

The impact of the coronavirus crisis in Florence

Our reporter
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The following account was submitted to the WSWs by a retired teacher and writer who has lived in Florence, Italy for more than 40 years.

What's it like to live in Italy now, with the draconian measures being taken by the government (and which seem to get more and more restrictive every day) to combat the spread of Covid 19?

There are two levels of the effects of these measures on my family's lives. The first goes deeper and will almost certainly last for a long time and has to do with our economic situation.

We (myself and my husband, my daughter and her partner and their nine-month-old baby) live in Florence, which is obviously highly dependent on tourism for its economy. My daughter is a self-employed tour guide who counted on starting up work again this spring with the high tourist season. Now, obviously, the tourists have disappeared (museums and other attractions were closed a few days ago, and as of yesterday, restaurants and accommodations as well) so she will have no work, and therefore none of the income they were counting on to support themselves and the baby.

Her partner is a cook in a breakfast and brunch place that caters mainly to American students (here in Florence there are many American study abroad programs), which has had to close for an indefinite period of time. He has a fixed salary, but it has been decided that the next few weeks will be considered his vacation time, so this summer he'll have no vacation. And that, of course, is the best-case scenario, because if the current emergency goes on for long, there's a risk that the place might close down. That would be a total disaster for them economically.

As for me, though I'm retired I still continue doing translating and tutoring. My students won't be coming to my place, but we can work out some way of doing

lessons online, at least for a while.

The government (led by Mr. Conte) has announced promised economic help for small businesses, workers and self-employed people in various forms. So far this is all quite vague, but I'm hoping that some of these measures will be available to my daughter and her partner. Meanwhile, I'll have to dip into my savings.

As of last week, all Italians have been asked (ordered?) to stay at home for all but essential movements, which include work, medical necessities, food shopping, returning to one's home elsewhere, and assisting sick or elderly family members. Gated squares and parks have been closed and taking kids to the open ones is not allowed. This is being enforced by the police, who are patrolling the streets and public squares.

Everyone who can is being encouraged to work from home (they call it "smart work" !!!). All stores and services except for pharmacies, food stores, newspaper stands, post offices and banks are closed. Public transportation is still going, but most people don't want to take buses if they can at all help it.

Theoretically, it's possible to order food by phone or online and have it delivered. But, in fact, the phone lines are clogged and deliveries are not guaranteed before several days—one supermarket that we tried to contact mentioned up to 10 days!

Fortunately, there are still some small food stores in the neighborhood that we're counting on, and the local supermarket is open, though there are lines to get in, since they are letting in a closed number of people at a time. So far, the lines aren't very long. The problem is that once you're in it's hard to keep the mandated distance (1 meter? 2? It's not clear) in the crowded aisles.

Then there are some rather ridiculous, if not stupid,

contradictions. One example: I had to go to the local post office to pick up a registered letter because the postal service had suspended home delivery. Which meant I had to leave the house—something I am strongly urged not to do, as a 75-year-old—to go and pick it up. They weren't allowing people in unless their number had come up, and so I had to wait on the sidewalk. But it's a narrow sidewalk, and the entrance is precisely at a bus-stop, so there were quite a few people congregated there. Which is, of course, exactly what they say must be avoided at all costs.

Then there's the problem of what to do about the baby. Italians generally live in quite close quarters, mostly without any outdoor spaces. So it's especially important to be able to take children out to the local parks or piazzas. This hasn't been forbidden, but the children are not supposed to get close to one another. It's not easy to take them to the piazza *not* to play with other children.

Since all schools are closed until April 3, the problem of how to care for children whose parents are still working away from home is critical. Of course, in Italy a lot of slack has always been taken up by family members, especially grandmoms, but now that old people are the most vulnerable, it's doubtful that they should be staying in close contact with the children. The government has promised aid to cover the cost of baby-sitters, but again, this is still to be seen.

If asked how well the country's medical system is coping with this crisis, I think I'd say that so far it's holding up more or less, but obviously the structures, equipment and staff are being stretched to their limits. Emergency measures are being taken, like having recourse to private facilities, emergency hiring, and asking retired medics to pitch in.

There is a great difference in Italy between one region and the next as regards the public health systems, with the north in general being far superior to the south. Tuscany, the region I'm in, is generally considered one of the best, but so is Lombardy, which has been the region hardest hit so far, and many significant weaknesses are showing up even there. Everyone is frightened that the contagion will spread significantly to the southern regions, whose health systems are very poor.

These inadequacies are largely due to the constant cuts that have been made to the national health system

over the last two-three decades, under every government whether center-right or center-left. Structures (buildings and beds), equipment and staff have been progressively decreased, so that by now even in ordinary times getting an appointment with a specialist or for a test or an operation is a very frustrating experience, sometimes involving a wait of months and other times simply not possible in the foreseeable future.

Clearly, many of the personal problems I've described above are more vexatious than really serious. But if the situation goes on for long, it will be hard to go on. And the long-term effects on the Italian economy are bound to be very serious indeed, if not devastating. So, one tries to keep a stiff upper lip, but underneath we're pretty worried.

There are some strikes in factories where workers don't want to be put at risk.



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