

## **The wage and employment issue in Italy.**

### **A comparison with the Eurozone's largest economies**

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This paper deals with the Italian wage and employment issue through a comparison with the Eurozone's largest economies. The comparison is made by processing data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the statistical office of the European Union (EUROSTAT), the annual macro-economic database of the European Commission (AMECO) and the Italian National Statistical Institute (ISTAT). The study analyses wage and employment dynamics from 2000 to 2021 and presents a framework in which Italy, in divergence with the main Eurozone economies, is characterised by a long-term wage stagnation and growing weight of lower skilled professions. Lastly, the article shows how the increase of the job precariousness area feeds the areas of wage distress and working poor, showing that this polarisation, in wage and employment terms, is the result of economic policies decided by governments and implemented by firms with the aim of regaining competitiveness through wage moderation. The consequences of these policies are explored within a Kaleckian and Kaldorian framework, arguing that a new and stable economic growth path can be retaken through a wage growth, higher quality of employment and innovations. Italy is a relevant case-study insofar as it is the economy which performs worst among the main European economies, also during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**JEL classification:** J31, E24, E64

**Keywords:** wage, employment, wage moderation

#### **1. Introduction**

The changes in the Italian labour market produced by its different reforms since the '90s, and the economic crisis of 2008, have led to a wage stagnation (Giangrande, 2021a) and an increase of employed people receiving low pay, which in many cases is insufficient to lead a decent life. In Europe, this economic and social phenomenon has progressively become the subject of research by

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various scholars and research institutes, which have focused on the definition and measurement of the so-called “working poor” (Ioakimoglou & Soumeli, 2002) or “in-work poverty” (Lohmann & Marx, 2018).

Despite the literature on the working poverty not being particularly extensive, it emerges clearly that there is no univocal theoretical model and neither a consensus on its perimeter (Crettaz, 2013), which indeed varies profoundly according to both the definition and the poverty line adopted. These differences also have repercussions on the official surveys carried out by statistical institutes<sup>1</sup>, which may measure the phenomenon in absolute or relative terms, or in relation to particular individual and/or family conditions.

Many studies have analysed the various structural causes that determine a greater risk of in-work poverty, mainly highlighting those linked to the contractual conditions, work intensity, professional qualification, company size, territorial context, and the level of education and skills (Di Bartolomeo A., Di Bartolomeo G. & Pedaci, 2011; Lucifora & Ferraris, 2018; Barbieri, 2019). The working poverty is an extremely complex phenomenon that needs to be explored in its multiple dimensions, especially in the case of Italy where its incidence is particularly high compared to the EU average (Raitano *et al.*, 2019; Garnero *et al.*, 2021; Struffolino 2021).

The aim of this research is to investigate the Italian employment and wage issue and to explore their dynamics within a post-Keynesian framework, in particular Kaleckian and Kaldorian ones, arguing that a new and stable economic development path can be retaken through wage growth, higher quality of employment and innovations (Kalecki, 1943; Kaldor, 1966).

The paper is structured as follows: in the 2<sup>nd</sup> section we compare average annual gross wages in the four largest Eurozone economies (Germany, France, Italy and Spain) from 2000 to 2020 through an elaboration of data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and we examine, through data from the European Commission (AMECO), the dynamics of the wage share in the same countries mentioned above; in the 3<sup>rd</sup> section we assess, on the basis of data from the Statistical Office of the European Union (EUROSTAT), the distribution of the employees by main occupational groups and working hours in Italy compared to the average of the other three main Eurozone countries from 2000 to 2020; in the 4<sup>th</sup> section we present the Italian wage and employment dynamics in 2021, comparing it with the other main Eurozone economies, based on

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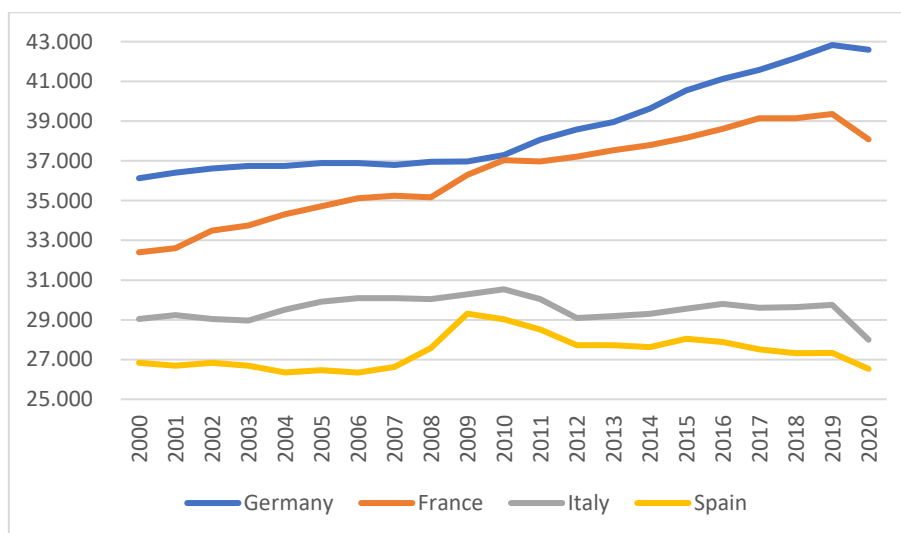
<sup>1</sup> See the Statistical Office of the European Union (EUROSTAT) and the Bureau of Labour Statistics of the United States (BLS), among others.

the most recent wage bill and employment statistics published by EUROSTAT; in the 5<sup>th</sup> section we show the occupational distress and the substantial unemployment areas in Italy in 2021 through an elaboration of the data from the Italian National Statistical Institute (ISTAT); and finally, in the last section we present the discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Annual gross wages and wage share (2000-2020)

In 2000, the average annual gross wage, calculated in 2020 constant prices in euro, stood at 36.1 thousand euro in Germany, which was higher than the average wage in France (32.4 thousand euro) and, in particular, in Italy (29.0 thousand euro) and Spain (26.8 thousand euro). Since then, and until the end of 2019, average wages in Germany and France have followed a strong upward trend, registering a cumulated increase of +18.6% and +21.5%, respectively. During the same period, average wages in Italy and Spain showed a very modest growth of +2.5% and +1.8%, respectively (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 - Average annual gross wages in 2020 constant prices (euro) per full-time and full-year equivalent employee in the total economy in the four largest Eurozone economies (2000-2020)**

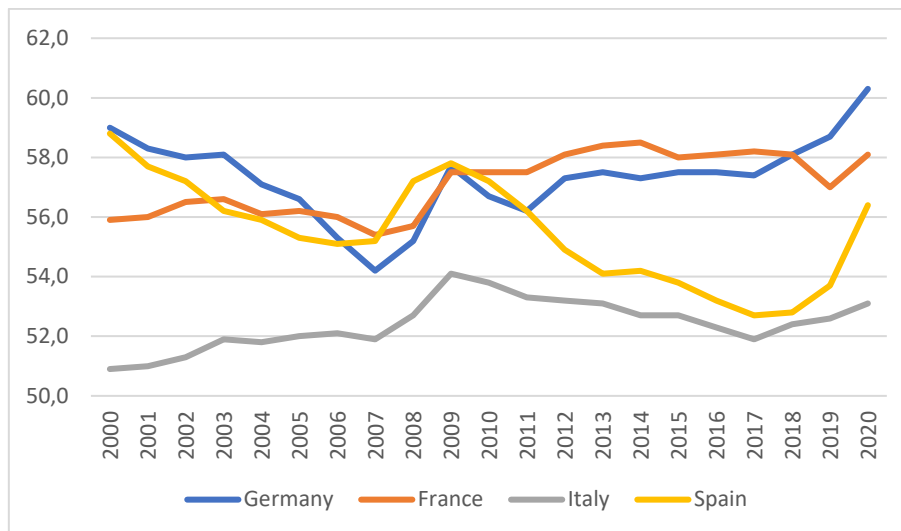


Source: FDV elaboration on OECD data

In Italy, the share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the compensation of employees was just over 50 per cent in 2000, the lowest value among the main European economies (Figure 2). The wage share in Italy grew until 2003, and once again in 2008-2009, when it reached its highest value in the last 20 years (54.1%), which was still 3.6 percentage points below the average of Spain, France and Germany. Since then, the Italian wage share declined steadily until 2017, to rise again in the

following three years and stand at 53.1%<sup>2</sup> in 2020 (still -3.3 p.p. below Spain, -5.0 p.p. compared to France and -7.2 p.p. compared to Germany).

**Figure 2 – Adjusted wage share as percentage of GDP at current market prices, 2000-2020**



Source: FDV elaboration on AMECO data

### 3. Employment and working time (2000-2020)

The stagnation of real wages that has plagued Italy for decades can also be analysed through the different composition of the employed labour force, which, unlike the other three main Eurozone economies, suffers from a lower participation of the most qualified segments while registering a higher incidence of the least qualified segments (Birindelli, 2019; Giangrande, 2020).

Over the 2008-2019 period, the share of managers halved in Italy (-1.0 p.p.), while in Germany and France it increased by +0.3 p.p. and +1.3 p.p., respectively (Table 1). Over the same period in Italy, the share of elementary occupations grew (+2.0 p.p, from 11.2% in 2008 to 13.2% in 2019), while in the other three countries it decreased, most evidently in Spain (-1.9 p.p.), where it is still relatively high (14.7% in 2019), but also in Germany (-0.9 p.p., to 8.2% in 2019) and in France (-0.5 p.p.).

<sup>2</sup> The wage share growth observed in the pandemic year (2020) is attributable to the GDP contraction, which was higher than the wages fall.

**Table 1 - Percentage distribution of employees by main occupational groups in the four largest Eurozone economies, 2008 and 2019**

|   | 2008          |               |               |               | 2019          |               |               |               |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
|   | Germany       | France        | Italy         | Spain         | Germany       | France        | Italy         | Spain         |
| Managers                                | 3,8%          | 5,7%          | 2,2%          | 2,5%          | 4,1%          | 7,0%          | 1,1%          | 2,5%          |
| Professionals                           | 13,6%         | 13,5%         | 9,0%          | 13,5%         | 16,8%         | 18,4%         | 13,9%         | 18,7%         |
| Technicians and associate professionals | 22,5%         | 20,1%         | 22,6%         | 12,9%         | 24,0%         | 21,4%         | 17,9%         | 11,7%         |
| Clerical support workers                | 13,8%         | 13,7%         | 14,9%         | 10,7%         | 13,4%         | 9,2%          | 14,9%         | 11,9%         |
| Service and sales workers               | 13,0%         | 13,7%         | 13,1%         | 17,6%         | 13,9%         | 16,0%         | 17,6%         | 20,9%         |
| Specialised and skilled manual workers  | 24,4%         | 22,2%         | 27,0%         | 26,2%         | 19,6%         | 17,5%         | 21,3%         | 19,6%         |
| Elementary occupations                  | 9,1%          | 11,0%         | 11,2%         | 16,6%         | 8,2%          | 10,5%         | 13,2%         | 14,7%         |
| <b>Total</b>                            | <b>100,0%</b> | <b>100,0%</b> | <b>100,0%</b> | <b>100,0%</b> | <b>100,0%</b> | <b>100,0%</b> | <b>100,0%</b> | <b>100,0%</b> |

*Source: FDV elaboration on EUROSTAT data*

Moreover, the analysis of weekly working hours (Table 2) shows that the average number of usual weekly hours of part-time work in Italy in 2000 (24.0 hours) was higher than in all three other countries. In 2019, the average hours of a part-time worker in Italy (22.5 hours) was only lower than in France, and corresponded to 57.7% of a full-time worker. Conversely, the ratio between the average number of usual weekly hours worked by a part-time worker and a full-time worker in Germany, was 50.7% in 2019.

**Table 2 - Average number of usual weekly hours worked by an employee (15-64 years) in the four largest Eurozone economies, 2008 and 2019**

|      |           | Germany | France | Italy | Spain |
|------|-----------|---------|--------|-------|-------|
| 2000 | Part-time | 18.1    | 23.1   | 24.0  | 18.1  |
|      | Full-time | 40.1    | 38.9   | 38.6  | 40.6  |
|      | Total     | 35.8    | 36.1   | 37.2  | 38.8  |
| 2019 | Part-time | 20.4    | 23.8   | 22.5  | 19.5  |
|      | Full-time | 40.2    | 39.1   | 39.0  | 39.6  |
|      | Total     | 34.6    | 36.4   | 35.6  | 36.4  |

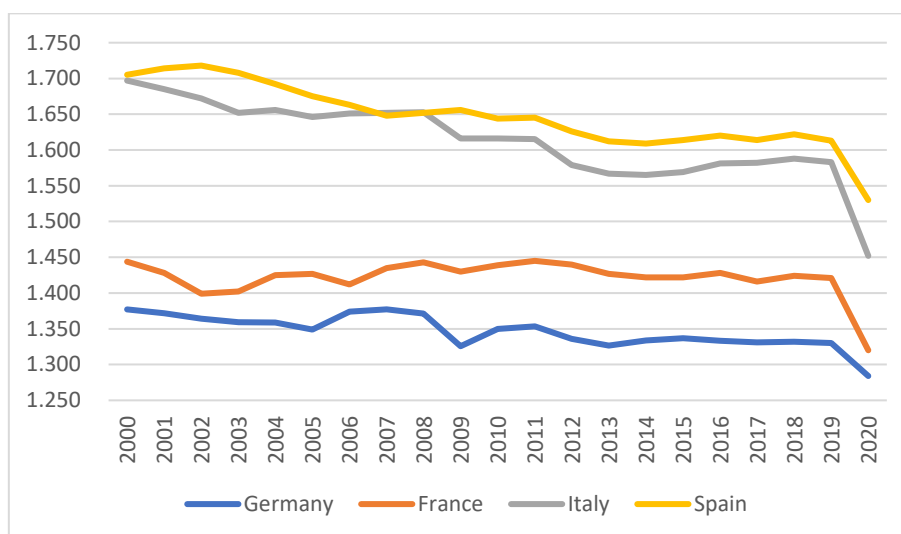
*Source: FDV elaboration on EUROSTAT data*

In 2019, the average number of hours worked annually in Italy by employees was 1,583 (Figure 3), which is slightly lower than in Spain (-30 hours) but significantly higher than in Germany (+253 hours) and France (+162 hours). This figure, read together with the wage share already shown (Figure 2),

highlights how in Italy, although employees work comparatively much more than in Germany and France, the share of income destined to remunerate work is considerably lower, even than in Spain.

In 2020, the year marked by the pandemic crisis, we observe a dramatic decrease in the number of hours worked per year by an employee in all four countries, albeit to different degrees: Italy recorded the biggest drop (-8.3%), followed by France (-7.1%), Spain (-5.1%) and Germany (-3.5%).

**Figure 3 - Average annual hours actually worked per employee in the four largest Eurozone economies, 2000-2020**



Source: FDV elaboration on OECD data

#### 4. Wages and employment in 2021

The analysis of the data for 2021 shows an increase in the average annual gross wage<sup>3</sup> compared to 2020, which was more pronounced in Italy also due to the fact that it had suffered the greatest decrease in 2020 in comparison to the other three countries. Although we observe an overall recovery with respect to 2020, if we compare the average annual gross wage of 2021 with that of 2019, it emerges how the wage gap between Italy, on the one hand, and France and Germany, on the other, has widened further: the difference with the French wage has increased from -9.8 thousand to -10.7 thousand euro, and with the German one from -13.9 thousand to -15.0 thousand euro (Table 3).

<sup>3</sup> The average annual gross wage for a full-time equivalent employee is obtained by multiplying the ratio of wage bill to internal employment by the ratio of the average usual weekly hours for full-time employees to the average usual weekly hours for all employees. For more details on the methodology, see OECD (2021).

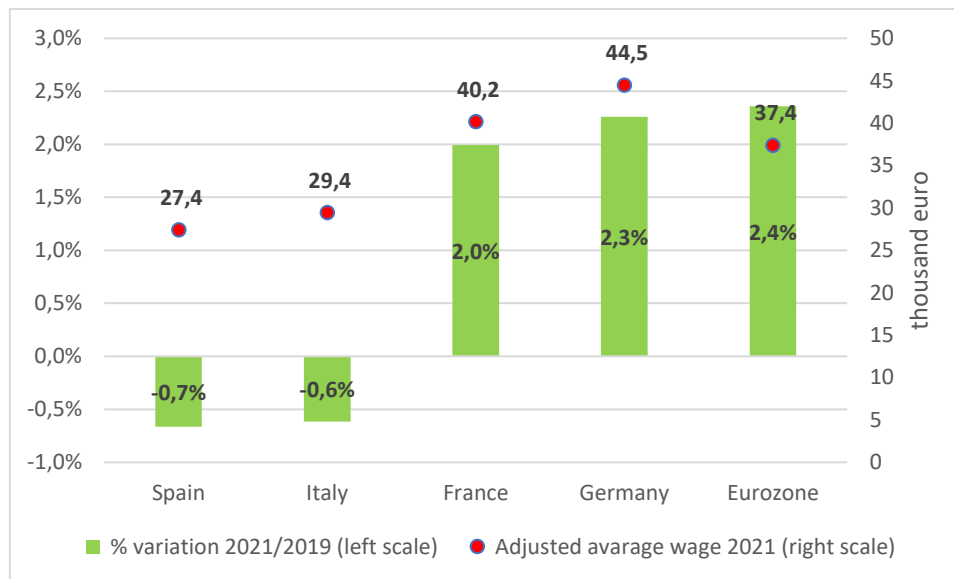
**Table 3 - Average annual gross wage (in euro) per full-time and full-year equivalent employee in the four largest European economies and in the Eurozone, 2019-2021**

|                 | 2019   | 2020   | 2021   |
|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|
| <b>Germany</b>  | 43,485 | 43,092 | 44,468 |
| <b>France</b>   | 39,385 | 38,096 | 40,170 |
| <b>Italy</b>    | 29,623 | 27,868 | 29,440 |
| <b>Spain</b>    | 27,587 | 26,547 | 27,404 |
| <b>Eurozone</b> | 36,521 | 35,987 | 37,382 |

Source: FDV elaboration on EUROSTAT data

When comparing 2021 with 2019, it is possible to see that Spain and Italy have not yet recovered the average wage level they had before the pandemic emergency, while the French, German and Eurozone wage average increased by +2.0% or more (Figure 4).

**Figure 4 - Adjusted average annual gross wages in 2021 (in euro) and % variation (2021/2019) in the four largest European economies and the Eurozone**



Source: FDV elaboration on EUROSTAT data

Regarding the composition of the employed labour force in the main Eurozone economies, in 2021 Italy had the lowest share of managers (1.4%) and professionals (13.6%); in contrast, the share of elementary occupations was 13.0%, well above the same share recorded in Germany, France and the Eurozone, and just below that of Spain (Table 4).

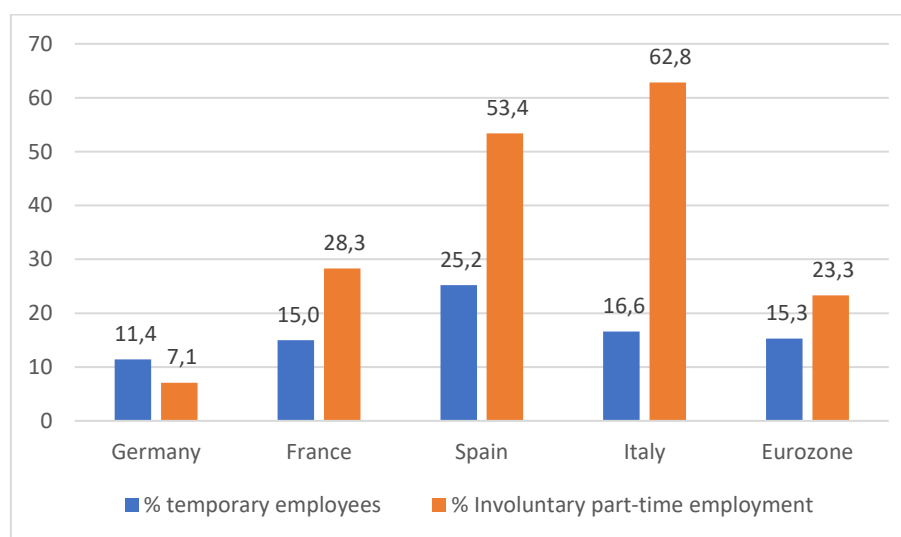
**Table 4 - Percentage distribution of employees (15-64 years) by main occupational groups in the four largest European economies and in the Eurozone, 2021**

|  | Germany | France | Italy  | Spain  | Eurozone |
|--|---------|--------|--------|--------|----------|
| <b>Managers</b>                                | 3.3%    | 5.6%   | 1.4%   | 2.7%   | 3.8%     |
| <b>Professionals</b>                           | 20.7%   | 23.4%  | 13.6%  | 19.7%  | 21.3%    |
| <b>Technicians and associate professionals</b> | 21.0%   | 18.9%  | 17.6%  | 12.2%  | 17.6%    |
| <b>Clerical support workers</b>                | 14.6%   | 10.1%  | 16.1%  | 12.2%  | 12.7%    |
| <b>Service and sales workers</b>               | 13.3%   | 14.3%  | 16.6%  | 19.7%  | 15.7%    |
| <b>Specialised and skilled manual workers</b>  | 19.4%   | 17.9%  | 21.9%  | 19.2%  | 18.9%    |
| <b>Elementary occupations</b>                  | 7.7%    | 9.8%   | 13.0%  | 14.2%  | 9.9%     |
| <b>Total</b>                                   | 100.0%  | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0%   |

Source: FDV elaboration on EUROSTAT data

Moreover, in 2021, the share of fixed-term employees on the total number of employees reached 16.6% (lower only than in Spain), and the share of involuntary part-time<sup>4</sup> on the total number of part-time employment stood at 62.8%, which is higher than in other European countries and the Eurozone average (Figure 5).

**Figure 5 - Temporary employees as percentage of the total number of employees and involuntary part-time employment as percentage of the total part-time employment in the four largest European economies and the Eurozone, 15-64 years, 2021**



Source: FDV elaboration on EUROSTAT data

<sup>4</sup> Involuntary part-time identifies employed persons who indicate that the reason for their part-time job is not to have found a full-time one.



## 5. Occupational distress and substantial unemployment in Italy in 2021

Lastly, Ferrucci & Giangrande (2022) redefined and updated the labour market indicators already elaborated in previous research published by the Giuseppe Di Vittorio Foundation (FDV). These indicators are useful to trace the occupational distress and the real consistency of unemployment in Italy, with the aim to understand the labour market dynamics and to discuss appropriate economic policies.

The Occupational Distress Area (ODA)<sup>5</sup> is made up of temporary employees who would like a stable contract (*involuntary temporary workers*) and part-time workers who would like a full-time job (*involuntary part-time workers*), as well as the workers absent from work for an expected period of three months or less, due to temporary layoff or lack of work/reduced activity (*suspended employed*). As shown in the Table 5, the ODA in Italy in 2021 counted 4 million and 872 thousand people from 15 to 74 years old. The corresponding Occupational Distress Rate (ODR), calculated as the ratio between those employed in the ODA and the total number of employed, was 21.7%.

**Table 5 – Occupational Distress Area (in thousand) and Occupational Distress Rate (%) of employed (15-74 years), Italy, 2021**

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| Involuntary temporary workers (ITW)           | 2,232        |
| Involuntary part-time workers (IPTW)          | 1,765        |
| ITW and IPTW                                  | 784          |
| Suspended employed                            | 91           |
| <b>Total Occupational Distress Area (ODA)</b> | <b>4,872</b> |
| Other employed                                | 17,591       |
| Total employed                                | 22,463       |
| <b>Occupational Distress Rate (ODR) (%)</b>   | <b>21.7</b>  |

*Source: FDV elaboration on ISTAT data*

The Substantial Unemployment Area (SUA) consists of the formal unemployed as recorded by the official statistics, and the inactive people in working age with previous work experience and immediately available to work, but that are not seeking jobs due to specific reasons. These can be grouped into three main types of inactives: discouraged, blocked or suspended (Ferrucci & Giangrande, 2021). As shown in the Table 6, the SUA in Italy consists of 4 million and 278 thousand people (15-74 years) in 2021, from whom 2 million and 367 thousand are formally unemployed. The

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<sup>5</sup> The reference group, which in previous research consisted of the employed from 15-64 years old, now is made up of the employed from 15-74 years old. The shift to the more inclusive 15–74-year-old class is motivated by the progressive ageing of the employed population.

Substantial Unemployment Rate (SUR), calculated as the ratio between SUA and the Extended Labour Force (ELF)<sup>6</sup>, is 16.0% - much higher than the corresponding official unemployment rate (9.5%) and yet lower than the non-participation rate estimated by ISTAT (19.3%).

**Table 6 - Substantial Unemployment Area and Extended Labour Force (in thousand) and Substantial Unemployment Rate (%), 15-74 years, Italy, 2021**

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| Unemployed                                       | 2,367        |
| Discouraged inactive                             | 696          |
| Blocked inactive                                 | 273          |
| Suspended inactive                               | 943          |
| <b>Total Substantial Unemployment Area (SUA)</b> | <b>4,278</b> |
| Employed   | 22,463       |
| Extended Labour Force                            | 26,741       |
| <b>Substantial Unemployment Rate (SUA) (%)</b>   | <b>16.0</b>  |

*Source: FDV elaboration on ISTAT data*

In conclusion, in 2021 the Occupational Distress and the Substantial Unemployment Areas involve more than 9.1 million people in Italy experiencing either a condition of hardship at work (caused by a limited time horizon of the employment relationship and/or insufficient number of hours compared to their needs, or a temporary suspension caused by the lack of work), or suffering a condition of substantial unemployment.

## 6. Discussion and concluding remarks

In this paper, we analysed Italy's wage and employment dynamics in comparison to the other main Eurozone economies, with a focus on the most precarious segments of the Italian labour market. The structural difficulties of the Italian labour market (i.e. the failure to catch up on hours worked, the slow recovery of employment, the growth of involuntary part-time work and the stagnation of real wages, see Giangrande 2020, 2021b), which emerged dramatically after the Great Recession of 2008, were worsened by the pandemic crisis. The consequences of the last crises on the labour market particularly affected precarious workers (Di Nunzio, Pedaci & Pirro, 2020), and were only partly mitigated by the freeze on layoff and the massive recourse to social safety net programs (Filippi *et al.*, 2020).

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<sup>6</sup> For Extended Labour Force we mean the sum of employed and the substantial unemployed.

Despite the trend decrease of the hours worked in Italy, in 2019 the average hours per employee was still significantly higher in Italy than in France or Germany, against a much lower average wage. Indeed, the stagnation of real wages is distancing Italy from the main European economies: the distance from the average wages of France and, in particular, Germany, which was already considerable before 2020, has widened further.

The changes in the structure of the employed labour force, which, unlike in other European countries, sees a growth of the weight of less qualified professions and, therefore, lower-paid ones, contribute to this wage dynamic and the working poverty.

The progressive deterioration in the quality of work and wages is the result of economic policies decided by governments and implemented by firms, with more determination since 2009 following the Great Crisis. These policies had the implicit aim of recovering competitiveness through wage moderation, using temporary employment as a *locomotive* in the economic growth phases and as the *last carriage* to be easily disposed of in the recession phases.

This choice exacerbated the long Italian economic decline (Giangrande, 2021a) and increased the distance from the main Eurozone economies. This happened because, in a context characterised by micro and small firms located in low value-added sectors, together with the pre-pandemic framework of severe fiscal consolidation, the policy of wage moderation ended up compressing consumption and aggregate demand, thus disincentivising private investment and contributing to worsening firms' expectations. Indeed, in the capitalist economy, the wage has a double role: it is a cost for the individual firm but, in the meantime, it is also a component of aggregate demand through the consumption (Bhaduri & Marglin, 1990; Hein, 2017; Kalecki, 1968, 1971).

From this paper a worrying wage dynamic emerges in Italy, which in 2021 showed a worsening divergence from Germany, France, and the Eurozone. The level of Italy's average annual gross wage is affected by both the strong discontinuity of employment and the higher presence of lower occupations. These two features of the Italian labour market are the result of a production system with a low propensity to innovation. Indeed, from the Kaldorian framework we assume the link between the rate of growth of labour productivity and the output growth rate, and the idea that the path of innovation is dependent on the dynamics of aggregate demand, according to the so-called Verdoorn Law (Verdoorn, 1949) or Kaldor's second law (Kaldor, 1966). The unmistakable sign of the structural weakness of the labour demand expressed by Italian firms is represented by the

growing weight of temporary employment and the involuntary part-time, two conditions that workers suffer rather than choose.

All these elements signal the need and urgency to address the wage issue together with the issue of employment quality, relaunching the *full and good employment* (CGIL, 2022) through four priority actions:

- (i) the renewal of wage contracts. ISTAT (2022) certifies that, in June 2022, about 6.4 million employees are waiting for contracts' renewal (51,6% of employees and wage bill). Furthermore, ISTAT calculates that, in June 2022, compared to the same month of the previous year, the average time to renew expired contracts increased from 28.1 months to 30.7 months;
- (ii) the reduction of fixed-term contract types. Indeed, against precariousness and in-work poverty, it is crucial to restore the permanent and stable employment, reducing the number of non-standard contracts and limiting the use of temporary employment by firms. This would be useful also to incentivise firms to increase productivity through investment in innovation instead of competing by reducing production costs, especially wages;
- (iii) the active role of the State in the economy. It is fundamental to tie the investments envisaged in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) to the highest multiplier effect on employment and to relaunch the industrial policies for those sectors with the highest added value. This would have the double objective of increasing the number of employed and the quality of employment through its direct and indirect creation, and structurally reindustrialising Italy in order to produce goods that now are imported;
- (iv) the reform of social safety net programs. The fragmentation of the temporary layoff support programs that emerged during the pandemic emergency showed the structural weakness of Italian social protection system, which can be corrected through a comprehensive reform of the welfare based on the principles of universality, inclusivity and equity.

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