



# Lacking Active Labor Policies: Who is to Blame? Insights into Unionism, Employment and the Labor Market

by Giorgio Impellizzieri, Michele Tiraboschi

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After more than thirty years of unsuccessful attempts, the Italian debate on active labor policies<sup>1</sup> has now reached its climax. Everyone is talking about them, as they are regarded as the solution to issues characterizing today's ever-changing labor market. Labor supply does not meet demand, while job positions remain vacant in spite of many unemployed, inactive and underemployed people who would be happy to find better employment.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that companies have begun to experiment with do-it-yourself recruitment strategies, a long-standing practice which has recently attracted public attention due to the move of FIM – CISL's metalworkers union – which has stood up against it. Specifically, this trade union has pointed out the lack of active labor policies as some unusual forms of collaboration take place between employers and workers to fill job openings, i.e. in some cases, workers are rewarded for identifying possible candidates (see D. Cavalcoli, *Mancano i lavoratori: premio ai dipendenti (fino a 3 mila euro) che segnalano candidati*, in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 11 May 2022).

Engaging in complex analyses concerning the failure of active labor policies falls outside the scope of this note. However, it can be argued that in modern transitional labor markets, it would be misleading to think of active policies as a panacea for the problems arising from work-related changes and difficult employment transitions (see, the ADAPT-ASSOLOMBARDA research on active policies in modern transitional labor markets).

However, FIM's move is relevant as it points to a long-standing misconception, which is based on two considerations. On the one hand, it is argued that active labor policies have a purely public function – i.e. public bodies are responsible for them. On the other hand, it is assumed that active policies shall be implemented in favor of inactive or unemployed people or people at risk of losing their jobs, rather than devising a more elaborated strategy for combining training and work.

As pointed out in some provisions of the Biagi Law (Title II of Legislative Decree No. 276/2003) – which however have been poorly implemented – modern active labor policies can neither fall within the competences of public bodies alone nor concern the most vulnerable categories of workers on an exclusive basis.

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<sup>1</sup> The debate on active labor policies dates back to the early 1960s but no foundations have been laid so far to make them more effective. See L. Frey, *Sindacato, mercato del lavoro, occupazione*, in G.P. Cella, T. Treu (a cura di), *Relazioni industriali. Manuale per l'analisi della esperienza italiana*, il Mulino, 1982, qui pp. 302-304.


The role of private operators is central, not only authorized entities – e.g. employment services – but also schools, universities and representation bodies, which have always been a catalyst for matching labor supply and demand. In this sense, it is significant that trade unions were created first in trades and local areas, and subsequently they developed in factories and commodity sectors.

While the collaboration between workers and businesses in the labor market is not unusual, what raises doubts is its informal and sporadic nature, a problem which also characterized the limited implementation of dual apprenticeships and interprofessional funds for lifelong education.


Representatives of workers and companies have a tool to act with determination on this aspect, i.e. joint bodies. They are valuable instruments for the co-management of labor markets, and yet they are still opposed by some professionals – because of the costs, which are actually investments for a well-functioning labor market and for people’s protection – and by those advocating for active labor policies only when they are funded by the government. This approach affects cooperation and the effectiveness of the measures put forward.

In conclusion, in today’s rapidly changing labor market, bilateralism can be key in understanding and governing changes from the point of view of training and the identification of needs and trades – especially when implementing dual apprenticeship schemes. This is so because joint bodies can interpret this growing labor market complexity, which escapes overgeneralized national norms that only risk turning active labor policies into bureaucratic tasks.

***Giorgio Impellizzieri***

PhD Student, Doctoral School in Learning and Innovation in Social and Work Settings  
ADAPT, University of Siena  
 @giorgioimpe

***Michele Tiraboschi***

ADAPT’s Scientific Coordinator  
 @MicheTiraboschi

