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The supermarket works. But at whose expense?

The hidden cost of exploitation in Italian large-scale retail. And why workers are not the only ones paying the price.

A supermarket opens regularly, keeps its shelves stocked, serves customers and meets its financial targets. Revenue grows, staff costs remain under control and margins are maintained. Management congratulates itself on the results achieved.

But how were those financial results obtained?

The financial result does not show how many hours of work went unpaid, how many rest periods were denied or how much work was loaded onto an insufficient workforce. If seven employees are needed to cover a shift properly, but the company deliberately chooses to employ only three to save on staffing, we are not witnessing an extraordinary example of efficiency. We are witnessing a precise choice: remove four necessary people and expect the remaining three to do the work of seven. The tasks remain the same: unload goods, restock shelves, staff the tills, assist customers, check expiry dates and clean the premises.

The company reduces resources, but not the performance required.

Each employee must compensate for the work of several people, sustaining a pace and workload that should not fall on them. When those making these decisions know the real staffing requirement and deliberately choose not to fund it to increase margins, they are not making a planning mistake. They are knowingly transferring part of the cost of the business onto the people working in it. It is they who must rush, give up breaks, bear excessive workloads and stay beyond their hours. And when unpaid hours are imposed or entitled rest periods systematically denied, we are no longer talking about questionable management.

We are talking about labour exploitation.

Meanwhile, the supermarket keeps selling. Exhausted staff become normal, insufficient staffing becomes the reference for planning subsequent shifts, and the savings appear in the financial results as a management success. This is precisely the most serious point: when exploitation is knowingly maintained because it makes financial targets achievable, it is no longer an unforeseen consequence of the organisational model. It has become one of the means through which that model generates profit. The same logic appears in contracts and working-time management. The accounts collected reveal situations where workers are hired for twenty hours a week, paid for twenty, but employed practically full-time, sometimes seven days out of seven, with barely half a day off.

When a company knows the hours actually worked and chooses not to pay for them, the saving does not come from greater productivity. It comes from using labour it should have paid for but instead obtains for free. Involuntary part-time work is a documented problem in Italian retail. But there is an even more penalising mechanism: contractually guaranteeing few hours while demanding far greater availability, without allowing the worker to organise the remaining time independently. Someone who discovers only on Friday evening when they will work the following week cannot plan family commitments or arrange a second job.

They are left with insufficient pay and personal availability almost entirely dictated by the company. The business benefits from flexibility; the employee bears its financial and personal cost.

Job insecurity further unbalances this relationship. Some people spend years accepting contract renewals, excessive shifts and last-minute requests, hoping eventually to obtain stable employment. The prospect of a permanent contract becomes an extremely powerful lever in the hands of whoever decides whether to renew the employment relationship. The worker learns that challenging abuse may mean jeopardising their employment prospects. And when that wage supports a family, resisting is not a choice without consequences. This is how the need to work is used to obtain availability the contract does not guarantee and discourage those who would seek to enforce their rights.

The result is already before our eyes: employees who consider themselves lucky because they work continuous shifts, know their schedules several days ahead or manage to take their entitled rest. We have reached the point where respecting working conditions is perceived as a favour from the company rather than a worker's right.

And this mechanism does not stop with the most vulnerable employees. It also involves those who believe they have finally attained a better professional position. An employee demonstrates reliability, experience, willingness and problem-solving ability. They are offered a promotion: Supervisor, Deputy Manager, Store Manager, Store Director. Titles suggesting greater prestige, decision-making autonomy, financial recognition and opportunities for growth. After years of sacrifice, that person is proud of the trust placed in them. Perhaps they even receive two hundred or three hundred euros more a month.

In everyday life, however, that title changes much less than the employee imagined. They continue unloading goods, restocking shelves, working on tills and covering absences. The difference is that they must now also guarantee the functioning of the entire supermarket, regardless of the staff and resources the company provides. When someone falls ill, they must find a solution. When staffing is insufficient, they must compensate personally. When financial targets are missed, they must answer for it, even though they could not decide how many people to hire or which resources to use.

The contractual forty hours become fifty, sixty, sixty-five. And in some businesses, the flat-rate overtime allowance is treated as permission to demand any amount of additional work. For three hundred euros extra a month, the company may obtain over a hundred additional working hours a month when a manager consistently moves from forty to sixty-five hours a week. The employee believes they have received a promotion. In these situations, the company has mainly acquired

someone onto whom it can offload greater responsibility and from whom it can demand practically unlimited availability, at a negligible additional cost compared with the work required.

But the problem does not end with hours and pay. These people are given a managerial title without necessarily being prepared to exercise a true management function. The title promises professional growth, but in practice often recognises only a greater capacity to endure workloads, pressure and emergencies.

During a recent recruitment process for managers and deputy managers of a new supermarket, I met several candidates already holding similar positions in other food-retail businesses. Some had many years of experience and demonstrated excellent operational abilities.

Yet when the interview moved from operations to the actual management of a supermarket - budgets, margins, KPIs, workforce planning and leadership - surprising gaps emerged. People who had held manager or deputy-manager positions for years could not address fundamental aspects of the managerial function. They did not lack experience, dedication or problem-solving ability. They lacked skills their companies should have developed before entrusting them with those responsibilities. They had learned to handle emergencies, cover absences and guarantee everyday operations, but not to manage the store's financial and human resources with informed judgement.

A manager should be able to analyse a budget, identify the causes of variances, distinguish a staff shortage from a productivity problem, develop employees' skills and make decisions consistent with business objectives. To do so, they must be trained, know the available resources and have real decision-making autonomy. If instead they do not know the budget, cannot decide on hiring and must deliver any result with whatever staffing is imposed on them, what are they actually managing?

The company assigns them responsibility for problems it does not allow them to solve. Instead of developing someone capable of improving the organisation, it secures someone who compensates daily for its shortcomings, working as much as necessary to keep everything standing. The damage also emerges when that person seeks another job. After years with the title of manager, they discover their experience does not match the skills required by a structured organisation. They have sacrificed time, health and family life, believing they were building a career, without receiving professional development appropriate to the responsibilities assumed.

How did we come to regard an organisation of work built on these conditions as normal? To understand it, we need to return to the economic crisis of 2007-2008. Falling consumption and pressure on margins pushed many Italian large-scale retailers to reduce staffing costs, review workforce numbers and increase scheduling flexibility. These measures were adopted during genuine economic difficulty. In 2017, Italian research conducted by TradeLab for EBINTER and the Filcams CGIL research centre addressed a decisive question: would these measures be abandoned at the end of the crisis or become permanent?

Interviews with managers revealed that companies had now integrated new planning tools, new ways of distributing working hours and organisational systems capable of containing costs. They had invested in introducing them and learned to use them. Returning to the previous organisation was no

longer economically attractive.

And this is where the most significant mechanism emerges. During a crisis, a company reduces staffing to contain costs. The remaining employees increase their pace, take on additional duties and do everything possible to maintain service. The supermarket keeps opening, selling and taking revenue. When the emergency ends, however, staffing is not necessarily restored: the savings have already entered the company's budgets and financial objectives. What was presented as a temporary sacrifice becomes the new standard. Restoring staffing to an adequate level is considered a cost increase, even when it merely means returning employees to sustainable working conditions.

It is a mechanism we know in other economic contexts too: a cut is introduced out of necessity, it proves advantageous to maintain, and what should have been temporary becomes permanent. The difference is that, in large-scale retail, behind those savings are people asked to perform more and more every day. Organisational flexibility is a legitimate tool when it distributes work better while respecting contracts, pay and rest. It becomes something else when used to maintain fewer staff than necessary, demand continuous availability and obtain work without recognising the pay due.

The 2007-2008 crisis ended long ago. Businesses' economic difficulties have not disappeared, but we cannot keep attributing to that emergency organisational choices still maintained today because they are advantageous. After almost twenty years, structurally insufficient staffing cannot be treated as a temporary measure.

Someone continues approving those budgets, authorising those resources and demanding those results. It was precisely by exploring these dynamics that I began questioning my initial interpretation. At first I attributed many of these situations mainly to inadequate entrepreneurial preparation: an inability to calculate real staffing needs, organise sustainable shifts, train managers and reconcile financial results with dignified working conditions. Serious problems, but solvable through more competent management. Then I began examining operational and economic dynamics, comparing necessary resources with those actually deployed and listening directly to employees' experiences.

I began recognising situations repeated for years without correction while continuing to generate financial advantages for companies. At that point, the explanation of entrepreneurial incompetence began to fall apart. A workforce-planning mistake can happen. But when a company has known about staffing shortages for years, sees employees systematically working beyond their contractual hours and continues demanding the same results without intervening, incompetence no longer holds as an explanation. A far more disturbing conviction formed in me: in some businesses, exploitation is not an unwanted consequence of poor organisation but a conscious choice through which costs are contained and financial results improved.

The difference is substantial. An unprepared entrepreneur may not understand a problem's causes. But someone who knows the working conditions, knows how many staff are needed, has the power to act and deliberately continues not to do so because it is financially advantageous is not simply making a mistake. They are choosing to make employees pay part of the company's costs. And this is where the most insidious mechanism emerges: it exploits not only people's labour but also their need to

work. Someone supporting a family fears losing their pay.

Someone who has waited years for a stable contract avoids objecting. Someone aspiring to promotion accepts increasing sacrifices. Someone with a strong sense of responsibility feels obliged to compensate for shortages to avoid letting colleagues down. The very qualities a company should value - reliability, dedication, ambition and responsibility - become instruments for obtaining more and more work and availability. The employee keeps sacrificing, the supermarket keeps functioning, and the company keeps benefiting from the savings. But who decides that all this must continue? Every supermarket has a staffing budget, an authorised headcount and financial targets to meet.

These numbers do not set themselves. People decide how much to spend, how many hires to authorise and which results to demand. If ownership or central management approves a budget insufficient for the real requirement, that is where responsibility for the shortage originates. If instead the budget is adequate but the operator chooses not to use it to improve their own financial results, responsibility lies in their decisions. In both cases, when workers' rights are violated, narrow margins or sector difficulties are not sufficient justification.

It is necessary to establish who knew the situation, who had the power to correct it and who chose to maintain it.

No assumptions are needed to reconstruct these responsibilities. What is needed is a comparison of the staffing actually required with that authorised, the hours actually worked with those paid, and hiring requests with the decisions of those who should have approved them. Responsibility should not automatically fall on the person organising shifts, but on those who made the decisions that produced those conditions and those who could have intervened but chose not to.

When a company knows the illegal conditions in which its employees work, has the power to act and chooses to maintain them because they are financially advantageous, exploitation becomes part of its operating model. Costs fall, margins improve and results are celebrated. But part of that result comes from work that should have been paid for and obligations the business failed to meet. How significant can this financial advantage be? An Italian investigation helps us understand. In May 2025, the Guardia di Finanza intervened at a supermarket.

According to the prosecutor's reconstruction, 37 workers were allegedly subjected to exploitative conditions, with working weeks exceeding sixty hours, pay falling in the most serious cases to €1.60 an hour and rest reduced to two days a month. Investigators quantified approximately €1.6 million in unpaid wages and €1.15 million in omitted social-security contributions. The investigation led to precautionary measures against two company officials. The allegations remain subject to final judicial determination. But there is an even more significant element in the investigation. According to the prosecutor, those people accepted illegal conditions because they needed their wages to support their families and had no concrete economic alternatives.

According to the prosecution, their need to work was precisely what those under investigation exploited. It was not a free choice to relinquish their pay or rest. Workers' economic vulnerability made the system alleged by investigators possible. This is the mechanism that Article 603-bis of the Italian

Criminal Code recognises and punishes when the elements of the offence are present: labour exploitation through taking advantage of a state of need. Now consider the economic meaning of those figures. If the findings are confirmed, it will mean that millions of euros due in wages and contributions were not paid.

We are not talking about a business that found a smarter way to produce the same results. We are talking about a financial advantage obtained, according to the prosecution, by withholding resources owed to workers and the social-security system. And here a consequence emerges that is rarely considered. That money is missing not only from employees. It is also missing from the economy of the community where they live. Every euro of unpaid wages reduces a family's available resources: less money to shop, pay for services, support children's education, meet healthcare expenses or build financial security.

When this deprivation affects dozens of workers in the same area, the spending power that sustains local commerce also suffers. The neighbourhood shop, the craftsperson, the restaurateur and other small businesses also depend on the incomes of families living in the community. And when social-security contributions are also unpaid, the damage extends to obligations towards the social-protection system and workers' protections. The saving remains available to those who failed to bear the costs due. The economic consequences also fall on those who never worked for that company.

The damage does not stop with families and the local economy. Exploitation also distorts competition, penalising precisely those entrepreneurs who follow the rules. A supermarket that correctly pays every hour worked, pays contributions and funds adequate staffing bears costs an unscrupulous competitor avoids. The latter can afford more aggressive prices or record higher margins, not because it developed a more efficient organisation, but because it makes people work without giving them what they are owed. The result is a market where those respecting workers' rights must compete with those gaining financial advantages by violating them.

And when these practices are tolerated, those investing in lawful employment are penalised while those depriving employees of resources are financially rewarded. This is not healthy competition. It is an advantage built at the expense of others' labour, which also harms responsible businesses. But money is only part of the price paid. An employee who systematically works beyond their hours, without adequate rest and under continuous pressure, returns home with the physical and mental fatigue accumulated during the day. The consequences affect not only their ability to work the next day, but also their health and family life.

Think of a parent who spends ten or twelve hours in the supermarket and returns home exhausted. They have less energy to support their children, share time with their partner and recover physically. Someone who learns their shifts only at the last moment cannot even calmly plan a medical appointment, a parent-teacher meeting or a family commitment. Chronic overload and insufficient recovery increase risks to physical and mental health; when health problems develop, the consequences also involve families and health services. The business saves on the resources needed to ensure proper working conditions.

People and society bear part of the consequences of that saving. But there is further damage, less visible and destined to leave profound consequences: normalising exploitation changes the culture of work. When someone accepts unpredictable shifts, denied rest and excessive demands for years because they fear losing their wages, they begin adjusting their expectations to the conditions imposed on them. Respect for rights becomes a company concession. Unlimited availability is mistaken for professionalism, while those asking to be paid correctly or to rest are considered uncooperative.

The ideal employee becomes someone who does not object, does not refuse and keeps sacrificing. In areas where finding another job is particularly difficult, this mechanism becomes even stronger. Someone dependent on a single wage ends up accepting conditions they consider unfair because the alternative is jeopardising their family's economic survival. Over time, what should be unacceptable is considered normal.

People stop asking whether a job allows them to live with dignity. They settle for having one. They stop asking whether a promotion corresponds to real professional growth. They settle for the title. They stop demanding schedules compatible with their lives and consider themselves lucky when schedules are at least communicated in advance. The problem is that when a community becomes accustomed to such conditions, abuses become easier to perpetuate. Those who object are considered a problem; those who endure everything become an example to follow.

Young people also grow up observing this reality. They learn that keeping a job means accepting unlimited sacrifices, and that career progression means assuming ever greater responsibility, even at the expense of private life. Those who can seek better opportunities elsewhere. The area loses people, skills and the ability to build an economically and socially stronger future. And this is precisely where a contradiction emerges that is hard to ignore. Many retailers communicate their commitment to sustainability, promote local products, reduce waste and describe their contribution to the community's well-being.

But what benefit does a business bring to a community when it promotes local products while exploiting and impoverishing the people who sustain that community? Buying local products is not enough to support the local economy if, meanwhile, wages owed to workers are withheld, their health is compromised and time is taken from their families. Reducing food waste is not enough if financial results are also obtained through exploiting people. A business cannot call itself socially responsible for what it gives back to its community while ignoring what it takes away.

Fortunately, there are also entrepreneurs who face the sector's difficulties by making different choices. I am fortunate to work with some of them, owners of several supermarkets in Cilento, also involved in opening a new store in Capaccio Scalo. They know well the pressure on margins, high costs, unexpected absences and the complexity of maintaining service seven days a week. They do not have unlimited budgets and face the same economic constraints as other entrepreneurs. The difference is that they do not consider it normal to solve business difficulties by systematically placing their burden on employees.

They work to calculate the staffing actually required, organise shifts guaranteeing adequate rest, distribute workloads fairly and build roles where skills, responsibilities and autonomy have concrete meaning. They review budgets, analyse alternatives and seek solutions respecting both the business's economic sustainability and its people. It is not simple. It requires time, discussions, difficult decisions and even sleepless nights spent seeking better solutions than those that initially seemed possible. I feel deep pride and sincere gratitude at being able to contribute to this work. Working with entrepreneurs who do not look away when organisational difficulties emerge confirms for me that financial results can be pursued without considering employees' sacrifice an acceptable solution.

The tools to do this exist or can be created: real staffing needs can be calculated, sustainable shifts organised, work distributed better, budgets analysed and managers trained to manage people and results. But no tool can replace the will of those making decisions. Everything begins when an entrepreneur stops asking only how much they can save on staffing and starts asking what conditions they are imposing on people to obtain that saving. Sometimes simply putting oneself in employees' shoes is enough to notice problems one has chosen not to see.

Then expertise, commitment and the courage to revisit financially convenient decisions are needed when their cost unfairly falls on workers. The existence of entrepreneurs already choosing this path makes the claim that respecting people is economically impossible even less acceptable. This experience also touches a deeply personal choice. I chose Italy. It is not simply the country where I happened to live. I chose it to build my family and raise my children, attracted also by the importance placed here on affection, solidarity and respect.

Values often called old-fashioned, but which I consider fundamental for the future too. And I continue meeting people who confirm that I made the right choice. Throughout my professional journey, I have met dozens of honest, reliable, responsible employees willing to make enormous efforts to guarantee their families a better life. People who ask to work with dignity, not to be privileged.

Yet precisely by listening to their experiences, I encounter a contradiction I cannot accept. How can people who recognise the value of their own families come to ignore the value of others' families in their business decisions? Those approving budgets and setting financial targets know the value of time spent with their children, a Sunday together, the possibility of being present when family needs them. Why, then, should these same needs matter less for the people working in their supermarkets?

Why should an entrepreneur's time with their children be precious, while a cashier's time with hers is sacrificed to save on staffing? Why should an executive be able to organise family life calmly while considering it acceptable for an employee not even to know next week's shifts? This is not about demanding that a supermarket close every Sunday or that everyone work the same hours. It is about organising the business to guarantee everyone rest, correct pay and the possibility of a life outside work.

When these conditions are denied to contain costs, it is not the market imposing it: someone has decided to make employees' families pay part of the company's saving. Is family a value only when it is

one's own? Do employees' children need their parents less? I would like to put this question particularly to those who know their employees' working conditions and continue celebrating financial results also obtained through their exploitation. Because behind every unpaid working hour and every deliberately denied rest period are precise decisions.

And those decisions also affect people with no power to change them: children spending less time with parents, partners sharing exhaustion and worries, families forced to give up plans and important moments. The contradiction becomes even more serious when we consider the values we want to pass to the next generation. We teach our children honesty, respect, solidarity and the importance of family. But what example do we set when, in our professional responsibilities, we behave as though these principles apply only to those close to us?

What value is there in teaching respect to our children if we then build financial results by trampling on the dignity of other children's parents? Is this the reality we want to leave our children? Because they will inherit not only the businesses, wealth and economic opportunities we have built. They will also inherit the way of treating people that we have helped make normal. And this is another reason why we must change how we judge entrepreneurial success. A business must produce results, cover its costs and remain competitive.

But if it achieves its margins only because it does not pay for all work performed or systematically violates employees' rights, it has not found a solution to its economic problem: it has made others pay for it. Entrepreneurial ability is demonstrated by organising resources better, developing skills, correcting inefficiencies and building conditions that allow people to work well without sacrificing their dignity. Management quality should be judged by those results, not by employees' willingness to endure any abuse. There is something many entrepreneurs continue to underestimate: enabling people to work well does not mean sacrificing revenue.

It means creating the conditions to increase it. Trained, motivated employees supported by an adequate organisation provide better service, strengthen customer trust and contribute to loyalty. It is not merely a question of well-being: it is also a question of financial results. Continuing to squeeze staff to save on labour costs means ignoring how much that same choice may cost in lost sales, dissatisfied customers and missed opportunities.

More competent management that respects people does not benefit employees alone. It improves the conditions for building a solid business capable of retaining skills, ensuring service continuity and contributing to local prosperity. Because supermarket employees are also citizens, parents and consumers. Their families visit local shops, buy services and participate in the economy of the community from which the supermarket itself derives an important share of its revenue. Here is the economic contradiction of a business benefiting from exploitation: it improves its own accounts by impoverishing the people on whom the vitality of its market also depends.

It saves on wages and contributions owed while reducing families' available resources. It demands excessive performance, compromising the health and working capacity of people it needs. It penalises fair entrepreneurs, who must compete against artificially lower costs. And it helps spread a culture in

which working means enduring rather than having the opportunity to build a dignified life. This is the bubble we have normalised. An apparently positive financial result, obtained by making others bear part of the costs necessary to produce it. Those costs do not appear in the accounts; they do in people's lives.

And the damage does not belong to a distant future: it is already being paid for in families, health, lost opportunities and the local economy. Tomorrow we will enter a supermarket again. We will find stocked shelves, products in place and functioning tills. Perhaps we will be irritated by a queue that is too long or because one person at the deli counter cannot serve everyone. Before judging her, let us remember that she does not decide how many people to hire, which budgets to approve or how many hours to fund.

At the checkout, we will meet someone who continues doing their job professionally. Perhaps she will smile at us. We will not know whether she has already worked ten or twelve hours, whether all those hours will be paid, when she can rest or whether she can spend next Sunday with her children. That smile tells us nothing about the conditions in which she works. It tells us only that she is doing her job, despite everything she may be required to endure. And perhaps we should begin demanding the same professionalism and sense of responsibility from those making business decisions.

From those approving insufficient staffing, those demanding results without funding the necessary resources, and those who know employees' rights are being violated but continue benefiting from the savings. Because when a company achieves its financial targets through exploitation, it has not demonstrated better management. It has simply made others pay part of its costs. And next time someone celebrates those margins, before congratulating them we should demand a precise answer: how much of that result was achieved through entrepreneurial competence, and how much by taking from workers what they were owed?

Because behind those numbers are people, families and children to whom we are teaching what success means.

If building our own families' well-being requires sacrificing that of others' families, we have not built a model of success to leave our children. We have built a problem they will have to solve.

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