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An Italian Jobs Opera

By THERESA LIU

After months of negotiations between management and the unions, it turned out that the Italian company I worked for could not fire us, not just yet. Instead, the firm offered generous incentives to entice us to leave.

The negotiating parties followed the stringent conditions of a collective dismissal that occurs when a company with more than 15 employees intends to dismiss at least five within 120 days. The process begins with the preprocedure, which can last up to 75 days. At the end of this phase, if the head count has not been reduced to the specified level, the company can begin the 120-day legal procedure. If all this sounds confusing, it is. But, to be clear, the urban myth that Italian workers cannot be fired is false.

I refer to unions in the plural because my company, despite having less than 200 employees, has two unions. Although one union, as expected, is leftist in politics, the other leans to the right and is Catholic; in fact, the representative is a former priest. Is there such a concept as a rightist union?

Happily I came to Italy 10 years ago with a job in hand. I soon remarked that the company was overstaffed and the situation was not sustainable. The incredulous looks I got from my co-workers told me this game should never be up so I surrendered to my dream. After all, I wanted to live in Italy since I was a five-year-old. Was it my job to worry about the big picture?

As the preprocedure got under way, workers spun stories of our fate to anyone willing to listen and newspapers carried articles about our downsizing. Even the barista, who tends our espresso, speculated on how much money management might offer. There were days when the *rumeur du jour* built anxiety to such a crescendo that someone invariably smashed the tension with a release of wild sobbing, or flung an object against the wall.

Most people seemed determined to sit at their desks and do nothing. It is very un-Italian to take action. What was I to say when a co-worker insisted, "I'm not leaving. Have you seen what it's like out there? There are no jobs! I'm staying." Perhaps they expected a *deus ex machina* to blow this episode to smithereens. My workplace became an extension of the dread that has enveloped this nation.

To an Italian it is unfathomable that a job's permanency can become void. Indeed, my work contract states plainly that my employment is *indeterminato*, which simply means there is no end.

A worker's right to permanent employment is sacrosanct. Because Italians see their job as a lifelong fixture, they have little incentive to develop professional assets or to cultivate relationships with people who understand their talent. The job is merely an entitlement that allows them to coast until retirement. Inertia set in long ago — not just in my company but the entire country. It seems only the ambitious Chinese immigrants possess the will to construct something out of the mess.

Eventually the unions called an assemblea to give us an update. The scene was the usual chaotic free-for-all where everyone shouts and no one listens. Finally, a union representative was allowed to speak. The head count was to be reduced by over 50 percent! People were clearly shaken.

Upon returning to our offices a co-worker barked at me through a tearful fit, “But you’re American, you’re used to getting fired!”

Rather than stay and get picked on, I left the building. On my way out I saw people in the hallway comforting each other; I heard both soft and loud crying. They went opera on me for the nth time.

Several more months passed before settlements were reached. Everyone was entitled to the money and so began the risk calculation of staying or leaving. Hanging over our heads was the legal procedure, if invoked could leave us far less than what was on offer.

Years ago when I came for the job interview a company executive remarked, “You are very couuurious aren’t you? Don’t you know that couuuriosity kills the cat?”

“Yes,” I replied, “but a cat has nine lives.”

However many lives I’ve used up, and however many may lie ahead of me, my life over the past 10 years has been among the best of them — so far.

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