

Do social workers employed in Italian probation stand up to welfare state erosion?

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Often social workers involved in supervising offenders have to stand up to political changes in the area of penal welfare erosion. How can their behaviour be defined? Can their political action be considered effective or too weak? If their positions are very vulnerable, why do they not succeed in enforcing them? In my research, I examined in depth a controversy originated by the Attorney General's proposal to change the ways of controlling people under alternative measures to prison. I analysed the discourse originated by this event; my tools have been both the documents collection about this event that is published online and interviews of social workers employed in probation offices. Through an examination of different qualitative research analysis methods, I have chosen those suitable for my research question (above all, grounded theory and frame analysis). The results show that Italian social workers ask the Attorney General to abandon his purpose, because it could bring the features of supervising offenders very far from social work principles, such as rehabilitation and inclusion. Although they react to the Italian Attorney General's proposal, their language seems to be much influenced by his proposal; therefore, the social workers' position seems affected by the change and corruption of meaning of terms like "rehabilitation" and "inclusion." These results cause me to think that the social workers in probation offices, instead of only "reacting" to the erosion process of penal welfare without any proactive position, should stand up to this process. Besides, in order to gain more confidence in their political action, they need to examine in depth both the meaning of the changes due to the erosion of the welfare state, and the knowledge that may enforce their positions closely linked to their professional principles.