

The COVID-19 crisis and the end of the ‘low-skilled’ worker

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One day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker if it is to survive, for the person who picks up our garbage, in the final analysis, is as significant as the physician, for if he doesn't do his job, diseases are rampant. All labor has dignity.

—Martin Luther King

The COVID-19 crisis is causing working class people lots of pain and suffering. Beyond the deaths of loved ones, [unemployment](#) and income insecurity are creating an uncertain future. But the crisis is also leading to some quite contradictory (and potentially interesting) outcomes in the world of work. Right in front of our eyes, the COVID-19 crisis is dissolving the foundations upon which the traditional division of labor between intellectual and manual labor was based. In particular, this crisis is interrogating the legitimacy of that skills-hierarchy that places at the bottom all those skills and jobs that are necessary for the reproduction of life and society. Suddenly, workers in the food chain, from [agricultural laborers](#), to workers in food factories, to [warehouse and logistics workers](#), supermarket employees, waste collectors, and [cleaners](#), as well as healthcare and care workers, are called “key,” or “essential” workers, or are given other specific legal entitlements that are reminiscent of wartime economies and would have been unimaginable earlier this year.

At first sight, this might not seem that radical. But it is. After all, the distinction between low-skilled and high-skilled jobs has allowed capital to legitimize wage inequalities, to stigmatize and devalue social reproduction, and to [mobilize international migratory movements](#) from poor countries to richer ones. Thus, the current crisis, and the dissolution of the traditional division (and hierarchy) of labor it has (momentarily) brought about, are forcing us to interrogate the underpinnings of so-called low-skilled work, to see clearer than ever the racialized and gendered nature of much so-called “unskilled” labor, and to put onto center stage the role of ‘life-making activities’ in the class struggles to come.

The labor market isn't working

To understand the current paradigmatic shift, it is necessary to acknowledge how the figure of the “low-skilled worker” has been socially constructed. The OECD defines low-skilled workers on the basis of their educational attainment rather than in relation to the job they perform. Organizations such as the OECD, the European Union’s Eurostat, or the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in Britain, use these definitions to calculate the so-called “skills mismatches,” which they consider as market inefficiencies. For an individual worker, these inefficiencies mean that they work in a job below their skills-level and thus receive lower wages. For capital, these types of skills-mismatches can result in labor shortages (if skilled workers refuse to accept lower-skilled jobs), which can place pressure on labor costs and increase workers’ bargaining power. According to the OECD, 80 million workers in Europe are mismatched by qualifications—a sign that our labor markets are completely dysfunctional.

The British ONS calculates workers’ skills-levels in terms of how long it takes someone to acquire the necessary skills to perform a certain job. This explicitly creates a hierarchy of skills, which inflates Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) skills and directly devalues non-STEM, or other invisible, heterogenous, and non-quantifiable skills such as interpersonal and relational skills, as well as competences acquired through work experience. This situation also helps explain why those economic sectors that employ mostly female workers—who tend to have non-STEM skills in higher percentages as compared to men—remain undervalued and underpaid compared to traditional male occupations, even if the degree of qualification is comparable.

Marxists have long regarded the construction of “skills” as driving the division between manual and non-manual workers, and thus, as the root cause of social inequalities and workers’ alienation. In Capital Volume I Marx argued that capitalism’s tendency towards mechanization would lead to the increasing deskilling of workers, an idea later embraced by Henry Braverman in the 1970s in his pioneering work on monopoly capitalism. For Braverman, technological advancement in capitalist societies created the conditions in which “the more science is incorporated into the labor process, the less the worker understands of the process; the more sophisticated an intellectual product the machine becomes, the less control and comprehension of the machine the worker has” (295).

Braverman was referring to a Fordist world in which the majority of workers in the Global North were employed in manufacturing and industrial production. With the growing relocation of many factories to the Global South and the expansion of tertiary

economies (see [Figure 4](#)) in the Global North from the late 1970s onward, some of his hypotheses required correction as tumultuous economic development have led to the re-organization of global labor.

Instead of a linear process of “deskilling” of the workforce through constant automation, what we have witnessed since the 1970s instead is a rather heterogenous process of patch-worked mechanization within the same sector, and an increasing polarization and segmentation of skills, occupations, and economic branches between high-skill and low-skill. What is interesting here is that it is particularly the sectors with low levels of mechanization that have resorted to a workforce defined as “low-skilled”—unlike the situation predicted by Braverman. As we will discuss in more length shortly, the lack of mechanization in these sectors has been even used as a justification to either prevent workers’ upskilling, or to treat such low-automated sectors as too labor intensive and too low in productivity to be entitled high wages.

Furthermore, such a situation of polarization and segmentation of skills, occupations, and sectors has engendered a growing racialized and gendered dynamic. A large portion of those employed in the bottom sectors of the segmented labor market and paid low wages have been migrants, ethnic minority workers and/or female workers.

On the one hand, the labor markets of the Global North in the last forty or so years have undergone what has been commonly described as a process of feminization. Such a process under the aegis of neoliberalism has not only implied that women have entered the labor market *en masse*, but also—as Guy Standing showed in the late 1990s—that the low wages and bad working conditions that have been historically reserved for feminized subjects have now been extended to an ever larger proportion of the working class through various forms of precarious and low-pay contracts.

On the other hand, many low-pay and precarious jobs have been occupied by migrant and ethnic minority laborers. From the 1973 Oil Crisis onward, we have witnessed what [Alessandro De Giorgi](#) calls the simultaneous process of de- and re-bordering richer nations. This means that while the so-called stoppage policies of the mid 1970s in Northern Europe and the USA were meant to send non-nationals the message that they were no longer welcome—at least rhetorically—those same borders were selectively left open to allow enough migrants to meet the growing demand for cheap labor.

As a result, an increasing number of occupations in the lower echelons of the labor market have been increasingly reserved for racialized and disposable populations, as so-called native born workers are no longer willing to engage in the famous DDD (Dirty, Dangerous and Demanding) and CCC (Caring, Cooking and Cleaning) jobs that tend to

pay abysmally low wages. The processes of de-bordering and re-bordering that have been put in place by the richer countries in the last forty years were thus meant for nothing but to control, select, and govern labor mobility. Whether the European Union's "freedom of movement," the points-based immigration systems in countries like Australia or Canada (and soon UK), or the *de facto* toleration of nearly 12 million undocumented migrants in the USA, these policies lock migrants into a subordinate position, render them without political rights, and make them instantly disposable or deportable. This type of flexible and instrumental process of de- and re-bordering parallels the increased flexibilization of the labor market, which capital deems necessary to accumulate profits in times of sluggish growth and low profitability.

Mechanization, skills hierarchies and life making

jobs

Some of the jobs at the bottom of the segmented racialized and feminized labor markets we described above include those in the agricultural and care sectors. Jobs in these sectors are among the lowest paid and lowest regarded in our societies. And yet—following on Tithi Bhattacharya's definition—they should be better described as "life-making jobs, or activities," for without them, the reproduction of life, simply stated, is not possible. It is not surprising then, that in the midst of a pandemic, these jobs are now being categorized as "key," or essential," thereby turning the skills hierarchy on its head and ultimately making apparent the much more relevant hierarchy between those activities that are truly life-making, and those that instead exist solely to enable profit-making.

International institutions such as the OECD, World Bank, and IMF argue that workers in agriculture, care work and other "life-making"-sectors cannot be granted higher wages because productivity gains are difficult to achieve. Meanwhile, "bullshit jobs"—to borrow David Graeber's apt definition—such as project, training and sales managers, private equity CEOs, lobbyists, telemarketers, and actuaries lie on the other end of the polarization and have seen salary increases beyond belief, contributing to rising income inequality. And this is not because they are jobs that require high skills, but only because capitalists deem them useful to help achieve the supreme goal of profit-making. The on-going crisis thus has made at least crystal clear that humanity will probably do just fine without the bullshit jobs. But it is also making increasingly clear that the reason why life-making workers such as nurses, carers, agricultural workers and so forth receive low wages is not because they are low-skilled. Instead it is because our

capitalist-driven economies find that profits are higher when the majority of life-making professions are devalued to second-rate ranking and remain reliant upon feminized, racialized and other categories of “more disposable” workers, as these workers have less bargaining power and are thus forced to accept low-wages. Furthermore, capitalists understand all too well that some life-making sectors serve profit-making better if they remain, at least in part, non-mechanized. In this latter respect, we should reassess Braverman and, partly Marx’s, prediction that the capitalists’ growing investment in mechanization will bring about the deskilling of workers.

Certain sectors of agriculture, for example, has maintained very low levels of mechanization not to upskill but rather to deskill workers. While various forms of agricultural mechanization have focused mostly on land cultivation technology or are employed in monoculture crops, in Europe in particular, some sectors have remained in large part reliant upon migrant day laborers whose hands and arms are still the only reliable “tools” to pick fruit and vegetables, as this video shows. These agricultural workers are a prime example of skills mismatch, as they often hold degrees or vocational training from their home countries, which are not recognized in the European Union. The availability of migrant workers is the main reason why these jobs in the richer parts of Europe have remained largely un-mechanized. Employing workers from poorer countries is in fact cheaper than buying costly machinery, insofar as initial investment is high and needs to be managed and maintained by highly skilled engineers and technical staff.

Migrants working in these agricultural sectors are often undocumented or else recruited as seasonal workers with visas allowing them to remain within a country only during harvest. It is precisely this situation of illegality and/or extreme precariousness of this workforce that allows bosses to depress wages and keep laborers politically disenfranchised and in a constant state of fear. Moreover, employers cash in considerably by providing migrant workers with food and lodging, and thus paying them abysmally low wages (even though the housing they provide are mostly made of barracks below ILO standards). Such shoddy practices targeting migrants even extend to nurses who are keeping the British NHS alive. Here, migrant nurses have had to pay an immigration pay surcharge of £400 to obtain a visa. As discussed above, the combination of the skills hierarchy and migration regimes has allowed agribusiness to save on labor costs and rake in massive profits. Life-making activities such as agriculture thus, are belittled and remain unrecognized in times of relative capitalist

stability. Yet, it is in times of crisis such as the one we are living that their essential role is revealed for what it is.

Another life-making activity which has moved center stage in recent weeks is care work. Whether healthcare, elderly care, or childcare, care work is a sector that is nearly impossible to automate. Attempts at automating some parts of care using ‘nursebots’ in care homes, for instance, have mostly failed. Care workers cannot be replaced by machines precisely because care tasks require inter-personal and relational skills. Thus, one of capital’s strategies to reduce the labor costs in the care sector has been that of recruiting (again) migrant workers from various parts of the Global South or comparatively poorer areas. And like the agricultural sector, the care sector too is one in which most job profiles—from nurses, to elderly carers, to day-care teachers—are considered low-skill, even though many of the (predominantly female) migrant workers in the sector tend to have high degrees. This results in workers being under-paid and employers being able to save on labor costs.

In recent years, employers have opted for different strategies to devalue and under-pay care work. In particular, they have attempted to standardize and segment the care work process, which is facilitated by the growing corporatization of large sections of childcare and elderly care in many EU countries. This becomes very clear in Ken Loach’s latest film, “Sorry we missed you,” in which the care worker is subject to the same forms of management and control of the labor process as her husband who works as a delivery driver. While a delivery route had to be completed in a set amount of time, the care worker depicted in the movie also had ten minutes to feed her client and ten minutes to shower them before rushing to the next client. This has been increasingly made possible by the fact that for-profit companies are investing in care, taking advantage both of the growing demand for elderly care brought about by the aging of the population and by the state’s subsidy of private care services.

All in all, the reason why agricultural work and care are mostly (and increasingly) low pay is not because of their skills requirements, but exclusively because these are life-making sectors that capitalists deem too low in productivity and too labor intensive. As Social Reproduction Theory well explains, capitalist production needs social reproduction (or what we are here calling life-making) in order to thrive, but capitalists want to pay as little as possible for it, if at all. That is why many life-making workers such as waste collectors, healthcare or utilities workers are either incorporated into state services (which provide increasingly less jobs security and pay given the dominance of New Public Management), or else employed through private organizations which compete with each other by reducing labor costs.

The case of elderly care is paradigmatic as stories such as Southern Cross or, more recently, Four Seasons increasingly show. We should thus be wary of the skills-lexicon we have inherited according to which many life-making jobs are low-skill. On the contrary, we should challenge the skills paradigm and hierarchies that continue to determine huge social inequalities, fight for the recognition of the equal dignity and importance of jobs and professions (particularly those capitalism disregards and renders undesirable), but above all, fight for their reorganization and higher remuneration.

The trap of the essential/non-essential worker

binary

As we discussed above, the neoliberal restructuring of the labor market over the past forty years has degraded most life-making work through processes of skills and wage segmentation rather than linear deskilling. The distinction between low and high skills has been presented as one based on educational levels, with a narrow understanding of education as one that does not include vocational training or other inter-personal skills. At a fundamental level, it is based on the distinction between manual and intellectual labor. Consequently, the skills hierarchy has served to present wages as meritocratic rewards for those who achieve high levels of tertiary education, in particular in STEM subjects. On the other hand, university education in the social sciences or humanities has been refitted to teach transferable skills with the goal of creating employable graduates for whom the old trade union slogan of “lifelong learning” has become the nightmare of perpetual self-optimization through skills acquisition.

There was an understandable reason why the trade union movement of the 20th century in Europe and North America demanded life-long learning and upskilling for the workforce. This was to create a sector-wide internal labor market, which would strengthen the bargaining position of the union and the workers who had worked within the same company or sector for a long time. Eventually upskilling would also lead to productivity gains, which would translate into higher wages and improved terms and conditions for workers. The trade union movement was successful in establishing this for a small section of mostly highly trained male workers in industry and manufacturing. With the breakdown of the post-WWII consensus, the onset of neoliberal economic and labor policies, and a shift towards a service-based employment, this model of economic and social integration through lifelong learning and upskilling of the workforce vanished.

Yet, the mostly migrant and female workers who are employed in life-making sectors, and have been categorized as “essential” during the COVID-19 crisis, were never part of this economic set-up of Keynesian capitalism. Then and now, if they receive any training at all, it is nothing more than a glorified onboarding, or company-run training scheme, to enable them to do their job. Most of these training schemes are non-certified, meaning that workers who have completed hours of training do not have these recognized when they move to other companies within or outside the sector. The European Union’s Joint Employment Report 2020 evidences that only four percent of low-skilled workers are currently enrolled in any educational program for adults across the EU. This is one of the ways capital is empowered over labor, as workers are less mobile and less confident to try to switch jobs and thus achieve higher wages. The current crisis has thus revealed the contradictory nature of so-called low-skilled and life-making work. Capitalism continuously seeks to devalue this type of work. However, as an economic and social system, capitalism depends on life-making both as a source of profit (as in the case of agribusiness) and as a source of nourishment and health for its workers (as in the case of food production/distribution and in that of care work), as the current crisis has made crystal clear. In Britain, big business champion, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, repeatedly thanked cleaners and carers for their service and now calls them “key workers.” In Norway, the Crown Prince sat down for a Zoom conference with a group of cleaners, acknowledging their “critical function” in society. In Germany, the government has lifted the ban on seasonal migrants and has been flying in thousands of agricultural workers from Romania and Bulgaria. The human cost of this has been very high as one of these workers has died of COVID-19. But for the first time, there has actually been a debate on how this work is organized, how necessary it is to the German economy and livelihood, and how reliant it is upon migrants. The sudden glorification of life-making, low-pay, and (seemingly) low-skilled jobs has led to their public visibility and the beginning of a political discussion about the fairness of these workers’ wages. Furthermore, such a situation is putting the ONS skills classification, which deems many essential workers’ skills as “elementary,” onto the backburner. It is a definition that belittles these skills as “simple” and thus provides grounds for their low wages. These are important developments, whose potential for the class struggle to come we will discuss in the following section. However, we should be very wary of the traps hidden behind the sudden appreciation of life-making jobs as “essential.”

To begin with, the now common distinction between “essential” and “non-essential” jobs risks reinforcing capitalist prejudice and tactics rather than challenging them. Jobs deemed as “non-essential” are often those that belong to the art, creative, and cultural industries, which have experienced severe cuts over many years, as they are deemed non-profitable. Jobs that are based in sectors that are experiencing a lowering, or lack of demand in the present or foreseeable future (e.g., restaurants, hotels and hospitality industry, airports and air-companies, college lecturers etc.), have also been labelled as “non-essential.” This is leading to widespread redundancies or “short-time work” contracts.

Furthermore, reports begin to suggest that professionals are facing increased workloads because of the move to home-work online. As the EY’s latest study suggests, the current pandemic is being used to automate numerous industries while new information systems technologies and internal HR systems have increased workplace surveillance. Swathes of white-collar professionals are now being digitally monitored in the same way as a Deliveroo driver. Some groups of so-called white-collars are thus now experiencing the precariousness, insecure pay, and feeling of worthlessness that so many “essential workers” have experienced on a day-to-day basis for a long time. The binary “essential/non-essential” can thus be a dangerous terrain for workers’ rights as it can provide the “moral” justification for new skills-hierarchies and mass unemployment as some kind of deserved outcome.

The public praise for life-making jobs as “essential so far has not been followed by a commitment to improve their wage situation and working conditions. In the UK, migrant nurses, who already have a low salary and are now commended as key workers, have to pay an immigration pay surcharge of £400 to obtain a visa. ILO and Eurofund research found that the COVID-19 crisis in Europe is affecting female health-workers disproportionately, as they are working longer hours and have to care for children and older people at home. And the same could be said for workers in general, and female workers in particular, in other now “key sectors,” who cannot move to home-working but still face the brunt of a demanding, low-pay job and possibly a family to look after at home. Thus, while increased recognition of these life-making jobs has been a feature of this unfolding crisis, an improvement of essential workers’ wages and working conditions has not followed, nor is under discussion at governmental level.

The class struggle to come

It is hard to predict the future and ultimately to know whether these jobs will maintain the status they have so far acquired once the pandemic has ended, and if applause will be followed by actual wage increase. But if the crisis created by the pandemic has made one thing clear it is that many life-making workers might no longer accept hazardous conditions for the same low-pay. In California, care workers at a hard-hit nursing home stayed away from their job. In the cleaning sector, employers have faced staff shortages and unusually high absentee rates. Workers have started to fear the virus more than their employers. Most of these protests have been about workplace safety and lack of PPE. Staten Island Amazon warehouse worker Chris Smalls organized a walk-out at his workplace over the lack of sufficient personal protective equipment. Not only did Amazon workers win a paid leave policy on March 23, but they also obtained the PPE they were demanding.

In recent weeks, manufacturing, logistics and supermarket workers have all engaged in spontaneous strike actions over health and safety issues at their workplaces. The strikes have raised eyebrows in many corners of the mainstream press with New York Magazine even featuring a story titled, “The Coronavirus is radicalizing workers.” Many of these spontaneous strikes are indeed turning into stable union organization; the union, Unite, in the UK, for instance, reports that more than 16,000 workers joined the union since the beginning of the lockdown.

Workers in life-making sectors in particular have also begun to claim the long overdue wage increases they deserve. Some companies have tried to preempt workers’ demands for higher wages by paying them “bonuses,” as in the case of the French supermarket chain, Auchan. Similarly, Amazon is paying new recruits \$2 an hour more, while the German government has pursued another route by passing a new working time law, which will be in place until the end of July and states that workers in “essential services” work up to twelve hours to stem the labor shortage and increased demand for these services.

All of this can open up new fault lines at a time when the link between productivity and wages is clearly broken down across the whole of our economies. For this reason, focusing our demands on higher wages and improved conditions for “life-making” workers might prove strategically key for the labor movement, and the left globally at this conjuncture. That is the case not only because life-making workers are on the frontline in a time of pandemic, but above all because their struggles shed light in the clearest possible way on the unsustainability and life-threatening nature of capitalism. Life-making sectors could thus become the new hubs of organized labor.

As life-making laborers stand in an insoluble contradiction with profit-making rationality, their work can speak of an alternative way of conceiving the economy and wealth, one that puts human lives and public health first.

Sara Farris is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Goldsmiths University of London and a member of the Editorial Board of *Historical Materialism* and international book review editor for *Critical Sociology*.

