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Slow Rites, Fast Wrongs

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By Betsy Krause and Massimo Bressan (</author/itemlist/user/49752>), Truthout (<http://truth-out.org>) | Op-Ed

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A makeshift memorial outside where seven Chinese workers were killed in a fire at Teresa Moda fast-fashion outlet in Prato, Italy, Dec. 4, 2013. (Photo: Gianni Cipriano / The New York Times)

PRATO, ITALY - A funeral for the victims who died in the Teresa Moda factory fire in Tuscany's industrial district of Macrolotto was held on an asphalt parking lot 203 days after that tragic dawn. The unusually long span of time between the wretched deaths and the mourning rite was poignantly ironic given the furiously fast conditions that define these migrant workers' lives.

For more than 200 days to pass between people losing their lives and being put to rest is a curiously long time indeed. It was a long time for survivors to suspend their grief. A mother's heartbreaking wails for her deceased son and two daughters' weeping for their perished

mother resounded along with Buddhist bells and evangelical hymns. Some 300 attendees, mostly Chinese immigrants, but also Italian and Chinese officials, paid their final respects beneath a blazing afternoon sun on the longest day of the year.

The contrast between the time it took for one of the oldest and most fundamental of human rites and the furiously flexible fastness under which these workers produced trendy clothes for a fickle fashion market suggests something is terribly wrong: that their lives were almost as expendable as the clothes they made.

Family members were unable to afford the modest funeral. Neither Italian nor Chinese public entities were forthcoming with resources. Several private Chinese associations eventually contributed 20,000 euro toward the funeral costs.

The turnout at the funeral was much smaller than organizers anticipated. In fact, the event had originally been scheduled for a public assistance facility, but was moved to the Piazzale Ebensee, the former parking lot of Prato's hospital, in anticipation of a large crowd. Observers questioned why so few showed up, especially so few Italians. The absence was an expression of the workforce's transience and profound segregation.

Meanwhile, 20 kilometers down the road in Florence, record numbers of buyers and visitors attended Pitti Uomo, one of the most important trade shows in men's fashion. Nothing like light shows and Renaissance palaces to serve as an amnesia elixir for the global labor behind all those handsome clothes.

Prato itself is a living laboratory of globalization, and the experiment has not been so smooth. The problems that plague globalization intensify in this industrial city. Once a darling of postwar flexible family firms of the *made in italy* brand, it has hardly become a crown jewel of globalization. The economic crisis has hit both the mainstream Italian economy and the coexisting ethnic one hard.

A city with 187,000 residents, Prato has witnessed intense growth that began in the 1950s as Tuscan sharecroppers from the rural countryside and later Southern Italians migrated to the city during a textile and sweater manufacturing boom. In recent decades, the factory city has drawn more far-flung immigrants into its newer fast-fashion niche. The overseas Chinese population of Prato increased from 500 registered individuals in 1990 to 15,000 in 2012, and twice that many Chinese are estimated to be living in the city below the radar, making it home to Europe's most concentrated overseas Chinese population.

On the surface, everyone wants to address the problems of workplace safety blamed for the tragedy. Beneath the surface, that will be no simple matter. The Region of Tuscany has allocated 12 million Euros to intensify a crackdown on immigrant "illegality" - from housing workers in factories to ignoring safety codes and employing those who lack residency permits. The newly elected center-left mayor of Prato, Matteo Biffoni, wholeheartedly supports the measures.

Issues related to the integration of fast-fashion immigrants have stirred controversy. Roberto Cenni, the mayor of Prato until June 2014, was elected to office in 2009 on an anti-immigrant campaign that characterized the Chinese immigrant situation as a "siege." His city council, the first center-right political alliance in the city since the fall of fascism, was quick to pass an ordinance that created an old-style ghetto whose boundaries coincided with Via Pistoiese, the main artery of the Chinese part of town. That neighborhood alone was subject to laws limiting the hours in which businesses, restaurants and factories could operate. A group of Chinese citizens challenged the law, and two years later, the Regional Administrative Court found the ordinances discriminatory.

That same city council in 2011 also denied permits to organizers of a Chinese New Year's parade that would have taken the dance of the dragon beyond the city's medieval wall to its central pedestrian-only piazza. The city's then-minister of integration, Giorgio Silli, justified the denial, calling it a "hazardous route" and deemed the event to have "neither national nor local value."

After the factory fire, the mayor of Prato called for the city's first-ever citizen mourning. Few households reportedly hung the black flags traditionally used as a sign of respect for the dead, and police intensified their factory raids and security crackdowns.

In both traditional and social media, some Italians even made outrageous suggestions that workers disregard laws governing childbirth. The hospital of Prato registered 53 percent of all births to foreign mothers in 2012, and more than one-third were to women from China. There is nothing illegal about having babies in a public hospital; in fact, the city's public health agency has shown itself be a protagonist of integration for the services it provides daily to guarantee health rights to all - citizens or otherwise - in need of care. The babies born are not, however, conferred Italian citizenship, which is an issue that Italian minister of integration Cécile Kyenge has taken upon herself to change, despite racist insults and threats.

This discrimination is self-sabotaging to the region because the Chinese community in Prato is actually highly diverse in terms of socioeconomic status. A 2013 study by a team of sociologists funded by the Region of Tuscany and the Chamber of Commerce revealed a growing Chinese

middle class with lifestyle and consumption patterns similar to those of Italians. This economic growth is in spite of the city's many new arrivals, who initially live in makeshift dorms in factories or crowded apartments, working long hours, often at night, to pay the debts they incurred getting there.

While the Teresa Moda factory fire does not compare in numbers to the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh that killed 1,100 garment workers in April 2013, any deaths from substandard working conditions are alarming, particularly when these kinds of incidents happen in the context of a country such as Italy where the 1948 Constitution asserts the rights of the worker-citizen.

The quest for high profits and low-cost goods drives a broken system in which workers are treated as disposable commodities. The slow time between death and burial is a symbol of a much graver problem related to human dignity.

The crackdown on "criminality" in the name of saving lives runs the risk of turning migrants into criminals for low wages and precarious work environments. Dignity requires more than security measures. It requires fair economic systems and political structures in which global citizens have rights and feel safe to participate.

This article is a Truthout original.

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