



The Great Resignation and the Right to Choose the Job We Like*

by Emmanuele Massagli

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In the media, the “Great resignation” has been portrayed as a form of socialism, a sort of opposition to modern working conditions that are generating anti-capitalist attitudes. Thousands of workers leave stable employment – because it is poorly paid and unrewarding – to “change their lives”. This is clearly a biased interpretation of the phenomenon, though it is a real issue which needs to be examined further and in an objective way.

In 2021, nearly 1.9 million voluntary resignations were reported in Italy, about 12% more than in 2019 [source: Italy’s Ministry of Labor]. There were 307,000 in the first quarter of 2022, the highest figure since this statistic has been calculated (up 35 percent from 2021, which was also a record year) [source: INPS]. Two-thirds of those discharged are adult workers (35 years old and older) but the share of young people (+27%) and seniors (+71%) is also growing significantly [source: Veneto Lavoro].

The percentage of job positions defined as “difficult to fill” is also on the increase: 39% of the 560,000 job opportunities made available as of June 2022 risks going unfilled, as people with adequate experience cannot be found (69%), there are no candidates (16%), or due to a lack of appropriate skills (13%) [Source: Unioncamere Excelsior].

These statistics generate a paradox when examined with those concerning young people (57% of the unfilled positions refer to this category): Italy is the European country with the highest number of NEETs. If we analyse the 15-34 age group – 34-year-olds in Italy are still referred to as ‘young people’ – they are 3.085,000 people [source: Eurispes]. They are out of work in spite of lower competition – not because of educational merits, but because of demographic reasons. From 2002 to 2022, the number of young people between 15 and 34 years of age in Italy has decreased by 3,051,000, just over 20% of the figure at the beginning of the millennium [source: ISTAT].

Without considering the experienced workers, who are resigning to earn more in the same sector where their skills are more marketable (this is the case for 65% of workers living in Northern Italy who find a new job in less than one month), some reflections need to be made for young people. They are willing to earn less, as long as the new occupation is in line with their skills, though they re-enter the labour market later due their lack of experience. Significantly, 125,000 positions per month are offered to people aged below 35 which are considered difficult to find, with young people who also benefit from economic incentives implemented by European regulations which exclude adults. Nonetheless, a significant number of young people decide to stay out of the labour market or to leave voluntarily.

According to left-leaning social and political parties, the reason for this is the low wages offered especially in the trade and tourism sectors, which are accessible even as first jobs.


Yet the Italian Federation of Public Establishments (FIPE) has been complaining for months about the lack of 250,000 workers in the hospitality sector, recalling that the starting pay regulated by the collective agreement for a young person without any experience is 1,200 euros per month for 40 hours per week of work, along with overtime pay.

In contrast, some employer associations and centre-right parties take issue with citizenship income, though the average amount of support income in the South is 581 euros [Source: INPS], far lower than the minimum offered in the sectors that are looking for personnel. Moreover, not only menial jobs are refused, but also well-paid professions, as long as stable jobs in the public administration, as recently pointed out by the Ministry of Transport, which highlighted the large number of people turning down jobs at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Lastly, there are those who recall the shortcomings of the Italian school and university system, whose provision fails to consider the situation in the labour market, save for vocational education and training regulated by regional bodies. Nevertheless, at this stage entrepreneurs are willing to hire even young people who want to engage in on-the-job training. Yet the problem is that they are difficult to find.

Therefore, what are the reasons why so many young people are out of work? Academics, politicians, educators, but also businesses must realize that the relationship between new generations and work has been changing. The right to ‘a desired job’ is giving priority over the right to work, so the focus is on occupations in line with personal aspirations. This represents a further step towards working for something more rewarding than pay. Yet there are those who point out that the dedication with which the rider defies traffic and weather conditions to put food on the table, the perseverance with which thousands of couriers deliver Amazon packages, and the dedication of teachers that work in run-down schools, would deserve greater appreciation than the latest Instagram post denouncing an unacceptable job offer at bars in popular tourist destinations.

Therefore, we need to praise those who turn down a regular job offers to pursue their dreams, those who resign because they were refused an extra day of remote work, or those who, with no experience, have felt that too much is being asked of them. They are not wrong. However, they are right, either, as their aspiration to have a dream job might challenge the main reasons for which one works, which are the only levers for promoting growth in society.

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