

Beyond Fragmentation: the Case of the Italian Entertainment Industry during the Pandemic

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Abstract

This article proposes empirical insights into labour mobilisation in the entertainment industry during the pandemic, aiming to examine the intersection between government policies and workers' demands. It also introduces methodological reflections on the “operaist” tool of “*inchiesta a caldo*”, through a continuous process of dialogue oriented toward the design, implementation, and analysis of the findings. The objective goes beyond mere knowledge production, seeking instead to build a shared political framework for identifying key issues and formulating the demands needed to improve working conditions in the sector. The findings show that overcoming various forms of fragmentation (contractual, hierarchical, and occupational) occurred around the shared claim for universal and continuous welfare measures, capable of ensuring income during inactivity periods and reducing contractual inequalities. This process has taken on a broader political meaning within the current neoliberal context, where solidarity among precarious workers represents an act of rupture against competitive individualism and the ideology of the “own entrepreneur”.

Keywords

entertainment workers, fragmentation, pandemic, workers' inquiry, welfare

Introduction

Historically and across various countries, the entertainment industry has been the subject of several workplace protests. However, a persistent challenge has been the absence of a cohesive framework that can unite the multifaceted professional constituents of this sector. This phenomenon can be attributed primarily to the unique composition of the industry, which is characterised by various lines of fragmentation. This phenomenon operates on multiple levels, ranging from the organisation of the sector and its subfields to the types of contracts and employment arrangements, professional specialisation, and internal workplace dynamics. These processes of occupational distinction are deeply embedded in the organisational structure of certain segments of the industry, producing marked inequalities among workers themselves. This is especially evident in the economic disparity between artists and technicians or backstage personnel, or even within the professional differences in the same sector. In certain instances, divergent perspectives emerge even among individuals who possess analogous job titles or within the same company. This pattern can be observed among younger and less experienced workers, those lacking prestigious collaborations or extensive professional networks, or those who are not yet regarded as professionals but rather as amateurs. The reproduction of fragmentation is typically sustained by

the multiplication of collective agreements that regulate labour relations, wage levels, and job duties. This structural configuration is also distinguished by notable differences between employees and self-employed workers, primarily supported by substantial disparities in individual rights, wage levels and contractual classifications.

In Italy, the fragmentation of the economy worsened considerably during the pandemic. Following the emergence of the novel strain of Coronavirus, public authorities introduced a series of measures aimed at curtailing the spread of the virus. Among these was a prohibition on arts and cultural activities. Restrictions on live performances and public events persisted well beyond the end of the initial lockdown, alternating between suspensions and partial reopenings depending on the epidemiological situation. The initial economic support policies were found to be selective, thereby further exacerbating the existing divisions within the sector. The exclusionary and discretionary nature of the measures gave rise to a national protest movement in the early weeks of lockdown. This phenomenon originated in the online sphere, rapidly disseminating to encompass a diverse array of entertainment professionals across all sector. From the outset, the protests were characterised by demands for the extension of emergency support, but also by a broader rethinking of the future of the sector as a whole. This rethinking entailed a challenge to the existing conditions and the advocacy of systemic change, beginning with measures aimed at restructuring the sector itself. The necessity to overcome fragmentation was expressed in the concise yet potent slogan "United in Diversity", which affirmed respect for professional plurality while emphasising the importance of dismantling established hierarchies and contractual divisions.

The objective of this article is to analyse the subjective process that led to the overcoming of professional fragmentation in the sector during the pandemic. Amidst a pervasive climate of discontent and a prevailing sense of readiness for action, the research process adopted the form of a "*inchiesta a caldo*" (Panzieri, 1971)², as it developed over the course of two years of mobilisation during the pandemic. The inquiry's collaborative approach entailed the involvement of workers engaged in mobilisation in the design, implementation, and analysis of results. In this sense, we adopt a perspective that seeks to minimise the divide between researcher and subject within the cognitive and political process. This is achieved through continuous participation in the initial workers' assemblies, detached observation, and the conduction of interviews and informal conversations. A large-scale survey was conducted, the formulation of questions and indicators being the outcome of a self-reflective and negotiated process, following an extensive strategy aimed at including (through a self-selected sample) workers from all subsectors, geographical backgrounds, and socio-professional conditions. Moreover, with the objective of investigating the potential emergence of unifying demands, the study encompassed artists, technicians, administrators, and teachers.

The article is structured as follows: the following section places the study within the existing literature on the labour market. The debate on issues related to labour fragmentation in the sector is highlighted. The subsequent section delineates the research methodology, with a particular emphasis on the worker survey process and the tools and techniques that were utilised. This is

² "Inquiry on the spot" is the English translation of "*inchiesta a caldo*". In Raniero Panzieri's work, it refers to a political and theoretical approach to militant labour analysis. Based on the direct experience of workers, it is carried out amidst factory conflicts. This approach rejects scientific neutrality and the separation of knowledge from political militancy. Raniero Panzieri, an Italian Marxist workerist scholar from the 1950s and 1960s, was the main proponent of this approach. The main objective is to understand how workers' awareness and demands change during a workers' struggle.

followed by a section analysing the economic consequences of the restrictions imposed by the government in response to the pandemic, with a particular focus on the impact on the sector's activities. The present study also examines the effects of the support measures that have been approved by the government in order to mitigate the impact of the aforementioned restrictions. The final section of this study discusses the main demands shared by the mobilised workers, in an attempt to identify potential elements for overcoming fragmentation.

Precarious workers in a fragmented industry

This present article aims to expand beyond a narrow focus on artistic labour, thereby broadening the perspective to encompass the entire entertainment sector, wherein the artist assumes a central yet non-exclusive role. At the same time, it seeks to highlight that fragmentation in the sector intersects multiple levels—hierarchical, occupational, and contractual. Nevertheless, a preliminary that should be given full consideration is the role of the artist in relation to the economic system. Historically, sociological research has focused on the evolution of the artist's figure by addressing two main dimensions: creative activity itself, and the organisation of dissemination and reception processes (Luise and Minardi; 1986). The prevailing tendency among scholars has been to focus on the individual profile of the artist, frequently neglecting to undertake a more comprehensive examination of employment in the sector. Within this body of research, artistic labour has been examined through the lens of social and professional identity (Moulin, 1986; Minardi, 1986), often presented as exceptional compared to other sectors. From this standpoint, certain scholars regard the artist a form of micro-entrepreneur (Menger, 1999; Kleppe, 2017) or a rational actor capable of balancing self-realisation with economic risk (Menger, 2001). This interpretation has been the subject of substantial criticism by Praznik (2021), who has highlighted how framing workers in the art sector as creatives rather than as workers is a mystifying stance.

From a sociological perspective, it is necessary to move beyond the conventional interpretation of artistic labour as an exceptional domain. This is because the conventional interpretation aligns with a narrowly market-based evaluation of creative products that legitimises exploitative practices. This dynamic is rooted in neoliberal culture and its conception of the worker as an individual entrepreneur (Dardot and Laval, 2013), which fosters a logic of competitive individualism. As Ross (2001) observes, it is the "free agent" logic that propels entertainment workers into a relentless pursuit of success, fulfilment and self-gratification, engendering self-exploitation practices and the formation of a "low-wage volunteer army". In this context, the erosion of the post-World War II employment model has led to the widespread diffusion of conditions that were once characteristic of artistic labour. A model previously seen as "atypical" has become "paradigmatic" (Bataille et al., 2020) for understanding the trajectory of labour market flexibilisation. The contemporary labour market is characterised by the proliferation of job insecurity, career intermittency, the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life, and reliance on non-routine tasks. These characteristics are no longer confined to the supposed exceptionality of the art world.

Another salient distinction that runs through the entertainment sector concerns hierarchical inequalities, often described through the dichotomy between "extraordinary" and "ordinary" artists (Bois and Perennoud, 2017). The former are considered as distinctive and exceptional individuals who often receive significant recognition from their industry peers and a high level of public

notoriety. The latter, while comprising a greater numerical quantity, are neither wealthy nor famous. Ordinary artists are integrated into the sector but are unable to achieve full economic independence due to the limited number of working days, low wages, and the instability of projects. In this regard, the concept of "dark matter" has been utilised to denote the underrepresentation of amateur workers within the field (Sholette, 2011). However, the exclusion of these individuals is not a viable option, as their presence is crucial for the survival of the sector. Moreover, the distinction between artists and amateurs has been shown to influence both professional and economic trajectories. In order to ensure their financial survival, they may find themselves compelled to engage in a variety of activities, resulting in non-linear artistic careers characterised by an alternation of jobs and professional roles. These workers pursue a sort of "dual career" (Luciano and Bertolini, 2011), describing it through the notions of "multiactivity" and "pluriactivity" (Rannou and Roharik, 2006). This strategy can manifest in various forms, including the undertaking of a supplementary vocation concurrently with the primary one, or its execution during the interstices between artistic projects. Furthermore, it can occur either within or outside the performing arts sector. In the former case, the individual works across different areas – such as theater and film – or holds different positions within the same domain, as in the case of a musician who also works as a sound technician. Interpretations of this strategy vary. Some view it as characteristic of a risk-conscious investor who diversifies income sources to mitigate economic uncertainty (Menger, 1999; 2001), while others see it as a shift towards instrumental and entrepreneurial logics that erode traditional forms of solidarity (McRobbie, 2002). However, what clearly emerges is the chronic lack of adequate resources, which makes it more appropriate to speak of in-work poverty than effective risk management. Performing arts professionals face daily economic uncertainty, which may result in their leaving the sector or losing creative energy (Serino, 2020). Furthermore, the unpredictability of work and exposure to the abundance-scarcity cycle forces workers to adopt a survival-oriented approach, juggling opportunities and cultivating contacts, without ever knowing where the next project and source of income will come from (Ross, 2008; Praznik, 2018).

The hybrid characteristics lying between subordination and autonomy (Armano and Murgia, 2017; Chicchi and Turrini, 2013) represent another fracture crossing the entertainment sector, making the performing arts a paradigmatic case for observing broader labour market transformations. Beyond the typical Fordist frameworks, the sector is shaped by a variety of professional roles and employment relationships that encompass traditional subordination but also extend beyond it, placing significant reliance on individual performance evaluation. Drawing on the concept of immaterial labour, several scholars have highlighted the role of subjectivity, framing artists as an advanced element within the broader category of the cognitive precariat (Chicchi and Turrini, 2013; Armano et al., 2016). From the standpoint of subjectivity, the workers' inquiry aims to explore the potential emergence of a new collective awareness, capable of imagining a shared future that bridges the divide between cognitive and manual precariousness. In this context, "ambivalent subjectivities" emerge (Chicchi et al., 2014), torn between individualism and the aspiration for autonomy. On the one hand, there is an intensification of personal initiative and a heightened sense of responsibility in securing work and resources; on the other, there is a growing capacity to carve out spaces of independence and resist market-driven logics. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the mobilisations in France in the early 2000s, performing arts professionals possess collective resources capable of transforming their structural vulnerabilities into the basis for political and social mobilisation (Sinigaglia, 2007).

It is an irrefutable fact that nearly every production or event requires a range of roles; only in rare cases can an artist operate entirely alone. More frequently, they are supported by technicians, administrators, managers, and – on occasion – educators and coaches. The outcome of this process is a sector characterised by a significant fragmentation, as evidenced by the prevalence of a plurality of collective agreements and occupational divisions. In Italy, the rules and norms of collective bargaining in the sector remain weak. In particular, the existence of six different national bargaining agreements (CCNL) – the majority of which were signed approximately two decades ago (Di Nunzio and Toscano, 2018) – has resulted in the establishment of distinct metrics for measuring work. Each of these metrics confers preferential treatment on certain categories of workers while excluding or isolating others deemed marginal (such as younger and less experienced individuals, interns, trainees, extras, etc.). Moreover, there is no dedicated social security system for intermittent workers (Bataille et al., 2020). Conversely, ad hoc funding is typically allocated to specific projects or subfields, without any comprehensive social protections for workers (Serino, 2020). Certain scholars have posited that the fundamental problem of precariousness in Italy is, in essence, a welfare issue, in which the existing protections are deemed to be inadequate to address the issue of employment instability (Armano and Murgia, 2017). From this perspective, endeavours to broaden the scope of the welfare system can be regarded as a unifying element for the entire sector, with the potential to overcome fragmentation and coalesce around a shared political demand. However, this ambivalent subjectivity has historically found little expression within traditional union structures and channels. Instead, it has often manifested in forms of improvisation, informality, and the pursuit of independence and unpredictability.

A process approach of workers' inquiry method

We chose to adopt the tool of “*inchiesta a caldo*” (inquiry on the spot), that is workers' inquiry in the heat of the struggle, carried out in a situation marked by intense conflict and mobilisation (Panzieri, 1971). We investigated how workers' consciousness and demand change in circumstances of work conflict when awareness of alternatives emerges. This phenomenon is due to the fact that some of the demands supported by workers in times of conflict are absent in normal circumstances and vice versa. This research process is conceived as a moment within a broader political project and thus not merely investigation (Woodcock, 2014). The merits of this approach are threefold: its timeliness, its foundation in the social phenomenon, and its capacity to facilitate comprehension of conflict dynamics. Additionally, it engenders knowledge that is pertinent for both research and social action. From this standpoint, we situate ourselves within the enduring tradition of workers' inquiry, which originates with Marx, traverses the Trotskyist political tradition, and encompasses the praxis of Italian *operaismo* (Haider and Mohandesi, 2013), culminating in social inquiry (Pugliese, 2008), which exhibits a closer congruence with academic research practices.

This is a process defined as “militant” both in terms of its purpose and its method: the inquiry aims to prefigure scenarios for improving the working and living conditions of those operating in the sector, and it was carried out through active participation in assemblies, protests, and occupations, often serving as an instrument for reflection and critical engagement with workers' conditions. According to Ross (2013: 8), “militant research involved participation by conviction, where researchers play a role in actions and share the goals, strategies, and experience of their comrades because of their own committed beliefs and not simply because this conduct is an expedient way to get their data”. However, our interpretation of the “*inchiesta a caldo*” changes

Panzieri's methodological approach to some extent, incorporating elements of innovation and redefinition within the context of tradition. Analysis and political elaboration of the results has not been delegated to trade union and political structures, as Panzeri asserts. Instead, in accordance with the methodology of co-research (Alquati, 1993), an immersive and committed position has been adopted in both the observational and analytical acts, up to the collaborative development of political action strategies. The co-research method is distinct from the approach of workers' inquiry insofar as it operates under the assumption of an inherent imbalance of power between the worker and the activist-researcher (Alquati, 1993; Roggero, 2014). Therefore, the researcher must ensure a minimal separation between themselves and the subject in order to choose and implement cognitive tools. In this way, the researcher assumes the role of the producer of the sociological knowledge necessary to activate an autonomous cooperative process. This links theory and practice in the phases of analysis and political intervention aimed at social transformation (Woodcock, 2014).

Our positioning was to adopt "*inchiesta a caldo*" to analyse how collective consciousness changed during the mobilisation process, investing in the performing arts sector due to its potential to offer useful tools for reducing fragmentation as a paradigmatic and not exceptional aspect of the Italian labour market. We decided to focus on the entertainment sector as members of the autonomous union Camere del Lavoro Autonomo e Precario (CLAP) that animated the mobilisations within the Rete Intersindacale Professionist Spettacolo e Cultura (RISP). From the outset, the forms of mobilisation adopted seemed capable of producing an innovative change in workers' perception of labour. We decided to conduct a workers' inquiry together with the Auto-organizzati dello Spettacolo di Roma (ASR), a collective which is part of the RISP network, in order to understand how the sector's structural fragmentation could be overcome and what effects a unified mobilisation produced on the perception of work in the sector. Initially, as members of CLAP, we voluntarily placed our sociological expertise at the service of workers' mobilisation. This entailed establishing personal and collective relationships with workers, taking part in confrontational situations and public initiatives, and attending assemblies, technical preparation meetings and study sessions.

We decided to structure the survey process into several phases with different timelines, each characterised by ongoing dialogue with the people involved in the mobilisation. The initial phase occurred in early 2021, coinciding with a complete suspension of activities. Following the contributions made during the assemblies and informal discussions held outside of them, a preliminary questionnaire was drafted, comprising 41 closed and pre-coded questions. The tool had two functions: firstly, it was necessary to embrace both the subjective and objective dimensions of the workers' experiences; secondly, it was necessary to capture the political aspects of participation in mobilisation initiatives, including collective goals and demands.

In the second phase, the questionnaire was administered online (via an open link shared on the social media pages of the participating organisations) in the months following the restart of activities, which occurred approximately one year after the initial implementation of containment measures in response to the first wave of the pandemic. The large-scale survey was conducted over a three-month period, from 15 March to 15 June 2021, and 894 valid questionnaires were collected. The third phase was initiated in December 2021 with the public presentation of the primary findings. In this context, the specific objectives and content of the survey were discussed, distinguishing between two different contextual conditions: one linked to the emergency phase of the pandemic and the other linked to a broader moment of social conflict.

Pandemic crisis and multiplication of welfare responses

Research on the economic consequences of the pandemic in the performing arts sector is a well-established field of study, with several territorial focuses: at the continental level, as in the case of the survey on the African situation (Buse, 2020); at the city level, as in the work carried out in Portland (Gilsdorf, 2021); and at the national level, as in the case of studies on the United Kingdom (Hancock et al., 2021; Banks, 2020; a-n The Artist Information Company, 2020). Although these studies examine areas that differ in scale and economic significance, all research highlights the difficulties faced by many artists during the emergency, who suddenly found themselves out of work and were forced to reinvent their professions through alternative means. At the same time, the studies draw attention to the effects of activity shutdowns that hit a labour market already structurally fragile. In Italy, the situation was similar: the pandemic had a dramatic impact on the sector. Data published by SIAE³ (2020) report an almost 70% decrease in activity compared to the previous year. The general labour market also suffered to some extent: according to INPS⁴ data (2022), the contraction compared to 2019 affected several key indicators—number of workers decreased by 20%, total compensation by 22%, and total number of paid workdays by 27.5%. Interestingly, the average number of paid workdays per worker per year remained relatively stable, falling only slightly from 99 to 91. This suggests that, despite a drastic reduction in overall activity, the labour market did not shrink proportionately. Moreover, the statistical data provided by SIAE were unable to reflect the unequal consequences of the crisis, which compounded a pre-existing system of inequality. Responses to the web survey indicate that the reduction in workdays was more pronounced in certain areas and for specific groups of workers. In terms of professional categories, artists experienced the most substantial decrease, while technicians were less severely affected. Furthermore, while the diminution in paid working days impacted all workers, the extent of this impact varied, thereby accentuating the hierarchical disparities between "dark matters" and "extraordinary" workers. Those with stronger integration into the sector continued to work, albeit with fewer days, while those who had worked between 7 and 15 days in 2019 were significantly more likely to be excluded from the sector altogether in 2020.

The economic hardships caused by the pandemic exacerbated all of the sector's existing fragilities, making the continuation of creative and cultural work unsustainable (Comunian and England, 2020). Indeed, during discussions held in preparation for the inquiry, workers repeatedly emphasised that poverty and precarity were not circumstantial effects of the pandemic but rather structural characteristics of the system. The consequences of the suspension of activities should not be interpreted as an isolated event, but rather as a manifestation of the systemic shortcomings of the performing arts sector as a whole. According to data from the INPS for 2019, the performing arts workforce was comprised of 331,000 individuals, of whom 194,000 held fixed-term contracts, 47,000 were seasonal workers, and only 89,000 had permanent employment. The majority of these individuals were employed, with only 67,000 (equivalent to 20%) being self-employed. The ISTAT survey, which was based on data from 2016, placed particular emphasis on the working conditions

³ SIAE *Società Italiana degli autori ed editori* - Italian Society of Authors and Publishers - is a non-profit collective organisation responsible for protecting intellectual property and managing copyright intermediation in Italy.

⁴ INPS *Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza sociale* - National Institute for social security - is the main public entity and authority of the Italian public retirement system.

of employees. The median duration of employment contracts and paid hours were significantly lower compared to those of private sector employees (194 vs. 365 days and 399 vs. 1,252 hours). With regard to remuneration, the performing arts sector evidently exhibits a state of labour poverty. Specifically, the median hourly and annual wages were €11.24 and €4,328, respectively. The latter figure is notably lower than the national general labour market median wage of €13,563.

Another effect of the pandemic was the unveiling of the ideology of the performing arts worker as a micro-entrepreneur capable of managing risks by alternating multiple jobs, a premise that justified reliance on individual survival strategies. For artistic careers – and, to some extent, also for operators and technicians – diversifying employment has become an essential strategy for subsistence. During the COVID-19 emergency, however, double careers and second jobs became significantly more difficult due to the suspension of activities. Nonetheless, second jobs remained a reality even during 2020, though to a lesser extent. About half of the respondents (46.5 %) reported having held a job outside the performing arts sector in the two years prior to the survey (2019 and 2020). From this perspective, the crisis revealed how ephemeral the notion of the performing arts worker as an own entrepreneur truly is (Dardot and Laval, 2013), and rather how this conception conceals a constant risk of poverty and failing to provide sufficient income for basic subsistence (Praznik, 2021). Such secondary jobs are complementary to work in the performing arts—that is, they serve primarily to supplement income and cover the cost of living. Notably, 59% of respondents reported earning less than €500 per month in their secondary job, while 28% earned between €501 and €1,000. As one might expect, the proportion of workers with a second job is inversely correlated with income: the higher the salary, the lower the percentage of individuals holding additional employment. The concept of a “high-stakes lottery” is further reaffirmed, whereby a minority of fortunate individuals succeed while the vast majority of performers bear the risks associated with the inherently precarious nature of creative work – characterised by endemic cycles of abundance and austerity – and this dynamic generally reinforces income polarisation (Ross 2007).

Other research conducted during the pandemic has deepened the role of cultural labour, both from the perspective of movements’ capacity to develop transformative proposals for working conditions (De Peuter et al., 2022; Iannuzzi and Campolongo, 2023) and through the emergence of new forms of solidarity within the sector (Naclerio, 2022). However, while numerous studies address creative workers broadly, few examine the intersection of pandemic policies and labour mobilisation in Italy’s performing sector. Historical mobilisations in Italy’s arts sector have acknowledged the necessity of universal welfare to counteract the spread of precarious and non-standard work (Murgia and Selmi, 2012). From this perspective, organisational forms have often centered advocacy strategies targeting public administrations to promote new governance models in the cultural sector (AWI, 2020). The pandemic, in this regard, acted as a detonator of a new process of mobilisation and critique toward the regulatory system of the performing arts sector. Indeed, government support measures were on one hand selective and complex to access (Pulignano et al., 2021); on the other, they reproduced and, in some respects, amplified pre-existing fragmentation and inequalities. To counteract the economic effects of the interruption of activities, in fact, ad hoc measures have been provided for a multiplicity of professionals and companies in the sector. In the Ministry of Culture's reporting, there are 48 measures to support entertainment⁵,

⁵ Information on the support measures allocated to the entertainment sector during the period of the emergency caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus can be found on the website of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage at <https://www.beniculturali.it/covid19>. In total, more than €2.6 billion was allocated to the

divided into five different categories. In addition to the aforementioned, it is necessary to consider the regional measures, the financing of sector funds, and the ordinary measures directed at all workers. This multiplicity is also recorded in the responses to the web survey. Workers have predominantly benefited from the extraordinary COVID-19 benefits, including that of €600 for the self-employed⁶, the “*Reddito di Emergenza*” (ReM)⁷, and the allowances provided for by the “*Sostegni*” Decree. Among the forms of aid received there are also those intended exclusively for the entertainment sector, with a relevance of benefits provided by the regional administration. Conversely, the ordinary measures elicited a less significant response among the interviewees. Unemployed benefits were the most widespread, while the “*Cassa Integrazione*” was utilised to a lesser extent. A notable finding of the study was the significant proportion of respondents who received direct cash transfers. Furthermore, a mere 7% of survey respondents reported having had no access to any support measures, while 59% said they had received one, and 7% had accessed three different types of support. A general analysis of the questionnaire responses indicated that workers placed significant emphasis on the crucial role of information disseminated during the mobilisation, particularly through campaigns organised within social networks. These efforts resulted in a significant increase in awareness regarding the available measures, procedures, and eligibility requirements necessary to access them.

From the outset, assemblies and public statements focused on two parallel objectives. The first and most immediate was the need to expand the pool of beneficiaries eligible for emergency economic bonuses during the COVID-19 crisis. At the same time, there was a growing demand to envision new, permanent welfare measures. Welfare thus emerged as a key arena for collective bargaining and recomposition—bridging the gap between artists, technicians, administrative staff, and educators. As Armano and Murgia (2017) have argued, the most critical issues related to precarious labour in Italy concern the structure of the welfare system, which offers limited or no access to social rights for workers without permanent employment. For performing arts professionals, the main issue is the lack of economic support during the intervals between jobs.

Beyond fragmentation: Rethinking unity

The workers’ inquiry made it possible to identify a system of differentiation that begins with the fields of activity—where theater dominates (53%), followed by music (25%), cinema (7%),

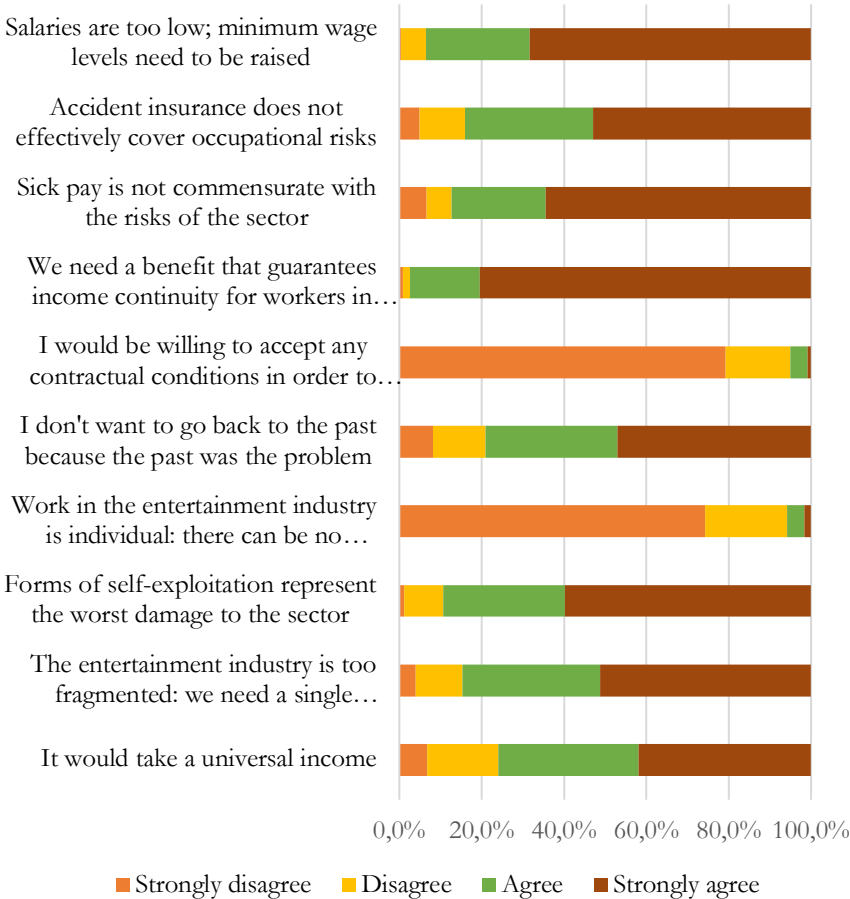
entertainment sector until January 2022, distributed across the following areas: cinema; entertainment workers; live entertainment; music; authors; and performers. Of this, almost €424 million was allocated to entertainment workers.

⁶The first measures implemented by the “*Decreto Cura*” (Decreto legge n.18 of 17 March 2020) provided for a variety of support measures, including the extension of the *Cassa Integrazione* (wage supplementation fund), allowances for VAT-registered workers, allowances for CoCoCo workers (*Collaborazione Coordinata e continuativa* - coordinated and continuous collaboration - a type of employment relationship that does not establish a relationship of subordination between employer and employee, implying that those who work under such a contract are described as being in a “quasi-subordinate” job, i.e. self-employed, but working in a manner similar to that found in subordinate employment), and the FIS (fund for temporary workers). In addition, a specific allowance of €600 was included for entertainment workers. The eligibility requirements were aimed at those who had paid at least 30 days of contributions in 2019 and had an income of no more than €50,000.

⁷The ReM – Emergency Income – was introduced by Decreto legge No. 34 of 19 May 2020 (*Decreto Rilancio*), Article 82.

multidisciplinary performances (6%), and radio-television (4%)—and extends into internal organisational structures through the division into sub-sectors. Within this system of differential treatment, the pandemic acted as a profoundly destabilising event—one that prompted not only the most uncertain or youngest workers, but a broader segment of the sector, to reconsider and redefine their career paths, employment prospects, and life expectations. This has been accompanied by a growing awareness, as evidenced by the numerous protests that have emerged across various online platforms and materialised in public demonstrations in multiple Italian cities. This collective awakening facilitated—perhaps temporarily and contextually—the recomposition of a fragmented workforce, even as differences in professional roles and fields of activity persisted. Already during the construction phase of the inquiry, the main concern of the workers was to identify possible ways to overcome fragmentation and “build a collective yet diversified body”. This vision claims a protective perspective towards the most precarious and fragile components of workers, constituting the so-called “dark matter” (Sholette, 2011). Indeed, during the interviews conducted as part of the inquiry, participants repeatedly expressed support for the adoption of universal and urgent measures aimed at protecting against poverty risk (such as a universal basic income), alongside targeted measures capable of ensuring income continuity for performing arts professionals and moving toward a “unified sector-wide contract” (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 - Main demands of entertainment workers



Source: analysis of data from the workers’ inquiry on entertainment workers

The prospect of overcoming fragmentation at the contract, hierarchical, and occupational levels emerges from the analysis of the degree of agreement with the main demands expressed during the mobilisation. The first element concerns the multiplication of contractual forms. More than 50% of respondents in the survey expressed full agreement with the statement “We need a single contract for the whole industry” as a means to overcome disparities in treatment and compensation that often coexist within the same sector or work environment. Including those who expressed partial agreement, it emerges that the demand for a unified sector-wide contract involves more than four out of five workers. Furthermore, at this level of fragmentation, contractual intermittency emerged as the most widely perceived critical issue, to the extent that the statement “We need a benefit that guarantees income continuity for workers in the entertainment industry” received the highest level of agreement (80% strongly agreed, and 17% somewhat agreed). Indeed, work discontinuity—when not accompanied by adequate welfare measures—results in the absence of income for long stretches of the year, often unpredictable in duration. This situation further exacerbates conditions of poverty and underscores the need for legislative intervention aimed at ensuring financial coverage during periods of unemployment. The model most frequently cited as a benchmark is the French⁸ system, which was consistently referenced during assemblies and interviews. However, access to a dignified standard of living is not seen as a privilege for performing arts workers alone. In clear rejection of corporatist and sector-specific logics, more than three out of four respondents affirmed the necessity of establishing a universal income measure to combat the growing spread of poverty and social inequality in Italy. This demand represents the clearest expression of the political awareness developed over the months of mobilisation—during a time in which poverty and inequality became manifest in their most severe and dramatic form. In this regard, one of the central slogans of the protests was “Remake the Globe”—a phrase rich in layered meanings. On one hand, Globe referred to the “Globe theater” in Rome, that was symbolically occupied in April 2021, where three days of assemblies and discussions were held, and to a broader statement of intent. It expressed a proposal to radically rethink labour in the performing arts beyond professional fragmentation. On the other hand, it also made explicit the call for systemic changes in wages and welfare provisions—demands that, by asserting their universal character, went far beyond temporary or ad hoc measures.

Another element of the demands concerned overcoming professional disparities within the workplace, which, however, dissolved into the themes and objectives of what became the most extensive and inclusive mobilisation in the performing arts. Recomposing labour fragmentation emerged as the primary goal both in calls for specific measures and in the rallying slogans. This was evident from the earliest weeks of mobilisation: initial demands focused on convening an inter-ministerial forum charged with designing a structural reform of the sector that would involve workers and union representatives. This perspective also surfaced in questionnaire responses, revealing a widespread call for a systemic vision aimed at promoting a comprehensive and radical reform of the entire sector—one that would transcend the barriers between subfields, job roles, and workforce categories. In this context, criticism frequently targeted workers’ tendencies toward

⁸ In France, the unemployment system for intermittent performing arts workers provides a benefit to cover periods of unemployment between contracts. Eligibility is based on several criteria: possession of a recognised qualification, employment seniority, and a minimum of 507 hours of work in the previous year. These hours may include not only performance work but also training and teaching hours, as well as periods of leave or medical absence. The monthly allowance is paid for up to 10 months and is calculated based on the income earned and the number of hours worked during the reference period.

competitive individualism, a behaviour long accepted as necessary for career success but which ultimately operated as a conscious mechanism of division and self-exploitation: a neoliberal ideology that obstructs both recomposition and the fight against inequality.

On this same level, the demands to overcome wage polarisation (Ross 2007) and the unrecognised conditions of risk exposure in workplaces are also situated. Indeed, the demand to raise minimum wages is recognised as a top priority by nine out of ten respondents. Wages are widely considered to be excessively low and inadequate in relation to the workload and level of commitment required, regardless of the specific employment sector. A slight exception emerges only among those working in the film industry—particularly in artistic roles—who expressed partial disagreement with the statement “salaries are too low: minimum wages must be raised”. Health and safety in the workplace are two principles that are systematically overlooked, and in certain contexts, even denied. These issues are inextricably linked to precarious and unstable contractual arrangements and are perceived as especially critical by those employed in technical sectors. In fact, 87% of respondents to the web survey stated that sickness benefits are entirely inadequate “given the specific conditions of the sector” while 84% believe that accident insurance fails to effectively cover the occupational risks inherent to the profession.

A final element of the demands concerns the opposition between subordinate employment and self-employment. The latter condition is rarely considered advantageous for the worker, who is often forced to accept it as the only access to work, causing significant harm to the sector for 90% of workers. This evidence strengthens the mobilisation’s ability to challenge the neoliberal models established in the fields of art and the labour market, as well as the ideology that the creative subject is not a worker but a micro-entrepreneur bearing the responsibilities and risks of their own success (Praznik, 2021). In this regard, as also theorised by Panzieri (1971), the immediate inquiry succeeded not only in detecting but also in stimulating an evolution of workers’ critical consciousness, who developed greater awareness of the exploitation mechanisms governing labour in the performing arts sector.

The unified mobilisation of performing arts workers also had concrete effects at the institutional level, decisively contributing to the process of defining Law 106/2022, which introduced important, but partial, innovations regarding the protections for workers in the sector. The most significant innovation was the so-called “*indennità di discontinuità*” (discontinuity allowance), a welfare instrument designed to support intermittent performing arts workers during gaps between contracts. This outcome signifies a rare instance in which a movement of precarious workers has effectively transformed its collective action into regulatory progress, thereby asserting itself as an active political entity in the reform process within its professional domain. Notwithstanding the political recognition of the mobilisation, this intervention has only partially addressed the numerous demands that emerged during the inquiry and protest. Indeed, the regulation is inadequate in guaranteeing continuity of income, and moreover, it does not go beyond the selective system that has been established in previous regulatory interventions. It provides for very restrictive access requirements and inadequate funding for the needs of the sector.

In essence, the inquiry process exerted an indirect and limited influence on the delineation of regulatory intervention. Nevertheless, as Panzieri argues, it served a significant political and militant function, namely the enhancement of workers’ awareness and the articulation of distinct objectives for mobilisation. Indeed, the method proved particularly useful as a device for symbolic and cognitive unification in a structurally fragmented sector, promoting a shared understanding of precariousness and poverty as structural characteristics rather than contingent on the pandemic.

Conclusion

The “*inchiesta a caldo*” conducted in Italy’s entertainment sector during the pandemic can be regarded as an innovative methodological and political contribution within the tradition of Italian workers’ inquiry. The primary innovation resides in the adoption of a situated and engaged approach, conceptualised as militant research, capable of unifying analysis and collective action, thereby transforming workers from mere objects to subjects of knowledge production. This objective was realised through an ongoing process of dialogue aimed at constructing the inquiry, collecting information, and analysing the results. The objective of this study is twofold: firstly, to produce knowledge, and secondly, to devise a shared political plan for identifying key issues and developing the demands necessary to improve the working and living conditions of entertainment workers. In contrast to the numerous studies that have concentrated on specific professional categories, this investigation encompassed all sectors, incorporating artists, technicians, administrative personnel, and educators. It sought to address the internal fragmentation that often characterises these fields, offering a unified perspective that transcends the differences between these groups. The findings demonstrate that the overcoming of various forms of fragmentation (contractual, hierarchical, and occupational) occurred precisely around the common demand for universal and ongoing welfare measures capable of guaranteeing income during periods of inactivity and reducing contractual inequalities. In the contemporary neoliberal context, this process has assumed a broader political significance, as solidarity among precarious workers represents a rupture with competitive individualism and the ideology of the self-entrepreneur.

From this perspective, the inquiry not only functioned as an interpretive mechanism, but also served as a tool for raising awareness, thereby contributing to the transformation of social relations. Beyond the specific case study, the inquiry has also been useful in revealing the contradictions of the reproduction mechanisms of contemporary capitalism, which is founded on precarity. In this sense, the inquiry method, understood as a situated and cooperative practice, thus continues to be a valuable tool both for contemporary labour sociology and for workers’ struggles, as it is capable of revealing—and fueling—the forms of resistance and emancipation that arise from the very mesh of exploitation itself.

As many authors have noted (Ross, 2008; Bois and Perrenoud, 2017; Praznik, 2018; Bataille et al., 2020), work in this sector has increasingly become a paradigm of contemporary precarious working conditions and self-exploitation, emblematic of broader transformations in labour under neoliberal capitalism. Within this theoretical framework, passion, vocation and creative autonomy are frequently mobilised as ideological resources that legitimise unpaid labour, extended working hours and the acceptance of unstable income. In this context, the fragmentation of the workforce functions not merely as an organisational outcome but also as a mechanism of labour control that weakens collective identification and reinforces competitive individualism. It is evident, therefore, that mobilisations and demands emerging within this sector may also function as a paradigm for identifying new forms of organisation and collective action among precarious workers across all sectors of contemporary capitalism. Those engaged in this field have been compelled to experiment with alternative repertoires of mobilisation that extend beyond traditional union structures. These include network-based organising, issue-specific coalitions, and transversal alliances across occupational boundaries. Moreover, these struggles underscore the emergent possibilities for

reconfiguring solidarity, representation and collective power in an era characterised by widespread precarity.

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