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Labour in Pandemic Capitalism

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Abstract

This article aims to point out some of the main destructive trends in relation to the working class that, although not caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, are being widely intensified amid this health crisis. Thus, the intention is to show that the antisocial metabolism of the capital system has been developing 'laboratories' to experiment with labour, driven by large corporations and digital platforms, of which 'Uberised work' and remote working from home are examples, and that these trends have tended to expand in the post-pandemic period, further aggravating the precarious conditions of the working class on a global scale. Long working hours, intense forms of exploitation and the complete lack of labour rights constitute some of the main proofs of these precarious conditions, resulting in the elimination of large sectors of the working class that have become superfluous and disposable, thus increasing unemployment.

Keywords

pandemic and working class – Uberisation of work – work on digital platforms – capitalism – destructiveness – lethality

Experimenta in corpore vili [Experiments on a worthless body] like those of anatomists on frogs, were formally made.¹

1 K. Marx, 'Capital. Volume 1: The Process of Production of Capital', in *Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, Collected Works*, vol. 35 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), 460.

The Pandemic of Capital

The interrelation between the economic crisis and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused profound impacts and consequences for the section of humanity that relies on its own labour to subsist. In addition to high global mortality rates, there has been a significant increase in the number of impoverished and extremely poor working-class individuals globally. For huge portions of this contingent, who are unemployed or working in the informal economy, the situation has become truly desperate, as the examples of India and Brazil tragically confirm.²

Similar phenomena, although different in intensity, have also been occurring in several countries in the Global North. In the United States, for example, we saw homeless workers sleeping on pavements, public squares and makeshift carparks, with stalls with walls chalked out on the floor so that there was no contamination. More than 33 million workers applied for unemployment benefit in May 2020, in addition to forming huge queues at food banks. Moreover, the United States has shown the world the complete hollowness of its privatised health care system under President Donald Trump's denialist government, endowed with proto-fascist tendencies. All of this helps to explain why the richest country in the world had, for many months, the highest levels of mortality during 2020.

In Brazil, where we find intense exploitation of labour and deterioration of working conditions and labour rights, the consequences, socially, have been even more perverse. A few examples: more than 40% of the Brazilian working class was in the informal sector at the end of 2019, just before the start of the pandemic. At the time, more than 5 million workers were employed in 'Uberised work', which is characterised by the complete lack of labour rights. There was also a growing mass of individuals who were unemployed, under-employed, or in outsourced, intermittent and/or precarious work, as in the rest of the Global South.

This was the tragic situation before the pandemic; the picture at present, amid this terrible crisis, is even bleaker. What, then, can be expected in relation to the working class? At the base of the social pyramid, will the section of humanity that works – and in particular, the working class – be able to prevent such destruction and begin to overcome the dominance of capital? Or, to formulate the question differently: what can be expected from the social

2 In this article, I readdress a set of theses and formulations presented especially in the e-book R. Antunes, *Coronavírus: O Trabalho Sob Fogo Cruzado* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2020).

metabolism of the capital system,³ which at this moment has proved to be so tragic for the portion of humanity that relies on its own labour to subsist?

This obliges us, initially, to indicate what we mean by ‘the social metabolism of the capital system’.

If it was Marx, in *Capital* (Vol. 1),⁴ who provided the rich metaphor of ‘social metabolism’ to better understand the complex gears and mechanisms that move and set in motion the capital system, we owe it to István Mészáros’ originality and critical density, especially in *Beyond Capital*,⁵ where the Marxian formulation underwent a rich and broad analytical development, capable of providing the intellection of this system which is, ultimately, more and more destructive.

The social metabolism of the capital system is, according to Mészáros, the result of a historically constituted process, seeking to make capital-production the purpose of society. As it is a complex economic gear with unlimited expansion (for its focus is always the production of more capital), its results are achieved by means of marked destructiveness. In order to accomplish this movement of self-valourisation of capital, the authentic mechanisms of human interaction – in particular, labour activity – are essentially geared toward the accumulation and reproduction of capital.⁶

These unfortunate trends found a more favourable social ground after the structural crisis of capital,⁷ which erupted between 1968 and 1973 and later in 2008–09, allowing them to gradually emerge and intensify, with well-known consequences, including dizzying rhythms of deterioration of labour; unlimited destruction of nature; degradation of the rural world, converted into the agribusiness and many other forms of predatory extractive activity; and urban and social segregation. Alienation and estrangement, environmental devastation, oppression related to gender, race and ethnicity: all these aberrations are being unleashed from the most abject dungeons, the most dismal catacombs and fossilised caves, which in some cases appeared to be closed.

Furthermore, strong social eugenics, exacerbation of racism, gender oppression, xenophobia, homophobia, sexism, as well as the spread of the aberrant cult of obscurantism (opposition to scientific knowledge, denialism, etc.) are among many destructive traits that develop in this era of aggravation of the instrumental reason and preventive counter-revolution, according to Hebert

3 I. Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition* (London: Merlin Press, 1995).

4 Marx, ‘Capital. Volume 1’.

5 Mészáros, *Beyond capital*.

6 Ibid., 522.

7 See also I. Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010).

Marcuse⁸ and the Brazilian sociologist Florestan Fernandes.⁹ In this scenario, almost everything must ultimately serve or boost the capital valourisation process, with the consequent private enrichment of the ruling and proprietary bourgeois classes, while private property and the corporate universe remain untouched. It is clear, then, how difficult and complex it is to overcome this system, which is expansionist, since its *modus operandi* is essentially oriented towards the ever-increasing extraction of surplus value; destructive due to the unlimited direction of its movements; and, therefore, uncontrollable.¹⁰

Social production, which should meet human social needs, has been fully subordinated to the imperatives of capital's self-reproduction, causing devastating consequences for humanity, including monumental unemployment, environmental destruction, the commodification of life, and daily encouragement for new wars and armed conflicts, in addition to the many elements that we have already indicated, and has led up to this pandemic era that has accentuated the lethal dimension of the capital system. To provide an analytical understanding of this process, Mészáros came up with the concept of decreasing rate of utilisation of the use-value of goods. This trend is expressed in the reduction in the useful life of products, because the shorter their durability, the greater the need to reproduce them, regardless of real human needs, aiming to increase the intensity and pace of the valourisation process.¹¹

Instead of the produced goods being conceived as use-values to meet human social needs, the exact opposite occurs, since the profitability of the capital system is inversely proportional to the useful life of goods, which makes it in itself and for itself a destructive system whose imperative drives are to create more and more commodities. That is why cars, household appliances, cell phones, in short, everything produced must last as short a time as possible.¹²

What can be said then of a production system that expands the more it reduces the useful life of what it produces, thus increasing its destructive tendency? It would be a true miracle if this real Frankenstein did not, over time, reveal the virulence and lethality of its way of being and reproducing. Karl Polanyi's metaphor of the satanic mill could not be more timely.¹³

8 H. Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

9 F. Fernandes, *A Revolução Burguesa no Brasil* (São Paulo: Globo, 2006).

10 See Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, especially 522–46.

11 Ibid., especially 547–79.

12 Ibid., 617. See also R. Antunes, *Farewell to Work: Essays on the World of Work's Metamorphoses and Centrality* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming) and idem, *The Meanings of Work: Essay on the Affirmation and Negation of Work* (Leiden: Brill; and Chicago: Haymarket, 2012), especially 5–14.

13 K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

The result of this metabolic engineering is clear. On the one hand, we have the exuberance of global corporations that concentrate part of the world's wealth and develop themselves intensively in contemporary capitalism. On the other hand, we see the proliferation of misery, creating a myriad of vilified types of human labour, where anything goes: slavery-like situations, overexploitation (for example, of immigrants), generalisation of outsourcing in all labour spheres, informality and intermittency. Anyway, 'new modes' of compulsory extraction of surplus value have spread to encompass the world, from China to Brazil, from the United States to South Africa, from India to Mexico, from France to Russia, from Japan to the Philippines, and from England to South Korea.¹⁴

A New Era of Devastation of Work

It was in this context of structural crisis of capital that the pandemic struck, leading millions of workers to death and unemployment. Preliminary ILO data, calculated at the beginning of the COVID-19 health crisis, estimated an initial loss of 195 million full-time jobs, with an additional 1.6 billion entering the informal sector.

With COVID-19 advancing into its second year, we know that the numbers are even higher, considering the invisibility that characterises the world of work in our time, a trend that intensified during the pandemic, because the estimation of so-called discouraged workers becomes even more difficult.

The example of Brazil is illuminating and signals the trend that has been developing in the countries of the periphery. The existence of the antisocial metabolism of the capital system in a time of profound structural crisis found a tragic confluence with the outbreak of COVID-19, making what I call pandemic or virotic capitalism more visible. The first manifestation of this is found in its deep discrimination based on social class, since the pandemic has hit the working class, especially its most impoverished sections, much harder. With the steep growth in the number of workers unable to earn enough for subsistence, the level of infection and lethality increased sharply, taking a particularly harsh toll on the working masses.

The bourgeois class – including its senior management retinue, which holds much of the wealth produced socially – has access to ample hospital resources and privileged housing conditions, which allows them to choose the best

14 R. Antunes, *O privilégio da Servidão: o novo proletariado de serviços na era digital* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2018).

conditions for social distancing (lockdowns), while the labour class struggles tenaciously, every day, to survive, trying to escape the unemployment, hunger and lethality caused by the pandemic, especially in the Global South, where these trends are even more acute. The example also applies to the children of the proletariat; poor children of school age are unable to obtain food if they cannot attend public schools because of the pandemic. However, if they attend school, they can be infected and transmit COVID-19 to their families.

This is how the first death of a black domestic worker occurred in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: she got infected while taking care of her employer who had contracted COVID-19 shortly after returning from a tourist trip to Italy. The employer recovered, but the black domestic worker died.

This example also exposes the unequal socio-sexual-racial and ethnic division of labour, since the working class is much more at risk than the bourgeois and the upper middle class. And, in a succession of horrors, white working women also suffer more than white men. This is evident in the high rates of domestic violence and femicide during the pandemic. And, following the social chain of inequality, black, indigenous, immigrant and refugee female workers also suffer more than white women. It is worth noting that, in Brazil, there are 6.2 million female domestic workers, of which 68 per cent are black.¹⁵

All of this illustrates a visceral contradiction that affects the working class, which is on the 'razor's edge'. We know that, when COVID-19 cases soared, lockdowns had to be decreed in order to protect the population and contain the spread of the virus. If lockdowns had not been imposed, the working class would have been increasingly infected, becoming ill and dying at a greater rate.

However, a crucial question arises: how should a lockdown be conducted if the vast majority of the working class who are unemployed have no way of obtaining resources for minimal subsistence? How can those employed in the informal sector, in intermittent, Uberised, outsourced jobs without basic workers' rights, receive remuneration if they do not perform any work? The very limited emergency support in the countries of the periphery, in the Global South, was insignificant and lasted for very short durations.

This is why the pandemic has also helped expose the fallacy of what businesspeople euphemistically calls 'entrepreneurship', capital's new ideological vilification that serves to both mask and obliterate wage relations and to hide other full evidence, given that virotic capitalism does not even have a minimum

15 IPEA (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada [Institute for Applied Economic Research]), *Texto para discussão 2528*, https://www.ipea.gov.br/porta1/images/stories/PDFs/TDs/td_2528.pdf (accessed 13 May 2020).

social policy to minimise the suffering of the unemployed. It then resorts to ideological mockery, with the aim of introducing them as 'new entrepreneurs'.

That is why, in *O Privilégio da Servidão* [The Privilege of Servitude],¹⁶ I characterised the 'entrepreneur' as having an oscillating valuative conscience, at times closer to the neoliberal ideology, which makes them imagine themselves as a *bourgeois-of-themself* and, at times as a consequence of enormous exploitation and plunder, seeing themselves as a *proletarian-of-themself*.

The working class, then, is under intense crossfire. Between unemployment and infection, their daily lives in the pandemic oscillate between hunger and the search for work, with the constant risk of illness and death. This socially unequal situation concerning the working class is accentuated significantly in countries that are outside the Global North, of which India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa are emblematic examples.

In Brazil and India, in particular, devastating neoliberal policies have remained in effect, if not intensified, prioritising the enrichment of their respective bourgeois classes. Both are countries of the Global South with strong economies, but profound inequality. This situates them among those countries in which the wealth of the bourgeoisie is in abysmal contrast to the poverty and misery of the popular classes. In India, poverty is aggravated by its enormous population in addition to the nefarious symbiosis between the class and caste systems, which further increases the levels of poverty.

If this was the situation before the pandemic, it is not difficult to point out, as we will see below, that in the post-pandemic world matters will be more serious and difficult. It is in this context that the permanence and even expansion of unemployment, underemployment, overexploitation, precariousness, informality and intermittency present as a 'natural' trend. This hypothesis becomes more plausible since the COVID-19 pandemic has been aggravating the social abyss that characterises not only the two countries mentioned above, but the entire Global South, while indicating that the countries of the Global North will also not be immune to these destructive trends in relation to work. Given that the globalised capitalism of our time has an *uneven and combined* characteristic, the near future is much more fraught with fear than with optimism.

If this global social representation is well-founded, it does not seem an exaggeration to point out that the *antisocial metabolism of the capital system* has now itself assumed the form of *virotic capitalism*.

16 According to Antunes, *O Privilégio da Servidão*.

The Pandemic of Uberisation

It was amid this devastating social concatenation that the world of work ran into a 'second pandemic': *the pandemic of Uberisation*. This strong trend, which had been spreading in the world of work even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, found new conditions to facilitate its expansion during the pandemic.

This process has been implemented through the dissemination of work on digital platforms – which are in fact large global corporations – responsible for the creation of Uberised work. Without any available work and employment alternatives, a growing mass of surplus workers finds its only possibility of earning is through companies such as Amazon (and Amazon Mechanical Turk), Uber (and Uber Eats), Cabify, 99, Google, Facebook, Airbnb, Lyft, Ifood, Glovo, Deliveroo, Rappi, and many others that are spreading throughout the world. These are corporations that, under the hegemony of financial capital,¹⁷ have at least three essential elements in their operations:

- 1) the intensive use of information and communication technologies (ICTs);
- 2) the availability of an immense surplus labour force, eager to accept 'any job' as long as they receive some remuneration;
- 3) the requirement that these new workers become 'service providers', 'self-employed' or 'entrepreneurs,' so as to be able to exclude them completely from the social legislation that protects workers.

Thus, the great 'secret' of digital platforms is that they manage to carry out a profound metamorphosis in labour relations, by assigning to workers the status of 'service providers' who are 'self-employed', in order to circumvent the labour legislation in force in the countries in which they operate. In order to accomplish this 'masterstroke', they almost always rely on the acquiescence and subjection of governments, as well as the legislative and judicial powers, to become highly profitable. The unemployed working class, then, can only attempt to escape this scourge by means of Uberisation.

Naturally, this destructive phenomenon in relation to the working class and the rights it has obtained with much struggle over decades and even centuries has been expanding significantly in several sectors of production (used here in a broad sense). It has proved particularly agile and speedy in the services

17 See F. Chesnais, *La mondialisation du capital* (Paris: Syros, 1994); and from the same author, see also *Finance Capital Today: Corporations and Banks in the Lasting Global Slump* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

sector, which has been intensely privatised and commodified over the past few decades, while also expanding into industry and agriculture.¹⁸

Since capital does not stop expanding into other spaces, increasingly using ICTs and digital technologies, we are also witnessing the expansion of the working class employed in call centres, telemarketing, agribusiness, banks, commerce, fast food, tourism and hotels, and so on. And this trend has intensified in the last decade, with the development of the so-called Industry 4.0, a proposal conceived to enable a new technological leap in the world of production, further increasing automation and robotisation, practically throughout value-production chains.¹⁹

Another social consequence of these movements of corporate capital is the enormous expansion of this new contingent of the proletariat, which Ruy Braga and I call the infoproletariat and which Ursula Huws has designated the cybertariat.²⁰

Thus, the trend, already present and visible long before the pandemic broke out, was clear. It was a matter of further reducing living labour,²¹ replacing manual and traditional activities with automated and robotic tools under informational command, making *living labour* more 'residual' in the most advanced digital plants and pushing it into more 'manual' activities, which are still heavily used by capital – especially (but not only) in the Global South – when not laying them off. As a result, the surplus labour force is expanded even more, which ends up further lowering the levels of remuneration of the working class.

Here it is necessary to readdress another central element that also intensified during the pandemic. We know that the destruction of the workforce is a trend that has been present in the logic of the antisocial metabolism of the capital system since its beginnings. It was why Marx caustically observed:

Capitalist production [...], more than any other mode of production, it squanders human lives, or living labour, and not only blood and flesh, but also nerve and brain. [...] Since all of the economising here discussed arises from the social nature of labour, it is indeed just this directly social nature of labour which causes the waste of life and health.²²

18 Antunes, *O privilégio da Servidão*.

19 R. Antunes, ed. *Uberização, Trabalho Digital e Indústria 4.0* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2020).

20 See R. Antunes and Ruy Braga, eds., *Infoproletários: degradação real do trabalho virtual* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2009); and U. Huws, *The Making of a Cybertariat: Virtual Work in a Real World* (London: Merlin Press, 2003).

21 Marx, 'Capital. Volume 1'.

22 K. Marx, 'Capital. Volume 3: The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole', in *Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, Collected Works*, vol. 37 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), 92.

But to this destructive sense in relation to the workforce must be added another of Marx's basic theses: capital cannot completely eliminate work, because, if it does so, its own reproduction will be compromised. This is why the destruction of living labour cannot lead to the complete extinction of human labour activity. The extraction of surplus labour was, is and will continue to be the ontological foundation of the value-form and surplus value, since machines cannot create it, although they do exponentially increase surplus value.²³

Thus, in this new period of expansion of dead labour, through the introduction of new informational machinery and the replacement of human activities with automated tools under digital command, capital valourisation itself cannot do without living labour.

It was the pandemic that exasperated that reality. This was why the global business community sought, in any way possible, to prevent the recurrent use of lockdowns: without production there is no profit and no creation of surplus value. A global human tragedy (the COVID-19 pandemic) needed to occur so the mistaken 'Eurocentric' theses about the end of work (and, consequently, the end of the proletariat), showed its enormous fragility. The myth that capitalism could subsist on technology, without the exploitation of the labour force and the extraction of surplus value (given that we have entered the 'knowledge society', based on immateriality and intersubjectivity), proved to be deeply mistaken.²⁴ The synthesis below is perhaps the most sophisticated expression of the great misunderstanding. According to Habermas:

the utopia of a labour society lost its persuasive force [...] Above all, the utopian idea of a labouring society of independent producers has lost its persuasive power [...] Above all, it is because that utopian idea has lost its point of reference in reality: the power of abstract labour to give structure and form to a society. [...] Emancipated living conditions worthy of human beings are no longer seen as arising directly from a revolution in working conditions, that is, from a transformation of heteronomous Labour into self-directed activity.²⁵

23 Marx, 'Capital. Volume 1'.

24 See, for example, J. Habermas, 'Technology and Science as "Ideology"', in his *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); A. Gorz, *The Immaterial* (London: Seagull Books, 2010).

25 J. Habermas, 'The New Obscurity', in J. Habermas and S. W. Nicholson, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 4–5.

The pandemic has highlighted, once again, the crucial and determinant importance of work for capital valorisation, a phenomenon that has occurred since the Industrial Revolution and has been accelerating with ICTs. It also evidenced the despair of the antisocial metabolism of the capital system, whose opposition to the lockdown occurred in a generalised way. Thus, the pressure for the 'economy', for the 'return to production' at any cost, to the detriment of the health of the working population, added a new ingredient to capitalism, which, in addition to being destructive, assumed a clear lethal dimension, incapable of even hiding the disdain for human life. The subterfuge used was to say that the return to work was to 'guarantee jobs', as has been said, for instance, in Brazil since the beginning of the pandemic. Once again, the shamelessness of the bourgeois class became evident.

It was within this logic that the capitalist system acted in two ways. On the one hand, it sought to prevent lockdowns; on the other, it leveraged the pandemic to develop new laboratories to experiment with work, aiming at creating 'new', even more intense ways of exploiting work.

The main result of these capital laboratories was the realisation of the enormous scope to expand Uberised work, allowing companies to use the huge mass of unemployed people almost without limits. In various parts of the world, we can see the results of combining the refusal to comply with labour legislation, the use of cutting-edge technology, the encouragement to individualisation, and the consequent weakening of trade unions and class movements, all in a phase of structural crisis characterised by the expansion of the reserve army.

The form of work that is expanding the most in present-day capitalism, Uberised work, has the following working conditions: working hours are increasingly strenuous, reaching 16 or more hours a day, often without weekly rest; wages steadily lowered, even during the pandemic; transport/delivery app workers can be dismissed at any time by a unilateral decision of the company, which does not even need to justify the decision; the maintenance costs of vehicles, motorcycles, bicycles, cell phones and necessary equipment are the exclusive responsibility of the delivery personnel, configuring a reality where binomial exploitation/plundering go together.²⁶

This nefarious symbiosis between intermittent work, and digital and informational artefacts allowed me to present the thesis that platform capitalism,

26 See the wide set of studies presented in R. Antunes, ed., *Uberização, Trabalho Digital e Indústria 4.0*.

driven by major global financial corporations, has been practising work modes that are similar to the protoform of capitalism.²⁷

This apparent paradox occurs exactly because, in the most technologically advanced era, with the expansion of algorithms, artificial intelligence, the internet of things (or industrial internet of things), big data, machine learning system, Industry 4.0 and 5G, we are also experiencing the expansion of work modes typical of the age of the constitution of capitalism, suffering, at present, from the vicissitudes of what I call digital slavery.²⁸

It seems all too evident that digital-informational technological advances do not have the basic objective of improving the living conditions of the working class. This is exemplified by the confrontation between the US company Apple and the Chinese company Huawei. The dispute between the two giant digital corporations does not imply, even in the distant future, any improvement in working conditions and wages.

The example of the global outsourcing company Foxconn, which produces Apple products at its production facilities in China, is also enlightening. This plant saw 17 suicide attempts in 2010, of which 13 people actually died.²⁹ And its competitor, Huawei, as well as Alibaba, both Chinese, set a 'good example' of the working conditions they practice, as both use the '9-9-6 system', in which workers work from 9 am to 9 pm, every day, for 6 days a week.³⁰ These working hours resemble conditions in 18th- and 19th-century Manchester.

Thus, if technological invention is, since its beginnings, the result of the activity of humanity, it is imperative to add that the antisocial metabolism of the capital system, since the generalisation of commodity production and the advent of industrial capitalism, introduced a 'second nature'. Its first and basic objective is to be a driving force for capital valorisation regardless of whether this intensifies the degradation of work, increases the destruction of nature, increases social inequalities between classes, impoverishes huge portions of humanity that rely on their work to subsist and so on. But the 'satanic mill' is not just about that. In addition to Uberised work, there are other experiments underway in the labour laboratories, which have also been intensified during the pandemic, and will be widely used in the post-pandemic period. Let us take just one emblematic example: remote work.

27 R. Antunes, 'Trabalho Intermitente e uberização do trabalho no limiar da indústria 4.0', in Antunes, ed., *Uberização, Trabalho Digital e Indústria 4.0*, 11–22.

28 Antunes, *O privilégio da Servidão*.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

Right from the start, the advantages of remote work for companies are all too evident: there is a stimulus to the individualisation of work, which is separated from spaces of sociability and collective work, where relationships of solidarity and awareness of working conditions tend to flourish.

Consequently, individualisation of work also weakens union and class organisation, providing loopholes for the elimination of labour rights and the conversion of wage earners into 'entrepreneurs'. Their household expenses, as we know, are also significantly increased, since remote work in a home office requires better digital equipment, furniture, and so on.

Another important point, when thinking about the everyday life of the working class, is that remote work obliterates the separation between working time and living time, as the working space becomes confused and merged with the private, microcosmic family universe. And this juxtaposition between productive work and reproductive work has had profound consequences, such as the duplication and intensification of women's work, further expanding the unequal socio-sexual, racial and ethnic division of labour.

It is also worth noting that companies are becoming increasingly equipped to digitally control the productive activities carried out in the home office, in order to prevent distraction and the replacement of work with other reproductive activities. In addition to this set of control tools implemented through a new digital panopticon, we know that the corporate ideology repeats, ad nauseam, that in the corporate universe of our time, the 'goals', 'collaborators', 'partners' and 'entrepreneurs' must be increasingly 'resilient', among other adulterations of the lexicon that modify the true etymological meaning of these words. In doing so, this ideology seeks to inculcate these 'values' more deeply in workers' subjectivity. The result is a deeper control and subjection of what Gramsci called the 'psycho-physical nexus of work' (a formulation that appears in his seminal criticism of Taylorism and Fordism), in which he also denounced corporate attempts to control the sexuality of workers.³¹

There are also points that can benefit the working class. For example, reduced hours spent on commuting to work; more freedom to manage working hours; being closer to their children; consuming better food at home; and so forth. However, it is imperative to have in mind that the negative aspects are much greater than the positive ones when the generalised practice of remote work from home is widely and critically analysed.

A very similar process is observed in Distance Learning (DL), a practice that has been employed frequently by private and public educational institutions

31 See A. Gramsci, 'Racionalización de la Producción y del Trabajo', in *Antología: Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Manuel Sacristán (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1977), 476.

during the pandemic. The consequences have proved very negative for teachers. That is because private education companies have been using DL to significantly reduce their faculty, replacing it with artificial intelligence software, expanding the use of automation and robotics. Instead of teachers having rights and regulated employment contracts, Uberised teachers, who are hired through digital platforms, have become increasingly common, exacerbating their precariousness and proletarianisation, in addition to their exclusion from social legislation that protects workers.

The main result of this situation is that pedagogical work, with rigour and scientific knowledge, supported by critical and socially useful research, is being gradually eliminated, to be replaced with 'business schools', which are transformed into large private 'educational' conglomerates.

A similar process has also been taking place in public schools (and universities), where the private-oriented logic deepens, leading to the exclusion of the poorest students, who do not have access to the internet and digital networks to enable them to study from home, constituting a contingent of people who are left under-educated by the digital 'pedagogical' process. Although this reality has a global dimension, it is in the Global South that the social consequences are strongest.

Meanwhile, Google and several other global corporations continue to profit through the widespread and anti-pedagogical introduction of distance learning, without the living presence of teachers. This gives great relevance to Gramsci's complaint, at the beginning of the century, that the industrialist school should not become an 'incubator for small monsters [...], without general ideas, without general culture, without soul, but only with accurate eyes and steady hands'.³² It seems that history once again repeats itself.

The corporate prescription for the post-pandemic area is already designed and outlined: increased flexibility, informality, outsourcing, intermittency, Uberisation and remote work, with algorithms 'commanding' human activities. Thus human activities are converted into new personifications of capital, more commodified and reified, and now converted into new automatic appendages of the digital-informational machinery. All this occurs under the appearance of 'technological neutrality', which is in fact conceived, designed and structured to serve the interests of the new autocracy of capital, composed of a select and restricted group of global financial corporations with their entourage of millionaires.

If this is the design of the antisocial metabolism of the capital system that has wreaked so much destruction, there is an urgent need to give it a new

32 A. Gramsci, *Escritos políticos* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2004), vol. 1, 75.

dimension, as evidenced by the outbreak of COVID-19. We have entered the period of pandemic or virotic capitalism, that in which 'experimenta in corpore vili [experiments on a worthless body] like those of anatomists on frogs, were formally made', to recall Marx's quote in this article's epigraph.³³

These bodies, it is necessary to add, are predominantly of the working class, from the Global South, markedly poor, female, black, indigenous, immigrant, living in the slums, without health benefits, and with precarious conditions of life and work.

That is why virotic capitalism has a class body, to use the suggestive formulation of Iside Gjergji.³⁴ This means that it centrally affects the body of the class-that-lives from-labour on which infection, illness and lethality have the greatest impact because, being largely employed in the informal sector and in intermittent work, it cannot adapt to a lockdown.³⁵ That is why their levels of infection and death are much higher than those of the upper middle classes and the bourgeois class. Due to the enormous dearth that characterises their daily life, the working class is forced to work to subsist, under the worst conditions, and is therefore closer to death.

Thus, it does not seem difficult to see that the pandemic was not an 'event of nature', but the result of an antisocial metabolism of the capital system that has been destructive and even lethal for the working class, the environment and nature, obliterating and hindering in many ways the struggle for 'substantive equality' among genders, races and ethnicities; for full sexual freedom; and for effective social emancipation.³⁶

A Final Note

Based on what we pointed out above, we must reiterate that the crucial challenge that the pandemic imposes on us is to endeavour to preserve life and, at the same time, devise a new way of life.

So, from where should we start?

Our starting point must be based in the present, on our most immediate challenges, in order to recover the energies of the working class, both to overcome the global health crisis and to channel all the necessary efforts into

33 Marx, 'Capital. Volume 1', 460.

34 I. Gjergji, *Sociologia della tortura Immagine e pratica del supplizio postmoderno* (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2019).

35 See Antunes, *The Meanings of Work*; Antunes, *Farewell to Work*.

36 Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*.

reinventing a new metabolism that is truly human and social. As we are experiencing an absolutely exceptional moment in the history of humanity, there is an urgent need to redesign our way of life, creating one in which humanity is effectively endowed with meaning in its most vital and essential activities. So that it does not appear that we are resorting to generalisations without being concrete, we now highlight some starting points in everyday life.

Let us begin with the most vital human activity, without which humanity cannot subsist: work. We have seen that today there are hundreds of millions of workers with precarious jobs and daily shifts that reach conditions similar to those at the onset of the Industrial Revolution. However, when we look at the world of work on a global scale, we also see that there is a monumental contingent of people who have no work and because of that travel from place to place desperately seeking labour.³⁷

The first step is almost intuitive. The struggle to reduce working hours is a decisive first step, in order to better distribute working time among all of those who are unemployed. But there is a second step: the pandemic has also helped us better understand which jobs are socially useful and necessary, and which jobs are destructive, superfluous and limited only to enriching the proprietary classes.

If we take these two first steps, work will be treated in a qualitatively higher dimension. This means that humanity must focus its work activities on the production of socially useful assets (not commodities) – activities that can be executed with a shorter workday.

Our first point can now be better defined. It concerns the refoundation and re-creation of work, conceiving of it as a vital, free, self-determined social activity, based on disposable time and, therefore, radically rejecting the anti-social metabolism of the capital system that introduced waged and alienated work, based on the exploitation of surplus labour, which typifies and characterises wage labour in today's society, including its digital-informational configuration.

Though easy to write, this constitutes a colossal challenge, as it cannot be realised while the capital system persists.

Accordingly, the environmental issue is highlighted, since the recovery and preservation of nature has become another crucial imperative of our time. Everything that capitalism has caused in its almost three centuries of destruction has to be essentially stopped, demolished and even overcome. Global warming, the unlimited use of fossil energy, the proliferation of pesticides and

37 P. Basso, *Tempos modernos, jornadas antigas: vidas de trabalho no início do século XXI* (Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 2018).

transgenics, the predatory practices of mineral extraction, burning, agribusiness, the dirty industries, and the arms industry, all express some of the most harmful characteristics of virotic or pandemic capitalism. All of this has to be deconstructed and transformed into socially necessary and anti-destructive human activities.

Given that the social being is a constitutive part of nature and that human nature is inextricably intertwined with organic and inorganic nature, there is unavoidable interaction between these essential dimensions of being, which can no longer be conducted by the destructive and lethal system of capital.³⁸

We can observe, then, that these vital issues have become more visible to all humanity during the pandemic. It is even clear what the first and main challenges to be addressed are, if we want to prevent and overcome virotic capitalism, which is already offering us several new viruses that could eliminate vast swathes of the global population, in addition to the thousands of lives that COVID-19 has already claimed.³⁹ It was our recent daily experience that allowed us to see that, with the adoption of lockdowns, cities had a significant reduction in pollution levels, either by reducing urban traffic or by decreasing emission levels from polluting factories and production activities.

That is why the recovery of nature, which is in a sharp collapse, also forces us to devise a new mode of production beyond capital, the only way effectively capable of eliminating the most destructive and lethal elements of our time. This, once again, puts us in direct opposition to capital and its way of life, thus expanding the scale of direct confrontation with large global financial corporations.

The same challenge arises when we aim to achieve 'substantive equality' between genders, races and ethnicities, and thus to effectively eradicate homophobia, sexism, racism, xenophobia, and other similar aberrations of our time.

It can always be argued that this proposition is utopian, impossible. But was not it also seemingly impossible to demolish powerful systems such as feudalism, which lasted for ten centuries? Was it possible at the time to conceive that feudalism would be defeated by the bourgeois revolutions of France and England?

³⁸ Here, for a better understanding of the concept of *social metabolism of the capital system*, in addition to Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, previously indicated, also see the important readdressing of this issue in K. Saito, *Karl Marx's Eco-socialism: Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019).

³⁹ See, for instance, M. Davis, *The Monster Enters: Covid-19, Avian Flu and the Plagues of Capitalism* (New York: OR Books, 2020) and R. Wallace, *Dead Epidemiologists: on the Origins of Covid-19* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

Could anyone foresee that the masterful Paris Commune could flourish in one of the most advanced cities in Europe in the 19th century? Did the outbreak of the revolution in Russia, a country dominated by a brutal tsarist autocracy, seem plausible beforehand?

Certainly, a new epoch can only rise through revolts, upheavals, rebellions and revolutions that stem from the subordinate classes, in which the working class, in its new morphology, is of central importance. But this change of epoch cannot occur without the action of social movements in the peripheries, especially the Global South.

The role of anti-racist and feminist struggles has already been decisively pointing to this direction, by carrying on, in various parts of the world, the fight against oppression and patriarchy, in their symbiosis with capitalism. Indigenous communities too have been resisting for centuries. Recovering the collective and communal spirit present in the lives of indigenous peoples and black communities that fought against slavery will also be vital in this mosaic of social experiments capable of providing a new prospect where human and social emancipation can finally thrive.

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