

# Do we need essential work?

## Unveiling narratives in and about essential sectors in Poland during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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# Essential/Key industries before the pandemic

	Personnel shortages	Precarization of employment	Wage differentiation (segmentation)	New forms of labor control	Erosion of collective labor relations
Health Care	***	**	***	*	*
Education	**	*	**	**	*
Social Work	***	**	**	**	**
Logistics	**	***	***	***	***

Mrozowicki & Burski 2024

# Background & Theoretical Inspirations (I)

- “The battle of ideas is also a battle of words.” (Hayman 2007)
- Power Resources Approach
  - **Narrative Resources** - “values, shared understandings, stories and ideologies that aggregate identities and interests and translate and inform motives.” (Levesque and Murray 2010)
  - -> source of discursive power – inside or outside the organisation (Schmaltz, Ludwig, Webster 2018)
- Discursive Institutionalism (cf. Preminger 2020, McLaughlin and Wright 2024)
  - **Ideational Power** „capacity of actors (...) to influence other actors’ normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements” (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016)
    - **power through ideas** - convincing other actors to particular “views of what to think and do”
    - **power over ideas** - control over production of meaning and the diffusion of information via the mass media
    - **power in ideas** - subconscious structures of knowledge and meaning, which appear as common sense, something taken-for-granted

# Background & Theoretical Inspirations (II)

- Covid-19 pandemic highlighted existing inequalities in the world of work
- BUT „crisis can also be an opportunity” (Fairclough 2011, Rodrik 2014).

“A **crisis is both a moment of failure** (the failure of financial and economic systems etc) and a **moment of possibility and opportunity**, or as Debray puts it (1973: 99) ‘the culmination of one process and the beginning of another’ where ‘it is clear to everyone that something of vital importance is being determined, but no one can agree as to what the solution will be’. (...) **in times of crisis, though the capacity of particular discourses to contribute to social change through ‘ideological effects’ is likely to change**” (Fairclough 2011)

- **new discursive opportunity structure** -> chance to reframe the dominant views on workers skills, effort and their necessity for social reproduction
- social media as important tool and opportunity for TU revitalization (cf. Hodder & Houghton 2015, 2021; McCallum 2022)

# Research questions:

- What were the unions direct narratives about the workers of the four industries during the covid-19 pandemic?
- To what extent were these narratives present in the mass-media (in the press)? How else were workers in essential industries described?
- How in the context of essentiality did workers self-identify? How does it correspond with the other narratives?



# Q1: TU narratives in social media

- low activity of TU in social media in general
- no references to the category of essential or key work → wasted potential
- main focus on „anti-crisis shields” and crises of the social dialog in Poland
- TU membership presented as source of stability in uncertain times
- Exception: Trade Union Forum -> „Heros deserve more than applaus”



Trade Union Forum

8 mandjand 2020 · 🌐



[#NowEmployees](#) !

Heroes on the front lines fighting the coronavirus deserve more than applause!

The Trade Union Forum proposes - all professional groups that today constitute an army waging a ruthless war against the COVID-19 epidemic should be covered by additional insurance!

Do you support? Share!

# Q1: Trade Unions narratives in social media

- Twitter / X in Poland – „elitist but influential” but not in the case of TU
- Facebook – more visible but neglected

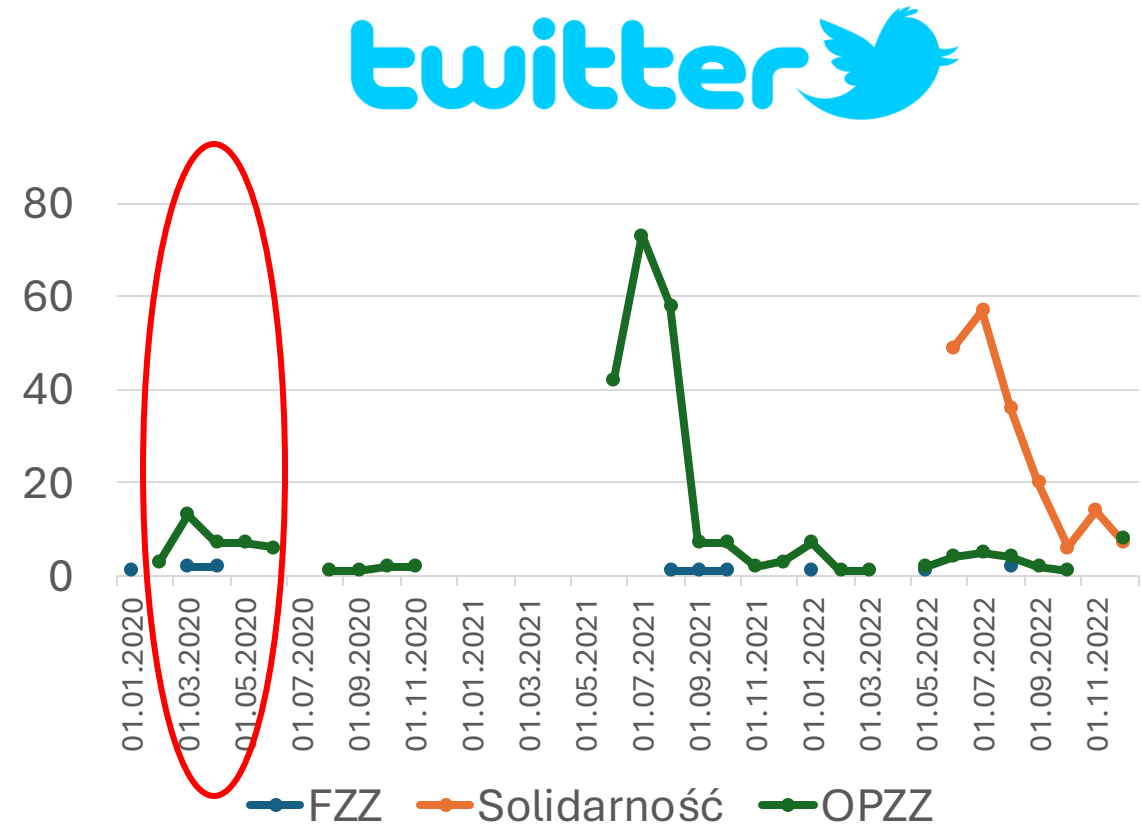
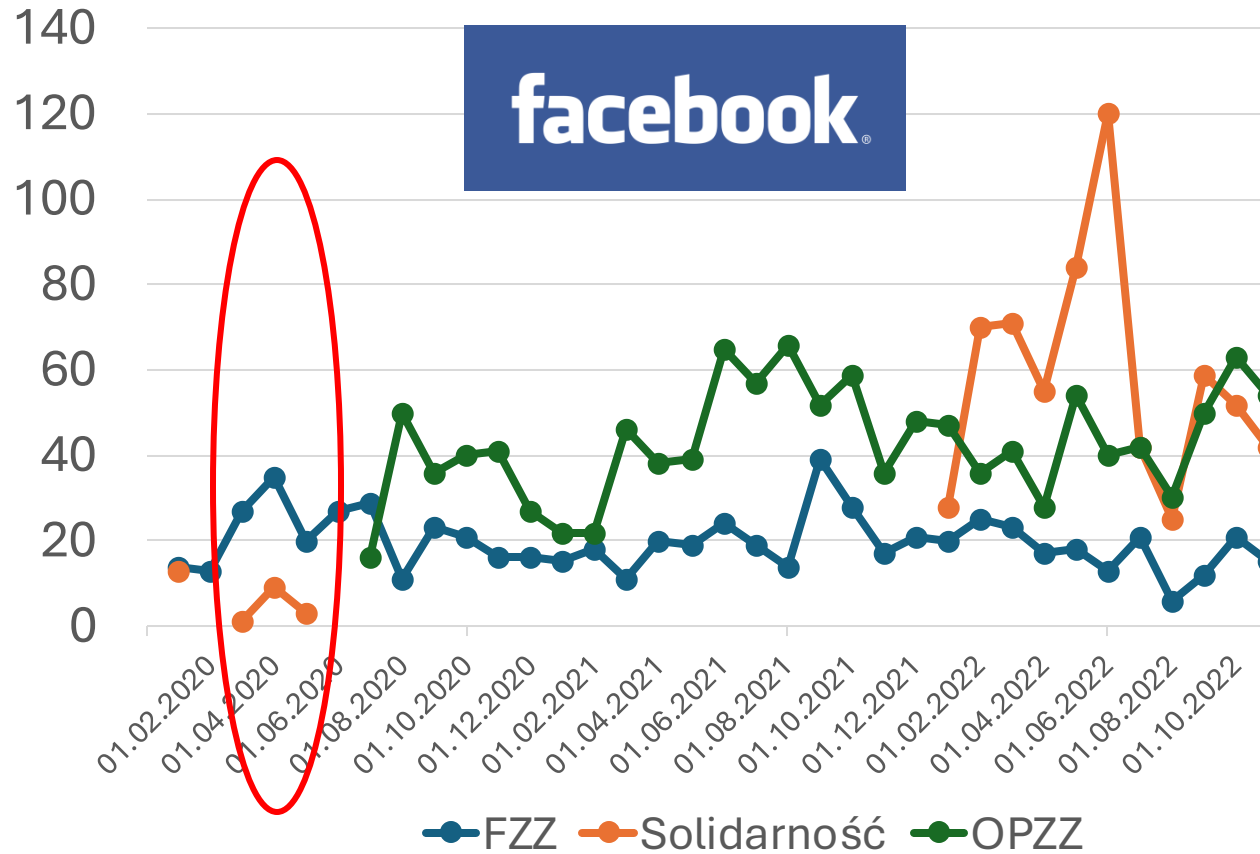


facebook

	Original tweets	Followers (as of 07.2023)	Posted retweets	Retweets	Replies (discussion)	Posts	Followers (as of 07.2023)	Comments	Posts shares
<b>OPZZ</b> (02.2020-12.2022)	<b>249</b>	3 539	21	521	194	<b>1296</b>	3 900	2226 (c/p 1,7)	10814 (s/p 8,3)
<b>Solidarność</b> (06-12.2022)	<b>100</b>	201	89	149	45	<b>714</b>	10 000	1577 (c/p 2,2)	2575 (s/p 3,6)
<b>FZZ</b> (01.2020-08.2022)	<b>3</b>	13	10	8	4	<b>703</b>	5500	868 (c/p 1,2)	7054 (s/p 10)



# Activity of Polish trade unions on Facebook and Twitter (X) during COVID-19 pandemic (posts/month) (2020-2022)



**CODZIENNY PORADNIK ANTYWIRUSOWY**

**CO ROBIĆ, GDY BRAKUJE NACZYNIŚ**  
KOMU SIĘ NALEŻĄ DODATKI MIESZKANOWE ▶ 20

wyborcza.pl

**GAZETA wyborcza**  
NIE MA WOLNOŚCI BEZ SOLIDARNOŚCI

Średnia: 122 kłosa/ha 2020 | Płatki nie przemieszczają się przez powietrze | Coś więcej o 40% w sezonie | 1 na 10 000 2

**Dzisiaj: specjalny dodatek o dokonaniach polskiego samorządu**  
**JAK ZMIENIŁY SIĘ NASZE MIASTA**

**Sondaż SWPS. Polacy o walce z koronawirusem**

**Doceniamy medyków, nie ufamy rządowi**

**Walczeć!**

Do końca pandemii nie ma szansy na powrót do normalności. Odsłonięto jednak, że większość Polaków docenia pracę medyków, ale nie ufaje rządowi. Wynik sondażu SWPS. Medycy i ratownicy są bohaterami, a rząd nie ma szansy na powrót do normalności. Wynik sondażu SWPS.

**Podpisz apel**

**Jak zawiesić spłatę KREDYTU**  
Wielki poradnik na czas kryzysu

**JUTRO** jak zawiesić kredyt dla firm

**Najlepsza cena!**  
TYLKO 199 zł

**SUPER se.pl express**

**„SUPER EXPRESS” APELUJE RZĄD WYŚLUCHA**

**Pokazała pokój dzidziusia**

**Orlen zawsze jest z Polakami**

**Maseczki obowiązkowe!**

**Najtansza biała kiełbasa, jajka, szynka, masło**

**Dzisiaj: specjalny dodatek**  
Porady na czas pandemii dla pracowników, podatników i samorządowców – uprawnienia, pomoc z ZUS i PFR, zatrudnienie

**DZIENNIK GAZETA PRAWNA**  
PATRZYM OBIĘTYMI. PIĘKNI ODPWIEDZIALNI

**MAGAZYN NA WEEKEND**

**Zaniedbaj, spanikuj, powtórz**

**AS-11**

**IOG**  
Cena: 6,30 zł

**RZECZPOSPOLITA**

**Zapomniany sojusznik aliantów**

**Ekstraklasa wraca z przerwą**

**Szpital przed zawalem**

**Polacy tłumnie wracają na SOR-y, ale na oddziałach nie ma dla nich miejsc. A może być gorzej.**

**W NUMERZE:**

**GOSPODARKA**  
Nowych tarcz już...

**Koronawirus psuje majówkę i wakacje**  
**Sprawdź, jak odwołać wyjazd i nie stracić!**

**Wtorek, 21 kwietnia:**  
PIAŻA, GRILL, DZIAŁKA  
CO BĘDZIE MOŻNA ROBIĆ W MAJÓWKĘ?

**Środa, 22 kwietnia:**  
CIĘCIA ETATÓW, OBNIŻKI PENSIJ  
PRACOWNIKÓW, SPRĄDZ, JAKIE MASZ PRAWA W CZASIE EPIDEMII!

**Fakt GAZETA CODZIENNA**

**DRAMAT MIESZKAŃCÓW DOMÓW POMOCY. CHOROBY PRZYZOSŁY**

**Gazeta Polska**  
codz.

**Epidemia nie hamuje**

**ZDROWIE** | Zbliżamy się do liczby 3 tys. osób zarażonych koronawirusem na terenie naszego kraju. Bilans ofiar śmiertelnych do wczorajszego wieczora wyniósł 51 pacjentów. To zdecydowanie lepsze statystyki niż chociażby na zachodzie Europy. Jednak o bezwzględnej izolacji społecznej i pozostaniu w domu. Zgodnie z zapowiedziami szefa MSWiA policja będzie surowo karać za nieprzestrzeganie obstru...

## Q2: Press discourse about work in „essential sectors”

	Health Care		Logistics	Social Work	Education
	doctors	nurses	curiers	social workers	teachers
N of articles	7601	1651	246	19 + 366 (nursing home care)	2214
<b>Who is speaking for labour?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unions' representatives</li> <li>• workers on social media</li> <li>• opposition politicians</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• journalists,</li> <li>• researchers,</li> <li>• employers</li> <li>• casual workers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• journalists</li> <li>• local politicians</li> <li>• unions' representatives (rarely)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unions' representatives</li> <li>• NGOs</li> <li>• opposition politicians</li> </ul>
<b>The discourse</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• heroes -&gt; risk of contracting the virus -&gt; bodily and psychological sacrifices -&gt; calls to express gratitude (symbolic)</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• entrepreneurial potential virus carriers</li> <li>• chance for the unemployed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• overworked potential virus carriers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unappreciated group</li> </ul>
<b>Main problems at work</b>	personnel shortages (greedy and ungrateful doctors emigrate / unappreciated nurses) -> overwork		lack of regulations -> exploitation by platforms (pov: researchers)	personnel shortages (infections and quarantine) underfunding	organisational chaos personnel shortages politicization of schools
<b>„essentiality”</b>	<b>yes</b> -> biological survival of society		<b>yes</b> -> temporary	<b>no</b>	<b>yes</b> -> only short-term for functioning of economy -> allows parents to work
<b>Discursive power</b>	<b>medium</b>	<b>strong</b>	<b>medium</b>	<b>weak</b>	<b>weak</b>

# Q3: Self-identity in the context of essentiality

- **Medical staff: biological survival of population**
  - **unsustainability of heroic discourse**
    - Nurse: *From praise to blame*  
(pl: *Od poklasku do potrzasku*)
- **Teachers: enabling other people's work**
- Teacher: *Many people treat school as a storage facility. It bothers them a lot that their children are at home. I don't blame them, it's hard to work from home when children are in.*

### **Q3: Self-identity in the context of essentiality**

- **Nursing homes staff: not essential until socially recognized**
  - Nursing home manager: *In the media we were portrayed as one big dirt, stench and complete hopelessness.*
- **Nursing homes staff: workplace level recognition**
  - Nursing home carer: *Only the nursing home manager appreciated us, no one else*

# Conclusions and Discussions

- TU showed **no efforts to introduce new narratives on essential work(ers)**  
-> wasted potential for discursive power.
- **Failure to utilize new communication channels** (such as social media) forces unions to mediate their discourses through traditional media (independent from TUs and not always supportive).
- The **unions' narratives** - when present - often **refer to the discourses of heroism and sacrifice**. This is **problematic** because:
  - 1) it is temporary, 2) individualizes responsibility, 3) has a negative impact on psychological well-being, 4) substitutes discussions about working conditions and the limits of duty of care. (cf. Cox 2020)
- We believe that **adopting the discourse of essentiality as a narrative resource would be more fruitful** for unions because:
  - 1) is more sustainable,
  - 2) is worker-centric, ie. shifts the focus from individuals and their actions to structural inequalities,
  - 3) enables the promotion of a model of recognition that is not only symbolic but also implies material and legal grounding of workers' interests, (cf. Castel 1996)
  - 4) is more in line with the occupational self-identification of workers, who do not consider themselves as heroes or heroines

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# Recognition (Laaser & Karlsson 2022)

## **Social recognition** (Castel, Hancock & Tucker)

labour law regulations, job safety, decent work conditions & “entitlement to the values of respect and dignity due to their sovereign decision to work for the organization”

## **Recognition as self-esteem** (Honneth)

“acknowledgement of individuals’ particular traits, abilities and contributions to a valued project”

## **Workplace level appreciation** (Voswinkel, Sayer)

“conditional on workers’ practices and engagement in relations that strengthen the community and reinforce its identity”, reciprocity and solidarity in the workplace