

Crisis and the Everyday: Global Connections, Resistance and Solidarity

Written by Mythri Prasad-Aleyamma and Debbie Samaniego

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The uneven geography of the Covid-19 pandemic has alerted us that nations, communities and cities are unequally positioned to deal with its wider social and economic effects. Nowhere is this inequality more visible than at the workplace. Lockdowns and re-openings have been intimately connected to the ways in which specific groups of workers were considered essential but disposable and how safety was redefined not in terms of safety of workers but of an imagined “public”. For the majority of poor workers in the Global South, ‘crisis’ and ‘everyday’, ‘home’ and ‘work’, public and private space are not neatly separable (Bhan et al, 2020). As the pandemic created new inequalities based on who can work from behind a computer screen and who cannot (Prasad-Aleyamma, 2021), existing racialized and gendered vulnerabilities were accentuated (Rogaly and Schling, 2021).

Seeking to reflect on this particular moment that made visible old and new inequalities, as well as the structures of power that facilitate racialized and gendered vulnerabilities, a panel was organized to stimulate a discussion amongst scholars analyzing this impact on workers from various locations. Particularly, the panel sought to focus on the pandemic experiences of workers across the world and what could be learned from the similarities and differences of these experiences, global and local power structures, as well as workers’ collective mobilizations in resistance to their employers’ disregard for their safety.

The roundtable discussion was scheduled to take place on March 1st, 2022, as part of the Association of American Geographer’s Annual Meeting. While the panel discussion would allow us to dialogue and exchange about workers’ struggles around the world, those of us based in UK academia were also fighting for our own workplace conditions through strike action led by the University and College Union (UCU). The ongoing strike by UCU has been a long-standing dispute over pay, casualization, workload, gender and race pay gaps, and pensions. This is in the context of the marketisation and financialisation of the university system in the UK over the last decade and a half. As members of the UCU, three of our panelists withdrew from the roundtable discussion as part of the strike and in solidarity with fellow university workers in the UK. Following their individual withdrawal from the panel, the remaining participants supported the collective withdrawal of the panel as a sign of solidarity and to use this action to bring broader attention to the UCU strike beyond the UK. Below is an excerpt of the statement of solidarity that was shared by Mythri Prasad-Aleyamma, the co-organizer of the original AAG panel, after the panel was withdrawn:

The strike has significance beyond the borders of the UK and beyond the walls of the university. Whether it is in the US or India or Australia or South Africa, the university functions by dividing and dehumanising its workers. Some of us are tenured, some are adjunct, some are waiting for tenure, some are thinking of leaving academia, some have suffered years of sexist and/or casteist behaviour from their colleagues and are simply tired. We are constantly confronted with choices that ask us to prioritise our survival over dignity and individual careers over collective futures. Yet, we all hang on in the hope that things will become better and remind ourselves that research and teaching give us pleasure even as conditions in which we labour are deplorable... The strikers are demanding the withdrawal of drastic reductions in pension benefits and increased workloads. They want justice for their colleagues who are impacted by gender, race, and disability pay gaps. It is impossible for us, the rest of the panelists and conveners who are also university workers, to go ahead with the panel when our colleagues are striking for demands that directly impact all of us in academia. We join them in this strike and are withdrawing the panel in solidarity.

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As we write, the 'four fights' dispute led by the UCU continues in the UK. Moreover, in April 2022, pension cuts were implemented whereby 'a typical lecturer [will] lose at least 35% from their guaranteed retirement income, which for some will rise as high as 41%' (UCU, 2022). It is beyond the scope of this short piece to discuss the imperative to push against the shift towards a neoliberal university system. Nevertheless, we highlight our own fight within the university in this piece as we see the university space as replicating inequalities, vulnerabilities, and exclusions along similar axes found in other workplaces. Moreover, the solidarity we experienced beyond the UK also mirrors a global solidarity that emerged in the context of workers' struggles during the pandemic.

Following the withdrawal of the panel and having used the moment to highlight the UCU strike, we agreed to find a way to continue our conversations and to create a collection of short pieces that captured our exchanges regarding the impact of the pandemic on workers and workplaces across the world. The contributions deal with, but are not limited to, the following lines of inquiry:

- How has the pandemic changed work and work-places?
- What traces will it leave on the ways in which our work-places and working-lives are organized?
- How will the pandemic re-work the uneven global organization of production?
- In what ways and how much did unions and workers' associations negotiate with employers over the allocation of workers to roles that involved working from home and others that entailed travelling to work?
- How are racialized and gendered vulnerabilities reproduced and reworked during lockdowns and re-openings in different places?

The collection is intended to be an intervention and to stimulate ongoing discussions about workers' experiences around the world and the vulnerabilities they experienced during the pandemic. In a moment where various states seem to be promoting a 'return' to a 'business as usual' mentality, it is imperative to continue resisting and mobilizing against those inequalities and vulnerabilities that were seen as acceptable prior to the pandemic. This includes resistance against the normalization of the inequalities and vulnerabilities that have emerged as a result of the pandemic. We emphasize resistance and mobilization as this requires us to go beyond symbolic gestures of solidarity such as the 'Clap for the NHS' campaign in the UK during the pandemic. It requires us to actively challenge structures of power and seek transformation.

This examination of the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to how workers experienced 'crisis and the everyday' in the workplace continues through the following three interventions:

Labouring geography: towards world-making praxis in a global pandemic by Hannah Schling and Ben Rogaly

Covid in an uneven world: Are we all in this together? by Suparna Bhaskaran, Madhumita Dutta, and Sirisha Naidu

The Pandemic, Migrant Essential Workers and the Global Colonial Division of Labour by Debbie Samaniego

One of the ways that these contributions provoke us to think is by foregrounding the tension between the global nature of the pandemic and the local impacts and responses it elicited. The truncated globality of the pandemic when it affected regions and nations in waves and phases reflected the uneven nature of capitalism and the ways in which it has ordered the world- some nations and regions are more interconnected than others. Some states had more control over the lives of their citizens than others. Some towns and villages had more people who migrated for work than others. Some had more migrant workers who returned when lockdowns were announced than others. As the pandemic progressed, the unevenness of its spread trumped its globality. It has so far defied both optimistic predictions of its liberatory potential and pessimistic forecasts of total control over the people's affairs by the state.

The contributions in this collection of articles reflect this tension between this truncated globality of the pandemic and the contradictions and conflicts that are immanent within capitalism. These authors discuss the differentiated impact of the pandemic on workers. In doing that, they remind us that it is important to reflect on our own position as teacher-workers and researcher-workers even as we write about workers who may belong in a different world of work. Often exposed to far greater levels of precarity, danger, and exploitation, the experiences of migrant, factory, or agricultural

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labourers in the workplace are not equivalent to that of many teachers and researchers in academia. Nonetheless, it is worth asking whether there are threads that connect workers across these different worlds of work. The experience of withdrawing from the panel in solidarity with teacher workers of UK academia has taught us that these threads exist- the lives of adjuncts and tenured professors are interconnected as much as the lives of domestic workers and working women are connected or the lives of garment workers in Bangladesh and workers in the fashion world in the US are connected. As Rogaly and Schling (2022) remind us when they quote David Featherstone, solidarity emerges through collective activity – by doing things together. This collection of short essays is the record of a moment of solidarity, of striking together in the world of work called academia.

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