

When Mediations Collapse

Migrant Struggles and Organisation in Italy

In recent years, the war—from Russia to Ukraine, from Gaza to Sudan—has profoundly transformed the context in which women and men migrate. Battlefronts are multiplying, and borders, controls, and exclusion mechanisms are getting strengthened, while governments exploit the warfare to justify new forms of austerity, intensify exploitation, and entrench racism and patriarchy. Migrant women and men are the first to pay the price of this restructuring: war hardens top-down governance of mobility, accelerates the militarisation and control of borders, and reconfigures the racist hierarchies that states impose on migrants. This happens at the borders, while within the states, migrants are progressively excluded from welfare systems, framed as internal enemies or a reserve labour force to exploit at will in ever more precarious conditions. Across the West, obtaining a residence permit has become increasingly complex.

In Italy, as across Europe, repressive policies targeting migrants aim explicitly at producing a workforce that is more precarious, blackmailable, and available for exploitation. This is happening especially in logistics warehouses, agriculture, and care work. Although migrant labour remains crucial to the production of goods and services, differentiated relationships between class segments are emerging—both outside and within migrant labour itself—to the point of transforming its political function. In recent years, repressive and anti-union measures have steadily increased, broadly neutralising existing social forces. Supported by the State, bosses are systematically producing new divisions and hierarchies among migrants themselves, dividing them based on legal status (coming from inside or outside the EU, from a ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’ country, etc.),

gender, and nationality. Expulsions and deportations, repeated denials of residence permits, and the erosion of migrant workers' capacity for autonomous political assertion, whether inside or outside trade unions, are neutralising their ability to organise and fight politically.

This process is not confined to Italy. For months, the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has carried out a widely publicised migration repression. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have turned deportations into media spectacles, sharing videos of chained individuals and publishing their names to sow fear, and patrolling streets and workplaces daily, even with helicopters. While global attention focuses on Trump's anti-migrant show, the European Union is conducting a silent but equally ruthless repression. In the first nine months of 2024, EU member states issued 327,880 expulsion orders, with 27,740 forced returns between July and September alone. Deportations increased following the implementation of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted in December 2023 and effective since June 2024. Under this pact, member states are accelerating repatriation, expanding detention centres, and deepening cooperation with third countries to facilitate expulsions.

What happens to migrants in Italy must therefore be understood in this context. The far-right government led by Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Salvini, and Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi, has launched a crusade against migrants—whether men or women, from 'safe' or 'unsafe' countries, recent arrivals or long-time residents. Through an agreement with the Albanian government, the Meloni administration has built detention structures in Albania for migrants awaiting repatriation. In these centres, migrants are altogether detained, and nobody but "guests" and staff are allowed to enter. Given the small numbers of detainees and the enormous costs for the Italian State, these centres serve primarily as ideological façades: the government wants to broadcast the message that migrants are neither wanted nor welcome in Italy, and that it uses an iron fist to deport them to prisons in another country. The obvious victims are the hundreds of migrants locked away in these black-box structures of arbitrary detention from which there is no escape.

In 2025, the Italian government introduced a new Decreto Flussi, committing to the regular entry of approximately 150,000 foreign workers, mainly for the agriculture and construction sectors. Behind this guise of openness lies a selective and repressive mechanism: strict criteria, slow procedures, and employer-driven selection, which turn the decree into a tool to discipline and control migrant labour, keeping it precarious, exploitable, and stripped of concrete rights.

The situation is no less harsh for those who have been in Italy for several years. Indeed, the Albanian agreement completes a criminalisation agenda pursued

systematically by Meloni and her cohort through various means, starting with the racist administration of asylum seekers and migrants by prefectures, police headquarters, and local governments—mechanisms that daily isolate migrant women and men, leave them undocumented, and make it impossible for them to work or access healthcare. In line with the blockade introduced by the German government and the new EU directives in the Pact on Migration and Asylum—which drastically restrict migrants’ right to family reunification—the Italian government effectively hinders reunification through systematic administrative delays in police headquarters, prefectures, and consulates.

Into this bleak scenario come the government’s newest measures, once again distinguishing itself in its severity. The latest security law (Decreto Sicurezza) further tightens the authoritarian clamp on protests and demonstrations: road blockades—an essential tactic of logistics workers, nearly all migrants, whose industrial actions in the last decade produced wage and rights gains—are now criminal offences punishable by up to five years in prison. Meloni’s security law also creates new offences specifically aimed at those who resist in prisons or in immigration reception and detention centres in Italy. Not even those who claim to be “in solidarity” with migrant struggles are spared.

At the same time, the government is dismantling, piece by piece, whatever remains of the migrant reception system. Admission procedures to deny services and reception facilities for migrants—especially for those from countries arbitrarily declared ‘safe’—are becoming increasingly rapid. Demands of international protection issued by nationals of countries like Bangladesh, Senegal, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Gambia, the Ivory Coast, and many others are immediately denied. Without it, migrants cannot access essential services such as housing, employment, language training, and the opportunity to rebuild their lives. Although the government currently lacks the capacity to carry out mass repatriation, rejected asylum seekers are also given expulsion decrees. Thus, newly arrived migrants in Italy quickly lose the possibility to enter the reception system and to obtain a legal status, access to healthcare, housing, or employment. Those few migrants from ‘unsafe’ countries who are eligible for international protection are swiftly expelled from reception centres and left on the streets.

Nonetheless, migrant women and men are refusing to endure this institutionalised racism silently. Recently, in Bologna, migrants living in the Malalbergo reception centre—all beneficiaries of international protection—were ordered to leave within five days. In response to this impossible demand from institutional racism, they collectively refused to go and end up on the streets. They organised themselves, took it to the streets, and obtained the time necessary to find alternative housing. In the following weeks, the police stepped up legal persecution against some of them, pressing charges for illegal occupation.

To break fear and isolation and to build migrant-led struggle and organisation in adverse conditions, in late May in Bologna, the Women's Assembly of the Migrant Coordination organised a migrant feminist festival attended by hundreds of people. The festival, titled "Ad Alta Voce" (Out Loud), has been a crucial moment to connect and bring together women and collectives fighting firsthand against patriarchal and racist violence, groups and unions resisting exploitation in warehouses and textile factories, social workers, and activists. It was also a moment to tackle key feminist issues, tackling the question of how to build a link between the struggle against patriarchal and racist violence and the organisations of women workers who, inside and outside trade unions, fight against exploitation. The festival connected individuals and collectives struggling in different ways and spaces—from collective mobilisations of factory and multinational women workers to social sector workers, from individual voices of digital activists and anti-racist influencers to grassroots anti-exploitation groups.

The repression against migrant women and men and their attempts to organise makes the fight against racism, patriarchy, and exploitation ever more difficult. On June 8 and 9, 2025, a citizens' referendum, launched by the country's major trade unions, took place. It aimed to curb labour precarity policies and to reduce the legal residence period required for citizenship from ten to five years, and to automatically extend the right to citizenship to applicants' minor children. This reform would have reduced the dependence of hundreds of thousands of minors on their parents' status and citizenship applications, while guaranteeing them access to essential rights. The referendum failed to reach a quorum, revealing both the depth of racist ideology in Italy and the increasingly limited capacity of trade unions to mobilise workers in a large-scale political project. Yet the referendum's failure also made one thing clear: we need to make a resounding signal, as fear and resignation continue to stifle migrants' autonomous organisation.

It is thus clear that both the international and Italian contexts make life more complicated for migrant men and women, intensifying their exploitation, normalizing patriarchal violence, and strengthening institutional racism as part of a strategy to control migrants' movements. The collapse of the political, trade unionist, and social mediations that had allowed migrants to secure better wages, welfare access, and influence class relations in recent decades now presents a new organisational challenge that concerns the role of migrant women and men and their struggles in social production and reproduction. The strike that several months ago halted the Montblanc textile district in Prato—mobilizing migrant workers alongside activists of the Strike Day in Prato—demonstrates that beneath the surface of repression, there is a growing demand... to strike.