

VareseNews

Day foreigners. We can't do without them.

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"We're fed up. Border workers are not tax evaders." Placards, banners and slogans, as they have never been seen before. A few days ago, about a thousand Italian workers met outside the Italian consulate in Lugano. The protest resulted after the implementation of measures for the "tax shield", which, in fact, does not concern border workers in any way, and which simply entails filling in a form. Now, this has been extended until 30 April.

Who are the border workers, how many of them are there, and what do they do?

The first question is about numbers. By no means is it a marginal phenomenon. At the end of September, in Canton Ticino, there were 44,000 border workers, a little fewer than half of whom came from the province of Varese. If we consider that there are no more than 300,000 people living in that area, we can understand how significant the phenomenon is for the people in Canton Ticino, but it is no less significant for those in the province of Varese, because it brings significant wealth to the area.

As far as numbers are concerned, over the last thirty years, the phenomenon has undergone substantial evolution.

In 1980, there were 30,000 border workers; by 1990, this number had grown considerably to 40,000. Over the following decade, as a result of a deep economic crisis in Canton Ticino, the number fell to the lowest ever, in 1999, of fewer than 28,000. In 2000, the number started growing again, reaching an all-time high in the last few months, of over 44,000.

The evolution of this phenomenon is not limited merely to a numerical calculation.

The role of the border worker has also changed radically in these thirty years.

According to a study by the Swiss Statistics Institute, in 1990, 62% of the Italian workers in Ticino were unskilled, and 28% were partially skilled; three quarters of the jobs were connected with the building trade and with manufacturing industry. Today, the workers are more highly skilled, and the main job sectors are logistics, biotechnology and information technology. And there is ever increasing growth in the education sector, where the three Swiss universities employ hundreds of Italian lecturers.

In short, as Siegfried Alberton, a Company and Social Sciences lecturer and researcher at SUPSI, states, "We can't do without border workers." His analysis is in answer to a delicate question because the crisis is felt even in Ticino, and there is great social and political tension with a Ticino league, which often insults the colleagues from across the border, threatening them with severe retaliation. It should be remembered that Ticino is one of the few Swiss cantons that voted down the bilateral agreement, because they considered them to be dangerous for the local economy. Scientists and businesspeople think quite differently, because they have understood that the Swiss model for economic development cannot exclude a strong partnership with Italy. Stopping the flow of border workers would be a terrible mistake, explains Alberton, who adds, "The unemployment rate would probably be even higher, because if certain activities that work well disappeared, the jobs of locals it would also

disappear.”

Less restrictive regulations, on the one hand, and expansion of the service industry, on the other, are leading to differentiation of the demand for border workers. This topic will continue to be significant for long time, and it is one that Italy pays little attention to, about which little is known. And this is a terrible mistake, because about 20,000 workers cross the border every day to work in a variety of companies. And it is a mistake also from a social and cultural point of view, because, like other foreign countries, Canton Ticino is increasingly attracting more highly qualified people, for whom research is also very important. Unlike other, distant countries, Canton Ticino is a neighbour, with whom we could develop interesting relations.

Leaving the analysis of this topic only to those in Ticino is a terrible mistake and a loss of interesting opportunities for Italy, not to mention the 20,000 workers.

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