

Wave of suicides in Italy as social conditions deteriorate

Our correspondent
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A series of recent suicides and suicide attempts has highlighted in dramatic fashion the impact of the economic crisis in Italy.

While the overall number of suicides in Italy remains relatively low, in the past four years suicides related to “economic causes” have increased by 30 percent, according to a report by a national institute devoted to health concerns. These tragic events and the stories behind them have filled the headlines over the past few months in particular. A report published on May 18 listing these types of suicides documents over 30 cases since the beginning of the year.

These cases involved different types of people who shared a common inability to cope with life under existing social conditions. Those who committed suicide included chronically unemployed workers, some who recently lost their jobs or had been otherwise unable to make ends meet, as well as indebted small businessmen. They included individuals as well as couples and families, younger and older workers, immigrants and Italian nationals. Some of these incidents took place in public in shocking fashion, while more frequently people took their lives while hidden from view, leaving friends and neighbors to find their bodies.

In March of this year, a 62-year-old man and his 68-year-old wife hanged themselves in Civitanova Marche, in the Marche region of central Italy. The man had worked in a shoe factory and had no pension, while his wife received a small one that proved to be inadequate to even pay rent. Having learned of the tragedy, the woman’s 70-year old brother also committed suicide, throwing himself into the sea.

In the same city, earlier this month, a 27-year-old Albanian woman attempted to turn her daughter over to the police, declaring that she could not bear to steal in

order to live, and intended to commit suicide. The woman was unemployed and married to a bricklayer who had recently lost his job.

On a particularly tragic day in mid-April this year, five men took their lives in different areas of the country. In Turin, a 38-year-old bricklayer hanged himself after finding out he had lost his job, leaving his pregnant girlfriend to find his body. A 52-year-old worker who had been struggling for years to find a job killed himself in his apartment near Treviso, in the Northeast area of the country. A 33-year-old worker, father of two, hanged himself from a tree in the same region.

On the same day, two small businessmen killed themselves in the south of Italy. One of them did so after being forced to lay off most of his workers, then found himself unable to pay the wages of his two remaining employees who had been with him for 30 years.

The month of May saw more suicides committed by people in desperate economic situations. Near Rome, the owner of a small restaurant set himself on fire inside his car. Also near Rome, a worker who had been living on unemployment relief after being laid off threw himself from a bridge. In Sicily, a 27-year-old worker hanged himself after a long period of depression brought on by unemployment, his family members reported.

Several other cases have been reported over the course of the past few weeks. On May 27, a 52-year-old man and his 44-year-old wife were found dead in their apartment. The man, unemployed and facing an impending eviction, strangled his wife before hanging himself.

On June 6, a 62-year-old businessman in the construction industry shot himself after being unable to

pay his debts, leaving behind his wife and sons. On June 10, having recently lost his job, a 35-year-old laborer hanged himself in the streets near his apartment in Turin. On the same day, in what was perhaps the most shocking and well-reported recent case, a Neapolitan florist, unable to secure a permit from the city government, doused himself with gasoline, set himself on fire, then jumped to his death from a balcony in city hall.

Many more such instances can be reported, along with cases in which the suicide attempt failed. In May, for example, a 53-year-old worker from Rome set himself on fire in the streets, only to be saved by an alert bus driver who put out the flames using the vehicle's fire extinguisher.

In all these cases the economic roots of these tragic acts have been established, either through the notes left behind by the deceased or through the testimony of their relatives, friends and neighbors.

The phenomenon of “morte per crisi” (death by crisis) is only the sharpest manifestation of pressures and difficulties coming to bear, with varying degrees of intensity, on the Italian working class as a whole.

Italy, already in the grips of longstanding social decay, was hit particularly hard by the international crisis that began in 2008, and is among a series of Southern European countries whose economies are on the brink of collapse.

According to a recent report by the National Institute for Statistics (ISTAT), 15 million Italians have been categorized as suffering from “economic distress,” with almost 9 million of these categorized as facing “serious economic distress.”

Italy's national poverty rate already stands at 25 percent. In the south, historically the most underdeveloped area of the country, it climbs to 40 percent. Nationally, six families out of ten have found themselves compelled to cut their food consumption, while seven out of ten families must do so in the south. In addition, the purchasing power of Italian families fell over the course of 2012 by nearly 5 percent.

Italy also has Europe's highest rate of young people (15 to 29 years of age) who neither study nor work. Between 2011 and 2012 the unemployment rate among Italian youth rose from 20.5 percent to 25.2 percent. Only 57 percent of young high school and college graduates are able to find a job three years after the end

of their studies.

The situation confronting older people is also grim. According to a report released in 2012, 55 percent of all Italians over 65 five years of age live with an income of less than €1,000 (US\$1,320) per month, while 25 percent have less than €500 (US\$660).

These economic problems have left less than 25 percent of all Italians feeling optimistic about their future in the next five years.

In this context, individual suicides express, in a particularly tragic and fruitless manner, a sentiment that is in fact broadly shared: social conditions can no longer be endured. The crucial question facing the Italian working class is to find a way to give this sentiment a progressive political expression.



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