the three countries covered by the research –, against the background of the transformations taking place in the capitalistic system (para. 2).

As each national legislation is fundamentally different, it is essential not to fall into the trap of equating the French, German and Italian “reform policies” too quickly. However, we can observe some common trends: the neoliberal ideologies’ drive for the precarisation of employment relations and the decline in workers’ rights in these countries in the last thirty years (para. 3).

2. THE CONTEXT

Capitalism has historically gone through radical transformations, which have involved the society’s superstructures such as labour law, and the State’s organisation and its functioning.

Simplifying complex processes, we can consider Fordism the milestone in the evolution of last century capitalism. It shaped the labour market for enterprises and the labour organisation, and the social relations (Supiot, 2019, p. 32) of which labour law is part.

The transition from Fordism to Toyotism or post-Fordism has also impacted the organisation and regulation of industrial societies’ economic and social relations. Labour law, regarded as a factor that characterises these changes, had to respond to both the possibility and necessity of reconfiguring work according to two types of models. On one side, a flexible workforce at the functional level, who had substantial protections. On the other side, a more flexible and precarious workforce (hired through temporary work agencies or other casual-workers contracts) became

In the Conclusions, I will consider how labour law could stop the most dangerous trends in the labour market and impact on the models of economic and social regulations. Labour law currently faces several challenges: unemployment, precariousness, “uberisation”, globalisation, fragmentation of workers’ communities, letter-box companies, blurring the line between professional and personal time, new management methods, weakening of trade unions and workers’ organisations. However, some forms of resistance seek to find new ideas and normative to address these challenges (see para. 4).

a sort of periphery of the labour market. During the 1980s and 1990s, there was pressure on labour law to accommodate and systematise these two atypical work forms. Significant changes have also affected how the public sector works, such as downsizing, outsourcing, etc. (Countouris, 2019, p. 311).

We are now facing a third phase of radical economic and social change: the “uberisation”. We use the term to refer to the growing digitisation processes of the economic relations within the so-called “platform capitalism framework”. According to authors like Ekbia e Nardi (2017), these processes transform labour division between humans and machines into disguised work, poorly paid or carried out by digital technology users. This extraction of economic value from low paid labour in the digital networks is rapidly becoming a new capital accumulation process distinctive the twenty-first-century capitalism. It has significant consequences on economic and social relations. According to the same authors, “heteromated” labour²⁰ can transform the labour relations and the nature of the economy into a

20 The term “heteromation” is a neologism composed of hetero and automation.

system of “tiny moments of economically valuable labour that return very little to the worker but sustain wealthy, powerful companies” (Ekbja & Nardi, 2017, p. 32. See also Adams & Countouris, 2019, p. 2; Countouris, 2019, p. 312).

Various sources have already suggested that the “uberization” and the digitalisation of our economies should go together with (if not supported by) the recognition that a growing part of the workforce could or should be used

on-demand, both as service providers and as simple “users”. This would melt down the fragile distinction in the labour market between the protected “hard-core” workforce, and the weak periphery Countouris, 2019, p. 313).

In this context, the growing intervention of competition law in this area of labour market regulation²¹ is an example of the pressure exerted on labour law to “modernise” itself (Countouris, 2019, p. 313).

3. THE NEOLIBERAL “REFORM POLICIES”

It is hard to deny that the last thirty years were characterised in all Western European countries – under the pressure of neoliberalist ideologies – by various forms of precarisation in employment relations and a decline in workers’ rights.

Precarisation has taken multiple aspects and, using different paths and instruments, has affected the labour market as a whole and not just a particular segment of it. Thus the use (and abuse) of parasubordinate workers (in Italy in the form of coordinate and continuous collaborators) and atypical work relationships (fixed-term contracts of very short duration as well as “contrats de mission” and “contrats de chantier” in France (Bogard, 2018); short-term employment, marginal employment, on-call work and temporary agency work in Germany), have replaced permanent employment contracts. The process has targeted primarily young people, denying them satisfactory working and living conditions. The use of fixed-term contracts has targeted mostly workers in the third sector. Moreover, by abusing the traditional workers’ rights framework (e.g. the dismissal

regulations)²², legislative interventions have made precarious also permanent employment contracts of workers in the industrial and manufacturing sectors.

Precarisation does not exclusively affect the private sector; on the contrary, it is also widespread in the public sector, although this sector is nominally resisting various deregulatory practices already in force in the private sector.

The gig economy embodies the latest manifestation of precariousness. Digital platforms allow to fragment jobs into micro-tasks offered to a crowd of potential workers, performed by whoever is available.

In the three countries covered by the research, the neoliberal “reform policies” began in the 1990s, and even earlier in Germany.

In France, the beginning of the neoliberal “reform policies” can be dated to the early 2000s²³. However, since the election of François Hollande in 2012, we witnessed an impres-

21 ECJ, December 4th 2014, C-413/13, *FNV Kunsten Informatie en Media*. In this ruling, the ECJ denied the right of collective bargaining to self-employed services providers, considering it incompatible with the EU competition law. According to the ECJ, a collective labour agreement concluded “by an employees’ organisation in the name, and on behalf, of the self-employed services providers who are its members, does not constitute the result of a collective negotiation between employers and employees, and cannot be excluded, by reason of its nature, from the scope of Art. 101, para. 1” of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union (para. 30). This agreement is therefore not compatible with the EU competition law as it constitutes a practice that aims or has the effect to prevent, limit or alter the competition (art. 101 TFEU).

22 Since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008, the countries of Southern Europe have been implementing structural reforms in their labour markets. Some countries such as Greece, Spain and Portugal have been more or less forced to do so, to ensure the financial support of EU institutions. Others, such as France and Italy, have done so under the pressure of, notably, specific recommendations by the Council of the European Union or the European Central Bank. All these countries had to change their rules on justifying or sanctioning dismissals based on the idea that this lever could avoid dividing the labour market into insiders and outsiders. (see Palli, 2018, p. 618; Allamprese and Dalmaso, 2019).

23 See the Order no. 2005-893 of August 2nd 2005, which introduced the “*contrat nouvelle embouche*”.

sive number of legislative interventions aimed at meddling with traditional workers' rights which have been instrumental to a growing precarisation of the job conditions. We can point out the "Sapin Law" in 2013, the "Macron Law" in 2015, the "El Khomri Law" in 2016 and the "Macron Orders" in 2017.

Precarisation has taken several forms: making dismissals easier, increasing platform work, reducing the weight of workers' organisation, making more difficult the recourse to employment Tribunals, reducing compensations, allowing new ways of breaking employment contract either directly such as the RCC (Ruptures Conventionnelles Collectives) or indirectly such as the APC (Accords de Performance Collective). French labour law deregulation presents the most varied range of forms.

The "Sapin Law"²⁴ was mainly concerned with the "securisation" of collective economic redundancy procedures. The aim was to reduce the legal red-tape caused by "Plan de Sauvegarde de l'Emploi" (PSE). However, in a positive note, the "Sapin Law" promoted a greater involvement of the trade unions in the PSE negotiations.

The so-called "Macron Law"²⁵ reformed the employment Tribunals ("Conseil de prud'hommes") procedure, making it more difficult for the claimants (i.e. the employees). It has led to a significant reduction of applications.

The Law so-called "El Khomri"²⁶ introduced a special legislation for platform workers. Although the scope of this Act is minimal, it stated that platform workers are self-employed. The Act also tried, without success, to fix a ceiling on the compensation for dismissal without real and serious cause.

The so-called "Macron Orders"²⁷, more than all legislation listed above, profoundly impacted workers' rights, both at individual and collective level. The introduction of a scale of compensation for dismissal without real and serious cause

has, in many cases, reduced the indemnity for workers, and dissuaded them even more from taking legal action. The disappearance of the "Comité d'entreprise" and the "Comité d'hygiène, de sécurité et des conditions de travail" (health, safety and working conditions Committee) in favour of the "Comité social et économique" has weakened the power of the workers' representative bodies. The introduction of the RCC facilitates collective breaches of the employment contracts for economic reasons without going through the normative on matter of dismissals. Finally, the APC makes it much easier to change the terms of employment contracts.

All these laws aim to introduce so-called "supplementary" standards to the detriment of mandatory standards. It is becoming increasingly easy to derogate from the *Code du travail* through collective bargaining. These derogations are most often unfavourable to the employees, as the APCs show. The Trade Unions have to accept disadvantageous concessions to avoid the worst for the employees when negotiating during crisis periods.

In Germany, the neoliberal "reform policy" – as mentioned – already began in the 1980s. Under Helmut Kohl's government, the so-called "Employment Promotion Act" of 1985 made legal the use of fixed-term contracts without the support of factual reasons (initially up to 18 months, today up to 24 months). It also made capacity-dependent the variation of the hours allocated to part-time jobs. The Act expanded temporary and marginal employment (without social security). These trends continued and reached their peak in the so-called "Employment Promotion Act" of 1996, which restricted the protection against dismissal by extending the small business clause (section 23 Kündigungsschutzgesetz – KSchG). The 1998 Correction Act of the social democratic Schröder government initially corrected this law. Still, a few years later, the so-called "Labour Market Reform Act" of 2003 (Agenda 2020) re-enacted essential parts of it, such as the reduction of protection against dismissal. The same law allowed unlimited temporary work, and the

24 Law of June 14th 2013.

25 Law of August 6th 2015.

26 Law of August 8th 2016.

27 Orders no. 1385, 1386, 1387, 1388 e 1389 of September 22th 2017, adopted in the implementation of the Delegation Law no. 2017-1340 of September 15th 2017.

negative deviation, through contractual agreements, from equal pay statutory rights²⁸. As soon as the law came into force the so-called “Christian trade unions” began to sign disadvantageous contractual agreements, some of which were up to 50% below the collective agreements. The Act made it attractive for employers to replace their existing workforce with temporary workers. The result was a sizeable percentage of German employees was hired on low wages. Only in 2010 the Federal Labour Court declared these “Christian trade unions” incapable of collective bargaining and their collective agreements to be void²⁹.

Later developments, especially during “Grand Coalitions”, show the efforts of the trade unions and of sectors of social democracy to reverse these neoliberalism conditions. However, under the leadership of a reluctant CDU/CSU majority, successes have been limited. Temporary agency work was limited in 2017 to temporary assignments of up to 18 months for each assigned worker, but with extension options. The collectively bargained deviation from equal pay is still possible. Whether both are compatible with the Temporary Agency Work Directive 2008/104/EC is currently being reviewed by the European Court of Justice. Unjustified fixed-term contracts are still allowed for up to 2 years, as is variable part-time work. However, this is not comparable to zero-hours contracts; indeed, only variations between 20% and 25% are allowed (§ 12 Teilzeit-und Befristungsgesetz – TzBfG).

Marginal employment is the trap for millions of precarious workers, especially women. False self-employment and contracting out work and services have always been a way to escape employment regulations. Attempts to stop these business models by improving the legal employee definition (§ 611a BGB – German Civil Code) failed in 2017.

No special legislation covers platform workers, whose contracts are regularly in avoidance of labour law. Recently, the Federal Labour Court decided that platform workers are employees³⁰. However, this is not yet final, as presumably the platforms will now try to make their contracts “water-tight”.

The Covid-19 pandemic, when hundreds of contract and agency workers in the “meat production industry” were infected by the virus, exposed their disastrous working conditions to a broad public. Consequently, at the end of 2020, the “Occupational Health and Safety Control Act”³¹ was passed. The Act states that an employer in the meat processing industry can only employ workers as an employee. Temporary work is also restricted. However, the CDU/CSU parties have ensured that exceptions are once again permitted.

Similar processes, albeit with non-identical characteristics, have occurred in Italy, where the neoliberal “reform policy” began in the 1990s. We remember, in order of time, Law no. 196/1997 (so-called “Pacchetto Treu”), Legislative Decree no. 276/2003 (so-called “Riforma Sacconi”), Law no. 183/2010, Law no. 92/2012 (so-called “Riforma Fornero”) and the Renzi’s government’s legislation in 2014-2015.

These new laws favoured the use (and abuse) of parasubordinate workers (in the form of permanent coordinated and continuous collaborators – Co.Co.Co.)³² and atypical work relationships.

These laws have undermined and threatened with precarization even the conditions of the permanent employees’ “hard-core” in the industrial and manufacturing sectors. These interventions concretely try to remove labour from capital venture. Thus the employer is free from the contract

28 “Gesetz zu Reformen am Arbeitsmarkt” v. December 16th 2003. BGBl I Nr. 67 (2003) S. 3002; Buschmann (2004); Buschmann (2017), p. 17.

29 German Federal Labor Court (Bundesarbeitsgericht – BAG) December 14th 2010 – 1 ABR 19/10, BAGE 136, 302-333, *Arbiet und Recht* 2011, 20, p. 41; 2011, 164, p. 181; confirmed May 23th 2012 – 1 AZB 67/11, *Arbeit und Recht* 2012, p. 270.

30 German Federal Labour Court (BAG) December 1st 2020, 9 AZR 102/20, *Arbeit und Recht*, 2021, p. 40. See *La Corte federale del lavoro tedesca risolve il rompicapo della qualificazione dei lavoratori delle piattaforme*, *Giornale di diritto del lavoro e relazioni industriali*, 2020, no. 4, p. 835 ff.

31 “Gesetz zur Verbesserung des Vollzugs im Arbeitsschutz (Arbeitsschutzkontrollgesetz)” December 17th 2020, BGBl. 2020, 3334.

32 The regulation of “*contratto di collaborazione a progetto*” (single task collaborators) introduced by Legislative Decree no. 276/2003 is an exemption.

with the workers who still produce for him, but no longer “belong to him”. This is apparent, at least as a trend, in the statutory recognition of supply workers, the outsourcing parts of the production system, and transitional or permanent forms of staff leasing.

The worst forms of precariousness – i.e. underclared work – remain very widespread, sometimes as examples of new slavery in their extreme aspect. This form of illegal work has proved resistant and unyielding both to penal and administrative prosecution’s attempts (even from the EU), and to legislation that seeks its “surfacing” by offering “emersion” reward. However, old and unsolved injustices, irrationalities and gaps are still present in regular work, which also ultimately translate into situations of precariousness and under protection: for instance, workers’ rights that are dependent on the specific size of the company (as the ones related to the dismissal, but not only), are avoided by dividing the company in sub-entities, nominally designated as separate legal entities, connected however in the ownership structure.

Finally, precariousness didn’t affect only the private sector; on the contrary; it has spread widely, albeit for different reasons, also in the public sector, by opting-out from the main restrictive or sanctioning regulations still in force in the private sector. For instance, public sector employers are exempt from the rule that a faulty fixed-term employ-

ment contract had to be converted into a permanent employment contract (see Article 36 of Legislative Decree no. 165/2001, so-called “Testo Unico sul lavoro alle dipendenze della pubblica amministrazione”).

Almost all the governments for nearly thirty years contributed, in a more or less profound manner, to undermine a coherent and tested system of rights, that had resisted better than expected the small revolution provided by the so-called “Riforma Sacconi” of 2003. From the Amato’s government in 1992 to the yellow-green M5S-Lega government in 2018-2019, passing through the Renzi’s government in 2013-2018 (with rare exceptions), with alternating either political governments (of centre-left and centre-right) or technical governments.

We are considering a system of rights that although primarily concerns individual employment relationship has direct effects at the collective level. These rights, by protecting the employees from oppression, pressure and blackmail increase her chances of joining the Unions and taking part on collective bargaining both at national and company’s level.

A timid change of direction seems to be taking place in 2019/2020, like the protections introduced for the delivery riders by Law Decree no. 101/2019, converted into Law no. 128/2019.

4. THE RESISTANCE OF ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

The “uberization” of economic systems poses fundamental challenges to the traditional methods of organising our societies and our means, including the labour law, of redistribution of wealth.

Labour law and collective bargaining have always been a means for the workers to claim their fair share of national wealth (Countouris, 2019, p. 316). The “uberization” tries to reduce this share and does it in various ways.

First of all, it tries to do this by disguising subordinate work with self-employment or micro-enterprises. It is something that digital platforms claim, relying on several legal strategies. For instance, delivery riders are not considered “work-

ers”³³ because they have an ampler right of substitution (i.e. not limited to other workers of the same company or with similar contract workers).

Secondly, the “uberization” hides the labour contribution to the creation of wealth. “Uberization” needs specific conditions to have a role and importance comparable to Fordism and Toyotism. A series of structural and technical transformations, which also tend to change the relationship between work and capital, is primarily needed. Furthermore there is the need for a change of narrative as well. In other words, there is the need of an interpretation of the “uberization” technology as a hegemonic technology together with a specific, adequate concept of work, just

33 *IWGB v. Deliveroo*, EWHC 3342 (Admin), 2018; *Pimlico Plumbers Ltd v. Smith*, UKSC 29, 2018.

as Fordism did before. We are witnessing the emergence of such narratives. The language of “uberization” is full of positive terms and words like “gigs” or “crowdsourcing” or “user”, aiming to build a speech that hides the contribution of work and people to processes of wealth accumulation (De Stefano, 2016).

It is up to the democratic institutions to stand up against these trends. The share that we must claim is that of accumulation, the creation of wealth, and it is wealth that is still essentially forged by labour and its interaction with capital. To achieve this, it is necessary to reconceptualise labour and provide a new, improved concept of the organisation of that instrument of redistribution of wealth which is, or should be, labour law (Countours, 2019, p. 316).

Some proposals for the legal frame reform aim to meet this challenge.

Indeed, in some European countries (France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom), between 2015 and 2020 several groups of academics (often closely linked with trade unions) contributed to collecting into a coherent set of proposals (in some cases, an actual bill) projects for reforms (Allamprese, 2020). These reforms are necessary to contrast – or even reverse – the composite trend of employment precariousness and decline in worker’s rights (Supiot, 2010; Freedland, 2016, p. 289) which has characterised the last thirty years under the pressure of neoliberalist ideologies (see above, para. 3).

We can group these instances of resistance in three distinct initiatives:

1. The “Carta dei diritti universali del lavoro”: a Bill, presented by the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) in 2016, which was based on the idea of creating a labour law that provides basic fundamental rights for all workers, both employed and self-employed;
2. The proposal put forward in France by GR-PACT (Groupe de Recherche Pour un Autre Code du Travail) to expand the scope of labour law beyond the employment contract to include self-employed people, using the concept of the economically dependent worker;

3. A group of British academics has forwarded the most radical proposal: “Rolling Out the Manifesto for Labour Law”. The proposal is articulated around a new definition of “worker” as “any person who is engaged by another to provide labour and who is not genuinely operating a business on his or her account” (Ewing, Hendy, & Jones, 2018, pp. 36-37). This definition is closely related to the concept of “personal work relation” (Freedland & Countours, 2011) and aims to break the binary divide between “employees under a contract of employment” and “self-employed”. The definition includes in the new concept of “worker” all forms of paid work (contractual or relational, subordinate, dependent or independent), only with the exclusion of those activities that are not mainly personal, or those activities which, although being partly work, generate value mainly through the use of the work of others (in which case it would almost always be employers’ activities) or through the use of capital (as it is a business activity).

I will consider the two proposals from France and Italy.

The French proposal of Labour Code, drawn up between 2015 and 2017 by GR-PACT (Dockés, 2017), is meant to respond to the broad reform introduced during François Holland’s five-year presidency. The Code’s revision aims to show how a simpler labour regulation system still protects workers hired with an employee contract (Dockés, 2016, p. 422; Laulom, 2017, p. 233). Chapter 1 of the proposal deals with the contract of employment and employer’s powers. The concept of economic dependence informs the criterion of subordination to broaden the concept of worker and expand the scope of labour law on individual rights. This idea was proposed in France by Alain Supiot in an article published in *Le Monde Diplomatique*³⁴. GR-PACT also suggests it (see Chapter 1, section 1, “the definition of contract of employment”). According to the authors of this proposal, each “natural person who performs services under *de facto* power or under the dependence of another person” would be qualified as worker (Article L 11-3). Therefore, the proposal would differentiate between “*salariés autonomes*” (Article L 11-7) and “*salariés externalisés*” (Article L 11-12) that are both governed by the Labour Code. This proposal responds to the challenges of the “uberisation” of work

34 (Supiot, 2017). According to this opinion: «*l’adoption de ce critère serait un facteur de simplification du droit du travail, en même temps qu’il permettrait d’indexer le degré de protection du travailleur sur celui de sa dépendance*».

and platform capitalism (Dockés, 2017, p. XIV). Regardless of the degree of power, either through outsourcing or through workers' control techniques, these workers are dependent workers (Darringer, 2017, p. 152).

In Italy, a group of academics – connected to the CGIL – drafted a bill named “Carta dei diritti universali del lavoro”. This proposal – currently under discussion in the Italian Parliament (Bill No. c. 11) – does not question the binary divide between “employees under a contract of employment” and “self-employed”, but suggests to extend some universal and fundamental labour rights beyond the narrow limits of subordinate work and therefore to self-employment.

Section I of the “Carta” contains the rights that apply equally to employees with a contract of employment and independent workers. Fundamental rights are also guaranteed, with only a few exceptions, to independent workers under the same normative as for the employees.

The “Carta” also deals with some additional rights based on specific work relations characteristics. Two concentric groups of rules integrate the core rights. One group is for the employees (Section III). And another is for the collabo-

rations that are continuous and coordinated with the employer's organisation and for the economically dependent workers (i.e. self-employed persons that work for more than six months per year for a single contractor who provides a remuneration corresponding to at least 60% of the worker's annual income).

The authors of the Charter also propose – in Section II – a regulation of industrial relations aimed at implementing articles 39 (freedom of association and right to collective bargain) and 46 (workers' participation) of the Italian Constitution. The aim is to strengthen the democratic framework of regulations by making it conditional, wherever possible, to the parties' collective autonomy rather than to legal and statutory rules, on the condition that the said collective autonomy has the safeguards of representativeness and workers approval (referendum).

The proposals described above have in common that they respond to a need that is not entirely new: the protection of labour, regardless of how it is exercised.

5. CONCLUSIONS

There is an urgent need to define a Statute of universal labour rights to counteract the increasing employment precariousness and the decline in workers' rights typical of the last decades. The precariousness has taken multiple aspects, as we said at the beginning, and now must be tackled at the European level.

The European framework is changing. The President of the European Commission has appointed the Commissioner for Employment and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, to move forward on an initiative to “improve the working conditions of platform workers”³⁵. The initiative, pursuant to Ar-

ticles 154 and 155 of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union, will be launched during the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union (February 2021). So the text of the proposal of the Commission will presumably see the light at the end of 2021.

We don't know which approach will be adopted by the EU, whether it will be the approach based only on the concept of subordination or a different approach. In the first case, it will be necessary to understand whether this approach helps us extend social protections and collective bargaining to a wider reality of European workers vis-a-vis the gig

35 ETUC, *Resolution on the protection of the rights of non-standard and workers in platform companies (including the self-employed)*, Brussels, October 29th 2020. On the 16th of November 2020, Leila Chaibi, member of the European Parliament in the GUE/NGL group, presented a “Proposal for a Directive on digital platform workers”. The Proposal aims at influencing the projects announced by the European Commission on this topic, even if – it should be recalled – only the latter (and not the European Parliament) has the power of legislative initiative. The Proposal qualifies platform workers as workers (i.e. “any person who enters into a contract with a digital platform concerning the hiring of his or her labour”: article 2), in order to apply them all the relevant *acquis communautaire* (for example, on working time, health and safety at work, etc.). Moreover, the Proposal establishes some specific rules on data protection and on the algorithm used to assign work shifts and delivery, and to evaluate workers' performance.

economy. The relations based on economic domination, with which labour law has dealt from the beginning, currently extend far beyond subordinate employment boundaries. Therefore, labour law shall become the *common* law of all employment relationships, subordinate or non-subordinate (Supiot, 2021). The proposals considered in paragraph 3 are moving toward this direction.

Whichever path we follow to produce an EU proposal, we must use the updated categories to analyse the situation.

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- All those created for the nineteenth-century work relationships have already shown their limits in the second half of the twentieth century, and even more so now. In short, it will be necessary to read carefully the changes taking place in the "uberization", that significantly affect both the superstructure and the capitalist system. Only if we understand – in the vast area of the European Left – the changes of capitalism that "uberization" entails, we could propose a model that can protect all workers.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

What can we learn from this overview of the situation of workers in Italy, Germany and France? First of all, we understand that there are now experiences, voices, and lives behind the figures and curves that are used to describe the labour market's evolution. The disembodied reports, which certainly allow us to grasp the big picture and global developments, do not take into account how a stressful or dangerous working environment, lower pay, precarious employment, lack of social protection, non-recognition of work, gender discrimination, the multiplication of odd jobs or how unemployment profoundly affect the lives of workers, deeply permeate their bodies, which are often tired, exhausted and the anger that sometimes all these cause. While research on workers is generally available, this survey aims to provide analysis carried out with the workers, and show how they think about their working conditions, their personal and professional situations, and how they perceive those businesses and politics, that often deny them the possibility of living a dignified and secure life.

Through these experiences, it is possible to understand capitalism's current evolutions. Whether in Italy, Germany or France, these few portraits show how domination and exploitation are normalised, leaving ever decreasing space for collective struggles and less margins of maneuvering for the workers. The public sector seems to be increasingly aligned with the private sector's neomanagerial demands. Achieved social rights are gradually dismantled. The logic of competition is becoming more severe, budget cuts and job cuts lead to increased workload, stress, and overwork. The most precarious workers, either take up multiple jobs to get by, as shown particularly in the case for Germany; or, as we see in the French case, have to become self-employed and accept long working hours and limited social life.

The health crisis of Covid-19 has often increased workers' precarious situations and highlighted the decision-makers' contempt for workers. At a critical moment when there is widespread uncertainty and anxiety about whether one's family members or oneself are safe, governments and authorities have been lobbied by employers' organisations to keep the economy running, often causing stressful and unsafe conditions for the population. Small-scale traders, workers without social protection, or those working in the catering and cultural sectors have been the hardest and

most directly affected, as governments' financial support has systematically proven insufficient.

Moreover, these real-life reflections on work suggest solutions and understanding that still escape neo-liberal logic. First of all, the close relationships with colleagues and the solidarity built in the workplace are presented as crucial, even if the mechanism of an increasingly strong competition tends to make them conflictual. Secondly, workers who are not in a highly precarious situation, have found staying away from work a positive experience that has enabled them to get rid, at least for a few weeks, of a job perceived as burdensome and thus to have more free time to devote themselves to activities considered truly essential for their well-being. Thus, they had, possibly for the first time, a perspective of emancipation as a complete transformation of their relationship to work. Furthermore, the trend of workers' increasing depoliticisation doesn't stop collective initiatives and the promotion of organisations in Italy, Germany, and France to defend locally or at national level, achieved social rights.

Finally, it is important to highlight what can be learned from comparing these three countries' situation. Through the workers' voice, the importance of different economic and social contexts, forged by specific national histories, can be understood. Whether it is a question of work organisation, social rights or the trade unions composition, the situations diverge and lead to different priorities and work experiences. However, putting these cases together also allows shared issues to emerge, and the call for similar responses. Moreover, it suggests the strength that a united initiative at the European level could have, bringing workers' interests to the forefront and enabling the circulation of ideas, local achievements and experiences to benefit everyone.

The time has come to find solutions. And again, as with this project, they must come from the workers themselves. Traditional forms of protest are struggling to slow down the tragic political descent into ever more precariousness and increasingly less space for the workers' action. However we can find novel forms of resistance by simply broadcasting to a wide audience the workers' experience of employment (or unemployment), the evolution of their working conditions and the political perspectives that they bring to light.

When asked what message they would like to convey to other European workers, the interviewees reveal a lack of communication and exchange. It is apparent that most of the time, workers deplore the fact that they know very little about workers from other countries. It seems that the conditions for establishing a “European working class” are not present, and this calls for trade unions and political organisations to make the effort to connect these workers. However, in order to create international alliances among workers, trade unions and other political organisations, that want to represent labour interests, need first to face the challenge of reconnecting with workers at the local level. Emin, a German slash worker, self-defined as “precarious”, gets to the heart of this issue:

“ Unions should be more local, more like a solidarity network for workers and for workers who work in precarious jobs. And unions shouldn't just focus on people in their workplace but see the rest of the people beside that, and not just see the person who pays them ten bucks a month. And I think unions should be more approachable and should work more on the local sphere.

Notwithstanding all the efforts still necessary to establish a workers' solidarity network across countries, the interviewees are well aware of the common interests to be defended.

Ibrahim, French social worker:

“ There are certainly common concerns, but it's so fragmented that in the end... What brings us all together? To be honest, I don't know.

Giorgio, Italian self-employed worker in the insurance sector:

“ Unfortunately, I don't really know what “European workers” means. I do not perceive [the existence] of a European working class. My sector... my experience has been so fragmented, I can barely think of an Italian working class. I want to tell them, and I am telling it to myself first, it would be so nice to create something like it. I don't know how, though. It would be necessary to develop a culture... a class culture.

Arthur, French self-employed worker:

“ I would like to talk to them! To find out how they live. What I say to myself and what I could tell them is that we are linked to each other, we are in a globalised society, and the stakes go far beyond borders.

Workers criticise the European Union, since several of its decisions, once introduced in national frameworks, have led to an increasing precariousness of working conditions. Nevertheless, their awareness of this legal system makes possible to set up a unified movement to defend their interests.

Vivien, French entertainment worker:

“ I believe quite a lot in Europe, that we still remain in solidarity on the Climate, on capitalist policies. So, when I say solidarity, it's not in favour of capitalist policies [laughs].

Lucía, migrant worker employed as an informatics engineer in Germany:

“ We are not alone, we have to unite, and we have to trust that we are going to be there for others so that we can all improve this society, improve our own lives and also our social life as a whole, as a society. [...] Between countries, what you have to do is put pressure from below. If society, the ordinary citizen, moves, and we create connections between us, we will become stronger.

Nicola, an Italian worker in the public sector:

“ We are on the same boat. We should always remember that there are others like us, out there, that have our same life, our same job... and that we should stop the infightings and organise, for working collectively less... because the time we have in life is the most precious thing we have.

John, migrant worker, employed in private education in Germany:

“ We are all in it together, and if we want to make a change, then that’s something that has to happen collectively. I feel a sense of solidarity with people in other countries in Europe, and I think greater cooperation between countries should be encouraged. And that’s a problem with politics these days, a return to more isolationistic and nationalistic ways of thinking is counterproductive to improving society, in my opinion.

It seems is the time now for the feasibility of this global movement that workers are calling for and that they are radically ready to join. Moreover, as Valentina and Steffi suggest, concrete demands, such as the universal basic income, must be put forward and claimed.

Tania, French teacher:

“ Sometimes, there are big movements that bear fruit. So that yes, it would be good if, beyond the borders, we could break certain trends in our society. It would be a pleasure for me to take part in that.

Valentina, Italian self-employed worker in the legal sector:

“ The time has come for a universal basic income. That’s for sure. For people that have a job, too. Universal, without the requirements that the “*reddito di cittadinanza*” has [conditional guaranteed minimum income established in Italy in 2019; it has been criticised for the workfare requirements it includes]. I think this is a common project that the European workers can, together, make a reality.

Steffi, self-employed photographer in Germany:

“ Universal basic income would be an excellent idea, I think, because I think a lot of creativity and knowledge is lost by always having to think about this money issue. But I have to pay my rent. I have to do this job now, even if I am not one hundred per cent behind it. [...] Yes, and that wouldn’t mean that nobody would work anymore, because I also enjoy my work and I also work part-time in a gallery for contemporary photography for a very low hourly wage. But I do that because it makes me feel like I can do something for the community. And I think that everybody needs to work somehow to have such a fulfilment for themselves somehow.

It is with these words of hope and these demands from the workers and many open questions that this project concludes. How can trade unions adapt to structural changes to best represent workers and influence political and economic changes? How can we create the conditions for the emergence of a class consciousness within the “European working class”? How can we circulate experiences and promote dialogue between European workers?

One thing is certain, and what this project has tried to achieve: these changes will not be possible without starting from the workers, their experiences and their lives, the struggles they fight locally, and their hopes and their sufferings.

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