

## **Stuck and Exploited**

Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Italy Between Exclusion,  
Discrimination and Struggles

edited by Francesco Della Puppa, Giuliana Sanò

# **For Dignity, Against Racism: The Struggles of Asylum Seekers in Italy**

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**Abstract** In Italy, over the last years in the world of social struggles asylum seekers have been in the spotlight several times, having led several episodes of mobilisations and protests. They emerged as political subjects, with their own claims and situations; parallel to the issue of reception, they expressed themselves in the public space as asylum seekers, with campaigns, pickets, and marches, with which the respect for their rights and dignity is advocated. This study analyses the causes, forms and repercussions of the struggles of asylum seekers in the last decade. After the analysis of the experience of immigrants' struggles over the last three decades, the article examines the social roots and the features of the struggles of asylum seekers between 2011 to 2019, and considers their meaning in the political context.

**Keywords** Asylum seekers. Struggles. Reception. Italy. Racism.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Struggles and Self-Organisation of Immigrants in Italy: A Snapshot. – 3 Asylum Seekers Between Precarity, Exploitation and Racism: The Social Roots of Protests. – 4 Struggles of Asylum Seekers Between Occasional Protests and Organised Mobilisations (2011-17). – 4.1 Organised Mobilisations. – 5 The Decline of Struggles Between War on Migrants and Repression (2018-19). – 6 Concluding Remarks: Fragmentation, Dignity, New Horizons.



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## 1 Introduction

In Italy, over the last few years in the world of social struggles asylum seekers have been in the spotlight several times, having led several episodes of protests and mobilisations. Asylum seekers have often been present in immigrant struggles in the 1990s and 2000s, yet it was in the last ten years, since 2011, that asylum seekers emerged as individuals, *as political subjects*, with their own claims and situations. Parallel to the issue of reception, they have started to express themselves in the public space *as asylum seekers*, with protests, campaigns, pickets, and marches, with which the respect for their rights and dignity is advocated.

The majority of claims have immediate concrete goals, aimed at improving daily living conditions; many of them are, necessarily, temporary and occasional, while only a lower number has a longer duration, becoming structured, widening the topics, getting in connection with other organisations. This entails early claim processes with growing incisiveness which exposes the reception system, migration policies, public policies; wider protests and mobilisations in time, space and contents criticise the state policies up to the global situation, the state of affairs, meanwhile some realities enlarge the dimension of criticism and look beyond the local context.

If there is no unified movement in the struggles of asylum seekers, no connection with a wider immigrants' movement (which has weakened), no significant connection with the set of social struggles; this is due in part to the conditions of extreme precarity and weakness of asylum seekers, but mainly to the lack of a unified movement of social struggles and extreme limitation of social conflict. In any case, asylum seekers are a reality which creates struggles, and this is an important element for all social struggles; such struggles contribute to voice and support immigrant workers and all workers. For this reason, struggles of asylum seekers rekindle the political issue of the relationship between capitalism and migration (Basso 2020), regarding the relations between national workers and foreign workers, between social struggles and immigrants' struggles. Within this relationship, the features of the struggles of asylum seekers shall be understood, to observe what their role is and how they interact with social struggles. In theory, new solidarities may be generated by the fact that the disadvantaged class is a global one (Sassen 2007), but in practice, nothing can be taken for granted as there are several elements against it - starting from institutional racism, working relentlessly to disparage and divide.

The first chapter analyses, without aiming to be exhaustive, the causes, forms and repercussions of the struggles of asylum seekers in Italy in the last decade. The second chapter reports the experience of immigrants' struggles over the last three decades; chapter 3

examines the social conditions of asylum seekers, in terms of social roots for their struggles; chapters 4 and 5 analyse the struggles between 2011 to 2019.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Struggles and Self-Organisation of Immigrants in Italy: A Snapshot

In the 1990s and 2000s, in Italy there have been several experiences of struggle and organisation of immigrants, which led to the creation of an embryonic immigrant movement. More or less structured, more or less long-lasting, and more or less wide and impacting experiences which saw the activation and self-organisation of immigrants, shedding light on important social issues in addition to the daily problems (*Trade Unions* 2004; Basso 2006; Basso, Perocco 2003). The immigrants' drive for self-organisation has taken two distinct, and in part separate, forms: immigrants' associations, the participation in trade unions. As for the first aspect, a great number of associations (cultural, religious, social and advocacy associations), have been constituted since the late 1980s, but they have manifested a certain fragility. This has been due to the permanent precariousness that characterised the working and the juridical conditions of immigrants, as well as to the migration policies that have hindered their process of self-organisation. Despite this fragility, there has been a trend over the years to constitute associations of a multi-national character, which have gradually taken their place alongside the several mono-national associations. As for the second aspect, the unionisation of immigrants has grown considerably in the last two decades; after a first phase which saw a movement of immigrants *towards the unions*, a phase of trade unions *towards immigrants* followed (Basso 2004; 2007; Della Puppa 2018).

The activism of immigrants was not irrelevant at all, despite the systematic effort to make it look as such. In the 1980s, when immigrants were a few hundred thousands, the very first organisations were created, mainly revolving around support networks and associations, which converged in Rome on 7 October 1989 in the first mass demonstration on immigration "For the rights of immigrants and equality". Since then, for over 15 years, there has been a surge in activities by immigrant workers, through the occupation of places where they could live and get organised, a remarkably wide unionisation, the struggles for residence permits in 2000 and 2010 in Brescia

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<sup>1</sup> The study is based on a census of the struggles and protests in the period 2011-19 featuring asylum seekers, whose data were gathered from the press and internet. A ten of interviews and talks were carried out with activists and leaders of the struggles.

(Montagna 2002, 2012) and in Rome, the creation of the Comitato Immigrati in Italia, the mobilisation and general strike in the provinces of Vicenza and Reggio Emilia against immigration law 189/2002 in the period 2002-03, the active participation side to side with Italian workers in the protests to defend Art. 18 of the Workers' Charter (Prohibition of dismissal without just cause). In between, a number of little, yet significant, responses, to the periodic intensification of state racist campaigns, started in 1991 against Albanians (locked up by the thousands in Bari stadium), in 1997 with the sinking of Albanian ship *Kater i Rades* by a corvette of the Italian navy, or the physical attacks against individual immigrants with the outbreak of wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, or against Palestine. This process of politicisation has reached its peak in December 2004 to then decrease, together with the gradual reduction of strikes and struggles of the national working class. This set of struggles, strikes, and mobilisations involved over the years, with changing intensity, several dozens of thousands of immigrant workers. Important concrete results arrived, such as the large regularisation launched with the entry into force of law 189/2002. Besides that, such resistance has raised a number of fundamental questions for the Italian public: the root causes of international migrations, the reasons of 'illegality' of a certain number of immigrants, the sources of racism and of the system of institutional discrimination, and their use by the upper class (Baso, Perocco 2020).

Between 1999 and 2004 immigrant workers were at the forefront of several actions to claim rights that the labour market and immigration laws were denying 'foreigners', more or less openly; whereas since 2008 onwards - due to the economic crisis, unemployment and precarity, state and employers' repression, Law 94/2009 "Provisions in the field of public security" together with other punitive measures, the exacerbation of racism and anti-migrant propaganda - there has been a comeback of struggles within a larger process of withdrawal in the labour movement and decrease in social conflict. In any case, mention shall be made of the several protests by farm labourers in Southern Italy countryside, in the province of Latina, by the female workers employed in fake cooperatives in the agri-food sector, by migrants in Rome for a right to housing (see also Lotto 2015; Mometti, Ricciardi 2011). A special highlight goes to the most important social struggle of the past ten years, i.e., the mobilisation of porters employed in the logistics sector, related to the independent trade union S.I. Cobas (Cillo, Pradella 2016). The logistics sector sees a remarkable presence of cooperatives or small firms working in subcontracting for large transport (Sda, Ups, Gl), trade (Amazon) or production (Ikea) companies; cooperatives' workers (warehouse keepers, porters, drivers) are mainly immigrants and are employed under very harsh conditions (extreme precarity, very low wages, ex-

hausting rhythms and working hours). Over time, workers have organised and mobilised to protect their rights and improve their working conditions, thus contributing to the development of S.I. Cobas; they have won several labour disputes and obtained good results in the hubs of logistics. The leading role of immigrant workers has affected the vision in S.I. Cobas, who has widened its scope also to immigration and migration policies; this political path has condensed in a two-fold unified struggle program (unification of social struggles, unity of Italian and immigrant workers) to face globally the various social issues.<sup>2</sup> This political program materialised in several demonstrations and mobilisations, which culminated in the general strike of 26 October 2018, and in a large demonstration in Rome on the 27 October, which saw the participation of 15,000 people, many of whom were immigrant men and women. The attention towards asylum seekers stems from different reasons, among which the fact that a part of them has been entering the labor market, in the sectors of logistics, agri-food and industry; in this process *labor activism* and *migration activism* intertwine and are tied together.

Asylum seekers have often been present in these struggles. One example is Jerry Masslo's story, a South African asylum seeker, anti-racism activist from Mthatha, a farm labourer in Campania who in 1989 with other immigrant workers asked for better working conditions: for that he was killed by the organised crime – always present in agriculture, especially in the recruitment of labourers through *caporalato* – illicit intermediation of workforce (Fanizza, Omizzolo 2019). His murder caused a sensation in the country, and gave way to the era of the political participation of immigrants, started with their presence in the aforementioned first large demonstration against racism (Rome, 7 October 1989). Another example is the asylum seekers who took part in the early 2000s to the struggles for residence permits and regularisation, for the right to housing, against the wars in the Middle-East, or in the last few years against the exploitation of farm labourers (Borretti 2010; Scotto 2016). Yet, it was in 2011, with the so-called 'North-Africa Emergency', that asylum seekers emerged as social and political subjects with their own claims. After having experienced arbitrary norms and practices, discrimination and racism, they have started to express themselves in the public space *as asylum seekers*, with protests, pickets and marches. Thus, in the 1990s and early 2000s asylum seekers had taken part in several social struggles in the country, but in the last decade, they have become leaders in struggles that are fully their own, on their living conditions, their reception, and their rights.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://sicobas.org/news/3123-documento-contro-il-razzismo-di-stato-per-l-unita-di-classe-tra-proletari-immigrati-e-autoctoni>.

### 3 Asylum Seekers Between Precarity, Exploitation and Racism: The Social Roots of Protests

The increase in arrivals from Africa and Middle-East and the tripling of asylum demands from 2010 (12,000) to 2011 (37,000),<sup>3</sup> has highlighted the structural limitations in the system of asylum seekers reception, based on reception centres and refugee camps - which look more like total institutions. The higher number of asylum seekers applications<sup>4</sup> in 2014 (63,456), 2015 (83,970), 2016 (123,600) 2017 (130,110), 2018 (53,596),<sup>5</sup> 2019 (43,873)<sup>6</sup> have further underlined such limitations.

The reception and legal status of asylum seekers, reformed under legislative decree 142/2015, introduced important changes. It provided a legal framework and set standards, introducing important changes: the establishment of *Centri di Primo Soccorso e Assistenza* (CPSA, 'First-aid and Assistance Centers'), located in the landing regions or in the neighbouring ones; the establishment of regional Hubs and *Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria* (CAS, 'Extraordinary Reception Centres') aimed at initial reception and classification; the enhancement of SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), centers for reception and social integration. Instead Law 46/2017 limited the guarantees offered to asylum seekers: created to "streamline bureaucracy and protect those who deserve it", promulgated together with Law 48/2017 on the security and decorum of cities,<sup>7</sup> it generalised the hotspot approach of the European Agenda on Migration 2015<sup>8</sup> and introduced several procedural and changes of a restrictive nature.<sup>9</sup>

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3 Source: Ministry of Interior.

4 <http://www.libertacivilimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/i-numeri-dellasilolo>.

5 67% denied. [http://www.libertacivilimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/riepilogo\\_anno\\_2018.pdf](http://www.libertacivilimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/riepilogo_anno_2018.pdf).

6 81% denied. <https://viedifuga.org/richiedenti-asilo-ed-esiti-in-italia-2019-dati-aggiornati-dopo-quattro-mesi-di-interruzione-gennaio-giugno-ipertraffica-dinieghi-umanitaria-all16/>.

7 A law against "urban decay" and in favour of "urban decency", affecting the poor and marginal layers.

8 It is based on the large-scale implementation of asylum-seekers and refugees centres.

9 For example: the amendment to the first instance judgment of international protection, i.e., the replacement of 'summary orders' with chamber proceedings without hearing, thus eliminating the open public aspect of the proceedings, the oral cross-examination and the possibility for the judge to ask questions to the asylum seeker who lodged an appeal; the abolition of the second degree of judgement: migrants won't be able to appeal against a judicial decision when their asylum claim is rejected; the establishment of Centres for repatriations, in view of increasing rejections and expulsions; the introduction of voluntary community service work, which turns asylum from an unconditional right into a status that shall be 'deserved'.

Such provisions have radicalised the restrictive and repressive approach of Italian migration policies, and at the same time they have not solved the issues affecting asylum seekers. The model of “widespread reception”, proposed by the national reception system, failed because, notwithstanding the enhancement of SPRAR reception centers and the National plan for the distribution of asylum seekers,<sup>10</sup> only a part of the Municipalities offered accommodation.<sup>11</sup> Many Municipalities refused to host reception centers and thus the majority of asylum seekers (77% as of 15 July 2017; ANCI 2017, 23) were hosted in CAS, which are marked by inadequacy: lack of decent living conditions (overcrowding, structural deficiencies of the buildings), lack of services (food, legal and medical assistance, Italian language courses), and isolation of structures.

Whether it is a matter of first or second reception, of this or that type of reception structure, the social conditions of asylum seekers and refugees are quite poor. The housing, health, work, administrative, daily life conditions present many marked critical aspects.<sup>12</sup> But this is not only due to the emergency approach of migration policies, to a limitation of rationality and knowledge of public policies: it is a policy of inferiorisation and subjugation knowingly and systematically implemented in Italy for the last forty years concerning immigration. Therefore, in the case of asylum seekers, it is not only a problem of poor reception, of lack of attention from the state towards reception centres: the problem is the reception model itself, based on centres, based on camps, on the camp model, which has turned *Italy into a country of camps* (Roma camps, refugee camps, etc.). A model that clearly and necessarily must be overcome.

The concentration of public funds and structures in the hands of a few ‘giants’ of the non-profit sector turned often the reception of asylum seekers into a fully-fledged business activity. Social workers in reception centres are not properly trained and are underpaid; minors and the victims of human trafficking are barely protected; the long stay in reception centres, due to the delays in assessing asylum applications, leads many asylum seekers to depression, irregular work, prostitution or petty crime (Campagna lasciateci centrare et al. 2016). Besides the serious violations of rights in the process of identification of newcomers (Amnesty 2016), the asylum seeker’s right to be heard within 30 days from the application day is still a very long way off.<sup>13</sup> The long

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**10** Memorandum of the Ministry of Interior of 11-10-2016.

**11** In 2016 only 40% (ANCI 2017, 25).

**12** Avallone 2018; Busetta et al. 2019; Campagna lasciateci centrare 2016; MEDU 2015; NAGA 2019; Swiss Refugee Council Osar 2020.

**13** In 2016 the mean time between the application and the response was 307 days (ANCI 2017, 25).

wait is exacerbated by the frustration caused by the rejections, which are quite abundant (around 50% of applications in 2016, 60% in 2017).<sup>14</sup>

Labour insertion of asylum seekers is quite critical. The majority of them ends up in irregular work and underground economy, especially once they are outside the reception system (either after obtaining international protection or after their asylum application was rejected). Voluntary community service work turned out to be irrelevant for the purposes of employment; on the contrary, the programs of voluntary work follows the logic of getting used to a permanent work precarity (Pasqualetto, Perocco 2020), which asylum seekers experience once they leave the reception centres.

This is topped by the violent stigmatisation campaign against asylum seekers, carefully fed by the mass-media, state institutions, political parties. Asylum seekers – portrayed as a global threat, as locusts draining the welfare system, as idlers – are pointed at as responsible for the financial scandals affecting the reception system and this increases the opposition of the Italian people against reception. They are subjected to the role of double ‘victim’: of poor management of public resources, of people’s rage promoted by institutions. The latter is daily fueled by the spreading of fake news on public funds aimed at asylum seekers (e.g. the daily pocket money), on their lifestyle, on their culture, and on the reasons of their protests. Such news embeds the notion that the majority of asylum seekers are not ‘real refugees’ but rather ‘economic migrants’ in disguise as refugees who exploit the welfare and asylum system entering Europe ‘illegally’. This narrative, based on the wrong yet smart distinction ‘asylum seekers’/‘economic migrants’, is enhanced by the high number of rejections to asylum applications, even though such result has been proved to be the consequence of the assessment criteria (ANCI 2017, 25).

As it often happens, institutional racism has translated into popular racism. People’s rage has burst against asylum seekers: from North to South in Italy, in small villages and large cities, there has been a plethora of protests (roadblocks, citizens’ associations, pickets, torch marches, damaged reception structures) in anticipation of the arrival of asylum seekers in reception centres or against their presence.

Emergency policies, poor management, inadequacy of the structures, lengthy bureaucracy, extreme precariousness, institutional racism, and hatred campaigns are the main features of the framework of reception of asylum seekers. These are also the main elements generating their protests.

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**14** <http://openmigration.org/analisi/domande-dasiloin-italia-tanti-dinioghi-in-prima-istanza-non-bastano-per-parlare-di-infondatezza>.



#### 4 Struggles of Asylum Seekers Between Occasional Protests and Organised Mobilisations (2011-17)

In the last decade, asylum seekers were at the forefront of hundreds of protests and mobilisations. The majority of their struggles is focused on reception conditions, as in their daily lives they basically live the reality of reception centres. Most of the times, these protests were inevitably occasional.

From 2011 to 2017 around 390 occasional protests were counted, mainly temporary actions lasting for a couple of hours, or a couple of days, which had no follow up. Such protests started from the daily experience of asylum seekers, who questioned specific aspects of the reception system and often focused against the cooperative managing the reception centre hosting them (186). Usual reasons are: food (90) – its quantity, quality or distribution pattern; the failure to distribute the 2.5 euro pocket money each asylum seeker is entitled to (72), the lack in the centre of equipment for the winter (warm clothes, hot water, heating, 19), clothes (27), wi-fi or means to communicate with the outside world (17); health and sanitation issues (29); the entry/exit time in the structure (6);<sup>15</sup> gaps in healthcare (26), in legal advice (7), in Italian language courses (15), in social inclusion or vocational training projects (6); the cooperative abandoning asylum seekers (5); insults, threats or ill-treatment by the operators in the reception centres (12).

Other reasons concern direct responsibilities of the State or anyway ascribable to decisions of the public authorities: the slowness in the assessment of their asylum application (111), the rejections of their applications (19), the request to issue an ID (12), the depletion of reception funds (7), the isolation or overcrowding of the reception structure (41), the transfer of asylum seekers to other structures against their will (13), the lack of communication of their transfer to other structures (2), the request by asylum seekers to be transferred to other structures (28), the exclusion from protection though they would be entitled to it (8), their removal from the reception centre on disciplinary grounds (4), forced identification procedure (4), a forced idleness ongoing for months or years (5), and their safety (2).<sup>16</sup>

The majority of such protests took place outside the reception structures. The most frequent method has been the roadblock in the street in front of the reception centre or in one of the main streets

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<sup>15</sup> In Brindisi (Apulia) there were protests by the asylum seekers working in the agricultural fields nearby since very early in the morning (“Protesta migranti a Brindisi”, *Ansa*, 01-04-2016, [www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2016/04/01/protesta-migranti-a-brindisi\\_ed1eb799-6c3c-4f03-be6d-daa7b5ba3327.html](http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2016/04/01/protesta-migranti-a-brindisi_ed1eb799-6c3c-4f03-be6d-daa7b5ba3327.html)).

<sup>16</sup> Some protests were connected to the death of asylum seekers, for instance in Sesto Fiorentino (Tuscany) in 2017 and in Crotona (Calabria Region) in 2013.

(132);<sup>17</sup> more rarely in ports (2) or in airports (2).<sup>18</sup> There were several pickets and protests – sometimes with overnight camps – in front of the Civil Government (53), Municipalities (11),<sup>19</sup> Police (10), Carabinieri (7), legal head office of the cooperative managing the reception centre (34), Province Councils (1). These add up to parades and marches (18),<sup>20</sup> the occupation of squares (6), of important streets (2), of railway stations (3), of railway tracks (4). The protests inside the reception structure were carried out through spoken complaints (26), hunger strikes (30), occupations with the block of entrances (38), damaging furnishings (27), fires (5), occupation of transport means for transfers (4), block of the catering vehicle (1), voluntary work strike (1).

Though the protests were short-lived, focused on immediate requests, on limited issues, they affected the whole country and have taken place in all sorts of reception structures, old and new, of initial and secondary reception (with all their names – Hotspot, Hub, CPSA, CDA, CARA, CIE, CPR, etc.); they have exposed the bad conditions in which asylum seekers are forced to live, bringing to light the arbitrary practices they undergo systematically; at times they have marked an important occasion to create contacts and solidarities with the associations and anti-racist groups or have constituted the core of larger, more organised protests.

#### 4.1 Organised Mobilisations

Asylum seekers were at the forefront of organised mobilisations and have also taken part in organised actions. These are more structured protests, again originating from bad conditions of living, but

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**17** The most relevant episodes affected the reception centre/CARA in Mineo (Sicily) with 9 roadblocks on the Gela-Catania Highway and the reception centre/CAS in Pian del Lago (Sicily) with 8 roadblocks, between 2013 and 2017.

**18** Of which one with occupation of the runway by forty Eritreans escaping the reception center/CPA in Elmas, Sardinia (“Cagliari, migranti in fuga dal Centro di accoglienza bloccano l’aeroporto per quattro ore”, *La Repubblica*, 18-12-2013, [www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/12/18/news/aeroporto\\_di\\_elmas\\_invaso\\_da\\_migranti\\_eritrei-73970647](http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/12/18/news/aeroporto_di_elmas_invaso_da_migranti_eritrei-73970647)).

**19** Of which one with the occupation of the Municipality of Messina (Sicily) by some fifty asylum seekers after the flood of the baseball field where they were hosted in tents (“Messina. I richiedenti asilo nel fango del campo di baseball”, *Terre Libere*, 28-12-2013, <http://www.terrelibere.org/4727-messina-i-richiedenti-asilo-nel-fango-del-campo-da-baseball>).

**20** Sometimes for dozens of miles, such as the refugees in Valderice (Sicily), who in December 2014 walked to the Civil Government in Trapani (“Trapani: trasferiti da Palermo, i migranti dormono in strada per protesta”, *La Repubblica*, 19-12-2015, [http://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/12/19/foto/trapani\\_trasferiti\\_da\\_palermo\\_i\\_migranti\\_dormono\\_in\\_strada\\_per\\_protesta-129809763/1/#1](http://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/12/19/foto/trapani_trasferiti_da_palermo_i_migranti_dormono_in_strada_per_protesta-129809763/1/#1)).

with which they criticised migration policies as a whole and the whole reception system, accused of the infantilisation and degradation of the 'guests'.

In Lampedusa (Sicily), where after the reception centre was turned into a hotspot, from October 2015 on regular protests have taken place against forced identifications, violence and inhuman living conditions, and have seen the constant support of local associations. During the May 2016 protest, when seventy asylum seekers camped for days in the square in front of the San Gelasio parish to ask to leave the structure, they refused the intervention of Save the Children and Unchr, and went back to the structure after having received the legal support of local associations. In the first few months of 2018 there were several protests by the approximately 200 (mainly Tunisian) 'guests' - which culminated with a suicide on 5 January, an attempted suicide on 18 March, arson on 9 March, and serious accusations by associations (ASGI, CILD, Indiewatch) and local authorities.

Between February 2013 and March 2014, the refugees hosted at Ferrhotel in Piacenza (Lombardy) mobilised after they were abandoned by the State institutions when the funds for North Africa Emergency ran out; finally they obtained, with the support of local associations, the extension of their stay.<sup>21</sup> The request to issue an ID and the replacement of the cooperative managing the reception centre lie at the basis of the protest of asylum seekers in Busto Arsizio (Lombardy):<sup>22</sup> despite the hostility by the local administration and the majority of the local population, asylum seekers have repeatedly occupied the reception centre and the railway station, winning, after months, the struggle for documents and decent reception. The poor conditions of the former military barracks Serena in Treviso (Veneto) have led to the protests which took place between September 2016 and March 2017,<sup>23</sup> while the exclusion from the SPRAR reception project of Afghan and Pakistani asylum seekers in Cosenza (Calabria) - in spite of their international protection - triggered the protests of early 2016.<sup>24</sup> In spring 2017, in Pordenone (Friuli) asylum seekers who arrived through the Balkan

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**21** "La verità sui profughi arrestati", *Melting Pot*, 01-04-2014, <https://www.meltingpot.org/Piacenza-La-verita-sui-profughi-arrestati.html#.YP56py9Q0JW>.

**22** "Busto Arsizio, occupato centro migranti", *Ansa*, 29-06-2017. [http://www.ansa.it/lombardia/notizie/2017/06/29/busto-arsizio-occupato-centro-migranti\\_02438d95-1ef5-4c74-9e61-87664e356a76.html](http://www.ansa.it/lombardia/notizie/2017/06/29/busto-arsizio-occupato-centro-migranti_02438d95-1ef5-4c74-9e61-87664e356a76.html).

**23** "Profughi, ancora una protesta in Piazza dei Signori a Treviso", *Tribuna di Treviso*, 27-09-2016, <https://tribunatreviso.gelocal.it/treviso/cronaca/2016/09/27/news/profughi-ancora-una-protesta-in-piazza-dei-signori-a-treviso-1.14163232>.

**24** "Cosenza, la polizia contro il presidio dei migranti", *Osservatorio Repressione*, 02-07-2016, <http://www.osservatoriorepressione.info/cosenza-la-polizia-presidio-dei-migranti/>.

route protest at the Civil Government's premises for not being placed in the reception system, which is only aimed at asylum seekers from the Mediterranean route; forced to live in the parking lot of an abandoned office district, removed by the local administration in the name of urban decency, they asked for a decent place to live.<sup>25</sup>

These claims were expressed in different ways, but all share the physical occupation of public space. A few examples: the protest marches in Turin (Piedmont) in 2011;<sup>26</sup> the occupation of the sea rocks with hunger strikes, pickets and the creation of a 'tent city' by asylum seekers stuck on the French/Italian border in Ventimiglia (summer 2015 and 2016);<sup>27</sup> the camp in the garden of a former primary school in Padua (Veneto) organised by Tunisian refugees in May 2011<sup>28</sup> and by refugees who passed through Libya in April 2013.<sup>29</sup>

One main feature of these protests is the connection and collaboration with associations, NGOs, independent unions. The support of associations has often produced a change in the nature and methods of the struggle; on one hand the claims were more organised and visible thanks to the presence of associations rooted in the local context, on the other hand the associations represented the interests of asylum seekers presenting themselves to the institutions as their champions, thus limiting their voice and independence. Among the several experiences of collaboration, the following shall be mentioned: the claims by the refugees in Terzigno (Campania), expelled from the reception centre after the publication of a video denouncing the terrible living conditions and readmitted after a permanent picket promoted by Associazione 3 Febbraio (July-August 2016);<sup>30</sup> the claims by asylum seekers in Bet Sit hotel and Papa Paolo VI and Santa Sofia structures in Taranto (Apulia), expelled from the project after their protests at the Civil Government (September 2016-June 2017) and readmitted thanks

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**25** "Protesta dei profughi a Pordenone", *Il Friuli Web*, 04-04-02017, available on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3pVJ56M-7M>).

**26** "Diritto d'asilo, libertà di movimento per tutti/e!", *CSOA Gabrio*, 22-01-2012, <https://gabrio.noblogs.org/post/2012/01/22/diritto-di-asilo-liberta-di-movimento-per-tuttie/>.

**27** "Ventimiglia. Un 20 giugno per la libertà di movimento, contro la Fortezza Europa", *Global Project*, 20-0-2015, [https://www.globalproject.info/it/in\\_movimento/ventimiglia-un-20-giugno-per-la-liberta-di-movimento-contro-la-fortezza-europa/19210](https://www.globalproject.info/it/in_movimento/ventimiglia-un-20-giugno-per-la-liberta-di-movimento-contro-la-fortezza-europa/19210).

**28** "[Bsa Padova] La nostra lotta parla a tutta la città", *Brigate Solidarietà Attiva*, 18-11-2018, <https://brigatesolidarietaattiva.net/2011/05/18/bsa-padova-la-nostrolotta-parla-a-tutta-la-citta/>.

**29** "Padova, le voci dei profughi dalla Gabelli occupata", *Melting Pot*, 13-04-2013, available on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCwwEKNIxS>).

**30** "Tra feci e spazzatura, dentro il centro di prima accoglienza di Terzigno", *La Stampa*, 16-07-2015.

to the support of the independent union Slai Cobas and ASGI;<sup>31</sup> the struggle of asylum seekers in the former military base of Cona (Veneto), which received quite extensive media coverage: after almost two years (2015-16) of protests inside and outside the structure against overcrowding, cold, filthy sanitation, lack of medical assistance, on 3 January 2017 an uprising broke out after the death of Sandrine Bakayoko. On 13 January, asylum seekers, independent union USB and CISPM organised a protest march to demand closing off the structure. On 14 November, 300 asylum seekers left the camp and went to the Civil Government in Venice (50 km away) in what was called the 'March for dignity';<sup>32</sup> the march, which lasted several days, supported by the hospitality of families and parishes in the villages crossed, led to the distribution of 200 asylum seekers in other reception centres. One week later, other refugees followed the lead and left the camp, but without success: they had to go back after being blackmailed by the state authorities who said the asylum seekers would lose their right to apply for asylum. The demonstrations continued and on 13 January 2018 the permanent closure of the camp was requested.

All these protests contributed to a wider and deeper acknowledgment of migration and of the conditions of asylum seekers, at the same time they saw a widening of the scope and degree of criticism, reaching the whole reception system, migration and public policies, and sometimes the relationship between national workers and immigrant workers. Often their discourse and actions go beyond single actual situations and tackle wider matters (the political asylum system, national and European policies), sometimes they endeavour to establish a link with labour issues (precarity, exploitation, reduction of wages and social rights) and with workers' struggles.

For example, CISPM (International coalition sans-papiers, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers), part of an international federation created in 2012 in several European and African countries which federates several Italian organisations, was involved in organising protests by asylum seekers in Ventimiglia (2015), Turin (2015),<sup>33</sup> Florence (2016),<sup>34</sup> and Cona (2017). These experiences have

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**31** "Taranto: proseguono le espulsioni dei richiedenti asilo", *Radio Onda d'urto*, 18-01-2017, <https://www.radiondadurto.org/2017/01/18/taranto-proseguono-le-espulsioni-dei-richiedenti-asilo/>.

**32** "La marcia dei migranti contro il sistema di accoglienza in Veneto", *Internazionale*, 21-11-2017, <https://www.internazionale.it/reportage/annalisa-camilli/2017/11/21/cona-conetta-migranti-marcia>.

**33** Movimento Migranti Rifugiati, "Manifestazione a Torino per la Settimana Internazionale di azioni", available on Facebook ([https://www.facebook.com/pg/movimento.migrantirifugiati/events/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/movimento.migrantirifugiati/events/?ref=page_internal)).

**34** USB Toscana, "Firenze: migranti in piazza diritti e libertà di movimento per tutti!", 17-12-2016, <https://tinyurl.com/7uth2h3w>.

converged in the “Fight/Right - Diritti senza Confini” demonstration, held in Rome on the 16 December 2017, among its organisers was CISP. <sup>35</sup> CISP has come to national attention during the protests for the murder, on the 4 June 2018, of Soumaila Sacko, farmhand and trade unionist working in the vegetable harvest in the Calabria region. His murder has once again brought back to the attention of the public the exploitation of immigrants in the agriculture sector, an issue which CISP faces with independent union *Usb*; but it tackles wider topics: it opposes EU migration and austerity policies; it criticises the agreements among European and African countries on migration movements; it opposes Italian laws on migration; it demands permits of stay and decent reception for all asylum seekers; it advocates a general struggle for social justice, linking immigrant struggles to those against social expenditure cuts; it considers the denial of immigrants’ rights as a matter involving the whole population and as such it advocates for a more explicit international class struggle across-the-board for all nationalities.

Modena’s Refugees criticised specific aspects of their real experience as asylum seekers and the reception system as a whole, including work exploitation embedded in voluntary work <sup>36</sup> or the Centers for Repatriation. The Movimento Migranti Rifugiati in Turin fights for migrants’ and workers’ rights, considers the EU and the European states guilty with promoting policies which are against international law and causing the ordeal asylum seekers have to bear. <sup>37</sup> *Asahi* supported the struggles of asylum seekers in Bologna and works in traveling routes with meetings in the main Italian cities to inform asylum seekers of their rights. The Coordinamento Migranti Bologna supported the struggles of asylum seekers in Bologna expelled from shelters at the end of 2017 <sup>38</sup> and took part to the Transnational Social Strike Meeting in Paris in October 2016; created more than ten years ago with the establishment of a national platform against Im-

<sup>35</sup> The claims were humanitarian permits of stay, the abolition of migration Laws 180/2002 and 46/2017, the right to housing and residence, a decent reception, the increase in social spending, the minimum wage, rearrangement of agreements with African countries on migration movements, the overcoming of the Dublin Regulation (<https://www.facebook.com/Roma16Dicembre>).

<sup>36</sup> Modena’s Refugees, “Basta sfruttamento, documenti e dignità per i/le migranti”, 15-05-2017, available on Facebook ([https://m.facebook.com/Modenas-Refugees-148933708978763/events?locale2=sw\\_KE](https://m.facebook.com/Modenas-Refugees-148933708978763/events?locale2=sw_KE)).

<sup>37</sup> Movimento Migranti Rifugiati. *Programma*, 13-06-2013, <http://www.migranti-torino.it/?p=29512>.

<sup>38</sup> “Noi non ce ne andiamo! Non potete buttarci in strada! Manifestazione delle e dei migranti dei dormitori di Bologna”, *Coordinamento Migranti*, 12-12-2017, <https://www.coordinamentomigranti.org/2017/03/29/noi-non-ce-ne-andiamo-non-potete-buttarci-in-strada-manifestazione-delle-e-dei-migranti-dei-dormitori-di-bologna-30-marzo-ore-14-piazza-maggiore/>.

migration Law 189/2002 and on the relevance of immigrants' struggles against precarity, it denounces the Italian reception system for asylum seekers as a functional element to their subordination, the European norms on asylum and the migrations policies of European states.<sup>39</sup>

## 5 The Decline of Struggles Between War on Migrants and Repression (2018-19)

In the period 2018-19 there has been a tightening of migration policies, matched by a surge in propaganda and anti-immigrant racism, aiming at countering their rooting, demeaning their social value, reducing the social and political costs of immigration. This campaign mainly targeted asylum seekers, with the slogan "they are all illegal"; and it turned out to be a fully-fledged *war on asylum* (Burnett 2015).

It refers to law 132/2018 (the so-called 'Security Decree') which has taken to extreme decades of exclusion and criminalisation of immigrants, in a process now focused on asylum seekers. This law worsens dramatically the conditions of incoming immigrants, it reduces the rights and guarantees for asylum seekers, it strongly limits the application of the right of asylum up to almost erasing it. It introduces a remarkable worsening of custody and administrative detention<sup>40</sup> and it abolishes humanitarian protection.

Such law introduces several obstacles to the issuing of international protection. It broadens possible crimes that, in the case of criminal conviction, determine the denial of international protection or the cancellation of the refugee status and subsidiary protection: among new possible crimes, with final judgment, we find threats or violence against public officials; it introduces as new grounds for exclusion of entering Italy any sentence for refusing to dissolve a demonstration or meeting. Though there is a clear willingness to demean and neutralise subjectivity, organisation and resistance in immigrants, the general scope of that law shall also be underlined, as it pursues a general repression of social movements, struggles, and workers' mo-

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**39** Coordinamento Migranti Bologna, available on Facebook (<https://it-it.facebook.com/coordinamentomigranti.bologna.7/>).

**40** It introduces a new system of administrative detention for those asking for international protection, to determine or verify their identity or citizenship, up to 30 days in hotspots or first reception governmental centres; when their identity or citizenship may not be determined, their detention may continue within a Centre for Repatriation up to 180 days. It prolongs the maximum detention time within Repatriation centres for the foreigner to be deported, increasing it from 90 to 180 days. It entails a review of suitable places for detention while waiting for deportation, including "undetermined facilities", different from Repatriation centres, available for public security authorities or suitable locations at the border offices.

bilisations: with a view to suppress social unease and disagreement, to criminalise poverty and to exclude, it prohibits pickets and meetings, it introduces again roadblock as a crime,<sup>41</sup> it exacerbates punishment in case of occupation of buildings and terrains, it entails expulsion of poor people and beggars from the cities to preserve the urban decorum.

Such law worsens the conditions of refugees and asylum seekers through the disarticulation of the reception system: it is partly erased, as it will only host the beneficiaries of international protection and unaccompanied foreign minors, thus excluding asylum seekers and the beneficiaries of humanitarian protection. It favours a reception model of asylum seekers based on emergencies, isolating and marginalising them, built on large-sized centres (dormitory-centres) only providing some essential services. Asylum seekers may only be hosted in CAS and CPA (Centri di Prima Accoglienza), which were often already lacking social, language, training, employment and legal protection services. Asylum seekers, distinguished by refugees and beneficiaries of international protection, are placed in a suspended context, in a limbo which does not entail nor start any process of social integration. This condition of exclusion and suspension is symbolised by the provisions on the registration at the registry office,<sup>42</sup> which is compulsory for the issuing of the residence certificate and the ID, on the required documents to access public services (social services, public housing, aid and incentives) or to obtain services by private entities (employers for the work contract, landlords for a lease contract, driving schools to get a driving license, banks to open a bank account).

For the period 2018-19 a decrease in protests is observable. In CAS, CARA and CPR (Repatriation centers) there were 78 occasional protests in 2018 and 36 in 2019 (against 79 in 2015, 112 in 2016, and 122 in 2017); no organised mobilisations in which asylum seekers acted collectively, autonomously or partially so, to raise structured claims. This decrease has also affected the activities of associations led by immigrants themselves, after the lively previous season; among the few cases, highlight should be made of the 6 December 2018 demonstration in Naples against the 'Security Decree', which saw the participation of asylum seekers.

The first three months of 2018 presented a number of protests, though in decline, in the wake of late 2017 mobilisations; afterwards there was a sharp decline. In 2018-19, there were two peaks in pro-

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**41** It targets workers' mobilisations, the struggles of trade unions and social movements, etc.

**42** Foreigners, to obtain registration, shall prove their stable permanence in one place and have a residence permit.



tests, one in December 2018 (9 episodes) and one in September 2019 (12 episodes), both at the time of the conversion into law of the Security Decree and Security Decree II. Yet, these peaks in protests are not only linked to the elimination of humanitarian permits, the slash of funds for reception and expulsions from the centres, because the protests mainly concerned Repatriation centres – where immigrants are detained before being deported. The overcrowding of such structures (due to the increase in illegality rates as a consequence of migration policy), the harshening of detention conditions, the increase in actual deportations, are the main causes of protests in CPR, the main actors of the protests.<sup>43</sup> The Repatriation centres with the highest rate of conflicts were Turin (corso Brunelleschi) with two cycles of protests (late 2018, July-September 2019); Rome (CPR Ponte Galeria) with harsh protests in summer 2019; CARA in Bari Palese (late 2018); CPR in San Gervasio in the area of Potenza with a permanent state of agitation (spring 2018, late 2018, July – September 2019); CPR in Lampedusa (protests from early 2018 until its closure in March, again starting from September 2019); CPR in Caltanissetta (winter 2018-19), CARA in Mineo and Trapani Milo. In CPRs we saw the most radical forms of protest: individual (2) and collective (8) hunger strikes; attempts to escape (13) more or less successful, damage (6); CPRs were the locations of all fires (8) and clashes with the police (6 out of 7).

In Csa conflicts decreased, both in frequency and in forms, despite the measures cutting places in structures and funds. As in the previous period, protests took place both inside and outside the reception structures, for the very same reasons; collective protests against mass expulsions from centres after the entry into force of the Security Decree, culminated in the Caserta incident in 2019.

Among the most frequent reasons for the protests in CAS we find again food (23), the delays in the procedures of asylum application (17), the delay or lack of pocket money (18), unsuitable clothing (4), heating (2), hot water (3), internal rules (2), healthcare (4), threats and violence by operators (3), general conditions of reception and services (12), facility conditions (5), overcrowding (3), residence documents (5), transfer request (3), transfer resistance (6), isolation (3), deportations from CPR (2), death of an asylum seeker (2), expulsions for unavailability after random presence controls (1), voluntary work (1).

Around half the protests took place inside the facilities, with one case of damage (27 in the previous period); in three cases one or more operators were held captive; in one case asylum seekers refused to get off the transportation means used to transfer them from one facility to another. As for protests outside the structures, the most frequent ones were roadblocks (13), patrols (7), demonstrations (5),

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**43** On the situation of CPR, see Migreurop 2020; Majcher et al. 2020.

street protests (4); only one march of considerable length. Part of the protests took place at the cooperatives (2), law enforcement premises (3), Red cross (1), municipality (3), or railway stations (2).

The decrease of protests in the reception system have different causes, among which, first and foremost, the entry into force of the Security Decree and following cancellations by Prefects. The elimination of residence permits for humanitarian reasons cancelled the right to residence permit for thousands of asylum seekers and prevented many others to access the reception system; the number of 'guests' in CAS and CARA went from 183,000 in January 2018 to 92,000 in November 2019, with a reduction by 30% between October 2018 and October 2019. Furthermore, the repression introduced by the Security Decree inhibited the action of immigrants and compromised solidarity by associations supporting immigrants' struggles. Finally, thousands of asylum seekers saw or could see their reception revoked based on the arbitrary power of Prefects to do so; among the main reasons for the revocation of the residence permit we see possible 'unruly' behaviours by immigrants.

## **6 Concluding Remarks: Fragmentation, Dignity, New Horizons**

Though still at an early stage, with several difficulties and in different ways, the last decade in Italy saw the rise of asylum seekers as political and social subjects. In a nutshell, though fragmented and linked to the situation, within social struggles there has been an increasing centrality of asylum seekers, who have had a role, striving, self-organising, creating moments and processes of claim with growing intensity.

Many protests are impromptu and remain local. The majority of claims have immediate concrete goals, aimed at improving daily living conditions. Many of the mobilisations are, *necessarily*, temporary and occasional, only a lower number has had a longer duration, becoming structured, widening the topics, getting in connection with local organisations. Yet they paired early claim processes with growing incisiveness which denounced the reception system, migration policies, social problems. There were wider protests and claims in time, space, contents and goals, which have criticised the state policies up to the present situation; some realities have enlarged their dimension of criticism and look beyond the local context. There were several collaborations with local activism, sharing experiences or participating in associations, in anti-racist and (mainly independent) unionist organisations.

There is no unified movement in the struggles of asylum seekers, there is no connection with a wider immigrants' movement, there is no significant connection with the set of social struggles. This lack of

connection is due to the conditions of extreme precarity and weakness of asylum seekers, but even more to the lack of a unified movement of social struggles and extreme limitation of social conflict in the country. Against policies, practices and discourses which inferiorise them concretely, socially, psychologically, and spiritually, the struggles of asylum seekers aim at dignity and respect; asylum seekers are a reality which creates struggles, and this is an important element for all social struggles, as such struggles contribute to voice and support immigrant workers, all workers, all social struggles.

The march of emigrants from Africa and the Middle East to Europe is the march of insertion within the world labor market. Such insertion happens in the name of wage slavery as people belonging to the working class and in the name of racism as people belonging to races and nations which have been historically dominated and colonised. In concrete, such insertion happens with their (subordinate) integration in the European working class, where they meet the fate and expectations of local workers, and where they meet the social and political struggles of European countries. This class meeting may give rise to new solidarities, new social ties, new opportunities for exchange and mutual learning; new possibilities of social transformation may arise, to overcome suffocating barriers such as nationalism, but for that to happen racism and discrimination must be erased, as they were placed on purpose on the road to the collective enhancement of workers. Asylum seekers' struggles aim to the affirmation of their dignity as human beings and workers, to the achievement of decent life and working conditions, i.e., they aim at the fulfilment of the social needs of working humanity, and, along such universality and shared destiny, they contribute in voicing and supporting immigrant workers and all workers. For these reasons they shall be saluted and supported.

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