Comparative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on work and employment – why industrial relations institutions matter

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes both a global public health and socioeconomic crisis (Dobbins, 2020). In the context of substantial ongoing restructuring of work due to the pandemic, the purpose of this special issue is to provide an international comparison of how the pandemic and different public health responses impacted workers and work outcomes in different institutional settings across and within countries.

The pandemic acted as a major shock to employment, globally. While many countries experienced rising unemployment and decreased labor force participation (Eurofound, 2020; ILO, 2020), the precise implications of the COVID-19 crisis for workers and work outcomes are embedded in country-specific institutional variations within capitalism as a global economic system (Burgess and Connell, 2013; Frege and Kelly, 2020; Meardi, 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2018). National institutions, cultures, politics, and demographics will partially account for the uneven distribution of the effects of COVID-19 on employment (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Bamber et al., 2021; Hale et al., 2020; Mora and Schickler, 2020).

The impact of the pandemic on patterns of work also varied significantly across and within nations. For example, while up to 50% of workers in the US and Europe worked from home or other remote locations at the peak of the 2020 lockdowns (Darby et al., 2022), not everyone had this opportunity, and not all countries were subject to lockdowns and associated social distancing rules (Dobbins, 2021; Kulik, 2022). Indeed, right-wing populist governments in countries like Brazil and Indonesia were complacent and slow in reacting to COVID-19 (Lassa and Booth, 2020). In countries where government shutdowns and business closures were widespread, such as in the US and Canada, jobs were often reduced, reallocated, furloughed or

eliminated (Barrero et al., 2020). This had a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable (Butterick and Charlwood, 2021; ILO, 2021), including low-wage workers (Koebel and Pohler, 2020), ethnic minorities (Lamare et al., 2022), less educated workers and women (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020), accentuating and exacerbating existing intersectional racial, gender, and class inequalities (Lee and Tapia, 2021). The pandemic revealed and accentuated global inequalities in workers' rights and working conditions, notably between countries in the Global North and South (Dobbins, 2020).

While many front-line workers lost their jobs due to government shutdowns and business closures, other essential frontline workers in sectors like health, warehousing, food production and grocery retail had some level of job security, though they were often vulnerable to exposure to the virus (Koebel and Pohler, 2020; Winton and Howcroft, 2020). In addition to changing our understanding of what jobs really are essential to a functioning society, the pandemic highlighted the social importance of everyday human work beyond its economic value, illustrating that workers are not merely commodities or human 'resources', and infused debates about democratizing and decommodifying work (Ferreras et al., 2022).

A key question is the extent to which crises like the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 or the COVID-19 pandemic generate permanent transformations of work and employment (Johnstone et al., 2019; Roche and Teague, 2014). In light of this question, the scope of any longer-term changes can be debated, but not yet accurately predicted. To contribute to this debate, our introductory paper first summarizes the four articles accepted for this special issue, which describe different institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in various countries. We then identify relevant conceptual issues and present an analytical framework to enable the reader to better understand how and why countries' institutional differences in industrial relations (IR) influence policy choices which, in turn, matter when making comparisons about the impact of COVID-19 on workers and work outcomes internationally. In particular, this introduction attempts to offer an understanding about which employment relations theories and frameworks can best help us analyse the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on work and employment in light of the contributions of the special issue papers. Following this, we outline how the responses of the state, trade unions, and employers varied internationally due to these institutional differences. We consider whether there are differences between co-ordinated market economies (CMEs) and liberal market economies (LMEs) (Hall and Soskice, 2001), as well as countries with IR institutions beyond this rather blunt dichotomy

(notably nations in the Global South). This focus leads to another question, namely, what IR institutions and policies played a particularly important protective role in the decommodification of labor during the pandemic. Here, we identify the importance of institutional responses like short-time working (furlough) schemes, tripartite cooperative pacts, works councils, collective bargaining, and active labor market policies (ALMPs), in playing a vital protective function for workers and society. Empirical examples across many countries are provided in the four special issue articles.

The Special Issue contributions

The first special issue article by Behrens and Pekarek is entitled 'Delivering the goods? German industrial relations institutions during the COVID-19 crisis'. Behrens and Pekarek suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused labor market disruptions at an unprecedented scale and is akin to a stress test for IR institutions. This raises an important question: How do IR institutions protect workers during a crisis of this magnitude? Drawing on a large-scale (n=6,111) quantitative survey of German employees, the authors empirically investigate whether and how the two main collective institutions comprising Germany's dual system of employee representation - works councils and collective bargaining – have delivered on their protective potential and mitigated the impact of the pandemic on workers.

They demonstrate that employees in robust collective employee representative voice environments fare better on a range of outcomes than those who lacked this coverage. They find that collective bargaining gives workers stability in uncertain times by providing job and income security. Moreover, their results show that works councils play a critical role in decommodifying non-monetary aspects of work by promoting workforce skill development and work–life balance. Behrens and Pekarek conclude that the pandemic has put the protective promise of these IR institutions to the test, foregrounding their capacity to decommodify labor in the face of an unprecedented crisis. They argue that these collective institutions "deliver the goods" for workers, fulfilling a valuable protective role in supporting employees' interests "on the ground." Germany's key IR institutions have expanded their protective repertoire to address the novel workplace challenges posed by COVID-19. Whether and how these key IR institutions can maintain this more expansive role in the long run is an important research question.

The second article by Brandl is titled 'The cooperation between business organizations, trade unions, and the state during the COVID-19 pandemic: A comparative analysis of the nature of the tripartite relationship'. Investigating the underlying rationales behind cooperation between national peak-level employers and business organizations, trade unions, and state authorities in 19 countries, Brandl observes that the COVID-19 outbreak has led to an increase in social dialogue in general and, in particular, peak-level tripartite cooperation in many industrialized countries around the world, although the intensity of this cooperation has varied among countries. The sample includes coordinated market economies (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden), liberal market economies (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States), and more mixed European political economies (France, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and Spain).

Four broad themes were identified regarding cooperation between social partners and state authorities, including furlough schemes, income protection, and policies to support business survival. Brandl concludes that while the problem-solving function of cooperation enabled the development of policies that helped overcome the health, economic, and social crisis directly, the expressive function of cooperation also played an important role, because it enabled actors to express unity in a time of crisis. This expressive function also serves as a potential basis for a renewed social partnership. However, Brandl observes that it is too early to draw any conclusions as to whether this increase in tripartite social dialogue activities is sustainable, especially in those countries outside the European CME core in which cooperation between social partners and the state is weakly developed or previously never existed.

The last two special issue articles provide a much-needed extension of global comparative IR analysis by looking at the impact of the pandemic, and the role of institutions, in countries that are not incorporated within conventional varieties of capitalism theories; notably countries in the Global South. The third article by Ford, Gillan and Ward is titled 'Beyond the Brands: COVID-19, Supply Chain Governance, and the State–Labor Nexus'. The authors focus on the relational interactions between state authority and local labor actors in supply chain governance in the garment sector in Southeast Asian countries Cambodia, Indonesia, and Myanmar during the pandemic. The article explores what agency unions mobilized in the face of brands' refusal to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on workers in global supply chains and also scrutinizes the role of the state in garment producer countries during the pandemic. Ford, Gillan, and Ward develop the argument that the reduction in brand influence on labor governance during the

pandemic revealed the contingencies and instability of the relationships that underpin private market-based regulation. In considering these dimensions in the context of different Southeast Asian countries' responses to the impact of the pandemic on their garment industries, the authors extend their analysis by asking when and why states *choose to act* to influence labor governance, and how trade union agency shapes this. Their analysis confirms that the relational nature of the state–labor nexus must be taken seriously to better understand how workers assert their rights in the context of the fluid arrangements that characterize the governance of global supply chains.

The final article by Valizade, Ali and Stuart is titled 'Inequalities in the disruption of paid work during the COVID-19 pandemic: A world systems analysis of core, semi-periphery, and periphery states'. This article assesses whether different trajectories of state intervention at the onset of the pandemic led to international inequalities in the likelihood of losing paid work; and which factors triggered these different trajectories. The article extends and elevates the level of comparative analysis globally above and beyond varieties of capitalisms in advanced capitalist economies by adopting World System Theory (WST), which includes core, semi-periphery, and periphery states (Wallerstein, 1987). The core system comprises wealthy industrialized states with established institutions of employment relations, including the US, United Kingdom, Japan, etc. The semi-periphery system includes countries transitioning from underdeveloped to developed economies (or vice versa) with emerging labor market institutions, for example, Brazil, India, South Africa, and China. Periphery states are the least developed countries, characterized by weak or non-existent labor market institutions, informal work and insecurity, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and some countries in the Middle East.

The study provides a quasi-experimental analysis of the impact of the pandemic on participation in paid work on a global scale, involving nationally representative household panel surveys across 20 countries worldwide. Empirically, the study finds a much sharper increase in the likelihood of dropping out of paid work in semi-periphery and periphery states relative to core states. The authors identify a relationship between such international disparities and the early trajectories of state interventions in the labor market. Further analysis demonstrates that within all three world systems, delayed, less stringent interventions in the labor market were enabled by right-wing populism, but ultimately mitigated by the strength of active labor market policies (ALMPs) and collective bargaining. The authors conclude that the comparative employment relations literature could use WST to account for a wider range of

systemic inequalities, especially in periphery and semi-periphery countries in the Global South, that are not incorporated in the conventional varieties of capitalisms framework.

Theorizing why institutional differences matter

Institutional variations, and the national, sectoral and organizational levels where COVID-19 induced actors' responses, raise issues about how the impact of the pandemic on workers and work outcomes around the world can be understood conceptually. Our starting premise is that capitalism coexists with different IR institutions (Meardi 2018; Sisson, 2020), and that these differences impact how the COVID-19 crisis affects workers and work outcomes across and within countries. The pandemic compelled nation states around the world to react and construct political responses to preserve jobs and incomes, often in consensus and collaboration with other stakeholders (i.e., social partners). In turn, events during the pandemic support to some extent the argument that rather than simply converging towards a common deterministic trajectory of neoliberalism (Baccaro and Howell 2017), policy responses to COVID-19 emerged as crisis-driven, more politically contingent and shaped by multiple forms of power and agency, resulting in institutional variations in different countries (Meardi 2018). This institutional variation is illustrated in the four special issue articles above.

State interventions during COVID-19 were required across the world, but these were shaped and filtered by country-specific institutional variations and agency. The perceived urgency to respond to the COVID-19 crisis was revealed, when, for example, even nations often labelled as neoliberal like the UK, Australia, or Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, implemented job retention and income protection (furlough) schemes (albeit temporarily). This can be theoretically understood in relation to Polanyi's (1944) argument that 'double-movements' emerge to protect society and preserve life, especially during crises, and act in opposition to economic marketization forces and actors seeking to liberate market capitalism from all social regulations protecting human life. IR institutions in particular play a protective role in the process of labor decommodification. For example, Behrens and Pekarek identify how works councils and collective bargaining in Germany provided a protective role during the crisis. Thus, the institutional pathways and foundations of labor market (de)regulation are key in understanding country specific responses to COVID-19 and IR impacts. It also appears that the "return to normal" capitalism is coming under pressure from organized labor, with

increased strike action in various countries during a cost-of-living crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic (Graham, 2022).

Diverse responses to COVID-19 across varieties of institutional contexts

The Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) analytical framework (Hall and Soskice 2001) has often been used to account for cross-country institutional differences to comparable challenges in advanced economies. Distinguishing between co-ordinated market economies' (CMEs) and 'liberal market economies' (LMEs), the framework shows that workers' rights and protections tend to be more extensive in CMEs compared to LMEs. Second, the universal rights to worker representation for the purposes of employee information, consultation and codetermination are more widespread and institutionally embedded in CMEs than LMEs, reflecting the formal 'voice' rights available to employees and their representatives (trade unions and works councils) as stakeholders or social partners. Third, regarding the structure of collective bargaining, in CMEs centralized multi-employer and sectoral bargaining structures are often legally binding and coverage is extended through various institutional extension mechanisms. Many CMEs also have centralized tripartite pacts/national-level social partnership agreements involving the state, employers and unions (Doellgast and Benassi, 2014; Müller et al., 2019), as shown by Brandl in his special issue article. In LMEs, in contrast, where it exists collective bargaining tends to be decentralized to organization-level single-employer bargaining, with lower coverage (Sisson, 2020).

In reality, hybrid countries exist comprising elements of both LME and CME categories, tendencies towards particular directions at different points in time, or else reside outside the LME-CME framework. Regarding the latter point, Valizade, Ali and Stuart apply a World Systems Theory (WST) framework (Wallerstein, 1987) to the 20 countries investigated in their article. This is especially important for comprehending institutional responses to COVID-19 in periphery and semi-periphery countries in the Global South, that are excluded from more conventional VoC theories. The article by Ford, Gillan and Ward also provides insights from the garment manufacturing sector in three countries in South-East Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, and Myanmar) that reside outside the LME-CME dichotomy, regarding the weakness of their institutional protections in the context of COVID-19.

Reflecting the varieties of capitalisms (VoC) and World Systems Theory (WST) approaches, different employment/welfare regimes mean countries may have varied in terms of (a) preparedness for the COVID-19-induced disruptions to work and employment and (b) responses thereto. This helps in understanding how and why institutional differences might matter when making comparisons regarding the impact of COVID-19 on state/employer/worker responses. Those European CME countries that are most unionized and collectivist and have the most developed welfare states were thus expected to have offered greatest protection to workers in crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, as revealed in the articles by Brandl and Behrens and Pekarek. In part, they achieved this through tripartite collective bargaining, with institutional policy responses documented since the start of the pandemic, notably job retention and short-time working schemes (ETUI, 2021).

In Denmark, the government and social partners agreed to national short-time working protections: the state paid 75% of wages for three months if employers did not lay off employees. In Sweden, laid off workers were guaranteed 90% of wages: half paid by government, half by employers. In Norway, workers were entitled to 100% wages for 20 days (18 days paid by government and two by the employer), then 80% onwards; the self-employed were also protected. Germany expanded access to its famous short-time working scheme (*Kurzarbeit*) (Herzog-Stein and Zapf, 2014), and the government subsidized (*Kurzarbeitergeld*) 60% of net wages, or 67% for working parents. In Austria, a short-time working package guaranteed a net replacement wage of 80-90% (ETUI, 2020, 2021). Even in Central and Eastern Europe countries, where labor markets underwent significant liberalization during the 1990s and 2000s, welfare states remained underdeveloped, and tripartism can be illusory (Crowley and Ost 2001, Ost 2000), the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated employment protection measures, sometimes negotiated with social partners (Kahanec et al. 2021).

In comparison to CMEs, the history and institutional pathways of highly liberalized market regimes like the US, and increasingly the UK, mean that a) employment protections are weaker than the European CMEs above; b) minimalist welfare regimes limit the safety net available to those who suffer most from sudden economic shocks; and c) institutions are less developed for tripartite dialogue between the state/employers/workers to respond to and resolve problems arising from such crises. Therefore, in countries like the UK and US, with entrenched financialization, neoliberalism and individualist approaches dominating flexible labor markets (Rubery et al., 2016; Thompson, 2013; van der Zwan, 2014), insecure low-wage work and

weaker employment protection have been increasing (Avdagic, 2015; Heyes and Lewis, 2015; Koeniger et al., 2007). Consequently, countries like the UK, and especially the US, were and continue to be generally less equipped to protect workers and unemployed people from the socio-economic damage of COVID-19. The pandemic increased the exposure of people in flexible precarious jobs without adequate employment protection to health and safety risks. Nonetheless, despite similarities, there are also still important points of contrast between LMEs like the US and UK. The UK still has elements of a welfare state such as a National Health Service and implemented a (temporary) furlough scheme to protect incomes and jobs, which were absent in the US. The institutional responses to COVID-19 in the UK and US, respectively, are outlined in more detail below.

In the UK, after 40 years of neoliberalism, collectivist social institutions have severely atrophied: trade unions have declined, while public services and the welfare state have been eroded by austerity policies imposed by Conservative governments (Howell, 2021). The UK also has limited institutional history of national-level tripartite bargaining, aside from a brief (aborted) attempt at a social contract in the 1970s. Despite these institutional weaknesses, in a national crisis it was noteworthy that the then UK chancellor of the exchequer, Rishi Sunak, held discussions about COVID-19 with unions and employer groups, resulting in a new Job Retention Scheme operational from April 2020 (UK Gov, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis compelled the UK's populist right-of-centre Conservative government to belatedly introduce collective interventions (to protect jobs and incomes) not normally associated with the party. The state subsidized 80% of workers' wages (maximum of £2,500 per month) if firms retained employees. This was eventually accompanied by income protection for the self-employed. It shows how important trade unions remain, because European-style wage subsidies were advocated by the UK Trades Union Congress (TUC) in discussions with government and employers. However, unlike many of the European job and income protection schemes that are more institutionalized and embedded, the UK furlough scheme was temporary and has since been removed (Stuart et al., 2021).

In the United States, de-unionization and job insecurity are even more evident (DiGrazia and Dixon, 2019; Lowe, 2018). In conjunction with the predominance of policies embracing neo-liberalism and deregulation, since the late 20th century, business strategies have generally disfavoured collectivist institutions, with managers preferring a more unitarist and individualistic approach towards work (Kochan et al., 1986; Budd, 2018). In the US, unlike in

Europe, workers and the unemployed are far less protected by the welfare state, with no comparable state job retention scheme during the pandemic. Rather, they were much more likely to become unemployed, and receive unemployment benefits (Aaronson et al., 2020; Apuzzo and Pronczuk, 2020; Bell and Blanchflower, 2020). One response in the US has been highly visible protest activities aimed at re-opening the economy (Fernandez, 2020). These protests have been partly driven by politically conservative groups, and it is not clear to what extent they embody a grassroots movement concerned with economic insecurities or a campaign reflecting business interests (Vogel et al., 2020). Similar protests have occurred in other countries and became increasingly common as the pandemic progressed. As just one example, the trucker convoy protest in Canada was at least partly to do with widespread government and employer vaccine mandates and border/travel policies that affected both the economy and workers' ability to work (Globe and Mail, 2022).

Trajectories of responses to COVID-19 that are embedded in country-specific institutional frameworks are evident also beyond the institutional contexts of typical cases of CMEs and LMEs in Europe and North America. A notable occurrence internationally is that job retention schemes, which were credited with avoiding massive unemployment during the 2008/9 financial crisis, have been used much more extensively in response to COVID-19, with ten times as many workers on short-time work in 2020 compared to the peak of the 2008 financial crisis (ETUI, 2021; OECD, 2020). Where job retention schemes already existed, they have often been adapted to increase access, coverage, and generosity, while new (temporary) schemes were introduced in some nations, including the UK, Australia, and Hungary (ILO, 2022). In Australia, the government provided a historic wage subsidy to eligible businesses covering around 6 million workers, who received a flat payment through their employer, equivalent to around 70 per cent of the national median wage (Wright and Kaine, 2021).

Many East Asian countries had to face COVID-19 earlier than the rest of the world and were widely portrayed as very interventionist (ILO, 2020), including Japan (Kubo and Ogura, 2021) and South Korea (Lee, 2021). In South Korea, for instance, the state and social partners used tripartite cooperation and a series of social accords to deal with the consequences of the pandemic. However, substantial differences in experience are evident across a continent as vast as Asia. In India, for example, where there are limited labor market regulations and protections, the pandemic resulted in further deterioration of the working conditions of its large informal labor force. In turn, the pandemic has severely affected poverty, hunger, deprivation,

unemployment, and economic and social inequality in India's informal sector (Gururaja and Ranjitha, 2022; Noronha and D'Cruz, 2021). The articles by Valizade, Ali and Stuart, and Ford, Gillan, and Ward in this special issue are invaluable for extending our understanding about institutional responses to COVID-19 and associated inequalities in various countries in the Global South, which we know too little about.

Conclusion: the future politics of work

This special issue focused on an international comparison of how national employment relations institutions led to country-specific responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of these responses on workers. It is unclear how post COVID-19 patterns of work and employment relations will evolve in the long run globally, and the implications these patterns may have for future policy and politics around work (Dobbins, 2020; Wilkinson and Barry, 2020). The ILO announced a global call to action for a 'human centred' recovery that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient in the development of decent work for all, including for citizens in the Global South (ILO, 2021). Rather than having a utopian post-work society option, the reality is that, to survive, most working people may perceive no alternative than to accept the current wage-effort bargain under global capitalism. Nonetheless, possibilities may emerge to resist market fundamentalism, commodification, and environmental destruction (Burawoy, 2013). In line with Polanyi's (1944) focus on 'double-movement', a sharp U-turn away from commodification, neoliberalism and the politics of austerity appears vital, but certainly not guaranteed, in order to reorganize the economy, democratize work and address the climate crisis (Ferreras et al., 2022). It remains to be seen whether new policies to progressively reform the post-crisis world of work and reduce global inequalities in working conditions and workers' rights will feature on the policy agenda in different countries. Presently, the portents do not look optimistic at a time when many countries have retreated into nationalist postures (Dobbins, 2020).

That said, the papers in this special issue illustrate that while capitalism exerts global systemic forces, different worker experiences of and country responses to the pandemic illustrate that variations in employment relations institutions and the politics of work are evident across countries. The four special issue articles make important research contributions to enhancing our understanding of these differences in international experiences and impacts of the

pandemic on work and employment, and the mediating effects of structure and action regarding country specific institutions, regulations and agency.

Brandl identifies the institutional role of centralized cooperative tripartite pacts between the state, employers and unions in protecting countries and citizens from the pandemic, however he concludes that it is too early to draw any conclusions as to whether this increase in tripartite social dialogue activities, at least in countries with institutional foundations for coordinated employment relations, will continue after the pandemic. And, while IR institutions like collective bargaining and works councils have evidently played a vital protective role in the pandemic, they are strongest in countries like Germany, as noted by Behrens and Pekarek, while elsewhere, notably in the Global South, such institutional protections are often weaker or absent, as illustrated by Ford, Gillan and Ward and Valizade, Ali and Stuart.

Looking forward, therefore, the future of work and the politics of work can be debated, but not accurately predicted, given the ongoing turbulence within and across countries. Researchers in the field of industrial relations can play an important role in revealing what is happening and why. For example, Hodder and Martínez Lucio's (2021) paper 'Pandemics, politics, and the resilience of employment relations research' suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has appeared to change the public narrative on work and employment, and highlighted the continued relevance and value of employment relations as a field of study and research, and in informing public policy. Other researchers from different countries have also provided important contributions analysing how the pandemic has affected the world of work (Gavin et al., 2022, Holubová and Kahancová, 2022). IR institutions will continue to matter, and the theoretical and empirical contributions in this special issue are important for informing future research on why and how institutions matter. In particular, more international and comparative research about IR institutions, both in global crises and in "normal" times, is required in countries from the Global South.

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