

The restaurant sector faced with Covid-19 pandemic: Evidence from Italy

Le secteur de la restauration face à la pandémie de Covid-19 : le cas de l'Italie

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La normativité ordinaire à l'épreuve de la crise sanitaire. Le cas de la restauration (France-Italie et Québec)

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Article abstract

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The restaurant sector faced with Covid-19 pandemic: evidence from Italy

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ABSTRACT

Italy has been one of the European countries most severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, with dramatic economic impacts on the service sector. On the basis of a quantitative and qualitative analysis, this article analyses the impact of the pandemic on the Italian restaurant industry by taking into consideration the perspective of both employers and employees. Specifically, the article focuses, on the one hand, on the working conditions and job quality in the sector; on the other hand, on the changes occurred in the restaurant industry, the impact of policies implemented during the health emergency and the problem of labour shortages.

KEYWORDS: Restaurant sector; Covid-19 pandemic; Italy; Working conditions; Labour shortages

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RÉSUMÉ

L'Italie a été l'un des pays européens les plus gravement touchés par la pandémie de Covid-19, engendrant des conséquences économiques dramatiques dans le secteur des services. En mobilisant des données quantitatives et qualitatives, l'article analyse l'impact de la pandémie dans le secteur de la restauration en Italie en prenant en considération le point de vue des employeurs et des employés. Plus précisément, l'article se concentre, d'une part, sur les conditions de travail et la qualité de l'emploi dans le secteur et d'autre part, il analyse les changements survenus dans le secteur de la restauration, l'impact des politiques mises en œuvre pendant l'urgence sanitaire et les problèmes de pénurie de main-d'œuvre.

MOTS-CLÉS : Secteur de la restauration, Pandémie Covid-19, Italie, Conditions de travail, Pénurie de main-d'œuvre

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Introduction

In most European countries, the food service industry was one of the economic sectors most severely hit by the Covid-19 pandemic (Plzáková & Smeral, 2022). During the lockdown phases, restaurant activities were completely or partially closed, and the physical distancing measures to contain the spread of the virus still made it very difficult to keep businesses active (Madeira et al., 2020). In the post-pandemic period, the sector has gradually recovered, but it is well known that it continues to offer quite difficult working conditions. As in other customer service occupations, the activities are mainly carried out at unsocial hours (meal times, evenings, weekends) and are physically demanding (Ariza-Montes et al., 2019; Lippert et al., 2020). Work contracts are often part-time, and the search for flexibility in managing the workforce leads to the widespread adoption of fixed-term and on-call contracts (Eurofound, 2004, 2017). In addition, the work lacks social recognition and is poorly paid (Bosch, 2009). For these reasons, the sector has always been characterised by high staff turnover (Murray-Gibbons & Gibbons, 2007; Lippert et al., 2020). In relation to these considerations, an emerging issue is that the pandemic is likely to have generated a potential shift in the industry, as labour shortages and recruitment difficulties are a very recent phenomenon in many countries. Given that the work tasks have not varied, it is reasonable to assume that some changes have concerned the matching between labour demand and supply, as well as the 'functioning' of the sector.

Focusing on the Italian case, this article aims to investigate the changes that occurred in the restaurant sector during the Covid-19 pandemic, with particular attention to the *normativité ordinaire* (i.e. the ordinary regulation) that characterises the industry and the quality of the jobs. Italy has been one of the European countries most severely affected by the pandemic (Berardi et al., 2020; Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020), with a dramatic economic repercussion on the service sector and, especially, on the activities that are more intensive in face-to-face interactions (Giglioli et al., 2021). However, despite the significant contribution of the restaurant sector to the Italian economy and employment (FIPE, 2019a; 2023), this industry remains under-researched, particularly in terms of employment practices and working conditions, as well as in relation to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (Esposito et al., 2022). This gap in empirical research, partly due to the limited availability of comprehensive data on the sector, led to a dearth of insight into the demand-supply dynamics and experiences of both employers and employees (Madeira et al., 2020; Sardar et al., 2022). Starting from these premises, the following pages examine how the Italian restaurant industry changed during the pandemic, from the standpoint of both restaurant owners and workers.

The article is structured as follows: after having provided some analytical tools and an overview of the characteristics of the sector and the workforce employed, the results of a study carried out in Northern Italy are presented. In particular, quantitative data collected among employees in the sector and

qualitative interviews with employers illustrate the impact of the pandemic on restaurants, providing insight into government support measures for businesses and workers, staff shortages and recruitment difficulties. The sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction of the restaurant workers are also analysed in order to identify possible reasons for the labour shortage.

1. *Normativité ordinaire* and job quality

In order to understand what happened with the health crisis in the food service sector, it is important to outline the characteristics of the *normativité ordinaire* (ordinary regulation) of the sector, that is, the set of informal rules normally shared by employers and workers that exist alongside the formal rules regulating employment relationships (Monchatre 2010; Laneyrie & Monchatre, 2024). In the restaurant sector, the *normativité ordinaire* encompasses several areas. Firstly, a high degree of flexibility is required in terms of working hours, as they depend on the flow of customers and are not fully predictable. As a result, wages are often partially unrelated to the number of hours worked. Secondly, it is important to consider that the sector, in Italy even more than in other countries, is dominated by small-sized companies, where employers often work alongside their employees. In small businesses, according to Monchatre (Monchatre 2010; Laneyrie & Monchatre, 2024), *conventions domestiques*, relationships based on traditional authority, sense of duty and willingness to sacrifice, are more significant than formal rules. Formal regulations of the employment relationship are intertwined with informal rules and personal relationships which legitimise certain practices and requests that would not be considered as such in other work contexts.

In addition, it is worth highlighting that irregular forms of work are widespread in food services (Williams & Horodnic, 2017) and rely on informal agreements between employers and workers. According to Laneyrie and Monchatre (2024), there is a kind of internal regulation of employment relations, thanks to which employers ask their employees to go beyond what is formally defined in their contract, to adapt to changes in working hours and to extend them without asking for overtime pay, to commit themselves. Generally, these informal arrangements involve a core of workers whom employers trust and to whom they guarantee a certain degree of employment stability (Monchatre 2010; Laneyrie & Monchatre, 2024). The pandemic crisis may have challenged such relationships of trust that underpin the *normativité ordinaire*. In addition, the state interventions implemented in many countries to reduce the negative impact of the health crisis have introduced a new *normativité exogène* (external regulation) that affects the functioning of the sector. Therefore, public policies have been another factor influencing the match between labour supply and demand, and the relationship between employers and workers (Fullin et al., 2024).

In order to understand which elements of the pre-existing equilibrium have been affected, employment conditions and job quality in the sector need to be considered. The traditional dimensions of job quality are ergonomic, economic, that of autonomy and that of control. To these should be added the dimensions related to the quality of employment, namely work-life balance, stability of employment and symbolic recognition (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011; Eurofound, 2017). In the food service industry, some aspects of job quality and employment conditions are structurally problematic. With regard to the ergonomic dimension, work in both the kitchen and the dining room is tiring because it involves standing for many hours, moving weights and – especially in the kitchen – being exposed to heat, noise and hazardous materials. In terms of work-life balance, the unsocial hours (e.g. evening and night work) and the unpredictability of schedules, which depend on the flow of customers, make working in the restaurant industry particularly tiring (Fellini, 2017). The symbolic recognition of the value of the work is quite low, as the activities do not require specific training – except for cooks – and have a relevant ‘servile’ component (Fullin, 2023). These negative aspects are not compensated economically, as wages in the sector are generally low (Bosh, 2009; Lippert et al., 2020). In addition, the widespread use of part-time contracts makes it difficult for workers to obtain a full income, and – as will also be shown below – the situation is aggravated by the presence of irregular forms of work, particularly in some countries such as Italy (ISTAT, 2023). These elements make the issue of the dignity of work and the problem of the working poor particularly relevant in the restaurant sector (Vettor, 2024).

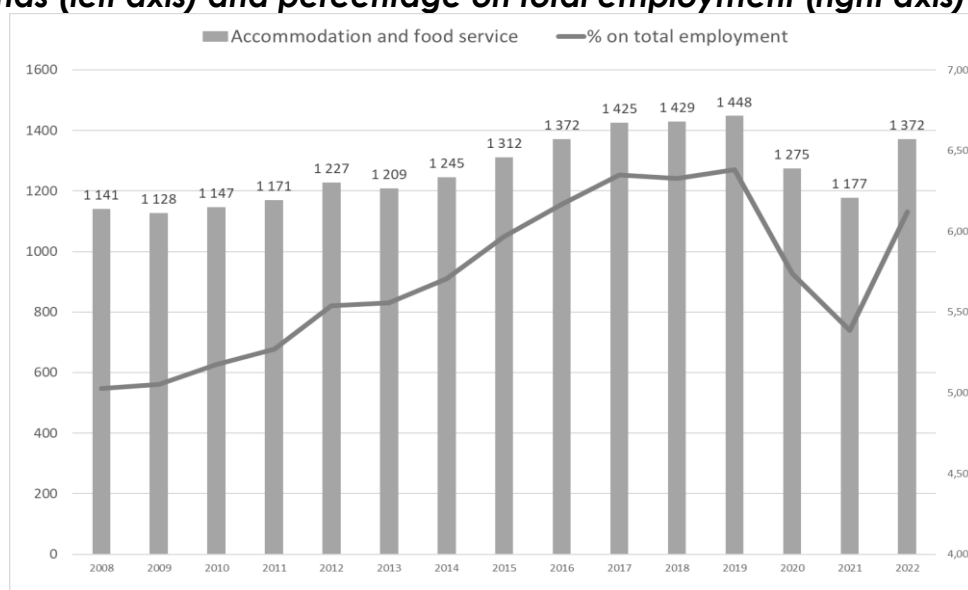
It seems reasonable to assume that these structural elements remained essentially unchanged before and after the Covid-19 pandemic, as they are intrinsic features of restaurant jobs. It is likely that other factors have influenced the precarious balance between labour supply and demand, as the sector has experienced persistent staff shortages in many countries in recent years (Joppe, 2012; Morosan & Bowen, 2022). Some authors have highlighted a shift in the expectations and preferences of workers in the wake of the pandemic. The focus is on younger cohorts who, according to some scholars, have changed their attitudes towards work and are seeking more suitable conditions to ensure a better balance between work and leisure (Coin, 2022). Rather than using voice strategies to demand improvements in working conditions, many would have chosen to quit their jobs, leave the sector and seek employment elsewhere. However, the factors underlying this supposed generational divide remain unclear (Luc & Fleury, 2016; Moulin et al, 2024). From the perspective of employers, the breakdown of the pact of trust with their employees has led to a sense of mistrust and, in some cases, the generation gap narrative has been embraced (Luc & Fleury, 2016). Potential discrepancies between experiences of entrepreneurs and employees could undermine the internal equilibrium of the sector. Given the focus on the Italian case, it is important to briefly describe the characteristics of employment in the national food service sector and to outline the impact of the pandemic.

2. The restaurant sector in Italy and employment consequences of Covid-19

As in many other Southern European countries, the restaurant sector in Italy has traditionally been an important employment driver, also due to its strong connection with tourism activities (Fellini, 2017). The growth of the sector in recent decades can also be explained by some economic and social changes that have affected the traditional models and habits of food consumption of Italians, namely a fairly significant reduction in the numbers of meals prepared and eaten at home and a greater propensity to have breakfast, lunch, dinner or aperitifs in restaurants and cafés (FIPE, 2023). Although Italy is a country with a deep-rooted gastronomic tradition and a widespread food culture (Montanari, 2012), the rise in living standards, the (albeit late) feminisation of the labour market and the modernisation of family life have pushed the change in food consumption habits. On the one hand, Italy records with Spain the highest share of the household budget devoted to food, on the other, the budget devoted to food services is remarkably lower in Italy than in the UK or Ireland (FIPE, 2019a).

Italy is still a relatively industrialised country but, among services, the relevance of the restaurant sector for employment is crucial (Fellini, 2017). In 2022, almost 1,4 million people were employed in accommodation and food services in Italy, around 20% more than in 2008. Unfortunately, employment statistical data do not allow a distinction between accommodation and food service workers; therefore, the overall sector has to be considered to account for recent developments.

Figure 1 - Accommodation and food service sector in Italy: employed in thousands (left axis) and percentage on total employment (right axis)



Source: EU-LFS – European Labour Force Survey

As shown in Figure 1, in recent years, the most significant employment growth in the sector took place between 2014 and 2019, when the employment recovery in the Italian labour market was mainly driven by the growth in low-skilled, labour-intensive sectors (Fellini & Reyneri, 2019). Instead, the pandemic crisis in 2020 led to a significant drop of 12% compared to 2019. In 2021, the decline in employment continued, while in 2022 the growth was impressive (+16%), even though pre-pandemic levels have not been fully recovered. The growth in the number of people employed in the sector went along with a not negligible increase of the share of employment in the sector out of total employment: from 5% in 2008 to 6.4% in 2019, the highest value over the period considered. This means that, although the Covid-19 crisis was more severe than in other economic sectors, in the medium term the industry is running faster than the overall employment.

Administrative data on employees by sector help to approximate the importance of the food activities component for the overall tourism segment. According to the National Institute of Social Protection (INPS), in 2022, around 76% of workers in the accommodation and food activities sector worked specifically in food service activities, namely the large majority¹ (INPS, 2023). In absolute values, this corresponds to just under one million of employees in the food services sector working in nearly 200,000 firms with at least one employee. But the numbers are even larger considering that there are many firms with no employees. According to FIPE (2023), in Italy, there were over 335 thousand firms enrolled in the public register of economic activities in 2022, of which nearly 60% were in the restaurant subsector and almost half were individually-owned firms (Table 1).

Table 1 – Firms in the food sector, Italy, 2022

	Restaurants	Bar & cafés	Canteen & catering	Total
Number of firms	195,329	136,101	3,620	335,050
Percentage	58.3	40.6	1.1	100.0
Percentage of individual firms	45.0	52.9	29.6	47.9

Source: FIPE (2023)

The characteristics of the restaurant and food services sector mirror the general characteristics of other Italian labour-intensive personal services such as retail, hospitality and personal care services (Fellini, 2017). In Italy, restaurants, bars and cafés have traditionally represented a 'shelter' sector for many low-skilled workers who were unable to enter the labour market of manufacturing, business services and public social services (Ranci, 2012). This

¹ The same share is estimated by FIPE (one of the most representative employers' associations in the restaurant and café sector), based on the average number of workers in the sector during the year (FIPE, 2023).

has implied a relevant presence of family businesses, not professionally run but rather based on an artisanal organisation. Indeed, the food service sector is still characterised by relative fragmentation and a lack of managerial skills. Table 2 summarises these characteristics, building on the elaboration by FIPE of the most recent National Accountability data and administrative data on employment. The composition of employees by skill level shows that the overwhelming majority is blue-collar (87.5%). Managerial positions are virtually nonexistent, even though it should be remembered that the self-employed represent a relevant share of the workers (36.2%). However, also due to the relatively small size, restaurants and food service business owners are often involved in front-line service activities rather than just management tasks. As regards their socio-demographic profile, more than half of the employees are women, the presence of young workers is significant (almost 40%), and the share of foreign workers is not negligible (nearly double than in the overall economy).

Table 2 – Employees in the restaurant and food service sector by characteristics

	2022
Percentage of employment*	63.8
Employees by level	
Apprentices	7.7
Blue-collars	87.5
White-collars	4.5
Managers and middle-managers	0.3
Women	51.1
Foreign workers	25.3
Under 30	39.6
Part-time	59.6
Temporary	30.7
Seasonal	9.9

*National accountability data on 'accommodation and food services' sector

Source: FIPE (2023)

Characteristics of the labour contracts used in the sector confirm the problem of high instability of employment as about 40% of employees are hired with fixed-term contracts. Moreover, the intensive use of part-time contracts could be another reason for low employment quality because it means low income for a large part of restaurant employees. Given the necessity to work during evenings and nights, part-time does not ease their work/life balance as in other sectors.

In Italy, in the accommodation and food services sector, the organisational contexts are often typical of low-productivity service sectors where informality and irregularity are widespread. According to ISTAT (2023) data from the Economic National Accounts, the irregularity rate in the

accommodation and food services sector was 16.4% in the year before the pandemic and 14.5% in 2022. In both cases, the figure is higher than for the overall economy – 12.8% and 11.3% respectively – and is among the highest recorded, similar to that of the construction sector. The rate of irregularity in the accommodation and food services sector was higher than the average for the service sector in total, and only lower than in agriculture, domestic work and leisure services.

3. The research

Given the specificities of the food and accommodation industry in Italy, this article aims to investigate the changes occurred in the restaurant industry during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data come from an exploratory study carried out in Northern Italy, the area of the country that was most hit by the pandemic (OECD, 2021). From January to July 2022, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with owners and managers of restaurants in Northern Italy (labelled Res-01 to Res-11 in the analysis below; see Table A.1 in the Appendix for details). The restaurants were targeted at different market segments and management models, as well as different numbers of employees. The interviews covered a wide range of topics, including the impact of the health crisis on the restaurants considered – with its consequences at the economic, organisational and division of labour levels – and the changes that were taking place in the restaurant sector, government support measures for businesses and social protection benefits available to workers.

After the interview, the restaurant owners and managers were asked to circulate a short questionnaire among their employees. In 7 out of 11 cases it was possible to collect responses from employees (64 respondents), balanced by gender (54% women). The sample consists mainly of young people, as 48% are less than 25 years old and only 11% more than 40, with a medium-high level of education, where 69% have a high school diploma and 19% a university degree. 80% are born in Italy, of which 10% are second-generation immigrants who speak other languages than Italian at home². The large majority of respondents (72%) were waiters and waitresses, while a small percentage were cooks or assistant-cooks (17%) or waiters' supervisors. They were employees with an open-ended labour contract in 40% of the cases, and half of the sample were part-timers. Although this is not a representative sample, the survey data provide an overview of some of the main reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the job and the working conditions in the restaurant sector.

² A possible selection effect could be due to the fact that the questionnaire was written in Italian. Migrants working in the restaurant sector only need to speak Italian when dealing with clients. Only a basic knowledge of the Italian language is required to work in kitchens and/or cleaning activities, where migrants are concentrated.

4. Employers facing the pandemic in the restaurant sector

4.1. Impact of Covid-19: from lockdown to local containment, and Green Pass

With the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers (DPCM) of 11 March 2020, all restaurant activities in Italy were closed, and only home-delivery services were permitted³. These measures were extended until 3 May. From the following day, with the start of the so-called 'Phase 2', the containment measures were gradually eased, as the epidemic curve was descending⁴. The obligation to wear a mask was introduced in all indoor places, and in outdoor places where interpersonal distance could not be maintained.

In spite of their closure, restaurants still had fixed costs. In this respect, the interviewees mainly emphasised energy consumption (electricity, gas, water) and, for those who did not own the premises, rent. Although some interviewees claimed that the owner of the premises offered them the possibility of deferring payments (Res-04) and reducing rental costs (Res-07), this expense remained one of the most significant. In addition, the sudden lockdown resulted in substantial economic losses for businesses that had significant stocks of raw materials.

My restaurant was closed for months, with the costs of electricity, gas, water... of the refrigerators that are never turned off because otherwise there is trouble when you turn them on again, and the products inside [...] were thrown away. (Res-03)

With a restaurant as big as mine, opening and closing is like shooting yourself. If we close from one day to the next, we lose food due to expiration dates... (Res-04)

The pandemic has stimulated innovation in the food service sector as the restaurants concerned, in the face of economic loss, implemented a delivery service (Esposito et al., 2022). While Res-11 relied exclusively on platforms, restaurateurs offering mid- or high-target dishes also used direct booking. Res-01, for example, used both platforms and direct booking, implementing an ordering system on its website.

At the time of the lockdown, we started the delivery service that didn't exist before, both directly – by creating a space on our website where you can order – and via Deliveroo and Glovo... [...] We can't say that it

³ The closure began a few days earlier in Lombardy and in 14 provinces in Central and Northern Italy. In addition, all movements to, from and within these areas were prohibited.

⁴ DPCM 26 April 2020.

made us achieve big numbers, but it made us survive... It is a service that we still offer today, and we are often forced to say no because we are unable to handle all the deliveries... (Res-01)

Res-02, Res-03, Res-05 and Res-06, on the other hand, managed the delivery service directly, without relying on platforms. While Res-02 commissioned a tailor-made app, the others processed orders by telephone. Despite the difficulties, Res-05 also offered a delivery service for customised menus on the weekends.

I did not immediately activate a delivery because we were not set up for this service. [...] Then, when the situation started to normalise, we began to do deliveries, in person and without platforms. I probably did more than 30,000 km between April and August [...]. I also tried to offer a lunch service on weekends, from appetisers to dessert. But this constant adaptation to the needs of the customers caused delays and difficulties, because you always worked by the day... (Res-05)

Res-06, instead, created a special menu that was particularly successful. It also changed the way work was organised with waiters working as riders – thus keeping staff involved in the activities of the restaurant.

Initially everyone said that Covid would disappear quickly, and we just closed down. Then, when we saw that it was getting longer, [...] we started a delivery service, which we hadn't done before. [...] We started with two riders, and before the reopening we had twelve riders, and we were doing some pretty scary business... [...] The waiters worked as riders. Then, as we needed more people to deliver, we started hiring riders... Pizza goes on delivery without any problems. I also created an aperitif menu designed for delivery. People were very happy with it and kept ordering. [...] When we reopened, the restaurant was still active, and we were overrun. While some restaurants were struggling to reopen because they lost their clients, business and so on, we exploded! (Res-06)

The managers interviewed emphasise that, during the health crisis, they invested a significant amount of energy in attempting to maintain the operational continuity of their restaurants. This has meant putting themselves on the line personally, such as Res-05 delivering food to the customers during the lockdown periods.

However, this often entailed a considerable effort on the part of the employees themselves. For instance, Res-06 required the waiters to undertake home deliveries. It is reasonable to assume that, in order to cope with the emergency, employees were often required to perform activities that were not originally provided for in their contracts. The aforementioned changes to the content and organisation of work, introduced in a short period of time in a situation of great uncertainty, resulted in a modification of the *normativité ordinaire* within restaurants. This was made possible by the fact that it was considered legitimate to circumvent formal regulations (i.e. the external

regulation) – which are characterised by a high degree of rigidity in defining workers' duties and work contents – in the name of the exceptional nature of the situation.

In most cases, the delivery service not only ensured that employees worked, but also kept the restaurant running and clients loyal (Polese et al., 2022). Nevertheless, in some cases, maintaining the relation with employees became more difficult than usual and some employers started worrying about workforce turnover.

Our first aim was to retain human resources... [...] We always tend to stabilise workers, because making them productive requires investment, training and branding... [...] For us, turnover is a significant cost. (Res-02)

During the lockdown and in the first phase of reopening, with reduced workload due to pandemic containment measures, restaurant owners tried not to lose their human resources. The restaurant industry is 'always exposed to a certain degree of turnover' (Res-09), but for high-end restaurants, such as Res-02, turnover represents an important cost as employees need to be trained (see also Tesone, 2008; Gordon & Parikh, 2021).

On the other hand, in less expensive restaurants human resources retention was not such an important issue. Employers were aware that, especially in the role of waiter and server, many workers are transient, and most are university students who will not work in the restaurant industry for a long time.

Most of our waiters are very young and at their first work experience [...] Since it is not their goal to do this job for life, since it is an interlude during their studies... to be honest, it is not our aim to retain them, because we know that those who stay a lot, stay for 2-3 years. (Res-07)

The reopening of restaurants and the reintroduction of table service was possible from 18 May 2020 and required additional innovation from restaurateurs. As the pandemic demanded a high level of attention to hygiene and safety⁵, they had to implement the required measures to limit the risk of contagion (Esposito et al., 2022). These actions included measuring body temperature and making disinfectant products available to clients and staff; adapting interior settings to ensure physical distance between customers; using screens to prevent contagion; sanitising tables and replacing paper menus with QR codes; improving air exchange systems; equipping staff with PPE (personal protective equipment).

The rules were very strict! The number of staff that could enter, the clients that could enter, the entrance lanes, the exits, the distances... So, part of the job was to comply with the rules as new ones were issued

⁵ DPCM 17 May 2020.

periodically... and then there was a redesign of the internal layouts as well as personal protection measures. The furnishings were revised to have the distances [...] Then the communication to be displayed and on the tables [...] and the part of health prevention, and therefore the purchasing of masks, gloves, protective screens, sanitisation products... (Res-11)

After a summer and autumn of activity, there was a second period of restrictions due to the so-called 'second wave' of the virus. From 26 October to 24 November 2020, restaurants were only allowed to operate from 5 am to 6 pm⁶, while from 6 November to 3 December 2020 a nationwide curfew was implemented from 10 pm to 5 am, with mobility allowed in this time slot only for reasons of work, health and necessity⁷. In addition, measures were implemented at regional level, considering three potential risk scenarios – 'yellow', 'orange' and 'red' – depending on the spread of infections. The introduction of these measures created uncertainty among restaurateurs, who tried to save money by cutting costs. Res-03, for example, by changing the weekly opening days.

For the first time in 20 years, we changed our opening days... to have less expenses, heating and so on... So, we stayed open from Friday to Sunday... (Res-03)

From 4 December 2020 to 15 January 2021, table service was only allowed until 6 pm⁸. Later on, take-away was permitted until 10 pm until 5 March 2021, and the existing containment measures were essentially confirmed to last until the end of April⁹.

The shift from full to partial openings resulted in a widespread perception of instability, and many restaurateurs highlighted the difficulty of planning their business.

Planning is difficult and devastating... In this phase of recovery, the market is constantly changing, and with this instability we are still in the grip of any negative moment that may come. (Res-10)

In April 2021¹⁰, a few months after the start of the vaccination plan, the COVID-19 Green Certificate was introduced, and a timeline for gradually easing containment measures was organised, especially for areas with a limited spread of infection. From 26 April, in the 'yellow zones', restaurant activities with table service could only be conducted outdoors, within the limits of the curfew. In the 'orange' and 'red zones', only take-away and delivery were permitted. From June on, table service could also take place indoors in the 'yellow zones',

⁶ DPCM 24 October 2020.

⁷ DPCM 3 November 2020.

⁸ DPCM 3 December 2020.

⁹ DPCM 14 January 2021, DPCM 2 March 2021.

¹⁰ Decree-law 22 April 2021 no. 52.

and the curfew was first reduced, then finally removed¹¹. From August 2021 to the end of March 2022, holding the Covid-19 Green Certificate – and, later on, the ‘reinforced’ version called ‘Super Green Pass’, which proved the completion of the vaccination cycle – became mandatory to access restaurants with table service¹².

The restaurant sector was significantly impacted by the implementation of containment measures, resulting in the closure of numerous establishments and the cession of business to larger operators (Demma, 2021; FIPE, 2021).

Several businesses have closed, the smaller ones certainly had to close down... [...] Big fish ate small fish. If you have a small restaurant and I'm an entrepreneur, your place can be attractive to me if you're in trouble... You sell it to survive, even under unfavourable conditions... [...] In Milan, the companies that have survived are those with an important tradition, those that have been able to manage funds and have taken precautions... (Res-01)

It is clear, therefore, that for some employers it was really a matter of ensuring the survival of their activity.

4.2. The dissatisfaction of employers with the policies to support companies

As mentioned above, the policies implemented to support food service businesses represent external interventions related to the *normativité exogène*, that affect the *normativité ordinaire* of the sector. It is therefore important to understand how these measures were perceived both by employers (current sub-section) and by workers (next sub-section). Most of the employers interviewed acknowledged that the Covid-19 pandemic represented a new emergency that made decisions difficult. In their opinion, the Italian government tried to do its utmost to contain the spread of the virus. However, the measures to provide economic support to businesses affected by the health emergency restrictions were evaluated negatively by the interviewees. The main measures implemented in 2020¹³ (De Socio et al., 2020; Venditti & Salvati, 2021) and available for the restaurant sector included:

- Tax deferrals and postponement of utility bill payments in most affected municipalities;
- Measures to support credit supply;
- Tax credits for rents of non-residential buildings;

¹¹ Decree-law 18 May 2021 no. 65.

¹² See Decree-law 23 July 2021 no. 105, Decree-law 26 November 2021 no. 172, Decree-law 24 December 2021 no. 221 and Decree-law 30 December 2021 no. 229 for details.

¹³ Several Decree-laws were promulgated between 2020 and 2022. The main ones are Decree-law 17 March 2020 no. 18; Decree-law 8 April 2020 no. 23; Decree-law 19 May 2020 no. 34; Decree-law 14 August 2020 no. 104; Decree-law 28 October 2020 no. 137; Decree-law 18 December 2020 no. 172; Decree-law 22 March 2021 no. 41. Law 30 December 2020 no. 178 also included measures and contributions to the sectors affected by the pandemic.

- Non-repayable contributions for businesses that experienced a decrease in revenue of at least 33% in April 2020 compared to April 2019;
- Suspension of payment of public land tax for outdoor service;
- Non-repayable contributions for the activities most affected by the restrictive measures implemented during the Christmas holidays;
- 10% reduction in VAT for food delivery and take-away;
- For restaurant chefs, a tax credit of 40% of the expenses incurred for the purchase of equipment and participation in training courses.

The main measures implemented by the Italian government in 2021 included:

- Non-repayable contributions for companies that lost at least 30% of their average monthly revenue in 2020 compared to 2019;
- Non-repayable contributions for companies which have been subject to temporary closure measures;
- Extension and prolongation of the tax credit for the rental of non-residential buildings, and ease for the municipal waste tax.

Despite the Italian government implementing several measures to support businesses, most of the interviewees expressed a negative opinion of them. Although the communication from the government was considered timely, several interviewees complained about the lack of clarity of the dispositions and the difficult interpretation of the procedures for accessing economic support, which required the involvement of consultants and lawyers.

The government communicated decisions in an unclear way... We had to dig, call and pay consultants to get to the point! [...] Even the consultants had a thousand doubts... and when you made a request for contributions, you were anxious that it had gone well, that there no documents were missing, that you had sent the right ones... because maybe we had misinterpreted the instructions... (Res-04)

All the interviewees considered the economic support for companies to be insufficient and disproportionate compared to the losses incurred.

The amounts were underestimated, not enough to cover the total lack of revenue [...]. But it was still an answer, not the best of answers, but an answer. [...] Let's say it was an attempt to hold it all together a little... not enough, for sure... (Res-05)

Specifically, the interviewees disagreed with the way in which the parameters for eligibility to support benefits were calculated.

There were eligibility parameters for non-repayable contributions. [...] But if you didn't fall within those parameters, even by 1%, you didn't get a cent... (Res-08)

However, some interviewees argued that those who were not satisfied with the amount of the economic contributions had always evaded taxes – and thus received economic support in line with their fiscal declaration. The policy measures designed to support companies, which could be described as a form of *normativité exogène*, were not in line with the *normativité ordinaire* of the industry, which is based on a significant prevalence of irregular work and tax evasion.

The State was super-punctual, and I received all the money it promised me. It was a sh*tty year, but I can't say that the Italian State left me in a lurch, because I always paid taxes based on what I produced. If a restaurant had always evaded taxes and never proved to the State that it was working, the government gave aids to the company according to its revenue. [...] I think that many restaurateurs who went to the streets to protest were not really behaving properly. Of course, everyone knows for themselves... We were lucky because we owned the building. We had a loan that was almost paid off, so we had a different stability than those who were tenants or just starting out. (Res-03)

4.3. Support measures for workers

While before the pandemic, only large-sized companies could apply for the *Cassa Integrazione* (redundancy fund), a social benefit that keep workers formally employed but paid by the State, during the pandemic similar social benefits (*Cassa Integrazione in deroga* and *Fondo di Integrazione Salariale*) were available for almost all employees¹⁴ (Ales, 2021; Jessoula et al., 2021). As regards the amount of social benefits, however, all the interviewees argued that workers were not adequately protected as the economic compensation guaranteed by the *Cassa Integrazione in deroga* was much lower than their normal wages. It is worth stressing that the benefit is calculated on the basis of the formal regular wage, which is below the actual wage level for the (many) workers who receive part of their wage 'out of contract'.

Workers were not protected at all. The social protection benefits were ridiculous.... [...] I know many people with family and children, who went to the soup kitchen to get food... (Res-01)

Workers were paid a percentage of the minimum wage. But it happened that the ordinary waiter got as much as the cook, because they both got 40 per cent of the minimum wage and that is not fair... Because a cook is used to get a higher salary and the difference is not small. (Res-03)

Moreover, workers without a regular labour contract did not receive any support. The main problem for the employers interviewed was the timing of payments. Some companies paid social protection benefits in advance and were refunded by the State. In other cases, workers waited months.

¹⁴ See Decree-law 17 March 2020 no. 18 and Decree-law 22 March 2021 no. 41 for details.

The payout time for the social protection benefit was medium to long. We took it upon ourselves to anticipate it [...] so I think we played an important part in this process, which would certainly have put many families in difficulty. (Res-11)

In the beginning, many workers had difficulties because the social protection benefit arrived very late [...] because maybe one had to pay rent or something... In the 'second wave', we anticipated the social benefit and nobody had any problems. But maybe, in other cases, it arrived 2, 3 or 4 months late and there were problems... (Res-06)

In this regard, it is worth noting that 67% of the workers who took part in our survey expressed satisfaction with how their employers acted in support of policy measures. The respondents were probably referring to the role played by their employers in applying for social protection measures and often anticipating the payment of their wages.

Besides the implementation of the *Cassa Integrazione in deroga*, the Italian government established the suspension of layoffs by law up to 30 June 2021¹⁵ (Jessoula et al., 2021). During this period, however, employers did not renew fixed-term and zero-hours contracts, the latter mainly involving university students and weekend workers, increasing their risk of experiencing marginalisation or poverty (Bekker et al., 2021). Since May 2020, when restaurants reopened under tight restrictions, most of the employers interviewed resorted to their permanent staff.

We only reopened with our permanent staff, without on-call workers. The permanent staff only worked at weekends, because they received social benefits during the week. Not all of them, because work was scarce. With the start of the season, we returned to normal working hours, the employees covered their shifts, and we brought back the on-call workers. Our permanent staff worked every evening during the week. Then, at the weekend, from Friday, the on-call workers – waiters and servers – came during the evening and for Saturday and Sunday lunch. (Res-03)

Some entrepreneurs who owned several restaurants decided to close the most impacted and least profitable ones and tried to relocate the workers, in rotation, to the restaurants that remained open. However, Res-11 noted that this operation surprisingly proved to be more complex than expected, with many workers refusing to be relocated.

Our restaurants are quite close to each other, but relocations are always experienced as a big drama [...] Some workers would rather have no salary or a much-reduced salary than work, so the social protection benefit was almost seen as an opportunity by several people. This surprised us a bit

¹⁵ See Decree-law 17 March 2020 no. 18, Decree-law 14 August 2020 no. 104 and Decree-law 22 March 2021 no. 41 for details and exceptions regarding the suspension of layoffs.

because we were trying to give everyone the opportunity to work, and to be fair in deciding the rotation. It was also a joint operation with the unions. Instead, some workers were available and others were not. [...] The critical issues raised by the workers were the distance, the working hours – as the restaurants that were closed had reduced opening hours, so they had to go to work not only for lunch and dinner, but at any time and mainly in the evening – and also the preference to stay at home in a risky time... (Res-11)

This interview excerpt illustrates the inability of entrepreneurs to fully understand the needs of their employees. In particular, employers tried to use their permanent staff to maintain business operations, not realising that in some cases the working conditions they offered were not favourable. Indeed, the change of workplace and the alteration of working hours can have a detrimental impact on job quality by making it more difficult to balance work and family life. The employers interviewed felt that they had no viable alternatives, as they were forced by the health crisis to make these changes. However, their employees had a different viewpoint. It appears that there were limits to the loyalty that employees were willing to demonstrate to their employers, and that such limits may not have been fully recognised by the employers. As a result, the balance on which the *normativité ordinaire* is based has been compromised, and the situation has been further exacerbated as the health crisis reached its conclusion. Indeed, the problem of labour shortage has become very relevant in the food service sector after the pandemic. In order to better understand the reasons for this, it is worth examining the perspective of both workers and employers.

5. Labour shortages and recruitment difficulties

Regarding the post-pandemic situation, a recent survey in the sector shows that employment in Italy will return to pre-pandemic levels. According to FIPE (2023), in 2022, 14% of restaurant owners reported that they had fewer workers than before the pandemic, 79.6% returned to pre-pandemic levels and 6.4% had more workers than before the pandemic. A similar picture emerges for bars and cafés, where 11.9% of respondents had fewer employees than before the pandemic crisis, 86% recovered to pre-pandemic levels and 2.1% had more workers than before. In the restaurants segment, around 45% of employers ran recruitment campaigns, of which 64% reported significant difficulties in finding the required profiles (FIPE, 2023).

5.1. Labour shortages and working conditions

Difficulties in recruitment have been a recurring issue for the sector in the post-Covid period, and have been intensively covered by mass media campaigns. Annual data on prospective hirings in food service activities for 2022 (Table 3) shows that the issue of difficult recruitment is widespread among the most requested occupational profiles. According to employers, nearly 40%

of waiters and over 43% of chefs are hard to find (FIPE, 2023). Recruitment is especially difficult for the 'back-stage' occupations in kitchens and, for all the most requested profiles, depends on the scarcity of candidates rather than the unsuitability of the subjects. In the large majority of cases, waiters, chefs and bartenders are required to have previous work experience, but in very few cases permanent contracts are offered.

Table 3 – Most wanted occupations in the restaurant and food services sector, Italy, 2022

	Hirings	of which (%)						
		with previous experience	substitution of other personnel	permanent contract	temporary contract	difficult to recruit, too few candidates	difficult to recruit, inadequate candidates	difficult to recruit (total)
Waiters	356,570	69.5	26.6	7.6	69.4	28.0	10.9	38.9
Chefs in restaurants and hotels	208,880	84.7	28.8	17.5	72.9	30.1	13.5	43.6
Bartenders	143,660	59.7	26.9	13.0	68.3	19.6	10.7	30.3
Pastry chefs, ice cream makers	10,730	64.3	31.0	17.0	68.0	26.5	19.5	46.0
Food preparation, cooking, delivery	36,070	58.5	51.0	18.9	66.4	20.5	6.7	27.2

Source: FIPE (2023)

The overall profile of recruitment for the most in-demand occupations highlights some unpleasant working conditions, which may partly explain the increasing difficulties in recruitment. Although unfavourable working conditions as a specific reason for difficult recruitment are overlooked in Italy, it is well known that working in restaurants and food services is physically demanding and stressful due to the pace and intensity of the work (Lippert et al., 2020). Moreover, it implies long-working hours, evening and weekend shifts, and requires relational skills and emotional control (Fullin, 2023). All these factors negatively affect the job quality in its various dimensions (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011).

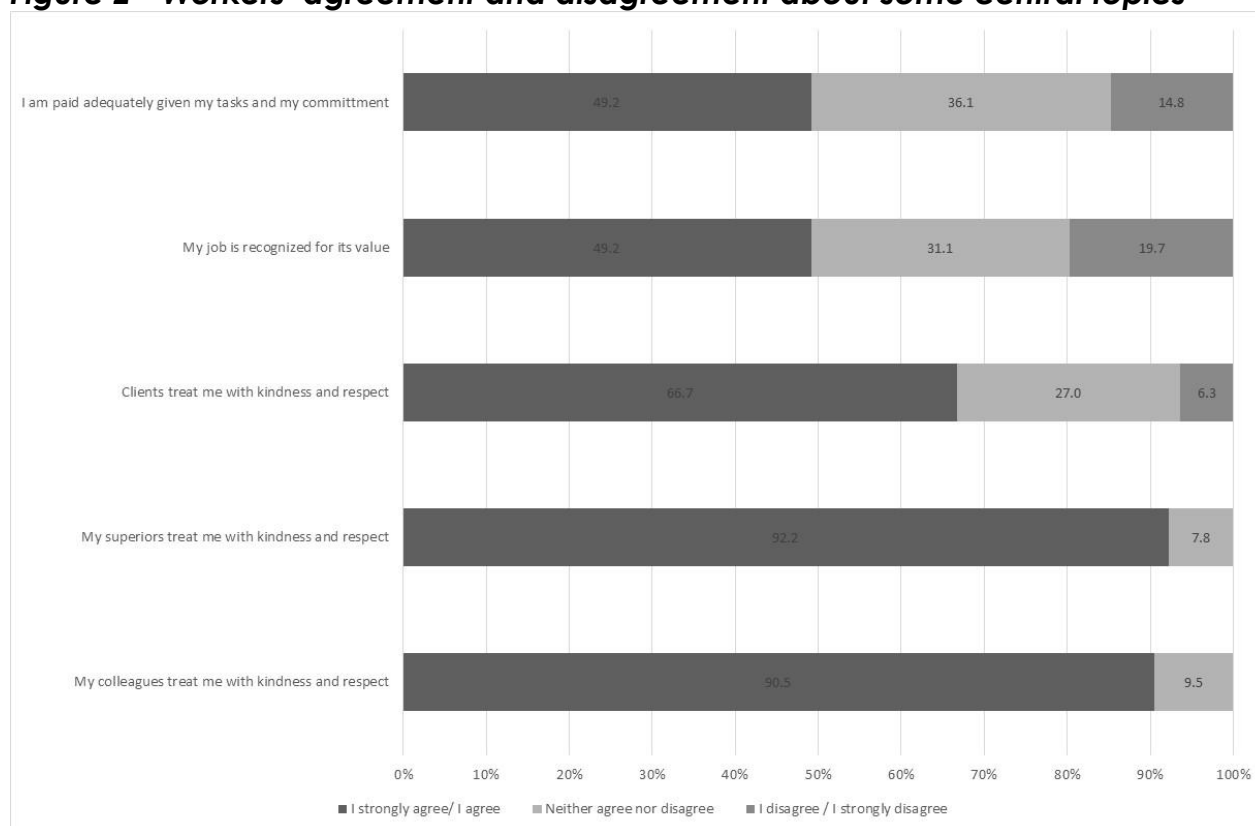
Our survey carried out among workers, which investigated the reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their jobs, confirmed this scenario. Indeed, 16% of respondents disagreed with the statement 'My work is safe in

terms of risk of injury or exposure to health risks', and 39% evaluated the impact of work on their physical health as negative or highly negative. As to physical demands, the main problem is tiredness, with 48.4% of respondents declaring they always or often feel tired, plus 34% who sometimes feel tired. Furthermore, many respondents stated that they often/always have pain/problems in their hands and feet (28%) and in their neck, shoulders and back (27%). These are obviously the consequences of jobs that require standing for many consecutive hours, while often moving weights.

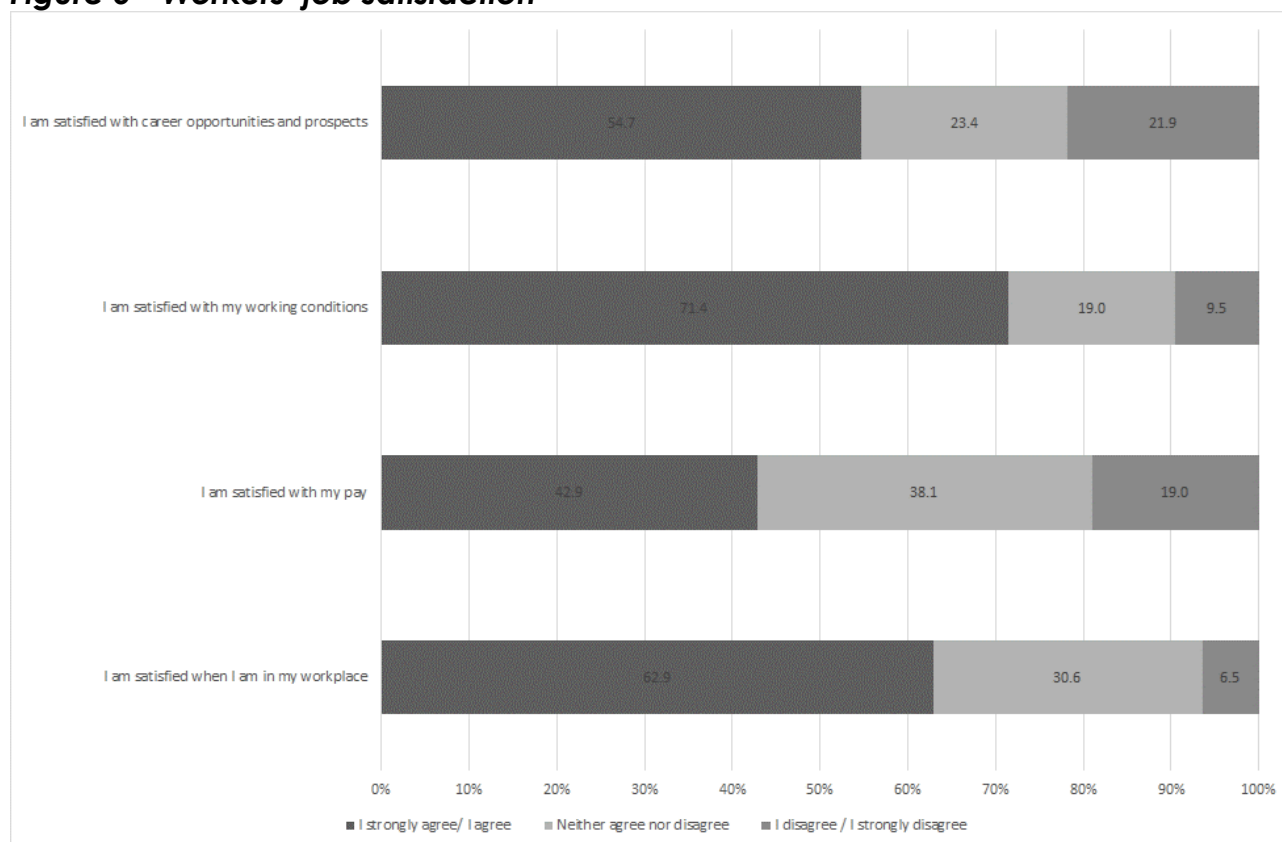
Risks related to psychological well-being are less frequently mentioned than those concerning physical well-being, even though international literature highlights that they are widely present in the hotel and restaurant sector (Ariza-Montes et al., 2019; Booyens et al., 2022). For example, according to other research, the psychological and physical risks associated with sexual harassment affect women much more than men (Ram, 2018; Minnotte & Legerski, 2019).

Relations with colleagues and superiors appear to be very satisfactory (Figure 2), even if the data may be distorted because the questionnaire was distributed to workers by their managers. The evaluation of the relationship with customers is more ambiguous, with some respondents (6%) stating that they are not treated with kindness and respect by them, and 27% stating they neither agree nor disagree.

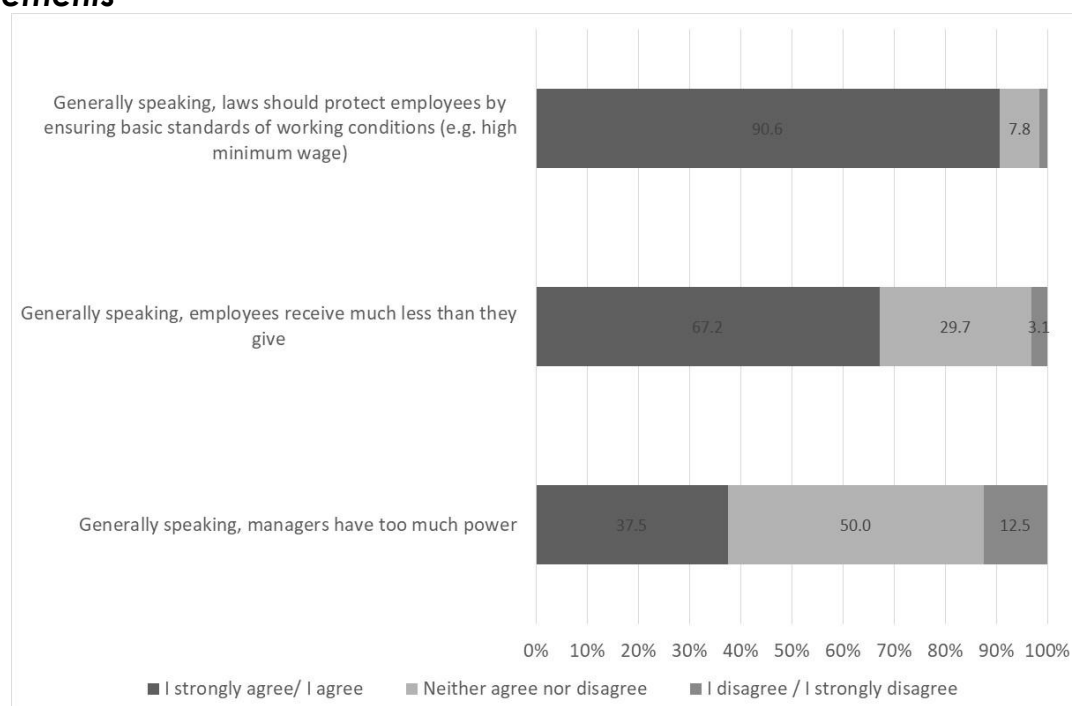
The recognition of the work done is the most problematic aspect. In fact, only 49% of respondents felt that their work was adequately recognised and rewarded. The two very similar responses to the questions concerning recognition and wage make it clear that pay is considered by workers as the first and main recognition for their work.

Figure 2 - Workers' agreement and disagreement about some central topics

Another part of the survey aimed at investigating the level of satisfaction workers had with their jobs (Figure 3). 63% of respondents reported their satisfaction, and the aspects that appeared to be most relevant in this regard were working conditions, while career opportunities and salary levels left around a fifth of respondents dissatisfied. Actually, the level of wages in the restaurant sector in Italy is quite low. As for employees, INPS (2023) estimates that the average annual wage in the accommodation and food sector is EUR 10,295, the lowest of all economic sectors and about half the total average. This is partly due to the large number of part-timers and workers with short-term contracts in the sector, who work fewer days per year than full-time permanent employees (Fellini, 2017; Coin, 2023). Moreover, according to ISTAT (2022), the accommodation and food services sector is affected by a combination of low hourly wages and widespread weaker contractual conditions for workers, making working conditions worse than in other economic sectors. Partial confirmation comes from a report on people receiving the minimum income scheme in 2021 despite having a job, as 22% of them were employed in the restaurant sector (INPS, 2022).

Figure 3 - Workers' job satisfaction

Our questionnaire also explored the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with some general statements about the power relations between managers and employees, and their feelings of injustice. The data show that workers in the restaurant sector often feel exploited by their superiors (Figure 4). In particular, 67% agreed with the statement 'Generally speaking, employees receive much less than they give', and 37% with the item 'Generally speaking, managers have too much power'. Furthermore, almost all respondents (90,6%) believed that a set of minimum standards for working conditions should be established and guaranteed. This package could also include the minimum wage, which is not regulated by law in Italy (unlike in almost all other European countries) because the system of collective bargaining is supposed to cover the vast majority of employees (CNEL, 2023). This is not completely true in the restaurant sector, where there is a large number of workers without any contract and a widespread use of 'grey' forms of remuneration, for example, part-time contracts for full-time jobs or unpaid overtime (Coin, 2023).

Figure 4 - Workers' agreement and disagreement about some general statements

5.2. The employers' attitude

The interviewees observed that, with the gradual easing of measures aimed at containing the pandemic in 2021 – especially in areas with limited spread of infection – the sector faced serious difficulties due to staff shortages (FIPE, 2023). During 2020, many workers changed jobs, moving to sectors that were less impacted than the restaurant industry.

When we were looking for staff, we had a hard time. In the year that we were all closed, a lot of people who had trained as cooks moved on, because they knew that this sector was being penalised at that time and went to other industries – the factory or whatever. [...] So, supply is very tight compared to demand and, like us, many other restaurants need staff and are struggling to find any. Those who remained in the industry are bending over backwards as they have to work harder to make up for this shortage. (Res-07)

In big cities, off-site university students who often work as waiters and servers 'have returned to their homes [...] so it is hard to find workers' (Res-11). In addition, almost all the employers interviewed stated that workers often preferred social protection benefits over working, or found undeclared jobs in order to have a double income.

Within a week of reopening, we had no kitchen staff... So, it was a real problem, also because it is well known that the pandemic made it difficult to find staff. Those who had a fixed-term contract that expired before the lockdown took the unemployment benefit or the universal basic income, maybe even finding a place to work off-the-books. Some told us that they would stay at home until they received unemployment benefits. Of course, they were all people who lived with their parents and had no family to support. [...] We had workers who did not want to renew their fixed-term contracts. They preferred to stay at home with the social protection benefit, saying they were taking a break... (Res-04)

Several interviewees also made a generational argument, claiming that young people have less desire to work.

I only take university students as waiters and waitresses [...] but now there is much less availability [...]. Some people come, but they are not really interested in working... so they come once or twice. And their approach is very 'light', in the sense that they don't think they are challenging themselves in the world of work... so, seriousness is needed... (Res-05)

The existence of a generational difference in attitudes toward work, which cannot be investigated here, concerns the way in which entrepreneurs emphasise the distance they perceive between themselves and their (young) employees. This distance can be experienced by employers as a kind of betrayal of values (Luc & Fleury, 2016; Moulin et al., 2024) underlying the *normativité ordinaire* that regulates the working conditions in the sector. In addition, some interviewees complain about on-call workers because they do not always make themselves available to work. However, the former do not realise that there is no obligation to be available and that the employment offered, even if well rewarded, is still precarious.

New staff have little desire to work... Some young people with great potential stop and say: 'Why should I work? There are social benefits that make my living without struggling anyway'. [...] There is a huge demand for personnel in the sector, and young people can earn a good wage as the minimum is EUR 8-9 per hour [...] And there are those who come for one weekend and stay at home for two, because with the money they have earned they go to the seaside. [...] I respect what you want to do, I'll give you shifts, I'll call more workers, but if you make promises and then don't come to work, I won't call you again. (Res-03)

It should be noted, however, that at the beginning of the pandemic, workers with fixed-term occupations paid the highest price because their contracts were not renewed, while permanent workers could not be dismissed. Moreover, during the uncertain recovery phase, restaurateurs were reluctant to take risks and increased flexibility, offering only short-term contracts. These dynamics have contributed to a deterioration of the *normativité ordinaire*. On the one hand, the perception of instability among workers is likely to have increased; on the other hand, the pool of labour available for precarious

employment has probably decreased. However, employers seemed to be largely unaware of this issue and felt justified in increasing the use of fixed-term contracts due to the prevailing uncertainty in the sector.

I preferred to hire workers on temporary contracts, both to see how they worked and how the restaurant was going, because there could be another lockdown... (Res-06)

The way of hiring changed... We offered contracts with less stability because something could happen... we protected ourselves more. If before the pandemic we offered 6-month or 1-year contracts, now we offer 3-month renewable contracts... (Res-04)

While reflecting on the staff shortage and the widespread preference for social protection benefits, only few employers interviewed seemed aware of the need to improve working conditions in the sector. In general, employers did not seem to take into account the onerous aspects of restaurant work, showing a short-sighted approach to problems related to recruitment and staff turnover.

In the past, this work was very different. Today we go on because there are also non-European staff. No one wants to do some of the more menial jobs anymore, also because of the required commitment and the availability at different working hours. Hotel schools churn out thousands of graduates every year, but we never see any. My dream is that someone comes in and says 'If you make me work, I want to work'. You don't hear these statements anymore. (Res-04)

Concluding remarks

The restaurant sector in Italy is an important industry in terms of revenue and employment (Fellini, 2017; FIPE, 2019a, 2023). In terms of profitability of the food service industry, the Italian market is the third largest in Europe, after the United Kingdom and Spain (FIPE, 2019b). The employment in the restaurant industry, which was severely affected by the implementation of physical distancing and lockdown measures during the health crisis, has recorded a remarkable recovery in the post-pandemic period. However, this growth has coincided with the emergence of labour shortages that were previously unknown. Given that the content and forms of work organisation have remained largely unchanged, it can be argued that there have been shifts in matching labour supply and demand.

Through quantitative data on experiences of workers and qualitative interviews with employers in the restaurant sector, this article has aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying factors that have shaped the dynamics of the industry and to identify the critical elements that have contributed to its evolution. The analysis has focussed on the *normativité*

ordinaire of the sector, namely the formal and informal rules that govern its operations. The Covid-19 pandemic represented an exogenous shock that altered the internal balances of the sector, affecting the relationship between employers and employees. There was a prolonged period of considerable uncertainty during which both employers and employees were exposed to the potential risk of business closures and job losses. This was followed by a period of recovery, although it was marked by instability. At the same time, policy aimed at supporting economic activities and workers led to changes in the formal regulations, that are inextricably linked to informal ones. In particular, the presence of irregular work and 'grey forms' of remuneration made some measures less effective than they could have been, while the norms governing employment relationships showed a certain degree of fragility when faced with the exceptional nature of the health crisis.

The exploratory nature of this study did not allow for the identification of all the reasons for labour drain from the sector, but the analysis of experiences of employers and employees highlighted some underlying issues. In particular, there is a clear need to improve wages and working conditions, without which the current labour shortages are likely to persist. In this respect, the employers' perspectives are very important and would need to be analysed in more detail through further research. Given the characteristics of the *normativité ordinaire* of the restaurant sector, which in Italy is based on a widespread use of irregular forms of work, on a flexibility of working hours that is much higher than that defined by labour contracts, and on informal relationships between workers and their employers, it is crucial to understand the extent to which the latter are aware of the current critical issues or attribute them to the supposed lack of work ethic and spirit of sacrifice of younger generations. In relation to the problem of staff recruitment, it should also be considered that Italy is characterised by an increasingly older population (Eurostat, 2024), which is more and more educated and less willing to work in low-paid, low-skilled, and physically demanding jobs (Unioncamere, 2022).

In shedding light on a crucial yet under-explored sector of the Italian economy, the findings of this study underline the need for ongoing research to fully understand and address the multiple challenges faced by employers and workers.

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Appendix

Table A.1 – The restaurant employers and managers interviewed

Interviewee Code	Role	Type	Restaurant Level	Management	Number of workers
Res-01	Staff manager	Gourmet restaurant	High	Associates	40 + various on-call
Res-02	Owner and chef	Gourmet restaurant	High	Family-run	14 + 5 consultants
Res-03	Owner and manager	Restaurant with banquet service	Medium-high	Family-run	10 + 15 on-call
Res-04	Owner and manager	Restaurant and pizzeria	Medium-high	Associates	10
Res-05	Owner and manager	Restaurant, steakhouse and pizzeria	Medium	Family-run	6 + 8 on-call
Res-06	Owner and manager	Restaurant and pizzeria	Medium	Family-run	12 + various on-call
Res-07	Owner and manager	Steakhouse	Medium	Associates	8 + 5 on-call
Res-08	Owner and manager	Pizzeria	Medium	Chain	6 + 4 on-call
Res-09	Manager	Pizzeria	Medium	Franchise	9 + various on-call
Res-10	Owner and manager	Street-food with table service	Low	Family-run	15
Res-11	Operations manager	Fast food	Low	Chain	> 200 (for eight restaurants)