

Research frontiers in Economic Sociology and Labour Studies (ResFron ESLS)

Seminar

Do Institutions Matter for Low Wage Workers in Retail Multinationals? A US-Italy Comparison on Subjective and Objective Dimensions of Job Quality

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Seminar Room (via Conservatorio side), h. 11.00-13.00

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via Conservatorio 7 - Milan



The retail sector is one of the largest low-wage industries, both in the US and Europe, involving the weakest components of the labor force - women, young people, immigrants and low educated people - and providing jobs that are often very precarious. Working conditions, level of precariousness and the dimensions of it (in terms of number of working hours, unpredictability of working schedules and risk of losing the job) do vary by country in a significant way. The research aims at comparing the job quality in the retail trade in the US and in Italy, by taking into consideration both objective dimensions of that quality, namely the employment conditions and the characteristics of the job contents, and its subjective dimensions, i.e. reasons of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the job.

About 100 semi-structured interviews with front-line service workers and union representatives were collected in chain clothing stores of medium/low price level in two large cities: Milan and New York. To improve the comparison some stores belonging to multinational chains present in both Milan and NY were selected.

The Italy/US comparison is very useful to highlight how the different institutional contexts (labor legislation, unionization) do have an impact on the objective dimensions of job quality, while the subjective dimensions might be affected by the different expectations that workers have about their job in the retail sector and by managers' attitudes. Moreover, local labor market conditions and characteristics of the labor force employed in the sector are likely to influence the workers' and managers' expectations. Interactions with customers are also an important source of satisfaction/dissatisfaction that seems less affected by the specificities of the national context.