

## JOURNALISTS AND WORKING POOR IN ITALY: A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE OF NEW-MUTUALISM AS A TOOL TO CONTRAST PRECARIOUSNESS

Italy is one of the main European countries that assisted, in last decade, to a fast deterioration of journalists' working conditions.

With reference to above, 2009 was the year in which the number of reporters ascribable to the field of autonomous work overcame the amount of journalists hired with a dependent labour agreement. Nowadays, according to the report "*Osservatorio sul giornalismo*" drafted in 2017 by the national Authority for communications (Agcom), on an overall number of about 35,000 reporters currently working for written and on-line newspapers and periodicals (people licensed to work as journalist but doing another profession at the moment in which the survey has been realized are not counted), 9.572 are employees, while about 13,000 are self-employed and 12,935 may be considered in a mixed area composed by retired, unemployed workers, and persons receiving unemployment benefits.

The affirmation of autonomous work agreements as the standard arrangement between reporters and their publishers is a critical and troubling signal: in some cases self-employed journalists are not high professionals able to choose their customers and/or bargain their individual treatment, but young collaborators working for one or more publishing houses, with low compensations and in a substantial condition of dependency not assisted by rights and protections that the Italian labour law framework reserves to employees. This assumption finds confirmation in the most recent data provided by Agcom with reference to reporters' retribution, underlining that 55% of them, in 2017, declared an annual wage lower than 20,000 Euro; among the ones benefitting of an annual retribution overcoming the said level, finally, only 23% are properly self-employed workers, and 17% collaborators, while the prevailing group is composed by elderly employees.

In this context, with a legal framework that – despite reforms enacted, in particular, in 2015 with the "Jobs Act" and the presumptions connected to hetero-organized work – seems not to be particularly helpful in reversing the trend towards the extension of the area of self-employment, private actors started developing new solutions to improve the conditions of the weaker part of the considered professional category.

To this aim, an interesting reply could be found in new mutualistic associations, a new form of organizations – which the most known is the Belgian SMArt, nowadays active in a plurality of European countries – that, reprising and modernizing the principles which inspired benefits societies at the beginning of XX century, attempt to gather the largest group of freelancers, in order to assure them better treatments, permitting them to accede to the more protective legal framework of employees and providing for specific services, as professional insurance agreements, at affordable prices, as well as a mutualistic fund assuring freelancers to obtain timely payments also in case one or more customers is defaulting.

While these tools were utilized, in Italy, in general for people active in the domain of arts, autonomous workers not affiliated to professional associations and even small entrepreneurs, during recent months *ad hoc* solutions for self-employed and precarious journalists have been developed.

The main example is represented by DocPress, a branch of the wider new-mutualistic cooperative company DocServizi, aimed to realize a net of journalists, press offices and freelancers active on news sector, to improve their condition. The autonomous reporters concerned, in particular, may affiliate to DocPress becoming, first of all, employees of the cooperative company, maintaining in any case the possibility to act, substantially, as freelancers – the company indeed limits itself to invoice the performance to customers indicated by the worker, withdrawing a fixed sum to finance general costs of the structure – and with the possibility to accede to the legal protections, comprehensive of social security contributions, maternity leave and sick pay, generally assured to reporters with a traditional employment agreement. Furthermore, journalists members of DocPress could choose to remain self-employed,

benefitting of a series of services as tax and legal advice at low rates and a credit recovery office. Irrespective of the kind of relationship the reporter opted to, DocPress will provide him, finally, with another series of common new-mutualistic tools, as a structure managing payments, contracts and invoicing activity, an office specialized in Italian or EU tenders, education opportunities and, in the next period, the introduction of a digital platform to share the said services, news and announcements related to the profession concerned.

In the light of above, even if, as at the beginning of the past century, new-mutualistic organizations may not represent the only and definitive reply to poor working conditions in the journalists' domain, being necessary an impressive initiative of the legislator to reduce the tendency to recur to self-employment instead of traditional wage labour, they surely constitute a concrete and actual tool to assure a relief to the difficult condition of reporters in Italy, demonstrating how workers' auto-organisation could still be considered a precious resource in the difficult landscape of labour market at the beginning of XXI century.

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