

# THE REACTION OF ENTERTAINMENT WORKERS TO THE COVID-19: A COOPERATIVE CASE STUDY

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**Paper prepared for presentation at the**

**“7th Conference of the Regulating for Decent Work Network”**

**Virtual Conference, International Labour Office Geneva, Switzerland**

**6-9 July 2021**

## **Abstract**

*In Italy, the entertainment sector lost about 80% of its turnover in 2020, corresponding to about €8 billion, with a strong negative impact on its approximately 327,000 workers. Due to the workers' previous precarious working conditions, and the fragmentation of the sector, the Italian government was not immediately able to provide effective solutions and support for them. For this reason, many workers in the performing arts have chosen to organise themselves into formal and informal associations or to eventually join a trade union and try to fill this gap. Of particular interest is the role that cooperatives of entertainment workers have played in this situation. For example, Doc Servizi, the largest Italian workers' cooperative in the sector with 6,400 members in 2019, acted as a safety net for performing arts workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, becoming a bridge between workers and*

*institutions and one of the natural spokespersons for entertainment workers. In addition, the cooperative provided round-the-clock assistance to members to access health care, sick leave, unemployment benefits, COVID-19 support measures, and organised with the support of trade unions training courses to empower members to gain new skills.*

Keywords: entertainment workers, COVID-19, worker cooperative, social mobilisation, decent work

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## **1. Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic caused a severe crisis on the labour market, and, according to the OECD, the impact of the pandemic has been especially harsh for creative industries, with entertainment workers particularly affected due to the shutdown of performing arts (OECD, 2020a).

A recent ETUI research paper highlights how the pandemic shows the essential role of social protection in the actual context, and the related difficulties of non-standard workers that usually do not receive health insurance, retirement, family and sick leave, unemployment benefit (ETUI contributors, 2021b). Considering that most of the entertainment workers in OECD countries are non-standard (OECD, 2020b), they were one of the most fragile workers' groups in terms of the impact of the labour crisis and access to social protection during the pandemic. Only in Italy, the entertainment field lost about 80% of its turnover in 2020 (8 billion euros) with a serious impact on about 327.000 workers (Fondazione Centro Studi Doc, 2021).

Italian entertainment workers, after a long story of scarce unionisation and political participation, during the pandemic chose to become protagonists of the Country's political life and bridge the gap existing between their field and the Government, that was not immediately able to provide effective solutions and support for them. Many entertainment workers chose to reunite in formal and informal associations, or enter a union (Campolongo and Iannuzzi, 2020; Antonelli *et al.*, 2021).

Particularly interesting is the role that entertainment worker cooperatives played in this situation. For example, Doc Servizi, the biggest Italian worker cooperative in the field with 6,400 members in 2019, during the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a safety net for entertainment workers, becoming one of their spokespersons with the Italian Government (Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2021), supporting them 24/7 to access health care, sick leave, unemployment benefits, COVID-19 support measures, and organizing training courses allowing members to obtain new skills.

## **2. Research question and methodology**

There are still few research and reports at European and national level dedicated to the social and economic insecurity of entertainment workers caused by the COVID-19. They focus more on creative and non-standard workers and on the extent of national government measures to support vulnerable workers than on their effectiveness, while very few reports focus on direct workers' reactions (see ILO COOP). This research would like to highlight the peculiar condition of Italian entertainment workers,

which in other reports is only partially considered, and analyse a case study that describes the solutions provided directly by workers to the crisis through the experience of a worker-owned cooperative.

Statistical and general data come from national repositories (Italian National Institute of Statistics, ISTAT, and Italian Social Security Institution, INPS), and institutions working in the entertainment field. The data relating to the effectiveness of Government measures, the reaction of entertainment workers, and the case study, have been collected in more than one year of field study based on observant participation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis.

### **3. Main features of Italian entertainment workers**

Artists were the first gig workers, as the word “gig” itself shows—from “engagement”, it comes precisely from the performing arts, and indicates a performance associated with a single contract and therefore unique and occasional (Howes, 2016). Working in the entertainment and artistic field means dealing with multiple clients, discontinuity in employment relationships, fragmentation of the work activity, the impossibility to perform, or work in the same show in the same place for long periods.

In Europe, due to this atypical work patterns characterised by intermittence, heterogeneity, and instability (Culture Action Europe & Dâmaso, 2021), entertainment workers usually work part-time, without an open-ended contract, and combine employment and self-employment throughout their careers, and in other sectors (services, education, etc.). Additionally, self-employment is higher in the cultural and creative sectors (33%) than in employment for the total economy (14%) (Ernst & Young, 2021).

These working conditions imply that workers in the entertainment are mostly non-standard workers. And if standard employment is a job that is continuous, full-time, with a direct relationship between employer and employee based on labour law, in non-standard employment working time, health and safety requirements and responsibilities are not regulated as well as in standard employment (ILO, 2016).

Considering that most entertainment workers are usually isolated in the labour market, they also suffer from a lack of bargaining power and struggle to exercise their representation and trade union rights. For this reason, they can be forced to work undeclared or accept poor working conditions with a higher level of precariousness than workers of other sectors and negative consequences in terms of health, and safety and social security (Charhon & Murphy, 2016). Therefore, entertainment workers

have low and irregular incomes and only restricted access, or even no access at all, to conventional banking services and social protection schemes, such as unemployment benefits, sick and maternity leave, schemes covering accidents at work, and lifelong learning opportunities (OECD, 2020b; Panteia and EENCA, 2020).

These characteristics are also common to Italian entertainment workers. Even if entertainment workers have a higher level of training than the average Italian population, they alternate between different jobs and therefore are much more employed with non-standard contracts, such as fixed-term and part-time contracts, than the average Italian population (Fondazione Symbola, 2019; ISTAT, 2019; INPS, 2021). As well in Europe, one-third of Italian entertainment workers are self-employed (Tridico, 2020), work with multiple clients, discontinuity and strong mobility, and, therefore, face a lack of access to social protection and difficult economic conditions (Fondazione di Vittorio, 2017). In 2019, on average, workers in the performing arts had an income of around €10,000 in one year (Tridico, 2020), just above the Italian poverty line<sup>1</sup>.

Beyond the discontinuous working conditions, in Italy, the low incomes of entertainment workers are linked to the high level of undeclared work in the sector (e.g. overtime or days actually worked which are not recognised) and to the multiple job holding condition, which is the fact that work in the performing arts is often combined with another employment (ISTAT, 2019).

A recent research held by the Centro Studi Doc Foundation calculated that in Italy in 2018 the amount of undeclared economy in the live music sector was around 4 billion euros (Fondazione Centro Studi Doc, 2020a). The research crosses the data and information of the year 2018 obtained from sector studies, institutional data (ISTAT and INPS), and the data obtained from field research carried out among musicians and sector operators. The research outlines that the live music sector in Italy is little known, as evidenced by the fact that there are conflicting definitions of what it is. This incongruity in terms of definitions is also reflected in the numbers of the sector because, in function of the data set, the number of Italian musicians can vary from 20,000 to 45,000. While the live music sector in 2018 had an economic impact of 1.5 billion euros (SIAE, 2018), the field research has shown that 9 out of 10 events in clubs and popular festivals belong to the undeclared economy and that the cachet is often given partly in regular form and partly cash-in-hand. The difference between the economic impact of tracked live music (1.5 billion) and the shadow economy (4 billions) shows how much undeclared work

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<sup>1</sup> In 2019, the Italian National Institute of Statistics set the relative poverty threshold equal to the average monthly per capita expenditure for: a two-member household at €1,094.95; a single person from €552.39 to €819.13 depending on the region of residence.

affects workers in the music sector and provides a starting point for understanding its impact on the whole entertainment industry.

Among the main causes of undeclared work in the Italian entertainment industry are the excessive bureaucratisation of the sector<sup>2</sup>, the special social security legislation that requires the existence of an employer for entertainment workers<sup>3</sup>, artists' inadequate knowledge of the rules that guide the sector to which they belong (Chiappa and Martinelli, 2019), and low investment in the sector by the Italian State. In this context, Italian entertainment workers are usually poorly unionised. Their isolation due to the fragmentation of the artistic field, their constant movement from one place to another, the large number of undeclared workers, and the sudden change of job even on the same day (e.g. a musician can be a teacher and an orchestra player in one day) imply that these workers are difficult for trade unions to reach (Marino *et al.*, 2018; Pulignano *et al.*, 2018; Fulton, 2018; Martinelli, 2019; Quaderni rassegna sindacale, 2019; Murgia and Pulignano, 2019).

#### **4. The role of entertainment workers'-owned cooperatives in Italy**

Facing this uncertain panorama, in Italy since the 1980s some entertainment workers choose to practice cooperation to obtain professional recognition and more constant contracts. Artists' cooperatives focus on some specific needs: sharing of resources, legal recognition for non-standard work and access to social protection mechanisms, opportunities for cooperation among professionals, autonomy in the management of personal activities, the introduction of technology to redistribute wealth and, in some cases, representation of their needs in front of institutions.

In the cooperative, artists obtain the double status of worker-member: as workers, they become employees of the collective organization and access the typical rights of employees, such as health insurance, pension, family leave, sick pay, and unemployment, and have the certainty of working safely and legally; as members, they become entrepreneurs of the cooperative and, through the democratic management, they can choose how to orient the business to achieve the goals that they would not achieve alone.

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<sup>2</sup> At present in Italy there is no single law regulating all the activities of the performing arts and the relations between its many actors.

<sup>3</sup> With all the bureaucracy (e.g. compulsory safety training) and costs involved in the recruitment of an employee event if only for one performance.

Concretely, entertainment cooperatives apply the Italian “job on-call contract” (artt. 13-18 of D.lgs. 81/2015 “Jobs Act”)<sup>4</sup>. This contract gives continuity of contractual relationship to structurally discontinuous work because unlike other contracts it remains active even during periods when the worker is inactive (Martinelli, 2017, 2019). In this way, the continuity of the employment relationship and social security is guaranteed.

In entertainment cooperatives, members usually choose to organize themselves to safeguard a certain level of autonomy in the execution of their work and in the calculation of their revenues. They tailored their own cooperative in function of the flexibility of their employment and chose to have the opportunity to keep the freedom in the management of activity (where, when, with whom, etc.) and in finding their clients. Moreover, each worker’s income is calculated on the basis of the actual income generated by his or her activity (Martinelli, 2017). At the same time, workers can “collaborate” in the cooperative, where they share the management costs, share risks and benefits, and investments. Due to this ability to combine the continuity of a working relationship with respect for artistic individuality, the entertainment cooperative model can be defined as a self-management cooperative.

Over the years this mix of autonomy and increase of protection being part of a community has attracted all the figures who revolve around the world of entertainment (technicians, teachers, photographers, communicators, etc.) as well as other professionals that usually work with high levels of independence (IT workers, artisans, journalists, riders, etc.). This is why in the last decades in Italy we observe the increase not only of cooperatives of entertainment workers but also of freelancers. In 2019 there were more than 80 self-management cooperatives in the entertainment field, with a number of worker-members ranging from less than a dozen to several thousand.

## **5. The case of Doc Servizi**

One of the first cooperatives created in Italy with the purpose described is Doc Servizi<sup>5</sup> (Martinelli *et al.*, 2019). In 1990 in Verona, ten musicians founded the worker cooperative Doc Servizi precisely to have the opportunity to get out of the dynamics of undeclared work and fight isolation by entering a community. They wanted to obtain decent work at the best economic and moral conditions, and collectively valorise their work by sharing job opportunities, creating working teams and organizing specific training to increase their expertise. In 2019, Doc Servizi counted 6,800 members spread in 33

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<sup>4</sup> “Contratto di lavoro intermittente”, also called “contratto a chiamata”.

<sup>5</sup> Website: <http://iprofessionistidellospettacolo.docservizi.it>.

branches in Italy and closed with a turnover of around 58 million euros. Moreover, even if Doc Servizi still focuses on the entertainment field (its members are mainly musicians, technicians, actors, dancers, event communicators, and photographers), it is part of a bigger network of cooperatives that together cover all sectors of the cultural and creative industries<sup>6</sup> and in 2019 counted more than 8,400 members in Italy and have a turnover around 72 million euros.

Within Doc Servizi, members chose to invest in expanding the community and strengthening the cooperative's role as a business facilitator by optimising costs and services. Therefore, they share administrative and accounting management's costs, the cost of specialised consultants, experts in writing employment contracts, advice on social protection, workplace safety training, and the bureaucracy for working abroad. Members also set up offices dedicated to promote their business, such as the marketing and communication office, the tender office, and the local branches. They also created dedicated business units in the cooperative that support specific professions, such as a travel agency for those who are often on tour, e-commerce to sell products, an independent publishing house, a promotion agency for artistic projects, and specialised training centres for entertainment technicians and drone pilots.

To better exchange job opportunities, ideas, and work with each other, members of Doc Servizi created communities linked to individual professions (e.g. entertainment technicians, photographers, press officers, etc.), which also help them build business units (e.g. music band, communication agency, events producers). Each business unit of members enters the market with its personal brand that autonomously looks for job opportunities, but job opportunities can come from Doc Servizi too, which can either collect a client's request or promote the work of members (e.g. through calls for tenders or simply by proposing projects on the market) using the support of product managers<sup>7</sup> who are in charge to manage projects within a community and help members in building work teams.

The organization of all activities is possible thanks to an in-house digital platform (Martinelli *et al.*, 2019). The digital platform was created as management software to better manage discontinuous work. Over the years it has become a tool to support self-management and self-entrepreneurship. From the heart of the platform dedicated to job management today various platforms are connected to each other, and connect members and partners with customers, through showcase sites or e-

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<sup>6</sup> The other societies of the network are: Doc Educational, Doc Creativity, Hypernova, STEA, Doc Live, Freecom. With Doc Servizi, they are a joint cooperative group. More info here: <https://docservizi.retedoc.net/en/>.

<sup>7</sup> A product manager is a professional role that is responsible for the development of products for an organization.



commerce of products. The principles on which the platform is built are inspired by those of the blockchain, i.e. security, transparency, trust, and quality, as well as cooperative ones.

## **6. The alliance between cooperation and unions in Italy**

Regrouping for decades entertainment workers, Doc Servizi has developed a great knowledge of the entertainment sector. Thanks to this expertise, at some point the cooperative has started to participate in the public debate around entertainment workers' rights and labour law and to exchange with Italian trade unions about the working conditions in the entertainment industry (Martinelli, 2017; Chiappa, and Martinelli, 2019) The cooperative began to actively advocate for its members in relation to two events that shocked the whole Italian world of music: two fatal accidents of stage technicians in Trieste in 2011 and Reggio Calabria in 2012. Entertainment workers not only of Doc Servizi but of the whole field asked for help to elaborate good practices to protect entertainment workers from the risks of work accidents. Therefore, Doc Servizi promoted the "Table for legality and safety in the entertainment field", a committee of cooperatives agents, organisers, consultants, self-employed workers, companies, and all other operators in the entertainment sector, that involved even the trade unions. For the first time, Doc Servizi brought together realities that until then had been divided, if not opposed, thanks to the same common interest in security, and from this moment, the table began a path that the cooperative has strongly supported.

The most important results of this table are the first decree dedicated to the safety of technicians ("Decreto Palchi e Fiere") delivered in 2014 and the first Italian collective bargaining agreement (CBA) for the professionals of the arts who work in a cooperative signed in 2014 (Martinelli, 2017; Chiappa, and Martinelli, 2019). The CBA was signed by the most representative Italian trade unions (CGIL, CISL, and UIL) and the major trade association of cooperatives (Agci, Confcooperative, and Legacoop). This CBA is valid at the national level and regulates on-call work, apprenticeships, the right to safety and health of workers, working hours and breaks during tours, smart working, the forms of union representation, the remuneration tables which are the basis for building the minimum income the sector, previously non-existent (Martinelli, 2017; Chiappa, and Martinelli, 2019; Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2021).

As a result of the debate that emerged from the table, in 2018 ShowNet<sup>8</sup> was also founded. ShowNet is a network of cooperatives – that includes Doc Servizi – involved in technical services dedicated to the sectors of entertainment and cultural and artistic events in general. In ShowNet, cooperatives are allied to promote the culture of legality and safety through the adoption of common strategies in the entertainment field. The cooperatives of ShowNet took part in the consultation that led to the stipulation of the first CBA for cooperatives in the entertainment, art, and culture sector, and actively participated in its renewal. The CBA has been indeed updated to protect all the freelancers of cultural and creative industry and regulate platform work. It was signed at the beginning of 2020 (IPSOA, 2020).

Finally, to formally carrying out research activities to support and promote the model of self-management cooperative in Italy and throughout Europe, at the end of 2018 the Centro Studi Doc Foundation (Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2021). The research center has been created as a new institutional body by the seven societies of Doc Servizi's network<sup>9</sup>.

## **7. The impact of COVID-19 on the Italian entertainment industry**

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic the equivalent of 255 million jobs were lost with an increase of global unemployment by 33 million in 2020, a decline of global labour income by 8.3% (US\$3.7 trillion), and of global GDP by 4.4% (ILO, 2021).

All the major institutions at the international and European level (OECD, 2020a; KEA European Affairs, 2020; ILO, 2021; ETUI contributors, 2021a; Culture Action Europe & Dâmaso, 2021; Ernst & Young, 2021; Eurofound, 2021), estimated that the impact of the pandemic has been especially harsh for creative industries, with a negative peak in entertainment and arts, whose workers have been one of the most affected working group by the effects of COVID-19 due to the shutdown of performing arts activities. Moreover, we underlined that most entertainment and arts workers are non-standard workers that represent around 40% of total employment in sectors most affected by containment measures (OECD, 2020b). This means that the negative effects of the pandemic have hit a sector where workers are already fragile and vulnerable.

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<sup>8</sup> Website: <http://www.shownet.info/>. ShowNet is composed by Artistica Music & Show (AMS), Crea Stage, Crew Room, Doc Creativity, Doc Servizi, fasolmusic.coop, NRG Coop, Techne, Tempi Tecnici.

<sup>9</sup> The founding members are Doc Educational, Doc Creativity, Hypernova, STEA, Doc Live, Freecom.

Focusing on numbers, at this point in the year we have enough information to compare the year 2019 with the year 2020 and thus better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world of entertainment in Europe and Italy.

In 2019, according to data from Ernst & Young, the cultural and creative industries (CCI) accounted for 4.4% of the GDP of EU countries, with annual revenues of €643 billion and a total added value of €253 billion (Ernst & Young, 2021). In Italy, in 2019 the CCI sector employed 864 thousand people (3.4% of Italian workers) and produced an added value of almost €60 billion (3.2% of the Italian GDP). If we consider the entire “event industry” sector, and therefore also consider sport and projects of a strictly commercial nature, the entire supply chain counts 1,5 million workers (5.9% of Italian workers) and produces 90 billion euros, which was the 5.7% of the Italian GDP (Fondazione Symbola, 2021). Within this framework, in 2019 the entertainment industry counted 327,000 workers (INPS, 2021), and produced an added value of almost €11,4 billion (0,6% of the Italian GDP) (Fondazione Symbola, 2021).

In Europe, Ernst & Young estimated that CCIs lost €199 billion due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which corresponds to more than 30% of their business volume in 2020. Particularly affected were music and live entertainment, which contracted by 75% and 90%. Italy estimates an average 70% loss for the cultural and creative industries sector in 2020. This loss is correlated to an average halving of Italian cultural consumption (-47%) with the average monthly expenditure per family that has gone from 113 euros in December 2019 to about 60 euros in December 2020 (Osservatorio di Impresa Cultura Italia-Confcommercio, 2021). In Italy, the music and live entertainment sectors were also among the hardest hit, losing an average of 84.6% of their turnover (Fondazione Symbola, 2021; SIAE, 2021). This is related to the fact that in 2020 spending on live shows has dropped enormously, with about a 90% drop in the number of spectators for cinemas, concerts, and theatres, which corresponds to a reduction in public spending of over 70% compared to 2019 (Osservatorio di Impresa Cultura Italia-Confcommercio, 2021).

Combining these data, we can say that the entertainment sector has lost around €8 billion in 2020 compared to 2019 (Fondazione Centro Studi Doc, 2021). This has obviously had a negative impact on workers, who in some periods have found themselves at a 100% standstill. The 2020 employment figures disseminated by the INPS show an overall drop of almost 70,000 workers (-21%). Even if the effects on the average number of paid days (-8.6%) and on the average wage in the year (-1.8%) are more limited (INPS, 2021), these data show that the pandemic has led to a strong selection with a high share of staff excluded from employment and the contraction of days and wages of those who were still able, with all the known limitations, to work.

## **8. The Italian government's response to the effect of COVID-19 pandemic and the reaction of entertainment workers**

The Italian Government has always had a lack of information on the entertainment field due to its complex and very specific bureaucracy, the great variety of companies and professionals in its supply chain, and the wide diffusion of undeclared work. This endemic fragmentation is further amplified by the scarce unionisation of workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic made clear this gap. For example, when the word “entertainment” was not even mentioned in the first decree issued by the government at the end of February to help citizens and businesses with COVID-19 relief<sup>10</sup>, even though that was the first sector to be affected by the first pandemic closures. In the months that followed, this distance showed itself on repeated occasions, despite the goodwill of the Italian government to «Not leave anyone behind»<sup>11</sup>.

The difficulties that performing arts workers in Italy have had in obtaining state support are similar to those encountered by non-standard and self-employed workers across Europe. More in detail, ETUI identifies the following problems regarding their access to government support schemes: lack of eligibility; complexity and length of administrative procedures for claiming benefits; insufficiency of funds to support long-term employability; no entitlement to economic, social, and labour rights (ETUI contributors, 2021a).

The pandemic left many Italian entertainment workers reliant on state support because they could not carry out their profession by law. Yet, due to the variety of atypical employment contracts that entertainment workers are hired on, many fell through holes in the safety net and were left with no support during the first months of the pandemic. Some have still not been able to access support despite their de facto entitlement to protection, or have been required to repay what they have received.

This is due, firstly, to the fact that the Italian government established rigid thresholds which did not fully account for the reality of entertainment work. Entertainment workers claimed to be excluded because of legal technicalities, because they had not worked enough days in 2019, or because their incomes were considered to be too high, even if in lockdown this income decreased to zero. Secondly, in Italy entertainment workers struggled with applying for funding due to technical reasons and complicated bureaucracy reasons related to the INPS. Not only the INPS' website repeatedly crashed

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<sup>10</sup> DL 47/2020 inserted in the Official Journal on 25 February 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Statement by former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte at a press conference in the country on 28 March 2020.

in April 2020, but throughout the year the provision of support was very slow compared to the needs of workers (the first one arrived several months after the decree was passed). Moreover, the behaviour of INPS has been very different depending on the territory of residence and, in function on the different interpretations of the circulars by INPS employees, workers in the performing arts were arbitrarily denied the benefits to which they were entitled or forced to repay it back.

Finally, entertainment workers as atypical workers have also difficulties accessing ordinary social protection schemes (ETUI contributors, 2021b). For example, entertainment workers who did not have enough working days, could not even access sickness benefits also in times of COVID-19 pandemic.

The result is that the situation of Italian performing arts workers has been very varied with respect to obtaining state support. There is in fact a minority of workers who have not obtained any support from the state, while other workers have had allowances that can vary from a few thousand euros to around €10,000, also depending on the aid that the Ministry of Culture has provided to support individual professions.

The 20% drop in workers in the performing arts between 2019 and 2020 is also linked to access to funds. Since entertainment professionals have experienced a critical situation due to lockdown, support measures have been in some cases sufficient to help them survive the economic consequences of the pandemic, but have not enabled them to deal with the problem of maintaining long-term employability in the field. The result is that many workers have changed jobs and will not re-enter the entertainment industry.

In this very complicated situation, for the first time in their history, all workers in the entertainment field found themselves at a complete standstill. The shutdown of activities and the difficulties to access both ordinary and emergency social benefits made visible the existence of a common social condition among workers of the sector, which in some cases resulted in the (re)emergence of some collective mobilisation processes (Campolongo and Iannuzzi, 2020) with many entertainment workers that chose to organize themselves in formal and informal association or to eventually enter in a union. Although this reorganisation process has not solved the problem of fragmentation in the sector, which still remains important (Antonelli *et al.*, 2021), workers have searched for common ground in order to respond to the Italian government's difficulties in answering the sector's needs, and therefore have tried to bridge the gap between them and the government in various ways.

## 9. The commitment of Doc Servizi to the entertainment sector during the COVID-19 pandemic

As in any period of crisis, cooperatives also showed during the COVID-19 pandemic to offer a valuable response and support measures providing relief for their workers, members, and communities (ILO COOP, 2020a). In Italy, as far as workers in the entertainment field are concerned, particularly interesting is the case of Doc Servizi, the largest Italian cooperative of workers in the sector with 6,400 members in 2019, whose witness was even included in the ILO COOP video “The COVID-19 response: Cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy (SSE) organizations” (2020b).

Although Doc Servizi was also hard hit by the crisis from the outset, with a loss of turnover in the first months of the lockdown of around 95%, leading to an overall loss in 2020 of 60% compared to 2019, since the beginning of the pandemic the cooperative has responded to the situation mainly in two ways: supporting the lobby action of the Centro Studi Doc Foundation for entertainment workers, who involuntarily become one of their spokespersons with the Italian Government (Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2021); and acting as a safety net for members, supporting them with various actions.

Concerning the lobby action of the Centro Studi Doc Foundation, it began with a simple post on Facebook at the end of February 2020 that underlined that the measures proposed by the government completely excluded entertainment workers. This post was then turned into the #nobodyexcluded (#nessunoescluso) campaign, which was based on the promotion of the first Italian petition in favour of entertainment workers launched few days after the first post on Facebook (Voinea, 2020). Within few months the petition obtained more than 50,000 signatures.

The petition is addressed to the Minister of Culture, the Minister of Labour and the President of the Italian Social Security Institution (INPS). Since the launch of the petition, the Centro Studi Doc Foundation has written not only to them, but also to the other ministries concerned, to the head of government, and to parliamentarians to highlight the needs of workers in the performing arts. The petition summarises in few points the main requests that the state can implement to support entertainment workers during the Covid-19 pandemic and is based on the request to finally recognise the specific legal status of the entertainment worker. The demands of the petition have been constantly updated as the situation and difficulties for entertainment workers have changed and it will remain active until all the points requested are achieved. Thanks to this initiative, the Centro Studi Doc Foundation became one of the natural spokespersons of entertainment workers (Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2021), who started to get in touch with the research centre for clarification or to talk about their difficulties and needs.

The huge numbers of signatures made it possible to bring attention to the difficulties of the sector, including through hearings with the government (both at the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate), and to resolve many of the inconsistencies that have made it difficult for workers in the performing arts to access state support over the months. The Centro Studi Doc Foundation was also invited to join the Permanent Table for the Live Shows, Audiovisual and Cinema Industries (Tavolo permanente per lo spettacolo dal vivo, il cinema e l'audiovisivo), promoted in November 2020 by the Minister of Culture, created to discuss the emergency condition of the entertainment industry and possible solutions, such as a reform (Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2021).

At the same time, since 27 March 2020 the Centro Studi Doc Foundation has promoted the activities of the Arts and Entertainment Forum (FAS - Forum Arte e Spettacolo)<sup>12</sup>. The project reunited more than 60 realities of the performing arts (formal and informal trade associations, cooperatives, agents, promoters, individual artists, agencies, actors, musicians, authors, circuses, buskers, dancers, etc.) and 12 culture councillors from as many Italian metropolitan municipalities around the project to create a new system for the sector. Due to its scientific expertise as a research centre the Centro Studi Doc Foundation played a key role in FAS by coordinating the forum and several round tables, including one dedicated to the reform of the entertainment system. The work of FAS led to the elaboration of a package of bottom-up collectively elaborated proposals for the reform of the entertainment sector based on the recognition of the status of the entertainment worker, that were then included in two bills deposited respectively in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate in December 2020 and are currently under discussion.

Doc Servizi not only participated fully in all these activities carried out by the Centro Studi Doc Foundation by providing its knowledge of the sector but also actively supported its administrative staff and working members. Throughout the emergency phase, firstly the cooperative activated the redundancy fund for the administrative staff anticipating the payment of subsidies (the institute in charge, INPS, has accumulated up to 4 months of delay). While for worker-members, the cooperative provides round-the-clock assistance to members to access health care, sick leave, unemployment benefits, COVID-19 support measures, organising also regular meetings and information about Italian Government Decrees.

Moreover, since March 2020, the cooperative started through its technological platform to profile members' skills to understand whether workers of the entertainment sector could find work in other,

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<sup>12</sup> Website: <https://forumartespettacolo.org>.

less struggling sectors (e.g. web and software design, graphics, videomaking), organising at the same time free refresher courses (e.g. rigging, safety, streaming).

Finally, thanks to the help of trade unions, Doc Servizi was able to reach important second-level agreements that made it possible to: allow members to work in areas other than entertainment at least during the period of the pandemic while remaining in the cooperative (e.g. as electricians or gardeners at high altitudes); and implement between May and July 2021 a massive lifelong learning programme partly funded by the state and with the characteristic to pay workers for each hour of training attended (Fondazione Centro Studi Doc, 2020b). Entitled R.Evolution 4.0, the programme has included 27 training courses and involved 1,111 people (administrative staff, artists and technicians), for a total of 980 training hours. The course offered trainees the chance to gain new skills by participating in courses on improving English language skills, communication for the arts, cooperation and associationism, tools for working in streaming, IT skills, labour law in the performing arts, videomaking and photography.

## **10. Concluding remarks**

The analysed case of Doc Servizi shows the supportive role that a worker cooperative can play in obtaining decent work not only for its members but for the whole sector to which it belongs, also thanks to the establishment of new synergies with existing trade unions. In fact, over the years, the cooperative has increasingly used its ability to gather together workers who are usually isolated and not very unionised to share with trade unions and institutions information about working conditions of entertainment workers and seek new solutions together.

This peculiarity of the cooperative to act as a bridge between workers and institutions is rooted in the double nature of the worker-member. On one hand, worker-members as workers are employees of the cooperative thus they automatically assume a status that can be represented by trade unions, on the other hand, they are not just employees of the cooperative because as members they participate in the management of the cooperative democratically. Thanks to this second feature we observe a lack of the classical social conflict between enterprise and worker, turning cooperatives into allies of trade unions against market abuses and undeclared work.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we saw that this role proved crucial because immediate access to information meant that Doc Servizi and the Fondazione Centro Studi Doc acted promptly, progressively adding new strategies and collective actions to their repertoire of support.



Broadening the perspective, concerning the relationship between self-management cooperatives and trade unions we observe that for cooperatives an alliance with trade unions means allowing their members access to higher and more efficient levels of negotiation through union experience in collective bargaining and in other forms in which traditional representation is expressed. While for trade union organisations the identification of allies in this type of cooperative means having support in better understanding and therefore better representing the needs of all those figures who are looking for representation but who can only with difficulty be reached directly by them (Martinelli, 2019).

After all, the first cooperatives were born in the cultural humus of the mutual aid societies and the first trade unions, sharing with them the principle of «Unity is Strength». Therefore, a relationship of synergy between cooperatives and trade unions is already written in the roots of these organisations. We are curious to see which direction this relationship will take in the future.

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