

## ***Tocca uno tocca tutti / What concerns one concerns all***

by **Angelika Stepken**

New alliances in Prato: migrant workers, autonomous trade unionists and artists for a better life.

The city of Prato, located around 20 kilometers northwest of Florence, has 194000 inhabitants, a good quarter of whom are foreigners. It has a long history in the textile industry, since the Renaissance. To this day, the archives of the long-distance trader and wool producer Francesco Datini, which he left behind in 1410, are frequented by international researchers. In the post-war period, Prato was the "rag center of Europe" and attracted workers from the south of Italy. In the 1980s, the first Chinese from the small town of Wenzhou in the Zhejiang region came to the flourishing industrial metropolis, initially as guest workers, before setting up their own companies. Over time Prato became the largest textile location in Europe and the largest Chinatown in Europe with officially 23000 Chinese residents (estimated: more than twice as many) and circa 124 different ethnic groups that have relocated there. Up to 1.5 million euros are transferred to China from the city every day by money transfer. Labor in the almost 8,000 textile and fashion supply companies is largely based on illegal moonlighting and the quasi-lawless status of migrant workers.

In 2017 the Italian wide grassroots trade unions SI Cobas opened their first office in Prato / Firenze. Only a few months later first groups of workers self organized strikes in the textile sector, and that was just the beginning of a unique and ongoing mobilization until today. In 2021 during the strikes at Texprint in Prato - the third largest fabric printing company in Europe – several local artists got into conversation with the striking workers and the SI Cobas coordinators. This was the beginning of an extraordinary new alliance, based not on "external solidarity", but on how to contribute to the workers' struggle, how to support their voices through artistic competencies and a permanent dialogue. Over the course of three years the "Comunità di lotta" (community of struggle) of migrant workers and unionists includes a steadily growing collective of artists and curators who named themselves after the strike slogan *ToccaUnoToccaTutti*.

Unregulated working hours of up to 12 hours per 7 days are no exception in the textile companies. Migrant workers are often recruited directly in the reception centers for asylum applications. The existence of these workers is extremely precarious: if they lose their jobs, they lose their place to sleep and residence permit. 42000 workers were employed in Prato's export economy in 2021, whose profits increased by 44% in the textile industry and 94% in the clothing industry in the same year. The massive crisis in the Italian textile industry around 2009 coincided with a boom in Chinese Pronto Moda and its cheap offers for European Alta Moda companies. In his 2006 book *Gomorra*, Roberto Saviano wrote extensively about the mafia-like structures of white-collar crime in the Prato textile sector. On December 1, 2013, seven Chinese workers died when "Teresa Moda", one of the many textile factories in the Macrolotto industrial area in the south of Prato, went up in flames. Links between the 'Ndrangheta and the Chinese mafia repeatedly lead to legal proceedings involving money laundering, illegal disposal of toxic waste, etc., which are usually dropped in the end. Official inspections against illegal employment, which are supposed to take place unannounced, are often announced behind the scenes. The national anti-mafia prosecutor

Federico Cafiero De Raho called Prato "the European capital of the Chinese mafia" in 2018. Thousands of small companies in Prato are surviving with disguised procurements for the big fashion brands. The official politics tries instead to continue the false narration of two separate districts: the good one of excellence and Made in Italy in Prato and the bad one of black labour, migrants etc.

Marco Ravasio, anthropologist who wrote his master's thesis on Prato and the 8x5 Movement and author of the article *Education as a practice of freedom. Prato and the School of Fight 8x5* (2023), affirms: "In the last 40 years, the textile sector has changed a lot, but it is still the same hell for the workers. With just one difference: yesterday it was the inhabitants of Prato who were exploited, today it is the migrants. In fact, Prato appears to be a special economic zone in which workers' rights, or at least those of migrant workers, who appear to be completely subjugated, are excluded. Their exploitation is based on three pillars: the failure of the reception systems for migrants, the endless working hours, the exclusion from the regular housing market. These pillars support a solid wall that separates the lives of migrant workers from those of society in Prato. A dehumanization that is clearly felt by those who suffer from it."

At the beginning of 2021, the Texprint company summarily dismissed Pakistani, Senegalese and Chinese workers after they denounced their working conditions. Eighteen workers then went on strike in January, which lasted nine months. It provoked heavy company counter-demonstrations, involved thugs and culminated in a hunger strike in September 2021. The strikers held out in a tent outside the factory gates for 230 days and nights: Their banner reads: "8x5 - No more slaves, we want a better life". They started a hunger strike in front of the town hall which was violently ended after two days, the workers were evicted and four arrests were made for "resisting public officials". A few weeks after the hunger strike, 15 different small, red, 7x7 cm stickers suddenly appeared all over the city: they showed a heart, the text *ToccaUnoToccaTutti*, a date and a QR code. If you scan the QR code, you can see short documentary videos showing the actions and violent confrontations of the Texprint workers from January 21 to September 30. The stickers were produced and distributed by the *ToccaUnoToccaTutti* artists collective and then passed on en masse by workers and strikers or sent by cell phone. The stickers were presented at a two-day public meeting with discussions. The artists' idea: To regain publicity - after and despite police violence - to bring criticism of working conditions in the Prato textile industry from the periphery to the center, to agitate urban society. The films can still be seen today on the website [www.toccaunotoccatutti.net](http://www.toccaunotoccatutti.net) and, together with the material and actions of the following months, will one day become part of an archive of migrant workers' struggles in Prato, possibly housed in the non-profit Istituto Ernesto di Martino, which is home to the largest private European collection of audio documents of proletarian and popular culture.

In the winter of 2021, a ruling by the Prato labor court orders the first reinstatement of a Texprint worker, and the labor inspectorate officially certifies the exploitative working conditions in the company. For the first time since autumn 2018, workers succeeded in monitoring the textile and clothing district in Prato and organizing the migrant workers. The grassroots trade unions SI Cobas communicated after the first verdicts, that they proved the exploitation at Texprint and that strikers have always been right. Now they demanded regular contracts, the extension of residence permits, the claim all wages owed and not paid

during the years of exploitation. This first "victory" of the Texprint workers is covered by the national press, including a major report in *L'Espresso* entitled: "The slaves of the textile sector, 12 hours of work a day. Those who protest are blackmailed and beaten to a pulp", which focuses on the mafia-like structures in the European capital of illegal employment, but also congratulates the two colleagues Sarah Caudiero and Luca Toscano from SI Cobas for Prato and Florence on having achieved the "miracle" of better working conditions. Both trade unionists had themselves been the subject of criminalization attempts during the struggles and were issued with a "Foglio di Via" by the local police headquarters in Prato in 2019 and again in neighboring Campo Bisenzio in 2023 for distributing leaflets in front of companies. A "Foglio di Via" is similar to a banishment: the person in question is - for the duration of three years - only allowed to enter the city for work purposes and after prior registration with the police. In the case of Luca and Sarah the "Foglio di Via" has been withdrawn after legal request and public manifestations.

Protests by migrant workers began in spring/summer 2018 at the gates of three factories in Prato: the Tintoria DL dye works (with 24 workers), the Tintoria Fada dye works (with 60 workers) and Gruccia Creations, which produces plastic clothes hangers with 12 employees: they were protesting against 12-hour working days, 7 working days a week, hourly wages of 4 euros, working conditions without regular contracts. They risked a lot with their protest: not only the loss of income (there are no strike funds in Italy), the loss of their job, the loss of their accommodation, the loss of their residence permit in Italy. There were strikes, police operations, violent eviction squads, hospital admissions, sit-ins - and finally the first, actually improved employment contracts and working hours. But there was also intimidation of the autonomous trade union by means of these police "Foglio di Via". In summer 2019, the author Simona Baldanzi summarized the industrial action of the past year in an article on "[www.jacobinitalia.it](http://www.jacobinitalia.it)" and recalled the exclamation of a striker "This is not a war between Pakistanis and Chinese, but between workers and exploiters. Now we are only Pakistanis, but slowly, slowly all workers will take to the streets".

April 30, 2022: the artists' collective ToccaUnoToccaTutti invites Oppy De Bernardo, an Italian-Swiss colleague, to collaborate on a nomadic installation that could support the Movimento 8x5 struggles. The work by Oppy De Bernardo was initially conceived as a means to express solidarity with the mayor of Riace, Mimmo Lucano. Lucano had revitalized the Calabrian village of Riace by welcoming and settling migrants there and was then expelled from the town by the right-wing Interior Minister Salvini (Lega), who endorsed anti-migration policies. Oppy De Bernardo had installed a light bulb sign on a truck that stated: *La legge è uguale per tutti* (The law is the same for everyone) which should have departed from Riace (actually it didn't for logistic issues) to various other places and stopped in front of those factories in Prato where strikes had recently happened. Workers, trade unionists and local residents gathered next to the truck to talk about the labor struggles against exploitation.

Six months later, on 13 November 2022, the artists' collective - which had now grown to a group of around 20 people - met in front of the Iron&Logistics company in Prato and organized a one-day, unannounced exhibition outside the strike site. This very area had been cleared by the police a week earlier because it was not a "public" space. With the artistic

action, it was occupied again and became a place for intensive discussions between workers and artists.

The alliance of migrant workers, trade unionists, and artists may seem a highly reflective balancing act: how to create awareness for the conflicts of migrant workers and support their voices without "adorning" the position of an artist with their struggles or getting lost in discussions on abstract macro-levels? In Prato the strategy of all participants has "simply" been: to struggle together, not talking about the struggle but being part of it. Starting with the stickers in town, where the artists introduced their means to show what happened in front of the factories up to the public discussions with the workers around the van with the bulb slogan and the physical occupation in front of Iron&Logistics, all interventions grew out of a permanent dialogue within the triangle workers, unionists, artists. Such the collective has been growing with the struggles.

After May 2023 workers, SI Cobas coordinators and artists discussed mainly four topics: the relationship between workers and commodities, the concept of the inhuman, the language of justice and the experience of different times and different narratives. These joint discussions gave rise to the project of a one-day exhibition in various locations in Prato on October 8, 2023. Workers, trade unionists and artists jointly reconstructed the activity of the struggles, legal procedures, disputes, complaints and "victories" since 2018 and conceived together an exhibition tour through the city to the periphery, from the studio spaces to the union headquarters. The title of the exhibition is simply *Arte e lotte operaie* (art and workers' struggles). Installations (for example, the weight of a court orderly on the seat of a child's rocker), comic drawings on the struggles, videos alternate with theoretical texts on the aforementioned themes and a graphic timeline of the struggles since 2018: a long and complex list of the places and resistances and goals achieved and - in the lower half of the paper roll - the chronology of all the criminal trials highlighting the justice which usually tried to protect the traffic of goods, not the humans.

"The actions of ToccaUnoToccaTutti are not only expressions of solidarity in support of the workers' struggle, but also a way of working towards the construction of an artistic and economic model based on sharing and not on competition, on solidarity and not on indifference," writes ToccaUnoToccaTutti in one of its own pamphlets for the exhibition in October. And the SI Cobas colleagues summarize: "Five years of battles, victories, conquests, but also trials, injustices and waiting, interwoven with this line, the art that does not stand aside, does not observe, does not describe, but strengthens. Fighting. To give a voice to the last. To tell the truth. To create community. ... Militant art, by the people and for the people." Together with the workers and SI Cobas they are preparing now a film about the exhibition and about the (successful) history of struggles in Prato which then should travel to other zones of workers' conflicts and encourage collective, self organized fights for a better life.

In Prato meanwhile the fight against the omnipotence of the big brands, their system of exploiting the weakest and hiding the base of their illegal profits will continue in an ongoing community of struggles - and victories.