



Subcontracted Migrant Labour and Just-in-time Retail Chain Requirements: A Qualitative Research on the Bagged Salad Commodity System in Northern Italy

*Travail migrant sous-traité et demandes just-in-time des chaînes de la
distribution : une recherche qualitative sur le système de production de salades
en sachet dans le nord de l'Italie*

*La mano de obra migrante subcontratada y los requisitos just-in-time de las
cadenas de supermercados: una investigación cualitativa sobre el sistema de
productos de ensalada en bolsa en el norte de Italia*

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Subcontracted Migrant Labour and Just-in-time Retail Chain Requirements: A Qualitative Research on the Bagged Salad Commodity System in Northern Italy

Martina Lo Cascio¹ and Domenico Perrotta²

Over the last fifteen years, the flourishing social science literature on migrant work in agri-food systems in Europe has addressed a great number of relevant issues: *inter alia*, the vulnerabilization of migrants, due to the restrictive EU and national policies on transnational mobility; the different dispositifs of formal and informal, public and private workforce recruitment; the processes of spatial and social segregation of migrant labour force, in informal settlements, institutional reception centres, or in private accommodations included in the workplaces; the role of “racialization” in the labour process.

With this article, we aim to contribute to this literature by addressing two relatively understudied topics. Firstly, while for the most part research in this field concerns farm labour, we will focus on migrant work in food processing and packaging plants. Secondly, we will provide new empirical material and theoretical reflections on the impact of retailers’ dominance on the whole agri-food systems and, in particular, on labour organization in manufacturing companies. This impact has often been observed by agri-food scholars (e.g. Gertel and Sippel, 2014; Corrado *et al.*, 2016a), but the connection between, on the one hand, the unequal power relationships between retailers and manufacturers (as well as farmers) and, on the other hand, labour conditions in factories, has rarely been studied from an empirical and qualitative point of view.

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Our contribution is based on an empirical study on the commodity system³ of bagged salad in Italy, focusing on the two main production areas, the provinces of Bergamo and Brescia in the region of Lombardy in the North, and the province of Salerno in the region of Campania in the South of the country. This commodity system epitomizes a number of characteristics of the agro-industrial production and “retailing revolution” (Burch and Lawrence, 2007; McMichael and Friedmann, 2007): these products are mostly distributed by retail chains (98% in Italy) and represent an innovation in production, processing, distribution and consumption; the majority of the salad vegetables are grown in greenhouses, often with up to six harvests per year on the same land; managers in processing plants proudly present this production as “industrial” more than “agricultural”; logistic and information technologies are central for answering the just-in-time requests of supermarket chains (Lo Cascio and Perrotta, 2021). Finally, and importantly, a relevant number of workers in this commodity system are of migrant origin: in Lombardy, both on farms and in factories, employees are mostly of Indian origin,⁴ and, on a lesser extent, also come from Pakistan and North African countries; in Campania, the greenhouse labourers are of migrant origin (mostly from Morocco and Eastern Europe), while processing companies mainly employ Italian women (Avallone, 2016).⁵

In this article, our analysis focuses on processing plants in the Lombardy region, for two main reasons. Firstly, the most important industrial actors of this commodity system are headquartered in this region, especially in the provinces of Bergamo and Brescia, while the agricultural production is especially located in Campania (and, to a lesser extent, in other Italian regions); secondly, in the handful of processing plants in Campania, for the most part the workers are of Italian origin, while in the factories in Lombardy they are mostly of migrant origin. For these reasons, the bagged salad processing plants in Lombardy appear to us an interesting empirical field to study the impact of retailers’ dominance on migrant work and on labour organization in the food industry.

3 With “commodity system”, Friedland (2005: 32) proposed to define “a distinct production-distribution-consumption network” at the national level, to differentiate it from a “commodity chain”, namely a “singular network of commodity production, distribution and consumption”, and from a “segment”, which designates “a particular aspect of activity, such as growers and growing, grower organization, labour, science, distribution, marketing, culture, consumption, etc.”

4 The presence of migrant labourers of Indian origin in Northern Italy — in particular in Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy regions — and the features of their insertion in the local labour market have been extensively studied by some sociologists, who described the peculiar system of informal labour intermediation of their social networks. In particular, Azzeruoli (2016) analysed Indian migrants’ labour in the production system of Parmigiano Reggiano and Grana Padano cheeses; see also Bertolani (2016). We did not focus on this issue, but we can assume that the massive presence of migrants of Indian origin in the bagged salad plants in the provinces of Bergamo and Brescia is due to similar processes of informal labour intermediation and recruitment.

5 According to the National Institute for Social Insurance (INPS), in 2017 the non-Italian agricultural workers (i.e. those who were employed for at least one day in the agricultural sector) were 364,385, 34.3% of the total. The main nationalities are Romanian, Indian, Moroccan and Albanian (Macri, 2019). In the sector of industrial food processing plants, the total number of employees is 441,957 (average 2015-2017: Ismea-Federalimentare, 2020); among them, 31,407 are employed in the “fruit and vegetables” (“ortofrutta”) plants. Unfortunately, data on the number of migrant workers in this sector are not available.

It is important to note that the characteristics of migrant labour in this sector are very different from those that were described by research in the enclaves of intensive agriculture in Italy, and especially where seasonal labour is required: a great number of studies documented how migrant workers are usually employed without formal contracts, with piecework and cash-in-hand remuneration, and through the illegalized intermediation of labour brokers; moreover, they often find accommodation in informal settlements in the countryside, without establishing any contact with the local and native population (see Corrado *et al.*, 2016a; Salvia, 2020). Very differently, migrant labourers employed in bagged salad processing plants in Lombardy usually have regular and long-term permits of stay, are hired through formal contracts and live in “normal” apartments in the small towns of the provinces of Bergamo and Brescia. Nonetheless, some problematic aspects emerged in our interviews, such as the difficult working conditions, especially in the fact that labourers must spend all their working hours in cold workplaces;⁶ the fragmentation of the workforce through subcontracting and outsourcing practices and the recruitment of part of the workforce through “cooperatives of convenience”; the widespread use of collective labour agreements of other sectors (e.g. transport and logistics) instead of the collective labour agreement for the food industry. As we show in the last section, these practices — that some actors we interviewed consider to be at the edge of legality — allow bagged salad companies to increase flexibility and reduce labour costs, with the aim of meeting retailers’ requests.

The field study is based on thirty-eight in-depth interviews — conducted between November 2018 and February 2020 — with actors at the different levels of this commodity system in the Lombardy region (while eight interviews were realized in Campania and the remaining two in other Italian regions): in particular, farmers (six), migrant farmworkers (three), managers of producers’ organizations (three), migrant factory workers (five), managers and technicians of processing plants (eleven), those in charge of workers’ cooperatives (two), trade unions’ officers (three), representatives of farmers’ associations (two), staff members of retail chains (one), privileged witnesses (two); moreover, we briefly visited two plants in Lombardy during working hours, thanks to the availability of managers and workers.

The article is structured as follows: after a review of the literature on migrant labour in the food industry in Europe and the relationships between retailers and manufacturers (first section), and a description of the commodity system of bagged salad in Italy (second section), in the third section we focus on three topics emerging from our field study: firstly, the importance of outsourcing and subcontracting to smaller plants and “cooperatives of convenience”, which mainly employ migrant labourers; secondly, the impact of retail chains’ requests for a just-in-time production on labour organization in processing plants, which brought — for example — the introduction of night, as well as Saturday and Sunday working shifts; thirdly, the role of some workers’ unions as mediators between processing companies and migrant workers.

⁶The temperature in bagged salad processing plants is constant at 4°C, in order to maintain the quality of the fresh products.

Migrant Labour in European Food Manufacturing

Over the last fifteen years, the research on migrant labour in the agri-food sector in Europe has flourished. A number of empirical studies described the labour and living conditions of migrant farmworkers in different European countries (for collective volumes, see Michalon and Morice, 2008; Crenn and Tersigni, 2013; Gertel and Sippel, 2014; Corrado *et al.*, 2016a; Rye and O'Reilly, 2020; see also Farinella and Nori, 2020). In particular, among those addressed in this literature, three main issues are relevant for the present contribution: the EU mobility regime, and its consequences on the vulnerability of migrant workers (e.g. Peano, 2020); the different forms of public and private intermediation in the agricultural labour markets of European countries (Corrado *et al.*, 2016a: 183-230; Lo Cascio and Perrotta, 2019); the unbalanced power relations between buyers and suppliers in vertical agri-food chains, and especially the role of the “retailing giants” as new “authorities” in the agri-food systems, which determine production standards and a downward pressure on the other actors, especially agricultural producers and manufacturers (Garrapa, 2016; Perrotta, 2016; Salvia, 2020).

In this growing literature on labour in the agri-food sector, migrants are mostly studied in the fields and, to a lesser extent, in the dairy sector: tomato and orange harvesters, greenhouse workers, strawberry pickers, milkers. Comparatively, much less attention has been paid to labourers employed by food manufacturers. This is probably due to the visibility and relevance, in the European public debate, of some cases of violent social conflicts (e.g. El Ejido in Southern Spain, Rosarno and Foggia in Southern Italy, Manolada in Greece: see Corrado *et al.*, 2016b: 1-3), that drove many researchers to study migrant labour in the agricultural sector. Nonetheless, such a gap in the research on migrant labour in food industry is striking if we consider both the economic relevance of food manufacturers (tomato canneries, slaughterhouses, meat processors, cheese factories, industrial mills, etc.) in the agri-food systems and the growing presence of migrant workers in this sector of the labour market all over Europe.

Among the few studies on migrant labour in European food manufacturers, meat processing appears to be the sector that deserved more attention, especially in Germany and, to a lesser extent, UK, France and Italy. These studies not only describe the role of the migrant workforce in assuring flexibility for the just-in-time production and lowering labour costs, but also the multiple strategies used by manufacturers to reproduce the vulnerability of at least part of their workforce.

For example, Wagner and Hassel (2016) argue that in meat processing in Germany low salaries and problematic labour conditions are due to three factors: the subcontracting of part of the production process (which allows “companies in Germany to evade sectoral agreements or to renegotiate company agreements by establishing subsidiaries and outsourcing parts of their production to the latter under another name”, *Ibid.*: 167); the posting of workers and labour mobility from Central and Eastern Europe; the segmentation of industrial relations and the dualization of the labour market, with important differences between, on the one hand, native workers and, on the other, posted workers, migrants, and labourers in subcontracting companies, which represent more than one third of the total workforce in this sector. Mense-Petermann (2018: 27) contends that, because of

protest movements and pressure by the government, in 2015 the main German meat processors “agree to abolish posting and to contract out meat processing only to service providers who employ their workers under the German employment and social security laws”; even if a number of frauds have been recorded over the subsequent years. Looking at the same industry from the perspective of Romanian workers posted in Germany, Voivozeanu (2019) notes that they engage in low-wage and insecure jobs essentially because they compare them with the much lower wages in their country of origin as well as because that they have a limited knowledge of German language.

Similar processes of workforce segmentation, outsourcing, and racialization of migrant workers were described also for the meat sector in France (Tersigni and Souchard, 2013), Wales (Lever and Milbourne, 2017) and Italy (Piro and Sacchetto, 2020 and 2021), with important differences in the practices of workforce recruitment: while among migrant workers in France we find both migrants with long-term permits of stay and posted workers, in Wales they are mostly agency workers of different national origins, while in Italy for the most part migrant workers are employed through subcontracting work cooperatives.

Some of these studies touch on the issue of the unequal power relationships in the supply chain, as an element that contributes to explain food manufacturers’ practices of employment of a vulnerable and segmented workforce. For example, Mense-Petermann (2018: 28) argues that German meat producers are “squeezed between the price cartel of the farmers and the huge buyer power of a handful of dominant retail chains”. Similarly, Lever and Milbourne (2017) describe British supermarkets’ just-in-time requests and pressures on the meat industry and maintain that the “compartmentalization” and segmentation of the migrant workforce is a necessary practice for meeting such requests.

One of the few studies on the bagged salad industry in Europe, and in particular in the UK (Scott, 2013: 1103), considers the supermarket chains as at least partially responsible for the intensification of the workplace regime in food processing plants as well as on farms, and analyses employers’ appreciation of migrant workers’ willingness “to work enthusiastically [...] at the bottom of the labour market”. And in a non-academic inquiry, Lawrence (2004: 78) affirms:

“The preparation and packing of fresh foods such as salad are now dependent on cheap, casual labour. That cheap labour has been largely provided by migrant workers. The labour-intensive business of sorting, washing, cutting and packing leaves by hand could not be done without them. Many of them, however, are now living in this country in appalling squalor.”

It seems to us that it is necessary to move a step further into the combined analysis of these two issues: on the one hand, the processes of labour segmentation and workplace regime intensification in food manufacturing and, on the other, power relationships between supermarket chains and food manufacturing companies. A contribution in this sense can be found in those scholars in agri-food studies that focused their attention on the so-called “supermarket revolution” or “retailing revolution”, namely, the fact that the “retail sector has moved beyond its traditional responsibility for food *distribution*, and is now strongly influencing patterns of *production* and *consumption*” (Lawrence and

Burch, 2007: 9, italics in the original text; see also Lawrence and Dixon, 2015). These scholars analysed the impact of retail power on food manufacturers through the imposition of production standards and the growth of supermarkets' own-brands (Burch and Lawrence, 2007), the limits of audit practices (Davey and Richards 2013), the "manufacturer counterstrategies" and strategic alliances between manufacturers and retailers (Hattersley *et al.*, 2013), sometimes leading to "bilateral oligopolies" that exclude agricultural smallholders (Lee *et al.*, 2010).

Unfortunately, in this research field the role of (migrant) labour is relatively understudied: factory workers are almost absent from this picture of the food systems. This is strange enough if we think that in the wider domain of the global commodity chain analysis, scholars recognized the importance of the study of labour – labour mobilization, labour regulation, labour conditions, labour collective organization and conflicts, etc. (Tsing, 2009; Selwyn, 2011; for an empirical study on factory workers in the global chain of electronic products, see Chan *et al.*, 2020).

Before presenting our analysis of labour in the commodity system of bagged salad in Italy, in the next section we briefly describe its history and structure.

Manufacturing Ready-to-eat Bagged Salad

According to Guthman (2003: 49-50), the idea of "bagging lettuce mix" first emerged in the San Francisco area in the mid-1980s, after that some "countercultural" and upscale restaurants had introduced the organic salad mix as a successful "healthy" meal for rich urban consumers; in this context, some agricultural producers started to sell "washed, spun dried and re-sealable bagged salad mixes to supermarkets". This kind of production seems to have soon reached Europe, in particular France and Italy in late 1980s (Ciconte and Liberti, 2019) and the UK in 1992 (Lawrence, 2004).

In Italy, since the late 1980s the main area of production has been located in the province of Bergamo, in the Lombardy region, one of the most industrialized areas in Europe. In a few years, manufacturers based in Bergamo moved part of their agricultural production to the South, to the Campania region, and more precisely to the Sele Plain (Ciconte and Liberti, 2019). The Italian production of fresh vegetables for bagged salads is still concentrated in these two areas: 31% in Lombardy – in particular in the provinces of Bergamo and Brescia – and 30% in Campania, in the province of Salerno (Ceccherini, 2016): this diversification is due to the complementary features of climate and of seasonal production in the two areas (Baldi and Casati, 2009). Differently, bagged salad manufacturers are concentrated in Lombardy, even if some plants are also located in Campania and in other Italian regions. According to Avallone (2018), some farmers in the Campania region represent the presence of "Northern" bagged salad manufacturers as a form of "economic and technological colonization" of their agricultural area. In 2012, in the entire country, around 500 farms produced salads for bagging, on around 6,500 hectares (of which, about half are in greenhouses); the manufacturing companies number around 120 (Ceccherini, 2016). Among the manufacturers, the most well known is probably the French multinational corporation Bonduelle, with its two plants for bagging salad in Italy, in the provinces of Bergamo and Salerno.

From the point of view of consumption, Italy is the top country in Europe, before the UK, Spain France and Germany (Nomisma-Unaproa, 2016: 118-119). Between 2015 and 2019, consumption rose steadily (Ismea, 2017, 2019 and 2021b), but in 2020 the first drop in sales after many years was registered, probably due to some changes in shopping and consumption habits during the first year of the COVID-19-related health crisis, with remote work and mobility restrictions (Ismea, 2021b). Notwithstanding, in 2020 bagged salad represented 9% of the retail sale of all fresh and canned vegetables in Italy (Ismea, 2021a).

From the point of view of retail, 98% of these products are sold by supermarket chains (Baldi and Casati, 2009; Ismea, 2017), and 65% are labelled as the supermarkets' own brands (Dall'Olio, 2016). Bagged products are much more expensive than "normal" fresh vegetables: 7.21 €/kg vs 2.19 €/kg for lettuce (+ 329%) and 4.39 €/kg vs 1.28 €/kg for carrots (+ 345%; Ismea, 2021b). These data show not only how important the added value is due to the processing, but also, most importantly, that the commodity system of bagged salad offers an interesting point of entry for the study of the supermarket revolution (see first section).

In Italy, the main actors in the bagged salad commodity system are supermarket chains, food manufacturers and producers' organizations (POs). At all the levels of this system, the power relationships between buyers and suppliers are unbalanced (Cox and Chicksand, 2007; Vorley, 2007). As in other commodity systems in the age of the supermarket revolution (Burch and Lawrence, 2007; Perrotta, 2016; Salvia, 2020), retail chains are able to impose prices, certifications and "voluntary" standards that work as "entry barriers" for their suppliers; moreover, retailers' orders set the quantity and types of products that manufacturers must process on a daily basis.

The relationships between manufacturers and farmers are organized through POs. Created by the EU Common Market Organization, POs are formally expected to express farmers' interests; during our field research, however, POs appeared strictly integrated with manufacturing companies, from the point of view of their staff, strategies and vision. Farmers are obliged to become members of a PO, but they often see POs as counterparts in the commodity system. Moreover, each PO is de facto compelled to sell the raw material to one single processing company. This creates a dependency effect in the relationship between farmers, PO and manufacturer: the farm's production choices depend on the PO's decisions and PO's decisions are connected with the processing plant's needs. In turn, the processing plants' daily production depends on what is ordered by the retail chains (Lo Cascio and Perrotta, 2021): thus, the whole picture is that of a "vertical" commodity system.

Migrant Labour in Bagged Salad Plants: Flexible Cooperatives, Powerful Retailers and Compliant Trade Unions

In this section, on the basis of the interviews we conducted, we analyse labour in Lombardy region's processing plants. The majority of the 120 companies in the bagged salad sector in Italy own a plant in this region; some of them employ

several hundred workers (up to 400-500 in one plant), while some others are smaller and count fewer than thirty-fifty employees. According to the trade union officers and activists we interviewed, the majority of these workers are of migrant origin, especially from India:

“The sector has plenty of immigrants, around 90-95%. This feature is typical of cooperatives. A massive presence of this nationality [Indian nationality] can be found in the bagged salad [industry], in the greenhouses as well as in the dairy sector.” (Interview with an activist of a rank-and-file union, Province of Bergamo, December 2019)

“Today in this plant [one of the greatest plants in the sector] at least twenty different ethnicities are present. I think that around 90% of them are foreign workers. In a very high percentage, male workers. The main nationalities are Indian, Pakistani, North African, with a presence of Latino-Americans and other Asian workers as well.” (Interview with a union officer, Province of Bergamo, February 2019)

Among the migrant workers we interviewed and met in informal conversations, some point out that the most difficult aspects of their job concern the cold work environment, physical efforts and low wages.

“The most difficult aspect, in this moment, is the issue of personal safety, because we work in a very cold environment, between 2 and 4°C. Moreover, it requires efforts in picking and uploading something. [...] The machinery is more modern than in the past, and the attempt is to do your job with lower physical effort [...]. Every year, the work is increasing... what is always the same is the wage!” (Interview with a fifty-nine-years-old factory worker in a big plant and union delegate, Latino-American origin, Province of Bergamo, March 2019)

“The greatest difficulty is represented by the cold. Because salad needs air conditioning; in the ‘red zone’ we add ham, chicken, cheese and that room needs temperature below zero degrees. At the ‘washing’ the temperature is a bit higher but you always have air conditioning over your head, and the problem is the cold water.” (Interview with a migrant woman worker, of Algerian origin, formerly employed for fourteen years in a small processing plant, which act as a supplier for two big companies, Province of Bergamo, April 2019)

Interestingly, in the following excerpt the manager of a processing plant tries to explain to us why for the most part the workers in these plants are of migrant origin: the main difficulty in this job for Italian workers, in his opinion, is related to the availability to work on night and Sunday shifts and on festival holidays:

“The population in these plants — in our plant and I believe also in other companies in the North — are mainly from India. Why? It is very simple: they have an agricultural tradition and culture, they moved to Italy to find a job, they entered farms and fields, and the [Italian] farmer, that developed his activities and started to produce bagged salad, brought him [the Indian worker] into the industrial plants, this is why we have an Indian workforce inside. It is difficult to find Italians. We tried to change this tendency. The main problem is that our sector works on night shifts, from Monday to Saturday, and sometimes we work on Sundays, in all the festival holidays. To reduce the risk of wasting products, unfortunately we also have to work also during some festivities such as August 15, April 25, as they are working days for us. It is not easy to find a young Italian workforce that is interested and wants to make personal sacrifices to work on these days. We have mainly

found young University students as interns for developing food technologies.” (Interview with the plant manager of a medium processing plant, Province of Bergamo, July 2019)

In the next subsections, our analysis of labour in bagged salad processing plants focuses on three main points. Firstly, we show how different forms of outsourcing and subcontracting — in particular to workers’ cooperatives, which mainly employ migrant labourers — are widely used by processing companies with the aim of reducing labour costs and assuring the flexibility of production, which is necessary to meet the just-in-time requests of the retailers. Secondly, we unpack the power relations between retailers and manufacturers, and explain why such a flexibility in production is required. Thirdly, we discuss the role of workers’ unions in the relationships between management and workers in processing companies.

Migrant Labourers and Cooperatives of Convenience: Outsourcing and Subcontracting

Over the last twenty years, with the aim of reducing labour costs and gaining the flexibility which is necessary to meet the daily requests of retailers, one of the main strategies of bagged salad manufacturers has been the outsourcing and subcontracting of part of their operations to other companies. This fragmentation allows the main company to offload retailers’ pressures onto smaller actors, in particular smaller processing plants, temporary labour agencies and workers’ “cooperatives of convenience”, which, in turn, usually employ migrant labourers.

Firstly, part of the production of bagged salad is sometimes outsourced to other — usually smaller — plants, for example in case of production peaks, which cannot be managed by the main company, or when the smaller plant is dedicated to particular lines of production (for example, of organic products). In these cases, the outsourcing allows the main company to reduce production costs, as concerns both labour and investments in technological advancement. Workers’ conditions in smaller plants are usually worse than in bigger ones, especially if the latter are companies whose brand is well-known in the market. Look for example at this interview, with a clerk (now retired) of a small plant which used to work in outsourcing for one of the biggest companies in the sector:

“80% of the production of my company used to be for [main company]. A number of labels used to come out of our plant, because [main company] sent us orders for both its brand and supermarkets’ own labels. [...] We only produced spinach and small leaf, not lettuce. [...] [The main company] supplied us with its plastic bags, already with their label, and they managed all the rest; at seven in the morning they sent us the orders, for each different label. [...] At the end they [main company] didn’t mind, they didn’t say to us: ‘if you worked a little more, please tell me, I will pay you more’. They used to set the price at the beginning of the year, and then it didn’t change, even if we had a rainy year and our income was very low. And in turn we did the same with our suppliers, the farmers... [...] The most important difficulties for our workers were related to the low level of technology; they had to work harder than those in [main company] because their labour was mostly manual.” (Interview with a former clerk in a small processing company, Province of Bergamo, April 2019)

Secondly, part of the labour process is subcontracted to other firms within the processing plant, usually to worker cooperatives or, better still, “cooperatives of convenience” (COCs), as Iannuzzi and Sacchetto (2020) defined them, which mostly employ migrant labourers. It represents one of the most common forms of segmentation of labour — often following the lines of national origins — within workplaces in many productive sectors in Italy: logistics (Cuppini *et al.*, 2015; Benvegnù *et al.*, 2018), meat industry (Piro and Sacchetto, 2020 and 2021), agriculture (Donatiello and Moiso, 2017), tourism (Iannuzzi and Sacchetto, 2020).⁷

In almost all the processing plants in which we conducted interviews and observations in the province of Bergamo, at least part — and often a *relevant* part — of the production process is subcontracted to cooperatives. The differences in the labour conditions between the main company and the subcontracting cooperative are described, for example, in the two following interviews, respectively with a migrant worker, who used to work for two cooperatives in a small plant which in turn operated in outsourcing for two big manufacturers, and with a clerk (who underlines wage differentials):

- *“I used to work with the cooperative for three-four years; then I passed to another cooperative, then I was hired with a permanent contract by the [main] company and have been with them for one and a half years. In the plant we were half with the cooperative and half directly employed. Those who were with the cooperative had fixed-term contracts of one month or seven days, it depends on the orders. We substituted the direct workers when they were on holiday or sick, or when there were many orders. When, on the contrary, there is less work, some of the cooperative workers stay at home, on furlough or unemployment benefits [...]”*

- *“What is the main difference?”*

- *“They [the direct employees] have a permanent contract, while we [cooperative workers] have a fixed-term contract; [...]. The other difference is that if there is a lot of work, we all work in the plant; if there is less work, those from the cooperative go home.”*

- *“But the labour is the same?”*

- *“Yes. You must learn to do everything, because you do not have a fixed place in the plant; at the beginning you probably have to prepare the bowl and put in the lettuce, the other workers add corn, the other ingredients such as the olives, tomato; another worker puts the bowl on the weight scale, the other prepares the bag or prepares the boxes, it depends, so you must know how to do everything.”* (Interview with a migrant woman worker, of Algerian origin. Formerly employed for fourteen years in a small processing plant, Province of Bergamo, April 2019)

⁷ In the sociology of work it is well-known that outsourcing “involves deconstructing employment relationship by circumventing labour market rules and institutions representing workers. When activities are outsourced, workers can be moved from a company with high wages and high standards to a company with low wages and a precarious employment system” (Iannuzzi and Sacchetto, 2020: 3); in Italy, “the favourable tax regime for cooperatives, along with their blurred legal boundaries, makes them particularly suitable for supporting outsourcing and, at the same time, facilitating the creation of cooperative of convenience, which are business-oriented, hierarchically managed and created ad hoc for outsourcing activities. In recent years and following the financial crisis, COCs have become one of the most widespread methods for the casualization of employment relationships and are one of the main actors involved in corporate restructuring” (Iannuzzi and Sacchetto, 2020: 5).

“Ten of the workers were directly hired and twelve by a cooperative; this was sufficient for all, the labour process and the warehouse; we were two clerks. [...] If a direct employee used to earn 10 euros gross per hour, namely 6,5 euros net, our company used to pay 11,50 to the cooperative [per hour, for each worker], but you have to calculate that the outsourced workers did not have the right to holiday, illness, I think that the cooperative worker didn't earn more than 4 euros per hour. But in the labour process there was no difference. In the most intense periods they used to start at six in the morning and work up to ten in the evening.” (Interview with a former clerk in a small processing plant, Province of Bergamo, April 2019)

In one case, in the meeting room of a medium-big processing plant, we interviewed both the plant manager and the person in charge of the subcontracting cooperative. In this plant, all the operations of sorting, washing, and bagging are subcontracted to the cooperative, and only the clerks are directly hired by the main company. The cooperative is much bigger than the processing company and operates with a number of customers and workplaces, in different productive sectors as well (mainly in logistics). The two managers seemed to admit that the relationship between the two companies is at the edge of legality. For example, the plant manager describes how he — and not the person in charge of the cooperative — often tells the subcontracted workers what they need to do:

“I control the production line, but all the things we must say to the workers are told by the person of the cooperative, because by law we should not do — in theory — what then in practice is done, by law we cannot give direct orders and communication to the [subcontracted] workers, but all that is related to the organization of labour must be said to the person of the cooperative and he then relays all the communication. [...] In practice, however, the boy on the production line knows that if there is a problem we cannot wait for a meeting with the manager of the cooperative [...]. In any case I would prefer to have direct employees, in order to manage them directly. Behind this choice [of subcontracting all the production work] of the director there is an economic advantage, surely. We do not have to manage work accidents, sickness periods, or if someone has an accident he is substituted by the cooperative and we don't carry any responsibility.”

(Interview with the plant manager of a medium-big company, Province of Bergamo, July 2019)

On his part, the person in charge of the cooperative describes the relationship of subcontracting as a stable form of organization: the group of (subcontracted) workers has been working in this plant since its opening. His “cooperative network” — he says — employs groups of workers which work with continuity in various plants, in different sectors (Interview with the person in charge of a subcontracting worker cooperative in a plant of a medium-big company, Province of Bergamo, July 2019).

In this sense, this relationship appears more a form of labour intermediation than of subcontracting. The same interviewee claims that “the cooperative makes sense, and it is convenient for all, for us, for the workers and for the main company”; at the same time, he admits that “some misuses of the cooperative occurred, because we are in any case in a market logic”.

As a labour inspector explained us:

“When we enter a factory [for a labour control], we do not find the employees of the company, but we find the cooperative, that with a more favourable contract reduces labour cost. On this activity the legislator has been careful and today it is considered a criminal offence, the fraudulent labour supply, namely I — the company — do not use my workers, but I call on a cooperative, which sends me its workers, but it is not an authorized temporary labour agency.” (Interview with a labour inspector, Bergamo, February 2020)

The strategy of subcontracting a part of labour operations to COCs is very widespread in Northern Italy. If in the South of the country the informal intermediation is very common (albeit illegalized, see Avallone, 2016 for a study in the agricultural area of the province of Salerno), in the North these cooperatives guarantee to the main companies at least the presence of a formal contract. Nonetheless, they play a similar role in providing (usually migrant) labourers, with lower wages and greater flexibility than direct employees, thus contributing to workforce segmentation. A number of interviews showed that the relationship between bagged salad companies and subcontracting COCs is a stable one, and it lasts for many years.

It must be added that both the big manufacturing companies and COCs often decide to not apply the collective labour agreement of food manufacturing and select a different one (for example, those of logistics and transport, or trade and services), if it is considered more convenient from the point of view of working shifts, hourly wages and tax advantages. This practice is considered to be at the edge of legality by some of the union activists we interviewed.

Finally, in some plants, in the case of production peaks, companies also turn to temporary labour agencies:

“Many workers left the job, but new workers weren’t hired, because some work with [temporary job] agencies. They bring in young boys who work on fixed-term contracts and then move on. There is a part of agency work in relation to the flexibilities that are needed. Because not all the days are the same, not all the periods of time are the same. But we do the same work, with the difference that they are hired by an agency.” (Interview with a fifty-nine-years-old factory worker in a big plant and union delegate, Latino-American origin, Province of Bergamo, March 2019)

In the next subsection, we show how this need for flexibility in processing plants is connected with the requests of the most powerful actors in the commodity system, namely supermarket chains.

Retailers’ Power and Changing Working Shifts

As we noted in the first section, the debate in agri-food studies on retailers’ power over food manufacturers mainly points towards issues such as quality standards and prices. It is generally assumed that retail chains have an important impact on suppliers’ organization of labour; however, it is often unclear how this impact takes place in the daily interactions between these actors and, in particular, how it affects labour conditions.

On the basis of our interviews, we highlight at least three important elements to answer this question.

Firstly, retailers are able to impose changes in working shifts in processing plants, in order to meet the necessities of the rapid delivery of fresh products to the logistic hubs of the supermarket chains and then to the stores. For example, the officer of a trade union recalls how and why the night working shift was introduced in an important plant of one of the most relevant manufacturing companies in this sector, in the early 2000s.

“Previously [before 2001], the normal working schedule was from Monday to Friday, with two eight-hour shifts per day, and, on Saturday, only one morning shift, and then workers used to work overtime; for this reason, workers raced to work on Saturday, because the only element of flexibility was that the Saturday [afternoon] shift was managed by the company as overtime. [...] it is clear that this organization could no longer hold on [...]. The company proposed the introduction of the night shift. [...] We were obliged to rediscuss everything. [...] The company told us: ‘this is the market and we must be ready to give an answer, namely, salad must get to the retailer’s shelf in the morning and we need that the trucks leave at five in the morning, and the products must be ready yet. It is necessary to introduce a shift that starts at midnight, with the aim of being able to start the shipment at 5am, because if we start the production at 5am, the products would get to the stores in the afternoon, and the customers would be buying the salad produced in the previous day’. A very strong evolution took place. [...] Thus, today the ‘fourth-range’ [bagged salad] production has changed because the retailers have become more and more demanding, they order the goods today for today and ask suppliers to be very flexible.” (Interview with a union officer, Province of Bergamo, February 2019)

In the next section we will come back to this interview, in order to discuss the role of trade unions in this process of change. Interestingly, a similar story is told by a member of the management and it concerns the sudden introduction of a working shift on Sunday, in the early 2010s:

“Some years ago, a big retail chain told us: ‘look, from this December, our stores will be open every Sunday, so we would like you to produce for us every Sunday’. It was in late November. We answered: ‘Okay. You are saying this to us at the end of November. We need some time to organize such a change, we need to negotiate it with the workers’ union, we need to write an agreement... in short, we must follow some rules, we are not able to work for you every Sunday, starting from next week. [...]’. [They added]: ‘in reality, this production does not represent additional volumes, we just want to move part of Saturday production to Sunday’. We said: ‘ok, we will get organized and we’ll do that’. [They answered]: ‘Okay, please consider that while you get organized — correctly, from the point of view of workers’ union and so on, take the two or three months you need — but please know that in the meanwhile we will pass those production volumes from you to another supplier.’” (Interview with the President of a PO connected to one of the biggest manufacturers in this sector, Province of Bergamo, July 2019)

These two interview excerpts illustrate how, in Italian bagged salad processing plants, in the early 2000s night shift and Saturday afternoon shift were introduced, and in the 2010s the Sunday shift was added;⁸ in both cases, this transfor-

⁸ In December 2011, the Law 2014/2011 allowed the stores to open on Sunday.

mation was related to the requests of the retail chains. It is worth noting that, in the interviews we cited, the perspectives of the member of the trade union and of the management are very similar: the former adopts the perspective of the company, agreeing that it is necessary to help it to “stay in the market”, while the latter argues that he must negotiate a new agreement on the working schedule with the workers’ union. They both describe retail chains’ requests as non-negotiable, and they both represent the retailers as their counterpart in the supply chain, a powerful counterpart whose requests are not negotiable, because they are able to “pass those production volumes from you to another supplier”.

Secondly, and broadening the picture, our interviews show that not only the working shifts, but also the entire organization of production in processing plants (as well as in the farms) is strictly linked to the just-in-time requests of the retailers. In the next excerpt, the plant manager of a medium company describes his daily work:

“The organization of our work depends only and exclusively from the time organization of retailers’ platforms, we are oriented to respect only that time organization. We start to work on the basis of our production forecast, and the retailers’ orders arrive later. [...] If we were to wait for their orders to start our labour, we wouldn’t be able to deliver the products on time. [...] The first orders of our customers arrive from 8.30-9am, and up to 1-1.30pm. I check that all that they have ordered is close to our production forecast, otherwise we need to check if the raw material we have ordered is sufficient to satisfy these requests, and — if it is not sufficient — we need to understand how to solve this problem. After that, at around 12, I start to deal with the problem of the raw material for the day after. We order ‘A for C’, today for the day after tomorrow. [...] Today is Tuesday, I will now order for Thursday. [...] My supplier [the farmer] receives an email — through the system where I write all my needs — I order today, he receives my email, tomorrow morning he harvests, loads the truck, the truck leaves in the late afternoon or in the night, the following morning we receive the goods we ordered. It arrives from either the North, the Center or the South (of Italy), it depends. [...] And then we start to work, to process, to bag this raw material, together with the raw material we already have in stock.”

(Interview with the plant manager of a medium-big processing company, Province of Bergamo, July 2019)

In this commodity system, all the products must be sent to the retailer in a few hours. Processing companies cannot keep their products in stock and sell them afterwards. Thus, they only produce what they foresee that the retailers will order on a daily basis, and on the basis of what is indicated by their forecasting software. The entire production and logistic process is thus organized to meet the necessity of just-in-time, delivering fresh product to the supermarket’s shelves.

Finally, the manager of a medium company adds that the relationships between retailers and manufacturers are unstable and this makes it difficult — for processing companies — to invest in technological improvements:

“Today I am certified and listed — as we say in jargon — and I am authorized to produce for — for example — Carrefour; [...] but if at the end of the year an auction is opened, where [name of a competitor] makes a better offer than mine, in a while we can pass from the 70% to the 30% of the supply for that retailer. This makes the technological development in the sector very difficult. Because it does not guarantee the companies that

your investments can be profitable over the next three years." (Interview with the plant manager of a medium processing plant, Province of Bergamo, July 2019)

Consequently, the required flexibility, as well as lower labour costs, is obtained through the subcontracting of part of the production process to COCs, which mainly employ migrant labourers, as we described in previous section.

Workers' Unions and "the Market's Needs"

In their analysis of unions' strategies in the meat processing industry in Northern Italy, Piro and Sacchetto (2020: 529-535) describe three different approaches towards subcontracting practices and COCs, which, as they describe, mainly employ migrant labourers. The unions that adopt the first approach consider subcontracting as an evolution of labour processes, which is deemed as necessary for the companies to compete more efficiently in the markets; these unions do not discuss the framework of the current productive organization. The second approach considers subcontracting as a negative form of segmentation and fragmentation of the workforce: these unions thus claim a re-internalization of the subcontracted operations, with the aim of deleting the inequalities between workers. The third approach takes for granted the fact that subcontracting is a central form of the "just-in-time" production and try to organize workers' actions accordingly: for example, a strike of subcontracted workers can stop the whole production chain, thus showing the vulnerability of the main company. As a conclusion of their analysis, Piro and Sacchetto argue that all these three approaches are not able to involve the entire workforce of the plants in the union activity and, rather, risk strengthening the fragmentation between direct and subcontracted employees, without influencing the organization of production.

If we look at unions' approaches in bagged salad processing plants in Northern Italy, where we find similar forms of subcontracting and fragmentation of production, we argue that the first of the approaches described by Piro and Sacchetto (2020) is the most widespread.

In previous section we described how in one of the main companies the working shifts were re-organized, with the subsequent introduction of night and weekend shifts, with the aim of meeting the retailers' growing requests of just-in-time and quick supplying of bagged products. In this process of re-articulation and flexibilization of the labour process, the union's role appears as central for convincing workers — who are mostly of migrant origin — to "accept" such innovations. Or, at least, this is how both the union officer and the PO manager we interviewed describe the union's action. We quote again from the interview with the union officer. He introduces the topic by saying that: "*When we [the union] entered that plant, immediately the issue was how to redesign a labour organization which was more functional to the market's needs*"; interestingly, he takes for granted that "the market's needs" cannot be questioned. When the company asked the union to consider Saturday afternoon shifts as "normal" and not as overtime shifts — the officer says — the problem was how to compensate for the loss in workers' wages and "*we [the union] invented some bargaining for food stamps and performance-based rewards*". Then, when the company decided to introduce the night shift,

“There was a very strong discussion within the union, mostly with those that still had a rigid vision, but the company told us: ‘this is the market and we must be ready to give an answer’ [...]. A very strong evolution happened. Today the company makes a very strong request for flexibility [...]. We [the union] tried to create a discourse of further flexibilization of working shifts, but it is a bit difficult to convince workers to accept it. The problem is that the company receives the orders day-by-day and is not able to ask the worker the day before ‘please tomorrow we require you to work one hour more’. Anyway, the night shift and the three shifts per day have represented a big step forward. Today the fourth-range [bagged salad] production has changed because the retailers have become more and more demanding, they order the goods today for today, and this requires great flexibility also for the suppliers.” (Interview with a union Officer, Province of Bergamo, February 2019)

In this interview, the officer describes his union as a mediator between the needs of the company (due to the “market’s demands”) and the workers; and he proudly explains how he convinced the workers to accept greater flexibility, in the form of new “normal” shifts, night labour, a lower possibility to access overtime payment. He defines the resistance to this process as “a rigid vision” and believes that the workers had to accept the increasing flexibilization, even if it was “difficult” for them.

A different approach — similar to the second among those described by Piro and Sacchetto (2020) — can be found in the activities of a small rank-and-file union in the area of Bergamo. This union, in particular, in the summer 2019 denounced the fact that, in a medium plant, the management put subcontracted workers in competition with direct employees, and, for this reason, asked the company to hire all the cooperative workers:

“Eighty to 100 workers are hired by the cooperative and twenty are direct employees and they do the same job, side by side. We dispute the subcontract because there is a plant, the machinery, the production, there is an objective work management by the company... so, why is the subcontract with the cooperative needed? There is no reason to support the subcontract: for us it is a fraudulent labour intermediation.” (Interview with a rank-and-file union activist, Province of Bergamo, December 2019)

It must be noted that over the last years this sector has not witnessed high levels of labour conflicts related to subcontracting practices and COCs, differently from what happened in neighbouring areas in the sector of logistics in the 2010s (Benvegnù *et al.*, 2018) and in the sector of food manufacturing in other regions of Northern-Italy, such as Emilia-Romagna (Piro and Sacchetto, 2020).

The weakness of the unions’ action, however, does not mean that forms of workers’ resistance are not present in these plants. We found some traces of this latent conflictuality in the words of a worker of Algerian origin, who has been working for fourteen years in a small processing plant:

- *“I fought inside the plant, only with the aim of raising my daughter. I am not that kind of woman that says ‘yes, yes, yes’. No, about certain things, I say no.”*
- *“Which were the ‘no’ things?”*
- *“How they treated you, I can’t just shut up. Am I wrong? [...] They used to say ‘you are a foreigner, you have stolen our jobs’ [...] they didn’t call me by my name, but they said ‘you, foreigner!’. [...] Especially in the last two years it has been hard. [...] I had a discus-*

sion with one of the bosses, and I have come to the point of hating my job. [...] When I speak, I speak on behalf of myself, unfortunately other workers have fear, but I don't! [...] You must have dignity, even if you leave that job." (Interview with a migrant woman worker, of Algerian origin, Province of Bergamo, April 2019)

As Iannuzzi and Sacchetto (2020: 16-17) wrote in their analysis of hospitality work in Venice, "outsourcing has affected workers' rights by changing collective bargaining agreements, increasing flexibility and worsening working conditions through the COC system"; nonetheless, "through their social networks, migrant workers have reconstructed forms of solidarity involving some grassroots trade unions and implemented more conflictual practices", which "can be considered forms of resistance", even if they are not collectively organized.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, through an analysis of the bagged salad commodity system in Northern Italy, we contributed to the scholarly debate on migrant labour in the agri-food sector in Europe in three directions. Firstly, we described how processing companies reach a greater flexibility and lower labour costs through the outsourcing and subcontracting of relevant parts of the production process to smaller suppliers and to "cooperatives of convenience" (Iannuzzi and Sacchetto, 2020), which mainly employ migrant workers. Secondly, we unpacked the relations between retailers and manufacturers, by showing how the former are able to determine changes in the production process in the plants, in the direction of greater flexibility and new working shifts with the aim of satisfying the just-in-time requests of supermarkets. Third, we showed how some trade union officers represent themselves as mediators between processing companies and (mostly migrant) workers, to convince the latter to accept a greater labour flexibility.

In this productive sector, for the most part factory workers are of Indian origin; a major shortcoming of our field study lies in the fact that we have not been able to conduct a massive campaign of interviews with these workers, with the aim of analysing their points of view on this commodity system. We mainly interviewed other actors in the supply chain, because we were more interested in explaining which are the main determinants of labour conditions in processing plants.

Further research is required to better understand the mobility strategies and labour practices and representations of migrant workers in this sector. In her study on Punjabi Indian workers (and on their peculiar form of labour recruitment and intermediation) in dairy production in the regions of Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna, Azzeruoli (2016: 28) wrote:

"In the analysis of the recruitment of Punjabi workers in dairy production, we cannot simply maintain that migrants have replaced local workers. Rather, the contemporaneous processes of transformation of the entire supply chain (and in particular cheesemaking) and the recruitment of a migrant workforce were mutually constitutive."

Following this research hypothesis, Indian workers have not replaced their Italian colleagues in the bagged salad manufacturing plants: indeed, migrant labour has probably been a fundamental factor for the structuration of the whole

bagged salad commodity system since the early 1990s (see second section), and then for its transformations in the 2000s and 2010s (see second subsection of the third section). In this sense, vulnerable, cheap and flexible migrant labour in manufacturing plants, and retailers' power in a vertical agri-food system, were mutually constitutive, by means of cooperatives of convenience and compliant trade unions.

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Martina Lo Cascio and Domenico Perrotta

Subcontracted Migrant Labour and Just-in-time Retail Chain Requirements: A Qualitative Research on the Bagged Salad Commodity System in Northern Italy

This article focuses on the commodity system of the ready-to-eat bagged salad in Italy, and in particular on the transformations in labour organization and labour relationships in processing plants in the Lombardy Region. Here, the most part of employees are migrant workers, especially of Indian origin. Our analysis concerns three main points. First, a relevant part of the labour operations in processing plants are outsourced to smaller manufacturers or subcontracted to workers' cooperatives, which mainly employ migrant workers, with the aim of reducing labour costs and reaching a greater production flexibility. Second, labour organization and working shifts are explicitly organized to meet retail chains' just-in-time requirements. Third, some trade unions officers act as mediators between management and migrant workers in defining labour organization in the processing plants. The field study is based upon thirty-eight in-depth interviews with actors at all the levels of this commodity chain.

Travail migrant sous-traité et demandes *just-in-time* des chaînes de la distribution : une recherche qualitative sur le système de production de salades en sachet dans le nord de l'Italie

Cet article se concentre sur le système de production de la salade en sachet prête à consommer en Italie, et en particulier sur les transformations de l'organisation et des relations de travail dans les usines de transformation dans la région de Lombardie. Ici, la plupart des employés sont des travailleurs migrants, notamment d'origine indienne. Notre analyse porte sur trois points principaux. Premièrement, une partie importante des opérations de travail dans les usines de transformation est externalisée à des usines plus petites ou sous-traitée à des coopératives de travailleurs, qui emploient principalement des travailleurs migrants, dans le but de réduire les coûts de la main-d'œuvre et d'atteindre une plus grande flexibilité de production. Deuxièmement, l'organisation et les temps de travail sont explicitement organisés pour répondre aux exigences *just-in-time* des chaînes de la distribution. Troisièmement, certains responsables syndicaux font office de médiateurs entre la direction et les travailleurs migrants pour définir l'organisation du travail dans les usines de transformation. L'étude de terrain est basée sur trente-huit entretiens qualitatifs approfondis avec des acteurs à tous les niveaux du secteur.

La mano de obra migrante subcontratada y los requisitos *just-in-time* de las cadenas de supermercados: una investigación cualitativa sobre el sistema de productos de ensalada en bolsa en el norte de Italia

Este artículo se centra en el sistema de producción de la ensalada embolsada lista para consumir en Italia y, en particular, en las transformaciones de la organización del trabajo y las relaciones laborales en las plantas de procesamiento de la región de Lombardía. Aquí, la mayor parte de los empleados son trabajadores migrantes, especialmente de origen hindú. Nuestro análisis se refiere a tres puntos principales. En primer lugar, una parte importante de las operaciones laborales en las plantas de procesamiento se subcontratan a fabricantes más pequeños o a cooperativas de trabajadores, que emplean principalmente a trabajadores inmigrantes, con el objetivo de reducir los costes laborales y alcanzar una mayor flexibilidad de la producción. En segundo lugar, la organización de la mano de obra y los turnos de trabajo se organizan explícitamente para cumplir con los requisitos *just-in-time* de las cadenas de distribución. En tercer lugar, algunos funcionarios de los sindicatos actúan como mediadores entre la dirección y los trabajadores inmigrantes a la hora de definir la organización laboral en las plantas de procesamiento. El estudio de campo se basa en treinta y ocho entrevistas en profundidad con agentes de todos los niveles del sector.