LEVFEM

ESSENTIAL STRUGGLES:

PANDEMIC FRONTS

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ESSENTIAL STRUGGLES: PANDEMIC FRONTS

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Transnational Social Strike

E.A.S.T (Essential Autonomous Struggles Transnational)

ESSENTIAL STRUGGLES:

PANDEMIC FRONTS

Sofia, 2021

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(Post)pandemic struggles in social reproduction

LevFem Collective & Transnational Social Strike Platform

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed, more than anything, the deep interconnectedness and mutual dependencies that exist more generally between different countries in Europe and beyond, and between different economic sectors but particularly between production and social reproduction. It showed that in order to maintain and reproduce our lives and society, some of the members of this society, especially women and migrants, Roma, and LGBTQI+ people, have long been expected to willingly sacrifice themselves. It was them again who fell under the capitalist imperative to put their lives "on the frontlines" against the pandemic. The so-called essential workers -- nurses, teachers, care workers, cleaners, logistic workers, grocery store workers, seasonal workers -- were to 'naturally' fill the abyss in social protection gazing at us from the ruins of ever more fragile welfare systems. It was them who had to bear tremendous increases in workload in order to reconcile multiple shifts of working at home and outside, while being left without sufficient state aid and support. At the same time, with schools and kindergartens closed, it was mostly women who were

forced to take the burden of the unpaid childcare work at home, while also performing their paid employment. Others even lost their jobs because of their increased childcare responsibilities. And while we were told to "stay home and stay safe", it was rarely mentioned that the home is not a safe space for those who struggle against domestic violence, or for those who live in overcrowded places with poor sanitary conditions, or for those who do not even have a home.

It was also in this pandemic context, however, that women, LGBTQI+ people, migrants and essential workers in Eastern and Central Europe, not unlike many others around the globe, decisively refused to accept the tightening of capitalist, patriarchal and racist regimes that exploit their reproductive and productive force while leaving them in the lurch. An increased number of struggles took place within the region. In Bulgaria nurses went on continuous protests for a reform in the public health sector and for better pay and working conditions. In Poland the strike of women against the abortion ban inspired women across the world. In Romania activists protested against the governmental ban on gender studies and continued an ongoing struggles for better housing conditions - a problem especially acute within the Roma community. The Serbian anti-corruption and anti-governmental protests converged with the struggles in the country against indebtedness and for safe housing for all. The migrant struggles erupted in Turkey, Greece and along the Balkan route, in parallel to the struggles of East Central European seasonal workers in Germany

and Italy against their terrible living conditions and exploitation. All these struggles pointed to the proliferation of experiments in subordination against the social and political devaluation of essential labor, that shows the patriarchal and racist conditions of exploitation, which originate in society but affect the situation in the workplaces. The question was how to connect these struggles transnationally in order to overcome isolation and subvert this society.

This is the conjuncture in which the feminist network EAST (Essential Autonomous Struggles Transnational) emerged in 2020. The EAST network unites feminist activists and workers from Eastern and Central Europe and beyond with the goal to connect and support common struggles on the terrain of social reproduction. The project was initiated by the Bulgarian socialist feminist organisation LevFem and the platform Transnational Social Strike, but collectives from Romania, Serbia, Georgia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Turkey, Hungary, Greece, France, Italy, Sweden, the UK and countries beyond the European confines gradually joined. East Central European countries share a common history of the dismantling of the social welfare state, the privatisation of industries, goods and services previously under public ownership, and thus of a great crisis of productive work and social reproduction that has been mitigated through mass migration. The ruthless, systematic implementation of these reforms in accordance with exploitative and racist EU labor and migration policies, has set the conditions for the horrendous social-economic consequences of the pandemic.

The postcommunist toxic mix of extreme primitive capitalist accumulation and the strengthening grip of (re)emerging (neo)traditional reactionary patriarchal politics that many countries in the region are experiencing influences the living and working conditions of those who stay and those who migrate, affecting production and social reproduction in the whole European space and beyond. To address these realities, we need a coordinated and common political initiative. EAST acknowledges the distinct developments in East Central Europe and in the different countries within the region, while also trying to connect the experiences and struggles in the "East" with the Western European and global movements. After all, capitalism, patriarchy and racism are global systems that reinforce and feed off extreme forms of inequality and violence, thus we need a global resistance to be able to effectively crush them.

In order to visibilize and deepen our understanding on essential feminist struggles in different countries within East Central Europe, EAST organised a series

of webinars between July and September 2020 with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Bulgaria. They centred around topics such as care work and migration, feminist, housing and labor struggles especially with a focus on the developments amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, EAST launched an Essential Strike Manifesto for the 8th of March that aimed at mobilizing women, migrants, workers, LGBTQI+ people whose labor is deemed essential, but whose lives are considered disposable. The texts in *Essential Struggles: Pandemic Fronts* are a result of these webinars, while the Essential Strike

Manifesto finds its way. All of the authors took part as panelists during these online meetings. Their contributions should not be seen as purely analytical exercises. Along with providing detailed overviews of the current situations on the terrain of social reproduction in East Central Europe and beyond, the authors in this issue share many practical examples of ongoing essential feminist struggles and pose important questions about the future possibilities for a collective feminist resistance locally, regionally and transnationally.

It is because of this reason, that we firmly believe that the edited volume *Essential Struggles: Pandemic Fronts* can empower us to share our knowledge and experiences of struggles, and to connect and amplify our voices, while learning from each other and becoming more effective in our struggles. We believe that each one of them offers valuable insights for our path towards a transnational social strike. But most importantly: we believe that the issue gives its readers both hope that a future without capitalist exploitation and patriarchal and racist violence is possible, but also tools to struggle for such a future.

Part I

Key Topics in Social Reproduction

Housing as a field of social reproduction and struggle for housing justice in Romania

Enikő Vincze

What is social reproduction?

A socialist feminist approach to social reproduction (see Ferguson, n.d.; Bhattacharya, 2017) calls for recognizing the fact that the (material and symbolic) reproduction of the labor force is an essential condition of capitalist production. Most importantly, it highlights how capitalism functions at the intersection of gendered dominance (patriarchy), racialized oppression (racism), and class exploitation (capitalism). Reproductive work (including unpaid housework and care for children and elderly, which, in a patriarchal regime, are roles performed by women), as well as the underpaid labor of racialized social categories, and the reserve army of the impoverished labor force are all productive forces of capital accumulation and reproductive factors of capitalism itself.

This reproductive dynamic of capitalism does not only happen at the level of nation-states, but at the scale of the world system. As Saskia Sassen observed: The decline of manufacturing, the growth of the service sector, the spread of temporary, part-time and other 'casualized' forms of labor, and un-

conventional production processes such as sweatshops and industrial homework in the developed countries, all expanded the supply of low-wage jobs and the demand for working-class immigrants to fill them (Sassen, 1988). From the perspective of semi-peripheral countries of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, we should add the following to this picture of reproduction of global capitalism: on the one hand, the economic collapse of the former socialist countries freed a large number of workers, who embarked on transnational migration, among them very many seasonal workers and circular migrants, who do not put a permanent burden on the public services of the receiving countries; on the other hand, the internationalization of production and the export of jobs in IT and service sectors from the developed countries towards these semi-peripheries where the labor force is cheaper, recreate social polarization both between the West and the Rest and within the latter between the high-income professionals and low-waged workers.

Housing as terrain of social reproduction

The reproduction of the labor force usually happens in a home. Generally speaking, in patriarchal capitalism, the labor exploited at the workplace is reproduced due to the unpaid work of women at home. From a political economic point of view, in capitalism housing is a territory of capital accumulation: it is not only a commodity that becomes more and more expensive in the society whose politics favors marketization and hous-

ing for profit, but it also functions as an asset for investments made for profit. Housing is therefore, from both points of view, crucial for the social reproduction of capitalism.

Except for the relatively short period of its Golden Age (the period from the end of the second world war until the 1970s), capitalism delegated housing matters to the market, respectively to the individuals' private sphere. Capitalism promotes a housing order based on the conviction that it is the individuals' responsibility to provide housing from the market for themselves and their families, and the state is not accountable for delivering homes to people or for assuring housing as a socio-economic right.

As part of the systemic control over the labor force whose needs are subordinated to profit, capitalism, supported by patriarchy and racism, tries to hide the fact that social reproduction is political. In other words, it pretends that all the relations and practices through which social reproduction is happening are 'naturally' a part of the domestic/ private sphere, and all the related needs of the individuals have to be met as a result of personal efforts.

The argument against the involvement of the state in the direct production of housing to meet people's needs even makes use of the supposition that by this, the state would interfere in people's private life, which should be free of state control. This ideology is used to disguise the fact that housing is a core domain for the accumulation of capital, and the state's withdrawal from its role in housing provision serves the interests of housing for profit, or real estate developers.

What does the pandemic reveal about the housing crisis in Romania?

The recent pandemic exposed a whole series of housing inequalities and deprivations in Romania that were not created by Covid-19, but by the profit-oriented housing regime becoming dominant in the past three decades. Nevertheless, these phenomena have been manifested more clearly due to the prolonged epidemic, the lockdown, and the economic recession.

The long-durée underdevelopment of public services was disclosed most importantly by the shortages of the healthcare system, such as lack of the proper number of public hospital beds, the accessibility of free medicine, and the insufficient number of professional personnel*. It was also disclosed by

* Information retrieved from the Tempo-online database of the National Statistical Institute shows a decrease by over 40,000 hospital beds from 1990 to 2000; by almost 30,000 beds from 2000 until Romania's integration into the EU; and by almost 8000 more from 2007 to 2010. Then, in 2011, President Traian Băsescu launched his program to build a "highly efficient state" while his party colleague, Prime Minister Emil Boc, "made work more flexible". And out of a desire to comply with the imperative of endlessly continuing privatization in many more sectors, as a condition for getting further loans from the IMF and the World Bank, they began to cut hospital beds, saying: "too many hospitals with too many beds and too much activity in hospitals." They started this work even earlier: from 2009 to 2011, almost 12,600 hospital beds have disappeared from Romania. After 2012, the number of beds in public hospitals fluctuated a bit up and down, so that in 2018 it reached 125034. Of course, these data are national aggregates and do not reflect

the high prices of private healthcare services, unaffordable for many, and by the refusal of the private units to offer their help for free during a health emergency. Moreover, when talking about viruses, disease, and death, we should keep in mind that social and economic conditions are a factor that shapes human health or the lack of it. They generate enormous inequalities in terms of life expectancy between groups of various economic standing. There are inequalities in life expectancy depending on the life people are forced to live or in terms of their bodies' ability to defend themselves against diseases depending on their housing and working conditions and diet. In 2018, life expectancy at birth was 75.3 years in Romania, while the EU-28 average was 81 years, and even higher in Switzerland (83.8 years), Spain (83.5 years), Italy (83.4 years), Sweden (82.6 years) and other states*.

Similarly, the following fact could be also easily noted during the pandemic: people living under inadequate housing conditions cannot respect the rules of hygiene and physical distancing as a way to protect themselves from the infection. These manifestations of housing crisis now became even more critical for the many who are living in overcrowded homes and residential areas or houses lacking utilities including running water; have been faced by insecurities due to

the large inequalities between localities, counties, and regions in this respect. Switching to the very present, we should note that in 2020 the Romanian Government cut funding for healthcare and increased the funds allocated to the Ministry of Interior by over 13.16% compared to 2019. The budget for the Ministry of Defense also increased by 16.1%.

* See Eurostat data.

informal/ unconventional housing; have experienced homelessness; are under the risk of eviction due to a reduced financial capacity to pay housing costs, etc. All these realities are also rooted in the underdevelopment of the public housing fund, which is less than 2% of the total housing stock in Romania.

The shock, felt not only by people but also by the state institutions and public authorities in the face of the new pandemic, should have been a warning sign for everybody about the fact that life for many was not normal even before. Therefore, it could have been expected that the measures to be taken as a reaction to Covid-19 should not consist in a return to the pre-pandemic 'normal', but should be about interventions dedicated to solving the manifestations of the housing crisis mentioned above.

How to imagine other possible worlds in the context of the pandemic?

Nowadays, the optimistic scenario of the current health and economic crisis, according to which at this critical moment, especially in key economic areas, workers could renegotiate their interests with employers through unions, seems to be eroding. Nevertheless, it would have been and still is a good idea to negotiate wage increases and labor protection as a condition that companies receiving state aid or benefiting from tax cuts should fulfill.

We, the activists for housing justice, would have liked to integrate housing measures in such potential

new deals: increasing the amount of social housing to be allocated as emergency homes to homeless people and people living in inadequate and crowded facilities; prohibition of evictions; supporting families who do not have the resources to pay for utilities and ensuring they have access to water, electricity, gas or other sources for heating; and, in general, implementing a medium and long-term governmental program for the construction of public housing so that the state can meet the housing needs in different localities.

The current crisis shows that labor is essential to any economic activity and without labor the economy cannot be saved (not even in this period of financialized capitalism). The Romanian labor force is one of the most exploited in the EU because of the low wage system and of the overwhelming private housing sector dictating high housing costs. Furthermore, the uncertainties surrounding the resolution of the healthcare crisis and the economic recession must make us all recognize that the 'normality' interrupted by Covid-19 is not normal. This is because it is not normal that almost half of employees earn the minimum wage, which is about half of the value of the decent minimum consumption basket. It is not normal that so many people live in overcrowded spaces or improper conditions, or they do not even have a roof over their heads, or they are at risk of eviction given that they cannot afford to pay their rent, mortgage, or utilities due to their low income. It is not normal that the public healthcare system is unable to meet the needs of the population impoverished by economic exploitation even in peaceful times, not to mention periods of shocks generated by the pandemic.

The Manifesto for Housing Justice released in March 2020 by the Bloc for Housing stated: "The emergency social measures are pressing today, but they are not enough to guarantee an exit from the epidemiological and economic crisis. They are not enough to reduce the dramatic effects of similar future crises, which, as we know, are inevitable in capitalism. This crisis must not be 'solved' as the previous ones were, in favor of capital. It is vital to denounce and to surpass the structural adjustment programs, which promote more privatization and austerity as a one-size-fits-all solution. These programs were imposed over the last few decades by the big international organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These programs result, everywhere and always, in measures against the public sector and poverty, in underfinancing public health, education and housing, as well as in subordinating the development of all economic and social domains to the foundational logic of capitalism: the rush for profit. The Bloc for Housing asserts that to surpass the crisis and to institute a just social and economic order, which serves people's interests, it is important that the state invests in public services, especially in public housing [...]. The time has come for the rich to pay for everything that they stole through workforce exploitation, real estate speculation, and the theft of the government's resources to the disadvantage of the many. We need radical measures to make sure that the economic post-crisis order will be one of equality and social justice. The time has come for those privileged by the system all over the world, who have accumulated profit and enormous wealth

over the last decades, to pay their dues. They must contribute significantly to the costs of the programs needed for everyone's state of health and economic situation to improve once and forever. It is time to end the regime where the real estate developers, the great renting companies, and private utility providers make an enormous profit off the backs of those who barely survive from one month to the next!" (The Block for Housing, 2020a)

Noting how limited the government's measures in social, labor and housing were during the state of emergency, even though the special circumstances provided an opportunity for giving more adequate support to homeless people, people at risk of eviction, people who cannot pay huge rents, people who earn the minimum wage or even less, the Bloc for Housing addressed a Memorandum to the Presidency, Parliament, Government, and three Ministries in particular. The Memorandum entitled "The current epidemiological crisis is also a social and housing crisis. Maximum emergency: decent minimum wage and adequate social housing for the most affected people" (The Block for Housing, 2020b) was signed by 53 organizations and over 100 people involved in civic organizations and/or social activism. The demands of the Memorandum included, among others, the following: coverage of social services and social benefits and various aids during the state of emergency for all vulnerable persons; increasing the guaranteed minimum income and redefining it as a decent minimum income to provide all people with the necessary financial resources to cover the value of the minimum consumption basket for a decent living;

increasing the stock of social housing through various means (construction, conversion, expropriation, etc.), so that it meets real local needs; adopting the 'housing first' model in allocating social housing and supporting the beneficiaries through an integrated package of social and healthcare provisions for as long as needed.

Today's crisis calls for reconnecting several themes and creating a broad social movement*. It also calls for rethinking how a society built on equality and social justice for all can be achieved. It is necessary to connect all anti-racist, anti-nationalist, and feminist movements, which could join other international movements, for a society without exploitation and liberated from the domination of profit. We could witness that militarization and surveillance were the tools used by the Romanian state in a state of emergency and alert under the guise of fighting a virus. This draws our attention to the risk that the state, when it aims to strengthen its power, does not do so to end inequalities and in-

* The Bloc for Housing (with all of its member groups: Social Housing NOW!, The Common Front for the Right to Housing, The Right to the City, ERomnja, RomaJust), alongside with several other activist initiatives in Romania (among them: Romania – Land of Cheap Labor; Urzica; Justice. Respect. Equality. Protection. Transparency; Mahala – Militant Workers' Community) and from the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and the City, is working today to reconfigure the political discourse on capitalism and its crisis, but also to outline radical post-crisis perspectives. Besides, we are in solidarity with Roma organizations that rise against racism and police abuse. Moreover, we are looking for cooperation with the trade union initiatives that militate for decent salaries and working conditions.

justices by promoting measures usually taken up by the social state, but rather, is willing to turn into a police state and a state favoring austerity measures. All this to further support the ruling capitalist class in old and/or new ways. Facing their coalition, in addition to imagining other possible worlds, we also need to rebuild our political subjectivity.

Last but not least, LevFem and Transnational Solidarity Strike has asked us, how to connect our struggle with other fights from the region in a powerful transnational initiative? Let me put here an idea that could complete the initiative of immigrant/transnational workers to organize in their receiving countries under conditions in which neither the latter nor their home countries take responsibility for their employment and housing rights. To jointly react against the exploitation of these laborers, which is related to the free movement of capital across national borders, for example, to organize transnational strikes against multinationals functioning in several countries, could be a challenge to think about in these terms.

Enikő Vincze is a Professor at the Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and housing justice activist in the local movement Căși sociale ACUM!/ Social housing NOW!, and the national network of several activist groups from Romania, Bloc for Housing.

Part II

CARE WORK

Bulgarian care workers in Greece in the hands of fate

Zorka Mihailova

We have founded the informal organisation "Together we can – a union of Bulgarians in Greece"* with the thought of it eventually becoming an established part of trade unionism in Greece. Our main goal was to facilitate a space for mutual aid for Bulgarian immigrants in Greece, so we participated in various joint actions in 2016 with the union leader and former Syriza MEP Kostadinka Kouneva. Kouneva fought to pass a resolution** in the EU parliament, making it imperative for EU member states to recognise domestic and care workers' rights across the EU.

Unfortunately, the problems not only still persist, but have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. The main problems we have stem from the unwillingness of the employers to sign work contracts with the workers. As a result, 80% of all Bulgarian immigrants in Greece work without proper contracts

* antenab.com, https://bit.ly/3ujxsVC

** https://www.europarl.europa.eu/, https://bit.ly/30WyskR

and health insurance! This creates bigger problems in light of the conditions that this pandemic has created. Those who have been laid off as a result of the quarantine are not entitled to sick pay or benefits, unlike those who are insured. Furthermore, those who get sick have to pay the entirety of their hospital bills and medicines, for which they might not have the necessary means. This means we have to organise fundraising campaigns every month.

Tiny percentage of those Bulgarian workers who are insured get paid for only 4 hours instead of the 8 hours of pay that they're entitled to. Furthermore, those who retire after working for 15-20 years get miserable pensions, somewhere of not more than 100 euros. The wait for these pensions amounts to 3-4 years and the reason for this is the sluggish Greek administration which has only recently introduced electronic governance.

Here lies, I might add, another problematic aspect of the work that we do and that is connected to the lack of security in our jobs. For example, after the person we have been caring for dies and we get laid off, we are not entitled to any unemployment benefits under the current system, because we simply don't exist in the system. If we count as cleaners – an actual employment position – we would claim unemployment benefits since they are able to make a claim if they get dismissed from work. As live-in care workers we are deprived of such rights. This is very unfair as it is not guaranteed that the person you care for is not going to die. Thus, we are left in a position where we have to choose between not having a job and doing just any job. We are not socially protected.

The Greeks have a lot of strong syndicates, but our organisation cannot find its place within them because they are organised by branch. Which union are we supposed to join when 'domestic worker' does not even exist as a profession? That is why we've created this organisation, so we can help each other out.

As live-in domestic and care workers, we face a variety of different abuses when it comes to the conditions in which we carry out our work. In many cases, working women don't have their own room, no space in which to rest, having worked some days for not 12 hours but up to 24 hours. They [employers] don't care if you have been on your feet all day and might not be able to sleep tonight. They simply say that they have hired you to look after this person! Not sleeping for 24 hours is common. People with certain illnesses can be calm in the morning and erratic at night. It's difficult to sleep during the day because your client is not sleeping either and you don't know what they might do. In the daytime you're also responsible for the grocery shopping, cooking and cleaning. It's difficult to ignore housework as it's expected of you to do it. When we work in someone's home, the burden of responsibility for the housework falls largely onto us domestic workers.

At night when you retreat for a rest, the chance is you might not have a room of your own. You have to sleep in the same room with the person you work for, who might have serious mental health issues. Not everyone is capable of leaving immediately and until they find another woman to fill in the position, you do not have the right to just pack your bags and leave, it is illegal. The sick person can do something or some-

thing can happen to them. They can accuse you of anything, that you have killed this person and that is why you left. Overall, there are so many problems.

For something to change, we found that 'domestic worker' is not recognised as a regularised profession in national legislation, work that most Bulgarian immigrant women find themselves doing in Greece. We have worked with the MEP Kostadinka Kouneva, who managed to bring a resolution in the European parliament calling EU states to implement changes in national legislation when it comes to domestic and care work. However that is not a resolution Greece has yet committed itself to.

So, even if we are properly documented, working as domestic and care workers we get no social security. Working with affiliates to Kostadinka Kouneva, we managed to get through to the Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs in Greece, and as it turned out, even domestic workers in more professionalised ranks remain uninsured. Kostandinka Kouneva was a union activist when she was attacked with acid. Of course, we immediately jumped in to help. We were fundraising money for her. After all, she is a woman who has always fought for the rights of women.

Bulgarians are still being asked to present tons of documents to declare their status, even though that goes against their right as European citizens to free movement between Bulgaria and Greece. That is even more evident now in pandemic conditions. We have tried multiple times to find a solution, or even a response from our own legitimate governmental bodies, however we're just a voice in the wilderness.

We are holding on to God to protect us as it seems like that's our only hope!

Zorka Mihailova is a Bulgarian immigrant who's been a care worker in Athens, Greece for the past 19 years. She's one of the founders of "Together We Can", a grassroots organisation offering mutual aid to Bulgarian immigrants in Greece.

Romanian live-in care workers in Austria: exploitation and self-organization

Cornelia Igas

My name is Cornelia Igas.

I am 38 years old, I come from Romania and I work as a live-in care worker in Austria. Earlier this year, I joined the platform "DREPT – Interest group for live-in care workers" in Austria and have been active in the organizing of migrant care workers ever since. Our group has been recently formalized into a Non-Governmental Organization and is slowly and informally taking up the role of a union for Romanian live-in caregivers: we offer advice and assistance to care workers in need, we communicate over social media all relevant information about our workers' rights, we offer crisis intervention and conflict mitigation, we do political lobby and media work, and we work with state institutions to improve working conditions for us all.

Together with my other Romanian care work colleagues and our dedicated activists, we, in DREPT, fight for better labour rights and higher, fairer wages for all migrant live-in care workers in Austria! We demand the annulment of the self-employment system

and replacing it with regular, labour contract employment – so we too are protected from abuse and exploitation at work!

About live-in care in Austria. The mobilization of Romanian caregivers.

Live-in care offers services of care and personal assistance for the sick and the elderly in their own homes. The almost 60,000 24-hour caregivers working in this system in Austria are almost exclusively migrant women from Eastern European countries. Romanian caregivers represent the biggest group working in Austria: around 33,000 persons are actively working in this field. Transportation companies bring us to Austria in packed minibuses. In Austria we work for 2, 3 or 4 week shifts at a time, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Not even the nights are our own, as we have to remain on call, in case our clients need our assistance. Many of us don't even benefit from lunch breaks. In many cases, we don't have much privacy while we're in the patient's home, and in more extreme cases, the care worker shares a room with the person they look after, so they can be available throughout the night. In many cases, care workers are asked to go above and beyond their duties and look after more than the person they were hired to assist.

After finishing our shifts, we return to our homes for a period equal to the period of time worked. At home, we regain our strength and spend time with our loved ones.

Our job is very hard, physically, but also emotionally and psychologically. Our clients are suffering from various mental health conditions such as dementia or Alzheimer, have very limited or no mobility in some cases and it's not an easy task to be with them around the clock, every day of the week, closed between the limits of their homes, for a whole shift at a time. We work around the clock and are on call even during the nights. For this work, we earn between 2 and 5 Euros per hour, which is less than minimum wage in most European Union countries.

Live-in caregivers in Austria work as freelancers, we are all self-employed, as this is the only work arrangement permitted by the Austrian authorities in the elderly care industry. This cuts us off from all social benefits, such as unemployment insurance, paid vacation, paid medical leave, as well as any labour protection and collective agreements through unions or the Workers Chamber. This system also leaves us with no protection when faced with workplace exploitation and abuse. Furthermore, as self-employed workers, we are officially members of the Austrian Chamber of Commerce, which theoretically should be representing our interests. But the Chamber of Commerce represents the interest of all companies, and implicitly, it also represents the interests of placement/ intermediary agencies – with whom most of our conflicts take place.

It is no exaggeration that the worst of it all, in this field of work, are the placement agencies, which decide our compensation, choose our clients and dictate our shifts. They make us sign abusive work contracts, mostly under intense pressure, after tens of

hours of travel and with no possibility of negotiation. Sometimes these contracts are drawn up only in German, and more often than not, the care workers' proficiency in German is not sufficient for them to understand and negotiate the contracts they have to sign.

In the next stage, intermediary companies are forcing live-in care workers recruited in Romania to accept transportation from a company hired by them, limiting the ability of care workers to pick the transportation company and method of their choosing. In some cases, care workers have been critically hurt in accidents which were the result of tired, overworked drivers being pushed to transport care workers to and from Austria without proper rest.

In many cases, care workers are only presented with the contracts once they arrive in Austria, where they are under intense pressure to sign them and with virtually no option to return to Romania if they were to refuse signing the contract. This, of course, leaves care workers with no possibility for negotiation. Intermediary companies also manage our finances.

For this, they cash in high commissions not only from us, but also from our client's families. A lot of problems come out of their "representation." When conflicts between placement agencies and care givers take place, a clear conflict of interests occurs, as the Chamber of Commerce is in the position of representing both sides. In reality, nothing happens and the caregivers are left completely unprotected.

So you see, our only solution is self-representation and self-organizing. DREPT filled in a very necessary gap in this sense. The work members do within DREPT is voluntary, so we try to fit it somehow while juggling

our jobs, our personal life, our families and our free time. But we try to help the people in need nonetheless. Because we know that there is nobody else who will help. In addition to building a community where caregivers can receive support, advice and feel less alone, we strive to inform our members and other care workers about rights and benefits available to them.

On our Facebook page, we post relevant information from the Austrian state, we share information about travel restrictions, we campaign for issues that affect us, such as the right for our children to receive the same child benefits as Austrian children, and we discuss the best reform strategies for our work sector. We also strive to support our members in workplace abuse situations, such as payment denial from intermediaries, and provide advice and considerations for issues that affect care workers – what things to consider before signing a contract with an intermediary company, how to end collaborations with them, how to ensure care workers understand the contracts they are being asked to sign and that the contract clauses are satisfactory, etc. We also share information on abusive intermediaries, we care for each other and provide advice and support in situations where care workers are forced to demand their rights.

Care work during Covid-19

In the care work field, we experienced the lockdown very quickly and suddenly. There was no time to prepare for it, make arrangements, find solutions. As the borders closed, half of the live-in care workers were

trapped at home, in Romania, suddenly facing the fact that they had no income and couldn't travel for work for an unclear period of time. The other half of my colleagues were stuck at their workplaces in Austria – in a foreign house, with their client, not knowing when and if all this will be over. They were left with no choice but to continue working, extending their shifts indefinitely, until the borders would re-open. Both workers who were at home, in Romania, and workers who were on the job, in Austria spent long periods of time not knowing any information about how the lockdowns and border closures will affect each of us and with no support from either the Romanian or the Austrian state.

That's when the madness happened: of course, the whole live-in care system in Austria fell into a crisis: there were not enough care workers available and the ones stuck at their workplace were burning out. The state improvised solutions: while everyone was told to stay home, respect physical distancing, and avoid unnecessary travels, the live-in care workers were brought into Austria by charter planes and specially organized train corridors. In such conditions, the infection risks were high, but our financial risks were even higher: quarantine costs were always regulated as the responsibility of the caregivers, while this was supposed to be the responsibility of the state. We should have gotten better working conditions and higher wages for travelling and working cross-border during a pandemic.

During those times, DREPT had demanded that care workers be paid for the two weeks of quarantine we were told to observe, that care workers receive

fair compensation for the risky work we performed, that commissions paid to placement agencies be suspended for the duration of the pandemic, and that the child care benefit for our children matches the benefits received by Austrian children, considering our contributions to the Austrian society. But all we got was unnecessary bureaucracy, systemic obstacles and applause. Applause doesn't feed our families and it doesn't prevent burnout.

How we survived Covid-19: we stood together as a family.

During the difficult period of the Corona crisis, when the lockdown occurred and the borders closed, I was at home, in Romania, with my family. Perhaps you will think that it was better, because at least I was home and not working far away from my family, with no possibility to return. But the thing is, it wasn't at all as easy as it might seem. In my country, everything was also getting worse and worse regarding the number of Corona infections, and everything was getting more and more expensive, every day. And I had no income. My husband was out of work for three weeks, as well. I couldn't work because I couldn't travel to Austria due to the travel restrictions and there was no clear information when this would change or how long we would have to survive in these conditions. But, nevertheless, we stood together as a family and made it through these tough times. This was the best part of it all.

The worst part was that I couldn't work and secure our regular income and the fact that we couldn't go out of our homes at all, only for shopping – and that too had been done in a very short time and under a lot of stress. Romania imposed a very strict policy of permits to leave your house. Every time you wanted to go grocery shopping, you had to fill out an affidavit listing the reasons for leaving your house, your address, date, time and other personal data or risk very high fines for just being on the street.

Not being able to work had a heavy impact on my mental well-being because the uncertainties were immense: we didn't know how long the borders would be closed down, how long the lockdown in my country will last and if we're going to survive it all one way or another.

Thank you.

Cornelia Igas is 38 years old. She works in Austria as a live in-care worker and fights for the rights of the Romanian live-in care workers.

Social services and care sector in and beyond pandemic: issues of Czech social and care workers and possible solutions through sectoral unions

Eva Michalkova

The pandemic caught us all unprepared, but also showed that many current issues are rooted in long-term systemic problems. This article looks at some of the issues in the social services and care sector in the Czech Republic. It argues that many of them have already been affecting social services for the long term and they require systemic changes. The article suggests that sectoral unions might be part of these changes and looks closely at how.

The impact of covid-19 on the care sector in the Czech Republic

The pandemic has revealed two important aspects of the care sector in the Czech Republic. First, how important it is, and how often it is neglected and underestimated. Second, that there are long-standing problems affecting social services, care, and social work-

ers, and finally also the clients. Some of the problems which emerged during the pandemic are indeed new, as is the context, but many are in fact problems that have been affecting the care sector for a long time.

The fact that the Czech government was unprepared to manage the pandemic was also visible in the care sector. Especially at the beginning of the first state of emergency*, there was a serious lack of personal protective equipment. Many social and care workers, but also volunteers or the families of clients dealt with this situation proactively, sewing home-made masks that were then distributed to social service workers, clients, or anyone in need. Even if protective equipment gradually became available, it is however important to highlight that performing all the tasks of a social or care worker for twelve hours wearing a mask and other protective equipment is very physically demanding. In addition to the lack of protective equipment, clear and consistent information was also missing during the first state of emergency. It was unclear how social services should change their procedures in order to protect both clients and care workers while maintaining at least the minimum standard of provided services.

The risk of infection is higher in the social services: often, care workers and social workers cannot maintain the safety distance; they work with target groups that are not regularly tested for COVID-19;

* The first state of emergency lasted from the 12th of March to the 17th of May. During the time of finishing this article, the government decided to declare another state of emergency, which will take effect from 5th October and should last 30 days.

or they have to take care of clients who are infected, being locked up together in the facilities where they live. At the same time, many social workers in fact changed their routines and after-work life in order to reduce the risk of bringing the infection to their facility, which shows a great deal of responsibility towards their clients.

Many facilities faced their clients' needs change due to COVID-19 or had to change the way they provided services because of preventive measures. This increased requirements on the staff: some facilities had to go almost fully online, others were locked down or had to provide extra services, either in response to changing needs or to systemic solutions (e.g., for people without homes). This resulted in increased stress, the pressure to increase efficiency, the pressure to learn new digital skills, but way too often no satisfactory solution for unpaid overtime and increased expectations.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs announced a grant call for bonuses for social and care workers, especially those working in infected facilities. In practice, as with any other grant for social services, it was the organizations or facilities that had to apply for the grant. Therefore, not all social service providers received the funds automatically, but only those who decided to apply, or who had the capacity or knowledge to submit the proposal. Ultimately, it was again the leadership of the organization, not workers themselves, who decided whether to pay this extra money and to whom, even though the original purpose of the government grant was to compensate social and care workers for their efforts

and the risks to which they exposed themselves. Moreover, this compensation was a short-term and symbolic solution, whereas the underfunding and overstretching of the care sector is a problem that must be addressed systematically. Only then this sector might be better prepared to react to crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Long term problems affecting the care sector

The acute problems the pandemic caused for the care sector are largely connected to long-term issues of inadequate financing. To justify this, politicians and economists rely on the very weak argument that the care sector does not produce an economic profit. Yet this perception is also reproduced by many within the sector. Social work students, for example, are prepared by their professors to think of social work as a mission and not expect to be earning a decent salary from it.

Current discussions about state expenditures for fighting COVID-19 also reinforce the division between welfare and profit by focusing on the impact of the crisis on the state budget. As with any crisis impacting the economy, during and after the pandemic the social welfare system and the care system might be the first to see budget cuts. Some politicians, especially on the right of the political spectrum, already describe these cuts as efforts "to save money from the nonprofit sector and use it to fight COVID-19." Whether they mean the budget should go to the in-

dustry of the healthcare sectors, such statements reflect a lack of understanding of how the non-profit and care sectors work. Specifically, there is little acknowledgment of the fact that these sectors mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and help minimize the negative effects for the most vulnerable individuals and communities.

In fact, the financial prestige and overload issues in the social services and care sector are intertwined. There are not enough funds to recruit more qualified and experienced staff, there is a high fluctuation of workers due to poor working conditions and low salaries, and this in turn negatively affects the remaining workers who have to make up for understaffed facilities. Because the grants and subsidies from the state and municipalities are insufficient, most nongovernmental organizations have to supplement the budgets for social services from other sources and extra activities. This increases the demands of fundraising and project management for each facility without alleviating financial uncertainty since most grants are awarded only for one or a maximum of two years. This situation also has structural roots in patriarchy: social work and care, in general, are perceived stereotypically as women's natural activities, and consequently are not valued either financially or symbolically, and have low prestige.

Sectoral unions as a possible solution

The problems in the care sector outlined so far inspired the creation of a sectoral union of social and care workers* from different facilities. The union's main goal is to ensure adequate salaries and work safety, as well as increase the prestige of social and care work. This entails both systemic changes and changes at the level of individual facilities. Not all social and care workers are or will be union members, but all of them deserve fair working conditions. Addressing the problems rooted in patriarchy also requires systemic solutions. We must fight to redefine social work and care as important sectors that benefit the entire society, even if the work of preventing and alleviating social problems is often invisible. And it is especially important to stress out that, as a society, we cannot afford to acknowledge the true value of social services only when they are missing. This also ties in with promoting an anti-individualistic perception of social work. Some campaigns that aim to increase the prestige of social and care work build on the argument that each person might need care at some point. However impactful this argument can be sometimes, we should rather fight for a community-based understanding of care: focus on how it benefits all of us as communities and as a society, how social services are part of an entire structure of social welfare, and how much care relies on solidarity, support, and participation.

* The Union of employees in social services is registered under the Union of employees in trade, logistics, and services.

Sectoral unions can also affect broader changes, by supporting workers to gain self-confidence and push back against the argument used as a scare tactic by employers that they are easily replaceable and expendable. In reality, it is not easy to find qualified, experienced, and empathetic care workers. My colleagues in the care sector must learn to stand their ground based on their qualification, experience, and worth: we do have specialized training, continue to educate ourselves, and apply new methods in social work adapted to changing social realities, and the work we do comes with a great deal of responsibility.

Unions should also work to raise awareness about labor laws and workers' rights. The non-governmental and non-profit sector is sadly no different when it comes to pressuring employees, exploiting their lack of knowledge, or even using illegal procedures. Every care worker should be aware of their rights and should not be afraid to point out when they are being violated.

Organizing and unionizing are important especially considering the workers in the most precarious positions in the sector – workers with irregular contracts, migrant workers, workers in the lowest-paid positions, older workers, or workers with small children. For them, speaking up or challenging the employer might seriously jeopardize their job, income, or immigration status. Sectoral unions are a way to support and protect these workers, providing the important option to express their opinion and fight for better working conditions together.

Conclusion

Social work and care work is hard, demanding, and responsible work. The demands on it increased during the pandemic due to the higher risk of infection, clients' changing needs, and the inadequate solutions provided by the state and municipalities. Aware of the demands, social workers and care workers are driven by a sense of meaning and accept that their job requires certain flexibility, especially during a crisis. However, this cannot mean that care and social workers do not deserve fair and safe working conditions, adequate salaries, and compensation for the risks and strain to which they are exposed. At the same time, we cannot wait for somebody else to fight for us. We have to raise our voices and be heard, we have to start pointing out the long-term issues in the care sector, and perhaps setting up the sectoral union can be a way for care workers to argue things cannot go on like this.

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Part III

MIGRATION

Maintaining Life during Pandemic in Turkey: Women and Migrants

Sanem Ozturk

We had already been feeling as if in a dystopian movie, when the Covid-19 pandemic exposed even more of the social and economic injustice and the collapse of neoliberal health care systems. In this talk, I will specifically try to focus more on women's social reproductive labor inside and outside home, unemployment, especially female unemployment and the general situation for migrants and refugees in Turkey after Covid-19 crisis.

No need to mention that women perform most of the social reproductive work, inside or outside the home; paid or unpaid; it's a global fact that also holds true for Turkey. What has changed in the field of social reproduction after COVID-19? Certainly, women's unpaid reproductive work inside the home has become heavier. It was already too much; however, according to the most recent research on women's and men's share in domestic labor, women spend four times as much time than men on house and care work*, which increased unprecedentedly with the isolation condi-

* *Women doing four times as much unpaid work as men during lockdown, research finds* (2020), tr.undp.org, https://bit.ly/2OXTqgI

tions. Despite the fact that men's share in domestic labor increased after Covid pandemic, the numbers show no sign for a more equal share of social reproductive work inside the household.

The situation for those who perform social reproductive work outside the home is inevitably getting heavier as well. Especially health, education, food and retail sectors are the ones where women are really high in number. Here, I really need to underline two important consequences of this situation. On one hand, the top critical sectors in the COVID crisis are also the sectors where the labor force is forced to work overtime, unpaid, insane hours, under inhumane conditions, under the threat of losing jobs (because why not? There's an army of unemployed out there). We have seen cases where people started work without proper training, proper cleaning and protection supplies. Women's workload doubled, even tripled.

But on the other hand, the real importance of social reproductive labor became much clearer as if we woke up in the morning and suddenly cleaning services, distribution services, caretakers, nurses, teachers, social workers gained extra visibility. In a crisis where so many sectors had to shut down or slowed down and only the critical sectors were working in full capacity, women's importance in the total workforce became quite visible. In other words, it became clear that women labor is mostly located in the most critical sectors that we all depend on not only during crisis but every single day, especially in a country where women's participation in the total labor force is low, around 35%*.

* Kadınların İşgücüne Katılım Oranı Aynı (2019), m.bianet.org, https://bit.ly/2ZBgW5i

Losing a job is a risk for all during the pandemic, especially for the people working in the non-critical sectors. In Turkey, we already have a really high rate of unemployment, which was around 24 % before the pandemic but it is expected to reach a very critical point unless the necessary precautions were taken by the government. However, the numbers released by the official statistics institution do not seem to reflect the reality according to the worker unions' confederation (DİSK)*. According to the July 2020 unemployment report of DİSK, between April 2019 and April 2020, male employment decreased 7% and female employment decreased 13.9%. The government was forced by the unions to take a measure to prevent private sector companies from firing people during a pandemic. However, this measure was taken very late; and it had loopholes, especially in a country where so many people work informally and does not prevent forced unpaid leave. The Turkish government provides economic support to people who are on unpaid leave, but that amounts to less than half of the minimum wage (around 170 dollar per month), which is far from being sufficient for one person to pay the rent, let alone for a family to survive the whole month.

But there's another very important issue here: One of the main differences between male and female unemployment is the access to unemployment benefits. In Turkey, in order to be eligible for the unemployment wage, you have to score a certain number of days worked with insurance, and most women in the labor force are unable to score that num-

* Temmuz 2020 İşsizlik ve İstihdam Raporu: Türkiye tarihinin en büyük işsizliği! (2020), disk.org.tr, https://bit.ly/2NoQY2k

ber because they cannot work at a full time-secure job because of domestic work, care work, or because they are forced to quit when they get married or have kids, or because they work unregistered and paid under the table most of the time. So when they are fired from their jobs, we know that they will be the poorest without any backup system.

As for the situation of migrants and refugees in Turkey, it gets a bit darker. For the most part, the situation was already dark for them here, mainly because of the perception about the migration itself. There are more than 5 million migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented people in Turkey as we know today. Around 3.5 million of them are Syrian population, the rest are from various origin countries. What the majority of Turkish society see when they consider migrants is simply a "problem." And this perspective is the very reflection of the denial of the fact that migration is an integral part of our lives for a very long time. It's not a "temporary" situation that will be gone, let's say, after the Syrian conflict is resolved. It's not a guest and house owner issue. It did not start in the 2000s. It will not end. And it definitely did not only happen to Turkey. The world is a migrating world. It will always be. And we will keep seeing migration as a problem unless we start to understand the key factor: Basic human rights.

In Turkey, more than most other societies, these questions aren't seen in terms of human rights. Last year, the Turkish government took really harsh measures that made life harder for migrants and refugees. The military operation in Northern Syria and the losses there, and the economic crisis also added

to the existing xenophobic, anti-refugee atmosphere in Turkey and thousands and thousands of families who started to rebuild a life were forcefully displaced again. Some were displaced inside the country, some were deported.

Even those migrants who are in the labor force are extremely vulnerable. There's no way I can give you a number of their job losses because the vast majority of them work without registration because of Turkey's migration regime*. Turkey does not give refugee status to any person except for European citizens. It doesn't matter if they flee from a war or torture, or violence. So, although millions of people live in Turkey and everybody calls them refugees, they do not have such status. Therefore, they have no refugee rights either. They cannot apply for a work permit; because this right belongs to the boss. You can imagine that few bosses are willing to apply to that permit instead of hiring a person unregistered and firing them whenever they want. So, the migrant workforce is mostly unregistered and therefore highly disposable. While some become unemployed, some are forced to work long hours without any protection.

And many families who had started to build a life in Turkey went back, or more precisely, were pushed back to square one during the pandemic. Migrant women and LGBTI are at the absolute bottom of this hierarchy. Many migrant women who had started to work for the first time in their lives, became the breadwinners of the family, became a part of the labor force, gained strength and confidence about themselves found themselves in a very harsh sit-

* https://bit.ly/3eL8OYA

uation all of a sudden beyond the economic consequences we can imagine.

As expected, access to healthcare is a vital problem among migrants as well. A big part of the problem are status differences. Thousands of people have no access to the healthcare system or basic supplies because they are not given any protection status. Of course, there are some actions organized by some initiatives who also build solidarity, especially in the fields of gender equality and solidarity with migrants and refugees. Women's movement in Turkey is actually very used to working in coordination, within initiatives or platforms. Again, Migrant Solidarity Network and We Want To Live Together Initiative continue to build solidarity around equal rights. These initiatives also tried to distribute material support within various neighborhoods. They did a great job in forcing some municipalities to extend their social support programs to include migrants and refugees. But it is still too little considering the lack of resources allocated for the welfare of the people. Most of the neighborhood initiatives try to create their own resources with solidarity.

And a more dangerous situation waits for us because the case numbers are not decreasing. (Actually it was just recently revealed, sorry, confessed by the minister himself that the government was lying about the case numbers all along)*. But we are getting back to "normal" anyway; not because the pandemic is over but because the economy is collapsing,

* Türkiye'nin güncel Covid-19 tablosu; Koca'nın ‚belirti göstermeyen vakalar' açıklamasına tepkiler (2020), tr.euronews.com, https://bit.ly/37uA9tt

which clearly shows us our place in the hierarchy of priorities. In addition, we are more than sure that the main sectors the government will support during the post-pandemic days will not be social reproduction sectors that actually make life exist and sustain but the sectors like construction and/or –destructive– energy, which are their absolute favorite.

On top of all, the other pandemic spreading around the world, namely gender-based violence affects women's lives in Turkey more heavily than ever before. This should be taken into consideration when we speak about social reproductive work since, as we all know, discrimination starts with birth and everything interconnects after that. Participating in the labor force or continuing education gets harder for a woman who is in a violent home and cannot get support. If we define health as the state of wellness, a refugee denied their basic rights or a woman subjected to violence are definitely far from being in a healthy environment. Just as Covid-19 sweeps our lives like a tornado, gender-based violence destroys lives of millions of women and just like Covid, it is a life-or-death situation for women and children. However, the Turkish government seems to think the opposite way.

Turkey's record in terms of gender-based violence was already bleak before the pandemic; but it got worse and worse and in addition to that, many women who are subjected to violence were forced to "stay at home" with their torturers. They could not access the mechanisms that are supposed to be there for them. They were rejected by the very officials who are supposed to protect them. They were sent away from

the shelters because they had to prove that they were Covid-negative. Plus, the most recent debates on women's hard-gained rights in Turkey also showed that the year 2020 would have been still very challenging for women in Turkey even without the pandemic.

One of the main issues brought in the agenda of women is the TCK 103 (Turkish Penal Code, Article 103) problem, in other words, a proposed motion to pass an amnesty for the perpetrators of sexual abuse of minors*. Another debate has been revolving around the Istanbul Convention of which Turkey is the first signatory. It's quite a challenge to keep the fight against a mentality that occupies the absolute majority of the Parliament and vastly dominates every sphere of life including media; however, women's movement does not give any sign of pullback. In fact, the recent debate around the Istanbul Convention seems to increase the support to women's movement, even among AKP voters**. So, it's only natural to ask the question: Why does a government who repeats that "they will fight against gender-based violence" at every occasion tries so hard to withdraw from a Convention whose sole purpose is to eliminate gender-based violence? Why does it even become a subject of debate in a country there's at least one femicide almost every day?

In the Turkish case (and in many other places, of course), the ruling mentality already has a very obvi-

* Women's Agenda in Turkey: Top Issue Is Gender Based Violence (2020), internationalviewpoint.org, https://bit.ly/2NL-3SYo

** AK Parti'nin yüzde 49.7'si İstanbul Sözleşmesi'ni savunuyor (2020), gazeteduvar.com.tr, https://bit.ly/3qFqsAd

ous standpoint on gender equality in any sphere of life. And in terms of migrants and refugees, the perspective dominating Turkish politics is the perspective that refuses to see the reality of migration and considers it as an issue to deal with. Just like they see women: A problem to overcome, or at least, to be silenced. However, this whole year (ed.note: 2020) showed us very clearly that women and migrant labor do the most vital and critical work that makes life on earth exist and survive.

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From solidarity to politics: Transformative action along the Balkan migration route

Sasha Hajzler

Along with the immediate threat and damage to human lives, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic burst the door wide open to a global exercise of the politics of fear, surveillance technologies, war narratives, and tightening border policies, accompanied by financial instruments of control and other means of repression. As a result, the burden on countless precarious lives intensified. The world witnessed strikes, protests, direct action, the politicization of solidarity actions, and the interweaving of struggles tactics. The situation in the Balkans is not an exception. Below is a short overview of the struggles, but also a note on promising transformative actions along the Balkan route:

The height of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Balkans has brought to the light of day various exploitative government regulations, corrupt political and economic practices and debilitating restrictions on movement: from the lengthy curfew in Macedonia, municipality-localized movement restrictions in Slovenia, to the harshest confinements in migrant camps and detention centers everywhere. Like Germany and France,

Slovenia also **left the backdoor open to migrant labor**, allowing entry for migrants with skills, predominantly in logistics, and in the industrial and agricultural sectors, not only widening the gap between "skilled" and "unskilled" people, but also **intensifying the problem of treating people as mere labor, as tools, justifying their movement only when they move as servants of capitalism and neoliberal policies**. Factories, nursing homes for the elderly, chain shops and hospitals became the primary points of tension where profit has been valued over life (as in the cases of the Lidl worker unions, the Gorenje factory in Slovenia, and textile factories in Macedonia.) These as well as similar jobs depend strongly on systemic and structural conditions which are, even as the presence of the West varies among nation states, **very similar throughout the region**. Workers who have been laid off, or pushed to work for employers' profits are often a common sight in protests.

Reclaiming the freedom of movement goes hand in hand with reconceptualizing labor. Both concerns are inextricably tied beyond borders and nations. Solidarity actions on behalf of activists were made for **common visa and residence permit policies,** but **we must think how to confront and disrupt the logic that subjects people to these exploitative conditions in the first place.** People who moved from Balkan & East Europe to the West/North/EU as a labor force are probably most aware of this issue, as some were unable to return home during the Covid crisis due to government policies restricting entry.

Such was the case for Serbian workers who for a while slept in cars in Slovenia where they worked in

construction, since the Serbian government refused to timely open the borders for them. The responses of those showing solidarity toward them were similar to the responses to homelessness and relied on guerilla mutual aid and pirate care actions. Next, movement restrictions have also put additional strains on the concept of "the traditional family," with an increase in rates of domestic violence. Just as a house is not necessarily a home, a home is also not always a safe place. Not only is there a chronic lack of proper regular housing in the region, but specifically safe houses are for many years now an issue on their own, affecting the lives of many, predominantly Roma, the homeless, the disabled, victims of domestic violence who are often women, children, and the elderly, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and migrants.

At the same time we witness a firm continuity of action concerning the Balkan route: from reclaiming **freedom of movement by crossing borders and demanding unconditional common residence permit to calls against patriarchal notions of women's roles in the family.** Within this sense, transnational practices of care and solidarity which transcend humanitarianism and operate in the realm of *the political* have merged during the pandemic. For the Balkan route struggles, just like elsewhere, women are at the front, fearing neither the visible nor the invisible border. These borders occur as tools, policies, places, laws, actors, and even ways of knowing. Let these abstractions not seduce the reader – they are not only concepts hanging high in the air – they have real-life consequences, often acting as violent borders do, bringing pain and death, but also raising resistance and enactments of

bold political imaginaries. As care intrinsically carries power relations, processes of disciplining, skill and structural positioning, solidarity must be political: let us not forget that mutual assistance among the poor is in one sense quite welcome to governments, who can thereby shuffle off responsibility for the suffering that happens within their borders, encouraging the notion that care for others is a matter of private charity: a humanitarian, not a political, matter. Capitalist exploitation thrives on good humble people.

Knowing well that care must not remain only in the hands of "women as usual," individual political will or humanitarianisms, but must as be alternatively institutionalized and politicized, feminist practices have proven key for illuminating and transforming visible and invisible borders. One prominent example of good political practice, besides Infokolpa, and also led by women, is the Transbalkan solidarity, where activists are focused on organizing, strategizing, direct support, action and common thinking in regard of the Balkan route: Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia. The practice is radical in its direct engagement with detangling and defying imperial, neocolonial, racial, patriarchal, cooptive violent regimes by agile (counter)action and **common work, as a platform that connects different struggles, but also a political space of common sense-making that understands, recognizes and works with the differences.** It is a political practice of prefigurative politics centered around the Political and politicized care.

The Transbalkan solidarity is also active with the campaign to raise the No One Is Illegal rainbow flag demanding that the EU provides shelter and protec-

tion to LGBTIQ+ people on the move throughout the Balkan route, and is also cross-pollinating with other initiatives such as Infokolpa, and further with Border Violence Monitoring, intensifying practices by interconnecting or, even confederating with other practices and movements in imaginative alliances. This is a promising response model to the needs of the present: combining the local with transnational. **The above is especially relevant since after the global neoliberal protest movements against oppression, exploitation and inequality from 2019, governments have used Covid-19 to make many transborder and public-space actions and terrain work impossible.** Such government policies have gotten their share of criticism, for example through protests, i.e. Friday protests in Slovenia, joining various blocks of struggles, ecology, feminist, anti-government, migrant – focusing on the increase of horrid deaths at the borders of Europe, as a consequence of the racist, discriminatory, fascist policies of EU, financed militarization, surveillance, all in the name of national sovereignty and state security – the same old adage from the power-thirsty propagandist machinery. Good examples of such propaganda found in government-produced military narratives praising nurses, care workers and doctors as our "soldiers, heroes, troops, and frontlines". In Slovenia for example, they were celebrated with cross-country flights, symbolically accompanied by US F16s, which have been used in many vile military operations around the world.

This narrative has to go. Health and life must not be abused to propagate militarization. In line with this, during and after the first COVID-19 outbreak

there have been several records of symbolic acts of solidarity throughout the Balkan countries to contest and denounce such militarization, policing and other violence by the organs of oppression. Healthcare itself has been a separate issue in the region, especially for the most vulnerable groups: Roma, women, migrants, low wage precarious workers. Let us not forget that the savior doctors and nurses, as well as the health care bureaucracies who oversee them, also face (and execute) difficult **decisions over who gets to live and who does not.** It would be naive not to expect race, class, and gender not to play a role in these decisions on a systemic level. One brutal example was the death of a pregnant Macedonian Roma woman, who passed away due to belated and improper healthcare. Not so far away in BiH, a pregnant woman in labor with twins was denied hospitalization because she tested positive for COVID-19.

And this pattern exists not only in the Balkans, but in the whole of Europe, there seems to be a political decision that elderly homes are last in line for medical aid, not surprisingly resulting in most of the deaths coming from the population stuck there. **Just as this opened the question of political indirect euthanasia for the elderly, migrant deaths at the borders are becoming a sort of a death sentence comeback – in a way it evokes a death penalty, indirectly and sometimes (in cases of pushbacks) directly permitted or caused, merely for crossing the border of fortress Europe**.

On that note, the implementation of public health measures in migrant camps and at borders clearly had little to do with Covid-19 and a lot to do with anti-mi-

grant policy. Scenes of state violence toward migrant minors in detention centers have flooded the internet. Another proof is the much-discussed and highly contested border violence. Pushbacks are proving to be a systemic practice of EU-sponsored violence, repressive border regime, dehumanization, illegalization, and criminalization of people through organized, mostly violent operations of illegal collective expulsions of people across the green border, without giving them a chance to ask for asylum. People try to avoid getting caught and decide for dangerous crossings, that sometimes result in deaths on the border, or after, of exhaustion or illness. During the COVID-19 outbreak, militarization and the policing of borders were a staple suggestion in government-run measures. Repressive practices occurred as well inside the borders, let us remind ourselves of the example when in Serbia migrants were placed in a 24-hour mandatory quarantine and the military was deployed to monitor the curfew. Or when the COVID-19 related lack of hygienic conditions and healthcare in the Slovenian detention center resulted with a protest of the people stuck inside*.

This regional overview is the result of a two-year data-collection process. Data was collected from various sources (individuals, non-formal groups, organizations) in the field. Most outstanding in transnational organizing were migrant movements, which are **inherently fundamentally questioning the abusive structure and violent nation-state system, connect-**

* AYS Slovenia Special: Protest breaks out in detention centre Postojna a week after court decision in favour of an asylum seeker (2020), medium.com, https://bit.ly/3qFWQTl

ing protests, global or regional or thematic approaches, and practices. The key is not only within prefigurative politics and building dual power, strategizing and thinking together, building a common discourse, making space for emergent movements, but also maintenance and repair work on the precarious daily life. We need to involve even more the migrant, labor, housing and women's movements, translating struggles from local and "trans-" contexts, since during translation similarities and differences can be mapped and worked with, toward building an infrastructure of a more wise, just and solidary world.

Infokolpa is a self-organized civil society initiative based in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Made up of locals, asylum seekers, refugees, migrants, associations and international activists, it is dealing with migration, asylum, support, politicization and the production of legality and illegality along the Balkan route.

Part IV

HOUSING CRISIS

COVID-19 and housing justice in Serbia

Ana Vilenica

Housing as a basic means of social reproduction came into focus during the COVID-19 crisis in an unprecedented way in Serbia as well as everywhere else. The "stay at home" instruction exposed existing housing injustices* resulting from privatization, restitution, housing financialization, social housing residualization, homelessness, and gender-based violence and racism against Roma and migrants. Those living in collective centers, but also in informal, insecure, unsafe and unhealthy conditions, found themselves hyper-exposed to risks not only from infection but also from further impoverishment, and from the violence of quarantine managers. Those privileged enough to be staying-at-home have been facing the hyper-exploitation of domestic space**, alongside the continued expectation of free reproductive labour. Homes became schools, day cares for our children, our offices, but also hospitals

* Covid-19 and housing struggles: The (re)makings of austerity, disaster capitalism, and the no return to normal (2020), radicalhousingjournal.org, https://bit.ly/3kb2avA

** Feminism, the Pandemic, and What Comes Next (2020), ctjournal.org, https://bit.ly/3pDtyU6

where we are supposed to care for sick family members or for ourselves. This situation provoked organised reactions throughout society including a grassroots answer from the housing movement. Housing struggles during the pandemic in Serbia could be roughly talked about as going through three phases starting from march 2020; organising militant aid during lockdown, struggles against state repression during the mass protests, and ongoing struggles not to return to normal.

Organising militant aid during lockdown

After the initial ridiculing of the virus by state officials at the beginning of the pandemic, a state of emergency was imposed in Serbia on March 15th in response to the declared Covid-19 pandemic. Two headquarters were formed after the Serbian president publicly declared 'the war on virus': Headquarters for health, and headquarters for the economy, with an aim to eliminate the consequences of crises for the economy. During this short period, two main measures directly related to housing were introduced. These were the moratorium on mortgage payments in the form of a three-month break on the payment of the installment that was made possible by the National Bank of Serbia, and a recommendation to the Chamber of Public Bailiffs by the Ministry of Justice that paused evictions during the state of exception. Though these measures had some effect on easing hardships, their key role was to maintain the basic infrastructure that allows for the exchange value of housing to be a pivotal axis of capitalist circulation. The social prob-

lems that emerged or which have been exacerbated during lockdown were not addressed by the state measures. The majority of the people have been left to their own devices to deal with the pandemic. Under the quarantine regime, many have been unable to work and provide food and personal hygiene items for their families, because of the restriction of movement, job losses and poverty. Those without a roof over their heads and those living in informal settlements, working in the street, started earning less due to physical distancing measures and curfew.

The anti-eviction organization The Roof, working in three cities in Serbia, has changed its focus from preventing evictions that were now paused, to organizing aid for the forgotten quarantine residents and unhoused. As part of the "No one hungry, no one thirsty, no one without a roof" campaign, the organization collected more than a million dinars and provided food and hygiene products for more than 1000 people in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Subotica. This action was financed mainly by the citizens themselves through personal donations. At the beginning, help was delivered to families who had previously cooperated with the organization in the defense of their homes, but soon calls began to arrive from others, from those who are struggling to survive in quarantine. As an answer to this social disaster the Roof organized grassroots "Social headquarters" (to contrast with the government's "Emergency headquarters") in order to show failure of the state to deal with the pandemic. The Roof demanded that the state and institutions provide housing and medical care to all, as well as water and electricity, to all those who had

no access to this essential infrastructure. In parallel, the Solidarity Kitchen* was formed in Belgrade, with the active support of the Roof. It was created spontaneously by a group of friends, after they learned that many in the city could not access basic necessities.

At the same time The Roof encountered several difficult situations emerging from numerous unhealthy homes that exist in Serbia. Due to the new way health institutions functioned in the quarantine regime, many patients were sent for home treatment. Home treatment implies certain conditions that a significant number of people in Serbia do not have. While distributing aid in Dalmatinska Street, inhabited with people under threat of eviction due to restitution, activists found a 72-year-old man** who had been sent for home treatment living by himself with infected wounds from third degree flash burns in a room unsuitable for human life.

In Serbia during the lockdown migrants were seen as the biggest threat to health for Serbian citizens. At the beginning of the pandemic, the police evicted all self-organized squats, and their perimeters were guarded by the army and the police. Most people were taken to already overcrowded accommodation facilities while others were illegally pushed-back to neighboring countries. From March 16th on, asylum centers and reception centers have been guarded by armed soldiers. Officials stated that the aim of these

* Solidarna kuhinja (2020), facebook.com, https://bit.ly/3boA1x5

** OVAJ ČOVEK IMA TEŠKE OPEKOTINE I NAKON VELIKIH NAPORA PRIMLJEN JE U BOLNICU! Kad izađe, tek mu sledi pakao! https://bit.ly/2P3tS1u

measures was to prevent the spread of the coronavirus among the migrant population. The military was authorized to use firearms if the situation requires so.

The lockdown phase ended officially on May 6th. Transition to the next phase was marked with the action of a right-wing activist that was broadcasted live on Facebook. With the car, he smashed into the fence of a migrant camp in Obrenovac that was closely watched by police and military, yelling*: "I don't want my girlfriend to be attacked by migrants. I do not want my army to protect migrants. I do not want a Muslim state, I do not want to suffer this, the punishment will be great."

Struggles against state repression during the protests

The full lockdown phase was followed by a short new pre-election 'normality'. The government manipulated the death tolls and infection numbers until the elections in June. The ruling party won easily, with the opposition boycotting the elections even before the pandemic. After the elections, the dire nature of the situation quickly became apparent. Serbia's crumbling public healthcare infrastructure was overwhelmed. The introduction to a wave of spontaneous protests**

* „(VIDEO) LUDILO SNIMAK! Ne želim da moju devojku napadaju migranti! Mladić upao u centar za azilante u Obrenovcu i napravio haos! (2020), republikhttps://bit.ly/3ut2omu

** „Nije u redu da se studenti sele svake dve sekunde jer im to ometa studiranje". Studenti protestuju zbog ponovnih pretnji iseljenjem (2020), masina.rs, https://bit.ly/3azNHWK

occurred on the evening of July 7th, in response to the declaration of increased security measures, including the eviction of students from their dormitories. Many students gathered in front of the House of the National Assembly building, together with a group of right-wing protesters. During the protest, conflict emerged when the group of students demanded the right-wing banner to be removed. In the following days, these students were subjected to threats of rape and murder from online right-wing trolls.

After another round of curfews had been announced as a prescribed punishment for 'irresponsible behavior' of mass protests gathered in front of the House of the National Assembly. There is no doubt that the protests started spontaneously*. People were frustrated because of the contradictory information they were fed, the collapse of the social and healthcare systems, and the fabrication of truth. Protesters of different provenances, from liberals to leftists to anarchists, to orthodox fanatics, fascists, and football hooligans have been competing for the narrative that will determine the future of the movement. The fact is that the right-wing triumphed in these protests. Members of the right-wing groups and political parties were there because, to them, Vučić has betrayed his far-right origin**. He "sold out Kosovo" and started working in the interests of the European Union, George Soros, NATO, migrants, 5G, the USA etc. Well trained, they used violence in the protest en-

* Mass protest in Serbia and an attempt of state-led demobilisation (2020), dversia.net, https://bit.ly/3aCk4E6

** Serbia: The Latest Front in the COVID-19 Riots (2020), crimethnic.com, https://bit.ly/2ZyZ0bd

vironment toward their own goals. Although others also took part in destroying property and in attacks on the police, the right wing had control. The police responded with violence; they tear-gassed everyone who found themselves nearby including bystanders and those passing by.

At the protest in Belgrade, the activists of the Roof were violently attacked by the right-wing activists, while many of the former were arrested in clashes with the police and convicted. This is how one of the arrested activists of the Roof* described the situation: "After being severely beaten and having my phone stolen, they threw me into the basement of the House of the National Assembly, and ordered me to lie on my stomach. We were all lying down, and a policeman with a white button was walking above us, threatening that if we looked up, he would beat us in the head." In Novi Sad, where the situation was slightly different, another activist of the Roof was arrested under false charges while president Vučić proclaimed an attempt of protesters to block a highway to be "pure terrorism."

In the light of these events, the Roof started a campaign for the liberation of all political prisoners. For Roof, it was clear that the arrests were a part of a push against its activists that had begun before the pandemic. The new amendments to the law on public-private bailiffs already contributed to further criminalisation of solidarity and as a result to the prosecution of and high penalties for, activists resist-

* Hapšenja, zatvaranja, oslobađanja, pa nove presude – država efikasna u borbi protiv mirnih demonstranata (2020), masina.rs, https://bit.ly/3uhKF1d

ing evictions. Arrests became a symbol of a broader trend of the regime to reckon with activists, but also as part of austerity politics, class stratification and putting public institutions at the service of private interests – banks, public-private bailiffs and, finally, political parties and individuals in power. In front of the central prison in Belgrade, the Roof demanded the liberation of all arrested. At the protests we could listen to analyses of the prison system that revealed its class and racialized character, something that cannot be heard often in Serbia.

The Struggle not to return to normal

Finally, during August and September, we have been forced in Serbia to inhabit an attempt to live the new normal, while new and old forms of dispossession, privatization and financialization have been consolidating in the shadows. Behind the competing narratives about the pandemic, a new housing crisis, augmenting the one that we already inhabit, has been emerging, threatening to affect an increasing number of people. In the current phase, violent evictions have restarted with full force after a short pause during lockdown. Private-public bailiffs are collecting debts in many cases by selling people's only homes out from under them. Many are coming out of the quarantine with increased debts, their savings spent, and having taken new micro loans with which they try to bridge the absence of state support and loss of jobs. Many are facing evictions due to inability to pay rent, and many others are facing poverty. In the first

period of pandemic alone, around 200 000 people lost their jobs in this country of 7 million. While people are dying in Serbia because there are not enough emergency medical vehicles, evictions due to restitution, privatization, the loan-shark debt, mortgage foreclosures, frauds, are happening with the full support of paramedics, fire department and police. In this situation, the housing movement in Serbia continues to organize direct actions, militant aid, legal support and emotional support, as well as new strategic alliances and public campaigns.

At the moment the Roof is involved in an ongoing campaign in collaboration with the mainstream news portal Nova.rs. The goal of this campaign is to spread the word about solidarity and struggle and send the message to all those facing hardships with housing in Serbia that they are not alone. The campaign consists of fifteen stories told by those living under siege, those experiencing eviction, and those in struggle for home. This is one of them:

"No, I wasn't born on the street," says A. and waves her hand, almost with a smile. "I lived in a house in Zvezdara, a small family house, made of mud, and then the neighbor next to us decided to take it, because he wanted to expand, to build a big house, maybe a hotel, and he already has one hotel. He first offered to buy it from my father, who was already seriously ill at the time, and then he started reporting us to the police and the inspection office, because allegedly branches were crossing from our garden to his.

The first fine was 200,000, the next even more.

When those reports and fines started to arrive, I got into debt, and then the interest rate went up,

and then the interest rate on the interest rate, and it turned out to be a huge amount. The police have been coming constantly, the neighbor has been threatening, they enter at night, tear down our fence, my father was lying sick, he didn't know where he was. I didn't know where I was going; go to A&E, go to Zvezdara hospital, from hospital to hospital... They enter, cut, urinate – a doom one cannot imagine. That's how it goes with the loan-shark debt, especially when the loan-sharks are working with those who are taking your house, and the police won't do anything, the banks are interfering.... and so goes the house!

No, I'm not feeling well. I am 61 years old, and I have always been in poor health, but my condition has just gotten worse. I worked as a nurse, and after I fell, when the analysis showed that it was systemic sclerosis, with hypertension and anemia, I retired after 27 years of work. Homeless and in debt, at first I slept with colleagues at work, but I was careful not to be with anyone for too long, maybe a shorter period, but I could not stay six months, that's a lot, people have their families... And then the terrible problems arose.

No, the state didn't help me. Neither the lawyers nor the others helped. I wanted to go to the monastery, no matter what, you can't enter, there is no speech. Then I found a job through the church, to live with an elderly man, they say: he is alone, ill, he has no income; he is mobile, but he needs care. But, when I came! I realized that he has nothing to pay me with, but there was no accommodation either. At least it was an apartment. He put me to sleep in the hallway, there was nothing, no water, so I went for water twice a day at the fountain, I carried stuff there to wash, there was

no electricity, I was cooking on gas, and he still treats me as if I was a slave, as if he possessed me.

I slept like that in the hallway in front of the door, dressed, because it's really cold in winter, and across the street some neighbors wanted to hurt him, so they called the police to chase me away... And the patrol when they came, they treated me like I'm the biggest criminal; they hit me, the three of them on the woman, and then they pushed me down the stairs... That was really hard. I stayed there a little longer, and then, when the pandemic began, that guy kicked me out in the street, literally throwing me out to die.

I used to squat like that, so I look where there are more people with children, it seems safer, but again, you have to change the place, my legs hurt, my back hurts, they force you, or there is someone always teasing you. Some old people were looking for sex, they come and offer something, they want to take me to their apartment, one said, as if I were living with him. Come on! I just turned around and left. And then they shout all sorts of things at you, they immediately insult you. A drug dealer who works with another woman from Belgrade once approached me and said: 'You will come to my place, there will be no going out to the city, you just go on assignments, I will give you accommodation, but you have to get food yourself.'

How do I get food if you don't let me out? And he wanted me to be his slave, and I don't know what would have happened if I had gone to him, if he would have beaten me. I can't, I think, I won't let anyone beat me again. These are all kinds of jokes, and you take shelter every time it's dangerous, and then you run away, you run away all the time... You have nowhere

to bathe, all the fountains are closed during corona, and to get to the lake Ada you have to walk far, you heat bottled water there, yes you just wash yourself a little. What can I tell you, it is very difficult. It's like a job, that life on the street, you work all day, you manage, and you still have to save yourself.

I didn't dare to meet anyone anymore, I was mostly alone, until I met people from the Roof. And the apartment they found for me is good, it's beautiful, of course, it also has hot water. You know what it means to me to be able to wash! Only the rent is high and heating is expensive, how can that be paid? I don't know what to expect, I can't say anything, it's uncertain... It's good that at least for this period I could calm my nerves a little, but it's not over, something more permanent must be found... When you have your home you still have security, you also have mental health. It's no small thing. And everyone – everyone has the right to it." (An excerpt from the interview with A*. by Irena Ristić for the Roof)

Some questions

The questions that have emerged from the struggles during the pandemic are more or less the same questions that we have been asking ourselves before the pandemic started. Nevertheless, these questions have been amplified with the new experiences that remind us how quickly our lives can become disposable, how far is the state ready to go to protect the in-

* Krov nad glavom i Nova.rs: Ko su ljudi koji ostanu bez doma (2020), nova.rs, https://bit.ly/3k5BQCY

terests of capital and what is 'essential' for our lives. Some of those questions are:

1. Pandemic regime(s) have made very clear what the essential activities and infrastructures are that sustain and reproduce our lives. This sudden and unexpected change of focus from profit to life opened the portal*. The doors of the portal that have briefly opened during the pandemic are most definitely closed now and the new normal is pressing in. This new normal is nothing to look forward to. One of the questions emerging from this experience is how to imagine (and practice) together the new paradigm outside of the borders and regimes of the new normality, and how to amplify the ideas and practices that are already out there (like for instance: the universal right to housing, moratorium on evictions, housing not profit, non-capitalist self-management, occupations of land and housing, etc.)?
2. The crisis has shown very clearly that the struggle for housing is directly related to the fight against gender-based violence, patriarchy, racism, labor struggles, health related struggles and state and police violence. The question is how to connect our movements (locally, nationally and transnationally) better and how to deal with problems, conflicts and political differences in our movements in militant but also creative and joyful ways.

* Arundhati Roy: 'The pandemic is a portal' (2020), ft.com, https://on.ft.com/3bo7jMJ

3. Solidarity mobilizations in times of COVID-crises has made issues related to poverty, at least temporarily, a common problem; perhaps not for all of us, but certainly for a significant number of people in Serbia that have shared with others that little that they had. How do we sustain this energy in the long struggle against the new normality that is taking shape ahead of us? And how do we create and sustain alternative housing infrastructures?

4. These lessons from 'disaster capitalism' teach us that one of the ways to normalize political movements and militant solidarity is by restructuring the movements from a militant to a humanitarian mode of functioning. The question is how do we resist these tendencies in our own struggles. This is by no means a simple question partly because they make us deal with complicated issues about morality, ethics and politics and sometimes even choosing between helping one person and doing something that is relevant for the collective.

The struggles for the articulation of the protests in Serbia described here have shown that the mass protests have to also be seen as the struggles for the right to organise our own reproduction in the way we see it suitable. In this light, the burning question remains how to prevent the right wing from dominating clashes with the authorities and how to create strong and mass movements that will show that the right-wing actually doesn't have anything to offer to us besides hatred.

Ana Vilenica is a member of the Roof an anti-eviction organisation from Serbia, the Radical Housing Journal collective, editorial collective for Central and East Europe of the Interface a Journal for and about Social Movements and the EAST-Essential Autonomous Struggles Transnational.

Intersectional alliances between housing and essential workers' struggles in Romania

Veda Popovici

The social, health and economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the surface the underlying political problems in societies across the world while also forcing social movements to rearrange their visions, tactics and practices. In the last several months, new alliances have been emerging and efforts across borders are put into forming transnational networks. For movements fighting for housing justice, 2020 has meant a growing momentum for their struggles.

This piece looks at how housing injustice intersects with experiences of essential workers, effectively mapping out fields of overlap and intersectional acknowledgement and action. Supported by insights into practices of organizing by housing justice activists, such mapping offers new possibilities for transnational radical solidarity and action.

As history shows us, capitalism takes up any new crisis it faces with rapid rearrangements so as to ensure its survival. So, while capital reorganizes, the pandemic crisis intensifies, bringing more un-

bearable burdens for workers while authorities act unsurprisingly as an antechamber for corporations and private elites.

For the months of March through June, governments and municipalities across the world have passed a variety of housing legislation that seemed to ease the burden of housing costs (EAC, 2020a). Although disproportionately benefiting companies, this legislation included social measures that were unthinkable just a month before. Now they were being passed without much fuss*. Eviction moratoriums, rent freeze, rent decreases, mortgage postponement all were passed hastily, taking by surprise housing justice activists everywhere. By the time the UN called for moratoriums on evictions and foreclosures at the beginning of April, several countries were already implementing such measures.

Housing came to occupy the center of the political conversation, with pro-capital economists launching new warnings of a possible housing crisis. Soon, it became clear that all of these measures form a grand deferral strategy, by no means actually alleviating the crisis but merely postponing it.

* For a wide global overview of housing legislation passed during the COVID pandemic see the COVID-19 GLOBAL HOUSING PROTECTION LEGISLATION & HOUSING JUSTICE ACTION map created by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project: https://antievictionmappingproject.github.io/covid-19-map/#close

Organizing for housing justice in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic

While activists were rapidly adjusting their demands and interventions to the new legislation, they were also facing an overnight deepened housing crisis. As it became clear that health and even survival depends on the capacity to stay at homes with as little physical interaction with others as possible, the already badly housed had been at high risk. These two conditions pushed housing movements around the world into a new stage of organizing, effectively producing their radicalization and growth.

The European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City, a transnational network of grassroots housing justice organizations across Europe, has published a report that looks at how the health, social and financial crises ignited by the COVID-19 pandemic have affected housing conditions and the organizing for housing rights in the period of March-June 2020 (EAC, 2020a). Based on my contribution to this research, it seems fair to conclude that just as the housing conditions worsened, our networks across the world grew stronger and have advanced more international solidarity and organizing.

In short, even though restrictions have greatly affected the capacity of organizers to continue their activities, groups across the continent adapted to the situation and responded swiftly and consistently. The main tactics used have been: a) mutual and direct aid; b) campaigning, advocacy, lists of demands; c) support, monitoring & consulting; d) rent strike or rent decrease; e) direct action; f) building alliances. Most

organizations used at least two of these tactics in a cohesive strategy for a whole period of March-May 2020. While detailing how these tactics developed and overlapped, the EAC's report shows that activists are expecting the crisis to deepen in the next year with housing issues and increased policing at its core.

The coordinated efforts of the EAC have proven to be a platform for many local groups and movements, most notably through publishing the 15 Demands in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic (EAC, 2020b) at the start of the pandemic (published March 28). The demands, based on online campaigning, manifestos and demands written by various member groups of the EAC, featured some of the key issues that were to be developed in the months to come. Some of them are: "Moratorium on evictions in Europe!", "No cuts on utilities, regardless of debts or formal status!" or "Suspension of all penalties for not paying rent or utilities!" as well as radical demands trying to anticipate new possibilities for the housing movements: "Immediate public requisition of hotels, tourist apartments, holiday houses and all empty buildings to re-house the homeless and the overcrowded!", "Decriminalization of occupations of vacant buildings!" and "Decriminalization of all informal, alternative, ephemeral and mobile forms of housing!".

Inspired by the demands of the EAC, the Block for Housing, a national alliance of housing justice organizations in Romania published the Manifesto for Housing Justice: Against the Pandemic of Capitalism and Racism (Block, 2020). The text serves as the axis of a wider campaign developed by the Block as a response to the pandemic crisis and includes tac-

tics of online campaigning, pressure on authorities and support to its member groups for the continuity of their on ground organizing work. As many other movements around the world, the Block dedicated the month of May to labor rights. In the context of the pandemic, an intersectional vision that understands how labor and housing are linked became essential in the 2020 strategy of the alliances.

A local context with regional relevance

When trying to understand the nature of the housing crisis in the ECE space, we need to go beyond the myth of the "natural homeowners" (Florea and Vincze 2020), a political and discursive construct serving the legitimation of real estate capital. Big homeowner societies such as those in the post-socialist space are no substitute for secure or adequate housing. As Florea and Vincze show, homeownership does not guarantee increased quality of life but for the majority of the population in Romania "the only precarious resource in a deregulated market economy".

While the great majority of households are mortgage-free, this does not mean they are debt-free. Access to public housing remains heavily restricted with the public housing stock dropping from 30% to less than 2% in 30 years. At the same time, the real-estate market in big cities has increased with an average of 43% only in the past 5 years. With the highest overcrowding rate (almost half of the total population), highest severe housing deprivation rate (37% of poor households and 16% out of all house-

holds) in Europe (Feantsa, 2020), Romania was already in a deep housing crisis by the time the effects of the pandemic installed.

With a percentage between 32 and 40% (depending on undeclared income) of all workers having minimum or below minimum wage (280 euros) and average keeping decent housing is a struggle even for home-owners. While almost 50% of all labor contracts are at minimum wage shows that a great percent of workers take several jobs to make ends meet while the private sector keeps the poor, poor with low wages.

While observing a trend of the steady increase of the gap between the rich and the poor for the past 10 years (Syndex 2019), this year's crisis has triggered the termination of more than 400 000 employment contracts by the end of May. According to recent numbers, Romania may well have some 6 million people just above or under the poverty line, about half the working population (Vincze, 2020). Outstanding in these statistics is the great increase of unemployment amongst women: with a staggering 48% (while unemployment amongst male identified workers has risen with 16%.

All of these processes are natural consequences of the violent neoliberal enclosure of non-private resources in the past 30 years. With private capital backed by transnational finance structures pushing for a precarization of the labor force so as to serve the unattractive labor in Western Europe. A supplier of cheap labor force, the global semiperiphery of ECE shares a recent history of neoliberal reforms that set the frame for the deepening of the current crisis. At

the same time, the most affected – women, migrant and essential workers – have been at the forefront of protest and demand for rights (LevFem Collective and Transnational Social Strike Platform, 2020).

ECE workers – at the intersection of racism, gender violence and housing deprivation

Indeed, it is the same geopolitical structural inequality that disproportionately affected the lives of migrant workers from East and Central Europe. The infamous asparagus story amused and horrified the whole world. Presented as an anecdote, however it is actually representative for a key segment of seasonal migrant labor, ECE agricultural workers. In mid-April this year, a harvest worker from Romania died of the corona virus contracted on the asparagus farm he was working on in the South of Germany. About 20 more workers got infected owing to the lack of protection by the employer. The event sparked a greater debate about the protection and rights of Eastern European workers against the safe-guarding of the consumption habits of Western European populations (Boatcă, 2020). All in all, it was clear that the lifestyle of Western societies relied on Eastern Europe's cheap and precarious labor force at the cost of the latter's lives.

Migrant labor became increasingly risky, adding up to the burdens of housing, loss of employment, gender exploitation and gender violence. Key to organizing migrant care labor during the past six

months has been the newly emerged DREPT pentru Îngrijire organization (RIGHTS for Carelabor with DREPT standing for justice, respect, equality, protection and transparency). Initiated as an online support group for care workers from Romania working in Austria, the group became a syndicated structure effectively organizing the members through mutual help and advocacy efforts. Through public events, it also brings awareness and raises solidarity for its community. Together with alliances with the Block for Housing and other social justice-oriented groups, DREPT has successfully brought attention to the hardships of migrant care workers, predominantly women. Among others, they show that migrant care work – performed overwhelmingly by women – has been since March systematically devalued and underpaid. Illustrating the asymmetries between Western Europe and Eastern Europe, this type of work, although considered essential, has been excluded from governmental emergency subsidies.

These experiences are also linked with structural and social racism – of which the current crisis has also triggered an increase. Although of great variety across Europe*, for the purpose of this short piece, I'll focus on anti-Roma racism.

* While organizing for refugee rights has been strong throughout the period with work of such relevant groups such as the No Name Kitchen, the wave of anti-racist protests ignited by the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the US found a resounding solidarity cry in Eastern Europe. In Bucharest, a protest action was organized in support of #BlackLivesMatter by an alliance of anti-racist and anarchist organizers, in spite of the total ban on protests still in place in Romania.

While anti-Roma racism remains at the heart of housing injustice in Romania, the new crisis has deepened dehumanizing and criminalizing narratives. As the state of emergency in Romania suspended several human rights, it is to be expected that the most vulnerable were affected, namely those whose rights were already volatile. Roma housing activist Maria Stoica reports that for poor Roma communities the emergency state measures didn't mean much, as their rights have been continuously violated for many years (Stoica and Vincze, 2020). Stoica, a resident of the Cantonului community, near Cluj tells us about the perceived communication with authorities. When her community is told to "stay home", they are in fact told to: "stay there in your poverty, we do not want to see you, we do not want to hear your complaints". In April, a fire broke in one of the communities living next to the landfill in Cluj: one of the residents set his barrack on fire in protest against the lack of protection in face of the pandemic crisis. On another day, the police raided the community equipped in riot gear and throwing teargas so that the people sitting outside would go in their shelters.

Nicoleta Vișan, another colleague in the housing movement, also recounts numerous occasions of anti-Roma racist police violence reported in her online communities in and around Bucharest (Vișan and Popovici, 2020). Most notable in her account are stories of Roma homes being raided by police in what seem to be random acts of violence. Under the guise of discipling the unruly bodies disrespecting distancing measures, the state upped its anti-Roma position with a new level of direct physical violence. In

addition to police brutality, overt anti-Roma racism consisted of restriction of access to utilities by local municipalities and an increase in stereotypical dehumanizing media representations (Costache, 2020). Housing activists across the region have expressed worries about an increase in surveillance and policing – an altogether reorganizing of violence (EAC, 2020a). The bodies at the forefront of such reorganizing are the ones already pushed at the intersection of various injustices.

Such are the residents of the Cantonului community, near the landfill of the city of Cluj. Notably, some of them, cleaning workers have been organizing towards syndication for a couple of years. During the emergency state, their situation has been increasingly tending towards precarity. Relying mostly on overtime paid labor, the new legislation cut down the limit for overtime while many were being sent home without knowing if they would be paid, put into technical unemployment or laid off. Efforts of these workers to unionize were rendered irrelevant with the new state of emergency legislation, suspending all rights to organize or strike.

For the ones already experiencing intersectional injustice, the crisis may feel like simply just another burden to carry as Nicoleta Vișan puts it (Vișan and Popovici, 2020). If we are to place the experiences and visions of such organizers and workers at the forefront of our struggles, we see a change in the narrative of crisis: as opposed to dominant narratives, we are not at all living extraordinary times, but just another stage in the true face of capitalism.

The gendered space of the home

The space of the home has long been identified as a battlefield in feminist literature and organizing. The current crisis has added a new layer of tension on the spatial politics of the home. As capitalism relies on unpaid domestic labor, so does new corona capitalism rely on the space of the home to compensate for the violence triggered by the pandemic. The already installed housing crisis only brought to the surface the severity of what it means to live in an overcrowded home or to lack access to basic utilities.

Enforced spatial constraint into one's home has meant a day-to-day, for many a 24-hour forced facing of the acute overcrowding conditions they live in. Two important consequences have resulted from this: an increase in social reproductive labor and an increase in domestic violence. As schools and kindergartens as well as other social reproduction structures were closed, the needs of household members had to be catered differently. In the face of the incapacity of state and wider social structures to care for their members in a crisis, women are yet again the ones to provide domestic labor to compensate for this lack (Dattani 2020). To this we add the increase of domestic violence due to the stay-at-home restrictions. The home, thus, is not a given, nor is it safe when it is in fact accessible.

While the political dimension of the home has become more visible through the deepening housing crisis, women are also often at the forefront of housing organizing. These two conditions have overlapped during the past few months making the gendered di-

mension of housing injustice more visible through voices of women housing activists. Keeping in mind the high number of new unemployed amongst women, Vișan's observation that for women the current crisis has brought a four-fold more pressure sounds dauntly accurate.

The old or the new "normal"

For societies perpetually deemed in transition towards capitalist civilization, such as the post-socialist societies of ECE, a crisis always feels like a painful and giant step back. However, this is simply another narrative serving the naturalized idea of the West being the ideal society to aspire towards*. What analysis and organizing such as that of the local housing movement shows is that the current crisis is simply a new opportunity for capitalism's reorganizing. The region, ruled by the hegemony of capitalist values, places private property at the heart of its moral compass (Popovici, 2020): you live in a decent home, you must be a good person/ you live in an overcrowded home

* Unsurprisingly, Western media has used the same tired tropes of the chaotic, corrupt and weak East. Interestingly, the tropes have been intuitively adapted to explain two opposing phenomena: the very low number of infected with COVID-19 over the period of March through May through high militarization typical of post-dictatorial societies, orthe high rates of contagion the period after May through the general incompetence of authorities and unruliness of populations. All this while Western Europe, with few exceptions, has maintained a very high infection rate throughout the period. All of this is worth a discourse analysis in itself.

or don't have one, there must be something wrong and evil about you. In this climate, asking for public requisition of empty buildings and hotels, demanding public and social housing and the immediate housing of the overcrowded and homeless passes for communist propaganda. It seems to take back society to the forgotten era of actually existing socialism.

With an anticommunist regional consensus across the spectrum of the political parties in power, such demands are virtually ignored. In what feels like an uncanny déjà vu from 2008, the government is prioritizing keeping the real-estate market afloat, trying to prevent new dramatic drops of prices. Functioning as mere assistants to the circulation of capital for the corporate elite, governments throughout the world focused their interventions at maintaining the "normality" of the already existing housing crisis. In this context, analyzing the politics of housing proved to be essential to understand the trends in capitalism's reorganizing (RHJ collective. 2020).

In Romania, talks of "economic recovery" serve as a code for increased militarization, policing and the support for the international capital's continuous accumulation. Any hint of social protection, workers' support or housing policies are deemed populist, ignorant or communist (Vincze, 2020). One important difference from the 2008 crisis is the increased state reliance on the military industry* (Vincze, 2020). At its best, the return to "normal" announced by the gov-

* As Vincze points out the 2020 budget allocations provide for an 18% rise of military budget as compared to 2019, while the Ministry of Internal Affairs can do with an extra 13% on top of the increased budget for the Romanian Intelligence Services

ernment is a concentrated effort to go back to the business-as-usual conditions for exploitation, marginalization and violence.

Meanwhile, housing activists around the world are denouncing the new arrangement of real-estate capital and calling for a time when the rich pay for what they have stolen through labor exploitation, real estate speculation and the enclosure of public resources (Block 2020). Building transnational and cross-movement alliances seems as important as ever if we are to push back against 2020 going down as just another page in the disaster capitalism handbook.

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Part V

Education

They will "manage somehow": notes from Ukraine on care labor in the time of the local and global crises

Oksana Dutchak

> *The maintenance and reproduction of the working class is, and must ever be, a necessary condition to the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave its fulfilment to the labourer's instincts of self-preservation and of propagation.*
>
> *K. Marx, Capital, Vol.1*

The ongoing COVID crisis highlights the deep crisis of the current system and the futility of liberal attempts to overcome gender inequality without addressing its root causes. Since the beginning of 2020, we have seen the "progress" of cosmetic liberal reforms, promoted on the global level and implemented by local governments to a varying extent, collapsing like a house of cards and revealing deeply rooted, structural problems. These problems derive from the hierarchies of the current capitalist system, with its

artificial separation between economy and social reproduction, and between the spheres of finance, production and reproduction. These hierarchies lead to the devaluation of both paid and unpaid reproductive labor – including care labor – and a deep dysfunctionality of reproductive infrastructure (healthcare, education, childcare etc) due to its subordination to the needs of capitalist accumulation. With the arrival of the crisis, the lion's share of reproductive work has been pushed back onto families, with the pretext that they will "manage somehow". Which usually means that women will manage somehow – with all the deepening gender inequality implied.

My colleagues and I have been doing research on the Ukrainian public kindergarten system throughout the year*. This sector is quite an illustrative case for the study of care, social reproduction and gender inequality, as it is predominantly (90%) female and, as the most universal option of pre-school childcare, it has a paramount impact on mothers' chances of return to the labor market. Its importance was particularly striking during the first several months of the pandemic, when kindergartens all over the country were closed and women had to "manage somehow." However, the problems of the sector are totally absent from public discourse in Ukraine – while there is quite a lot of talk about schools and teachers, there is almost no discussion of the problems of kindergarten workers and infrastructure**. In what follows, I

* With support from the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung in Ukraine, together with Olena Strelnyk, Olena Tkalich and Nina Potarska.

** Schools and higher education also have a lot of prob-

will use this sector to look at care labor and the situation of women in a time of multiple crises – war, an economic see-saw of collapse-recovery-collapse, and a global pandemic. I will also briefly bring an example from another key care sector, public healthcare, which is not only illustrative but also inspiring, due to the protests and grass-rooted self-organization efforts in the sector throughout the last year.

While the kindergarten system is formally a part of the education sector – officially called the "preschool education system" – it offers the lowest pay in the sector. According to the quantitative data we collected, the average net monthly wage of people employed in kindergartens (including administration) is 155 – 56% of the country's average and close to the 120 EUR minimum wage. The extreme cheapness of the labor involved may be explained by the low status of care labor compared to education. This depreciation of care labor forces workers into highly problematic survival strategies to support themselves and their families. Those workers whose partners' contribution to the family budget is significantly higher can be considered the best off. However, even this situation reproduces a pattern of gender inequality which justifies paying women less, as their wage is considered "supplementary" – with all the financial dependence and general depreciation of predominantly female sectors and positions implied.

lems, but these problems are somehow addressed at least and even used in electoral discourse both due to higher perceived importance in the society, and due to organized labor struggle in the sector – which is not quite explosive but at least exists for some years.

Other survival strategies, when a partner's wage is not significantly higher or there is no partner, also have a highly negative impact on the lives of workers and their families. These include regular overtime, subsistence agriculture, side-jobs, seasonal labour migration, and chronic indebtedness – all of which deprive women of time and, together with reproductive labour in their families, lead to a constant deficit of time and deterioration of well-being. Even worse is the situation of women whose options are more restricted: single mothers, rural women, and older women. In these cases, multiple inequalities intersect and reinforce each other through the tie-in of depreciated paid care labor into unpaid care labor, spatial inequalities and the gender-age inequalities of the labor market. As a result, 9% of our study respondents evaluated their conditions as "not enough money even for food" and 55% as "enough for food, but it is hard to buy clothes".

At the core of the problems faced by more than 300,000 workers in the sector and by mothers of young children who are hoping to get back to the labour market is its critical underfunding. Accepting children starting age two or three, the system faces chronic labour shortages and often poor conditions, and thus is sometimes open for hours shorter than the standard working day. Kindergartens are overcrowded in cities and lacking facilities in villages – with the situation being particularly critical in isolated settlements close to the war zone, where there are no kindergartens and public transportation is absent or irregular*. Like other elements of social infrastructure, in recent decades

* And little options for any work whatsoever.

kindergartens have been framed not as an essential support for women's care labour and a crucial tool in combating gender inequality, but as a "service" which the authorities provide if and to the extent they have funds for it. In cases when the infrastructure is failing, well, women have to "manage somehow".

Since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, the situation has developed unevenly. On one hand, workers retained their jobs and most of their wages – though often salaries were paid at lower rates and many women were pressed to use part of their paid annual leave, or even forced to take some unpaid leave. However, taking into account the extremely low wages, which destine workers to live from paycheck to paycheck, this is hardly a winning position. For those working mothers of young children who were lucky enough to retain their jobs, these several months were yet another story of "managing somehow" – this time, with no option of delegating childcare to kindergartens. Methods of "managing" included working from home with young children around, taking paid or unpaid leave, delegating childcare to grandparents or other relatives, leaving children basically unattended (with school-aged siblings, for example) or quitting a job. When some kindergartens reopened in early summer, most provided fewer places due to distance requirements, and in many places the safety equipment provided by the authorities ran out after several days. In the end, workers and parents had to "take care" of these supplements themselves*.

* Not an unusual situation in Ukrainian public kindergarten, where many expenses are unofficially pushed on the shoulders of workers and parents.

The striking absence of these problems from public discourse or any meaningful attempt by the authorities to solve them has several causes: the structural depreciation of care work, the neoliberal approach of the state to "service provision" and "optimization", the austerity anti-crisis policies which began in 2014, and the overwhelming imbalance between support for business and support for workers over the course of the COVID crisis. However, the prospect of fixing the immense hole in childcare infrastructure might be less distant if there were any attempts at collective labor struggle and self-organizing. But unlike school teachers, kindergarten workers have been almost entirely unorganized, aside from actions such as petitions to the central government, the last of which came before the kindergartens were reopened in summer. There have been no large-scale protests by kindergarten workers, not to mention strikes. This situation contrasts strongly with the schools, whose teachers struck occasionally from the 1990s until 2011. One important factor in the difference is funding: unlike schools, kindergartens in Ukraine are almost entirely financed from local budgets, while their wages are determined by the central government, allowing both local and central governments to deflect responsibility onto each other. In the end, workers feel that nobody cares and they have to "manage somehow" –individually.

Strikes are also as yet unimaginable in the public healthcare sector, where the average net monthly wage amounted to 205 in summer 2020, and wage arrears skyrocketed 300% since the beginning of 2020 – partially due to underpayment of the COV-

ID "premium" promised by the government. However, this most essential of care sectors in a time of global pandemic is seeing quite a unique mobilization from an under-privileged, overwhelmingly female part of its workforce: nurses. This started in the end of 2019 against a background of several years of neoliberal "optimization" reforms and "healthcare service" discourse, which offered but did not deliver higher wages. Facility closures and layoffs, explicitly following the logic of the reform, sparked several protest outbreaks in recent years. In spring 2020, as the pandemic unfolded, officials announced further closure of more than 300 facilities and layoffs for 50,000 healthcare workers. In November 2019 a nurse from Kyiv Region, Nina Kozlovska, wrote a Facebook post about the situation, which went viral and led to several protests and organizing efforts – both virtual and "IRL". The "Be Like Nina Movement" group on Facebook reached almost 60,000 members, and an initiative of the same name has been registered officially while active alliance-building is taking place on the ground.

The kind of grass-roots, collective and relatively militant "managing" of problems which is taking place in the public healthcare sector is still quite rare in Ukraine, especially in predominantly female care sectors. There are some prospects of its spread, both due to the inspiring example of the nurses and due to some revelations brought by the COVID crisis. The pandemic has made obvious the subordinate role assigned to social reproduction by the current capitalist system, and the results of this subordination. Though still receiving limited recognition, these conclusions

are penetrating into the everyday understanding of many people and the political understanding of activists – and now they are touching the edges of public discourse. Whether they will stay in the public eye and change mainstream perceptions of "economy" and "society" despite the growing desire to "return to normality", and whether they result in socio-economic policies in which the "socio" takes its rightful place – depends on many factors. However, we activists have no right to leave the situation to unfold by itself, hoping it will "manage somehow." We should support inspiring struggles, bring their revelations to light, and politicize the former with the help of the latter.

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What did Bulgarian teachers learn from the pandemic?

Darina K.

The virus suddenly and radically changed our world – several times by now. If during the "first wave" of the pandemic we teachers learned to be adaptive, to use software we had never heard of before, and generally to do the impossible, then the second wave revealed much more clearly that the system we work in is inhumane. How many educators had to die before society perceived school closures as a reasonable measure? How many petitions had to be signed by students and parents, before they were heard by their own headmasters? How many European countries had to enforce extreme measures before our own government suddenly switched gears away from protecting the "economy" at all costs, even at the cost of the lives of medics, teachers, and ordinary people. Looking back not only at the past few months, but also at the history of labour struggles of teachers in Bulgaria in general, we can find inspiration for what we must do today, in order to stay stronger in future.

The past and present of teachers' struggles in Bulgaria

Teachers' movements in Bulgaria have a rich and exciting history, including in the not-so-distant past. In 2007 we witnessed an incredible mobilization of roughly 100,000 education workers. For forty days they applied unprecedented pressure on institutions society as a whole, which resulted in an actual wage increase despite the negative media pressure and total lack of solidarity from other trade unions protesting over the same period*. It appears that the mass mobilisation was in fact possible thanks to the coordination between several active teachers' syndicates across the country. Yet the immediate impact of all those efforts was disappointing and demoralising. This seems to have had an impact on teachers' protest culture which can still be felt.

If we look further to the past, we can see an intriguingly rich political culture and active community of teachers, which included long-standing publications**, mutual aid funds and political engagement***. From today's point of view, all this is exceptionally impressive, as the contrast with the current lack of any kind of movement, let alone a mass movement, as well as the lack of solidarity and unity, feels es-

* How a Bulgarian teacher made the news... for all the wrong reasons (2014), criticatac.ro, https://bit.ly/3pyGz16

** Златното време на вестник «Учителско дело» (2015), bnt.bg, https://bit.ly/2ZxKDEa

*** Български учителски съюз, daritelite.bg, https://bit.ly/3qJGyso

pecially painful considering we are faced with a profound and wide-reaching health and social crisis.

The pandemic demonstrated how ill-prepared school environments are to face the challenges of a public-health crisis. It also revealed many problems that had been bubbling under the surface, such as a lack of unity and coordinated reaction on behalf of education workers. On one hand, live classes pose a serious threat to the health and even the life of education workers – as we saw from the inordinately high number of school-workers of all ages, who fell victim to the virus and the inadequate healthcare system. On the other hand, online education forces teachers to work in thoroughly inadequate working conditions, without adequate preliminary preparation, often with reduced working hours and hence, reduced wages. The consequences of this were also felt heavily by educators teaching individually or privately, whose wages, social and health insurance, as well as opportunities for days on sick-leave and paid-leave, are limited at best. The consequences are also felt in terms of the lack of technological equipment or internet connection, with it being almost taken for granted that the teachers would provide these themselves. We are left with the feeling that the general disposition across society, and among co-workers and institutions, is "everyone for themselves".

Remote education and virtual activism

Pushback against the high death-rate among teachers as restrictions were loosened and schools opened

in Spring was heard solely on social media. A modest Facebook group of less than 3,000 people appeared, including many parents and like-minded individuals, often not even living in Bulgaria. Together they organized a petition asking that schools be closed and online education reinstated, and wrote letters, which were widely, albeit, sometimes antagonistically, reported in the local media.

These initiatives generally have not received mass public support, nor do they have the support of trade unions. This group did show, however, that in smaller towns there are indeed self-organised groups, mostly of parents, but in some cases also of pupils, who exert pressure on their local authorities to choose remote online education – and some have succeeded. We also observed some small mutual aid groups, such as those trying to support children without access to online platforms, or children of teachers who succumbed to the virus while the schools were open. We now see not only that we cannot depend on state institutions, but that in their indifference and inadequate policies, these institutions put our lives in danger and in some cases kill us. We see that organizing from the bottom up can have an effect, but it is almost impossible to do so when there are no foundations for it. We might assume, for example, that parents are more likely to protest, because they are not dependent on school management in the same way that the teachers are. Smaller towns may have better conditions for organizing locally, because the communities themselves might have more opportunities to communicate and cooperate with each other than in bigger cities where the culture of individual-

ism, alienation, and lack of experience and skills for this kind of collaboration, are felt much more sharply. On top of that, in the cities such efforts require many more engaged individuals if they are to reach a critical mass that can bring about significant change.

Allies in the intersections

According to data for 2019/2020 from the National Statistical Institute, public school teachers are overwhelmingly women (85.6%)*, and one third of all teachers** are over the age of 55. These facts instantly put us teachers in a position from which we can easily sympathise with the struggles of medical workers, who share similar demographics in their own sector. Another parallel between the two which is harder to measure, but familiar to all who work in our sphere, is that many teachers are working at more than one workplace, often in the private sector, without contracts and hence without insurance. Education workers are often apathetic or overworked, or both, to a large extent because long hours of work with children (and their parents) are emotionally, psychologically and physically draining; moreover, often a large part of the work is unrecognised and unpaid. All this is normalised by society and internalised by the teachers, because it is as a teacher's "natural

* Преподавателски персонал в общообразователните училища по степен на преподаване и пол (2020), nsi.bg, https://bit.ly/2ZDZj4N

** Преподавателски персонал в общообразователните училища по възраст (2020), nsi.bg, https://bit.ly/3srfOxB

role" to do more out of "the goodness of her heart", or out of dedication to her "calling," so that she does not require or need additional payment. Some forms of care work are hardly perceived as something which people should or could ask to be paid for, much less as something they could refuse to do for free.

Our circumstances are thus much like those of medical workers', but instead of making connections based on solidarity, we are set up against each other, as we can see every time a wage hike for teachers is discussed in the news. On the one hand, the increase in teachers' wages was constantly being brought up in discussions about nurses' protests, always with disdain. On the other hand, during the quarantine in March 2020, for example, it was common to hear people scandalised by the idea that cash-register workers in big supermarkets (also predominantly women) were earning more than nurses. It was implied that this type of work is inferior, as it is unqualified, does not save lives and hence does not "deserve" higher wages, while the fact that medical workers received even less than cashiers is perceived as especially degrading.

Meanwhile, an Austrian study titled "Corona Crisis: Society is held up by women*" showed that nurses and cashiers alike were continually on the "front line" during quarantine. The data suggested that in times of a national (and, as we know, international) crisis, the typically low-paid labour of some of the only sectors which remained active at all times, namely care-workers, grocery store employees and medical

* Corona: Frauen halten die Gesellschaft am Laufen (2018), 23degrees.io, https://bit.ly/3k7zrHM

workers (not including doctors) is overwhelmingly done by women. Each of these sectors is made up of a minimum of 70% women. And, at least in Bulgaria, all are notoriously underpaid and overworked. But even without all these parallels, nothing could justify workers in any of these sectors having to endure miserable conditions and miniscule pay. We should not allow the struggles of different workers to be used against one other, especially since they are often between those working in low-paid and feminised professions. There is so much more to gain from our mutual solidarity and collective action.

Other important allies can be found among parents, who it turned out have more existing structures of mutual aid and communication than the professional communities in feminised sectors of labour did. During the first wave, parents of school-aged children were forced to work or remain at home (often without income), which on the one hand allowed them to mind their younger children, but on the other, obstructed their own ability to work, especially when more than one electronic device was required. The second wave, however, was even more full of contradictions. Parents continued to work outside the home, while even the youngest of children were left without day-care, kindergarten or school. Once again, we witnessed the total lack of a holistic approach to this crisis – one that could have met the needs of the people and guaranteed their material conditions, in order to allow them to actually follow the measures being enforced.

The need for hope

During the discussion* organised by LevFem with a teacher, a nurse, a trade unionist and a care-worker, we discussed our shared impression of a lack of solidarity from both colleagues and the general public, and asked ourselves why that is. From a practical perspective, the lack of active and engaged workers mobilised within trade unions is clear, as are the lack of legal, economic and social conditions for an effective strike. Simultaneously, the word "consciousness" came up, as did the feeling that there is not enough of it in our society, and even when it is present, people do not have the hope that something will ever change, let alone that they might contribute to it. Like nurse Nadezhda Margenova, I hope that we will all recognize the need for radical unionism – for organizing in the workplace for effective strikes and generally in the framing of working conditions. I hope more and more of us recognize feminism as a movement for equality, despite the constant efforts of the movement's opponents to denigrate the very word as dirty, scandalous or even irrelevant. I truly hope that we realize the inhumane reality of capitalism, an economic system which places profit above all life, no matter whether this model is forced onto us by state or corporate power, or by both simultaneously.

Primarily as a teacher of art, but also as an artist, I believe that if all of this is to happen, we are in dire need of developing our collective imagination, crea-

* Женски труд: кризи и мобилизации в България по време на Ковид19 (Online Event, 2020), facebook.com, https://bit.ly/37zuoe8

tivity and our ability to entertain the idea that things really can and must be different. Art is a tool through which we can process, overcome and share difficult experiences. It can serve as a connection with our history, just as it can provide a way to imagine a better future. Art, when it is socially conscious and radical, has the potential to impact our entire culture, even if bit by bit. Art in different forms can challenge accepted norms, make us think, open new opportunities and inspire. Much like with care work, all artistic labour and contribution to society is crushed by our patriarchal culture and capitalist economy. Art, especially the socially conscious kind, does not possess commercial value, which is the only reason why any form of art is valued in neoliberal society. During the full lockdown, art was a refuge for all of us, it helped us maintain our mental health. While everything else was interrupted and the world was full of fear, contradictions and uncertainties, movies, books and music continued to bring meaning into our lives. Despite this, artists behind this life-sustaining labour were predictably left without any opportunities to show their work, as well as practically no financial or social support.

This crisis had an especially harsh impact on the already precarious position of artists in our society, but that is not enough to stop us. The capitalist economy has always left an incredibly small window of opportunity for survival with artistic work, but art is made nevertheless, precisely because its real worth and the need for it are beyond the reach of this system. That is why artistic labour is such an invaluable instrument in the struggle for change – because it is

one of the few things that have the magical ability to create something that does not yet exist, to inspire hope, courage, and the faith that things really can be different, and that the fight is worth it.

Teachers, nurses, syndicalists, care-workers and artists, patients and students, workers and the unemployed – we all depend on each other and we are all stronger together. Another world IS possible – with solidarity, mutual aid and struggle!

Darina K. is a young person working across art, education and activism. She is a third-generation teacher, although she has been working in the field for just 3 years. She studied social policy in Scotland, where she deepened her political engagement. The problematics surrounding women's role in society features in her artistic work, including the series of portraits she contributed to the feminist exhibition "Everything is fine" in March 2020.

Part VI

Trade Union Struggles

Who will pay for pandemic crises?

Magda Malinowska

In terms of the employment structure, Poland differs from Western Europe. 59% of all employees work in services, 31% in industry, and 10% in agriculture. Although the Polish economy is largely dependent on foreign investments and the situation in partner countries such as Germany and France, this country should be relatively less affected by the current crisis than, for example, Spain, Italy, Greece or France. We can see it observing production growth indicators: Although industrial production in Poland fell by 25% in April, it started to increase in June, and in July it reached 0.2% higher than in the same month of 2019. Registered unemployment indeed increased, but not drastically so far. The main statistical office recorded an increase from 5.5% in January 2020 to 6.1% in July 2020. There are still fears that official data do not show the actual scale of unemployment and we will experience a crisis in this field in autumn or winter (when the seasonal work and programs to counteract layoffs introduced by the state will end). Currently, however, it is still one of the lowest rates in Europe.

This does not mean, however, that employees in Poland are in a privileged position. Hunger wages

still remain a problem for the local labor market. In June 2020, the average wage in Poland was almost four times lower than in Germany, three times lower than in France, and half that in Italy or Spain. Labor costs in 2019 were 2.5 times lower than the EU average, over 3 times lower than in France and Germany, and 2.5 times lower than in Italy. Apart from its geographic location, it is mainly low labor costs that attract foreign capital to Poland. Due to low labor costs in Poland, some services, production, transport, logistics, warehousing and construction are profitable for global capital, even in a recession. Unfortunately, only a few benefit from such investment.

In 2017, the increase in nominal wages in Poland accelerated, reaching 6%. However, it was not enough to compensate for the imbalances arising in the labor market in less than three years. The pandemic and the specter of the crisis contributed to a decline in wage growth. In July, it was 3.8% and was similar to the one in June – 3.5%. With inflation around 3%, this means that real wages in Poland are almost stagnant. This is confirmed by the situation in Polish Amazon facilities, where it was announced that most employees will not receive any pay increase this year. Such a decision was made a month after Forbes magazine published information indicating that as a result of the pandemic Amazon founder Jeff Bezos became the richest man in the world, with a fortune of $200 billion.

The data published by analysts do not indicate that due to Covid, Poland has to confront a deep collapse of the economy. The panic, however, made it possible to transfer funds towards capital, hit small

entrepreneurs and tighten the screws for workers. How did this happen?

„We don't want to be a human shield"

After the pandemic was announced, as in other countries (although on a smaller scale), the Polish government started to support the economy by introducing new anti-crisis shields for businesses. Unfortunately, from the point of view of employees, the virus was used to worsen working conditions and to introduce further privileges for business. The current government's proposals did not differ much from the austerity plans implemented after the recession of 2008. At that time, employees paid for the crisis by flexibilization of working time, increasing the retirement age, spreading civil law contracts, outsourcing, wage freezes, and extending billing periods. These changes were supposed to be temporary, but have not been reversed till today. It is partly because of the decisions of previous governments that the current situation in the labor market (weak bargaining position of employees, the number of people employed under junk contracts, chronic overwork) and in health care is so dramatic.

This year, as part of the shield the state created for businesses, working time was made even more flexible by reducing the daily and weekly obligatory rest period, the rules for granting holidays were changed to the disadvantage of employees, work without medical examinations was made possible, the functioning of the labor inspection was suspend-

ed for several months, the possibility of sending employees to a standstill – payable only 50% of their salary – was introduced, etc. People who worked under civil law contracts could receive benefits, but it was the employers who had to apply for them.

At the same time, a large stream of money was directed to large enterprises, offering them low-interest loans and subsidies. The condition for receiving financial aid was maintaining jobs for a minimum of 3 months. However, to get the subsidies, enterprises had to shorten the working time of employees and to reduce wages by 20%. Subsidies were dedicated to those businesses whose production and profits dropped and who couldn't provide enough work to employees anyway.

The experiences of workers show that employers applied for subsidies and reduced working time even though the amount of work in these enterprises didn't drop. One of the biggest foundations which supports women on the labour market, Sukces Pisany Szminka, made an inquiry among women about their situation during the pandemic. One third of respondents answered that they now spend more time at work and have more professional duties than before the outbreak of the pandemic and at the same time their wages dropped. Even in workplaces such as the Avon factory and distribution center, which, according to financial reports, did not experience significant production drops, they still cut working time in order to get subsidies. Nevertheless, trade unionists from Avon, united in the OZZ Employee Initiative, for several months argued about working time and remuneration. As a result, both were cut by only

"10%" (not 20% as previously assumed). During the dispute, employees were threatened with mass layoffs, although the number of orders did not indicate that these layoffs would be justified. A similar situation occurred in many other companies that applied for subsidies.

Business Demands a Social State (for Itself)

As the trade union Inicjatywa Pracownicza, we tried to build a wider coalition of trade unions to resist the provision of subsequent anti-crisis shields for business and to push through pro-employee changes such as the shortening of working time without lowering wages, introducing wages in accordance with the 3: 1 rule (meaning that the highest wage in an enterprise cannot be higher than three times the lowest paid one) or universal health insurance for all. More than 40 companies signed up to our demands. Most of them, however, unionized in Inicjatywa Pracownicza and just a few plants from 7 other trade unions. Large union centers have not taken significant steps to block the unfavorable changes. Only the extreme anti worker ideas of the government were blocked. During the lockdown, conflicts broke out among workers like: DPS carers, locked in nursing homes with their own patients who tested positive; nurses whose working conditions were significantly worsened by putting them on high alert and requiring the greatest dedication; employees of markets and plants where infections have been detected; employees who were

threatened with group layoffs; employees whose duties were increased by reducing working time, etc. All these protests were, however, atomized and did not turn into a larger collective resistance. The rapid introduction of new anti-crisis shields for business, required the quick reaction of various workplaces and the analysis of new documents, which, combined with reduced mobility, significantly weakened mobilization capabilities of unions and workers.

The broken, weak and neglected labor movement in Poland still needs time to unite and overcome its limits. This is not favored by the still dominant view that blue-collar workers are entitled to work like dogs for nothing, white-collar workers for a little bit more, and big entrepreneurs are sacred cows who should have access to all the wealth in society and nobody has a right to question it.

As a consequence, entrepreneurs turned out to be the most militant group in Poland during the pandemic. With the support of the right, they organized a series of demonstrations during which clashes with the police took place. Ironically, they called the protest 'a strike of entrepreneurs.' Self-employed people (e.g. hairdressers) who actually found themselves in a difficult situation due to the lock down also took part in it. The main organizers, however, were right-wing politicians and wealthy entrepreneurs who demanded faster financial support and subsidies, guaranteed by the pro-business shields. The 'strike' of entrepreneurs received wide coverage in the media and overshadowed workers' protests. Those who for years had been lobbying against the right to strike and against worker demands, without any embarrassment, re-

ferred to working class traditions and started riots demanding a 'social state' (but only for business).

Amazon and Volkswagen Workers in the Struggle

In plants such as Amazon and Volkswagen, employees demanded the closure of warehouses or the introduction of additional security measures as well as hazard pay, to compensate them for working in dangerous conditions. Due to the lockdown of production in Germany and the lack of access to components from China, the Volkswagen factory was closed for some time. Trade unions associated in OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza postulated, however, that "production lines in Volkswagen Poznań factories should be immediately switched to the production of respirators and [PPE] necessary for hospital workers in Poznań and all over Poland." Since the 1990s, Volkswagen has benefited from enormous subsidies from the government and is exempt from taxes. It was demanded that in this way the company should repay the hard work of its employees and the support of the Polish state.

At Amazon, a financial bonus and additional benefits were obtained thanks to the bottom-up international cooperation of employees from Poland, Germany, the USA, France, Italy, Spain, Slovakia and the groups and people supporting them, such as the Solidarity Group of OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza, Transnational Social Strike, Amazonians United, etc. Thanks to this cooperation, Amazon workers man-

aged to work out joint demands, organize a petition, organize joint conferences and speeches, write a letter with demands to Jeff Bezos, etc. An important achievement was breaking the divisions between white-collar and blue-collar workers and the mutual support of warehouse workers and tech workers, and cooperation with Amazon Employees for Climate Justice. Another important element of the protests was the use of such tools as work stoppages when workers don't feel safe. On that basis, various walkouts from warehouses in the US were organized, protests in France and Italy, etc.

In Polish Amazon branches, about 60% of employees stopped coming to work, using sick leaves or childcare leaves (one of the few additional benefits provided to parents of children under 8 during the pandemic was the possibility of taking paid care leave due to school closures). Although it wasn't a form of collective resistance, the absence of so many employees certainly helped put pressure on Amazon to improve working and pay conditions at its facilities.

One of the primary demands made globally by Amazon employees at the begging of the pandemic was to close warehouses. Bringing together thousands of people from different cities and towns, these warehouses didn't seem safe. Indeed, in countries where more tests were performed than in Poland, many cases of infections were detected. Also in Poland, infections occurred in most warehouses. This postulate was supported by the majority of employees, but not all of them. It aroused mixed feelings among some people, for example those employed by employment agencies, who were afraid of redundancies.

Most of the employees of Amazon's Polish warehouses come from low-income households in small towns. Usually they are dependent on the income of at least two family members. Moreover, the high cost of living in bigger cities limits their mobility. In the localities they come from, they have houses or flats (often built at cost, by themselves and their family members), the value of which is much lower than that of much smaller flats in a larger city. Moreover, in their hometowns they can count on their family or friends and neighbors, often people whom they have known for many years, to help, for example, in taking care of children or the elderly. During talks with union shop-stewards, some employees of the warehouse located near Poznań said that lockdown meant staying at home, where they did not want to stay. There are many reasons for this, the basic ones are domestic violence and conflicts in the family. Others include the quality of housing, overcrowding, lack of space for oneself, intimacy and peace, etc. According to these employees, despite the risk (most of them are at a higher risk because of their age), they prefer to work for pennies in a warehouse where it is dry and warm and you do not have to argue or look after anyone from your family than stay in their own homes.

The pandemic situation reminded us that the housing situation of employees has a significant impact on their bargaining ability. The lower the access to a decent roof over your head, the more difficult it is to fight for decent working conditions. The situation can also be described in the opposite way: the better our housing conditions and the possibility of

changing the flat, the more stable our position in the conflict with capital.

The coronavirus pandemic has revealed who our society depends on for survival. It was those working in logistics, health care, trade, the post office, and other 'essential' industries that saved many economies from collapse and ensured the functioning of entire societies. Yet, years of living in poor conditions, working in unsafe workplaces where our lives don't mean anything, years of alienation and marginalization of workers in the public sphere have left quite a mark on working class abilities for mobilization. Those who managed to organize across the workplace's walls and borders started to build transnational structures a long time ago. During the pandemic we could see that it wasn't for nothing. We have to continue transnational organizing as labour and tenants' movements on an everyday basis. If we only start to do it when a crisis hits it can be too late.

Magda Malinowska – a member of Inicjatywa Pracownicza trade union, co-organizer of the Social Congress of Women. Currently works in the Polish branch of Amazon. She is the author of several social-related films. Among them are: the "Plyta" – introducing the figure of M. Szary, an uncompromising trade union activist, employed in the Cegielski factory in Poznan/Poland, "Bourgeoisie returns to the center" – explaining the process of gentrification on the example of several Polish cities and Berlin, the "Mothers' Strike" – on single mothers who squat flats and stage a hunger strike in Walbrzych, fighting with mass evictions (in cooperation with Think Tank Feministyczny)the "Special Exploitation Zone" – about the strike and living conditions of workers employed in polish Special Economic Zones (in cooperation with Think Tank Feministyczny) and The Women's Strike Continues. Film about the struggle of

women who work in municipal kindergartens and nurseries in Poznań (Poland). The kindergarten workers also participated in the countrywide demonstrations against the thightening of the abortion ban in the fall of 2016 ("Black Protest") which are shown in the film.

Women's labour before and during the Covid-19 pandemic

Vanya Grigorova

The coronavirus pandemic brought pressure on working people all over the world, and especially the more vulnerable – people with disabilities, mothers of young children, low-wage and cash-in-hand workers. Women, too, belong to this more vulnerable category. Female workers and public servants had to be at the centre of government policies during the state of emergency and the 'emergency epidemic situation' that replaced it. In countries such as Romania, for example, a special law was passed to support parents who could not work because they had to take care of their children. In Bulgaria, a similar measure was passed only months later, and in such a way that only a handful of parents could sign up for it due to the impossible accessibility criteria.

In keeping with tradition

Thanks to the inclusion of women in production during the socialist period, employment differences between men and women in Bulgaria are less than in

the EU as a whole. Indeed, this is one of the very few socioeconomic indices where the country does not rank at the very bottom of the European community. For example, employment statistics show that the participation rate of women in Bulgaria is almost three percentage points above the EU average*.

Still, gender differences are visible. The participation rate of male employees is a full 8 percentage points higher than their female counterparts. The chart shows data from 2019, when the economy was booming and there weren't any serious global challenges. Therefore, we can consider this as the 'normal' picture.

* Women's employment in the EU (2020), ec.europa.eu, https://bit.ly/3pEJnK7

Source: Eurostat

However, when serious challenges emerge, the most vulnerable turn out to be ... men. A series of studies show a considerably higher resilience of women during the global recession in 2008, for example. Their employment was also affected, but much less than that of men. The decrease of women's employment in 2010 was 3.6%, while men's one was 5.4%. So in 2012 the difference between male and female employment fell to just 5% in Bulgaria, compared to 11% EU-wide. The situation 'normalized' only after the stabilization of the economy in 2013, when men's employment rose faster than women's. This was also a consequence of the fact that men take the collapse harder on a psychological level, they are prone to depression, and that they hardly put up with less prestigious jobs and/or lower wages.

When it comes to payment, the picture is similar. The pay gap in Bulgaria is smaller than the EU average. However, as the following chart shows, the situation has worsened over the last decade: political statements, development strategies, and largely declarative European priorities have not managed to counter the growing wage disparities in the country.

Two out of 20 priorities of the European Pillar of Social Rights are aimed at women: 'Gender equality' and 'Work-Life Balance'. The wording is fair, but the policies behind it are empty. The Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers was developed as a continuation of the declarations of the Social Pillar. The document recommended greater flexibility at the workplace, work at home, and other opportunities for employers to continue using the labour of parents but without the obligation of states or companies to pro-

Source: Eurostat, online data code: SDG_05_20

vide places in kindergartens and nurseries for free so that people can actually work. Of course, it is precisely women who are the most affected by the difficulty of maintaining a work-life balance. The main obstacle to the employment of mothers of young children is the work hours: whenever women are unable to get their children to and from kindergarten or school, they don't have the physical ability to receive an income from working. And in case they find a normal work time, resting is not exactly 'private life' – paid work during the day passes into unpaid domestic labour and taking care of the children in the evening.

There are systemic reasons for the lower remuneration of women. In most cases, the salary of women is frozen during the two years of paid maternity leave, while everybody else's increases. Often, the lag is not compensated upon returning to the workplace. As a result, in recent years the public service sector adopted a mechanism for a one-off update of remu-

neration following maternity leave. In the private sector, however, this solely depends on the benevolence of the employer.

Mothers – the unwanted workers

Asking young women at job interviews whether they have young children or plan to get pregnant soon is a widespread practice in Bulgaria. Under the pretext that labor law forbids employers to force some categories of workers to work night shifts, they force their prospective female employees to sign a declaration to certify that:

- they are not mothers of children under 6;
- they are not pregnant;
- they are not in the final stages of artificial insemination.

The declaration is signed before signing the work contract. In case the woman is in one of those groups, a contract is not signed at all, on the grounds that she would not be up to par. And, from the point of view of the management and the owner, it is precisely like that – there are legal obstacles to "use" this employee whenever and however they see fit. Of course, the applicant can fill in false information. According to criminal lawyers, however, later on the employer can sue her for that.

Even if she gets to the workplace she yearns for, the young woman can become a mother later. The declaration is only valid for the moment that it was

signed in, but it also gives the employer an opportunity to exercise psychological pressure on the employee who got pregnant or has a young child.

I will describe a real case. A female worker from the retail chain Fantastico who went back to work from maternity leave pro-term received less remuneration than what she was given before. The child, under 2, had just started going to a nursery. It is very common for children to get sick often during the transition from home environments into childcare facilities. In this case, the mother was forced to take a sick leave. This meant that every time this happened the company had to pay three days' wages for an employee who was not working, and in addition, to look for an employee to replace the missing one. The Labour code is unequivocal – the salary cannot be lowered unilaterally by the employer. However, a common practice in Bulgaria is for employers to pay more than half of the salary in the form of a bonus that depends on the will of the employer. In this case, the will was aimed at discouraging the employee, thus forcing her to quit. The other mechanism that was applied in this case was making last-minute schedule changes. The single mother found a friend who could pick up her child from the nursery while she was at work. But this friend was also working and depended on their own working time that could not be changed in a matter of hours. Thus, it became impossible for the mother to take care of her young child: while the Labour code protects her from getting officially fired, in most cases she is forced to leave by herself.

A Covid-19 parental crisis

The economic difficulties that emerged as a result of the pandemic and the emergency increased the 'innate' vulnerability of working women. Even as early as March 13, at a meeting between the minister of labour and the social partners, the trade union I work for brought up the issue of mothers who will have to stop working because their children cannot go to school or kindergarten. We proposed that these parents received vouchers to use for babysitters. This was not accepted and neither was our demand for an additional parental leave. The chaotic governing decisions and the refusal to adopt measures supporting people (mainly women) who had to stay at home forced many female workers to bring their children to work, compromising the safety measures, while neither being able to work properly nor to take care of the children. The only measure that found its way in the Emergency law almost two weeks after the state of emergency began, was the possibility of those workers to get a paid or unpaid leave without an employer permission.

A measure to pay out a one-time benefit of 375 lv (€192) for such cases was only adopted a month later. The conditions, however, were extremely restrictive: a woman had to have used up her full paid leave and to have been on unpaid leave for at least 20 days, while the family income was to be under 610 lv (312). First, it is almost impossible that the full paid leave is used up at the beginning of the year. Second, an income of 610 lv does not allow for a babysitter to be hired. Third, there were mothers who managed to arrange

their time together with other members of the family in order to stay at work (an inaccessible choice for a large part of women who raise their children alone), but working part-time, therefore with their income decreased. Fourth, this is a one-time, not a monthly benefit. The criteria were such that few could comply with, which is why some mothers who were hit by the crisis and were left without an income decided to attack the measure in the Commission against discrimination*.

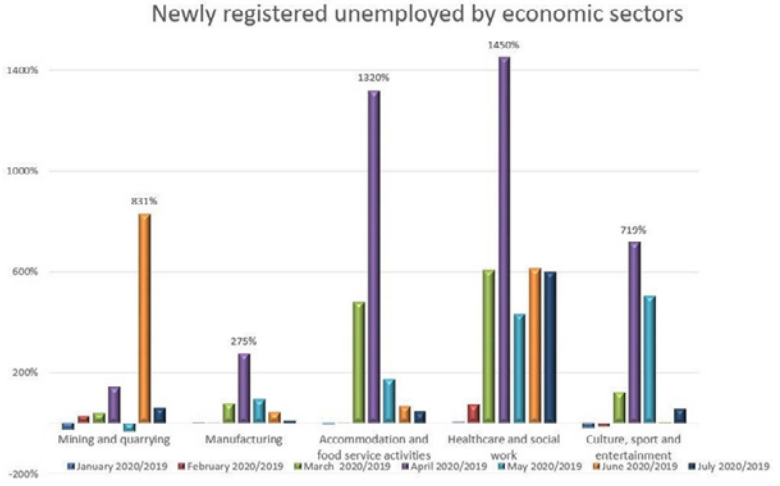
The pandemic was used by employers to pressure female employees they had labour disputes with. The telecommunications company A1, for example, has demanded for years that its workers signed a declaration that allowed the employer to apply deductions from their salaries. This practice continues, although the Labour Inspectorate has deemed it illegal. One of the few workers A1 who refused to sign it was tasked with looking for clients on the streets and in elderly homes – where visitations were banned following the coronavirus outbreak. As the woman is a single mother, she sent her child to her parents, who lived in the countryside. She asked for a paid leave for the first day of school so that she can bring her child to its school in the capital. The request was vehemently denied by the employer and she was told that after the end of the mission she would be sent back to work outside of Sofia again, as a punishment. Put in a position that makes it impossible for her to raise her child risk, the worker was forced to quit and lose her income.

* solidbul.eu, https://bit.ly/3sfl9rC

Unemployment in the feminized sectors

The socioeconomic measures had to be aimed at preserving the employment rate and workers' income. The most popular of these was the '60/40' scheme. Since the start of its implementation, the government and their supporters insisted that it has saved 200-300 thousand workplaces. This was refuted* later, but the government never publicly conceded the point. Unemployment rose at breakneck speed. Most talked about and assisted were the tourism, accommodation and restaurant sectors. Indeed, thousands who were employed in those were left jobless. However, a careful examination of the data by sector demonstrates that actually the largest increase of newly registered unemployed people in the critical

* solidbul.eu, https://bit.ly/2OXFF1A



Data: National Employment Agency, monthly bulletins

month of April was in the sector of healthcare and social work.

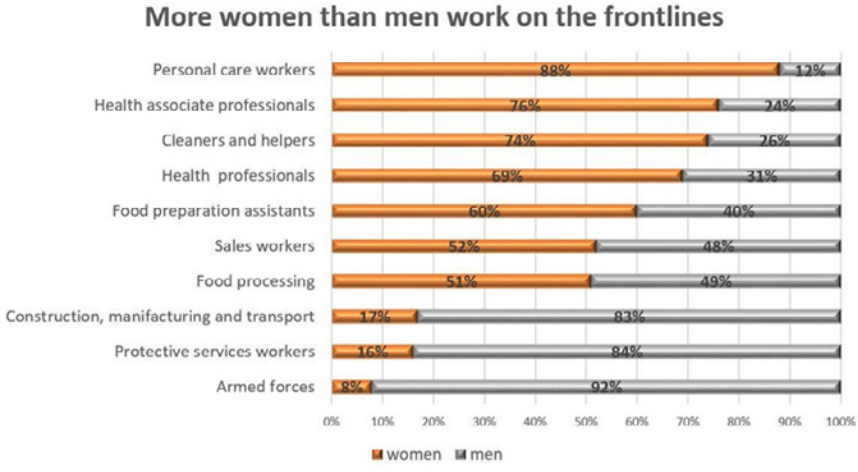
According to the International Labour Organization*, between 71 and 80% of those employed in healthcare and social work in Bulgaria in 2020 are women. The increased need for medical and social workers suggests that they have not quit their jobs on their employer's initiative. The only explanation could be the fact that those are some of the most underappreciated professionals in Bulgaria. The threat of infection combined with the low wages is probably the main reason why workers quit.

This claim was supported by a participant in a webinar on working conditions of women during the pandemic, organized by LevFem with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in the beginning of October 2020. A nurse quit after she was not provided with the necessary protective equipment and she decided that it was not worth risking her own health and the health of her infant child for 700 lv (358) per month. During the second wave of the pandemic in Bulgaria, against the obvious shortage of medical specialists, these people were denounced as deserters. It is true that soldiers do not flee, but at least they are armed. In contrast, doctors and nurses were even left without masks while governmental officials pressured hospital directors to deny that they lack basic personal protective equipment.

* *The COVID-19 response: Getting gender equality right for a better future for women at work (2020), ilo.org,* https://bit.ly/37AkRn7

Critical workers with nominal wages

When many European countries closed their borders in March 2020, the European Commission suggested that national governments should not hinder movement of the so-called critical workers. Those, according to the Commission, are medical workers, child carers, elderly carers and ... seasonal workers. What they have in common is that most of them come from Eastern Europe and are very poorly paid in their own countries. That means they cannot afford to stay in their homeland, even when travelling equals infection, and sometimes death. The trade union I work for published an open letter to the Bulgarian Government demanding that those people are provided with an income that allows them to stay in the country and



Data: ILO

prevent the further spread of the disease. The open letter was taken up by the media in Bulgaria and some foreign countries, but the government chose to ignore it. These professionals were key for the European Union but not important in their own country.

An article entitled "The coronavirus is not gender-blind, nor should we be¨* notes the pandemic's key repercussions on women and children. The authors quote ILO data that show women working on the forefront of the pandemic at significantly greater rates than men. These include precisely the critical workers that the European Commission insists should continue travel on the risk of their health and lives.

Women are still the primary caretakers of children and the elderly. This means a more continuous absence from work due to maternity leave or sick leaves. It means longer periods without a paid job due to the lack of accessible specialised institutions such as hospices for example. Caring for others, however, leads to lower pay that reflects calamitously on pensions size later on. The pandemic further increased the pressure on working women, and the government chose not to alleviate it with adequate social measures. While allegedly stimulating birth rates. Or so they say.

Vanya Grigorova is an economist, an adviser to the president of the Podkrepa Labour Confederation, and a chairperson of Solidarna Bulgaria association. She is an author of studies on the impact of international finance institutions on the socioeconomic development of Bulgaria, the effects of free-trade treaties, the

* worldbank.org, https://bit.ly/37zv2Zc

consequences of the deregulation of public services. She graduated from the National Trade and Banking High School, holds a master degree from the UNWE (University of National and World Economy, Sofia), and is currently pursuing a doctorate in the Department of Human Resources and Social Protection at UNWE.

Lessons from the Therapist Union in Georgia

Sopiko Japaridze

To further develop and strengthen common work and understanding across post-communist countries, as well as Europe and beyond, we have compiled a report and analysis of Solidarity Network's labor organizing of behavior therapists during the pandemic. We chose this experience in organizing workers in social reproduction to highlight the challenges and opportunities the pandemic and life after the pandemic presents for us. The recently created therapist union is attempting to overcome decades of austerity, virtual adoption of the neoliberal framework, devaluation of social reproduction, both unpaid work inside the home and paid work, lack of legal protection, and the effective disappearance of the worker from both discourse and policy.

Parents with children who are on the autism spectrum had been fighting for a government-funded autism program for years with the support of donors and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Finally, in 2015, the autism program was created under each city's jurisdiction. It allocated a certain amount of lari (Georgian currency) per child. It was wildly popular, and there were waiting lists to get children into these programs. A few for-profit centers were created to

receive the incoming children and the now steady stream of government funding. The new program also created a demand for behavior therapists that were hired by these centers. Many young people flocked to these jobs since unemployment and structural unemployment are quite high in Georgia. Since this program was created by the input of parents, centers, and the government, and not therapists acting in their capacity as workers and not just educational design, labor rights were never taken into consideration.

Due to this program being popular among parents and to make it more successful both in terms of garnering support for the government and to include more children, each year the program must grow. As a PR move by the authorities and in perfectly neoliberal fashion, the program is designed to maximally showcase how the children are receiving the money per head and to hide who does the work. One way an increase in the number of children enrolled per year was achieved was that the Tbilisi mayor reduced the amount per child a couple of years ago. Another, and the most important, way is that costs have been kept down through wage theft. The therapists only get paid if the child comes to their scheduled session. Every month, non-attendance leads to a 15-20% loss of wages for each therapist, which then funds other children to be added to the program. At the beginning of the year, money is allocated to a certain amount of therapy sessions per child, and when they do not attend their sessions for various reasons, the money doesn't go to the therapist but goes back into the program, thus making it possible for another child to be added, thus increasing the program's and the mayor's ap-

proval ratings. And yet this principle effectively sets the interest of the parents who are waitlisted against the interest of the therapists. More children getting much-needed therapy comes at the cost of therapists' much needed decent wages and stable working conditions. Wages also do not take into account all the work done in preparation for each session.

According to the Georgian labor code, each worker is entitled to one month-long paid vacation per year. These therapists do not get paid either at all or the full amount because their pay is contingent on completed behavior therapy sessions even though during August almost everyone is on vacation and most children do not attend any sessions. Besides, during certain months like January, which is a holiday month, few children attend their appointments.

Some therapists are also classified as independent contractors and some are classified as workers – depending on the specific center. Depending on the classification, the centers are either breaking the labor code of conduct or not. More importantly, since these centers only exist due to the funding through each city's autism program, even those that are classified as wage workers, are unable to go far with using labor laws since their immediate employer (subcontractor) has little to no power in their ability to satisfy the therapists' main demands – to end wage theft and create more stable working conditions. The therapists can start a labor dispute but won't be able to get their demands met unless the mayor takes responsibility and voluntarily asserts its role as an employer. Legally, there is no way to bring him to the table. Because of the pandemic, strikes are impossible to organize since the work is already functionally

stopped. Striking in any situation would include legal and illegal strikes since the therapists are (mis)classified as both independent contractors and workers, thus having different rights and legal protections.

The therapists have lived under these contradictions and highly precarious work relations for years. More or less, their anger has waxed and waned without organizing themselves. Then the pandemic hit and all schools closed down. They were left without a paycheck and no way to afford basic subsistence. About sixteen therapists from different centers came to Solidarity Network (SolNet) to organize a union and get paid during the pandemic – at this time, we didn't know how long the shut-down would last. There were a few challenges from the beginning: the whole country was on lockdown; the employers running the autism centers have little power; the mayor holds all the power; the financing scheme of the program is antagonistic to therapists; our ability to organize is very limited. More importantly, the therapists disclose that the parents association of children with autism has been hostile to them, and they are expecting pushback from the association's leadership. There also seems to be a division between the leadership and the rank-and-file parents. The therapists mention that the often-stated line against them has been "This is the children's money." In fact, the funding scheme has been set up to be both politically profitable for the ruling party and used by a certain part of the parents and the mayor as a tool to morally beat down the therapists whenever they speak up about labor conditions. So our aim was to get support from the parents as well

as organizing most of the therapists under our union to show unity and high numbers.

At first, the therapists did not believe most parents would support them. In order to neutralize the parent's association leadership, we made our own petition and reached out to parents directly – we cut out the association as the mediator between parents and therapists in order to amass a certain number of parents who would support us. Then once we had a certain percentage, we would invite the leaders to sign the petition to make them feel included. We agreed at the meeting that each therapist would try to get one parent to sign a petition and recruit five therapists. The demands were to get paid during the pandemic as before and upon reopening, all decisions regarding continuation should be made with the therapist union present. Since we knew how the parents and mayor used moralism to exploit the labor of therapists, refusing to make up any work would have been too controversial and might have damaged unity among therapists since many therapists had also felt morally obliged to make up hours and between therapists and the parents, we left the makeup hours deliberately vague. SolNet prioritizes democratic decision making at the workplace and fights for democracy beyond typical economic demands. Since we know that democracy in the workplace is important for workers and that the employers are always the most reluctant to give up any power, we used the post-pandemic demand of the working group as a jumping point to establish a process where workers were included in decision making regarding the program.

The petition was wildly successful. Instead of the expected 50 parents, the therapists got over 700 parents to sign on to it. Almost all the therapists – 300 of them – were organized under our union. By the time the parents' association knew what had happened, we had almost all the parents on our side. The leader of the association tried to intervene and demand conditions that the therapists get an advance during the pandemic and then make up the missed hours later on – which would have exacerbated labor exploitation due to violation of overtime pay laws. The centers had a meeting with the union, and they were trying to reduce our demands to partial payment through the pandemic. After a brief dispute – it is also important to note that the centers had never sat down with any of the therapists before as equals to make decisions together – some of them definitely attempted to treat the therapist union leader as a subordinate, unable to grasp that they aren't in charge right now. One director of a center told another one to "control her employee" who was speaking out. Overall, the circumstances that both the centers and therapists were depending on mutual victory against the mayor to get paid, forced the employers to reconsider their approach to the therapists. The centers were going to negotiate with the mayor later that day, but made it clear to them that they weren't going to reign in the therapists if the mayor didn't agree to continue the salaries during the pandemic.

Afterward, a well-publicized press conference was held by the therapists. The mayor was feeling the pressure – parents, therapists, and centers were united. He went from categorically saying the therapists weren't going to get anything to saying during his

press conference that the therapists were going to get paid now but that they had to make up the hours. It was a victory for the time being.

Two problems emerged. A section of the therapists wanted a guarantee from the mayor that no hours would be made up. This was challenging because we didn't have unity on this among the therapists, didn't have enough power to demand it, since we were under lockdown and couldn't protest nor threaten a strike, and the leader of the association of parents was waiting for an opportunity to come after us. There was a debate within the union but no position emerged that had a majority of supporters – someone was also leaking internal group discussions to the parents' association. Then the leader of the parents' association, along with a handful of parent-activists, wrote a letter demanding that the parents of the program should receive the money allocated for the kids since the parents of the children were burdened with even more work and responsibility since the lockdown and "children's money" shouldn't be "wasted" on the therapists who have no intention of making up these missed hours. Thankfully, she didn't have many supporters nor did her letter go very far, but the fact that she attempted multiple times to deter therapists from receiving salaries during a pandemic should be concerning.

While the parents association leader kept attacking as expected, the inability of therapists to agree on a course of action, the inability to meet in real life and being only reduced to communicating with each other over social media with very tenuous connections made it easy for the mayor and the centers to impose makeup work via online sessions

without an organized intervention. The majority of therapists didn't agree on a position regarding online work. On the one hand, online work actually required more work per hour than in-person sessions and on the other hand, therapists were worried all the work they put in with kids would be void due to such a long time between sessions. In other words, the kids would regress, so even though online sessions were difficult and required more work, it was better than starting all over with kids that had made strides in development. As expected, the mayor felt the pressure reduce and though he did pay the therapists, it was staggered, and in later months, the amount paid depended on the hours made up.

The actions of the parent's associations leader, despite being reactionary, exposes the pressure that mothers, especially with special-needs children, feel in fending for themselves without societal support and to what lengths some will go to keep a meager government program, even when it denies subsistence to workers. The fact that social reproduction is either looked at as the responsibility of the family or undeserving of decent pay and stable working conditions plays a critical role in how the program is both structured and its scope and capacity. The accepted belief of neoliberal restructuring of the government's responsibility towards its citizens is articulated best by requests to decrease government expenditures, labor costs and use of subcontractors – most shockingly enshrined in the Georgian constitution where government social services are capped at 30% of the budget in the "Liberty Act" – is also behind the architecture of this social program.

This social program in design makes sure to deprive therapists of their legal rights by removing the government from the role of the employer and instead, placed a powerless subcontractor and thus pressuring them to further violate labor laws by institutionalizing wage theft and misclassification of workers. It also set up the parents and the therapists against each other in a zero-sum game. The more exploited the workers are, the more children will receive care, thus easing the burden off parents. Having a program like this gives the ruling party credit in the eyes of the public locally while donors, NGOs, and international and regional organizations applaud the progress of children with disabilities. All the while increasing the war on workers in Georgia and weakening the position of workers in being able to survive and fight for better working conditions.

Despite the limited gains, a therapist union was organized for the first time in this field due to the pandemic. Most therapists agree they would have been left without any wages during the pandemic if it wasn't for the organizing done by the union. The neoliberal funding scheme was challenged for the first time openly and in the media with most of the public support going to the therapists. The unchallenged moralism of the "children's money" slogan was finally challenged both internally in the union and in public – losing the ability to manipulate both the therapists and parents. Many NGOs working on disabilities questioned the actions of the parents' association leader within their organizations, and one publicly condemned their letter on social media. Therapists realized that more parents actually sup-

ported them than the self-anointed gatekeeper of the parents – the leader of the association. Despite the hostile anti-social design of the autism program in Georgia, most parents, therapists, and activists found common ground, signaling that these moments like the pandemic can break down even the most vicious attempts to divide the working class – between paid and unpaid work. This is only the beginning. As demonstrated, the current legal framework and policy scheme does not give much room for legal maneuvering.

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As a conclusion

Essential Strike Manifesto for the 8th of March

We are the women who are essential for the healing of the entire world from the pandemic. We are doing essential work and yet we find ourselves in miserable conditions: our work is underpaid and undervalued; we are overworked or jobless; we are forced to live in overcrowded places and to constantly renew our residence permits. We face a daily struggle against male violence, at home and in our workplaces. We are fed up with these violent and exploitative conditions and refuse to remain silent! We started organizing together in a network that connects struggling women, migrants and workers in Central, Eastern and Western Europe: this is Essential Autonomous Struggles Transnational (EAST). **On the 8th of March we call all who struggle against capitalist, patriarchal and racist violence to join our strike!**

On the 8th of March we strike against the exploitation of our productive and reproductive labor. With our essential work as nurses, cleaners, teachers, grocery store workers, logistic and seasonal workers, paid and unpaid domestic workers and caregivers for kids, elderly and sick people, we keep society afloat. Especially with schools and kindergartens closed, the burden of childcare and domestic work is on our shoulders. During the pandemic many of us have lost

their jobs among others because at home we had children to take care of and domestic work to do. Our work is essential, at home and in the workplaces, and yet degraded.

On the 8th of March we strike against the tightening of patriarchal violence! National governments are using the pandemic as a chance to strengthen the grip of patriarchy: in Poland, with the attempt to further limit freedom of abortion; in Turkey, with the proposal to withdraw from the Istanbul convention; in Hungary, with the restrictions of transgender rights and an anti-LGBTQ agenda. While we were told to "stay home, stay safe", many of us don't have homes at all. And for many others their homes are everything but a safe space as they live with abusive partners and struggle against increased domestic violence during the lockdowns. An open attack has been waged to make us stick to the role of serfs of society, subordinate at home and exploited in the outside world.

On the 8th of March we strike against the racist and exploitative regimes of mobility! As care and seasonal migrant workers from Eastern Europe, we have been "allowed" to reach Western countries to perform essential labor here, but we had to do so at our own risk, with no protections or social security. Our work sustains (health)care in the West, while in the East, the healthcare systems are collapsing on the shoulders of overworked and under equipped workers. Migrants and refugees from within and outside of the EU are left living in overcrowded dormitories, camps and working in unsafe environments, while they are never entitled to the same monetary aid that local populations are given. On the unequally divided

map of Europe, migrants are paying the highest price of the pandemic, as they usually pay the highest price of exploitation.

We refuse to be considered essential only to be exploited and oppressed! Inspired by former and ongoing struggles, we build on the experiences of the global women's strike, the Polish women's strike and the feminist struggles in Argentina for the right to abortion. We look up to the protests and strikes of nurses, doctors, (child)care workers, logistic and seasonal workers in Bulgaria, Georgia, Austria, Romania, the UK, Spain, Italy, Germany and France. We learn from the struggle against the Romanian law banning the discussion of 'gender' in education, the migrants' transnational mobilizations and the demonstrations for black lives. Building on these collective experiences of struggle and their power to challenge the status quo, **we call women, workers, migrants and LGBTQI+ people to join us in an essential strike on the 8th of March.** Our strike strives to disrupt the current conditions of our oppression and claim us a voice in the conditions of the reconstruction. With our strike we fight for the following demands:

Freedom from patriarchal violence in all its forms! We see violence against women not as an isolated event, but as part of the whole patriarchal system that wants to make us stick to the role of caregivers. We refuse to bear the burden of essential work imposed on us through violence and harassment. We oppose the attacks of ultra-conservative governments and demand safe, legal and free abortion and contraception in every country. We demand an immediate stop of the political and legislative attacks on LGBTQI+ communities.

Higher wages for all! Our feminist struggle over wages is not simply against the gender pay gap, but against the capitalist conditions which produce and reproduce so many more wage hierarchies between genders and ethnicities, nationalities and whole regions. While the rich have sought the pandemic as an opportunity to amass more wealth, we are left behind to bear the burden of austerity. Enough! We do not simply claim wage equality of the genders, but higher wages for all workers! We demand the transnational redistribution of wealth! Let's start taking back what is ours!

Well-funded and inclusive welfare transnationally! We refuse reconstruction plans that continue off-loading the costs of decades-long welfare cutbacks on women and migrants. We want to create transnational connections between struggles for welfare, aids and social security. Even though welfare conditions differ from country to country, they are based on the gender and racist division of labour and wage differences that create hierarchies between women of different nationalities. We want to turn these hierarchies into a common fight against patriarchal welfare transnationally!

Unconditional European residence permit for all migrants, refugees and asylum seekers! We reject the way governments and bosses blackmail migrants by imposing impossible economic and institutional requirements necessary to obtain and renew residence permits. This forces migrants, especially from outside the EU, into otherwise unacceptable working conditions.

Safe and better housing for all! By March 2020, we were already in a deep housing crisis. Through-

out the pandemic our homes have become politicized even more so beyond our agency and consent! We demand adequate and financially accessible housing for all, free from overcrowding and precarious conditions! We call for the immediate rehousing of persons that went through domestic violence!

With our essential strike we want to show that **our lives and our struggles are essential!** Therefore, we need to join forces across the borders. On the 8th of March we want to call everyone to make visible the force of essential labour and use it as a weapon to impose our terms for the post-pandemic reconstruction!

We call on everyone to organize strikes in the workplaces and outside of them, demonstrations, marches, assemblies, flashmobs, symbolic actions, pañuelazos, ruidazos! Let's push unions to support the women strike! Let's imagine together the ways to make our different struggles visible and connect them across borders.

We call all women, migrants and workers who share our vision and demands to join us for a public assembly* on the 21st of February where we will discuss the horizons of our essential strike!

We invite everyone, who identifies with this manifesto to sign it, share it widely or translate it to their language so that it can reach more women, migrants and workers.

Our work is essential, our life is essential, our strike is essential!

Sign the manifesto here: *https://forms.gle/zpNnciKrGZikBHB79*

* Essential Strike for March 8th: Public Assembly (Online Event, 2020), facebook.com, https://bit.ly/2ZBJiMQ

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