

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
Universidade de Coimbra



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CENTRALITY OF WORK

Manuel Carvalho da Silva

Unexpectedly, a virus highlights the irrationality of the dominant socio-economic model and screams at our consciousness the centrality of work. We must reflect on the value of all human work, on the values in which it must be anchored, on its social and international division. Precariousness and non-regulation of labour are forms of violent unilateral regulation that ultimately favour selfishness, utilitarianism and the unjust and sterile concentration of wealth.

Work has a central place in society and the economy. It provides support to the production of goods and services, has strong social value and is paramount in socialisation, enables access to consumption, is a source of social rights and citizenship, gives people qualifications and a position in society, and is relevant in solving environmental and ecological problems. This centrality was shaped in the course of a complex struggle for the dignity and against the alienation of workers, through a balance between the individual and the collective and the affirmation of labour as a universal right.

The centrality of work has always been subject to pressures which, due to multiple factors, increased with time and generated the false idea of a devaluing of work in the lives of people and societies. Some aspects are worth mentioning in this regard: the changes to the structure of the economy and its financialisation, which extended to work itself; the glorification of credit-fuelled consumption, as if to substitute for a salary; false technological determinisms that lead to the adjustment of

workers to machines rather than the adjustment of machines to the work process; the camouflaging of hierarchical and functional dependencies that create the illusion of a proliferation of casual “activities” in place of employment – a process made easier not only by the fragmentation of production and the proliferation of precariousness, but also by the information and communication technologies and by mobility; social identities misleadingly portrayed as a replacement for the “old”, labour-based identity; the appropriation of Labour Law by privileged groups that manipulate it against those it has historically covered.

It is essential to reclaim the centrality of work in order to transform society, making it more just and humanised; to ensure work protected by law and by contractual ties established through collective bargaining; to reclaim full employment as a goal and to guarantee wages that provide the material means indispensable to lives lived to the full; to strengthen, through more jobs and better salaries, universal welfare and social protection systems, so that no one is left dependent on the charity of others.

Work must be at the centre of a country’s development matrix, of cohesion policies, of macro-economic options and their ramifications, of the application of scientific and technological advances in the prevention of catastrophes. Labour law and ethics must provide the framework for labour relations systems, freeing them from submission to the dictates of the markets, from “competitiveness” and from the centrality of the machine.