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The Pandemic Response Shows How Workers Defend the Interests of All Humanity

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Across France, workers are insisting that they be allowed to make masks and ventilators rather than continue with business as usual. Their initiatives show that when workers, not stock prices, decide what's being made, production can serve the needs of society as a whole.

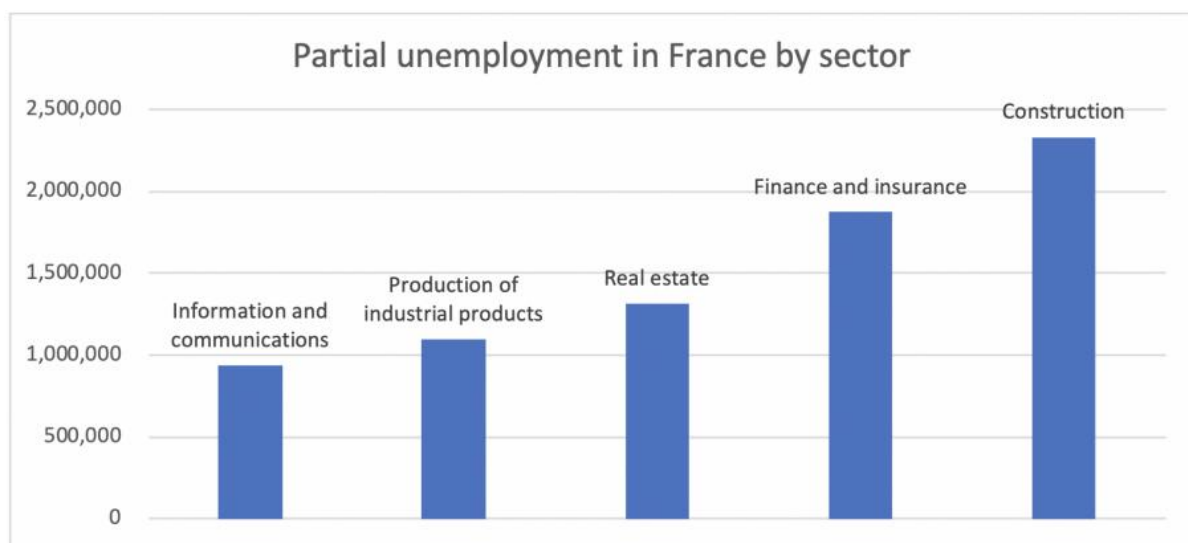


A box containing disposable protective masks stands among boxes of products by 3M and Honeywell at the Rhenus logistics center during the coronavirus crisis on April 16, 2020 in Grossbeeren, Germany. Sean Gallup / Getty

Coronavirus has become a global crisis; official figures tell us that more than 3 million people have already been infected (some estimates put the number ten times higher), and more than a quarter of a million have died. In the bid to contain the virus's spread and reduce the strain on

hospitals, over 3 billion people are on lockdown. In this context of crisis, many analysts have pointed to errors in initial risk assessments, against a backdrop of structural unpreparedness and budget cuts. Government pronouncements regarding masks — initially considered ineffective, before they were deemed essential — speaks to the contradictions and fluctuations in public discourse on the pandemic.

Yet the focus on government action — as symbolized by the daily ritual of televised press conferences offering updates on the situation — should not obscure the initiatives and the work that is being done by other social actors. As shown in the weekly tracking from French statistics agency DARES, the country's labor market has been deeply affected by the state-imposed lockdown: since the second week of April, 11 million workers in France have filed unemployment claims, mainly among small and middle-size businesses (83 percent in firms with under 250 workers).



In this context, the divisions that structure the labor market seem to have been aggravated. As France comes out of one of its largest workplace conflicts in history — also coming after the *gilets jaunes* protests — the world of labor is experiencing a new series of social tensions. They are not very audible because opportunities for collective action are limited by COVID-19 precautions; the spread of partial unemployment, remote work, and layoffs has also largely atomized workers. But how are these social tensions structured — and are they likely to have an effect beyond the current health crisis?

Even though the data is scarce and fragmented, some do point to major conflicts traversing the world of labor today — ones that assume an unprecedented role and visibility during the current crisis. For instance, if the coronavirus crisis highlights the failure of public policies to “rationalize” public health costs, it also reveals the extent and failure of an economic model centered on the profit motive “embedded” in other social realities, in this case, public health. As well as the capital-labor conflicts over the production of sanitary equipment, this crisis highlights a reality of the world of labor that is often less considered among the general public: namely the “professional consciousness” of workers and trade unionists, concerned with their health, viable economic production, as well as objectives of general interest. In this sense, it constitutes an observatory for the differentiated practices between firms, depending on the degree of social democracy in action.

The Crisis and the Economic Logic Behind It

The principles and practices of political economy that guide globalization are now well documented. For the last forty years, there have been countless reports and sociological surveys on the economic, social, and ecological effects of a system of exchange founded on the principles of increasing productivity and short-term profit, which sacrifices even profitable enterprises, if their margin is lower than other potential and accessible investment projects. However, the coronavirus crisis shines a harsh light on the objective oppositions within this system: private proprietors' time frames and economic aims don't coincide with the health needs of the general population. Worse still, there are successive examples of certain kinds of production being terminated, even though they are much needed in a health crisis like the current one. The demands of average profit rates and their timescales have undermined the industry supplying the public health system, as three recent examples illustrate.

The Gerzat site, in the center of France, has long produced oxygen cylinders, which are much needed by hospitals (or by fire departments, in the case of large fires). Even though it was the only site of production in Europe for this resource — and a shortage of oxygen cylinders is not hitting Italy (after Iran and China) — the British company Luxfer decided to [close the site](#) in order to induce delays on the market and thereby increase the company's profit margins. As the shortage of these oxygen bottles becomes more and more acute, there is a clear gap between the expectations of shareholders and the needs of the general population — everyone is a potential stakeholder. Faced with this situation, employees are currently occupying the site to keep the production of these oxygen cylinders going: if workers' employment is always part of their confrontation with employers, the need to provide sanitary equipment is also just as important.

One such line of division can be found at the Plaintel factory. Situated in the west of France (Brittany), this is the only French site producing FFP masks: thanks to their high filtration level, these offer professionals the best antibacterial and anti-aerosol protection. The state has moved to build up stocks of these masks. However, the acquisition of Sperian Protection by the Honeywell group in 2010 meant the integration of the factory into a global corporation. The first layoffs came very quickly, followed by strategic firing, and finally the total liquidation of the plant [during summer 2018](#), which meant the last thirty-eight employees losing their jobs. Yet a financial audit concluded that the site was still profitable. Thus, we see that the closure was motivated by the desire to increase dividend per share as well as the total market valuation of the Honeywell group. Faced with this closure, it was impossible for the employees of the Plaintel factory to hold on to any fixed capital because Honeywell quickly moved to dismantle the machines and send them away to be scrapped. Therefore, the reasons for the closure owed not to profitability at the Plaintel factory so much as its profitability *as compared to* other parallel factories owned by the Honeywell group.

In addition, the Péters Surgical site in Bobigny, in the Paris suburbs, [will close in June 2020](#), meaning the dismissal of sixty of its 134 employees — in spite of a net profit of €6 million in 2018 as well as €600,000 in grants from CICE [tax credits]. This site produces feeding tubes that are unique in Europe because they are produced with a sheath that protects nursing staff from possible splashes. They are currently sought by hospitals around the continent. However,

profit margins can be increased by transferring production to India rather than adapting to new European standards for medical production.

Crisis Management and Speculation

With the general shortage of appropriate sanitary equipment (such as respirators, tests, and protective masks), a speculative dynamic is emerging at the heart of public crisis planning. Not only has the shareholder logic limited the availability of resources needed to fight the pandemic, it has also created a situation marked by soaring prices for sanitary equipment.

Competition is [raging](#) between public buyers (the state, communities, and health infrastructures) eager to obtain the necessary equipment to combat COVID-19. Online auction sites are frequented by private and public purchasing centers — and the use of this mode of transaction lengthens by several weeks the time needed to secure access to the required equipment. These sites also deprive certain communities of any protection at all, because administrators are unable to get authorization fast enough to keep up with real-time auctions.

In this unstable environment, prices are [soaring](#) and the [black market](#) is expanding. An increasing proportion of equipment is acquired through direct contracts, which can mean behind-the-scenes arrangements, disguised favoritism, or even embezzlement. There are many examples of middlemen who buy sanitary equipment wholesale directly on the airport tarmac at a competitive price in order to resell it elsewhere. Many American investment banks are already pushing medical providers [to raise their prices](#), taking advantage of a “captive” clientele who cannot simply wait for more competitive prices.

When private firms move to provide their employees with protective equipment, they make it harder for the public sector to access masks. For example, Airbus recently reopened its sites, [at the price of having to order twenty thousand masks](#), in addition to stocks already procured and the thousands of orders throughout the chain of subcontractors. This shows how the desire for private activity at all costs helps to cause shortages of equipment for caregivers.

Consequently, faced with shortages, thousands of employees — [or their relatives](#) — turn to homemade solutions: they save material, disregard expiration dates, reuse materials despite recommendations to the contrary, or even manufacture and disinfect equipment (such as masks) themselves. Could this time spent be a new kind of surplus value extracted from workers during this crisis?

Overwork and Health Costs

As well as causing problems for the medical industry, a logic of speculation and shareholder advantages puts strain on hospitals by mobilizing a workforce in cramped and face-to-face conditions. Amazon [illustrates this perfectly](#), given the explosion in the rates of profits related to the delivery of video games, office supplies, and electronics. This has the corollary of spreading the virus to yet more workers, in turn increasing the numbers who hospitals have to find beds for.

Therefore, a section of the workforce is mobilized for tasks that [have questionable public utility](#) and contribute to the congestion of health services. Far from restricting the

mobilization of the workforce, [recent government decisions](#) increase the exposure of the workforce to coronavirus by authorizing deregulation of working-hour limits as well as permitting work on Sundays in sectors of the economy supposedly “necessary to the continuation of social life.” This opens a new field of interpretation and controversy whose resolution will last long after the decisions bosses now make.

Last, we can hypothesize that the pandemic will have health consequences of a more classic psychological and physiological order. These stem from workers being permanently online and contactable, and the general suspension of paid holidays and breaks in certain sectors under these same government directives — not to mention [the intensification of work for caregivers](#). Employers are now demanding that employees convert their time in confinement into paid holidays, preferring the eating-up of paid holidays rather than “partial-unemployment” claims. In certain situations, the extortion of work takes an unprecedented form: employees are asked to work from home *and* declare “partial-unemployment” status, while they are actually declared by their firm as being on paid leave. There are two consequences to all of this. First of all, salaried work is swapped for work from home, without compensation. Second, the real break time normally given to employees disappears. In coming months, this will weigh heavily on workers and, consequently, the medical sector.

Employers’ expectations, notably within large firms, thus conflict with multiple recommendations made by health professionals as well as the medical system’s own capacity to treat new patients. The confrontation between this type of decision and union recommendations highlights a dichotomy between the interests of capital and of labor. Far from reducible solely to questions of employment and income, this sense of professional consciousness appears to be closely linked with a sense of public interest, which currently contributes to helping the struggle for health.

Professional Consciousness and General Interest

In recent decades, the sociology of work has been used to highlight neoliberal policies’ harmful effects on working conditions and employment in both the private and public sectors. The sociology of trade unionism has long followed a similar trajectory. Faced with failed mobilizations and the collapse of union membership, specialists in this field have highlighted the weakening of workers’ main defenses against employer and state efforts to enforce the dominant economic logic.

But for at least a decade, trade unionism has been far from inactive. As shown by the work of [Rémy Ponge](#), the federations have taken up, for example, occupational health issues, in particular mental health issues and musculoskeletal disorders (MSD). [Thanks to fruitful collaborations with academics as well as consulting firms](#), we are seeing the proliferation of initiatives working to better our knowledge about the health effects that work has on employees. In the late 2000s, the CGT launched an important investigation into working conditions at Renault. In collaboration with psychologists and doctors, [trade unionists are trying to reformulate the relationship to work](#) — not only to improve working conditions, but also to transform the existing frameworks of union mobilization. Solidaires is probably the trade union that pulled off the action best known to the wider public: following the privatization of France Télécom, its post and telecoms wing Sud-PTT was the first to raise the

[alarm to the suicides that hit the firm](#). Sud-PTT was one of the key actors in the court process that took place last year and resulted [in the conviction of company management](#). More generally, trade union organizations participate in regular awareness-raising work through the French shop-floor councils: the “Comités Social et Économique” (CSE).

Amid today’s great anxiety, this long-term activist work is now influencing many workers’ own conduct. Facing an absence of employment protections, [many protest movements are appearing](#). After the first day of confinement, some employees of the Atlantic shipyards [refused to restart work](#). At the post office, one out of five post carriers exercised their right to withdraw from work, with unions denouncing safety measures that were reduced to “[a bottle of water, a package of tissues, and a garbage bag](#)” as well as management pressure on workers. Management was forced to reconsider the organization of work, reducing the number of postal rounds per day as well as closing many post offices. But beyond the minimum protection measures, many trade unions are launching petitions urging for the cessation of nonessential work and [the requisition of medical equipment](#).

Three weeks after the start of the quarantine, in some sectors such as the automotive industry, employee representatives [are still opposing the resumption of work](#) for the same reasons, even though negotiations seem to be succeeding in some places, where wages are paid if employees [surrender vacation days](#). However, the sanitary problems posed by COVID-19 do not only concern workers with strong professional integration. Facing the total absence of barrier measures and social distancing, employees at Amazon have also joined in the call to close [non-vital activities](#). After management’s rejection of workers’ right to withdraw from their posts during the pandemic, the Solidaires union brought the case to the judicial tribunal in Nanterre, filing a complaint over the endangering of employees. The tribunal ordered Amazon to scale down its activity in France; faced with this decision, the company decided to close its [warehouses for several days](#). Better still, their struggle has surpassed the national framework as Amazon employees in both Europe and America [are supporting it](#). Even the most precarious workers, such as those doing bike delivery, are calling for the suspension of [deliveries](#) from which they get their income. Recently, Gregor Gall [has reminded us of workers’ reactions to COVID-19 around the world](#).

Professional Consciousness Is Helping the Fight Against COVID-19

Far from Épinal’s image of struggling trade unionists, many works have shown union activists’ ability to show creativity and [make new proposals](#): whether [in the service industry](#) or in more [traditional industrial sectors](#), trade unionists, including the most radical, are continuously making proposals to management, not only on matters about working conditions, but also about investment strategies. As Guillaume [Gourgues showed with regard to the worker-occupied LIP factory](#), the Collectif du 9 août with regard to Molex, and indeed our own work on the workplaces taken under worker management in [Argentina](#) and [France](#), these workers demonstrated not only their welter of economic and legal ingenuity in saving their workplaces from the threat of closure and the short-term logic that had gone before, but often forcefully asserted their own social utility — placing it within a wider socioeconomic perspective. Unlike large multinationals, employees and their representatives have a much better understanding not only of their work activity, but also of its usefulness and role in a given field. France’s government is aware of this and receives representatives from the CFDT,

CGT, FO, CFE-CGC and the CFTC via video conference several times a week — but limits them to the role of sources of information and a mechanism to issue alerts.

In this crisis, we find many examples of this professional conscience. The most emblematic concerns hospital workers. The sheer extent of the COVID-19 crisis results from public health policies which hospital personnel have been combating for years. In France, 2019 saw a continuous strike that brought together all grades of health care professionals, in a movement that built on older collective protests. As Pierre-André [Juven, Frédéric Pierru, and Fanny Vincent](#) remind us, this movement above all displayed a vision alternative to the budget cuts pursued in hospitals for some three decades — insisting that public hospitals are a productive investment and not just a cost. Since the beginning of the lockdown, there have been countless media interventions by care staff denouncing the deplorable conditions in which they work but also demanding a radical paradigm shift in the public health system. Emmanuel Macron himself adopted “welfarist” tones at the beginning of the lockdown, calling for the defense of public hospitals for all.

Many other groups of workers have taken spectacular initiatives to back up the fight against the epidemic, notably in production facilities outside the influence of finance capital or where unions have a strong organizational presence. While no French collective has taken measures as radical as in Tunisia (where workers decided to quarantine themselves in order to make masks for the [population](#)) or in Argentina (where companies under workers’ management have launched various solidarity initiatives like making masks and hydro-alcoholic gel for their [neighborhoods](#)), actions serving the public good or showing solidarity have, in fact, rapidly emerged. In the Creuse département, seamstresses in technical unemployment responded to a home-help association’s appeal by [providing them with masks](#). Their initiative rapidly expanded to include making prototype disposable overalls for hospital staff — proof of both the existence of an on-the-ground solidarity network and the reconversion of high-skilled work. Similar initiatives have come to light [elsewhere in France](#). Initiatives have also been launched based on union activism. In Marseilles’s quartiers nord there has been similar territorial-level solidarity: workers on strike at a McDonald’s decided to use their workplace as a base for providing [aid to the poorest](#), using cool chambers in order to stock free food.

But probably the most emblematic example of this professional conscience resides in the current project to restart the Plaintel site — the mask factory cited above, closed for reasons of shareholder advantage. Since early April, a “Co-op for the General Interest” project has been developed by union figures, workers, associations, and elected representatives at the local level. Defending a company model where power is shared between different stakeholders — workers, local administration, consumers, clients — they hope to subordinate production to the interests of the collectivity.

The Power of Cooperative Working

It is hardly surprising that that these initiatives “from below” rapidly turn to cooperative forms that perfectly espouse the sought-after balance between social utility and economic imperatives. Despite its limited means, the co-op movement is already very present across France’s territory via its regional unions. In some parts of France, they are major sources of employment (like ACOME in Normandy, owned by its 1,300 employees). These firms also have a strong inclination to support solidarity initiatives, as we see in the current context of health crisis. In the Marseille region, staff at the SCOP-TI tea factory — recovered by its

workers after a well-known struggle — revised their work organization even before the lockdown, distancing their work posts, systematically cleaning the premises, and organizing to avoid teams crossing in shared living spaces. Then, on the recommendation of a workplace doctor, they distributed protection material to care centers; “a little over 1,000” masks, overalls, full-body suits, and hygiene caps were sent to hospitals [in Aubagne and Marseille](#). In Rennes, a recently established undertakers’ co-op set up a whole series of measures as both mutual aid for its own employees (such as masks), but also for the families of the dead, so that they could attend the funerals. Many co-op employers’ federations, like in the building trade, are asking authorities to tighten restrictions on which businesses stay open.

Unlike the big financialized capitalist corporations, these employers are trying to limit their activity in order to lower the tension between public health care (at the territorial level) and market shares (between individual businesses). Indeed, such efforts seem very widespread among the various French co-ops. The proximity between management and workers led to drastic protection measures right from the first days of the pandemic — or even pulling down the shutters, prioritizing the health risk above the financial one. Their participation in stable territorial webs — through their local rootedness and recognizability — allows them to collect, stock, and redistribute health protections to many inhabitants of the surrounding area. Finally, the solidaristic notions present in the workplace, uniting collectives of workers, demand some concrete expression in a moment of crisis. Companies’ ability and will to invest their efforts in the health care crisis seems closely linked to their workers’ commitment to their work and their control over the means of production.

Putting Workers in Charge

The initiatives outlined in this article are not necessarily representative of employers or workers in general. Since the beginning of the crisis, we have also seen employers’ organizations defend their workers’ conditions, sparking major tensions with the government. Even a large firm like LVMH — headed by Bernard Arnault, one of the world’s richest men — has reoriented part of its activity to producing hydro-alcoholic gel (though some might be so rude as to suggest that this hardly compensates for the mass-scale tax evasion in which the firm has indulged — and its share of responsibility for low health care budgets). Similarly, the translation of work hierarchies into the lockdown situation has produced very varied relationships to work itself: when managers keep working, their exposure to virus is limited by remote work, while shop-floor and service workers often have no fallback other than to stop working entirely. Often this form of inequality is intersected by another, much more powerful one: the total shutdown of many unskilled jobs done by artisans and blue-collar workers. It is difficult for them to take a leading role in making proposals and offering practical efforts to combat the epidemic.

But the health crisis also reminds us that power relations within companies are a matter for us all. They obviously concern the workers in each business, but they are also reflected across the whole territory, in the form of the sanitary resources and potential contamination that results from them.

We might even assert, rather bluntly, that the greater the workers’ power (through unions, or co-ops), the greater the “social” direction of its activity. While the data we have for now is temporary and full of holes, the materials we can study suggests that individuals are better equipped to help fight the crisis when they have better professional consciousness. Not only

because the workers know their workplaces better — i.e., both the conditions in which they work and the possibility of transforming them — but also because they know the local productive ecosystem and can “account” to other actors at the local level. Thus, the insertion of co-op activity within wider webs of relations, and their management’s responsibility to the personnel, lead to the mobilization of specific networks sometimes inaccessible to large corporations detached from their immediate environment.

The appropriation of the means of production is not just an economic principle that alters the aims and rationale of work. Rather, it is also a reliable, prudent, and long-term principle ensuring good hygiene and health care. In this sense, the “class struggle” highlighted here does not necessarily have to do with its ancestral model, but it can also bring together economic actors (as in the case of co-ops) who share similar definitions of the sense to give production. This means respect for workers and work itself, providing for the general interest, and planning for long-term need over short-term profits.