

THE SOCIAL CAMPAIGN OF MELEGATTI: AN EXAMPLE OF PRO-LABOUR PROSUMERISM?

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March 2018,

Melegatti – a well-known Italian company, with its headquarters in Verona and active for more than a century in the confectionery sector – fell in a deep financial crisis during the 2017.

In particular, several wrong investments have driven the company one step away from bankruptcy, without the funds required to buy all the raw materials required to confirm the level of merchandise usually produced for the Christmas period, one of the most profitable for Melegatti.

Therefore, in autumn the production was stopped, the company required access to the wages guarantee fund and attempted to start a collective proceeding to find an arrangement with creditors. After that, at the beginning of November, the Court of Verona authorized Melegatti to restart production, with the specific target to produce and sell 1.75 million of Christmas products (mainly the traditional pandoro and panettone). In order to help the company in its effort of financial restructuring, workers (70 employees, between 150 and 250 seasonal) and their representatives attempted to involve consumers in this effort. The campaign “*Un pandoro per battere la crisi?*” was born (“*A pandoro to fight the crisis?*”).

The operation was carried out, in particular, not through traditional communication channels, but via social networks. In a brief time, was launched the hashtag #NoiSiamoMelegatti (#WeAreMelegatti) asking local and national consumers to adhere and buy, for Christmas, Melegatti’s products, to allow the company to survive the crisis, to demonstrate that its market appeal was still remarkable, and to attract possible future investors interested in buying out the company.

The attempt succeeded: the message quickly became viral and the campaign revealed itself a great success, underlined by media that commented it as a beautiful Christmas story. In about three weeks all the 1.75 million of products were sold, through the internal shop of the company or by mean of retailers and supermarkets. Additionally, the company, trade unions and receivers had the opportunity to agree on an extra production of others 5,000 confectionery in December 2017, so avoiding the need to recur another time to the wages guarantee fund, as initially announced.

Even if the aforementioned lucky campaign was not sufficient by itself to relaunch the company, it confirmed the commercial value of Melegatti, the quality of its workers and stood, substantially, as a sort of advertisement for investors. After that, Melegatti faced another troubled period, with strikes and doubts on the future of the company, until the end of February, when the Italian coffee producer Hausbrandt advanced to the Court of Verona an expression of interest to buy out Melegatti, paving the way to solve the crisis and save work places.

The facts reported above could be inscribed in the raising phenomenon called prosumerism: consumers are increasing their awareness of their power to influence the commercial policies concerning the quality and kind of products, or the producing methods of companies, and are starting to act consequently.

In particular, this is a case of pro-labour prosumerism, as the almost contemporary Italian ones of Amazon – an episode in which some people expressed their solidarity to employees and temporary workers in strike to ask better working conditions – and Ikea – where a relevant number of consumers criticised the company that dismissed a woman that not respected work shifts in reason of the need to care her children.

The Melegatti case, in particular, is worthy of note for two reasons. Firstly, it is peculiar because, this time, consumers not limited themselves to express concern or threaten boycotts for policies or conducts

assumed by a company, but actively participated buying products in order to help workers in saving their workplaces, demonstrating that joint action of clients and employees could be remarkable not only when there is a conflict between workers' organizations and employer, but also in case of company crisis. In addition, this case is relevant because consumers involvement has been realized through social networks: this choice permitted a viral, effective and fast campaign, that reasonably would have not attained the same results if developed by institutional consumers' organizations. This latter element is crucial for trade unions, that could, in the future, capitalize the Melegatti experience, promoting systematic campaigns focused to involve and orient consumers, present on social networks, on several issues.

Therefore, pro-labour prosumerism, if adequately developed, could represent a new powerful instrument of pressure for trade unions – when traditionally tools as strike, at least at national level, are losing their effectiveness –; it seems destined to become even most relevant in next years, when the digitization of manufacturing – Industry 4.0 – and the diffusion of just-in-time production could increase the influencing power of consumers on companies, hopefully contributing to foster a new balance between employers and workers' organization, in recent years altered by the effects of globalization.