

## Corona and Work around the Globe

# Work in Global and Historical Perspective

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Edited by  
Andreas Eckert, Sidney Chalhoub, Mahua Sarkar,  
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*Work in Global and Historical Perspective* is an interdisciplinary series that welcomes scholarship on work/labor that engages a historical perspective in and from any part of the world. The series advocates a definition of work/labor that is broad, and especially encourages contributions that explore interconnections across political and geographic frontiers, time frames, disciplinary boundaries, as well as conceptual divisions among various forms of commodified work, and between work and 'non-work.'

## Volume 11

# Corona and Work around the Globe

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Edited by  
Andreas Eckert and Felicitas Hentschke

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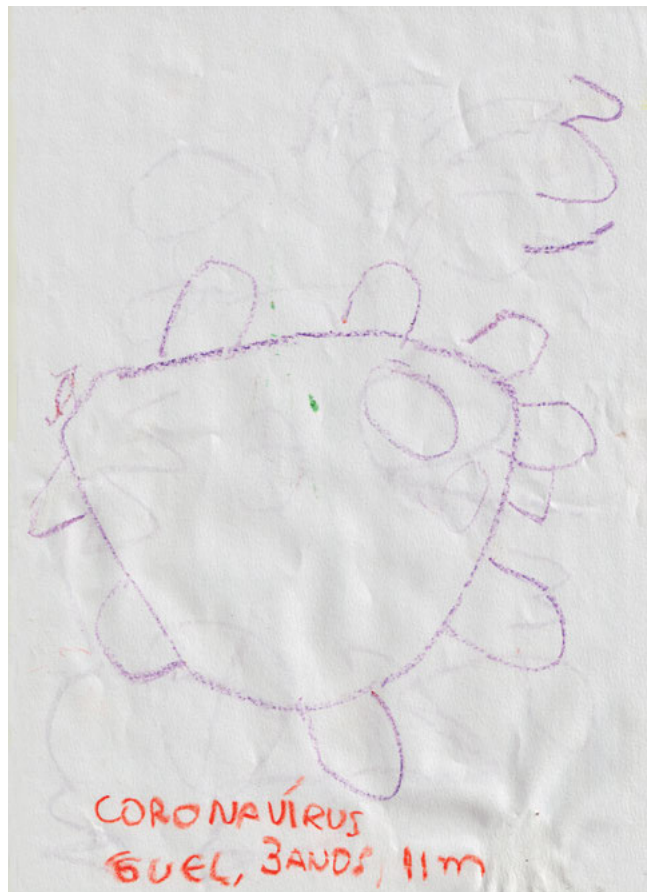
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This book is dedicated to young people across the world,  
who will have to make the most of what we leave behind.



Miguel Corrêa Fontes (4) "Coronavirus", Rio de Janeiro, April, 28, 2020.



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Finally, we would like to thank our contributors, all of whom are former fellows or close cooperation partners. It was a special experience to embark on such a book project in the middle of the coronavirus period, without being able to come together spatially and within a time frame of just a few months. We are very happy that it worked.

This book is dedicated to young people across the world and to all those throughout the world who were robbed of their basic rights and existence in connection with the coronavirus crisis, and those who oppose the injustice that happens to them – sometimes risking their lives in the process.

Andreas Eckert and Felicitas Hentschke



Mahua Sarkar  
**Prologue**

## **The Incident**

It was around 10:15 am on April 1, 2020. As on every Monday and Wednesday morning since the beginning of the spring semester, the lecture hour for Sociology 100 (Introduction to Sociology) at a public university in New York state was in full swing. Except, the campus had been in lockdown mode since the third week of March, and all classes had moved online as part of a statewide effort to stem the rising tide of COVID-19 infections. For many of the students with homes in New York City (especially those from the relatively underprivileged boroughs of the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island) and Long Island, this had meant returning to a far more dangerous context than the sleepy university town where the infection rates were – and would remain – comparatively insignificant. Just that morning, the number of people infected with COVID-19 had surged past 47,000 in New York City alone; while statewide figures had surpassed 83,000, with nearly 2,000 reported deaths. By the end of the semester, several students in the class would be afflicted by the virus, and a few would lose people close to them in a battle with the beast.

That morning, however, the peak of the pandemic's first wave was still a few weeks away, and despite the increasing gloom in the air, the students – nearly two hundred in all – appeared lively and engaged. The topic was flexible labor and global migration, and the documentary (*The Supermarket Slave Trail*, *The Guardian*) they had watched in preparation for the class on the exploitation of 'slave' (or functionally enslaved) labor in the global shrimping industry seemed to have touched a nerve. Students – many women, non-white, and/or international students among them – seemed particularly interested in learning about the global value chains that linked the lives of severely coerced workers in other parts of the world with their own lives as consumers in the United States.

It was at this point that two young men suddenly appeared on the screen, intervening in the conversation in a manner that seemed both insistent and oddly disjointed. At first, they were polite enough, but as the minutes passed, their tone turned increasingly sarcastic and disrespectful. Soon, it was obvious that they were intent on disrupting rather than constructively engaging with the perfectly intelligent discussion that was underway. As the confusion and tension mounted, the vigilant and tech-savvy graduate teaching assistants realized that the class was being 'Zoom-bombed' – a term used to refer to unwanted infiltrations of virtual meetings – and they moved swiftly to expel the two intruders.

Despite being rattled, the class began to regroup and focus collectively on salvaging the discussion. However, a few minutes later it was disrupted once again – this time by a posse of six or seven young men sporting masks and other disguises conjuring up images of the Islamic State. To the utter shock and bewilderment of everyone present, they shouted obscenities and *Allah hu Akbar* in the same breath, made barking noises, smeared racist and pornographic content across the screen and, most egregiously, invited female students and the professor alike to partake in sexual acts. The teaching assistants once again swung into action, but this time it proved well-nigh impossible to expel the intruders, because they had hijacked the names of students – specifically non-white students – who were in the class. A few minutes into this mayhem, the professor was left with no choice but to abandon the class for the day. Indeed, eventually all synchronous Zoom meetings for the course were cancelled for the rest of the semester in the absence of guaranteed, credible protec-

tion against further attacks from the university administration, already struggling with the sudden fallout from the pandemic lockdown.

In the aftermath of this deeply disturbing incident – described by students and teaching assistants alike as “traumatic” – reports surfaced about the Zoom-bombing of two other classes on campus that week: Social-Cultural Anthropology and African-American Literature. The three affected courses share important commonalities: as broad introductory courses that critically examine social structures such as race, class, gender, sexuality, culture, and religion in a global/national context, they draw students from diverse backgrounds. The specific targeting of these courses suggests that this was no mindless prank by students breaking into a class for a bit of juvenile fun. Rather, as a number of the students and teaching assistants later observed, this was an “organized, preplanned, and coordinated action.” The fact that the intruders singled out women and/or non-white students for racist and misogynist gibes further points toward a supremacist politics of intimidation motivating these specific disruptions. Indeed, reports emerging from universities across the United States around this time would seem to support these suspicions. Apparently, the two young men who appeared first as hecklers in the incident described above were known entities with possible links to white supremacist groups on the FBI’s radar.

## Implications

Nine months into the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that the impact of the crisis on human life and livelihoods is – and will likely continue to be – colossal. And while the virus – dubbed the “great equalizer” – does not seem to discriminate in its choice of victims, the severity of its afflictions is in fact far from equal, with particularly devastating consequences for underprivileged communities across the world. The pandemic has also ushered in profound and likely irreversible transformations in the world of work. Even as essential workers, represented overwhelmingly by black, latinx, and poor (im)migrant labor, are compelled to toil in dangerous conditions on farms, in food processing factories, hospitals, and in transportation, others are forced into workspaces that range from the near dystopic for those who live alone, to a daily struggle for quiet for those who live with families, sometimes in small spaces.

A university campus, with the many different forms of work that it supports, can be seen as a microcosm of sorts for the world of work at large. The particular story of disruption in one class at a public university in an ethno-racially super-diverse state such as New York indexes many of these troubling questions that the COVID-19 crisis throws up. Let me highlight a few.

There is no doubt that the pandemic has delivered a massive fillip to ideas of distance learning and virtual conferencing that have been on the horizon for some time now. Much of the discussion about the transition to a virtual world of conferencing, teaching, and learning, spearheaded by tech companies that stand to make windfall profits from it, tends to be celebratory. However, virtual learning and working online offer no ready panacea. The experiences of students mentioned above spotlight some enduring structural problems – beyond the disproportionately pernicious effects of Zoom-bombing on some (women/students of color) as related above. For instance, not all students have the kind of space at home that supports uninterrupted class attendance. Many lack access to stable internet connections, while some are obliged to share a single computer with multiple working members of the household. But perhaps more than anything else, the pandemic-induced social distancing invites us to recognize anew the significance of campus life as a crucial social site for the complex, sometimes fraught, and lifelong process of learning.

Some faculty members – those who have secure positions that have not been eliminated due to the pandemic – have undoubtedly come to appreciate the flexibility of teaching online asynchronously while living elsewhere. For many others, however, the loss of frequent human contact with colleagues and students, the (not always necessary but pleasurable) forays into the library, the possibility of learning from casual exchanges in the corridors, or after the occasional film or concert or other academic/artistic events – things that make university campuses so different from other sites of employment – have been disorienting, to say the least. Perhaps more than anything else, what has really transformed the experience of teaching as a profession is the loss of the ever-so-delicate affective dimensions of pedagogy in physical classrooms. The imperceptible nods, the light (or confusion) in the eyes of students as they comprehend something (or not), the satisfaction (or frustration) of succeeding (or failing) to get a point across, and the inevitable milling around after lectures when the more shy or differentially able students haltingly articulate their questions – all such cues that add depth, meaning, and texture to communication, so central to intellectual labor in all its iterations, are flattened, *virtually*.

Beyond the immediate experience of teaching on campus, there are other structural ramifications on the horizon for the world of academic work. The standardized 40/40/20 (research/teaching/service) model that has defined employment contracts of tenured faculty in many institutions across the world has been under pressure for some time. Now, as the pandemic threatens to shrink overall funding for both research and casual teaching jobs – disproportionately affecting early-career academics who depend on them – the familiar models of employment relations in academia may well be a casualty in the near future.

The immediate and daunting task facing instructors across the world, however, is of reinventing pedagogical tools to make them consistent with the demands of virtual classrooms. So, for now, we grapple with online platforms and PowerPoint presentations, on shared screens dotted with one-inch-square student/speaker slots, carrying faces and names that can be hijacked by ever novel forms of cyber aggression.





Andreas Eckert and Felicitas Hentschke

## **Introduction: Corona and Work around the Globe**

*Corona and Work around the Globe* is about the simultaneity of events that have affected people and their daily lives, their work routine, and their understanding of what it means to be a citizen in different parts of the world during this global pandemic. In many cases, experiences of lockdown, standstill, empty streets, closed shops, and no-go public areas are similar.

These similarities between government measures to contain the crisis – social distancing, disinfection and, in many places, mask requirements – are impressive, but sometimes worrying. There are also vast differences. Where do welfare concepts work, where do they not? Where are parliamentary rights suspended and where are they not? Where are human rights trampled on and where are they not? How much has work changed under coronavirus conditions? And what does that mean for a possible ‘Post Corona’ scenario? We tried to find out.

### **The Lockdown**

On March 11, 2020, the federal state of Berlin directed coronavirus measures at the institutions of higher education in Berlin. As of the end of the working day on March 20, 2020, operations at all Berlin scientific institutions and thus also at the Humboldt-Universität were limited to emergency levels, and they closed their doors. re:work closed its doors, too. Our center remained empty until June 2020. Since then, the strict measures have been gradually relaxed, but even today the university has not returned to normal operations. Currently, due to rapidly rising infection rates, the university is even re-introducing a number of restrictions.

Overnight, all communication switched to online or via telephone. During this ghostly time, we received a lot of messages from our alumni group of fellows. All thoughts revolved around this new, decisive, and hitherto unknown experience, from which everyone was now equally affected: COVID-19. In the aim of sharing this with everyone we know, scattered around the globe, the idea for the book at hand arose. We invited colleagues living and working in various parts of the world to bring this idea to life with us. The Berlin Center for Global Engagement (BCGE), an initiative of the Berlin University Alliance, provided financial support.

### **Corona and Work around the Globe**

There is little doubt that the coronavirus pandemic has fundamentally disrupted the world of work, causing massive human suffering and laying bare the extreme vulnerability of many millions of workers and self-employed individuals. According to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the large-scale workplace closures in response to COVID-19 have led to a worldwide reduction in hours worked of 10.7 percent in the second quarter of this year, which translates into a loss of more than three hundred million jobs. In the world of work, coronavirus has been particularly damaging for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, thus dramatically exposing the devastating consequences of the massive inequalities underpinning societies across the globe. Worldwide, over six out of ten working people make their living in the informal economy. Referring

again to ILO data, out of more than two billion workers, 1.6 billion face an imminent threat to their livelihoods as average income in the informal economy shrunk by approximately sixty percent in the first month of the pandemic alone. This breathtaking decline has intensified global poverty. Moreover, the pandemic has impacted women and men in the world of work in specific ways. For instance, women are over-represented in the more affected sectors such as services or in occupations dealing with the pandemic on the frontline, for example health care and care work. Finally, young people all over the world, many of them already squeezed in labor markets before the pandemic broke out, have seen their prospects deteriorate sharply. Those leaving or soon to leave education now face a bleak future in labor markets reeling under the impact of COVID-19. Some commentators are already describing them as the “lockdown generation.”

## Views from Different Corners of the World

Against this backdrop, this volume aims to provide a global perspective on the transformations in the world of work brought about by the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>1</sup> It enables us to reflect on the effects of coronavirus by bringing together case studies from various corners of the globe. These case studies explore the ways in which coronavirus has shaped labor relations and work practices in different parts of the world, locating these insights within a broader historical perspective and conversation. We aim to break down the general statistics and trends into glimpses of concrete experiences of workers during the pandemic, of workplaces transformed or destroyed, of workers protesting against political measures, of professions particularly exposed to coronavirus, and also of the changing nature of some professions.

The coronavirus crisis has also strengthened populist and anti-democratic forces in the United States, Western and Eastern Europe, Brazil, and India. This has led, among other things, to a blatant denial of scientific expertise and fierce attacks on international organizations such as the World Health Organization. These tendencies have coincided with a transformation of universities and scholarly work in many parts of the world, with scholars facing increasing constraints on their academic freedom, as some participants in our project, for example those based in Brazil, India, or even Japan, are currently experiencing for themselves.

This book is based on a truly global academic cooperation. We asked each of the authors to write an essay on how coronavirus has changed work and labor in particular neighborhoods, cities, regions, or even states. This main theme was refined by questions such as to what extent disruptions and intensifications had instituted changes for the better or worse, or if changing features of labor had also changed (or were related to changes in) the cityscape, welfare politics, an awareness of the strength or failure of government, the democratic order. We did not specify the format. The authors were free to write in any way they chose. Accordingly, the spectrum ranges from reports and heavily source-based analyses to more literary forms. In this kaleidoscope, some authors used photographs, drawings, or interviews, some used statistics and graphics, others did without all of that. In terms of the main content, some essays focus on people and their professions and activities. Others are interested in labor law and labor rights, or draw historical comparisons. The protagonists of the essays range from informal workers and industrial workers, to artists, employees

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<sup>1</sup> There are currently a number of efforts to analyze the effects of Corona on work. See e.g. Aaron Benanav, “Service Work in the Pandemic Economy,” In *International Labor and Working-Class History* 2020 (online, October 12, 2020).

in public offices and universities, and unemployed people. All essays are based on the personal experiences of the authors and their concerns in these difficult times. What was most important for us was the regional spectrum, that our authors focused on the region they are living in, where they witnessed the coronavirus pandemic.

Amid the diversity, two main themes emerge: Inequality and contestations of democratic principles and parliamentarism. The authors approach these overarching focal points using different examples. Accordingly, we have bundled the essays into six subject areas.

They are preceded by a prologue. MAHUA SARKAR, one of the editors of this book series, writes about the university as a work site in times of Corona – which is appropriate, since, after all, all authors come from the university environment.

The essays in the first section, *Despair and Indifference at the Margins*, describe the force with which the poorest, the people at the margins of various societies, have been hit by coronavirus and the measures to contain the pandemic. SUPURNA BANERJEE conducted numerous interviews with migrant and local workers in the informal sector of Kolkata. She spoke to people who have acquired skills in niche areas of the informal sector so as to earn a modest but reliable income. With the lockdown, many activities were lost and those affected had to be inventive in order to find a job – often in areas in which they had no skills at all – and earn at least enough to feed themselves and their families. For the protagonists of ALINA SANDRA CUCU's essay, the professional flexibility that the workers in Banerjee's essay find challenging seems to be a familiar normal. Cucu analyzes the lives of those in Romania who have always had to switch from job to job and take whatever they can get, regardless of their skills and talents. NICOLE MAYER-AHUJA moves this topic to Germany. Coronavirus and associated measures to stop it from spreading bring the issue of inequality onto the agenda. Mayer-Ahuja reconstructs the supposed solidarity that emerged in certain German cities across class, gender, and race boundaries in the first period after the lockdown, as well as the sharp decline in this trend and its subsequent reversal over the course of the pandemic – even though solidarity is one of the few ways we can tackle the new social challenges. CHITRA JOSHI compares the severity with which Indian labor migrants were and are affected by catastrophic pandemics and the measures taken against them today and in the past.

The section *Being 'Relevant to the System' Is Female* contains three essays that address so-called systemic relevance in very different ways. LARISSA ROSA CORRÊA and PAULO FONTES study the situation of domestic workers forced to risk their lives in the pandemic mainly for three reasons: they have to stay at home in their favelas in Rio de Janeiro shaped by high infection rates; they have to endure financial shortages rendering them unable to support their families; or they have to expose themselves to the virus on public transport or through their employers while being exploited for extra work that goes unpaid. BRIDGET KENNY examines the constraints on low-paid service workers under the various government security levels to contain the pandemic in Johannesburg, especially the female cleaning personnel who maintain streets and buildings in the center of the city. Her findings are strikingly similar to those of her Brazilian colleagues. The suffering related to COVID-19 is female in many places. BAHRU ZEWEDE tells a refreshing counter-story about a female fashion designer in Addis Ababa, who makes a virtue out of necessity and takes to producing masks in a system-relevant manner.

All over the world, attempts are being made, again and again, to relate the number of deaths in the coronavirus crisis to the quality of the respective health care systems. The better a system works, the fewer deaths there are. In the section *The Health System in Which We Live*, four essays discuss the possibilities and limitations of welfare systems in the countries in which the authors live. MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN focuses on nurses, who often work under poor conditions and who are chronically underpaid. At the height of the pandemic, they were hailed as heroines. When they

tried to use this praise to fight for better wages, the hype fell silent. DEBORAH JAMES, a member of London School of Economics Department of Anthropology's Covid and Care Research Group, presents a jointly-authored analysis of the changing care networks in the United Kingdom during the coronavirus crisis and the importance of the third sector in the face of state withdrawal and state-driven austerity. PREBEN KAARSHOLM writes about the sudden changes in the care system in Denmark that accompanied the coronavirus crisis, drawing comparisons with Norway and Sweden, which have followed different paths in many respects. He reflects on the potential return of Keynesianism and economic policies of debt financing, public investments, and multiplier effects after a long drought of neoliberalism. YOKO TANAKA writes about the comparatively harmless course of the coronavirus crisis in Japan, which may be due to fortunate circumstances but has been claimed by the Japanese government as a product of their success, while their measures have remained inadequate and dysfunctional.

The fourth section, *Thwarted Youth*, comprises three essays dealing with problems and opportunities, especially concerning young people and their career prospects – as well as those who provide their start in life, namely the teachers. MARY JO MAYNES and ANN WALTNER describe the situation faced by young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four in Minneapolis in the United States who are disconnected from work and school under the current pandemic conditions. The interruption of their plans for first jobs, internships, volunteer work, etc. has an effect far beyond simple life planning. Insecurity and depression contrast with new forms of empowerment, such as engagement in the Black Lives Matter protests as observable generational markers of the new COVID-19 generation. The essay by JAMES WILLIAMS considers the mandatory school closures in Great Britain during lockdown. How does this affect learning and teaching? Williams examines how the various actors – the children and their parents, the teachers and school administrators and the teachers' union – have reacted to this. BABACAR FALL reports from one of the world's poorest regions, the Sahel, covering countries such as Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad. He writes about the Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD), an initiative that was set up to give young girls from this region a professional perspective. A large-scale project has enabled girls to produce masks for the entire Sahel zone and make a useful contribution to prevention during the pandemic.

In the section *Fighting for Justice in the Pandemic*, LEON FINK compares low-wage immigrant poultry workers and the United States police, two groups whose very polarity at opposite ends of the spectrum of control and collective influence raises increasingly pressing challenges for community health, welfare, and democratic self-rule. CRISTIANA SCHETTINI shows how sex workers in Argentina fought long struggles for their work to be recognized and how state policy has taken back hard-won rights as a side effect of measures to limit the pandemic. Airlines around the world were among the first and particularly hardest hit by the spread of coronavirus. ON BARAK traces the connection between military and civil aviation and explains the resulting protections for Israeli pilots with a military background in the global aviation crisis compared with their colleagues around the world.

The last section, *When Private and Public Spaces Become Blurred*, brings together essays on changes in working conditions and working methods that have emerged in the wake of local pandemic lockdowns. In the history of work, the division between the private sphere and the workplace has been fiercely contested. Against this background and with a look at historical pandemic experiences, JÜRGEN KOCKA and SANDRINE KOTT look at the phenomenon of the 'home office.' DANIEL EISENBERG also addresses remote working, but approaches it in a methodologically different way. In a kind of self-observation, he describes the simultaneity of the experience of being at home, of being in intensive exchange with colleagues via the internet, the neighborhood's empty

streets, and the news of the coronavirus crisis and the demonstrations against racism in many American cities.

## Current Issues in the World, Told Visually

This book also includes visual contributions that do not require words. The documentary photographer and artist MAURICE WEISS accompanied a medical team in an emergency ward for coronavirus patients at the Ernst-von-Bergmann hospital in Potsdam for three weeks in March/April 2020. His photo series “Black Ward” depicts their pressures, stress, and helplessness in the face of coronavirus, about which little was still known at the time. ELLEN ROTHENBERG is a concept artist and feminist political activist. In her collage “‘This is Ridiculous,’ Voting as Labor During COVID-19: A Report from the United States,” she considers inequality in the United States, which emerged more strongly than ever during the coronavirus crisis. She observed the primary elections in Wisconsin and Georgia, which took place on April 7 and June 9, 2020, and demonstrates the effort and cost of exercising the right to vote under coronavirus conditions. Interviews with Rothenberg and Weiss contextualize their work as artists as well as their art around the subject of work.

The chapters for this book were written over the European summer months of 2020. By the time it goes to print in December 2020, the world may once again look completely different. It is and can only be a snapshot of a completely unexpected, unusual time for everyone – from the Americas and Africa to Europe to Asia.



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## **Despair and Indifference at the Margins**





Supurna Banerjee

## Skill, Informality, and Work in Pandemic Times: Insights from India

Rajindar came to Kolkata from a small village near Muzzafarpur in Bihar. Prior to COVID-19, he worked with his cousin as a presser in one of the city's neighborhoods. Having worked in the same area for a long time they enjoyed a steady income. During festival periods, the pace was quite frenzied and they would often call for extra help from their village, young lads who could come and earn some money and also explore the city at the same time. In March 2020, his cousin returned to the village. It was not long since his previous visit (they took turns so as not to lose business) to bring back his ten-year-old daughter. She had been supposed to stay for two weeks and would then return with one of the many people moving between the village and the city. The lockdown, however, changed all that. With the closure of the trains, movement was no longer possible. An even more severe blow, however, was the total loss of earnings. With offices shutting down and the fear of contagion, people stopped bringing clothes to be ironed. For someone who had over one hundred articles of clothing to iron on an average day, now he was faced with weeks of no work. His paltry savings dried up in no time. On the verge of starvation, and especially for the sake of his young daughter, Rajinder asked around for help with food. "All my life I have earned an honest living. To be reduced to begging like this is so humiliating. So I started then assisting people by doing their groceries and bringing their medicines, in return for which they gave me one hundred rupees."<sup>1</sup>

Tamanna lives in a village close to Kolkata with her daughter. She works part-time as a live-out domestic worker in three houses in Kolkata, commuting daily by train early in the morning and returning late afternoon. With the outbreak of COVID-19 and the consequent lockdown resulting in a suspension of trains, she has been unable to go to work. Only one of her employers has promised to pay her wages during the lockdown period, while the others argued that they couldn't pay her because they had to do all of the work themselves. But even with the relaxation of the lockdown, the train services remain suspended, thus preventing workers like Tamanna from getting to their workplaces. "I have lost all the jobs that I had, they have all employed domestic workers locally. Who will wait for five months? I don't blame them, but what is to become of us?" Left with no earnings, Tamanna doesn't know if she can even afford for her daughter to continue schooling. "There were days when we had nothing to eat and just kept our stomachs filled with water. Now I have started selling fruit in the locality. I buy them from the market and then go from street to street selling them. Sales are low and there are far too many vendors but at least we can eat a meal."<sup>2</sup>

These two extracts, from interviews I conducted during the lockdown, provide glimpses into the destitution facing informal workers in India during this period. These are, unfortunately, not exceptional moments of suffering that the pandemic and the consequent anti-poor response have unleashed on the working population of the country. After a brief contextualization of the working

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<sup>1</sup> Face-to-face interviews, Kolkata, March-June 2020. One hundred INR is currently 1.4 USD.

<sup>2</sup> Telephone interview, June 10, 2020.

conditions of this vast majority of India's workforce, this essay looks at the experiences of insecurity, destitution, and the resulting need for fluidity for such workers who do not have any employment security or social safety net to fall back upon.

## Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 necessitated stringent measures globally to arrest the rapid spread of the virus. Much like other countries, India, too, decided to opt for complete lockdown. The difference, however, was that this policy was mostly based on gimmicks rather than on well-thought out protective measures. With only four hours' warning and a lack of either measures to protect marginalized populations or safeguards to prevent domestic violence, what began as a public health crisis quickly escalated into a humanitarian one. As factories, shops, and other establishments closed their gates, street vending was wound down to a bare minimum, and household labor was prohibited, it became evident that the main brunt of the economic shutdown was to be borne by workers in the informal sector, which, estimated to comprise 450 million, is the majority of the country's working population.<sup>3</sup> The plight continued not only during the lockdown but also in the post-lockdown period.

There has been much written about the precarity of informal labor both generally<sup>4</sup> and specifically<sup>5</sup> during the pandemic. This essay builds on this body of work to think about what the lockdown – the economic shutdown – signifies for work itself, specifically in the informal sector for both migrant and local workers. The informal job market is characterized by tenuous employment contracts, a lack of acknowledgement of skill, depressed wages, and a general precarity.<sup>6</sup> While this generates conditions for the movement of workers from one sector to another, such fluidity is not entirely the norm. Apart from agricultural labor, which can involve a large number of workers during a particular season, the segmentation of non-farm labor is quite stable. Generally, workers tend to be engaged in similar work (with the higher skilled more likely to be tied to a particular occupation) as far as it is consistently available. The experience of work in a specific industry equips workers with a certain amount of experience, if not skill, allowing them to attain efficiency. But during periods of economic downturn – either in general or during specific crises such as the closure of firms – workers are compelled to look for other sources of livelihood, often in fields that are less remunerative, more competitive, and less economically productive. The COVID-19-induced lockdown and unprecedented economic shutdown meant a loss of jobs, drying up of earnings, and even conditions akin to destitution.<sup>7</sup> In the absence of government data, there are no exact

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3 Yogima Seth Sharma, "National Database of Workers in Informal Sector in the Works," *Economic Times*, January 19, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/national-database-of-workers-in-informal-sector-in-the-works/articleshow/73394732.cms>, accessed September 3, 2020.

4 E.g. Snehashish Bhattacharya and Surbhi Kesar, "Precarity and Development: Production and Labor Processes in the Informal Economy in India," *Review of Radical Political Economy* 52/3 (2020): 387-408.

5 Sunanda Sen, "Rethinking Migration and the Informal Indian Economy at the Time of a Pandemic," *The Wire*, June 1, 2020, <https://thewire.in/economy/rethinking-migration-and-the-informal-indian-economy-in-the-time-of-a-pandemic>, accessed August 9, 2020.

6 E.g. Tom Barnes, *Informal Labour in Urban Cities: Three Cities, Three Journeys* (London: Routledge, 2015).

7 Anil Dharkar, "COVID-19 has Made Migrant Workers' Plight, State Apathy Visible," *Indian Express*, May 25, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/invisible-india-migrant-exodus-coronavirus-6425627/>, accessed September 3, 2020.

numbers but news reports, activist accounts, and personal experience suggest that the loss of more remunerative, stable jobs has forced workers to become self-employed in low-productivity sectors on an almost unparalleled scale. It is not the intention of this essay to predict the magnitude of this crisis; but rather to illustrate how compulsory fluidity in the informal sector plunged workers into livelihoods they were ill-equipped to handle and also brought forward the risk of deskilling, thus causing further precariatization.

This essay is based on observations and informal conversations with workers in and around my neighborhood in Kolkata as well as phone conversations with returning migrant workers from other states. Kolkata, as a metropolitan area and the capital of West Bengal, provides employment for migrants from the districts of West Bengal as well as neighboring states of Bihar and Orissa. In recent years West Bengal has also seen high out-migration to states such as Delhi, Maharashtra, and Kerala, but this essay deals with the former. Fleeting conversations – sometime repeated, often isolated – during a single tract of time do not offer deep ethnographic insight. Rather, these glimpses into the working lives of informal workers trace the precarity of their location as laborers within the larger questions of skill and informal work in India.

## Context

Informal workers constitute almost ninety-three percent – the vast majority – of India's working population.<sup>8</sup> A lack of social security benefits (although some firms offer social security entitlements on paper) and the absence of any job security characterizes informal employment in India.<sup>9</sup> Informal workers are contractual and casual workers both in the unorganized informal sector but also increasingly in the formal economy through its links to subcontracting and outsourcing of cheap contract labor. Chowdhury points out that between 1999-2000 and 2004-05 the entire increase in employment in the formal sector was represented by informal workers.<sup>10</sup> This shows a paradoxical process of a growing GDP with an almost complete absence of formal employment, a trend which continues. The National Sample Survey of 2004-05<sup>11</sup> (NSSO) demonstrates that the increase in employment was primarily due to an increase in self-employment. Srivastava argues that workers involved in various kinds of putting-out systems and subcontracting arrangements are characterized as self-employed based on their activity status.<sup>12</sup> However, they differ from independently self-employed workers. While they may use some of their own capital they are in reality disguised wage workers.<sup>13</sup> The precarity of self-employed workers is evident from the NSSO survey, which reveals that a large proportion of such workers do not consider their employment to

<sup>8</sup> Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance, Government of India, "Economic Survey 2018-19 Vol-2".

<sup>9</sup> Tom Barnes, *Informal Labour in Urban Cities*; Ravi Srivastava, "Structural Changes and Non-Standard Forms of Employment in India," *ILO Conditions of Work and Employment Series* 68 (2016), [https://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2016/116B09\\_9\\_engl.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2016/116B09_9_engl.pdf), accessed August 9, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Subhanil Chowdhury, "Employment and Growth under Capitalism: Some Critical Issues with Special Reference to India," *Institute of Development Studies Kolkata Occasional Paper* 27 (2011): 1-40.

<sup>11</sup> NSS Report No. 515: *Employment and Unemployment Situation In India*, 2004-05, [http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication\\_reports/515part1\\_final.pdf](http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/515part1_final.pdf), accessed on September 3, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Ravi Srivastava, "Structural Changes and Non-Standard Forms of Employment in India," 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ravi Srivastava, "Structural Changes and Non-Standard Forms of Employment in India": 13.

be remunerative.<sup>14</sup> The growing difficulty of finding a regular job and the rise in self-employment therefore suggests that much of this form of employment is in fact distress driven. Accompanying this crisis in regular employment has been the worsening of earnings. This sector of the labor force is offered scant protection under laws which were largely designed for the formal sector. The few laws which exist are limited either by their inapplicability (e.g. Contract Labor Regulation and Abolition Act) or by implemental lapses on the part of the employer and the state (e.g. Building and Other Construction Workers Act), all of which consolidates the power relations skewed against the informal sector.

The post-lockdown difficulties facing workers are therefore neither unexpected nor sudden, but rather emerge from the structural constraints characterizing these sectors. Further, the pandemic comes in the wake of the highest unemployment in four decades.<sup>15</sup> The economic distress caused by the lockdown was met with limited measures by the central and the various state governments (Kerala being an exception), which lacked a grounding in reality and political will to implement. On top of receiving paltry or no compensation for their loss of earnings, no provisions were made for migrant workers to return home. This led more than a million workers to set out from the cities to their villages by foot, hand-cart, or bicycle, facing police repression, detention, and even being sprayed with disinfectant on their way.

## Informality, Work, and Fluidity

Rajindar and Tamanna's experiences, described at the beginning of this essay, point to the precarity and lack of security that workers in the informal sector face, whether employed or self-employed. Another aspect underlying the nature of their labor is the question of work itself and skill. Informal work is commonly associated with unskilled labor (although skilled informal workers receive higher wages as we will see below). While the Ministry of Labour and Employment's 2019 Code on Wages sets out detailed criteria for determining the minimum wage for different categories of workers, it does not specify the classification criteria. The Indian government uses the International Labour Organization's taxonomy in its general classification, which sees skill associated with formal education and technical qualifications and thus categorizes most blue-collar work as unskilled. Tandon notes that such a system of classification is based on a hierarchy that privileges college degrees and devalues experience gained through work.<sup>16</sup> The experience and knowledge of workers categorized as unskilled or elementary has therefore been economically unrewarded. That said, there is some level of on-the-job acknowledgment of skill, which allows workers to become efficient in their work, accomplish more in a shorter time, and often even rise in rank. None of this maps onto the state's skill register per se but does provide certain advantages to the working lives of those in the informal sector.

<sup>14</sup> Subhanil Chowdhury, "Employment and Growth under Capitalism: Some Critical Issues with Special Reference to India" *Institute of Development Studies Kolkata Occasional Paper* 27 (2011): 1-40.

<sup>15</sup> Anand Patel, "Cat Finally Out of the Bag: Unemployment at 45-Year High, Government Defends Data" *India Today*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/business/story/india-unemployment-rate-61-per-cent-45-year-high-nss-report-1539580-2019-05-31>, accessed August 9, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Rajesh Tandon, "Who is Unskilled?" *Times of India*, July 10, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/who-is-unskilled/>, accessed August 9, 2020.