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Angelo Castellani

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Health, Labour and Climate Change: Insights from Food-Delivery Workers in Bologna

Angelo Castellani¹

Abstract

This article looks at how climate change is shaping the working conditions and health of food-delivery riders in Bologna, Italy. The main idea behind this study is that climate change should be thought of as a global health issue, and that health should not be understood as simply a biological condition, but rather as the result of social and environmental factors. The fieldwork was conducted from March to July 2024, carrying out interviews with food-delivery riders, union representatives and health professionals. The data gathered shows how rising temperatures and sudden heavy rain are affecting riders, often times worsening already precarious life conditions. Some of them develop a specific understanding of climate change, yet struggle to think of concrete solutions or actions, their priorities being their own survival. The article argues that protecting workers exposed to the outdoors cannot rely only on small adjustments or individual strategies; real improvements require stronger labour protections and serious climate-mitigation efforts that address the roots of the problem, i.e., climate change.

Keywords: Climate Change, Environmental Labour Studies, Eco-Social approaches to Health, Riders, Heatwaves, Vulnerability.

¹ Angelo Castellani, Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna.
angelo.castellani2@unibo.it

Riassunto

Questo articolo analizza come il cambiamento climatico stia influenzando le condizioni di lavoro e la salute dei rider che effettuano consegne di cibo a domicilio a Bologna, in Italia. L'idea principale alla base dello studio è che il cambiamento climatico debba essere considerato una questione di salute globale, e che la salute non vada intesa semplicemente come una condizione biologica, ma come il risultato dell'interazione di fattori sociali e ambientali. La ricerca si basa su un'indagine qualitativa condotta tra marzo e luglio 2024, che ha incluso interviste semi-strutturate a rider, rappresentanti sindacali e professionisti della salute, oltre a momenti di osservazione sul campo. I risultati mostrano come l'aumento delle temperature, le ondate di calore e le piogge intense incidano direttamente sui ritmi di lavoro dei e delle rider, aggravando vulnerabilità già esistenti. L'esposizione prolungata agli agenti atmosferici si traduce in affaticamento, disagi fisici e rischi per la sicurezza, rendendo il lavoro sempre più insostenibile. Sebbene molti/e rider sviluppino una consapevolezza concreta della crisi climatica, la loro capacità di azione collettiva risulta limitata dalla frammentazione del lavoro e dalla necessità di garantire la propria sopravvivenza quotidiana. L'articolo sostiene che la tutela di chi lavora all'aperto non possa basarsi solo su piccoli adattamenti o strategie individuali: miglioramenti reali richiedono tutele del lavoro più solide e seri interventi di mitigazione climatica che affrontino le cause profonde del problema, ovvero il cambiamento climatico.

Parole chiave: Cambiamenti climatici, Studi sul lavoro ambientale, Approcci eco-sociali alla salute, Riders, Ondate di calore, Vulnerabilità.

■ 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the accelerating pace of climate change has begun to redefine the conditions under which people live and work. Among its most immediate and tangible consequences are the increasing frequency, duration, and intensity of heatwaves, with impacts ranging from decreased productivity to severe heatstroke and death. In 2024 ILO published two reports examining how climate-change related hazards are affecting workers' safety and health worldwide, one more general on climate change (Ensuring safety and health at work in a changing climate, ILO, 2024a) and one specific on the topic of heat (Heat at work: Implications for safety and health, 2024b). As stated, millions of workers are exposed to hazards exacerbated by climate change, with 22.85 million occupational injuries, 18,970 deaths and 2.09 million disability-adjusted life years attributable to excessive heat alone every year (ILO, 2024a). Workers across various sectors are exposed to these hazards, but "some workers, such as agricultural workers and other outdoor workers carrying out heavy labour in hot climates, may be particularly at risk" (*ibid.*, p. 1). This article wishes to contribute to existing research by bringing Environmental Labour Studies into dialogue with eco-social