Pandemic as the driver of social innovation: a worker perspective

Adam Mrozowicki, Jacek Burski

Overview

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Introduction

- Pandemic as social crisis leading to novel worker and managerial responses with longer-term consequences for the world of work (e.g. Anleu, Sarantoulias 2022; Van Barnefeld et al. 2020; Verick 2022)
  - Has the pandemic opened the opportunities for bottom-up workers' social innovation at work?
  - How did social innovation at work differ across industries variously affected by pandemic and on-line /on-site work?
  - What are the potential consequences of workers' social innovation for post-pandemic changes in work organization?
- Research on essential industries crucial for society during pandemic:
  - **education** [primary school teachers] [high TU density, public, online]
  - **health care** [doctors, nurses, paramedics] [moderate TU density, public/private, on-site/hybrid]
  - **social care** [nursing homes staff], [moderate TU density, public/private, on-site/hybird]
  - **logistics** [truck drivers, couriers, food-delivery workers, logistic centre employees] [limited TU density or no unions, private] [mostly on-site]

Contradictory outcomes of pandemics

- Crises as situations of violation of the social order as a result of a combination of - usually difficult to control - internal or external processes and events, which force individual and/or collective social actions resulting in the reproduction or transformation of the pre-crisis situation (cf. Wielecki 2012: 391)

- Contradictory outcomes of pandemics:
  - It challenged organizational arrangements in the workplaces of essential workers (Chemali et al., 2022; Felder, 2021; Loustaunau et al., 2021), forced innovative actions and the need to rely on informal support (Wu, 2021)
  - It led to the expansion of "bio-political" control and surveillance of workers' work and lives, including lockdown regimes (Rose, 2021; Turner, 2021).

- The need for novel conceptualization of the relationships between innovation, control and resistance

Conceptualising the responses to the pandemic crisis: the I-C-R model

- **the Schumpeterian approach:** the crisis as the moment of "creative destruction" and a source of social innovation (the role of entrepreneurs/bricolageurs)
- **the Marxian approach:** pandemic as a driver of conflicts over the control and autonomy at work
- **the Polanyian approach:** the crisis as an opportunity for counter-movements aim at social re-embedding of work

Innovation

Control/Autonomy

Resistance
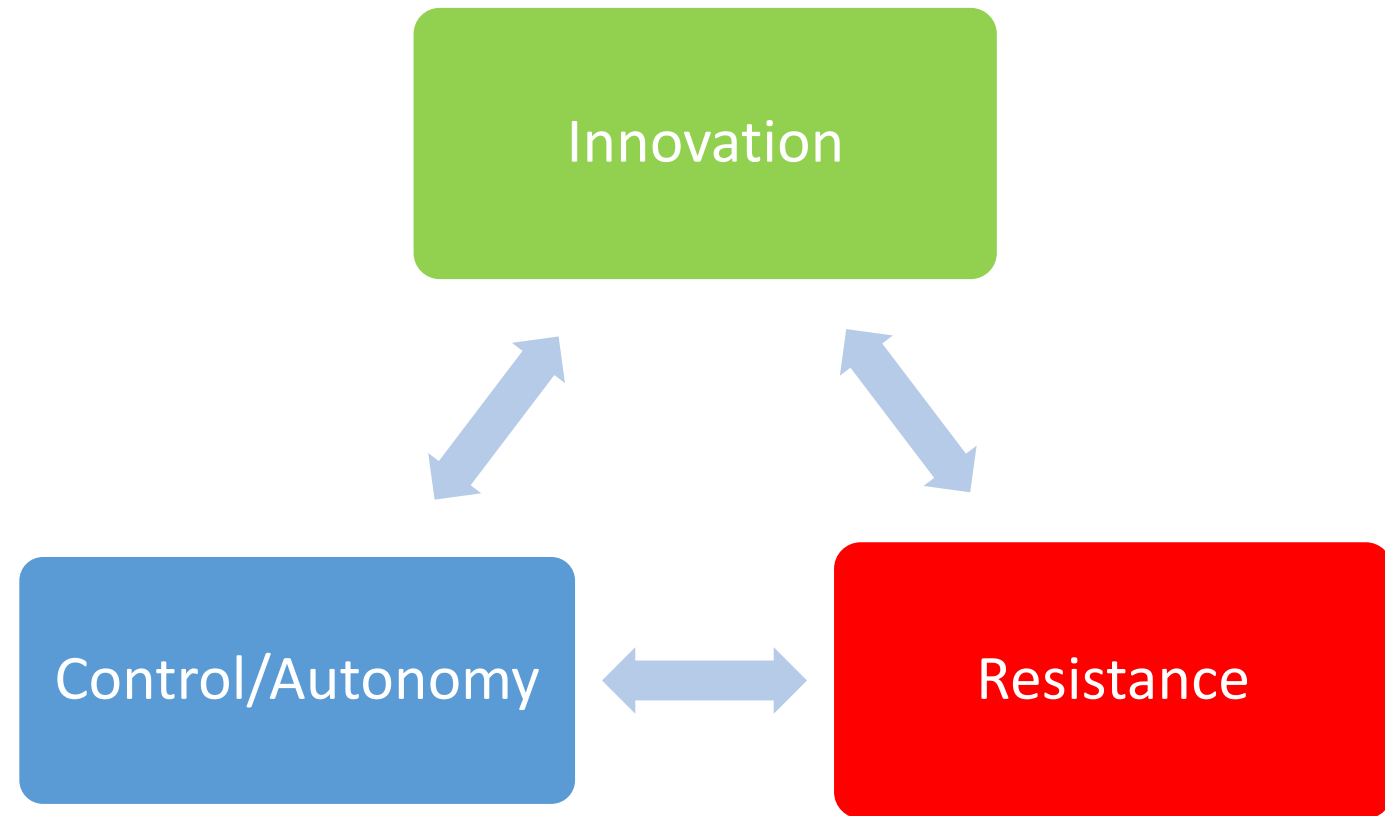
Social Innovation in pandemic time

- **Social Innovation**: Mulgan et al. (2007: 5), refer to 'new combinations or hybrids of existing elements' that cut across 'organisational, sectoral or disciplinary boundaries' and 'leave behind compelling social relationships'.

- Research interests on social innovation in pandemic are mostly focused on **health, technological and organizational aspects** (Cohen, Cromwell 2021; Palalar, Ozbilgin, Kamasak 2022, de Lucas Ancillo, del val Nunez, Gavrila 2021, Azevedo, Schlosser, McPhee 2021).

- We apply a more **critical attitude** toward theoretical background of the social innovation concept itself (Abad, Ezponda 2021)

- Our approach covers **bottom-up, worker perspective** rooted in crisis-based experience and labour process analysis

Innovation and crisis: a preliminary model

Conflicts and negotiations of organizational goals
(organizational efficiency vs. job quality)

EMPLOYERS

WORKERS

Organisational efficiency (G)

Control over labour (N)

Organisational
Technological
Social Innovation
Innovation as Resistance

Job quality (G)

Worker autonomy (N)

Conflicts and negotiations of organisational norms
(worker autonomy and control over the labour process)

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CRISIS

Three industries: the case of Poland

- Pandemic and 'patchwork capitalism' (Rapacki, Gardawski 2020) - the weak institutional coordination: *no choice but to innovate?*

- Limited social dialogue during pandemic (Czarzasty, Mrozowicki forth.), low TU and EO density, limited collective bargaining

- Higher unionization of education, health/social care, low – logistics

- Labour shortages in all industries (the least in education), partially filled by migration; 1/5 of nurses leaving jobs in 2016-2020(!)

- Unequal growth in wages in pre-pandemic period: higher in the case of doctors and nurses, lower – teachers, stagnation in logistics

- Work intensification: overtime typical in health care and logistic; frequent multiple job holding due to low wages (limited by pandemic)

Methodology

- 14 focus group interviews with primary school teachers (4), doctors (3), nurses (2) and nursing home employees (2), couriers (1), food-delivery workers (1) and logistic centers (white-collar) employees (1) in Warsaw and Mazowieckie voivodship;

- 32 biographical narrative interviews with primary schools teachers (6), doctors (6), nurses (2) and paramedics (1), nursing homes employees (5), truck drivers (3), food-delivery couriers (4) and logistic centers workers (3) in large and small cities in two regions (Lower Silesia, Mazowieckie)

- 20 expert interviews with social dialogue partners at the national level and in the following sectors: education, health care/social assistance, logistics (12 ZZ, 5 OP/P, 3 ADM) plus secondary data /official documents' analysis

- Open coding and selective coding (GTM); analytical memos to each case, panel discussions in research team and beyond, support of the Atlas.ti;

General remarks

- Much more emphasis on the innovative potential of pandemic in interviews with teachers, doctors, nurses and nursing homes workers as compared logistic workers;

- Industry-specific character of social crisis: higher disruption of work organisation in the public services as compared to logistics;

- Organisational resources influence the level of preparedness to crisis and the need for innovation in the public services: much more experimentation needed in smaller cities and organisations with lesser resources;

- The importance of the 'pandemic phasing': innovation refers mostly to the first phases of pandemics;

The first experiences of pandemic: *chaos, intensification, fear*

- *„First of all, in hospitals, which were established practically overnight, it fell on us like a bolt from the blue" (Annemarie, hospital nurse)*

- *I was also afraid to go home, because there were people, like my mother, who's 90 years old, I was also afraid to go home, so as not to infect my mother, so we isolated her. We isolated the child, because there was such a pressure, so completely. But maybe that's how we saved ourselves (Kasia, social care worker)*

- *I remember that moment very well, at the beginning, I was teaching 7th and 8th grade Polish and at the beginning there was such trepidation, of course we prepared, we had postal addresses, parents' phones, we looked for platforms, we tried on Teams, we tried on Discord, on Klickmeet. (Dagmara, teacher)*

- *At first there was panic (...) after a while the warehouse was divided up, we weren't given anything, we weren't prepared for anything at first. After a while, they just started handing out gloves, liquids in cans, it all took time. (Kazia, courier)*

Innovative potential of pandemic

- Education, health care, social care: the need for improvisation and bottom-up **organisational innovation** due to weakening formal control structures (sick leaves, admin staff working remotely), lack of equipment or forced lack of tasks;

- Forced **technological innovation** in education due to remote work with no adequate equipment and training; the relevance of social media for consultations of new treatment in health care; accelerated learning; experimentation with online care;

- **Social innovation**: from mutual suspicion to mutual help among colleagues (in some cases: the reverse, regressive process took place!); overcoming hierarchical division of tasks in some cases; mixing staff

- **Innovative means of resistance**: the first strike of Glovo couriers mobilized via FB and actively encouraging others to join; organizing protests in social care homes

Institutionalized innovation?

- Innovations which served work efficiency and were management-driven were more likely to remain in a longer run:
  - Return of formal control structures and improved modes of workers surveillance replacing bottom-up **organizational innovations;**
  - Lasting effects of **technological innovations**: hybrid work, new communication tools, technological competences increased during pandemics;
  - Diverse outcomes of **social innovations**: in some cases (hospitals, schools), pandemics contributed developing less formal and hierarchical relations; otherwise: limited institutionalization of social innovations.
- Better effects of social innovations in case of **collective mobilization** – innovative means of resistance.

"We never got any raises without a fight" (FGI4) - Innovative means of resistance?

- Informal oppositional practices at work:
  - By-passing *lean* management system in social care during Covid (the story of subverting the Supra Care lean system in FGI10);
  - Some attempts to bypass algorithmic management in case of platform work – e.g. "exchange of hours" to accumulate more orders (Marcin)
  - Questioning social distance rules in education and logistic as "apparent" distance which is used more to exercise managerial and state power
- Relatively weak and fragmented cases of collective actions
  - Scepticism towards unions in FGIs with *better organised* teachers, nurses… and more organising among unorganised care workers and young doctors;
  - Trade union activity during pandemic little seen by unorganised workers (despite street protests of public service employees)
  - The promising narratives of organising in nursing homes (Trade Union Organising Centre) and Amazon ("vest protest" during Black Friday; blocking delivery of goods; global letter campaign of unions and MPs to Jeff Bezos; walk outs (logistics)

The narratives of resistance and discontent

- *Bożena (nursing home organised by COZZ/the Confederation of Labour): This pandemic gave us that, that, despite everything, y, yy, in moments of extreme, y, together we're stronger, aren't we? If we had started to say [AP: Mhm.] each from oneself, I suspect we wouldn't have got anything. (**mobilising social ties created during pandemic**)*

- *EX2 (Amazon, Workers' Initiative): The pressure on the company led to things that we always said were a problem, which was the pace of work, the working hours. So it's like, well, actually, as Amazon was introducing all these things, our postulate to close warehouses turned out to be more and more absurd when they started to open everything for the summer, so our postulate to close or reduce was more and more difficult to maintain, so we adopted this first strategy more and more, and we know that in the US it's strongly exploited, that since we are essential employees we should be simply appreciated. (**strategizing essentiality**)*

- *Kornel [a unorganised truck driver]: The resistance hasn't existed for years in this industry (...) Until the drivers take matters into their own hands, well, then, nothing is likely to change in that direction (...) As I said, in France they were able (...)to stop for two, two, three days [JK: Mhm] and then the drivers were noticed, their demands were noticed, there was a lack of food on the shelves, a lack of fuel, a lack of practically everything.* **(unmet potential of organising)**

Conclusions

- The space for bottom-up, worker-driven innovations **was industry dependent** and its duration work-organization specific (but rarely lasted longer than the 1st and 2nd wave of pandemic in 2020?);

- **More experimentation in (health) care, moderate in education and the least in logistics** - the role of the depth of organisational crisis; preparedness to managing crisis situations; regional disparities and organisational resources

- **The post-pandemic continuity & reinforcement of control apparatus** and quite rarely institutionalization of worker-driven innovations (except of flattering hierarchies in some cases and the effects of union organizing)

- **The post-pandemic discontent was more typically informal**: limited visibility of union actions in case of disorganized and discouragement by pre-pandemic industrial actions (teachers, nurses)

- Pandemic has also been **a trigger for organizing in some workplaces**: mobilizing post-pandemic social ties and strategizing essentiality;

- More general conclusions: the need to further theoretically broaden the notion of innovation beyond the functionalist, post-Mertonian framework **to understand innovation as result of conflicts over control, norms and values at work**?

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