



From bricolage to conflicts? The pandemic experiences of work in education, health care and logistics in Poland

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Introduction

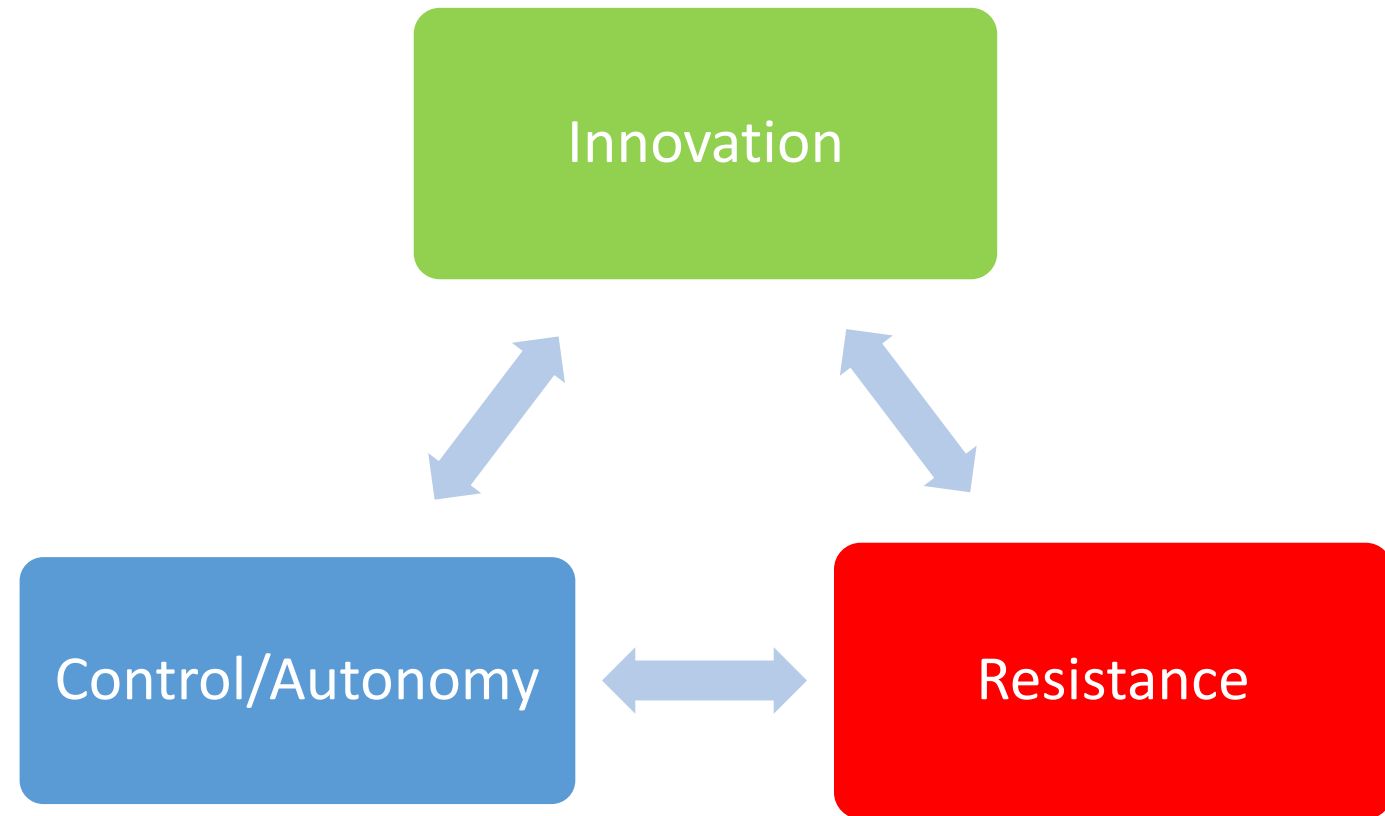
- Pandemic as social crisis leading to novel worker and managerial responses with longer-term consequences for the world of work (e.g. Anleu, Sarantoulas 2022; Van Barnefeld et al. 2020; Verick 2022)
 - what was the impact of the crisis for the scope of workers' autonomy and managerial control at the workplaces?
 - To which extent did the experiences of work during pandemic contribute to the emergence of new conflicts at work?
- 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]
 - **social care** [nursing homes staff], [moderate TU density, public/private, on-site]
 - **logistics** [truck drivers, couriers, food-delivery workers, logistic centre employees] [limited TU density or no unions, private] [on-site]

Pandemic as a social crisis

- 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)
- Pandemic as i.a. the crisis of neoliberalism (Kılıç, 2020), the state (Turner 2021), Anthropocene (Arias-Maldonado, 2020), HRM (Butterick, Charlwood 2021); the state of exception as normal (Agamben 2020)
- The pandemic as social acceleration (Rosa 2020) deepening pre-pandemic trends of inequalities, precarity and digitalization (Van Barnefeld et al. 2020) and adding new pressure on essential workers (Loustaunau et al. 2021)

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/bricoleurs)
- **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



Three industries: the case of Poland

- Institutional context:
 - Pandemic in the context of 'patchwork capitalism' (Rapacki, Gardawski 2020) characterized by the weak institutional coordination and developed during subsequent systemic crises since the late 1970s: *no choice but to innovate?*
 - Limited social dialogue during pandemic (Czarzasty, Mrozowski forth.), low TU and EO density, limited collective bargaining in the context of crisis
 - Higher unionization of education and health/social care, very low - logistics
- Labour market context:
 - Low unemployment (max. 6% in Feb.2021) and widespread precarious employment, in particular in logistics (25-40% of temporary workers)
 - Labour shortages in all industries (the least in education), partially filled by migration; 1/5 of nurses leaving the occupation in 2016-2020(!)
 - Relative and 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)

Selected job quality dimensions

	Primary education	Health care	Social care	Logistics
Labour shortages	Moderate/Low	High	Moderate	Moderate/high
Temporary employment	Limited	Limited/ Moderate	Limited/ Moderate	High
Wages	Very limited increase	Moderate increase/diverse	Very limited increase	Very limited increase/diverse
Working time	Standard	Overtime	Standard	Overtime
Unionisation	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Low/no unions

Methodology

- 10 focus group interviews (so far) with primary school teachers (4), doctors (2), nurses (2) and nursing home employees (2) in Warsaw and Mazowieckie voivodship;
- 30 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 disruptive (and transformative?) potential of pandemic in interviews with teachers, doctors, nurses and nursing homes workers as compared logistic workers
- The level of preparedness to crisis generally better in the case of schools, hospitals, nursing homes in larger cities as compared to smaller cities
- Pandemic much more visible in expert interviews and focus group interviews as compared to biographical narrative interviews in which it was a 'background experience'
- The importance of the 'pandemic phasing' – the gradual 'normalization' of pandemic in subsequent waves or the potential for collective mobilization?

“Institutions? What kind of institutions?!”

The first experiences of pandemic

- *“We were thrown into deep water. There were no prompts there and I was terrified. The first moment, the message that remote education, in general we connect with kids online through Teams, it was like: “But how?” (Anna, teacher)*
- *“One day I got a phone call from one of my friends here at one of the county hospitals, uh, near W-city, that he was ordered to organise a COVID ward (...) he had absolutely no place for it, no infrastructure and absolutely no budget (...) But what are, er, good people and friendly contacts for? (...) We’ve just played it budgetary way” (Tomasz, paramedic)*
- *“Suddenly you realise what is going on, yes, what this one. We had such a crisis, here the masks, here this, people are crazy, people don't see what's going on, nobody really, one big chaos.” (Piotr, logistic centre low-rank manager)*

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) and lack of equipment;
 - *“In normal times everything is set, it goes by some system, and here you had to adapt because it was something new” (FGI10, nursing homes)*
 - *“there was a lot of this kind of makeshift (prowizorki) work” (Paulina, a doctor)*
- 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
 - *This difficult work, in these Covid wards, has created various bonds (...). There was no rigid division, that I am a doctor, I won't touch it, because it's not my area. (FGI4)*
- **Innovative means of resistance**: the first strike of Glovo couriers mobilized via FB and actively encouraging others to join

The “strike” at Glovo

- *Marcin: It turned out that we had around forty people who came. And in contact we still had around I don't know, maybe thirty people, everyone contacted someone there, here glovers, couriers, so a total of seventy-eight people, somehow around that. Together we were on strike and everyone from different places in the city tried to order, yy, something on the Glovo application. Well, very often it didn't work, because the app was closed, but if it did work and a Glovo courier arrived, he was called a 'strike-breaker' (łamistrajk). And if there was someone who ordered something paid in cash, they either didn't pay the courier on the condition that he throws away his hours and didn't work that day (...). So more than a hundred people we had on strike. This gave us that they started to talk to us, any talks started to take place and we were promised that there would be improvements and that there would be talks every fortnight.*



Ukrainian couriers at pro-Ukrainian demonstration in Wrocław (February 2022), fot. A.Mrozowicki

Struggles over autonomy and control

- Return of authority at work is characterized by the diversity of experiences rather than a straightforward sequences:
 - New modes of surveillance of teachers via online tools: school head's access to all classes on MS Teams, possibility to pop-up without a notice
 - Return to the level of autonomy typical of hierarchical division of labour in bureaucratic organisations in case of hospitals, high in the case of doctors, lower in the case of nurses and other staff;
 - From a quasi-volunteer work on Covid wards to receiving orders to work : *"We did not have the option to refuse (...) We had to adapt if we wanted to have a job"*. (FGI10)
 - New and improved modes of worker surveillance based on some measures which were initially designed to fight the virus (e.g. 2-meter teams in Amazon) – the double control by the state and the company (as the “state within a state” – EX3)

The return of control in narratives

- *Anna (the teacher): At the beginning we had quite a lot of freedom. And I liked that. I could do the lesson the way I imagine eem check the assignment the way I imagine, to the children, to hold them accountable for what I wanted them to be held accountable for, these, these children. At that point the management said that she would structure it for us in some way. [Nervous laughter] (...) Here, I am angry with the management that (.) they didn't ask us what works, they just imposed it. Although I had a system which I thought was really good iii for the children in my opinion the best. [quieter]*
- *EX2 (trade unionist at Amazon): Amazon refers to the fact that it has appointed the so-called 2-meterers, or these 2-meter teams (...) they walk around the warehouse and say 2 meters, 2 meters, don't talk. This is employee discipline. We call it the mask police, because the effect is that Amazon has actually introduced these things, they have separated workplaces with plexiglass, or in the canteen there is simply a table separated by a plexiglass fence, but this also leads to isolation and hinders organization, because you can't talk to each other, (...) In our opinion, uses the means which it has introduced to alienate and isolate employees.*

“We never got any raises without a fight” (FGI4)

- The potential 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 the institutional/organisational crisis and preparedness to managing crisis situations; the relevance of regional disparities
- 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;
- Other scenarios to be explored, in particular a scenario of no innovation, no resistance and limited impact of pandemic all together (in some BNIs)

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