

#DEMOCRATIZINGWORKITALIA

DEMOCRATISING AND DECOMMODIFYING WORK, DECARBONISING THE PLANET: FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL

DEMOCRATIZING WORK ITALY

On 16 May 2020, three scholars and activists - Isabelle Ferreras, Dominique Méda and Julie Battilana - spread the #DemocratizingWork Manifesto online, proposing a way out of the pandemic through three fundamental objectives: democratising enterprises, de-commodifying work, and de-polluting the environment, in order to tackle effectively the economic, social and environmental challenges of our time at their roots. [In just a few weeks, almost 7000 academics, activists and civil society representatives worldwide endorsed the Manifesto.](#)

A key turning point in the international journey was the Global Forum #DemocratizingWork on 5-7 October 2021. Almost 400 speakers from over 40 countries spoke on more than 100 panels at this unprecedented event. The participants engaged in an in-depth discussion, which has been lacking in our institutions for too long, around the principles of the Manifesto ([here is the video link to all the panels held](#)).

Within this global framework, as Italian organising committee we organised seven panels articulating the three key words of the appeal within the situation of our country. We discussed workers' participation and recovered factories, cooperativism, logistics and the struggles of trade unions, the health crisis and the need to support a society of care, the invisibility of cultural workers, the green ideology and the need to decarbonise production processes.

In the following months, we spread the principles of the manifesto in our country, multiplying the opportunities for discussion both in academia and beyond. With this objective in mind, on 15 February 2022 we organised an [online seminar with Isabelle Ferreras](#), thus presenting the Italian network of #DemocratizingWork to dozens of professors, researchers and precarious workers engaged in research.

In February, we gave a talk at the Fridays For Future training school, also engaging with mobilising groups, such as the GKN collective, in the construction of the 25 March climate strike.

In March, as soon as it was possible to organise in-presence meetings again, [we presented and discussed with the author the book 'Rights Against the Machines' \(by Marco Marrone\) at Piano Terra](#), a space shared by several activist organisations including Deliverance Milano, which together with other organisations such as Rider Union Bologna supported the claims of food delivery workers.

After more than a year, the group Democratizing Work Italia continues to meet regularly with the aim of promoting discussions, reflections and study groups open to all those who recognise in its principles the way to build a sustainable, democratic and inclusive society.

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In addition to our experiences and research, we now have one more tool in this journey. The promoters of the Manifesto, together with many other colleagues, united their efforts in a collective work '[Le Manifeste Travail](#)' translated into [Portuguese](#), [English](#) (published by the University of Chicago Press) and now also into [Italian](#) with a preface by the CGIL general secretary Maurizio Landini (Edizioni Castelvevchi).

OUR REASONS

Signing the Democratizing Work appeal was, for many of us, a spontaneous, instinctive, natural act, at an exceptional moment, the pandemic, which locked a part of the population inside the walls of their homes, while another part continued to guarantee essential services, exposing themselves to the risk of contagion. If the pandemic was teaching us anything, it was the vital need not to return to a toxic and destructive normality. Often, in situations of crisis, the urgency emerges to question the meaning of what we are doing, as individuals and as a society. In other words, the need arises to assess whether the small world that constitutes our everyday life is contributing to the drift or, on the contrary, is genuinely striving for a balance between living beings and the environment resulting from a democratic decision that benefits all rather than a small circle of subjects that hold power and wealth.

The exceptional nature of the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and contrasts that were already widely present and entrenched in society: on the one hand, an elite that is increasingly richer and less numerous, on the other hand an increasingly large and poorer mass, as well as deprived of its rights. By signing that appeal we chose not to be indifferent, as Gramsci teaches us, not to give up demanding courageous choices able to reverse the direction that society has been taking for too long.

Thinking of democratising enterprises, decommodifying labour and rethinking the relationship with the environment seems to us a necessary choice to respond to the social contradictions emphasised by the pandemic crisis, now worsened by the international political-economic crisis associated with the war in Ukraine.

WAR AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

If war is politics carried out by other means, it seems fair to frame the recent tragic events as a crisis of democracy. Beyond its brutality, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought to light interconnections between democratic and authoritarian regimes that make it necessary to look beyond mere geopolitics: democratisation and decommodification of labour and decarbonisation offer a fundamental key to interpret and act now. In particular, the decarbonisation imperative cannot be achieved without

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understanding and deconstructing the network of transnational interests that reproduce energy policies and practices destroying the planet.

The democratisation of labour requires addressing the inequalities that we directly observe on a local scale, but it cannot exempt us from reforming those transnational infrastructures that make possible the accumulation and concealment of wealth, which emerged in the headlines with the sanctions on Russian oligarchs.

Decommodifying labour also means that, in hoping for and supporting the political and economic reconstruction of Ukraine, we should not ignore its role - played until now - as a European economic periphery, a reservoir of workers for richer Europe (including Italy), often exploited and without rights. Combining ideas and strategies to democratise enterprises and decommodifying work, together with the idea of rethinking the production system for an ecological transition, requires a double effort. We need to combine ideas and actions on global and local scale.

We need to join our energies against all forms of domination, exploitation and exclusion. This is the only way to combine global and local perspectives, rejecting simplifications that fragment closely interconnected issues: democratic deficit in the workplace, progressive commodification of labour and destruction of the planet in the name of unearned incomes and profit. It means thinking of people and society needs before those of the market, of care rather than unearned incomes and profit, of respect for labour, communities and the environment in which everyone has the right to live in dignified conditions.

Democratic politics, progressively emptied of meaning by the feigned struggle between what Nancy Fraser calls the poles of 'progressive neo-liberalism' and 'reactionary populism', has led to the depoliticisation of entire generations, entire areas of the world, entire social classes, who feel increasingly powerless. What has happened, in other words, is what authors like Norberto Bobbio have been pointing out for many decades: political democracy if it does not also become social democracy cannot endure. The

Democratizing Work project was born in a very critical context in which democracy is retreating. As the very recent invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army unfortunately remind us, an arsenal of atomic weapons, which mobilise catastrophic imaginaries resurfacing directly from the darkest moments of the Cold War, threaten our world. The spectre of Dr Strangelove sadly continues to surround the logic of domination and oppression. At the same time, the urgency to react re-emerges, forcefully demanding disarmament policies. It is crazy and paradoxical that during the pandemic period, the arms industry did golden businesses. Getting away from the logic of destruction, whether military or supporting a production system that blindly chases growth and profit, means going beyond particular and contingent interests to restore meaning and centrality to the common good.

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DEGRADED LABOUR

In the present scenario inequality and exploitation of labour are growing. In time of crisis capitalism finds the ideal terrain to expand its margins. In many cases organisational decisions, working conditions, rhythms and wages impede workers to live in dignified conditions, and from focusing on their interests and affections.

Eurostat data (2020) certify that average wages in Italy have decreased over the last thirty years, at purchasing power parity, unlike the rest of Europe. This is combined with a high rate of youth unemployment, with a strong and persistent gender inequality. A significant number of productive sectors such as the hotels, catering and tourism sector are not offering decent working conditions and remuneration, but operators in this sector are surprised not to find workers. The logistics sector has been experiencing years of intense conflict over working conditions, as the trade unions denounce on a daily basis. This trends show how labour is devalued and reduced to pure commodity. We are witnessing the paradox of generations of young people forced to work for free dreaming for a career that is often characterised by precarious contracts, self-exploitation and, in the best of cases, a family welfare that fuels hopes of redemption. We are witnessing the growth of poor workers, unable to define or maintain stable life projects, to imagine spaces of emancipation able to counter alienation and daily frustrations. The unsustainability of this situation, further aggravated by inflation fuelled by the conflict in Ukraine, is evident. This extreme socio-economic fragility is a prelude to social conflict.

Labour cannot be a mere market variable. Decent living conditions must be pursued and inalienable social rights promoted, both for workers and unemployed. We feel it is crucial, for example, to defend the few but important progressive social and labour policies introduced in our country in recent years, such as the Citizenship Income. More generally, a social protection system capable of guaranteeing dignity to people is fundamental, a system able to tackle the new working conditions and the new and fragmented social needs.

We must conceive job opportunities for the emancipation of people and the safeguard of the planet. Democratizing and decommodifying work means claiming a decision-making role for workers in organisational processes and working conditions, also taking as a model the historical and contemporary experiences, including those in Italy, of recovered and self-managed enterprises, workers' cooperatives which show not only the subjective need but the real possibility of exercising direct control over working processes.

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DEGRADED ENVIRONMENT

Economic democracy and decommodification of labour are also tools for designing and building a non-extractive economic system, which means using natural resources without exhausting them and without causing unacceptable living conditions for most living beings, both human and non-human. The only possible future economic system is the one based on energy transition. It is necessary to counter the climate and environmental crisis, which effects impact all over the world, but are particularly evident in the impoverishment of populations forced to migrate.

Decarbonisation, however, is not only about climate. It has to do with the land degradation associated with energy-intensive agricultural industrialisation and the groundwater pollution that the intensive use of chemicals produces. It is linked to deforestation and the increasing anthropisation of nature, the effects of which affect not only the absorption of CO2 but also the dramatic zoonotic consequences that the pandemic has highlighted.

To face these issues, we need a comprehensive and organic look. Social and environmental justice needs to go hand in hand as movements like Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion highlight by claiming decision-making space for all those aspiring to a sustainable, fair and inclusive future for every living being.

SPACES FOR ACTION

The book *Le Manifeste Travail* - now also available in Italian - is a collection of essays by numerous scholars who have long been engaged in the critical analysis of the economic sphere. It addresses those processes innervating and orienting the society, generating hierarchies and priorities that are blindly profit-oriented, also generating marginality, exploitation and pollution that are often concealed by rhetoric of 'fair', 'corporate social responsibility' or 'green economy'.

We perceived it as a stimulus to push further the analysis of the manifesto, a sequence of suggestions inviting debate, as an open project. The book presents several proposals without claiming that they are globally exportable.

The critical events of recent years have highlighted how much room for intervention exists for economic and social actions that the dominant rhetoric tended to present as incompatible. We refer to the measures taken by states and the European Union during the Covid pandemic. The suspension of European agreements on the management of public budgets and the introduction of European funding to relaunch the economy showed that reacting is possible if a political intention exists. Similarly, the hosting of six

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million Ukrainians by European states shows how the complaints about the alleged invasion of people from other countries were rhetorical and instrumental.

We think the time has come to relaunch our action expanding and strengthening the network we built over the last year. The war, after the pandemic, made clear that going back to is no longer possible. The months ahead will decide our future, the future of our communities and the future of the planet. It seems increasingly clear that the free market and growth-at-any-cost formulas as configured in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) are rather part of the problem. The solution, however, is not at hand: there is no expert, organisation, politician or international ally capable of tackling such deep-rooted problems on their own. No one is able to find a solution alone; likewise, no party, trade union or association can be self-sufficient. We believe that a fundamental part of our journey should focus on alliances and coalitions able to contaminate society valuing existing attempts to foster solidarity and democracy. We strongly believe that a horizontal and open discussion could produce solutions that we cannot even imagine if we remain isolated. Our contribution, as researchers and activists of Democratizing Work Italia, is the creation of a cultural infrastructure available to all those (groups, organisations and individuals) interested in sharing knowledge and building new tools to collectively change the world. This is an open invitation to actively contribute to our project by joining the network, following the [Facebook group](#), proposing debates and initiatives (you can write to us here: democratizingwork2021it@gmail.com).

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