

Why Italy's southerners stay put

CAGLIARI

EVEN though they are prospering, with production up sharply in the first half of this year, many firms in northern Italy are unhappy—because they are short of labour. In the Veneto region, inland from Venice, companies poach workers from each other. Big companies threaten to move plants abroad if they cannot find local workers. So they are asking the government to admit more foreign workers.

They need around 40,000, fast. This year's quota of 63,000 entry permits for non-EU workers, known as *extracomunitari*, was filled by March. Compared with other big countries in the EU, Italy has relatively few legal immigrants from outside the Union: only 1.3m, or little more than 2% of the total population of 57m, against more than 5% in the Union as a whole. Even if you add some 300,000 illegals, the Italian figure is still much smaller, proportionately, than in northern Europe. The govern-

ment, with regional bosses wanting to have a say too, seems ready to comply.

But this week the prime minister, Giuliano Amato, asked why so few Italians were coming up north to look for work from the south. There, the unemployment rate is 22%. And joblessness among southerners under 24 is rife: 55% in Sardinia, 60% in Sicily, 63% in Campania, 66% in Calabria, farther south. In Reggio Calabria, on Italy's "toe", seven out of ten young people have no jobs.

Why do more southerners not go north? First, because they are put off by the high cost of living in places such as Milan, where the cheapest jobs barely pay the rent. When southerners went north in their thousands in the 1950s and 1960s, many employers helped them with housing. Nowadays the laws protecting tenants make landlords much less keen to let rooms cheaply to poor strangers.

45 A second, perhaps surprising, reason is that many young southerners feel over-qualified for the lowlier jobs on offer up north. Many southern families have invested a lot of money and hope in educating their children to a high level, and are loth to encourage them to seek jobs on building sites or in factories in the north. Many southerners think that northern employers anyway would prefer a shy, ill-paid African to an assertive young Sicilian with a law degree.

A third reason has to do with the southern way of life. Southerners are brought up in highly protective families which cosset their young, providing them with bedroom, pocket-money, connections and mamma's cooking and love—often well into their 30s. Grandfathers often dole out part of their pensions to the family's youngsters, if they stick around. Friendships, say southerners, are warmer. So is the climate. The lure of a hard life, albeit with a job, up north is not what it was. No wonder Moroccans seem more active in the Milanese job market.

22 JULY 2000 CAGLIARI