

Public services meeting migrants
The Italian public service union and immigration
Bari, 16 March 2010

It is essential for the public services union to be closely involved in the complex question of how to address migration. The impact of the profound changes in the make-up of society, the new needs of groups, individuals and families of migrants and the challenge of integration and multiculturalism, make serious demands on the design of the welfare state produced to date. This is the case in Italy, as in all European states, particularly those facing the Mediterranean.

National and local welfare systems face new priorities and the need for change in the way services are structured. Employees and professionals in the civil service or in third sector bodies involved in reception and integration are the first to be called upon to meet these requirements and experience the difficulties of this change. The ability to create a society that is fair, cohesive and inclusive, in which respect for human and civil rights is combined with legality and safety and where integration and reception are combined with the ability to adequately respond to needs, has become a top priority for public service employees.

Statistics illustrate the scale of this challenge in a country like Italy, where in less than twenty years the total number of resident migrants (those living in the country legally) has risen from 350,000 to 4.3 million, with the country receiving over 300,000 people every year. (According to one forecast there will be 12 million foreign residents in Italy by 2060, representing 20% of the population). Almost one tenth of Italy's GDP is produced by migrants, including 2 million workers who pay social security contributions. Around one million belong to a union and there are 250,000 foreign business owners. Over 650,000 students in Italian schools come from other countries or are of foreign descent. The question of housing and insertion in local communities which we would like to see culturally open, socially united, safe and cohesive, is just as important as that of initial reception (and services for entry, leave to remain and permanent residence).

Public administrations are therefore facing strong structural demand for general or targeted services. The immediate effects are most obvious for local organisations, which are the first to receive requests for housing, family services, schooling, intercultural education and employment. But they are also felt by the regions which must reassess and adapt vital services based on demographic changes throughout the healthcare system. The concern of the Puglia Region, which is hosting the conference, is thus well-placed.

Generally speaking this will involve promoting strategies for monitoring and facilitating the insertion of families, workers, young people and children, providing active support through access to services and integration within the fabric of local communities, with particular attention to the most difficult situations across the entire public sector. What is certain is that the development of effective instruments together with more far-reaching social policies, from a long-term structural perspective (and not simply in reaction to an "emergency"), as well as stimulating policies of integration for those arriving in relation to pre-existing situations, represent an important resource for sustainable development, both in economic and socio-demographic terms.

In many cases migrant workers make up the majority of those employed in welfare services provided to the entire community. This is currently the case above all with regard to domestic help for the

elderly, the disabled or families (almost 70% of domestic workers and carers were not born in Italy), but also for personal social services organised collectively (one out of ten nurses, and even more among newly-hired staff, and a large proportion of workers collaborating with the public health sector, are employees who come from and were trained in other countries.)

It is thus important to understand how this affects us and how we need to react. There is a profound lack of information and coordination in this regard. All too often frontline public employees who come into direct contact with the effects of migratory flows are left without enough assistance. The support offered to these workers needs to be greatly improved and there is a growing need for specific training, both in relation to laws and foreign languages and the ability to manage multicultural relations. Continuous targeted training is needed. Similarly, for an attentive and innovative service, new profiles and skills must be created which can increase our ability to understand and respond to the challenges of an increasingly global Europe and Mediterranean.

The question we must ask ourselves – as a body committed to public services and the representation of workers – is how are we preparing to address the great commitment that migration requires of us? What is being done by the countries on the banks of the Mediterranean, what are the best practices currently in use? We need to discuss these matters together, with representatives from the political sphere, international institutions and NGOs, and make comparisons based on specific knowledge. This is why today's Euromediterranean Conference is so important, just as the Malaga conference will be. Today the unions from the Mediterranean group, supported by EPSU and the PSI, are launching a very important project, to come together to study and start planning a future of coexistence and integration in which advanced high-quality public services will play a crucial role.

Speech by Daniela Volpato, National Secretary of FP-CISL, 16 March 2010