Trade Unions and the Contested Incorporation of Tourism Labour in Italy

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Why-So-Poor. The Social Determinants of Low-Wage Labour in the Italian Tourism Industry (2025–2028)

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A giant economy

- A complex system of interactions between firms, markets, institutions and citizens (Britton 1991) which has become the world largest industrial complex (UNWTO 2023)
- Accounts for around 10% of global GDP (WTTC 2025)
- Between 2014 and 2019, 1 in 5 jobs created globally was in tourism and related activities
- These characteristics sustain a powerful narrative of tourism-led development

  → A "ready-made" solution to deindustrialisation processes

  → A key driver of development in regions with weak endogenous growth

  → A"pro-poor" industry and a tool to reduce labour market inequalities

Fragile labour

- Tourism labour **contingent, seasonal and highly mobile workforce**, → **secondary segments of the labour market** *(Lucas & Mansfield 2008; Duncan et al. 2013)*
- Characteristics of tourism labour *(Eurofound 2012; ILO 2020; Bianchi & De Man 2021)*:

→ low wages and low job quality
→ short-term contracts and employment instability
→ poor working conditions and limited career opportunities
→ high informality and turnover

→ around 39% of workers in selected tourism industry in the EU-27 are low-paid (Eurofound 2020)
→ in Italy, over two-thirds of workers in the sector are at risk of in-work poverty (Ministry of Labour 2022)

Hard-to-organize

- Small firms, high turnover; strong seasonality and workers mobility **produce discontinuous and unstable employment relations**
- **Workforce composition**: relies disproportionately on women, migrants and young workers → **groups with weaker labour market power**
- Class formation: fragmented and spatially dispersed workers → absence of sustained interaction → undermines the formation of stable work collectives (Macfarlane 1982; Wills 2005)
- Industrial relations: weak institutionalisation of employment relations and historically low unionisation;
- Union presence remains intermittent and difficult to consolidate (Wood 2020; Papadopoulos & Ioannou 2023; Ford 2023) (with some local exceptions)
- Tourism as a "Bermuda Triangle" of industrial relations

Historical Exclusion and Symbolic Marginalisation

- The representation of labour has historically been structured around industrial work and a **productive, masculine imaginary**, understood as the privileged site of value production and class formation.
- Spatial concentration, employment stability, and the visibility of work made it possible to construct recognisable collective interests, translate them into trade union organisation,
- Tourism work developed historically outside this core.
- Its origins in reproductive, domestic and servile labour together with its association with women, migrants, young workers → positioning it outside the "proper" realm of work, distant from the industrial and masculine imaginaries of the working class (Raspadori, 2014),
- This positioning translates into lower collective visibility, difficulties in sustaining stable forms of aggregation, and only partial inclusion within the repertoires of representation → Workers are **symbolically peripheral**.
- This symbolic positioning feeds back into organisational dynamics, weakening collective identification and limiting the scope of representation.
- Not only hard to organise but partially constituted as a legitimate/subject object of representation.

From Declining Core to Expanding Margins

- The decline of industrial work and the expansion of service employment have destabilised the traditional bases of union representation.
- Trade unions increasingly confront a workforce that is more heterogeneous, less stable and less spatially concentrated, and lacking historical associational power.
- The literature on union renewal has shown that unions seek to adapt through new repertoires: developing forms of organising beyond the workplace *(Tapia 2013; Tapia & Turner 2018)* mobilising new combinations of power resources *(Lévesque & Murray 2010)*
- key question: not only how trade unions adapt to these transformations, but how they define and position these workers within the boundaries of representation.
- How unions frame and position these workers within the boundaries of representation, shaping how they are recognized as subjects of representation and incorporated as legitimate subject of the working class

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Methods and context

- Focus on mechanisms of **classification and representation** → From labour as a given object to labour as a **contested object of recognition**
- Qualitative interviews (N=21) with union officials in Italy *(tourism sector)*
- Content analysis

Italy? Tourism (and derivate activities) accounts for **~11% of GDP**

Strong expansion of the sector:
→ 770,000 workers (2006) → 1.5 million (2024) *(+94%)* Firms +50%

Workforce composition:
→ 58% under 40
→ 51% women
→ 28.1% migrant workers

Embedded in broader transformations: → deindustrialization

Industrial relations context: Marked by **trade union pluralism**
→ differences among confederal unions (distinct histories and cultures)
→ presence of grassroots unions
→ A relevant setting to observe variation in processes of incorporation

Three Ideal-Typical Union Approaches to the Tourism Sector

1) Bargaining and services approach: centres on collective bargaining as instrument of regulation

- Key activities include: the renewal of National Sectoral Agreements; the strengthening bilateral agreements; and the improvement of welfare access through union services (e.g. NASPI, CAF)
- Workers are primarily engaged through service provision, which often represents the main entrypoint into union membership

2) Conflict and services approach: combines service provision, workplace mobilisation, campaigning and the construction of collective class consciousness..

- Key activities include: the management of labour disputes (individual and collective); strikes and workplace mobilisation; media and community campaigns; and street-level organising strategies targeting hard to reach workers.
- Unions adopting this strategy seek to improve working conditions while advancing struggles for recognition.

3) Identity-Based associational approach: a third strategy emerging in the absence of effective union organising, driven by bottom-up initiatives focused primarily on seasonal workers

- These organisations operate through: rights-awareness campaigns; peer-to-peer legal assistance; and informal counselling channels.
- Their objective is to strengthen recognition of seasonal workers as members of a distinct occupational category with specific rights and needs.

Findings 1:

- Across Italian trade unions, tourism is widely recognised as a sector of growing economic importance.
- Union tends to (partially) reproduce dominant narratives that frame tourism as:
  - Driver of local development
  - Response to deindustrialisation
  - Source of employment expansion

"Tourism is an important asset, perhaps the most important, in the Italian economy. Unfortunately, it is not fully exploited as it should be"

"In areas such as Romagna, work in tourism has not only meant economic development, but has also been "a genuine driver of the territory's own emancipation" since the early twentieth century. […] Given that Italy is a country where manufacturing production has almost disappeared, the economy now largely rests on the "services and tourism" sector."

It may well be the real industry that can save this country, but we need to start developing it in a more structured way"

Findings 2:

However, tourism is not interpreted as a pro-poor industry.
All trade unions recognise the structural characteristics of tourism labour (low wages, low job quality, employment instability, poor working conditions and opportunities, widespread informality)

"People speak of shifts ranging from 10 to 12–16 hours a day, often seven days a week, with no days off for the entire season"

"In the hotel cleaning sector, shifts are often split and spread throughout the entire day, effectively making the worker available 24/7."

"The most widespread phenomenon is "informal labour": part-time contracts (e.g. 20 hours) that mask an actual full-time of 50–60 hours, with the difference paid in cash or not paid at all"

Despite this recognition, the integration of tourism workers into trade union activities remains:

- Partial, marginal & unstable

Partial, Marginal & Unstable

Partial, as unions tend to organise primarily the more stable segments of the workforce, namely non-seasonal, full-time, male, Italian workers employed in larger firms.

By contrast, trade unions considers the remaining workforce as difficult to organise, particularly due to the sector's temporariness, fragmentation, and high turnover rates.

"[…] I mean, there are contexts, places, and companies where unionisation is relatively straightforward. The larger the company, the easier it is to unionise; the smaller it is, the harder it becomes. Nationality is not really the issue—there might be, for instance, a small bar with three employees where no one will ever join a union. And this is true regardless of whether they are Italian or foreign workers; it makes no difference." (Trade unionist)

Marginal - yet to become workers

Integration is also marginal because trade unions often embrance and reproduce a narrative in which tourism labour is often framed as:

- Transitional work
- Low-skill or non-professional activity
- A “lavoretto” (a “small job”) (understood as something casual, low-commitment, often carried out by young people, especially students, and not recognised as a real career)

Partial, Marginal & Unstable

"And for me, as a trade unionist, it is essential to reaffirm the value of work experience during the study period, because people who study and work improve, they acquire a background and experience that will be useful when they enter the labour market. It also helps them become better workers simply because they have done a few seasonal jobs, thus giving work a cultural value […] And for a student, this is ideal because they earn some money, have time to study or enjoy the summer, and for an employer it can also be an opportunity, because if I need to cover a 12-hour shift, and I have three people who each properly cover their part of the shift, I can cover the shift and employ three people instead of asking one person to stay in the company for 12 hours from morning to evening."

"In reality, for those living in areas with a strong tourism vocation (such as this Island), the seasonal job is not a "stopgap" but a compulsory life path, as it is often the only available employment alternative

Marginality

One of the reasons behind the marginal position of tourism work is to be found in the social composition of workforce. Many trade unionists frame migrant workers as:

- Difficult to organise
- Temporary
- Weakly attachable to collective identities

Also, processes of racialisation penetrates into trade unions frames contributing to selective patterns of inclusion within representation.

A further factor emerged, related to training, connected to the fact that foreign workers have different habits compared to Italians. For example, an entrepreneur mentioned the case of having hired an Indian cleaning worker, and, how can I put it, it is a customary ritual in India to welcome a guest by leaving a drop of urine in the toilet. […] This is why training for foreign workers is necessary, because they come from different cultural backgrounds compared to Italians. […] These workers need to be trained and, in a sense, educated, and this is done through training. (Trade Unionist)

Marginality within Union Structures

The limited representation of tourism labour is not only externally determined. It is also reproduced within union organisations.

In particular:

- Tourism union federations occupy a secondary position within confederal hierarchies
- Representativeness continues to be measured according to industrial criteria
- Even grassroots or conflict unions tend to interpret tourism workers as “atypical labour” rather than as a distinct sector

As a consequence, tourism remains peripheral within internal union priorities.

Marginality within Union Structures

"Well, then I'm sorry, also because they are comrades, you know, so it's complicated, but there isn't this recognition. Tourism is also considered by comrades within the organisation as non-structural work, not a job of choice or continuity, not a job that, let's say, is of good quality in general—although, all things considered, they are not entirely wrong—but it is strategic; that is, for them it is not strategic. Anyway, I don't want to go on, I'll stop here"

"…bureaucratisation is one of the problems of organisations, as is a certain sense of weakness in representation and in understanding sectors that are not traditional for these organisations. When I say 'traditional', I mean that it is much easier […] more convenient […] it is easier to deal with forestry work, public and quasi-public employment, therefore the well-known precarious workers who have been precarious for sixty years, and who therefore form the historical core around which you carry out your struggles with institutions, associations, and politics by talking about forestry workers, industry, and so on. Whereas doing the same in tourism, or in sectors that are not historical or traditional, and on which you **do not even have a consolidated body of analysis or widespread sensitivity, is much more difficult**."

Towards a contested Incorporation?

The incorporation of tourism workers within trade unions structures and narratives is shaped by three mutually reinforcing dynamics

1. Pressure towards inclusion: Rapid expansion of tourism employment and scarce working conditions increases pressures to extend the boundaries of representation.

2. Structural and symbolic constraints: fragmented labour processes, seasonality and mobility, persistent servile stigma limit the possibilities for stable organisation.

3. Changing workforce composition young, feminised, precarious and includes an increasing number of migrant workers challenge inherited organisational routines and representational categories historically shaped around stable industrial workers.

Tourism workers are therefore neither excluded nor fully integrated. Their incorporation remains selective, negotiated and uneven