

## **C2 | UNEQUAL LABOR MARKETS MEET A DISEQUALIZING PANDEMIC**

### **Introduction**

Since the 1980s, neoliberal globalization has had dramatic impacts on workers through the informalization of employment relationships and the flexibilization of labor markets (Labonté and Ruckert 2019). This restructuring had serious implications for workers' health, as work and income are considered crucial social determinants of health (SDH) (Ruckert, Huynh, and Labonté 2017). Labor markets can contribute to higher rates of injury and psychological stress, while neoliberal reforms of the 1980s contributed to higher rates of material deprivation and poverty, heightening societal and global disparities (Labonté and Ruckert 2019, 94). Labor market trends are a crucial element in monitoring population health and, as informal and precarious work continues to grow, it becomes increasingly necessary to understand the implications this will have for health.

The COVID-19 crisis is continuing this process of dramatically reshaping the world of work in ways that could have significant and long-lasting implications. Not only has it led to a material decrease in employment and hours worked; it is also reshaping how and where people work. This chapter considers some of these emerging trends to better understand how labor changes are unfolding, and what their health-related implications might be. We begin by providing some historical background on how the rise of neoliberalism reshaped labor markets. The regional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment and their variations are then considered. Following this, changes that occurred in supply chains and on production, writ large, are summarized. The growth of informal and precarious employment in the wake of the pandemic and the rise of digitization in work are then discussed. Finally, the chapter considers how these labor market trends are affecting health now, and into the future, and what countermeasures could be taken to protect worker's health.

### **Neoliberalism, health, and labor markets**

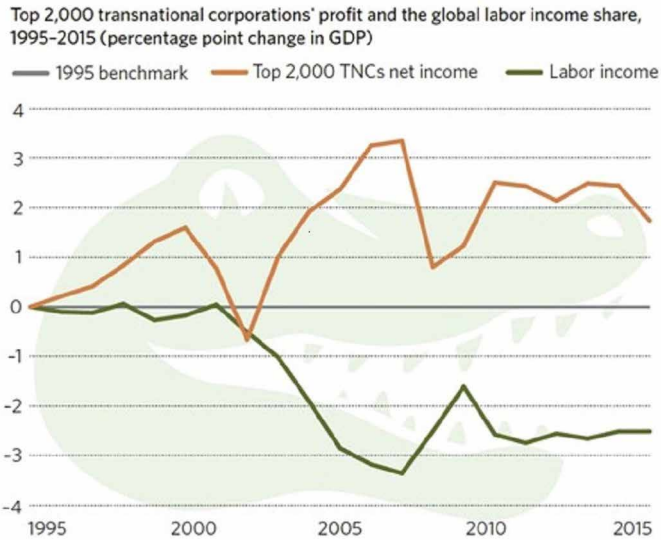
Prior to neoliberalism, Western labor markets were characterized by the Fordist model of industrial capitalism, that is, permanent, full-time, and year-round employment that often came with various health-related benefits. The ability that labor had to sustain these arrangements was related to the strength of unions and their ability to collectively bargain. This bargaining power allowed labor to

secure a greater proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) through rising wages and a stronger social safety net that provided more and higher quality public services (Peters 2008, 83–98). However, this reality was not shared by many of the workers in the Global South. Similarly, in the so-called “developed world,” women, marginalized groups, and self-employed contractors were often excluded from the benefits associated with this supposed “golden age of capitalism” that lasted from the 1950s into the 1970s (Quinlan, Mayhew, and Bohle 2001, 334–414). The standard employment relationship came under pressure in the late 1970s during the economic crisis of stagflation. Following this, Western states implemented economic programs characterized by austerity and neoliberal restructuring (which remain dominant in most parts of the world today).

According to the neoliberal economics that succeeded the Fordist model of industrial capitalism, one of the reasons capitalism entered crisis was the rigidity of labor markets. This led to a major societal reorganization process through the weakening of labor power and strengthening of capital, a process that has been ongoing for decades and continues today. This was accompanied by a global trend towards capital liberalization in the 1990s which facilitated the rapid movement of finance across the globe to invest in areas conducive to capital accumulation, leading employers to threaten to move operations elsewhere when labor regulations and benefits were deemed too restrictive or unfriendly towards their desired profitability. Together these developments culminated in the reorganization of global production under a new international division of labor (Labonté and Ruckert 2019, 95).

Over the three decades that followed, global production was restructured with acute impacts on labor markets and the health of workers. As low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) began to emerge as spaces consisting of low wages and minimal protections for workers, they became the de facto destination for many of the Fordist production activities that had been present in the West. Export Production Zones (EPZs) became a common policy to attract foreign investment in these new spaces for manufacturing, due to their weak regulation of wages and worker safety. Beyond issues of inadequate pay, various reviews of EPZs have found problems with enforcement of even basic workers’ rights, as for example in the case of derogations on health and safety standards in EPZs in Bangladesh and Kenya (Perman et al. 2004, 12; Labonté and Ruckert 2019, 102).

In high-income countries (HICs), the health and well-being of workers were also facing setbacks. A decline in unionization, due partly to the outsourcing shift in manufacturing and the rise of right-to-work legislation, meant lower wages and a general decline in health and safety regulations. Union density in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) declined by almost one-fifth since the 1990s, from 21% of the workforce in 1999, to roughly 17% in 2013 (Labonté and Ruckert 2019, 105). There is also a correlation between declining unionization rates and labor’s share of GDP



Source: UNCTAD 2017.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure C2.1** Global profit and labor income share.

Source: Reproduced with permission from Kevin Gallagher; UNCTAD (2017) as cited in Boston University Global Development Policy Center, "A New Multilateralism from Shared Prosperity," 2019. <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/files/2019/05/Updated-New-Graphics-New-Multilateralism-May-8-2019.pdf>

(Labonté and Stuckler 2016), and between the rise in transnational corporate profits and the fall in global labor income share (Figure C2.1). In sum, the integration of global commodity chains through neoliberal restructuring has had both direct and indirect health impacts, many of which are being intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Impact of COVID-19 on employment

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immediate impact on employment rates, with no corner of the globe spared from the economic collapse induced by the virus and its accompanying public health measures. The number of people employed globally experienced a steep drop alongside declining global labor incomes and working hours, with some sectors facing more severe damage than others. Globally, an OECD report suggests that working hours declined by 14% in 2020, which approximates to roughly 400 million full-time jobs, with 265 million of these losses occurring in G20 countries (OECD and ILO 2020, 12). Compared to the corresponding periods in 2019, labor income dropped by 10.7% during the first three-quarters of 2020, equivalent to \$3.5 trillion (ILO 2020a, 11). Among the most impacted are those employed in high-risk sectors, which the United Nations (UN) defines as agriculture, manufacturing, wholesale

and retail trade, and accommodation and food services; globally, 38% of the workforce, or roughly 1.25 billion workers, are employed in these sectors (United Nations 2020a, 9). Particularly affected by pandemic-related employment losses have been young people, low-skilled workers, women, and the elderly.

Low-income countries so far (as of mid-2021) account for the greatest share of the loss in labor income, at 15.1%. This compares to projected labor income losses in lower-middle-income countries of 11.4%, upper-middle-income countries of 10.1%, and high-income countries of just 9.0% (ILO 2020a, 8). These variations will inevitably impact the nature of employment within different global regions. For instance, 85% of workers in African countries are informally employed, as is the reality for most workers in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East (UN 2020a, 5). Workers in these regions will be particularly affected by pandemic-related job insecurity due to their inability to access social protection measures.

### *1. COVID-19 related health risks due to impacts on employment*

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed health risks to workers in various ways. To begin, it is the health workers on the frontline of this pandemic that face unsafe and underpaid work, a concern that has mobilized nurses' organizations globally (see Chapter A2). Inadequate access to personal protective equipment (PPE) has been an issue that has politicized many healthcare workers and led to various forms of political struggles and activism. For example, healthcare workers in Zimbabwe, Kenya, and South Africa organized protests over inadequate access to PPE (EQUINET and SATUCC 2021, 9). Similarly, in Canada most healthcare workers in the province of Ontario felt they were unprepared and unsafe due to a lack of PPE (Brophy et al. 2021, 268), complaining of a lack of enforcement of health regulations and laws in the context of the pandemic response. Concerns over a lack of PPE and social distancing requirements, alongside inadequate pay, have similarly caused workers in other sectors to echo these calls for safer working conditions (EQUINET and SATUCC 2021, 10). Even for those that could easily transition to working from home, the pandemic has the potential to impact their health negatively by increasing their social isolation and loneliness, in turn raising the potential for exacerbating mental health related disorders and ergonomic related physical injuries (ILO and OECD 2020, 22).

### **Case study: garment and textile industry**

The garment and textile industry provides a snapshot of the trends emerging in global labor markets due to the pandemic. One central element is the potential for much sharper regional divides in the post-COVID-19 world. Manufacturing has often been centered in Asia, the “factory of the world,” with the garment and textile sector making up large segments of exports for countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam (ILO 2020b, 6–7). With the collapse of supply chains due to low consumer demand and fears of Western

**Box C2.1: World Cup (of Shame) vs. the health of workers in Qatar**

The construction of the facilities for the World Cup in Qatar highlights the struggle of migrant workers to secure safer and more secure working conditions. For the workers of largely South Asian descent, the construction of the World Cup facilities has been characterized by death and tragedy. According to a recent report, in the ten years since Qatar was given the right from FIFA to host the world games, more than 6,500 migrant workers have died in the country (Pattison et al. 2021). This amounts to close to 12 workers a week dying due to the conditions they are faced with. A British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news story reported that workers were having to work long hours in the heat without access to water, told to perform tasks that they had little training in, and were being paid less than previously agreed (Fottrell 2015). The reporters who filed this news item were arrested in Qatar in 2015 (Stephenson 2015). Qatar's intense summer heat is likely to be significant in these workers' deaths; however, their deaths are often misclassified to suppress this information and attributed to acute heart or respiratory failure, despite many occurring among a largely young and fit workforce (Pattison et al. 2021). Most of these deaths by "natural causes" occurred amongst Indian, Nepali, and Bangladeshi workers. Amnesty International spoke out against these death classifications, calling for not only greater workplace safety standards but also for greater transparency and clarity (Pattison et al. 2021). Through its World Cup of Shame campaign, Amnesty International has highlighted the plight of these migrant workers, including appalling living and working conditions, delayed or non-existent salary payments, physical confinement, and forced labor (Amnesty International 2021). Some professional football players have supported this, and similar campaigns, by staging on-field protests in World Cup qualifying matches, with Norwegian players wearing a shirt stating: "Human Rights, On and Off the Pitch." Such campaigns, however, have had limited impact thus far, the only exception being the scrapping of the need for an employer's permission to change jobs, something that rights activists said tied migrant workers' presence in the country to their employers and led to abuse and exploitation (Aljazeera 2021).

The deaths of Qatar's World Cup construction workers have occurred over the course of a decade, although the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the hazardous conditions they face. They are not alone in this, as most migrant and guest workers are confronted with unreliable contracts and unsafe workplaces. From construction workers in Qatar to temporary foreign workers in Canada, migrant workers and their generally exploitative working and living conditions continue to underpin many of the major building projects of wealthy states and developers, even as they experience higher

rates (than non-migrants) of adverse occupational exposures and working conditions, which lead to poor health outcomes, workplace injuries, and occupational fatalities (Moyce and Schenker 2018).

states reshoring their manufacturing sector, several futures for these workers are imaginable. One possibility is that these jobs may return, but the already few benefits once associated with them may be even more limited and employment more precarious. As a recent report on the garment industry noted:

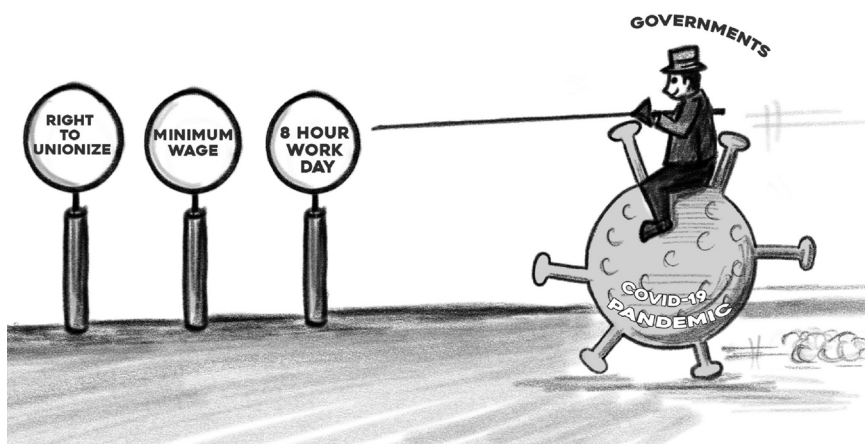
72.4% of [Bangladeshi] furloughed workers were sent home without pay. 97.3% of buyers refused to contribute to severance pay expenses of dismissed workers, also a legal entitlement in Bangladesh. 80.4% of dismissed workers were sent home without their severance pay. This is despite the fact that many brands have “responsible exit” policies, in which they commit to support factories in mitigating potential adverse impacts to workers should they decide to exit. (Anner 2020, 2)

The scale of these labor rights violations raises serious questions about how these workers will be reintegrated into this sector once the pandemic subsides and whether this new level of mass disregard for labor rights will become the new normal. When this is considered alongside the fact that women are over-represented in this sector in Asia (ILO 2020b, 7), and that women are already suffering at a greater rate than men amidst the pandemic, the potential for a rise in (health) inequalities is significant. Alternatively, as many HIC governments consider reshoring manufacturing and protecting domestic industries in the wake of the shock to supply chains, countries that were chosen for their cheap wages and weak labor rights regimes may be further relegated to a peripheral economic status as their key industries are uprooted.

## *2. Impact of COVID-19 on the growth of informal and precarious employment*

Various organizations are already reporting the unique impact the pandemic is having on those working in informal and precarious employment. In particular, the “gig economy,” characterized by precarious jobs with flexible employment standards, had already seen rapid growth before the pandemic, as reported in *Global Health Watch 5* (People’s Health Movement et al. 2017, 207). The pandemic is acting as an additional catalyst for growth in this kind of employment (Ståhl and MacEachen 2020). According to UN estimates, informal workers account for 1.6 billion worldwide with an additional 400 million of them working in precarious forms of employment such as temporary, short term, or non-standard employment (UN 2020b, 10). Workers in this sector, that is,

## ATTACK ON LABOUR RIGHTS AMID COVID-19 PANDEMIC



**Image C2.1** “Attack on labour rights.”

Source: Sketch by Arun for *Global Health Watch 6*.

self-employed workers, those on temporary, on-call or part-time contracts, and informal economy workers, have been hit hard by this crisis as they often lack access to social benefits if they become unemployed. In the UK, for example, many workers experienced a decline in employment earnings, but the self-employed suffered a much steeper drop than those in salaried positions (OECD 2020, 15). This finding is significant given that 40% of workers in the EU are estimated to work in this form of employment (OECD 2020, 15).

Beyond the self-employed, fixed-term contract workers are also suffering unique challenges. An example of this is found in France where the bulk of unemployment claims in March and April 2020 came from fixed-term contract workers who were not having their contracts renewed, with similar patterns being identified in Italy and Spain (OECD 2020, 15). For informal workers, the situation is also dire, as staying home often means losing one’s job. According to 2020 estimates, there were 1.2 billion informal workers in G20 countries; roughly 70% were impacted by the pandemic crisis, leading to an estimated 61% decline in their earnings and 36% increase in their relative poverty (OECD 2020, 15). In terms of regional impacts, African and Latin American informal sector workers are expected to be hit particularly hard, as their earnings are expected to drop by 80%, in contrast to the global average of 60% (UN 2020a, 11). Among those most impacted by the crisis are care workers, domestic workers, young people, and refugee and migrant workers, all groups that are overrepresented in the



informal and precarious economy and for whom job loss is likely to exacerbate their already present lack of access to health and social services (UN 2020a, 13).

In terms of the gig economy, there are already indications that the COVID-19 pandemic is transforming this ongoing trend. The gig economy covers various fields, such as delivery drivers, online platform-related jobs and other, often tech-driven, jobs. Most notable during the pandemic has been an increase in delivery services, with numbers of delivery orders in Europe, as one example, rising on average by 36%, and with “35–55% of existing [European] consumers intend[ing] to continue using delivery more in the future” (Khan et al. 2020). To meet these growing demands many of the platforms that employ gig-economy workers, such as Etsy, Uber, and delivery-related services, are re-organizing their workers’ responsibilities. Etsy encouraged those who work through their platform to craft masks, while Uber encouraged their drivers to begin delivering groceries and other supplies (Alvarez et al. 2020, 3).

There are promising developments and signs that gig workers are gaining the power to ensure their contracts with these corporations have some protections and permanency. One notable situation where this is taking place is the UK in the court case *Uber v Aslam*. This case dealt with the question of whether Uber drivers, such as Yaseen Aslam, had been self-employed, or were instead “workers’ with statutory rights to a minimum wage and paid holidays” (Dukes



**Image C2.2** Over 2,500 years ago a message-courier ran scores of miles to proclaim Greek victory over the Persians, and then promptly died. Are gig workers our new marathon couriers?  
Source: Sketch by Arun for *Global Health Watch 6*.



and Streeck 2021). Uber argued that its drivers were self-employed, and that Uber was simply an intermediary, and as such drivers were not entitled to the rights associated with the term “worker” as recorded in UK legal statutes. The Court, however, asserted that “It is the very fact that an employer is often in a position to dictate contract terms ... that gives rise to the need for statutory protection in the first place” (Dukes and Streeck 2021). This case will likely resonate with gig-economy workers across the globe in their respective struggles to gain full employment rights.

Furthermore, Spain has also reached a landmark agreement between social partners and the Spanish government on the labor rights of people working for digital platforms. The agreement not only establishes employment rights for those delivering services via a digital platform but also calls for algorithm transparency. Declaring drivers on digital platforms employees follows the decisions already made by courts of other states; however, the decision on algorithm transparency is unique. This ensures that these workers have a right to the information, such as the mathematical or algorithmic formulas determining their working conditions (Aranguiz 2021). Nevertheless, the decision is not without setbacks. Drivers only cover a small percentage of the informal economy. Furthermore, contracting arrangements will still be the mode of operation for these companies and their employees during “peak” hours, meaning that arrangements for wages during these select times will still be shaped through temporary contracts. Nonetheless, progress is occurring in ensuring better working conditions for those in the informal gig economy.

Pandemic-related adaptations in the informal or precarious sectors are often designed to cater to a customer-centric approach that prioritizes customer over worker safety. The pandemic surge in home deliveries insulates the customer from exposure to COVID-19, while delivery workers who are then expected to pick up, deliver, and sometimes also return these products risk exposure instead (Alvarez et al. 2020, 3). A good example of this is San Francisco, where a “shelter in place” order required most workers to stay at home. Uber drivers, however, were deemed essential workers and remained on the frontlines of COVID-19 exposure, even while they lacked any of the worker protections if they became sick, as well as basic income security (Dubal and Whittaker 2020). Although considered “essential workers” they were simultaneously labeled as “independent contractors,” whereby employers don’t have to provide such workers “with basic protections and benefits, including the minimum wage and unemployment insurance” (Dubal and Whittaker 2020). Gig-economy jobs that occur from home, such as decentralized call centers operating through home offices, are also being intensified, with the dual demands of managing work from home and family life increasingly being laid upon the shoulders of workers employed through these platforms (Alvarez et al. 2020, 4). Carrying the burden of work and family from home amidst the current state of isolation has implications for the mental health of these workers (see Chapter B5).



**Image C2.3** “Quien sostiene la vida” / “Those who sustain life” (2020).

Source: Henar Diez Villahoz, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, Madrid, Spain.

### 3. Gendered impacts on employment due to the COVID-19 crisis

Women are emerging as one of the groups uniquely disadvantaged by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the pandemic-related trends differentially impacting women are not returning to employment at the same rates as men; more likely to be employed in precarious or informal jobs; and more likely to be working in sectors that are particularly unsafe with respect to risk of infection with COVID-19 (see Chapter A2). Among the first of these trends, women are likely to emerge from this crisis in economic conditions worse than their male counterparts. An OECD report, for example, notes that women in G20 countries are experiencing a greater fall in employment and total hours worked in comparison to men, particularly so in Italy and Spain (OECD 2020, 19). The reduction in paid work has corresponded with higher rates of unpaid care work due to school and daycare closures (OECD 2020, 12). In addition, women in OECD countries (and elsewhere) are overrepresented in employment sectors

most vulnerable to job loss, such as retail trade, hospitality and food services, arts, entertainment, and other personal services (OECD 2020, 19). Where job loss has not occurred, women's service sector work generally cannot be done from home and often involves face-to-face contact with the public, putting those working in these jobs at a greater risk of infection. These risks become more acute when considering the precarious or informal employment status of many women. Recent OECD data find that women account for 42% of employment in informal sectors in comparison to 32% of men (OECD 2020, 19). Ultimately, the combination of women being expected to shoulder most of the burden of unpaid care work at home, and being overrepresented in dangerous and informal work, is leading to a potential trend that leaves women less secure than men in the aftermath of the pandemic.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on the digitization of the economy**

The digitization and automation of workplaces is becoming increasingly characteristic of labor market changes unfolding through the pandemic. This is likely to become a key employment trend. The most obvious example of this is in the rise of those workers whose jobs shifted online in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, with “evidence based on surveys conducted in mid-April show[ing] a massive surge in the share of workers working from home compared to the pre-crisis numbers, ranging from around 30% in Canada to almost 70% in South Africa” (OECD 2020, 21). This growth in digital workspaces is further reflected in the strong economic performances of some e-commerce companies. In the United States, Amazon has reportedly hired an additional 100,000 workers to meet the surging demand for products that perhaps would have been purchased on-site at another company (Palmer 2020). These trends are likely to persist post-pandemic (Palmer 2020), and it is important to understand the implications this will have on health equity and its underlying social determinants. The first among these consequences is that a more digitized world will likely sharpen regional divides, particularly between the Global North and South. The UN reports that in 71 countries, mostly located within the African continent and South Asia, less than half of the population has access to the internet; in Latin America and the Caribbean, 38% of the poorest households do not have internet access (UN 2020b, 14). Unless the digital divide is greatly reduced, large numbers of workers will be unable to pivot to the digitalization of work, further compounding the regional divides already occurring due to strains on supply chains, discussed earlier.

### **How has organized labor responded?**

As the COVID-19 pandemic alters the global labor market by intensifying precariousness, workers are pushing back by organizing. Instances of rising labor activism can be found across the world. Earlier, this chapter noted that delivery drivers are making gains not only in their reclassification as employees

but also in their demands for greater transparency between themselves and the digital transnational corporations that employ them. In Canada, the Ontario teachers' unions have organized for greater protection in schools and the mass vaccination of all education workers (Canadian Press 2021). Globally, healthcare workers and their unions have been on the frontlines challenging the lack of PPE and other safety measures that put them directly at risk (see Chapter B3). Across North America migrant agricultural workers have been struggling to gain greater access to safer working conditions and vaccinations, as these workers, due to their unsafe (crowded) housing conditions, are at substantial risk of COVID-19 exposure (see Box C2.3). In another example of growing labor activism, workers at an Amazon facility in the US state of Alabama recently attempted (though unsuccessfully) to organize themselves into the first union at an Amazon distribution center, demanding better and safer working conditions as the company overall recorded 20,000 positive COVID-19 cases amongst its workforce (Associated Press 2020).

Globally, trade unions and civil society organizations focused on the rights of workers have coordinated to protect the health, well-being, and interests of workers amidst the pandemic. Trade unions and worker rights organizations have been among those pushing governments to make available comprehensive supports for those affected directly by increased COVID-19 risks and by subsequent lockdowns associated with public health measures. Although trade unions have endorsed government efforts to support workers, such as wage subsidy programs, they have also noted the limitations of these programs, noting that such subsidies do little to address the unsafe work environments that are driving transmission among precariously employed workers in the informal economy or to limit the commodification of social services that can undermine access to healthcare, even if subsidies are made available to support access to privatized services.

**Box C2.2: Associations of workers and former workers with occupational illness in Colombia**

Transformations in the world of labor derived from the legal, technological, and managerial changes introduced in production processes in recent decades have intensified the conditions of precarious work, bringing about profound impacts on the health and lives of workers. Our present situation recalls the working conditions surrounding the origins of the Industrial Revolution, where long and intense working hours, exposure to physicochemical, biological, and mechanical risk conditions, and the manner in which workplaces were organized produced high rates of occupational accidents, illness, and death.

In recent decades, the workers' movement has lost crucial achievements organized labor had achieved earlier, for example, that of "the three eights."<sup>1</sup> Today, employees (again) work long hours thanks to piece-rate pay schemes or temporary service contracts, among other informalized work arrangements, and thanks to new communication technologies which keep workers permanently connected to their jobs.

Thus emerges an epidemic of pathologies derived from labor, serving as an expression of the conditions of overexploitation and flexibility imposed by the new global labor structures. These structures favor the new patterns of capitalist accumulation characteristic of neoliberalism, highlighting even further the contradictions between capital and labor, accumulation and injury, profits, and insecurity.

These working conditions and their impacts on the health and lives of workers have historically triggered collective action by workers to preserve their health. In Colombia at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the clash between capital and labor manifested also in other ways, as evidenced by the large group of workers and former workers who became ill because of their working conditions. They were denied recognition of the labor-based origins of their pathologies, leading them to organize and form associations to demand their rights.

### **The associations: establishing a collective actor**

Since 2006, there began to emerge in Colombia several associations of workers and former workers with occupational illness; as of 2019, 19 such groups exist. These associations have a broad national reach explained by the presence of productive processes in several regions of the country, linked to mining-energy, agriculture, construction, tobacco, manufacturing, maintenance, hotel, and health and safety sectors.

The shared experiences of these affected workers and former workers led them to understand that the damages incurred against their health were due to their working conditions, a problem that was common among them and one that was met with responses of rejection and disregard for their illnesses. This led these workers to organize in associations.

These associations in Colombia have taken many forms, including associations where there is no labor union, associations that arise with the support of a labor union, and associations in dispute with a labor union or unions which then take issue with the association.

The concept of forming an "association" arose from two perspectives and one condition. First, it was to avoid the less favorable option of having the labor union serve as an organizational body, since it was believed that the labor union was not interested in the problems of sick workers. Second, the association was a broader option than discussions with the labor union,

since it allowed the affiliation of both workers and former workers, and even of workers' relatives. These conditions also had to do with regulations, as dismissed workers can no longer unionize, and labor unions did not have a regulatory framework to address the issues of dismissed workers and their social security.

Given their collective dynamic, the creation of these associations in Colombia established a novel organizational process in terms of its more open and flexible structure in comparison with labor unions, which were historically used to organize workers. This sometimes led to conflicts, including legal disputes with company-based labor unions. The conflicts are an expression of the irrelevance of the subjects of workers' health and the problems of sick workers within the labor union agenda. At the same time, these conflicts could also be revealing a rift between sick and "healthy" workers, the latter being the ones who primarily make up labor union membership. This issue is a problematic one, as it demonstrates the inadequacy of social class as the basis to build organizational unity.

### **Conclusions: progress in setting up non-toxic forms of work**

The experience of workers and former workers with occupational illness demands that society discusses how to shape labor markets so that they generate health and well-being and not illness and death.

The experience of these injured workers' associations in Colombia reveals three realities. First, changes in the world of labor in recent decades resulting from shifts in workplace organization and management and in forms of labor ties are creating toxic work settings where the capital-labor conflict leads to the dispossession of work, health protection at work, and the body and health of the worker.

Second, it reveals the failure of health protection in the world of labor, at least within Colombia, but almost certainly more broadly as well.

Third, in the political competition established mainly for the control of the domain of workplace safety and health, a crucial aspect is the control and hegemony of technical and scientific information on the harmfulness of working conditions. This rests more with capital (owners) than with the knowledge of affected workers and that of independent doctors and academics.

Colombian associations represent processes of identity-building, a search for support mechanisms, and development of legal actions and factual accounts. These processes exert pressure on employers, the state, and social security entities to guarantee the health, labor, and social security rights of workers. In turn, these associations can be understood as an appeal to society to discuss the ways in which people work today, given its intensified traits of insecurity, subordination, and alienation, forming a neo-slave-like way of working which must be challenged and overcome.



Labor activism has been particularly pronounced in the Global South. In countries such as Namibia and Botswana where wage subsidy programs were implemented, employers did not use these programs and instead imposed unpaid leave on workers; this led to union activism and educational campaigns about workers' rights to access such wage subsidies (EQUINET and SATUCC 2021, 10). In Zimbabwe, Kenya, and South Africa, healthcare workers protested their precarious working conditions amidst the pandemic (EQUINET and SATUCC 2021, 10). Additionally, healthcare workers in Mozambique have been working to build networks amongst migrant workers to ensure they receive prevention and quarantine messages and services (EQUINET and SATUCC 2021, 11). A related example is the Vula platform in South Africa which has been used to allow health workers to share advice and provide mutual support to one another (EQUINET and SATUCC 2021, 12). Mineworkers across this region, such as in the DR Congo, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, have engaged in strike action to challenge unsafe working conditions and allowances (EQUINET and SATUCC 2021, 10).

### **Box C2.3: Temporary migrant agricultural workers**

Temporary migrant agricultural workers are the backbone to many economies around the world as they compose the workforce that helps feed local populations. In Canada, they represent more than 20% of the total agricultural workforce each year. Though referred to as temporary, those migrant workers often fill long-term positions and provide crucial support to the agricultural industry around the globe. Temporary migrant agricultural workers face particular risks in the COVID-19 pandemic due to their communal living and working conditions. While health vulnerabilities faced by these workers have long been well documented, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of these and further increased the risk of labor rights violations and vulnerability to exploitation. Substandard living conditions have contributed to the rapid spread of COVID-19 amongst this workforce, while many face additional barriers and challenges accessing social and medical services. In Canada, these conditions led to the infection of over 1,000 temporary migrant agricultural workers and to the eventual deaths of three of these workers to date. A follow-up coroner's review of the COVID-19 deaths of migrant farm workers in Ontario renewed a call for better safeguards and improved working conditions for foreign seasonal agricultural workers. The acute problems experienced during the pandemic, however, are deeply rooted in a system that consistently fails to protect these workers' health, labor, and human rights. The COVID-19 pandemic



highlighted these inequities that were previously easily overlooked, while also underscoring the crucial role that temporary migrant agricultural workers play in ensuring food security. It is the duty of local, national, and global authorities (the International Labor Organization (ILO), the International Organization of Migration, and the Office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights) to address major flaws in the structure and implementation of the Temporary Foreign Worker Programs around the world and to finally break a cycle of perpetuating injury, inequity, and exploitation (Landry et al. 2021).



**Image C2.4** A group of migrant agricultural workers petition for residency status in 2016.

Source: Reproduced with permission from Chris Ramsaroop; Harvesting Freedom, "Petition: Tell both the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario farmworkers need urgent protections." May 7, 2020. <https://harvestingfreedom.org/2020/05/07/petition-tell-the-ontario-government-farmworkers-need-urgent-protections/>

## Where do we go from here?

The pandemic has made it abundantly clear that it will require a long and lasting collective effort to challenge the dominance of neoliberal policy hegemony in the fight for fair pay and secure jobs. But there are some potential policy reforms that could have a direct and immediate impact on health outcomes associated with employment and related determinants of health pathways, policies which have been promoted by a coalition of progressive NGOs and various international organizations even before the pandemic.

### 1. Universal basic income

One solution a variety of countries utilized during the pandemic to support individuals struggling financially were direct cash transfers. A more lasting

solution could be a permanent extension of this aid in the form of a universal basic income (UBI), as mentioned in Chapter A1. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed significant gaps in social protection coverage that a UBI program could potentially solve.

First, with informal and gig-economy jobs both surging in growth, these workers are often on the frontlines of the pandemic but with little-to-no health coverage or other basic entitlements. Not only are these workers not getting benefits while working but, if they lose their unstable employment, they will also be left with little or no social security coverage. A UBI program would provide these workers with the stability that labor markets are currently not providing, guaranteeing a basic level of income security (Gentilini et al. 2020, 45). Thus, as COVID-19 intensifies the flexibility of labor markets through the growth of precarious employment, UBI could fill a gap by providing workers with crucial income protections. While better regulations on gig-economy corporations and progressive labor market reforms are also necessary, a UBI could provide immediate relief for workers struggling in the rapidly expanding precarious labor market. There is strong civil society support for the notion of UBI (see Box C2.4 below), and even some political parties, such as the Liberal Party in Canada or the Green Parties in Germany and the UK, are currently considering the role that UBI could play in social policy reform going forward. This support for UBI is also growing in LMICs. Even before the pandemic, there have been multiple experiences with UBI in LMICs, including a pilot project in 2011 in India where the state of Madhya Pradesh gave a basic income to some 6,000 Indians. The largest and longest UBI experiment in the world is currently taking place in Kenya, where the charity GiveDirectly is making payments to more than 20,000 people spread out across 245 rural villages. As part of this randomized controlled trial, which started in 2016, recipients receive roughly 75 cents per adult per day, delivered monthly for 12 years (Sigal 2020). The pandemic has only accelerated the popularity and uptake of basic income programs, in both the developed and developing world, with new (but time-bound) UBI initiatives implemented widely, including in Spain, the United States, Bolivia, Mexico, Argentina, and South Africa.

#### **Box C2.4: Basic income – a post-pandemic quick fix**

Interest in basic income<sup>2</sup> has grown steadily around the globe in recent years. When the pandemic hit, interest soared as existing programs proved inadequate to meet people's needs in the economic fallout. When some governments responded with direct cash transfers and a lessening of conditions to receive them, the possibility of a basic income became more tangible. The pandemic has also made the stakes higher by both magnifying

and accelerating long-standing problems, putting the virus on a collision course with the intersections of race, class, gender, and colonialist divides.

The current patterns of inequality, insecurity, poverty, and societal unrest reflect chasms in public policy that are endangering people, livelihoods, and the planet. The world's wealthiest people have gained billions from the pandemic while countless others have lost jobs, businesses, housing, health, and lives. Firms that could speed up their technological investment did so, creating more disruption for humans as workers and as citizens.

This is the context for thinking about basic income: not in the abstract, but in the reality we face now and going forward.

Payments that are temporary, irregular, or one-off are not a basic income. What characterizes a basic income is regular, universal, unconditional payments to individuals – no strings attached and no stigma. Benefits traditionally tied to participation in the labor market are neither universal nor unconditional; they leave people out, undermine non-market work that holds up the rest of the economy, and deepen disadvantage faced in the paid labor market. Last resort programs that stigmatize and deprive people of autonomy and dignity compound the damage.

In practice, a basic income may be difficult to establish in an ideal version, at least for now. Progress and design will depend on a country's context, including its other income programs, labor legislation, social infrastructure, and politics. The principle of universality is especially important now as it is applied to policy design. Providing an equal check to everyone may be an ultimate goal, but the extent of change required for this is daunting. Adequacy is increasingly the more urgent policy concern. In France and Canada, rigorous modeling shows that there are different ways to achieve good results.

While people identify many different reasons for instituting a basic income, there is also a range of criticism which defies traditional left/right or other political categorizations. The most frequent concerns are about work disincentives, costs, and funding. Much effort has gone into finding evidence of a “work” disincentive (work here meaning paid employment) but to no avail. The deeper root of this continuing concern despite lack of evidence is likely discriminatory bias against people different than oneself and a desire of those with privilege to protect it. That is more challenging to address.

The concerns about cost and how to pay for a basic income program are very important ones, and they deserve careful attention. Modeling that looks at benefit design, funding sources, and outcomes is critical. A progressive benefit can result in perverse outcomes if the funding sources are not also progressive. A narrow focus on gross rather than net costs or

the claim that public services *must* be cut to afford a basic income are not constructive and undermine its healthful and solidaristic intent. Some critics identify alternatives – more services or a job guarantee for people in poverty instead of income. Aside from the practical and moral issues these ideas raise, there is little analysis and evidence showing how they could provide results equivalent to income.

What the large and growing body of evidence tells us about basic income, however, is hopeful and confident. There have been unconditional cash transfer programs running successfully in some countries for years. There are many pilots around the world including those from the USA, Canada, India, Kenya, and Finland. There is evidence of basic income's beneficial impacts from research on human behavior, neuroscience, inequality, scarcity, mental health, food security, and more. Now we can learn from the cash transfers during the pandemic. The consistent pattern across all this work is that a basic income improves lives with benefits to health, education, family, and community life. It improves all forms of work and employment, and it empowers women and marginalized groups, builds greater trust among people, and leads to less violence and crime.

A basic income is not a silver bullet to the health crises created by insecure labor markets or inadequate labor incomes that pre-date the pandemic. But it is arguably the fastest, most direct, and effective way that people collectively can improve the post-pandemic distribution of income, wealth, work, health, and decision-making power that affect our lives.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. *Social protection floor*

Social Protection Floor (SPF) is a global program designed to enhance social cohesion, particularly during turbulent times such as economic recessions. The SPF concept can be understood as a basic set of social rights (derived from human right treaties) including access to essential services (such as health, education, housing, water and sanitation, and others) and social transfers, in cash or in kind, to guarantee income security, food security, adequate nutrition, and access to essential services (ILO 2021). The floor is based on the idea that everyone should enjoy at least basic income security sufficient to live a healthy life, guaranteed through transfers in cash or in kind such as pensions for the elderly and persons with disabilities, child benefits, income support benefits, and/or employment guarantees and services for the unemployed and working poor.

The idea behind the need for a SPF dates to a Social Protection Floor Recommendation issued in 2012 by the ILO. As many countries have responded to the pandemic by introducing, scaling up, or adapting social protection measures to protect previously uncovered or inadequately covered population

groups, calls for implementation of a SPF are again gaining momentum (ILO 2021). While there are many potential policy structures for an SPF, some ideas include cash transfers through the global monetary system and strengthened state-level legislation to broaden social protections or state-level guarantees for certain essential services, such as health, food, and housing (as advocated for by the Social Protection Floor Coalition, <http://www.socialprotectionfloorscoalition.org>).

An internationally funded SPF program could serve as one means to ensure that, during periods of global economic uncertainty, workers faced with job loss or lack of access to basic social services would be able to access an international program designed to ensure their fundamental needs are satisfied. Indeed, migrant workers unable to qualify for national programs would have guarantees through this international program to ensure that they would have either cash or a combination of guarantees for social programs that they might otherwise not have. Similarly, due to the impacts of crises often being gendered, women who are vulnerable to being dependent on a job or living situation would have increased security to provide for their safety.

### *3. Stronger labor regulations*

While the UBI and SPF are post-market reforms (distributing wealth after the market has failed to generate fair outcomes for workers), pre-market reforms are also necessary to address the health and economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. As detailed throughout this chapter, the pandemic has revealed the weakness of labor protections and the lack of enforcement of existing labor rights for unionized and precarious workers alike. Stronger labor regulations must be part of a comprehensive solution to overcome the growing informalization and precarity of work, notably those regarding the right to organize trade unions, which has suffered amidst pandemic public health restrictions (EQUINET and SATUCC 2020, 12). Strengthening this basic labor right post-pandemic, alongside ensuring all countries move to ratify the full set of ILO conventions, must be key health activist demands. For as the world returns to its pre-pandemic trajectory of growing income inequities worsened by the pandemic, labor/class politics are resuming prominence in progressive social activism.

This chapter has indicated that the health struggles related to informal and precarious employment are likely to intensify over the coming years, as the digitization of the economy, the explosion of the gig economy, and the pandemic-related loss of employment by vulnerable population groups represent intensifying challenges to population health. To address these challenges will require a comprehensive policy response that acknowledges employment relationships as a key entry point for improving population health, and promotes secure and fair employment relationships that allow workers to live healthy lives and to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Three eights” is the idea that a healthy workday should be divided into three parts: rest (eight hours), work (eight hours), and leisure (eight hours).

<sup>2</sup> The term “basic income” is used here as a plain language, lower case description of a concept. As a policy or a proposal being advanced, basic income can go by many names, like *Bolsa Familia* in Brazil, or by abbreviations,

like UBI (universal basic income). Knowing some detail about how it works is more important than what it is called.

<sup>3</sup> To learn more, the website of the Basic Income Earth Network (<https://basicincome.org/>) has links to the research supporting basic income's many positive health and social impacts and links to country affiliates around the world.

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