

Pandemic Capitalism and Cities: Work and Inequality

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ABSTRACT: In this paper we explore how precarious work is being globalized across urban space. We tie the devaluation of labour to the growth of multi-scalar inequality through the COVID-19 pandemic and in the context of urban austerity. We also seek to identify opportunities for rebuilding worker power through a radical anti-capitalist politics attuned to cities in crisis. We argued that this unevenness across multiple scales creates openings and possibilities for future resistance.

KEYWORDS: Pandemic; Cities; Austerity; Urbanism; Precarious Work; Inequality

Introduction

Before Marx, much of the classical political economy tradition assumed private property and profits emanated from the act of buying cheap and selling dear. It so followed that poverty, dangerous work, malnutrition, ill-health and decaying housing appeared as either unrelated phenomena or worse, the result of individual pathologies, idleness or alleged cultural and religious backwardness. Understood this way, the “dark satanic mills” of newly industrializing cities appeared as something inherently urban. For Marx and Engels, however, these dramatic urban upheavals were not unrelated tendencies but inextricably linked with the brutal historical process of separating people from the means of providing for themselves. In other words, for capitalism to become dominant, the economic self-sufficiency of feudal communities had to be destroyed. Not only were market forces brought to the countryside, eliminating traditional rights and security, but the city of time immemorial was transformed too.

The English enclosure movement turned formerly feudal lands into private property, transforming products like wool into cloth made in factories by a now landless proletariat and value-added commodities sold in trading ports to fuel British imperial domination (Whiteside 2020). Resistance was met with a series of state-sponsored disciplinary measures, including flogging, branding, and execution (Perelman 2000). The need to instill market discipline, “civilize” workers, and stamp out indolence justified the harsh measures. Private property and profits did not, as Smith, Ricardo and others contended, derive from age-old practices that gave rise to the division of labour and the Industrial Revolution, but rather by ‘the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the Aboriginal population, the conquest and looting of the East Indies, and the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, wherein capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt’ (Marx [1867] 1977, chap. 31). In other words, urbanization and capitalist growth came to dominate on the backs of slave, peasant and proletarian immiseration.

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Extreme wealth and poverty thus went hand-in-hand as once self-sufficient communities, now dispossessed, migrated to cities with nothing to sell but their labour power. As David Harvey (2008) argues, “From their inception, cities have arisen through geographical and social concentrations of a surplus product. Urbanization has always been, therefore, a class phenomenon, since surpluses are extracted from somewhere and from somebody, while the control over their disbursement typically lies in a few hands.” The wage relationship became a seemingly ‘voluntary’ affair as impersonal market forces both ensured and obscured working-class subordination to capital.³ Although capitalist class relations give the unique impression that the labourer was a ‘free vendor of his labour-power’ (Marx 1986: 194), market-dependence is an instituted compulsion: capital has a choice, labour does not. Capital too faces an imperative: accumulation or crisis (Harvey 1982). And with that we get an urban dynamic oriented to fostering growth in one moment, only to render it obsolete at another.

In this paper we explore how precarious work is being globalized across urban space. We tie the devaluation of labour to the growth of multi-scalar inequality through the COVID-19 pandemic and in the context of urban austerity. We also seek to identify opportunities for rebuilding worker power through a radical anti-capitalist politics attuned to cities in crisis. We argue that this unevenness across multiple scales creates openings and possibilities for future resistance.

Precarious Work: Global Urban Dimensions

We are now, it is argued, in an age of ‘planetary urbanization’ with ‘the urban’ dominating contemporary politics and economics (Brenner 2018). Beyond the empirical reality that the global majority now lives in cities, deeper processes of capitalist crises and class inequalities related to global urbanization are upon us. Indeed, the United Nations (UN) reports that crowded and connected cities were the early epicentre (2020) of the global pandemic: “The size of their [cities’] populations and their high level of global and local interconnectivity make them particularly vulnerable to the spread of the virus...COVID-19 highlights the critical role local governments play as front-line responders in crisis response, recovery and rebuilding” (UN 2020). Likewise, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) equally acknowledges that cities have been on the “frontline” of pandemic-related effects, and that local governments have mobilized the delivery of services and strategies for recovery despite the conundrum that “cities cannot fix the magnitude of the challenge on their own” (OECD 2020).

The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of the previous decade launched a prolonged period of austerity that continues to play out in particularly urban ways. Much needed investments in public transit, affordable housing, aging infrastructure and social services elude cities constrained by low taxation, interurban competition and an ongoing ideological commitment to neoliberalism. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), national governments around the world intervened

³ The violent, historical process of ‘original accumulation’ set in motion a specifically capitalist urban dynamic whereby ‘the market’ (and the city) acquired a qualitatively new role in agrarian production relations, as direct producers were deprived of non-market access to the means of their own self-reproduction. As Marx noted: ‘the historical movement which changes the producers into waged workers, appears, on the one hand, as their emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds, and this side alone exists for our bourgeois historians. But, on the other hand, these new freedmen became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and of all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And the history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire’ (1986: 508).

with trillions in broad tax relief, wage subsidies, grants, preferential loans and other guarantees to prevent widespread economic collapse and support the recovery. Governments also took equity stakes in everything from energy, rail, automotive and air transportation to support troubled firms. As emergency responses once more turn to exit strategies, challenges are beginning to be refocused within the broader prism of ‘permanent austerity’ (Pierson 2001; Albo and Fanelli, 2014), a condition preceding but exacerbated by the coronavirus crisis. An estimated 2.3 billion people could face the dire consequences of future pandemic-related budget constraints and income loss by 2023 (Kentikelenis and Stubbs 2021).

Austerity can be defined broadly as government measures taken to reduce public spending, particularly in the areas of social welfare expenditures and public sector employment (Whiteside et al. 2021). Among conventional approaches, these measures are taken when a government’s expenditures exceed its revenues, creating debt burdens due to over-borrowing; and for municipal governments without monetary or fiscal autonomy, the widespread presence of balanced budget legislation has meant having to do more with less. Seeing the problems as part of this broader shift towards permanent austerity, as opposed to a transient and temporary slimming of fiscal capacity, is valuable because it reveals the larger political and economic drivers of these problems that go beyond more particular issues such as antipathy towards taxes, alleged over-spending or the salaries of municipal workers (Albo and Fanelli, 2019).

Born of crisis, austerity urbanism reconfigures the neoliberal city (Peck 2012), the manifestations of which vary across diverse urban contexts. As an approach to public policy, austerity urbanism has included tax-shifting for competitiveness, reductions to social services provisioning, contracting-out and privatization of public assets, new forms of marketization such as the use of public-private partnerships, and a shift away from universality to user-pay provisions (Fanelli and Thomas, 2021). New workplace arrangements have also proliferated, including the use of part-time and short-term contracts, as well as casual and seasonal forms of employment. In many cases, this has also incorporated new restrictions on workers’ rights to unionize and bargain collectively, including reductions to workplace compensation (Evans et al., 2023; Yates, 2022; Ness, 2021).

The COVID-19 era has thus meant a crisis of unprecedented proportions for urban workers, not only for its effects on production and reproduction but also through the coalescing of structural inequalities and cyclical instabilities characteristic of capitalism. It has also brought into focus how local capitalisms materialize from these particularities, not as isolated local economies and states, but as part of the value flows of the world market. The power condensed and legitimated in the national state may ultimately set the political parameters, policy fields and fiscal capacities of cities, but they cannot avoid operating within and through the local state (Gough 2014). In 2019, the International Labour Organization (ILO), in celebrating its 100th anniversary, used the occasion to renew calls for improved opportunities and working conditions, social protections and collective bargaining rights. The ILO’s Global Commission on the Future of Work (2019, 2) proposed a “human-centred agenda for the future of work that strengthens the social contract by placing people and the work they do at the centre of economic and social policy and business practice.” The UN body urged action to develop national strategies on the future of work and transformative investments that meet the challenges of climate change. Yet there remains a considerable gap

between this call for ‘decent work’ and fundamental rights, and the reality most workers face in the workplace.

For decades, employers have been attempting to increase profit margins by reorganizing work to make it more precarious, that is, insecure, unstable and deregulated (Graeber, 2019; Benanav, 2020). This includes subcontracting, offshoring, converting full-time jobs to part-time and temporary, and reclassifying direct employees as independent contractors. Employers have also introduced new technologies to cut jobs and adopted “just-in-time” scheduling practices to more precisely adjust work hours. In some sectors, like healthcare and education, many workers are often forced to work overtime and double-shifts (Armstrong and Armstrong, 2019). In others, such as food, hospitality and retail, employees often do not have enough hours of work and may even have to compete with other employees to get assigned shifts (Clawson and Gerstel 2014, Lambert, Haley-Lock, and Henly 2012). Employers have been able to accelerate these strategies due to neoliberal reforms that deregulated industries and made labour laws less protective, particularly for unionized sectors. Employers and government have worked together to rewrite laws and regulations; the result is greater rights for employers and investors, and fewer rights for workers (Luce 2014; Evans et al., 2021). Pushed to the margins, workers are in the fight of their lives: on the frontlines of the pandemic, in their homes and workplaces, for climate justice and against the daily precariousness of life under capitalist oppression and exploitation.

Across the Global South, it is estimated that 1.5 billion informal workers concentrated in cities, most of which are women, often children and amongst the most vulnerable, lost their job with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic – an amount equal to nearly half of the global workforce (UN News, 2020). Informal workers’ earnings, which comprise some two billion people worldwide, often without labour rights and social protections, have been cut in half. For migrant workers, a sector dominated by long-standing employment and human rights violations and exemptions, work and living conditions have gone from bad to worse, with a growing preponderance of non- or underpayment for work performed (Foley and Piper, 2021). And, for the first time in two decades, the number of child labourers has risen, which now stands at more than one-hundred and sixty million worldwide – an increase of more than eight million, with estimates suggesting this number could rise by more than forty-six million in the absence of extended social protections (UNICEF, 2021). The ILO’s 2022-23 Global Wage Report estimates that inflation rose between four and nearly ten percent across emerging and developing economies by the end of 2022. Increased costs of living disproportionately impact lower-income earners and their households because of the greater proportion of disposable income spent on essential goods and services.

In the Global North, job losses have also been concentrated in densely populated urban centres. In 2020, fifteen percent of the US workforce (26 million persons) applied for unemployment benefits, wiping out more than 22 million jobs created since 2010. It is estimated that nearly half of the US working age population is employed in low wage jobs, with forty-four percent of workers earning a median annual salary of \$18,000, or roughly \$10.22 per hour (Ross and Bateman, 2019). While European job losses were less severe through the pandemic, due largely to more robust government wage subsidy programs equal to 60-90 percent of wages and a broader social welfare net, it is estimated that upwards of 59 million jobs were lost, on top of cuts in pay and hours worked, while the Eurozone experienced the most significant economic

contraction in its history (Schnieder and Syrovatka, 2020; Kraemer, 2020; Strauss, 2020; Picchi, 2019). Globally, the share of labour income has declined by US\$3.7 trillion (8.3 percent), equivalent to roughly 4.4 percent of global GDP (CRS, 2021). By end of 2022, worker purchasing power was lower than before the pandemic began, declining 2.2 percent across the G20 and 1.4 percent globally, with the exception of China. Falling real wages have coincided with positive productivity growth, with the gap in 2022 reaching its widest point since the start of the twenty-first century at more than twelve percentage points above wage growth (ILO, 2023).

Urban poverty rates have risen sharply with close to one-hundred million joining the ranks of the extreme poor (earning less than US\$1.90 per day), and an additional eighty million more undernourished than before the pandemic. Cumulative per capita income losses over 2020-22, compared with pre-pandemic projections, are equivalent to 20 percent of GDP in the Global South (excluding China), while losses in the North are expected to be roughly half that (OECD, 2021). COVID-19 has dramatically accelerated the global restructuring of work, with the most prescient impacts being felt in urban centres. An estimated 255 million jobs were lost, with global unemployment increasing by thirty-three million, and more than eighty million leaving the ranks of the labour force altogether (ILO, 2022).

Loss of employment and income has disproportionately impacted youth, women, racialized and lower-educated workers who have experienced the most dramatic declines. Patterns of racialized urban labour market inequality have intensified as neoliberalism weakened labour market protections and income security policies (Acuto et al. 2020; Fanelli and Hudson, 2020). As a consequence, racialized groups and new immigrants often remain trapped in low-income occupations across the labour market (ILO, 2023; Ritchie, 2022). If present trends continue, these differential impacts are likely to leave a generational scar on labour force participation, productivity growth and global macroeconomic stability.

Urban Austerity and Inequality

In the context of growing precarity of job tenure and poverty, inequality has grown across various scales, from intra and inter-urban aspects, to regional, national and global dimensions (Nijman and Wei, 2020). In what follows, we illustrate the ways in which these processes overlap and are inextricably embedded in capital accumulation strategies that tend to reinforce spatial inequality and uneven development. The unequal relationship between ruling and ruled class is linked economically and institutionalized politically. Pandemic-induced insecurity has strengthened the grip of ruling classes worldwide. The speed and scale of billionaire growth is unprecedented, with the world's 2,755 billionaires worth \$13.1 trillion in 2021, up more than sixty-two percent from \$8 trillion just a year earlier (Jackson, 2021; Tognini, 2021). A recent report from Oxfam (2023) suggests that the richest 1 percent grabbed nearly two-thirds of all new wealth worth \$42 trillion created since 2020, almost twice as much money as the bottom 99 percent of the world's population. Likewise, top financial institutions have reported record profits all the while benefitting from a global tax system that conveys disproportionate advantages to the wealthy (Evans, 2021).

COVID-19 responses feature bailouts for big business and billionaires far in excess of relief efforts for vulnerable workers, those un(der)employed, ill, disabled, or elderly. For instance, the US \$2.2 trillion Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) offered

households \$500 per child and \$1,200 for individuals earning up to \$75,000, as well as extended unemployment insurance and an additional \$600 per week (transfers declining above that income threshold). If individuals owed outstanding debt, there was nothing preventing banks from garnishing the pandemic support (Dickerson, 2020). Small and medium sized businesses were required to make reasonable efforts to maintain their payroll and employees, including restrictions on issuing dividends and executive compensation but those same rules did not apply to large corporations receiving aid.

Likewise, the Federal Reserve and Treasury Department purchased \$750 billion in bonds issued by large corporations with no strings attached: no limits on dividends, executive compensation, stock buybacks, or employment levels. As Gibson (2020) reveals, “A recent analysis by the Joint Committee on Taxation found that more than 80% of the benefits of a change in the tax code for ‘pass-through’ businesses will go to Americans who make more than \$1 million per year.” If past practices are the best predictor of future performance, one need look no further than Trump’s 2017 dramatic corporate tax cuts to anticipate the impact of CARES. Advocates of the 2017 tax reforms claimed wages would rise, investments would surge, and the cuts would pay for themselves. Research by the Congressional Research Service found that wages did not rise, investments did not increase, and the tax cuts did not benefit government coffers. Instead, they led to a record-breaking upswell in corporate stock buybacks and dividends for shareholders worth over \$1 trillion, which reduced federal revenue by \$170 billion by end of 2018 (Gravelle and Marples, 2019).

These astonishing gains were made possible by decades of regressive tax cuts and billionaire-friendly regulations, which saw wealth surge over 1,100 percent between 1990–2018, all the while tax obligations as a percentage of wealth decreased by 80 percent since the 1980s (Collins et al., 2020). Indeed, even before the pandemic began the world’s wealthiest families were estimated to get \$4 million richer by the hour (Bloomberg, 2019). Likewise, approximations suggest that global losses from multinational corporations shifting their profits are worth some \$600 billion per year, with cash stashed in tax havens equal to at least 10 percent of the world economy (Shaxon, 2019).

Macro-level inequalities reproduce themselves in locally specific contexts through the intersections of multiple deprivations – lack of quality employment, low income, poor housing, ill-health, inadequate public transit, limited public services – and spatially segregated inequalities among urban residents. But cities are not only the victims of austerity urbanism (Peck 2012), they also create their own precarious circumstances through statecraft (Pike et al. 2019a; 2019b). Gentrification, neoliberal urbanism, austerity, and financialization are found beyond the Anglo-American context (Deruytter and Bassens 2021; Ward 2021; Fanelli, 2016) and extend to the Global South (Aalbers 2020). Putting this together, and focusing attention on extended urban zones, Biglieri et al. (2021, 564) write:

“Decades of underinvestment in social, health, housing and transformation infrastructures in the peripheries [of cities]...contributes to structure social vulnerabilities that are exacerbated by COVID-19, especially for demographic groups like older adults, immigrants, racialized folks, disabled individuals, and people living in poverty...As a consequence, we see health issues exacerbated by COVID-19 in the periphery, often located in the ‘forgotten densities’ of social housing, poorly maintained rental housing towers, prisons, group homes for the disabled, long term care (LTC) and retirement facilities.”

Generalized instability throughout the pandemic has not only stretched workers and maxed out supports for social reproduction, it has also left governments large and small saddled with large debts, with most unwilling to reverse the neoliberal assault on fiscal policy.

Already by the midway point of 2020, global economic stimulus amounted to \$10 trillion, three times more than the collective responses to the GFC (Cassim et al., 2020). By 2021, this had grown to over \$20 trillion, with the value of COVID-19 fiscal stimulus packages as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in some G20 countries surpassing more than 50 percent (IMF, 2020; OECD, 2021). A recent IMF report (2020b), spoke of the “difficult trade-offs between implementing measures to support near-term growth and avoiding a further buildup of debt that will be hard to service down the road.” While the IMF did recommend some modest tax and revenue measures to support the economy, it also cautioned of debt sustainability and reminded of the familiar need to remove targeted support in the future.

In a rare, candid moment of ruling class honesty, Mario Draghi, former President of the European Central Bank (2011-2019) and former Prime Minister of Italy (2021-22), alluded to what likely lies ahead, writing: “The loss of income incurred by the private sector — and any debt raised to fill the gap — must eventually be absorbed, wholly or in part, on to government balance sheets. Much higher public debt levels will become a permanent feature of our economies and will be accompanied by private debt cancellation” (Draghi, 2021). Like the GFC a decade earlier, private debt is increasingly at risk of becoming public debt, with corporations and the well-heeled disproportionately benefitting (Konzelmann 2019; Shefner and Blad 2020; Whiteside et al. 2021). The implications of this COVID turning point can be anticipated through earlier literature on the political economy of neoliberal private finance and public fiscal policy, though dynamics today are different from those of the 1980s given decades of neoliberalism and a dramatic pre-existing expansion of indebtedness for cities, workers, pensioners and even capitalists.

The resurgence of austerity following the GFC – and poised to return as COVID-19 emergency stimulus unwinds – are part of a longer historical trend (Blyth 2013) of neoliberal era spending restraint through balanced budget legislation and spending control, regressive taxation, growing mercantilism in fiscal federalism and protracted low growth/recession. Within this context, Streeck (2014) argues that for states long since starved of funds but with services, operations, and infrastructure costs to cover (even after significant episodes of privatization), the tax state has been transformed into a debt state – one which is heavily reliant upon credit accessed through financial markets for its financing. Useful though it may be, the concept of a ‘debt state’ ignores the nuance offered by broader ‘fiscal studies’ (Whiteside 2021) that capture the uneven distribution of budget cuts: expenditures on services, programs and employees (benefits, pensions, jobs) are quick to face the axe of fiscal restraint, but those budgetary elements which draw on the market for financing often escape unscathed through financialized urban governance (Peck and Whiteside 2016; Whiteside 2018).

Exposed like never before to the vagaries of financial markets and monetary policies, the presence of significant inflation in 2022-23 and promises of interest rate hikes through a renewal of monetarist-style class politics, are threats once more. The inflation debate has generated a good deal of controversy, with some arguing it is ‘transitory’ and others suggesting the rising price of

global commodities are here to stay. This has left policymakers with the difficult task of assessing whether it is prudent to continue raising interest rates sharply to tighten monetary policy, or whether such actions could lead to a prolonged recession. While a full discussion is not possible here, conventional monetarist approaches lament ‘excessive monetary injections’, while Keynesians lay blame at ‘excessive demand’.

As Roberts (2022) has noted, both approaches reveal the inadequacies of mainstream explanations of inflation and their policy remedies. There is little evidence to support a ‘wage-push’ explanation, and rapidly increasing interest rates essentially calls for creating unemployment to weaken the bargaining power of workers. While recognizing, to varying degrees, the supply-chain bottlenecks caused by the COVID pandemic, as well as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, both approaches misread the distributional conflict at the heart of inflation, particularly in the context of wholesale price gouging (i.e. higher corporate profit margins). As noted earlier, labour’s share of income and real wages have been falling, even as unemployment falls (Perkins, 2022; Bivens, 2022; Roberts, 2022b).

Building Worker Power: Inside and Outside the Workplace

Breaking the cycle of precarious work and rising inequality that has characterized the last four decades of austerity urbanism requires a radical political economic agenda that rejects the market-based remaking of urban life. For socialists, building worker power begins with organizing against those who make the rules – employers and expressions of class power through the tools of state action. The COVID-19 pandemic sparked wide public demands for protecting people’s standards of living against rapidly eroding purchasing power, precarity of job tenure and inequality. It was also painful reminder that domestic manufacturing capacity matters, whether ventilators, medical supplies, personal protective equipment or basic foodstuffs. What the world economy will look like a year from now, let alone ten or twenty, may be uncertain, but there is little denying that governments will have the difficult tasks of both ramping up spending to maintain standards of living and generating revenue needed to cover the emergency outlays.

Increasing urbanization and the outsized economic role of cities (and wider regions) are creating pressures to reform fiscal and governance capacities to foster the conditions for growth and social progress. In an era characterized by the geographical restructuring of economic relations and spatial reconstitution of state power to supra-national and local bodies, neoliberalism should not be read as a juxtaposition of state against market, but rather as a particular kind of state suited to capital in a historically specific conjuncture. Greg Albo notes (2007: 23) there are few reasons to suggest that “the national and global are on a scale that is any less human and practical than the local. This is not to deny the importance of the local in anti-neoliberal politics; nor the importance of the question of appropriate scale for post-capitalist societies. It is to insist, however, that local socio-ecological struggles cannot be delinked from – and are indeed always potentially representative of – universal projects of transcending capitalism on a world scale.” Building up local bases of power and administration must be connected to projects to transform national state power and to internationalize political struggles and alliances against the world capitalist market. The most effective internationalism at this stage is for each labour movement to try to learn as much as possible from others about the limits and possibilities of class struggles that are still inevitably locally based.

As Peck and Tickell (2012: 247–8) remind, the solution is not to re-double local efforts aimed at stimulating globally competitive urban environments: “but to challenge and ultimately transcend the extra-local rules of the game that were being shaped by the rolling process of neoliberalization, since the potential of local initiatives would always be limited by an essentially antithetical, competitive inter-local settlement.” Given this wider context, there is an urgent need to do more thinking about socialist alternatives to neoliberal urbanism, but only new organizational capacities will make such ideas politically viable. Various ‘rebel cities’ campaigns, for instance, are focusing on ‘living wages’, free public transit, social housing, public spaces that are protected from commercialization and anti-poverty initiatives. Making the case for expanded public services counters the prevailing orthodoxy of neoliberalism — one that challenges private accumulation as the engine of economic growth — and raises a set of demands for non-commodified labour and services (McBride, 2022).

While challenging the policies of neoliberalism is important and necessary, so too is confronting the wider capitalist politics that leaves those with nothing to sell but their labour power market-dependent. Central to any radical political economic project will be the rebuilding and remaking of trade union capacities. Aside from the socio-economic advantages to being unionized — higher wages, pensions, benefits, job security — organized labour has a long history of shaping social policy in the interests of working class communities and strengthening the social wage — public services or benefits that people receive in supplement of their wages earned from work and paid for by redistributing wealth through the tax system (Himelfarb and Himelfarb 2013). Compensation in unionized workplaces tends to be more equitable overall, with relatively higher wages for lower paid workers and less of a wage gap for women, younger workers and racialized groups. Unionized workers are also more likely to be full-time, permanent and to work longer for their employers. And unionized environments tend to be safer, with lower rates of critical injuries, mobility impairments, lost-time due to injury claims and broader support services (Petach and Wyant, 2023; Jones and Schmitt, 2014; Banerjee et al., 2021).

Unions also exert political pressure outside the workplace, such as raising a series of demands for pay equity and equal pay for work of equal value, the undervaluation and occupational segregation of women and other groups, struggles for changes to human rights legislation, and same-sex spousal benefits. As Susan Hayter and Jelle Visser (2018: 4) recount: “It was considered desirable that the norms and rules negotiated between organized employers and the union(s) be made generally applicable.” In the wake of neoliberalism, general applicability is no longer the case, if it ever was. Advancements for workers via collective bargaining are illustrative of capitalist class concessions fought for and won over the course of intergenerational class struggles, not privileges bestowed by employers or the benevolence of the state. Higher rates of unionization also often lead to increased democratic participation outside of work (Sojourner 2013). Alex Bryson and colleagues (2014) argue that union members have historically been more likely to participate in general elections than non-members, cultivating a broader civic culture and participation in democratic politics. Union members are also more likely to vote and engage in a range of pro-social civic behaviours, including the signing of petitions, attending public meetings and/or volunteering for political parties. In other words, building power at work in the form of higher rates of unionization tends to contribute to a life-long attachment to democratic politics outside of it.

In contrast to the postwar class compromise, the ability of organized labour to help secure increases in social spending, impart political pressure for more progressive taxation and improved equality for all workers is at an impasse. Should the trendline continue, this could have significant implications for labour in an era characterized by the resurgence of right-wing authoritarianism (Thomas and Tufts, 2016; Greenhouse 2019; Albo et al., 2019). But unions are paradoxical institutions, simultaneously advancing workers' interests but rarely challenging the prevailing power relations at work. James Rinehart (2006, 203-4) has noted that while unions might nibble away at the margins of power, they do not alter the subordination of labour that lies at the root of capitalist class power. Unions remain one of the few mechanisms through which workers can affect change inside and outside of their workplaces, but if trade unions are to deepen and extend their political influence and organizational capacities, it is incumbent on a wider revitalization of working-class politics that can address wider social dislocations in and outside of the workplace.

Community and labour activists continue to struggle with new ways of understanding the relationship of movements to one another, their shared interests and how to build solidaristic political capacities. However, it is becoming ever more difficult to envision the “democratic capitalism” that has animated so much of social democracy as a feasible alternative to neoliberalism. As Berman and Snegovaya (2019) uncover, “From the late nineteenth through the late twentieth century, the distinguishing feature of the social-democratic left was its insistence – in contrast to communists, liberals, and others – that it was possible to use the democratic state to mitigate or even eliminate capitalism’s most destructive effects” Social democracy emerged in a historically specific capitalist conjuncture and constellation of class relations. The social democratic link is significant, especially through the post-war ‘golden age’, as Keynes’ ideas helped to establish the policy and ideological terrains enabling liberal state intervention.

But the social democratic welfare state has had the paradoxical effect of deepening and extending commodification not, as is frequently argued, decommodifying public services. These initiatives accelerated commodification through full-employment policies and the expansion of services, which bound the working class to the imperatives of capital. These short-term, historical interludes quietly consolidated capital’s control by legitimating the social subordination of labour via impartial social welfare inducements as a patch onto the flawed fabric of capitalism until they were unleashed onto the world market. In this regard, social democracy has, time and again, proven itself unable or worse unwilling, to challenge the power of capital for democratic control over workplaces, politics and the economy (Albo, 2007; Sharzer, 2012; Schwartz and Sunkara, 2017).

The politics of austerity that has emerged since 2008 take further steps toward the privatization of the public sector, deploying anti-democratic measures in defense of austerity and market freedoms. Capitalist class and state militancy against workers and working class standards of living has been a hallmark of so-called post-COVID-19 public policy as reflected in increasing back-to-work legislation, sharp reductions to pandemic relief, the growing threat and use of anti-labour legislation, increased private sector provisioning and legislated caps on public sector wages.

Against this context, organized labour cannot transcend the institutional and legal limitations that dictate so much of its behaviour; this requires: a left as much outside as inside of formal trade union structures to build the capacities of workers to fight back against concessionary demands; develop a movement inside the union that pushes for enhanced democratic participation and control; pursues a radically feminist, anti-racist, class-struggle-oriented political praxis that engages with the struggles of the broader community; and educational efforts intent on building a mass of workers and activists that embody both intellectual understanding and engagement. The challenge before the left today is not just one of policies but of politics – to inspire and rebuild a socialist movement across the diverse cleavages of working class communities.

Conclusion

In 2020, the *Financial Times* felt compelled to reason that, “Radical reforms – reversing the prevailing policy direction of the last four decades – will need to be put on the table. They must see public services as investments rather than liabilities and look for ways to make labour markets less secure. Redistribution will again be on the agenda; the privileges of the elderly and wealthy in question. Policies until recently considered eccentric, such as basic income and wealth taxes, will have to be in the mix.” That the *Financial Times* lists as ‘radical’ the protection of public services, less insecure labour markets, a basic income and implementation of wealth taxes indicates not only the limit of its vision but also how ripe the moment is for change.

Real change begins with challenging the structural power of capital shaping production and social reproduction. Rather than limiting political possibilities to forms of timid redistribution that merely enable the poor to keep their heads above water, combatting precariousness requires taking on hard questions like what happens pre-distribution through state power to fiscally support cities now resorting to austerity, and how distribution is determined through property rights. Even the IMF (2020) recently proposed ramping up income, property and wealth taxes, modeled as a “solidarity surcharge,” noting that profit shifting by multinational corporations in tax havens undermines both public revenue and faith in the fairness of the tax system. Public policies, of course, matter, including the form of state interventions to support value-added activity, such as requirements for domestic processing, limits on exports of unrefined resources, the use of fiscal subsidies to encourage downstream investments and the direct allocation of public equity capital in large-scale resource projects.

Given that the world of work begins at home, the ILO has also called for new investments that more evenly distribute unpaid care work, from parental leave to public care services, which would increase opportunities to engage in paid employment; universal entitlements to lifelong learning via active labour market policies that provide opportunities for re/upskilling; proactive universal social protections that support people’s needs over the life cycle; new investments in the institutions of work, from regulations and employment contracts to collective bargaining and labour inspection systems; expanded “time sovereignty,” that is, the right to disconnect from work and greater autonomy over working time; and harnessing technology – artificial intelligence, automation and robotics – in a manner that prioritizes human well-being, regulates data use and algorithmic accountability in the world of work.

With governments increasingly detached from the demands of ordinary people and hostile toward tripartite compromises with labour, public involvement in formal politics has declined significantly (McBride and Whiteside, 2011). This has contributed to both an increased public disdain for and seeming indifference to politics, which is indicative of a broader crisis with deeper roots – namely, that western electoral democracies are not, and never have been, wholly democratic to begin with (Pilon, 2018). In the absence of substantive alternatives, mounting inequality and social polarization have led to a resurgence of populist, anti-establishment parties, often manifest as a rural/suburban ‘working class’ or ‘common folk’ vs. an urban ‘liberal elite’ which is not only empirically imaginary in class terms, but also grossly exaggerates polarization for political effect. The ‘centre’, like social democratic politics more widely, is a politics devoid of adversaries, and increasingly a spent force neither able to provide a convincing intellectual explanation of what has been happening over the last forty years, nor connect with the various layers of the working class negatively affected by the consequences of neoliberal de-democratization.

The decade of austerity that has followed in the wake of the GFC and, now COVID-19, reveals how constituted state powers remain political obstacles requiring strategic address, not theoretical abstractions. If an emancipatory politics of resistance is to emerge, it will do so from multiple scales through a national politics of transformation that is internationalist in its commitments. In other words, local bases of power need to be integrated into revolutionary projects to transform national state power and to internationalize political struggles and alliances against the world capitalist market. Building working class power, unionized and non-unionized, waged and unwaged, across the diversity of those with nothing to sell but the labour power is therefore the primary political imperative of the twenty-first century.

Socialism was a dirty word a decade ago, but today it not only offers an anti-capitalist future, it also brings new life to the political-economic arena by offering alternatives to a dire pandemic and looming ecological collapse. Common cause on existential threats to health and environment makes the task of reorganizing space and society in more socially just and equitable ways all the more urgent. As James Meadway (2021) has noted: “COVID-19 emerged at a specific point in our history. It has spread because of how we organize ourselves, and the path the pandemic takes from here onwards will depend on that social organization...COVID is, in other words, a disease of capitalism, and it is in this register that it is best understood.” Executive power is increasingly inoculated from parliamentary scrutiny and accountability all the while multiplying state surveillance, legalized restrictions and policing modalities for the disciplining of dissent by the ‘austerity state’. With cities as epicentres of capitalist and coronavirus disease, the urban dimensions of the pandemic have tracked those of exploitation and immiseration more generally, with effects exacerbated by local government deficiencies wrought through austerity and neoliberalization.

COVID-19 responses have underlined the enduring importance of an active and interventionist state at multiple scales of governance in the making and remaking of global capitalism (Panitch and Gindin, 2015). Better labour laws, improved social protections and a stronger voice for workers’ organizations will be central to any successful and sustainable recovery (Evans et al., 2022). The welfare states of the postwar era were only possible because millions of people demanded change. If the working class is going to break from its political paralysis it is

dependent upon a wider renewal of a politics left of social democracy – a spent force increasingly an impediment to, rather than an instrument of, truly progressive politics – and must be rooted in a broad class politics that prioritizes building new institutions, engaging in direct action, running for office, organizing in our workplaces and communities. In other words, a politics that confronts both the authoritarian/anti-democratic politics of the right and transcends the debilitating “post-politics” of radical centrism (Albo and Leys, 2022). Liberal democratic capitalism is increasingly losing legitimacy. But what comes next may be a form of right-wing populism, supported by nationalist politicians and movements looking to close borders and blame immigrants and trade for economic insecurity. This uncertainty raises the question, without any foregone conclusions, of whether working class movements will be able to unite to radically shift the balance of class forces. Potential initiatives are political choices, not simple determinants of economic competitiveness.

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