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THE WAGE QUESTION IN ITALY: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

edited by

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1. Introduction

The aim of this special issue is to understand the phenomenon of long-term wage stagnation in Italy from a sociological perspective. The SI aims to put forward a comprehensive analytical lens capable of capturing the multiple facets of the Italian “wage question”, grasping not only its direct economic and social causes and consequences, but also the social and political conditions underpinning its reproduction. Italy’s long and exceptional wage stagnation offers a privileged vantage point from which to observe the intertwining of productive transformations, conflict dynamics, organisational practices, and processes of social reproduction.

This special issue seeks to contribute to a renewed sociological attention to wages: not merely as an economic variable, but as a complex and multidimensional social institution, a terrain of negotiation and conflict, a source of recognition, and a key component of material citizenship. Re-centering wages means questioning how labour creates value, how that value is recognised and distributed, and which conditions have made the last thirty years of wage stagnation in Italy possible—and relatively weakly contested.

2. State of the art

In recent years, the “wage question” has returned to the centre of public and academic debate in Italy, spurred by the inflationary acceleration following the pandemic and the impact of the energy crisis. However, in Italy wage stagnation is neither a recent nor a cyclical phenomenon, but rather a long-term structural trajectory whose origins can be traced back at least to the early 1990s. As OECD data show, Italy has been one of the few advanced capitalist economies in which real wages have remained essentially stagnant or have even declined over more than three decades. Several ILO reports (ILO 2022, 2023, 2024) confirm that, while in many countries the post-pandemic fall in real wages is embedded in a cyclical dynamic, in Italy it adds to a long-standing stagnation trend.

At the same time, nominal wages are also low in absolute comparative terms, especially in the core segments of private-sector dependent employment. The erosion of purchasing power in recent years has rendered visible and acute a fragility in wage dynamics that has in fact been accumulating for a generation. This Italian anomaly has profound implications: for workers’ economic autonomy, for trajectories of in-work impoverishment, and for the country’s productive structure as a whole, characterised by weak domestic demand and a growth model that continues to rely more on low labour costs than on innovation (Burroni *et al.* 2021; Baccaro and Bulfone 2022; Bulfone *et al.* 2025).

2.1. *The economic perspective on Italy's wage stagnation*

A substantial part of the recent economic literature has refocused attention on wage stagnation and provided systematic analyses of some of its causes and effects. The volume by Fana & Fana (2019) contributed to bringing public and academic attention to the “wage problem” and to the structural weaknesses of the Italian productive model already before the pandemic. More recent studies—from Gaddi and Garbellini (2023) to Evangelista and Pacelli (2025), as well as Garnero & Mania (2025)—have offered an even broader reconstruction of the multiple causes of the Italian “wage question”: productivity stagnation, specialisation in low value-added sectors, small firm size, limited diffusion of innovation, a high tax wedge, and the effects of labour market reforms that have liberalised labour market regulatory institutions and thus weakened workers’ bargaining power (Cicala 2025).

A specific strand of research, represented among others by Deidda *et al.* (2023), Leonardi (2023), Pigliarmini (2023), Tronti (2023), Maccarrone (2023), Gaddi (2023), and Tassinari *et al.* (2024), has explored the role of collective bargaining in the recent inflationary context, highlighting how the Italian bargaining model – centralised at sectoral level, but characterised by relatively low minima, often delayed renewals, and subject to increasing fragmentation and erosion – struggles to protect real wages in phases of price shocks.

Overall, this literature has provided a robust diagnosis of wage stagnation as a systemic problem of the Italian economy. However, its focus remains predominantly macroeconomic and institutional, centring on factors such as productivity, taxation, industrial structure, labour market regulation, and the erosion of collective bargaining institutions. Many typically sociological dimensions – what happens in workplaces, in families, in organisations, and in the actor-centred dynamics of collective bargaining – remains often in the background.

2.2. *Sociology of work and the wage question: much attention to working poverty, less to wages*

Italian sociology of work has produced, in recent years, fundamental contributions on precariousness and in-work poverty. An important strand of studies (among others Barbieri *et al.* 2018; Colombarolli 2021; Filandri and Struffolino 2021; Marchi 2021; Filandri 2022; Filandri and Tucci 2025) has shown how the risk of poverty among employed individuals is linked to structural factors (contract type, working hours, employment transitions, work intensity), but also to family, gender, and citizenship conditions (cf. Filandri *et al.* 2021).

One key contribution of this body of literature has been to connect the analysis of labour markets with that of social structures, more precisely demographic and family structures. However, this literature rarely addresses the wage-setting system as a whole. The causes of in-work poverty are often traced back to contractual precariousness or insufficient working hours, rather than to wage determination dynamics – especially labour regulation institutions and collective actors. Moreover, it is now evident that wage stagnation in Italy is not a phenomenon affecting only the margins of the labour market, but rather a structural feature present also in “core” segments: from public employment to industry, from specialized manual occupations to more knowledge-intensive professions.

This gap between the rich body of research on working poverty and the limited attention paid to wage-setting mechanisms opens up, in our view, a still underexplored and fruitful research space. A sociological perspective on the “wage question” allows wages to be considered simultaneously from two analytical viewpoints. On the one hand, wages are an institution that structures social stratification, defining positions, internal hierarchies within labour, and possibilities for economic mobility and social

reproduction. On the other hand, wages are the outcome of negotiation processes and power relations operating at multiple levels: in workplaces, at collective bargaining tables, in managerial practices of evaluation and reward, and even in family strategies that modulate the sustainability of certain pay levels. Taking wages as a central object of sociological analysis therefore makes it possible to connect dimensions usually addressed separately – labour institutions, productive organisations, conflict dynamics, family conditions, and biographical trajectories – and to renew sociological analyses of inequality and economic citizenship. In this sense, the proposal aligns with the spirit of the agenda recently outlined by Vogel (2025) to build an *interdisciplinary political economy of wages* capable of “connecting power to prices”, overcoming the disciplinary division of labour whereby economists focus on wage levels, while sociologists concentrate on contexts and power relations without tracing their effects on wages.

3. The potential contribution of the sociology of work to understanding the wage question

The sociology of work can provide an essential contribution to understanding the causes, dynamics, and prospects of Italian wage stagnation in comparative perspective, articulating analysis across multiple levels.

3.1. *Industrial relations, conflict, and institutional reproduction*

The successive transformations of the last thirty years – reforms of bargaining arrangements, fragmentation and the growth of contractual “dumping”, the rise of company welfare, changes in union strategies – have redefined the role of collective bargaining as an instrument of wage protection. The sociology of industrial relations can analyse actor strategies, the dynamics of conflict escalation and/or moderation, sectoral differences, and the ways in which social actors interpret the wage question (as a macro problem, as a claim-making issue, or as a difficult-to-politicise issue area). Attention should focus not only on forms of conflict around wages, but also on the ways in which such conflict is channelled, redirected, or made difficult to activate. In the Italian case, this implies questioning how institutions, bargaining practices, and actor strategies have produced a relative absence of mobilization around wages (Pilati *et al.* 2018) despite persistent wage stagnation.

Alongside the formal architecture of bargaining, it is crucial to analyse how the social partners interpret the role and limits of bargaining institutions, and how these interpretations – consistent with the perspectives of ideational and discursive institutionalism (Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Schmidt 2008; Carstensen and Schmidt 2016) – contribute to defining the institutional boundaries of the wage question and its possible solutions. Shared representations of what constitutes an “adequate” wage, of bargaining priorities, and of realistically available room for manoeuvre contribute to reproducing the existing bargaining arrangements, even when these produce “suboptimal” outcomes at distributive and macroeconomic levels. The persistence of the Italian collective bargaining model, with its evident limitations, lends itself to be analysed as the product of sociological mechanisms of institutional reproduction: sedimented organisational conventions, path dependence, internal equilibria within the social partners, and coordination costs across sectors and territories. Moreover, organisational and political conditions – such as internal fragmentation of representation, heterogeneity of sectoral interests, and difficulties in building cross-cutting coalitions – further limit the politicisation of the wage question. Bargaining cultures and expectations about the future of the economy further shape actor strategies,

contributing to wage moderation and to the stabilisation of an institutional system that, although recognised as imperfect, tends to reproduce itself over time.

3.2. *Workplaces, value chains, and the reproduction of “low wages”*

Wage stagnation is not only the outcome of macroeconomic or institutional processes: it is also constructed and reproduced within workplaces, through firms’ organisational and discursive practices, evaluation and control devices, managerial narratives, and internal labour markets. Moreover, processes of productive fragmentation, subcontracting, informalisation and “platformisation” – often associated with the differential inclusion of migrant and racialised labour (Castles *et al.* 1993; De Genova 2005; Pugliese 2006; Alberti and Sacchetto 2024) – reproduce wage compression along value chains (Piro and Sacchetto 2020; Massimo 2020; Chicchi *et al.* 2022; Iannuzzi and Sacchetto 2022), amplifying the distance between core and peripheral labour segments (Gordon *et al.* 1982; Weil 2014; Fana *et al.* 2024).

Economic and organisational sociology – from labour process theory (Bagnardi and Maccarrone 2023) to studies on company-level industrial relations (Bubbico *et al.* 2018) and analyses of HR practices and organisational models in Italian firms – offer useful tools to understand how wage expectations are formed and consolidated, why certain pay levels are accepted or naturalised, and through which mechanisms forms of politicisation, resistance, or demands for recognition emerge.

Attention to organisational contexts thus makes it possible to shed a light on the “moral economy” of wages in contemporary workplaces and to analyse the intersection between managerial dynamics, contractual constraints, and value chain processes. This represents an analytical space in which organisational sociology, industrial relations, and economic sociology can engage in particularly fruitful dialogue.

3.3. *Family and intergenerational dynamics*

An important, though rarely discussed, part of the sustainability of low wages is played out outside the workplace – within family networks. Dialogue between the sociology of work and family sociology can shed light on how family resources, wealth and inheritance, gender stratification, and biographical trajectories compensate for or amplify the effects of wage stagnation. The family constitutes a crucial space of resource redistribution across genders and generations. Especially in a country like Italy, the family functions as a “wage compensation mechanism” (CENSIS 1979) mediating access to income: it is within families that decisions are made about who can afford a low wage thanks to the more stable income of other members; who is “chosen” or feels compelled to exit employment when work–family reconciliation becomes unsustainable, often with long-term marginalising effects upon re-entry (Rizza *et al.* 2025); who bears the constraints of part-time work or precarious employment because these are considered more “compatible” with care responsibilities; and, consequently, who benefits from the stability and career continuity made possible by others’ (more secure) work (Saraceno and Naldini 2021).

A further dimension concerns the role of wealth and rents: in some segments of social stratification, property income and family transfers compensate for weak labour incomes, contributing to masking or attenuating wage distress and thus also to “dampening” the social conflict associated with it. Analysing these mechanisms makes it possible to understand how wage stagnation intersects with intergenerational and wealth inequalities, and how it is rendered sustainable through differentiated family and social configurations.

3.4. *State, public policies, taxation, and welfare*

The role of labour, fiscal, and redistributive policies in “subsidising” low wages deserves greater sociological attention. Bonuses, contribution relief, hiring subsidies, transfers, and tax reforms interact with the bargaining system and productive structure, producing not always linear effects (Pedersen and Picot 2023). The debate on a statutory minimum wage – reignited by the EU directive – also offers fertile ground for interdisciplinary reflection on the interaction between public policies, institutional arrangements, and wage dynamics (Leonardi 2024). Last but not least, approaches inspired by the sociology of public policy and of quantification (Desrosières 2011; Hennequelle and Jatteau 2021) also deserve close attention, as they can account for the processes through which key economic indicators for wage policy – such as consumer price indices – are constructed, politicized, and depoliticized (see, for example, the discussions in Garbellini 2023; Jany-Catrice 2023).

4. Objectives of the special issue

In light of these considerations, the special issue aims to offer empirical and theoretical tools to understand the roots of Italian wage stagnation from a sociological perspective; bridge the gap between the rich literature on precariousness and in-work poverty, on the one hand, and the relative absence of sociological reflection on wages as an institution, on the other; bring wages back to the centre of sociological analysis, in their conflictual, symbolic, organisational, and material dimensions; engage in structured dialogue with historical, economic, and political science literature on the “wage question”, enriching it with an approach oriented towards micro- and macro-political processes, practices, and meanings; and embed our understanding of wages – and in particular the dynamic of wage stagnation in Italy – within an analytical framework encompassing both the spheres of production and of social reproduction.

The special issue invites contributions addressing, among others, the following themes:

1. *Wage institutions and bargaining dynamics*

- effects of the institutional architecture of collective bargaining and its “pathologies” (dumping and pirated contracts) on wage levels;
- union and employer strategies in wage setting;
- union strategies and power resources in bargaining dynamics;
- institutional innovations (e.g. minimum wage, indexation clauses, multi-level or inter-sectoral coordination) and their effects;
- perceptions, frames, and representations of the “wage question” among social partners;
- sociological mechanisms of institutional reproduction of collective bargaining and wage determination systems;
- bargaining cultures and wage expectations across different segments of the social partners;
- the role of uncertainty and future expectations (*imagined futures*) in wage bargaining.

2. *Organisations, value chains, and managerial practices*

- company pay policies, classifications, and incentive systems;
- effects of subcontracting, informalisation and platformisation on wage dynamics;
- transformations of low value-added value chains.

3. *Wages and the sociology of everyday life: experiences, expectations, narratives*

- how workers experience the stagnation of their wages;
- dynamics of politicisation or silencing of wage claims;

- media, political, and corporate narratives on the wage question.
- 4. *Low wages, working poverty, and social reproduction*
 - intersections between precariousness, low wages, gender, age, ethnicity and citizenship;
 - the role of families, social networks, rents, and family wealth in “compensating” labour incomes;
 - impoverishment trajectories over the life course.
- 5. *Public policies, welfare, and European comparison*
 - effects of fiscal and redistributive policies on effective wages;
 - interaction between minimum income schemes, transfers, and wage dynamics;
 - international comparisons and the role of the EU in defining the regulatory framework.

5. Deadlines and further information

Article proposals, written in Italian or English, must be submitted via the journal’s Open Journal Systems platform (<https://journals.francoangeli.it/index.php/sl/about/submissions>), approximately by **15 April 2026**. Authors are encouraged to contact the special issue editors to discuss any potential deviations from the indicated deadlines. Authors must follow the instructions for uploading full manuscripts. Articles must not exceed 8,000 words and must comply with the journal’s style and editorial standards (available at this link https://www.francoangeli.it/riviste/NR/Sl-norme_EN.pdf). Any submission that does not respect the word limit or the stylistic and editorial requirements outlined in this call will not be accepted. Properly formatted articles submitted through the journal’s online platform will be subject to a double-blind peer review process. For any further information, please contact: arianna.tassinari4@unibo.it or roberto.rizza@unibo.it.

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