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Research Report — Published Version

What this pandemic reveals about the value of work

Coronavirus and its Societal Impact - Highlights from WZB Research

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What this pandemic reveals about the value of work

By Robert Koepp

This pandemic is a revelation. All of a sudden, it has become evident what type of labor is necessary to sustain our society, which use-values are indispensable to maintain our lives: Food, health, care, shelter, hygiene, energy, and the distribution and transportation of these goods and services.

These necessities are provided for by workers of different industries. They shoulder this load in supermarkets, hospitals, warehouses, offices, and elderly homes while others work from home or in their single offices. At last, society is beginning to recognize the importance of these workers' efforts in the face of the SARS-CoV-2 crisis. Regularly, city dwellers stand at their windows and on their balconies and applaud the strenuous and dangerous efforts health care workers take up to save lives and to care for the sick.

From this there is much to learn about the different amounts of social prestige and trust attributed to certain jobs.[1] The appreciative applause was - at least in the beginning - not initiated for low-skill service workers like cleaners, warehouse workers, and delivery agents. Although their labour services are paramount to meeting basic needs, they have gone oddly unnoticed - working behind a veil that is only slowly lifting in this pandemic. At least some of them have by now been identified as "systemically important"—ironically, a term once reserved for banks considered too big to fail in the world economic crisis starting in 2007.

But unlike big banks, the currently "systematically important" low-skilled service workers cannot rely on a public bail-out mechanism. Their employment is precarious and poorly paid. From studies in labor market segmentation[2] and the sociology of work[3], we know employees take up these jobs at the lower segment of labor markets because of a lack of other employment opportunities - they have to earn a living.[4] They are often of migrant origin or commute from Eastern Europe to their workplaces in central Europe. And they often work in mass workplaces like a warehouse or are workers with customer contact like parcel delivery agents: It will be difficult for these workers to avoid the risk of contagion while opening doors, running down narrow aisles, going by passengers in staircases - and all this while meeting performance targets. Businesses like parcel delivery and distribution, e-commerce, and logistics service continue to operate, while in the public, gatherings of more than two people are prohibited.

Most of these workers will find themselves stuck between the choice of either putting their own health and labor power at risk - or not to provide for themselves and their families at all. But there is a third choice: That is to bargain and struggle with their employers about the conditions under which they sell and spend their labor power.

And workers are doing so already. Italy, the US, France, and other countries already saw wild work stoppages and strikes about protective gear, hygiene measures, safer working conditions, and lower performance standards. Not a small amount of the striking workers

went further. In a common statement, the network of “Amazon Workers International” demanded “the immediate closure of Amazon warehouses until this coronavirus pandemic is declared over by the World Health Organization. During this shutdown, Amazon must pay all workers their full salary.”

Whether this demand has a chance to be fulfilled is debatable. Yet the pandemic’s revelation that “the workers who are most important in the sense of what they actually do are so often valued so little under capitalism” (Daniel Denvir) cannot be undone. It is time to listen to them and to support their material demands. It will be up to the trade unions, social movements, and the workers themselves to use this window of opportunity – not just in services but also in health care. It will be up to society as a whole to reflect on what the pandemic teaches us about ‘systemically valuable’.

[1] Deutscher Beamtenbund/Forsa Gesellschaft für Sozialforschung und statistische Analysen 2016: Bürgerbefragung öffentlicher Dienst.

[2] Kalleberg, Arne L. 2011. Good jobs, bad jobs: the rise of polarized and precarious employment systems in the United States, 1970s to 2000s. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

[3] Z.B. Staab, Philipp. 2014. Macht und Herrschaft in der Servicewelt. 1. Auflage. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition.

[4] Heiden, Mathias. 2014. Arbeitskonflikte: verborgene Auseinandersetzungen um Arbeit, Überlastung und Prekarität. Berlin: edition sigma.

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