



From coronavirus to risk society: the challenges trade unions will face

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Covid-19 has created the most severe crisis since World War II. However, we have to understand that there is more to come. There will be a before and after the pandemic in the world of production and also in society. There will be threats to work and union organisations which will depend on the response of players in the productive sectors: above all, the unions will determine whether the world of work will take a turn for the worse or for the better.

The cost of each month of confinement is equivalent to 2% to 3% of global GDP. The drop in GDP in OECD member states is therefore estimated at 6% on average, with European and North American countries facing a particularly dramatic situation (OECD, 2020). Countries such as Mexico or Brazil, where government action has been rather limited, might even face a double-digit contraction. Job losses proportionate to the decrease in GDP will accompany the contraction. The ILO estimates 7% of the world's jobs – 195 million - will have been lost by the end of June (ILO, 2020). The United Nations' perspectives are even bleaker: four out of five jobs are currently suffering, or will eventually suffer, the consequences of the crisis.

The legacy of Covid-19 will not be limited to the loss of employment: it will also include reduction of working hours, elimination of wages, and infringements of collective bargaining agreements amidst the social storm during the pandemic. It must be stressed that workers and their families, particularly those from the most vulnerable sectors, will be most affected by the human and productive cost of the pandemic.

Moving from a world of materialities to one of viruses

Until now, the world of work was based on an accumulation of materialities: factories, machines, infrastructure, logistics, various networks, transport systems, stations, walls, roofs, rods, chains, tools and devices, paint and colours of all kinds. The same applies to the universe of government and education: a world of buildings, concrete, cement, classrooms and offices, boards and desks, and pens. Yet, these materialities were based on social and power constructions, on borders and territories defined by countries and on proximities and kinematics determined at the level of people and social class. This set has always been problematic, as it mixed the notions of nation and state with identifications based on status, aesthetics, wealth

and prestige. Its final backing was provided by an axiology of standardisations as to what is 'good' (and valuable) and what is 'bad' (and negligible). This world will not return.

It is possible that Covid-19 will change the world's mobility and our spatial and territorial relationships, which underlie such materialities. It is possible that the virus has come to stay forever; it would then become another kind of cancer, for which we don't have a vaccine. Until we eventually generate the antibodies or develop the medical elements to gain control over the virus at some unforeseeable point in the future, we will not be able to recover the distances and mobility we have been used to. The implication is that the code of 'healthy distancing' which we have learned during recent months will have accommodated itself among us like a permanent guest.

These perspectives are not exaggerated, because even if Sars-Cov-2 could be controlled in the short term, another virus might follow, whose consequences might be even worse - a mutation of the current virus, or another with as yet unknown characteristics which cannot be controlled.

There is a vital fact which has to be assimilated: Covid-19 is a product of the extreme expressions of the materiality-focused world we have arrived at – or been taken to – under the guidance of entrepreneurs whose interests do not go beyond income and profit. About 44 years ago, Ulrich Beck (1992) called our attention to the arrival of the risk society, a state of development resulting from a system guided by the use of ever more sophisticated technology and the irrational exploitation of natural resources for the sole purpose of obtaining ever more individualised benefits. It is a state fraught with risks and uncertainties, as the quest for unlimited profit led to the management of the most sensitive variables of social, productive and natural life becoming shrouded in irrationality, ambiguity and uncertainty. This episode of history is so severe that the survival of the human species is at risk.

The pandemic - with more than half a million dead worldwide at the time of publication and the United States, as the world's leading power, at the centre of the outbreak - provides strong evidence that Beck was right. The risk society - where the irrational becomes normal, while risk is called the new normality and the lives of all of us are hanging in the balance –has found its place among us.

Digital revolution

Other visitors which have come to stay and change our lives forever are machines that are capable of learning, autonomous cars and sensors that create data and take decisions following the assumption that their (artificial) intelligence is superior to that of humans; clouds that store trillions of kilobytes of data on less than one square centimetre of physical space; affordable intelligent communication devices, which are already in the hands of a huge proportion of the population; transport and logistics companies that move millions of people, goods and services every day without producing a single car or creating a single employment relationship, and whose market value exceeds the value that the majority of car manufacturers achieved over more than a hundred years; platforms capable of tracing our movements, likes and preferences in order to forecast our behaviour, sell our data without paying a dollar in return, and jeopardise our private lives.

Digital technologies are not new (see WEF, 2019), but the pandemic has made them the only winners within a generally depressed economy. Therefore the value of 'high-tech' companies, such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Uber, is increasing. Thanks to the multiple forms of telework promoted by these companies (such as Zoom, Skype, and WhatsApp) schools, governments and millions of workplaces remain operational. The digitisation of everyday life encouraged by the pandemic will be the final blow to the world of materialities in which we have lived so far. The pandemic has made it clear that work is not limited to the walls of particular buildings.

However, digitisation had already anticipated an immediate future where non-analog robots will replace one-third to two-thirds of standardised, repetitive, predictable and mechanical industrial jobs - activities carried out by the less qualified and most vulnerable sectors, and jobs based on cheap labour that poor and emerging countries took over from developed countries, as in Mexico (See, for example, Ekkehard et al, 2019).

As a result, we might witness the 'new normal' accelerating a threefold loss of employment: first, the loss of millions of jobs due to the disease; second, the replacement of millions of jobs by robots; and third, telework employment, relocated to our homes, while facilities that had been taken for granted will be closed or demolished. A fourth layer of unemployment may be linked to facilitation jobs (supervision, logistics, maintenance, general service provision, and so on), which depend on the existence of those materialities.

Challenges and risks for trade unions

These are the risks and threats organised labour will face. Therefore the time has come to act with the instruments provided by law, reason and social dialogue. The principles laid

down by the international labour standards the ILO (2020) has been accumulating and registering for more than a century provide a safe route to navigate disasters and threats by:

- 'promoting economic recovery for employment and decent work opportunities and social-economic reintegration;
- 'promoting sustainable employment and decent work, social protection and social inclusion, sustainable development, the creation of sustainable enterprises, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises, the transition from the informal to the formal economy, a just transition towards an environmentally sustainable economy and access to public services;
- 'conducting employment impact assessments of national recovery programmes;
- 'promoting social dialogue and collective bargaining;

and in order to:

- 'ensure basic income security, in particular for persons, who lost their work or their livelihoods following the crisis; or adopt, re-establish or expand comprehensive social security systems and other mechanisms for social protection;
- 'promote an approach focused on people, health and work, and...
- 'work on the basis of the Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation (No. 205), adopted in 2017'.

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