


The precariat pandemic: Exploitation overshadowed by COVID-19 and workers' strategies in Poland

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Abstract

Based on the material obtained from focus group interviews conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the article analyses the mechanisms used by employers towards employees, as well as the adaptation strategies applied by those in precarious employment in Poland. The authors' considerations refer to anti-worker changes introduced under the pretext of the pandemic in the capitalist labour market: layoffs and cuts in wages, manifestations of discrimination against precarious workers and the potential attitudes of employee self-defence. The authors conclude that it is almost certain that under the conditions of post-pandemic capitalism, the number of the precariat will grow and the neoliberal system will want to retain as many of the anti-worker solutions introduced in the shadow of the pandemic as possible.

JEL codes: J70, J81, J28

Keywords

precariat, inequalities, capitalism, COVID-19, workers' strategies, austerity, class

Introduction: The pandemic in society and its socio-economic consequences in the labour market

From a social perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health tragedy that has radically increased the mortality rate in individual societies, but also a socio-economic

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drama. Like any crisis, the effects of the pandemic hit groups of poor and marginalised people who are already defenceless against the logic of the ruling system. Moreover, the increase in economic inequalities is accompanied by an increase in authoritarian tendencies in the political dimension. This applies not only to periphery countries, but also to core countries such as the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) (Murshed, 2020).

This crisis could be a good opportunity to change global policies that, without sustainable development, have been devastating health care and deepening inequalities in all dimensions of collective life. Whilst the pandemic has exposed all the weaknesses and dangers of neoliberalism, the ruling classes try to save it with an even greater number of neoliberal dogmas and demands for ‘deregulation’ (Van Barneveld et al., 2020). As Naomi Klein (2007) writes in *The Shock Doctrine*, the atmosphere of crisis, the confusion of a large part of society and a sense of losing the remnants of control over social processes helps the capital to take advantage of the situation and tighten the screws even more on the people’s classes.

Although COVID-19 has exposed the void of neoliberal solutions and could offer hope for the ideological collapse of neoliberalism (Kılıç, 2020), precautions have been made to prevent that from happening. For example even when the importance of frontline workers (nurses and paramedics) is emphasised in the fight against the pandemic, the propaganda narrative about individual heroes is used for this purpose. Their sacrifice is said to be the only way to overcome the crisis (Lohmeyer and Taylor, 2020). Any collective solutions, the need for structural change and changes in public sector policy are covered by stories of individual efforts which are said to be sufficient to deal with the ongoing adversities. The effects of the crisis of neoliberal capitalism are to revive and reproduce neoliberal patterns of thinking and measures without violating the rules of the game.

Based on the material obtained from focus group interviews conducted during the pandemic, the article analyses the mechanisms used by employers and the government towards employees, as well as the adaptation strategies applied by those in precarious employment in Poland. The right-wing populists from the Law and Justice (PiS) party took power in 2015 by taking advantage of disenchantment with the neoliberal transformation implemented since the early 1990s. In return they offered ‘nationalist, authoritarian populism, combined with a welfare chauvinist social policy, promising to protect ordinary people from liberal elites’. However, this conservative-populist political project only offers limited forms of redistribution with no real strengthening of labour rights (Orenstein and Bugarič, 2020). The pandemic well exposed the alleged ‘social’ character of the PiS’s policies in Poland. The situation of precarious workers may be a symbol of the false social myth disseminated by the populists. This article is a contribution to the debate about the precariat during the pandemic and under right-wing populism, which in Eastern Europe is as neoliberal as the liberal political forces with which it competes.

Although it is disputed whether the precariat is only ‘a complex of employment situation, lack of rights within the state and the fragmentation of workers in the labour market and/or the sphere of production’ (Smith and Pun, 2018) or, as Guy Standing (2011) writes, a ‘new dangerous class’, it is a real challenge for contemporary capitalism.

Whether it will be capable of mass and political mobilisation as a class, aware of its separate interests and able to create its own socio-political identity remains an open question. However, if someone is thinking about exerting a real impact on the course of events in the sphere of employee relations, they cannot avoid looking for opportunities to engage the precariat in political activities, stress its role in contesting new forms of exploitation and to signal possible forms of alternative solutions in the workplace (Gall, 2020).

Post-pandemic capitalism

The social and economic conditions caused by the post-pandemic crisis have facilitated the perpetuation of the processes started by the 2008 global economic crisis (Chowdhury and Žuk, 2018):

...helping a new bloc of transnational capital, led by the giant tech companies along with finance and the military-industrial complex, to amass ever-greater power during the pandemic and to consolidate its control over the commanding heights of the global economy (Robinson, 2020).

It is true that the political elite could use the current crisis not only to stimulate the economy, but also to redirect it to other paths. For example as Mazzucato (2020) writes, ‘Instead of handing out no-strings-attached assistance to corporations, they can condition their bailouts on policies that protect the public interest and tackle societal problems’. Without changing the current rules of the game, economic growth will be neither inclusive nor sustainable after the post-pandemic crisis. This will spoil the labour markets even more, completely destroy the relationship between the public and private sectors and lead to another crisis.

Like any crisis under capitalism, the manifestations and socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have hit primarily the lower classes. The answers to mundane questions related to the pandemic are class-based: ‘who can work at home and who cannot. This sharpens the societal divide as does the question of who can afford to isolate or quarantine themselves (with or without pay) in the event of contact or infection’ (Harvey, 2020).

From the point of view of the ruling classes, the post-pandemic crisis is the perfect environment under which capital accumulation can be even more predatory. All external circumstances contribute to this: social isolation and the associated lower social solidarity; difficult conditions for organising social and political protests; focussing media and public attention on the immediate threat of the disease and averting the problem of inequality and threats to working environments; demonstration bans, curfews and travel bans introduced in many countries; additional border controls or the closure of national borders. The neoliberal state, under the guise of protecting order, has introduced additional authoritarian solutions. Its aim is not to restore balance in the economy or the environment and introduce more egalitarian solutions. Quite the contrary, its goals are to protect neoliberal rules in the economy and to further develop authoritarian principles in politics. Public

funds are spent to protect the market, not workers (Šumonja, 2021). Hence, the pandemic catastrophe with all the economic, ideological and political disgrace of neoliberalism does not have to lead to its end (Saad-Filho, 2020), but to a regrouping of forces and even more aggressive forms of actions aimed at the people's classes.

The history of the pandemic written by the mainstream media is the history of governments, medical companies and official institutions that try to limit the spread of COVID-19. However, behind these images and the known history, there is – using the Frankfurt School distinction – subterranean history (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2007).

These two stories are closely related when some multiply their fortunes in the glory of saviours, the silent majority loses the remnants of social security. Whilst some use the pandemic to demonstrate entrepreneurship and gain new profits (often thanks to state orders), others at the same time lose their jobs and wages and cannot count on state aid. The imbalance between the state's treatment of business and working classes is visible to the naked eye. In line with the neoliberal slogan saying that 'entrepreneurs create jobs' and therefore need to be helped, some can count on financial support. Employees, however, as usual, are left alone with their problems and are forced to tighten their belts.

Waves of precarisation in Poland

The process of precarisation of the labour market in Poland is a good illustration of how the situation of workers and work culture have changed in the entire former communist bloc after the neoliberal transformation of the 1990s.

The precariat has existed in Poland since the beginning of the neoliberal transformation in the 1990s. It was then that a massive wave of privatisation and unemployment began, followed by uncertainty in the labour market. The first blow of the neoliberal wave between 1989 and 1993, which reduced the real incomes of workers by an average of 29%, was only the beginning of precarisation (Karolak, 2020: 51). In the second decade of transformation, workers already clearly knew that better working conditions existed in the remnants of the public sector, and not in the private sector. Moreover, the precarised 'new working class' employed in services and trades in small and medium-sized private companies felt inferior to traditional labourers from large industrial workplaces. As they said at that time:

- We employees have no guardian of some sort to take care of us, we have no one to report to. In the past, there were unions, there was someone to report to and they were a kind of refuge for employees. And now there is nobody and nothing.
- The crew often changes. You can see how they rotate. I've been working in a shop for two years and I can see how people change. Terrible, huge employee turnover. Nobody will be working soon, because everyone will go abroad. One thing is the working conditions. And another thing is there is no respect between the employee and the employer.
- Respect for the employee, for their work. There are no decent earnings. And no problem – please leave, another person will come (cf. Žuk, 2007).

The above opinions of hypermarket employees well illustrate the mechanisms of the new, ‘flexible capitalism’ (Sennett, 1998) – indifference in the workplace, lack of attachment to the company in which one works, weak ties with colleagues from the workplace (resulting, among others, from a huge employee turnover), the so-called flexible working time, individual employment conditions and the breakdown of employee solidarity. One of the statements also includes the issue of going abroad as a strategy of coping with working conditions in Poland. This mechanism was in force throughout Eastern Europe, and was even more intensified after the accession of most of the former Eastern bloc countries to the European Union (EU) in 2004. Economic migration did not only apply to employees with low qualifications but also to construction workers, doctors, and nurses (Żuk et al., 2019). Thus, there was a double exploitation: firstly, in post-communist countries, workers experienced all the consequences of the neoliberal transformation, and then, looking for better working conditions and wages, they fled to Western European countries, where they played the role of a cheaper and competitive labour force (Bieler and Salyga, 2020). Although they had better wages in host countries, they occupied the lowest positions in the employment structure and at the same time contributed to social dumping among the Western European working class. The political reaction to the effects of the neoliberal transformation in Eastern Europe has been a wave of political populism and authoritarianism, which is most strongly observed in Hungary and Poland today (Żuk and Toporowski, 2020). In the case of the losers of the neoliberal transformation, nationalism has turned out to be an ideology expressing class anger – this was the case among Hungarian workers (Scheiring, 2020) and a certain number of Polish workers (Ost, 2018). However, the emergence of anti-immigrant sentiments and nationalist slogans has not undermined the neoliberal rules of the game in the economy – a new hybrid has emerged, which can be described as authoritarian neoliberalism (Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton, 2020). Even some forms of social support for families (such as the 500 plus programme) introduced by the populist regime do not question the neoliberal course at the macro-social level (Shields, 2019). Despite shifting governments and ideological stresses, neoliberalism, and the accompanying precarisation of labour relations, has been expanding its influence continuously since the early 1990s.

Whilst the first wave of precarisation was directly related to the ‘shock therapy’ of the early 1990s, the second wave of precarisation in the early 21st century was a response to high unemployment, primarily among young people (in 2002, the unemployment rate in Poland was approximately 20% and as much as 39.6% among people aged 15–24) (Karolak, 2020: 53). It was then that employers demanded liberalisation of the labour law, which they accused of being too strict and a legacy of the communist period. Meeting their expectations resulted in the second wave of precarisation between 2002 and 2004, which primarily affected young people (at that time 25% of them worked on fixed-term contracts) (Karolak, 2020: 54). The social and political tension caused by the precarisation of the labour market was easily resolved – a large number of them simply left the country after Poland’s accession to the EU in 2004.

From the 2008 global financial crisis to the pandemic: A systematic process of neoliberalisation of the labour market

The 2008 global financial crisis was the pretext for a third wave of precarisation in Poland. In 2009, the Act on Mitigating the Effects of the Economic Crisis for Employees and Entrepreneurs was adopted. It involved making the labour market more flexible and introducing further changes to the Labour Code, unfavourable for employees (e.g. the possibility of concluding an unlimited number of fixed-term employment contracts with one employee). Although it was assured that the introduced provisions were to apply only until 2011, in practice they were introduced permanently (in 2013 they were entered into the Labour Code) (Karolak, 2020: 55).

Although the 2008 crisis in Poland was not particularly dramatic, it helped legitimise further flexibilisation or expenditure cuts. At that time, the workforce was hit by rising unemployment and stagnant wages. Simultaneously:

... the crisis had an indirect effect on employment relations through its impact on social expenditure. With the Polish budget deficit increasing to over 7 per cent of GDP in 2009 and 2010 and despite accumulated debt only reaching 56.3 per cent of GDP in 2011 (well below the EU average of 82.5% and within the Maastricht criteria), demands arose for public employment and welfare cuts (Meardi and Trappmann, 2013: 200).

Whilst the Eastern European capitalism was not without strains before 2008, the view that its problems were magnified by the Great Recession is widely shared. As Bohle and Greskovits claimed (Bohle and Greskovits, 2009), the pressure of market forces posed a threat to the model's embedding traits, and thus to its political legitimacy. The post-crisis policy opened the political door to populists in Eastern Europe and directed countries such as Hungary and Poland towards the 'clan state' (Sallai and Schnyder, 2018) or 'mafia state' models (Magyar and Vasarhelyi, 2017). In these models, the political ruling class takes economic profits, the state is identified with the interests of the ruling party, whilst labour relations are further neoliberalised and the political sphere becomes increasingly authoritarian. This was evident in the next phase of the precarisation of labour relations.

The fourth wave of precarisation in Poland covered by the pandemic waves

Although the PiS government emphasised in its post-2015 propaganda that it broke with neoliberal orthodoxy, in practice nothing of that sort happened. The so-called social programmes implemented by the PiS government only confirmed that 'neoliberal programmes dismantle existing social arrangements to involve more people in market rationality' (Shields, 2021: 10). It was rather a policy of weakening social ties, breaking up society and setting some groups against others. And even the PiS's flagship programme, 'Family 500+' supporting Polish families, confirmed this:

The state retreats in some areas, expands in others, and reauthors its role at the intersection of neoliberalisation, nativism and populism. In the most abstract sense, 500+, by contributing to

the reproduction of the family, is central to capital accumulation and a social order predicated on familiar distinctions between deserving and underserving populations (Shields, 2021: 15).

The same logic prevailed during the pandemic. Changes made to the wage conditions of workers and how work has been organised under the pretext of the pandemic may also permanently damage employment relations and reduce workers' rights. From the beginning of the pandemic in spring 2020, the government in Poland has introduced the so-called 'anti-crisis shields' – public aid which exceeds PLN 200 billion, which, however, only goes to entrepreneurs under the pretext of 'job protection' (Serwis Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej, 2021). Nobody cares about the fate of employees. In practice, in many companies, employees have been laid off or their salaries have been cut. Trade unions unambiguously assessed the actions taken by the government. According to the activists of the Workers' Initiative Trade Union (*Inicjatywa Pracownicza* – IP), 'Taking advantage of the collapse caused by the pandemic, the government adopted an anti-crisis shield to further deteriorate working conditions and create further privileges for business' (OZZIP, 2020) IP indicated that the government's proposals for the time of the pandemic did not differ from the policy of austerity measures introduced after the 2008 recession. At that time, employees in Poland paid a high price to meet entrepreneurs' expectations and increase their profits. Namely, the working time was made more flexible, the retirement age increased, civil law contracts and outsourcing became more common and wages were frozen. In their statement, IP activists proposed their own solutions, claiming that:

In the face of the anti-worker policy pursued by the government, which only supports private companies, we have created an employee anti-crisis shield. The implementation of the following demands can save workers from the crisis to which the elites are trying to condemn us (OZZIP, 2020).

Among these proposals and postulates were the demands to introduce permanent employment contracts for all employees, to indefinitely suspend public aid for large private enterprises operating in Special Economic Zones, and to introduce a universal right to health insurance and free benefits from the health care system.

However, not only IP activists negatively assessed the government's actions. The headquarters of the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (*Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych* – OPZZ), one of the two main unions in Poland, also explicitly rejected the provisions of the government's anti-crisis shields: 'These scandalous proposals are extremely anti-worker in nature and destroy the achievements of national labour legislation, bringing Polish labour relations back to the 19th century. They are in clear contradiction to the fundamental labour standards of the International Labour Organization' (OPZZ, 2020a).

Particular outrage was caused by the government's proposals for the duration of the pandemic, such as the possibility of dismissing an employee by e-mail, the freedom to dismiss an employee who has other sources of income, arbitrary management of annual leave by the company, suspension of the provisions providing for special protection of the

durability of the employment relationship and the law on collective redundancies and suspension of collective labour agreements.

According to these trade unionists:

The government consciously broke with the publicly declared need to maintain jobs during the pandemic and used this extraordinary period to declare open war on workers in Poland. It wants to change the labour law into the law of the jungle, guided by the principles of social Darwinism. The government introduces proposals unfavourable for employees during the pandemic, expecting the society, preoccupied with their health issues, not to protest (OPZZ, 2020a).

According to trade unionists, another, so-called fourth anti-crisis shield was also created solely for employers and business owners. The OPZZ argued on this occasion that ‘such a significant disturbance of the relationship between work and capital is not only grossly unfair, but also poses a risk of a long-lasting socio-economic crisis, growing social problems and a sharp increase in unrest’ (OPZZ, 2020b).

The following solutions in the so-called Shield 4.0 were considered particularly unfavourable:

- Lower severance pay, compensation and cash benefits for dismissed employees
- Suspension of corporate labour law provisions, including suspension of the company’s social benefits fund
- The possibility of layoffs in subsequent units of the public finance sector
- Compulsory holiday leaves
- The possibility of eliminating holidays pay funds
- Unclear principles of remote work in the field of health and safety
- Introduction of remote control at entrepreneurs (OPZZ, 2020b).

Whether this pandemic-related deterioration of the labour market – which can be called the fourth wave of precarisation in Poland – will become a permanent element of labour relations will depend not only on the decisions of the authorities, but also on the attitudes of employees themselves and collective responses. This article provides new empirical insights into the opinions and attitudes of precarious employees towards solutions introduced during the pandemic because these decisions affected them the most.

Research methods and empirical data

The empirical material used in this article comes from focus group interviews. They were carried out in September 2020 – in Poland, this was the period between the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (March–June 2020) and the next peak in October 2020. The interviews were carried out in three focus groups – six to seven people participated in each of them. The criterion for sampling respondents to participate in the interviews was their uncertain form of employment. Most of the respondents were employed under civil contracts or temporary contracts. Several people admitted working illegally. Gender

balance was maintained in the focus groups. The respondents employed under civil contracts worked in both small companies and large workplaces on a daily basis. In the latter case, employment agencies acted as intermediaries in signing contracts. The diversity of the companies in which respondents worked made it possible to capture common elements in the precarisation process, independent of the number of employees in a company and the type of economic sector.

Although focus group interviews, like other qualitative research methods, do not guarantee the representativeness of the sample, they well show the trends that take place in society – in this case, trends in the labour market during the post-pandemic crisis. The results of focus group interviews are not intended to be used to construct statistical generalisations. However, they provide reliable data that give vital knowledge about human behaviour. They make it possible to learn not only the motivations of the respondents' behaviour and the justification of the attitudes adopted, but also to conclude about the possible actions of entire social groups. In this case, these are workers employed under precarious conditions. Additionally, under the conditions of reduced social activity and a lower level of trust – caused by the cultural and political atmosphere of authoritarianism – direct contact with the respondents and the guarantee of anonymity made it possible to obtain honest and critical opinions. This was also the case of the research with the precariat.

The social framework of the precariat's life

Pandemic cuts and a new version of austerity

The effects of the pandemic were felt very quickly by employees. These included job cuts, wage cuts, precarisation of employment contracts and a reduction in overtime rates. All these changes in employment standards were facilitated by employment agencies mediating the concluding of employment contracts. The following two statements illustrate this mechanism:

I work for the Wabco corporation under a contract of mandate. At the beginning, I worked there through an employment agency as the so-called 'green' – a person wearing a green T-shirt and employed by an employment agency. Due to the crisis, I was dismissed, but after three months they called me with a job offer. However, I did not want to work as a 'green' so I negotiated and got a contract of mandate. It is true that there are also employment contracts, but in these times, people rarely fight for them. They don't want to trouble themselves, because when there is a crisis, they just kick your ass and that's it. (male, 36 years old)

I work through Randstad in a foil manufacturing company. I was also supposed to be taken over by the company, but due to the pandemic, I stayed with Randstad on a mandate contract. We have blue T-shirts here and it is still called Randstad. In my workplace, group layoffs have started. The plant employs 2000 people, so 200, 300 people were laid off. The boss came and said that due to the pandemic he had to fire people, but they usually dismissed those who had worked for a short time. The salary has also changed because I was paid 100 % for night

shifts, and now, after the pandemic started, they pay me an hourly wage for night shifts. (male, 33 years old)

Employment agencies help to reduce labour costs, but most of all they guarantee the obedience of employees and reduce the level of unionisation among employees (Zafar Sheikh et al., 2021). Using employment agencies allows companies to move from collective bargaining to an individual contract with a specific employee. In this way, the bargaining power of agency workers is radically reduced. Employment agencies, however, not only affect the fate of individual employees, but also reduce the social security of all employees and are a means to further neoliberalise labour relations: ‘the trend towards the utilisation of agency workers has become a driving force in the global capitalist economy, as cost-effective and easily disposable tools’ (Iteboje and Chang, 2021).

The problems of precarious employment are not only low wages but, above all, the constant uncertainty and the lack of any permanent obligations on the part of the employer (Thelen, 2019). The pandemic has only added to this uncertainty. As one of the respondents stated:

We were told right at the beginning of the pandemic that our salaries would be reduced by 25 % and you could accept it or not and quit, but all employees signed it. I have a fixed-term contract and my three-year contract will end in October. I don’t know what will happen next, because many people have been dismissed. (female, 33, energy industry)

Fear and uncertainty in the labour market were also intensified by information from other companies, which confirmed that the anti-worker tsunami had become a common phenomenon:

People came to us and told us that while working at BMW they had been fired overnight. When you work for us for the first three months, nothing happens, you only have to find clients. A person who works for us for a short time is not doing well. (male, 33 years old, a contract of mandate with Netia – a company offering internet, phone calls and TV)

According to the respondents, the post-pandemic crisis in the labour market is manifested in lower wages, the expected further job cuts and further increases in social inequality:

For me, the main salary has remained the same, but other things, such as bonuses, have been cut by half. (female, furniture company)

Our criterion for dismissal will be the number of returns. When a person does something and this product is returned because something has been wrongly done, they can be fired. In fact, this can happen to anyone. People will start taking out loans and going into a spiral of debt, but bailiffs will have their hands full. (male, works in an art company under a contract for a specific work)

'I don't think about old age': Retirement and sickness under precarious conditions

Uncertain employment conditions, worse pay conditions and the inability to save financial resources lower the quality of life 'here and now' and also have a significant impact on the living standards of future pensioners (Sheen, 2017). From this perspective, precarious work almost always leads to a 'precarious retirement' that will fail to meet basic social needs. This is almost certain in countries such as Poland, where the privatisation of the pension system has additionally deprived the general public of any chances for a dignified retirement (Žuk and Žuk, 2018). These feelings were also expressed by the respondents themselves:

It is said that our pensions have long been consumed by the system. Why should I worry about what will happen in 30 years if I kick the bucket earlier? I think about the future, but I do not want to think about the fact that I will not have this pension because hope is the mother of stupid people. (male, 35 years old)

I believe that we have to put money aside ourselves because we cannot count on the state. I do not believe that the money paid to the Social Security Institution will ever come back to me. (female, 33)

It is interesting how the lack of faith in the state forms of old age security and the lack of hope for a dignified retirement turn into activities that support private pension funds. As one of the respondents admitted: 'I put PLN 200 into a private fund each month'.

However, anxiety about an uncertain retirement and old age social security is not the only consequence of precarious employment. Health care is also a huge challenge when a precarious worker has a disease. Precarious employment contracts generally reduce occupational hygiene and safety, especially in hazardous workplaces and industries (Devereux and Wadsworth, 2020). However, a common problem is not only the lack of reliable health care among employees on mandate contracts, but also the fact that the loss of health is treated as something that reduces the value of working people. An employee who begins to have a health problem becomes a burden and an unnecessary problem for a company. Hence, a disease can mean losing a job. Such situations are illustrated by the following statements:

In my company, when you are sick, someone from the shift will replace you or simply someone is not there, that's all. However, when you get sick too often or for too long, and if you come back with some limitations from the doctor, they have no mercy; even if you are protected by trade unions, they have no mercy. They can even unlawfully force you to take unpaid leave, so that you will run out of money and quit. And so, they do.

My friend had an accident and wasn't at work for six months. He came back and a few years later had another accident. His disc popped out and his hand was badly damaged. He was on leave for four months. He came back with the recommendation to limit lifting heavy weights, and he was fired after several years of work. They illegally sent him on unpaid leave, waited

until his money ran out and he would have nothing to live for, and he simply quitted himself. However, it turned out to be a good thing for him because he found a better job.

Out of fear of dismissal, employees sometimes neglect to take care of their own health and postpone necessary procedures. Even in the event of disease and the need for further treatment, employees come to work:

A friend had a cyst in his pancreas and kept postponing the procedure for which he finally went. He hadn't yet recovered from it, but he was back at work but without his employers knowing. And then he did the work of another person who didn't actually do the job at all. The person gave him the money he earned in place of this person. It is such a merry-go-round that is constantly spinning and, when someone is missing, there can be no gap, this is what it looks like. It's supposed to be pulsating like a pumping artery.

Precarious or illegal employment can have serious financial consequences for those who do not have health insurance. Any serious accidents and diseases or the need to undergo surgery may cost them beyond their financial capacity:

A year ago, my brother was working illegally at a construction site when he had an accident. He spent a week in hospital, followed by an operation and rehabilitation, and they billed him PLN 60,000 (about 15,000 USD).

The above statements, as well as the experiences related to the pandemic, have clearly shown that the fight for work safety must include not only the issues of remuneration and its regularity, but also health insurance, which nowadays must be among the fundamental workers' and citizens' rights.

'Nursery loan' and 'overtime': Living under credit pressure and a constant search for extra earnings

Just as debt was said to be the main reason for the collapse of 'real socialism' in the Eastern bloc countries, today, debt also plays the role of putting additional pressure on citizens and controlling workers' behaviour. When low wages, high indirect taxes (VAT) and inflation lower real household incomes, credit is the only way to deal with financial pressure for many people. Those who live under the pressure of debt are less prone to social resistance. From this perspective, debt is a form of exerting social discipline on the lower classes (Bonefeld, 1995). Although consumer loans relieve the financial pressure on individuals for a moment, on the macro-social scale they falsely blur the problem of low wages and social insecurity. Generally, the burden of debt has become a manifestation of the precarisation of entire societies.

An additional reason for taking out a loan is inefficient public services, which become available only on a commercial basis and must be paid for. In the case of inefficient health care system, people have to use the private services of specialist doctors if they want to have quick appointments. Similarly, if the number of places for children is insufficient in

public kindergartens, parents have to use private ones. Hence, debt can be taken on to satisfy the most basic needs that the state is unable to provide for its citizens. As one of the respondents claimed:

In Warsaw, my daughter and her husband had to take out a loan to pay for a private nursery for their child because she did not get to the state nursery due to a lack of space and the private one is PLN 1600 per month.

Financial pressure and constant problems with balancing the household budget force people to look for additional jobs. Sometimes there are absurd situations where their job becomes their entire life. As one of the employees of a security company said:

Here, overtime is when you fill in for someone else. The exact number of hours per month is always marked there. In security, it is a maximum of 744 hours – as many hours as a month has. And we had such a record holder in our company, who spent 744 hours at work. At that time, he rented out his apartment while he lived at work.

Overtime at work can also be a form of inter-employee competition and an award from the supervisor:

If you come in on a Saturday and you earn PLN 100 as standard, you not only get this PLN 100 but also another hundred and a third hundred for the very fact of coming to work that day. So, on this day you earn as much as you would normally for three days at work. Saturday hours are counted quarterly, and if someone comes in every other Saturday for three months, he has two payments every quarter. Everyone's killing themselves for overtime. A lot of overtime is not always required. If the company has smaller orders, there is not much overtime.

Employees on precarious contracts often look for additional employment in their spare time. Both official and occasional multi-employment become the norm in precarious capitalism:

My fiancée's mother has befriended doctors who bought a house in Wrocław and I go there and mow the lawn every month and get PLN 300 (about USD 80) for this, and it takes me two hours.

Self-defence attempts and the importance of trade unions

Precarious employment makes it difficult to mobilise workers and build a union base. However, worker mobilisation in McDonald's and other fast food chains in recent years proves that employees can organise themselves with the help of social media to fight for employment rights even outside their workplace (Wood, 2020). In labour sectors where collective bargaining is impossible for technical and legal reasons, emphasis must be put

on informal bargaining via direct action rather than formal negotiations (Cant and Woodcock, 2020).

The problem with the involvement of the precariat in trade unions occurs in various societies, including those with a high level of unionisation. In Poland, the privatisation of the 1990s reduced unionisation, and trade unions were never established in many small private companies (Žuk, 2017). Moreover, trade unions in Poland noticed and dealt with the problem of precarious employment quite late (Trappmann, 2011). And just like in countries where unions are stronger than in Poland, traditional trade unions are not always successful in representing the precariat (Meardi et al., 2021).

Small and more radical trade unions, often of a syndicalist or anarcho-syndicalist orientation, usually have the greatest experience in such activities. On the other hand, large union headquarters are often conservative, have a paternalistic attitude towards people outside the traditional labour market (Paret, 2019), and their hierarchical structure makes it difficult to enter the environments of workers employed on temporary contracts (Urbański, 2014: 216). In Poland, an example of the former type of union is the Employee Initiative IP, which often supports workers employed by employment agencies or on mandate contracts. Inicjatywa Pracownicza's strength is also the fact that it gives a sense of security to employees and does not expose them to harassment because the management of the company does not know who belongs to the union. As one of the respondents said:

Trade unions helped me when my boss harassed me because I was often on sick leave. However, when he saw that I was getting along with a person from the trade unions, he stopped picking on me. We have two open unions and one secret union, which means that the employer does not know who belongs to the secret union. Being in an open union, you pay the union dues, because some percentage of the wage is deducted by the employer, who knows who belongs to the union. I belong to another union, where I pay a different rate and it is a secret union. The employer knows that such a secret union exists, but does not know who belongs to it. If they want to fire me, they have to send a letter to the trade union and ask them if I belong to it. The union has five days to respond, so I know if I will be fired five days in advance. Only the number of members is disclosed.

In general, however, trade unions are the exception to the rule among employees who work on temporary or civil contracts. Companies make it clear that unions are frowned upon in the workplace:

On admission, when employees asked about unions, the boss stated that we should be glad that we had jobs and that we should forget about unions.

– In my appendix to the employment contract, it was stated that there was a ban on association and union formation. It wasn't in the contract itself, but in the appendix. There are no unions here.

In my company, unions are in another hall, but we don't have unions here. There was such an idea and unions were supposed to be created, but the director took one, two and three people for an interview and that was the end of the topic.

– Unions are the law that was demanded. In our country, when someone starts to drill down on the law, he hears something like this: quit, we will hire Ukrainians.

Although the level of unionisation in Poland has been falling since the early 1990s, their role and importance are more and more appreciated among the precariat:

It is worth belonging to unions because you can always arrange something. If you pay premiums, you have free advice and legal assistance. Even if you have private problems, you can get advice for free. The most important thing is that the union negotiates pay raises for working people every year.

Such attitudes confirm the earlier findings that employees experiencing precarious employment conditions more often do not trust their employers and are also inclined to believe that unionised workers are in a better situation (Fiorito et al., 2019).

Although an employer usually does everything to make it difficult to establish informal relations among employees, even ordinary friendly contacts can take on a political character and be the basis for a common workers' struggle. Such relationships can develop even where ties between people are apparently broken (Kearsey, 2020). Such direct friendships can facilitate joint activities, particularly in small companies and under the pressure of economic conditions:

We have about 30 permanent employees. We have managed to get ten days of paid leave and after ten years, we get one more vacation day for each year we work, but no more than 20 days throughout a year. It was after that great crash in Europe in 2008 and the boss made concessions to keep us. There were few jobs at that time and people started to quit their jobs. The boss is German, but he thinks rationally and saw that when employees quitted and he hired new ones, it would take him long to rebuild what he had built so far and then he made such a concession.

Toil, inequalities and precarious dreams of a wage of EUR 1 000 a month under the conditions of Eastern European capitalism

The aforementioned practice of taking on overtime and looking for additional work as a strategy of precarious employees at the individual level turns into a society that is constantly on a treadmill and working excessively at the macro-social level. Employees from Poland, who compare their labour standards with those in Western Europe, have a special sense of overwork:

People are afraid that if the state abolishes working Saturdays and they will not earn more, how will they live? Besides, we Poles are like oxen. When people from Wabco went to Hanover, they told them that we are insane when it comes to work.

The feelings of employees are confirmed by OECD data, according to which Poland is one of the countries where people work the most. According to the OECD comparison for

2019, Poland (1806 h a year) was ahead of only a few countries in this respect, such as Mexico (2137), Korea (1967), Russia (1965) and Chile (1914) (OECD, 2021). In most European countries, employees work shorter hours – in Germany it was 1386 h, in Norway – 1384 and in Denmark – 1380. Moreover, from the perspective of the precariat surveyed in Poland, these shorter working hours in the Scandinavian countries result in a higher standard of living. Although this image is perhaps too idealised, the Scandinavian model of work and organisation of social life is a particular point of reference for criticising the living conditions in Poland:

My friends came back from Sweden, where people can afford to go to a restaurant for a beer every day. But the CEO doesn't earn 1000 times as much as you do, but maybe four times as much.

Employee frustration is deepened by the social inequalities noticed in everyday life:

How is it possible that I have a 20-year-old junk car that stalls when I put it in neutral and another person buys a Mercedes for PLN 250,000 in cash? I would like to know from where he has the money for it.

Class differences are observed in daily lifestyle and, for example food shopping places:

On a daily basis, it is a matter of whether someone goes shopping in Biedronka (a chain of discount shops in Poland) or in some local bio-food store. Those who earn little go to Biedronka, and those who earn a lot go to the shop with eco, bio food.

During the focus group interviews, when asked about the level of income that would guarantee a decent life in 2020 and meet their financial expectations, precarious employees indicated a limit of PLN 4500–5000 (approximately EUR 1000–1110). These declarations show still huge differences in income between the countries of the 'old' EU and the new EU members from Eastern Europe.

Choice or coercion?

In the case of people employed on temporary or civil contracts, a permanent employment contract is often taken as a promise and a decoy to keep precarious workers disciplined and obedient:

In my company, employees are frequently promised that they will switch to a full-time job, but if you screen this company, you will see that after three years of work, 3 % of people get a full-time job, but this is a very small percentage.

A similar variant of employers' manipulation of temporary workers takes place in the 'interns' model – new employees are promised that if they perform well during the trial period as interns with a small salary, they will have a chance to be employed full time.

After 6 months, the company recruits another group of ‘interns’. In this way, it radically reduces the salary costs of employees and creates an additional atmosphere of ‘liquidity’ and uncertainty among employees.

Generally, however, when having a choice of the form of employment, the majority of the surveyed employees decided on a permanent employment contract:

I would go to work under a contract of employment. I see other people of my age who work under a contract of employment – they are covered by certain benefits, they have full social welfare, and it happened to me that when I was supposed to be accepted under a contract of employment, there was a crisis.

Precarious employment is associated with financial uncertainty and a sense of insecurity. Employees are aware that their work is, in fact, full-time work, but they have no choice when choosing the form of employment:

I know people working on mandate contracts and they also work full time and cannot negotiate the terms and if they object, they are fired, and this is associated with financial uncertainty. These are industries that these people are interested in and want to develop themselves, but employers do not give them this sense of security. Without this feeling, people get stressed and get sick more often. Employers know about it, but they say that ‘if it’s not you, someone else will come.’

Work duties that meet the characteristics of full-time work but are called temporary work or reduced to forced and bogus ‘self-employment’ are the area where trade unions and employees can struggle to establish real employment contracts that reflect the actual work performed. Such actions may bring about progressive changes in the position of employees, but require mass, not individual, actions and social campaigns (Kirk, 2020).

However, in the group of precarious workers there are also people who try to rationalise their current position and present it as an expression of their own choice. This is supposed to increase their autonomy and independence, and is also supposed to be proof or an illustration of their entrepreneurship and ability to cope with difficult situations. Moreover, it also affects their identities. As one of the respondents claimed:

Having a contract for specific work, I am a subcontractor, not an employee. I don’t work in my situation every day, because it takes place in a different mode. This is not an everyday job. It is associated with certain dates and seasons. Everything has its pros and cons. This stabilisation and a fixed salary are ok, but it is also a restriction because you do not have this freedom.

Discussion and conclusions: A precarious anomie as a permanent element of capitalism in the 21st century

The presented empirical data collected in Poland make it possible to better understand the experience of precarious workers whose jobs are now a permanent feature of 21st century

capitalism, particularly in semi-periphery and periphery countries. In both the literature and some of the statements made by respondents employed under precarious conditions and participating in our focus group interviews, precarious work is often treated as a temporary form of employment, a certain stage inscribed in the biography of young people and an issue related to the particular fate of an individual rather than to a generational or systemic challenge (Mrozowicki and Trappmann, 2020). In this approach, precarious employment may seem to be one's own choice, which is to be an expression of one's aspiration 'to greater freedom in their work and more exposure throughout their life course, for instance, travelling and staying in the creative industries rather than following a single and stable path of career development' (Wong and Au-Yeung, 2019). As our research has shown, this apparent autonomy, however, does not give greater freedom, neither in the sphere of employment, nor in other dimensions of social life, as it is based on constant socio-economic uncertainty. However, precarious work is considered a new and common norm by young people. Moreover, those responsible for employment policy more and more often treat it as an element of employment policy, which makes precarious work an alternative to unemployment (Rubery et al., 2018). In this way, precarious employment ceases to be a springboard to permanent employment, and more and more often extends into adult life as the obligatory standard of work (Chesters and Cuervo, 2019).

Precarious employment not only takes away dignity and lowers the living and employment standards of precarious workers, but also adversely affects the bargaining position of employees on permanent employment contracts (Moore and Newsome, 2018). This is because it allows the army of precarious and migrant workers to be portrayed as a threat and used as a form of pressure in negotiations with permanent employees. In this way, working conditions deteriorate among those employed on temporary and permanent contracts. The state and the employer transfer responsibility for social security directly to the employee. Under such conditions, social security becomes an individual and private matter and only depends on the employee's strategy (additional jobs, overtime and illegal work) (Gauffin, 2020).

However, it is also worth noting the opinions which draw attention to the fact that the discourse on the precariat is developing mainly in core countries. This is because in periphery countries all workers are employed on an 'informal', temporary or precarious basis (Azhar and Khan, 2020). In this sense, all capitalist labour relations have the characteristics of 'precarious employment', and the precariat rather emphasises the enduring instability of the long history of global capitalism (Larmer, 2017). Jane Hardy shares a similar opinion. According to Hardy, precariousness is an inherent feature of capitalism, which results from the constant cyclical nature of its crises and the constant striving to colonise new virgin areas and spaces (Hardy, 2015).

Neoliberal working conditions, labour standards imposed on precarious workers and their position in the social structure prevent them from realising the dreams and aspirations created by popular culture and capitalist ideology. This leads to the classic situation of social anomie described by Robert K Merton (1968). As our research has shown, the forms of adaptation under the conditions of the neoliberal labour market may be various. Usually, 'ritualism' dominates, in which employees automatically perform their

duties without conviction whilst not believing the official ideology that says they can achieve something in this way. It is often a life on the verge of forced and mechanical conformity, in which employees do not even have a chance to think about their lives or professional alternatives due to exhaustion. As one of the respondents stated:

This employee working for the lowest national rates does not think about the job, but about whether he will survive with the money, whether he will have enough money for medicines and whether he will be able to come to work tomorrow. But this is only because Mr Jones who employs him wants to become rich quickly.

A large number of precarious employees do not accept the applicable rules of the game, but do not take any collective actions to change their position. Instead, they shut themselves away and live from month to month. It is rather a manifestation of discouragement and indifference, which corresponds to Merton's retreatism. In practice, it involves not only abandoning the goals set by the social system, but also not participating in any corrective or contesting actions – there is an attitude of resignation and non-participation in social activities.

Those employed on civil contracts who try to build their identities as 'subcontractors' or 'self-employed' entrepreneurs usually accept the market rules of the game and the goals of market competition but, in their opinion, do not follow the beaten path and are more resourceful. This corresponds to Merton's innovation, equated with the acceptance of the dominant values of the system, whilst rejecting the standard ways and means of achieving the official goals of the system.

The interviews also show the potential for a more activist attitude (rebellion), which rejects both the official goals of the neoliberal system and the ways of achieving them. This potential is shown by those who have already tried to change something in their situation, are interested in union activities and have no illusions about the rationality of the current solutions in their workplace.

These diverse attitudes mean, however, that the precarious workforce is diverse and difficult to consider as a monolith. It can also be seen that the precariat is divided into various categories, which may differ not only in their socio-political philosophy, but also in their own interests. Another challenge is the problem of the relationship between the precariat and permanent employees. As Erik Olin Wright notes, their interests can sometimes be contradictory. Hence, [Wright \(2016\)](#) tends to think that 'certainly the case that in some rhetorical contexts calling the precariat a class could help elevate the status of the issues connected to precariousness and serve as a way of legitimating and consolidating a programme of action', yet the precariat is hardly a social class. At the same time, he is aware of the political potential of the precariat and therefore believes that:

The precariat, as a rapidly growing segment of the working class and the bearer of the sharpest grievances against capitalism, may have a particularly important role to play in struggles over the rules of capitalism and over capitalism itself, but it is not a class in its own right ([Wright, 2016](#)).

The fact that under the conditions of post-pandemic capitalism, the number of the precariat will grow and the neoliberal system will want to keep as many of the anti-worker solutions introduced in the shadow of the pandemic as possible is almost certain. The open question is how this will translate into the political demands and social activity of employees themselves.

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