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## “Si RedPass”: Contagion and Mobility in a Transnational *Sciopèro*

Morganne Blais-McPherson

“It should be called **Si RedPass**,” one Texprint worker joked as we painted 8x5 flags on the floor of the union’s headquarters in preparation for a march through the Macrolotto. I laughed, hoping I would remember to jot down the joke about the union’s name the next morning, knowing fully well that I would be returning home that night exhausted from the fumes and contortions. God knows how our bodies do it, I thought to myself while taking in the pool of red flags surrounding me. It was already close to midnight, there were dozens of flags to go, and we were running out of room on the floor to lay down old newspapers. It was going to be another late night.

from fieldnotes, Prato, Oct 15, 2021

I had been conducting participant-observation in Prato with the labor union Si Cobas for almost four months at the time of the march. Like other foreign observers and militants that summer, I had met most of the group under the shade of the beaten down gazebos lining the road to Texprint Srl. The gazebos, and the permanent encampment that sprawled onto the adjacent lawn, had become the heart of the union. Serving as a home, dining and cooking area, office space, press conference room, Italian language school, and recreational area, this *presidio* sustained much of the life of the organization and its members during the strike. And it was a long strike.

From January 18 to October 12, 2021, a group of eighteen immigrant workers at the fabric printing company Texprint went on strike and began a picket line in front of the factory gate and struck for their right to a 40-hour workweek, or “8x5” as they call it. Arrests, mass dismissals, beatings from the boss’ henchmen and law enforcement; fines and sanctions for COVID-19 curfew violations and roadblocks totaling almost 50,000 euros; and the war of attrition brought on by the suffocating heat of the Tuscan summer, the biting wind of Prato’s winter, and living for months without a salary. Theirs was an epic story, and I knew from that first encounter that I needed to be part of it, whatever it entailed.

The *presidio* was an image of what was possible – immigrant, industrial workers fighting for a better life. An image of a “contagious method,” as union organizers put it, that reproduces itself in neighboring factories when workers look to the *presidio* and decide that “the moment has come to start living.” And I saw it happen. People working twelve-hour days, seven days a week in Prato’s Macrolotto coming to union headquarters saying they wanted to strike, setting up a *presidio* in front of their workplace, and quickly winning 8x5 as their employers tried to avoid a Texprint-like standoff.

It is also an image that, for many years in Prato, has been unthinkable. The “weak,” the “fragile,” the “riffraff,” people without residency permits (*permessi di soggiorno*) striking in a main manufacturing organ of the *Made in Italy* fashion industry. And partly because of this co-existing contagiousness and inconceivability, it became an image whose visibility, ontology, and legitimacy within the urban landscape and industrial narrative had to be fought over. Elected

officials, law enforcement, bosses, activists, political parties, unions, and journalists – it seemed everyone had something to say about “what was going on at Texprint.”

It was far more than a strike. These guys were dangerous; these guys were the biggest victims of them all. They weren't *really* Texprint workers; they were Texprint workers already on 8x5 contracts. They were outside agitators; they were exploited asylum-seekers brainwashed by Italian union organizers.

Could immigrants who have been working in brutal, illegal working conditions for years in the Macrolotto really be striking? Or was this all just Italian activists manufacturing clickbait images of the combative Italy of times past?

It was both and neither.

On January 18, seventeen Pakistani men and one Senegalese did not go back to work after deciding with Italian union organizers that they were willing to risk a protracted battle in order not to work twelve-hour days without sick leave or holidays for the rest of their lives. But I am not convinced their definition of a strike, “sciopero” (sciò·pe·ro) in Italian, is the same as you would find in a social theory textbook. “Fare sciopero (scio·pè·ro)” (to do strike), as the Pakistani workers often put it, emphasizing the second syllable rather than the typical first during union chats, involves not just withholding labor to win something. In fact, it more often refers to waving flags and yelling “sciopèro, sciopèro” with a group of supporters, or blocking company trucks from passing through factory gates.

They are combative tactics and visual imagery that at times evoke Italy's hot autumn, of which Si Cobas and the activists that surround it are organizational and political descendants. But this is not merely a performance of past models of Italian militancy. For the tactics used are not entirely new to the Pakistani workers, some of whom participated in protests in Pakistan or have politically engaged family members. Indeed, the Texprint hunger strike that took place on the piazza facing Prato's city hall was one worker's idea. When I asked him the reasoning behind the tactic, he simply told me that this was how things were done in Pakistan. And others present had also protested in the immigrant reception centers when they first arrived in Italy.

The Texprint workers were also masters at social media. They were wizards at Tiktok, for example. Video montages of police brutality and fun times at the picket line, protests, and hang outs at the *presidio* flooded Tiktok and their WhatsApp stories, almost always including Pakistani music of courage, strength, or love in the background. Some compilations had tens of thousands of likes. One particularly prolific worker-producer told me how his followers sored after he had started posting videos of the Texprint struggle. Though his audience is still mainly located in Italy, including natives and Pakistani alike, Texprint content has allowed him to expand his reach to the US and other EU countries. His content is inspired by “cose belle” (“pretty things”) – workers and activists clashes with the police, his life within the factory, and dinners with union members and other co-nationals.

These men were not inexperienced victims subjected to the ambitions and tactics of Italian militants nor were they passive bodies whose images were used to feed into the cultural wars plaguing the Italian left. Far from it. This was a transnational *sciopèro* with a far reach and dispersed origins.

If we return to the emic concept of contagion, such as that theirs was a contagious example for other workers, as one Florentine activist collective wrote, we can see more than a foreign agent spreading through a host body. We notice people intentionally reproducing their own image. And while the motivation may not necessarily be a desire to agitate observers into

mimesis, many newcomers to the union did first interact with them through social media. In other words, we see active agents of contagion.

Immigrants have often been treated as contagious bodies, both through metaphor and through nation-states' institutional immigration processes. Italy is no exception, with a recent iteration being the mandatory COVID-19 screening and isolation for asylum-seekers arriving to Italy's reception system as a way "to avoid the risk of contagion between received migrants and the operators of the reception structures."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the state police in Prato often used the excuse of contagion to forbid Texprint workers from protesting in front of city hall, pushing the protest to less central piazzas. Ironically, the same piazza would be packed by young Italians on Friday and Saturday nights.

Such efforts to contain the strikers usually fell flat. Regardless of prohibitions, COVID-19 curfew violation fines, and past experiences with the containment logics of Italy's immigration reception system, the Texprint workers usually kept on with the plan. They slept in front of Texprint, they protested in front of city hall, and, to my knowledge, not one has paid a fine.

Indeed, their mobility has been a central theme in my conversations with them. The most frequently cited activities that they wanted to do, which working 84-hour weeks had previously prohibited, was seeing other cities in Italy, learning Italian, and socializing with friends. In fact, the Texprint *sciopero* was for many of them the first substantive opportunity to do all these things. There were the cross-Italy travels involved with the Texprint tour, the Italian language school that had been started at the *presidio*, spending extended amounts of time with Italian comrades and each other, making speeches at protests, and conducting interviews with researchers and the press.

It is within this context of what Nancy Munn might call an expanding intersubjective spacetime that we may start to understand why a Texprint worker might rename his union using a reference to the Green Pass.<sup>2</sup> The Green Pass, a digital COVID-19 certificate that is required in indoor bars, the workplace, or museums (depending on the norms of the day) in Italy, has garnered an opposition movement. And while most are vaccinated, many Texprint workers are sympathetic to "No Green Pass." "Si RedPass," then, takes on the form of both the union name and the chant of this opposition movement, while altering its content to affirm the need for a different kind of certificate for mobility – a combative union. It is perhaps then no surprise that the red union banner, as well as the union membership card, have both been referred to by the workers as their "permesso di soggiorno." To move through this country, all you really need is your Red Pass.

And it is the power evoked by these Red Passes that has started to scare bosses into submission, a fear that is central to union jokes and storytelling. We laughed at each other's imitations of one boss begging and fully conceding to a worker upon his flashing a Si Cobas membership card. I was in awe at the story of a worker who responded, "Ok, that's alright," when his boss threateningly showed him the viral videoclip of the Texprint strikers being beaten up by boss henchmen.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own "Misure di prevenzione COVID-19 nel sistem di accoglienza migranti," Ministero dell'Interno, 22 giugno 2021, <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/misure-prevenzione-covid-19-nel-sistema-accoglienza-migranti>.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Munn, *The fame of Gawa: A symbolic study of value transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) society* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992).

But on that long night spent painting 8x5 flags on the floors of union headquarters, I began to understand what having a Red Pass meant. It meant being able to march through the streets of the Macrolotto with hundreds of workers and activists after having watched a video of yourself and your peers get beaten up by thugs. It meant developing a kind of faith that you would withstand an attack and that the risk was worthwhile. Having a Red Pass meant being able to do *sciopèro, sciopèro* in a forbidden piazza or through industrial streets, and watching as curious workers stood in front of their factories to watch this contagious, inconceivable image.