

Covid and the future of work

Sun, 9/13 10:00AM • 1:16:08

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

workers, people, trade unions, crisis, unions, workplace, pandemic, organising, economy, sectors, business, question, work, automation, terms, companies, pay, social distancing, employer, alice

SPEAKERS

Will Stronge, Alice Martin, Shreya Nanda, Ian Taylor

Will Stronge 00:14

Hi, everyone, okay, I think we're gonna get started. Welcome to TWT 2020. This talk COVID and the future of work, what we learned and where we go from here. My name is Will Stronge and I've got the pleasure to be moderating tonight's session and saying a few words beforehand. I'm the Director of Research at 'Autonomy', a think tank all about the future of work. And just before I introduce the session and speakers, I have a few announcements from TWT of house rules. Firstly, to make the session more accessible, we'll be using a live transcription service called otter. Attendees using otter will have to follow a link and open the transcript with a separate window. The link we share in the chat box by tech volunteer if you're having difficulties please message and tech volunteer on the chat. Secondly, as many of you are aware, TWT is free for all but only made possible by the contributions of our supporters. So if you're able to please consider supporting us at theworldtransformmed.org/support to help us sustain our work all year round. And lastly, a few chat principles. We want everyone to feel welcome in these spaces and for everyone's voice to be heard. So please bear this in mind when engaging with chat. Please don't use inappropriate, rude or unkind language. And please don't spam. Participants who stray from these principles may be prevented from further posting in the chat or comment box. But hopefully this will not happen. If you do have a question or comment for one of our speakers, please do fire away so we can include them in the q&a towards the end. Now, on to the session. The panellists will speak for about 10 minutes, I'm gonna try and keep them to time. There'll be a q&a at the end about 30 minutes or so I'll try and make sure that enough time for that as possible. And I'll select questions at the end and we'll try and have those questions highlighted on the screen. At the end of the session, you'll have the opportunity to listen to a short radio play called Foodbank by the play by Laura Bay, just to mix things up a bit. Okay, so I'm going to introduce our panellists when they start to speak and before that it's my honour duty in this session to give a bit of a snapshot of the world of work in the UK before and during this covid crisis. Sp coming into the crisis, the UK had historically low unemployment rates. You know, most countries were shouting about this- "4% unemployment, very low". And this actually masked a lot of underemployment. So a lot of precarious work. About 1 million zero hours contracts existed before the before the crisis hit. About 5 million workers can be counted as precarious workers, whether that's short term contracts, low pay, uncertainty of hours, and so on. So actually, the situation in the UK was already bad going into this crisis, I think 30 years of neoliberalism, you know, compounded by 10 years of austerity have really led

us to be unequipped for the shock to the system that COVID gave us. Even in February 2020, this year, there was there was the historically low unemployment, but this was distributed unevenly across the country. Some of our research we were doing our 'Autonomy' show that basically in places like Blackpool and other northern regions such as Birmingham, unemployment was still around 7%. They've never really recovered from the 2008 crisis. Of course, when a lockdown hit mid March, the situation got much worse. And there's regional inequalities were exacerbated. Everywhere around the country saw a huge spike in unemployment claims. So claim benefit claims made at job centres, but there's places like Blackpool and northern regions and you know, inner city parts of London were reaching eight to 12% unemployment so this COVID crisis landed right in an awful labour market as it was, but made it much much worse. When it comes to welfare, I think we're all very aware of how bad and how withered our welfare system was coming into the crisis. 'I Daniel Blake', by Ken Loach being the film that presented that most coherently. The austerity period and the neoliberal era basically, successfully turned the welfare state from a safety net into a weapon against those workers, out of work looking for jobs, as it was used as a stick to beat people over the head with to take any job, in an unsatisfactory labour market. When it comes to health and social care coming into the crisis 35% of care workers will have zero contracts one of the industries with the highest proportion of workers on such contracts, and the average care worker was paid below the poverty lines that's below two thirds of the median wage. Of course, these sectors- health and social care- were hit hardest by the crisis, not only in terms of the stress that these people were under, but also in terms of the health risks involved. The care workers have amongst those with an occupation that suffered from the highest amount of covid related deaths. And finally, before I move on to our speakers, we should also acknowledge the revelations around keyworkers and essential work. So teachers cleaners, nurses, transport workers, even delivery drivers, these professionals and occupations, often paid at the lowest amounts and valued the least in our society soon became very obvious that if you have to stay at home, you have a health condition and so on these occupations, we value socially, the most. So with that in mind, that's the kind of context we have come to find ourselves in. I'm gonna introduce our panellists. I'm gonna start with Alice Martin. Alice is an expert in labour issues at PIRC, and also is an advisory board member of Autonomy, which I am very pleased about. Alice will be speaking about businesses and what they've been up to, during COVID. I will reflect on what this means going forward. Alice, over you.

Alice Martin 05:27

Hi, thanks Will. So yeah, as Will said, I work for a shareholder advisory firm called PIRC. And so we represent investors with trillions of pounds worth of combined shares. And these shares are in some of the biggest companies on pricing in the UK, many of which you'll know, you know, big supermarkets and online retailers, JD sports, boohoo, and ASOS, but also a lots of lots of companies that you'll never have heard of, so I'll be talking about some of those in my session now. And so the job I've been doing day to day involves actually having meetings, online meetings, obviously at the moment with company secretaries, executives, and in some cases, the CEOs of these these major firms. And I'm a labour specialist. So I focus on how the workers are faring in these companies. And as you can imagine, since the onset of the pandemic, the focus hasn't just been on on things like pay conditions and working rights around around pay conditions, but actually, on very kind of blatantly, whether those workers are contracting COVID at work, and in some cases, we're having to have conversations about why there have been significant fatalities in these workplaces. And not all of this information is in the public realm, because we are representing the investors at these companies we do get kind of special access to to

speak to the companies and part of our job is to push more of this out into the public realm and to kind of scrutinise companies on behalf of shareholders, but increasingly also working with trade unions to do that stuff. And so I'm going to talk briefly about three examples, we're going to look at three sectors, which I think tell us something different about what's going on in the world of work under COVID. They're all low paid sectors and because I thought that's probably what the you know, the most important area for us to focus on, but maybe we can have a broader discussion later on with the other speakers about the world of work more holistically, and I'll focus on three low paid sectors, so food processing, and care, which Will touched on, and hospitality. And so in food processing under COVID-19, we've seen that the kind of continued functioning of the economy has been necessitating certain people to take huge risks to their own health and to their life in some cases, just to go into work and and just to keep the economic cogs turning and to keep food on the tables for the rest of society. So food processing is the best example I think, because it is a huge sector- there are over 400,000 workers in food processing in the UK. It's actually the UK's largest manufacturing sector. We don't really think about it when we think about manufacturing on the whole. And we've actually never probably heard of most of the companies, well, most people have heard of the companies operating there the likes of Bakkavor, 2 sisters, Cranswick. And these are the companies with, you know, tonnes of Well, yeah, thousands of employees each and are supplying our major supermarkets. Yorkshire and the Humber and the northwest of the two regions that have the most food workers. So each region has over 40,000 workers. There's lots of women in food manufacturing, so half of the lowest paid quartile of food workers are women workers, and the workforce receive a lower than average pay than other manufacturing jobs. There's really low levels of automation, because these companies have worked out that it's cheaper to pay people to do the work and to essentially work a bit like robots. And it's cheaper to do that than than to invest in in the machinery. And agency work in the sector is really common. So a lot of the workforce will just be coming in for, you know, one week at a time and then maybe going to a different site of work. A quarter of the workforce are EU migrants. And I wanted to give you that context because I think it kind of sets the scene for why there have been such serious COVID outbreaks in food processing during the pandemic. You'll have probably all seen stories about about the outbreaks in different factories, particularly in meat production, you will have definitely heard about this happening over in the states where there's been over 100 deaths, and this is just on record hundred deaths in in meat processing so far, but it's likely to be much, much more. I thought I'd let you know a few things that I'm hearing from from these food workers and to just paint a bit of a picture of what these jobs are like during COVID. And so I've spoken to people who are aware that they've been really, you know, major outbreaks in their workplace. So over 100 people have contracted COVID on the same day in a particular plant, but their employer is telling the other staff that they still need to come in. They're not letting them know about the extent of the outbreak, because they don't want more absences, because they're so scared of staff shortages. And they really want to keep the production speeds up. And on a call with a major meat producer, a couple of weeks ago, I asked them why they couldn't slow down the line speed so that people can actually socially distance and because people are actually standing shoulder to shoulder still in this in this line of work (because it's essential work, the same social distancing rules don't apply). And I asked him what you know, why don't you slow down the line speeds to enable people to work a bit more safely, and he told me that one of the reasons they won't do that is because it will cause animal welfare issues. And because they are slaughtering thousands of pigs every single day. And slowing down the lines will mean that some of those pigs are caged for longer. I thought I was just a really grim insight into that some of these, these companies are operating- playing

off animal welfare with with workers rights. And I've also heard from from food workers that they've been asked to wear like cake boxes as face masks to work and basically to improvise to create their own PPE in the early stages of the crisis. And we now know that there are thousands of COVID cases among food workers in the UK, but on the whole companies are logging these as community transmission cases or cases in the community. So they're not taking responsibility for the possibility that those cases were contracted in the workplace. And this is an area that we're kind of really pushing on. Because we don't think it's right that companies aren't publicly reporting, on the cases on the fatalities in their workplace. And the second sector is care. And, as we know, you know, just 10s of thousands of predominantly women working in the sector, who have been working throughout the crisis. A high portion of migrant workers, a high portion of these workers are black or from other ethnic minorities. Under COVID, the model that we've got in the UK of privately run care has massively struggled. And I think it's a it's an interesting sector to look at, for the way the kind of myth of privatisation and has really been exposed under COVID. So what we've seen is carehomes basically calling on a government, either nationally or calling on local councils, to top up wages and to support them to be able to pay sick pay, proper sick pay to care workers, again, so that they can avoid staff shortages. In Wales this is now happening so the government are going to be topping up the sick pay of care workers so that they can safely self isolate. And, I think it's an interesting state that this sector is in, given how when things get really serious, actually it's the state that needs to step in and support workers. And I think in care particularly, because there is so much private equity ownership there, you know, there were these kind of overseas owners with very opaque and complicated ownership arrangements. The workers and the unions operating in care homes really don't know who to turn to in a crisis, and they've had to turn to the state and the state of having to step in. And so I think that's something that will potentially be a bit of a watershed moment for care. We all knows in trouble anyway, but I think now COVID has really proven that it's completely dysfunctional. And, then the last factor is hospitality, where there has been mass redundancies and hotels, bars, restaurants, heavily used the furlough scheme, with hundreds of thousands of workers furloughed and estimates are that over a third of the people who were furloughed in this sector will probably be made redundant. Many of them already have actually, a lot of this has already taken a hold. We've been speaking to companies that have put as much as 90 percent of their jobs at risk. And there plan really- and they've been quite open about this- is to fire and rehire. So fire now because they don't know what happening kind of demand wise, and then just wait for business to pick up. And we hire people potentially on worst terms and conditions, as and when they need it. And the theme that I guess I'm trying to throw out there is that there's a whole raft of kind of flexible, low paid workers who are treated in a way that they can kind of be picked up and dropped when they're needed. And I have spoken to a hotel worker in a major chain- in Marriott chain actually, and their story really stuck with me because they were basically being told that they had to come in to do a different job during the crisis. So they work they usually work from reception, but they were told they had to come in to help sanitise the hotels ready for reopen. So they actually became cleaner for a night shift, and they're on the minimum wage is zero job. And in the same communication, they were told that they would probably lose that job from September. So it was a real example of this kind of, yeah, this workforce that the companies feel they can pick up and drop, and as and when they need them. And so yeah, I'll probably just wrap up there. And and it's, it's probably worth pointing out that those 3 sectors have really low levels of unionisation. And you can really tell that during this crisis. Yeah, I mean, beyond the kind of legal minimum standards like the living wage, when these workers are entering their

own unionised workplace in these sectors, their employer really is calling the shots. So they're deciding what what happens that and that's having really grave consequences at the moment.

Will Stronge 15:50

Thanks, Alice. Yeah, I guess anyone want to talk about talking away is I think it's quite worrying to think about how this crisis has been used as an opportunity to restructure businesses, according to however suits the company in these different sectors. And in -some ways COVID has opened that car bonnet and revealing things that are commercially perhaps I didn't want to know or want to see. But actually it's kind of inner workings with low paid high risk roles and how they're just like incredibly unprepared for for a health crisis. Partly, because they are all so packed in and also because they have so few rights at work- I think that's really important to know...Lets keep going, and maybe we can add more time the end for questions. Alice was very on time, so that's always something to appreciate as a chair. And so Up next we have Ian Taylor, who is a Royal Mail worker and is on the National Executive Committee of the CWU. I should mention that the CWU and Autonomy are co-hosting this event. Autonomy have been working with the CWU for well over a year now. And so we're very proud to be working with them on this event, and again every year to try and run a couple of sessions. And so we're very happy to have Ian here. You're gonna talk to us about the experiences of people and his colleagues at CWU in this crisis and also what he's seen in his role. So I hand over to Ian now for another 10 minutes. Sorry Ian, your on mute. Yeah. Yeah.

Ian Taylor 17:23

Yeah. Apologies. Can you hear me now? Thank you. Sorry about that. Apologies. What I'm gonna try and do is give a quick whistlestop tour of the impact of the COVID outbreak on the Royal Mail workers and subsequently the challenges they pose for the union. And probably some of the challenges that will COVID will probably continue to pose as we go forward. And some of us may or may not be aware that COVID arrived for royalmail workers in the CWU smack bang in the middle of a dispute with the employer over a variety of issues, not not least of all, what role the union was going to play going forward in the transformation of the business. And we had just received an overwhelming 'yes' vote for industrial action, following a huge campaign. So we had a bit of a dilemma at the outbreak of covid. Do we call industrial action during what was clearly a bit of a national crisis and run the risk of facing the wrath of public opinion? Or did we cancel any proposed action? And in doing so probably face the wrath of our members who had overwhelmingly supported the union and did our people continue to provide a service you're drawing the pandemic? So we had a bit of a dilemma. The pandemic obviously didnt come at the right time for anybody, but least of all, the Communication Workers Union and their members. So what we did eventually decide and rightly in our view, was that we're couldn't in our conscience continue to announce industrial action, but to position our people as key workers, as we've always seen them during the pandemic. Unfortunately, this wasn't universally supported by the members, the overwhelming majority did indeed see the logic of that position. And unfortunately, again, the minority of detractors were encouraged by the lack of PPE in the early stages, and the lack of preparedness and response from both the business and the bids and the government in the beginning was really problematic for a number of workers who were understandably very worried and very nervous, and he was during this time, we on a number of occasions had to make it very clear to to the business- who by now and bought into the keyworker status probably more for financial reasons than anything else- that our members, we're only going to continue to provide the sacred service if it was

safe to do so. And also ensuring social distancing in the workplace was also proving extremely difficult. And if the truth be known, large proportion of management we've now seen the continuation of the service as a bit of a financial benefit rather than anything else. We're paying lip service to it, and eventually, we managed to convince them that they needed to be improved conditions, in terms of social distancing, and eventually, as for everybody to PPE provision improved. And so what this did was that it insured the posties achieved key worker status. And what we believe, is that this kept our members in good shape with with public opinion. And I believe as a consequence, the public opinion in terms of our postal workers was was at an all time high. It also enabled us to cement our position as key workers by achieving some new contracts, including receiving and collecting COVID tests from home addresses and a number of priority boxes. What we did see during this time- because the majority of people were at home- was a massive increase in passenger traffic and a huge increase in internet shopping. Unfortunately, this was taking place against the decline in letter traffic, which poses some real challenges for the business finances falling fall. The growth in parcels is significant, but the competition is fierce in this area. And, where we compete with some pretty poor employment practices in terms of our competitors, zero- hour contracts and some of that other gig economy features. So what we're seeing is the business is already beginning to make overtures about reducing numbers of employees and terms and conditions, and citing COVID as the reason for this. Therefore, COVID does remain a huge challenge going forward as the need for social distancing hinders the business push from increased profitability. And I think as long as it remains, the increase for impulse mechanisation will also increase. So, as far as we're concerned, we believe we're only just at the the beginning in terms of the COVID impact. What we've seen during COVID for some of our workers was that amongst them were a number of vulnerable people, which meant that we had a lot of people who were off work- sick absences- and were having to stay away from the world of work for one reason or another. The business's response initially was was very understanding, but as things progressed, you could see that pressure was now beginning to be applied on workers to return to work as soon as possible. Consequently, we did see a number of outbreaks in a number of sites where social distancing wasn't particularly being adhered to. And in many of the sites, it was quite difficult for it to be adhered to anyway. So what we ended up doing was we had to intervene again with the employer and continue to press very hard for them to maintain the utmost standards in terms of social distancing. What we think is going to remain some significant challenges going forward is the requirement for social distancing to be maintained going forward, and that is placing huge pressure on on the employer in terms of shared vans where individuals normally two to a van. Some of the workplaces, which can hold all the employees at any single time, which is requiring people to stick to have standard stacks and staggered attendances and a whole raft of new ways of working. What we believe the business's response to this will be is to reduce the service. They've already made overtures about reducing the service; made overtures about impending redundancies. And so COVID is providing cover, in our view, again, for some of those in the business that would like to see reductions in the workforce and ever increasing mechanisation at the expense of workers. Colgan is providing that cover. So we believe there's lots of work to be done going forward. And, and that if we're going to avoid some of the worst excesses managerial excesses that would normally come to bear, as a consequence of COVID will then have to remain extremely, extremely vigilant. So that's a little whistlestop tour will be where we're where we are possibly the challenges that we have going forward.

Will Stronge 26:29

Thanks Ian yeah, I think it's this crisis has definitely shown the importance of trade unions in these struggles, because as soon as you know, something hits the economy, it's up to trade unions to make sure that workers rights are understood and that they deserve are held. And so I think, you know, with the long decline of trade union membership, it's really good to see that last year something bucked that trend. And I like to think that this this crisis is really showing people the importance of representation in the workplace, and of course, the work that essential workers do, such as positives. Okay, so we're still on time, we have a few questions, but I'll post them at the end. And next up we have Shreya Nanda who is a work in the centre of economic justice, IPPR. And for my money, has produced some of the sharpest analysis analyses of this crisis so far. So I'm really happy to Shreya with us and she should be speaking, perhaps on a more positive light, and by positive I mean positive something, not necessarily positive in terms of happy clappy and...where should we go from here basically? We kind of acknowledged the crisis we've acknowledged the kind of the hit to our economy and to our workers rights. How can we build or rebuild our economy in a way which kind of resets the situation such that we can have a more prosperous future where prosperity is shared out amongst everyone, rather than attributing to a minority as we had before, so I'll leave a Shreya to take us away.

Shreya Nanda 27:59

And thanks very much. We'll. So I'm going to talk briefly about some broad historical trends and how the current crisis fits in with those. And then about some potential solutions and some things to think about that. And so at the risk of making this, talk about the issue that I'm most interested in, I think you can't talk about the future of work without talking about, you know, the broad issues of, of power in the economy and wealth, the wealth distribution and wealth inequality. So, briefly looking at some historical trends, and apologies if this is very obvious. And so obviously, we have the rise of social democracy after World War Two, which represented a massive fall in in inequalities of wealth and power, and a building up of wealth and power among ordinary people. And then obviously, in the 1980s, we had a backlash against that. So the government, opening up the economy and using the threat of moving production offshore to counter the bargaining power of ordinary people and dismantling lots of the policies that underpinned the more equal economy we saw before that. And so since then we've seen wealth inequality rising, markets becoming more concentrated, home ownership and low wages stagnating, regional inequality rising. And every time there's been a shock or a change of any kind or a destabilisation in the economy, we've seen those trends accelerate. So for example, the 2008 financial crisis breaks it trend towards automation, and now the Coronavirus crisis. And so in terms of what this means for the workforce, higher wealth inequality obviously means all the things we don't want to see it means higher unemployment, worse conditions, low wages, longer hours and less job security. And so in terms of how the current crisis fits in, I don't want to speculate because I think there's a lot where we have to wait and see what's going to happen and how the government are going to respond going forward. But I think we're already seeing that the crisis is another destabilising shock, that's going to help increase wealth inequality. So we're seeing, obviously your businesses facing lower demand, some businesses going under, and the ones that are going under first are the smallest ones who were the least able to access credit, or those which are already highly over leveraged. And the trend is now towards like the bigger tech firms. So those are the ones doing best now. And those are the one's where ownership is obviously more highly concentrated at the individual level as people have already said, we're seeing the risk that businesses are going to lay off workers and hire them back with low wages and worse conditions. And yeah, we have homeownership falling and Yeah, basically, wealth

inequality rising. And so we've seen that wealth inequality is increasing, and it's going to keep increasing unless we do something different about it. So what can we do about it? So I think there's, yeah, there's a range of different ideas on the left from basic income and basic services, to jobs guaranteeing a full day week that, something that Autonomy has done a lot of brilliant work on, to higher taxes and spending, to stronger unions. To me, the most important thing is about the direction travel towards a more equal economy with significantly lower wealth inequality. But I think it's worth considering some of the counter arguments that these policies attract from the right. So the classic one for the last 10 or so years has been how are you going to pay for it? But in my mind, I think this is possibly going to lose some salience now. The current crisis is exposed that the government actually can find the money for things when it when they need to. And so I think what may become more salient is the argument that if we do all of these things, then companies are just going to move production abroad, and we'll be worse off. So I think there are there are three responses that we can make to that. One of them is to say, okay, we're going to have a more closed economy. We're going to say you can only sell to our markets if you have these great working standards and if you contribute to the economy. Secondly, we can try and push for change as a global level. So we saw a sort of national rebalancing of power after the Second World War. trying to push for the same thing at a global level. And thirdly, we can say okay, yes, we want to have an open economy. So we need to be an attractive environment for business. But this isn't incompatible with having things like great infrastructure, restoring social safety nets to ensure that people are able to take risks and innovate. Making sure that this is a pleasant place to live and have a family. Possibly the approach that countries like Sweden have taken. So I think, I wouldn't want I don't necessarily have an opinion on which of those is the direction that we should go down especially, like it's very difficult in the current context because you know, the Conservatives are using everything to fight a perpetual culture war, and we have large companies that are now more powerful than most countries. But I think that those are some of the ways that the left should be thinking about these policy debates going forward. That's my assessment.

Will Stronge 33:45

Thanks Shreya, regarding wealth inequality, how do you feel about a wealth tax? There has been some polling recently by the Tax Justice UK which seems to imply that effectively there is strong public support for wealth taxes and even if perhaps if it's framed In terms of, you know, going after billionaires is less popular, but the idea that's happening wealth and inequality seem to be fairly popular. As a policy option, you know, what's your opinion on that?

Shreya Nanda 34:11

Yeah, I think I think that is one really, really effective way of doing what I talked about of reducing wealth inequality. But I think you do have to think about how to do it carefully because again, there is concern about how it would interact with the international economy and work. Would it push things abroad? I think definitely we should be looking to do more things like that.

Will Stronge 34:31

Correct me if I am wrong but I remember, maybe a week ago, there was a really great IPPR pape, or at least a call for like taxing wealth at the same levels of your taxing income, same rates. That seems to be one of those kind of almost like, you know set in stone, probably how our economy should function as going forward. This seems to make no sense to people with wealth, that you know, have to pay less

tax relatively, at the expense of those who earn their money. See and I guess one final question, not put you on the spot or anything, that's why we have you here! Obviously during this crisis and this is not necessarily the topic of this session, renters, landlords, housing has become a really acute issue mainly, mainly because people were either being laid off or working less, and were therefore short on cash, that cash then has to go to the renters or their landlords, which has become a really important issue and I think you probably can't disassociate it from the world of work or the future of work. A kind of extractive economy which takes cash out of people's pockets and puts them into landlords or renters and so forth. I wonder if you could say something about that. Um, there was a lot of discussion about, you know, rent wavers and so forth. How is it that you think we regulate that sector? I wanted any thoughts on that? I thought that's something that is a real issue at the moment, and I guess the future is uncertain in that way.

Shreya Nanda 35:56

Yeah, I think that's that's a really key area, where we have seen the increase in wealth inequality has been expressed in possibly the most obvious way and it's really become more salient now, because, yeah because you're seeing people being laid off or not being afford their rent. And it's also one of the areas of the economy where I think it's the most obvious where the policy should be different because the houses are all still there. Like people should be able to live in them, so I mean, yeah, that like I think you mentioned there is different ways you can deal with that. So like, rent controls, building more house, but I think its very, very obvious that something different should be being done.

Will Stronge 36:37

Mm hmm. Here is my opinion, something like, you know, any reform to the labour market shouldn't be an isolation basically there's a whole raft of new measures is to kind of make sure the economy is kind of sturdy going forward, so one that works for everyone. Thanks, Shreya. So we have we weren't gonna have to Dan Carden with us. But Dan is yet to join. Hopefully we'll go to make it. In the meantime, I thought maybe we go to the general discussion between speakers and then also q&a. And I may want to get one to get the conversation started I'll pick one from the audience. There is a question here from Andy. So Andy asked a question about, you know, how he was shocked to hear about the condition that workers were working in, everything from Alice's discussion, there is there. "Cakeboxes for PPE is terrible, what kind of legal recourse do workers have Alice and has there been any fights against this and which ones perhaps been successful? To broaden that question maybe.

Alice Martin 37:46

Yeah. So um, I mean it's a really good point because even outside of a pandemic, there kind of routes for legal recourse are like really weak anyway for workers and so we do have kind of laws in place. To say that our employers, you know, can't hurt us and our lives at risk at work. However, if they're not enforced Well, they don't really mean anything and the means for enforcement for any laws kind of in the workplace, and whether it can come from that you can kind of have enforcement for different areas. So one is the state, and local authorities and Health and Safety Executive, which you might have heard quite a lot about on the news recently, are the kind of means through which the state can can enforce those laws in the workplace. But what we've been seeing during the pandemic is that HSE is just completely overwhelmed and it was you know, struggling even before COVID started. It can't meet the Kind of requirements that are needed in terms of actually auditing workplaces and physically going and

looking at what's going on. And there's also Public Health England which are operating at a very local level as well in actual local authorities. But what we're finding there is quite a lot of- I don't really want to use the word collusion, but it's in my head, so I'm gonna say it. Collusion between some of these health authorities and the employers, and I don't know if it's intentional. But it's because they're kind of so taken aback by the seriousness of the situation, they don't really have the regulations. And the guidelines to tell them what to do. What we're seeing is so many cases of accidents happening at work and people you know contracting COVID and it is being labelled as community transmission, as I mentioned earlier, 'cases and community'. And I think that term should really stick in people's heads because I think it means a lot more than what it does in that in that kind of exact situation where basically what they're arguing is that, a workplace has COVID yes, but they must have contracted it, you know, at their mates house or at the parents house or a social gathering they were at. And that's what we're kind of term means. But I think what it also signals is a kind of devolving of responsibility or denial of responsibility on the part of employers towards their employees. And I think they're kind of using it COVID in some ways to do this and that's why we're hearing about these, you know, local lockdowns and the narrative is very much focused on social gatherings or particular characteristics perhaps of that community often with quite racist undertones. And what we're not hearing about is that down the road, there's an employer with 3000 people on site at any one time, and that has been deemed a type of essential work like food processing and therefore social distancing doesn't by law have to take place on site. And so that was a very long way of saying that yes, there are recourses for kind legal action in these cases, but the enforcement is so weak around it that it's hard to know if any of it will really happen. And then the other kind of way in enforcing laws that we have in the workplace. So obviously trade unions. And I would argue that they're a much better route to kind of enforcing our rights in work because trade unions by their very nature exist in that workplace and from that workplace. And so they are the experts really on what's happening, what's going wrong and we've seen trade union reps and health and safety reps really step up during the crisis and and show themselves so, you know, the fantastic work that they've been doing to actually keep those workforces safe and I think ideally we you know, one good thing coming out of this pandemic would be that more employers recognise that that role that that trade unions have in the workforce. And then just add just another point on the kind of, I guess legal recourse. And interestingly in many of these food factories that are health and safety kind of tribunal cases that come up all of the time. We've been looking into the records that stretch back to before the pandemic and actually they're are, you know, accidents at work and serious risks posed to these workers that they will have many people for the pandemic and often they are settled out of court with a pay off, so there's actually not very much information in the public realm about the kind of incidents and accidents that are happening in many of these places and I think this is a kind of laser focus on it now because of COVID. And hopefully that's something that will that will continue as we work out the pandemic.

Will Stronge 42:13

Thanks. I think that is an important point you make there. And talking about the motive, that we can have a political move to divide workplaces from civil society in terms of, you know, sort of civil societies spreading COVID and workplaces are kind of fine. You should go to work and almost bracketing and discussion about the COVID spread. And, you know, I think that is important, as you say, to point out that these huge workplaces are just right next to the the places of these supposed spreads. I think that's that's really important point. We have a question for Ian. Do you want to peel off hear Ian- can

you see on the screen? "Were there some walkouts at some? I seem to remember that happening, cant remember details!"

Ian Taylor 42:57

Yeah, as I've said during the brief contribution and early on in the pandemic, PPE was very scarce and I think it intertwines with something that is there where you do have active trade unions. People do feel evil to assert their rights and we were very clear, as a trade union during that period where the provision of PPE was less than ideal, that where where individuals felt unsafe that they were to remove themselves from that environment and, on a number of occasions, members in some unions did exactly that. And we will not expect any less. Mostly, what it has touched on is the role of the health and safety reps. We affectionately refer to them as anoraks, but they have been worth their weight in gold. The trade union Health and Safety representatives we have are better trained, better informed and their business counterparts. So, yeah, I would just endorse that idea that where you have strong trade unions, that is way more effective than the weak legal recourse, that we that we currently have. But yeah, there was a number of walkouts and in each instance they were supported by the trade union until the situation was considered safe for them.

Will Stronge 44:41

Thank you for clarifying that. And so another question here from Theodora about the role of new trade unions, referring to the precariat, or that section of the workforce who do not have secure employments and various ways and there's a couple of prediction that that will spread and it has been spending quite far and wide. I wondered if any of the panel has any thoughts around new forms of organising broadly speaking but also how, you know, perhaps broader reflections on precarity and COVID and whether thats predictions or whether that's ways of kind of ameliorating it. Anyone want to jump in?

Alice Martin 45:26

I'm very interested in a topic but I've already spoken so, if no one else want to jump in first?

Will Stronge 45:30

If you want to jump in

Alice Martin 45:35

So I think they have been really interesting new forms of organising during the pandemic because we've all forced to move online. I think it's actually been a good move for a number of trade unions to kind of shift branch meetings onto WhatsApp or to Zoom and actually have this kind of virtual meeting place that that was something that many unions weren't really doing much of before, so I think there's been a good shift towards kind of digital organising and the reason that's important is because even before the pandemic, several workplaces were very hard to access for us. either because it was a very anti union employee, employer sorry. And there was union busting going on on site and surveillance etc. Or because just physically you know that those sites are very difficult to access and to get into. And so I hope that you know whether it's the kind of smaller insurgent unions like Baker's union (for example) and whether it's them or whether it's already, you know, our established bigger unions, and I hope that as a kind of collectively as a movement that there is an opportunity here that unions can build on the great work that they've been doing and really try an access workers in sectors that they really

haven't made good inroads into. So up to now and they're the kind of sectors I was talking about earlier, hospitality, care, food Processing and other parts of kind of the kind of low paid food, you know Farm to Fork kind of process. But I think there are also you know, some really worrying things that are happening in relation to Union organising during the pandemic. For example, where there were mass redundancies going on. If there were trade unions active in those sectors, they are losing members at the same time. And I heard of, you know, one story from the States where one kind of, is kind of an offshoot union, that had grown out of a larger union. Basically lost a very high percentage of its members overnight, due to redundancies of one particular company that has, you know, hotels and businesses across the country. So I think there's a very, you know signs of a fantastic organising going on among unions and new members in some areas. But I think in sectors like aviation, some parts of Manufacturing that were better unionised and, you know, the redundancies are meaning that that unions are going to be kind of weaker in certain areas.

Will Stronge 48:07

Thanks Alice. Another question from Theodora thought we might use, just to open a discussion about welfare. And obviously, just as the rent and renting I don't think you can distinguish, and that we cannot separate out working life and life outside of work or support you might have an outside of work. Traditionally the welfare state work and out of work support has basically been used as a stopgap, but with the trends of automation, potentially with an ageing population and obviously through the COVID crisis, we've seen how welfare might be put under strain with more workers churning through work and out of work with low pay, no pay cycles and so on. Shreya I wonder if you had any thoughts about welfare and how do we improve our welfare, security, Social Security or our safety net, and why is that important today? The question was about basic income but I think broadened it out to welfare in general, and your thoughts?

Shreya Nanda 49:08

Um, yes I am quite Pro Basic Income Personally, I think it comes to the idea of like the commons. So saying that everyone has a right to some parts of the economy like natural resources, like new inventions or like Yeah, just general production and that there is a rationale for that to be redistributed. I think it's an open question about One level of a UBI would be sort of feasible and desirable. But yeah, I think changes to welfare are really important for the wealth inequality stuff I was talking about. And then yeah in terms of how you do it, I think you have to bear in mind what I was talking about, managing the relationship between the UK economy and the economies of other countries. But I think within that framework it would be very feasible to have much stronger social safety net that we have now.

Will Stronge 50:06

Thank you and I already mentioned automation briefly but I think there was some signs, I think at the start the crisis that a company like Ernest and Young were putting out surveys with business leaders around, you know, to what extent are you, you know going to be automating processes off the back of this crisis now that you've experienced life without certain workers or you experienced the need to have labour when even when labour was withdrawn. So some talk about this threat being exacerbated. Alice, did you want to come in here and talk about this a little bit. Or ask a question maybe?

Alice Martin 50:37

Yeah, so it's a question really for the other two speakers. So were both of you, or Ian first of all maybe from the perspective of the CWU. How do you feel about the possibility of more automation, either in your in your line of work but also just across the economy because I know it's something that the CWU have handled really well up to now and it's been the kind of basis of their 4-day week campaigning or, you know reduce working week campaigning and you secured that great win to reduce hours, kind of gradually, hopefully over a number of years and in response to the increased automation and it feels like there is this and this building again of kind of pro automation and potentially acceleration of the kind of automation plans that companies already had, and we've seen Food Processing and because of the health risk and because of the kind of labour shortages that are happening because of the health risks and also Because of Brexit incidently, companies are now thinking now is the time to take the plunge and invest in machinery. And and I just don't know if we're kind of ready as that as a labour movement to like own that move and make it a positive thing? But also, you know, inherently don't feel we should be scared of automation. I think it's better to have machines doing things that they can do better and more safely rather than having workers paid probably any money to basically act like a machine, which is what we're seeing in food production, and so I'm kind of Pro automation in some respects, but not where it is a threat to to jobs and So yeah, I guess the question to everyone, how do we feel about it? Is it really going to accelerate? Is there an opportunity to really own that process or not?

Will Stronge 52:27

Great question. Anyone want to jump in?

Ian Taylor 52:32

I think Alice's is pretty much identified our approach to it. Automation has been something the Communication Workers Union has battled with over the years. And I say have battle with it. However, there is a certain amount of inevitability towards automation. Automation will provide and can provide some more opportunities in our industry, but as has been indicated it's our view is a clear one. It needs to bring some benefit to workers as well. It can't merely be there to replace workers, so if the trade off needs to be a shorter working week a better work life balance then so be it. It can't merely be something that is done at the expense of workers and there is a distinction we make between automation and new technology because there are elements of new technology are there in to tag workers and to tag workers into what they are doing, to snoop on workers every minute of every day and I think it's fair to say we resist that type of technology. What we won't resist is technology that has benefit for the industry benefits for all the customer and the consumer, but at the same time produces some benefits for the worker such as a shorter working week and better work-home balance. I think there is a there is a balance to be had. And I think that's what we strive to do. And I think that's the challenge going forward, for a lot of trade unions.

Will Stronge 54:19

Thanks Ian. Just a question to go straight back to you Ian. Do you also see this intensification of work, the increased surveillance the Speed up sometimes, does that factor into the the argument for shorter working week? Because you mentioned, by sharing the gains of productivity gains and so on, but I imagine sometimes people who make the case for intensification is also part of that kind of demand. They know work is going to be more intense because of these machines and therefore, you know, more time off the job is is required or at least that's that's what we're asking for.

Ian Taylor 54:51

Yeah, the two are interlinked. If you're going to be asking people to work smarter in keeping with the technology and that that will work is going to be monitored in a more solid and more stringent way. So more of their day is monitored and the expectations upon them increase, then yeah, well were going to argue that you need more time away from work. You know these these things in our view are basic, but unfortunately, you know, I think over a period of time trade unions have been unsuccessful in making and achieving the demands that suggests that workers have some benefit from new technology. In terms of the monitoring though, the excessive monitoring. I think communication will continue to be resistant to it until somebody can convince us that it's completely and utterly necessary.

Will Stronge 56:06

Thank you. Shreya I am going to bring you in. I know that IPPR have also joined the calls for a short working week as part of the exit strategy of this COVID crisis, but you know, who knows whether there is going to be an exit. But I know that IPPR, TUC, Autonomy and others have been having talks about 4 day week as a tried and tested strategy on employment. Obviously, you know, the German scheme. I'll let you answer to that but also if you want to speak to ask a question about automation and I know that I've also been some of the best bits of IPPR's research has been on automation. So whatever you would like to respond to.

Shreya Nanda 56:43

Yeah on automation, I I was gonna say a couple of things. So I think as I'm mentioned before automation can drive wealth inequality because we're everyone's sort of so precarious that even when a small change comes along you can sort of lose your place in the economy and then you're probably going to come back in a worse place. But wealth inequality can also affect automation. Because if you have this supplier, very cheap labour then businesses might be like well, why bother investing in automation when I can just hire workers, very cheap prices? And I think that Yeah, our economic model because it's so unequal in some ways stops us from from moving towards a better, more advanced economy because everyone's so precarious that everyone kind of resists Any change or like Yeah adaptation towards different technologies. But I think that, as people on the left, we'd like the idea of a world where things are more automated and people have more time for leisure. So the four day week is a step towards that and then I think the four day week specifically as a response to Coronavirus is about saying, Well, you know, we know that demand is going to be less for the moment because certain sectors of the economy are shut down for now. So let's try and share the workout more evenly between people. And I think in some sectors that will make sense in other sectors, it will make less sense because the skills are such that it's difficult to bring new people in but Yeah, I thought yeah, it makes sense to me.

Will Stronge 58:21

Great. Yeah, I think I mean, I guess there's also we probably want to avoid those discussions that talk about "okay, the economy's taking a big hit and therefore, we can't have nice things and can't have many things at all". We're talking about redistribution policies, where we're redistributing work, redistributing incomes. And I know that as Alice has been looking at, you know industry has huge concentrations of wealth and earnings at the very top of the company, the managerial executive

committee starts. I think that arguments probably do need to be made that at you can't be laying off workers and rehiring them, when your giving shareholders huge earnings. So I think that's a discussion that probably needs to be had probably beyond the discussion of this call. Another question here we have: "Does working from home make union organisation more difficult? Not having direct access to the workers as well as removing the feeling of workplace collectivity?" Does anyone have any thoughts on organising and in COVID, I know that Ian is the only speaker from a trade union, but the question of collectivity and connectivity and I suppose as Alice was talking about those smaller unions are often shifting organising to WhatsApp and others networks, but the question here of collectivity, which obviously traditionally, way before COVID much earlier in the 20th century, large sites of production are fertile grounds for organising. In COVID, a lot of workers are working from home, a lot more work is atomized. Does anyone have anything to say on that?

Alice Martin 1:00:06

I'll jump in again because it does interest me. I think the idea of like, you know, we all used to share these massive workplaces, ie. factories and now we don't anymore. I don't actually think that's true, like loads of people still work in factories, people work in distribution centres. So there is that kind of collectivity. Like physical proximity to colleagues, however I don't think that necessarily means kind of collectivity and I don't think it's necessarily an organic place for union organising partly because of, what some of the reasons others were talking about on the call, things like surveillance and monitoring. And so you can all be together on one site but you're being monitored. You're being watched. To being positioned in ways that you can't actually, you know, speak to each other come together. Breaks are so short, that you know, there'd be no time to talk to one another,, and in the kind of big distribution centres, for example, it's quite common to have a 12 hour shift, with only two half hour break within a 12 hour shift, if that's completely legal. So I'm not convinced that like physical proximity to colleagues is necessarily what you need for good organising and I do think that even though that you know more of us are working from home now I think we're actually better connected digitally and I think and that's a great place to start from. I do think however that, you know there is something we're missing for people that, like me, that you are where you are kind of working from home now is the norm. And yeah, I know that people kind of in office jobs that might be doing the same and are now kind of Working from their bedrooms, I think you are missing a kind of social element, that is probably very important to work for. And but again, I don't think is completely insurmountable for organising, I think we might move to a model where you have kind of more co-working spaces in your immediate area so you can kind of go in and be physically with other people. Working even if you're working for different employers, and you have that sense of collectivity there, and yeah, that would be something that I think would be a kind of a cool outcome of the pandemic and I think it's important to remember that yeah for so many people were working from home, it just hasn't been an option during the pandemic.

Will Stronge 1:02:31

On that, I wondered whether you had any thoughts particularly because I suppose and the average posties job I guess I don't know, I would assume that it's on their own, delivering their assigned mail. Is there a sense of connectivity amongst remote workers because of their site base? Or the kind of like base camp they kind of return to and that's where the organising gets done or is it that actually you guys had to adapt with new technologies- networking technologies- for organising. I'm interested in how that works.

Ian Taylor 1:03:02

Yeah, so they all have a base, whether that be the first thing in the morning at a delivery office and/or at any sorting centre/mail centre where they do the majority of their work. So there's two groups of workers, those that go out on the beat, who start in a delivery office and those that do the mail sortation from the mail processing centre. And just just to the broader question about connectivity and organising. And I think the strength of of the Communication Workers Union is is that we do have these buildings and we have a representative on the ground in every single unit. I'm convinced of that, anybody who's ever seen our build up to any dispute with the employer where we have a day where usually it gains some traction on social media. Every site organises a gate meeting on the gate to discuss the issues. Our ability to adapt to a changing world, by the way, is going to be key. because things are gonna change people are more and remote, people will become more remote as time as passes on. There'll be less time in workplace and I think new technology as we've had to start using it during COVID will become more prevalent. Whether it will produce the same quality as our ability to organise in our workplaces, given we've got web service, it is something that we will need to assess. As things stand, my view is, from my experiences, having that ability to organise the world place has been a significant benefit to my doing my work.

Will Stronge 1:05:06

Great, thanks Ian. I'm gonna apologise once again, Dan can now join us, there were many technical issues. Okay, so let me ask one more question to everyone. But it's actually just because splits into two and it's about the future of work. On the one hand, what needs to happen in the immediate term, so literally in the next few weeks, months for those ending and we've got a potentially second wave looks like the second wave is coming and as is a second lockdown. So I want everyone to answer one, you know, just like what do you think immediately needs to change and a lot of work to make it more accessible? And then, you know, kind of yeah base to make sure that like this time this set for the second wave, let's say the crisis doesn't hit those, perhaps the most vulnerable, the hardest, but immediate wash of change. And then a more utopian question. I think, you know, this is this is The World Transformed festival we, we do, try and bring a bigger picture of all these into this. So a bigger, more utopian question of what should the future of work be, where we try to get to, and I'm going to try and ask you to try and stay away from platitudes to try and get a few, a few some details that are second question to use. So I'm going to start with Alice first. Then we'll be Shreya and then end with Ian. No pressure of course.

Alice Martin 1:06:22

So in terms of the immediate, I would say we need to extend the furlough scheme. Its mad that were are having this kind of cliff edge fellow scheme, when clearly loads of employers are just going to sack people. When the scheme ends, there's this kind of 1000 pound bonus that if an employee that's had someone furloughed and keeps them employed until January, they can claim 1000 pounds, I'm not convinced that this is going to achieve much. And so yeah, number one would be kind of extend the furlough scheme. And and then from from kind of individual perspective, join unions or even form unions in your workplaces if there isn't a union kind of operating already, and get to work together with your colleagues and create one. And then in terms of the future, I think I mean, stuff that we've already touched on already. So I would argue less time in work overall, and or less time in paid work, but also

the recognition of a lot of the unpaid work that we do at the moment, being, you know, ideally would be better recognised, and as a valuable contribution to the economy. So that's something we've not really talked about this evening. But, so many people have kind of sucked up additional care work at home during the crisis, whether it's care of their children, because the nurseries and schools are closed or, or care of loved ones who are shielding, and, all of that work kind of props up the rest of the economy. And I think we've got an opportunity now to really acknowledge that and, and recognise it better in society and in the wages of care workers, but also kind of more broadly in the way we organise ourselves, our workplaces, and, you know, ensuring that kind of childcare is something that's embedded in the way we kind of live our lives and something that's free, affordable or yeah, free and accessible to everyone. And so I think that my two points I maybe have one other. Oh, yeah, just this idea of kind of localised places of work, so if you don't want to just work from home, you could actually still get together with people in kind of localised work centres so that your work is a bit more integrated into your community and you're not having these like mad commutes to an out of town warehouse or to the centre of a city. And but actually you're able to work on a closer to home if you want to, and but still in a social way. So yeah, they would be my three utopian things.

Will Stronge 1:08:54

Right, that did have detail! Okay, Shreyna, then Ian.

Shreya Nanda 1:09:02

So I Yeah, I agree with everything that Alice said. And yeah, I think urgently, we need more protection for unemployed people and people who are self isolating, and more protection for workers in workplaces. And then in terms of the future, so as I said, I think the vision is of a society where much more as automated And people yet people are able to do work that's more meaningful to them. They're not wasting their lives, you know, making loads of money. And there's probably a cop out but I think if we read balanced wealth and power the economy then that a lot of that will just fall out from that.

Will Stronge 1:09:45

Great, okay. And Ian will give you the Yeah- no pressure but, the final say on what immediately should change and then longer term thinking, a more utopian guise, the future of work.

Ian Taylor 1:10:04

(unrecognised...) I can't can't go anywhere further than disagree with Susan Scott, about extending furlough...I think we probably do need to strengthen the enforcement of COVID compliance in the workplace, something needs to be in place that enable managers in management to be held reliable for non-compliance in a strong and structured way. In terms of the future, and some of the things I probably like to see, is better work-life balance, more time away from from the workplace. I think that's crucial, and a reversal of the race to the bottom which is created by the gig economy. In order to get to that place, I think we need to organise across sectors, so organising across sectors, so we start levelling people as a whole system, this this race to the bottom that's promoted by by the by gig economy and I think one of the things that's been on my list for for long time. We have become so accustomed to them, so we just take them to be the norm. An immediate reversal of some of the anti trade union legislation so it makes it easier for people to be represented in order to organise themselves and work is crucial in a fairer system.

Will Stronge 1:11:47

Great, that's, yeah, that's a great final line to end on. A few comments here just from other people. Theodora, killing it as usual. 'A New Lucas Plan: Create workers and community plans for social and ecologically useful production addressing the pre-existing multiple crises of militarisation, climate change, and robotisation.' Amd Christopher Hall: "Leisure and relaxation can be done from home. I work in the courts and we had a half hour in the afternoon, where legal advisors got together for a music quiz, meditation or yoga in our front rooms..so it can be done!" So, one of our themes tonight has been, how unions need to be renewed, how they're so important. And basically whether it's the immediate or long term, worker representation is going to be crucial. And the final thing, I have a little blurb here, before we finish a number of events that TWT have been accompanied by radio plays that relate to a theme, this is going to be one of them. And we'd like to thank Laura Bay for kindly providing her play, food bank does what it says on the tin, which here's his reading to highlight a long standing and shameful feature of our society food poverty, which is only increased during the pandemic, but ongoing crisis, unemployment and many millions of jobs expected to be at risk, the issue is likely to get worse still, the reading takes place at a food bank and explores an ordinary day both volunteers and users. Yes, choose common assumptions about people rely on such services and the real struggles of those who are. If you want to listen, just click on the link that's being shared in the chat now and start the audio once this event ends. Just before we go a few last announcements. To continue discussions we've set up a dedicated space on the community forum. You've already set up your account you can click this link. If you register the festival, check your email for sign up link to the forum, link please email info at World Transformed and also remember that loads of events at TWT are filling up very quickly so be sure to register for any that you'd like to attend. I think we are half way through now, about two weeks in so make sure you register for the festival event. If you enjoyed the session will help sustain their work and I will recommend that becoming a supporter go to the website theworldtransformed/support. I'm a supporter, I think everyone should be, everyone that cares about good political events should be supportive. The World Transformed is definitely the best event organisation in the country. And all the links are now in the chat. Apologies again for Dan not making it I hope you enjoyed the session. And I'll see you at another one soon. Cheers.