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The other side of migration: Africans' future in Italy

The strike is over. Flags have come down and the participants are back home. 300,000 all over Italy, 2,000 in the centre of Milan, thousands more in France. After firing Europe up with demonstrations of workers on its streets, the recently born “Yellow Movement” is gearing up to go. But African workers have a key role to play in the future of Italy and other European countries.

Stefania Ragusa, founder and organizer of this initiative, an Italian journalist and writer, is launching an appeal: the time to re-build has come.

“Now we are in the second phase. We have to create a political platform, call a national assembly of all the committees, which could be hosted once again in Bologna,” she writes in an open letter to all the *24 hours without us* Facebook group’s members, “but at the same time we must be the expression of civil society and preserve our autonomy from parties and trade unions.”

Numerous organizations joined the symbolic demonstration – which only in a few cities has turned into a real strike: PIME, the Italian Missionary Centre of Milan and various NGOs working in Africa, such as Terres Des Hommes, Amnesty International, AMREF and Emergency.

Africans were also among those on the streets, and they took active part in the demonstration by calling for a change in the relationship with foreign people and asking for equal rights. Some of them have remained critical, as they had already said to Afronline.org.

However, even though this event was only a small step – which gained a lot of media attention – Europe and Italy in particular need to get used to the growing presence of African workers.

According to the Dossier Caritas/Migrantes data, half of the foreign workers in France come from Africa, while they represent 34% in Portugal, 19% in Spain, 16% in Holland and 15% both in the UK and in Belgium. As for Italy? Perhaps a surprise to some will be the fact that in 2009 the number of African workers was around 889,345, which means 22% of foreign people. The majority of them are Northern Africans, followed by their Western African counterparts. Since 2000, African communities have deeply increased, with a peak in Eritreans, whose population growth is around 143%. Workers coming from Senegal have increased by 75%, while Moroccans, Tunisians, Ghanaians and Nigerians have doubled, overtaken only by people from the Ivory Coast who have tripled in number.

Antonio Ricci, a Dossier Caritas/Migrantes expert, has opened a workshop dedicated to African migrations’ trends in Praia, on the Cape Verde Island. He explains that “today there are 1 billion African people, and in 2050 there will be three African people for every European, with a total amount of 2 billion inhabitants. At a demographic level, Africa will be the third giant, behind India and China.”

But it is still a problematic giant, where the unemployment rate is around 40%, reaching 95% in Zimbabwe and 85% in Liberia. Population growth and living conditions will push a growing number of African worker towards Italy, particularly the ones from Sub Saharan Africa, and will make them spread more across the country.

Africans are arriving, in ever growing numbers, but most of all they are integrating into Italian society. Partially thanks to a high birth rate which has caused their increased presence in schools, they occupy 18% of the foreign active population in Italy, preceded only by people from Eastern Europe.

Those who have been in Italy for a long time and are since well established, have clear views on the perspectives of African immigrants in Europe. “I often talk about it with people from Togo who want to leave for Europe. When I say do not come, they ask me why I am not going back. I think that the most important factor is learning the language of the country you are entering. I arrived in 2002 and for two years I studied Italian. Without the language you are left out,” says **Sassou Efoe Mawuena Joseph, the Togolese founder of the cultural Association AFRIACA, based in Milan.**

Others disagree. “I arrived ten years ago and the situation was better, we were able to sleep at night, papers were not linked to job, while now you are illegal if you’re not employed somewhere. There is a sensation of insecurity and uncertainty. I was in Rosarno ten years ago and we where all irregular migrants. Now all the people who work in the fields there have papers,” explains **the Burkinabè journalist and writer Cleophas Adrien Dioma.**

Today he would not suggest to a young African to move to the other side of the Mediterranean. “We were foreigners, we became Italians. And then we suddenly became foreigners again. After 12 years in Italy, I am still a foreign worker, and this doesn’t make me imagine a future in this country. I have two possibilities: becoming Italian or accepting an awful job, which gives me the right papers. I feel I have no choice. This society is not prepared to welcome us.”

The authors of the Dossier Caritas define African migrants condition in Italy as “reassuring” however. Apart from the contribution at the economic level to the Italian system and the amount of remittances sent to Africa - around 1 billion euros per year - African immigrants have started 64,321 firms, 34% of the total number of foreign companies in Italy in 2009.

But the main positive aspect of their presence is in school. Africans are 30,5% of foreign school children in day nurseries, 26% in elementary schools, 21% of the students in secondary schools and 17% in high schools. The large number of young African children is testimony to the progressive expansion of migrants rooted in the country and living in Italy with a family. In this context, the importance of education is made clear, as fertility rates are set to remain high.

“We have to use culture to prepare the future of young Italians and foreign students, who will be our next ministers and politicians in years to come,” says **Sassou Efoe Mawuena Joseph** “I am a cultural mediator and I know that young people are aware that all people are equal. If we loose this hope, we lose the value of our lives too. We have to be faithful: one day it will all change.”

By *Chiara Caprio* – Afronline.org